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## EFFECTIVE WAYS OF ASSESSMENT OF READING COMPREHENSION

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### ABSTRACT

*At the first sight, testing reading comprehension seems easy and straightforward compared to productive skills. In testing oral abilities or writing there is hearable and seeable data to assess, while in receptive skills it is difficult to assess the process which occurs consciously or unconsciously in the brain system. However, taking any passage and designing simple items and addressing it to students cannot give the expected results on the measuring reading comprehension of students. Due to the unobservable process in reading assessment, designing reading tests cause major difficulties for test designers. For instance, on measuring a particular skill it is impossible to measure that particular skill since it is cannot be observed cause of conscious process in the brain and the teacher cannot know exactly student uses that particular skill which is intended to measure by the test designer. While reading there is several stages to achieve ultimate comprehension of the text including decoding the symbols into words, transforming the words into meaningful content, and understanding them. As a second language reader, this process may contain extra stages.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Reading Comprehension, Assessment, Summative, MCQ, Gap-Filling, Matching Headings*

### INTRODUCTION

Assessment is one of the essential tools in the education process for further instructions. While designing or constructing reading comprehension check question items, the test designer should take into account the students` basic knowledge and overall comprehension on reading competence. Another important point is that covering all of the students and providing reliable

reading test items is much harder than expected. Since every student has their own diverse backgrounds on literacy. The level of the students while mastering certain skills can be totally different, some of the students need basic skills on reading comprehension, while some of the students may already mastered sub-skills of reading. Considering these factors test designer need to provide the material that fits all of the students` needs in the classroom. Basic needs can be determined by ongoing assessments. Cause of the diversity of students, implementation of one method of assessing cannot be appropriate for all students. Applying different techniques on assessment is considered a beneficial tool among teachers. There is a competitive misconception have among teachers on assessing students. Some group of the teachers sees the assessment as a checking tool, while more modern teachers see assessment as a tool which should promote the student towards the learning process. It is also a great tool for gathering data about students and designing further implications for teaching strategies on reading comprehension.

In the research field, there are competitive two paradigms on assessing reading. The former stereotype is on the purpose of testing students` strengths and weaknesses in the process and the other one`s aim is to assess and diagnose the obstacles which are causing some challenges for students while reading process. As two of the above-mentioned terms can be interpreted as formative and summative assessment types.

The main objectives of this paper are analyzing the test items which are related to reading comprehension and achieving a reliable result from the students taking into account the majority of test designing methods and strategies. Another important primary objective of this paper is help to students to reach the ultimate comprehension of reading passage through implementing variety of test designing techniques. As in designing process of test items general knowledge of students and speed of the reader should be taken into account.

The importance of this project for teachers is that assisting for teacher in designing test items and views of researcher on how to address the test items for students so that they can differ the terms test and assessment. Regarding the assessment, designing and conducting the test items researcher tries to provide more rationale, justification and evidence to support his perspectives on testing reading.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As the next generation of majority of the students belongs to Generation Z after Millennials, assessing and testing them in educational field is becoming harder. To design appropriate test items which fit student`s needs, taking into consideration the students` needs analysis allows teachers and test developers to collect deeper data and understanding regarding the students. The paper highlights the important points while designing and constructing the test items and analyzes the weak and strong sides of original example, which is taken from the Academic Lyceum under Uzbek State World Languages University. After analyzing and synthesizing process researcher compares the original version and modified version of the test and tries to give more justification to support his rationale in terms of their reliability, practicality, validity and authenticity. Expected outcomes on designing test items are intended to receive positive wash back and promote and encourage the students towards studying.

The originally designed test for sophomore students in the lyceum is intended to address as a mid-term test in semester 1. The overall test contains three big parts including reading

comprehension check questions, language use question involves mostly vocabulary items and writing task. In the reading comprehension check part, 10 questions are involved. The grading system is quite straightforward. For the right answer in the reading and language use section is given 1 point. During the observation of this test, it seemed to be quite easy to complete. Reading passage question items contain only MCQ questions providing 4 alternatives to students. The test is intended to address for B1+ learners since majority of the students' language proficiency level is quite the same. Development of learner profile is a good way while educators gain enough relevant data about students' general knowledge and interest, their strength and weak sides, as these above mentioned information is extremely practical and valuable during constructing relevant test strategies. To check the modified version of reading strategies in terms of reliability and validity of that test, a group of students was invited to take part in this project.

The primary goal of any assessment is providing strong evidence about learner's needs and collecting information about student's overall comprehension. In that case usage of different testing methods and techniques on reading is very helpful in conducting the needs analysis of learners and approximate comprehension level of the students. In designing process of reading items and implementation, major step is identifying the base knowledge and proficiency level of students. In the lyceum context sophomore students' proficiency level in English should be higher intermediate, since lyceum is specialized in teaching foreign languages. In this regard selection of appropriate passage which fits to the grade level of students according to ESL standards, plays an important role in learning process. In every classroom has students with diverse backgrounds and undoubtedly their needs also differ from each other. Hughes (2003) assumes that to measure the exact level of the students more than one type of question type should be addressed. In this regard, author of the paper included two types of assessment strategies to check approximate level of reading comprehension of students. The nowadays, there is a stereotype that to measure the ultimate level of reading comprehension, productive skill-based assessments should be integrated for reading assessment, for instance writing summary or reflection. However, this is misleading concept, we need to recognize the fact that writing summary exercises can be difficult for even higher proficiency students. Traditional writing integrated reading assessments involve several questions which reader must answer by reading the whole passage. Main problem with that kind of assessment is lack of multi-modality which limits the students attempt to showing their general competence. Considering all of these factors test assessments which demands the minimal ability to write from students, gap-filling exercises are applied by the researcher to measure approximate level of student. For the second question types, matching headings assessment type is implemented for students.

## DISCUSSION

The initial reading comprehension check questions involved only MCQ question items and it seemed to me not reliable enough to assess the exact knowledge of the students. Cause of this researcher decided to focus on reading test to modify. Any good assessment should cover three major principles: practicality, validity and reliability. Practicality can be defined from different perspectives as every subject on designing and addressing process has their own perspective while evaluating the test as practical. From the teachers' point of view, practical tests should be easy to assess and score considering effect and time. Administration members emphasize its financial sides and available human resources during the addressing process. In terms of

practicality, reading section is practical as it is easy to implement and convenient to scoring. According to Brown (2010) MCQ questions should be carefully designed which characteristics of test items and distractors need to guard the test items from unreliability. To make the test more reliable in using MCQ technique for assessing reading comprehension, distractors need to be carefully designed and implication process of the test also should be taken into account. Ambiguous test alternatives and providing more than one correct answer make the test less reliable. However, providing too many options for students can cause some anxiety and confusion which can lead to design unreliable tests again. In terms of reading section question items, there are only 4 options for each question and it may increase the possibility of guessing which means one option is equal to 25% of correct answer. Another noticeable thing in the questions is lack of distractors, as in MCQ techniques distractors play an essential role. Considering all of these factors test items seem less reliable for me to identify the more approximate level of readers. On constructing the test item, the most essential principle and the most effective criteria in evaluating the test items and techniques is validity. A valid reading test measures the exactly reading comprehension of the student and to provide content validity the test need to measure the exact performance of student directly.

When having a research about the learners needs about testing reading, most of the students assume that MCQ questions are easy to accomplish, which gives more independence for students. Most of students were in favor of this technique of assessment. It is more convenient for them to guess and find correct option. Moreover, it demands lower-order thinking abilities and doesn't require to use of cognitive abilities from students. Lack of available human recourses in the classroom also rises the higher possibility of cheating. In that point of view, level of the passage and quality of test items were not compatible with each other. The level of the anxiety during the assessment process can be lower in MCQ test, nonetheless it doesn't measure the approximate level of student.

The reading test which was addressed for students as a mid-term should base on the materials which were discussed at the previous lessons. If the mid-term reading section is intended to measure the expeditious reading skills of students and during the test it requires more detailed reading from student in that case it would not be valid enough. Another important point both teacher and test-taker need to consider is face validity. Good example for face-validity is clearly instructed direction, in addition to test appearance which does not cause any doubt for test-designers and well-designed test items. Fairly difficult and not complicated test items also serve for improving the face-validity of assessment. Considering the all of the factors reading section seems partially valid.

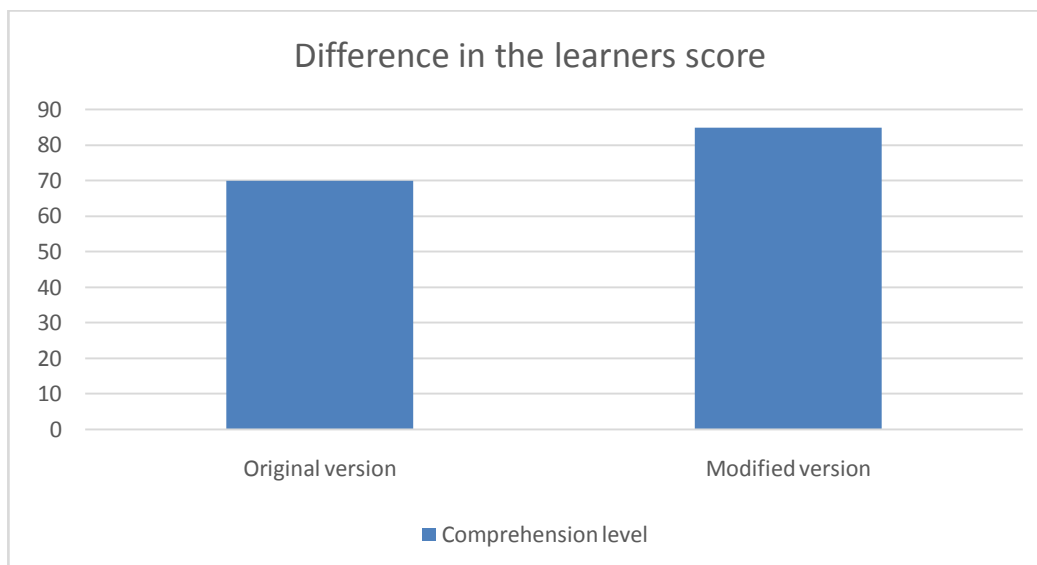
Taking into account all of considerations and assessment principles, the test items are easy to administer, to evaluate and requires only low-order thinking skill as it allows to students giving more focus on content itself. Another strength side of this test is it is dueable within the time limit. Moreover, majority of students are familiar with this assessment technique and it doesn't require extra detailed instructions from teachers. Besides that, entrance exam of most of the local universities is wholly based on MCQ questions. However, major problem with this reading section is relying on only one technique. According to Wren (2004) to measure the approximate level of students' reading comprehension more than one technique needs to be applied. Besides that, role of distractors especially in MCQ test items is quite essential. Lack of distractors

impacts to likelihood of guessing on test items. As test contains only four alternative options it raises level of guessing correctly up to 25%. Moreover, MCQ in local context especially students who are familiar with each other impacts on growth of the possibility of cheating. In micro level, especially in local context lack of human resources and insufficiency of total control within the classroom also influences to possibility of cheating. As a consequence of these factors, even reliable and valid tests cannot measure the approximate level of students.

While modifying the chosen reading test learners` needs were taken into consideration as well as the other classroom members. Shanklin&Rhodes (1993) state that teachers or test designers should develop the test items considering the learners` needs and including all classroom members. In designing process of reading items and implementation, major step is identifying the base knowledge and proficiency level of students.

Applying product-oriented assessment assists to improve further instructions and curriculum of the local context. However, some of the reading tests mainly tend to focus on limited range of vocabulary which may not be valid for lower and higher proficient students. Reaching ultimate level of comprehension requires using different methods and applying into test practice. For the fair assessment, types of the test and intended measurement should be determined and constructing specific components can provide overall validity of the assessment. It is essential to take into account diversity of test types while constructing, since they will determine the major problems on the students, their reflection and engagement for the test items.

When the researcher addressed the modified version of reading test, students feedbacks were positive and they said that they were highly motivated by doing modified version. Major upside of modified version was also enhancement of reading comprehension percentage. Modified version demanded more detailed reading from students and it helped them to comprehend the passage better. During the analysis of results of original and modified version, we can observe that after implementation of modified version, the comprehension level of students regarding the passage was higher. The following chart describes the information about comprehension level of students between two test items.



Major disadvantage of MCQs is possibility of guessing. Concerning the guessing of students teacher cannot judge the exact level of students. Advantage of gap-filling exercises over MCQs it prevents students from likelihood of guessing. Teacher cannot identify that students read that passage carefully or they ticked and circled the possible answers. That's why teacher cannot create the true image of students' knowledge while checking. Another interesting point is that, MCQs are not compatible with real-life situations, in actual life mostly individuals need to choose between two items. While complicated distractors may easily frustrate the students which can lead to failure of student or high level of anxiety in assessment process. Practicality of MCQ in terms of scoring, administration is undeniable fact, while actually designing reliable MCQ is time-consuming compared to other techniques and it costs much more than ordinary items as it takes much area on the papers. Heaton (1990) suggests that while designing that kind of test items, the options should be equal in length and compatible with content of passage. Having considered several drawbacks of this technique the author of the paper decided to substitute this technique into gap-filling exercise in the form of sentence completion. Alderson (1996) considers there are two types of gap filling activities including pseudo-random and rational cloze. Pseudo-random technique removes the word or words in the definite rate. Main distinction between regular gap-filling exercises is that in this technique first letter of word is omitted in the passage. It serves to prevent from confusion while filing the gaps. Without the help of the teacher or any hints are not required in this type of technique. Alderson (1996) states that that kind of testing item provide huge opportunity for test-takers and gives independence. Furthermore, this technique motivates the students on assessment process and serves to reduce the anxiety level on students. Nevertheless, concerning the several advantages of this assessment technique, it demands high level of language knowledge in terms of vocabulary and grammar. That's why providing meaningful gaps which are related to previous sentences or reading passage itself makes gap-filling test more reliable and valid. It is evident that goal of using that kind of assessment is to check reading comprehension of students. Weir (1990) states that gap-filling items are easy to administer and construct, in addition to easy to evaluate. In this regard gap-fillings are very practical. Comparing to other test techniques gap-fillings assess only exact part of the reading comprehension and knowledge of students. Learners know exactly that what kind of word type should be inserted into the gap, since it is very helpful on assessing expeditious reading skills of student. Moreover, advantage of gap-fillings, they give opportunity to focus on particular part of passage only, which reduces the possibility of confusion among the students.

For the second question type, matching headings assessment type is implemented for students. The main advantage of this type of test item is to check students detailed reading abilities and their skimming also. By summarizing the main idea of the paragraph students need to match correct headings into appropriate paragraphs. It is one of the best strategy for checking students skimming and expeditious reading skills, since matching headings activity demands skimming skills and identifying topic sentences from students. Another major advantage of this activity is it forces students to read whole passage in detail and it serves to comprehend the passage better. On improvement the confidence in the students this technique can be essential also. Doing the task within the time limit gives a confidence and motivation for students for further studying process.

## CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, further improvements for chosen test items from the perspectives of researcher should consider main principles. Assessment process can promote learning process or it can diminish the inner motivation of students. In that case reading assessment should be taken into special attention while designing. Test constructors and teachers as main actors in the micro and macro level have great responsibility on designing valuable and reliable test items. The wash back of students after implementation of assessment need to be take into consideration by test designers. Each test designer`s awareness on developing test items and involving important factors on them, makes test more reliable and valid. The primary goal of testing reading is measuring the overall ability of reader, however different reading assessment strategies can be used for different purposes. In our education system most of the time reading assessments mainly framework with the assessment of the proficiency in that particular skill or it can be referred as standardized testing which is commonly used by educational authorities. Standardized assessments are very helpful for assessing the general competence of reader and serve to construct further development of instructions. Mostly proficiency measurement assessment belongs to high stakes of assessment as it is developed by taking into account future goals and objectives on teaching reading. The major challenge in developing that kind of assessments is involving all the components of reading. As constructing reading assessment is not straightforward as it is seen. In terms of validity, reliability and time effort standardized test assessment should cover all of these and including the consequences after administration of test items.

As a teacher and student, researcher gained a lot experience regarding development of test items and doing them compatible with the major principles of assessment. Without doubt researcher can say that project practiced as an essential step on further development of career.

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