Evaluation of reading comprehension questions in Moroccan ELT textbooks

Jillali Nakkam
Department of English, IbnTofail University, Kenitra, Morocco
Nakkam30@gmail.com

Abdesselam Khamoja
Department of English, IbnTofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

Abstract

It has been well-documented that traditional teaching that emphasizes rote memorization is unable to meet the 21st-century challenges. Learners of today need to learn how to think for themselves and voice out their opinions. This can be achieved only by providing learners with teaching materials that promote skills of analysis, syntheses, and evaluation. The objective of this paper is to evaluate reading comprehension questions of Moroccan ELT textbooks, entitled Ticket to English 2 and Gateway to English 2. This paper seeks to examine the extent to which higher-order questions that stimulate thinking are infused in reading comprehension texts. The study adopted the descriptive quantitative method using a checklist. The checklist is used as an instrument to collect the data using Bloom's taxonomy to investigate the frequency of questions. The results obtained show that 77% of the questions in the first textbook and 84.12% of the questions in the second textbook are classified as being low-order questions. The questions that emphasize high cognitive skills are 23% and 14.78 respectively. Hence, it has been deduced that the two textbooks failed to promote skills of higher-order thinking skills through reading comprehension questions.

Key words: Bloom' taxonomy, Morocco, questions, Reading comprehension

Introduction

The present paper aims at evaluating the reading comprehension questions of Moroccan ELT textbooks titled *Ticket to English 2 and Gateway to English2*. More precisely, it seeks to examine the extent to which higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) are integrated by means of reading questions and activities. According to Bloom's taxonomy, the theoretical framework of this paper, the cognitive domain is divided into six levels namely knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom et al, 1956). Questions at the first three levels are classified as being low-cognitive questions. Students here are required to recall facts and knowledge or to easily locate answers in the text. However, questions of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are meant to enhance students' higher thinking skills. The high cognitive thinking skills enable learners to think beyond the rote memorization of knowledge. In this

respect, high order questions or activities help students to deeply read the text and evaluate ideas critically. Put differently, higher-order questions require learners not only to understand the printed words but also to be able to apply the information acquired/learned in a new context and hence make connections between ideas.

The rationale behind the focus on Bloom's Taxonomy to assess the textbook originates from the ongoing discussion about the education reform in Morocco. The latest version of this reform is what is termed the 2015-2030 Strategic Vision. The Strategic Vision has emphasized the shift from learning that focuses on recalling facts to learning that promotes students' critical thinking. The objective is to make learners be active participants in the learning process. Accordingly, there should be a "…switch from a logic of linear transmission of knowledge and memorization to that of learning and developing critical thinking, engaging in personal growth and development, the acquisition of languages, knowledge, civic values and digital technologies skills" (The Strategic Vision for the Reform 2015-2030). Ibrouk (2016) shows that teaching methods need to move away from the one-sided transmission of knowledge towards the self-construction of knowledge. To explain, the transmission of knowledge alone is not enough to create a citizen who can cope with challenges at different domains be it economic, social or technological to name but a few. To achieve this, a change of curricula and teaching methods needs to be adopted if the objective is to create a better educated and skillful citizen (Llorent-Bedmar 2014).

Bloom' s taxonomy of cognitive domains

Benjamin Bloom with the collaboration of a group of educational psychologists classified the cognitive processes into six levels (Bloom,1965). These levels are meant to be sequential; the objectives of each level need to be attained before moving to the following. Through observation, Bloom et al. found that 95% of questions posed require learners to recall facts and already-acquired knowledge. Put differently, much emphasis is allotted to the levels of knowledge and comprehension. (Nappi, 2017)

Bloom's taxonomy is represented as a pyramid with higher cognitive levels at the top (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) and low cognitive levels at the bottom (knowledge, comprehension, and application). This taxonomy is meant to ask questions progressively; starting with simple questions (knowledge, comprehension) to more challenging ones (high level questions). The latter are the ones that can make of learners to be autonomous thinkers (Nappi, 2017). Cooper and Simonds (1999) gave a succinct explanation of the levels, which include:

Knowledge: questions which seeks to recall already-known information.

Comprehension: questions which require students to restate or paraphrase material literally to show understanding.

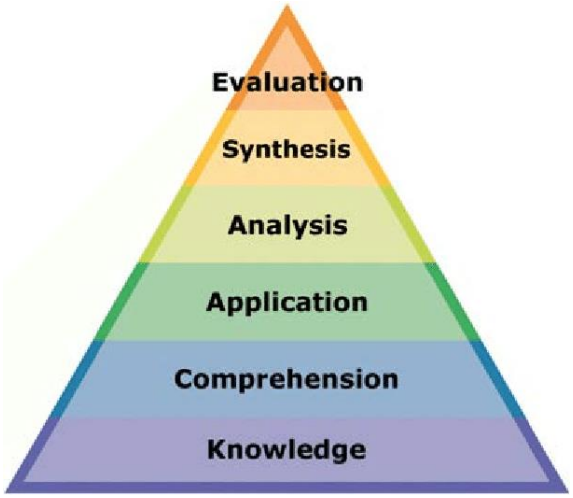
Application: questions which require learners to use already-known knowledge to solve problems.

Analysis: questions that seeks to break down ideas into its component parts for analysis.

Synthesis: questions that require learners to combine ideas into a statement, plan…etc that is new for them

Evaluation: questions that require learners to judge and evaluate ideas based on some criteria.

Cooper and Simonds (1999).



Bloom et al.(1956) Taxonomy

Low and high order questions

Tienken, Goldberg, and DiRocco (2009) made a distinction between questions that require learners to recall and memorize facts and questions that necessitate students to engage in higher process of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. It has been stated by many researchers (Redfield and Roussou ,1981; Long and Sato ,1983; Wilen ,1991) that higher order questions are advantageous to students' learning and achievements. Lewis (2015) showed that asking high order questions give teachers a clear image about students' deep understanding.

Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is defined as "the construction of the meaning of a written or spoken communication through a reciprocal, holistic interchange of ideas between the interpreter and the message in a particular communicative context" (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 39). The most important word in this definition is "construction". The word implies the active participation of the reader. That is, Reading Comprehension is not simply to memorize words or locate an answer to a simple question. It is the active involvement of the reader in constructing the meaning of the printed words. Smith (1994) stated that reading is not a passive mechanical activity, but it is a "purposeful and rational dependent on the prior knowledge and expectation of the reader (a learner). Reading is a matter of making sense of written language rather than decoding print to sound**"** (Smith 1994, 2)

According to *schema theory* (Anderson & Pearson, 1984) reading comprehension is not only a bottom-up process where readers are supposed to understand synonyms, answer multiple choice questions, etc, but it is also a top-down process in which the reader brings about his background knowledge and problem-solving skills to give a meaning to the text. (Brown, 2000).

Davies (1995) classified reading activities into two kinds: passive and active. Passive reading incorporates silent reading to answer multiple questions, true-false statements, gap-filling exercises, and vocabulary exercises to name but a few. These tasks do not require students to deeply understand, analyse and evaluate ideas. Learners can easily locate the answers. Hence, these kinds of reading activities do not encourage deep learning. Active reading, on the other hand, requires students to use skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Students at this level work in pairs or groups to negotiate answers and pose questions about the ideas discussed in the text (Davies 1995). Active reading enhances student-student interaction and therefore more communication is generated. Most importantly, the role of the teacher is minimized. He/she is no longer the all-knowing figure who imposes their ideas. The instructor's role is to facilitate learning.

Brown (2000) suggested three phases of teaching reading. The first phase is the pre-reading discussion. This is a warm-up activity to prepare students for the text. At this level, students are encouraged to ask questions that the text can answer. Tomitch (1991) called this technique ReQuest which stands for the reciprocal questioning. Learners write their questions on a piece of paper that is called and reproduced on the board. This is motivating to students who actively participate in providing questions to the text. The second phase is "the while reading". At this stage, students are offered a quick instruction that explains their purpose of reading. Students read to find answers to the questions they asked before. It is an opportunity to see the extent to which students' prophecies were valid. The last phase is "the post reading" activity. Along with posing low order questions to check understanding, there should be a set of questions that stimulate critical thinking such as questions of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The objective is to foster a student-centered approach, which emphasizes the dynamic participation of students in the learning process. (Drown, 2000).

Review of literature

Research has documented that most textbooks are not designed in a way to promote students' deep learning. Mrah (2017) evaluated two Moroccan EFL textbooks. The results revealed that the textbooks do not foster skills of critical thinking as they focus too much on low-order thinking skills. Karns, Burton, and Martin (1983) studied the type of questions used in six textbooks of economics. The results showed that low-order questions such as questions of knowledge, comprehension, and application are much-emphasized skills in the textbooks. On the other hand, high-order questions that improve students' critical thinking and develop their oral communication are not given much importance. Similarly, Riazi and Mosalanejad, (2010) investigated the exercises and activities of high school and pre-university textbooks and found that there was much focus on low-cognitive skills. The results showed that about 75.3% of the exercises and the activities are low-order skills and only 24.7% are classified as being high-cognitive skills. Ighbria (2013) analyzed six units of 9th-grade textbooks. Her objective was to examine the extent to which textbooks help in developing students' thinking. The result showed that out of 381 questions in the textbook about 244 questions occur at the levels of knowledge, comprehension, and application. However, comparing these studies with the previous ones we can notice that questions at the analysis level are much more frequent in the reading comprehension texts. About 89 out of 381 are at the level of analysis. Kurnia

et al (2019) conducted a study on the use of high-order skills in the reading comprehension questions of English textbooks of year X of high school in Indonesia and found that about 73.3% and 6.32 of the reading comprehension questions belong to knowledge and comprehension cognitive domains respectively. That explains that about 80.62% of the questions are low-cognitive questions. Only 19.38% are ranked as high order questions. The aforementioned studies have revealed that there was too much focus on the low-order skills.

Objective of the study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate reading comprehension questions of the EFL textbook in Morocco namely *Ticket to English2*. This textbook was selected because it is widely used in Morocco and is highly recommended by education inspectors. We used Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives to assess the types of questions. The study sought to investigate which levels of Bloom's taxonomy were much frequent in the reading comprehension texts. Hence, this study aimed to answer the following research questions.

1- Which types of questions are more prevalent in the reading comprehension?
2- To what extent do these two textbooks help in developing students' thinking through reading comprehension questions?

Method

This study adopts a descriptive quantitative research design. We opted for this method to evaluate reading comprehension questions and investigate the frequency of high order questions using Bloom's taxonomy.

We used reading comprehension pre-and post-reading questions of *Ticket to English 2* textbook as a source of data. The textbook is divided into 10 units dealing with different themes. In each unit, there exists a text whose topic is related to the theme.

Instrument, procedures and data analysis

Based on bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives, a checklist was used to evaluate the cognitive domains of the reading comprehension questions. Moreover, to analyze the data collected, all reading comprehension in the textbook were classified, analyzed and codified using the Bloom's taxonomy. The reading questions were first calculated and then classified in a table containing the six levels of bloom's taxonomy. The coding categories are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Findings and interpretations

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of reading comprehension questions in the textbook.

	Levels of bloom's taxonomy	**Frequency of questions (Ticket To English 2**	**Percentage**	**Frequency of questions (Gateway to English 2**	**Percentage**
Low order thinking skills (LOTS)	Remembering	10	11.76 %	15	20.27%
	Understanding	55	64.70%	42	56.75%
	Applying	0	0%	6	8.10%
High order thinking skills (HOTS)	Analyzing	5	5.88%	6	8.10%
	Synthesizing	5	5.88%	0	00%
	Evaluating	10	11.76%	5	6.75%
	Total	85	100%	74	100%

The examination of the reading comprehension questions displays that low order thinking skills (LOTS) are more frequent than high order thinking skills (HOTS). The total number of questions that were categorized according to Bloom's taxonomy was 85 in *Ticket to English* 2 textbook and 74 in *Gateway to English 2*. Approximately, 77% and 84.12% of the questions occur at the level of knowledge and comprehension. It seemed that the first textbook utilized less low-order skills than the second. However, the difference is not that huge to make us assume that the first is better than the other. High cognitive skills (Analysis, synthesis and evaluation) received the lowest percentages in the two textbooks. Only 23% and 14.78% of questions are found to emphasize higher order thinking skills.

While investigating the type of questions in the reading comprehension, it was found that most activities incorporate true/false tasks, multiple-choice questions, filling the gap/chart activities and vocabulary exercises. Most of these tasks are easily located in the texts and hence are unable to promote students' deep learning. Besides, pre-reading questions that are supposed to arouse curiosity and encourage learners to discover the ideas in the text are also classified as being low cognitive questions. while comparing the two textbooks, we could notice that *Ticket to English 2* received higher percentage of high cognitive skills than *Gateway to English 2*. However, this does not lead us to give preference for one textbook over another. Put in a nutshell, the findings reveal that there is a disbalance in the use of low and high cognitive skills.

Discussion

It has been well-documented that certain types of questioning behavior have dominated the classroom discourse for many years. Research shows that questions that require students to give factual information and answers are frequent. However, high order questions that engage students to reflect on their knowledge are barely used (Nunan, 1991). The above results depict that preponderance of reading comprehension questions seek to check students' understanding. These types of questions are important for teachers to assess students' comprehension. However, they fail to foster deep learning. Deep learning is achieved when learners are challenged to sort out problems through questions of interpretation, analysis, and reasoning. This kind of learning encourages more interaction and increases students' talk in the classroom. Deep learning also promotes student-centered models in the classroom. In other words, students are held responsible for their learning. According to Ouakrime (1991), developing student-centered approach is meant "to produce … independent learners, with AIR in their lungs to successfully sail through their language learning journey". When students are given more opportunities to express themselves, the teacher's role is minimized to being a facilitator. For students to have a good understanding of what they read, they need to be able to make inferences and use information that goes beyond the written text (Resnick,1987)

The findings of this study are in accordance with similar studies conducted in Morocco. Elboubakri (2013) and Mrah (2017) Es-salhi and El-fatih (2019) found that Moroccan EFL coursebooks failed to foster skills of critical thinking. Jabbour (2016), contrary to our findings, claimed that *Ticket to English 2* textbook contains important elements that can promote skills of critical thinking. Jabbour gave examples of (case study and project work units) which are overlooked by majority of teachers because of different reasons; time constraint is at the top. 86% of teachers who participated in this study said that they generally skip these units.

The overuse of low-cognitive skills may be attributed to students' low proficiency level. Textbook designers probably opted for lower skills to meet a large ratio of students. In other words, their choice is probably based on the assumption that students are not equipped with enough knowledge to use the language at a high thinking level. Hence, further research is required to get views from textbook designers and practitioners about the motives behind the emphasis on literal comprehension more than critical comprehension.

Conclusion and suggestion

In conclusion, reading comprehension of *Ticket to English 2* and *Gateway to English 2* textbooks emphasized more low order questions that correspond to the lowest levels of Bloom's taxonomy. The results obtained from the coursebooks showed that about 77% in the first and 84.12 % of the questions in the second occur at the levels of knowledge and comprehension. Only 23% and 14.78% of the questions in the textbooks target the high levels of thinking. Put in a nutshell, the textbooks failed to vary the cognitive levels of the reading comprehension questions. This leads us to conclude that reading comprehension questions do not help in stimulating students' high order thinking and hence teachers shouldn't rely too much on them. They can provide students with other more interesting and

motivating reading comprehension texts, which incorporate a variety of thinking skills. Texts that involve a variety of cognitive skills are more likely to increase students' motivation and engagement.

Limitation

The main limitation of this study is its reliance on one research methodology to evaluate the textbooks. Therefore, an open-ended questionnaire or a semi-structured interview should have been administered to investigate Moroccan teachers' perspectives and attitudes towards the emphasis on low-order skills in the two textbooks.

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