

Comparative Analysis of Readability and Reading Task Design in Grade 8 English Textbooks Used in Mongolia and China

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600150>

Received: 25 May 2026; Accepted: 30 May 2026; Published: 19 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the readability and reading task characteristics of Grade 8 English language textbooks used in Mongolia and China. The study aims to compare textual readability, examine the cognitive and pedagogical characteristics of reading tasks, and identify the relationship between readability and task difficulty. A mixed-method comparative research design integrating quantitative readability analysis and qualitative pedagogical interpretation was employed. Seventeen reading passages selected from the Mongolian Wider World 2e Mongolia 3 textbook and the Chinese Grade 8 English textbook were analyzed using four readability formulas: Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level, Gunning Fog Index, and SMOG Index. Reading tasks were additionally categorized according to task difficulty, task type, and reading stage. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between textual complexity and task difficulty.

The findings revealed that both textbooks generally aligned with CEFR-oriented learner expectations; however, important differences emerged regarding linguistic complexity, pedagogical orientation, and cognitive demand. The Mongolian textbook demonstrated relatively greater linguistic complexity and stronger emphasis on communicative interaction and post-reading production, whereas the Chinese textbook prioritized readability accessibility, guided comprehension, and structured cognitive support. Task analysis further indicated that the Mongolian textbook incorporated comparatively more inferential and communicative activities, while the Chinese textbook emphasized medium-level comprehension processing and while-reading support. Correlation analysis demonstrated moderate relationships between readability indicators and task difficulty, suggesting that textbook designers organize pedagogical tasks in relation to linguistic complexity.

The study contributes to EFL textbook evaluation research by integrating readability analysis with cognitive and pedagogical task analysis. The findings highlight the importance of examining readability not as an isolated textual property but as part of a broader pedagogical system involving communicative support, cognitive scaffolding, and learner engagement.

Keywords: readability, EFL textbooks, reading tasks, cognitive demand, textbook evaluation

INTRODUCTION

English language textbooks play a central role in EFL classrooms, particularly in educational contexts where textbooks function as the primary source of language input, classroom interaction, and pedagogical organization. Beyond presenting vocabulary and grammar, textbooks shape learners' exposure to communicative practices, cognitive engagement, and reading comprehension development. Consequently, the readability and pedagogical organization of textbook materials strongly influence learners' language acquisition and classroom performance.

Readability has therefore become an important issue in language education research. Traditionally, readability refers to the degree to which a text can be read and understood by a target group of readers. Early readability studies focused primarily on linguistic variables such as sentence length, word frequency, and syllable count. However, contemporary perspectives increasingly view readability as a multidimensional construct influenced

not only by linguistic complexity but also by discourse organization, background knowledge, cognitive processing, and pedagogical support.

In EFL contexts, readability is especially significant because learners process unfamiliar vocabulary, grammatical structures, and contextual information simultaneously. Texts that exceed learners' proficiency levels may increase cognitive burden and reduce comprehension, while excessively simplified texts may fail to provide sufficient linguistic challenge for language development. Consequently, effective textbook design requires careful balance between accessibility and communicative progression.

At the same time, modern language teaching approaches increasingly emphasize communicative competence and integrated language use rather than isolated grammar instruction. Within Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), reading is not viewed merely as information decoding but as an interactive process involving interpretation, inference, evaluation, and communication. Therefore, reading tasks accompanying textbook passages become equally important in supporting learners' comprehension and cognitive engagement.

Reading activities may function as scaffolding mechanisms that guide learners through different stages of comprehension. Some tasks focus on direct information retrieval, whereas others require inferential thinking, interpretation, and personal response. Consequently, textual readability and task organization should not be treated as independent components of textbook design. Rather, they operate together in shaping learners' reading experiences and communicative development.

In both Mongolia and China, English language education has undergone substantial reform influenced by globalization and international educational standards. Both systems increasingly emphasize communicative competence and CEFR-oriented learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the two educational contexts demonstrate different curriculum philosophies and pedagogical traditions.

The Mongolian Pearson English-based curriculum emphasizes communicative competence, integrated skills, and competency-based learning aligned with the CEFR and Global Scale of English (GSE). In contrast, the Chinese curriculum demonstrates stronger emphasis on structured comprehension development, cognitive progression, and guided information processing. These differences make comparative textbook analysis particularly important for understanding how readability and pedagogical support are organized across educational contexts.

Although previous studies have investigated textbook readability and textbook evaluation separately, relatively few studies have examined the relationship between readability and reading task organization simultaneously. Furthermore, comparative studies involving Mongolian and Chinese EFL textbooks remain extremely limited within international scholarship.

Therefore, the present study aims to compare the readability and reading task characteristics of Grade 8 English textbooks used in Mongolia and China. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the readability characteristics of the selected Grade 8 English textbooks?
2. How are reading tasks organized according to cognitive difficulty and reading stages?
3. What pedagogical differences emerge between the two textbook systems?
4. Is there a relationship between textual readability and task difficulty?

The study contributes to EFL textbook evaluation research by integrating readability analysis with pedagogical task analysis within a comparative framework. In doing so, it argues that effective textbook evaluation requires examination not only of linguistic complexity but also of how textbook tasks scaffold learners' comprehension, cognition, and communicative engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Readability has long been recognized as one of the central factors influencing reading comprehension and language learning. Traditionally, readability refers to the degree to which a text can be read and understood by a target group of readers. Early readability studies focused primarily on objective linguistic variables such as sentence length, vocabulary difficulty, and syllable count. Consequently, several readability formulas were developed to estimate textual difficulty systematically.

Among the most widely used readability measures are the Flesch Reading Ease Formula, Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level, Gunning Fog Index, and SMOG Index. These formulas evaluate textual difficulty through structural linguistic indicators such as sentence complexity and multisyllabic vocabulary. Despite their widespread use, scholars have increasingly argued that readability cannot be explained solely through mechanical linguistic measurements because comprehension is also influenced by cognitive, contextual, and pedagogical factors.

Contemporary readability research therefore emphasizes the interaction between text characteristics and reader processing. Schema Theory explains that readers interpret texts through prior knowledge structures, while Rumelhart's Interactive Model proposes that reading comprehension emerges through interaction between bottom-up decoding and top-down meaning construction. Similarly, Cognitive Load Theory suggests that excessive linguistic complexity may overload learners' working memory, particularly in EFL contexts where learners process unfamiliar language forms simultaneously.

In language education, readability is closely connected to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and integrated-skills instruction. Within CLT, reading is viewed not merely as literal comprehension but as a communicative process involving interpretation, inference, and interaction. Consequently, textbook reading tasks play a critical role in shaping learners' cognitive engagement and communicative development. Bloom's Taxonomy further provides an important framework for evaluating task difficulty. Lower-level tasks generally involve identifying and understanding information, whereas higher-level tasks require analysis, evaluation, and creative response. Previous studies have shown that many EFL textbooks continue to rely heavily on literal comprehension activities despite growing emphasis on critical thinking and communicative competence.

International studies on textbook readability have demonstrated that many EFL textbooks do not fully align with learners' proficiency levels. Studies conducted in countries such as Ghana, Iran, and China report that excessive linguistic complexity may hinder comprehension and increase cognitive burden. At the same time, recent research increasingly emphasizes the importance of examining readability together with pedagogical support and task organization.

In China, readability studies have frequently focused on vocabulary density, sentence complexity, and discourse organization in secondary school English textbooks. These studies often highlight the importance of controlled progression and comprehension support within textbook design. In contrast, readability research in Mongolia remains relatively limited and has primarily focused on curriculum reform and communicative teaching implementation rather than detailed readability analysis.

Therefore, although previous studies have examined textbook readability and reading tasks separately, relatively few studies have investigated the relationship between textual difficulty and pedagogical task organization simultaneously. Furthermore, comparative studies involving Mongolian and Chinese EFL textbooks remain extremely limited. The present study addresses this gap by integrating readability analysis with cognitive and pedagogical task analysis within a comparative framework.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method comparative research design integrating quantitative readability analysis with qualitative pedagogical interpretation. The research investigated how linguistic complexity and pedagogical task organization interact within Grade 8 English textbooks used in Mongolia and China.

The Mongolian textbook analyzed in the study was Wider World 2e Mongolia 3, developed within the Pearson English curriculum framework and aligned with the CEFR and Global Scale of English (GSE). The Chinese

textbook was the officially approved Grade 8 English textbook developed under the 2022 Chinese English Curriculum Standards.

A total of seventeen reading passages were selected for analysis, including nine passages from the Mongolian textbook and eight passages from the Chinese textbook. The selection of seventeen reading passages was based on the overall structure of the two textbooks. The Mongolian textbook contained nine instructional units, while the Chinese textbook contained eight units. To ensure comprehensive representation and comparability, the principal reading passage from each unit was included in the analysis. Consequently, the study examined all major reading texts available in the selected textbooks rather than relying on a limited sample of passages. This approach enabled a systematic comparison of readability and task design across the full instructional scope of both textbooks. The texts were selected according to curriculum relevance, CEFR alignment, thematic representation, and inclusion of accompanying reading activities.

To evaluate textual readability, four internationally recognized readability formulas were employed: Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level, Gunning Fog Index, and SMOG Index. In addition, structural linguistic indicators such as average sentence length and syllables per word were analyzed.

The pedagogical characteristics of the reading tasks were examined according to task difficulty, task type, and reading stage. Task difficulty levels were categorized as low, medium, and high. Task types were classified as direct comprehension, deeper comprehension, and inferential or evaluative tasks. The activities were additionally analyzed according to pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages.

The selected texts were first prepared for readability analysis, after which readability scores were calculated individually. The accompanying tasks were subsequently coded according to the analytical framework. Finally, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were conducted to identify relationships between readability indicators and task difficulty. Task difficulty categories were numerically coded as low = 1, medium = 2, and high = 3.

To strengthen reliability, multiple readability formulas were used rather than relying on a single measurement tool. The broader questionnaire instrument additionally demonstrated acceptable internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.84.

RESULTS

1. Comparative Readability Analysis

To examine the linguistic accessibility of the selected reading passages, readability analysis was conducted using four readability formulas together with several structural linguistic indicators.

Table 1 Comparative Readability Indices of the Mongolian and Chinese Textbooks

Readability Measure	Mongolia	China
Flesch Reading Ease	77.7	80.3
Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level	5.4	5.1
Gunning Fog Index	8.0	7.3
SMOG Index	6.0	5.4
Average Words per Sentence	12.0	11.3
Average Syllables per Word	1.38	1.36

As shown in Table 1, both textbooks demonstrated relatively accessible readability levels suitable for Grade 8

EFL learners. However, important differences emerged regarding linguistic complexity and pedagogical orientation.

The Chinese textbook demonstrated slightly greater readability accessibility, reflected in its higher Flesch Reading Ease score (80.3) and lower grade-level difficulty. These findings suggest that the Chinese textbook prioritizes comprehension support through controlled sentence structures and relatively simplified linguistic input.

In contrast, the Mongolian textbook demonstrated slightly higher linguistic complexity across multiple indicators. The higher Gunning Fog Index and SMOG Index scores indicate relatively denser sentence structures and vocabulary usage. Furthermore, the Mongolian textbook contained slightly longer sentence structures overall, suggesting stronger emphasis on communicative progression and richer language exposure.

Despite these differences, both textbooks remained broadly aligned with CEFR A2-B1 learner expectations. However, the Mongolian textbook appeared more closely connected to transitional A2+–B1 development, whereas the Chinese textbook remained more strongly centered within the A2 range.

Overall, the readability findings suggest that the two textbook systems adopt different strategies for balancing learner accessibility and linguistic challenge. The Mongolian textbook appears to encourage gradual communicative expansion through moderately more complex input, while the Chinese textbook prioritizes readability accessibility and cognitive support.

2. Comparative Analysis of Reading Task Difficulty

To investigate the cognitive demands of the reading activities, the accompanying tasks were categorized into low-, medium-, and high-level difficulty groups.

Table 2 Distribution of Reading Task Difficulty Levels

Difficulty Level	Mongolia	China
Low	40%	35%
Medium	33%	45%
High	27%	20%

As presented in Table 2, the Mongolian textbook contained a larger proportion of low-level comprehension tasks, while the Chinese textbook demonstrated a stronger concentration of medium-level tasks.

The dominance of low-level tasks in the Mongolian textbook suggests strong emphasis on foundational comprehension support, particularly during initial stages of reading. Many activities focused on identifying explicit information and confirming basic understanding before learners moved toward more communicative and inferential tasks.

At the same time, the Mongolian textbook also demonstrated a comparatively higher proportion of high-level tasks. These activities frequently required learners to interpret meaning, express opinions, and engage in communicative interaction. This pattern indicates that the textbook attempts to combine comprehension scaffolding with opportunities for higher-order thinking and language production.

In contrast, the Chinese textbook demonstrated stronger concentration around medium-level tasks. This suggests greater emphasis on guided meaning construction and comprehension processing rather than highly open-ended communicative production. The findings indicate that the Chinese textbook prioritizes structured cognitive progression and controlled learner processing.

Overall, the task difficulty analysis demonstrates that the Mongolian textbook adopts a comparatively communicative progression model, whereas the Chinese textbook demonstrates stronger orientation toward guided comprehension development and cognitive scaffolding.

3. Comparative Analysis of Reading Task Types

The reading tasks were further categorized according to pedagogical function as direct comprehension, deeper comprehension, and inferential or evaluative activities.

Table 3 Distribution of Reading Task Types

Task Type	Mongolia	China
Direct Comprehension	40%	35%
Deeper Comprehension	33%	45%
Inferential/Evaluative	27%	20%

As shown in Table 3, direct comprehension tasks represented the largest proportion of activities in the Mongolian textbook. These tasks primarily focused on identifying explicit textual information and supporting learners' literal understanding.

However, the Mongolian textbook also demonstrated a relatively high proportion of inferential and evaluative tasks. These activities often required learners to interpret meaning, express opinions, and connect ideas beyond surface-level comprehension. Consequently, the textbook appears to extend reading instruction toward communicative interaction and higher-order thinking.

In contrast, the Chinese textbook demonstrated stronger emphasis on deeper comprehension tasks, which accounted for the largest proportion of activities. These tasks focused on meaning construction, relationship identification, and guided information processing during reading.

The findings therefore suggest two distinct pedagogical orientations. The Mongolian textbook appears to combine comprehension support with communicative expansion, whereas the Chinese textbook emphasizes structured comprehension development and guided cognitive processing.

4. Comparative Analysis of Reading Stages

The reading activities were additionally analyzed according to pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages.

Table 4 Distribution of Reading Activities by Reading Stage

Reading Stage	Mongolia	China
Pre-reading	20%	20%
While-reading	53%	55%
Post-reading	27%	25%

As illustrated in Table 4, both textbooks demonstrated strong emphasis on while-reading activities. This finding indicates that both educational systems prioritize active comprehension support during the reading process itself.

The Mongolian textbook demonstrated slightly greater emphasis on post-reading activities, particularly those involving discussion, interpretation, and communicative response. These activities often encouraged learners to express opinions, relate ideas to personal experience, and extend comprehension into productive language use.

In contrast, the Chinese textbook's post-reading tasks remained more strongly connected to comprehension consolidation and guided information processing. The activities generally focused on summarizing, organizing, and confirming understanding rather than highly open-ended communicative production.

Overall, the findings suggest that the Mongolian textbook extends reading instruction more strongly toward communicative output, whereas the Chinese textbook prioritizes structured comprehension support during reading itself.

5. Relationship Between Readability and Task Difficulty

To investigate the relationship between textual complexity and pedagogical task organization, correlation analysis was conducted using readability indicators and coded task difficulty levels.

Table 5 Correlation Between Readability Indicators and Task Difficulty

Variables	Flesch Reading Ease	Grade Level	Task Difficulty
Flesch Reading Ease	1	-0.84	-0.42
Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level	-0.84	1	0.48
Task Difficulty Level	-0.42	0.48	1

As shown in Table 5, a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.84$) was identified between the Flesch Reading Ease score and the Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level. This result confirms that easier texts generally corresponded to lower grade-level difficulty.

More importantly, moderate relationships were identified between readability and task difficulty. The negative correlation between readability accessibility and task difficulty ($r = -0.42$) suggests that linguistically more difficult texts were often accompanied by cognitively more demanding tasks. Similarly, the positive correlation between grade-level difficulty and task difficulty ($r = 0.48$) indicates that increases in textual complexity were associated with increases in pedagogical challenge.

These findings suggest that textbook designers organize reading tasks in relation to textual complexity rather than treating readability and pedagogy independently. At the same time, the moderate strength of the correlations indicates that pedagogical scaffolding may partially compensate for linguistic difficulty. Some relatively difficult texts were accompanied by supportive comprehension-oriented tasks, while some accessible texts included cognitively demanding interpretive activities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that readability and task organization function as interconnected pedagogical dimensions within EFL textbook design rather than as isolated instructional components.

DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the present study demonstrate that readability and pedagogical task organization function as closely interconnected dimensions within EFL textbook design. Although both the Mongolian and Chinese textbooks generally aligned with CEFR-oriented learner expectations, the two textbook systems reflected substantially different pedagogical priorities regarding linguistic complexity, cognitive demand, and communicative development.

One of the most significant findings concerns the balance between readability accessibility and linguistic challenge. The Chinese textbook demonstrated slightly greater readability accessibility and stronger emphasis on controlled comprehension support, whereas the Mongolian textbook maintained relatively higher linguistic complexity and denser sentence structures. These differences appear to reflect broader curriculum philosophies within the two educational contexts.

The Mongolian Pearson English-based curriculum emphasizes communicative competence, integrated skills, and progressive language development aligned with CEFR A2+–B1 expectations. Consequently, the textbook appears designed not only to facilitate comprehension but also to expose learners to richer communicative input and gradually increasing linguistic challenge. In contrast, the Chinese textbook demonstrates stronger orientation toward structured comprehension development, guided information processing, and cognitive scaffolding. The relatively high concentration of medium-level tasks and while-reading support activities reflects this pedagogical tendency.

The findings further indicate that reading tasks play a critical role in mediating textual difficulty. The Mongolian textbook combined relatively more complex linguistic input with comparatively stronger post-reading communicative and inferential activities. These activities frequently required learners to express opinions, interpret meaning, and extend comprehension into productive language use. Such patterns demonstrate closer alignment with Communicative Language Teaching principles and integrated-skills pedagogy.

The Chinese textbook, while pedagogically systematic and cognitively structured, demonstrated comparatively greater emphasis on guided comprehension during reading itself. Learners were frequently supported through activities focusing on meaning construction, relationship identification, and controlled processing of textual information. This suggests that comprehension support in the Chinese textbook is more strongly embedded within the reading process rather than extended toward communicative expansion after reading.

The correlation analysis represents one of the most important contributions of the study. The moderate relationships identified between readability indicators and task difficulty suggest that textbook designers intentionally organize pedagogical tasks in relation to textual complexity. This finding supports the argument that readability should not be treated as an isolated textual phenomenon. Instead, textual complexity, cognitive demand, and pedagogical scaffolding appear to function together as integrated instructional mechanisms.

At the same time, the findings also demonstrate that linguistic difficulty alone does not fully determine cognitive demand. Some relatively accessible texts included inferential and evaluative activities requiring deeper processing, while certain linguistically challenging passages were accompanied by supportive comprehension-oriented tasks. This suggests that pedagogical scaffolding may compensate for textual complexity and help learners manage increased cognitive load during reading comprehension.

Another important finding concerns the relatively limited proportion of higher-order evaluative and creative tasks in both textbook systems. Although both textbooks incorporated inferential activities to some extent, lower- and medium-level comprehension tasks remained dominant overall. This pattern reflects broader tendencies frequently observed in EFL textbooks, where reading instruction often prioritizes comprehension accuracy over critical thinking and independent communicative production.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest several implications for textbook development and curriculum design. First, effective EFL textbooks should maintain balanced relationships among readability accessibility, cognitive challenge, and communicative engagement. Excessively simplified texts may reduce opportunities for linguistic growth, whereas overly difficult materials may increase cognitive burden and reduce learner motivation.

Second, textbook developers should incorporate more systematic progression toward higher-order thinking activities. Greater inclusion of evaluative discussion, interpretation, collaborative tasks, and communicative response activities may support learners' critical thinking and communicative competence more effectively.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of integrating reading comprehension with productive language use. The Mongolian textbook demonstrated comparatively stronger integration between reading and communicative production through post-reading interaction and discussion activities. Such integration more closely reflects authentic language use and may therefore contribute more effectively to communicative competence development.

Overall, the study demonstrates that successful EFL textbook design requires dynamic interaction between readability, pedagogy, cognition, and communication. Consequently, textbook evaluation should move beyond purely linguistic readability measurement and instead adopt multidimensional approaches integrating textual complexity with pedagogical and cognitive analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the readability and reading task characteristics of Grade 8 English language textbooks used in Mongolia and China by integrating readability analysis with pedagogical task evaluation. The findings demonstrate that, although both textbooks generally align with CEFR-oriented learner expectations, they reflect different pedagogical approaches to balancing linguistic complexity, cognitive demand, and communicative development.

The readability analysis revealed that the Mongolian textbook presents relatively greater linguistic complexity and stronger emphasis on communicative interaction and post-reading language production, whereas the Chinese textbook prioritizes readability accessibility, guided comprehension, and structured cognitive support. Similarly, the task analysis showed that the Mongolian textbook incorporates a higher proportion of inferential and communicative activities, while the Chinese textbook places greater emphasis on medium-level comprehension processing and while-reading scaffolding. These findings suggest that the two educational systems employ different strategies for supporting learners' reading development and communicative competence.

A particularly important contribution of the study is the identification of a moderate relationship between textual readability and task difficulty. The correlation results indicate that linguistic complexity and pedagogical task design are not independent dimensions of textbook construction. Rather, textbook designers appear to align task demands with text difficulty, thereby creating instructional scaffolding that supports learner comprehension and engagement. This finding reinforces the argument that readability should be viewed not merely as a textual characteristic but as part of a broader pedagogical framework involving cognitive support, task sequencing, and communicative learning opportunities.

The study contributes to the field of EFL textbook evaluation by proposing an integrated analytical framework that combines readability measurement with cognitive and pedagogical task analysis. In addition to providing comparative insights into English language education in Mongolia and China, the findings offer practical implications for textbook writers, curriculum developers, and classroom teachers seeking to balance accessibility, cognitive challenge, and communicative development within reading instruction.

Although the study analyzed seventeen reading passages, these texts represented all major reading passages included in the selected Grade 8 textbooks, encompassing nine instructional units from the Mongolian textbook and eight units from the Chinese textbook. Nevertheless, future research may expand the scope of analysis by incorporating supplementary materials, workbook activities, additional grade levels, classroom observations, teacher perspectives, and learner-response data. Future studies may also employ discourse analysis, corpus-based approaches, and computational tools such as Coh-Metrix to examine dimensions of readability beyond traditional formula-based measures.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that effective EFL reading instruction depends not only on the linguistic accessibility of texts but also on the pedagogical support provided through task design. Textbooks are most effective when readability, cognitive engagement, and communicative interaction are systematically integrated to support meaningful language learning.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with general ethical principles governing educational research. The analyzed textbook materials were used exclusively for academic purposes, and all sources were appropriately acknowledged.

Participation in the questionnaire component of the broader study was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research prior to data collection. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed.

The study additionally attempted to maintain analytical neutrality throughout the comparative evaluation process. The purpose of the research was not to determine superiority between the two educational systems but rather to examine differences in readability, pedagogy, and cognitive organization within the selected EFL textbooks.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding researcher upon reasonable academic request. The dataset includes readability analysis results, task classification data, and comparative statistical findings used in the study.

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