Question Types in EFL Course Books

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Abstract

Reading is an interactive process between the text and the reader. This process makes reading ever so much enjoyable and an informative activity. Thus, texts designed targeting English language learners are expected to present questions that would go beyond a low-order level with an aim to trigger critical thinking in learners. Based on this premise, we conducted this piece of research in order to discover the types of questions related to EFL course books used in Middle and High School institutions in Turkey. As a result of our investigation, we found that a great majority of the posed questions did not go beyond a low-order level. Although this finding seems to have significant implications for the thinking process of learners of English specifically, the implications can also be of some significance for the general reader.

Keywords: Types of questions, course books, reading skill, low-order questions, high-order questions

1. Introduction

English, as a lingua franca, has affected many people around the world in different ways (Kachru,1990). Some people learn English to get a better job; some do that to get a better education, and some for intellectualism. Even though the motives and reasons to learn English vary, it is a fact that English is the most taught language over the world. This increasing interest in English has led to produce ways and materials to make the learning process efficient in terms of time and money. Course books have become the main candidates to meet this need. Thus, it is clear as to why schools, universities, and private courses use course books extensively, and they usually follow the curriculum of the book. In addition to their benefits as the main instrument in FL classes, most of these books include extra material like work books, teacher books, CDs, and online materials.

Textbooks are the main elements of EFL and ESL classrooms, and play an important role for both students and teachers in attaining learning goals. According to Tomlinson (2001), a textbook "helps to achieve consistency and continuation; it gives learners a sense of system, cohesion, and progress, and it helps teachers prepare and learners to revise." Choosing a course book usually becomes an overwhelming issue for teachers and program administrators. However, when the important role of textbook is taken into consideration, the choosing process becomes crucial. To emphasize the importance of this process, Sheldon (1988) states that selection of the course book is a clear sign of an educational decision, and defines this decision as a political, professional, and financial investment. However, this decision process is handled in various ways in different places. For example, while one school can decide on a particular course book, another may not have the same power and legal rights to do so. For instance, in Turkey, the government has the sole legal right and authority to decide on course books to be utilized in schools. Thus, it is not possible for teachers or administrators at a school to decide on the course book to be used in their institutions. In addition, the government in Turkey assigns some local companies to write EFL course books and distribute them freely to state schools targeting all levels from primary to secondary education. Books are assessed and evaluated by specialists from the Ministry of National Education (MNE); and if the course book in question meets the conditions set by MNE, it is approved to be part of the curriculum. Thus, the course book series, *Yes you Can,* the subject of this study, as claimed to have gone through this process, is therefore used in state schools in different locations across Turkey. The series has nine books of A1, A2, B1, B2 levels whose contents were supposed to be designed in line with the criteria of the *Common European Framework for Languages,* which is embraced by MNE. The extensive usage and inclusion of all language levels within its body have made this series a viable subject of this study.

Like most of other educational systems, the Turkish national education system does have some basic and specific goals such as emphasizing the education of individuals to think critically (MNE, 1978). Thus, course books, as a means to foster critical thinking, have an immense significance in the education system. According to McKenzie and Murphy (2000), critical thinking is a high order cognitive process in which the individual can evaluate arguments; make inferences; analyze ideas; offer solutions, and express judgments. As is also defined by Astleitner (2002), this process includes organization of information, reasonable argumentation, and ability to

create logical connections between old and new knowledge. Richardson and Ice (2010) claim that, in order to promote critical thinking skills, the right questions should be posed to learners. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types of questions asked in the course book series, *Yes You Can,* in order to assess the compliance of this series with the goals of the Turkish national educational system, that is, to what extent are individuals trained to think critically through inclusion of higher-order questions.

The analysis of the questions will be made based on Bloom's (1956) *taxonomy of educational objectives,* still used in the assessment of activities and question levels. This taxonomy has three domains: *cognitive*, *affective*, and *psychomotor*. According to Bloom (1956), the *cognitive domain* consists of six levels: *knowledge*, *comprehension*, *application*, *analysis*, *synthesis*, and *evaluation*. This study focuses only on the *cognitive domain* and seeks to categorize the question types incorporated in the course book series of this study, seeking responses to the following research questions:

1. What are the types of questions used in the course book series, *Yes you Can,* according to Bloom's taxonomy*?*
2. What are the frequencies and percentages of occurrence of such question types?
3. What is the overall questioning potential of the series regarding promotion of higher thinking skills?

2. Literature Review

The relationship between types of questions and quality of responses, representative of high order thinking skills, has been the subject of some research studies. For instance, Black (1980) analyzed the types of questions used in science classes according to Bloom's taxonomy. He randomly selected 48 schools out of 207 and analyzed one test from each of these schools. The study revealed that *knowledge-type* questions had the highest percentage followed by *comprehension* and *application* respectively.

McLaughlin and Mynard (2009) focused on online posts of students from 850 online discussion sessions, and they found that 55% of students' responses were of lower-order level according to Blooms taxonomy. They suggested that the reason lying behind this was the quality of questions; and, in order to raise the levels of responses, they recommended the utilization of high-order questions. In a similar vein, Ertmer et al. (2011) analyzed the relationship between the types of questions and levels of students' responses in nineteen different discussion forums. Questions were labeled with levels of critical thinking, as was described by Bloom (1956). The study revealed that when higher-order questions were asked, they promoted higher levels thinking and responses from students. As an extension to these studies, this particular research will deal with the matter from a Turkish perspective within a Turkish context.

3. Methodology

The data for this study was collected from a book series consisting of nine Turkish-authored course books. The series was selected from a list of EFL text books approved by the Ministry of Turkish National Education. The rationale underline this selection is based on the fact that the books were highly recommended by the Ministry and were freely distributed by the same institution to middle and high schools in Turkey. Every book of the series was examined with a focus on every question occurring with a question mark at the end. In the books, all topics with reading passages, dialogues and exercises were analyzed.

As stated above, the nine EFL course books selected were widely used in Turkish state middle and high schools. The examined books were categorized in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by MNE as A1.1, A1.2, A2.1, A2.2, A2.3, B1.1, B1.2, B2.1, and B2.2.

Initially, the questions in the series were determined, and later, in line with Bloom's taxonomy, were coded and categorized as *knowledge-type, comprehension-type, application-type, analysis-type, synthesis-type,* and *evaluation-type*. A frequency test was run utilizing the SPSS statistical package. At a further stage, a chi-square test was conducted in order to identify any potential significant difference in the dispersion of identified question types.

4. Findings

4.1 A-Level Books

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), language learners at this level should be able to "understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type." Therefore, the questions incorporated in material produced at this level should drive learners to comprehend (comprehension) and use (application) language at a basic level. Now that we are familiar with the requirements of this level, we proceed to analyze the books selected for this study.

4.1.1 A1-Level Books

Table 1 below displays frequencies and percentages of the questions employed in A1-level books (A1.1, A1.2).

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Table 1. Values for Question Types for A1-Level Books

Question Types	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Knowledge	292	46.6	82.5	82.5
Comprehension	53	8.5	15.0	97.5
Application	9	1.4	2.5	100.0
Total	354	56.5	100.0	
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)	0.000			

From Table 1, we can observe that a total of 354 questions were employed in A1-level books. As can be seen, three types of questions which have high frequency of occurrence are *knowledge*, *comprehension*, and *application* types respectively. With 82.5%, *knowledge-type* questions have the highest emergence rate, followed by *comprehension* (15.0%), and *application* (2.5%). With a number of 292 out of 354, it can clearly be stated that *knowledge- type* questions significantly dominated the A1-level books in terms of quantity. *Comprehension-type* questions are the second highest group in terms of frequency (53). Lastly, *application-type* questions take the third place with a frequency of nine. The percentage of occurrence of this type is 2.5 – a rather insignificant figure. Samples of these question types are presented below:
1. When is the school concert? (Yes You Can, A1.1, p.44., *knowledge-type*)
2. Why did they cook in the caravan? (Yes You Can, A1.1, p.77, *comprehension-type*)
3. How do you spell your name? (Yes You Can, A1.1, p.21, *application-type*)

4.1.2 A2-Level Books

This is the second level of the course book series "Yes You Can," and from Table 2, we can observe four levels of questioning employed in A2-level books.

Table 2. Values for Question Types of A2-Level Books

Question Types	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Knowledge	437	69.8	78.7	78.7
Comprehension	100	16.0	18.0	96.8
Application	2	0.3	0.4	97.1
Analysis	15	2.4	2.7	99.8
Synthesis	1	0.2	0.2	100.0
Total	555	88.7	100.0	
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)	0.000			

From Table 2 above, similar to A1-level books, it can be seen that *knowledge-type* highly dominated the types of questions occurring in A2-level books. With a frequency of 437 (78.7%), this type of questions is conspicuously seen as a major type of questions employed in the books, only to be followed by *comprehension* with a frequency of 100 (18.0%). Succeeded by *comprehension*, *analysis* has an occurrence frequency of 15 (2.7%). *Application* is the fourth type of questions to emerge in A2-level books. This type had a frequency of two (0.4%). Although extremely small, the occurrence of *synthesis-type* of questions is rather interesting here. With a frequency of one (0.2%), for the first time, we encounter *synthesis-type* of questioning in A2-level books.

In Table 2, we can observe a decrease in the rate of *knowledge-type* questions, and an increase in other types. While we could only observe three types of questions in A1-level books, this number has increased to five in A2-level. Clearly, while *knowledge* type has decreased in A2 level, *comprehension* type went on the increase; along with this, a greater variety of question types were introduced. We can state that *comprehension-type* questions were used with a high frequency in this book level compared to the previous one. Additionally, *analysis-type* questions have the third highest frequency. Samples of the types of questions occurring in A2 level books are cited below:
4. How much cheese do they have? (A2.1., p.20 knowledge-type)
5. Why Lisa is worried? (A2.1., p.24 comprehension-type)
6. Why does David wants to be a pet therapist? (A2.2., p.20 comprehension-type)
7. What kind of a text is it? (A2.1., p.74 analysis-type)
8. What makes you happy? (A2.2., p.99 analysis-type)
9. Can Ally be a good clown? (A2.1., p.33 synthesis-type)

4.1.3 Overall A-Level Material Questions (Basic Users)

From Tables 1 and 2 above, we can clearly see that knowledge type questions significantly dominated the existence of other types. This situation is illustrated in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Values for Question Types of A-Level Books

Question Types	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Knowledge	729	80.2	80.2	80.2
Comprehension	153	16.8	16.8	97.0
Application	11	1.2	1.2	98.2
Analysis	15	1.7	1.7	99.9
Synthesis	1	0.1	0.1	100.0
Total	909	100.0	100.0	
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)	0.000			

Looking at Table 3, while *knowledge-type* questions lead in terms of frequency of occurrence (729), *comprehension* and *analysis* (153; 15 respectively) follow with rather differing frequencies. *Application* and *synthesis* (11; 1 respectively) fall at the bottom of the list.

Having examined the question types in A-level books, and having found that the majority of questions occurring in the material are by far *knowledge* type, we can surmise from this analysis that users of these books have been restricted to think at lower level, presumably with no consideration of their potentials and capabilities to perform mental processes at higher-level order. Now that we have obtained such findings, we proceed with the analysis of B-level books.

4.2 B-Level Books

Viewed from the CEFR perspective, material developed for language learners should enable the learners to "understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.; interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity; produce clear, detailed text; and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options." Thus, questions posed in materials of this level should comply with requirements clearly stated in CEFR. With these requirements in mind, we present the analysis of question types existing in B-level books below. As was in the A-level books, the material at the B-level will also be dealt with as B1 and B2.

4.2.1 B1-Level Books

Table 4 below presents frequency and percentages of the questions detected in B1-level books. From this table, we can clearly observe that apart from the evaluation level, all other five were employed in the questions in B1-level material, albeit with significantly varying frequencies.

Table 4. Values for Question Types of B1-Level Books

Question Types	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Knowledge	240	38.3	59.7	59.7
Comprehension	127	20.3	31.6	91.3
Application	8	1.3	2.0	93.3
Analysis	23	3.7	5.7	99.0
Synthesis	4	0.6	1.0	100.0
Total	402	64.2	100.0	
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)	0.000			

As can be observed from Table 4, with a frequency of 240 (59.7%), *knowledge-type* questions topped the list of all other types. Following this level, *comprehension-type* questions, with a frequency of 127 (31.6%), were employed relatively close to *knowledge-level* questions. *Analysis-type* questions, with a frequency of 23 (5.7%), were observed to be heavily outweighed by *knowledge* and *comprehension*. *Application* and *synthesis*, with a frequency of 8 (2.0%) and 4 (1.0%), respectively were the least to be employed in the material of B1-level books. Samples of questions from B1-level books are presented below:

10. What's the presenter talking about? (B1.2., p.15 knowledge-type)

11. What does "escape" mean in Elliot's quote? (B1.2., p.20 knowledge-type)

12. How can you describe the main character of the story? (B1.1., p.71 comprehension-type)

13. Why do people do extreme sports on their holidays? (B1.1., p.21 analysis-type)

14. What would probably be happen if there weren't any frogs? (B1.2., p.83 synthesis-type)

Following the question types in the material, we will now proceed with our analysis of question types in B2-level books.

4.2.2 B2-Level Books

As was with B1 level, the material we analyzed at B2 displayed the usage of a variety of different types of questions. In correlation with B1 level, the ordering of question types in B2-level books illustrates a striking similarity; indeed, apart from the existence of *evaluation* in B2, the rest is the same. Table 5 below presents the frequency and percentages of the analyzed types of questions.

Table 5. Values for Question Types for B2-Level Books

Question Types	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Knowledge	305	48.7	48.7	48.7
Comprehension	200	31.9	31.9	80.7
Application	15	2.4	2.4	83.1
Analysis	80	12.8	12.8	95.8
Synthesis	8	1.3	1.3	97.1
Evaluation	18	2.9	2.9	100.0
Total	626	100.0	100.0	
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)	0.000			

Table 5 demonstrates the values of B2-level material. From the table, we can observe that both *knowledge-type* and *comprehension-type* questions were employed significantly much more frequently than the other types. While *knowledge-type* questions had a frequency of 305 (48.7%), the frequency for *comprehension-type* questions is 200 (31.9%). The other types, i.e. *analysis*, *evaluation*, *application*, and *synthesis* were respectively employed with 80 (12.8%), 18 (2.9%), 15 (2.4%), 8 (1.3%) frequencies. Samples of questions from B2 material are presented below:

15. What are the keys to get over the unaccepted situations? (B2.1., p.21 knowledge-type)
16. How did the neighbors learn about the accident? (B2.2., p.15 comprehension-type)
17. How do healthy people spend their time according to photos? (B2.2., p.18 analysis-type)
18. What would change in your life if you had a part time job? (B2.1., p.83 analysis-type)
19. Why do you think discovering their weaknesses and strengths can help their future career? (B2.1., p.55 synthesis-type)
20. Which one is more important and effective for you; verbal or non-verbal communication? (B2.1., p.79 evaluation-type)

Having a look at the question types in B1 and B2-level books, we can clearly see a tendency towards a higher-order level thinking type questions. For instance, the occurrence of *analysis-type* questions in B1 level material is considerably below that of B2 level; the occurrence of this type of questioning has more than doubled in B2-level material. Moreover, in this level, we can also see the emergence of *evaluation-type* questioning, an indication of compliance with CEFR. A joint analysis of B-level material suggests that *knowledge-type* questions still top the list of other question types, a situation that was also observed in A-level material. However, apart from this type of questioning, Table 6 below clearly indicates some deviation from a low-order level questioning in A-level materials towards supposedly higher-order questions in B-level material. That is, the overall dominance of *knowledge-type* questions has significantly diminished, only to be replaced by *comprehension-type* questions.

4.2.3 Overall B-level Material Questions (Independent Users)
From Tables 4 and 5 above, we can still see the dominance of knowledge type questions. The situation is summarized in Table 6 below:

Table 6. Values for Question Types for B-Level Books

Question Types	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Knowledge	545	53.0	53.0	53.0
Comprehension	327	31.8	31.8	84.8
Application	23	2.2	2.2	87.1
Analysis	103	10.0	10.0	97.1
Synthesis	12	1.2	1.2	98.2
Evaluation	18	1.8	1.8	100.0
Total	1028	100.0	100.0	
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)	0.000			

From our analysis of both A and B-level material, we can surmise that the authors of the examined materials displayed an increasing tendency towards introducing higher-order level questions, although not significantly, presumably, with the aim to foster higher-level thinking.

5. Discussion and Conclusion
Different studies from different subject areas and disciplines were conducted to see what types of questions were used by teachers, lecturers, and course book writers. The relationship between the types of questions and their effects on the critical thinking process of individuals are the themes of studies conducted by Ertmer et al. (2011), MacLaughlin & Mynyard (2009), Black (1980). Although these studies dealt with topics of different disciplines such as history, science, etc., they yielded rather similar results; i.e. the most dominant questions were of a *knowledge-type* nature. Irrespective of level of material, our study also revealed that the most dominant question

type remained at the *knowledge* level, therefore displaying significant similarities to the findings cited in previously conducted research. However, our results illustrate a tendency, albeit insignificant, towards the incorporation of higher-order level questions as the level of produced material increases. Figure 1 below illustrates a comparison of types of questions occurring in A-level and B-level materials.
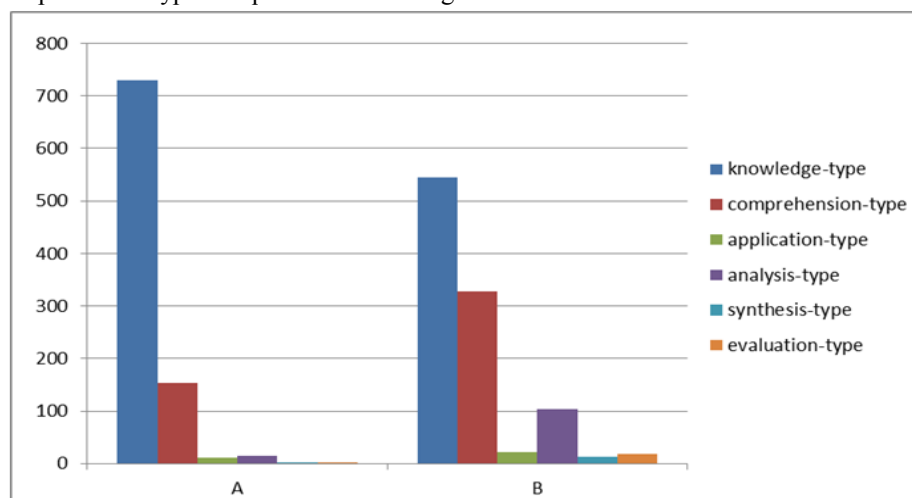

Figure 1: Comparison of A-level and B-level materials in terms of question types.

As can be observed from Figure 1, *knowledge-type* questions dominate in both A-level and B-level course books. Yet, an increase in the employment of *comprehension* and *analysis-type* questions can conspicuously be observed in B-level books. Although the incorporation of *analysis*, regarded as a higher-order question type, is rather encouraging at this level of material, the almost non-existence of other high-order questions here indicates that this material falls far short of meeting the requirements of CEFR, which suggests that B-level material must contain *application* and *analysis* content incorporating question types accordingly. Therefore, we cannot state that the questions included in the examined material here foster critical thinking potentials of students since the material hardly meets the criteria set by CEFR in terms of question-type inclusion.

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Notes
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