



# Text Relevance As A Valid Criterion For Selecting Reading Materials For Forming Reading Skills In Efl Class

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## Abstract

In this research, an analysis is carried out on criteria for selecting texts for forming reading skills in EFL class. Literature review showed that a good number of Russian and foreign scholars in education enlist a number of factors, namely the topic, the type of text and the information it sustains, that might be taken into consideration while choosing reading materials. No suggestion that text difficulty should be one of the most important indicators in selecting texts for reading in EFL class was found. The authors claim that text difficulty is a valid criterion for selecting reading materials for forming reading skills in EFL class. To prove this assumption, a series of authentic texts were assessed by Flesch formula, which allows defining texts' relevance. In this paper, the authors used the following leading research methods as a theoretical analysis of scientific and educational literature and an analysis of text assessments. The study resulted in the compilation of "The Reader" for MA students. The findings of the research can serve as general recommendations for university faculty and can be used in EFL class.

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**Keywords:** EFL class, Flesch formula, reading materials, reading skills, text relevance, text selecting, valid criterion

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## Introduction

Selecting reading materials has always been considered to be one of a classroom teacher's many daily duties. It has also been regarded as one of the most complex tasks that face an EFL reading teacher [1, 2]. To select appropriate texts for reading in EFL class, one should be determined what criteria the selected texts have to meet.

A theoretical analysis of scientific and educational literature showed that a great many researchers agree on the point that reading materials, in the first place, ought to satisfy students' interests, in the second place, students' level, in the third place, students' needs, finally, students' background knowledge.

In this study, the researchers put forward and confirmed the hypothesis that text difficulty can be ranked as a valid criterion for selecting reading materials for forming reading skills in EFL class. To prove this assumption, there were selected 65 texts which were offered to MA students for assessment on the criterion of text difficulty according

to the graded scale. The texts were reassessed by Flesch formula which made it possible for researchers to define texts' relevance on the above mentioned criterion. Such a scrupulous analysis of reading materials revealed that text difficulty is a valid criterion for selecting reading materials. Another goal the researchers aimed to achieve was to evidence that the appropriately selected texts ensure forming reading skills in EFL class. Some recommendations for EFL classroom teachers for selecting reading materials were framed. The study also resulted in the compilation of "The Reader" for students who are doing MA program. The findings of the research might be of general interest to classroom teachers who need to assess the "difficulty" of reading materials for forming students' reading skills in EFL class.

## STUDY MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Site

Leo Tolstoy Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication of Kazan Federal University (Russian Federation).

### Study instrument

As a very brief review, we selected a set of scientific articles (65) that are of an optional challenge for MA students to work out in EFL class. These articles included additional information needed for students to gain an overall knowledge of the subject, such as:

- ◆ *Cuisenaire Rods: Pedagogical and Relational Instruments for Language Learning*, Sevilay ADARÇAY School for International Training Graduate Institute, 2012.
- ◆ *Teaching approaches: what is the silent way?* Tim Bowen, one stop English, 2011.
- ◆ *Suggestopedia - Accelerated Language Learning*, 2012, Jasmine Vitarelli.
- ◆ *How to apply suggestopedia as a method of teaching*, 2015, Alvier, Mary G.
- ◆ *Background of the CLIL*, 2009, Mohammed Rhalmi.
- ◆ *Computer-Assisted Language Learning*, 1996, Mark Warschauer, etc.

21 MA students were asked to analyze and assess the articles on the criterion of text difficulty according to the graded scale:

- 5 - totally difficult;
- 4 - difficult;
- 3 - rather difficult;
- 2 - quite easy;
- 1 - easy.

We reassessed difficulty estimates using Flesch formula (Flesch, 1949). **RESULTS**

The results of students' answers are given below in Table 1.

Table 1. The results of text assessment by MA students

Scientific articles	Grade
28	5
10	4
8	3
9	2
10	1

This analysis revealed initial findings of article readability in students' opinion. As a valid criterion of text relevance, we suppose grade 4 to be of great importance in our research as it combines students' prior knowledge in language and some other skills they can master. To examine these articles more thoroughly, a final judgement was undertaken.

Difficulty estimates were reassessed by Flesch formula (Flesch, 1949). This index was chosen because it is easily the best known readability formula in current use, and it has the advantage of producing a numerical result. Flesch formula is:

Reading ease score = 206.835

- $(0.846 \times \text{number of syllables per 100 words})$
- $(1.015 \times \text{average number of words per sentence})$

Table 2 demonstrates the results of scientific articles relevance due to Flesch formula.

Table 2. Difficulty estimates for texts

#	Text	Flesch reading ease score	Estimated reading age
1.	Cuisenaire Rods: Pedagogical and Relational Instruments for Language Learning	34.4	23
2.	Teaching approaches: what is the silent way?	53.9	17
3.	Suggestopedia - Accelerated Language Learning	44.8	19
4.	How to apply suggestopedia as a method of teaching	43.1	20
5.	Background of the CLL	46.4	19
6.	Computer-Assisted Language Learning	33.8	23
7.	Teaching ESL: Incorporating a Communicative, Student-Centered Component	40.1	20
8.	The Effect of Affect on Foreign Language Learning: A Review of the Anxiety Research	44.0	19
9.	The Classroom Interaction of Outstanding Foreign Language Teachers	34.7	23
10.	The Din Phenomenon: Mental Rehearsal in the Second Language	43.3	20

Given these data only 6 scientific articles (aged from 20-23) correspond to the reading age and text readability identified by the students.

All these revision results taken together, on the one hand, seem to indicate that students take time and effort to revise the articles thoroughly. But, on the other hand, they fail to understand the main gist the author wants to convey. However, the reason might also be that students are not yet capable of making intensive revisions: they might not have the proper strategies to actually reading the scientific articles globally and closely.

Close reading is the most important skill you need for any form of literary studies. It means paying especially close attention to what is printed on the page. Close reading means not only reading and understanding the meanings of the individual printed words, but also involves making yourself sensitive to all the nuances and connotations of the language as it is used by skilled writers [15].

In our investigation, we suggest the following selected scientific issues to be taken into account while working with the article:

1. Recognizing scientifically investigable questions.
2. Identifying evidence.
3. Drawing or evaluating conclusions.
4. Communicating valid conclusions.
5. Demonstrating understanding of scientific concepts.

### Sample

Extension: Newspaper headline matching

**Aim:** To provide further skimming practice, using short newspaper articles.

**Preparation.** Choose between five and 10 short newspaper articles. The number of articles you choose will depend on how much time you wish the activity to take. Cut the headlines off the articles, stick them onto a sheet of paper and stick all the articles, minus their headlines, onto another sheet of paper, making sure that you mix up the order of either the headlines or the articles. Make one copy of each sheet for every group of students. To ensure that this activity focuses more on skimming than scanning, choose articles with headlines that don't contain obvious clues like names or places.

**Procedure.** Put the class into groups of 3-5 students. Give one copy of each sheet to every group. Tell the students to match each headline to the correct article by skimming the articles for the main idea. Tell them that it is a race and that they should work as quickly as possible. This will make the students skim the articles rather than read them carefully. Have the students read the choices 1-3, skim the article for thirty seconds and then circle the choice 1, 2 or 3 they think is correct. Be strict with the time limit, encouraging the students to skim the text. Check the answers as a class. Explain why the incorrect answers are wrong.

An important life skill for MA students is the capacity to draw appropriate and guarded conclusions from evidence and information given to them, to criticize claims made by others on the basis of the evidence put forward, and to distinguish opinion from evidence-based statements.

From the analysis of these texts the researchers found it possible to frame a number of recommendations for classroom teachers in selecting them properly. These are:

- Have a clear idea of your audience, including age, background knowledge, interest in your topic, reason for reading this text.
- Define the purpose of the text explicitly. Is the purpose to inform, for example, or to promote the role of an organization?
- Carefully select which topics are going to be used to achieve the purpose of the text. This is a serious question whenever the purpose of the text is not explicitly to inform the reader of, for example, the current situation in country x as a result of disaster y.
- Decide what the relationship between you and the student is going to be. Do you wish it to be somewhat distant, or do you wish to involve MA students through the use of appropriate structures? What other methods of personalization can be introduced to involve the student in the subject.
- Look through an overall structure for the text, in relation to the message to be conveyed, the audience, and the relationship to be established with the students. Is it more appropriate to structure the text as a narrative with examples, an abstract-example pattern, according to geographical areas, chronologically, a question/answer pattern, or a problem/solution structure.
- Consider the level of abstraction required in the text. If the level of abstraction is high, information load will be increased. Consider carefully how and where clear examples which characterize the abstractions can be introduced.
- What typeface, layout, illustrations, and other physical characteristics of the text (such as indenting sections of the text, bullet points, bold face or italics) can be used to effectively enhance the accessibility of the text?

## DISCUSSION

A great number of researchers in education find the task of selecting reading materials for forming reading skills in EFL class to be challenging. Therefore, selecting texts should be a thoughtful process. Literature review revealed that there are a few approaches to this issue.

Lotherington-Woloszyn [3] thinks that it would be boring to read it if a text is not interesting to the learner. Similarly, Fox [4] states that the first step for selecting reading materials is to find texts that appeal to students. Both Gebhard [5] and Papalia [6] share an opinion that reading materials for EFL class should be selected on the basis of students' interests. Melekhina [7] points out the high potential of interesting texts in forming reading skills in EFL class. Amankulova [8] claims that active reading skills of EFL learners can be efficiently developed through reading

materials of high interest to the learners. In Brown's standpoint, texts should be selected thoroughly so that these texts could encourage students to extensively read [9].

Another factor that influences the selection of reading materials is students' level. This point of view is supported by a few scholars who suggest that the educator should need to know which materials are suitable for the students' level [10, 11]. Gebhard joins this group of researchers asserting that the text selected for EFL class should not go beyond the students' level [5].

The importance of considering students' needs in the selection of reading materials for EFL class is frequently underlined by the researchers. Gebhard says that teachers should always take into consideration students' needs before making any decisions about the course content [5]. Likewise, Gray [12] underlines that the EFL teacher should be aware of students' needs so that to be able to help them fulfill these needs by providing appropriate reading materials. According to Bocharova [13], students might have individual needs alongside with common ones while doing a reading course.

Students' background knowledge can be regarded as another significant criterion for selecting appropriate materials for reading in EFL class. Smith, for example, affirms that reading cannot be separated from the readers' previous knowledge [14]. In Fox's viewpoint, background knowledge is an important part of the students' ability to read and understand a particular text. This is why it is the EFL teacher's responsibility to provide the students with the information required for comprehending a particular text [4].

Literature review showed that there had been made a good many attempts to find different criteria for selecting reading materials for the EFL class, although no researches dedicated to the investigated problem have been made so far. In this study, the authors present their point of view and evidence that text difficulty can serve as a valid criterion for selecting reading materials for forming reading skills in EFL class.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the issue of selecting reading materials for EFL class was under focus. Text difficulty was proved to be a valid criterion for selecting reading materials for forming reading skills in EFL class. The findings might be of general interest to all those who need to assess the "difficulty" or "accessibility" of a text for any of the purposes listed in the introduction to the paper.

It should be also taken into account that with English being taught throughout the world, it is not possible to have reading materials (texts) appropriate for all learners in all contexts. Teachers themselves are encouraged to add to these factors and to develop their own lists of criteria for their own specific situations [1]. If the instructor carefully selects pertinent reading material for his class, students are more likely to be interested in the class and will probably be anxious to use diverse strategies to comprehend the material [3].

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