EXPLORING LANGUAGE INPUT OF THE READING TEXTS IN NORTHSTAR TEXTBOOKS FOR FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, HUE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. There are numerous studies on English Language Teaching materials evaluation, but very few investigate the language input of reading materials through text input, which is considered a primary factor for successful foreign language learning. This paper reports the results of a project on exploring the language input of reading texts in a book series used in teaching reading for first-year English-major students at University of Foreign languages, Hue University. It aims at investigating text topics, genres, length, language difficulty level, and students' as well as teachers' perceptions of the studied texts in an attempt to facilitate students' reading comprehension. Thirty-two reading texts were studied by using a descriptive-analytical approach. Individual and focus group interviews were implemented with 15 students and 7 lecturers. The findings show that textbooks incorporate a wide variety of topics, which are interesting and familiar to students. Articles are the most popular text genre. The text length and language difficulty level prove to be appropriate to students' capacity. The lecturers and students' perceptions of the texts also support the textbook analysis findings. These findings implicate that the selected textbooks could be kept in the curriculum but need further adaptation. Besides, some suggestions were made to help ELT lecturers modify the text input effectively.

Keywords. reading text, language input, reading comprehension

1. Introduction

Reading has long been considered an important part of language proficiency that has a significant impact on academic success. There are numerous factors, both internal and external, that affect students' reading comprehension. Among them, English Language Teaching (ELT) materials are considered crucial in the teaching and learning process [9, 29]. Although the term "material" is used to refer to anything used by teachers or learners to facilitate the language learning [29], the textbooks themselves still serve as a fundamental source as they are the basis

for much of the language input learners receive when learning a language [24]. Besides, students' reading comprehension depends significantly on the language input they receive from the textbooks. Theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) all admit the need for language input even though each theory attaches a different degree of importance to it. Gass [12] believes no one can learn a second language without being exposed to some sorts of language input. Although playing a critical role in students' reading comprehension, text input has still received little attention from researchers. Only a few studies have dealt with some aspects of language input in the written mode, such as text length or text genres' effects on students' comprehension separately [15, 23]. Other studies have evaluated reading materials as a whole by using different evaluative checklists rather than addressed the issue of language input itself [6, 11].

At the university where this study was carried out, NorthStar books, a five-level series, are the main textbooks currently used in teaching reading for English-major students, serving as a mandatory resource in the curriculum. From the personal experiences of the first author of this paper as an English-major student, who had already studied five reading courses at this university, there have been diverse opinions among students about the effectiveness and appropriateness of the selected textbooks, especially its language input in facilitating students' reading comprehension. It is, therefore, important to conduct a systematic analysis of the books and understand students' perceptions of them. Since language input includes various forms, such as task instructions, teachers as a resource, and reading exercises, it is quite broad and difficult to cover all of these relevant elements. Therefore, this study is intended to deal with only the text input for the reading comprehension purpose in the textbooks for English-major freshmen at the selected university.

The main goal of this research is to shed light on the nature and characteristics of the language input of the reading texts and inform the teaching as well as learning of EFL reading skills at the selected university. Since there have not been any previous studies carried out in this field, this research will serve as a useful reference for further textbook evaluation and modification.

Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the topics and genres of the reading texts in the selected coursebooks for first-year English-major students at the selected university?

2. What is the length and level of language difficulty of the reading texts in the selected coursebooks?

3. What do lecturers and students think of the reading texts (in terms of topics, text genres, text length, and level of language difficulty) in the selected coursebooks?

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. English Language Teaching textbooks and materials evaluation

English Language Teaching textbooks and materials evaluation has played a critical role in education since it provides a valuable theoretical foundation for language teachers and educators. Sheldon [27] and Harmer [13] provide different checklists and guidelines for textbook evaluation. The common criteria are price and availability, layout, design, and ease of use, instructions, methodology, syllabus, purpose, topics, and content. According to these criteria, some researchers, including Ali [2], Çakit [6], and Mohammadi [20], implement studies about ELT textbooks evaluation to determine the overall pedagogical value and suitability of the selected books. The findings show some typical shortcomings of ELT textbooks, such as the lack of vocabulary glossary, heavy vocabulary load and structures, unsuitability to students' levels, and the lack of authentic reading texts. The studies presented here have tended to focus on textbook evaluation as a whole by following different evaluation checklists. Few studies have addressed the dimension of language input, especially the language input in reading texts.

2.2. Role of language input in reading texts

The critical role of language input in enhancing SLA has been investigated by different researchers. One influential hypothesis is the input hypothesis established by Krashen [17]. This hypothesis explains that language learners must have exposure to comprehensible language input that is a bit beyond their current level of proficiency for language acquisition to take place. However, providing comprehensible language input for each learner separately seems to be very challenging to fulfill, especially in large-sized classes. Krashen also points out features of optimal input, including comprehensibility, interestingness and relativity, non-grammatical sequence, and sufficiency.

Tomlinson [29] specifies the features of good language input. First, good language input should be understandable to learners and have a great variety in style, mode, medium, and purpose. In addition, it should have characteristics of authentic discourse in the target language. Equally important, it should offer opportunities for learners to notice linguistic features of the input and encourage learners' active interaction with the input as opposed to passive reception of it. Finally, good language input should stimulate learners to perform something mentally or physically in response to it rather than produce the language as usual.

There have been several researchers, including Alderson [1] and Arias [3], who state that there are two main constellations influencing the reading nature: reader-related variables and text-related variables. Alderson [1] believes, "Linguistic features of the text clearly affect the readability of text and readers' comprehension, and text type, organization, genre, and so on as

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well as text topic clearly influence how well readers can process meaning." [1, p. 80] The next section will address four text variables affecting the nature of reading and reading comprehension of the learners. These are topics, text genres, text length, and levels of language difficulty.

2.3. Text topic and text genre

Day [10] states that topic is the general theme or message of a text; topic variety helps to maintain the learners' interest and motivation. Sharing this viewpoint, Garinger [11] believes that routine and familiarity of topics can bring a sense of comfort and safety to the learners, but too much familiarity can be boring, which leads to disinterest. Most researchers, such as Alderson [1] and Arias [3], agree that the topic of reading texts is an essential factor that affects students' learning motivation. Therefore, if reading texts are varied in topics, students will become more actively engaged in reading. Besides, Cunningsworth [9] suggests that the topics of reading passages in ELT coursebooks need to be informative, exciting, challenging, amusing, and be able to give learners opportunities to expand their knowledge.

A genre, according to Harmer [13], is "a type of written organization and layout (such as an advertisement, a letter, a poem, a magazine article, etc.) which will be instantly recognized for what it is by members of a discourse community" [13, p. 31]. Genres of written language, according to Brown and Lee [5], can be classified as fiction, nonfiction, letters, electronic, greeting cards, diaries, journals, questionnaires, maps, menus, schedules, and so on. Other researchers categorize text types into narrative and expository texts. Different genres of reading texts have been proved to have different impacts on readers' comprehension [31].

2.4. Text length and level of language difficulty

In terms of text length, previous studies have displayed the influences of text length on learners' text comprehension. Newsom and Gaite [22] carry out a study in which the subjects read either a 2300-word long passage or a 300-word short passage. The results show that those reading short passages significantly outperform those reading longer texts. However, some other studies have indicated that the text length has no considerable impact on the subjects' reading comprehension performance [4, 19].

Regarding the level of language difficulty, assessing the difficulty level of reading texts is an essential step to ensure that the texts match the readers' proficiency level. According to Carrell [7], if reading materials are too easy, learners are unchallenged and easily get bored; learning, therefore, will not occur. On the other hand, should materials be too difficult or challenging, students will be frustrated, demotivated, and again no learning takes place.

Besides, there have been different definitions regarding the level of language difficulty in reading texts, for example, Richard and Schmidt [25] state it is how easily written materials can be read and understood by the readers.

Various factors are contributing to the level of language difficulty of a text. Several studies have been implemented to analyze the sentence comprehension, including Scott's study [26] and Zipoli's [32]. In Scott's study, four variables are mentioned as contributing factors to sentence complexity, including the number of propositions which aligns with the number of verbs and clauses, the number of embeddings, the order in which major elements appear, and the distance between crucial elements in a sentence. Scott [26] believes, "If a reader cannot derive meaning from individual sentences that make up a text, that is going to be a major obstacle in text-level comprehension" [26, p. 184]. Sharing a similar approach, Zipoli [32] explores four types of sentence structures that could be difficult to process in reading, which includes sentences with passive verb constructions, adverbial clauses with temporal and causal conjunctions, center-embedded relative clauses, and sentences with three or more clauses.

The studies reviewed so far have shown that all text-related variables play important roles in SLA, and each variable affects students' reading comprehension in different ways. The majority of the studies reviewed have focused either on analyzing the effect of each text-related factor on students' reading comprehension or providing different checklists for ELT textbook evaluation as a whole. Few studies have examined several text-related factors simultaneously, and much less is known about students' and lecturers' perceptions of this issue.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data sources

Thirty-two reading texts from NorthStar Reading and Writing 1 (3rd edition) written by John Beaumont and A. Judith Yancey and NorthStar Reading and Writing 2 (4th edition) written by Natasha Haugnes and Beth Maher were analyzed in this study. Reading passages that are not for reading comprehension were not included. Although there are various aspects related to language input in the language learning process, this study only focuses on the language input of the reading texts under the survey. The data sources also include interview data from 15 students and 7 lecturers working at the university where the study was conducted.

The reading texts were first collected, converted into word files, and analyzed. Then interviews with students and lecturers were conducted and analyzed as a further source of data.

3.2. Data analysis

3.2.1. Analyzing language input of the reading texts

According to Tomlinson [29], a good language input should be varied in style, mode, medium, and purpose and should be comprehensible to language learners. This suggests an understanding of the language input of reading texts, and the focus of this paper should entail understanding its variety and comprehensibility. Therefore, for the scope of the present study, the language input in the studied reading texts was analyzed in four specific aspects: topics, genres, length, and levels of language difficulty.

For each unit, the topic of each reading text was noted and counted for frequency and percentage. Genres were categorized according to Brown and Lee's text classification [5] (Table 1) because it is easy to guide the process of identifying text genres in the book. Each genre was noted and counted for its occurrences and percentages. The texts were additionally classified into the narrative and expository text [28]. Narrative texts consist of characters, settings, problems, or conflicts encountered by the main characters, plots, and affect patterns [16]. On the contrary, an expository text aims at sharing knowledge and content, hence, it is informational [16].

In terms of text length, each reading text was first typed and saved as a word file. Then, the function of word count in the Microsoft Word was used to calculate the number of words of each reading text, which was then entered into an Excel spread sheet to calculate the mean length.

The language difficulty level of the texts was analyzed on the basis of sentence

Table 1. Classification of written genres [5]

Fiction	Novels, short stories, jokes, drama, poetry
Non-fiction	Reports, editorials, essays, articles, reference
Letters	Personal, business
Electronic forms	Emails, tweets, blog posts
Academic writing	Shot answer test responses, reports, papers, theses, books, case study
Advertisements	Commercial, personal
Others	Greeting cards, memos, messages, announcements, applications, questionnaires, directions, labels, signs, recipes, bills, manuals, maps, menus, schedules, invitations, directories, comic strips, cartoons

complexity [32]. The number of simple, compound, complex, and mixed sentences of each reading passage was calculated and synthesized. According to Weinstein and Rabinovitch [30], a simple sentence consists of one independent clause and expresses a complete thought. A compound sentence has two (or more) independent clauses joined by a conjunction or semi-colon. A complex sentence contains a subordinate clause and an independent clause. A mixed sentence contains two or more coordinate independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses. The number of sentences with center-embedded relative clauses and sentences with three or more clauses was further explored to understand the language input's difficulty level since these structures can pose comprehension difficulty for language learners [32]. Additionally, Text Analyzer, a free online text difficulty analysis tool according to the Common European Framework (CEFR Levels), was also used to further analyze the language difficulty level.

3.2.2. Analyzing interview data

Focus group interviews for students and individual interviews for lecturers were implemented to further understand students' and lecturers' views on the language input in the books. The interview data were analyzed thematically. Thematic codes were devised for the responses given to each question. If any new codes emerged, they were noted and reviewed in the same manner to make up the themes. Examples were quoted from the original answers provided by the participants.

3.3. Reliability and validity of the research

Reliability and validity were enhanced through the explicit process of collecting and analyzing the data in this study. Inter-reliability coding was also conducted by having a trained senior English-major student at the university to examine 20% of the reading texts under investigation in terms of topics, text genres, text length, and levels of language difficulty. The percentages of the agreement for each category ranged from 80 to 85%. Besides, a second coder coded 10% of the students' and lecturers' interview data independently from the first researcher. The percentage agreement between the two coders was 85%, which is acceptable. Any difference or mismatch was resolved through discussion.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Text topics

The findings indicate that the textbooks cover a wide range of topics, of which food, sports & health come out on top (18.75%). Literature & Art and Business & Work life share the

second position with 12.5% each. The other topics including human values and manners, social media, hobbies and entertainment, crime, culture, adventure, family, education, and medicine are equally distributed with 6.25% each. These topics appear interesting, varied, not abstract, and quite relevant to students' background knowledge. They are also similar to the study findings of Neuner and Hunfeld [21], who outline the types of topics used in foreign language teaching coursebooks, such as relationship, housing, education, health, free time activities, and media.

However, to students' perceptions, these topics do not seem to sufficiently address some currently concerned issues in the Vietnamese social context since the books were not particularly designed for Vietnamese students. One student commented, "*I think the majority of the topics are set in the cultural and social context of foreign countries, which seems to be alien to me at first. However, it offers good chances for me to expand my knowledge*" (S12). More than half of the interviewed participants thought the topics are more related to the culture of English-speaking countries, which is beneficial to students as they can be exposed to intercultural knowledge. However, Tomlinson [29] claims that leaners "are more at ease with texts and illustrations that they can relate to their own culture than they are with those which appear to them to be culturally alien" [29, p. 9]. Therefore, ELT teachers should consider cultural appropriateness and provide necessary background information for EFL/ESL students beforehand.

According to Tomlinson [29], apart from being of interest and culturally appropriate to the target learners, topics also need to provide learners with opportunities to gain new knowledge. According to this criterion, 12 students and all of the lecturers asserted that there is always something new embedded in the texts as each topic offers different insights into various issues. However, some interviewed students stated that several reading texts are out-of-date and irrelevant, such as literature and art. Day [10] believes that students' motivation to read is dramatically lessened if the topic is irrelevant to their areas of interest. Therefore, ELT lecturers should add more extra materials or update the content of the reading texts to further facilitate students' learning process.

4.2. Text genres

The findings related to the text genres are summarized in Table 2 and Table 3.

The findings indicate that the text genres are varied, and articles are the most popular text type (56.26%). Blog posts and stories share an equal proportion of approximately 9.4% each. Each of the other text genres occurs only once and accounts for around 3%. When the texts are categorized into expository and narrative in nature, the findings show a dominance of expository texts (68.75%). The findings here are consistent with the features of a good language

Table 2. Text genres in the books

Genres/ Text types	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Article	18	56.26
Story	3	9.38
Blog post	3	9.38
Chart	1	3.13
Dialogue	1	3.13
Memos	1	3.13
Email	1	3.13
Interview	1	3.13
Book review	1	3.13
Editorial	1	3.13
Essay	1	3.13
Total	32	100

Table 3. Distribution of expository and narrative texts in the books

Genres	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Narrative	10	31.25
Expository	22	68.75
Total	32	100

input claimed by Tomlinson [29], "the input should vary in style, mode, medium, and purpose" [29, p. 14]. The variety of text genres is also responsive to the courses' requirements that are helping students initially get accustomed to different basic types of texts and equipping them with basic knowledge about these text types. Besides, most of the genres found are frequently used in daily life, such as emails, blog posts, and articles. In relation to reading at the university level, which usually places a heavy demand on reading for academic purposes in content areas, expository texts that aim at providing knowledge and information for students in various aspects are unarguably useful to learners.

Most interviewed students and lecturers believed that the genres of the reading texts are

varied. However, a small number of interviewed participants said the text types in the books are not really varied since most of them are articles. This concurs with the findings from the text analysis above, which indicates that articles make up more than half of the total. Besides, articles (expository texts) are the most predominant text genre, followed by stories (narrative texts).

Text genres are believed to have an impact on students' reading comprehension. Some interviewees stated that reading articles enhances their motivation and level of understanding thanks to its clear structure, while stories are usually interesting and attractive, which helps to attract readers' attention. This is consistent with Alderson [1], who claims that text types and its organization could clearly influence how well readers can process meaning. It also supports the findings of Zhou [31], whose study indicates that text types have significantly different effects on reading comprehension. However, a few interviewed students said text genres do not influence their reading comprehension but their motivation only. One student argued, *"Whatever text type the learners are introduced to does not really deter their comprehension as long as they concentrate on their reading in a serious way"* (S8).

4.3. Text length

The results related to the length of the reading comprehension passages show that the mean of passage length in the two books varies with the second book (*M* = 550.37, *SD* = 28.59) being much longer than that of the first one (*M* = 282.81, *SD* = 27.85). In particular, in the first book, the longest and shortest texts contain 427 and 80 words, respectively, while the figures in the second book are much higher, 722 and 389 words, which reflects an increase in length as students progressed towards the second book. Two-thirds of the interviewed students thought the texts have appropriate length, which is suitable to their proficiency level, while one-third believed that these texts are relatively long. This is explained by the mixed proficiency levels of different students.

Most students assumed that the text length does have an impact on their reading process. Two other participants, on the contrary, thought that text length only affects their reading motivation. Meanwhile, the three remaining students believed that text length affects neither their motivation nor reading comprehension, which is in line with Mehrpour and Riazi's [19], Beach's [4], and Jalilehvand's [15] findings. Sharing a similar viewpoint, all of the interviewed lecturers, although agreed that text length could have an impact on students' reading motivation and comprehension to a certain degree, claimed that it is not the only factor. An explanation was given by one lecturer, *"In terms of psychology, to most students, shorter texts seem to be easier than longer ones. But it also depends on the language use, topic, reading tasks, and the way they are designed"* (L4).

4.4. Level of language difficulty of the reading texts

Table 4 demonstrates different types of sentence structures found in the reading texts under survey.

The results of the study indicate that simple sentences in the reading passages of the two textbooks (764 sentences) outnumber complex sentences (271), compound sentences (75), and mixed sentences (16). Reading passages in the first book contains mostly simple sentences (366), more than five times higher than that of complex sentences (67). Meanwhile, the figure for compound and mixed sentences is only 30 and 4, respectively. However, there is a noticeable change in the sentence structures of the texts in the second book. While simple sentences are still dominant (398), there is a significant rise in the number of complex sentences, 204 compared with 67 in book 1. The number of compound and mixed sentences slightly increases but still only makes up a small fraction of the total figure (45 and 12, respectively).

The dominance of simple sentences indicates the suitability of these texts for the target students. However, although simple sentences, as a separate unit, make a given text easier to comprehend, the overuse of them results in a disjointed and unnatural string of sentences that have little connection with one another [14]. Although the dominance of simple sentences seems to suit students' levels, several researchers believe that text input should be slightly beyond students' proficiency level for SLA to take place [17, 29]. Therefore, lecturers can introduce other different texts with the same topics but containing more challenging structures to enhance learners' reading comprehension. The texts in the present study were also analyzed for center-embedded relative clauses and sentences with three or more clauses to determine the language difficulty level. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 4. Sentence structures of the reading texts

Book	Simple sentence	Complex sentence	Compound sentence	Mixed sentence
Book 1	366	67	30	4
Book 2	398	204	45	12

Table 5. Center-embedded relative clauses and multiple clauses in the reading texts

Book	Number of sentences with center-embedded relative clauses	Number of sentences with three or more clauses
Book 1	1	5
Book 2	19	8

The number of sentences with center-embedded relative clauses and sentences with three or more clauses in the reading texts of the first book is limited, with one instance of the former and 5 of the latter. However, these sentences appear more in the second book (19 and 8 sentences, respectively). In general, sentences with center-embedded relative clauses can pose processing difficulties to the readers. It is claimed that sentences whose arguments are separated by center-embedded constituents are processed more slowly than sentences whose arguments are close to each other [18]. This is because the distance between the main elements in a sentence is a major variable making that sentence more challenging. The greater the distance is, the more difficult the sentence will be understood [32]. Regarding sentences with three or more clauses, for some students who have attention, working memory, and processing speed deficits, sentences with multiple clauses can pose difficulty during their reading process. The overall increasing number of sentences with embeddedness and multiple clauses seems to be appropriate. However, as students move towards the later units of the textbooks or the end of the course, it does not seem to be so. This reveals that perhaps exposure to embeddedness is "incidental" and not explicit in these textbooks.

Besides, the findings from Text Analyzer show that the difficulty levels of the studied texts range from B1 to B2 level (CEFR) with the predominance of B1. This is just beyond the expected proficiency levels for students studying this course, which ranges from A2 to B1. However, it is responsive to Krashen's theory [17], which states that it is beneficial to provide language input that is slightly higher than the learners' levels.

The perceptions of interviewed students regarding the language difficulty level are varied. Most of the students thought that the reading texts are neither challenging nor easy. Some stated that the texts are quite easy, while one claimed the passages are a bit challenging. The perception of interviewed lecturers is also similar, with 6 out of 7 lecturers stating that the texts are well-suited to the level of first-year students, except one lecturer who thought some texts are easy, but the others might be difficult for a number of students.

5. Conclusion and implications

The findings show that the textbooks incorporate a wide variety of topics that are interesting and familiar to the targeted students. Besides, articles are the most popular text genre. The text length and language difficulty level prove to be appropriate to students' levels. The results from analyzing the participants' responses from the interview also support the textbook analysis findings. On the basis of these findings, it can be concluded that the selected textbooks could be kept in the curriculum but need further adaptation.

The findings of the study have some pedagogical implications. First, lecturers can modify and adapt the language input of the coursebooks in a way that can facilitate the reading comprehension and SLA process of students. To be more specific, the lecturers could easily identify and add more reading topics that are absent in the textbooks for students to enrich their knowledge, or using suitable supplementary sources of reading materials to cover those areas that had been ignored to maintain students' interests and attention. Different versions of tiered texts that provide students chances to strengthen their understanding of a range of topics and aspects of academic language could be used to cater for students of different proficiency levels. In addition, ELT teachers would be more aware of the critical role of sentence complexity in reading comprehension and some challenging structures that could pose processing difficulties for students. This, perhaps, could facilitate the lecturers in selecting further appropriate reading materials as well as designing suitable reading activities for the selected reading texts. Also, hopefully, the study will serve as a useful reference source for further ELT textbook evaluation, contributing to the development of the language learning and teaching process in the research context as well as similar settings.

6. Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, it could only recruit a small number of student and teacher participants and focused on a small sample of reading texts. More insights would be obtained with a larger sample of interviews, and further research should be carried out with other ELT textbooks with a larger corpus of language input. Next, the study only focused on the complexity of sentence structures, although many factors affect the language difficulty level of a reading passage. Future studies that explore the effects of other text-related factors on students' reading performances would be of great significance. In addition, since reading tasks are also an important source of language input, more studies should be conducted to explore the characteristics of the tasks in ELT textbooks. Despite the limitations, the study has provided a useful understanding of language input from coursebooks and from both student and teacher perspectives.

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