An Exploration of How Interest Contributes to the Readability of Writing Center Self-access Materials

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Abstract

The idea that genre-specific reading benefits apprenticing writers is a concept that the field of teaching writing values as an underlying constant. Following this, writing center directors select rhetorics (anthologies of writing exemplars) for their self-access library shelves from the over 200 rhetorics presently in print. To choose these texts, quantitative readability formulae (e.g., the Lexile Readability Formula) are often employed. However, such formulae only measure two (i.e., semantic, syntactic) of the many features that impact readability. Other important features that require qualitative exploration are not considered (e.g., interest). To address this, this article reports the findings of a sequential, mixed-methods study conducted in a Taiwanese university writing center setting. The study found that interest influences the readability of rhetorics both as (a) a primary (i.e., an isolated feature) and (b) a conjoined feature (i.e., consisting of two or more associated entities where the second impacts the first). The article also makes a recommendation for teachers, writing center staff, and the publishing industry that interest be considered when considering the difficulty of exemplars in rhetorics.

Keywords: text selection, readability, interest, Lexile, rhetorics, essays, writing center administration

Introduction

University writing centers have become commonplace in Asia (Baker, 2018; Chang, 2013; Paiz, 2017; Tan, 2011), the goal of which is to help writers become better writers (Hill, 2016). The composition-related texts writing center directors stock their shelves which have also become standard fare (Baker, 2019; Kincead & Harris, 1993), to include rhetorics: anthologies of paragraphs and essays "which explicate major rhetorical forms, present sample texts exemplifying major rhetorical patterns, and offer procedures to show students how to reproduce these patterns and genres in their own writing" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 130). These texts are made available because writing center directors generally accept that centers should be more than fix-it shops (North, 1984). They should be a "physical locus for the ideas and ideals the university has about writing" (p. 446). One idea congruent with this goal is that reading (Krashen, 2004), and more specifically genre-specific reading (e.g., rhetorics), provides reading-writing-related benefits (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006) in that reading model essays helps apprenticing writers to produce better writing (Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Saengsrichan, 2014), as much as a .70 correlation (Grabe, 2003).

Accepting that maintaining a self-access library of reading materials is a worthwhile part of writing center pedagogy is one thing; stocking it with appropriate texts is another, as directors must choose books that will be a good fit for the readers who might use them (Baker, 2019), a task which requires a consideration of text readability, i.e., how difficult the texts might be for intended readers (Dubay, 2007a). Looking at the extensive work done in the field of readability over the last century, it can be seen that readability is a widely and pervasively studied area (Armbruster, 2016). However, rhetorics, or more specifically the appropriacy of rhetorics for post-secondary native speaker (NS) populations, received only a limited and short burst of attention in the 1970s and early 80s (Auvenshine, 1978; Cline 1971; Dunn, 1983; Fox, 1978; Morrison, 1978). Each of these five historical studies employed what has become the prevailing method: First, a quantitative readability formula (e.g., Dale-Chall Readability Formula; Fry Readability Formula; Gunning Fog Index; Raygor Readability Estimate; Smog Readability Formula; Spache Readability Formula) was utilized to examine a varying number of texts (5-33), which included a limited number of rhetorics (1-4). Second, a varying number of students' (222-334) reading levels were examined via a quantitative, standardized reading assessment (e.g., the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, ETS Cooperative English Test). Finally, the texts' readability levels and students' reading levels were compared, with each study finding that the rhetorics were above the students' reading levels.

The aforementioned examinations utilized quantitative readability formulae, as these instruments measure two features that have been found to be reliable predictors of readability

(semantic, syntactic) (Dubay, 2007a). However, such two-factor formulae do not measure the many other features that contribute to text difficulty (Armbruster, 2016; Chall & Dale, 1995; Kintsch & Vipond, 1979; Lexile, 2010), features that are highly relevant to text adoption decisions (Armbruster, 2016; Mesmer, 2008). Accordingly, O'Hear, Ramsey and Baden (1992) offered an alternative to the traditional quantitative paradigm by including a qualitative component. The authors first used the Flesch Reading Ease Formula to determine the readability of three first-year college writing textbooks (two of which were rhetorics), albeit the authors did not (as previous studies had done) explore students' reading levels. Instead, in a second step, they qualitatively employed a cline method and questionnaire to explore how the students ranked the texts with regard to reading ease and interest. O'Hear, Ramsey and Baden reported that (a) the students found the texts to be in different orders of difficulty and easier than the formula indicated and (b) that interest was a mediating factor.

More recently, pointing out that readability is a richly explored field but that rhetorics have received limited attention in the NS arena and no attention in the English language learner (ELL) context, Baker (2019) enlisted a similar quantitative approach to that of 1970-80s NS literature. Working in an Asian post-secondary writing center context, utilizing the Lexile Readability Formula to examine rhetorics, and employing the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) to explore students' reading levels, Baker reported similar results. The texts were generally found to be above the students' levels. Informed by a long trajectory of NS literature beginning with Ojemann (1932) (see Armbruster, 2016; Kintsch & Vipond, 1979; Chall & Dale, 1995; Gunning, 2003; Fry, 2002; Lexile, 2010; Meyer, 2003) that argues relying on readability formulae provides a very limited view of what makes up text readability (Mesmer, 2008), Baker suggested that we must also subjectively explore what features beyond those measured by readability formulae influence English language leaner (ELL) students' perceptions of text difficulty when reading exemplar (essays) excepted from rhetorics.

Interest and How It Affects Students' Perceptions of Difficulty
Drawing on the early education treatises of Herbart (Felkin & Felkin, 1895) and Dewey (1913), modern discussions describe interest in one of three conditions: (a) individual interest, "a relatively long-term orientation of an individual towards a certain topic, or a domain of knowledge" (Schiefele & Krapp, 1996, p. 143), and (b) personal interest, "an intrinsic desire to understand a particular topic that persists over time" (Schraw & Lehman, 2001, p. 24). Individual and personal interest are also often described jointly as individual interest and distinguished from a third type (c), situational interest: an emotional state aroused by specific textual features (Schiefele & Krapp,

1996; Schraw & Lehman, 2001).

Following this, the effect of interest with NSs of other languages has drawn a moderate amount of attention (Boscolo & Mason, 2003; Brantmeier, 2006; Leloup, 1993; Schiefele, 1990, 1992; Schieffle & Krapp, 1996). A moderate amount of empirical work with younger and adult native speakers (NSs) has also been undertaken, studies which have informed research with the target focus of this study, adult ELLs.

Research with Native Speakers of English

There has been a moderate number of explorations of the effects interest has on the reading comprehension of younger NSs (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002; Asher, 1980; Baldwin, Peleg-Bruckner, & McClintock, 1985; Belloni & Jongsma, 1978; Bernstein, 1955; Oakhill, & Petrides, 2007; Shnayer, 1968; Soemer & Schiefele, 2019; Splinter, 2014; Stevens, 1979, 1980). A limited body of research has also been completed with NS adults, where it has been found that the degree of interest readers have about a topic can influence their comprehension (Bargh & Schul, 1980; Benware & Deci, 1984). Bargh and Schul (1980), for instance, studied the influence of interest by artificially inducing interest in undergraduates who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course. In their study, the experimental subjects were told that they would teach the contents of an article to other students. The control subjects, however, were simply told that they would be examined on the material. The results showed that the experimental group demonstrated greater recall.

Benware and Deci (1984) conducted a similar study. They presented two groups of psychology majors with a passage on higher brain functioning. Benware and Deci likewise explained to the experimental subjects that they would teach the article, whereas the control students were told simply to learn the material. Benware and Deci concluded that the experimental group demonstrated greater conceptual understanding of the material.

Research with adult NSs has also demonstrated a relationship between interest and background knowledge (Entin, 1981; Lin, Zabrucky, & Moore, 1997). Entin (1981) explored the influence of interest and background knowledge on undergraduates' comprehension of expository passages from *World Book Encyclopedia*. She reported that students with high interest demonstrated greater comprehension than those with low interest. She also indicated that students with high background knowledge demonstrated higher comprehension than those with low background knowledge. Regarding the interaction between interest and background knowledge, she reported that some topics the students reported to be of high interest were also ones they

reported having background knowledge in and vice versa. However, Entin (1981) noted that students who (a) have little knowledge about a topic may have interest in the topic and (b) students who know quite a lot about a topic may not be interested in reading about it.

Lin, Zabrucky and Moore (1997) investigated the influence of undergraduate psychology students' interest on their comprehension of expository texts from a variety of domains (i.e., biology, economics, engineering, geography, philosophy, political science). The results showed that students who reported having interest in the domains demonstrated higher comprehension. The results further illustrated that students who reported high interest similarly reported having background knowledge, as measured by the amount of confidence they expressed about the subject matter.

Research with English Language Learners
Drawing on late twentieth century work with NSs, a limited body of extant work with older ELLs, the focus of this study, and interest has likewise evidenced that (a) interest has a facilitative effect on comprehension and (b) interest and background knowledge are connected (Bugel & Buunk, 1996; Carrell & Wise, 1998; Erçetin, 2010). Bugel and Buunk (1996), for example, carried out a study with Dutch ELLs in their terminal year of high school to examine the influence of gender-related interest and background knowledge. They separated the students by gender and then presented them with narrative and expository texts on gender-specific topics the participants reported being interested in and having background knowledge about (i.e., motorcycle helmets for males; body image for females). Bugel and Buunk reported that each group demonstrated higher comprehension of their gender-respective passages than the alternate passages.

Carrell and Wise (1998) examined the influence of interest and background knowledge with undergraduates ELLs from 17 countries. They first presented students with a pre-reading interest-background inventory and articles from *Funk and Wagnalls Encyclopedia* and a post comprehension test thereafter. Carrell and Wise found that interest and background knowledge both have a facilitative effect on comprehension but that the two are not correlated. Similar to Entin (1981), who worked with NSs, Carrell and Wise maintained that students could express low interest in topics they have a fair amount of knowledge about and, conversely, indicate high interest in topics they have little knowledge of, i.e., be interested in learning more about such topics.

In a more recent investigation, Ercetin (2010) explored the effects of interest and background knowledge on Turkish undergraduate ELLs' comprehension of a scientific hypermedia text. Using separate interest and background pre-reading inventories and a combination of

instruments (i.e., electronic indicators in the text, interviews, and a recall protocol), they demonstrated that students' interest had a significant effect on text recall, but that background knowledge did not. They found no direct correlations between interest and background knowledge. They did, however, report that those with low background knowledge expended more effort to understand the text.

Tabatabaei and Bagheri (2013) explored interest and background knowledge with Iranian high school students and a selection of ELL textbooks. Exploring the correlations between text readability, interest, and background knowledge, they measured exemplars from the texts with the Flesch Reading Ease Formula, utilized an interest-background inventory questionnaire, and correlated the results. Tabatabaei and Bagheri found that interest increased as text difficulty levels decreased. They further reported that no significant correlation was found between readability and background knowledge. However, they did report a significant positive relationship between students' interest level and background knowledge, thus suggesting that background knowledge is a mediating variable of interest.

More recently, Asgari, Ketabi and Amirian (2018) explored the effect of providing high interest materials with undergraduates with similar background knowledge (e.g., health profession). Using an experimental design, they utilized a pre-reading interest inventory and a pretest. After this, they provided the control group with low interest materials (e.g., non-health-related materials), whereas the experimental group received only health-related materials, finding that the students who received high interest materials outperformed those who did not.

The Gap That Needs to be Addressed

Readability is a widely studied area, and readability and interest have received a moderate amount of attention in the literature. However, there has been only a limited number of NS rhetoric readability studies and a lack of attention to rhetorics in ELL contexts (Baker, 2019). The latter is not surprising. It is, however, disappointing. This is because (a) hundreds of rhetorics have been published since they first appeared in the 1890s, and many are still in regular use, up to two hundred in any given year (Bloom, 1999); (b) the reading difficulty of exemplars has been cited as a factor to be considered when including them in rhetorics (Bloom, 1999); and (c) the readability of the exemplars therein, such as the difficulty of reading materials for all subjects, has been shown to impact the experience of students when reading these texts (Auvenshine, 1978; Baker, 2019; Cline 1971; Dunn, 1983; Fox, 1978; O'Hear, Ramsey, & Baden, 1992; Morrison, 1978).

To address this gap in the ELL literature, this article explores one research question:

What benefits and difficulties does interest pose for post-secondary ELLs in the Taiwanese context when they read exemplars excepted from rhetorics?
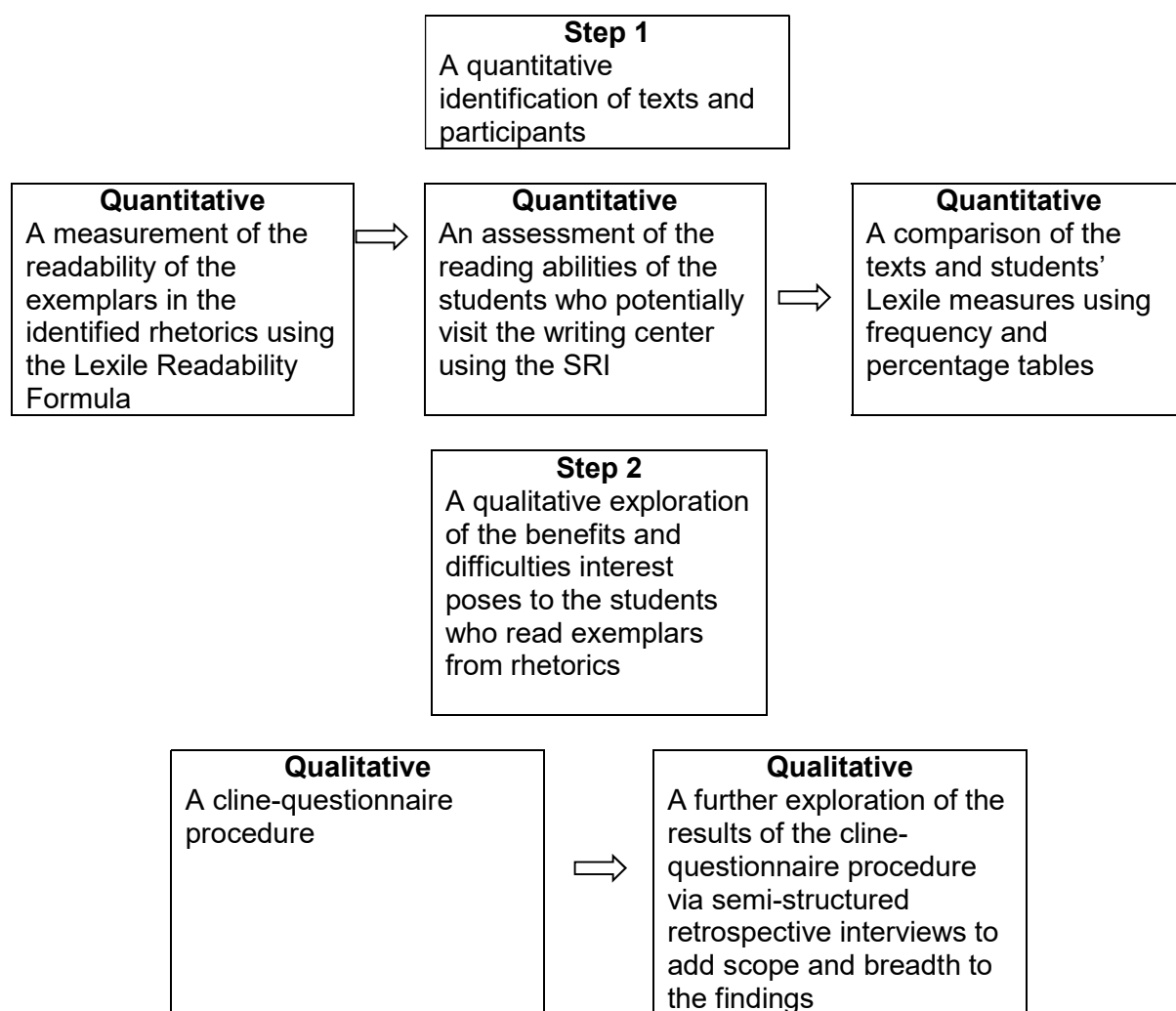
Method

This article provides an in-depth discussion regarding how interest affects ELL readers' perceptions of text difficulty, a feature that was identified in a larger unpublished sequential, mixed-methods study that identified 16 features that affect post-secondary ELLs' perceptions of difficulty when reading exemplars from rhetorics[1]. Separating the study and publishing separate articles regarding each feature was done in the interest of length so as to give each unique feature's literature review and data set full attention and discussion within the length of one article. To explore the effect of interest, one Taiwanese writing center context was selected: Jinwen University of Science and Technology in Taipei, Taiwan.

To collect and analyze the resulting data, an adaption of Creswell's (2013) sequential mixed-methods design was employed (Figure 1).

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[1] This article reports the results of a larger unpublished sequential, mixed-methods study (i.e., the author's 420 page doctoral dissertation).

Figure 1: Sequential Mixed-Methods Research Design

Following the sequential mixed-methods design, two sections (steps) and their relevant subsections are described here: (1) Identifying Texts and Participants and (2) An Exploration of the Benefits and Difficulties Interest Provides Students When They Read Exemplars Taken from Rhetorics, Essays.

Identifying Texts and Participants

To identify potential texts and participants for study, three steps were performed: (a) an examination of the exemplars' readability levels, (b) an examination of students' reading levels and (c) a comparison of the two. To identify potential exemplars for study, the readability levels (Lexile readability levels) of exemplars (N = 893) from 12 rhetorics available on the local market

were examined using a non-fee-based computerized version of the Lexile Analyzer [2] available to researchers.

To determine the readability (Lexile) levels of potential participants, the SRI was administered to a purposive sample of students enrolled in five of the seven sections of sophomore composition at the university (N = 91), as this group makes up the majority of visitors to the writing center. To determine which exemplars are accessible to the reading levels of the selected participants, a comparison of the exemplars' readability levels and target students' reading levels was performed.

Following Kvale's (1996) suggestion that the number of informants tends to be 15 ± 10 in interview studies, and in keeping with qualitative theory (Creswell, 2013), a smaller cluster sample (n = 14) was identified from the larger sample. The prospective participants were identified because they received SRI scores in the top 15% of their class (828-928L), which allowed them to examine a wide range of exemplars and help the researcher holistically explore the research question (Merriam, 1991). After this, they were queried by e-mail if they would be willing to participate in a paid, follow-up, post-course interview (i.e., 1,000 New Taiwan Dollars—appx 30 U.S. Dollars—per participant). Paid, post-course interviews were utilized to help ensure the informants would perform to the best of their ability.

Twelve informants assented and were provided with pseudonyms. The makeup of the sample (seven females, mean age 20.14 years; five males, mean age 20.8 years) (Table 1) was indicated by the students' Lexile measures, which identified them as appropriate participants rather than any purposeful intent of the sampling procedure (e.g., ethnicity, gender, age).

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[2] The Lexile Readability Formula uses two indicators (vocabulary and sentence length) to assess how difficult a text will be for a reader. The Lexile Framework has a range of 10L (Lexile) to 2200L. The SRI is a standardized reading test that utilizes Lexile measures to report students' reading levels.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Respondents

	Gender	Age	Lexile Measures
Kala	Female	20	864L
Jacob	Male	21	869L
Eve	Female	20	861L
Marsha	Female	20	877L
Harold	Male	21	837L
Linda	Female	20	892L
Ben	Male	21	858L
Cara	Female	20	828L
Dan	Male	20	870L
Nelson	Male	21	869L
Olivia	Female	21	926L
Annie	Female	20	928L

Identifying Exemplars

Five exemplars (range 610-1010L) were purposively chosen to be below, within, and slightly above the informants' Lexile range (i.e., 828-928L) (Table 2). This number was chosen in accordance with face validity. That is, allowing enough variety for the informants to engage in thoughtful comparisons and small enough to be examined and discussed within a reasonable time via the cline-questionnaire and interviews so that valuable data could be gleaned but informant fatigue could be avoided. The exemplars were additionally chosen to be approximately 100L apart instead of a larger measure (e.g., 200L) which would make the Lexile ranking more obvious and possibly reduce students' thoughtful reflections regarding the features under investigation.

Table 2
Exemplars Chosen for the Study

Exemplars	Lexile Measures
Traig, J. A Guide to proper hand-washing technique. In M. L. Conlin (Ed.), *Patterns plus: A short prose reader with argumentation* (pp. 176-178). Cengage.	610L
Hughes, L. Salvation. In S. V. Buscemi, & C. Smith (Eds.), *75 readings plus* (pp. 10-14). McGraw-Hill.	740L
McDonald, C. P. A view from the bridge. In T. Cooley (Ed.), *The Norton sampler: Short essays for composition* (pp. 37-41). Norton & Company.	810L
Harris, S. Freedom and security. In G. Levin (Ed.), *Prose models* (pp. 389-392). Wadsworth.	910L
Dalfonos, D. Grammy rewards. In T. Cooley (Ed.), *The Norton sampler*: *Short essays for composition* (pp. 206-208). Norton & Company.	1010L

Description of the Exemplars

The A Guide to Proper Hand-washing Technique essay was rated as the easiest of the five essays by the Lexile Readability Formula (610L). The editor of the anthology described it as a process essay that explains how to wash one's hands. Subjectively, it was expected that the students would be somewhat interested in the topic, both because of the background knowledge they have about the subject and the personally engaging subject matter.

The Salvation essay was rated as the second most difficult of the five essays (740L). It is described as a narrative that offers an autobiographical account of the author's childhood experience at a church revival meeting. Subjectively, it was expected that students who are familiar with revival meetings may be interested in the text and that those who are not might be interested in learning more, as many Taiwanese are Christians.

The A View from the Bridge essay, rated as the third most difficult of the five essays (810L), is descriptive essay with elements of narration where a jogger comes across a visually impaired boy who is attempting to land a fish. The jogger helps the boy bring in the fish, and the boy in turn helps the jogger see things in a new way. It was assumed that the students would find the text interesting as many of the students will be familiar with the idea of an adult helping a child and what interesting things one might see while jogging.

The Freedom and Security essay was rated as the fourth most difficult of the five essays (910L). Described as an argumentative/persuasion essay with elements of contrast and

comparison, the essay illustrates the abstract concepts of freedom and security as polarities. It was assumed that some of the students may be interested in political discussions.

The Grammy Rewards essay was rated as the most difficult of the five essays (1010L). The editor describes the essay's organization as a contrast essay that uses a point-by-point structure to contrast two grandmothers on the basis of how they interact with their granddaughter. It was assumed that the students would find the text to be interesting, as the subject appears to be personally involving.

An Exploration of the Benefits and Difficulties Interest Provides Students When They Read Exemplars Taken from Rhetorics, Essays

Once the texts and the participants were identified, the effects of interest were explored via a two-stage process: (a) a quantitative cline-questionnaire procedure and (b) qualitative semi-structured retrospective interviews.

The Cline-questionnaire Procedure

The purpose of the cline procedure was to have the students read the essays and put them in a cline of difficulty **(**from easiest to most difficult**)** so that the students would be able to reflect on this activity while completing a closed-response, Likert questionnaire. The exemplars were presented to the informants in random order, and criteria for ranking were withheld to ensure the informants engaged in the type of decision-making process "normally used when making such judgments" (Chall, et al., 1996, p. 77).

After the informants ordered their clines, they completed a closed-response questionnaire. This phase was administered to help the informants reflect on why they created the cline the way they did and relate it in such a way that would provide insight into what other factors beyond the Lexile Readability Formula they feel influence their perceptions of difficulty when reading exemplars excerpted from rhetorics. This phase lasted for an average of 24.4 minutes (range 17.4-32.4).

The questionnaire addressed 16 features related to comprehension (Appendix A), one of which was interest: How interested I was in the topic of each text influenced my decision about how to arrange the texts in the way that I did.

To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, it was translated into the students' L1 (Mandarin) using a back-translation procedure, checked with a second translator for accuracy, and pretested with a small number of respondents who were not part of the sample in the study (n = 2).

Interviews

To triangulate the data from the questionnaire, the informants (after creating the cline and completing the questionnaire) participated in semi-structured retrospective interviews. Each interview, in accordance with Creswell (2013), began with structured questions from the questionnaire and was followed up with semi-structured prompts that later became open-ended (Nunan, 1996). A bilingual research assistant was present to assist with any language difficulties, and an observational protocol, which included both video and audio taping, was utilized to record the interviews.

The interviews lasted for an average of 32.5 minutes (range 19.3 - 57.4). Variation was dependent on how much each informant had to offer and how much translation was required.

After the interviews were completed, the audio tapes were transcribed, and the transcripts were member checked. Once these steps were completed, the informants' responses were explored using Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen's (1993) emergent category analysis procedure. "To add strength and fertility to the entire analysis" (pp. 128-129), a second-level group debate procedure was also included.

Results and Discussion

This sequential mixed-methods study had two steps. The first quantitatively identified potential texts (N = 5) and participants for study (N = 14). Twelve participants assented and 11 reported to the test site, ten of whom successfully completed the procedures and thus provided useful data. The second step helped to answer the research question: What benefits and difficulties does interest pose for post-secondary ELLs when they read essays excerpted from rhetorics?

Cline Procedure

The second step began with a cline procedure where the informants ranked the essays from easiest to most difficult. The Friedman test was used to compare the predictive Lexile measures with the student rankings. The results showed that the student rankings (a, d, e, b, c) ran contrary to the Lexile results (a, b, c, d, e) (Table 3). The results further demonstrated a significant difference in the ranking of each (χ^2 (4) = 23.28, p < .001), thus illustrating that the informants made definitive

choices in their rankings.

Table 3
Comparison of Lexile and Participants' Cline Rankings

Lexile Cline	Student Cline	Student Mean
a_ A Guide to Proper Hand-washing (610L)	a_ A Guide to Proper Hand-washing (610L)	1.00
b_ Salvation (740L)	d_ Freedom and Security (910L)	3.00
c_ A View from the Bridge (810L)	e_ Grammy Rewards (1010L)	3.10
d_ Freedom and Security (910L)	b_ Salvation (740L)	3.90
e_ Grammy Rewards (1010L)	c_ A View from the Bridge (810L)	4.00

Questionnaire and Interview
Examining the informants' responses from the questionnaire and interview, it was found that the informants, as a group, perceived interest to be both (a) primary (i.e., an isolated feature) and (b) a conjoined feature (i.e., consisting of two or more associated entities where the second impacts the first), perceptions that influenced their overall perceptions of difficulty, i.e., how they ranked the essays.

Interest as a Primary Feature
Interest was cited as a primary feature by seven (70%) of the informants (Ben, Harold, Jacob, Kala, Linda, Marsha, Nelson). These informants explained that they perceived an essay as easy if they were interested in its topic and more difficult if they were not. Several informants (Ben, Harold, Jacob, Linda) illustrated this by simply pointing out that they found one essay more interesting and thus easier than another. Linda, for example, when contrasting the Grammy Rewards and Salvation essays, found the first simply more interesting and easier than the second, a result which is in contrast to the Lexile Readability Formula's ranking that indicated the reverse to be true.

Others provided specific reasons from which conclusions can be drawn and related to relevant research. Two of the informants (Marsha, Nelson), for example, expressed a lack of interest in the religious content of the Salvation essay and explained that their lack of interest influenced their perceptions of difficulty. Their reports ranged from general disinterest to a display of a high affective filter (Krashen, 1982). Marsha, for example, explained that she was simply uninterested in religious issues and that made the essay seem more difficult to her. Nelson,

however, strongly objected to the content: "This one is... like [the] Bible. I don't like this [the Bible], so I think it is difficult. Maybe I don't believe [in] God." Together, these reports are generally in agreement with other researchers' findings that have shown that the amount of interest readers have in a text influences the difficulty they have with it (Bargh & Schul, 1980; Benware & Deci, 1984; Bugel & Buunk, 1996; Carrell & Wise, 1998; Ercetin, 2010; Lin et al., 1997).

One informant, Linda, also commented that in addition to having no interest in religious issues, she had little background knowledge in religion. This could indicate, though it does not specifically show, that interest and background knowledge are related, a conclusion which is supported by Bugel and Buunk (1996) and Lin et al.'s. (1997) findings. Not surprisingly, all three informants consistently found the text regarding religion the most difficult, even though the Lexile Formula found it to be the second easiest.

A second informant, Kala, explained that she found the Grammy Rewards essay interesting and that this impacted her sense of ease. She explained that the reason she was interested in the essay was that it allowed her to learn about life-styles she was not familiar with. This finding is related to Entin (1981) and Carrell and Wise's (1998) studies that found that students can be interested in things of which they do not have specific background knowledge. Kala's report is also interesting because she positioned the Grammy Rewards essay as the second easiest, whereas the Lexile Formula positioned it as most difficult.

Another informant, Jacob, who positioned the A Guide to Proper Hand-washing Technique as easiest reported it to be interesting and thus easy because he felt it was humorous. This finding goes against previous research that concluded that comical, embellishing details reduce comprehension (Reder & Anderson, 1982; Schiefele & Krapp, 1996; Schraw & Lehman, 2001).

Conjoined Features

Interest was reported to be conjoined with other features by four (40%) of the informants (Annie, Ben, Kala, Harold). Five features were reported to be related to interest: (a) background knowledge, (b) logical organization, (c) overall length, (d) sentence length, and (e) vocabulary.

How Interest Is Influenced by Other Features. Interest was found to be influenced by four features, both negatively and positively. It was found to be positively influenced by logical organization and sentence length and negatively influenced by overall length and vocabulary (Table 4).

Table 4
Features the Informants Reported to Influence Interest

Conjoined Features	⇐	Influential Features	Influence
Interest		Logical Organization	+
		Overall Length	-
		Sentence Length	+
		Vocabulary	-

Kala, for instance, offered a comment about vocabulary. She explained that she was interested in the topic of the Grammy Rewards essay but that the amount of difficult vocabulary in the essay diminished her understanding of its content and thus her perceptions about whether she could understand the essay. Kala's report supports the idea that readers feel that vocabulary is an important predictor of whether they can understand a passage (Statman, 1987; Yorio, 1971), but her ranking is intriguing. Kala found it to be the second easiest, yet the Lexile Formula (which measures vocabulary) found it to be the most difficult.

Harold offered comments about the other three features: (a) logical organization, (b) overall length, and (c) logical organization. He pointed out the Salvation essay's overall length reduced his interest and thus increased his negative perception of difficulty about the essay. Harold's report is loosely supported by Schriver's (1997) work that has shown that a text's appearance can influence readers' interest and their perception of difficulty, making them feel the essay is formal and unapproachable if they associate the look of a text with other texts they have had negative experiences with in the past (e.g., length). This is curious, as Harold's positioning is in contrast to Lexile's. He found it to be the second to last in difficulty, whereas the Lexile Formula found it to be the second easiest.

Harold also offered reports that are related to student efficacy, specifically logical organization and sentence length. Harold commented that his understanding of the type of logical organization (i.e., point-by-point contrast structure) used in the Grammy Rewards essay raised his interest in reading this essay, as he was familiar with this pattern. This is because it can be assumed that Harold, as a reader who is aware of his past successful and unsuccessful reading encounters, is able to reflect on what contributed to his past experiences when predicting his success with the current materials, an idea that is related to Schiefele & Krapp (1996) and Schraw & Lehman's (2001) discussions of situational interest. Remarkably, Harold found this essay to be the third easiest, but the Lexile Formula found it to be the most difficult.

Harold also explained that he felt that the short sentences in the Salvation essay increased his interest in reading it. This report is associated with work that has found that shorter sentences

facilitate reading comprehension (Coleman, 1962; Coleman & Miller, 1968; Freedle & Kostin, 1993; Gray & Leary, 1935; McElree, 2000; McElree et al., 2003; McLaughlin, 1969; Mikk, 2008). This report, too, is surprising. Harold found the Salvation essay to be the second easiest, but the Lexile Formula found it to be in the fourth of five positions of difficulty.

How Interest Influences Other Features. Interest was also found to influence two other features: (a) vocabulary and (b) background knowledge. It was found to both positively and negatively influence vocabulary and positively impact background knowledge (Table 5).

Table 5
Features the Informants Reported to Be Influenced by Interest

Conjoined Features	⇐	Influential Features	Influence
Vocabulary		Interest	+-
Background Knowledge			+

Two (20%) of the informants (Ben, Annie) offered feedback about how they felt interest was influenced by other features. Ben offered a general comment, explaining that he is willing to spend more time to understand an essay with difficult vocabulary if he is interested in the topic.

The second informant, Annie, illustrated how her background knowledge about and interest in religion influenced her perceptions of difficulty about the vocabulary in the Salvation essay. She explained that her interest in the topic (i.e., religion) helped her to have a large vocabulary to draw on when reading the essay: "If you have more interest in some topic, you may know more ... vocabulary." We, the researchers who coded the data, interpreted her response to mean that she felt that her interest in religion facilitated her background knowledge that in turn led to her increased vocabulary in this area. Accepting this interpretation, her report is related to research that has found a correlation between background knowledge and interest (Bargh & Schul, 1980; Bugel & Buunk, 1996; Carrell & Wise, 1998; Entin, 1981; Ercetin 2010; Lin et al., 1997) as well as background knowledge and vocabulary (Allen & Garton, 1968; Anderson & Freebody, 1979; Chalmers, Humphreys, & Dennis, 1997; Huang, 1999; Lankamp, 1989; Ulijn & Salager-Meyer, 1998). Interestingly, Annie's vocabulary-based positioning of this article and all of the articles was in line with that of the Lexile Formula (which also utilizes vocabulary as a leading determinant).

Conclusions and Implications

Interest (how interested students are in the topic presented in a text) was found to influence readers' perceptions regarding how easy or difficult they found texts to be. This was demonstrated in two ways. First, interest was found to influence readers' perceptions as a primary feature (i.e., an

isolated feature, e.g., increased interest contributed to perceptions of ease; lack of interest contributed to perceptions of difficulty). Second, interest was found to interact with five other features to influence readers' perceptions of text difficulty (background knowledge, logical organization, overall length, sentence length, vocabulary).

Considering these findings together, the claim that readability formulae are valid predictors of readability with regard to the two features they measure (semantic and syntactic difficulty) (Dubay, 2007b) is not contested. It is, however, argued that interest also needs to be considered when holistically thinking about readability and the text selection of writing center materials (Baker, 2019; Chall & Dale, 1995; Fry, 2002; Gunning, 2003; Lexile, 2010; Meyer, 2003; Weaver, 2000; Zakaluk & Samuels, 1988). Therefore, this article reiterates the stance that quantitative readability formulae are a good starting point for explorations of readability but that other features they do not measure (e.g., interest) need to be explored in a hybrid fashion. First, a quantitative readability formula is used to explore a text's readability levels (with regard to semantic and syntactic difficulty), a standardized test (correlated with a readability formula) is employed to measure the students' reading levels, and then the two data are compared. This provides an approximate ranking. Second, additional features are explored subjectively to provide a more complete picture regarding students' perceptions of difficulty.

Taken as a whole, the findings further readability literature about how interest contributes to the readability of exemplars excerpted from rhetorics (i.e., essays) when read by ELL apprenticing writers. The findings also offer practical implications for those who support apprenticing ELL writers (instructors, writing center staff, and the research community as a whole), as the subject of readability during text selection is an ongoing concern (Mede & Yalcin, 2019). The data are also suggested for use by members of the publishing industry during the consideration of exemplars to include in rhetorics. This is because reading difficulty has been cited as a factor to be considered when including exemplars in the 200 plus rhetorics that are published each year (Bloom, 1999).

Suggestions for Future Study

The findings of this study further readability and interest literature and offer practical text selection implications for those in the field of writing education. However, the resulting data also raise additional questions that merit investigation. One is that interest and its relation to readability and rhetorics received a moderate amount of historically relevant attention in the North American

context, attention which prematurely ceased in the late 80s, yet readability with regard to rhetorics is still a highly relevant yet under researched area in Asia and other non-North American contexts. Thus, as this article purposively provides an exhaustive literature review and detailed methodology section, it marks a starting point for further discussions of the importance of how interest contributes to the readability of exemplars excerpted from rhetorics when read by ELL apprenticing writers. Another question related to this has a broader potential focus. That is, in-depth discussions of each of the other features that contribute to readability with regard to the Lexile Readability Formula and exemplars contained in rhetorics are still necessary.

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