

# Chapter 4

## An Analysis and Levelling of Reading Texts Across Arabic Textbooks Based on the CEFR Proficiency Levels

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter analyses the reading content in four prominent Arabic textbook series that are widely used in the UK and USA to assess their reading proficiency progression. The reading texts in each series are analysed using the Dutch CEFR grid and assigned a level as per the CEFR proficiency scale. The findings reveal that there is a lack of consistency among the different textbook series with regards to how reading proficiency is construed at different levels, especially at the intermediate and higher levels. The chapter concludes by highlighting that Arabic material developers, textbook writers, and teachers would benefit from consulting a recognized and systematic reference of proficiency such as the CEFR in developing a comprehensive view of language proficiency in Arabic that includes defining common thematic areas, most needed and suitable functions, and relevant linguistic features for each language proficiency level.*

### INTRODUCTION

There has been a noticeable development and evolution of language instructional materials over the past few decades due to the technological developments. However, textbooks remain the most popular and useful teaching materials language teachers and students rely on. One of the main reasons is that textbooks provide teachers and students with coordinated activities and tasks that work as a complete coherent syllabus; this increases the effectiveness and lucidity of language programmes (Zohrabi et al., 2012). However, over-reliance on textbooks can lead to increasing their authority in the classroom over learning. They can contour teachers' teaching methodology, students' learning style and the whole language programme (Gutierrez Bermudez, 2014; Tomlinson, 2012; Zohrabi et al., 2012).

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In the field of Teaching Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL), textbooks play an important role and represent the main source of input for students. However, it is often noticed that many students lack the competence and impetus to proceed to higher levels. This has been attributed to the complexity of defining proficiency skill levels in Arabic (Ryding, 2018). The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) provides a universal scale for language proficiency that is action-based and that progresses from the simple, concrete and familiar to the complex, abstract and unpredictable (Council of Europe [CoE], 2001). However, the CEFR scale is hardly referred to in TAFL whether on the macro level (curriculum design and teaching materials) or the micro level (classroom teaching).

This chapter is mainly concerned with how proficiency in reading comprehension texts is construed and represented across the Arabic textbooks under study, using the CEFR scale as a benchmark. A follow up study will, in turn, focus on in-depth evaluation of the proficiency spectrum in each textbook series and the implications for Arabic teaching and curricula based on the CEFR criteria. The current chapter begins with a brief literature review to discuss relevant issues, i.e. the importance of textbook analysis/evaluation, materials development in TAFL and the proficiency scene in TAFL. This will be followed by an outline of the context and rationale of the current study. Then, the methodology will be explained in detail to allow for comparability and transferability given the novelty of the study and the tools. A detailed discussion will then focus on the need for establishing systematic criteria for interpreting language proficiency in Arabic and for normative input texts to aid students' acquisition. The chapter will conclude by discussing the limitations of the study and providing recommendations for further studies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Importance of Textbook Evaluation**

Despite the unprecedented multitude of language instructional materials, including technology-based resources, textbooks continue to offer a reliable, secure, and cost and time effective learning and teaching resource. They are particularly important for students as they contribute significantly to language input, output, learning style (Van, 2016) and general proficiency level (Roberts et al., 2020; Sung et al., 2015; Wahba, 2018). For teachers, textbooks are guidelines and tools for planning that work as a teaching methodology (Gutierrez Bermudez, 2014; Van, 2016), stimulate theoretical knowledge (Gutierrez Bermudez, 2014; Zohrabi et al., 2012) and outline the language programme (Roberts et al., 2020; Sung et al., 2015). As Zohrabi et al. (2012) put it; the textbook “presents a certain way of looking at the world” (p. 91). However, over-reliance on textbooks can be problematic in that they can take over other important elements in the learning process, e.g. the teacher's voice, the local context, learners' needs and aims of the programme (Tomlinson, 2012; Zohrabi et al., 2012).

Choosing the right materials that suit the students' developmental level and reflect the programme's “underlying theory” increases the effectiveness of teaching (Fisne, 2018; Zohrabi et al., 2012). Hence, textbook evaluation is an important practice that helps teachers select, adapt and/or supplement the textbook to better serve their teaching methodology and their students' needs (Roberts et al., 2020). Not only this, Ellis (1997), Gutierrez Bermudez (2014), Richards (2005), Tomlinson (2012) and Zohrabi et al. (2012) agree that textbook evaluation contributes to the teacher's professional development. That is, “a thorough and structured evaluation will turn empirical knowledge developed by teachers through their practice into a technical or theoretical one” (Gutierrez Bermudez, 2014, p. 100).

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