

The Multi-Divisible or Unitary Nature of Reading: The language tester between Scylla and Charybdis

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This paper discusses the relevance for the valid testing of reading of the difference between a 'unitary skill' approach to reading, i.e. seeing reading as a single, undifferentiated skills activity, and a multiskills approach, seeing the reading activity as composed of a number of distinguishable skills. It reviews some of the evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, in favour of each contrasting view, and comments on the potential dangers for valid testing of the adoption of one or other approach. It produces experimental evidence from different areas, and using different test methods, which suggests that a distinction may be drawn between language-based skills and 'global' reading skills, and comments on the implications of this for EAP testing of reading.

INTRODUCTION

Employers, university admissions officers, teachers and other users of test data often need specific and reliable information about a candidate's reading ability. In the attempt to satisfy that need, the language tester has to try to reduce the possibility of muddled measurement by eliminating the influence of reading-irrelevant factors associated with the test method, and by focusing on a maximally clear characterization of the construct of reading *per se*. The tester might therefore avoid tasks such as selective summary based on prior reading of texts where the extended writing involved in task completion might interfere with any inferences we might wish to make concerning candidates' reading abilities alone. But first and foremost, the tester is obliged to be as explicit as possible concerning the nature of the ability about which the test is designed to provide information.

Williams and Moran (1989) give a representative account of the current consensus among writers of teaching materials on the nature of reading comprehension, stating that:

"While materials writers may disagree on the emphasis to be devoted to any particular skill, there seems to be substantial agreement on the importance of such skills as guessing the meaning of unknown words, identifying anaphoric reference, identifying the main idea, and inference." (p.224).

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