

# LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: ASSESSING READING COMPREHENSION ON BEGINNING LEVEL

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## Abstract

*This study aimed to find out how the way to assess reading comprehension on beginning level. The study also discussed about type of reading assessment tasks. Reading is an activity to find out information in written text. For finding out the information, it needs thought and perception. And also it needs a comprehension to find out the information. Comprehension is the process in understanding a sense of word, sentence, and connected text. For assessing reading comprehension, there are some procedures that paid attention by teacher to find out the students' reading comprehension on beginning level. First, the purpose of testing. Second, The specific information needed about the student's reading comprehension. Third, The number of students being tested. Fourth, the length of the test. Fifth, whether the test is an individually or group-administered test. Sixth, the number of forms available with the test, particularly if multiple administrations are needed. Seventh, for norm-referenced tests, the extent to which the norming sample is similar to the students to whom the test will be administered. Eighth, the examiner's qualifications. Ninth, the amount of training needed to administer a test, score it, and interpret results.*

**Key words:** Assessment, reading comprehension.

## 1. Introduction

Reading is useful for language acquisition (Harmer, 2007:99). Reading is a skill that has to be possessed by a learner in learning a language. Reading related to a language. Language is a tool of communication in daily activity. Because language is a tool of communication, so in communication it needs information. For getting information, the learner or user must have communicative competence. By having communicative competence, the learner or user can get prompt information. In reading comprehension, the learner or user has to get communicative competence to find out or identify the information in written text. For assessing the reading comprehension, the teacher or tutor must have also communicative competence or knowledge so that it could ease to teacher in determining the assessment of students' reading comprehension. Some aspects also have to be paid attention by teacher which it would be useful for teacher in assessing the reading comprehension.

## 2. What is Assessment?

Linse & Nunan (2005:138) said that assessment is the gathering of information for a specific purpose. They also (in Freeman and Freeman, 2004) said that when assessing students, it's important to remember that assessment should be a measure of what students are able to do and what they know. Brown (2004:4) said that:

Assessment is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain. Whenever a student responds to a question, offers a comment, or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment essay – is performance that ultimately is assessed by self, teacher, and possibly other students. Reading and listening activities usually require some sort of productive performance that the teacher implicitly judges, however peripheral that judgement may be. A good teacher never ceases to assess student, whether those assessments are incidental or intended.

Based on the definition above, it resumes that assessment is a way of gathering information about the students' productive result during they learn a field of their study. For assessing students, the teachers have to give the assessment appropriate to the students' knowledge or what they know.

### **3. What is Reading?**

Reading is a set of skills that involves making sense and deriving meaning from the printed word (Linse & Nunan, 2005:69). In order to read, the learner or user must be able to decode the printed words and also comprehend what they read (Linse & Nunan, 2005:69) It means that reading is a set of skill which need comprehension in determining or finding out the making of sense and meaning from the printed word and also ability in decoding (sound out) the printed word.

According Pang, Bernhardt and Kamil (2003:6), they mention that:

Reading is about understanding written texts. It is a complex activity that involves both perception and thought. Reading consists of two related processes; word recognition and comprehension. Word recognition refers to the process of perceiving how written symbols correspond to one's spoken language. Comprehension is the process of making sense of word, sentences, and connected text. Readers typically make use of the background knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, experience with text and other strategies to help them understand written text.

Nunan (1999:249) said that:

Unlike speaking, reading is not something that every individual learns to do. An enormous amount of time, money, and effort is spent teaching reading in elementary and secondary schools around the world. In fact, it is probably true to say that more time is spent teaching reading than any other skill. For hundred years, being literate has been the mark of educated person.

It means that in mastering reading skill we need more time, time, and effort in order to able to read. it doesn't talk about how people can read but how people are able to comprehend in finding out the information and meaning of word in a passage.

Based on the explanation above, reading is an activity in understanding written texts. For the success of getting a good reading comprehension, the reader has to get the sense of knowledge in understanding the text or the passage. Beside that, the reader has to able to construct the thought and perception to find the meaning each sentences or each paragraph and each passages.

#### 4. What is involved in reading comprehension?

Brown (2004:185) mentioned that for learner of English, two primary hurdles must be cleared in order to become efficient reader. First, they need to be able to master fundamental bottom up strategies for processing separate letters, words, and phrases, as well as top down, conceptually driven strategies for comprehension. Second, as part of that top down approach, second language readers must develop appropriate content and formal schemata, background information and cultural experience to carry out those interpretation effectively. Klinger, Vaughn, Boardman (2007:2) said that reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning by coordinating a number of complex processes that include word reading, word and world knowledge, and fluency. Linse and Nunan (2005:71) mentioned that:

Reading comprehension refers to reading for meaning, understanding, and entertainment. It involves higher order thinking skills and is much more complex than merely decoding specific words.

Klinger, Vaughn, Boardman (2007:8) said that reading comprehension involves much more than readers' responses to test. He also said that reading comprehension is a multicomponent, highly complex process that involves many interactions between readers and what they bring to the text as well as variables related to the text itself.

Based on the explanation above, reading comprehension is a complex process how to construct meaning, understanding of the text in order to able to discover information of the text by using the skill of thinking highly.

In reading comprehension, it needs cognitive process to stimulate thinking skills for finding out the meaning of the word and sentence in the text. Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman as cited Irwin (1991) mentioned that five basic comprehension processes that work together simultaneously and complement one another: microprocesses, integrative processes, macroprocesses, elaborative processes, and metacognitive processes. First, microprocesses refers to the reader's initial chunking of idea units within individual sentences. "Chunking" involves grouping words into phrases or clusters of words that carry meaning, and requires an understanding of syntax as well as vocabulary. Second, this process of understanding and inferring the relationships among clauses is referred to as integrative processing. Third, ideas are better understood and more easily remembered when the reader is able to organize them in a coherent way. it is macroprocesses. Fourth, elaborative process is a process of making inferences to draw upon information provided earlier in the text or upon our own previous experiences. And the last process is metacognitive processes, it is thinking about thinking, it involved in monitoring understanding, selecting what to remember, and regulating the strategies used when reading.

Spiro, Bruce, and Brewer (1980:537) mentioned that there are three general types of common reading skills in order to able to get the ability in comprehending the text or passage. First, locating details, it is simplest and involves recognition, paraphrase, and/or matching. The second group might be labeled simple inferential skills and refers to the ability to draw inferences after reading short segments of a passage. Representative skills in this group might be:

- understanding word in context
- recognizing the sequence of events
- recognizing cause and effect relationship
- comparison and contrasting

The third group might be labeled complex inferential skills and refers to the ability to draw inferences after reading longer segments and passage. Representative skills in this group might be:

- recognizing the main idea/title/topic
- drawing conclusions
- Predicting outcomes.

The three of reading skills is most necessary to be known by teacher in helping and assessing the student's reading comprehension.

Spiro, Bruce, and Brewer (1980:547) mentioned that there was a division of reading comprehension into literal, interpretative (or inferential), and critical reading. Literal refers to word meaning, context clues, sentence meaning, and paragraph organization—the ability of derive explicit meaning from text. Under interpretive or inferential reading, the author include: reaching conclusions, drawing inferences from what is read, identifying purpose, anticipating outcomes, making generalizations, and recognizing the main idea. Critical reading refers to recognizing the difference between fact and opinion, recognizing the logic of arguments, and judging the appropriateness of arguments and conclusions. So students have to master or comprehend the three of division of reading comprehension in order to be able to comprehend the components of reading skills and the aspect of language in reading skills.

## 5. Type of Reading

Brown (2003:189) mentioned that three kinds of genres of reading. They are

1. Academic reading
  - general interest article (in magazines, newspapers, etc)
  - technical reports (e.g., lap reports), professional journal articles
  - reference material (dictionaries, etc)
  - textbooks, theses
  - essays, papers
  - test, directions
  - editorial, and opinion writing
2. Job-related reading
  - messages (e.g., phone messages)
  - letters/emails
  - memos (e.g.interoffice)
  - reports (e.g. job evaluation, project reports)
  - schedules, labels, signs, announcement
  - forms, application, questionnaires
  - financial documents (bills, invoices, etc)

- directories (telephone, office, etc)
  - manuals, directions
3. Personal reading
- newspapers and magazines
  - letters, emails, greetings card, invitations
  - messages, notes, lists
  - schedules (train, bus, plane, etc)
  - recipes, menus, maps, calendars
  - advertisements (commercials, want ads)
  - novels, short stories, jokes, drama, poetry
  - financial documents (e.g., checks, tax forms, loan applications)
  - forms, questionnaires, medical reports, immigration documents, comic strips, cartoons.

Brown (2004:187) said that the genre of a text enables readers to apply certain schemata that will assist them in extracting appropriate meaning. It means that the genre of a text could assist student to comprehend certain arrangement of the information in a text or passage. For example, if readers know that a text is a recipe, they will expect a certain arrangement of information (ingredients) and will know to search for a sequential order directions.

Brown (2004:188) also said that for considering assessment procedures, several type performance are typically identified, and these will serve as organizes of various assessment tasks. They are

1) Perceptive Reading

Perceptive reading tasks involve attending to the components of larger stretches of discourse; letter, words, punctuations, and other graphemic symbols.

2) Selective Reading

In order to ascertain one's reading recognition of lexical, grammatical, or discourse feature of language within a very short stretch of language, certain typical tasks are used: picture-cued tasks, matching, true/false, multiple-choice, etc.

3) Interactive Reading

The focus of an interactive task is to identify relevant features (lexical, symbolic, grammatical, and discourse) within texts of moderately short length with the objective of retraining the information that is processed.

4) Extensive Reading

It applies to texts of more than a page, up to and including professional articles, essays, technical reports, short stories, and books.

## 6. Assessing reading comprehension

Klinger, Vaughn, Boardman (2007:14) said there are three purpose of reading comprehension assessment. First, it compares students' comprehension level to those students in a norming sample. Another is to find out if students have met preestablished criteria for their grade level. A third purpose is to inform instruction by determining when

students understand what they read and how efficiently they use which comprehension strategies.

According to Klinger, Vaughn, Boardman (2007:15) as quoted from Applegate, Quinn, & Applegate (2002), they mentioned that reading comprehension measures generally focus on the primary indicator of students' understanding. They (2007:15) also said that comprehension is typically measured by requiring students to read a short-answer question and then answer multiple-choice or short answer questions or by using a cloze task.

According to Klinger, Vaughn, Boardman (2007:15), there are different types of comprehension assessment in reading skill. First, it is norm-referenced tests, published tests administered under standardized conditions (e.g., with computerized answer sheets, timed); students' scores are compared with those of a normative sample. Second, students' test score are compared with predetermined criterion levels that indicate mastery of a skill or content; internal reading inventories are a type of criterion-referenced test. The third is curriculum based assessment, tests are based on the actual curriculum used in the classroom, and students are assessed regularly and their progress monitored. The fourth is interviews and questionnaires, students respond orally or in writing to a list of questions designed to assess their understanding of the reading process and their knowledge of reading strategies. The fifth is observation, examiner observe students' reading behaviors, using checklist, anecdotal records, or ethnographic note taking. The sixth is retelling, students are prompted to retell or reconstruct what they remember about they have just finished reading. The seventh is think-aloud, students are prompted to voice their thought before, during, and after reading. Teachers have to know the types of comprehension in reading skills in order to discover the result of assessment of students' reading comprehension. And teachers would know the best type of assessment for students especially for beginning level.

## **7. Discussion**

Based on the theory above, reading comprehension is a complex process to achieve the ability in reading skill because it needs the schemata or background knowledge in comprehending a text or passage. Besides, the reader must have cognitive process to construct the comprehension of readers or students' reading skill. And also the readers or students have to master the bottom up and top down strategies. Brown (2001:298) stated that in bottom-up processing, readers must first recognize a multiplicity of linguistic signals (letters, morphemes, syllables, words, phrases, grammatical cues, discourse markers) and use their linguistic data-processing mechanisms to impose some sort of order on these signals. He also stated that this is where a complementary method of processing written text imperative: top-down, or conceptually driven, processing in which we draw on our intelligence and experience to understand a text.

Brown (2004:188) mentioned that there are four types of performance for considering assessment to find out the students' reading comprehension; they are predictive reading, selective reading, interactive reading, and extensive reading. For beginning level, the types of appropriate performance in finding out the assessment of students' reading comprehension are predictive and selective readings because the task of

predictive reading attended to the components of larger stretches of discourse; letter, words, punctuations, and other graphemic symbols. It meant that students would identify the component of language, the similarity and difference of letter, word, punctuation, and other graphemic symbols in reading a sentence, text, and passage. The type of the task also could be reading aloud and multiple-choice. The task of selective reading helps student to comprehend one's reading recognition of lexical, grammatical, or discourse feature of language within a very short stretch of language, certain typical tasks are used: picture-cued tasks, matching, true/false, multiple-choice, etc. So it meant that the task gives students in order to identify the recognition of reading skills in comprehend the aspect of language (lexical, grammatical, and a few discourse features). The both of the task is an easy task for students to face the examination of reading comprehension because the task didn't need critical thinking in facing the task

Based on the theory of Spiro, Bruce, and Brewer, they (1980:547) mentioned that there three of division of reading comprehension (literal, interpretative or inferential, and critical reading). It could be assumed that for beginning level, the literal reading was the most appropriate because the students have still no prior knowledge in reading skills. So teachers have to give them the material appropriated to the student level.

On beginning level, Brown (2001:98) stated that since students at this level have little or no prior knowledge of the target language, the teacher becomes a central determine in whether accomplish their goals. It means that it becomes an important thing for teacher in determining a test. Three kinds of reading skill were mentioned by Spiro, Bruce, and Brewer to get the ability in comprehending a text or passage. They are locating detail, simple inferential skill, and complex inferential skill. They could be considered as test material to make a test in reading comprehension. At beginning level, students still have no prior knowledge of the target language so teachers have to determine the material appropriate to the students' knowledge.

Klinger, Vaughn, Boardman (2007:17) stated that teachers should consider numerous factors when choosing a test or assessment procedure:

1) The purpose of the testing.

In assessing reading comprehension especially for beginning level, teachers have to determine the purpose of the test appropriate to the students' knowledge or background knowledge what they have known.

2) The specific information needed about the student's reading comprehension.

A teacher has to arrange the content of the test. The content would be a question and it would be tested. The test must be appropriated to the students' level especially for beginning level.

3) The number of students being tested.

A teacher has to determine the number of students being tested whether is an individual, a small group, or a whole class.

4) The length of the test. A teacher has to determine the length of the test especially for beginning level.

At beginning level, teachers didn't need to make a complex test because the students still didn't have more knowledge or schemata in reading comprehension. Perhaps, short tests can be easier to give and less stressful for the students.

- 5) Whether the test is an individually or group-administered test.

A teacher has to determine whether the test was fulfilled individually or administered in a group. At beginning level student could be given a test individually better than administered in a group. It would make them more comprehending the purpose of the test, the finding of the information in the text of reading.

- 6) The number of forms available with test, particularly if multiple administrations are needed.

It means that the students could be tested by two forms in assessing their reading comprehension. They are pre test and post test. It would make them useful for assessing their progress.

- 7) For norm-referenced tests, the extent to which the norming sample is similar to the students to whom the test will be administered.

In this case, teacher used norm-referenced test to measure students' reading comprehension at what level they have faced. Norm-referenced test is an appropriate test for beginning level because the test could consist of multiple-choice format.

- 8) The examiner's qualification.

The tester or teacher must have the high or good skills to give highly specific test.

The amount of training needed to administer a test, score it, and interpret results. In order to be able to know the result of students' reading comprehension, teachers have to do training to students so that teacher could make an appropriate test for students when they face the examination of reading comprehension. For example, norm-referenced tests typically require some training.

Based on the explanation above, teachers have to consider the procedure to assess the students' reading comprehension. Reading comprehension test focused on the reader's ability to understand the intended meaning of the text. In order to be able to answer the questions of reading comprehension, for student on beginning level, teacher could use the norm-referenced test. It is an appropriate test for student because the test consists of multiple-choice and it didn't make student stress in answering the question.

## **8. Conclusion**

In assessing reading comprehension, teacher also needs knowledge to assess students' reading comprehension. Teachers must have the sense of reading comprehension, types of comprehension test, and procedures of making a test. At beginning level, the tests have to be appropriated to the readers or students' ability in reading skill because the students still have no prior knowledge about the target language especially for English. Teachers have to arrange the test material appropriate to the students' ability or knowledge. And also teachers have to determine a type of comprehension test appropriate to the students. For student at beginning level, the type of comprehension test is exactly norm-referenced test because it serves a multiple-choice test. The test didn't make the students stressful in facing the test. So it would make them to get a good result in reading comprehension test. And also it eases for teacher to analyze the students' ability or knowledge in assessing their reading comprehension.

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