

# 8

## Testing reading comprehension

### 8.1 The nature of the reading skills

Until recently the many and diverse reading skills and strategies for use in everyday situations have been largely subordinate to a narrower range of skills required for dealing with simplified readers, especially at the elementary levels. Furthermore, on a few language courses, efficient reading skills have been pushed into the background in an attempt to develop oral fluency skills. Attempts at dealing with the many complex reading skills frequently come too late, at the tertiary level (i.e. at university, technical college), when students suddenly find themselves confronted with professional and technical literature in the foreign language.

In spite of the wide range of reading material specially written or adapted for English language learning purposes, there are few comprehensive systematic programmes which have been constructed from a detailed analysis of the skills required for efficient reading. Much test material is still limited to short reading extracts on which general 'comprehension' questions are based. As with listening comprehension, reading comprehension test material is very closely related to the type of practice material used by the teacher to develop the reading skills. Few language teachers would argue against the importance of reading: what is still urgently required in many classroom tests is a greater awareness of the actual processes involved in reading and the production of appropriate exercise and test materials to assist in the mastery of these processes.

Before reading tests in the second or foreign language can be successfully constructed, the first language reading skills of the students must be ascertained. Clearly there is often little purpose in testing in the second language those basic reading skills which the students have not yet developed in their own language. However, the mere fact that a student has mastered some of the required reading skills in the first language is no guarantee at all that he or she will be able to transfer those skills to reading another language.

At this stage in our examination of reading difficulties, it would be helpful to attempt to identify some of the specific skills involved in reading.<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, these can be defined as the ability to:

- recognise words and word groups, associating sounds with their corresponding graphic symbols;

- deduce the meaning of words by
  - (a) understanding word formation (roots, affixation, derivation and compounding);
  - (b) contextual clues (e.g. *One of the members of the group exposed the plot, and the police were soon able to arrest the leaders.*);
- understand explicitly stated information (e.g. *I wish Ann had come. = Ann did not come - hence my wish.*);
- understand relations within the sentence, especially
  - (a) elements of sentence structure
  - (b) negation
  - (c) fronting and theme
  - (d) complex embedding;
- understand relations between parts of a text through both lexical devices (e.g. repetition, synonyms, antithesis) and grammatical cohesive devices, especially anaphoric and cataphoric reference (e.g. *he, they, it; the former, the latter*) and connectives (e.g. *since, after, because, although, however, in addition*);
- perceive temporal and spatial relationships, and also sequences of ideas;
- understand conceptual meaning, especially
  - (a) quantity and amount
  - (b) definiteness and indefiniteness
  - (c) comparison and degree
  - (d) means and instrument
  - (e) cause, result, purpose, reason, condition, addition, contrast, concession;
- anticipate and predict what will come next in the text;
- identify the main idea and other salient features in a text;
- generalise and draw conclusions;
- understand information not explicitly stated by
  - (a) making inferences (i.e. reading between the lines)
  - (b) understanding figurative language;
- skim and scan (looking for the general meaning and reading for specific information);
- read critically;
- adopt a flexible approach and vary reading strategies according to the type of material being read and the purpose for which it is being read.

No mention has been made here of reading aloud, since this particular skill is unique in that it involves different skills from silent reading.

Two different kinds of complementary reading activities to which students are usually exposed are generally classified as *intensive* and *extensive* reading. Short reading extracts of a moderate degree of difficulty and containing features which merit detailed study form a basis for intensive reading practice. Whole articles, chapters and books (usually simplified readers) are used for extensive reading practice; in this case, however, the material selected is generally slightly below the language attainment level of the students using it. Unfortunately, most reading tests concentrate on intensive reading to the exclusion of extensive reading, probably because it is more economical to have a large number of items based on a short reading extract than a few items based on a much longer one. However, these are insufficient grounds for neglecting to test extensive reading at certain levels.

In most tests, especially tests of general proficiency, it is useful to include a variety of text types for reading comprehension in addition to the

usual, more literary prose extracts: e.g. newspaper articles, instructions for using appliances and machinery, directory extracts, public notices, timetables and maps, advertisements, etc. The inclusion of such text types will not only provide a more realistic and reliable means of assessment but will also help to motivate students by demonstrating how the target language is used in real-life situations. Consequently, it becomes important that the actual presentation of the material should be as authentic as possible. In short, a newspaper article should appear in the actual form of a newspaper article, thereby giving a genuine feel to the material.

Several ways of testing reading comprehension are treated in the following sections of this chapter. Certain of the item types will be more suited to testing comprehension of a particular text than other item types. Indeed, there are numerous ways of testing reading comprehension, ranging from multiple-choice items to open-ended questions (i.e. questions which require students to write an answer in a sentence of their own). Although multiple-choice items are sometimes the most suitable instruments for testing reading comprehension, they should not be over-used. Frequently, other item types are far more interesting and useful. The text itself should always determine the types of questions which are constructed. Certain texts may lend themselves to multiple-choice items, others to true/false items, others to matching items, others to re-arrangement items, others to ordinary completion items, others to the completion of information in tables, and yet others to open-ended questions. Indeed, sometimes the same text will demand at least two or three different types of items.

## 8.2 Initial stages of reading: matching tests

The tests described in the first half of this section are concerned purely with word and sentence recognition. They test students' ability to discriminate visually between words which are spelt in fairly similar ways. If used in exercise material and progress tests, these test items will assist in developing word recognition speed. Though not administered as speed tests in the strict sense in the very early stages, word and sentence matching items should be covered by the students as quickly as possible. Once the students have gained familiarity and confidence with this type of test, their performances should be timed so that they are forced to read under some pressure. At first, it is advisable to confine the words used in the items to those already encountered orally; later a number of words not encountered orally should be introduced.

### *Word matching*

The testees are required to draw a line under the word which is the same as the word on the left.

now	bow/not/how/ <u>now</u> /mow
sheep	shop/shape/sleep/heap/sheep
ever	never/over/ever/fewer/even
top	top/stop/tap/pot/ton
wonder	wander/wonder/window/fonder/won
has gone	is gone/has won/has gone/his game/had gone
clothes	cloth/clothing/cloths/clots/clothes
most	most pleasant/more pleasant/most present/not pleasant/most pleasant
peasants	

### *Sentence matching*

This item is similar to the word-matching item. The testees are required to recognise as quickly as possible sentences which consist of the same words

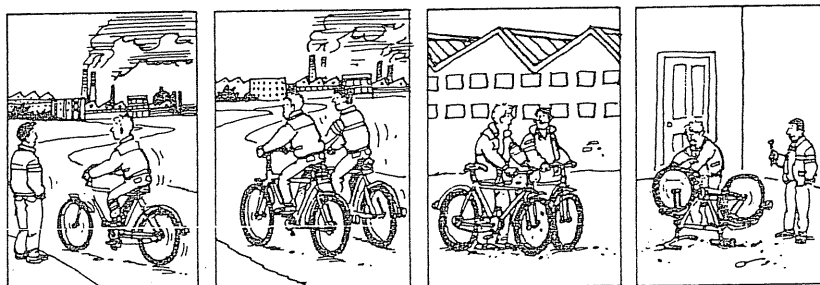
in the same order. They read a sentence, followed by four similar sentences, only one of which is exactly the same as the previous one.

1. Tom is not going to your school.
  - A. Tom is not going to your pool.
  - B. Tom is going to your school.
  - C. Tom is not coming to your school.
  - D. Tom is not going to your school.
  
2. The thief can hide in the jungle.
  - A. The thief can die in the jungle.
  - B. The thieves can hide in the jungle.
  - C. The thief can be hidden in the jungle.
  - D. The thief can hide in the jungle.

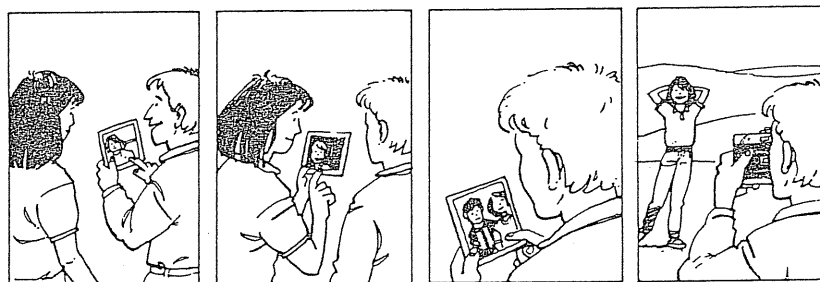
*Pictures and sentence matching*

In the remainder of this section the items will concentrate on word and sentence comprehension, using pictures to test this skill.

**Type 1** This type of item is similar to that used to test listening comprehension and described under Type 3 in Section 6.5. The testees look at four pictures and then read a sentence about one of the pictures. They are required to identify the correct picture.

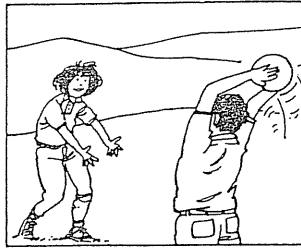


They are cycling to work.

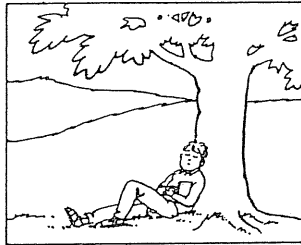


He is showing her the photograph.

**Type 2** This type is similar to the previous one but is much more economical in that only one picture is required for each item (instead of four). The testees look at a picture and read four sentences, only one of which is about the picture. They then have to select the correct sentence.

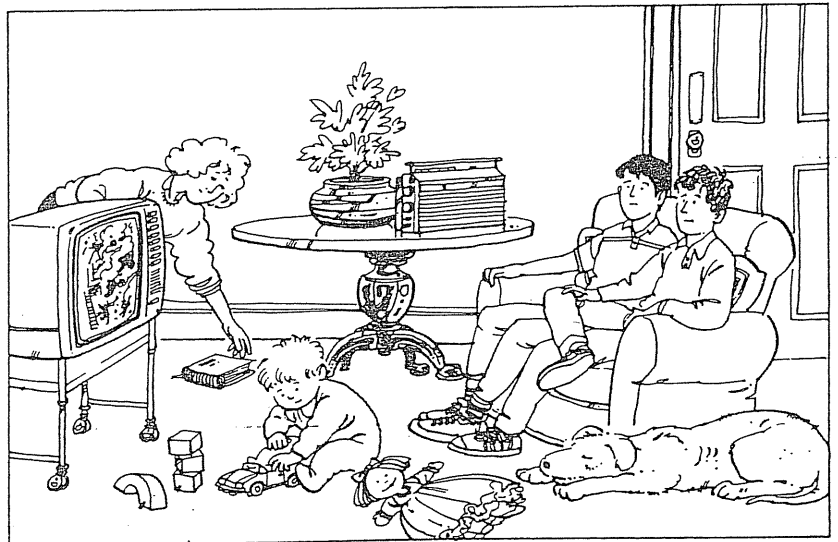


- A. Jenny is throwing the ball to Peter.
- B. Peter is kicking the ball to Jenny.
- C. Peter is throwing the ball to Jenny.
- D. Jenny is kicking the ball to Peter.



- A. The man under the tree is reading his book.
- B. The man resting under the tree is looking at his book.
- C. The man with the book is sleeping under the tree.
- D. The man carrying the book is going to sit down under the tree.

**Type 3** Although this item type is referred to here as a matching item, it could equally well take the form of a true/false item (in which the testees write T or F at the side of each sentence according to whether or not the sentence agrees with the contents of the picture). In this particular instance, testees have to select the (four) sentences which match the picture.



Four of the following sentences agree with the picture. Put a circle round the letter of each of the four sentences.

- A. The dog on the floor is asleep.
- B. The baby is playing with the dog.
- C. The baby has just broken a toy car.
- D. The television set is on fire.