



Doing Narrow Reading through Graded Readers: Possibilities and Difficulties

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This study analyzed the graded readers published by three major English publishers in Taiwan to examine whether they are appropriate for narrow reading/listening materials. Some 509 texts from Cambridge English Readers (CER), Macmillan English Readers (MER) and Oxford Bookworms (OBW) series were analyzed according to their authorship, quantity of texts by each author, language graded levels, and genres. The study found the following: a) Across the three publishers, there were a total of 20 writers who wrote or rewrote five or more texts; b) The majority of the writers wrote mixed genres; c) Among the three publishers, the quantity of each level in Cambridge was distributed most evenly; d) The most popular genres across the three publishers were thriller, crime, mystery, human interest, and romance. The results show that it can be limiting to do narrow reading based on authorship because not many writers wrote a sufficient number of texts at each level.

Graded readers have been widely used by L2 learners and practitioners due to the linguistic elements being largely well controlled to suit varying proficiency levels of learners. Recent corpus-driven research has found that related-topic texts (also narrow reading or series reading) contain fewer word types and familiar background knowledge, which makes the reading process easier than unrelated texts. For this reason, this study expanded from the first researcher's earlier studies that investigated narrow reading/listening on L2 learners' vocabulary acquisition and perceptions (Chang & Renandya, 2019a, 2019b). In their study (2019a), Chang and Renandya organized four forms of graded texts by authorship, theme, title, and random texts. Each form contained only three graded readers: one level 1, one level 2, and one level 3.

Because the four sets of graded readers had been read by previous students, all texts were rated very interesting and some of them were home-run readers (defined as the first book that L2 students can read and enjoy without assistance). The results of the two studies showed that with the exception of reading the same-title graded readers (*The Railway Children*), no significant differences were found between learning vocabulary from the texts of the same author, same theme, or texts that were randomly selected. The study also showed that students recalled 50% of the target words' meanings, correctly used 41% of the target words, and identified 61% of the target words by correctly naming the book in which they had encountered the words. For this encouraging learning outcome, this study focused on the possibility of organizing more texts according to their authorship and related-themes in the most popular (or accessible) three publishers.

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Relevant Literature

Gillis-Furutaka (2015) investigated some overlooked factors that cause difficulties in reading graded readers. Through interviews and thinking aloud, she conducted a study with 83 Japanese students from junior high school, senior high school, and university students over a three-year period. In addition to language problems such as unknown words, embedded clauses, or verb tenses, some other factors were also reported by her student participants: illustrations, cultural differences, pronouns and their referents, idiomatic and figurative expressions, onomatopoeia, inferences and other literary devices, and unexpected changes in the flow of the narrative. It is undeniable that no single text suits every reader. According to a recent study by Birketveit, Rimmereide, Bader, and Fisher (2018) with 83 Norwegian primary students on extensive reading, the authors found that their students most like to read the texts recommended by their classmates rather than

by their teachers, and the major reason for not finishing a book was that the book was boring. Most publishers, however, have few chances to reach L2 students, so some of them rely on the ER teachers' or librarians' feedback. A recent study that Claridge (2012) conducted with publishers found the following:

It is notable that all four publishing houses, to a degree, respond to voices in the market that they perceive to be the most influential: the teachers and librarians who buy the books. Macmillan Guided Readers told me that they never survey the learners; Penguin Readers obtains their marketing data from agents and teachers; Oxford Bookworms and Cambridge Readers do survey the learners but not on a regular, let alone universal, basis (p. 116).

In addition, publishers also publish varying texts with different selections. Table 1, taken from Claridge (2012), clearly shows

Table 1: Editors' Choices

Publisher TEXT	CER	OBW	MER	Penguin Readers
A good story	✓	✓	✓	✓
Classics and adaptations	✗	✓	✓	✓
Originals	✓	✓	✓	✓
Film tie-ins	✗	✗	✓	✓
Culture pc or not?	✗	✗	✓	✓
Format and support notes and glosses	✗	✓	✓	✓
Online support	✓	✓	✓	✓
CD	✓	✓	✓	✓
Market teachers consulted	✓	✓	✓	✓
Learners consulted	Sometimes	Sometimes	✗	✗

that different publishers have their own characterizations. For example, Cambridge English Readers (CER) has no classics or adapted texts, no film tie-in texts, and no glosses. Macmillan and Penguin readers tend to involve everything except consulting learners' perceptions.

In addition to all the differences and concerns raised by researchers and teachers, one of the major concerns was the wide differences in the numbers of headwords used at each level among publishers. For example, a big gap in headwords was found between Oxford Bookworms (OBW) and Macmillan English Readers (MER). By the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), from A1 to C1 levels, OBW series ranges from 250 headwords to 2,500 headwords, but CER ranged from 250 to 3,800 headwords. The wide differences make it difficult for learners to choose what to read. The information in table 2 is from publishers' websites.

As from the above, it is evident that publishers publish varying texts on different topics written by different authors using different levels of language. These discrepancies might lead to inefficient learning. As Gardner (2008) noted:

all too often, people are simply told that young readers must read widely or extensively in class or at home in order to substantially grow their vocabularies, without careful consideration of the types of materials that they could possibly read, the types of words that such reading will expose them to, and the varying levels of essential lexical redundancy that come about as a result of choices regarding which text to read first, second, third, and so forth (p.111).

In this regard, Gardner (2008) suggested that more attention should be paid to what students read, not merely how much they read. Based on these studies above, the present study address the following four research questions:

Table 2. Wordlists Compared to the Common European Framework (CEF)

CEF	OBW	CER	MER
A1	250	250	300
A1	400	400	600
A2	400	-	1,100
A2	700	800	1,400
B1	700	-	-
B1	1,000	1,300	1,400
B1	1,400	-	1,600
B2	-	1,900	-
B2	1,800	2,800	2,200
B2	2,500	-	-
C1	2,500	3,800	-

1. Could EFL learners read graded readers according to the authorship? If yes, how many texts and what level of texts did each author write?
2. Could EFL learners read graded readers by the themes? If yes, did the authors write the texts on the same themes or did they write on various themes?
3. What were the proportions of each level that the three publishers published?
4. What were the genre proportions for each publisher?

Methodology

Selecting Titles from Different Publishers

A main reason for choosing graded readers rather than those materials written for native speakers of English is that graded texts are written specifically for L2 learners to enable them to start reading as early as possible. Up to the present, the satisfactory series of graded readers are written under careful and rigorous language controls to suit standard syllabi; however, different series published by different publishers do not reflect equal levels, which can be roughly seen from www.erfoundation.org. According to the latest survey on graded readers by Hill (2013), there are more than 2,000 titles, the majority of which are fiction. Considering their availability and popularity, the researchers first focused on five publishers: Cambridge English Readers, Macmillan English Readers, Oxford Bookworms, Penguin, and Compass Classic Readers. Originally, the researchers also attempted to include Pearson Penguin Readers (PPR); however, it is not easy to obtain Penguin graded readers because there is no authorized retailer and thus limits probability of

analyzing PPR. In addition to PPR series, the study did not include Compass Classic Readers (CCR) because nearly all their titles were rewritten from classic novels. The researchers therefore selected three publishers and each of them is described below:

Cambridge English Readers (CER): All the stories in this series are original. There are seven levels containing a total of 91 titles, edited by Philip Prowse. This series was designed for adult and young adult readers. The total word count is 1,327,714.

Macmillan English Readers (MER): MER series has 178 titles classified into six levels, ranging from beginner to upper-intermediate. The whole series contains approximately 2,429,289 words.

Oxford Bookworms (OBW): This series has 223 titles, edited by Jennifer Bassett. The OBW series was considered the best for consistency of grading across each level (Hill, 2013). Although OBW has more titles than CER and MER, the total word count is about 680,219, which suggests that they have more lower-level titles.

The Analysis of Selected Graded Readers

All the graded readers published by the three publishers were selected, and most of them were read by the researchers and one student assistant. For many stories that were retold or rewritten, the rewriters' names were used (e.g., Clare West) rather than the original writers' names. Word counts, text levels, and genres for each title and each publisher were provided. To answer the first research question, the writers who wrote or rewrote five or more texts were selected. To answer the second research question, the genres of the writers who wrote more

than five texts were examined. The third research question regarded the proportions of the levels of graded readers from each publisher. Because separate publishers published varying numbers of graded readers, percentages were calculated. The fourth research question regards the genres that each publisher published.

Results

Research Question 1. To what extent could EFL learners read a series of graded readers written by the same writer?

In answer to the first research question, the researchers selected authors who wrote five or more graded readers and found the following:

Seven authors in the Cambridge English Readers wrote five or more series works.

Richard MacAndrew wrote a total of 14 readers ranging from level 0 to level 4, and Margaret Johnson wrote eight books, one for each level except level 5. Sue Leather wrote 10, among which six in the lower levels and four are at the higher levels; Philip Prowse wrote five for CER, and seven for MER, most of which are in the lower levels from 0-3. Alan Battersby wrote five, one for each level from levels 2-6. Antoinette Moses wrote eight, six of which are at levels 0-2, and two are at the higher levels. Frank Brenan wrote five short stories for levels 1-5 (See Table 3)

Eleven authors in the Oxford Bookworms series wrote five or more graded readers. The authors of Oxford Bookworms were different from those in the CER. Many of the OBW series writers who wrote five or more titles are those who rewrote classics. For example, Clare West rewrote 28 titles.

Table 3: Authors Writing Five or More Graded Readers

	Author	Genre	Word count	Levels						Total	Publishers	
				0	1	2	3	4	5			6
1	Richard MacAndrew	Mystery & thriller	141,896	3	2	3	4	2		14	CER	
2	Margaret Johnson	Romance	126,645	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	8	CER
3	Sue Leather	Mixed	112,750	1	4	1		2	1	1	10	CER OBW (1)
4	Philip Prowse	Mixed	103,885	2	3	2	2		2	1	12	CER(5) MER (7)
5	Alan Battersby	Thriller	91,687			1	1	1	1	1	5	CER
6	Antoinette Moses	Mixed	79,582	3	1	2			1	1	8	CER

7	Frank Brennan	Short stories	73,170	1	1	1	1	1	5	CER	
8	Clare West	RW	589,328	1	2	5	6	8	6	28	OBW
9	John Escott	Mixed & RW	250,428	5	6	7	2	7	2	29	OBW MER (2)
10	Jennifer Bassett	Mixed & RW	209,549	11	7	6		1		25	OBW
11	Diane Mowat	Thriller & RW	170,330	1	7	3	2	1	1	15	OBW
12	Tim Vicary	Mixed	155,038	1	9	3	8			21	OBW
13	Rowena Akinyemi	Mixed	143,125	4	2	2	2	1		11	OBW
14	Rosemary Border	Mixed & RW	94,835	2	2	1	2	1	2	10	OBW
15	Christine Lindop	HI NF	74,767	3	3	1	1			8	OBW
16	Janet Hardy-Gould	True stories	26,405	1	2	3				6	OBW
17	Nick Bullard	RW	50,600	1	1	2	1			5	OBW
18	Phillip Burrows and Mark Foster	Crime & thriller	9,688	7						7	OBW
19	John Milne	Mixed & HI	26,222	2	2	1		1		6	MER

Note: CER: Cambridge English Readers, OBW: Oxford Bookworms; MER: Macmillan English Readers; HI: Human Interest; RW: Rewrite; NF: Non-fiction

Some 13/15 of Diane Mowat’s works are rewrites. John Escott wrote 29 titles and 13 of the them are rewrites (see Table 3)

Only two writers in the Macmillan English Readers wrote five or more readers (see Table 3).

Research Question 2. To what extent could EFL learners read graded readers by the themes?

To answer the second research question, four out of the seven writers in the CER wrote the same theme texts. Richard MacAndrew wrote 14 graded readers on mystery and thriller, with a total word count of 141,896; Margaret Johnson wrote eight texts on romance (126,645 words). Alan Battersby wrote five texts on thrillers (91,687 words); Frank Brennan wrote five short stories on various topics (73,170 words). In the Bookworms series, two writers, Clare West and Nick Bullard, focus on rewrites of classics. Clare West rewrote 28 texts (589,328 words) and Nick Bullard, five texts (50,600 words). Janet Hardy-Gould wrote six texts on true stories (26,405 words). Interestingly, Philip Burrows and Mark Foster wrote seven starter readers (9,688 words), and all of them are of the same genre (crime and thriller). All other writers wrote mixed genres.

Research Question 3. What were the proportions of each level in each of the three publishers published?

The third research question explored the proportions of the graded levels in each of the publishers. Table 4 presents the quantity (in raw data and percentage) of the information. In general, CER evenly spread the quantity of each level from starter (level 0) to level 6. Each level has 11 to 15 texts (12% to 16%). MER and OBW seemed to be inversely distributed (See Figure 1). Some 54% of the graded readers in MER are at Level 4 to Level 6; however, 54% of OBW are in Level 0 to Level 2. Approximately 18% in both MER and OBW are at Level 3 (see Figure 2).

Research Question 4. What were the genre proportions for the three publishers?

The fourth question investigated the genres that each publisher published. Due to the fact that each publisher classified the texts differently to some degree, the results presented in Table 5, and shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5, may not truly reflect an accurate classification. For example, a text in OBW may be classified as human interest, but in Macmillan it may be considered thriller/crime/human interest. The global picture

Table 4: The proportions of graded readers at each level for the three publishers

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	total
CER	11 (12%)	12 (13%)	15 (16%)	15 (16%)	14 (15%)	13 (14%)	12 (13%)	92 (100%)
MER	0 (0%)	15 (8%)	35 (19%)	34 (19%)	25 (14%)	54 (30%)	19 (10%)	182 (100%)
OBW	28 (12%)	50 (21%)	50 (21%)	43 (18%)	30 (13%)	19 (8%)	15 (6%)	235 (100%)

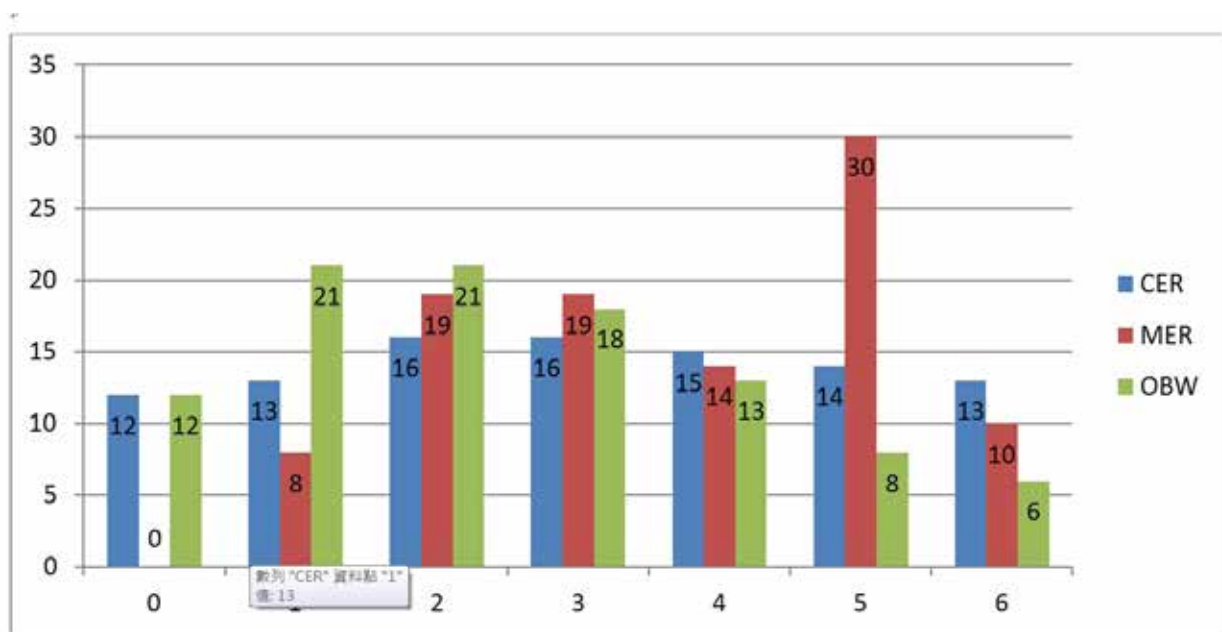


Figure 1: The proportions of graded readers at each level for the three publishers

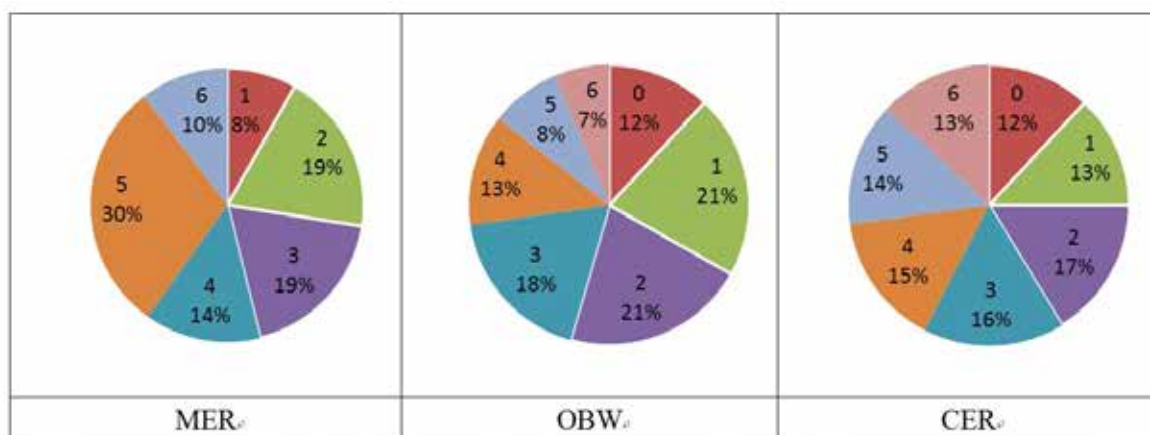


Figure 2: Proportion of levels of graded readers in MER (Macmillan English Readers), OBW (Oxford Bookworms) and CER (Cambridge English Readers)

on the genres that the three publishers have are thriller, crime, mystery, human interest, and romance; however, CER contains higher proportions of texts on thriller and crime, in particular for those levels above Level 3, and all are modern original stories. MER has a large proportion of rewrites of classics, in particular those at the higher

levels; 50% of the texts in OBW, however, are related to human interest, classics, and non-fiction.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the study can be summarized as below:

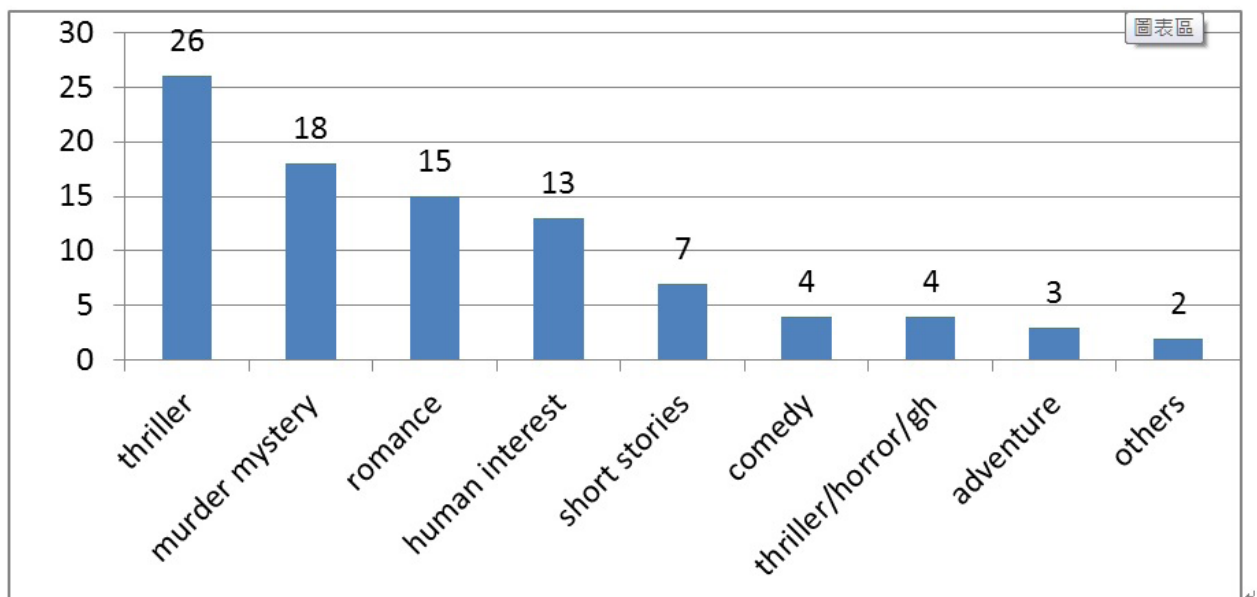


Figure 3: Genres of Cambridge English Readers

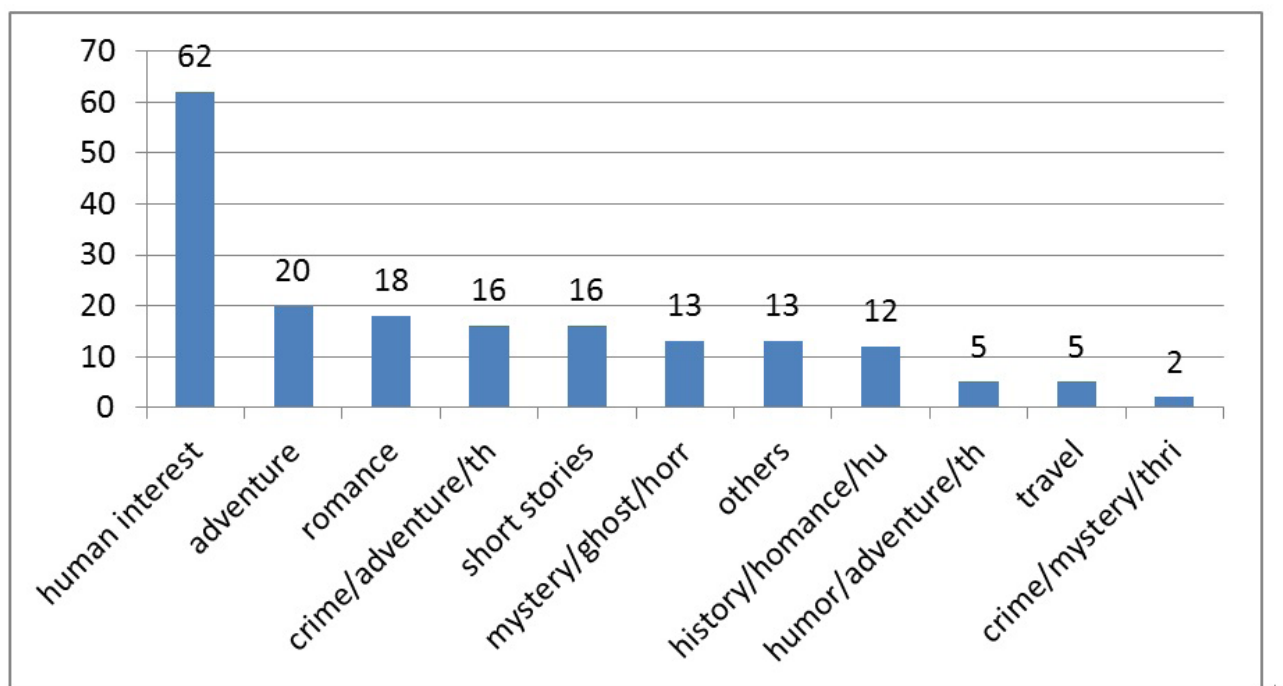


Figure 4: Genres of Macmillan English Readers

Table 5: Genres of graded readers in the three publishers

Publisher	Genre	quantity	percentage
CER	thriller	26	28.3
	murder mystery	18	19.6
	romance	15	16.3
	human interest	13	14.1
	short stories	7	7.6
	comedy	4	4.3
	thriller/horror/ghost	4	4.3
	adventure	3	3.3
	others	2	2.2
	Total	92	100
MER	human interest	62	34.1
	adventure	20	11
	romance	18	9.9
	crime/adventure/thriller	16	8.8
	short stories	16	8.8
	mystery/ghost/horror	13	7.1
	others	13	7.1
	history	12	6.6
	humor	5	2.7
	travel	5	2.7
	crime/mystery	2	0.5
	Total	182	100
	OBW	human interest	39
classics		38	16.2
non-fiction		36	15.3
fantasy and horror		30	12.8
thriller and adventure		29	12.3
crime and mystery		27	11.5
true stories		19	8.1
plays/scripts		10	4.3
world stories		7	3
Total		235	100

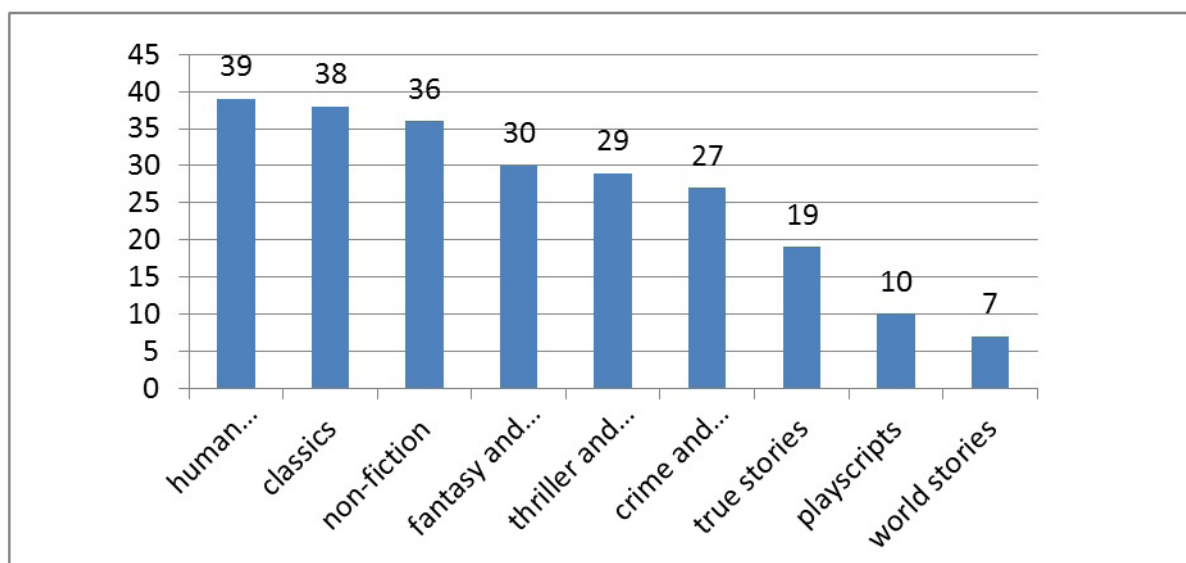


Figure 5: Genres of Oxford Bookworms

Across the three publishers, there are a total of 20 writers who wrote or rewrote five or more texts, among which seven were in Cambridge, 11 in Oxford, and two in Macmillan.

The majority of the writers wrote mixed genres. Only 4/7 of the writers in Cambridge wrote texts on the same genres, 2/11 in Oxford focus on rewrites.

Among the three publishers, the quantity of each level in CER distributes evenly from level 0 to level 6. MER has more texts at the higher levels whereas the OBW has more texts at the lower levels.

The most popular genres across the three publishers are thriller, crime, mystery, human interest, and romance. CER has more genres on crime/thriller/mystery whereas OBW and Macmillan have more texts on human interest and classic rewrites.

From the summary above, the study found that it can be quite limiting to do narrow reading using graded readers because not

many writers wrote a sufficient number of texts of the same genre. One such writer is Richard MacAndrew, who focused on the same genre and wrote three texts at level starter, two at level 1, three at level 2, four at level 3, and two at level 4. Because the texts are of the same genre, it might be sufficient for students to read only two or three books at each level and then move up to progressively higher levels. Another writer, Margaret Johnson, also wrote eight texts on romance, but unlike Richard MacAndrew, Margaret Johnson wrote only one text for each level. According to Chang and Millett (2017), their students seemed to move smoothly from one level to next, based on the same-theme texts and same-title texts. Chang and Renandya (2019a) also compared the four forms of text organization and found that texts written by the same author contained the fewest word types and students could acquire a substantial amount of vocabulary knowledge. Despite these findings, research into this area has been limited, and more research is needed to provide more empirical evidence.

Although there are only a limited number of texts that are suitable for doing narrow reading, another way of narrow reading is to read many same-level texts written by the same writer before moving up to the next higher level. In this case, L2 learners then have more selections. For example, John Escott wrote five books at starter level, six at level 1, and seven at level 2. Tim Vicary wrote a total of 12 graded readers for levels 1 and 2, and eight for level 3. The graded readers written by Tim Vicary and John Escott might be more suitable for beginning learners as per Webb & Chang (2015), who found that when lower-level students read 10 same-level, mixed texts by different writers, their gains seemed insufficient for them to move to a higher level.

On the whole, the study found that if the students' language level is lower, it is more suitable to begin the reading with the OBW series. If the students' language level is higher, and they want to read slightly longer texts, the Macmillan English Readers series may satisfy their learning desire. For the students who are interested in thrillers and crime stories, CER series is a good choice.

Before concluding the paper, one major limitation that should be noticed is that this study looked only at three publishers that have been more easily accessible in Taiwan. There are many more publishers of graded readers (see Hill, 2013 for a survey review of graded readers). For example, Cengage Learning has published a whole series of Foundations Reading Library books, which are suitable for beginner learners. Compass Publishing has published six levels of classical rewrites, which provides L2 learners with early contact with classical novels. Before implementing an ER program, it is worthwhile for L2 practitioners to do a thorough search to understand what texts are more accessible for students, and what

genres and authors are more popular with their students. Finally, the study can be concluded with what Krashen (1985) stated:

If the Input Hypothesis is correct, it suggests that narrow input is more efficient for L2 acquisition, that early specialization rather than late specialization is better, that students should be encouraged to read on only one topic at a time, or several books by the same author, in the intermediate stage, and that [L2] students stay on somewhat familiar ground when they first enter the mainstream (p. 73).

Acknowledgements

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