Reading Comprehension Passages of Iranian General English Books and MA

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Abstract

This is a corpus study aimed to compare six Iranian general English university textbook's reading comprehension passages and the passages of reading comprehension section of MA exams from 2010 to 2014. The study used three reading related factors to make the comparison: vocabulary coverage, syntactic complexity and discourse features. To meet these needs, three test types were used: measures of vocabulary coverage by the vocabprofiler software, measures of readability by means of readability formulas and measures of text easibility of the Coh-Metrix software. The analyses showed a big gap between what textbooks offered with regard to vocabulary, structures and discourse and what the MA examinations asked from the readers regarding the reading comprehension processes. The findings and results were presented along with the pedagogical implications and some suggestions for future researches.

Key words: reading comprehension, vocabulary coverage, readability, text easibility

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1. Introduction

Reading is an important skill which is with us all the time and nowadays it still strongly holds its place. Brown (2003, points to this fact in the following way:

> Even as we are bombarded with an unending supply of visual and auditory media, the written word continues in its function to convey information, to amuse and entertain, to codify our social, economic, and legal conventions and to fulfill a host of other functions. (p. 185)

Vocabulary knowledge plays a critical part in reading comprehension in general and academic reading in particular. According to Alderson (2000), vocabulary knowledge is considered as a very crucial element in first language reading and it was estimated that these readers need to have 10,000 to 100,000 words to comprehend successfully. Alderson (2000, p.35) states that 'coping with unknown words affects comprehension and reduces reading enjoyment. Vocabulary knowledge is in fact the only and the best predictor of reading comprehension'.

Nassaji (2003) indicates that vocabulary knowledge is the most powerful element among other reading comprehension components for 60 university level English as second language (ESL) learners. According to Grabe (2009), second language assessment researches show that there is a very strong relationship between word knowledge and reading comprehension.

Based on the frequency level of vocabulary, Nation (1990) designed *VocabProfiler* software which is now online. *VocabProfiler* is a computer program which does lexical text analysis. It takes any text and divides its words into four categories by frequency: the most frequent 1000 words of English (K1 words), the second most frequent thousand words of English, i.e. 1001 to 2000 (K2 words), the academic words of English (the Academic Word List (AWL)), and the off-list words which are not found on the other lists.

Hu and Nation (2000) reported that participants of their study needed to know 98%–99% of the words in texts before adequate comprehension were possible. Nation used the updated percentage figure of 98% in his analysis, which led to the 8,000–9,000 vocabulary figures. As reading is a crucial aid in learning a second language (L2), it is necessary to ensure that learners have sufficient vocabulary to read well (Grabe, 2009; Hudson, 2007; Koda, 2005). Schmitt, Jiang and Grabe (2011) showed that a reader of an academic text needs to know about 98 % of vocabulary used in the text to comprehend successfully.

Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) found that university students in Israel needed enough vocabulary to cover 98% of the examination reading

texts (6–8,000 word families) in order to obtain a score on a university entrance examination which indicated they could read academic material independently (with or without the aid of a dictionary). However, even the ability to read with some guidance and help required 95% coverage, entailing knowledge of 4–5,000 word families. Thus even assisted reading in an educational setting requires a considerable progression into mid-frequency vocabulary.

Teachers and material writers need to make a cost/benefit analysis of vocabulary to decide whether or not any particular lexical item deserves instruction or inclusion (Nation, 2011).

Vocab-profile software was used in this study to show the lexical coverage and the differences in the lexical coverage of these four levels in the reading passages of English textbooks and the MA examinations' reading passages.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Readability

According to DuBay (2007, p. 7), readability is 'what makes some texts easier than others to read'. Readability measures take the complexity of words and sentences into account. Different definitions are proposed for readability in the literature. The following three are cited from DuBay (2007):

- The sum total (including all the interactions) of all those elements within a given piece of printed material that affect the success a group of readers have with it. The success is the extent to which they understand it, read it at an optimal speed, and find it interesting (Dale and Chall, 1948, p.38).
- The ease of understanding or comprehension due to the style of writing." (Klare, 1963, p.1)
- The ease of reading words and sentences (Hargis, 2000,p. 123)
- The degree to which a given class of people find certain reading matters compelling and comprehensible. (McLaughlin,1969, p.640)

Dubay (2007, p.5) considers content, style, design and organization of the text as features that make reading easy. There are many readability formulas in the literature among them we chose two mostly applied readability formulas introduced below. (Readers who want to know more about these formulas are referred to DuBay, 2007).

2.2. Readability Formulas

What follows is the introduction of two readability formulas used in the study are among the classic readability tests which withstand the test of time. The first was Flesch Reading Ease (Flesch, 1948) measure which is based on a 0-100 scale in which high scores mean the texts are easier to read and low scores mean the texts are difficult. Below its formula is illustrated:

206.835 – (1.015 × average sentence length) – (84.6 × average number of syllables per word)

Table 1 shows the meaning of the scores obtained from Flesch reading ease score.

Table 1
Flesch's Reading Ease Scores (Extracted from DuBay, 2007, p.58)

Reading Ease Score	Style Description	Estimated Reading Grade
0 to 30:	Very Difficult	College graduate
30 to 40:	Difficult	13th to 16th grade
50 to 60:	Fairly Difficult	10th to 12th grade
60 to 70:	Standard	8th and 9th grade
70 to 80:	Fairly Easy	7th grade
80 to 90:	Easy	6th grade
90 to 100:	Very Easy	5th grade

The second readability index used in the present study was Gunning Fog Score (Gunning, 1968) whose formula is given below:

0.4 × ((words/sentences) + 100 × (complex Words/words))

Scores obtained from Fog Index range from 6 to 17. Table.2 gives.

2.3 Text Easibility Tool and its Components

Coh-Metrix (See www.Coh-Metrix.com), developed by researchers at the University of Memphis, is an online tool which assesses a text's coherence and cohesion on over 600 measures, linking approaches from computational and psycho-linguistics (Baker, 2010). Crossley et al. (2008) employed Coh-Metrix for second language assessment applications such as measuring L2 lexical proficiency, distinguishing between high- and low-proficiency essays, and VanderVeen et al. (2007) developed reading competency profiles based on reading passages in the SAT Reasoning Test, a US college entry test.

Coh-Metrix text easibility moves beyond readability measures by providing metrics of multiple levels of language and discourse which is in line with theories of text and discourse comprehension. (e.g., Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994; Graesser & McNamara, 2011; Kintsch, 1998; McNamara & Magliano, 2009). It has five components: narrativity, syntactic simplicity, word concreteness, referential cohesion and deep cohesion.

Table 2
The Gunning Fog Index (Gunning, 1968, p. 40)

Fog Index		Reading Level By Grade
	17	College graduate
Danger Line	16	College senior
	15	College junior
	14	College sophomore
	13	College freshman
	12	High-school senior
	11	High-school junior
	10	High-school sophomore
	9	High-school freshman
	8	Eighth grade
Easy-reading Range	7	Seventh grade
	6	Sixth grade

Narrativity considers the narrative nature of texts as a factor making the texts easier. By narrativity, the designers of Coh-Metrix mean how much a text is close to every day oral conversation. The more story like a text is, the more narrativity it has, hence the easier it is.

Syntactic simplicity refers to the issue that when sentences have fewer words and apply familiar and simpler syntactic structures, they are easier to comprehend.

Word concreteness indicates the idea that when words used in a text refer to concrete and touchable concepts, they are easier to perceive than a text full of abstract concepts.

Referential cohesion refers to the elements of the text by which all parts of the text are interwoven, helping the text to have unity and assisting the readers to find a complete whole out of the text.

Deep cohesion is the result of the work of connectives in the texts which causes causal and logical relationship among different parts of the text. When such connectives do not exist in a text, the act of the reader will be more difficult.

In this study, we used the Coh-Metrix software to meet these five features in the corpus and thereby to make a comparison between the MA examination reading passages and the reading passages of general English

university textbooks. No study has been done to investigate text easibility using Coh-Metrix in Iranian context so far.

To sum up, what this study aimed to do was to compare the reading passages of MA examinations of Iran and the reading comprehension of Iranian general reading textbooks regarding their vocabulary demands, readability and easibility.

3. Method

This study used three strategies namely vocabulary frequency, readability measures and text easibility tool to compare the reading passages of general English textbooks and MA examination reading passages.

3.1. The Corpus

This study is a corpus study. For every general English reading book a corpus of 5000 words was collected based on the random selection of the passages from all parts of each book. The corpus of MA examinations was collected from a random selection of passages of examinations from 2010 to 2014. All the corpora were composed of 35000 words. To obtain the corpus, first the reading texts were selected, and then they turned into Microsoft word data to be used in data analysis phase.

The general English reading books were chosen on the basis of their popularity and use in different universities of Iran. They were *Basic English for University Students (BEUS)* (Birjandi, 2012), *General English Reading for University Students (GERUS)* (Jahandar, et al. 2008), *General English* (GE) (Alimohammadi & Khalili, 2011), *Reading for general English (RGE)* (Pourgive, et al., 2005), *Basic English readings for university Students (BERUS)* (Ghasemzadeh, 2009), and *Live Reading* (LR) (Yazdani et al, 2011). All of these books have been used in general English courses in Iran. It is worth noting that in Iran, General English is worth three credits. It is an obligatory course and its purpose is to prepare the students to be able to read and write academic textbooks of their field of study. This course is of crucial importance because it is the last course in the educational life of the students, that is, the last chance academia provides for the students to learn general English. After this course, the students have English for Specific Purposes course whose main aim is to prepare them for their specific courses mostly taught by a content instructor rather than an English teacher.

In Iran, there is an increasing appeal among the youth for getting MA degree in their field of interest. A large sum of money has been spent on getting a BA degree, then for test preparation courses to get an MA degree. This appeal for getting an MA degree has made English as an important and crucial factor for the success and failure of the candidates of the MA

examinations because for every field, the exam includes an English test composed of thirty test items, 15 of them are reading comprehension passages.

This research is going to fill a gap in the English pedagogy of Iranian university system by showing the linguistic and as a result cognitive distance of the reading passages of Iranian general English textbooks and MA examination reading passages which have important effect on their future lives.

3.2. Instruments

In this study three free online tools for text analysis and measurement objectives were used. The first tool was vocabprofiler, a free online software,(www.vocabprofile.com) designed by Nation (1990) to make the analysis of the corpora of the present study and to show the frequency percentage of each four level frequency words in English, namely K1, K2, AWL and off-list words. This software gave the percentages of each four level in its output.

The second instrument used in the study was the online readability tool of the read.able site (www.read.able.com) which gives the above mentioned readability measures of the reading passages in its output.

The third instrument used in the present study was Coh-Metrix to analyse the easibility of the randomly selected reading passages of each corpus of the study.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

First the corpus of 5000 words made up of the reading passages of each book and MA examination reading sections was prepared. Then for the first round of the data analysis, the corpus was entered into the vocab-profile online software to obtain the vocabulary frequency of the words of each corpus in each four word levels. The frequency of each level was determined and then a comparison between each reading corpus and the MA examination corpus was done to find the differences between them regarding the frequency of vocabulary levels used in each corpus.

In the second phase of the data analysis, the randomly selected reading passages were entered into online passages were obtained.

In the third phase of data analysis, the easibility of the randomly selected passages of each corpus were obtained by Coh-Metrix online software.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Vocabulary Demands of the Reading Passages

In this section the findings of the study will be illustrated one by one and the comparison will be made descriptively.

Different corpora entered into the VocabProfiler software in order to obtain the frequency of the occurrence of words of different levels in all corpora. The output given by the software contains a profile of the percentage of words of the text of each of the four frequency level mentioned before.

The following table shows the frequency percentage of different corpora in the study regarding their lexical coverage of K1 words meaning the first 1000 most frequent words:

Readability software (read.able.com) and the two readability indices of the MA exam passages had the least amount of the most frequent words and BERUS had the highest amount of the most frequent words. Figure 1 shows the frequency.

Table 3
PThe Frequency Percentage of K1 Vocabulary Level across Corpora

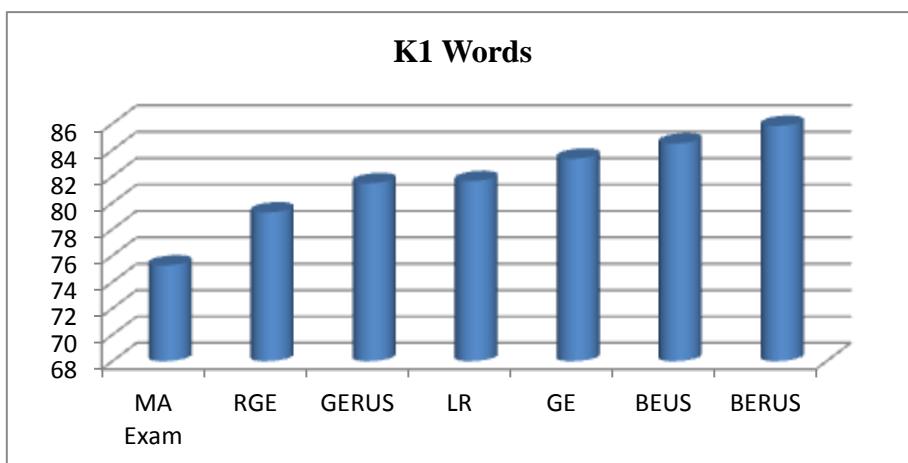| Corpus	MA Exam	RGE	GERUS	LR	GE	BEUS	BERUS
K1 Words	75.26	79.28	81.49	81.65	83.35	84.50	85.84

Figure1. The frequency percentage of K1 vocabulary level across corpora

Table 3 indicates the frequent percentage of the second 1000 most frequent words in different texts. BERUS had the most frequent K1 words in the corpora that was 85.84 percent and then came BEUS, GE and LR respectively. RGE was in the second place with regard to the least amount of the use of K1 level words.

Table 4 indicates that frequency of occurrence of K2 vocabularies in the corpora studied. As you see, in this level is GE had the least amount of

these words, MA exam stood in the third place regarding the use of the second most frequent words in all corpora. The most K2 words were found in GERUS reading passages. Figure 2 illustrates the frequency of the studied corpora regarding the use of K2 vocabularies.

Table 4

The Frequency Percentage of K2 Vocabulary Level across Corpora

Corpus	GE	LR	MA Exam	BERUS	BEUS	RGE	GERUS
K2 Words	5.28	5.61	5.83	6.64	7.20	7.62	8.39
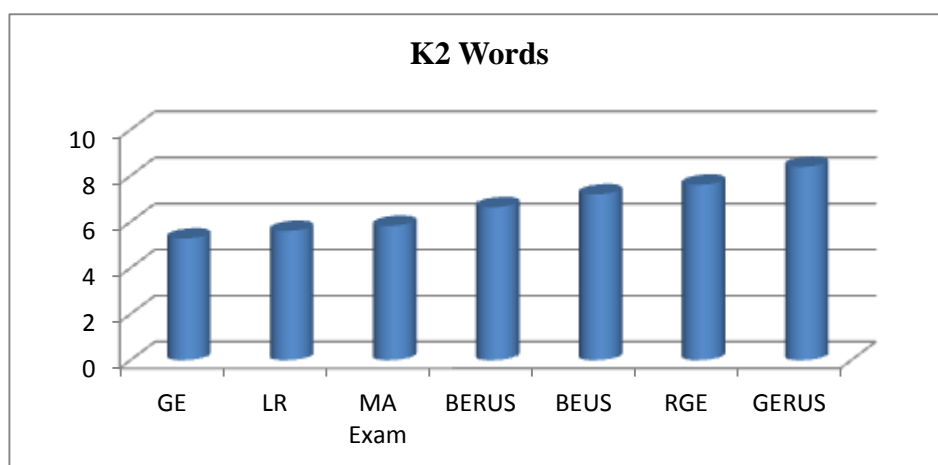
Figure 2. The frequency percentage of K2 vocabulary level across corpora

Table5

The Frequency Percentage of AWL Vocabulary Level across Corpora

Corpus	MA Exam	GE	LR	GERUS	BERUS	RGE	BEUS
AWL	7.28	7.11	4.90	2.52	2.47	2.39	1.28

Table 5 indicates the frequency of occurrence of AWL vocabularies in the corpora studied. Here MA exam corpus had the most amounts of academic vocabularies, and only GE had the closest amount of academic vocabularies, and then came LR. The least academic words were found in the corpus of BEUS. Figure 3 illustrates the ranking of different corpora studied.
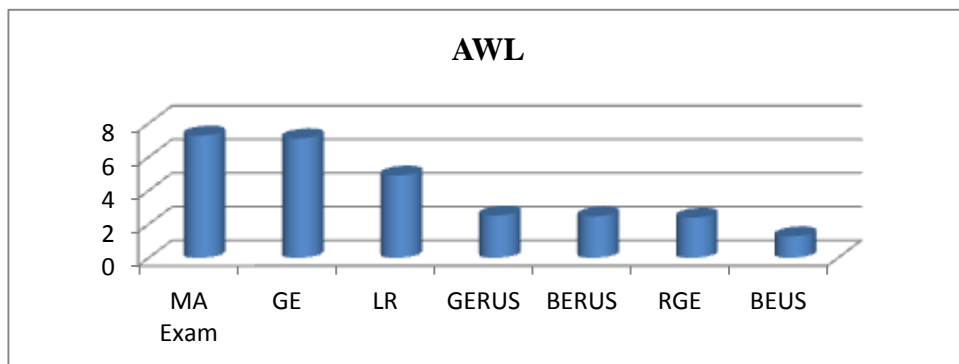
AWL

Figure 3. The frequency percentage of AWL vocabulary level across corpora

Table 6
The Frequency Percentage of Off-List Vocabulary Level across Corpora

Corpus	MAExam	RGE	LR	GERUS	BEUS	BERUS	GE
Off-list Words	11.63	10.71	7.84	7.60	7.03	5.06	4.26
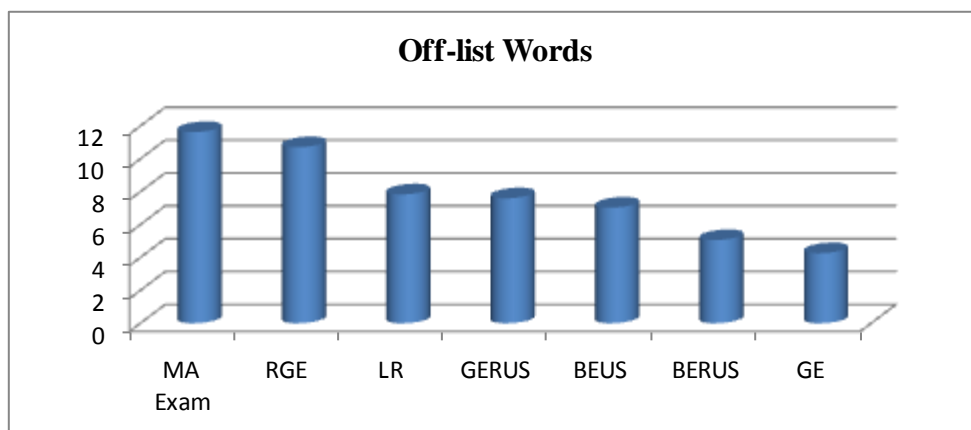
Off-list Words

Figure 4. The frequency percentage of Off-list vocabulary level across corpora

The occurrence of off-list words among the corpora are shown in the table. Table 6 shows that the task of the readers was highly demanding when it came to the use of off-list words. MA exam again had the most frequent Off-list level vocabularies than other corpora, and GE had the least amount of off-list vocabularies showing that they mostly dealt with the most frequent words in K1, K2 and AWL levels.

4.1.1 Readability Measures

Two readability formulas, Flesch Reading Ease (Flesch, 1948), Gunning Fog Score, were used in order to compare the readability of the corpora passages.

As shown in the Table 7, MA Exam was the most difficult among the corpora studied. MA Exam reading passages were difficult on the basis of the Flesch Reading Ease test and they were suitable for 10th to 12th grade level native students (See Table 1). It is worth mentioning that GE reading passages were one level behind in difficulty compared with MA reading passages by being fairly difficult on the account of this readability test and were suitable for 8th to 9th grade level native readers of English. Other passages were easy, fairly easy and standard meaning that they are appropriate for 7th grade level and below 7th level native readers. Figure 5 illustrates the findings of this section.

Table 7
The Flesch Reading Ease results

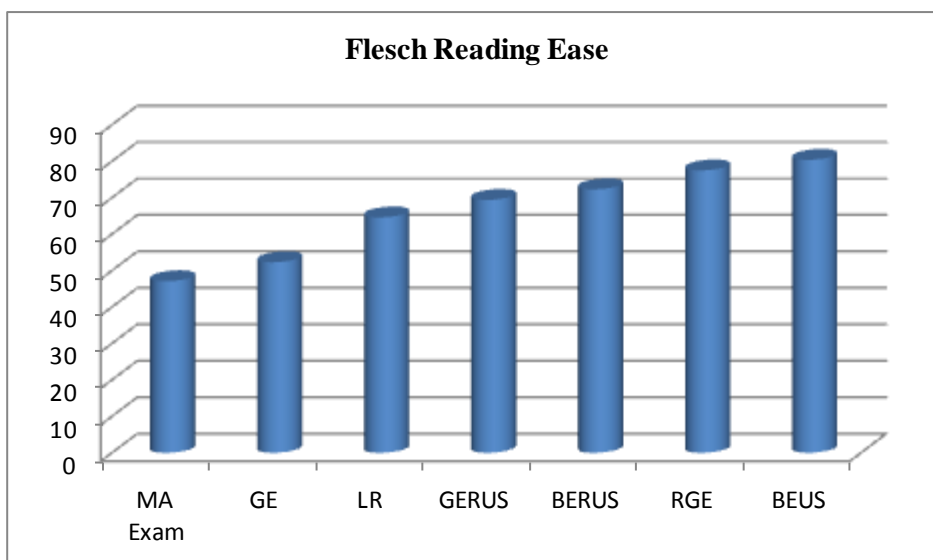| MA Exam	GE	LR	GERUS	BERUS	RGE	BEUS
47.1	52.3	64.6	69.4	72.3	77.5	80.4

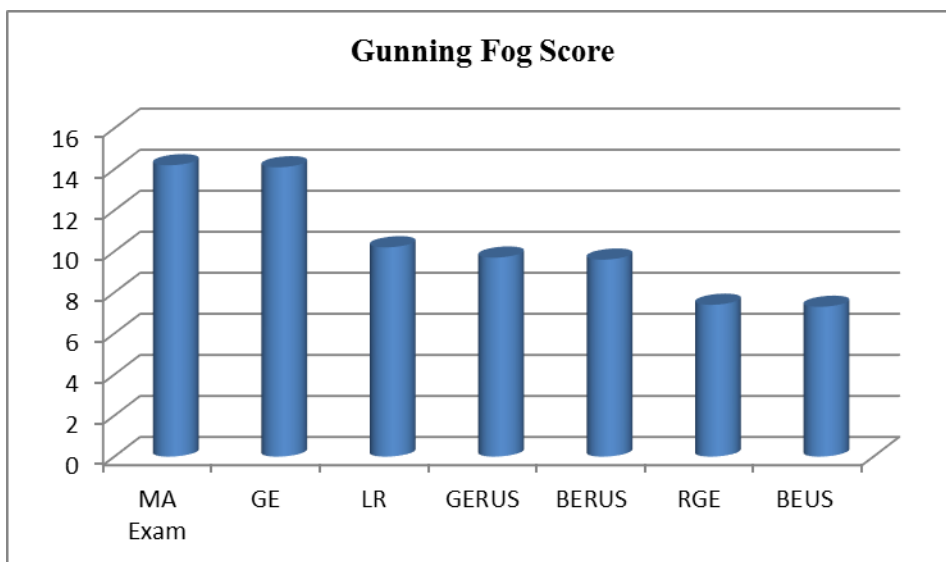*Figure 5.* The Flesch Reading Ease results

Figure 6. Gunning Fog Score results

Figure 6 shows the Gunning Fog score readability test results. Here also MA Exam reading passages were the most difficult regarding to the features analyzed by this readability formula among all other reading passages. Table 8 indicates the detailed differences of the texts covered in the corpora.

Table 8
Guning Fog Score

MA Exam	GE	LR	GERUS	BERUS	RGE	BEUS
14.2	14.1	10.2	9.7	9.6	7.4	7.3

The Gunning Fog score showed 14.2 for MA Exam reading passages which were at the level of college sophomore students of native speakers (See Table 2). GE obtained a close score to MA Exam that was 14.1 showing the same level of difficulty. LR is at the level of high school senior according to the grading level of the Gunning Fog Score, GERUS and BERUS were at the level of high school freshman native English readers, RGE and BEUS were suitable for Seventh grade level native readers.

4.1.2 Text Easibility

To meet the organizational features of the reading passages, the following test were run. The first component of text easibility is narrativity.

Table 9 below shows that the narrativity of the MA Exam passages were far lower than the narrativity of other reading passages extracted from other reading passages. Among the Iranian reading comprehension books, the

passages of GERRUS were the easiest with regard to narrativity. Figure 7 shows the ranking order of the studies corpora with regard to narrativity.

Table 9
Narrativity Percentages of the Corpora Used in the Study

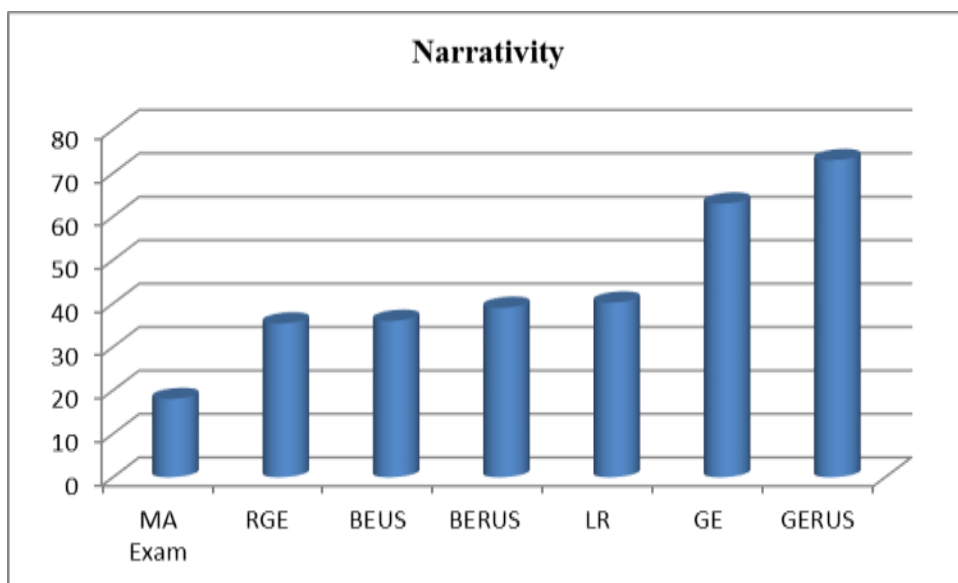| MA Exam	RGE	BEUS	BERUS	LR	GE	GERUS
18	35.4	36	39	40.2	63	73

Figure 7. Narrativity percentages of the corpora used in the study

Table 10 indicates the syntactic simplicity of the studied corpora. Here again MA exam reading passages had the least amount of simple syntactic structures, 34%. While reading materials' syntactic simplicity was highly above the syntactic simplicity of the MA exam, GERUS stood in the second place in this category and GE came in the third place. RGE used the most amounts of simple syntactic structures. Figure 8 gives a visual schema of the results.

Table10
Syntactic Simplicity Percentages of the Corpora Used in the Study

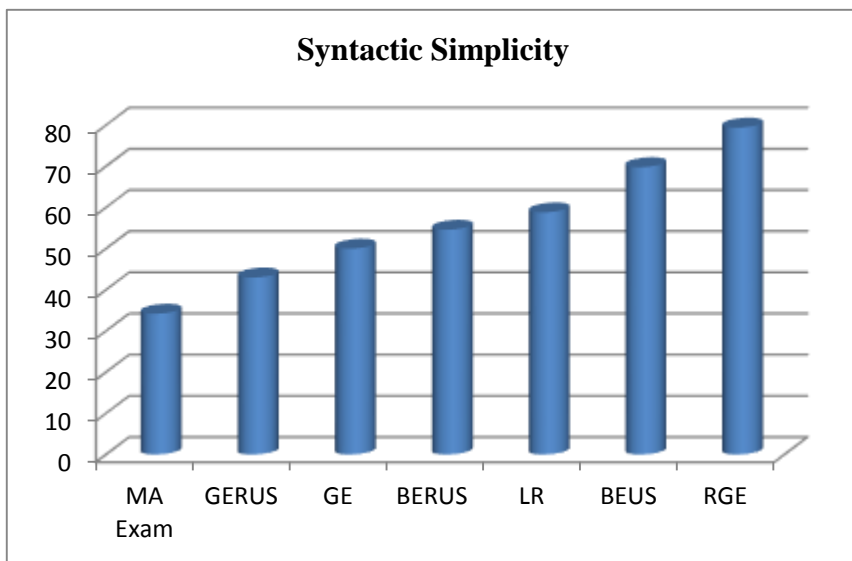| MA Exam	GERUS	GE	BERUS	LR	BEUS	RGE
34.2	43	50	54.6	58.8	69.8	79.4

Syntactic Simplicity

Figure 8. Syntactic simplicity percentages of the corpora used in the study

Word concreteness are at work when it comes to easibility of the reading passages. By looking at Table11, you can get the results. It also shows that MA exam passages were more difficult to cope with because of the use of the least amount of concrete words.

Among the reading books, GE was the second most difficult by exposing the readers with abstract words rather than concrete words. GERUS showed 99 percent of word concreteness. By having a look at Figure 12, you can get a better picture of the differences.

Table 11
Word Concreteness Percentage of the Corpora Used in the Study

MA Exam	*GE*	*BERUS*	*RGE*	*LR*	*BEUS*	*GERUS*
25.6	28	55.2	57.4	58.4	83.6	99

Figure 9 shows that MA exam reading passages didn't use referential cohesion making elements as used by their general English reading books' counterparts which could make processing more cumbersome on the part of the readers.

Table 10 shows that although RGE was not that far from the MA exam reading text with regard to referential cohesion providers, other reading materials went far from the MA exam's referential cohesion makers. GERUS showed 99 percent of having referential cohesion.
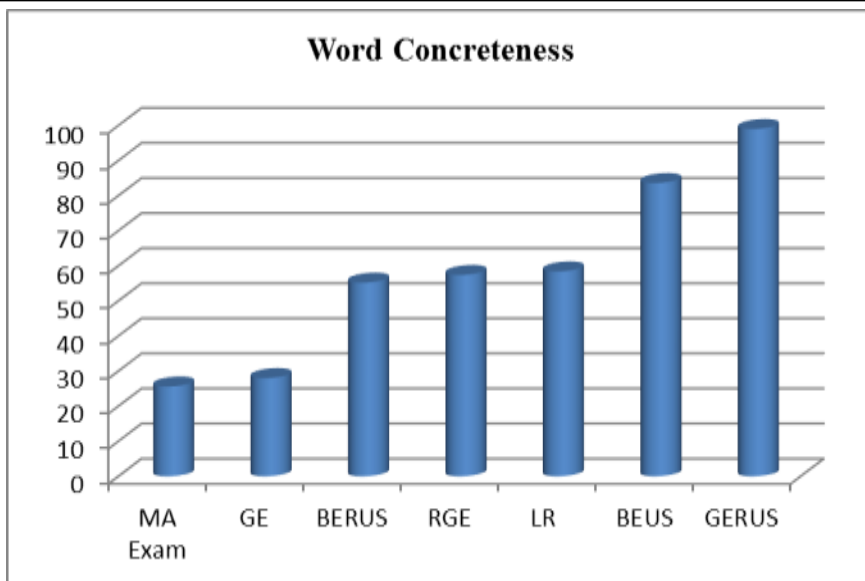
Figure 9. Word concreteness percentages of the corpora used in the study

Figure 12 provides the picture of the deep cohesion providers of the studied corpora. MA exam passages were highly more difficult with regard to deep cohesion of their texts while reading books' reading passages were did a good job by providing acceptable up to excellent deep cohesion. Table 12 gives the details of the differences.
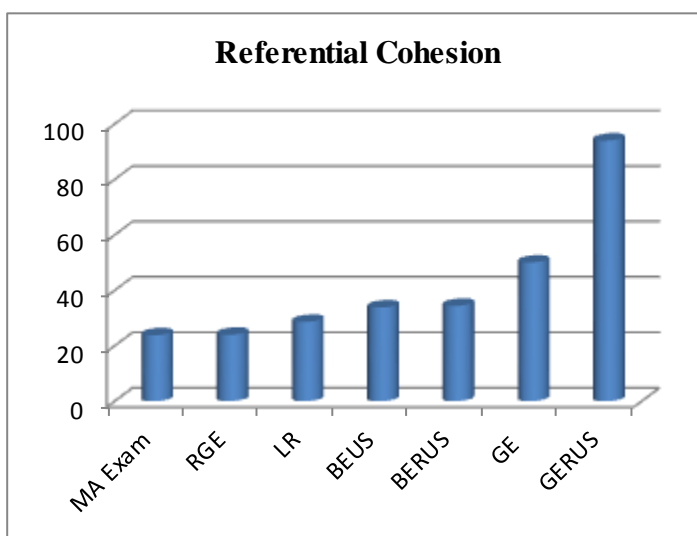

Figure 10. Referential cohesion percentages of the corpora used in the study

Table 12

Referential Cohesion Percentages of the Corpora used in the Study

MA Exam	RGE	LR	BEUS	BERUS	GE	GERUS
23.8	24	28.6	33.8	34.4	50	94

Table 13 shows that MA exam reading passages were difficult because they didn't show deep cohesion in the text easibility index. While the textbooks showed high level of deep cohesion. Gerus was in the first place regarding this easibility factor.

Table 13

Deep Cohesion Percentages of the Corpora used in the Study

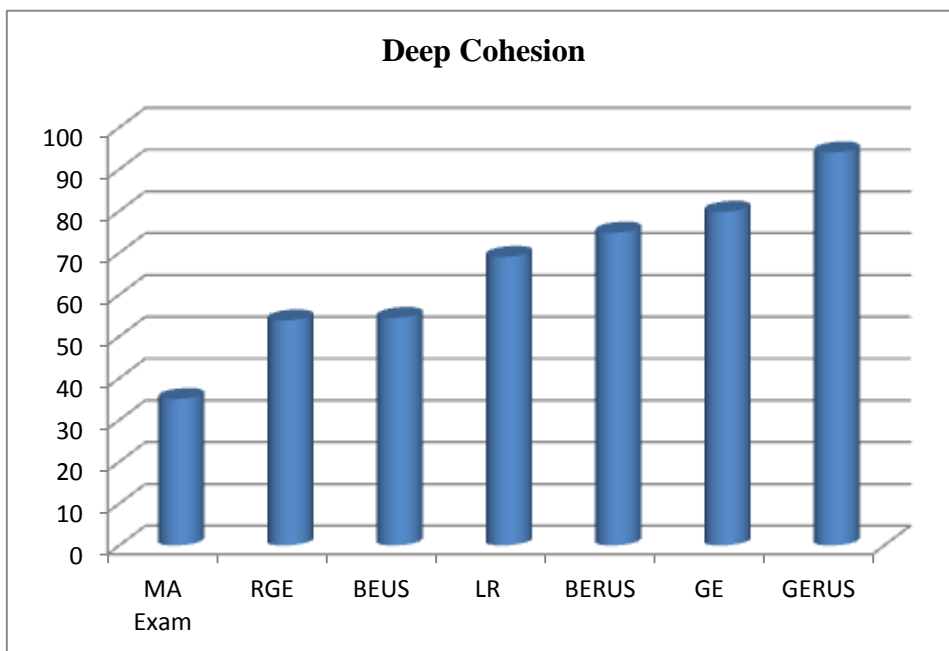| MA Exam	RGE	BEUS	LR	BERUS	GE	GERUS
35	53.8	54.4	69	74.8	79.8	94

Figure11. Deep cohesion percentages of the corpora used in the study

4.2 Discoussion

4.2.1 Discoussion on Vocabulary Demands

MA examination passages had the least amount of the most frequent vocabulary in English, K1 word level, meaning that they were more demanding for the readers to read and comprehend because the K1 words are the easiest ones for the readers due to their frequency and the high amount of exposure readers have with them. Regarding the use of K1 vocabularies, most reading books' lexical coverage devoted to K1 vocabularies showing their ease of reading on the part of the undergraduate students.

MA examination included the least amount of the K2 vocabularies which were ranged as the most frequent vocabularies from 1000 to 2000 vocabularies. This indicated that English reading books covered mostly the first two levels of the most frequent vocabularies of English, while their understanding and exposure chance were much more than the third level vocabularies. This makes the reading easier and less demanding on the part of the readers while the use of higher level frequent words is ignored.

Academic words are among the most important determiners of the lexical coverage for coping with academic texts as shown by many key thinkers in the field of vocabulary learning. In the corpora studies, MA exam passages used the most amounts of AWL vocabularies showing the needs of the undergraduate students to learn them in the best possible way if they want to comprehend the reading passages of the MA examination. As the study conducted by Schmitt et al (2011) showed if a reader has the familiarity with 98% of the vocabulary of the passages, their reading will be ended into comprehension. By the same token, we see that the weight of words used in the General English books don't help the learners to meet the demand made by MA exam reading passages.

Because MA exam included 11% of off-list words, if lexical coverage of the other three levels were met by the books, it is not still possible to reach to 100% of reading comprehension chance on the part of the readers of university graduates of Iran, but the problem becomes worse when this high amount of off-list words were used in the corpus of MA exams. According to Schmitt et al (2011), this problem endangers the comprehension process of the MA reading passages understanding by the students who are not armed with even most needed vocabularies.

4.2.2 Discoussion on Readability Measures

Results of both of the readability tests showed the differences in the patterns of the passages regarding the factors involved in the definition of those readability tests. MA reading passages were far higher difficult in readability indexes than the compared textbooks meaning that they were linguistically

more complex, and challenging for readers to be comprehend. GE in comparison to other books was closer to MA reading exam which showed books like GE can be of more help than other books studied in the case of preparing the students for MA examination reading passages, these reading books need to be more linguistically demanding to meet the needs of MA reading passages reading. A case in point here is that English General book designers may think of the ease of the texts at the price of losing their complexity and creating the demands for higher achievement in MA examination tests.

4.2.3 Discussion on Text Easibility

Since MA reading passages were mainly drawn from scientific textbooks and academic papers, their language was far from every day and story like languages which are high in narrativity index. There is a trap for textbook designer to ease the task of reading comprehension by selecting passages from every day and story like genres, but as can be seen when it comes to the success at higher level reading texts, they cannot be of much help. It rings an alarming bell for new book designers not to deprive the readers of the challenge of academic reading at the price of easiness.

Regarding the syntactic simplicity as mentioned above in the case of narrativity, the General textbook designers made efforts to create and select simple passages at the price of not exposing the readers with the complex syntactic structures, which is what the MA examination did and the demands of MA examination was high in this regard.

MA Exam reading passages made more use of abstract words which was more challenging to understand and made the reading comprehension more problematic on the part of the readers. Academic level texts require abstract and logical thinking; this is what general English textbook designers must bear in their mind. This need can be met by including some reading passages with sufficient amount of abstract words.

Although by itself referential cohesion is a respected process for writing, but when we want to prepare students for a higher level test and for academic life, it should be kept in mind that more difficult passages are needed and designers should not make the matters so easy for the reader while they are far behind the requirement of comprehending MA examination passages.

The exam passages lacked the connectives needed to give the texts deep cohesion. The same was the case for deep cohesion. All in all, the Iranian general English textbooks were far easier than the MA reading comprehension examination. Because the general English textbooks are to meet the needs of the students in their preparation for the MA university examination, the task of textbook designers become more challenging.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The study showed the gap between the Iranian general English books' reading instruction regarding their vocabulary demands by their coverage of the Nation's (2000) profile. The distance especially in the use of AWL vocabularies rings an alarming bell for both the test designers and the reading book's designers to meet the high vocabulary demands of MA examinations' reading passages and the students' future success in reading academic papers.

Taking the readability into account, the study shed light of the ease of coping with the general English books' reading passages which may show the writers' efforts to produce an easy and reader-friendly book but the point is that the purpose of university general reading courses is to bridge the relationship between academic free reading practices and the comprehension of high level texts. When it comes to the basic levels of reading proficiency, they are of great help, but when the question of their efficiency is considered from the textbook's preparation for the MA Exam and the real academic readership, these books are not that effective. It is on the shoulder of textbook designers to firstly analyze the needs of the students and consult with a readability software which is free online to test the texts before using them.

Easibility evidences drawn from the study also showed that English general book writers made efforts to meet the ease of reading passages for the readers. Although this ease makes the courses move smoothly, in the end the students are left with low level reading exposures.

This study was limited in its scope to only the text characteristics of the corpora studies but other ways of assessing readability like cloze procedures, and doing experimental studies are of great need to shed more lights on the reader based characteristics of the texts and also the assessment of the interaction of the texts and the readers.

Future researchers can make use of interviews with the authors of the books, and test constructors to gain more insights on this issue; conducting surveys can also shed lights on the other dark side of academic reading testing and materials design.

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