International Journal of Research in English Education

Online ISSN: 2538-3027

Homepage: https://ijreeonline.com

Reading for Information or Reading for Reflection? Text-based Nature of Thinking Skills: Lower Vs. Higher Order Thinking Skills

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Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:
Received: 19 April 2025
Revision: 1 September 2025
Accepted: 26 September 2025
Published online: 30 September 2025

***Keywords*:**
reading comprehension,
higher-order thinking,
lower-order thinking,
EFL textbooks,
question taxonomy

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explores the cognitive levels targeted by reading-comprehension activities in two textbooks of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) authored by the Tunisian Ministry of Education.

Methods: It adopts Freeman's (2014) Taxonomy of Reading-Comprehension Questions to provide a quantitative analysis of the 'categories' vs. 'types' of questions used in reading activities in the two textbooks, and the 'lower' vs. 'higher' order thinking skills they require.

Results: The analysis unveiled a recurrent pattern in the two textbooks favoring (1) question categories focusing on *content* and *language* as opposed to *affect*, and (2) question types focusing on explicit information and language input as opposed to questions requiring inferences, personal responses, and evaluations of the claims and views presented to learners. The diagnosed pattern is useful in developing the learners' linguistic repertoire, but it has limited impact on developing their critical views towards the ideas presented to them and enhancing their awareness about the cultural content embedded in the reading materials.

Conclusion: A study of the comprehension questions used in reading activities in English textbooks used for the final stages of secondary education in Tunisia revealed that the vast majority of these questions focus on explicit aspects of the reading materials and often limit learners' focus to easily-accessible information in the texts without engaging them in tasks that require deep critical thinking or high-level reasoning about the issues and topics presented to them.

Keywords: reading comprehension, higher-order thinking, lower-order thinking, EFL textbooks, question taxonomy.

Cite this article: Saidi, E. (2025). Reading for Information or Reading for Reflection? Text-based Nature of Thinking Skills: Lower Vs. Higher Order Thinking Skills. ***International Journal of Research in English Education***, *10*(3), 69-81.

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Publisher: Science Academy Publications.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has gained prominence in Tunisia's public educational policies. Until the late 1990's, it was taught in the second cycle of secondary education (age 16), but after 2000 it has been gradually introduced to lower grades. In the current Official Curriculum, English is introduced in the fourth-grade of primary education (age 9), and then maintained as a compulsory subject throughout middle school (grades 7-9) and secondary school (grades 1-4). In the public-education system, all schools use the same EFL textbooks prepared by the Ministry of Education. These textbooks are authored by Tunisian EFL teachers and inspectors and their content reflects the various linguistic proficiency levels described in the Curriculum.

The Curriculum divides the teaching of English into three phases and presents detailed lists of language forms and structures that students are expected to master in each phase (and in the levels pertaining to each phase). It also includes lists of the strategies used in the teaching of the four language skills and the nature of input presented to learners in each skill. These lists, and other recommendations on the role of the learner in the teaching/learning process and the teaching methods to be used with the different levels, serve as guidelines for authors to design textbooks reflecting the type of input described in the Curriculum. The Ministry is responsible for evaluating the appropriateness and suitability of the content presented in each textbook and for selecting the materials to be adopted at the national level. The textbooks adopted for the different levels have been reviewed and changed multiple times in the last two decades, but the principle has been the same: EFL teachers and inspectors propose modified or new textbooks and the Ministry decides on the ones to be adopted by all public schools in light of their faithfulness to the recommendations listed in the Curriculum.

By the end of secondary education (age 19), students sit for the National Baccalaureate exam, a requirement to graduate from secondary education and move to higher education. As part of this national exam, all students sit for an EFL test, among other subjects, and the score they achieve in the EFL test may increase/reduce their chances of admission to undergraduate programs taught in English in Tunisian Universities. The EFL instruction provided to Tunisian leaners throughout the years is thought to lead to the proficiency level required for the Baccalaureate exam. The preparation leading to it starts in primary education and lasts ten years, which makes the input presented to each level an essential part to reach the required proficiency level in the Baccalaureate exam.

Although students do not sit for the same EFL test in the Baccalaureate exam, depending on the academic stream they belong to (arts, mathematics, experimental sciences, technology, computer science, etc.), all EFL tests include a reading-comprehension part meant to assess their reading skill (in addition to two other parts on vocabulary/language and writing). The importance of the reading skill in the Baccalaureate exam reflects the importance of reading comprehension in EFL classes throughout the years, and underscores the need to examine how this skill is presented in Tunisian EFL textbooks, and what type of learning it achieves. In this context, the present study aims to explore the categories and types of reading-comprehension questions presented to Tunisian EFL leaners in the phase preceding the Baccalaureate exam, namely the third and fourth grades of secondary education, and the cognitive demands placed on them by the reading activities in the official textbooks.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The assumption that reading comprehension is a mere receptive skill seems to be over simplistic. Reading comprehension engages learners in constructing meaning from the texts presented to them by establishing connections between these texts and their prior knowledge and cultural background. When answering reading-comprehension questions, learners usually need to analyze attitudes, explore opinions, provide solutions, seek alternatives, etc. The questions presented to them engage them in different types of interactions with the texts (and their authors) and can significantly enhance their critical attitudes towards different matters and topics. In the Tunisian context, the analysis of the types of reading-comprehension questions presented in the series of textbooks authored by the Ministry of Education has remained relatively underexplored. More specifically, research on the types of cognitive skills required by reading-comprehension questions in these textbooks has remained scarce. The present study is an attempt to fill this particular gap.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The study of the categories and types of reading-comprehension questions presented to Tunisian EFL learners in the phase preceding the National Baccalaureate exam may offer empirical data on the worth of the teaching methods used

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in reading-comprehension activities and the value of the questions used in these activities in developing the learners' critical views towards the attitudes and opinions presented to them. It may also provide a critical methodological design to explore the categories and types of reading-comprehension questions used in the rest of the textbooks adopted by the Ministry of Education. The findings presented in this study and those formulated in potential similar research may provide invaluable insights to Tunisian EFL textbook designers to develop reading-comprehension questions that transcend the mere transfer of explicit information from reading passages to fuel leaners' curiosity and critical attitudes towards the cultural content presented to them.

2. Literature Review

Reading comprehension is a foundational skill in second and foreign language learning (Hall et al., 2014; Mol & Bus, 2011; Rodrigo et al., 2014). It helps learners understand input and expand their linguistic repertoire in multiple ways (Booth, 2001). It develops the learners' vocabulary and general language understanding, as well as grammar patterns and language structures (Chamot, 2001; Fraser, 1999). Reading comprehension also introduces learners to various aspects of the target culture and helps them understand nuances in communication patterns associated with it (Alptekin, 2006; Askari, 2023; Cunningham & Stanovitch, 2001; Endris, 2018; Erten & Razi, 2009). It enhances their grasp of the norms, attitudes, and values presented in reading materials, and develops their ability to infer social meaning and connect it to their own knowledge and experiences (Ketchum, 2006; Yuet & Chan, 2003). Additionally, reading comprehension enhances the learners' reasoning skills by engaging them in different types of reflections (Abdushukurova, 2024). The questions associated with reading texts may focus on general comprehension or on specific details, facilitating a deeper understanding of the materials presented to learners. The questions may also involve higher-order thinking processes, calling them to transcend the reading text and link the inferred meanings to the outer world through comparison, analysis, and interpretation (Vettori et al., 2024). In this regard, reading comprehension is not a mere skill to decipher the written input presented to learners; rather, it is a vehicle to develop critical thinking and advanced reasoning skills (Bartu, 2001; Brookhart, 2010; Cotrell, 2005; Ifanc & Wales, 2010; San, 2019).

Reading comprehension is most effective when presented in authentic reading materials (Heitler, 2005; Tomlison, 2012). Materials authenticity has been traditionally defined as texts "created to fulfill some social purpose in the community in which… [they were] produced" (Little et al., 1989, p. 27). An authentic reading text is a text that is not specifically designed for teaching purposes; rather, it is originally written for native speakers to serve different communication purposes. It can be a news article, a job announcement, a menu, a social media post, or any other written materials targeting native speakers and serving specific communicative purposes. In reading comprehension, authentic materials provide learners with a context that mirrors how language is used in genuine communicative situations (Khalid & Gulyamova, 2024). Authentic reading materials are thought to have a positive impact on learners' motivation because they find them more engaging than materials designed for teaching purposes (Akbari & Razavi, 2016; Huong, 2020; Peacock, 1997). In addition, authentic materials introduce students to language in natural settings, which helps them develop cultural awareness about how language is used by native speakers to serve different communication and social purposes (Gilmore, 2007; Hwang, 2005). Eventually, authenticity creates connections between the EFL classroom and the real world. It brings to learners genuine examples of language use in various situations and prepares them for real-world communication (Berardo, 2006; Yu, 2006).

A considerable part of the literature on EFL reading comprehension focuses on the questions presented to learners and their importance in fostering comprehension in different ways (Beerwinkle & McKeown, 2021; Isir & Uyar, 2022). One of the earliest attempts to classify reading comprehension questions relied on Blooms' (1956) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. The six objectives were converted into six question types targeting different aspects of reading comprehension. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) offered a revised version on Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy by turning the nouns used in the original version (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) into verbs. The revised taxonomy classified reading-comprehension questions in terms of what learners are asked to do:

- **Remembering**: recalling details from the text, like formulating its main idea or spotting specific facts and information;
- **Understanding**: interpreting the text and reformulating what is communicated;
- **Applying**: using the information presented in the text in new learning situations, like discussing findings with peer learners in post-reading activities;

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- **Analyzing**: establishing relationships between ideas presented in a text and inferring hidden meaning, like the author's tone;
- **Evaluating**: assessing the value of the text and the author's arguments, like comparing perspectives and showing limits; and
- **Creating**: generating new products based on the text, like developing a new perspective or writing a summary (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Usman and Muslem, 2019).

Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) also classified these question types according to the cognitive level required. They devised two sets of thinking skills targeted by the various types of questions: a first set called Lower-Order Thinking Skills (LOTS), including remembering, understanding and applying; and a second set called Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), including analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Limbach & Waugh, 2013; Mainali, 2012). While LOTS help learners develop foundational comprehension skills, HOTS help them develop critical thinking skills to engage with the text and its author(s) in different ways.

More recently, Day and Park (2005) offered another taxonomy, classifying reading-comprehension questions according to the cognitive processes involved in understanding the text. The new taxonomy also includes six categories of comprehension skills, namely literal comprehension, reorganization of information, drawing inferences, predicting what may happen next, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of information, and providing a personal response by linking the text to one's experience or opinion (Day & Park, 2005; Javed et al., 2015). Interestingly, an examination of the categories of questions listed in Day and Park's (2005) taxonomy, and those presented by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) before it, shows that they are largely inspired by Bloom's (1956) original taxonomy and never offered substantial changes informed by empirical research. The fact that the two revisions of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy kept the same number of comprehension categories is proof that the changes introduced to it were mere reformulations of the original categories. According to Freeman (2014), "no single taxonomy proved to be wholly suitable and superior to its counterparts" (p. 77).

Based on this critique, Freeman (2014) proposed a new taxonomy made up of two levels of categorization: a first level classifying reading-comprehension questions into three broad question categories, depending on the cognitive skill they require – *content*, *language*, and *affect*; and a second level dividing these categories into groups of question types serving the mentioned cognitive skills. Table 1 illustrates Freeman's (2004) Taxonomy.

Table 1. Freeman's taxonomy of reading-comprehension questions (Freeman, 2014, p. 83).

Categories	Comprehension Question Type	Description
Content Questions	Textually Explicit	In this question-type the answer to the question can be found stated directly in the text. There is word-matching between the question and the text. The information required is in sequential sentences.
	Textually Implicit	In this question-type the answer to the question is stated directly in the text but is not expressed in the same language as the question (no word-matching). The information is not all in the same order. It is separated by at least one sentence.
	Inferential Comprehension	In this question-type the answer to the question is not stated explicitly in the text but rather alluded to. The reader has to combine their background knowledge with the information in the text and make the necessary connections.
Language Questions	Reorganization	This question-type requires the reader to reorder, rearrange or transfer information in the text. - Putting sequences in chronological order - Transferring data into parallel forms (e.g. label pictures/maps, complete a table, translate)

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	Lexical	This question-type requires the reader to focus specifically on vocabulary, not information. Included in this category are exercises where the reader - Guesses the meaning of a word or phrase from the context - Matches definition A with word/phrase B - Uses a dictionary Word attack and text attack strategies are included in this level.
	Form	This question-type requires the reader to focus specifically on grammar or form, not information. Examples of Form questions include exercises where the reader - Changes a sentence from the affirmative to the negative - Forms the question that goes with a given answer - Explains the use of one tense rather than another (e.g. present perfect not past simple)
Affect Questions	Personal Response	This question-type requires the reader to offer their personal reaction to the text in terms of likes/dislikes, what they found funny, surprising, etc. The reader can be asked to transfer the situation in the text to their own cultural context and comment. Highly subjective, there is no 'right' answer.
	Evaluation	This question-type requires the reader to make a judgement or assessment of the text/information according to some understood criteria. These criteria can be: - Formally recognized independent sources - Teacher provided - Student-set standards The reader is also expected to provide a rationale or justification for their view.

The division of the taxonomy into two levels, one for broad question categories based on the cognitive processes involved and another for specific question types based on what the learner is required to do, allows for a deeper analysis of the reading comprehension questions and their impact on students' learning. Freeman's (2014) taxonomy has been used to study the categories and types of reading-comprehension questions used in two Tunisian EFL textbooks. The study seeks to answer the following two questions:

- What cognitive levels are addressed in the reading-comprehension activities in the two textbooks?
- What types of questions are used for each cognitive level?

3. Method

The corpus used in this study is made up of two textbooks authored by Tunisian EFL inspectors and teachers, and adopted by the Ministry of Education in all public schools across the country. The textbooks are for the third and fourth grades of secondary education, the last two grades in high school, leading to the Baccalaureate exam and graduation from secondary education. The two textbooks are similar in form and their content is organized in the same way. Both of them are organized into themes (called 'modules' in the third-grade textbook and 'units' in the fourth-grade textbook), and each theme is presented in a variety of activities involving the four language skills. The third-grade textbook is entitles *Activate and Perform*, and the fourth-grade textbook is entitled *Skills for Life*. The former includes 216 pages, and the latter 279 pages. The choice of these two textbooks is motivated by two main reasons. First they are used for the highest two EFL levels in Tunisia and, therefore, their content is expected to reflect advanced cognitive

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skills compared to textbooks used in lower levels. Second, they are supposed to have a particular focus on reading activities, remembering that the Baccalaureate test necessarily has a reading component, as opposed to speaking and listening, which are never tested in the same national exam.

To answer the two research questions, the analysis was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, emphasis was placed on the quantification of the reading-comprehension questions presented in the textbooks according to Freeman's (2014) cognitive-level categories; and in the second, the focus shifted to the classification of these categories in terms of the question types involved. The first part of the analysis looks into the frequency of the three cognitive-skill categories, namely *content*, *language*, and *affect*, to assess the cognitive levels most commonly targeted by reading-comprehension activities. As for the second part, the analysis focuses on the frequency of the eight types of questions associated with the three cognitive-level categories, namely textually-explicit questions, textually-implicit questions, inferential questions, reorganizational questions, lexical questions, form questions, personal-response questions, and evaluation questions. The two parts of the analysis are meant to provide quantitative information on the distribution of cognitive-skill categories and question types in the studied textbooks, but the interpretation of the findings sometimes involves a qualitative analysis, namely when considering the way some questions are formulated or explaining the importance of specific question formulations in activating particular cognitive skills.

To facilitate its implementation, Freeman's (2014) Taxonomy was turned into a checklist (Table 2). The checklist was used to record the occurrence of question categories and types in all reading activities presented in the two textbooks. The coding was done manually: for each reading activity, there is a corresponding number of question categories and types, and the general number of the question types recorded in the checklist corresponds to the total number of comprehension questions spotted in each textbook.

Table 2. Checklist used in this study

Textbook	Cognitive-Skill Category	Frequency of Cognitive-Skill Category	Question Type	Frequency of Question Type
Activate and Perform	Content		Textually-explicit	
			Textually-implicit	
			Inferential	
	Language		Reorganizational	
			Lexical	
			Form	
	Affect		Personal response	
			Evaluation	
Skills for Life	Content		Textually-explicit	
			Textually-implicit	
			Inferential	
	Language		Reorganizational	
			Lexical	
			Form	
	Affect		Personal response	
			Evaluation	

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4. Data Analysis and Discussion

A global look at the two textbooks shows that reading activities are consistently present in all thematic modules/units, focusing on topics that range from family relationships to education, science and technology in the third-grade textbook, and from art shows and holidays to inventions and life issues in the fourth-grade textbook. A total of 46 reading activities are included in the two textbooks: 22 in the third-grade textbook and 24 in the fourth-grade textbook. However, these activities are different in content and size. In *Activate and Perform* (third-grade textbook), some of the reading activities use shorter texts, like advertisements, graphs, and lists of services, whereas in *Skills for Life*, most of the activities rely on longer texts, like news articles and short stories. The visibly longer texts in the fourth-grade textbook reflect the authors' concern about the type of reading activities usually used in the Baccalaureate exam. These activities often rely on texts taken from different sources, relating personal stories on the themes presented in the textbook, and rarely using visual content.

Another visible difference between the two textbooks is related to the total number of reading questions included in them. In *Activate and Perform*, the 22 reading activities require students to answer 155 questions while in *Skills for Life* the number of reading-comprehension questions is as high as 280 questions. Actually, some of the activities in the third-grade textbook use different types of visualizations when asking students about explicit and implicit information in the texts, like tables and diagrams, while in the fourth-grade textbook, the questions are often listed separately. For example, in questions using 'who', 'where', 'when', and 'how', the third-year textbook often uses a table requiring students to provide answers under the same question. However, in the fourth-grade textbook, questions like these are often presented separately, resulting in a higher occurrence of questions in general. Additionally, the two textbooks are different in size (216 vs. 279 pages respectively), and the higher occurrence of reading comprehension questions in the fourth-grade textbook is a mere reflection of the larger input presented to students in their final year of secondary education.

Another visible difference between the textbooks is the number of units dividing the input presented to students. Paradoxically, the fourth-grade textbook includes only four units, compared to six in the third-grade textbook. The higher occurrence of questions despite the smaller number of thematic units can be explained by how input is divided within units in the two textbooks. In *Activate and Perform*, each thematic unit is divided into five 'sections', making the total number of lessons presented to students 30, with additional content entitled "Fun Page" at the end of each module. In *Skills for Life*, however, each unit is divided into nine sections, meaning that the total number of lessons is 36, with additional content entitled "Art Sessions" at the end of each unit, presenting students to content in literary and artistic forms, like tales and poems. The higher number of lessons in *Skills for Life*, despite the lower number of units, has obviously entailed a higher number of reading activities and questions.

Using Freeman's (2014) taxonomy on reading-comprehension question categories, the frequency of occurrence of the *content*, *language*, and *affect* categories is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of questions according to skill category

Textbook	Question Categories		
	Content (%)	Language (%)	Affect (%)
Activate and Perform	49.03	34.84	16.13
Skills for Life	41.78	38.93	19.29

The findings show a consistent pattern in both textbooks: *content* questions are the highest in terms of frequency. In the case of the third-grade textbook, *content* questions (49.03%, n=76) are three times higher than *affect* questions (16.13%, n=25), and in the fourth-grade textbook, the number of *affect* questions (19.29%, n=54) is less than half of *content* questions (41.78%, n=117). Additionally, both textbooks share nearly the same focus on *language* questions as the frequency of this category is respectively 34.84% (n=54) and 38.93% (n=109), highlighting the authors' tendency to integrate language components in reading-comprehension activities in both textbooks. According to Freeman (2014), this question category "requires the reader to *do* something with the information or language" (p. 91). The recurrent pattern within this category, as observed in the two textbooks, consists in selecting a specific lexical item or grammatical structure from the reading passage and asking students to use it in short productions of their own.

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In Freeman's (2014) words, the *affect* category requires "some kind of engagement with, response, or reaction to a reading passage" (p. 93). It involves the use of higher-order thinking skills as it encourages students to interact with the text, and express personal attitudes towards the ideas presented in the text or towards the writer's point of view. The fact that the frequency of the *affect* category is the lowest compared to the two other categories shows that the vast majority of reading-comprehension questions in the two textbooks focus on understanding the reading passage, without further involvement from the learners. The *content* and *language* categories, accounting for 83.87% (n=130) and 80.71% (n=226) of the total category occurrences in the two textbooks, involve the use of lower-order thinking skills and limit the students' attention to the reading passage. Lower-order thinking is mainly about understanding and recalling information from the text, and does not motivate critical thinking. Remembering that the textbooks in focus are for the last two grades in secondary education, targeting learners with the highest proficiency levels in Tunisian EFL classrooms, the overwhelming focus on *content* and *language* categories, and subsequently on lower-order thinking, seems to deprive students of genuine opportunities to engage with the texts presented to them.

To acquire a deeper understanding of the distribution of question categories in the textbooks in focus and the cognitive skills targeted by each category, the following part examines the frequency of occurrence of the types of questions pertaining to each category. Using Freeman's (2014) taxonomy, the *content* category is made up of three sub-types of reading questions (textually-explicit, textually-implicit, and inferential); the *language* category is divided into three other sub-types (reorganizational, lexical, and form); and the *affect* category includes two sub-types (personal response and evaluation). Table 4 Summarizes the frequency of each question type in the two textbooks.

Table 4. Distribution of question types

Textbook	Category	Question type	Frequency of Occurrence (%)
Activate and Perform	Content	Textually-explicit	50
		Textually-implicit	28.94
		Inferential	21.05
	Language	Reorganizational	18.51
		Lexical	55.55
		Form	25.93
	Affect	Personal response	72
		Evaluation	28
Skills for Life	Content	Textually-explicit	75.21
		Textually-implicit	14.52
		Inferential	10.26
	Language	Reorganizational	09.17
		Lexical	56.88
		Form	33.94
	Affect	Personal response	66.66
		Evaluation	33.33

The distribution of question types in the *content* category shows a consistent pattern in the two textbooks. Textually-explicit questions are the highest in terms of occurrence, followed by textually-implicit and inferential questions. In the second-grade textbook, 50% (n=98) of questions belonging to the content category are textually-explicit questions,

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and in the fourth-grade textbook, this type of questions is three times higher (75.21%, n=88) than the two other types combined (24,83%, n=29). These findings show that the largest focus of reading-comprehension questions is on explicit information in the reading passages, on "questions where the answer is in one place in the text" (Freeman, 2014, p. 80). This type of questions does not require any higher-order thinking as opposed to the two other types in the same category.

In her explanation of the difference between the three question types under the *content* category, Freeman (2014) maintains that "they are hierarchal from lower to higher order thinking" (p. 80). While textually-explicit questions involve only lower order thinking, textually-implicit and inferential questions gradually involve higher order thinking. In the case of textually-implicit questions, "the answer may be worded slightly different from the question or may be spread over several parts of the text" (p. 80), and in the case of inferential questions, the learner needs to reach "what is not written but is inferred" (p. 80) and "combine their own knowledge base and personal experiences with the information presented in the text in order to arrive at the answer" (p. 80). The low occurrence of inferential questions in the two textbooks (21.05%, n=16 vs. 10.26%, n=10, respectively) proves again that the vast majority of reading-comprehension questions in the two textbooks focus on information presented in reading passages and do not encourage learners to use higher order thinking and develop more critical attitudes towards the texts presented to them.

In the *language* category, the order of frequency is the same in the two textbooks: lexical questions are the highest in terms of occurrence, followed by form questions and reorganizational questions. The focus on lexical questions is almost identical in both textbooks, representing 55.55% (n=30) of the total language questions in *Activate and perform* and 56.88% (n=62) of the total language questions in *Skills for life*. According to Freeman (2014), the three question types are not organized hierarchically as they do not involve different degrees of higher order thinking. The higher frequency of one specific type of questions does not entail more focus on specific thinking skills, but it indicates the textbook authors' view towards reading materials as valuable sources for practicing specific language forms, specifically lexical items, in the textbooks under study.

Interestingly, a look at the way reading comprehension questions are organized in the two textbooks may offer an explanation for the overwhelming focus on lexical and form questions. In *Activate and Perform*, most reading activities include sections entitled "helpful expressions", "exploring grammar", and "practicing related grammar points", and in *Skills for Life*, most reading activities are presented with sections entitled "my new words", "check your definitions", and "grammar focus". These sections have entailed a recurrent pattern of lexical and grammatical questions throughout the two textbooks. All lexical items and grammatical forms presented to learners in these sections are taken from the reading passages, which highlights a common tendency to turn part of the input presented to learners into output activities meant to consolidate their linguistics knowledge in multiple ways.

The two textbooks also show similarity in the distribution of the types of questions pertaining to the *affect* category: personal-response questions and evaluation questions. In *Activate and Perform*, the frequency of personal-response questions is almost three times higher than the frequency of evaluation questions (72%, n=18 vs. 28%, n=7), and in *Skills for life*, the frequency of the same type of questions is twice higher (66.66%, n=36 vs. 33.33%, n=18). The major difference between the two question types is related to the type of response required from the learner: in personal-response questions, the response is "purely personal…, with no 'correct' answer" (Freeman, 2014, p. 81) whereas in evaluation questions, the response is "deeper" and "evaluative" (p. 81). According to Freeman (2014), the two types of questions target the learners' high-order thinking, but they "can be considered hierarchical" (p. 81). Evaluation questions involve higher-order thinking because they require "a considered and possible reflective response with a reasoned justification" (Freeman, 2014, p. 82). Consistently, the findings confirm that the questions requiring less critical thinking are dominant. Even in the very category devoted to high-order thinking questions, students' answers requiring explanations and justifications are less common than answers requiring personal opinions and views.

The dominance of personal-response questions in the two textbooks is due to a clear tendency to involve learners in personal reflections on the issues presented in the reading passages. In *Activate and Perform*, opinion questions are frequently asked at the end of reading activities, asking students to reflect on their own personal experiences with the topic/issues presented to them. Questions like "do you enjoy…?", "do your parents accept…?", "do you agree that…", and "how would you describe…?" are recurrent in almost every reading activity. In *Skills for Life*, however, the dominance of personal-response questions over evaluation questions is due to the recurrent speaking and writing tasks associated with reading-comprehension activities. Actually, the textbook presents the four language skills in an integrated way. In the subsection titles, the textbook uses combinations like "reading into speaking" and "reading into

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writing", favoring the integration of other skills into reading activities. These skill-combinations entailed post-reading activities (mainly speaking and writing) centered on the learners' personal and social life, requiring them to produce personal responses to the topics presented in the reading passages, rather than providing justified evaluations of the ideas and opinions presented by the text authors.

Relying on Freeman's (2014) taxonomy on the categories and types of reading-comprehension questions and the different cognitive levels they involve, it can be concluded that the four types of questions that require some higher-order thinking are textually-implicit and inferential questions in the *content* category, and personal-response and evaluation questions in the *affect* category. The remaining four types, namely textually-explicit questions in the *content* category and reorganizational, lexical, and form questions in the *language* category, involve only lower-order thinking. This two-set classification of reading comprehension questions can be useful in presenting a global view on the cognitive-thinking levels targeted by the two textbooks. The total number of reading-comprehension questions spotted in the two textbooks – all categories combined – is 435 questions (155 questions in *Activate and Perform* and 280 questions in *Skills for Life*). 66.44% (n=289) of these are typical lower-order thinking questions focusing on explicit information in the reading passages or on overt aspects of language and grammar. The questions that require some higher order thinking constitute only 33.56% (n=146), and if we put them into a hierarchy according the critical-thinking level required, those requiring more advanced skills, like providing justified reactions to the ideas presented in the texts, are even less common.

These findings have three major implications. First, authors of the two textbooks seem to share the conviction that reading-comprehension activities offer ample opportunities to present and practice language forms and structures. The analysis consistently showed a higher occurrence of questions with a lexical focus than questions requiring learners to interact with the views presented to them. Second, the visibly higher focus on textually-explicit information in the reading activities seems to confirm a view among the textbook authors limiting the leaning potential offered by reading activities to information that can be easily reached by learners. Considering the learners' intellectual abilities in the educational levels in focus (the last two years of secondary education) and their EFL proficiency levels (the highest in Tunisian EFL education), the overt focus on textually-explicit information seems to limit their attention to the information presented to them, with limited interactions with the texts and their authors. Finally, the higher focus on lower-order thinking skills in the two textbooks underscores a preference for reading for information over reading for reflection, as put in the title of the study. This finding proves that reading comprehension is mainly viewed as a passive skill, denying the potential active involvement it offers to learners when targeting their critical reflection and assessment.

5. Conclusion

The role of reading-comprehension activities in developing the learners' linguistic competence and cultural awareness is unquestionable. However, the amount of learning provided to learners depends heavily on the types of questions associated with the reading passages, and consequently on the cognitive levels required by these questions. The study of the reading-comprehension questions used in reading activities in the EFL textbooks used for the final grades of secondary education in Tunisia shows that the vast majority of these questions focus on explicit aspects in the reading materials, often limiting the learners' focus to easily-accessible information in the texts, without engaging them in tasks requiring deep critical thinking or higher-order reasoning towards the issues and topics presented to them.

The focus on explicit aspects of the reading passages, like the use of particular lexical items and grammatical forms in specific contexts and situations, is certainly helpful in developing the learners' linguistic repertoire and mastery of the target language. However, the limited attention to higher-order thinking skills, as diagnosed in the studied textbook, may deprive the learners of opportunities to question the ideas presented to them and the cultural elements embedded in the reading materials. In Tunisia, English is taught as a foreign language, after Arabic and French, and the reading materials provided to learners in the official textbooks provide them with valuable opportunities to reflect on cultural aspects that are different from their own. However, the lower occurrence of questions fostering the learners' curiosity towards the target culture and questions engaging them in critical reflections towards the topics/issues presented to them reduces the learning potential associated with reading-comprehension activities.

5.1 Limitations

The study of the categories and types of reading-comprehension questions in the textbooks in focus has been done through a checklist reflecting Freeman's (2014) cognitive-level categories. Although Freeman's (2014) Taxonomy is

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relatively recent compared to other question-classification taxonomies in the literature, the cognitive-level categories involved are limited in number and diversity (three categories compared to six in Day and Park's (2005) Taxonomy and six in Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) Taxonomy). The smaller number of categories has facilitated the quantitative analysis of the questions presented to learners, but it may have deprived the analysis of a larger spectrum of the cognitive abilities involved in these questions. Additionally, the corpus used in this study is limited to two textbooks in a series containing eight other textbooks used for lower primary and secondary education levels. The findings listed in this study are therefore specific to the chosen educational levels (the last two years of secondary education) and cannot be generalized to the rest of textbooks in the same series, although all of them are authored by Tunisian EFL inspectors and teachers and adopted by the Ministry of Education for all public schools across the country.

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