

# 1 Evaluating the ESL Reading Texts for Intermediate Learners of 2 English from the Perspective of Students

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## 8 **Abstract**

9 In order to provide an evaluation of the suitability of reading texts from the perspective of  
10 students in university-based intensive English programme, this study examined 53  
11 international ESL intermediate learners' perceptions of reading texts for a period of 14 weeks  
12 reading proficiency lessons. Features evaluated include content, readability, exploitability, and  
13 authenticity of the reading texts. The participants responded to a textbook evaluation  
14 questionnaire to express their perceptions with reference to the features of the reading texts.  
15 Results indicated the extent of appropriateness of the reading texts incorporated in the  
16 programme's reading textbook used by intermediate learners of English. Further consideration  
17 must be given to text selection by including the aspect of authentic text presentation.

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19 **Index terms**— Reading text evaluation; ESL intermediate learners; university-based intensive English  
20 programme.

## 21 **1 INTRODUCTION**

22 Textbooks play a vital role in teaching English because they form the fundamental of language input learners  
23 acquire in the classroom (O'Neill, 1982 cited in ??irkgoz, 2009, p. 79). For this substantial reason, it is necessary  
24 to be aware of the importance of evaluating textbook for reading development, which enables teachers to exploit a  
25 textbook effectively for the benefit of their language students. The process of evaluating and selecting textbooks  
26 is complex and involves many different levels of authorities. Despite this matter of fact, textbooks are for the  
27 learners themselves. The selected textbooks should meet their needs as learners of English in addition to fulfilling  
28 the curriculum requirement of English language communication skill content (Byrd, 2001). Therefore, students'  
29 involvement in evaluating textbook should not be overlooked. The present study covers four main criteria that  
30 influence the selection of a reading textbook: content, readability, exploitability, and authenticity.

31 According to Nuttal (2000), the most important criterion in selecting a reading textbook for our students is  
32 the suitability of the content, i.e. the reading texts "should interest the readers -preferably enthrall and delight  
33 them" (p. 170). The reading texts must have the quality to grasp the students' attention from the first line until  
34 the last line of the written discourse. In this respect, the content serves as an attraction in providing the sense of  
35 realness where the students are motivated to find out more about the gripping topic in-hand. Undoubtedly, there  
36 is a strong tendency for the students to get interested in the post reading activities in the process of gaining more  
37 fascinating insight into the topic. To maximize this plus point, teachers play a vital role to ensure the reading  
38 texts will generally interest a majority of the students, and at the same time, will not bring a sense of boredom  
39 to the other students.

40 Nevertheless, an interesting content should be accompanied by the criterion of exploitability -the second  
41 criterion of selecting a reading textbook. Exploitability emphasizes the important elements of both content and  
42 language that are the focus of a reading lesson. In this respect, the selected texts should facilitate students to  
43 become an effective reader with "the ability to extract the content from the language that expresses it" ??Nuttall,

## 7 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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44 p.172, 2000). Hence, the selected texts should have the potential to be exploited effectively to develop interpretive  
45 reading strategies or skills in making sense of any kind of text.

46 Generally, readability refers to the surface features of a text in terms of structural and lexical complexity, which  
47 in fact affects readers' interest and responses to a text. As claimed by Miller (2011), "longer words may demand  
48 more decoding of inflections, and longer sentence provide space for more clauses and intricate causal and phrasal  
49 embedding, again demanding more of a reader" (p. 36). Heilman, Collins-Thompson, Callan, and Eskanazi  
50 (2007) note that, the complexity of sentence length of texts should be increased as part of the reading levels of the  
51 intended students of second language, who are nevertheless in the process of mastering the grammatical structures  
52 of the target language. A high proportion of new words will discourage students to read more or extensively due  
53 to intolerable ease. The recommended number of new words is seven on a page of A4 size in an effort to provide  
54 a well-understood context that facilitates the process of learning new words efficiently ??Nuttall, p. 175, 2000).

55 Finally, Crossley, McCarthy, Louwerse, and McNamara (2007) note that authenticity in language use is crucial  
56 in reading in order to introduce students to the real context and natural instances of language. Authentic texts  
57 are used instead of simplified texts due to the importance of authentic texts in conveying the real message through  
58 the natural use of language. Nuttall (2000) suggests that a true discourse is needed to develop our students' text  
59 attack skills such as the capacity to infer unsaid message or meaning presented by the text implicitly.

60 The central question of the present study focuses on the importance of displaying the four mentioned criteria  
61 in selecting a reading textbook. Therefore, the present study aims to evaluate the extent of appropriateness of a  
62 reading textbook used by the intermediate learners of English as Second Language in university-based intensive  
63 English programme based on content, exploitability, readability and authenticity.

## 64 2 II.

### 65 3 MATERIALS AND METHODS a) Participants

66 A total of 53 intermediate learners of English, who were enrolled in Universiti Tenaga Nasional's Intensive  
67 English Programme, participated in the present study. Table 1 shows the students' backgrounds according to the  
68 categories of gender, age group, and educational background. The male students (n=47) made up the majority of  
69 the participants as compared to the female students (n=6). In terms of age group, young adult participants aged  
70 20 to 40 (n=44) dominated the study. Distribution in the category of educational background was approximately  
71 balance; High School (n=14), Foundation (7), Bachelor (13), and Master's (19). All students were in their first  
72 semester of studying in the university before proceeding to the university academic programmes; Foundation,  
73 Bachelor, and Postgraduate Programmes.

### 74 4 b) Textbook

75 The ESL reading textbook (Active Skills for Reading: Book 3) used in the present study was implemented in 2009  
76 as a main course book for the university's English intensive programme reading course. The students evaluated  
77 the textbook towards the end of the semester before taking their final examinations. In more detail, the textbook  
78 provides students with opportunities for exposure in the form of readings across disciplines in terms of economy,  
79 sociology, psychology, and biology. It was designed with a varied of challenging reading texts accompanied by  
80 excellent reading skills and vocabulary development exercises.

81 A textbook evaluation questionnaire was developed with reference to several ESL textbook evaluation checklists  
82 (e.g., Skierso, 1991;Byrd, 2001;Miekley, 2005). With guidelines provided by Nuttall (2000), the questionnaire  
83 comprises of 17 items deriving from the suggested textbook selection criteria: content, exploitability, readability,  
84 and authenticity. Respondents were prompted to indicate their perceptions from a fivepoint Likert scale ranging  
85 from "Strongly agree to Strongly disagree" by placing a tick in the appropriate box. Reliability Test was carried  
86 out on the items using the statistical analysis software SPSS version 18 with high reliability score of Cronbach's  
87 Alpha 0.821.

### 88 5 d) Data Analysis

89 The questionnaire data were analysed using a computer software programme. The frequency and percentage of  
90 the responses were generated using the descriptive statistic programme of SPSS version 18.

## 91 6 III.

### 92 7 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

93 Following is a discussion of results for the ESL reading textbook evaluation based on the perceptions of  
94 intermediate students. This section is divided into four subsections in accordance with the investigated textbook  
95 selection criteria: content, exploitability, readability, and authenticity.

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## 96 8 a) Content

97 The results presented in Table 2 below illustrate the percentage of response indicating the students' perceptions  
98 of the content of the used textbook. More than 65 % of them agree that they enjoy reading the texts and the  
99 texts make them want to read to find out more about the topics.

100 This finding shows that the textbook conforms to the first criterion where the reading texts in the selected  
101 reading textbook should interest the students. This might because of the reading texts cover different disciplines  
102 such as sociology, psychology, biology and economy.

## 103 9 b) Exploitability

104 On the other hand, Table 3 below shows the percentage of response that is drawn on by the students in indicating  
105 their perceptions of the second criterion, exploitability, of the used textbook.

106 The pattern is summarized in the table above which suggests that more than 56% of them agree that the reading  
107 texts allow them to make inference, apply what they read in their life, identify meaning of unknown words from  
108 the context, replace difficult words with simpler words, and new words are repeated for reinforcement. Therefore,  
109 this finding shows that this textbook conforms to the second criterion where the reading texts should increase  
110 students' knowledge and develop their reading skills at the same time. This

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112 c) Questionnaire criterion is important in achieving the curriculum goals as well.

## 113 11 c) Readability

114 As can be seen in Table 4 below, more than 50% of the students agree that the passages are not difficult, the  
115 words are introduced from simple to complex, the sentence length is reasonable, the structural complexity increase  
116 gradually, and the new words are worth learning. Meanwhile, less than 50% of them agree that the new words  
117 are too many.

118 Overall, this finding shows that this textbook conforms to the third criterion where the reading texts are  
119 chosen according to both lexical and structural complexity. In order words, an appropriate reading textbook  
120 should consist of a reasonable structural and lexical difficulty that would not demand an overwhelming cognitive  
121 load from the students or readers. If it is overwhelming, it will definitely demotivate our students to continue  
122 reading.

## 123 12 d) Authenticity

124 Results presented in Table 5 below illustrate the percentage of response indicating the students' perceptions of  
125 the last criterion, authenticity, of the used textbook.

126 More than 60% of them agree that the textbook language is used in real world, the reading texts have real-life  
127 issues that challenge them to think of their viewpoint, and the texts are accurate and up-to-date. This finding  
128 shows that the studied textbook conforms to the last criterion where students are introduced to the real context  
129 and natural examples of the target language.

130 IV.

## 131 13 CONCLUSION

132 The purpose of this study as indicated earlier was to examine the extent to which the textbook used in the  
133 university-based intensive English programme matches the set of criteria for selecting a good reading textbook.  
134 Findings from the present study suggest that the textbook conforms to all the four important criteria of reading  
135 textbook selection. It can be concluded that the textbook is appropriate for students reading literacy development.  
136 Further research could be done on the aspect of authentic text presentation which has been overlooked by  
137 the present study. It is suggested by Nuttal (2000) that the other criterion of reading textbook selection is  
138 presentation, "how they (texts) should be presented" (pg. 170). The intention of presenting a text in an  
139 authentic appearance is to establish a context of practicality. The passages are accurate and upto-date. 17 47 32  
4 0 SA 1 -Strongly agree, A 2 -Agree, U 3 -Undecided or Neutral, D 4 -Disagree, SD 5 -Strongly disagree V. <sup>1 2</sup>

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Category

Figure 1: Table 1 :

## 13 CONCLUSION

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2

Content	Percentage of Response (%)				
	SA	A 2	U	D	SD
I enjoy reading the passages in the textbook.	1		3	4	5
The passages make me want to read to find out more about the topic.	21	47	21	9	2
SA 1 -Strongly agree, A 2 -Agree, U 3 -Undecided or Neutral, D 4 -Disagree, SD 5 -Strongly disagree	19	49	19	9	4

Figure 2: Table 2 :

3

Exploitability	Percentage of Response (%)				
	SA	A 2	U	D	SD
The passages introduce me to new ideas that make think about things I	1		3	4	5
40	43		8	8	2

Figure 3: Table 3 :

4

Readability	Percentage of Response (%)				
	SA	A 2	U	D	SD
The passages in the textbook are very difficult.	1		3	4	5
The new words are worth learning at this stage.	4	25	30	40	2
The new words are not too many.	32	47	13	6	2
The new words are introduced from simple to complex words.	6	26	23	36	9
The sentence length is reasonable for me.	6	59	26	6	4
The sentence structures gradually increase in complexity.	11	47	34	8	0
SA 1 -	6	53	38	4	0

Figure 4: Table 4 :

5

Authenticity	Percentage of Response (%)				
	SA	A 2	U	D	SD
The passages use language that is used in real world.	1		3	4	5
The passages contain real-life issues that challenge me to think seriously about my worldview.	25	38	21	6	11
23	45		26	4	2

Figure 5: Table 5 :

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