

EVALUATING READING COMPREHENSION EVALUATION

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RESUMO

O trabalho discute o problema da avaliação da compreensão em leitura, tendo em vista abordagens recentes no ensino da leitura que levam em conta o processo — não observável — e não apenas o produto. Cinco questões são levantadas:

- 1) como "medir" a compreensão do leitor especialista no assunto de um determinado texto;*
- 2) qual seria o desnível de informação ideal entre o que o aluno sabe e o que o texto diz;*
- 3) como se certificar que a resposta do aluno reflete sua compreensão do texto;*
- 4) como testar mudanças na maneira de ler;*
- 5) até que ponto os testes reproduzem as situações da vida real.*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss some ideas related to reading comprehension evaluation. My concern is two-fold : ESP students usually have some or a good background on the subject dealt with in the texts they read, and nowadays the teacher tends to test more than his student's reading performance, that is, he is also interested in the student's reading habits.

Some aspects of reading comprehension evaluation should be considered first. The fact that reading comprehension is a mental process makes it difficult for

the teacher to evaluate his students in a reading course.

It is difficult to get reliable results from written answers (observable behavior) given by the student after reading (mental process) a text. It is difficult to be sure if the student understood a text; it is difficult to be sure if his answers reflect his comprehension, and it is even more difficult to evaluate this student through his ability (or lack of ability?!) to recognize/check/write the correct answer.

Smith (1978) suggests that a good way to know how well the reader performs his role is to ask him directly. This procedure may sound naive or obvious but in many situations the right person to evaluate efficiency in reading is the reader himself. Some of the above ideas are expanded in Figueiredo (1984).

The reading process can be evaluated through indirect means because it is not observable, according to Cavalcante (1983); this makes reading comprehension evaluation more controversial. Different solutions have already been adopted throughout the history of teaching foreign languages: for a while only open questions were used to evaluate reading comprehension and other linguistic abilities; in the '60s, however, multiple-choice questions prevailed, according to Morrow (1979) and Alderson (1983).

Another aspect of reading comprehension evaluation is a recent tendency to consider also the way the student reads in English besides his reading performance. It means that the teacher wants the student to improve his reading ability and also to change his attitude towards reading. It also means that new teaching procedures demand new approaches to evaluation.

How does one test reading comprehension/habits?

After several years of teaching (and testing!) ESP students, I feel as if I were questioning something

quite obvious. Maybe I am. What I am really questioning has to do with the student's knowledge of the specific subject he reads about and also his way of reading.

As it was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, an ESP student may have some or a good knowledge of a subject; he studies English as a means to achieve better results in his job or specific studies.

Robinson (1980) considers that students may take part in their ESP course before embarking on their occupational or educational role; they may combine their study of English with performance of their role or they may already be competent in their occupation or discipline but may desire to perform their role in English as well as in their first language.

It means that the language will not be tested as an end in itself but as an instrument to make the student perform his occupational or educational role.

In our ESP courses the student is encouraged to activate his previous knowledge of English, of his specific area and also to use his general life experience. Of course he should do that while he is being tested, too. By reading this way, the student interacts with the text in a more active way and his reading comprehension tends to improve.

I think it is extremely hard to separate precisely how much the reader gets from the act of reading and how much he gets by matching all his previous knowledge with the subject dealt with in the text. This is a very positive aspect as far as reading *comprehension* is concerned.

Now when it comes to reading comprehension *evaluation*, things get a little more complex. I sometimes find myself asking questions such as:

1. How can the teacher "measure" his student's reading comprehension if this student knows a lot about a specific subject he reads about? (His answers may be right even if he did not use the text).

2. How can the teacher be sure that there is an ideal information gap between what the student already knows and what the text is about?
3. How can the teacher be sure the student's answers really reflect his reading comprehension? (Some students complain that they sometimes understand a text but are not able to express themselves in written answers). In this particular case, are teachers testing reading comprehension or the student's ability to produce an answer?.
4. How can the teacher test a change in the student's way of reading besides his reading comprehension (as it is traditionally done)? A changing attitude is hardly measurable.
5. Are the tests lifelike? Do they get the student ready to perform his occupational/educational role? Do texts reflect the student's occupational/educational situation?

"It all depends on the student's aim" maybe one of the answers. Yes, that is true. The literature on English teaching also offers a number of answers; I myself have a few to contribute after spending these years teaching ESP and other courses, besides doing research.

I have not touched on technical aspects of evaluation such as reliability, validity, communicative testing (Valette, 1977; Oller, 1979; Carroll, 1980) and so on. We all want our tests to be reliable, valid and communicative ... though things are not that simple

My intention was to raise a few questions related to a specific area of evaluation: *reading*. Smith (1979) suggests that the more the teacher knows about the nature of the reading process the more he will be able to make adequate choices in his classes. Thus the more we understand about reading comprehension evaluation the better our results can be.

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