Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies
Vol. 7, 1 , 2013, 67–81

Apples

Testing the Reading Ability of Low Educated ESOL Learners

Jane Allemano, University of London

Current national policy requires all further education courses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to be accredited, including those in English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL). However, there are issues surrounding this policy, particularly for learners at the lowest level, who bring with them a very wide spectrum of prior language and/or literacy knowledge. Some have little or no experience of literacy in any language and poor English language skills. A major barrier to assessment of beginner readers seems to be the examination process itself. This article summarises an on-going research project into the reasons for wrong answers given by low educated adult ESOL learners in reading examinations and explores how the process of testing is affected by the structure and format of the examination itself. This research focuses on the learners and how they approach an examination strategically or otherwise and how they see the relationship between the rubrics, the questions and the text. The initial findings are that the biggest issue concerns the learners' interaction with the test. By the time they come to take the test, most of them have become proficient enough readers to take meaning from text but can fail to demonstrate this because of the task set.

Keywords: reading assessment, low-educated, barriers to assessment

1 Introduction

What is an exam? It is fundamentally a testing device but what does it test? In order to have construct validity, a test should test what it purports to test, be it history, biology or mathematics (Koretz 2008; Lambert & Lines 2000). It is common practice to present tests through questions written on a paper according to an accepted culture of testing methods. But what if the target knowledge and skills of an examination are also embedded in the very structure upon which the examination is built and is being taken by candidates with no previous experience of the conventions of testing, and with rudimentary command of the language? This is the case with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners with little or no previous education or literacy.

This article reports on an enquiry that took place in the UK and sets out to explore how the construct validity of testing the English reading ability of

Corresponding author's email: j.allemano@ioe.ac.uk
ISSN: 1457-9863
Publisher: Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä
© 2013: The author
http://apples.jyu.fi

speakers of languages other than English with limited education and low literacy abilities is affected by the examination process itself.

2 Background

To set the context, this concern has arisen from current UK government policy, whereby all adult learners in post compulsory education (16 plus) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, including those on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, are required to work towards a qualification. Of the funding for each learner, 10% is paid to the provider only on the learner's achievement of the qualification (Department for Education and Science DfES 2005). The introduction of this policy led to the rapid development by several awarding bodies of external certification for all levels of the curriculum, with little time for the quality assurance stages of piloting and redrafting. Most of the awarding bodies concerned had been developing best practices in assessing the English language skills of non-native English speakers for many decades with a rigorous research base in some cases. However, there had been little experience gained in externally set and administered testing of learners at the lower end of the achievement scale. Some awarding bodies developed portfolio-based continuous assessment processes, while others produced examinations in speaking and listening, reading and writing. Many providers chose the examination route, as it reduces in-lesson evidence production and record keeping and allows more time for teaching and learning to take place. While this may be the best route for low-educated ESOL learners in terms of the teaching time that is available to them, it presents problems for them at the testing stage, especially in terms of their reading, as their achievement rates in reading are low compared to those of literate learners. This is despite the fact that learners in both groups who are entered for these examinations can usually read for meaning in non-test situations.

The focus of this research is on reading tests used at the lowest level, A1, of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) or Entry 1 of the ESOL Core Curriculum for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

3 Literature review

Much work has been done on the assessment of reading from level A2 upwards and on the teaching of reading at all levels, but there has been less on summative assessment at level A1. This may be because hitherto there has been no official requirement for assessment at this level.

As a major awarding body in the field of English language testing, Cambridge English have conducted and sponsored a great deal of research into the assessment of reading. In a recent article outlining the connection between testing and the reading process, Khalifa & Weir (2008: 3) took the view that hitherto "informed intuitive approaches have been helpful in advancing our conceptualisation of what is involved in reading both for pedagogical and assessment purposes". This conceptualisation broke reading down into subskills such as skimming, scanning, inferring meaning, and deducing meaning. Since

the early 1980s, the 'subskills' approach has been predominant in teaching (e.g. Grellet 1981) and has been reflected in assessment to the extent that item writers have been required to identify the subskills that apply to each item, a practice that is arguably more relevant when testing information-based subjects than it is for cognitive processes involved in reading.

However, this "informed intuition" alluded to by Khalifa & Weir (2008) has not reflected the varied literacy practices that the learners living in multilingual communities are engaged in. These are exemplified by Saxena (1994) in a description of the multilingual literacies of a Punjabi family in Southall, London. Saxena's work highlights the strong connection between literacy and other aspects of life, the main argument being that reading is embedded in a much wider range of skills employed in everyday life.

Social practice theory has also had an important influence on the teaching of basic literacy in recent years (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanovic 2000; Grieve 2007) but not so much on test design, although authentic reasons for reading are a major consideration in test design. For example, we may 'scan' a takeaway restaurant to find out delivery times, skim to find some vegetarian options, read for detail to select a meal that goes together, read critically to compare with other outlets (Schwab 2010: 153). "Linguistic processing is embedded within and inseparable from social practices or routines in which individuals are engaged" (Hellerman 2006: 379). Furthermore, "while assessment approaches have typically captured the skills that learners can perform in a classroom, research has shown that these skills do not necessarily lead to improved literacy practices in learners' daily lives" (Grieve 2007: 124). There is a need to include "broader purposes for adult literacy such as personal development, community participation, supporting children's education and social change" (Grieve 2007: 126). This is a view also very strongly put forward by Wallace (1992) and by Cooke & Simpson (2008), who argue for a socio-cognitive view of literacy. In order to be a successful reader, a learner needs to be able to decode written text, handle longer stretches of discourse, relate the discourses to their social and cultural contexts, and bring a degree of criticality to their reading. "In order to assess this ability the test writer needs a knowledge of how L2 readers [those reading a text in their second language] process text and how their lives connect to the written word" (Schellekens 2007: 169).

Khalifa & Weir (2008) go on to argue the importance of a cognitive processing approach. There has been work done by language theorists and cognitive psychologists to try and establish what is involved in the reading process. The role of context is interlinked with this process. Khalifa & Weir (2009) discuss this issue with regard to context validity of different item types on an examination paper. This is a key area and a crucial factor in the testing of reading, as contextual clues that readers use are often not apparent on an examination paper. However, they do not discuss testing below level A2 on the CEFR.

At level A1 there are also issues of decoding and phonemic awareness to be taken into consideration when testing inexperienced readers (Young-Scholten & Strom 2006). This is especially true when learners have not built up a significant sight word vocabulary, the ability to decode at word level as opposed to phonemic or even alphabetic decoding. This has a significant bearing on the level of deep understanding, inference, and interpretation that can take place when a reader encounters a text.

In recognition of the difficulties imposed by the above constraints, examples of good practice in assessing level A1 readers include working one-on-one in a testing situation, with the assessor engaging in conversation about the text with a learner (Spiegel & Sunderland 2006). This is not practical on a national scale, although one awarding body goes some way towards this by examining candidates in small groups who talk face to face with an assessor.

I have as yet found no research focusing on a detailed analysis of large-scale methods of assessment of A1 ESOL literacy learners.

4 Level A1 ESOL learners

At A1 level in ESOL classes in the UK post compulsory sector, there is a wide disparity among the learners in terms of prior language and literacy knowledge. There are three broad categories of learners:

1. The first group consists of well educated (secondary level or beyond), highly literate learners with a background in a language that uses the Roman alphabet, for whom the issue is more that of learning a modern foreign language at a beginner level. They are not basic literacy learners.
2. The second group consists of learners who are also well educated and highly literate but with a background in a language that uses a script other than the Roman alphabet. These learners do have to learn a new written code, sometimes also a different direction of reading text on the page, as well as the language, but they have literacy skills to transfer. Many also arrive in the UK fully cognisant of the Roman script. In both cases, they are also not basic literacy learners.
3. The third group is the focus of this study, and consists of learners who have had little or no schooling and, therefore, have limited literacy skills in their first language (L1) or any other acquired language. At the beginning of their studies, they may even be grappling with the notion that "print carries meaning" (DfES 2001: 70).

In many Adult and Further Education (post-compulsory) programs in the UK, all three groups attend the same classes and work towards the same qualification. One unintended consequence of this is that the literate learners described above find these tests very straightforward because of their previous acquisition of literacy and so raise the average scores. This has meant that the pass/fail boundaries, which are based on "cumulative frequency graphs showing the proportion of candidates at certain scores" (Lambert & Lines 2000: 53), are set beyond the reach of the third group. This situation has been affected further by the accession of eastern European countries into the European Union. The consequential influx of migrant workers from these countries led to the first of the three groups described above expanding disproportionately to the other two groups and raising the benchmarks for all of the groups.

Why do learners who are literate in their L1 fare better than learners who are not? It is recognised that the first language or culture can be an impediment to reading; for example, the letters of the alphabet may be pronounced differently or the sentence structure that learners are used to may not apply in

another language and they may, therefore, have difficulty identifying the components of a sentence. However, the consensus so far is that while there are significant variables in play, not the least of those being the scale of difference between the L1 and the L2 in terms of either the language or the coding system or both, learners who are experienced readers in their L1 share certain benefits. There is an argument that the stronger a learner's literacy in the first language, the more readily literacy in a subsequent language is acquired (Cummins 1984). These learners are aware of what reading is, that print relates to speech, that speech is segmented into sounds and that the written word may be different from speech. They have developed metalinguistic awareness, an understanding of the general properties of language, including morphological awareness, and an understanding of the components of words when represented in print. They relate what they are reading to their existing knowledge and experience in order to aid understanding and enhance their knowledge. They may have many years of experience interpreting print. Koda (2008: 80) calls this "top down assistance". Adult beginner readers who have reached the A1 level and are ready for summative assessment for funding purposes will have passed through up to three stages of learning. Frith (1985) defines these stages as logographic, based on recognition of overall visual appearance of text; alphabetic, based on phoneme awareness; and orthographic, "where words are recognised and retrieved at speed and enable reading to take place without sound" (Spiegel & Sunderland 2006: 57).

Another breakdown into three stages appears in the Literacy Framework set up in the Netherlands (Stockmann 2006: 154): Alpha A, where the learner has basic phonemic awareness; Alpha B, where "consonant clusters and morphemes are read as a unit"; and Alpha C, where reading is "automated except for long and unknown words".

Both the orthographic stage and Alpha C equate to the lowest level, A1, of the CEFR: "Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words and basic phrases and rereading as required" (Council of Europe 2001). This is the target level for the lowest ESOL certification in the UK. At this level, readers would be beginning to use a top down approach to reading (Khalifa & Weir 2008; Spiegel & Sunderland 2006). Here readers begin with the text as a whole in its context and predict, confirm, and "engage in active thought processes to make sense of text [...] context is of paramount importance" (Spiegel & Sunderland 2006: 58). In order to do this, readers need to bring "a wide range of background knowledge to reading and [...] construct the meaning of the text by interpreting it in terms of the background knowledge activated by the reader" (Grabe 2009: 15). Therefore, challenges arise for learners who are learning the language they are reading in and have limited literacy or education.

4.1 Teaching level A1 ESOL learners

In order to address these challenges, current practices in teaching reading are rooted in social practice theory (Barton et al. 2000), whereby text is embedded in the daily lives of the readers. In this approach, reading, although often an activity carried out by an individual, seldom happens in isolation. Adults share what they have read by summarising, discussing, reading aloud and taking

action. Paulo Freire (1972) goes so far as to suggest that reading is part of a process that leads to exploring social issues and campaigning for social change. In any case, adult readers are taught to approach a text with a reason or even a goal, be it pleasure, to gain knowledge, or to follow instructions. This reason brings with it predictions and expectations in their minds as to the content of a text based on previous knowledge and experience, which the text will extend, confirm, or challenge. This approach to reading texts is impossible to replicate on the scale of a national examination, where candidates are asked to work with decontextualised text.

5 Tests of the reading ability of level A1 ESOL learners

According to Koretz (2008: 220), three main factors undermine test validity: "failing to measure adequately what ought to be measured, measuring something that shouldn't be measured, and using a test in a manner that undermines validity". This study is concerned with the second factor, where performance is affected by the need for skills unrelated to the intended construct. To interpret this in view of the examinations concerned, where the intended construct is understanding of written material, the result could be marred by a lack of background knowledge, unfamiliarity with the testing method, or failure to understand the language of the rubric. Any of the above could lead to a difference in performance between the literate and low-educated second language learners and therefore be a threat to the validity of the examination. "We need to […] examine […] the nature of the reading activities in which we engage during a test in such a way as to enable comparison with activities occurring during non-test reading" (Khalifa & Weir 2008).

A traditional reading test for adults consists of a number of texts, taken out of their contexts and with certain aspects of layout and design removed in order to save production costs. These texts are followed by questions in a variety of formats, including multiple choice, binary choice and open ended questions. Tests assess, among other subskills, recognition of the purpose of a text, understanding of overall meaning, recognition and understanding of detail, deciphering of syntax and deducing meaning of unknown lexical items. The questions are often preceded by an introductory explanation with a view to making the task accessible. Although good practice in developing reading assessments requires that the questions and rubric contain language slightly below the level of reading ability being tested, in a basic literacy test, they can still double the reading load, which can prevent the candidate from grasping the concepts behind the task.

The reading tests concerned in this study attempt to frame the texts in social situations and represent the layout of real texts, which is easier for some genres than for others. For example, a letter can quite readily resemble the real thing, a magazine article less so. Problems arise, however, because at present examination papers contain texts in black and white with few illustrations. They may represent a whole document or part of one, which can be confusing for a beginner reader. Also they are not situated in the learners' immediate environment, adding another layer of complication for the learners.

Skilled writers of reading tests also make a considerable effort to assess real-life reading skills, and to a certain extent they succeed. They may ask candidates to follow referencing within a text, to deduce meaning, or to scan for specific information. All of these skills can be transferred from reading in another language. Thus, learners without these skills in another language are disadvantaged. In tests of receptive skills, candidates need to demonstrate understanding by completing tasks such as finding answers from a selection of possibilities, which involves eliminating wrong answers designed to distract; establishing whether a given statement is true or false; and answering open-ended questions in writing. The tasks inevitably increase the reading and understanding burden and, therefore, may affect the validity of the test. In addition, the rubric that surrounds the texts may pose more of a challenge for the candidates than the tests themselves, another example of ”construct irrelevant variance” (Koretz 2008: 221).

6 The study

The question for this research was: In what ways does the examination process and tasks affect the validity of assessment of the reading ability of low-level ESOL Literacy learners? The subquestions were:

- What are the reasons behind the choice of wrong answers on reading comprehension examination papers?
- Do the reasons relate to the contexts of the reading texts themselves or to the format and rubrics of the examination paper?

6.1 Theoretical perspective

As there is a plethora of terminology to describe the different stages of the research process, I will follow the definitions laid out by Crotty (1998: 5). The crux of the theoretical perspective for this research is the constructionist concept of phenomenology. “The image evoked is that of humans engaging with their human world. It is in and out of this interplay that meaning is born” (Crotty 1998: 45). The view of reality researched here focusses on the learners and how they approach an examination. The way in which they see the relationship between the rubrics, the questions, and the text forms the basis of the enquiry. Here there can be no universal truth, because each individual creates his or her own unique understanding of the world so there are multiple constructions and multiple interpretations of reality (Croker 2009: 6). This is further complicated by the fact that the learners’ constructions and interpretations change as they develop awareness.

Here meaning is socially constructed; it is concerned with the way that the participants interact with the examination phenomenon in a particular context at a given point in time and the multiple meanings it has for them (see Table 1) The research is, therefore, limited to a particular group of adult ESOL learners in the face of a reading examination in the classroom setting.

Table 1. The reading test phenomenon

Participants	Phenomenon	Context
Low educated ESOL learners	An externally set reading test	Reading as social practice

The premise is that learners faced with an examination will attempt to interpret it by using their pre-existing views of the world blended with new meaning brought to them by the examination process. The aim is to ascertain how far this is happening for the low-educated ESOL learners when undergoing an assessment of their reading.

6.2 Research methods

The research was based on participant observation, the main form of which was an observer "interacting with people while they are carrying out their everyday tasks" (Cowie 2009: 169). I was introduced to the learners as an observer researcher but took the role of a participant in the classroom proceedings in order to elicit the information I needed from the learners. I reviewed their paper with them after they had taken the examination in the same way that I would if I were their teacher. This was, in effect, a semi-structured interview in a group format (two groups of four students). For triangulation purposes, I had also considered individual semi-structured interviews to follow up the observation sessions but rejected this as a method, as the interviews would have had to be on another day for timetabling reasons and so too much time would have passed since the learners had actually completed the test. Secondly, it would take learners out of their everyday worlds and might inhibit them (Croker 2009: 7).

6.3 Sampling

In order to gather data from learners with the requisite backgrounds, it was necessary to work with learners who:

- had minimal literacy skills in their first language, which would mean that their education would have been interrupted during primary schooling or earlier
- had a speaking ability of at least level A2 in order for them to be able to express their reasons for their answers
- were progressing at a pace that did not indicate learning difficulty or disability, such as dyslexia. However, this can be difficult to identify in the early stages of literacy development.

I had the opportunity to work with an inner city further education college, with which I have had very close links in the past. This scenario had the benefit of my knowing the teacher, who would be comfortable about my presence, but not knowing the learners and therefore having no preconceived ideas as to their abilities or approaches to tasks. One of the teachers had two classes each containing four learners who matched my requirements exactly. It was important that the two groups were taught by the same teacher so as to reduce

the variable of different approaches to teaching. The choice of groups was, therefore, convenience sampling, as they were the nearest and most convenient (Robson 2002: 265).

The eight learners were from eastern Africa and the Indian subcontinent, in the 30–50 age range. There were five women and three men. Six had had no schooling, and two had had basic primary education.

I attended two lessons, one with a daytime group of learners and one with an evening group.

6.4 Data collection

As the exact nature and quality of information the learners would be able to convey about the test taking process was unpredictable, data collection was an issue. I met with the four learners in each group in their classroom immediately after they had taken the reading test. The group interviews lasted about 40 minutes.

We went through the paper on a question-by-question basis to replicate as far as possible the classroom procedure that was familiar to the learners. This involved my noting which learners answered each question on the test incorrectly, their answers to my questions, and any other comments on the question that might present clues as to why they answered as they did. I therefore designed a chart for each item on the examination paper. In this way, I could focus on only one sheet at any given time and was more able to respond to the learners. After the interviews had taken place, I coded the answers according to the type of explanation given or comment made.

6.5 Trustworthiness of the findings

A number of issues could affect the validity of the research. The small scale of the study means that the findings are not necessarily generalizable. The findings may be specific to, or dependant on the particular context in which the study took place (Robson 2002: 107). If the research is repeated with a different group in a different institution or with a different teacher, other factors may emerge. In addition, "the nature of this kind of research is that there is scope for alternative and competing explanations" (Denscombe 2002: 21). At the data analysis stage, there is the possibility that the explanations of the learners could be interpreted in different ways, possibly because of the preconceived hypothesis of the researcher.

A question may be raised as to whether this kind of research into cognitive processes ever really measures what it is attempting to measure. The main issue is ontological: the research process itself may affect the evidence, and the evidence may not be a true reflection of learner cognition. The very fact of being interviewed about a paper can change the way in which the learners present themselves. Humans react to the knowledge that they are being studied, and there is the very real possibility that they will act differently from normal (Denscombe 2002: 19). They may, inadvertently or otherwise, describe what they think they did or would like to have done rather than what they really did.

I was aware that my presence may affect the learners' behaviour, as I was a stranger to them. Also the fact that they were working with me in a small group

may have inhibited learners who did not want to appear less able than others. "Creating a positive relationship with the learners is crucial" (Cowie 2009: 169), so to this end it was made clear to the learners that this work was being done to identify problems with the method of assessment and that errors they made would be the fault of the examination and not theirs. They were identified as helpers in this process, and I made my gratitude clear at all times by saying things like *that is exactly what I need to know,* or *that is very useful information, thank you.*

7 Analysis

The sessions were lively, with the learners expressing gratitude to me for feedback and the opportunity to discuss their work. They were much more able to talk about the processes they used than I had expected. They told me why they had given certain answers and, in some instances, were able to say what they were doing wrong. Although their spoken language was quite restricted, they were able to communicate with gesture, pointing, running a finger across the page, and saying things like *I confuse*, *no understand*, and *no see*.

In general, the learners had least difficulty with Part 3 of the paper, which consisted of three short texts publicising new English classes. Of the six multiple choice questions, which involved scanning all three texts to identify specific information, only one (Question 12, discussed below) caused problems.

I will now take eight key questions that caused the most difficulty.

The examination begins with a series of questions on three related texts: a message from Maria to a friend requesting help with finding day care for her child and expressing certain requirements regarding time and location (Text A) and 2 advertisements for a day care centre (Texts B and C). Question 1 requires candidates to identify the genre of texts B and C.

Question 1 is a multiple choice question about genre. Seven of the eight learners failed to answer this correctly:

Question 1:
Answers given

What are texts B and C? Tick one box.	
letters	4
emails	1
advertisements	1
No answer	2

Five of the learners had not understood that the question was referring to texts B and C only and had looked at the top of the page for their clues. The two that did not answer said they had not understood the word *advertisement*.

Questions 2 and 3 ask for the address and the cost of each day care centre. Three of the learners wrote only the address and the cost of the centre that they thought was suitable. They all said that they had not understood the meaning of *each*.

Question 4 asks which day care centre is good for Maria and was answered incorrectly by seven learners, even though three had demonstrated their awareness of the correct answer in their handling of question 2.

They were also required to write two reasons why the chosen centre was better. This question proved very difficult, with six leaving this part blank. The two that attempted to answer failed to grasp the concept behind the question, which was to identify the factors that applied only to the better centre. One gave a reason that applied to both centres (the cost), and the other did not refer to the advertisements, only Maria's needs: *she needs to work*; *she needs a centre near her house*.

Question 5 asks, *Maria thinks one of the day care centres is good. What does she do next?* All of the learners failed to realise that they should look at the three texts for the answer, and so they used world knowledge: *take her daughter to the centre*, *go to the centre*, *pay for the centre* etc. The correct answer according to the text was to phone the centre.

Then there are questions about short messages. Two of these caused problems: *Where could you see these notices and instructions? Tick one box for each*.

Question 6:

Please write in blue or black pen	
on a form	5
in a shop selling pens	1
in a notebook	2

The learners who got this question wrong had focused on the words *write* and *pen* and not thought about the real life context.

Question 7:

Today's sport on back page	
in a sports centre	3
in a newspaper	5
in a book	-

The three who answered this one incorrectly said that they had matched *sport* with the answers and had read no further. They had not seen the word *page*.
There are then three short texts advertising English language classes. The questions relate to all three texts.

Question 8:

Which class is in the Learning Centre?	
A Reading and Writing class	-
B Speaking and Listening class	4
C English and Computer class	4

The answer is in the third text about the English and computer class, but the second text about the speaking and listening task contained the sentence: *The class is in room 106 – this is next to the learning centre*. The five learners who ticked B had spotted *learning centre* in the first text they came across and had not read the rest of the sentence.

These answers given can be grouped according to the type of difficulty experienced by the learners – concept of the question (22 instances or 59.55% of answers), language of the question (5 instances or 13.5%), reading of the text (10 instances or 27%). See Figure 1.

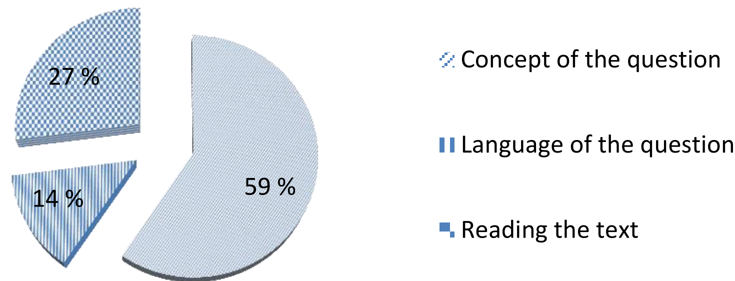


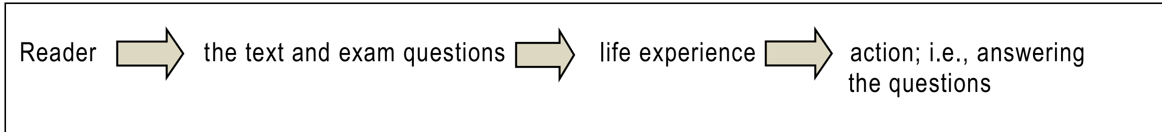
Figure 1. Reasons for wrong answers.

8 Argument

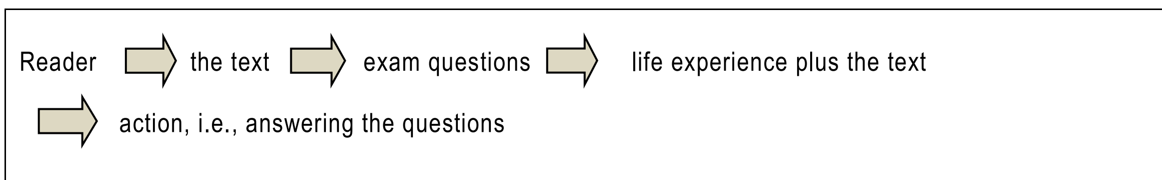
It would seem that the learners with a few exceptions have little difficulty understanding *the language of the questions* as they stand. Language difficulties that they expressed were at word level and not sentence level (e.g. *advertisement*, *each*). This would indicate that the language level of the questions is appropriate for these learners.

However, two key issues seemed to emerge. The lesser of the two is a consequence of *reading the text*. Predictably, due to their level of attainment, the difficulties some learners had with reading the texts were caused by the fact that they were still reading word by word and not taking in information in meaningful chunks, as indicated in answers to questions 6 and 8. It is possible for them to stop reading when they think they have an answer and not see words immediately following. It would seem that some of the sample are just beyond the alphabetic stage, as described by Frith (1985), where they are still sounding out words based on individual phonemes but have not yet fully reached the orthographic stage, where they recognise whole words and move through them at speed.

The biggest issue concerns the learners' interaction with the test, manifested through their grasp of the *concept of the question*. The learners in this small sample seemed to recognise that they needed to draw on their real-life experience and world knowledge in order to answer these questions but were engaging with the questions at the expense of interpreting the text and were approaching the task as follows:

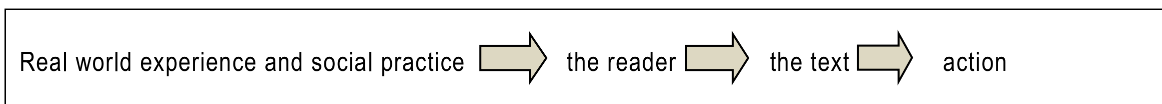


A reading test requires a rather different process, whereby the test taker approaches an exam with an open mind, brings in previous knowledge and experience where appropriate and knows how to use this information in a test. The experienced test taker is prepared for preconceived ideas to be confirmed or challenged by the text.



In this model, the text and the exam questions could be reversed, according to strategy.

It could be argued that in the real world, the following process of social practice that leads the reader to and through the text, is more normal:



9 Conclusion

This was a very small-scale piece of research in a specific context and is, therefore, not necessarily generalizable to other contexts and other learners. It does, however, indicate that these low-educated ESOL learners were hindered by the conceptual construct of the reading test that they took. By the time they came to take the test, most of them had become proficient enough readers to take meaning from text, but they failed to demonstrate this because of the task set. To refer back to Koretz's three factors that undermine validity, it would seem that the issue here is not the first "failing to measure adequately what ought to be measured" but rather the second "measuring something that shouldn't be measured" (Koretz 2008: 220). The texts relate to the background and experience of the learners, but some of the tasks set prevent the learners from demonstrating their understanding.

Although one of the key guiding principles behind teaching literacy to adults is that levels of literacy are not necessarily a reflection of intelligence, it would seem that because of the lack of experience in reading and without the support of their normal social practice, these learners are not ready to relate the task to the information they have gained from reading and demonstrate this through reading and writing in the same way that more literate learners might. In other words, the complexity of the tasks, although these may well be within their real life skills, rendered it difficult for them to be accomplished in an examination setting. Therefore, there needs to be a review of testing methods for

learners at this level in order to develop tests that enable them to demonstrate their true ability.

References

Barton, D., Hamilton, M. & Ivanic, R. (eds.) 2000. *Situated literacies: reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.

Cooke, M. & Simpson, J. 2008. *ESOL: A critical guide.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Croker, R. 2009. An introduction to qualitative research. In J. Heigham & P. Croker (eds.), *Qualitative research in applied linguistics. A practical introduction.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 3–24.

Council of Europe 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cowie, N. 2009. Observation. In J. Heigham & P. Croker (eds.), *Qualitative research in applied linguistics. A practical introduction.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 165–181.

Crotty, M. 1998. *The foundations of social research. Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage.

Cummins, J. 1984. *Bilingualism and special education.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Denscombe, M. 2002. *Ground rules for good research: a 10 point guide for social researchers.* Buckingham: Open University press.

DfES (Department for Education and Science) 2001. *Adult ESOL Core Curriculum.* DfES publications. [Retrieved June 03, 2013]. Available at http://cdn.cityandguilds.com/ProductDocuments/Skills_for_Work_and_Life/English_Mathematics_and_ICT_Skills/3694/Centre_documents/3694_Adult_ESOL_Core_Curriculum_v1.pdf

DfES (Department for Education and Science) 2005. *Further education: raising skills, improving life chances*. London: The Stationery Office. [Retrieved June 03, 2013]. Available at http://www.officialdocuments.gov.uk/document/cm67/6768/6768.pdf

Freire, P. 1972. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Frith, U. 1985. Beneath the surface of developmental dyslexia. In K. E. Patterson, J. C. Marshall & M. Coltheart (eds.), *Surface dyslexia: neuropsychological and cognitive studies of phonological reading*. London: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, 310–330.

Grabe, W. 2009. *Reading in a second language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grieve, K. 2007. Assessment for whom and for what? Stepping back to ask important questions about assessment. In P. Campbell (ed.), *Measures of success.* Edmonton, Alberta: Grass Roots Press, 123–158.

Grellet, F. 1981. *Developing reading skills*. A practical guide to reading comprehension exercises. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hellerman, J. 2006. Classroom interactive practices for developing L2 literacy. A microethnic study of two beginning adult learners of English. *Applied Linguistics* 27 (3), 377–404.

Khalifa, H. & C. Weir 2008. A cognitive processing approach towards defining reading comprehension. *Cambridge ESOL: Research Notes*, February 2008.

Khalifa, H. & C. Weir 2009. *Examining reading.* Studies in Language Testing no 29 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Koda, K. 2008. Impacts of prior literacy experience on second language learning to read. In K. Koda & A. Zehler (eds.), *Learning to read across languages*. New York: Routledge, 68–96.

Koretz, D. 2008. *Measuring up.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Lambert, D. & D. Lines 2000. *Understanding assessment – purposes, perceptions, practice.* London: Routledge.

Robson, C. 2002. *Real world research*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Saxena, M. 1994. Literacies among the Panjabis in Southall. In M. Hamilton, D. Barton & R. Ivanic (eds.), *Worlds of literacy.* Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters, 195–214.
Schellekens, P. 2007. *The Oxford ESOL handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Schwab, I. 2010. Reading. In N. Hughes & I. Schwab (eds.), *Teaching adult literacy. Principles and practice.* Maidenhead: Open University Press, 149–208.
Spiegel, M. & H. Sunderland 2006. *Teaching basic literacy to ESOL learners: a teachers' guide.* London: LLU+.
Stockmann, W. 2006. Portfolio methodology for literacy for literacy students. In I. van de Craats, J. Kurvers & M. Young Scholten (eds.*), Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition. Proceedings of the inaugural symposium.* Utrecht: LOT, 151–163.
Wallace, C. 1992. *Reading.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Young-Scholten, M. & N. Strom 2006. First-time L2 readers: Is there a critical period? In I. van de Craats, J. Kurvers & M. Young-Scholten (eds.), *Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition. Proceedings of the inaugural symposium.* Utrecht: LOT, 45–68.

Received 14 December, 2012
Revision received 9 June, 2013
Accepted 25 June, 2013