Original Article

Evaluating the Presentation and Practice of Reading Skill in Vision 3 and its Workbook Using Two Frames of Reference: Categories of a Taxonomy and Perspectives of English Teachers

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Abstract

Textbooks provide a framework for the English language teaching curriculum. Among different skills and components covered in the ELT materials, reading comprehension is conceived as an inalienable skill required to expand the students' knowledge of the language. Reading passages are accompanied by a set of questions to check the students' comprehension and enhance their reading efficiency. Focusing on the reading sections of the newly compiled English textbook for the 12th-grade students, the current study attempted to investigate reading comprehension questions accompanying the reading passages in Vision 3 and its workbook adopting Freeman's (2014) taxonomy. Furthermore, it elicited 80 teachers' perspectives on the reading sections utilizing the relevant items from an eclectic checklist. To deepen the results, eight teachers also provided their comments. First, the reading comprehension questions in Vision 3 and its workbook were analyzed and assigned to the categories and subcategories proposed in the taxonomy. The frequency and percentage values showed that Language questions were the most frequent category in Vision 3 while Content questions were the most prevalent of all in the workbook. Among the subcategories of reading comprehension questions, Form questions were the commonest type in the student book whereas both Forma and Personal Response questions were the most frequent of all in the workbook. In addition, the results of the Kruskal Wallis test revealed a significant difference between the student book and its workbook in terms of the frequency of Content questions. The analysis of the teachers' perspectives also demonstrated their discontent with the reading sections in that book that failed to provide the students authentic texts and challenging questions and activities. Notwithstanding the dramatic positive changes in Vision 3 concerning other skills and components, the findings showed that it needed to be revisited and revised considering the reading comprehension skills and sub-skills. The study raised the material developers' consciousness about the existing reading comprehension questions in both the student book and its workbook. It further enabled the teachers to identify the missing types of questions and develop supplementary materials to enhance the students' reading comprehension skills.

Keywords: Content Questions, Language Questions, Reading, Reading Comprehension Questions, Textbook Evaluation, Vision 3, Workbook

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1. Introduction

Textbooks play a key role in the English language teaching curriculum (Richards, 2001) and present a framework for leading the teaching and learning procedures (Byrd, 2001). They act as "the visible heart of any ELT program" (Sheldon, 1988, p.237). Despite the given prominence to the textbooks, using them has its advocates and opponents (Ur, 1996). The proponents view textbooks as a tool for regulating the syllabus and organizing the class activities while the opponents believe that utilizing textbooks restrains the teachers' creativity and fails to address the students' various styles (Ur, 1996). However, there is a standpoint between the two extremes which urges the researchers to unfold their merits and demerits (Ansari & Babaii, 2002).

Accordingly, textbook evaluation seems to be essential to identifying the strengths of the available materials and compensating for their shortcomings (Ellis, 1997; Williams, 1983). This would facilitate meeting the students' needs through enhancing the teachers' awareness of the presented content, its strengths, and flaws (Mirzaei & Tabatabaei, 2017; Torki & Chalak, 2017).

Among different skills and components in the textbooks, reading comprehension is of paramount significance. Indeed, reading to derive pleasure or obtain information (Ur, 1996) is an inalienable skill required to expand one's knowledge and support their language learning (Freeman, 2014; Mckee, 2012). Reading passages are accompanied by a set of "frequent and time-honored activities" (Aebersold & Field, 1997, p.117) to check the students' comprehension and enhance their reading efficiency (Grabe, 2009; Ur, 1996).

To evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of the activities in educational resources, numerous frameworks have been used. One such model was Bloom's (1956) taxonomy in which the activities were assigned to one of the six levels arranged in terms of their cognitively demanding nature, namely Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Having drawn on this framework, a host of scholars have examined the tasks and activities in the EFL textbooks (Adli & Mahmoudi, 2017; Razmjoo & Kazempourfard, 2012; Roohani, Taheri, & Poorzanganeh, 2014). The results of these studies have pointed to the inclusion of lower-order cognitive level of the activities in such ELT textbooks as Four Corners 2 and 3 (Roohani et al., 2014), American Headway and Inside Reading (Adli & Mahmoudi, 2017), and higher-order thinking skills considered in the activities in Interchange series (Razmjoo & Kazempourfard, 2012). Nevertheless,

Bloom's taxonomy did not merely address the activities targeted at developing a particular skill (Freeman, 2014). More specifically and given the importance of the reading skill, scholars have proposed a wide range of classifications to identify the types of reading comprehension questions in the EFL textbooks (Nuttall, 1996). A more recent comprehensive framework specifically geared to analyze the reading comprehension questions was put forth by Freeman (2014). She categorized the reading comprehension activities into three major groups, namely Content, Language, and Affect. Content questions entail Explicit, Implicit, and Inferential types and elicit the students' understanding and interpretation of the information explicitly or implicitly presented in the text. Language questions comprise Reorganization, Lexical, and Form categories and target language-related comprehension. Affect questions require the students' intellectual or emotional reaction to the ideas in the text and cover Personal Response and Evaluation types.

Since the introduction of Freeman's (2014) taxonomy, few studies (Baleghizadeh & Zakervafaei, 2020) have been conducted to scrutinize and evaluate the reading comprehension sections of ELT textbooks in light of their categories and sub-categories. Aiming to respond to the call for perusing the post-reading comprehension questions across different ELT textbooks (Freeman, 2014), the primary goal of the current study was to analyze them in the newly introduced ELT textbook into the mainstream education, Vision 3. As Freeman (2014) stated, the taxonomy allows for evaluating the reading sections and reveals their assets and flaws. Furthermore, among few studies which adopted this taxonomy, no heed has been taken of comparing the student books with their accompanying workbooks (Baleghizadeh & Zakervafaei, 2020). As a result, the study also attempted to bridge this gap by focusing on Vision 3 and its workbook.

On the other hand, teachers act as valuable sources of insights for evaluating the ELT materials (Yu, 1986). As the main users of the textbooks, their awareness of the nuts and bolts of the content would enable them to make more informed decisions about the activities and tasks (McDonough & Shaw, 2003). Hence, the study further attempted to supplement the findings from the analysis of the reading comprehension questions with the discernment of the teachers involved in teaching this book concerning the reading sections.

The significance of paying attention to the reading comprehension sections lies in the fact that Vision 3 is introduced in the last grade of high school and serves as a platform for

preparing the students to fulfill the academic tasks which mainly require the ability to read general and subject-specific reading passages (Atai, 2002; Rezaee, Taase, & Alishahi, 2016). Involving the teachers in evaluating the sections devoted to this important skill provides far-reaching implications for developing and revising the newly introduced books into the mainstream ELT curriculum (Ellis, 1997). Moreover, Cunningsworth (1995) reported that "optimum use can be of their strong points, whilst their weaker areas can be strengthened through adaptation or by substituting material from other books" (p.5).

2. Literature Review

The English textbooks taught in Iranian mainstream education have been evaluated in numerous studies. Evaluating the previous generation of Iranian high school English textbooks revealed such strong points as including challenging topics (Jahangard, 2007), high-quality printing (Ghorbani, 2011), and such negative points like lack of appealing illustrations and disregarding the students' background knowledge (Ansary, 2004) and ignoring the speaking skill (Ghorbani, 2011; Jahangard, 2007).

The second group of studies have attempted to unfold the merits and demerits of the new generation of textbooks in the mainstream ELT curriculum. Bemani and Jahangard (2014) pointed to the necessity of revising the books in terms of cultural issues. In the same line, Ahmadisafa and Farahani (2016) referred to an inefficient presentation of cultural dimensions and the book's failure in developing and enhancing the students' intercultural competence. Despite these flaws, however, Nejati, Cheraghi, and Naseri (2018) confirmed that they complied with the CLT norms.

All these studies attempted to evaluate the mainstream textbooks in their totality. Evaluating the textbooks with the primary focus on distinct skills and components seems to have remained untouched. Among the wide range of skills and components that ELT textbooks cover, the reading skill seems to play a key role in developing the students' cognitive abilities (Waters, 2006). Through enhancing their reading skills, the students are empowered to identify, interpret, infer, evaluate, and synthesize the ideas and information presented in various texts; this, in turn, promotes their critical thinking skills (Liaw, 2007). In the Iranian educational context, reading is considered the primary skill to fulfill a wide range of academic tasks (Atai, 2002). Hence, the ELT textbooks introduced within

mainstream education act as a platform to stress the students' readiness to read academic texts effectively.

To make reading enjoyable, purposeful, and efficient, the passages are followed by numerous questions and activities (Masuhara, 2013). Gearing specifically to the reading skill and attempting to present a comprehensive model for evaluating the reading-related questions and activities, Freeman (2014) inquired into the reading comprehension questions and tasks in four English language teaching series, namely Headway, American File, Cutting Edge, and Inside Out and put forth a novel framework. Drawing on her taxonomy, Freeman demonstrated the dominance of Content questions in all series.

Embarking on Freeman's (2014) taxonomy, Baleghizadeh and Zakervafaei (2020) analyzed the reading comprehension questions in the Four Corners series and came up with a similar set of results. Moreover, they pointed to the significant difference among the four levels of the book in terms of Explicit, Implicit, Lexical, and Reorganization types. Throughout the entire series, the Personal Response category was shown to be the dominant type while the least frequency belonged to the Form category.

All in all, Freeman's (2014) taxonomy seems to provide a useful tool for identifying and categorizing reading comprehension questions (Charles, 2015). However, no study has yet drawn on it for evaluating reading comprehension questions in Vision 3 and its accompanying workbook. Hence, the current study aimed to analyze the reading comprehension questions in light of Freeman's (2020) taxonomy since can serve the role of a reading evaluation checklist. To complement the results, the study attempted to elicit the teachers' evaluation of this section in the student book and workbook.

3. Methodology

The study aimed to evaluate the reading section of Vision 3 and its workbook in light of Freeman's (2014) framework and from the teachers' point of view.

3.1. Design and Context of the study

The study adopted a mixed-method design. The reading comprehension questions were coded by the researcher and two other coders who were familiar with Freeman's (2014) model through conducting a content analysis. Moreover, the questionnaire items

were given to the teachers to elicit their perspectives. To deepen the results of the quantitative phase, the teachers were asked to provide their comments on the reading sections in Vision 3 and its workbook. The recurrent themes in their comments were analyzed and reported. The 12th grade English teachers who were teaching in public schools in Tehran participated in the current study.

3.2. Participants

The study used a convenient sampling procedure and 80 (41 males and 39 females) English teachers who were teaching Vision 3 participated in the study. Their experience ranged from 5 to 15 years (M=10, SD=2.51). They were teaching English in public schools in Tehran and were aged between 27 and 52 (M=42, SD=3.90). The participants held BA (56), MA (21), and Ph.D. (3) degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (57), English literature (13), and English translation (10). The detailed information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1.

Demographic Information about the Participants

No. of teachers	80 (27-52 years old)
Gender	41 males and 39 females
Schools	Public schools in Tehran
The academic year	2019-2020
Degree	56 BA, 21 MA, 3 PhD
Major	57 TEFL, 10 Translation, 13 Literature

3. 3. Material

Vision 3 is the third book in the "English for Schools" series (Alavimoghaddam, Kheirabadi, Rahimi, & Davari, 2016) and was first introduced into the mainstream ELT curriculum in the academic year 1397-1398 (2018-2019). The book is accompanied by a workbook. Both the student book and the workbook comprise three lessons which include a total of six reading sections. The book is taught in the 12th grade before the students take University Entrance Examination and enter the university.

3.4. Instrumentation

Considering the primary goal of the study, Freeman's (2014) taxonomy of reading comprehension questions was utilized to assign the tasks and activities in the reading sections of the student book and workbook to their pertinent categories (i.e. Content, Language, & Affect) and subcategories (i.e. Explicit, Implicit, Inferential, Reorganization, Lexical, Form, Personal Response, & Evaluation).

As regards the secondary purpose of the study, the relevant items to evaluate the reading skill were extracted from an eclectic, valid, and reliable checklist (Shahmohammadi, 2018). The relevant subsections consisted of four-point Likert scale items ranging from *poor (1)* to *Excellent (4)* for the reading (3 items). The Cronbach alpha coefficients were calculated for the three sections as 0.87 (reading). Furthermore, a blank space was left at the end of the items to elicit the teachers; comments on the reading passages and their accompanying questions in Vision 3 and its workbook.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

The reading comprehension questions in Vision 3 and its workbook were scrutinized in light of Freeman's (2014) taxonomy. It is worth noting that the question here does not imply the interrogative form and covers "any text-related task" (Freeman, 2014, p.74). The researcher identified the categories and subcategories to which comprehension questions belonged. Two other coders were also asked to assign the reading comprehension questions to particular categories and subcategories in Freeman's taxonomy. The coders were familiar with the model used in the study and the Kappa coefficient was calculated as 0.97. The questions which were differently labeled by the researcher and the two coders were negotiated till they reached a common consensus.

Moreover, the teachers were given the checklist through email or social media and were asked to provide answers to the extracted items and comments on the reading sections. A total of 80 completed checklists were received. In addition, nine teachers left their comments on the reading comprehension questions in Vision 3 and its workbook.

3.6. Data Analysis Procedure

The frequency and percentage values were reported for different types of reading comprehension questions in each reading section. Furthermore, SPSS (version 25.0) was

used and a Kruskal-Wallis test of independent samples was run to find the possible difference between Vision 3 and its workbook in terms of the frequency of reading comprehension questions based on Freeman's taxonomy.

Moreover, the teachers' responses to the relevant items were counted and categorized. Descriptive statistics were used and the mean and percentage values were obtained for the checklist items. The teachers' comments were also analyzed in terms of the recurrent themes.

4. Results

4.1. Reading Comprehension Questions in Vision 3 and Its Workbook

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of three categories and eight subcategories of reading comprehension questions in Vision 3 and its workbook. It shows that Language questions (%50) were the most frequent category in the Vision 3 student book while Content questions (%40) were the most dominant of all in the workbook.

Furthermore, Form question type (%50) was the commonest type of reading comprehension question type in the student book whereas Form (%25) and Personal Response (%25) were the most prevalent questions in the workbook.
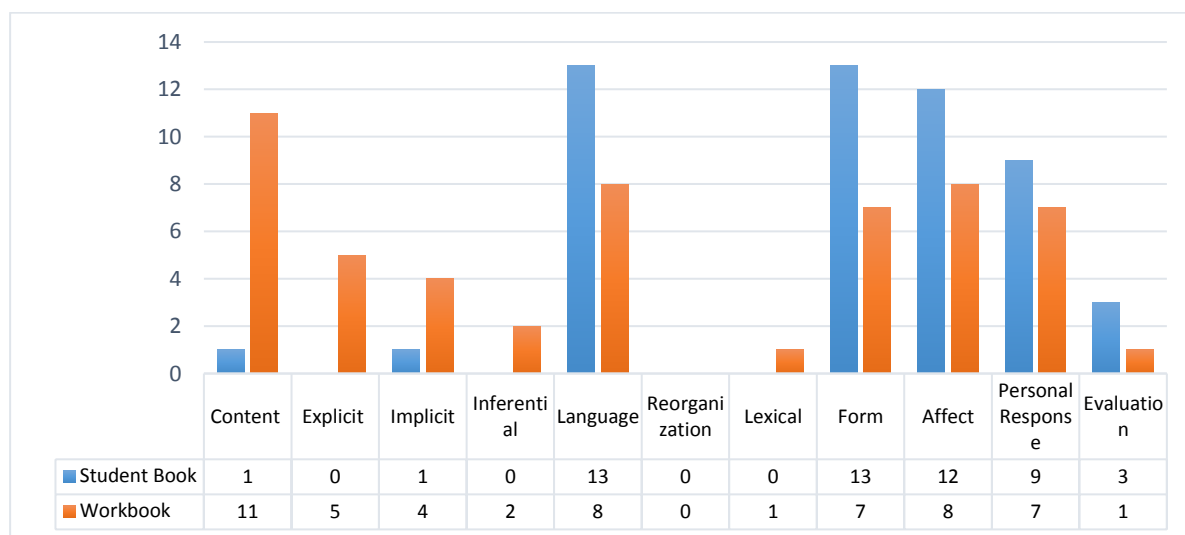

	Content	Explicit	Implicit	Inferential	Language	Reorganization	Lexical	Form	Affect	Personal Response	Evaluation
Student Book	1	0	1	0	13	0	0	13	12	9	3
Workbook	11	5	4	2	8	0	1	7	8	7	1

Figure 1. Frequency of each category of reading comprehension questions in Vision 3 and its workbook

Considering both the student book and the workbook, Language questions (%39.62) were the most prevalent category followed by Affect (%37.73) and Content (%22.65) questions. As regards the subcategories, Form questions (%37.73) and Personal Response (%30.18) were the most frequent types of reading comprehension questions.

As Table 2 displays, the results of the Kruskal Wallis test of independent samples indicated that there was a significant difference between the student book and workbook of Vision 3 in terms of the frequency of Content questions (Sig.=0.046, p≤0.05) while no significant difference was noticed considering Content and Affect questions.

Table 2.

The Significance Level of Post-reading Comprehension Questions across Student's Books and Workbooks

	Content	Language	Affect
Chi-Square	3.971	0.054	0.000
Df	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	0.046	0. 817	1.000

4.2. Teachers' Viewpoints about the Reading Sections and Tasks and Activities of Vision 3

As Table 3 shows, the teachers were dissatisfied with the reading sections in Vision 3 and its workbook. Despite their satisfaction with the opportunities provided for the students to read and understand the plain sense and implied meaning of the passages, the teachers stated that the book failed to address a variety of styles. Moreover, they complained about the lack of systematic criteria for selecting the texts. Almost half of the teachers (%48.75) rated the exercises of the reading sections as excellent. However, considering the appropriacy of the lexical resources in the reading passages, about %41.25 of them expressed their dissatisfaction. Similarly, most of the teachers (%65) believed that the reading passages failed to provide the students with various samples of authentic texts.

Table 3.

Descriptive Statistics for the Teachers' Evaluation of the Reading Sections

Items	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Mean	Mean of the criteria
Reading tasks offer exercises for the understanding of the plain sense and implied meaning.	8.75	12.5	30	48.75	3.18	
						2.30
It selects passages within the vocabulary range of the students.	41.25	22.5	23.75	12.50	2.07	
It selects passages reflecting a variety of style of contemporary English.	65	11.25	15	8.75	1.67	

Analyzing the teachers' comments also revealed their dissatisfaction with the reading passages fin that they neglected to expose the students to various genres and authentic samples from such sources as magazines, websites, and books.

The reading passages do not have a variety of genres. (T2)

The text types are somehow the same. The authors could provide reading passages with different genres, e.g. scientific, biographical, etc. (T3)

The passages do not provide the students with real texts they may see in English magazines or websites. (T5)

They also pointed to disregarding the students' interests in choosing the reading texts.

The students are not eager to read the texts. (T4)

The reading passages cannot evoke the students' interest. (T7)

The topics are so boring that students dislike the reading sections. (T8)

The teachers also emphasized the inadequate number of reading sections in Vision 3 and its workbook and asserted that only six passages would hardly suffice for empowering the students to read a wide range of texts in their future academic areas of interest.

The students read six reading passages. I don't think that's enough for developing the students' reading skills. (T1)

Only six passages cannot improve the students' reading ability. (T6)

They also asserted that the reading exercises fell short of addressing the students' learning styles. They believed that the new book has undergone valuable changes but its

reading sections declined in terms of both the number and quality of the texts and exercises compared to the previous English textbook for pre-university students.

The reading sections in Vision 3 and its workbook have lower educational efficiency than the ones in the previous book (T4)

The exercises are so limited in terms of the number and target skills and sub-skills. (T5)

Indeed, the teachers thought that the activities were inadequate and very dull. They mentioned that the activities were devoid of pedagogical challenges and would demotivate the students.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to identify the types of reading comprehension questions in Vision 3 and its workbook in light of Freeman's (2014) taxonomy. Furthermore, it elicited the teachers' viewpoints towards the coverage of the reading skill in this book. The results revealed that Form questions were most frequently included in Vision 3 while both Forma and Personal Response questions were equally the most prevalent types in its workbook. Both the student book and its workbook included a large number of language questions, followed by Affect and Content questions. As regards the subcategories, Form and Personal Response types were the most frequent questions in Vision 3 and its workbook. The results also pointed to the significant difference between the student book and workbook in terms of the frequency of Content questions and not the other two categories (i.e. Language & Affect).

Vision 3 is the last book in the "English for Schools" series. Including more Language questions may result from the authors' tendency to bridge the probably existing gap in the structural aspects of the language through contextualizing these features in the reading passages. In this line, the results corroborated those of Baleghizadeh and Zakervafaei's (2020) which revealed the highest frequency of Language questions in the books at higher levels. The findings of the current study were commensurate with their results in that the Reorganization subcategory of reading comprehension questions was absent in both the student book and workbook.

The Language and Affect questions were the highest frequent types in Vision 3 and its workbook. This might reveal underestimating the power of the content questions in

checking the students' comprehension of the presented information in the reading passages. Nevertheless, the authors' tendency to include more Affect questions in Vision 3 and its workbook might underlie the focus on developing higher-order thinking skills in this stage of education (Freeman, 2014). It seems that the low frequency of Content questions in Vision 3 was seemingly redressed in the workbook.

Furthermore, the high loading of Personal Response questions in the student book and workbook might underline the importance of eliciting the students' real-life experiences, emotions, and attitudes to relate to the classroom activities in their real lives (Masuhara, 2013). This increases the students' commitment to their learning and promotes their motivation to participate in classroom activities (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013).

However, the Lexical and Reorganization questions were disregarded in both the student book and the workbook. These types of questions act as the catalyzers to move the students towards autonomous learning by enabling them to discern the words across various contexts (Na & Nation, 1985). The same degree of ignorance was observed considering the Content questions in Vision 3. Overlooking these question types in the reading sections may hinder the students' optimal readiness to pass the university entrance examination successfully as this exam requires them to answer different types of reading comprehension questions.

The findings, however, disapproved of those of previous studies (Adli & Mahmoudi, 2017; Roohani et al., 2014) which showed the frequency of lower-order thinking skills in English textbooks. The inclusion of all types of reading comprehension questions in the workbook, targeting both lower-order and higher-order cognitive skills may be justified by its supplementary function in enhancing and expanding the students' skills beyond the level presented in the main book (Willis, 2008). This seems to explain the significant difference between the student book and the workbook in terms of Content questions. The prevalence of Content questions testified to view the reading section as a locus for developing the students' reading comprehension skills rather than their knowledge of the language (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013).

Furthermore, the teachers' viewpoints also revealed that the reading sections failed to meet the students' needs due to lacking authentic texts, interesting topics, and diverse activities. They believed that an adequate number of activities and tasks needed to be included in Vision 3 and its workbook to develop the students' reading skills and

prepare them to enter the larger academic communities. In this sense, the results were in line with those of the previously conducted studies (Salehi & Amini, 2016; Torki & Chalak, 2017). The findings also confirmed those of Rashidi and Kehtarfard's (2014) which demonstrated the teachers' dissatisfaction with the workbooks. This indicated the need for revising and modifying both the student book and the workbook in terms of a variety of activities and catering for both lower-order and higher-order thinking skills.

6. Conclusion

The current study aimed to analyze the reading comprehension questions in Vision 3 and its workbook adopting Freeman's (2014) framework and eliciting the teachers' viewpoints. The findings pointed to the imbalanced inclusion of reading comprehension activities and tasks across the student books and workbooks. The authors seemed to be inclined to take advantage of the reading sections for developing the students' knowledge of the language rather than their ability to understand and interpret the texts (Baleghizadeh & Zakervafaei, 2020). The teachers also referred to the inadequate number of activities to reinforce this important skill and promote the students' ability to handle academic reading tasks soon as university students.

The results of the study raise the material developers' awareness of the available reading comprehension questions in the newly developed textbook to locate the areas for further modification. Furthermore, the findings inform the teachers of the existing types of questions and the significance of supplementing Vision 3 through providing the students with several intensive and extensive reading tasks. The conclusions drawn from both the content analysis and the teachers' viewpoints seem to back up the importance of ongoing evaluation and modification of the new textbooks introduced into mainstream education.
To continue this line of research, future studies may focus on the activities and tasks gearing to other language skills. Moreover, other ELT textbooks and their accompanying workbooks might be studies in terms of their reading comprehension questions. In addition, new studies might focus on scrutinizing the reading sections of ELT textbooks in terms of other lexico-grammatical, discursive features to analyze their correspondence with the real-life authentic samples of language.

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