

Evaluating the Reading Components of B1 Level Textbooks. The case of Connect B1 and Incredible 5

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ABSTRACT- This study aims at evaluating two popular B1 level textbooks which are currently used both in Foreign Language Centers in Greece and in private tuition, namely Connect B1 and Incredible 5. They are evaluated with reference to the reading component based on criteria set in a preconstructed checklist and through interviews. Fifty respondents-teachers working both in the private sector and in the public sector completed the checklist. Eight interviews were also conducted. The evaluation aims at finding to what extent the reading component of the two books meets the criteria of the checklist, as well as to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the reading texts and tasks of the particular books in order to offer suggestions for improvement and, thus, to offer maximum gains both for students and teachers. This paper rounds off with the limitations of the research and proposals for further research.

Keywords- B1 Level; Component; Evaluation; Reading Component; Checklist; Interviews

The role of textbooks in the EFL teaching context

The textbook is the most tangible and visible aspect of the curriculum. As Arkian (2008, 254) states “coursebooks present a smooth running curricular program for the teaching of the essential and necessary items for the language taught with which one cannot lose his or her way as a teacher”. What is more, Ayakli (2004, 192) argues that “the choice of a particular textbook signals a major educational decision since a textbook will define, to a large extent, what teachers will teach, how they will teach and even what students will learn”. Similarly, Karamouzian (2010, 25) supports that “textbooks are seen as central to teaching and learning, as their quality is a determining factor in enhancing or diminishing the quality of a language program”. No matter the case, the textbook should not be regarded as a book which is to be accepted unquestionably.

First of all, textbooks constitute a rich source of information for both the students and the teacher owing to the fact that they cover a wide range of topics. Therefore, coursebooks expand the general knowledge and enable teachers to talk about a multiplicity of topics. Siemens (2014, 138) adds that “learning needs and theories that describe learning principles and processes, should be reflective of underlying social environments”. Also, textbooks offer security to inexperienced teachers, who do

not have to make their own decisions on what they will teach. Furthermore, since they include many activities, they can save teachers a lot of valuable time from planning or designing their own materials. In addition, learners can use their textbooks as a reference point since they are a source of knowledge to them.

However, despite the advantages that may exist, no textbook is thought to be perfect as it cannot cater for the diverse learners’ needs. Moreover, certain textbooks despite their effort to keep up to date with the latest trends in methodology may lack communicative tasks or authentic materials. Gabrielatos (2000) maintains that textbooks are not always crystal clear concerning the methodology used in terms of “what” and “how” to teach. There are also cases of inconsistencies between stated and actual methodology. Last but not least, the Teacher’s Book does not always offer ideas towards a more appropriate exploitation and implementation of the textbook.

The significance of evaluating EFL textbooks

Ayakli (2004, 151) comments on the definition of evaluation and says that “it is a natural and recurring activity included in many aspects of our daily routine”. It is only through evaluation that we can decide on the best textbook and identify whether and to what extent our curriculum is coherent. Cunningsworth (1995) suggests that textbook evaluation helps teachers move beyond objective assessments and acquire useful, accurate and

contextual insights into the overall nature of the textbook material.

The first to stress the significance of evaluation was Tyler (1949) who advocated that the curriculum should be dynamic and undergo constant evaluation. He also stated that teachers should divide their time and attention equally between the evaluation of materials and their students' assessment.

Purposes of evaluation

What is of utmost importance is the reason why we evaluate. There are three main reasons which cover respective significant areas:

- i) evaluation for accountability purposes,
- ii) for curriculum development purposes, and
- iii) for the self-development of teachers.

When an evaluation is carried out for accountability purposes, it means that a project is tested to examine its effectiveness and the information derived is used in order to make a decision as to whether it should be continued or not (Rea Dickins and Germaine, 2001). Also, it is associated with summative evaluation.

Evaluation for curriculum development purposes is carried out with a view to improving the quality of the program and encourage teachers to see clearly what happens in their classrooms. As Weir and Roberts (1994) point out the specific evaluation should be guided by the identification of strengths and weaknesses of the teaching materials so as to adopt more conducive means to achieve the desired objectives. The information collected is descriptive, qualitative and can be used for future planning and action. Moreover, it is linked with formative evaluation as it takes place during the lifetime of a program.

Evaluation for purposes of teacher self-development is linked with the self-awareness of the teachers as to what happens in their class. They not only confirm the validity of their teaching but also become aware of the processes that lead to successful teaching and learning. They also explore the potentials of change and, through this process, teachers develop themselves as they acquire valuable data about their practices and a lot of information for ameliorating their class practices (Rea-Dickins and Germaine, 2001). It is related to formative assessment as its focus is on the process and less on the product.

Formative and summative evaluation

Evaluation is distinguished between two types according to the time it takes place. On the one hand, formative evaluation, or internal, is carried out throughout the duration of a program. On the other hand, summative

evaluation, or external, takes place at the end of a program and its main focus is on the outcome. It determines whether a program efficiently achieved the intended goals. Hopkins (1986, 16) uses a metaphor stating that "when a cook tastes the soup it is formative evaluation and when the guest tastes the soup it is summative. The key is not so much when as why. Both lead to decision making". The focus of the specific study is on formative evaluation as it aims to examine as thoroughly as possible the reading component of two B1 level textbooks.

Pre-use, In-use and Post-use textbook evaluation

Materials evaluation has been defined by Tomlinson (2003, 15) as "a procedure that involves measuring the value, or potential value of a set of learning materials". The main aim of evaluating materials pre-use, according to Rubdy (2003, 42), is "to measure the potentials of what teachers and learners can do with them in the classroom" while Alamri (2008, 29) states that "it is context-free, content-influenced or context dependent". It consists of a quick judgment by the teacher or an institution and, as a consequence, some mistakes may appear during the actual use of the book.

"In-use and post-use evaluations are important in establishing how successful learning materials are" (McDonough & Shaw, 2003, 71). The former evaluates the materials while they are being used. The latter is regarded as the most reliable and valuable of all since it measures the actual effect of the materials on the learners and thus, provides data as to the adaptation or replacement of the teaching materials.

Questionnaires as an instrument of evaluation

Questionnaires of various kinds are used to a great extent as a method of data collection in the second language (L2) research. Dornyei (2003, 1) states that "their popularity is due to the fact that they are easy to construct, extremely versatile and capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processable".

Checklists as an instrument of evaluation

Mieckley (2005) comments that a valuable tool for evaluating textbooks for use in EFL/ESL classrooms is a checklist. A checklist makes the process more efficient and reliable. It is divided into many sections and it can be adapted so as to suit the researchers' needs of evaluation and they can place emphasis on the context they are most interested in.

Interviews

“An interview is a meeting where a reporter obtains information from a person and it is a conversation with a purpose” according to Kvale (2006, 483). An interview, which is qualitative research, can appear in a structured, semi-structured or unstructured format. In the case of a structured interview, it resembles a questionnaire but if it is unstructured, then qualitative responses can be elicited from the respondents. However, interviews –in comparison to questionnaires- are more effective in collecting qualitative data that enables researchers to explore interviewees’ views in greater depth (Kvale, 2003). The purpose is set clearly from the very beginning and surely the type of the interview greatly depends upon the objectives of the research.

Observations

Observation is another important method for obtaining comprehensive data in qualitative research especially if it is supported by some kind of record keeping, such as checklists or audiotapes. However, the presence of an observant may cause disturbance or distract the attention of the students, if it is a participant observation. In the case of a non-participant observation or observation from a distance, it can be conducted unobtrusively and in such a way that participants do not notice the researcher. Observation offers very rich data and understanding that cannot be elicited when using other forms of data collection (Ritchie et al., 2014).

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) guidelines concerning the reading component of B1 level

The CEFR (2001) refers particularly to reading, a receptive skill, where the reader receives and processes input written B1 level texts produced by one or more writers. Reading activities serve various functions, such as: reading for general orientation; reading for information; reading and following instructions; reading for pleasure. Furthermore, the purposes for reading tasks may vary. A language user may read: for gist; for specific information; for detailed understanding; for implications, etc. Illustrative scales are provided for: overall reading comprehension; reading correspondence; reading for orientation; reading for information and argument; reading instruction. In order to read a text, a student should be able to: perceive the written texts; recognize the script; identify the message; understand the message; interpret the message.

The CEFR (2001) makes a provision for textbook writers, as well, by stating that they are obliged to decide on the

selection and ordering of texts and activities and should also provide clear instructions for the learners as to what they are expected to do.

The Reading Component of Connect B1

The first book under investigation, Connect B1 by Burlington Books (2009), is accompanied by: a companion, a workbook with a CD, a test book for teachers, a grammar book, an interactive CD-ROM, and an interactive whiteboard software for school owners. The focus is notably on the reading texts and tasks, as many people love to sit down and read a good book (Bakke, 2010).

In the preface of the book, it is stated that the topics have been chosen especially for teenagers and the syllabus is based on the CEFR (2001). Particular emphasis is placed on pre-teaching vocabulary to aid reading comprehension and there are quite a few vocabulary expansion tasks. There are fourteen units and each one integrates all four skills. Also, there is a review at the end of each unit and a test is provided for every four units in the textbook. All the texts, refer to true stories, which all depict real figures or accounts of personal experience or celebrations and customs from different parts of the world. Each unit begins with a whole page devoted to pre-reading vocabulary activities as its aim is to familiarize students with some of the new vocabulary. The new words appear in color so as to draw learners’ attention. Tasks are of different types, such as true-false, circle the correct option, match the sentences, etc. The last task always encourages discussion among the students on issues relevant to the topic of the reading text that follows. The reading component, consists of pre-reading questions; the actual text; comprehension activities; etc.

The text can appear in two forms; either the text is followed by comprehension questions or it is a gap filling text. Quite a few post-reading vocabulary tasks follow, such as word-building, finding synonyms from the text, phrasal verbs or completion of a short text with the given words. It can be inferred by its position in the unit that the book places great emphasis on reading, though it does not offer questions which provoke the learners’ thought but rather the tasks aim at best comprehension of the reading text. It is worth mentioning that the teacher’s book includes very few instructions for the teachers and mostly provides the answers to the activities. The reading component of the book is in line with the CEFR (2001) guidelines for B1 level reading, yet it could provide more

instances for learner autonomy which is the ultimate goal of the CEFR (2001).

The Reading Component of Incredible 5

The second coursebook under consideration is Incredible 5 by Express Publishing (2013), and is accompanied by a student's Multi-ROM (CD & DVD), a workbook and grammar, a vocabulary and grammar practice, a teacher's resource pack, tests and posters.

The content of this book is highly motivating which ensures that students learn, remember and use the new language effectively. It is also aligned with the CEFR (2001). The first pages of the book include an introduction, where teachers can find useful information about the book and its aims.

It comprises ten modules and each module consists of four units; each module has its individual aims. After every two modules, the students have the opportunity to read short texts about aspects of life in other countries. They are provided with cross-cultural information thematically linked to the modules. What follows are the Content and Language Integrated Learning time sections (CLIL henceforward), where students are exposed to other fields of study (Math, Literature, etc.) through English. This reinforces their language learning and promotes learner independence and peer cooperation. CLIL courses, unlike EFL instruction, are particularly effective in teaching learners to read for overall meaning instead of detailed understanding, as well as using the context to understand unfamiliar words when reading (Skogen, 2013). Last but not least, there are two more sections which promote reading for pleasure and include interesting topics, such as myths and legends or environmental issues.

There are a variety of topics covering areas of interest within the students' knowledge. Furthermore, there is plenty of guidance for the teachers on how to better exploit the other components. The writers of the book also suggest teaching techniques and cater for the holistic development of students through engaging them in a number of activities, including listening, role playing, matching, etc. Accordingly, the language learning process involves the students' mind, emotions and spirit. The activities of the particular book are also aimed at meeting the needs of all types of learners (visual, auditory, tactile/kinesthetic).

Each unit of a module has at least two reading texts of medium length with one pre-reading question which invites learners to predict their content and then a listening task follows in order for them to confirm their answers. Activities presenting the new vocabulary follow. It is worth mentioning that the teacher's book is interleaved

including explicit instructions on how to conduct the tasks as well as answers to them.

The reading component of the book is in line with the CEFR (2001) guidelines for B1 level reading, though there is always room for advancement in learner autonomy which is the ultimate goal of the CEFR.

Both textbooks follow the skills-based syllabus as they are organized around the language or skills that the students will need most in order to use and learn the foreign language (Berns, 2013). The aim is to teach the specific skills that will help students use the foreign language they learn in the future. Among these skills are the reading skills, skimming and scanning. Furthermore, both books follow the task-based syllabus which comprises varieties of tasks with the aim of using the language in the real world (Berns, 2013). The tasks involve the use of the language and the focus is on the outcome of the activity. Berns (2013) claims that a combination of two or more types of syllabuses leads to a mixed-syllabus that combines the advantages of each type of syllabus separately and the learners gain more benefits from that combination.

Reading as a skill

Reading is described as the potential to anticipate meaning in lines of print so that the reader is not preoccupied with the mechanical details but with grasping ideas from words that convey meaning (Miller, 2007). Reading is a very important skill since it is the 'mother' of all skills and a basic tool of learning (Susser & Robb, 1990). According to Jimenez (2007, 132) "if teachers successfully select a variety of appropriate texts, the students will perceive reading as an interesting and valuable activity. The most significant factors in the reading selection process are related to the students' level, interests, needs and background knowledge". Other factors are related to the text itself: content, relevance and authenticity. One of the most important criteria is to be aware of the students' level since asking students to read texts that are far beyond their language level might prove counterproductive and frustrating for the learners themselves. The level of the reading texts should be only slightly above the students' true reading level at present" (Birch, 2002, 144). Extracting real information from a real text in a new/different language can be extremely motivating, therefore increasing students' motivation for learning by exposing them to 'real' language (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Appropriate texts for classroom use meet students' needs, engage their interests and challenge their capacities (Manuel & Brindley, 2012). However, age is a determining

factor and there are certain needs that teenagers have. Ozturk's (2007, 86) study revealed that among 78 topics suggested, "the top ten topics students preferred were cinema, the Internet, sports,[...], computers and holidays". Therefore, B1 level coursebooks, since they address mostly teenagers should include such topics.

Also, since when choosing to read a text our overall goal is to have a good grasp of the main ideas and relate them to our background knowledge, problems with lack of background knowledge could be solved with pre-reading tasks, or we could adjust the level of the texts (Skogen, 2013). Marinaccio (2012) claims that pre-reading strategies contribute to the successful comprehension of the text provided.

Factors that determine the selection of reading tasks

Reading is a purposeful activity as communicative as any other form of language use. "To this end, there are pre, while, and post-reading stages in order to help teachers make reading even more communicative" (Howarth, 2006, 88). Additionally, skimming and scanning help the reader guess and predict the subject of a text and, thus, facilitate understanding and reading (Simensen, 2007).

The pre-reading phase helps to activate learner's prior knowledge and existing schemata on the topic of the text (Mesbahul, 2010). Both textbooks under consideration use one or all of these techniques as pre-reading activities. While-reading tasks help learners comprehend the text better and encourage them to become active readers. Especially, Connect B1, greatly utilizes these techniques while in the second textbook, the while-reading tasks are limited only to reading the text. Finally, the aim of the post-reading stage is to help learners consolidate, put into practice what they read and display other uses of the language. Both textbooks include a great variety of post-reading tasks.

Skimming is reading expeditiously to get an overview of the text, look at headers, pictures and diagrams or read the first/last paragraph in order to find out if it contains the information one is looking for (Skogen, 2013). Both textbooks, and especially Connect B1, use this technique to a great extent. Grellet (1981) defines scanning as quickly searching for specific information in the text. Both textbooks apply this technique to the texts.

Design and justification of the evaluation techniques

In order to conduct the particular evaluation, two instruments were chosen, namely a checklist and

interviews. Karamouzian (2010, 25) disputes that, "the textbooks are seen as central to teaching and learning, as their quality is a determining factor in enhancing or diminishing the quality of a language program".

Quantitative Likert (1932) rating scales appear to be reliable and convenient, measuring the level of agreement or disagreement with an item, while qualitative checklists employing open-ended questions reveal subjective information. For the needs of this research the quantitative type was applied because it provides solid, reliable and valid data. Moreover, the checklist is economical and systematic and evaluation questions can be removed or added according to the specific needs of the teaching situation. It can also be administered to a group of people through which we can obtain an abundance of information, which can be processed relatively straightforwardly (Cohen, 2013). Additionally, it is versatile in that it can be used with a variety of people in various situations. Yet no checklist can act as a yardstick against which to judge materials and that is the reason why interviews were also used. Burns (2010) comments that if we apply triangulation to data collection it means that a combination of angles on the data will give us more objectivity.

Interviews are a classic means to conduct a conversation which explores the focus area, though they are more time consuming than checklists. Interviews become necessary when the researchers and the interviewees have a common purpose (Godfred, 2017). They can be structured, semi-structured or open-ended. The semi-structured type is the most suitable for this research. Burns (2010) maintains that the aim of a semi-structured interview is to enable a researcher to make some kind of comparison across their participants' responses, but also to allow for individual diversity and flexibility.

Validity and Reliability

Validity is the degree to which a research study measures what it intends to measure. Dörnyei (2007) supports that, validity and reliability issues guarantee the results of the participants' performances. There are two main types of validity, internal and external. Internal validity refers to the validity of the measurement and the test itself, whereas external validity refers to the ability to generalize the findings to the target population. In qualitative research data, "validity is achieved through the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached, the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher" (Cohen, 2013, 105). However, in quantitative data "validity might be improved through careful sampling, appropriate

instrumentation and appropriate statistical treatments of the data”, (Cohen, 2013, 105).

Joppe (2000, 1) defines reliability as “the extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable”. A correlation coefficient can be used to assess the degree of reliability. In qualitative research, reliability can be regarded as a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched.

The Research Methodology

Initial hypothesis- Research questions

At the beginning of a research, an initial hypothesis was formulated which according to Prasad (2001, 8), is “a clear statement of what is intended to be investigated and it should be specified before research is conducted”. Consequently, the hypothesis for this research is the following: The reading component in Connect B1 and Incredible 5 (3) is in line with the demands of the B1 level and meets the needs and the language standards of the respective level. In an attempt to further elaborate on the hypothesis, the following research questions were worded:

1. What criteria can be used to evaluate the reading texts and tasks concerning the improvement/development of B1 level students' reading skills?
2. To what extent do the reading texts and their accompanying tasks meet the criteria set in the suggested checklist?
3. What are the strengths of the reading component in these two textbooks as these emerge from the research?
4. What are the weaknesses of the reading component in these two textbooks as these emerge from the research?

The process of evaluation may help teachers reflect on their everyday practices; the teaching methodology or approach adopted by the coursebooks as well as the effect the teaching of reading has on their learners. It may also help them consider alternative lines of action by adapting the materials so that they enhance their students' learning.

Checklist

The particular checklist is divided into six clear sections with headings for each book, including thirty questions in total and they were adapted from Mickley's (2005), Sheldon's (1988) and Williams' (1983) checklists. In addition, an internal evaluation of the reading texts and

tasks in two textbooks was conducted. “The internal evaluation requires a closer, more detailed examination of the treatment and presentation of vocabulary and activities” (McDonough & Shaw, 2003, 61). All questions are related to the purpose of the research, while confusion and imprecision was avoided by paying attention to the wording of the items so as to ensure validity. Lincoln & Guba (1985, 316) state that, “since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter”. Patton (2002) with regard to the researcher's ability and skill in any qualitative research also states that reliability is a consequence of the validity in a study.

To be more specific, at the beginning of the checklist, the respondents were asked to provide background information concerning their gender, age, years of teaching experience, their highest qualification, and the sector they are currently serving in. Regarding the rest of the checklist, part A concerns the reading texts and consists of nine questions, which aim to provide information as to whether the selection of the texts is in line with the B1 level of the students. Also, the questions examine if there are a variety of text types and if these depict real-life situations that would appeal to the students' level. Part B relates to the reading tasks and attempts to answer questions concerning the adequacy of the reading tasks in the pre-, while-, and post-reading stages and whether these tasks promote scanning, skimming or, a better comprehension of the text. Part C discusses the text's vocabulary and the way it is presented whereas, Part D refers to context and if the text selections are appropriate for B1 level students. Part E deals with the appropriacy of the reading material and investigates whether it is interesting enough to draw the students' attention. Part F asks respondents if they find the textbooks sufficient enough to stand on their own without having to produce any ancillary material. Lastly, the checklist provides some space to the respondents to make their suggestions towards the improvement of the reading texts and tasks.

Piloting the checklist.

Various authors have pinpointed the significance of a pilot study to any research as it helps to trace possible errors in the measurement instrument (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001; Watson, Atkinson, & Rose, 2007) and whether concepts have been adequately operationalized. A pilot study basically “helps to ascertain how well a research instrument will work in the actual study by identifying potential problems and areas that may require adjustments” (Dikko, 2016).

The questionnaire was delivered to five English language teachers who were asked to think out loud while they completed it. Meanwhile, notes were taken by the researchers about any ambiguities, problematic wording, the time required to complete it and hesitations presented by the participants concerning the meaning of the question. In the case of the interviews, two of them were conducted in the piloting of the instruments. Once completed, the results revealed that minor changes needed to be implemented on one question of the questionnaire, which was immediately changed, i.e. the phrase pre-reading activities changed into pre-reading tasks.

Interviews

Maree (2008) explains that the purpose of triangulation is to obtain complementary quantitative and qualitative data on the same topic and bring together the different strengths of the two methods. However, during a semi-structured interview, the questions and direction of the interview may be modified (Skogen, 2013). Therefore, the interviewees were asked what they thought to be the weakness of each book and what they would change, if they could, concerning the reading component. Also, what other topics they would add in order to make the two textbooks more appealing for teenage learners of a B1 level. Furthermore, the interviewees expressed their most favorite elements of the books. According to Cohen (2013, 267), “interviewees express how they regard various issues from their own point of view”. The particular interviews were conducted to test the initial hypothesis and expand the results gathered from the checklists. Therefore, the interview followed the semi-structured type as this type is frequently used in the qualitative analysis (Kajornboon, 2005) and the basis for doing that is designing questions that elicit useful information that help the researcher draw valid conclusions and are closely related to the purposes of the study. Longhurst (2010, 106) mentions that “semi-structured interviews can be used as ‘stand-alone’ methods, as a supplement to other methods or as a means for triangulation in multi-methods research”. The framework of the interview questions was designed after the checklist results had been analyzed so that the researchers could pose questions so as to gain deeper insight concerning certain points that were not clarified in the checklist.

Participants

As far as the respondents to the checklist were concerned, fifty persons aged between 22 and 50 years of age, who came from all over Greece, completed it. The aforementioned teachers had a teaching experience of 6 to 25 years. As far as their qualifications were concerned, some of them were holders of post-graduate degrees while

a large number of them delivered private lessons. As far as the interviewees were concerned, eight teachers of English were willing to be interviewed and thus gave their consent. All of the participants had used the specific textbooks at some point in their careers even though some of them are now working in the public sector. All of the participants were females aged between 22-40 and had at least six-years-teaching experience either in the public or in the private sector or both, teaching all levels of students.

Presentation and Discussion of findings

The participants

The first part includes questions concerning teachers’ background information, namely, their gender, years of teaching experience, age, qualifications and their current working position. The second question deals with the years of their teaching experience. A small percentage of them (10%) have 6-10 years, a larger number of them (46%) has 11-15 and the rest of them (44%) have 16-20 years. The third question is about their age and the percentages are similar to the aforementioned ones, that is, some of them (10%) are between 22-31 years old, most of them (46%) are between 32-41 years of age and the rest (44%) are aged between 42-51.

Concerning their qualifications, a greater variety of results arose. Some of them (20%) have a Bachelor’s degree, while one teacher is a holder of both a Bachelor’s degree and a CELTA certificate obtained in London, UK. Some others (28%) are holders of a Master’s degree while a slightly higher percentage (30%) is in the process of obtaining their Master’s degree. Finally, quite a few (20%) have University degrees obtained in Greek Universities.

The majority of the respondents (60%) have used the particular textbooks in their private lessons or in Foreign Language Centers. Quite a few of them (30%) are currently working in the private sector and the rest of them (10%) are working in the public sector; a small percentage of whom (5%) are also supervising private lessons. Likewise, a small percentage (5%) is working both in Foreign Language Centers and delivering private lessons.

After the completion of the checklists, 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted. “Convenience sampling involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents” (Cohen et al., 2013, 93). The interviewees were 8 female teachers of English aged between 22-41 years of age. Most of them (5) have 6-10 years of teaching experience while the rest (3) have 11-15 years of teaching experience. Three of them have a Bachelor’s degree, three are in the process of obtaining their Master’s degree, one is

a holder of a University degree and one has already obtained her Master's degree. As far as their current work is concerned, seven of them are private tutors and one is working both in the public sector and is a private tutor.

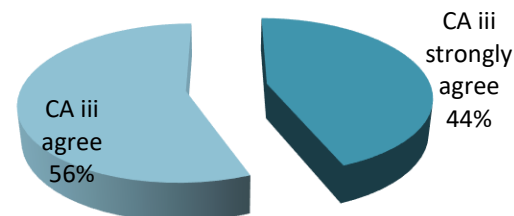
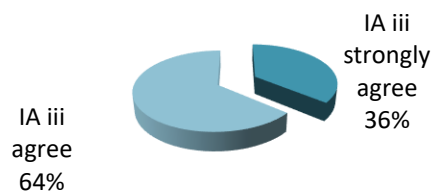
Description and Discussion of the Research Findings

The checklist appears on a horizontal page so as to facilitate the respondents to complete it, saving them time. Another reason for this is to limit the number of pages of the checklist rendering it less chaotic and exhausting. The next step after receiving the completed checklists is to transform the respondents' markings into a neat data file that contains figures recorded in a way that is appropriate for statistical analysis (Dornyei & Csizer, 2012). The research revealed very important findings. First of all, the results from question Aii. [The reading texts include a variety of topics (music,sports,stories,etc)] (Appendix I) showed that the majority of the teachers 78% and 56% respectively for Connect B1 and Incredible5 strongly agreed while the rest of the teachers (22% and 44% respectively) agreed with the same statement. The present findings are in line with the results of Daskalos (2005) who underlines the importance of relevant texts which motivates students in the learning process. Even if a textbook is a few years old, the topics could very well still be of relevance to the students.

When the subjects of the interview were asked what they liked most about the reading component in the two textbooks, 4 out of 8 (50%) replied that the fact that there were various topics from different, valid sources in both books was an element that they considered very carefully when selecting a book for their classes. The interview answers seem to confirm the checklist item showing that the existence of a variety of topics is of great interest to the teachers when it comes to selecting a textbook for their classes.

For question Aiii, [The texts are interesting for B1 level students (familiar texts or of personal interest)] more than half of the teachers (56% and 64% respectively for Connect B1 and Incredible5) agreed while the rest of them (44% and 36% respectively) strongly agreed with the particular statement. It is known that interesting topics draw students' attention to become motivated in reading and understanding them. Much in the same line, Brown (2007, 295) argues that "an important condition for language acquisition to occur is that the learners understand (via hearing or reading) input language that contains structures slightly beyond their current level of understanding".

Question Aiii: The texts are interesting for B1 level students (familiar texts or of personal interest).

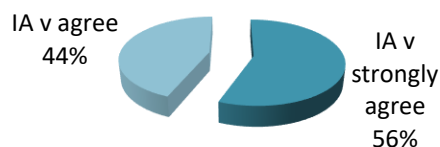


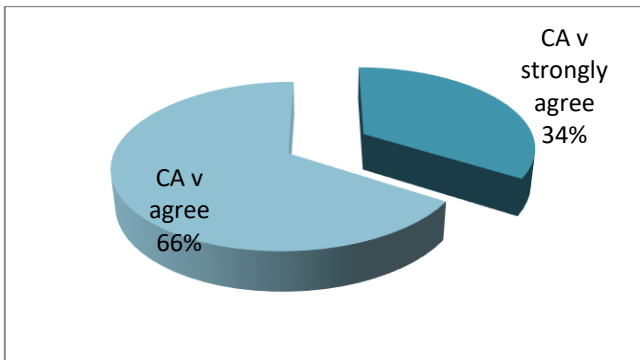
Pie 2: Results from question Aiii

Furthermore, that was an issue confirmed through the interviews; 5 out of 8 interviewees supported that in Connect B1 there are interesting and motivating topics while in the case of Incredible5, half of the teachers (50%) felt that the reading texts are simple and therefore easily understood by the students. The interview answers seem to be in line with the answers of the particular item as when there are intriguing topics students are encouraged to participate actively.

What is shown in Table 4 concerning question Av, is that all teachers either strongly agreed or agreed that both books match the B1 level of students in the sense that they provided everyday related language. The findings seem to be in agreement with Arkian (2008) who states that course books are not instructional materials only, but they are sources of knowledge and information on various aspects of individual and societal phenomena.

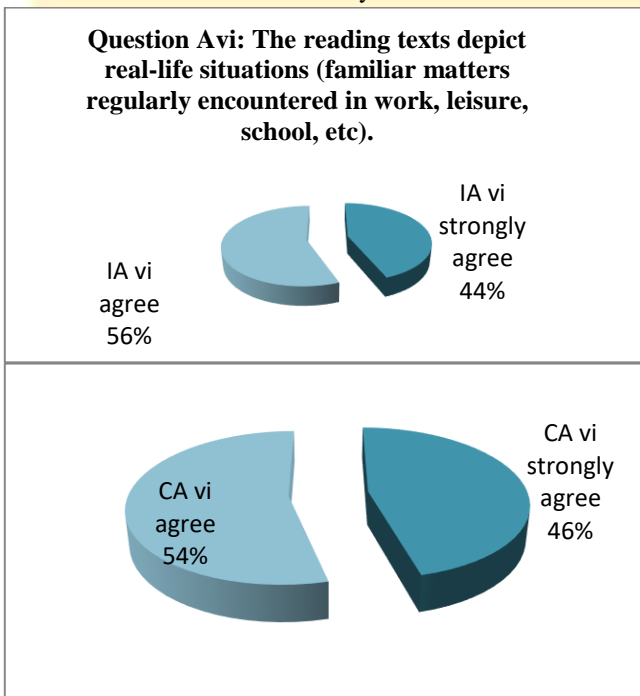
Question Av: The difficulty level of the text matches the B1 level of students (the texts present high frequency everyday related language).





Pie 3: Results from question Av

Another question of the checklist is if the texts depict real-life situations. A great number (54%) agreed that this is the case in Connect B1 whereas in Incredible5 the corresponding percentage was greater (66%). The results of this item seem to agree with Tovani (2000) who argues that these texts keep readers from becoming bored while reading, set a purpose for reading, keep readers focused and force them to become actively involved.

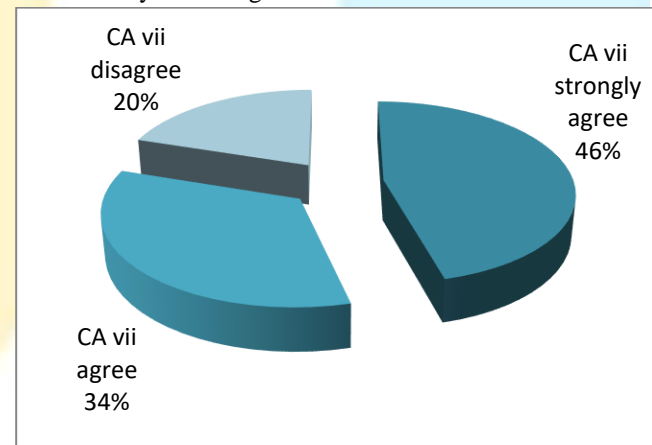


Pie 4: Results from question Avi

Moreover, the same issue was mentioned during some interviews. As for Connect B1, 5 out of 8 teachers appreciated the fact that the reading component included real-life issues and facts and as for Incredible 5, half of the teachers (50%) supported the same view. The answers

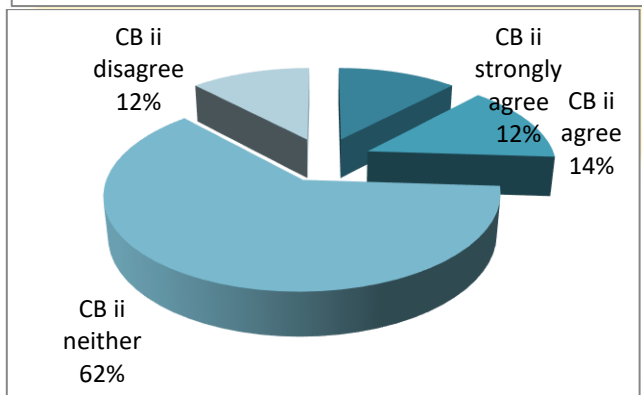
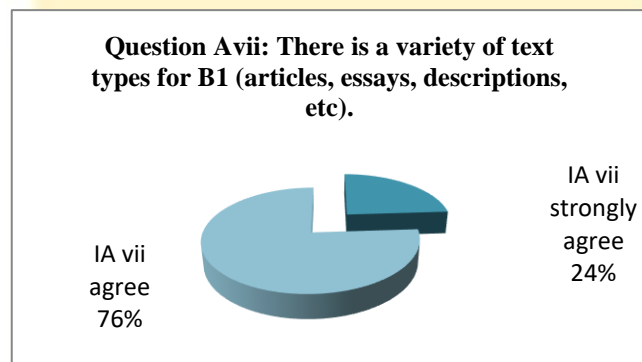
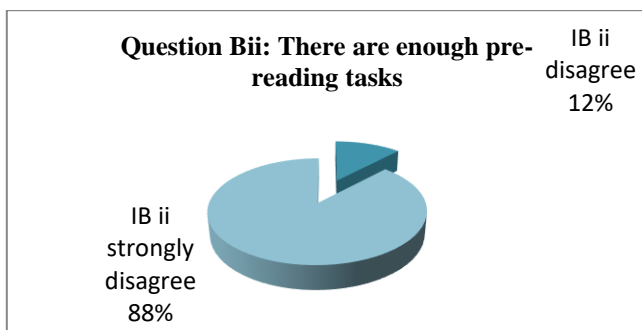
provided during the interviews concur well with the results presented in the checklists.

As far as the variety of text types is concerned, a number of teachers (46%) strongly agreed that there is variety and some others (34%) agreed with the statement. Only a small percentage (20%) disagreed that there are various types in Connect B1. On the other hand, as for Incredible, the vast majority (76%) agreed while the rest of them (24%) strongly agreed with the statement. The specific findings are consistent with Bakke (2010) who states that learners are supposed to read and understand different kinds of written texts, select appropriate reading strategies and are able to analyze reading material in a critical fashion.



Pie 5: Results from question Avii

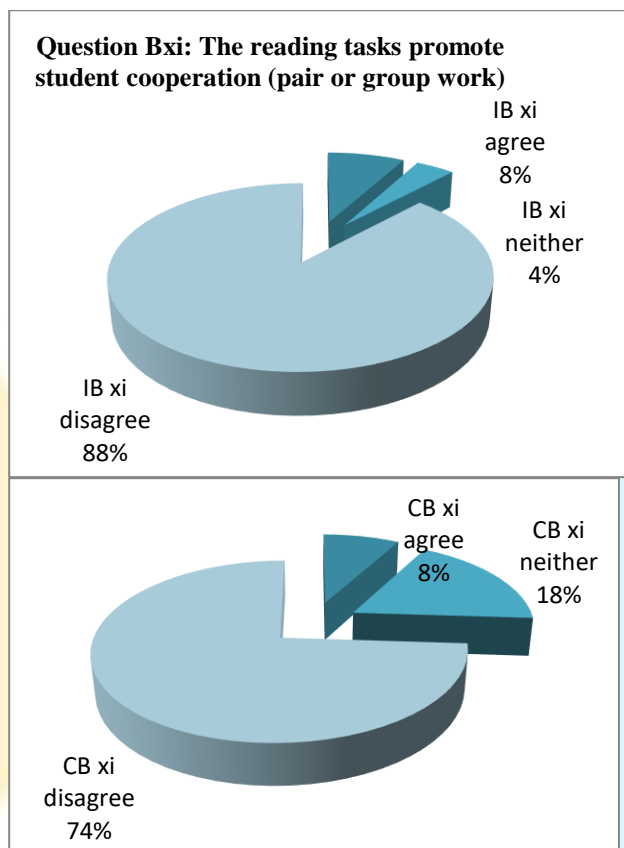
Another question was whether if the books contain adequate pre-reading tasks so as to guide the learners smoothly to the actual reading text. For Connect B1 there were various answers. Most of the respondents (62%) stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the adequacy of the pre-reading tasks, while there was an equal percentage (12%) of those who strongly agreed and disagreed with the statement. The picture was clearer for Incredible5 where almost all the teachers (88%) indicated that they strongly disagreed with the adequacy of the tasks in the pre-reading stage. The answers to this question are in agreement with Bujang (2004, 4) who maintains that “pre-reading activities can help to activate students’ schemata to enable them to relate what they know with the texts to make meaning”.



Pie 6: Results from question Bii

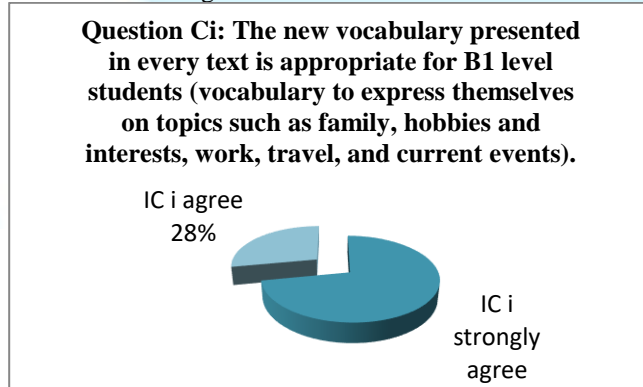
When interviewees were asked what they thought the weakness of the reading component in the books was, almost all pinpointed that the pre-reading stage needs some enhancement in Connect B1 and stressed the lack of this stage in Incredible5. More specifically, half of the teachers (50%) deemed that more pre-reading questions should be added to Connect B1 and all teachers (100%) stressed the need for pre-reading tasks in Incredible5. Their answers are in accordance with the results of the checklists.

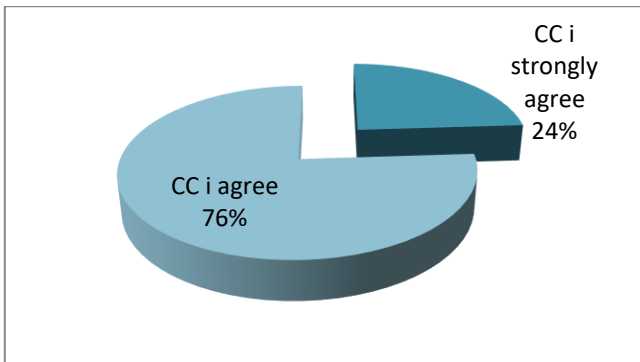
The issue concerning whether the tasks promote pair/group work was amongst the questions of the checklist. The respondents disagreed that the existing tasks in both books promote such kind of work (74% and 88% respectively for Connect B1 and Incredible5). The findings contradict the results presented by Van Boxtel et al., (2000, 313) who supports that “having students working in pairs/groups is effective since students benefit when they share ideas or ask for help from their peers to complete a reading task”.



Pie 7: Results from question Bxi

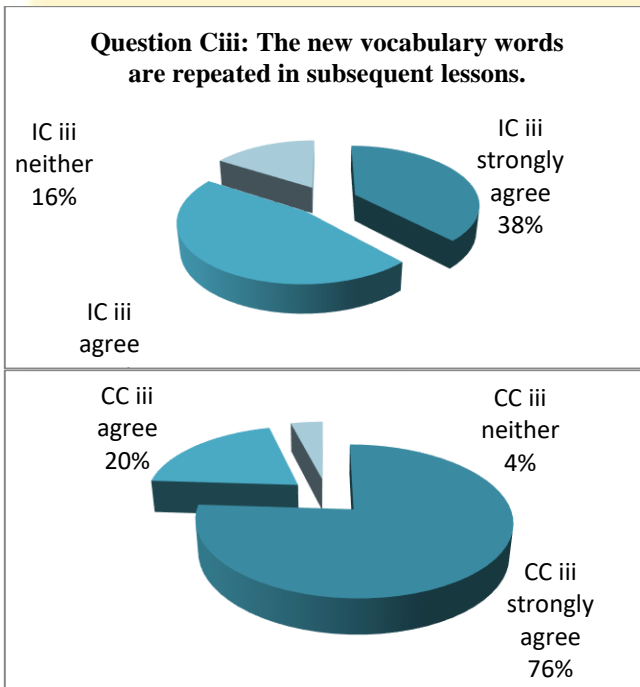
There is a correlation between the findings of the checklist and the interviews which highlights the lack of pair/group work tasks in both books, as was mentioned by many of the interviewees who considered it to be a disadvantage of the specific textbooks. From the interviews it was clear that the teachers regard students' participation and cooperation in the learning process as absolutely essential. For question Ci, a high percentage (76%) agreed that the vocabulary presented in Connect B1 was appropriate for B1 level students while approximately the same percentage (72%) exists for Incredible5. This finding tallies with Bakke (2010) who comments that having a varied vocabulary will make it easier to master a range of different texts when it comes to comprehension, fluency and critical reading.





Pie 8: Results from question C i

In addition, when teachers were asked to indicate if the words are repeated in subsequent lessons, a large number (76%) answered that in Connect B1 they are while very few (4%) stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed. In the case of Incredible5, many (46%) answered that they agree while quite a few (16%) stated that they neither agree nor disagree. This finding is in agreement with Koda (2007, 7) who also confirms that “in order to read well it is crucial for learners to have a large vocabulary and in order to expand one’s vocabulary it is crucial to be able to read well”. Furthermore, all the above are consistent with Hudson (2007, 245) who supports that “when the vocabulary is contextualized, richer meaning to each word is attributed”.

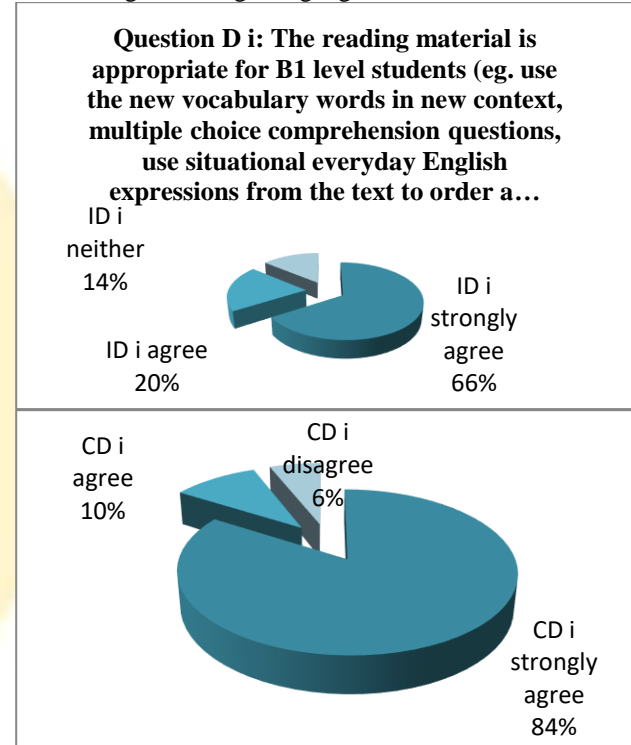


Pie 9: Results from question C iii

Actually, two interviewees stated that they liked the recycling of the vocabulary throughout both books thus agreeing with the previous results.

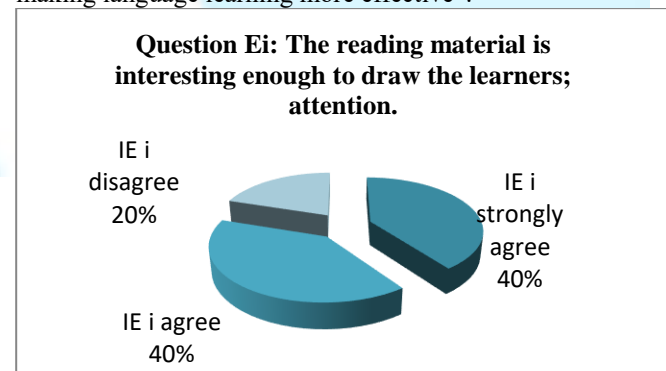
As far as the appropriacy of the reading material for B1 level students is concerned, a high percentage of respondents replied that they strongly agreed that the

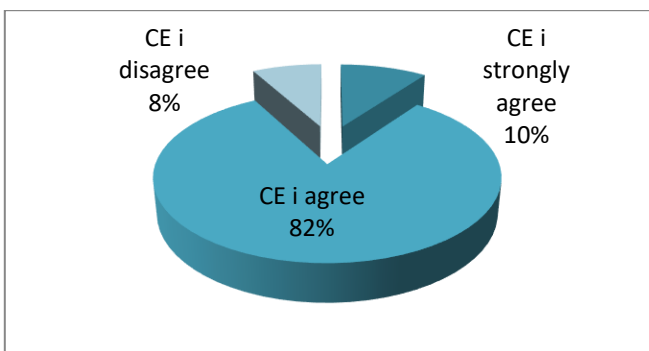
material is suitable for the particular level (84% and 72% respectively for ConnectB1 and Incredible5). This is in accordance with the reading criteria set in the CEFR (2001) for the B1 level which state that students are expected to deal with situations which will probably arise when using the foreign language.



Pie 10: Results from question D i

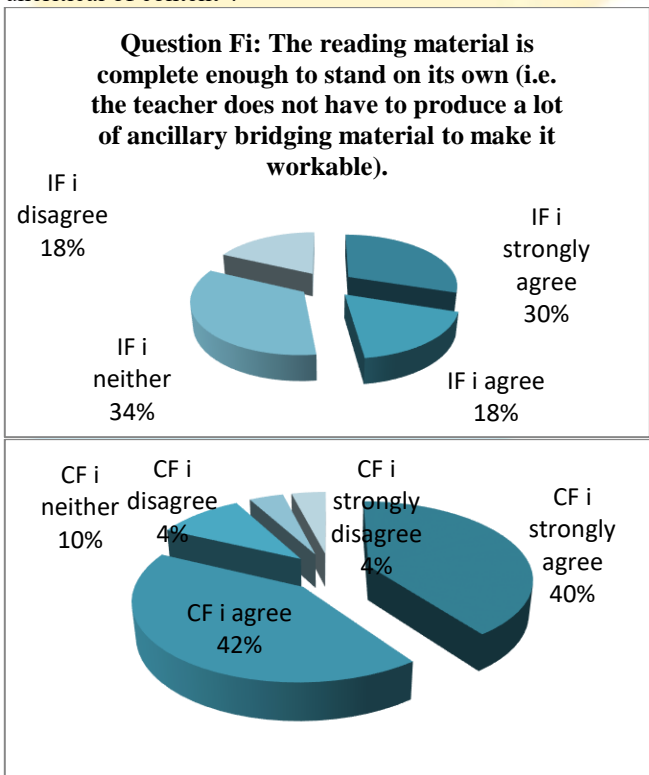
What is more, the respondents were asked to express their opinions on whether the reading material in both books is interesting enough to draw the students’ attention. Most of them (80%) agreed that the material is interesting in Connect B1, while only a few (10%) disagreed. In the case of Incredible5, a large proportion (80%) strongly agreed, while the rest (20%) disagreed. Both textbooks contain a plethora of interesting and suitable texts for B1 level students, which can be observed in the contents’ pages of each textbook. This finding complies with Tomlison’s (2008, 5) view who claims that “in a learning environment in which learners are motivated and positive about it, the speed of language acquisition can be greatly enhanced, making language learning more effective”.





Pie 11: Results from question Ei

The last question of the checklist dealt with the sufficiency of the textbook, that is, if the textbook can be used without having to produce any ancillary material. Teachers provided various answers and a number of them (40%) strongly agreed while some others (42%) agreed that ConnectB1 is sufficient whereas very few (4%) strongly disagreed. The percentages were quite different for Incredible5; approximately one-third of those surveyed (30%) strongly agreed and some others (18%) agreed while those who disagreed represented a small percentage (18%). The results concur well with Wong (2011) who claims that textbooks can serve as a good monitor for measuring the progress of teaching and learning. On the other hand, the results contradict Wong's view (2011, p.8) which supports that "if teachers develop reliance on the textbook, they may become uncreative in teaching and uncritical of content".



Pie 12: Results from question Fi

Although, at the end of the checklist some lines were provided for the teachers to add their own suggestions for

improving the reading texts and tasks in each book, very few suggestions were offered. More specifically, they proposed that more activities encouraging learner cooperation and tasks which would require different learning strategies should be included in both books.

Furthermore, during the interviews, the teachers were asked what other topics they would add in the two books. Although, most of them (5 out of 8) answered that there are adequate topics in the textbooks, one teacher said that she would like to add topics on social interaction in both books as they address teenage students who are preoccupied with issues on family or personal relationships. Another suggestion was that topics on technology or natural phenomena could be included as these may be subjects that would interest learners in their teens.

Last but not least, when teachers were asked which book they would choose to teach, half of them opted for Connect B1 while the others chose Incredible5. The response to this question was anticipated considering the results of the checklist and to what extent these were consistent with the answers of the interviews.

The research questions posed were answered with the help of the checklist and the interviews. The findings revealed both the strengths and weaknesses of the reading component in the two different EFL textbooks as well as the extent to which the reading texts and their accompanying tasks meet the criteria set in the suggested checklist. Finally, through the interviews, interesting results were obtained as to what should be altered or added in order to improve or develop the learners' reading skills. More specifically, although half of the teachers agreed that there is a variety of topics in both textbooks, all of them stated that despite the fact that they find the topics adequate for B1 level students, they would like more topics to be added which would interest learners more such as technology or environmental issues. Arkian (2008) argues that textbooks can expand their general knowledge more than any material with which learners are engaged within or outside their classrooms. Textbooks are a source of knowledge and information on various phenomena. Furthermore, all teachers emphasized the importance of the pre-reading stage and its absence from Incredible5. Howarth's view (2006) is that the pre-reading tasks aim at raising learners' knowledge of what they are to read. In addition, more than half of the teachers stressed the fact that no pair/group work tasks are present in the textbooks and it was among their suggestions that such tasks should be added. Bostel et al. (2000, p. 313) comment that pair/group work "can generate explanations, justifications, reflection and a search for new information".

Limitations of the research and suggestions for future research

However, during the various stages of the research, the existence of certain limitations was acknowledged.

First of all, the evaluation was limited to two books concerning their reading components. The array of B1

level textbooks is vast, therefore, the choice of the two particular books was random and potentially not representative of the specific level. Also, the evaluation did not apply to the entire book but just to the reading texts and tasks. Furthermore, the particular textbooks are used in private lessons and not in public schools. This by no means suggests that the findings are undermined; it rather underlines the limited applicability of the results and the difficulty in overgeneralizing the data obtained by the researchers.

In addition, data from the entire population was not gathered, so the fact that the participants were all females could also be considered a limiting factor. A larger scale analysis involving both male and female English Language Teachers, could be carried out in the future in order to gather more generalizable data.

Last but not least, the data collected from the interviews were analyzed by the researchers and the findings are subjective. Also, the duration and the data collected were limited due to lack of time and resources. Perhaps, even the fact that the students have the interviewers in front of them may have biased them and thus may have led them to giving a different answer to the one which they initially intended to give. Denscombe (2007, 105) declares that “people respond differently depending on how they perceive the interviewer, a situation known as the interviewer effect”. The interviews also entailed the writing down and analyzing of the beliefs of the participants. Determining the interviewer effect in this study is unfeasible and the question whether they answered what they really thought or what they wanted the interviewers to hear remains unanswered. In addition, other research instruments could be used, such as students’ questionnaires or observations, in order to collect more data.

Last but not least, further research can be conducted to evaluate other textbooks used in Greece, both in the private and public sector, as well as in other countries.

The findings derived from both the checklists and the interviews were very enlightening. However, as mentioned earlier, further research is suggested. First of all, more teachers, males and females, could be interviewed and surveyed so that the findings could be more complete. Also, similar research could be conducted in the other skills (listening, speaking, writing) of the books under exploration so as to evaluate them as well. Of course, research could be expanded not only to other B1 level textbooks but also to textbooks of other levels. Teachers, using the materials, could take the initiative themselves to evaluate their materials in their teaching context which could be regarded as step forward in their professional development (Reinders & Lewis, in Lamb & Reinders, 2008). Other research is recommended where observations or students’ questionnaires could be used to indicate results with higher validity and reliability.

CONCLUSION

The purpose was to evaluate the reading component in two different B1 level textbooks, namely Connect B1 and Incredible 5, respectively. These two coursebooks are used in Foreign Language Centers and in private lessons in Greece.

In order to achieve that, an evaluation checklist was used based on criteria regarding the reading texts, reading tasks, text vocabulary, context, appropriacy of the reading material and the sufficiency of the reading component. The aim was to use these criteria in order to encourage the teachers to evaluate the textbooks with the ultimate goal to help the learners improve or develop their reading skills. Moreover, some interviews were conducted so as to gather data concerning the variety of topics in the two textbooks, their strong and weak points as well as what needs to be added in order to make them more suitable for B1 level students.

The analysis of the results, derived from the two research instruments employed, revealed some useful information regarding the reading texts and their accompanying tasks in an attempt to help teachers adopt a critical stance towards the textbooks they use. Both the strengths and the weaknesses were pinpointed and some suggestions were offered by the teachers who participated in this research. The need to include pre-reading tasks in Incredible 5 along with the need to add pair/group work tasks in both books were stressed among other things, as their absence is a striking fact that could not be ignored.

However, both books were deemed appropriate for the specific level with adequate, interesting and varied topics from valid sources suitable for teenage students. Moreover, the fact that the new vocabulary words are repeated throughout the reading texts of the coursebooks was detected by the teachers who considered it to be an asset of the particular books.

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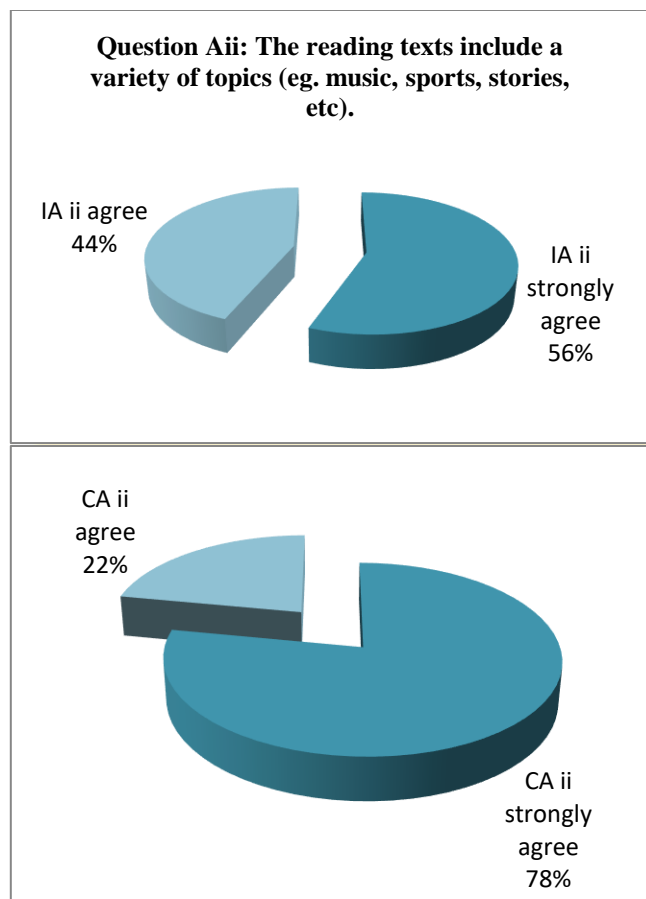
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APPENDIX I



Pie 1: Results from question A ii

The capital letter **C** refers to Connect B1 and the capital letter **I** refers to Incredible 5(3) henceforward.