

# Reading Abilities and Strategies: A Short Introduction

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## Abstract

This paper gives a short analysis of reading abilities and reading strategies. Much research has been done to investigate the nature of reading, though it's had to exactly define reading abilities and strategies. Different kinds of readings are discussed in this paper and distinctions are made between first language reading and second or foreign language reading.

**Keywords:** Reading abilities, Reading skills, Reading strategies, First language reading, Second or foreign language reading

## 1. Introduction

It is commonly recognized that there are different levels or strands of understanding or comprehension of a text. Distinctions are made between literal, referential, and critical understanding. A literal understanding is an understanding of meanings that are directly stated in text, or an understanding of the main implications. Comprehension at this level involves surface meanings, readers find information and ideas that are explicitly stated in the text. The second level is referential or interpretive understanding. At this level, readers go beyond what is said and read for deeper meanings. Readers must read carefully and analyze what they have read, they need to be able to see relationships among ideas, for example, how ideas go together, and also see the implied meanings of these ideas. It is obvious that before readers can do this, they have to first understand the ideas that are stated (literal understanding). Referential comprehension includes thinking processes such as drawing conclusions, making generalizations and predicting outcomes. Finally, the third level is critical reading whereby ideas and information are evaluated. Critical evaluation occurs only after readers have understood the ideas and information that the writer has presented. However, appreciative comprehension should be added here, which is reading in order to gain an emotional or other kind of valued response from a passage.

However, just as Alderson (2000) notes, although intuitively appealing, such distinctions among levels of understanding are not always easy to define, since language is rarely completely explicit, normal language processing requires the reader to make inferences. The three levels are not distinct.

## 2. Reading Abilities, Skills and Strategies

### 2.1 Reading Ability: Divisible or Not?

Language ability is identified by some as a set of language skills. A great deal of teaching and testing materials are organized around one such proposal, that of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and the four skills model still remains pedagogically useful today, though it lacks support of empirical findings. Reading is considered by many teachers, textbook writers and language test constructors to be made up of different skills and components. It is often claimed that sets of reading components provide useful frameworks on which to base course design, teaching, and test development.

A reading skill can be described as "a cognitive ability which a person is able to use when interacting with texts" (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Thus, unlike comprehension, which can be viewed as the product of reading a particular text, skills are seen as parts of the generalized reading process. So far, many different lists, taxonomies and even hierarchies of skills have been developed. Davis (1968) defines eight skills. Munby (1978) elaborately writes a reading ability list, he distinguishes nineteen reading microskills, which has been influential in syllabus and materials design as well as language tests design. Heaton (1988) also defines fourteen skills of reading ability. Hughes (1989) describes four levels of reading skills: macro-skills, micro-skills, grammatical and lexical abilities, and low-level operations.

Despite the widespread influence of a multidivisible view of reading on current practice, this view is greatly challenged. The idea that language ability is essentially unitary or holistic has been discussed in language teaching and testing circles since the 1970s. An early influential advocate of a holistic view of language ability is John Oller (e.g. Oller, 1979). His famous Unitary Competence Hypothesis (UCH) holds that language performance involving different skills and in different contexts draws on the same set of sources. Language ability could consequently be assessed as a whole, using integrative tests, such as cloze and dictation tests.

In opposition to a multidivisible view of reading, a substantial number of studies have found that it is not possible to differentiate between reading components, either through empirical demonstration of the separate functioning of such components when these are operationalized in language test items, or through the judgment of experts on what the focus of such test items actually is. Lunzer et al. (1979) find that there is no evidence that distinct separate skills exist and that, instead, reading consists of one single, integrated aptitude. A recent investigation conducted by Rost (1993) again finds strong evidence of unidimensionality, leading Rost to warn against different skill component interpretations for all available reading comprehension tests.

In a much quoted study (Alderson, 1990a, 1990b), Alderson investigated the reading component question through the judgment of experts on what reading test items actually tested. The judges could not agree on assigning particular skills and strategies to particular test items, they could not agree on what an item was testing, and even whether an item was testing a higher or lower level component.

Though the view that reading is multidivisible lacks empirical support, the unidimensionality which considers reading as a unitary skill is not without its problem. The above-mentioned Unitary Competence Hypothesis was rejected by Oller himself (Oller, 1983). Weir (1994, cited in Alderson, 2000), after reviewing the testing literature, reanalyzes the results of Alderson (1990a), and analyzes some test-based results of his own for EFL reading tests, he concludes that there is clear evidence that vocabulary should be seen as a component separate from reading comprehension in general. He says that if vocabulary is to be considered part of reading, then a bi-divisible approach might be more appropriate. There are other evidences which seem to suggest a bi-divisible view of reading, at least as far as word meanings and reading comprehension in general are concerned. It has become common in the research literature that reading is essentially divided into two components: decoding (word recognition) and comprehension (Alderson, 2000).

It might be the case that subskills are more readily identifiable in test for beginning, weak or dyslexic readers, but not for more advanced readers. But as described earlier in this section, no matter what theoretical position the test developer takes, the need to construct individual test items will exert strong influence on attempts to measure individual reading components or skills.

## 2.2 Reading Strategies

The 1970s and 1980s saw considerable interest in learner strategies in language learning, at the same time, more emphasis was put on the process of reading in reading literature. Both of these led to the thriving of reading strategies research in the 1980s. But much of the research fails to distinguish between strategies as defined more generally in the strategy literature, and skills as often used in the reading literature. Olshavsky (1977) defines a strategy as “a purposeful means of comprehending the author’s message”. Pritchard (1990, cited in Urquhart & Weir, 1998) argues that a strategy is “a deliberate action that readers take voluntarily to develop an understanding of what they read”. Though there is confusion in the literature as to what distinguishes a skill from a strategy, some distinctions are generally accepted (Urquhart & Weir, 1998):

- a. Strategies are reader-oriented, skills are text-oriented.
- b. Strategies represent conscious decisions taken by the reader, skills are deployed unconsciously.
- c. Strategies, unlike skills, represent a response to a problem.

In summary, a skill is an ability which has been automatized and operates largely subconsciously, whereas a strategy is a conscious procedure carried out in order to solve a problem (Williams & Moran, 1989, cited in Urquhart & Weir, 1998).

Olshavsky (1977) categorizes three strategies: word related, clause related and story related. Hosenfeld (1977, 1979, 1984) lists a number of effective reading strategies. Block (1986) distinguishes between general strategies (comprehension gathering and comprehension monitoring) and local strategies (attempts to understand specific linguistic units). Sarig (1987) classifies the reading moves or strategies into four types. Undoubtedly, the number and complexity of reading strategies is just overwhelming. Given the fact that strategies are frequently utilized in combination with each other and that individual readers use different terminology to explain the strategies they are using, a conclusion list may not be possible.

### 3. Different Kinds of Reading

All the models of reading that have been looked at so far have been designed with careful reading in mind. Many of the models of reading that have surfaced in the literature to date have been mainly concerned with careful reading at the local level. Weir (1993) proposes four types or levels of reading:

- A. Reading expeditiously for global comprehension
- B. Reading expeditiously for local comprehension
- C. Reading carefully for global comprehension
- D. Reading carefully for local comprehension

Urquhart & Weir (1998) distinguish between five kinds of reading: scanning, skimming, search reading, careful reading and browsing, though they claim that the list is not exhaustive. These terms for different types of reading are often used in the literature, yet they often appear to be used in different ways. These will be discussed in detail.

Skimming: reading for gist, it is a type of rapid reading which is used when the reader wants to get the main idea or ideas from a passage (Richards et al., 1992).

Scanning: reading selectively to achieve very specific reading goals, e.g. finding a number, date. It is used when the reader wants to locate a particular piece of information without necessarily understanding the rest of a text or passage. The main feature of scanning is that any part of the text which does not contain the pre-selected piece of information is dismissed.

Search reading: locating information on predetermined topics. The reader wants information to answer set questions or to provide data. Search reading differs from scanning in that in search reading, certain key ideas will be sought while there is no such attempt in scanning. It also differs from skimming in that the search for information is guided by predetermined topics so the reader does not necessarily have to get the gist of the whole text.

Careful reading: this is the kind of reading favored by many educationists and psychologists to the exclusion of all other types. It is associated with reading to learn, hence with the reading of textbooks. Urquhart & Weir (1998) note the defining features of careful reading are: (a) that the reader attempts to handle the majority of information in the text, that is, the process is not selective, (b) that the reader adopts a submissive role, and accepts the writer's organization, and (c) that the reader attempts to build up a macrostructure. They also distinguish between careful reading at local level and at global level.

Browsing: is a sort of reading where goals are not well defined, parts of a text may be skipped fairly randomly, and there is little attempt to integrate the information into a macrostructure.

There is no necessary correlation between a particular reading behavior and a particular genre of text. And readers may switch from one kind of reading to another during reading, they are under no obligation to maintain a particular reading behavior throughout the length.

In language teaching, reading activities are sometimes classified as extensive and intensive. The distinction is largely a pedagogical one, extensive reading means reading in quantity in order to gain a general understanding of what is read. It is intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading. Intensive reading is generally at a slower speed, and requires a higher degree of understanding than extensive reading.

### 4. First Language Reading and Second or Foreign Language Reading

Questions comparing first and second/foreign language reading generally revolve around two interrelated but separate issues: the reading process and reading skills. Some researchers investigate whether first and second language reading processes are similar or whether there is a universal reading process. Others wonder whether individuals' reading skills transfer from their first language to a second. Researchers also ask whether good first language readers are also good second language readers.

Although little consensus has been reached among researchers attempting to analyze and compare first and second language reading processes, their individual and sometimes specialized conclusions provoke examination. Devine (1981, cited in Barnet, 1989) concludes that first and second/foreign language reading processes resemble each other. Kern (1988, cited in Barnet, 1989) finds that some difficulties in reading are common to both types of reading.

Researchers, who argue that first and second/foreign language reading processes differ, commonly declare

subjects' language proficiency level to be a determining factor. In general, the reading process of the advanced second /foreign language learner proves analogous with first language reading process, whereas that of the beginning second/foreign language learner contrasts with both. Mcleod and McLaughlin (1986, cited in Barnet, 1989) argue that advanced second/foreign language readers differ not only from beginning second/foreign language readers but also from native readers. But in general, experienced second /foreign language readers read more like proficient first language readers than do beginning second/foreign language readers.

Singhal (1998) elaborates the similarities and differences in L1 and L2 reading processes. Reading in both contexts is a meaning making process involving an interaction between the reader and the text. Readers use mental activities in order to construct meaning from text. These activities are generally referred to as reading strategies or reading skills. Successful L1 and L2 readers will consciously or unconsciously engage in specific behaviors to enhance their comprehension of texts. Both top-down and bottom-up strategies are used by effective readers as they read. As they read, they sample from the text, predict what will come next, test and confirm predictions, and so on. They use their background knowledge and various strategies to facilitate comprehension. To this extent one can say reading in L1 and L2 are similar.

However, L2 reading also differs greatly from L1 reading, Singhal examines factors of cultural differences: content (background knowledge) schema, formal (textual) schema, and linguistic (language) schema. It is evident that schema plays an important role in text comprehension. An L2 reader who is not familiar with culturally based knowledge or content schema, or a reader who does not possess the same linguistic base as the L1 reader, will encounter difficulties in reading, such difficulties may be greater when there is a greater difference between L1 and L2.

There are two widely known hypotheses concerning the relationship between first language and second languages abilities: the linguistic interdependence hypothesis and the linguistic threshold hypothesis. The linguistic interdependence hypothesis, in its simple form proposes that L1 reading ability transfers to L2. It assumes that there is a common underlying cognitive ability between L1 and L2, and it implies that we do not need to learn reading in L2 if we have a certain level of L1 reading ability. According to this hypothesis, transfer happens automatically. The linguistic threshold hypothesis proposes, on the other hand, that a threshold level of L2 language ability is necessary before L1 reading ability transfers to L2. This implies that L2 learners need to acquire some basic linguistic knowledge before they are able to read in L2.

Alderson (1984) integrates the two hypotheses mentioned above into a question: "Reading in a foreign language: A reading problem or a language problem?". Here "language problem" refers to a weakness in the knowledge and skills required for processing L2 linguistic properties, i.e. orthographic, phonological, lexical, syntactic, and discoursal knowledge specific to L2, while "reading problem" refers to a weakness in what is called higher level mental operations such as predicting, analyzing, synthesizing, inferencing and retrieving relevant background knowledge, which are assumed to operate universally across languages.

In this classic article, Alderson broadly reviews research which contains implication for this question and proposes a tentative conclusion: The difficulties in L2 reading derive both from a language problem and a reading problem; L2 reading is more like a language problem at the lower levels of L2 proficiency and is more a reading problem at the higher levels of L2 proficiency. He concludes that there is likely to be a language threshold beyond which second language readers have to progress before their first language reading abilities can transfer to the second language situation.

After the publication of Alderson (1984), much research has been carried out to examine this topic. Though most of the research supports the linguistic threshold hypothesis, the concept of the linguistic threshold has not been elaborated enough.

After reviewing several studies, Yamashita (1999) proposes a model of the linguistic threshold. He hypothesizes three levels of the linguistic threshold to explain the contribution of both L1 reading ability and L2 language ability: the fundamental level, the minimum level, and the maximum level. Before readers reach the fundamental level, L2 language ability is very low and can not contribute to explaining the variation of L2 reading, there is no systematic relationship between their L2 language ability and their L2 reading comprehension. When the readers' L2 language ability has reached the fundamental level, L2 language ability starts to make a contribution to L2 reading, but L1 reading ability can not be transferred yet. The variation in L2 reading ability of the readers between the fundamental and the minimum levels is explained by L2 language ability only. When readers have reached the minimum level, L1 reading ability starts to transfer. When the readers' L2 proficiency develops towards the maximum level, the contribution of L1 reading ability increases and L2 language ability loses its power in explaining the variation of L2 reading ability. And last, when readers have reached the maximum level,

the L2 ability has developed so fully that it does not cause problems for L2 reading, therefore, variation of L2 reading comprehension is explained solely by L1 reading ability. In other words, L2 readers read in L2 as well as in L1, so this maximum threshold level must be very high.

But just as Yamashita himself notes, some researchers have pointed out that the level of the linguistic threshold is not absolute, depending on the reading tasks and readers' L1 reading ability. Future research is needed to further the understanding of the linguistic threshold.

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