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Newsletter Contents

Word of the week: Fossilization	3
Video: Shaping the Way We Teach English: Module 06, Managing Large Classes	4
Susan Ryan's Tip: Suffix Based Patterns for Syllable Stress in Spoken English	5
Article: 'Observations – why bother?' by Andy Baxter	7
Research Article: 'What is the Best Method to Assess EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension?' by Parnaz Kianiparsa and Sara Vali	8
National Conference on ELT: Language and Culture', Pune (India), February 11-12, 2011	25
GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS	27

Word of the week: Fossilization

Fossilization refers to the process in which incorrect language becomes a habit and cannot easily be corrected.

Example

Many advanced level learners who have Spanish as an L1 do not distinguish between 'he' and 'she'. This could be a fossilized error.

In the classroom

Errors in general take time to correct but a fossilized error may never be corrected unless the learner sees a reason to do so, e.g. if it is seriously hindering communication. Teachers can help learners notice their fossilized errors by for example recording them speaking, or by asking them to keep a record of written errors as part of a language portfolio.

[retrieved from <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk>]

Video: Shaping the Way We Teach English: Module 06, Managing Large Classes

In recent years, the demand for English has increased. Schools around the world have responded by adding more English classes into the curriculum. Class sizes can be quite large and, in some cases, are growing even larger. Classes of 50-75 students are not uncommon. Many people in education are asking themselves: * How do large classes affect an instructor's ability to teach, and a student's ability to learn? * And, how do large classes affect the quality of education?

Teachers may not be able to answer these as research questions, but they can examine pedagogical techniques and classroom management practices that make the best of large classroom situations.

An innovative offering from the Office of English Language Programs, Shaping the Way We Teach English, is a 14-module teacher training video series developed and produced in cooperation with the University of Oregon.

Watch the video at <http://www.eltweekly.com/elt-newsletter/2010/12/76-video-shaping-the-way-we-teach-english-module-06-managing-large-classes/>

Susan Ryan's Tip: Suffix Based Patterns for Syllable Stress in Spoken English

As I've discussed in my last three columns, using the wrong syllable stress patterns when you speak English creates an accent that is very difficult for native speakers to understand.

I find that although many people understand this concept, they don't know always know which syllable to stress. Here are some patterns you can use to determine stress placement.

One type of pattern that we use to predict which syllables receive stress are suffix-based patterns. The stressed syllables in each word are **bolded**.

In words that end with the suffixes; *graphy*, *tion*, *ity*, & *ogy* stress the syllable just before the suffix.

phot**o**graphy

ge**o**graphy

edu**ca**tion

valid**ati**on

curi**o**sity

mob**il**ity

techn**o**logy

bi**o**logy

Words that end with the suffix *ate* have a different patterns. In these words the stress falls two syllables before the suffix.

graduate

appreciate

evaluate

comm**unicate**

ex**aggerate**

educate

That means that the content words in the sentence below are stressed differently.

*In order to facilitate clear oral communication in English, it is vital that you learn **communicate** using the correct syllable stress.*

Using English syllable stress correctly enables native English speakers to understand what you are saying without struggle or confusion. If you apply the presented here you will be able to improve the rhythm and compensability of your speech.

Be sure to check back next week when I will discuss the topic of spoken English and phonetics.

Susan Ryan is an American English pronunciation teacher and accent reduction coach. She currently lives in South Florida. Read more articles by Susan at

<http://www.confidentvoice.com/blog/>

Article: 'Observations – why bother?' by Andy Baxter

“Nice board work.” This was a killer phrase back in the days before the invention of the interactive whiteboard. It normally sat, all alone, in the left hand column of a page divided by a vertical line, under the label “Good”.

The right hand column was labelled “To Think About”. And, even though you were just starting to learn how to teach, you couldn't help noticing that the number of entries that your Teacher Trainer had made in the “To Think About” section had overflowed into the bottom of the “Good” half, and sometimes even on to the back of the page.

It meant your lesson had been rubbish. Or rather, it meant that your lesson had been judged as rubbish. Because this phrase was, essentially, a code. To a novice teacher, it meant that you had written on the board in straight lines and not made any really bad spelling mistakes. But to the more experienced observer, the code was clear: the lesson was a stinker.

This may be an extreme example, but it does show how the notes from lesson observations do not necessarily mean what they say. Indeed, they will say one thing to one person (or set of people) and something quite different to another.”

Read the complete article at

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/observations-why-bother>

Research Article: ‘What is the Best Method to Assess EFL Learners’ Reading Comprehension?’ by Parnaz Kianiparsa and Sara Vali

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Abstract

Assessing reading comprehension ability of EFL learners has always been one of the disputable factors in language testing. Considering reading comprehension as one of the significant skills in learning a foreign language, it is essential for EFL teachers or experts to evaluate the ability of the learners in their reading performance. Thus, they always try to find and examine different kinds of methods to assess reading comprehension ability of the students more perfectly.

It is sometimes argued that the established means of assessment may not measure the actual learning of some students. In other words, the reading tasks after reading passages can affect the way we evaluate our learners’ comprehension ability. Therefore, we can conclude that finding an appropriate method to estimate the reading ability of EFL learners is one of the crucial factors in language testing and teaching.

Based on the literature, there are a lot of techniques for assessing reading comprehension in a foreign or second language context. However, none of them can be accepted as a perfect method to evaluate reading ability. The present paper tries to introduce different assessment means which are used to measure EFL learners’ reading comprehension. In other words, this article is a brief review on literature about the most common techniques and their strengths and weaknesses in evaluating the reading comprehension of our students.

Introduction

Reading comprehension is always one of the important skills which is crucial to second (SL) or foreign language (FL) learning among EFL learners. As Eskey

(2005, 563) has declared, many EFL students rarely need to speak the language in their day to day lives but may need to read it in order to “access the wealth of information”, recorded exclusively in English. In fact, the ability to read the written language at a reasonable rate and with good comprehension has been known to be as important as oral skills, if not more important (Eskey 1988).

There are a number of reasons for this. First, in most EFL situations, learning to read a FL is the ultimate goal of the students because most of the time, EFL learners aim to read for information or study purposes. Second, extensive reading can enhance the process of language acquisition and provide good models for writing and sometimes learning vocabulary or idioms. Thus, we can claim that reading is of utmost importance both among teachers and students (Richards and Renandya 2002).

As Grabe (1995) stated, reading for comprehension is the primary purpose for reading. In other words, EFL teachers should try their best to teach students how to comprehend the texts better. Reading can be defined as an interactive process between a reader and a text in which the reader constantly interacts with the text as he/she tries to elicit the meaning by using both linguistic and semantic knowledge (Alyousef 2006).

Most researches on reading now focus on the effective reading strategies that increase students' comprehension, and different methods are used to develop students' ability in reading comprehension (Chamot and Malley 1994); however, less attention is paid to the assessment techniques which should be used to analyze the students' strength and weakness in reading the target language. Most studies (Mohan 1990; Carrell 1991; 1992, Devine 1993; Koda 1994) are concerned with different ways of reading instruction while for improving teaching practice and reading comprehension skills, we may need some useful assessment techniques to evaluate our own teaching methods.

A lot of components are involved in the process of reading. Grabe and Stoller (2002) classified them into 2 different processes for proficient readers: lower-level process (bottom-up) related to grammar and vocabulary recognition; and higher-level process (or top-down) related to comprehension, schemata, and interpretation

of a text. Thus, for being a competent reader we need a combination of both of these processes. Brown (2004) stated that a professional reader is the one who can master fundamental bottom-up and top down strategies; as well as an appropriate contents and formal schemata.

As you know, the ultimate aim of the teachers in reading comprehension classes is to identify the successful and unsuccessful students through assessment practices. In the case of foreign language reading, evaluation should try to collect information from students' reading abilities, and then use that information for planning and implementing better reading classes (Gersten 1999). Therefore, teaching reading comprehension and assessing it should go hand and hand. Aweiss (1993) mentioned that assessment is a crucial element of successful instruction since it helps teachers be aware of students' learning and, therefore, make it possible to prepare and apply more effective teaching method. FL reading assessment should focus on the idea of recognizing readers in the classroom so that non-proficient readers can get more attention to improve and proficient readers can develop their abilities.

However, these days, there appears to be a certain intrinsic disagreement between the goals of student evaluation and its means. The aim is usually to assess the students' learning

ability to get enough information for more efficient instruction. The means, however, are often restricted to estimating the students' present performance level. This challenge was recognized as early as 1934 by Vygotsky (1934; 1986, see also Minick 1987; Kozulin 1998). Vygotsky believed that a socially meaningful cooperative activity is the normal learning situation for a student. New cognitive functions and learning abilities create within this interpersonal interaction and only later are they internalized and changed becoming the student's internal cognitive processes. Thus, under conditions of joint or assisted performance students may show certain developing functions that have not yet been internalized yet.

Regarding the above explanation, which task or method can be a good tool for measuring the EFL students' ability in reading comprehension? Stavans and Oded (1993, 481) suggested that "the established means of assessment may not measure

the actual learning of some students with particular learning styles. Recent studies on reading comprehension strategies used by unsuccessful language learners have revealed that some of these learners use the same kind of strategies at the same frequency as do successful learners. Yet their performance on reading comprehension assessments is appreciably lower.”

The aim of this study is to have a brief look at the literature to find out different methods which are used to assess the reading performance of EFL learners in English classrooms. In other words, we want to analyze the strength and weakness of testing mythologies in reading comprehension from the view points of some English experts and researchers to investigate whether the task performance can be influential in helping students to become a successful reader or not.

Now, in the next section, we are going to have a short review on the literature concerning reading comprehension and its most common assessment techniques which are the focus of this descriptive paper.

Review of the related literature

As Kobayashi (2002) maintained if tests are designed to provide an exact measure of learners' language abilities, examiners have to reduce the effect of overriding factors such as text organization and response format on test results. In her study on the results of reading comprehension tests for about 754 Japanese university students, it was found that text organization and test format have a significant influence on the students' performance. When we construct the texts clearly, the more proficient students can get better scores in summary writing and open-ended questions. However, the structure of the text has a little effect on the performance of the less proficient students. This implies that coherent texts make it easier to differentiate between students with different levels of proficiency. Kobayashi believed that examiners have paid little attention to the impact of text structure and test format on students' results so far. By considering these factors, they can improve the validity of their tests.

According to Cross and Paris (1987), reading comprehension assessment should be employed based on three particular purposes. The first one is sorting which is used to predict a learner's academic success or to show mastery of an instructional

program. The second one is diagnosing which is aimed at collecting information from learners' strategies and processes so that the teacher can choose the best instruction process. The final goal is assessment, which refers to determining the effect of a program on a specific community.

Grabe and Stoller (2002) suggested that how the main goal of foreign language reading evaluation should be to initiate assessment practices that include the following: fluency and reading speed, automaticity and quick word recognition, search processes, vocabulary knowledge, morphological knowledge, syntactic knowledge, text structure awareness and discourse organization, main ideas comprehension, recall of relevant details, inferences about text information, strategic processing abilities, summarization, synthesis skills and evaluation and finally, critical reading. The authors enlightened that assessment tasks should be based on realistic needs and activities.

Aweiss (1993) claimed that assessment techniques vary from the unstructured and gathering of information throughout instruction to structured tests with particularly definite outcomes and guidelines for running and scoring. Aebersold and Field (1997) distinguished some forms of assessment as informal, alternative, developmental, learning-based, and student-centered which include journals, portfolios, homework, teacher assessment, self assessment, and peer assessment, whereas others are considered formal, teacher controlled, conventional, and regular methods including quizzes and exercises. In a study of assessment instruments used for foreign language teaching, Frodden, Restrepo and Maturana (2004) categorized assessment instruments as hard and soft. Hard assessment instruments are a traditional way to assess objectivity, precision, and reliability considering result rather than process. Soft assessment instruments, on the other hand, are concerned with the naturalistic, alternative and purposeful ways of assessment.

Although there may be a great variety of assessment and testing measures to evaluate the reading ability, no method should be chosen as the best, as explained by Alderson (2000, 204) "It is certainly sensible to assume that no method can possibly fulfill all testing purposes... certain methods are commonplace merely for reasons of convenience and efficiency, often at the expense of validity, and it would be naive to assume that because a method is widely used it is therefore

valid”. Consequently, “it is now generally accepted that it is inadequate to measure the understanding of text by only one method, and that objective methods can usefully be complemented by more subjectively evaluated techniques. This makes good sense, since in real life reading, readers typically respond to texts in a variety of different ways.” (Alderson 2000, 207)

Cioffi and Carney (1983) stated that typical assessment procedures are best at measuring the students’ skills knowledge, but inadequate for estimating the students’ learning potential and provide little help for recognizing the conditions under which the development can be made.

In the second language acquisition, there is not a single definition for ‘task’. As Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2000) suggested, task definitions are usually “context-free.” In other words, tasks are considered differently based on the different perspectives. For example, Bialystok (1990) and Pica (1991) defined tasks as a way to meet criteria for information control, information flow and objectives of the study. Some other researchers view tasks as an entirely classroom interaction. For example, tasks are viewed as products (Horowitz 1986) or “real academic assignments” situated in a disciplinary context (Swales 1990). Crookes (1986, 1) defined a task as “a piece of work or activity, usually of a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course or at work.” Willis (1996, 53) defined a classroom task as “a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome.” Nunan (1989, 10) regarded tasks as classroom work which “involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.”

The third type of definition includes the perspectives of both the classroom and of research. Skehan (1996) considered classroom and L2 research tasks as activities which have meaning and generally have some resemblance to real-life language use, and success on the task is assessed in terms of reaching a result.

Perfetti (1997) suggested that based on the types of texts used and the types of tasks carried out, readers may build up a complex combination of information that can be learned.

In upper-level foreign language courses, the ability of students to read articles and literary selections and to respond to them in an intuitive and critical manner plays an important role (Ruiz-Funes 1999a; 1999b). Writing a journal inspires students' reflection on learning and thus improves learning (Todd et al. 2001). As Olson (2003) claimed, asking students to write a journal make them become more aware of the strategies they use in reading and writing. Journals help students to associate reading and writing by combining the two, allowing students to build their own meaning (Atwell 1987; Parsons 1990; Tierney and Shanahan 1991). Therefore, journals give students an informal chance to increase their understanding of learning, and help the teacher to learn what each individual student is doing and thinking (Tierney and Readence 2000).

It is believed that the method of evaluating reading comprehension affects how readers perform on a test of reading comprehension (Wolf 1993). Additionally, Alderson (2000) stated that there is no best technique for testing reading. Some common reading assessment measures include multiple-choice, written and oral recall, cloze, summary, sentence completion, short-answer, open-ended-question, true/false, matching activity, checklist, ordering, and fill-in-the-blank tests. Researchers declared that the result of each individual assessment task presents an incomplete representation of reading comprehension (Alderson 2000; Bernhardt 1991; Brantmeier 2001). Thus, to understand the complete image and to be able to generalize research outcomes, various assessment tasks are needed (Bernhardt 1991). Correspondingly, Anderson, Bachman, Perkins, and Cohen (1991, 61) argued that "more than one source of data needs to be used in determining the success of reading comprehension test items." Moreover, because test performance may be influenced by test method, Bachman (1990) considered it as important to utilize various task types to decrease such effects.

An ordinary method used to quantify L2 comprehension is the written recall task (Barnett 1988; Brantmeier 2001; 2003; Carrell 1983; Lee 1986a; 1986b; Maxim 2002). Bernhardt (1991) asserted that conducting the free recall does not affect a reader's understanding of the text in any way. She argued that with multiple-choice or open-ended questions extra interaction exists among texts, reader, questioner, and the questions. When students are asked to write freely they are not restricted

by the prearranged and created assessment tasks. In other words, the free-written task accepts the role of the individual reader in meaning construction.

Multiple choice questions are another common way of assessing learners' reading comprehension because they are familiar to subjects and are easy for researchers to score (Wolf 1993). Alderson (2000, 211) proposed that multiple-choice test items are so fashionable because they give testers the chance to control test-takers' thought processes while responding; they "allow testers to control the range of possible answers." Although preparing a multiple-choice test is time-consuming, it is easy to score, and to assess. Weir (1990) also mentioned that multiple-choice questions are popular since they are completely objective. Statman (1988, 367) suggested that "multiple choice items which have the format of a question with one of four distracters giving the correct answer are a clearer, authentic and more valid way of testing the reading comprehension of foreign learners of English at university level than is the common format in which the testee has to complete a sentence stem by choosing one of four distracters." However, multiple-choice tests have some drawbacks. First, distracters may deceive the test-takers deliberately, which leads to a false evaluation. Second, being a good reader does not guarantee being successful in a multiple choice test because this type of test involves a separate ability. Third, test-takers may not be able to connect the stem and the answer in the same way that the tester presumes (Cohen 1998).

The other test type of the reading comprehension is short-answer questions. As Weir (1993) emphasized, short-answer tests are tremendously helpful for testing reading comprehension. As Alderson (2000, 227) declared, short-answer tests are seen as "a semi-objective alternative to multiple choice." Cohen (1998) believed that open-ended questions let test-takers copy the answer from the text, but to do so, the testee needs to understand the text to write the correct answer. Test-takers have to answer a question briefly by inferring from the text, not simply by responding "yes" or "no."

However, short-answer tests are not easy to make as the test designer must consider all possible answers. Scoring depends on careful preparation of the answer keys. As Hughes (2003, 144) shown, "The best short-answer questions are

those with a unique correct response.” He also recommended that this technique is so useful when the test designer wants to test the ability to recognize referents.

In a study on assessing EFL reading comprehension by Stavans and Oded (1993), it was found that in comparison to multiple questions and recall tasks, the open-ended test format is the most facilitating assessment tool for reading comprehension. In her study on testing methods in reading comprehension, Shohamy (1984) indicated that each of the testing methods had different degrees of difficulty for the test-takers. These effects were strongest on low-level students. She recommended the use of multiple choice questions for testing reading comprehension.

Many professionals have ignored the difference between ‘the cloze test’ and ‘gap-filling and used them interchangeably (Razi 2005). Alderson (2000, 207) defined the cloze test as “...typically constructed by deleting from selected texts every n-th word ... and simply requiring the test-taker to restore the word that has been deleted”. He claimed that ‘n’ regularly varies from intervals of every 5th word to every 12th word; however, ‘n’ is a number between 5 to 11 according to Weir (1990) and just 5 to 7 according to McNamara (2000)

Designing a cloze test requires the tester to decide which word to delete first; the other deletions go after this systematically. Cloze tests can be prepared easily, but as testers are not able to control which words to delete, except the first one, they do not know what their tests assess (Alderson 2000). Cohen (1998) concluded that cloze tests do not evaluate overall reading ability but they do quantify local-level reading. These tests can be marked easily since the testers expect to see the words that they deleted in advance. They are also suggested to accept other answers which can be meaningful in the determined blanks.

To prepare a gap-filling test, however, the tester must decide which words to remove one by one. The crossing out of the words does not rely on any system, so making a gap-filling test is as easy as designing a cloze test. Deletion of the words is done on a rational basis; thus, the tester can control the test. However, Weir (1993) criticized gap-filling tests because this type of test does not need extracting

information by skimming, so the marking process of gap-filling tests is almost the same as the one in cloze test process.

Yamashita (2003) indicated that the gap-filling test produced text-level processing and distinguished well between skilled and less skilled readers. Therefore, she supported the claim that a gap-filling test can be used as a test to measure higher order processing ability. In contrast, Alderson (1979) believed that most of the research which has been done with the native speakers of English can not produce clear-cut evidence that the cloze test is a valid test of reading comprehension. It is stated that cloze tests are not suitable for testing higher order language skills whereas they are useful in testing lower order skills.

Another method used tremendously by the test designers is 'true or false' technique. Hughes (2003) stated that the problem with this technique is that the testees have a 50% chance of guessing the right answer without understanding the text. Although by adding one more statement such as 'not given', we may decrease this possibility to 33.3%. However, such statements essentially test the ability of inferring meaning rather than comprehension. Another way to resolve this problem is asking the students to correct the false sentences. Both designing and scoring of these tests are easy (Ur 1996).

And finally, among other fashionable techniques to assess reading comprehension are matching activities and ordering tasks. In 'matching tests', each item is like a distracter except one. As Alderson (2000, 219) stated, since "... there is only one final choice", giving more alternatives is more reasonable. He claimed that these tests are difficult to create due to the need to prevent unpremeditated choices. The scoring process of this task is easy because the test-takers get points for each correct matching.

Through 'ordering tasks', testees are asked to put the scrambled words, sentences, paragraphs or texts into correct order. Although they test "... the ability to detect cohesion, overall text organization or complex grammar..." (Alderson 2000, 221), the administration of these tests is somehow problematic. Firstly, the test-takers may suggest another reasonable order different from the tester's. The second

problem is scoring. The tester will possibly have difficulties in giving marks to the ones who answer only half the test correctly.

Conclusion

From the presented issues it was found that L2 reading is a multivariate process involving a variety of text and reader characteristics. Thus, for assessing reading comprehension performance of our learners, we need to apply different kinds of methods to evaluate their reading ability. In other words, we need a combination of various techniques to identify the weakness and strength of our students to help them become a good reader. However, the question is that which techniques should be combined with each other in order to gain the accepted result. Thus, further studies can be carried out to find an appropriate way to test reading comprehension performance of the EFL learners because as mentioned before, it is one of the skills which helps the students to get enough information from different texts written in the target language.

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