Eleventh Grade Comprehension Questions in a Palestinian Context: A Textbook Analysis of Linguistic Phrases

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Abstract

Recognizing the importance of the comprehension questions in EFL, the study aims to analytically describe comprehension questions in English for Palestine Eleventh Grade English Textbook to reveal their compatibility with Barrett's five higher thinking skills levels, the linguistic equivalence of the 281 questions, and higher thinking questions compatibility with the English for the Palestinian Ministry of Education's syllabus. The analysis revealed that there are real discrepancies between the levels of higher thinking skills levels of questions in students' textbook and the syllabus and that the linguistic and that the linguistics phrases were either under or over used.

Key words: EFL reading comprehension , EFL reading comprehension questions, higher thinking skills, Barrett reading comprehension taxonomy

Introduction

The pre reading, while reading and post-reading questions in schools Palestinian English textbooks constitutes the major block of questions used in the classroom followed by oral questions from teachers directed to students. However, not all textbook authors assure a fair distribution of these questions according to the higher thinking skills level and a fair distribution of their linguistic phrases. Their main concern is rather to write questions which cover the passages in textbooks regardless of their level and their linguistic phrases. Therefore, an analysis of the linguistic equivalents of these questions is necessary to make sure the textbooks are delivering on their premises. Many have proposed taxonomies for comprehension questions and their linguistic equivalents which integrate reading comprehension and higher thinking skills which help to make these taxonomies function as standards in the evaluation of these questions. Examples of these taxonomies are suggested by: Gray, Herber, Peason & Jonhson, Raphaer Bloom and Barrett (1997) as cited in Sunggingwati, 2003). The researcher used Barrett's taxonomy to analyze 281 reading comprehension questions in Palestine's the 11th grade English textbook to identify the most and least frequent linguistic phrases. The linguistic equivalence of each question was also examined to find out the distribution of the questions over the five higher thinking categories according to Barrett's Taxonomy. Another objective of this research is to discover the compatibility of percentages of the questions with the objectives of the syllabus for the eleventh grade English textbook.

Review of Literature

Comprehension questions have served very important roles in foreign language teaching and learning which makes it inevitable for researchers to conduct further investigation to evaluate them. Using Bloom's Taxonomy, Alul (2002) analyzed the questions in the eighth grades of an English language textbook, workbook and a story and he found that 51% of the questions in the student book were under the lower levels, 49% were of higher levels. Sixty six percent of the workbook questions were of lower levels, 34% were of higher levels while 78% of the story questions, were of higher level and 22 % were of lower level.

The fact that questions have served as an important and accurate means for teaching and learning a second language is a valuable opportunity for researchers to conduct studies in order to evaluate the questions raised by the textbooks. In the current research summaries of a number of these studies are discussed. Sunggingwati (2003), analyzed the questions in *Let's learn English* based on Barrett's Taxonomy and found that 79% of these questions were literal or of lower level. Inamullah (2011) analyzed 440 minutes of teacher talk at a secondary school using Bloom's Taxonomy. The findings were the following: 67% of these questions were knowledge-based, 23% comprehension, 7 % Application, 2 % analysis, 1% synthesis, with no evaluation questions.

A year later, Abu Humos (2012) conducted a research on the questions used by the 12th grade *English for Palestine* textbook according to Barrett Taxonomy and found that 59.5 % of the

questions are literal, 13.6 % were reorganization, 10% inferential, 13.6% evaluation and 2.7% were appreciation questions. When the researcher compared them to their syllabus he found a disparity since the distribution in the syllabus is as follows: 30.7 % should be literal, 19.2 % reorganization, 23 % inferential, 15.3 % evaluation and the appreciation level forms 11.5 % of the syllabus objectives.

Hunaifi (2008) conducted an interesting study analyzing the 40 reading comprehension questions of the academic reading test 1 on IELTS module using Barrett's Taxonomy and he found that the questions are divided into 2 levels: literal and inferential ones.

Methodology
Research Statement

There is a common belief among scholars and university professors that students who have joined universities recently are incapable of answering higher level questions believing that the main cause behind this is that these students were not exposed to questions of this type at school whether from the teacher or in the textbook. Thus, the researcher wishes to examine whether or not if the textbook questions are partially responsible for this situation by considering their linguistic equivalence (phrases) and to what extent the phrases used are fairly distributed.

Purpose of the study

The present study aimed at analyzing the linguistic equivalence of the English reading comprehension questions for Palestine's eleventh grade English textbook. Based on Barrett Taxonomy of higher order thinking skills, the study attempted to find out to what extent the questions and their linguistic equivalence match the five categories of the taxonomy and their subcategories respectively. Also, the researcher analyzed the questions in respect to their matchability with the syllabus's objectives. Another aim of he researcher was also to discover if the reading comprehension questions designed for high school students are really compatible with higher order thinking skills. Recommendations will be made for the text book designers and teachers to help make the questions function effectively as tools for activating student thinking by using them as indicators of the students levels of thinking and understanding.

The Significance of the Study

The central role that questions play in the teaching and learning process encourages us as researchers to verify whether the questions raised by the textbooks reflects higher thinking skills. Analyzing these questions is crucial for both academic purposes and life.

This study is significant since it deals with an essential component of language textbook questionings. Some scholars believe that what we ask is what we get, and therefore if we want to get answers of high level from our students, we have to be sure about the nature of our questions, what languages or what linguistic equivalence are used informing these questions. Another

significance of this research lies in the fact that this study is the first research conducted on the Palestinian English curriculum and which explores the linguistic equivalence of the questions.

Research Design

The descriptive method was used to analyze and evaluate reading comprehension questions in the eleventh grade English for Palestine students' textbook according to Barrett taxonomy. The 281 reading questions were evaluated in order to decide whether they are fairly distributed over the five levels of Barrett's higher order thinking skills taxonomy. The researcher also examined the linguistic equivalence of these questions to see if they are compatible with the subcategories of the mentioned taxonomy. The researcher also applied Barrett Taxonomy to the 23 objectives of the eleventh grade syllabus then compared the percentages of the syllabus with those of the questions in order to see if the results of the questions analysis match the objectives of the syllabus. Numbers and percentages of the questions were computed and tabulated.

A copy of Barrett's Taxonomy and the English for Palestine syllabus are attached in Appendix A and B.

The Research Questions

1. What are the distributions of the comprehension questions over the five higher thinking skills for Palestine's eleventh grade English textbook?
2. What are the percentages of linguistic phrases of the comprehension questions used in each of the subcategories of the taxonomy?
3. Are there any significant differences between the distribution of the eleventh grade objectives in the syllabus and the questions at the five higher thinking levels?

Results

Question 1. What are the distributions of the comprehension questions over the five higher thinking skills for Palestine's eleventh grade English textbook?

Figure 1.

The distribution of the 11th grade comprehension questions over the five higher thinking skills levels

Level of questions	No of the questions	The percentage of the question
Literal comprehension	157	55.5%
Reorganization	50	17.4%
Inferential	32	11.2%
Evaluation	25	8.7%
Appreciation	17	6.2%

Total	281	100%

The results show that the literal questions represent the highest level of the comprehension questions raised by the textbook with a percentage of 55.67% which may be attributed to the fact that textbook designers when dealing with a comprehension text focus on questions that cover "the material" without paying a lot of attention to the language of the question forgetting the level of higher thinking skills' issues and the linguistic phrase used. Abu Humos (2013) found out that regarding the twelfth grade English for Palestine textbook 55.5% of the questions were literal level ones, while 17.4% represented the reorganization questions in the textbook. As regards the higher levels, the percentages started to fall; For example, the inferential level is represented with 11.2%, the evaluation questions 8.7% and finally the appreciation level is represented with 6.02%. The researcher believes that levels of higher thinking skills vary according to academic levels questions.

Question 2. What are the percentages of linguistic phrases for each of the subcategories of the taxonomy used in questions?

Analysis of the Linguistic phrases of the comprehension questions

Figure 2.
Analysis of the Literal level

Linguistic phrases	Identify	find	Recall	describe	what caused	point out	complete	List
No. of questions	31	22	60	12	15	6	5	6
Percentage	11.0	7.8	21.3	4.2	5.3	2.1	1.7	2.1

This level is the most occurring with 55.5% of the total number of the comprehension questions in the eleventh grade English textbook. However, the analysis of the linguistic equivalence has revealed the following: the questions are not fairly distributed over the subcategories of the taxonomy. The most occurring questions in this category are the "recall" ones with 21.3 %., the 'Identify' questions comprising 11.0%. The least occurring questions were both categories 'point out' and 'list' with 2.1%.

Figure 3.
Analysis of the Reorganization level

Linguistic phrases	compare	para-phrase	pronoun references	Order	correct	Draw	Write	Turn

No. of questions	11	17	12	1	5	2	1	1
Percentage	3.9	6.0	4.2	0.3	1.7	0.7	0.3	0.3

The reorganization level which represents 17.4 % of the five levels shows a predominance of the 'paraphrase' questions with 6.0 % followed by 'pronoun' references with 4.2%. The least occurring questions are 'write', 'turn and 'order' with 0.3% each and "draw" with 1.3% which is not mentioned in the taxonomy but showed up in the analysis.

Figure 4.
Analysis of the Inferential level

Linguistics phrases	Predict	Guess	Match	characterize	could	Suggest
No. of questions	8	11	8	2	1	2
percentage	2.8	3.9	2.8	0.7	0.3	0.7

The inferential level questions represented 11.2 % compared with the other four higher thinking skills. The most occurring of the subcategories is "guess" with 3.9% usually recommended as a linguistic phrase to be used in questions and the least occurring is 'suggest' with 0.3% which means each represents one question in the textbook.

Figure 5.
Analysis of the Evaluation level

Linguistic phrases	in your opinion	do you agree	tone
No. of questions	14	6	5
Percentage	4.9	2.1	1.7

This level represents 8.7% of the total number of questions. The analysis revealed that 'in your opinion' is represented with 4.9%, and 2.1% for "do you agree". The "tone of the writer" is represented with 1.7 %.but it does not show in the taxonomy.

Figure 6.
Analysis of the Appreciation level

Linguistic phrases	do you agree	do you know anyone	Identification	emotional response
No. of questions	2	3	10	3
Percentage	0.7	1.0	3.5	1.0

Finally, this level of questions is represented with 6.02% of the total number of questions. It has the following distribution over its subcategories: "Identification" with 3.5%., "do you know anyone "and "emotional response sub level with 1.0%, each and 'do you agree' with 0.7. The distribution of the comprehension questions over the 5 level of Barrett's Taxonomy is not achieved nor are the sublevels in terms of the linguistic phrases.

Question 3: Are there any significant differences between the distribution of eleventh grade objectives in the syllabus and the questions at the five higher thinking levels?

Discussion

Distribution of the syllabus objectives and the textbook questions over the five higher thinking skills categories

Figure 7

Level of the taxonomy	The percentages of the syllabus	The percentages according to the results	The differences in the percentages
Literal	30.6%	55.5%	24.9%
Reorganization	19.2%	17.4%	1.8%
Inferential	19.2%	11.2%	8.0 %
Evaluation	23%	8.7%	14.3%
Appreciation	7.6%	6.2%	1.4%

As Figure 7 shows, the results of the analysis of the percentages of the comprehension questions diverge from the ones recommended by the syllabus. The syllabus proposes the literal level to be 30.7%. In the textbook, the questions are represented with 55.5%. Regarding the reorganization type the findings show some compatibility with the syllabus. A serious discrepancy shows up in the third and fourth levels the inferential level is represented with only 17.4% and the syllabus proposes the percentage to be 19.2%. The differences in the percentage of the evaluation level in the syllabus is 23% and the actual presentation of this level in the questions is 8.7% with 14.3% difference. The appreciation level is represented with 7.6% in the syllabus while in the textbook with 6.02%. which reveals 1.4 % difference.

Recommendations

1. Modifications of the distribution of comprehension questions in the textbook over the five levels and the sublevels of the taxonomy higher thinking skills since the eleventh grade is considered an upper advanced level.

2. Since Barrett's Taxonomy proved to be a valid tool when evaluating instructional questions whether written or spoken , teachers and curricula designers need to be trained to use them effectively when directing questions to students or when developing textbooks' questions.

3. Since there are discrepancies between the objectives of the English course syllabus and the question; it is recommended that compatibility be restored in the redevelopment of course textbooks.

4. It is also recommended that studies be conducted on other grades as well in order to verify the validity of the conclusions drawn by the present study.

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Omar Abu Humos is a university assistant professor of applied linguistics at Alquds University Department of English- Palestine. Dr. Omar participated in developing and designing the first Palestinian English curricula. His published researches focus on the English reading comprehension.

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Appendix A
Barrett's major five reading skills in details

1. Literal Comprehension
1.1 Recognition
1.2 Details
1.3 Main Ideas
1.4 Sequence
1.5 Comparison
1.6 Cause and Effect
1.7 Character Traits

2. Reorganization
2.1 Classifying
2.2 Outlining
2.3 Summarizing
2.4 Synthesizing

3. Inferential Comprehension
3.1 Supporting Details
3.2 Main Ideas
3.3 Sequence
3.4 Comparisons
3.5 Cause and Effect
3.6 Character Traits
3.7 Predicting Outcomes
3.8 Interpreting Figurative Language

4. Evaluation
4.1 Judgments of Reality or Fantasy
4.2 Fact or Opinion
4.3 Adequacy and Validity
4.4 Appropriateness
4.5 Worth, Desirability and Acceptability

5. Appreciation
5.1 Emotional Response to the Content
5.2 Identification with Characters or Incidents
5.3 Reactions to the Author's Use of Language
5.4 Imagery

Appendix B

The 23 reading comprehension skill objectives in the 11 grade syllabus

1. Answer factual, inferential, judgment or evaluation questions
2. Read familiar material with correct pronunciation and   intonation
3. Recognize pronoun referents

1.   Generate questions about reading text

2.   Summarize reading text

3.   Make predictions about reading text

4.   Make inferences about reading text

5.   Develop awareness of synonyms and antonyms

6.   Develop awareness of semantic fields (word mapping)

7.   Identify the main idea of reading text

8.   Identify supporting details

9.   Distinguish main idea from supporting details

10. Recognize rhetorical markers and their functions

11. Comprehend visual survival materials

12. Deduce meaning of unfamiliar words from context

13. Skim to obtain gist or general impression of text or graphics

14. Distinguish fact from opinion

15. Infer mood and author's attitude or tone

16. Scan for information from texts and realia (ads, menus, schedule, calendar, flight information and tickets, etc

17. Interpret information presented in diagrammatic display

18. Relate text for setting, theme, characters, etc

19. Extract and synthesize information from several sources to present in into expository form

23. Evaluate text for accuracy of information, soundness of argument, etc.