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READING COMPREHENSION AND ITS ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: *Reading comprehension is a fundamental language skill that plays a crucial role in academic achievement and lifelong learning. It involves not only decoding written symbols but also constructing meaning through interaction between the reader, the text, and the context. Assessing reading comprehension accurately is essential for identifying learners' strengths and weaknesses and for guiding instructional decisions. This article examines the concept of reading comprehension, its cognitive components, and major approaches to its assessment. Particular attention is given to traditional and alternative assessment methods, highlighting their advantages and limitations in language education contexts.*

Keywords: *reading comprehension, assessment, reading skills, language learning, evaluation methods.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is widely recognized as one of the core skills in language learning and literacy development. In both first and foreign language contexts, the ability to understand written texts is essential for academic success, access to information, and effective participation in society. Unlike basic decoding skills, reading comprehension requires higher-order cognitive processes such as inference, interpretation, critical thinking, and integration of prior knowledge. As a result, it is considered a complex and multidimensional construct.

In educational settings, reading comprehension is not only a learning objective but also a key indicator of learners' overall language proficiency. Teachers and researchers rely on assessment results to evaluate students' progress, design appropriate instructional strategies, and improve curriculum effectiveness. However, assessing reading comprehension presents significant challenges due to its abstract nature and the diversity of factors influencing comprehension, including vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, motivation, and reading strategies.

The purpose of this article is to explore the theoretical foundations of reading comprehension and to analyze major approaches to its assessment. By examining different assessment methods, the study aims to highlight effective

practices that can enhance both teaching and learning processes.

Reading comprehension is commonly defined as the ability to extract and construct meaning from written texts. According to contemporary models of reading, comprehension is an interactive process involving the reader, the text, and the context. The reader brings prior knowledge, linguistic competence, and cognitive strategies, while the text provides linguistic and structural cues that guide meaning construction.

Researchers emphasize that reading comprehension consists of multiple levels, including literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, and critical comprehension. Literal comprehension involves understanding explicitly stated information, while inferential comprehension requires readers to draw conclusions beyond the text. Critical comprehension, on the other hand, involves evaluating the text, recognizing the author's purpose, and forming personal judgments.

Cognitive theories of reading also highlight the role of metacognitive strategies such as monitoring understanding, predicting content, and summarizing information. Skilled readers actively apply these strategies to overcome comprehension difficulties and to deepen their understanding of texts.

Several factors influence learners' reading comprehension performance. Linguistic factors such as vocabulary size, grammatical knowledge, and discourse competence play a significant role. Learners with limited vocabulary often struggle to understand texts, even if they possess adequate decoding skills.

Background knowledge is another critical factor. Readers are more likely to comprehend texts that align with their prior experiences and cultural knowledge. Motivation and reading attitudes also affect comprehension, as motivated learners tend to engage more actively with texts.

In foreign language learning contexts, additional challenges arise due to limited exposure to authentic texts and insufficient reading strategies. These factors should be taken into account when designing reading instruction and assessment tools.

Assessing reading comprehension is essential for measuring learners' progress and identifying areas that require improvement. Traditional assessment methods include multiple-choice questions, true/false items, short-answer questions, and cloze tests. These methods are widely used due to their practicality and ease of scoring. However, they often focus on surface-level comprehension and may not fully capture learners' interpretive and critical abilities.

Alternative assessment approaches have gained increasing attention in recent years. These include open-ended questions, summaries, think-aloud protocols, portfolios, and project-based tasks. Such methods allow learners to demonstrate deeper understanding and

provide insights into their reading strategies and cognitive processes.

Formative assessment plays a particularly important role in reading instruction. Ongoing assessment through classroom activities, discussions, and feedback helps teachers adjust instruction and supports learners' continuous development. Combining formative and summative assessment methods is considered a more balanced and effective approach.

One of the main challenges in reading comprehension assessment is ensuring validity and reliability. Tests must accurately measure comprehension rather than test-taking skills or background knowledge alone. Cultural bias and text difficulty levels can also affect assessment outcomes, particularly in multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

To address these challenges, educators are encouraged to use a variety of assessment tools and to align assessment tasks with instructional goals. Integrating strategy-based assessment and learner self-assessment can further enhance the effectiveness of reading comprehension evaluation.

The present study aimed to examine reading comprehension abilities among learners and to evaluate the effectiveness of different assessment methods. Data were collected through a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments, including multiple-choice tests, short-answer questions, reading summaries, and

think-aloud protocols. Participants included 60 intermediate-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners from a tertiary educational institution. The analysis focuses on identifying comprehension strengths and weaknesses, the cognitive strategies employed by learners, and the reliability of assessment methods in capturing reading competence.

The quantitative results from multiple-choice and cloze tests revealed that learners performed reasonably well in tasks requiring literal comprehension. On average, participants scored 78% on questions that involved retrieving explicit information from texts. This suggests that most learners possess adequate decoding skills and can identify directly stated facts. However, performance significantly declined on items measuring inferential comprehension and critical analysis. The average score for inferential questions was 54%, while critical comprehension items yielded only 41% correct responses. These findings indicate that while students can understand surface-level information, they struggle to make inferences, interpret implied meaning, or evaluate textual arguments.

The analysis of short-answer questions and reading summaries provided deeper insights into learners' comprehension processes. Students who performed well on these tasks demonstrated the ability to organize information logically, identify main ideas, and paraphrase content accurately.

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However, many participants exhibited difficulties in synthesizing information across multiple paragraphs or integrating prior knowledge with new textual content. This pattern confirms that higher-order comprehension skills remain underdeveloped in the studied cohort.

Think-aloud protocols revealed the cognitive strategies learners employ during reading. Successful readers frequently used strategies such as predicting content, summarizing paragraphs, monitoring understanding, and questioning the text. In contrast, less proficient learners often relied on word-by-word translation, re-reading sentences without reflecting on meaning, or skipping unknown words, which negatively impacted their overall comprehension. These findings underscore the importance of metacognitive strategies in reading comprehension and suggest that assessment methods should capture both outcome and process.

Comparing traditional and alternative assessment methods provided valuable insights into their effectiveness. Multiple-choice tests were efficient in measuring literal comprehension but failed to capture inferential and evaluative skills. Short-answer and summary-based assessments offered more accurate measures of higher-order thinking but were time-consuming and required subjective scoring. Think-aloud protocols, while rich in qualitative information, were not practical for large-scale evaluation. These results highlight the necessity of using a combination of assessment techniques to obtain a comprehensive understanding of learners' reading competence.

Further analysis examined the correlation between comprehension performance and background factors such as vocabulary knowledge, reading habits, and prior exposure to English texts. Regression analysis indicated a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$) between vocabulary size and inferential comprehension scores, suggesting that lexical knowledge significantly supports higher-order understanding. Additionally, students who reported frequent independent reading and exposure to authentic English materials tended to achieve higher overall comprehension scores. These findings align with existing research emphasizing the role of vocabulary and extensive reading in reading comprehension development.

Several challenges emerged from the study. First, learners' limited inferential and critical comprehension skills suggest that traditional teaching practices may overemphasize literal understanding and neglect higher-order reading strategies. Second, the reliance on multiple-choice assessments in institutional settings may not provide accurate feedback on learners' full comprehension abilities. Third, motivational factors appeared to influence performance, as some learners demonstrated disengagement during complex tasks, further affecting results.

Finally, cultural background and unfamiliar contexts within reading texts sometimes hindered comprehension, particularly for texts with idiomatic or culturally specific content.

CONCLUSION

Reading comprehension is a complex and essential component of language proficiency that requires careful instructional and assessment practices. This article has highlighted the multidimensional nature of reading comprehension and examined traditional and alternative methods of assessment. The findings suggest that no single assessment method can fully capture learners' comprehension abilities. Therefore, a combination of assessment approaches, supported by formative feedback and reflective practices, is recommended. Effective assessment of reading comprehension not only measures learning outcomes but also contributes to improved teaching strategies and learner success.

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