

# An Assessment of Reading Competence in English of Entry Level Under-Graduate Students of Degree Colleges of Punjabi University, Patiala

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**Abstract –** The present paper aims to assess the existing level of reading competence in English of entry level under-graduate students of degree colleges affiliated with Punjabi University, Patiala (Punjab, India). It also aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the target students with regard to their reading skill. For this purpose, a comprehensive reading test (comprising three different tasks) was administered to 240 students selected as sample from eight colleges by using random sampling method. The responses of the test-takers were subjected to quantitative as well as qualitative assessment. The results obtained through quantitative analysis have been represented in the paper in form of tables and charts. In addition, a detailed discussion of the diagnostic inputs obtained through qualitative assessment of the responses of the test-takers has also been presented in the paper. Qualitative assessment of the responses was primarily carried out with an objective to identify those aspects of reading skill of the target students which they are most deficient in. A comprehensive assessment of the responses has led to an observation that despite undertaking a variety of reading during their school years, majority of target students only develop lexical and literal comprehension skills. Their interpretive and critical comprehension skills remain limited. They also appear to lack the subtle sub-skills of reading; a factor which can be a considered responsible for their limited reading skills at advanced levels. Prior to representation and discussion of the results of quantitative and qualitative assessment, reading has been discussed as a skill along with various other concepts related to it in general and in the context of reading in English as a second language in particular.

**Key Words:** Quantitative Assessment, Qualitative Assessment, Diagnostic Input

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## READING AS A SKILL

Reading, arguably, is the most subtle among the four skills of language learning, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It is considered to be of prime importance as it contributes significantly towards development of the other three skills in several ways. Primarily and explicitly, it does so by adding to the semantic resources of a reader. It also helps a reader in learning the rules of grammar and sentence construction in the concerned language in an implicit manner. In addition, a reader also gains knowledge about organisational patterns of different types of written texts. Thus, as an input skill, it lays the foundation for a learner-reader to mature and grow into an effective reader and writer. Highlighting the role that reading plays in developing language competence, Aruna Koneru states: "Reading helps you acquire vocabulary, word usage, sentence construction, developing paragraph and organisation of the material" (*English Language Skills* 287). In other words, it "helps to develop language intuition in the

corrected form" (*English Mate* 4). Traditional approaches to language teaching emphasised on developing reading as a habit that would automatically result in effective communication in written and spoken modes. In more recent approaches to language learning also, its status as a fundamental skill has been maintained. Modern linguists and scholars only depart from the traditionalists in terms of certain recommendations regarding materials, methods, and strategies that may be adopted to develop reading as a skill.

Generally, reading is considered to be an activity which is undertaken either for the purpose of academic achievement or entertainment. But undeniably it plays a subtle and key role towards success in professional and social spheres. Superficially, it appears to be a simple activity that involves decoding of symbols (in the form of letters) that may be arranged in numerous combinations carrying unique meaning/s assigned to them. J. Shermila, in *A Study of the Skills of Reading*

*Comprehension in English* proposes a short and concise definition of reading, calling it “a process of decoding a written message” (26). Her definition may be represented as under:

Encoder or Writer---->----->-----Message----->----->-----  
-----Decoder or Reader

Koneru, in consonance with the definition proposed by Shermila, also opines that reading can be analysed as a process of recognising words and inferring their meaning/s. Her definition of reading which includes an additional element of sound in the process may be represented as under:

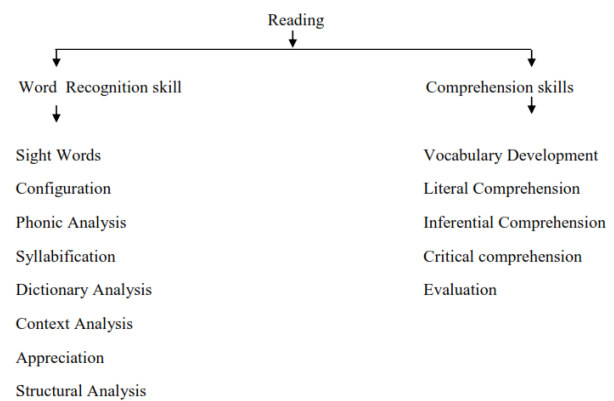
Sight->----->----Sound-->----->----Sense (288)

E. Williams, in *Reading in the Language Classroom*, also calls reading “a process through which one looks at and understands a written text” (2). These definitions by Shermila, Koneru, and Williams, however, explain the process of reading at the surface level; projecting it as a very simple and linear activity. Many subtle and important elements of the process of reading remain excluded in these definitions.

Several other scholars have proposed definitions which include multiple other dimensions of reading. C. Nuttall in *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language* defines reading as “the process of getting out of the text as nearly as possible with the message the writer puts into it” (4). He calls upon the reader to undertake the process of reading in a way so as to reach closest to the meaning that the author intends to convey. The definition also throws a subtle hint at the possibility of a text having more than one meanings. Such a possibility renders reading the character of a skill that requires a process (including several cognitive activities) to be undertaken in order to reveal multi-layered potential meanings of the text. A close observation of the process of reading reveals that it can be called a simple activity only when it is carried out in a casual manner, or when it is observed superficially. At a deeper level and when undertaken for specific purposes such as academic, analytic, or religious; it is a very subtle skill that is manifested in the form of a specialised task which one can successfully accomplish only after undergoing a certain period of training with an objective to obtain tangible results.

Thus reading may be defined as a process of interpreting writing which, at the basic level, is made up of unique combinations of alphabets of a specific language to compose words (vocabulary units) which can be further arranged in rule oriented patterns (sentence structures) that share mutual contextual relationships with one another. The sequence of interlinked syntactic units comprises progression of information which may be factual, ideational, or abstract in nature. However, it takes a proficient reader to spontaneously and accurately interpret such information, either as it exists or in light of the previous

knowledge acquired by him. John Kruidenier in *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education* points out that comprehension takes place when “words are decoded and associated with their meaning in the reader’s memory and phrases and sentences are processed rapidly or fluently enough so that the meanings derived from one word, phrase or sentence are not lost before the next is processed” (77). He further explores the significance of the other above-mentioned aspects of reading as he calls it “an active process” which requires a reader to “interact and be engaged with the text” (ibid). G. A. Ransom also evokes a lively image of the process of reading as “a conversation between the writer and the reader” (*Preparing to Teach Reading* 14). To reach the stage where a simple looking act of reading assumes the subtleties of a conversation, one needs to master the simultaneous operation of several sub-skills, leading to formation of micro and macro level structures during the process. These sub-skills, as per the report of *The National Reading Panel*, can be divided into two categories, i.e. “word recognition skill” and “comprehension skill” (2000). The former is considered to be a set of lower level skills which include recognition of individual words, phonological awareness, and local knowledge. The latter includes inferencing, monitoring, and integration of text information etc. Possessing the sub-skills at both levels is essential for meaningful reading comprehension. These sub-skills and their organisational framework may be represented as under:



(Mercer 375)

As can be inferred from the above representation, in addition to acquisition of a lot of corpus in the form of semantic and syntactic abilities in a language, a reader must also have a keen desire to possess information/knowledge that may be put to practical use during the process. All these factors become particularly crucial in the context of academic reading. As an academic text may be presented in diverse forms such as a discourse, a summary, a lecture, or an interactive conversation etc., it becomes vital to gain control over various cognitive and meta-cognitive skills. Highlighting the importance of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills in accomplishing an academic

reading task successfully, Wijekumar, Meyer, and Lei state:

Comprehending content area texts is a difficult task that requires students to fluidly bootstrap a complex set of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills. Cognitive skills...include vocabulary knowledge, contextual and background knowledge, linguistic awareness and strategies to select and encode ideas into memory structures that are well-associated, integrated with prior knowledge and available for use in a multitude of activities... Meta-cognitive skills include awareness of and appropriate use of strategies, planning and monitoring of the comprehension process and effective allocation of mental resources to the task at hand.

(Web-Based Text Structure Strategy Instruction Improves Seventh Graders' Content Area Reading Comprehension 742)

Therefore, a skilful application of a number of sub-skills is vital for the process of reading to culminate as equivalent to a conversation. Factors such as prior knowledge, experience, memory, and attitude of a reader; all of which may be culturally and socially situated, also shape a conversation. Reading at this level provides an opportunity to a reader to create his own meaning/s introspectively, promoting deeper exploration of the text. Thus decoding of a text or reflecting upon it requires an all-round efficiency that only stems from consistent and extended perusal of reading.

Another important dimension that deserves consideration here is related to the writer who may weave complex patterns of intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic shades into the text; lending it a degree of subjectivity. Dechant and Smith shed light on this aspect as they explain reading as an activity which, in addition to lexical and literal comprehension, also includes "an understanding of writer's mood, tone, feeling and attitude" (*Psychology in Teaching Reading* 237). Discussing the scope and dynamics of reading, Gray (qtd. in Koda) considers it as an activity that may take place at three levels, i.e. "reading the lines, reading between the lines and reading beyond the lines" ("The role of reading in fostering transcultural competence" 7). Reading the lines refers to the surface level interpretation of a realistic representation. At this level, a reader gives literal response to the words of a text, relating them with actual scenes and events narrated by the author. Reading between the lines refers to the activity of reading at a deeper level where a reader attempts to understand the intended meaning of a text. It requires him to use his interpretative skills to trace subtle clues present in the text to gain insights regarding thoughts and emotions of the writer. Reading beyond the lines refers to the deepest and most subtle level of reading where personal experience and judgment of a reader shape his response to the text which becomes a means of gaining new insights or higher understanding. At this level, a reader can speculate about multiple meanings

of a text and try to generalise them; developing a deep empathy and identification with the characters or situations of the text in the process. He also develops consciousness of moral, spiritual, or socio-political issues which the text might contain. A reader keeps moving through all these levels of comprehension at various stages of the process of reading. This concept of reading may also be interpreted as various levels of comprehension as under:

- I. **Lexical Comprehension:** This is the fundamental level of comprehension which requires a reader to use his semantic resources to understand the surface meaning of a text. Regarding the importance of lexical resources in overall comprehension of a text, Perfetti and Hart comment: "...it was possible to imagine being able to read words without comprehending the texts that contain them, it was more difficult to imagine being able to comprehend the texts without reading the words" ("The Lexical Basis of Comprehension Skill" 67). To attain this level of comprehension, a reader needs to possess at least basic vocabulary in a language along with an ability to use it in appropriate contexts as Perfetti and Hart further state: "rapid and perhaps modular word identification was important for a comprehension system of limited capacity" (ibid). However, to move from surface level to deeper levels of comprehension, knowledge of multiple meanings of a word and an ability to interpret them in the given context are vital. Such an ability develops by undertaking extensive reading as well as careful listening in the target language. It means that both the input skills contribute significantly towards achieving this level of comprehension which, in its turn, leads to enhancement of all the language skills. Thus a two way relationship between a level reading comprehension and input skills is established. Various types of tasks like 'fill-in-the-blanks', 'identify-the-picture', 'complete-the-puzzle' etc. can be used to test lexical comprehension skill of a learner.
- II. **Literal Comprehension:** This level of comprehension implies an ability to infer explicitly stated information. Regarding its importance as the foundational level of comprehension which facilitates progression towards more advanced levels, Jude and Ajayi state: "It creates a grasp of literal information and establishes a foundation for the assimilation of more complex reading skills" (Literal Level of Students' Comprehension in Nigeria: A Means for Growing a New Generation African Scholars 121). They also remind of a very important strategy of reading at this level as they suggest that a reader should



only be “thinking within the text” (ibid). Achievement of this level of comprehension is facilitated through knowledge of denotative meaning/s of words and phrases contained in a text. Reading for the central thought or main ideas contained in a text along with an understanding of the sequence of events in order to answer various questions also constitute a part of this skill. A learner’s level of comprehension at this level may be assessed by using “the ‘wh’ questions like ‘what’ ‘when’ and ‘where’” (Huggins PRAXIS I exams: 2009).

**III. Interpretive Comprehension:** Also referred to as ‘inferential’ reading, interpretive comprehension can take place at more than one levels. Marsha L. RoitEdD in “Effective Teaching Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension in K-3 Students” elaborates: “Making inferences may occur at the word level (inferring the meaning of a word), at the text level (making inferences about characters’ motives or causal relationships) and at a global level (inferring the theme or figuring out the relationship between characters across texts)” (4). Further pointing out that inferences of literary and factual texts may differ from each other, she states:

Making inferences forces the reader to engage in building meaning. When readers infer, they are interacting personally with the text. Skilled readers make inferences almost subconsciously by filling in the blanks with logical assumptions based on text clues and prior knowledge. This allows for some creativity and leads to a wider variety of interpretations of most fictional genres. When it comes to nonfiction, where texts deal with facts, interpretations are more limited.

(ibid. 4)

Illustrations and graphic representations of various types facilitate interpretive comprehension To judge the contents of a text at this level of comprehension, a reader uses his intuition, personal life experiences, experiences from previous readings, and value system to find out implicit meaning/s of a text. He makes use of “some external criteria from his/her own experience in order to evaluate the quality values of the writing, the author’s reasoning, simplifications and generalizations” (Hutura: 2016). To develop this level of comprehension, it is important to have an ability to analyse both sides of an argument before reaching a conclusion. A reader’s knowledge of words contained in the text and their connotative meaning/s, ability to combine ideas and draw conclusions contributes to his interpretive reading skills to a significant extent. As all these aspects are unique to each reader, their responses to the same text can also be unique. At this level, a reader can also identify with the characters of a text, its plot, and thematic concerns, and develops

an aesthetic sensibility and sensitivity towards emotive parts of a text.

**IV. Critical/Affective Comprehension:** It refers to the highest level of understanding in which a reader can empathise with social, moral, ethical, or spiritual issues which a text appears to deal with. This level of comprehension influences the evolution of the thought process of a reader who makes use of logical thinking and reasoning to understand the issues which do not have clearly distinguished right or wrong dimensions.

## READING IN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE

A number of studies have been undertaken worldwide to understand the relationship between reading in the first and the second language ( $L_1$  and  $L_2$  respectively). Researchers have attempted to find out whether reading experience of  $L_1$  learners is the same as that of  $L_2$  learners or the latter have to face certain specific problems. They also attempt to ascertain whether the problems which  $L_2$  readers face pertain to issues related to the target language or to the activity of reading in general.

A large number of researchers are of the opinion that majority of problems which  $L_2$  learners face while reading are related to the target language itself. The biggest among these problems is their limited semantic resources. These resources are almost always substantially richer for any reader in his native language than the target language. Carlisle et. al., in their research on meta-linguistic capabilities and performance in reading and Lesaux and August in their research on reading as a skill and reading instructions for children from low-income and non-English-speaking households, also observe that before they begin to undertake reading formally,  $L_1$  learners possess greater semantic resources than  $L_2$  learners. Several other studies corroborate these observations regarding  $L_1$  readers being naturally more adept at acquiring vocabulary from their surroundings as compared to their counterparts who have to learn, memorise, and recollect words. Similarly,  $L_1$  readers also get implicitly acquainted with rules of grammar and various types of sentence constructions in their native language while listening and reading in it. Majority of  $L_2$  readers, however, require learning about them explicitly in a formal classroom. As a result, even a limited formal training in various sub-skills, in addition to exposure to real life situations which facilitate acquisition of basic semantic and syntactic abilities, is sufficient to equip  $L_1$  readers (unlike  $L_2$  readers) to initiate the process of effective reading.

The difference between the levels of competence possessed by  $L_1$  and  $L_2$  readers (with regard to grammatical skill and vocabulary) before undertaking formal reading influences their choice of strategies

and the direction in which they process the activity. Second language readers have been observed as making frequent use of bottom-up strategies rather than the top-up strategies. In this context, Jeon and Yamashita's meta-analysis of strategies of second language readers reveals that knowledge of grammar of the target language and its vocabulary which are the basic elements of a bottom-up strategy of language learning are highly correlated with second language reading comprehension ("L2 reading comprehension and its correlates: A meta- analysis" 165). Ahmed in "Second Language Reading and Instruction" also points out: "... a key difference between reading in one's first language and reading in a second language is that reading in one's second language relies more heavily on lower-level processing" (42). At this level of processing, a reader moves from decoding the literal meanings of words towards meanings of individual sentences, and finally towards understanding the meaning of the entire text.

Another important factor which influences the level of reading competence of L<sub>2</sub> learners is what may be termed as 'parallelism'. When children formally start learning rules and structures of their first language or start reading literature in it, they do not need to refer to any other language. In contrast, while doing the same in a second language, consciously or unconsciously, they tend to find parallels between the meaning/s of words and other expressions of both the languages. Such bilingualism, as also recommended by traditional methods of teaching a second language such as the Grammar-Translation Method and Bi-lingual Method, imposes linguistic limitations on L<sub>2</sub> learner-readers who attempt to co-relate every L<sub>2</sub> structure with an L<sub>1</sub> structure. The practice becomes a major limitation of these methods (which are still very popular for teaching a second/foreign language) as finding precise parallels between words and structures of any two languages is not possible. Majority of words, expressions, or structures of L<sub>1</sub> which are used as parallels while reading in L<sub>2</sub>, fail to convey an accurate or the intended meaning. But despite its limitations, the practice of searching parallels still remains popular among L<sub>2</sub> readers. Maio in *URCCEIS* corroborates as he states that language learners "read in L<sub>2</sub> using a two language processing system" (14). Their mother tongue is never completely absent while reading in L<sub>2</sub>, and they use such strategies of reading in which both L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> are mixed with each other. An observation by Derakhshan and Karimi regarding speaking in second language can be aptly applied to the scenario with regard to reading. They say that even in a favourable environment "Learners of second language tend to transfer the forms, meaning and culture of their L<sub>1</sub> to the foreign language and culture .... By learning L2 habits, L1 habits are also transferred and then the errors occur" ("The Interference of First Language and Second Language Acquisition" 2113). Furthermore, social and cultural backgrounds of a reader also influence his reading experience and competence substantially.

Some researchers have also attempted to explore other dimensions of the issue of reading in second language and observed that problems which the L<sub>2</sub> readers face are not limited to vocabulary and grammar of the target language. An important observation made by a large number of scholars engaged in action research in applied linguistics is that even after receiving formal instruction regarding rules of grammar and sentence construction, a very large number of L<sub>2</sub> readers fail to apply them while performing an actual reading task. As a result, they remain marginal readers whose comprehension skills do not develop beyond lexical and literal levels. It clearly indicates that only formal knowledge of rules of grammar and possession of basic vocabulary is insufficient for L<sub>2</sub> readers to successfully accomplish various types of reading tasks requiring different levels of comprehension. There are other aspects of the skill, gaining control over which is imperative for L<sub>2</sub> learners to become effective readers. However, the fact that effective reading requires simultaneous application of multiple sub-skills is over-looked in most second language classrooms which are teacher-centered and where the emphasis is on building vocabulary and teaching grammar by using a deductive method. Koda in "The role of reading in fostering transcultural competence" corroborates: "Traditionally in foreign language instruction, reading ability and linguistic knowledge are not clearly distinguished" (6). Bernhardt and Kamil (qtd. in Brisbois) in their research titled "Interpreting relationships between L1 and L2 reading: Consolidating the linguistic threshold and the linguistic interdependence hypotheses" corroborate: "...the question implies that its answer lay in an examination of second language linguistic/grammatical knowledge apart from an examination of first language reading skill" (566). It indicates that the level of reading competence in second language is determined by more than one factors, several of which might be related to reading in general. However, intensive research is still required to gather conclusive evidences and results regarding similarities and dissimilarities between reading in L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> for learners from different personal and educational backgrounds.

## THE PRESENT SCENARIO

As the present study aims to assess the existing level of reading competence in English of entry-level students of under-graduate courses being offered by degree colleges affiliated to Punjabi University, Patiala in the state of Punjab (India), it is pertinent to discuss the scenario regarding teaching of reading in English at school and under-graduate levels in the state. Majority of schools in the state are affiliated to Punjab School Education Board (PSEB) or Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). A few schools are affiliated to CISCE which grants affiliation and provides guidelines as Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) up to Grade X and as Indian School Certificate (ISC)

for Grades XI and XII. There are about thirty universities in the state, out of which three, i.e. Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar; Panjab University, Chandigarh; and Punjabi University, Patiala grant affiliation to degree colleges which offer under-graduate, post-graduate, and diploma courses in various streams. All other universities (including technical, medical, and other universities) in the state function only on their respective campuses.

The fact that developing reading competence is vital to achieve proficiency in any language (including a second/foreign language) is duly acknowledged by all the schools boards and universities functional in the state. English is taught as a compulsory subject at all levels of school education (irrespective of the board to which a school is affiliated) and in almost all under-graduate programmes offered by the universities. In some programmes at school and at all levels of under-graduation, it is also taught as an additional elective subject. The affiliating boards and universities design syllabi for various courses in English language and literature. Most of the courses, at all levels, primarily focus on developing reading and writing as the two major language skills. To enhance the reading competence of students, the boards and universities prescribe various types of texts such as anthologies of stories and poems, plays, novels, essays etc. In addition, a lot of attention is paid also paid to development of grammatical competence. However, as mentioned above, despite exposure to a variety of reading in almost all English courses, very few students manifest competence beyond literal and lexical levels. They lack the subtle sub-skills which are required to attain proficiency at higher levels of comprehension. Common syllabi for all students, irrespective of their interest or existing level of competence, also make reading an unenjoyable and imposed activity. Besides this, an examination oriented system fails to generate interest in general reading among students. As a result of, the reading competence of the students remains limited.

In the present scenario in which it is crucial for students to gain proficiency in English, a comprehensive assessment of their existing skill level is central to designing reading material, and taking vital decisions about methods of teaching and testing. So far as the method of assessing the reading competence level of students in the present context is concerned, the students are mostly required to read unseen paragraphs of various types and then answer certain typical questions in a mechanical manner. In most cases, the students locate some key words in the paragraph and answer the questions by quoting a sentence or two (which contain those key words) from the text. In other cases, the nature of questions based on the reading of the prescribed texts is such that they can be answered by cramming a few things outlined in easily available help books. Therefore, absolute reliance on examination scores as final determiners of the competence level of students can be misleading as the scores are awarded on the basis of formative

assessment carried out through conduct of written examinations held annually or bi-annually. Even if testing is done more frequently (as by CBSE and ICSE/ISC boards), its purpose is not diagnostic. Moreover, the nature of questions used for testing is very predictable. Such an exercise does not put the actual reading competence or the individual sub-skills of reading possessed by a student to real test. Thus the examination scores cannot effectively serve as the basis for curriculum designing by the academic bodies of boards and universities.

In order to obtain specific inputs about strengths and weaknesses regarding reading in English of target students, and to contribute towards making teaching and learning of reading in English more effective, a detailed diagnostic assessment test was conducted. The exercise was undertaken with the following broad objectives:

- i. To make a quantitative assessment of existing reading competence of target students.
- ii. To make a qualitative assessment of existing reading competence of target students.
- iii. To identify specific aspects of reading which the target students are most deficient in.

## POPULATION, SAMPLE SIZE, AND METHOD OF COLLECTION

Entry level under-graduate students of degree colleges affiliated to Punjabi University, Patiala formed the population of the study. From the population, 240 students from eight degree colleges (30 students from each college) were taken as sample by using a random sampling method. Out of 240 students, 173 had passed their Grade XII from the state-run school education board, i.e. Punjab School Education Board (PSEB), 61 had passed from the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), and 6 had passed from other boards including Indian Secondary Certificate (ISC), UP School Board, and Haryana Board of School Education (HBSE). These students were enrolled in the colleges for under-graduate courses in different streams-humanities, sciences, commerce, and computer application. Only entry level students were taken as sample for the study with a rationale that it would be most beneficial to identify the problems of students at the earliest stage of higher education. It would help the curriculum designers and teachers to take all required measures to enhance the language skills of the students before they step out of educational institutions to enter the real professional world, success in which depends upon communicative skills of a person to a significant extent. Detailed qualitative inputs regarding the existing competence level of the students can also facilitate planning, designing,



administration, and testing of remedial and practice material.

Following is the list of colleges from which students were selected:

1. Akal Degree College, Mastuana Sahib
2. Govt. College, Gobindgarh
3. Govt. College, Mohali
4. Govt. College, Ropar
5. Multani Mal Modi College, Patiala
6. Public College, Samana
7. S.D. Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Mansa
8. University Constituent College, Ghanaur

### **NATURE, RATIONALE, AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE TEST**

Different types of reading tests are used by teachers involved in action research to test the effectiveness of their own teaching methods or to obtain certain specific input regarding the performance of the students. These tests may be classified into two broad categories: formal and informal. Formal tests include reading readiness tests, diagnostic tests, and other types of tests which usually constitute part of a formal reading programme. These tests are standardised before administration. Informal assessment tests include reading checklists, interviews, anecdotes, portfolios, and advertisements etc. These tests may also comprise a series of graded passages to determine the level of reading competence of learners besides identifying their strengths and weaknesses. In these reading tests, the learners are required to read the passage orally or silently, and then respond to various types of comprehension questions. The evaluator records their performances to make decisions about their control over various aspects of the skill.

Choice of the type of test primarily depends upon the purpose of assessment which, in the present context, was to ascertain the overall reading competence of the target students besides gaining inputs regarding their strengths and weaknesses regarding various related sub-skills. To obtain reliable and objective inputs regarding both the aspects simultaneously was quite challenging. For this purpose, a specially designed reading test comprising three tasks was administered to the selected students. The test had the elements of both: formal as well as informal tests. Three authentic reading passages arranged in accordance to their difficulty level and followed by thirty two various types of questions constituted the three tasks. Task One comprised twelve questions aimed at testing lexical

and literal comprehension levels of the target students. Task Two comprised eleven questions aimed at testing interpretive level of comprehension in addition to lexical and literal levels. Task Three comprised nine questions, aiming to provide inputs regarding all four levels of comprehension. The questions were framed in a manner so as to determine the existing lexical, literal, interpretive, and critical/affective comprehension abilities of the target students besides providing inputs regarding the level of individual sub-skills possessed by them. Out of thirty two, seven questions were designed to test the target students' level of lexical comprehension. Twelve, eight, and five questions were designed to test the levels of lexical, literal, interpretive, and affective comprehension of the target students respectively. Moreover, the nature of some of the questions (as mentioned above also) was such that they could yield inputs regarding more than one aspects of reading skill at the same time.

The test-takers were given an hour to complete the test that was conducted in the selected colleges only. All efforts were made to provide comfortable and anxiety free environment to the test-takers.

### **CRITERIA OF ASSESSMENT**

Criteria of assessment of performance in a reading test can either be "criterion referenced" or "norm referenced" (Glaser 519). The former type is used to compare the results of test-takers' performance against a set performance or criterion. It is used to determine whether the test-takers have learnt a specific set of skills or not. A teacher can plan instruction on the basis of the results of this type of assessment. The latter type is used to compare the scores of a test-taker or a group with another test-taker or group which had taken the same test previously. It is represented in simple terms such as numerical scores, percentile forms, ranks, or grades. This type of assessment is reliable and valid, and demonstrates how one particular group performs differently from the other group.

For the present study, making a decision about the criteria of assessment to be used for obtaining objective and reliable inputs regarding the level of reading competence of the target students on the basis of the performance of test-takers was crucial. Keeping the objectives of the test (quantitative as well as qualitative assessment) in mind, the responses of the test-takers were subjected to both types of assessment: criterion-referenced and norm-referenced. A special rubric assessment scale with different aspects of reading skill as components was prepared after consulting several other scales designed by various researchers and institutions. No scale, however, was adopted as such. The responses of the test-takers were assessed against four different components of the criteria, awarded points, and placed in five stages (Stages I-V) on the basis of the points scored by

them. Following is the rubric scale designed for the present study:

**Table1- Rubric Assessment Scale**

Criteria→ Stages ↓	Lexical Comprehension	Literal Comprehension	Interpretive Comprehension	Critical/Affective Comprehension
Stage-I	Possess extremely limited vocabulary, Try to use simple key words with hardly any success	Not able to infer even the explicitly stated information	Not able to infer any implicit information from the text, Cannot express any personal opinions	Not capable of critically comprehending a text
Stage-II	Possess limited vocabulary, Use simple keywords to answer questions with marginal success	Hardly able to infer the explicitly stated when the text contained very simple keyword	Hardly able to infer any implicitly stated information except in a rare case where a key-word can be spotted, Cannot express any personal opinions	Not capable of critically comprehending a text
Stage-III	Possess above average vocabulary to answer direct questions, Spot key-words accurately	Able to successfully infer explicitly stated information	Able to use interpretive skills to answer a few simple questions, Try to express personal opinions	Possess limited critical skills and logical thinking
Stage-IV	Possess sufficient vocabulary to respond to almost all the questions	Able to successfully infer explicitly stated information	Able to interpret information to answer almost all questions, can express personal opinions in a reasonably convincing manner	Can successfully use critical skill and logical thinking to respond to a number of questions
Stage -V	Possess sufficient vocabulary to respond to all questions	Able to successfully infer explicitly stated information	Able to successfully interpret information to answer all questions, can express personal opinions convincingly and emphatically	Can successfully use critical skill and logical thinking to respond to almost all questions

As mentioned above, the reading test consisted of three different tasks, each comprising a different reading passage followed by a variety of questions. Overall, the test had thirty-two questions carrying forty five points. Task 1 comprised 12 questions (nos. 1-12) carrying 12 points (1 point for each question). Task 2 comprised 11 questions (nos. 13- 23) carrying 13 points [nos.13-20 for 8 points (1 point each), no. 21 for 2 points, and nos. 22 and 23 for 3 points(1.5 points each)]. Task 3 comprised 9 questions (nos. 24-31) carrying 17 points [no. 24 for 6 points, nos. 25-27 for 3 points (1 point each), and nos. 28-31 for 8 points (2 points each)]. The last question (no. 32) carried 3 points. The test-takers were placed in five stages on the basis of number of points that they scored in the test. Those test-takers who scored less than 35 % (up to 16 points) were placed in Stage-I. The test-takers who scored between 36-55% (17-25 points), between 56-75% (26-34 points), between 76-90% (35-40 points), and above 90% (41- 45 points) were placed in Stages-II, III, IV and V respectively. Following is a tabular representation of the criteria:

**Table 2- Tabulation of criteria**

Stage	Percentage Level	Score
Stage-I	< 35%	0-16
Stage-II	36%-55%	17-25
Stage-III	56%-75%	26-34
Stage-IV	76%-90%	35-40
Stage-V	>90%	41-45

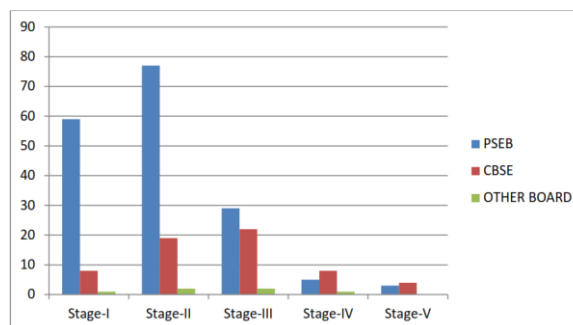
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

As per the above criteria, the test-takers were placed in five stages on the basis of points scored by them. The school board from which a test-taker had passed his Grade-XII was also taken into consideration. Following is a tabular representation of the same:

**Table 3-Tabulation of scores obtained by the test-takers from different school boards**

Stages Boards	Stage-I	Stage-II	Stage-III	Stage-IV	Stage-V
PSEB	59	77	29	05	03
CBSE	08	19	22	08	04
OTHER BOARDS	01	02	02	01	Nil

Performance of the test-takers (from different school boards) may also be represented through a bar-chart as under:



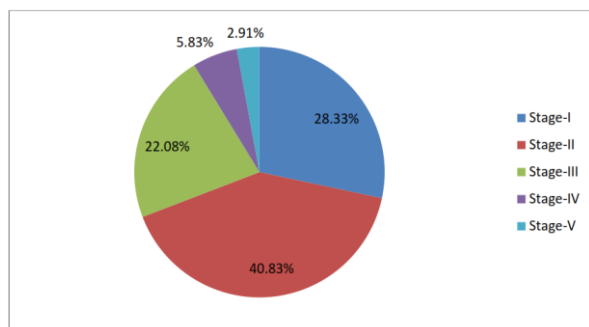
**Chart1: Representation of points scored by the test-takers**

It can be observed from the above table and bar-chart that 59 test-takers (34.1%) from PSEB in comparison to 8 test-takers (13.1%) from CBSE have only been able to score enough points to be placed in Stages-I. 77 test-takers (44.5%) against 19 (31.14%) have been placed in Stage-II on the basis of their performance in the test. 29 test-takers (16.76%) from PSEB have been placed in Stage-III as compared to 22 (36.06%) from CBSE. 5 test-takers (2.89%) from PSEB have managed to reach Stages-IV in comparison to 8 (13.11%) from the CBSE. 3 test-takers (1.73%) from PSEB and 4 from CBSE (6.55%) have managed to reach Stage-V. The performance of test-takers from Other Boards shows that 3 (50% of 6) have been placed in stages-I and II. The remaining 3 have been placed in Stages-III and IV. No test-taker



from these boards has managed to reach Stage-V. These observations are alarming in the light of the fact that reading is a skill which the syllabi of English courses of all school boards primarily aim at developing.

The overall performance of the test-takers (from all boards) may also be represented in percentage form with the help of a pie chart as under:



**Chart 2: Representation of overall scores obtained by test-takers in percentage form**

The above pie-chart shows that 28.33% test-takers (out of 240) have only been able to score less than 16 points in the test to be placed in Stage-I. 40.83% test-takers have managed to score between 17 and 25 to be placed in stage II. 22.08% have scored between 26-34 points to be placed in Stage III. Only 5.83% have managed to reach Stage-IV by scoring 35-40 points, whereas a meagre 2.91% have reached Stage-V by scoring 41 points or above.

Overall, the quantitative analysis of the performance of test-takers indicates that the level of reading competence possessed by the target students is, at the best, average. This result of the analysis is especially significant in the light of the objective nature of majority of the questions included in the test. Out of 32 questions, only four were subjective in nature. Remaining questions were to be responded in objective forms such as Yes/No/Not Given, True/False/Can't Say or Fill-ups etc.

After a quantitative analysis, it is pertinent to make a qualitative analysis of the performance of the test-takers for diagnostic purpose. This type of analysis was expected to be helpful in identifying the strong and weak aspects of reading competence of target students. The researcher was able to make following observations:

The above discussion makes it amply clear that a very large majority of test-takers possess extremely limited reading competence. 28.33% test-takers (68 in number), placed in Stage-I, have exhibited a level of competence which is limited to lexical and literal levels. These test-takers could successfully answer only those questions, the answers to which were explicitly given in the text in very simple words which they could use as keys. Locating the key-words to understand the

questions and answer them by looking for a similar word in the text appears to be the only reading strategy that these test-takers possess. Use of this strategy by the second/foreign language learners is very common, but in the present context, application of the strategy is rendered very limited in the wake of inadequate semantic resources possessed by the test-takers. It also indicates a sense of apprehensiveness while reading in English among these test-takers. Following are a few examples to corroborate the above observations:

The test-takers could successfully fill up the blanks with simple and direct words which are commonly used in day-to-day conversations and have also been explicitly mentioned in the text. e.g.

1. *The \_\_\_\_\_ of an AC is vital for safety while operation.*

(Ques.2, Answer is *front grill*)

2. *\_\_\_\_\_ protect electric appliances from fluctuations.*

(Ques.6, Answer is *Voltage Stabilizer*)

3. *The statues in the valley are of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.*

(Ques. 15, Answer is *Man, Animals, and Gods*)

Most test-takers were able to answer the direct questions which aimed to test the literal comprehension skill, e.g.

4. *Which paragraph tells about the geographical location of the statues?*

(Ques. 13, Answer is (A) *First*)

5. *Who discovered the valley?*

(Ques. 14, Answer is a *Spanish monk*)

A few test-takers could also answer questions like the above one, which contained a statement that is indirect but simple; and needs to be answered in Yes/No/Not Given or True/False/Can't Say, e.g.

6. *An AC unit should be installed in direct sunlight.*

(Ques. 9. Answer is *No*)

However, most of the test-takers could not answer the questions which comprised even slightly difficult words, e.g. questions 1, 5, 7, 16, 17, and 19 that contained words like *reinforce*, *slant*, *rear*, *modifiable*, *electrocution*, *ceremonial centre*, *unanimous*, and *testimony*. Similarly, they could not

respond to questions which were put through indirect statements, e.g. questions 17, 18, 19, and 27. Nearly all the test-takers responded to these questions in a random manner.

7. *The place where an AC has to be installed must be reinforced with a slant at the rear.*

(Ques.1, Answer is *False*)

8. *Certain parts of AC are modifiable.*

(Ques. 5, Answer is *False*)

9. *Handling any electric appliance with wet hands risks \_\_\_\_\_.*

(Ques. 7, Answer is *electrocution*)

10. *The valley perhaps was a \_\_\_\_\_.*

(Ques. 16, Answer is *a ceremonial centre*)

11. *Archaeologists are unanimous about the origin of the statues. (Ques. 17, Answer is *No*)*

12. *The smallest of the statues is 2 mts. tall.*

(Ques. 18, Answer is *Not Given*)

13. *Emotional expressions on the faces of the statues are a testimony of the mastery of the artist.*

(Ques. 19, Answer is *True*)

14. *A poor value system can help retain a level head during crisis. (Ques. 27, Answer is *False*)*

The test-takers could also hardly respond to questions 10 and 21 in which they were asked to locate the words in the text, meanings of which were provided as answers. Hardly one or two of the test-takers could locate the words *Durable* and *Splash*. But most of them could successfully locate a synonym for the word *height*, i.e. *altitude*. The test-takers were possibly guided by the numerical figure (*1800 metres*) mentioned in the sentence in which the word *altitude* figured.

15. Find out the words in the above instruction manual regarding AC which mean the following:

1. Which lasts long is \_\_\_\_\_
2. Sound of something falling in water or any other water is \_\_\_\_\_

(Ques. 10, Answers are *Durable* and *Splash*)

Ques. 21. Find out the words in the passage which mean the following:

1. Height
2. Excessive
3. Thickly
4. Belonging to an early stage of evolution

When asked to provide synonyms and antonyms, they could only find synonym for *sufficient* as *enough* and antonym for *grief* as *happy*. In question 24, which comprised a matching exercise, a few test-takers could match the meanings of words *miserable*, *dejection*, and *adversity*. But not even a single test-taker could attempt all of these correctly. One test-taker could respond to one word, while another could respond to another word, showing their limitations regarding vocabulary. Several test-takers could be observed as anxiously trying to respond to some of these questions, a situation which can be attributed to their vague understanding of the words. Perhaps they felt that they were familiar with those words; but could not provide their meaning, a synonym, or an antonym precisely..

Regarding the interpretive, critical/affective comprehension level of the test-takers, it was observed that they could not respond to the questions aimed at testing these levels. They could barely write a few words as answers to one or two of these questions. No test-taker could give a title to the last paragraph as asked in ques. 31. Another related observation that the above one leads to is that these test-takers could not construct grammatically accurate and meaningful sentences to summarise the passage as required in ques. 32. This, however, may be attributed to their limited writing competence. Interdependence of reading and writing skills lends a degree of subjectivity to assessment in such cases.

Thus it can be stated that limited semantic resources made the readers lose interest in reading, which initiates a bad spiral in which one does not read because he faces difficulties with vocabulary; and as a consequence, he remains a marginal reader because he does not read enough.

40.83% test-takers (98 in number) , placed in Stage-II, performed marginally better than their counterparts placed in Stage-I. Like them, these test-takers could only fill up those blanks, the answers to which were direct and simple, e.g. in questions 2, 6, 13, 14, and 15 (quoted as examples in the discussion of performance of test-takers placed in Stage-I).The answers to all these questions were simple and common words explicitly mentioned in the text; making them easy to locate. But in the case of indirect statements and when the words required to be filled in the blanks were uncommon and slightly more difficult to locate in the text, the test-takers got

confused and failed to respond correctly, e.g. in questions 1, 7, and 16. It could also be clearly observed that these test-takers were also dependent upon the key words to understand a question and locate its answer. They could successfully respond to questions the answers to which were in the form of Yes/No/Not Given or True/False/Can't Say only if the statements were either direct or contained a key word, e.g. in questions 5, 9, and 20, which contained the words and phrases *modify*, *direct sunlight*, *reading history is helpful*. Instead of trying to decode the complete meaning of the statement in the text, they preferred to use key words to answer them. This observation is indicative of a fair level of literal comprehension except when testing was done through indirect statements or when the questions did not contain a key word, e.g. in questions 17(containing words *archaeologists* and *unanimous*), and in ques. 18, 19, and 27.

Only a few test-takers were able to answer the question 1, which was made up of two short sentences from the text; and contained words *reinforced*, *slant*, and *rear*, which were probably not in their lexical reserve. Majority of the test-takers could not answer the questions when their answers were spread over more than a single sentence in the text. These test-takers could successfully locate some familiar words in the paragraph to answer questions 10 and 21. While providing synonyms, they could find words for *sufficient* as *enough*, for *abundant* as *many* and *too much*, and for *dejection* as *sad* or *disappointment*. While providing antonyms, they found *happy* or *happiness* for *grief*. While doing the matching exercise these test-takers were able to match the words *exceptional*, *miserable*, *dejection*, *adversity*, *grieve*, and *swallow*. Thus regarding the level of lexical competence of test-takers of this group, it can be stated that they performed marginally better than those in Stage-I.

When it comes to assessing the interpretive and critical/affective comprehension levels, this group also appears to be extremely under-competent. They could not critically analyse the paragraphs and respond to questions which aimed to test these skills, e.g. questions 28-32. They only attempted to copy sentences from the text and reproduce them as such in their responses. A few test-takers could also provide a title to the passage consisting of one or two words. But they could barely write a few words to summarise the paragraph as required in ques. 32.

Regarding the performance of 22.08% test-takers(53 in number), placed in Stage-III, it was observed that they could successfully respond to questions which were aimed at testing literal comprehension through simple fill-ups or direct statements containing a key word and which were required to be answered in Yes/No/Not Given or True/False/Can't Say. These test-takers could also answer a few questions which did not contain a key word or which were in the form of indirect statements. Their possession of better

vocabulary helped them in successfully answering few more questions than the test-takers placed in Stages-I and II. They also performed better while doing the matching exercise and providing synonyms and antonyms. They could match words correctly and also provide synonyms and antonyms except for a few words like *hazard*, *stern*, and *contentment*. Regarding their responses to questions 28-32, it was observed that they performed much better those placed in Stages-I and II, but their interpretive and critical/affective comprehension skills did not appear to be much developed. They could write only a few short and simple sentences as answers to these questions. Several test-takers provided an appropriate title to the passage as required in ques. 31. They also tried to summarise the ideas mentioned in the third paragraph (Task-3) as required in ques. 32.

Regarding the performance of 5.83% and 2.91% test-takers (14 and 7 in number respectively) who were placed in Stage- IV and V, it was observed that they possessed a wide range of vocabulary which helped them in responding to almost all the questions (of all types) in the first two tasks except for an occasional error made by one or two test-takers placed in Stage-IV. They correctly filled all the blanks and responded to questions that required to be answered in Yes/No/Not Given or True/False/Can't Say irrespective of the nature of the statement: direct or indirect. These test-takers also exhibited more advanced interpretive and critical comprehension skills than those placed in three other stages. Their responses to the questions aiming to test this level of comprehension were also much more relevant; and all of them provided appropriate title to the passage in ques. 31. They also attempted to respond to ques. 32 in grammatically accurate and impressive language. Thus it can be stated that these test-takers possess a much higher level of interpretive and critical/affective reading skills. What separated the test-takers placed in Stage-IV from those placed in Stage-V was their level of critical/affective reading skills, which were observed as better in the case of those placed in Stage-V.

On the basis of quantitative and qualitative assessment of responses of the test-takers, it can be averred that majority of target students possess a level of comprehension which is not beyond lexical and literal. A few students have developed interpretive reading skill and only very few have developed critical/affective reading comprehension skills.

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