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Task Types of Reading Texts in EFL Textbooks

Abstract

The teaching of the reading skill in foreign language education has been researched widely. Yet only few academic papers focus on the categorisation of questions and tasks accompanying reading comprehension texts in English as a foreign language textbooks.

The paper presents the research conducted on the reading syllabus of the latest edition of a global EFL textbook series, *Solutions*.¹ Based on Freeman's (2014) taxonomy of comprehension question types, we give an account of our own research on the types of tasks found in the volumes under scrutiny. Our findings show that there are tasks belonging to each major category (*Content, Language, Affect*) of Freeman's taxonomy.

We also argue that Freeman's categorisation needs to be modified: the last one of the three major categories (*Affect*) is proposed to be renamed and supplemented with a new subcategory that we call '*Creation*', whereby language learners are required to perform a high-level cognitive task based on the topic of the reading. This modification could allow for the inclusion of tasks that the selected textbook series calls 'internet research' and 'project', whose aim is to enhance learners' involvement in the topic of the reading by asking them to search for data and collect relevant information about the topic.

Keywords: reading comprehension tasks, taxonomy, EFL, textbooks, content analysis

1 Introduction

The reading skill is considered a necessity even in the digital era. From an early age in primary school, everybody is exposed to reading texts of various kinds ranging from schoolbook readings, internet websites, printed or electronic books to scientific texts. Reading is an inevitable skill to function properly in a society not only in one's mother tongue (henceforth L1) but more and more often in a foreign language (henceforth FL) as well. In the global village of today (McLuhan 1962), English is the international means of communication; therefore, English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) courses, let alone teacher training programmes at universities and colleges, should put substantial emphasis on the systematic teaching of the reading skill.

Reading comprehension is a complex process by which we understand the text we read (Alderson 2000:3). The comprehension of a text is the purpose of reading it, that is why we want to read it. Reading comprehension does not develop "naturally", it is a taught skill which

¹ See Selected Textbooks

requires structured instruction in any language including one's mother tongue and also in a foreign language.

In general, textbooks undeniably play an enormous role in enhancing learners' text comprehension. The use of textbooks in foreign language classes is a common feature of EFL instruction all over the world (Hutchinson and Torres 1994:315), which justifies research on how language textbooks handle the complex issue of the teaching of reading comprehension.

The current paper presents research conducted on the reading syllabus of the global EFL textbook series, *Solutions*, from the point of view of tasks learners are to complete in connection with the reading texts in the volumes. In this paper the word 'task' is used as an umbrella term embracing all kinds of pedagogical activities that accompany a reading text. As regards the forms of these activities, some are questions like (e.g. *Are the sentences true or false?* or *What do you think?*), others are instructions beginning with words like: *answer, match, choose, read, complete, discuss* or *compare*.

The paper is divided into four major sections. After the Introduction, Section Two gives an overview of the relevant literature on the classification of question/task types used in an educational context. Section Three presents the details of our own research including the research findings and their discussion. Finally, in Section Four, conclusions are drawn, and further research avenues are proposed.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 General taxonomies of the levels of thinking

Any historical overview of such categorisation should begin with the classical taxonomy developed by Bloom et al. (1956), familiarly referred to as Bloom's taxonomy. Its primary goal was to describe general intellectual behaviour required from university students to answer test questions in various disciplines. Bloom's six levels of behaviour (*Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis* and *Evaluation*) are ordered in a hierarchy moving from lower order cognitive skills to higher order skills.

In an educational context, questions that recall already learned material, that is, questions which reveal whether the learner knows or does not know the particular answer, belong to the *Knowledge* category, where minimal cognitive activity is required to perform the task. *Comprehension* is slightly more demanding for the learner, who understands the communication, and is able to perform certain tasks, for example, reorganisation, reordering or interpreting parts of the text. At the *Application* level, the learner is capable of using already learned material in a particular context. At the level of *Analysis*, an even higher level of cognitive activity, the learner possesses the ability to break the given whole down into its components, to restructure the material, or distinguish relevant data from irrelevant data. At the fifth level (*Synthesis*), the learner is capable of putting parts together and creating a coherent whole of the parts. According to Bloom, the highest level of thinking (*Evaluation*) means that the learner has the cognitive ability to judge or even criticise a material from a given point of view.

The influence of Bloom's taxonomy has been intense all over the educational sector and even beyond. Almost five decades passed before Bloom's taxonomy was modified by one of his former colleagues, David Krathwohl, who worked on the original taxonomy as well (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001). The revised taxonomy kept the hierarchical ordering of cognitive skills and the number of levels. However, some alterations were made to it (see Figure 1

below). At first glance, it is noticeable that while Bloom used nouns to name the levels, Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) opted for gerundive forms. A conceptual difference between Bloom's and the revised taxonomy is that Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) created a taxonomy of *Knowledge*, the necessary basis for all the other cognitive activities. As a result, the lowest level of cognition in the revised taxonomy is *Remembering*. Instead of Bloom's *Comprehension* Anderson & Krathwohl used *Understanding*. They also swapped the order of the third and the fourth levels. The revised taxonomy imports the category of *Evaluation* from Bloom's Taxonomy in the form of *Evaluating*. And at the highest level of cognitive skills, Anderson & Krathwohl introduced a new category: *Creating*, which means that the learner is able to produce something new, to design something original. In our view, the changes made by Anderson and Krathwohl have improved the original taxonomy for the following reasons: a) by separating knowledge from the skills and abilities the taxonomy has become more homogeneous, b) by introducing *Creating* the most complex cognitive activity has been incorporated in the classification.

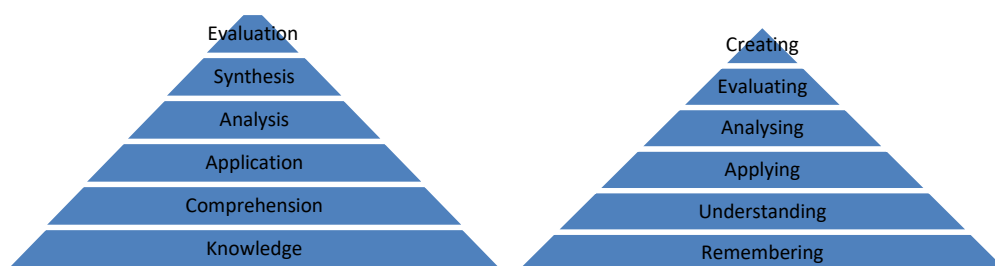


Figure 1. Our comparison of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) and the Revised Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001)

2.2 Taxonomies specific to reading

Only four years after Bloom's taxonomy, William S. Gray, a literacy advocate of his era, set up a model with four major aspects of reading: *Word Perception*, *Comprehension*, *Reaction to what is read* and *Fusion of new ideas and old*. By the first aspect, Gray (1960) meant recognition of meaning, comprehension stands for the recognition of main ideas, the third aspect encompasses the personal reflection of the reader, and the fourth represents the highest cognitive level, when the reader integrates new ideas with previous ones. He believed that it was important to cultivate all the four of these basic aspects of reading from an early age. His model is visually represented in concentric circles with a flower in the middle whose petals, similarly to a compass, show in every direction. Symbolically, it means that it is applicable to reading for different purposes and in various fields (in Robinson 1985: 35).

Another influential comprehension taxonomy of the sixties was developed by Barrett (cited in Clymer 1968). This comprehensive and detailed taxonomy aimed at teaching reading comprehension by incorporating not only cognitive but also affective aspects of reading. The taxonomy consists of five major levels, each of which is divided into several further subcategories; between four and thirteen, which demonstrates the sophisticated nature of the system. The lowest level of cognition is called *Literal Comprehension*, when the learner recognises or recalls explicitly stated information in the text. At the *Reorganizational Level* the learner is required to analyse, classify or organise information explicitly available in the text. At the *Inferential Comprehension* level, however, the information is not explicitly stated, it

must be inferred or predicted. At the *Evaluation* level, the learner is prompted to make a judgement based on a list, a set of criteria or values. At the *Appreciation* level, personal response is expected from the learner.

2.3 Taxonomies specific to reading in a foreign language

All the aforementioned taxonomies were meant to be applicable either in a multidisciplinary domain (see Bloom (1956), Bloom and Krathwohl (2001)) or in an L1 reading context (Gray (1960), Barrett (1968) as cited in Clymer (1968)). Nuttall (1982) set up a taxonomy of question types based on the specific skills required from the L2 learner to answer the questions accompanying texts. “It is also possible to classify questions according to the skills they require from the reader” (Nuttall 1996: 187).

In Nuttall’s taxonomy, the first category is *Questions of literal comprehension*; answers to these questions are directly and explicitly found in the text. The second category is *Questions involving reorganisation or reinterpretation*; the answers to these questions require the learner to obtain information from the text. Category three, *Questions of inference* are a bit more difficult than type two as the answers are implied and not stated in the text. Category four, *Questions of evaluation* require the learner to give thoughtful judgements about the text in terms of what the particular question contains. Category five, *Questions of personal response* ask the reader to react to the text. The sixth category, *Questions concerned with how writers say what they mean* was introduced by Nuttall. Such questions direct the learners’ attention to word use, style, text organisation aiming at making readers aware of writers’ choices.

In sum, we can say that Nuttall’s taxonomy of foreign language text comprehension is really comprehensive for it encompasses the text (categories one, two and three), the reader (categories four and five) as well as the author (category six). Nuttall’s taxonomy heavily relies on that of Barrett with two major modifications: a) she does not have any subcategories, b) she introduces a new category (category six) in order to make learners aware of the word choices of the author and also of the cohesive devices of a text.

The current paper bases the analysis of reading comprehension task types in EFL textbooks on the taxonomy of Freeman (2014), who created her own taxonomy because none of the previous taxonomies proved suitable for categorising all the questions she found in a textbook sample (ibid p. 8). She used certain categories of previous taxonomies and compiled her own model, which she used when she analysed the reading comprehension questions in ten global English textbooks (p.12).

Categories	Comprehension question types	Description
Content questions	Textually explicit	Answer to the Q can be found stated in the text.
	Textually implicit	Answer to the Q can be found in the text but is not stated directly.
	Inferential comprehension	Answer is not stated explicitly; it is alluded to. Readers are to infer it from the text.
Language questions	Reorganisation	Reader should reorder, rearrange or transfer information in the text.

	Lexical	Focus on vocabulary.
	Form	Grammar-related tasks.
Affect questions	Personal response	Reader's personal reaction to the text; likes/dislikes. Reader can be asked to transfer the situation to their own cultural context. Highly subjective answers.
	Evaluation	Make a judgement of the text/information, provide a justification.

Table 1. Freeman's (2014) taxonomy of reading comprehension questions

Her categorisation is new in that she divides the questions into three major categories on the basis of what aspect of the text the questions target at: *Content* questions, *Language* questions and *Affect* questions. Within the *Content* questions category, there is a hierarchy in terms of the level of thinking needed to answer the questions. The first subcategory is *Textually explicit* questions the answers to which can be found explicitly in the text. In the second type of questions, the answers are not stated explicitly in the text, but they are still there, in a different form. In the case of the most demanding *Content* question-type, the answer cannot be found in the text either explicitly or implicitly, rather it is only alluded to, so readers need to activate their background knowledge and make connections.

The second major category is *Language* questions, which embrace three well distinguishable areas of language without any hierarchical ordering. *Re-organisational* questions require the reader to reorder, rearrange the information in the text. *Lexical* questions target vocabulary items in the text, and readers are to guess the meaning of words or match words and definitions. The last question type of this category (*Form*) focuses on grammar. Learners may be asked to negate a sentence or explain the particular tense form of a verb. The final major category includes *Affect* questions with only two sub-categories here: *Personal response* and *Evaluation*. *Personal response* questions require the readers to verbalise their personal reaction to the text; whether they like it or not, whether they find it interesting or not. The other sub-category of the *Affect* questions is *Evaluation*. It expects the reader to make a judgement or an assessment of the text, often by giving a justification for their choice. Of the two *Affect* question-types *Evaluation* is of a higher level as it requires the reader to give justification for their choice based on some criteria.

3 The description of our research

3.1 Aims and Hypotheses

The goals of the research were manifold. First, we wanted to see if the reading comprehension tasks were geared to the level of the learners. Second, we intended to test whether Freeman's taxonomy was applicable to the selected textbook series or it needed any modification. Third, we aimed to direct the attention of EFL researchers, teacher trainers and colleagues to the need for the considerate and systematic use of various task types in order to improve learners' reading comprehension skills.

Based on the assumptions that task types and the levels of textbooks are strongly correlated, we formulated the following hypotheses.

- A) Within the *Content* category, *Textually explicit* tasks are the most prevalent at lower levels, whereas at higher levels *Inferential* tasks are more frequent.
- B) As regards the *Language* category, it is expected that tasks on *Form* outnumber those on *Lexical* and *Re-organisational* tasks at lower levels.
- C) As regards the *Affect* category, *Personal response* tasks were expected to be more common at lower levels, whereas *Evaluation* tasks were expected to be more frequent at higher levels.
- D) The range of tasks, that is the number of task types learners are presented in the selected textbooks, do not depend on the levels of the books.

3.2 The selected textbooks

For the sake of this study, the global English textbook series *Solutions* (Falla & Davies 2017) was selected. In Hungary, the Ministry of Education compiles a list of textbooks that are recommended for use in public education institutions. The textbook series *Solutions* is on the list, which means that a great number of pupils meet the series during their studies in primary and secondary schools. The textbooks have a similar structure: each consists of nine units of 10 pages. The reading syllabus covers two pages in each unit, which means that overall, 20% of a unit is devoted to the teaching of the reading skills. All the five volumes (elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced levels) were analysed, which makes it possible to compare the task types found in each volume. To the best of our knowledge, there is no other similar comparative study with the same focus in the literature.

3.3 Method and procedure

In our research, qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) was used, which proved suitable for the purpose. First, we marked every reading of the reading syllabus in each textbook. In some units, two or three short texts comprise the reading section, which explains the higher number of texts than that of readings below. As Table 2 shows, there are nine readings in each volume, and altogether ninety-two texts in the series. *Nota bene*, there are texts not only in the reading section but also in the sections teaching vocabulary or writing. These texts were disregarded as they serve purposes other than the teaching of reading comprehension.

Textbook	Number of readings	Number of texts
Solutions - Elementary	9	23 (1-5)
Solutions - Pre-Intermediate	9	16 (1-4)
Solutions - Intermediate	9	15 (1-5)
Solutions - Upper-Intermediate	9	17 (1-3)
Solutions - Advanced	9	21 (1-4)
Total	45	92

Table 2. Number of readings and texts in the textbooks

After marking the reading texts, we numbered and categorised the tasks accompanying each text. Following Freeman’s research procedure, we excluded from the analysis all the so-called pre-reading tasks because the aim of such tasks is to engage the learner with the topic and to activate prior knowledge, which means that these activities do not serve to increase reading comprehension skills directly.

During the numbering of the tasks, we realised that a small minority of the tasks (twelve) did not facilitate learners’ reading comprehension skills, so they were disregarded, and labelled as irrelevant in our context. For example, in the pre-intermediate volume (p. 47) a task asks learners to act out an interview prepared earlier. Table 3 shows the number of relevant tasks broken down to levels. It can be seen that the distribution of the tasks is even, the number of tasks per volume ranges between 57 and 62.

	Solutions Elementary	Solutions Pre-Intermediate	Solutions Intermediate	Solutions Upper-Intermediate	Solutions Advanced	Total
Number of tasks	57	62	57	59	61	296

Table 3. Number of relevant tasks in the selected textbooks

The categorisation of the 296 tasks was based on Freeman’s taxonomy. However, while doing the categorisation, we realised that there were tasks which did not fit into her taxonomy. In the textbook they are called *Internet research* and *Projects*. They require learners to do their own research linked to the topic of the reading. For example: “Prepare an advert for a real or imaginary product” (Solutions Upper-Intermediate: 102). Altogether there are eight such tasks in the five volumes (see: Figure 8). To complete these tasks, learners employ high level cognitive skills such as planning, researching, organising and structuring. They create something new. As we pointed out earlier, in Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001) the highest level of cognitive skills in is called *Creating*. We imported the term with a slight modification, and supplemented Freeman’s taxonomy with an extra category called *Creation*. As a result, a new sub-category is added to Freeman’s taxonomy. Furthermore, instead of the term *Affect* we propose a new term: *Reaction*, which embraces both the affective and the cognitive aspects of the tasks in the three sub-categories (see Tables 4a and 4b).

Categories	Task types
Content	Textually explicit
	Textually implicit
	Inferential comprehension
Language	Reorganisation
	Lexical
	Form
Affect	Personal response
	Evaluation

Table 4a. Freeman’s (2014) taxonomy

Categories	Task types
Content	Textually explicit
	Textually implicit
	Inferential comprehension
Language	Reorganisation
	Lexical
	Form
Affect Reaction	Personal response
	Evaluation
	Creation

Table 4b. Our modified version of Freeman’s taxonomy

3.4 Research findings and discussion

After the categorisation of all the reading comprehension tasks, the figures of each volume were recorded in working tables and from there transferred to graphs whose horizontal axis shows the nine sub-categories. Thus, it is easier to visualise and compare the details of the findings.

3.4.1 Solutions Elementary

The graph below shows that the highest number of tasks are about lexical items in the elementary level volume, and three categories (*Textually implicit*, *Form* and *Creation*) share the lowest number of tasks. In the *Content* category, *Inferential* tasks outnumber the other two categories. In the *Language* category, *Lexical* task types are prevalent. In the *Reaction* category, there are eleven *Personal response* tasks, two *Creation* tasks, and there is no *Evaluation* task at all.

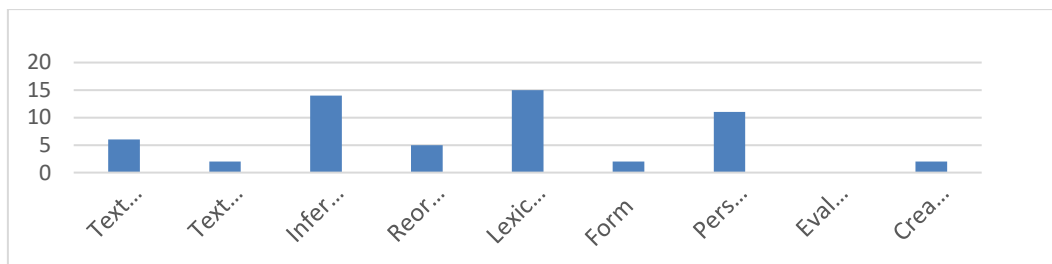


Figure 2. Reading comprehension task types in Solutions Elementary.

3.4.2 Solutions Pre-Intermediate

As regards the number of task types in the pre-intermediate volume, it is immediately apparent that there are substantially more *Inferential* and *Lexical* tasks than any other types of tasks. In the *Content* category, the number of *Textually explicit* and *Textually implicit* tasks is relatively low. In the *Language* category *Lexical* task types are the most prevalent, and there are six tasks on *Form*. In the *Reaction* category there are nine *Personal response* type tasks, and the *Creation* category is represented by only one task.

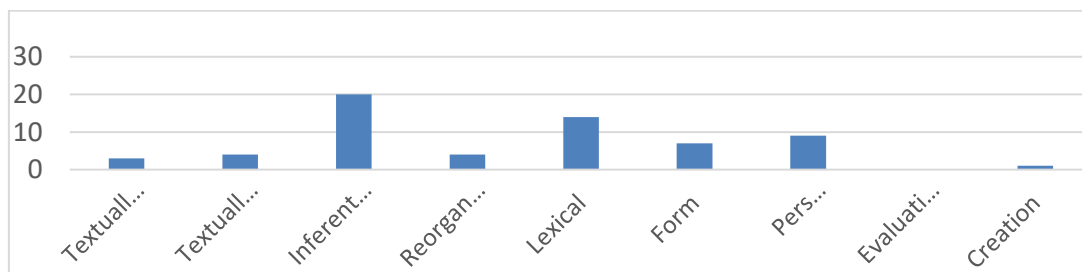


Figure 3. Reading comprehension task types in Solutions Pre-intermediate.

3.4.3 Solutions Intermediate

The graph below reveals that, similarly to the pre-intermediate volume, the highest number of tasks are those on *Inferential comprehension*. In the *Content* category there are twice as many *Textually implicit* tasks than *Textually explicit* ones. As regards the *Language* category *Lexical* tasks outnumber the other two types. In the *Reaction* category there are thirteen *Personal response* tasks and two *Creation* tasks.

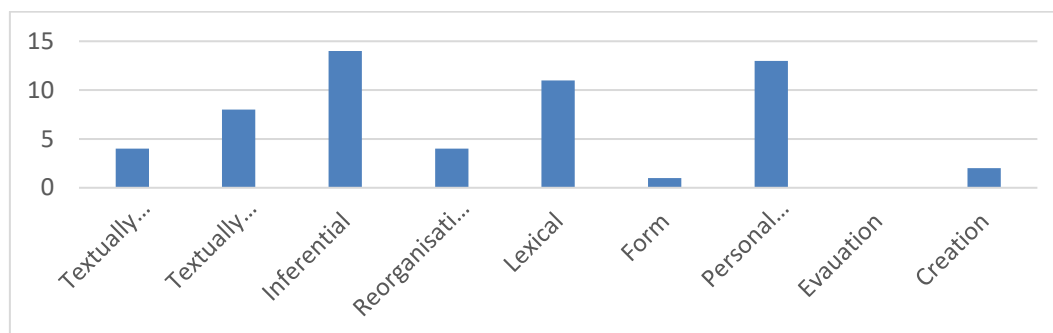


Figure 4. Reading comprehension question types in Solutions Intermediate.

As Figure 5 shows in the Upper-Intermediate volume, *Inferential* tasks outnumber *Textually implicit* let alone *Textually explicit* tasks within the *Content* category, similarly to the pre-intermediate and intermediate volumes. It can also be seen that, in the *Language* category, there are still more *Lexical* tasks than other task types. In the *Reaction* category, *Personal response* tasks prevail with fifteen items, whereas *Creation* tasks are limited to three.

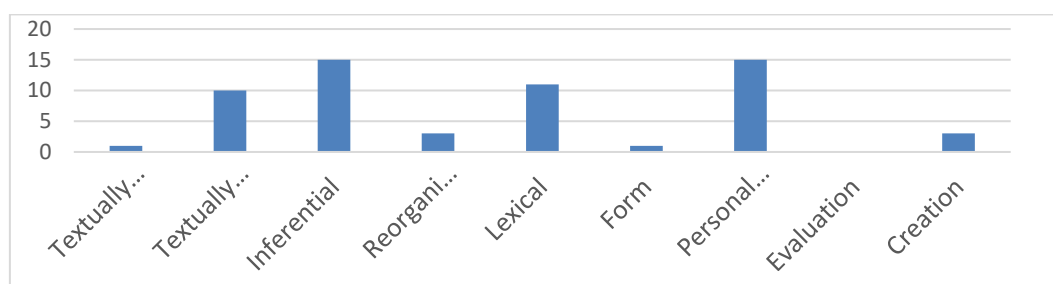


Figure 5. Reading comprehension task types in Solutions Upper-intermediate.

Figure 6 shows that there are only five task types in *Solutions Advanced*, which is dominated by *Lexical* tasks. In the *Content* category, unsurprisingly, there are no *Textually explicit* tasks, and only few *Textually implicit* tasks, whereas there are seventeen *Inferential comprehension* tasks. In the *Language* category, there are over three times more *Lexical* tasks than *Reorganisation* tasks and those on *Form* jointly. The *Reaction* category is represented by only one task type: *Personal response*. There are eleven tasks in this task type.

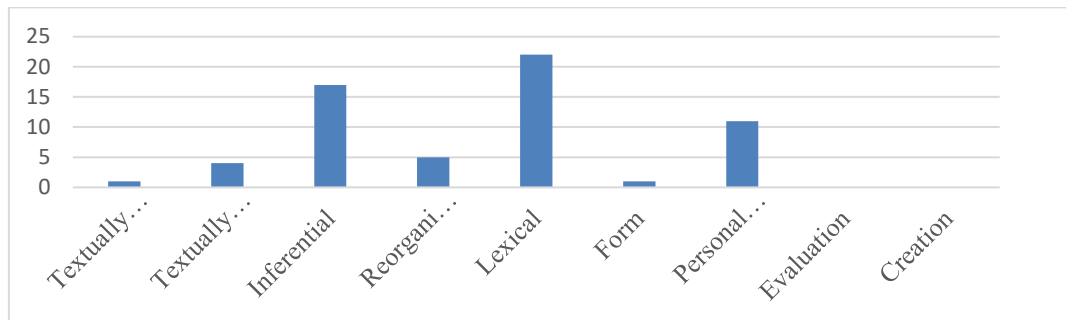


Figure 6. Reading comprehension task types in *Solutions Advanced*

Figure 7 serves as a summary graph offering a comparison of the reading comprehension task types in the five volumes of the textbook series respectively. With respect to major categories, it is noticeable that, in the *Content* category, the higher-order *Inferential* task types are more prevalent than either of the other two task types in every volume. It is also remarkable that, in the *Language* category, *Lexical* task types dominate massively over the other two categories in every volume. Unexpectedly, the series contains no *Evaluation* tasks at all. Four volumes contain the recently introduced *Creation* tasks, which need the highest order thinking skills to complete. However, surprisingly, it is the highest-level volume that does not offer any such task.

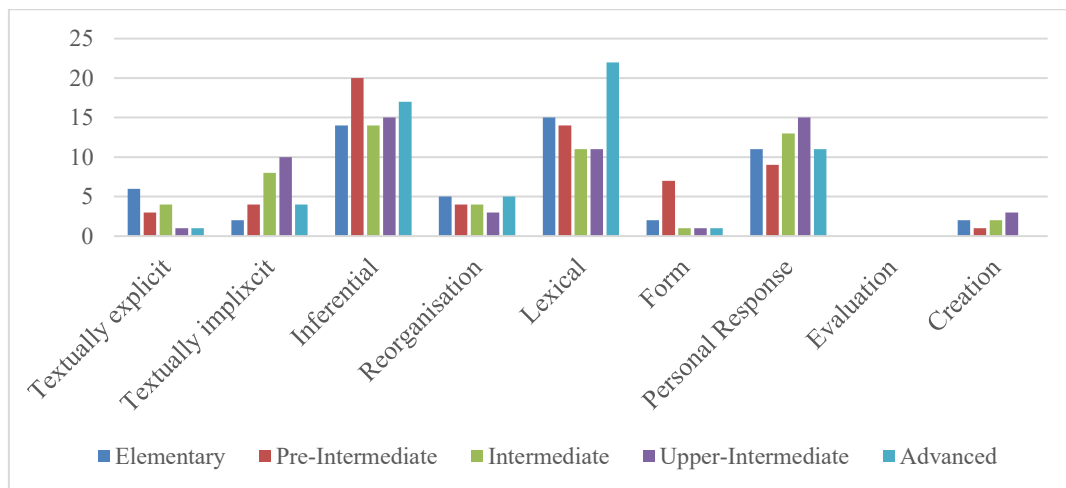


Figure 7. All reading comprehension task types in all volumes respectively.

The next comparative aspect to consider is the numbers of question-types in the series as a whole. The series is clearly dominated by *Inferential* and *Lexical* task types with eighty and seventy-three tasks respectively. There is a relatively high number of *Personal response* tasks, which means that *Solutions* provides learners with ample opportunity to express their opinions in the EFL classroom. In the *Content* category, *Textually implicit* tasks outnumber *Textually explicit* ones. In the *Language* category, there are relatively few tasks related to *Form*, which is understandable as there are specific sections devoted to grammar in the textbooks. Learners get eight opportunities to do their own research during their studies using the *Solutions* series.

However, contrary to our expectations, one category (*Evaluation*) is not represented by any task in any of the five volumes.

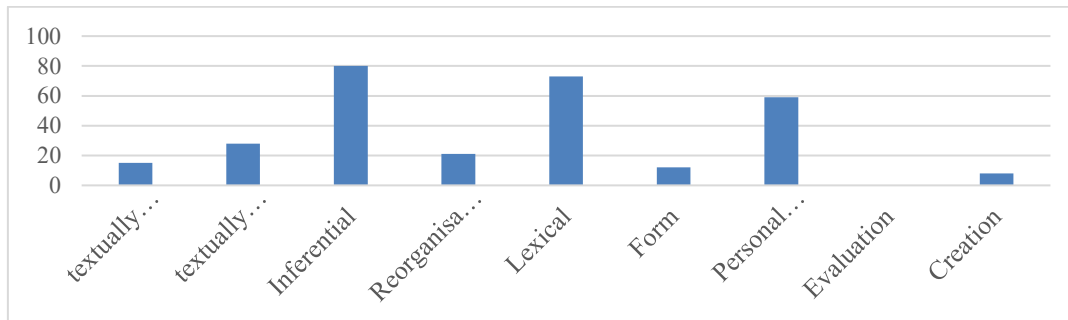


Figure 8. All question types in the series jointly

The final comparative aspect to consider is the range of the task types per unit in each volume, i. e., the number of task types in a unit. This is an important figure because it shows how many different task types learners are exposed to while they use this textbook series in their studies. The higher the figure, the better it is, as this shows that the task types are evenly distributed in the volumes. This figure is calculated out of a maximum of nine task types, which is the number of categories in the modified taxonomy used. It should be remembered that one task type (*Evaluation*) is missing from this series.

It can be seen that the range of task types is between three and six. Of the forty-five units in the five textbooks, there are three units which offer only three types of tasks, and there is a single one which has six types of tasks. The majority of units offer four or five task types. The mean of task types per volume ranges between 3.88 (Advanced) and 4.77 (Intermediate). The mean of the series as a whole is 4.41 task types per unit.

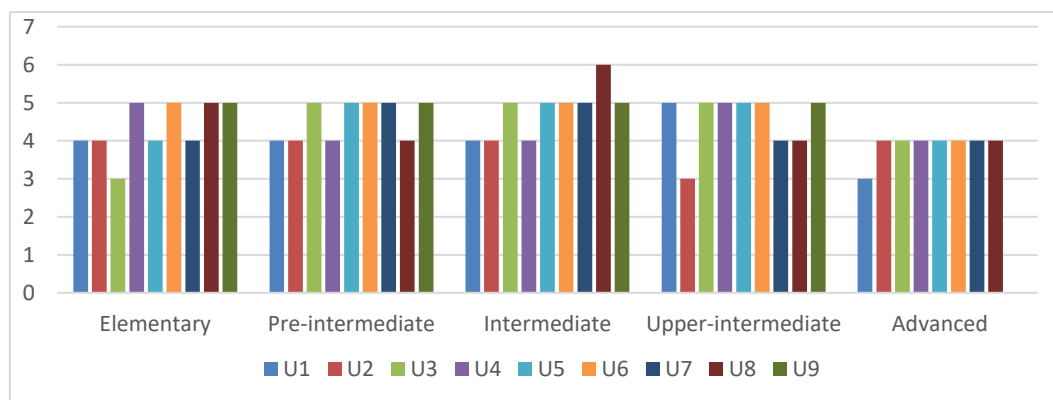


Figure 9. The range of task types per unit in the five volumes

4 Concluding remarks

Taxonomies of comprehension provide a useful springboard for analysing instructional materials from the point of view of what types and levels of comprehension tasks are available in a given textbook. So far, relatively few studies have aimed at presenting a systematic analysis of reading comprehension tasks. Our goal has been to contribute to filling this gap.

In this paper, we have reported the results of the research we carried out on the reading syllabus of a global EFL textbook series, *Solutions*. We had three goals: (i) testing the adjustment of task types to the level of the learners; (ii) assessing the applicability of Freeman's taxonomy (2014) to the selected textbook series; (iii) directing the attention of the profession to the systematic use of reading comprehension task types.

We argued that one of the three major categories of Freeman's taxonomy (2014), *Affect*, should be renamed as *Reaction*, and it should also be supplemented with a new subcategory: *Creation*. Our research findings show that in the *Solutions* series there are types belonging to each major category (*Content*, *Language*, *Reaction*), and eight out of the nine subcategories of the modified taxonomy are also represented, the only missing subcategory being *Evaluation*. The distribution of task types varies from volume to volume, but the range of tasks is relatively evenly distributed.

Our findings related to our initial hypotheses are as follows.

Hypothesis A)

Within the *Content* category *Textually explicit* tasks are the most prevalent at lower levels, whereas at higher levels *Inferential* tasks are more frequent.

This hypothesis proved true inasmuch as the Elementary volume contains the highest number of such tasks and the Upper-Intermediate and Advanced level volumes contain the fewest. However, as regards the *Inferential comprehension* tasks, we were partly wrong in that the Pre-Intermediate volume offers the greatest number of such tasks (see Figure 7).

Hypothesis B)

As regards the *Language* category, it is expected that tasks on *Form* outnumber those on *Lexical* and *Re-organisational* at lower levels.

This hypothesis turned out to be correct only in the case of the Pre-Intermediate volume, in which tasks on *Form* outnumber those on the other two sub-categories (see Figure 7).

Hypothesis C)

As regards the *Affect* category, *Personal response* tasks are expected to be more common at lower levels, whereas *Evaluation* tasks are expected to be more frequent at higher levels.

Our expectation turned out to be correct to an extreme extent: strangely enough, the series does not contain any *Evaluation* tasks at all (see Figure 7).

Hypothesis D)

The range of tasks, that is the number of task types learners are presented with in the selected textbooks, do not depend on the levels of the books.

This hypothesis was also borne out by our findings: there is no correlation between the range of task types and the levels of the textbooks (see Figure 9).

The research findings are applicable both in teaching and in testing contexts. Primarily, practising teachers and teacher trainers can enhance their teaching practice by systematically designing the use of task types in the course of teaching reading comprehension. The taxonomy presented in the current paper can be used as a checklist for assessing the task types accompanying a particular text. In addition, teachers can find out what particular task types their learners need more practice in.

Given that ours has been the first vertical analysis of this type, it can open a new research avenue in which similar analyses of other EFL textbook series or just single volumes can be carried out. Furthermore, the comparison of reading comprehension task types in textbooks of other foreign languages could also be a meaningful research direction.

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