



RESEARCH PAPER

Specifying the Criteria for the Testing of Reading Comprehension

Muhammad Mushtaq ¹ Dr. Aleem Shakir ² Dr. Shabbir Ahmad ³

1. Lecturer, Department of English, Government Ilmamia College, Sahiwal, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Department of English language and Literature, University of Sahiwal, Punjab, Pakistan

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**Corresponding
Author**

mushi121@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension tests are intended to measure students' understanding and reading ability in academic as well as non-academic texts. In other words, the test of reading comprehension is designed to know how well a learner comprehends what he reads. The purpose of this study is to find out the answers of the questions regarding the issues of the construction of reading comprehension tests. To know about the various practices that are going on to construct reading tests, the material has been obtained from various websites and from research journals such as B-Ok.Org., Google, Google Scholar, J Store, ERIC and Slides Share. Different journals such as Language testing, Language Testing in Asia (LTA), Journal of Reading, Reading in a Foreign Language, were also visited to collect data for this purpose. The data collected from these sources was read thoroughly and different types of important information were collected from these articles and websites. To evaluate these researches on practical basis, tests of different international agencies such as IELTS and TOEFL were also viewed to know about the similarities or dissimilarities in these tests. On the basis of all this data and its evaluation, it can be said that reading has very important place in the process of language learning and its testing is not only important but also multi-dimensional as it is apparent that by testing reading, speaking and especially pronunciation can also be checked.

Introduction

Testing of language was traditionally concerned more with the development, production and analysis of tests as a psychometric activity. Recent ethical and critical approaches to the testing of language have placed a lot of emphasis on the uses of

language tests. The main purpose of a language test is to decide the knowledge of a person and ability of language use and to discriminate the ability of that person from that of other persons.

Reading a passage involves comprehension, decoding, and the interaction between two processes. However, until recently reading assessment and researches on reading disability has focused largely on word decoding skills. This focus was due to the reason that decoding is basic to comprehension and that decoding failures are much easily defined than failures in comprehension, thus in rendering comprehension, decoding is a more tractable problem than that of understanding comprehension. In simple words, comprehension of reading is the ability to read, understand and recall what is read (Rutzler, 2017). But as comprehension is the actual goal of reading and because failures in comprehension can lead to the failures of school, there has been a greater interest in trying to understand and assess comprehension. So, as Yuill and Oakhill (1991) said comprehension of reading is very important.

It is both reasonable and common to assume that many reading comprehension tests available in the market are inter-changeable because all are offered as measures of the same construct that is *comprehension*. However, as we have learned again from more recent studies on discourse, processing and comprehension is not unitary construct. The main purpose of a reading test is to help the learners to develop the skills, experiences, knowledge (Texas Educational Agency, 2002). It consists of multiple cognitive processes. As such, it is also possible that different tests might tap differently into these processes. This possibility makes it very important to know how the tests can be compared to one another. Do all these tests measure the same skills of comprehension, or do some of these tests measure different skills than the ones measured by other tests?

To allow clinicians and researchers to compare varied reading comprehension tests, the only information, that has been accessible in the past, refers not to the kinds of cognitive processes measured by the tests but rather to greater practical information containing test format (e.g. question type, passage length), measurement (e.g. reliability, characteristics of the populations used in forming the instrument) and test administration (e.g. amount of time required to administer the test). Information about the kinds of comprehension skills assessed is not presented perhaps due to the reason that, as Pearson and Hamm (2005) noted, most of the tests of comprehension were developed much long before the theoretical frameworks for understanding comprehension processes started.

Research Questions

1. What is the purpose of reading comprehension test?
2. What are the important facts about reading comprehension tests to be known to the teachers, learners and their parents?

3. What should be the format of reading comprehension test?
4. What should be the reading speed in a RC test?
5. What kinds of activities are involved in a typical reading comprehension test?
6. What types of texts/extracts are needed to be included in a reading comprehension test?
7. How can the Text be organized in a comprehension test?
8. How a test format will have a significant effect on reading-comprehension test performance.
9. Are the multiple choice items better than cloze test items and why cloze tests are not included in the IELTS and TOEFL?
10. Which factors should be kept in mind to check validity of the test?

Material and Methods

This section gives a brief introduction about how the data for the essay was collected and utilized for the purpose.

This research is actually a library research in which the data is collected from various sources of internet and from different websites. Various search engines are used to obtain data such as Google, Google scholar, database like ERIC, JStore, research journals like Directions in English Language Teaching and Testing, International Journal of Language Testing and Assessment (IJoLTA), Journal of Reading, Scientific Studies of Reading, Language Testing in Asia (LTA). First the relevant data was selected from the downloaded data. Other than keywords, the information was also gathered by simply typing questions in the search bars of the mentioned databases and search engines. The names of the journals mentioned above were obtained from Master Journals List (Clarivate Analytics) and SJR (Scimago). These journals were selected due to their credibility and authenticity as they are indexed in academic research journals.

Data Processing

The above mentioned data which comprised of a lot of research articles, online books and PPTs, at first, the analysis of abstract was done which helped filter relevant data from irrelevant data. The remaining data that was related to the reading tests was read and relevant information was extracted.

Test Review

To have an overview of the current practices regarding reading comprehension tests, IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC and GRE tests were also reviewed and different points of similarities and dissimilarities were observed. Common practices in these tests were discussed to seek principles for devising reading comprehension tests.

Discussion

This part of the study gives detailed discussion on the material reviewed on the basis of different principles, strategies and comparisons of different types of reading comprehension tests by the different researchers.

Purpose of Reading Comprehension Test

The researchers and theorist always gave great importance to the concepts of speed and efficiency in their thoughts regarding ability in reading (Carver, 1992; Jackson & McClelland, 1979; Perfetti, 1985; Stanovich, 1986, 2009). The claim of Perfetti (1985, p.12) can be quoted as an example, "the definition of reading ability comes from considering both speed and comprehension". So, the tests of reading comprehension are intended to measure students' understanding and reading ability in academic as well as non-academic texts. In other words, the test of reading comprehension is designed to know how well a learner comprehends what he reads (Brown, 2004; Mohamad, 1999). So, it can be said that the fundamental purpose of the tests of reading comprehension is to check the ability of learners' understanding of what they read (Rutzler, 2017). It is also clear from the common practice of GRE, TOEFL, TOEIC and IELTS. All of these tests measure the ability of learners' understanding what they read

Important Facts about Reading Comprehension test

There are a number of important facts that Hirsch (2006) outlined regarding tests of reading comprehension that are very vital for the parents, teachers and learners to improve academic excellence. These facts includes;

- I. Interpretation and analysis of the information from textbooks or nonfiction books, graphs, reference materials, charts, audio/video presentations, electronic databases, diagrams, oral interviews etc.
- II. Comparison or synthesis of information from diverse sources, (3) distinguishing between irrelevant or relevant information.
- III. Relating new information to prior experience and knowledge.
- IV. Understanding and use of the features of a text which make the information useful (such as level of diction, sequence, format) etc.

According to Hirsch (2006), this process helps the learners; (a) read the texts and thereby determine the main ideas, (b) identify personal preferences concerned with reading of nonfiction or fiction, (c) read and organize information for different purposes like report making, interviews, test taking, and task performing and (d) recognition of difference between opinions and facts. Thus, to make the reading

comprehension test useful, the students, their parents as well as teachers should be made aware of these facts.

Format of Reading Comprehension Test

There are many test formats used in constructing reading comprehension tests. Among them are:

- (a) Whether reading is oral or silent,
- (b) The length of the passage,
- (c) The particular type of comprehension assessment.

It should contain three text paragraphs and every paragraph usually contains 13 questions as can be seen in the reading tests of both the IELTS and TOEFL. The quantity of words used in reading comprehension varies in different testing agencies; for example in primary level reading test there are about 1100 words in TOEFL and about three thousand words in IELTS.

Reading Speed

Reading speed should also be determined for the passages. Usually reading speed for an average native reader is 200-300 words/minute and 300-500 words/minute for the fast reader, however it is realistic to include 300 words for a reading comprehension test (Heaton, 1975).

Activities Involved in Reading Comprehension Tests Activities Suggested by Heaton (1975)

Reading aloud is not the testing of reading skill rather it is silent reading through which skills can be measured. There are two kinds of skills that are involved in it i.e.

- i. Intensive (reading of short extracts of average difficulty)
- ii. Extensive (reading of complete chapter, book and article)

It can be observed that most of TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS and GRE etc. reading tests focus on intensive reading. It is due to the reason that it is more economical in cost to have a large number of items based on short reading extracts.

Activities Proposed by Brown

Following types of reading are introduced by Brown (2004) to be measured in a reading comprehension test. First one is Perceptive reading: this type of reading is conducted on large stretches, punctuation, letters, words (bottom up technique), second one is selective reading: it includes the artifact of test formats to confirm

recognition of discursive, grammatical and lexical features, third one is Interactive reading: as reading is a process of the negotiation of meaning; readers carry a set of schemata to understand text. The inclusion of this process is the outcome of that interaction, so, short texts are utilized. Fourth one is Extensive reading: it make use of the reading of texts extending to more than a single page like essays, stories, articles, books to be read outside the class hours etc. It evaluates understanding of the texts at global level. Brown (2004) recommends to test the ability of reading through the measurement of all these four types of reading.

Types of Texts/Extracts are needed to be Included in a Reading Comprehension Test.

Usually text used for the reading compression is descriptive, argumentative and persuasive. But it is rare that narrative text is used to test the reading comprehension of the learning as is the example of IELTS and TOEFL. The text used in the reading comprehension should be common and precise, and cultural background of the learners should also be kept in mind while preparing the reading comprehension test. As far as the selection of reading comprehension passage is concerned, according to Heaton (1975), passage that is extracted for reading purpose is good to check the reading comprehension but along with them literary texts, instructions from manuals of appliance/machinery, newspaper articles, public notices, advertisements, maps, time tables and directory extracts are also useful to test the skill of reading. It will provide realistic means of assessment as well as motivate the learners to know how target language is used in lifelike situations.

Organization of Text in Reading Test

Text organization of a test plays an important role in the construction of a test. The five categories presented by Bachman (1990) are very important. So, the type of input selected for a test is one of the most important factors. This input should have the quality of coherence and the text should be presented in such a way that it can easily be comprehensible for the learners of that level. For the purpose of creating coherence in test, the sentences should be related to one another. For the structure of some schemes by the researchers, Mayer's model of prose analysis is very important because it presents rhetorical relationships among different parts of the text. His top level organization of text includes collection, causation, response, (which he later named as problem solution) description and comparison. If, we analyze these five points, we can divide them into two parts. First three points are based on the continuity of time and causality. While discussing the first point, we can see that when data is collected, the ideas may not have relation to one another and are disorganized because at this time the main purpose is to collect data for the test. So, ideas are in the weakest level at this point because it is loosely related to other data. Then the data is arranged in chronological order and it is arranged in the order of cause and effect. At the end in response the ideas are presented in such a way that it leads towards the solution of the problems with the help of causality.

Finally as far as the last two points, comparison and description, are concerned, they come under the organization of ideas. So, as we know that when we describe the things one argument is based on the other and leads to another and also becomes the cause of the modification of any argument while the comparison is the argumentation of different ideas keeping in mind the merits and demerits of both, as Mayer (1985) said.

Test Format and Comprehension

The characteristic of a good test is that it gets the best answer from the students. That is why it recalls the associated ideas from memory. So, a tester should use that type of test format that can make the learners recall the text. Kintsch and Yarbrough (1982) investigated the effects of two types of test format on reading comprehension and its performance. According to their suggestion, reading comprehension of main text ideas can be measured through open ended questions while cloze tests can only check the comprehension at local level.

Comparison of Cloze and Multiple Choice Items

There is a controversy over the use of cloze tests in reading comprehension tests. Some of the researchers (Alderson 1979) say that cloze tests can only be used for the purpose of comprehension at sentence level while others like Bormuth (1967) have shown that both multiple choice items and cloze test measure the same skill and their scores can be same and so both can be used alternatively. After the researches of decades, it is now accepted generally that although passage difficulty, the type of text, number of deletions, proficiency levels and scoring methods of test takers can have sufficient effects on the results, cloze tests can measure abilities including grammatical or syntactic knowledge more on lower level than higher level. This is the reason why cloze test are not included in the IELTS and TOEFL. Marsha Bensoussan (1990), from the University of Haifa came forward and conducted a research on the comparison of cloze and multiple choice items.

A test was conducted and the results of the tests show that though the subtests were not equivalent in both types of tests format, they gave the same results. However, the mean score of cloze tests was higher than that of MCQs. So, according to the researcher cloze tests can be used for the testing of reading comprehension. In addition, because there is the suggestion from Nation and Snowling (1997) and Francis et al. (2005) that tests using a cloze format may be more influenced by decoding skill than other comprehension tests, it is important to examine additional tests to try to provide further insight into this issue.

Test Validity

Bachman (1990) captures our attention regarding a lot of factors that can influence performance of test and therefore, jeopardize.

According to Bachman (1990), facets of method can be further divided into five categories:

- 1) Environment of testing;
- 2) Rubrics of test;
- 3) the nature of input;
- 4) Nature of the expected response; and
- 5) Interaction between input and response.

Here more emphasis is on Bachman's third category: the 'nature of input'. A review of examining text readability and characteristics suggests that the organization and coherence of the text are important factors influencing comprehension of reading (Reder & Anderson, 1980; Davison & Kantor, 1982; Klare, 1985; Olsen & Johnson, 1989; Beck, Omanson & MeKeon 1982b). Surface level features such as lexical or syntactic elements also affect readability but are of secondary importance. Background knowledge is a vital factor, but this has been researched extensively elsewhere (see, for example, Johnson, 1981; 1982; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Alderson & Urquhart, 1983; 1985; 1988; Mohammed & Swales, 1984; Steffenson & Joag-Dev, 1984; Ulijn & Strother, 1990; Bernhardt, 1991; Salager-Meyer, 1991; Clapham, 1996)."

Conclusion

To conclude, reading comprehension tests are very important in the process of language learning as it contains various characteristics that improve not only reading but also speaking and pronunciation. Usually reading is ignored after the initial primary level of learning and reading silently is appreciated but reading aloud enhances the confidence to pronounce the text correctly.

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