

Choosing the Right Texts for the Right Level: Analysing the Readability of 'English for Institutional Course' (EFIC) Textbook for the Undergraduates

Untsa Rohmah Fadzillah¹, Kamisah Ariffin^{2*}

¹SMA IT Al-Ghifari Kulon Progo, Sumurmuling, Gulurejo, Lendah, Kabupaten Kulon Progo, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55663, Indonesia

²Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang, 26400 Bandar Tun Abdul Razak Jengka, Pahang, Malaysia

¹rahmafddl@gmail.com, ²kamisah@uitm.edu.my

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*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Readability is an important aspect to be considered in the choice of educational materials as it has a significant influence on students' comprehension and learning outcomes. This study analysed the readability of the 'English for Institutional Course' (EFIC) textbook used for first-semester undergraduates in a university in Indonesia. As the book has not been assessed in terms of its readability, the study also aimed to determine the textbook's suitability for the university level students. The Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) formula was utilised as the framework for analysis. The data were procured from the reading texts of the EFIC textbook and the online tool of character calculator which incorporates the FRE formula was utilised to analyse the readability of the texts. The analysis revealed that five out of the eleven texts obtained the score of 80 and above, indicating that the textbook is easy and appropriate for primary and junior secondary education levels. This suggest that the textbooks may be too simple for tertiary education students. However, considering the FRE formula is based on and limited to the Western readability standards where English is the first language, its application to EFL contexts like Indonesia might not be entirely appropriate. Additionally, the textbook's range of readability levels may cater to varying student proficiency levels. Thus, the study concludes that while the EFIC textbook may seem easy from the readability score perspective, its suitability for the undergraduate level requires further consideration of contextual factors. The study also recommends for a localised readability assessment tool that is tailored to the context of local EFL learners be adapted, if not developed.

Keywords: *English for Institutional Course (EFIC), readability, textbook,*

INTRODUCTION

The basic of academic reading is to understand what is being read, and apply appropriate ideas from the reading to course-related tasks. Thus, one of the most important aspects in developing students' reading skills is the selection of the reading materials. This is because what students read may determine how well they read it. Hence, reading materials provided to the students should be assessed because

suitable reading materials would promote their reading skills, ergo, their language skills. As put forward by Torgesen et al. (2001), the selection of suitable reading materials is a very important consideration in determining the success of a reading programme.

An important aspect in assessing reading materials is readability. Readability determines the level of ease or difficulty which a text can be understood by the readers. Readability has been a major concern among language instructors with regards to the selection of reading materials. This is because too easy materials not only will bore the students; they will not promote the students' language development to their appropriate level. On the other hand, if the materials are too difficult and beyond the students' comprehension, they can demotivate the students from reading, and in turn, hamper learning and language development (Carrell, 1987; Graesser, McNamara, Cai, Conley, & Pennebaker, 2014). This has also been contended by Stanovich (1991) who observed that negative reading experiences among children with lesser reading ability create a downward spiral of failure that affects the subsequent development of reading skills and habits. Such findings have also been observed in the local Indonesian studies; that too easy level of readability could result in students' boredom while too difficult level of readability could impede students' reading interest (Arias, 2007; Fatin and Yuniarti, 2019).

In schools, more often than not, teachers mostly utilise reading materials provided in the textbooks in their teaching. Not only is such practice convenient, teachers believe that the materials are suitable for classroom teaching as the textbooks mandated by the Ministry of Education would have been vetted properly, including its readability. However, this may not be the case if the textbook is not a prescribed one by the ministry. For example, in Universiti Ahmad Dahlan, Indonesia (UAD, henceforth), the EFL textbook used for the undergraduates, 'English for Institutional Course' (EFIC), to the researchers' knowledge, has never been analysed for its readability. The textbook, written by a group of lecturers from UAD and published by the university (UAD Press), is only reviewed from time to time for improvement in terms of its content but not its readability. The researchers strongly feel that apart from the content, it is also important for EFIC to be reviewed based on its readability. This is because any objective input on the readability of EFIC may help to improve the quality of the book in terms of its suitability to the students' level.

Thus, as it has been established that there should be a match between the appropriateness between the readability level of the texts and students' level, the researchers feel that it is crucial to examine the suitability of EFIC for the intended students. This can be expressed by the following objectives of the study which are to:

- i. determine the level of readability of the texts provided in the 'English for Institutional Course' (EFIC) textbook;
- ii. ascertain whether the texts provided in the 'English for Institutional Course (EFIC)' textbook are suitable for the EFL undergraduate level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Readability is one of the most important aspects in the evaluation of a reading text or material. DuBay (2007) defined readability as 'the ease of reading created by the choice of content, style, design, and organisation that fit the prior knowledge, reading skill, interest, and motivation of the audience (p.6). Along the same line, Ruddell (2008, p.58) referred readability as 'the difficulty level of the text materials' and 'the degree to which texts are considered to be readable by a target population. Such definitions can simply be understood that readability is a term used to indicate how easy of difficult a text is to be read and understood by the reader. This is parallel to Richards and Schmidt's (2010) definition of readability as 'ease of a text can be read and understood' (p. 482). Hence, in short, readability concerns on how easy or difficult the text is perceived by the reader.

It is important to note that in the study of readability, the concept of readability has nothing to do with legibility or literacy. It is actually determined by some aspects including the average length of sentences, the number of new words contained, and the grammatical complexity of the language used in a passage. The readability level of a text gives impact on reading fluency. As put forward by Klare (1963), readability is concerned with the problem of matching between a reader and a text. Accomplished readers usually will feel bored if they are given easy texts below their reading level. On the other hand, poor readers will feel discouraged when they have to read texts that are too difficult for them (Arias, 2007; Carrell, 1987; Fatin and Yunianti, 2019; Graesser, McNamara, Cai, Conley, & Pennebaker, 2014; Stanovich, 1991). This is reiterated by Westwood (2001, p. 64) who claimed that ‘the readers should at least understand 97% of words on the page so that they can easily understand the text’.

Day (1994), Johnson (1998) and Mesmer (2008) put forward factors that may affect readability which include i) readers’ lexical knowledge and background knowledge, ii) the organisation of the text which includes discourse phenomena like topic arrangement, coherence and cohesion, and length of passage, iii) the physical factors of the text such as font, layout and spacing, and iv) the reader factors such as interest, motivation and abilities that concern reading-level, attention and memory. However, as this study focused on the readability level of a textbook, it only examined the text factors that can be measured easily by observing and calculating the text statistics.

Readability Formula

Readability formula is a procedure used to measure readability (Richards and Schmidt, 2010). It is a predictive device that provides quantitative estimates of the reading ease of the reading texts, through the measurement of language element. Since it is dealt with measuring something, the readability formula is, thus, mathematical in nature. This formula can be used to predict the difficulty level of texts. There are a few formulas and over a thousand researches have been issued on the readability formulas demonstrating to their strong theoretical and statistical validity, i.e. Fry Readability Chart, Flesch Reading Ease, Dale and Chall Original Formula, Gunning Fog Formula, Smog Formula, and Automated Readability Index (ARI). The Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) (1948) formula is the most employed and accountable for propagating the necessity for readability:

$$\text{RE: } 206.835 - (84.6 \times \text{AWL}) - (1.015 \times \text{ASL})$$

Where:

- RE : Reading Ease Score
- AWL : Number of Syllable per 100 words (i.e., the number of words divided by the number of sentences)
- ASL : Average number of words per sentence (i.e., the number of syllables divided by the number of words)

This formula drops the use of affixes and used only two variables: i) the number of syllables, and ii) the number of sentences for each 100-word sample, and it ‘predicts reading ease on a scale from 1 to 100’ (DuBay, 2004, p. 21). In this FRE formula, the higher score indicates easier reading. Table 1 presents the FRE scale.

Table 1: Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) Scale

Readability Score	Description of Style	Estimated Reading Grade
0 - 30	very difficult	College graduate
30 - 50	difficult	13 th – 16 th (College)
50 - 60	fairly difficult	10 th – 12 th (High school)
60 - 70	standard	8 th – 9 th
70 - 80	fairly easy	7 th
80 - 90	being easy	6 th
90 - 100	very easy	5 th

It is important to note here that all the text readability formulae are based on the English reading texts and US grade levels. Thus, the formulae may be limited in determining the readability of the local Indonesian texts as the EFL standards are not at par with the grade-level designated for the US. In addition, factors like cultural differences, idiomatic expressions and academic vocabulary that are not captured by the readability formulae may pose additional difficulties for the local students in comprehending the texts

Other Methods of Evaluating Readability

Readability can also be determined by using other techniques. The Cloze-Test Procedure, developed by Taylor (1953) is one of the techniques to measure the readability of English texts. In the Cloze Test technique, every *n*-th word from the text is deleted and replaced with a blank. Students are to read the modified text and fill the blanks with their best guess to complete the text. The readability of the text is determined by the score obtained by the learner. While other readability formulae evaluate the grade-level designated difficulty, this cloze procedure determines whether a learner is able to comprehend a specific text. Thus, this procedure can be considered a ‘personalised’ measure of readability as it evaluates and compares learners’ ability to understand the meaning of the text.

Another method of evaluating text difficulty is by qualitative assessments such as qualitative rubrics and reader-based assessments. These assessments involve using specific rubrics to analyse texts, usually informational or literary for their qualitative level of complexity. The rubrics are based on common aspects like meaning, knowledge demands of subject matter, language, and structure. The rubrics designed for each of these aspects are more descriptive than measurable. As put forward by Brookhart and Chen (2015, p. 343), ‘the assessment rubric, forms part of a set of criteria and refers specifically to the “levels of performance quality on the criteria’’. Thus, they provide feedback of the assessed items instead of no numeric scoring.

Studies on Readability of Indonesian EFL Textbooks

There have been a number of studies that examined the readability of textbooks used in national schools in Indonesia. Most of the studies utilised the available readability formula, especially the FRE (Waruwu, Sinulingga, and Erlita, 2018; Hakim, Setyaningseh and Cahyaningrum, 2021; Fata, Komariah, and Alya, 2022). While very few found that the readability level of the texts provided was suitable to the target education level, most studies reported conflicting readability level to the grade level.

For example, Waruwu, Sinulingga, and Erlita’s (2018), analysed the *English for Junior High School VIII* textbook and found that the readability score was 60, indicating that the book is suitable for students at level 8, the targeted grade level. However, the study went further into analysing the lexical density of the texts and because of their high lexical density, the book is considered difficult for the students as they still need the teachers’ assistance in understanding the text. The current study, however,

did not delve into the lexical density aspect, hence, it will not discuss this aspect in relation to readability.

Along the same line, Hakim, Setyaningseh and Cahyaningrum (2021) examined English on *Target* textbook aimed for grade X. Using the FRE formula and Coh-Metric L2 Readability Index, they found that the readability of the reading texts in the book range from 'very easy' to 'difficult' levels. The study concluded that most of the texts are mostly below the students' level as only 5.26% of the texts is suitable for 10th-grade students, while 94.74% is not. Similarly, Hanifah, Wahyuni and Haryati (2022) studied the same book and the results were in agreement with Hakim, Setyaningseh and Cahyaningrum's (2021) study that the reading texts are not suitable and at the lower level of the targeted grade students.

In another study, Fata, Komariah, and Alya (2022) compared the readability levels of reading texts in two books published by different publishers for the same grade level of education, *Pathway to English Grade X* and *Buku Bahasa Inggris Grade X*. They found conflicting results for the levels of readability of the books: the readability score of the former equals to the 'standard' level, indicating the matching of readability level and the targeted grade level. The readability score of the latter, on the other hand, indicates 'fairly difficult' level.

Several other studies have also explored the readability of the Indonesian textbooks, like those of Tasaufy's (2017), Miftaahurrahmi et al.'s (2017), and Mutiarni, Husein, and Siregar's (2016). These studies also pointed out to more or less similar findings as presented earlier – that the readability levels of the books vary from the intended grade levels. However, studies on the readability of textbooks that are exclusively written and used for English courses only for students at certain universities are still under-researched. Thus, there seems to be a need to examine the suitability of the books for the students in terms of their readability and level of study.

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on analysing the readability of the materials in the *English for Institutional Course* (EFIC) textbook. The book is written by a group of experienced, local English instructors and is specifically designed for the first semester undergraduate students across the various faculties in Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Jogjakarta, Indonesia. This textbook aims at developing the students' English language proficiency and provides teaching and learning resources for the English course. The EFIC textbook contains 11 units with contents that cover the language skills. Each unit provides the description of topics, reading texts, language functions and activities.

This study employed a document analysis method along the quantitative approach of data analysis. Data were procured from the reading texts in all 11 units of the book. The texts consist of short paragraphs and dialogues. To determine the validity of the data, the researchers first calculated the number of words in each unit using the word calculator tool integrated in the Word software to ensure that they are longer than 100 words. This is because any text that is less than 100 words cannot be analysed as the readability formula only measures a text within a 100-word sample. Table 2 shows the details of the data collected.

Table 2: Data for Analysis

Unit	Total Number of Words
1	847
2	964
3	622
4	2,137
5	1,001
6	1,537
7	1,001
8	723
9	415
10	647
11	1553

To measure the readability of the selected texts, the study employed the FRE formula. With the advance of technology, the formula has been conveniently incorporated into the online tool of Character Calculator (<https://charactercalculator.com/>) to facilitate research and knowledge. The researchers simply entered the texts to be analysed onto the text field, and the calculator did the analysis automatically. Meanwhile, to determine the readability level of the texts, the proposed FRE scale as shown in Table 1 above was applied. However, as mentioned earlier, the FRE formula may be limited in terms of its capability in determining the readability level for textbooks meant designed for EFL students. Thus, cautions should be taken into making any conclusions regarding the readability of the EFIC textbook.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented based on the research questions which are relative to: i) the level of readability of the texts provided in the EFIC textbook, ii) the discussion on the suitability of the textbook for the undergraduate level of students.

The Readability Level of the Reading Materials in the EFIC Textbook

The analysis indicates that the texts in the EFIC textbook have the readability scores ranging from approximately 30 – 90. In terms of the description of style and education attainment level, the texts are between ‘easy’ to ‘difficult’ and ‘Grade 6’ to ‘undergraduate’ respectively. This is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Readability Measure and Level of EFIC Textbooks according to Units

Unit	Total No of Words Analysed	Readability Score	Description of Style	Education Attainment Level
1	847	80.04	Easy	Grade 6
2	964	85.30	Easy	Grade 6
3	622	80.36	Easy	Grade 6
4	2,137	89.42	Easy	Grade 6
5	1,001	75.54	Fairly Easy	Grade 7
6	1,537	76.37	Fairly Easy	Grade 7
7	1,001	73.56	Fairly Easy	Grade 7
8	723	67.80	Standard	Grades 8-9
9	1,415	30.47	Difficult	Undergraduate
10	647	84.50	Easy	Grade 6
11	1553	64.82	Standard	Grades 8-9

In general, the EFIC textbook scores a range of ‘easy’ and ‘fairly easy’. As can be seen from Table 2, five out of the 11 units obtain the score of 80 and above (Unit 1= 80.4; Unit 2=85.30; Unit 3=80.36; Unit 4=89.42; Unit 10=64.82). The readability of these units falls under the ‘easy’ category and they are considered appropriate for the ‘Grade 6’ level of education. The analysis also points that three units score between 70 to 76 (Unit 5=75.54; Unit 6=76.37; Unit 7=73.56), indicating that the readability level of the units is ‘fairly easy’ with the suitability of the materials at ‘Grade 7’. Meanwhile two units scored between 64 to 68 (Unit 8=67.80; Unit 11=64.82) with the description style of ‘standard’, indicating that the readability level of the units is at par with ‘Grades 8-9’. Only one unit is classified as ‘difficult’ as it scores only 30.47, thus, deemed appropriate for the ‘undergraduate’ level.

The findings of the present study are in line with studies that examined the readability of textbooks designed for schools in Indonesia; that the readability scores did not match with the targeted grade level (Hanifah, Wahyuni and Haryati (2022; Hakim, Setyaningsih, Cahyaningrum, 2021; Fata, Komariah, and Alya (2022). The readability level of the EFIC textbooks shows that more than half of the units are considered as ‘easy’ and deemed appropriate for ‘Grade 6’ and ‘Grade 7’ (primary education and junior secondary school education in Indonesia, respectively). This suggests that the textbook may be too simple for tertiary education students, implying a possible need for more challenging materials at the university level. However, as English is a foreign language in Indonesia, perhaps the motivation behind the easy level of readability here is to facilitate the development of the language skills among the students. As the book is used for the first level of the English course in the university, most probably the writers were more concerned about the students’ mastering the basic competence in the language, rather than conforming to the grade level attainment.

The Suitability of Texts Provided in the EFIC Textbook for the Undergraduate Level

Having looked at the analysis of the data, based on the FRE framework, it is clear that the EFIC textbook is suitable for students at the lower attainment level of education. However, it is very important to note that, even though the findings clearly pointed that the readability of the materials in the EFIC textbook is easy and is apt for primary or junior secondary school level, we cannot derive at a general conclusion, assuming that the book is not suitable for the undergraduate EFL students. There are few important aspects that need to be considered before concluding that the EFIC textbook is suitable for the undergraduate students or vice versa.

First and foremost, the Flesch Reading Ease scale is based on the western readability background of which English is the first language. Thus, assessing the texts that are designed and written for EFL students with the western standard may not be accurate. Therefore, the readability scores obtained using this formula are not definitive for evaluating the textbook's suitability for different educational levels. For example, The findings from Waruwu, Sinulingga, and Erlita’s (2018) are a clear example of this; in terms of its readability score, the *English for Junior High School VIII* textbook is deemed suitable for the 8th grade level, however, students still need teachers’ assistance in comprehending the texts.

Along the same line, the education attainment level defined is also based on the western standard. The levels are actually based on the general grades in school based on the age where the English language acquisition is not a factor determining the grade. Indonesian students, despite being at the same grade level as their Western counterparts, may not have comparable English language proficiency. Thus, stating that the EFIC textbook's readability aligns with lower educational levels may be inaccurate. As similar patterns of the mismatch between readability scores and targeted grade levels have been found in most school textbooks in Indonesia (Hanifah, Wahyuni and Haryati (2022; Fata, Komariah, and Alya, 2022; Hakim, Setyaningsih, Cahyaningrum, 2021; Telaumbanua and Umiyati, 2019; Tasaufy, 2017), it may prove the point that the readability level of the books may be suitable to the students’ English proficiency grade, rather than the general educational grade according to age.

In addition, the EFIC textbook is designed and written for all the first semester undergraduates in the university regardless of their academic programme and level of proficiency in English. Thus, by having a range of readability levels from 'easy' to 'difficult' is a strategy to cater for the students' needs from different levels of proficiency. In short, from the readability scores' point of view, the EFIC textbook may not seem appropriate for the undergraduate level. However, having considered the aspects like western basis of the readability formula, the status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia and the students' different levels of proficiency in English, the view of the suitability of the EFIC textbook for the EFL undergraduates, thus, is inconclusive.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of readability of the EFIC textbook, it is evident that the book appears to have been designed for lower educational attainment levels, and by the western standard, primarily suitable for Grades 6 and 7 (elementary and junior secondary students). However, several factors prevent us from concluding definitively that the textbook is unsuitable for the undergraduates, i.e. i) the western readability standards of the FRE scale which makes it an imperfect tool for assessing texts meant for EFL students, ii) the western standard of educational attainment level that differs from Indonesia in terms language acquisition and proficiency, iii) the target audience of the EFIC textbook itself, which may call for a deliberate strategy to include the range of readability from 'easy' to 'difficult'.

The findings of the study call for several initiatives that can make a local textbook more suitable for the local students and to ensure it effectively supports the students' learning and language acquisition needs. It is recommended that a localised readability assessment tool that is tailored to the context of local EFL learners be adapted, if not developed. Since the study only focused on a single assessment tool, i.e the FRE formula, other methods of assessments should also be employed to obtain more comprehensive results. Qualitative rubrics and reader-based analysis can be used to gain insights on the book that cannot be captured by the FRE formula. The writers of the book should also collect feedback from the users, both students and instructors, with regards to the effectiveness and readability of the book. With the feedback, the writers can review, revise and make continuous improvements in textbooks.

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Fadzillah, U.R. conceived and planned the entire study and Ariffin, K. contributed to the supervision of the study. Both authors were in charge in shaping the study, analysing the data and writing the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

We certify that the article is the Author's and Co-Author's original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This research/manuscript has not been submitted for publication nor has it been published in whole or in part elsewhere. We testify to the fact that all Authors have contributed significantly to the work, validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to Jurnal Intelek.

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