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Y.Y. Arustamyan

National University of Uzbekistan

PhD, associate professor at the Department of Comparative Linguistics,
Tashkent

MODERN APPROACHES TO ASSESSING READING COMPREHENSION

Abstract: *The article discusses different ways of developing reading comprehension by introduction different types of assessment in EFL classes. Two approaches are compared in the discussion: traditional and modern. Traditional approaches utilize the levels of knowledge domain and help the assessor understand to what extent students were able to acquire the information; modern approaches may be applied to develop higher cognitive skills and help students control their progress in mastering critical thinking skills.*

Key words: *assessment, reading comprehension, EFL classes, test, informal assignment.*

Language: *English*

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Introduction

Reading comprehension is a valuable and complex skill that should be developed alongside with the other language skills. However, appraisal procedures in reading classes will undoubtedly differ from assessing writing or listening as, on the one hand, reading is a perceptive skill (when you take the given information for granted and work out the questions basing only on the given information), on the other hand it can be considered as productive skill as well (for example, if you want to develop your students' higher cognitive skills, like critical or creative thinking, reading may be a useful tool here). In other words, modern educational paradigm claims for developing not only knowledge and skills, but also students' ability to analyze and synthesize information (or, in future, situation) they work with.

Reading in a foreign language, according to many researchers [1; 2; 3, etc.], is considered to be a more complex process than reading in a native language, since in this case there is a constant interaction between the two languages. According to K. Koda, when teaching reading in a foreign language, we need to take into consideration that reading is a complex and multifaceted process involving many skills; moreover, the formation of each of these skills

implies the presence of certain linguistic knowledge; and finally, when reading in a foreign language, the development of reading skills occurs in the interaction of two languages - native and foreign [4, p.1-2].

Traditionally, when we deal with preparation for reading classes we arrange texts and materials (vocabulary, questions) in compliance with the objective to have our students (basing on Bloom's Taxonomy [5]) understand (for example, the main idea of text, or new words basing on the given context), apply (for example, the range of synonyms to the given context), and analyze (the relationship between the ideas). Within traditional approaches to testing techniques we do not deal with developing of higher cognitive skills as in this case we need to suggest other types of assignments (open-ended or essays), which would not have a generalized answer, and in this case a teacher may need more time for evaluation (we intentionally use this term in this situation) of the answer trying to understand the logics of the answer. Therefore, this question is being hampered by the lack of time for objective assessment. Another problem that may also prevent from the application of such techniques and activities is the objectivity of the assessment procedure and resulting scoring. It is clear that a teacher and a student may

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have different opinions discussing one and the same text and see different.

Of course, in the process of teaching reading in a foreign language, it is necessary to work on developing primarily linguistic competence, namely knowledge of spelling, phonology, vocabulary, morphology and syntax, which will allow you to effectively extract textual information at the sentence level. However, simply knowing the norms of a particular language is not always sufficient to read the text. The student must have the ability to understand information at the text level. Here we can talk, for example, about the ability to recognize discursive markers, the structure of the text. In addition, an adequate perception of information requires knowledge of the genre features of a text. And if at the initial stage of teaching a foreign language reading most often acts as the goal of learning - the student needs to be taught, based on language standards, to recognize the information contained in the text, then at later stages of learning reading is not only a goal, but, first of all, a means of teaching other types of speech activity (writing, speaking) [see, for example, 6]. Accordingly, at different stages of training, the development of certain, not always coinciding, skills and abilities is required, and the methodology of teaching reading in a foreign language will vary significantly depending on the specific goals and objectives of the training.

All of the conditions listed above dictate the need for new well-developed methods and technologies for teaching reading in a foreign language and the creation of new effective methods aimed at developing not only receptive reading skills, but also such skills that will allow the reader to isolate, analyze and critically rethink information, obtained from both paper and multimedia sources. Not taking into consideration the process of teaching methodology on the whole (I mean, teaching methods themselves), I am going to concentrate my attention on the procedure of assessment that may be a kind of scaffolding for teachers as well.

It is known that the effectiveness of control is ensured primarily by its compliance with the tools, goals and practice of training [7]. If in reality a student has to read, or listen to lectures daily in order to select the necessary information, analyze and synthesize the knowledge gained, in order to use it later in the process of creating their own texts, then the controls should probably reflect this paradigm and test all those skills, which are necessary for successful functioning in the academic environment.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the existing practice of testing reading skills and assess the degree of their compliance with the learning objectives. Discrete tests have traditionally been used as tools for assessing academic reading skills in a foreign language, which determine the degree of proficiency in individual elements of grammar, vocabulary, or one

specific speech skill. However, recent studies show that such forms of control do not meet the main criteria for control tools, primarily because of their narrow focus [8]. Recently, the most popular form of control of academic skills are such pragmatic (tests of communicative competence) standardized international tests as IELTS and TOEFL. However, according to many experts, they also have a number of serious limitations for use in the academic environment [8].

The main drawback of the aforementioned monitoring tools that research points to is their inconsistency with the requirements of cognitive, substantive, and constructive validity [9]. The substantive validity or effectiveness of the test is an indicator of its compliance with the curriculum, while the constructive validity demonstrates how accurately the testing tools reflect the constructive basis of training, in this case, the model of a foreign language academic communicative competence. The conceptual shift that occurred at the end of the last century in the paradigm of university education from the transfer of knowledge to its transformation, requiring the student to master higher-order intellectual skills (selecting information, analyzing, integrating, using it to solve a problem, a problem in a new context), cast doubt on the effectiveness of standardized pragmatic tests aimed at testing only the ability to extract the requested information, to understand the main idea, partial or complete understanding (both explicitly and implicitly) of the information presented in the text. As for cognitive validity, which demonstrates the correspondence of cognitive processes involved in performing test tasks to those used in performing similar operations outside of test conditions, it is obvious that the nomenclature of cognitive operations that today's student must perform in the realities of higher professional education is much wider than those which are popular with popular test formats. [10]

Identification of the shortcomings of existing forms of test control of reading skills at a university dictates the need to develop a new control methodology that allows one to evaluate reading and writing skills in integration. Testing an alternative format in order to confirm its effectiveness and justify its advantages compared to traditionally used formats is the next, final stage of the study.

Traditionally, reading comprehension tests can vary along many other important dimensions besides mode of administration, such as the type of text students are expected to read on the test (e.g., narrative, informational, or poetic material); time constraints and pressure for speed; whether or not students can refer back to the text in answering comprehension questions; and response format, or how students are expected to demonstrate comprehension of what they have read.

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Three response formats are especially common: cloze, question-answering, and retellings. Cloze format tests present sentences or passages with blanks in them (e.g., "The fish were swimming in the ____"); the student is expected to read the text and provide an appropriate word to go in the blank (for the previous example, a word such as water, lake, or pond). [11]

In tests with a question-answering format, a student reads passages and answers questions about them; the questions may involve multiple-choice or open-ended items and may be answered orally or in writing.

Another method is to use informal assessments. Ask students to tell you about what they read or retell the story or event in their own words. Put students in discussion groups and listen to what they have to say about the book, watching for areas of confusion and students who are not participating. Ask students for a written response to the text, such as journaling, identifying their favorite scene, or listing the top 3 to 5 facts they learned from the text. Retellings require a student to read a text and then orally tell an examiner about what was just read, usually with some sort of coding system for scoring the quality of the retelling. [12]

In general, different measures of reading comprehension correlate significantly, and quite substantially, with each other. That is, students who score highly on one measure of reading comprehension also tend to score highly on other measures, whereas those who do poorly on one test tend to have difficulty on other measures as well.

However, there is evidence that different tests may tap the abilities that underlie reading comprehension – such as word decoding, vocabulary, listening comprehension, and speed of reading – to different extents, such that scores sometimes can vary substantially in individual cases.

For instance, although all reading comprehension measures tap word decoding, cloze format tests may tap word decoding skills relatively more heavily than do question-answering tests, perhaps because children can rely on the gist of a passage or background knowledge in answering many typical comprehension questions.

Similarly, reading comprehension assessments that require students to write answers to open-ended questions – as do some state-mandated assessments – may be tapping components of writing as well as reading. And a test with stringent time limits clearly will tap speed of reading more than does an untimed test. [11]

Therefore, if only one measure of reading comprehension is given, as is often true, the results can potentially be misleading in certain cases.

In addition, tests of reading comprehension are broad measures that, by themselves, do not usually help teachers pinpoint difficulties in individual students. Two students might obtain the same score on

a measure of reading comprehension but might arrive at that score in very different ways. If one student has a strong vocabulary and strong oral comprehension skills coupled with weak decoding, and the other decodes well but has an impoverished vocabulary, then instruction for those two learners will need to differ in some important respects. Assessment of key component abilities is essential in order to interpret reading comprehension performance and facilitate instructional planning.

Finally, current measures of reading comprehension are not geared toward distinguishing specific comprehension processes that might underlie poor comprehension in both listening and reading. Measures identifying such processes could be enormously helpful in diagnosing and remediating comprehension problems. Developing these kinds of measures is currently an area of much interest in the scientific community.

There are also steps that students can take to improve their reading comprehension skills. The first, most basic step is to improve overall reading skills. Help students select books about topics that interest them and encourage them to read at least 20 minutes each day. It's okay if they want to start with books below their reading level. Doing so can help students focus on what they're reading, rather than on decoding more challenging text, and improve their confidence.

Next, encourage students to stop every so often and summarize what they've read, either mentally or aloud with a reading buddy. They may want to make notes or use a graphic organizer to record their thoughts. [13]

Remind students to get an overview of what they'll be reading by first reading chapter titles and subheadings. Conversely, students can also benefit from skimming over the material after they've read it.

Students should also take steps to improve their vocabulary. One way to do so without disrupting the flow of reading is to jot down unfamiliar words and look them up after they've finished their reading time. [14]

In other words, assessment occurs in many contexts and is done for a variety of reasons. There are many researches dealt with different aspects of assessment. While they do not answer every question, they should help to consider how to use assessment in teaching. Traditionally, the most common way to measure achievement and proficiency in language learning has been the test. [15] Even though alternative forms of assessment are growing in popularity, most teachers still use this old standby. And while many teachers may be gifted in the classroom, even the best may need some help in constructing reliable test items. Consequently, the problem of reliability of such tests should also be discussed in further researches as the introduction of informal assessment may claim for a range of precise criteria for clear and consistent items illustrating the

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degree of development students' skills in reading comprehension.

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