

Instructions for authors, subscriptions and further details:

<http://rimcis.hipatiapress.com>

Evaluation of “Ready for First Certificate of English” Reading Passages: Microstructural Approach

Ebrahim Khodadady¹, Atena Attaran¹

1) Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

Date of publication: March 30th, 2017

Edition period: March 2017 – July 2017

To cite this article: Khodadady, E., & Attaran, A. (2017). Evaluation of "Ready for First Certificate of English" Reading Passages: Microstructural Approach. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(1), 1-22. doi: 10.17583/rimcis.2017.2051

To link this article: <http://doi.org/10.17583/rimcis.2017.2051>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The terms and conditions of use are related to the Open Journal System and to [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC-BY\)](#).

The Evaluation of "Ready for First Certificate of English" Reading Passages: Microstructural Approach

Ebrahim Khodadady
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Atena Attaran
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Abstract

Despite much research done on language learning textbooks, there still exist several questions unanswered about what these textbooks' contents are about. This study is thus an attempt to investigate the 15 reading passages of "Ready for First Certificate of English" (FCE) in the light of schema theory. In doing so, the microstructural approach to schema theory was taken into the account which led to the classification of 8617 schema tokens into the three main categories of syntactic, semantic, and parasyntactic domains. Running the chi-square test revealed that the domains differ significantly from each other regarding both their types ($X^2= 2869.9, p< 0.05$) and tokens ($X^2= 1704, p< 0.05$) which lent support to their psychological reality. In addition, the descriptive analysis of the schemata demonstrated that reading passages are heavily outweighed by semantic types (80.7%), whereas syntactic and parasyntactic types formed only about 6% and 12.4% of the textbook, respectively. The pedagogical implication of the study is discussed and further suggestions are put forward.

Keywords: schema theory, microstructural approach, semantic domain, syntactic domain, parasyntactic domain

La Evaluación de los Fragmentos de Lectura del "Ready for First Certificate of English": Una Perspectiva Microestructural

Ebrahim Khodadady
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Atena Attaran
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Resumen

A pesar que los libros de texto para el aprendizaje de idiomas se ha investigado mucho, aún hay varias cuestiones sin responder acerca de la temática de su contenido. Este estudio es, pues, un intento de investigar los quince fragmentos de lectura del "Ready for First Certificate of English" (FCE) a la luz de la teoría del esquema. De esta manera, se tuvo en cuenta una perspectiva microestructural de la teoría del esquema lo que condujo a la clasificación de 8617 muestras de esquemas en las tres principales categorías de los dominios sintáctico, semántico y parasintáctico. La prueba del chi-cuadrado mostró que los dominios difieren significativamente los unos de los otros teniendo en cuenta tanto su tipo ($X^2=2869.9$, $p<0.05$) como su muestra ($X^2=1704$, $p<0.05$) lo que condujo a reforzar su realidad psicológica. Así mismo, el análisis descriptivo de los esquemas demostró que los fragmentos de lectura están fuertemente sobreponderados por los tipos semánticos (80.7%), mientras que los tipos sintáctico y parasintáctico conforman sólo alrededor del 6% y el 12.4% respectivamente de los libros de texto. Se debaten las implicaciones pedagógicas del estudio y se avanzan sugerencias para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: teoría del esquema, perspectiva microestructural, dominio semántico, dominio sintáctico, dominio parasintáctico

The saliency of textbooks in English language teaching (ELT henceforth) classes cannot be ignored due to their importance in providing language input and practices for language learners (Richards, 2001). Textbooks as the “visible part of any ELT program” (Sheldon, 1988) are the means of consistency in the language learning process and can give learners a sense of cohesion and belonging to a system (Toms, 2004). In fact, textbooks can provide the teachers with good models to map out their own materials (Nunan, 1987) and also guide students and balance the contents they need to learn. The content of a textbook not only does transfer knowledge and information, but also develop certain attitudes in the mind of the learners. Consequently, evaluating English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks in any educational program can be of utmost importance.

In fact, not only evaluating teaching materials plays a pivotal role in any educational system, it also helps administrators, teachers, and supervisors to “make judgments about the effects of the textbooks on the people using them” (Tomlinson, Dat, Masuhara & Rubdy, 2001, p. 85). This evaluation can be done in three different stages, namely pre-use, in the process, and retrospective stages. As the names suggest the pre-use stages embraces evaluation at the time when materials are seen as work plans or constructs; the next step involves judging materials in process during which it is used; and the final stage occurs when the outcomes from materials use are considered (Breen, 1989).

There have been numerous studies which aim at defining and evaluating the characteristics of textbooks (e.g. Chastain, 1971; Gharbavi & Mousavi, 2012; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Rashidi & Ghaedsharafi, 2015; Tucker, 1975; Ur, 1996; Van Leeuwen, 1996). While most of these studies are mainly based on checklists, questionnaire, and corpus analysis, some address issues like gender, culture, and grammatical points. Although they provide useful insights toward the materials evaluated, they mostly suffer from the fact that they are too general and thus either fail to accommodate some fundamental details or pay too much attention to one aspect of language like modals (e.g. Khojasteh & Reinders, 2013).

Nevertheless, to provide a meticulous evaluation of a textbook, there is, in fact, a need for considering all aspects of its language including semantic,

syntactic, and also parasyntactic ones and then examining their values and socio-cultural aspects. The reason behind this is that comprehension of texts involves the rapid integration of various types of semantic and syntactic knowledge (Altmann, Garnham & Dennis, 1992; Tanenhaus, Spivey-Knowlton, Eberhard & Sedivy, 1995). Moreover, there is a balance in how much attention we are supposed to pay to general and specific aspects of a book. In this regard, the microstructural approach toward schema theory analyzes each and every word of a text and assigns them to semantic, syntactic, and parasyntactic domains (Khodadady, 1997, 2004, 2013) to delve into the underlying layers of words objectively and avoid any ambiguous, general, and inaccurate judgments about texts.

Although the microstructural approach to schema theory (MICAST) has been applied to reading comprehension ability and language testing (Khodadady, 1997), it is highly likely the time to employ it in analyzing and evaluating textbooks. “Ready for FCE” (Norris, 2008) is a book which is taught in many language institutes in Iran to FCE candidates as well as learners at upper intermediate or advanced levels. Therefore, due to the importance of this book in the educational system of language institutes, this study aims at evaluating its reading passages in the light of the MICAST.

Review of Literature

Schema Theory

Schema theory was an attempt to explain learning in the early 1900s (e.g. Bartlett, 1932; Head, 1920; Piaget, 1926) which was inspired mainly by cognitive psychology (e.g., Rumelhart, 1975) and the early Gestalt psychology of the 1920s. It was also a great help to the studies done in the realm of artificial intelligence. Bartlett (1932) considered schema as “memory structures abstracted from idiosyncratic experiences” which play a significant role in the processes of narrative comprehension and recall (Hakemulder, 2006). Schema theory thus shed light on the way of people go through their everyday experiences by providing “explanation for facts from human cognitive adaptability to the use of definite reference in specific circumstances” (Stockwell, 2006, p. 12). Semino (1997) categorized

schemata into three types of ‘world schemas,’ ‘text schemas,’ and ‘language schemas’. While the first represents conceptual contents like the restaurant script, the second deals with our expectation of the sequence and organization of content scripts, and finally, the third fulfills our expectation of the appropriate linguistic and pragmatic features in which the world is articulated.

The three categories described above seem to be basically macrostructural in scope. It characterizes schema as scripted or rhetorical knowledge. In this regard, knowing schema means knowing the structural patterns of various texts such as narratives and expository ones (e.g., McNeil, 1987; Poplin, 1988). The MICAST, however, considers each single and phrasal word as a schema (Khodadady, 1997, 2004, 2013; Khodadady & Herriman, 2000). In this view, schemata are characterized as the words upon which the authentic texts are built. They fall within the three linguistic domains of semantic, syntactic and parasyntactic schemata (Khodadady, 2001, 2008a; Khodadady & Hesarzadeh, 2014). Consequently, to test comprehension ability it is essential to adopt a microstructural rather than macrostructural approach.

In the MICAST, each linguistic domain is hierarchically formed by its genera, which in turn consists of species and types. The semantic domain which is open in type comprises four genera, i.e., adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs. The genus of verbs, in turn, contains species such as complex, derivational, and phrasal verbs. And finally, each species consist of an open set of types such as *underlie* and *undertake*. The syntactic domain which is *closed* in type includes auxiliaries, conjunctions, determiners, prepositions and pronouns and the last domain comprises schemata such as numerals, abbreviations, names and para adverbs.

Based on the MICAST, Khodadady (2008b) examined 22 newspaper and magazine articles dealing with political issues. Categorizing the texts schemata into the three main domains and running the chi-square test on the data revealed that semantic, syntactic, and parasyntactic schemata differed both in type and subcategorization. Moreover, semantic schemata had the greatest share of the texts (77%) and parasyntactic and syntactic schemata accounted only for 17% and 6% of the text, respectively, which supports the priority of teaching meaning in English classroom.

6 Khodadady & Attaran - Evaluation of FCE Reading Passages

In another study, Khodadady and Kosravani (2014) aimed at delving certain texts into the two ideologically opposed news media, the BBC and Press TV, to cover the Syrian crisis. In doing so, they adopted the MICAST to analyse 26 news articles broadcasted by these two news media. The results of their study showed that both agencies benefit from semantic schemata more than the other two types, however, they differ significantly in number. More importantly, this approach has been used as a means of critical discourse analysis which could objectively show that putting certain schemata together reveal the ideological standpoints of text producers regarding a specific subject or ideology.

The empirical studies of employing the MICAST move beyond textual and discourse analysis. Khodadady, Pishghadam, and Fakhar (2010), for example, studied the relationship among reading comprehension ability, grammar and vocabulary knowledge on certain units of three textbooks taught at an intermediate level of language proficiency. The benefits of employing schema-based comprehension test are that they enjoy construct validity and they measure the academic achievement of learners objectively. In another study, Khodadady, Shirmohammadi and Talebi (2011) analyzed brainstorming and investigated its effect on critical thinking and speaking skills. The findings suggested that semantic schemata such as nouns are many in type but few in their frequency (token), whereas the syntactic schemata such as pronouns are few in type but many in frequency. Parasyntactic schemata such as names may be many in both type and frequency but always play a syntactic role in language comprehension and production.

The findings in each realm provide not only comprehensive but also an objective understanding of the subject area. In this regard, reading comprehension texts as an integral component of any textbook are also needed to be looked at through the lens of a microstructural approach.

Cambridge First Certificate in English

Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) is the second oldest exam offered by Cambridge English Language Assessment system (Zeronis &

Geranpayeh, 2015) which corresponds to CEFR level B2 – Independent User. It is a qualification at upper-intermediate level.

Cambridge English exams consider that communicative language ability as divisible to different sub-skills and abilities (Geranpayeh, 2007) and consequently, “language develop differently in each individual and can be measured as separate aspects of language ability” (Docherty, 2015). According to this basic notion, FCE exam consists of five sections: Reading, Writing, Use of English, Listening, and Speaking. However, since 2015 the Reading and the Use of English papers merged into one paper and tasks were shortened. In the revised version the reading topic revolved more around the vocational and educational issues to prepare students both for working in an English-speaking environment and furthering education (Howden & Mehta, 2015; Zeronis & Geranpayeh, 2015).

This exam is among one of the most popular Cambridge exams and a large number of students participate in it annually since 1) they can improve their job prospects; 2) continue their study; 3) it is recommended by their teachers; 4) it is a prestigious exam; 5) it is good for their personal development; 6) it is recognized as a school-leaving qualification (Howden & Metha, 2015).

Therefore, due to the importance of the exam different aspects of the exam are addressed by scholars. Purpura (1997), for example, tried to analyze the cognitive and metacognitive strategies EFL/ESL learners apply on FCE tests. The findings proposed that learners at the intermediate level of proficiency benefit from the ability to decode grammar and vocabulary, rather than do a top-down or interactive reading at higher levels of processing as suggested by Taylor, Harris and Pearson (1988). Daftarifard and Birjandi (2015) also scrutinized lower intermediate EFL learners’ performance on the reading section of the FCE exam. Their study showed that low proficient language learners could not properly make use of cognitive strategies. Moreover, good readers’ uses of Planning and Monitoring metacognitive strategies were significantly better than those of poor readers.

Tsagari (2011) also explored the influence of First Certificate in English (FCE) exam on teachers’ classroom practices. It was found that teachers highlighted the topics and skills expected to be tested in the exam due to the

accountable pressure for the results of the students. In fact, it was shown that classroom practices mostly deals with exam oriented materials and intense preparation activities.

So far the studies mainly dealt with the exam itself rather than the available exam resources and books in the market. In doing so, Roohani and Tanbakooei (2012) compared *First Certificate* and *Passages 1* textbooks by adopting critical discourse analysis framework. They particularly focused on social relations, subject positions, and contents in the conversation as well as vocabulary and grammar parts. Their results revealed that both textbooks encouraged equal social relations between men and women with equal social status and power. However, *Passages 1* paid more attention to *friends*' social relation, while *First Certificate* gave priority to *TV reporting*. Regarding the content, *Passages 1* mostly focused on uncontroversial issues, whereas *First Certificate* concentrated on controversial and market-oriented topics more than *Passages 1*. After all, both of these textbooks had the tendency to picture the cultural and ideological aspects of Western countries to language learners.

As can be noticed, the above studies provide no objective insight into what the FCE preparation exam books contain and there is no accurate picture of what such books include. Studies of FCE mostly have been carried out on the exam and no study has addressed the objective analysis of book contents. As a result, the purpose of this study is to examine closely and objectively the reading passages of "Ready for FCE" (Norris, 2008) by employing the MICAST to help the FCE candidates achieve their expectations in the exam.

Methodology

Material

This study analyzes fifteen reading passages of "Ready for FCE" (Norris, 2008) which aims at preparing English language learners for the FCE test. In fact, this book is situated at level B2 of the Common European Framework which is named Vantage. In this level learners are expected to express themselves on a range of topics and achieve their goals. The first criterion in

selecting this book was its being published internationally by one of the leading publishers, Macmillan. Additionally, the passages are longer than books in the lower levels and thus provide a better chance for the analysis of its writer's word choice.

Procedure

The contents of the reading passages from FCE was first typed and broken into their single/phrasal words representing specific concepts as schemata. Following Khodadady and Lagziyan (2013), parsed schemata were assigned to semantic, syntactic and parasyntactic domains. Each domain schema was then assigned to its genera. The genus schemata were, in turn, subcategorized into their constituting species. Upon specifying the 122 species of the 16 genera, the types and tokens of species were then counted. Moreover, to increase the reliability of the results, the codes assigned to schemata were double-checked after passing about one month from the first analysis.

Data Analysis

The readability level of each passage was computed via Microsoft Word by employing Flesch Readability Ease Score (Flesch, 1948) on a 100-point scale. The score on the scale determines the level of text difficulty which means that the higher the score, the easier the text. Standard documents score range from 60 to 70 (Kincaid, Fishburne, Rogers & Chissom, 1975). Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score was also used to determine the appropriate U.S. grade-school level of the reading texts. It ranges from 7.0 to 8.0 for standard documents. Then the statistical significance of semantic, syntactic, and parasyntactic domains and their subcategories was tested via Chi-square test and cross tabulation. SPSS version 22 was employed to run all statistical analyses.

Results and Discussion

Considering the level of 15 reading passages of FCE book, Table 1 was aimed at determining the readability level of these passages by running Flesch Reading Ease test. As the table reveals, the reading texts in this book fall within the range of 47.9 (difficult texts) to 74 (approximately standard texts) scores. Additionally, as the table shows reading passages are not organized from easy to difficult. Passage 7 (Value for money) is, for example, easier than all its previous passages and the second passage (Going to extremes) is one of the most difficult texts of the book which is presented at the very beginning of the book. Considering these issues it seems that no readability indices have been taken into consideration to select the 15 passages of FCE.

Table 1

Readability Level of the 15 Passages of Ready for FCE

| NO | TITLE | FLESH | FKGL |
|----|---|-------|------|
| 1 | Handle with Car | 67.7 | 8.5 |
| 2 | Going to extremes | 55.4 | 12.2 |
| 3 | The Convenience Society, or con for short | 60.2 | 10.8 |
| 4 | A walk in the midday sun | 69.2 | 8.3 |
| 5 | Home is where the school is | 59.5 | 9.4 |
| 6 | Family foods- or just lunch? | 62.7 | 9.7 |
| 7 | Value for money | 47.9 | 11 |
| 8 | Is your journey really necessary? | 61.2 | 8.7 |
| 9 | UFOs- have been visited? | 50.2 | 12.3 |
| 10 | Private investigators investigated | 59.6 | 10 |
| 11 | Lucky to be alive | 74.0 | 6.8 |
| 12 | Water: Are you drinking enough? | 52.9 | 10.5 |
| 13 | Life in the fast lane | 64.5 | 9.1 |
| 14 | The most successful living artist | 51.1 | 11.6 |
| 15 | Two Languages good, three Languages even better | 47.9 | 12.5 |

Regarding Flesch–Kincaid grade level scores, it can be seen in Table 1 above the passages are not homogeneous enough to guarantee the selection of FCE teaching materials based on any objective measures of comprehensibility. For instance, passage 11 (Lucky to be alive), is suitable for grade six students while passage 15 (Two Languages good, three Languages even better) and passage 2 (Going to extremes) are proper for college students.

Table 2 illustrates the types and tokens of subcategories comprising semantic, syntactic, and parasyntactic schemata of FCE reading texts. The results reveal that the FCE reading passages are mainly composed of semantic (46.7%) and syntactic (40.5%) schema tokens and only 12.6% of tokens are parasyntactic in the domain. Moreover, this finding reveals that *there is a significant difference between semantic, syntactic, and parasyntactic tokens in FEC book* ($X^2= 1704$, $p< 0.05$).

Table 2
Distribution of Schema Genus "Types" and "Tokens" in 15 Passages of FCE

| Schema | Genus | Type | Type % | Total % | Token | Token % | Total % |
|----------------------|-----------------|------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Semantic | Nouns | 1204 | 42.6 | 80.7 | 2029 | 23.5 | 46.7 |
| | Verbs | 569 | 20.1 | | 1186 | 13.7 | |
| | Adjectives | 413 | 14.6 | | 667 | 7.7 | |
| | Adverbs | 93 | 3.2 | | 146 | 1.6 | |
| Syntactic | Determiners | 27 | 0.9 | 6 | 1105 | 12.8 | 40.5 |
| | Conjunctions | 23 | 0.8 | | 505 | 5.8 | |
| | Prepositions | 53 | 1.8 | | 946 | 10.9 | |
| | Pronouns | 52 | 1.8 | | 640 | 7.4 | |
| | Syntactic verbs | 37 | 1.3 | | 300 | 3.4 | |
| Parasyntactic | Abbreviations | 47 | 1.6 | 12.4 | 101 | 1.1 | 12.6 |
| | Interjections | 0 | 0 | | 0 | 0 | |
| | Names | 165 | 5.8 | | 220 | 2.5 | |
| | Numerals | 69 | 2.4 | | 135 | 1.5 | |
| | Para-adverbs | 66 | 2.3 | | 472 | 5.4 | |
| | Particles | 2 | .0 | | 156 | 1.5 | |
| | Symbols | 2 | .0 | | 8 | .1 | |
| | Total | | 2822 | | 100 | 100 | |

12 Khodadady & Attaran - Evaluation of FCE Reading Passages

Nonetheless, the percentage of domains differ noticeably from each other regarding schema types as shown in Table 2 above. In other words, 80.7% of the texts embrace semantic types, whereas syntactic and parasyntactic schema types constitute only 6.3% and 12.4%, respectively. This finding is in accordance with that of Khodadady (2008b) and suggests that teachers should spend a considerable amount of time on meaning. This notion can also be profitably used in order to enhance students' reading comprehension because as Wade (1990) mentioned good readers are more meaning oriented.

Table 3 presents the significance of differences found among the three genera types ($X^2= 2869.9$, $p< 0.05$) and tokens ($X^2= 1704$, $p< 0.05$). As can be seen, FCE reading passages benefit significantly from the presence of semantic types (observed $N= 2279$) and rest heavily on them. Syntactic (observed $N=191$) and parasyntactic (observed $N=352$) types are both far less than expected ($N=940.7$). This finding also suggests that *there is a significant different between semantic, syntactic, and parasyntactic types in FEC book* which endorses the fact that schema analysis of books can mirror their psychological reality.

Table 3
Chi-Square Test of FCE Reading Schema Domains

| Schema | Observed N | | Expected N | | Residual | |
|---------------|------------|-------|------------|-------|----------|-------|
| | Type | Token | Type | Token | Type | Token |
| semantic | 2279 | 4028 | 940.7 | 2872 | 1338.3 | 1156 |
| syntactic | 191 | 3496 | 940.7 | 2872 | -749.7 | 624 |
| parasyntactic | 352 | 1092 | 940.7 | 2872 | -588.7 | -1780 |
| Total | 2822 | 8616 | | | | |

Discussions and Conclusion

This study analyzed *Ready for FCE* textbook in the light of the microstructural approach to schema theory. This book aims to prepare students for Cambridge First certificate examination which is held all over

the world to test “candidates’ readiness for English-medium vocational and Higher Education courses” (Zeronis & Geranpayeh, 2015, p.5). The test consists of “5 main papers each of which carries 20% of the total and one of these papers is devoted to reading comprehension test” (p. IV). Therefore, students’ reading comprehension is one of the main objectives of this test.

Although in new version of FCE test reading comprehension passages emphasize “use of English tasks is on lexical and grammatical knowledge, they, along with Reading tasks, require reading comprehension” (Vidakovich, Elliott & Sladden, 2015, p. 9). As assessment tools, they require a wide range of cognitive processes. Khalifa and Weir (2009) model of reading comprehension represents the processes as below:

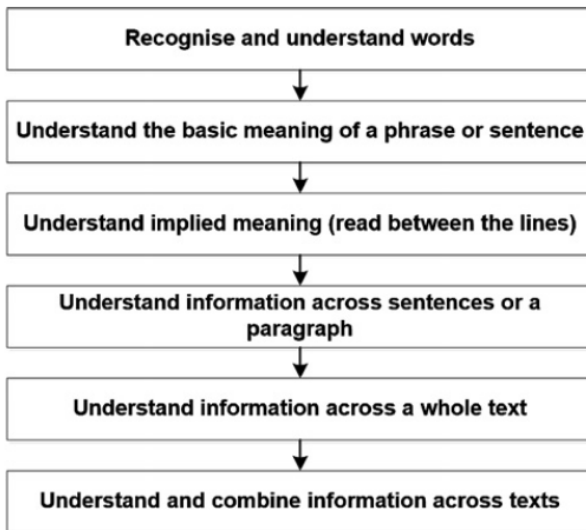


Figure 1. A model of reading comprehension (adopted from Khalifa & Weir, 2009, p.43).

As shown in figure 1 above, all cognitive processes can be summarized into a microstructural approach dealing with the meanings as well as the linguistic functions of words as they combine with each other to produce texts. In fact, in this view schema is a representative of a specific concept whose comprehension in isolation and in combination with others brings

about understanding as learners move from the first step of this model to the last. In fact, the microstructural approach can be a theoretically sound method of teaching reading comprehension as documented in Khodadady, Pishghadam and Fakhar's (2010) findings. More importantly, taking schema-based language teaching approach can change students' performance significantly not only on seen texts but also on unseen ones, providing a great help for FCE test candidates. The reason is that reading passages of the FCE tests are assumed to be unseen to their takers.

As was mentioned earlier, the FCE test has been revised for better changes. According to Zeronis and Geranpayeh (2015), one of the key aims of this revision was "reflecting the most up-to-date methodological approach to communicative language testing" (p. 4). The people in charge of revision did not, however, provide any support for their claim. It is not, for example, obvious what they meant by *the most* up-to-date methodological approach to communicative language testing. The claim sounds unsubstantiated since the only change they made to the test was merging the Use of English tasks with Reading tasks.

Furthermore, Geranpayeh (2007, cited in Docherty, 2015) brought up another shortcoming of the FCE test by stating that the model of language proficiency underlying all Cambridge English exam reviews is based on the notion that "communicative language ability can be divided into different sub-skills and abilities" (p. 15). He argued further that "although an overall language ability exists, language skills (i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening) and language knowledge or systems (i.e. grammar and vocabulary) can develop differently in each individual and can be measured as separate aspects of language ability" (p. 15). In other words, communicative language ability is nothing but the sum of reading, writing, speaking and listening abilities. Gestalt advocates, however, insist on the fact that whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This implies that learners' communicative language ability is greater than the students' sheer abilities of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Through the lens of microstructural approach, FCE book encompasses 2822 semantic, syntactic, and parasyntactic schemata which need to be learned in this book. Almost about 80.7%, 6% and 12.4% of schema types comprising this book are semantic, syntactic and parasyntactic in the

domain, respectively. The syntactic and parasyntactic schema types are responsible for connecting the semantic schema types together to produce the broader concepts called species which are signified in sentences. Since syntactic and parasyntactic schemata account for the English grammar, the sum of syntactic and parasyntactic schemata ($6\%+12.4\%=18.4\%$) and their total division by the percentage of semantic schema types ($18.4/80.7=0.22$) provides the most accurate index of FCE comprehensibility. As an index of text comprehensibility, 0.22 shows that FCE texts are very difficult. This finding lends support to Khodadady's (2008b) study in which the objective theory-driven microstructural approach to textual analysis is suggested to be utilized to analyze materials developed for the objective teaching of the English language.

Comparing the microstructural index of comprehensibility (MICRO) with Flesh Readability Ease Score (Flesch, 1948), it can be seen that MICRO considers linguistic functions of words and their combination to produce texts as well as their meaning. However, Flesh is solely based on average sentence length and an average number of syllables per word. For instance, the following sentences are from the first unit of this book named *Handle with Care*. (Its Flesch Readability Ease Score (67.7) shows that it is a standard unit.)

After recent accounts of drug-taking amongst teenage models in the care of their model agencies, the catwalk world has come once again under public scrutiny. Jess Hallett used to be a booker taking bookings for models, organizing their itineraries and generally running their lives.

As can be seen, the passage "*Handle with Care*" is about the modeling industry, which is not a recognized industry in the contexts of Iran and is, therefore, difficult for students to comprehend. Consequently, it seems that the dependence of the score on word length and syllable cannot be the distinguishing features of text difficulty level. Indeed, to determine the difficulty and comprehensibility of a passage there is a need for not only linguistic functions but also semantic meanings of the linguistic elements and their combinations which are the main concepts of the microstructural approach of schema theory (Khodadady, 1997). In fact, there is no room for

words' meaning or schemata in Flesh Readability Ease Score which is its great weakness and suggests the MICRO superiority.

More importantly, instead of viewing words in terms of their length, the MICRO approaches them as representative of specific concepts whose comprehension in isolation and in combination with each other brings about the understanding of texts such as the FCE reading passages (Khodadady, 1997). This perspective of MICRO is in line with FCE test designers' objective. For instance, "Sometimes it is necessary for students to choose between words with a similar meaning, e.g. choosing 'leaking' rather than 'spilling', 'pouring' or 'flowing' to fill the gap in 'The roof of our tent was...'" and, therefore, it is suggested to give learners "practices in recognizing the differences in meaning between similar words, e.g. 'cut' and 'tear'" (<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams/first/>). In this sense, FCE test deals with schemata rather than memorizing vocabularies because schemata, according to Khodadady (2009), evoke an idiosyncratic image in the mind of a given test taker when he encounters it in a spoken and written text. He also provided the example of *leak* in the following lines:

But when the results of the tests were *leaked* last week, Amgen, the Californian biotechnology company which owns the exclusive rights to develop products based on the protein, saw an overnight jump in its share prices.

Khodadady (2009) argued that *leak* in the sentence above is a schema because it had a definite meaning for the author when he wrote the article *Miracle' jab makes fat mice thin* (*New Scientist*, 5 August 1995, No 1989). It must evoke the same meaning in the mind of its readers if they are to understand the article as the author intended them to do. Consequently, "The evocation of an image by a schema depends directly on the semantic and syntactic relations it has with all similar schemata in general and the schemata used in the text in which it appears in particular" (p. 5).

From the cognitive aspect of a microstructural approach, some of the most frequent schemata such as "children" (token of 27), "water" (token=26), and "language (token=18) are discussed here. Children and language are used the most in unit 15 which is named *Two Languages good, three Languages even better*. Clearly, as the title of this unit suggests it deals with the idea of language learning and that is why the schema of language is

used the most in this unit. Additionally, “who does the greatest proportion of language learners belong to?” The answer to this question would be more or less limited to children which is used 10 times in this passage.

Another example is the schema of “water” which is used 11 times in unit 4: *A walk in the midday sun* and 8 times in unit 12: *Water: are you drinking enough?* There is no surprise that unit 12 is one of the units which is weighed down by “water” schema because the unit itself approves the frequent use of this schema by its title. The question is how is the frequent use of “water” justified in unit 4. As was mentioned before, in the microstructural approach, schemata are considered both in isolation and in combination with each other which brings about the understanding of the text. In this regard, a combination of words like *A walk in the midday sun* can bring the notions like thirst, sweat, lack or need of water to mind which cognitively prepares the readers mind for encountering the word “water” for about 10 times. As a result, the profound understanding of schemata helps students comprehend the text by focusing on the title.

Therefore, schema can be considered as the basic unit of text analysis as well as teaching materials because it provides the readers and learners not only with linguistic and cognitive domains, genera, species and types represented by texts, paragraphs, sentences and words, respectively, also with their discursal context as they move from schema types to domains continuously. Based on this interactive process Khodadady (2008b) maintained that schema theory explains how teachers and learners utilize concepts brought up in the textbooks to gain proficiency in a language.

It is also worth mentioning that students’ language learning journey can be facilitated by schema-based language teaching (Khodadady & Hesarzadeh, 2014). As discussed earlier, teaching reading passages by explicit teaching of schemata can deepen students’ understanding of reading passages. However, it should not be forgotten that future research is required to find out whether significant differences would be observed on FCE test results of students enjoying schema-based instruction which can be an inspiration to many test designers and material developers.

References

- Altman, G. T. M., Garnham, A., & Dennis, Y. (1992). Avoiding the garden path: Eye movement in context. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 31, 685-712.
- Bartlett, F. C. (1932). *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Breen, M. (1989). The evaluation cycle for language learning tasks. In P. Rea-Dickins & K. Germaine (Eds), *Evaluation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chastain, K. (1971). *The development of modern language skills: Theory to practice*. Philadelphia: Curriculum Development Center
- Daftarifard, P., & Birjandi, P. (2015). Lower Intermediate Readers and Their Use of Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 12(10), 757-761.
- Docherty, C. (2015). Revising the use of English component in FCE and CAE. *Researchers Notes*, 62, 15-20.
- Flesch, R. (1948). A new readability yardstick. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 32, 221-233. doi: [10.1037/h0057532](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0057532)
- Geranpayeh, A. (2007). Using structural equation modelling to facilitate the revision of high stakes testing: The case of CAE. *Researchers Notes*, 30, 8-12.
- Gharbavi, A., & Mousavi, S. A. (2012). A content analysis of textbooks: Investigating gender bias as a social prominence in Iranian high school English textbooks. *English Linguistics*, 1(1), 42-49. doi: [10.5430/elr.v1n1p42](https://doi.org/10.5430/elr.v1n1p42)
- Hakemulder, F. (2006). A third culture: The empirical study of literature, culture, and the arts. In K. Brown (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics*, (pp. 274-280). Oxford: Elsevier.
- Head, H. (1920). *Studies in neurology*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Howden, D., & Metha, S. (2015). Stakeholder consultation: Review of FCE and CAE. *Researchers Notes*, 62, 6-8.
- Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Khalifa, H., & Weir, C. J. (2009). *Examining reading: Research and practice in assessing second language reading*. Cambridge: UCLES|Cambridge University Press.
- Khodadady, E. (1997). *Schemata theory and multiple choice item tests measuring reading comprehension*. Unpublished PhD thesis. The University of Western Australia.
- Khodadady, E. (2001). Schema: A theory of translation. In *Training Translators and Interpreters in the New Millennium, Portsmouth 17th March 2001 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 107-123).
- Khodadady, E. (2004). Schema-based cloze multiple choice item tests: Measures of reduced redundancy and language proficiency. *ESP specialist*, 25(2), 221-243.
- Khodadady, E. (2008a). Measuring translation ability and achievement: A schema-based approach. *Quarterly Journal of Humanities, Al-Zahra University*, 18(70), 56-76.
- Khodadady, E. (2008b). Schema-based textual analysis of domain-controlled authentic texts. *Iranian Journal of Language Studies (IJLS)*, 2(4), 431-448.
- Khodadady, E. (2009). Objective-based achievement testing in the context of schema theory. *Iranian Journal of Language Studies (IJLS)*, 3(1), 1-30.
- Khodadady, E. (2013). *Research principles and methods and statistics in applied linguistics*. Mashhad: Hamsayeh Aftab.
- Khodadady, E. & Herriman, M. (2000). Schemata theory and selected response item tests: From theory to practice. In A. J. Kunnan (Ed). *Fairness and validation on language assessment* (pp. 201-222). Cambridge: CUP.
- Khodadady, E. & Hesarzadeh, R. (2014). The effect of schema-vs-translation-based teaching on learning English in high schools. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4(1),143-154. doi: [10.4304/tpls.4.1.143-154](https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.4.1.143-154)
- Khodadady, E., & Khosravani, H. (2014). Ideology in the BBC and press TV's coverage of Syria unrest: A schema-based approach. *Review of Journalism and Mass communication*, 2(1), 47-67.

- Khodadady, E., & Lagzian, M. (2013). Textual analysis of an English dentistry textbook and its Persian translation: A schema-based approach. *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences*, 2(1), 81-104.
- Khodadady, E., Pishghadam, R., & Fakhar, M. (2010). The relationship among reading comprehension ability, grammar, and vocabulary knowledge: An experimental and schema-based approach. *Iranian EFL Journal*, 6, 7-49.
- Khodadady, E., Shirmohammadi, S., & Talebi, F. (2011). Brainstorming and Its Effect on Critical Thinking and Speaking. *The Iranian EFL Journal*, 19, 51.
- Khojasteh, L., & Reinders, H. (2013). How textbooks (and learners) get it wrong: A corpus study of modal auxiliary verbs. *Applied Research on English Language*, 2(1), 33-44.
- Kinciad, j. P., Fishburne, R.P., Jr., Rogers, R. L., & Chissom, B. S. (1975). *Derivation of new readability formulas (Automate Readability Index, Fog Count and Flesh Reading Ease Formula) for Navy enlisted personnel*. Research Report 8-75, Millington, TN: Naval Technical Training, U.S. Naval Air Station, Memphis, TN.
- McNeil, J. (1987). *Reading comprehension: New direction for classroom practice*. Blenview, IL: Foresman, and Company.
- Norris, R. (2008). *Ready for FCE*. Macmillan: Macmillan Publisher
- Nunan, D. (1987). *The teacher as curriculum developer*. Adelaide: National Curriculum Resource Centre.
- Piaget, J. (1926). *The child's conception of the world*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Poplin, M. S. (1988). Holistic /constructivist principles of the teaching /learning process: Implications for the field of learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 21,401-416. doi: [10.1177/002221948802100703](https://doi.org/10.1177/002221948802100703)
- Purpura, J. E. (1997). An analysis of the relationships between test takers' cognitive and metacognitive strategy use and second language test performance. *Language Learning*, 47(2), 289–32. doi: [10.1111/0023-8333.91997009](https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.91997009)
- Rashidi, N, & Ghaedsharafi, Sh. (2015). An investigation into the culture and social actors representation in Summit series ELT textbooks

- within Van Leeuwen's 1996 framework. *SAGE Open*, 5(1), 1-10. doi: [10.1177/2158244015576054](https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015576054)
- Richards, J. C. (2001). *The role of textbooks in a language program*. Retrieved from <http://www.professorjackrichards.com/pdfs/role-of-textbooks>.
- Roohani, A., & Tanbakooei, N. (2012). Evaluating Passages 1 and First Certificate Textbooks: A Discourse Perspective. *Research in Applied Linguistics*, 3(2), 82-106.
- Rumelhart, D.E. (1975). Notes on a schema for stories. In D. G. Bobrow & A. Collins (Eds.), *Representation and understanding* (pp. 211-236). New York: Academic Press.
- Semino, E. (1997). *Language and world creation in poems and other texts*. London: Longman.
- Sheldon, L. E. (1988). Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials. *ELT journal*, 42(4), 237-246. doi: [10.1093/elt/42.4.237](https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/42.4.237)
- Stockwell, P. (2006). Schema theory: Stylistic applications. In K. Brown (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (pp. 8- 13). Oxford: Elsevier.
- Tanenhaus, M. K., Spivey-Knowlton, M., Eberhard, K., & Sedivy, J. (1995). Integration of visual and linguistic information during spoken language comprehension. *Science*, 268, 1632–1634.
- Taylor, B., Harris, L. A., & Pearson, P. D. (1988). *Reading difficulties: Instruction and Assessment*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing company.
- Tomlinson, B., Dat, B., Masuhara, H., & Rubdy, R. (2001). ELT courses for adults. *ELT Journal*, 55(1), 80-101. doi: [10.1093/eltj/55.1.80](https://doi.org/10.1093/eltj/55.1.80)
- Toms, C. (2004). General English coursebooks and their place in an ESAP programme. *Asian EFL Journal*, 6(1).
- Tsagari, D. (2011). Washback of a high-stakes English exam on teachers' perceptions and practices. *Selected Papers from the 19th ISTAL*, 431-445.
- Tucker, C. A. (1975). Evaluating beginning textbooks. *English Teaching Forum*, 13, 355-361.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

22 Khodadady & Attaran - Evaluation of FCE Reading Passages

- van Leeuwen, T. (1996). The representation of social actors in discourse. In C. R. Caldas-Coulthard & M. Coulthard, (Eds.), *Texts and practices: Readings in critical discourse analysis* (pp. 32-70). London: Routledge.
- Vidakovic, I., Elliott, M., & Sladden, J. (2015). Revising FCE and CAE reading tests. *Researchers Note*, 62, 8-14.
- Wade, S. E. (1990). Using think alouds to assess comprehension. *The Reading Teacher*, 43(7), 442-451.
- Zeronis, R., & Geranpayeh, A. (2015). Continuity and innovation: Updating FCE and CAE. *Researchers Note*, 62, 3-5.

Ebrahim Khodadady is currently an academic member of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. He has been offering undergraduate and graduate courses in applied linguistics in Australia, Canada and Iran.

Atena Attaran is PhD candidate of Applied Linguistics at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Contact address: Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Azadi Roundabout, Mashhad, 91779-48883, Iran. Email:

ekhodadady@um.ac.ir