Assessing ESP Reading Skills. Case Study on Business Topics

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Abstract

This paper approaches several elements pertaining to the assessment of ESP reading skills. The theoretical section briefly presents several aspects of language assessment and testing, in general, such as definitions of language testing, elements influencing score measurement, ways of assessing language skills, assessment forms and functions. This theoretical section continues with the presentation of certain aspects related to reading assessment, with a focus on the elements that should be taken into account when assessing reading skills. The experiment section of the paper designs a case study to be conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022, with two groups of students, in order to see whether the employment of adequate assessment techniques furnishes learners the necessary backwash in order to further enhance their reading skills.

Key words: ESP, language testing, reading assessment, ESP skills, business English
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1. Introduction

Having in view the intensification of international relationships and the escalating pace of technological development triggered by globalization, English has been promoted as an internationalized language, rising, among many others, the scholars' interest in issues such as English language learning and testing. More and more businesses need employees that are proficient in English and that are able to understand many business situations from a cross-cultural perspective (Popescu, 2016, p. 30). Thus, upon employment, many employers test their applicants in order to establish whether they have the required English skills in order to perform well at the workplace. Moreover, some companies organize English language courses and assessments for their employees, in order to monitor their language acquisition and development and to enhance their performance.

2. Theoretical background: aspects of language testing

Language testing has been defined in various ways, connecting it to key terms such as proficiency, evaluation, assessment, knowledge, ability, skills, achievement, aptitude, scales, task, examination, test. In 1888, in "The Statistics of Examinations", Edgeworth defined language testing as "a species of sortition infinitely preferable to the ancient method of casting lots for honours and offices". A hundred years later, Black and Wiliam (1998, p. 2) professed that assessment encompasses all the endeavors and tasks – in which teachers and students engage – aimed at assessment and self-assessment, furnishing vital data that can be processed and used in order to enhance the quality of subsequent teaching and learning activities. Other scholars, such as Cheng and Fox (2017, pp. 1-2), scrutinized this definition and pinpointed the manifold dimensions engaged within the assessment process, underlying that it "involves teachers and students" and that it "can be carried out between a teacher and a student or a group of students" or "between a student and another student or among students themselves". Furthermore, these scholars also explained that the assessment process also encompasses "the classroom tests and daily assessments that we teachers use in our classroom, and the largescale tests that our students take" (Cheng and Fox, 2017, pp. 1-2).

According to Hidri (2021, p. 11), assessment should be mainly aimed at verifying the occurrence of the learning process, its extent and anticipated outcomes, as it is chiefly concerned with systematically gathering and compiling information in order to emit judgments or to make decisions in connection to certain people.

In Brown's perspective (2003, p. 8), the continuously changing teaching methodology has consistently influenced language testing tendencies, forms and conventions. In this respect, he argues that in the 1950s – against the background furnished by contrastive analysis and behaviorism – in the limelight of testing practices there were placed particular language aspects, such as the various disparities of phonological, grammatical, and lexical nature between two languages. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, a more integrative perspective upon testing was triggered by communicative theories of language, while nowadays test designers are looking for assessment tools characterized by authenticity and validity so as to replicate the circumstances of real-world interaction (Brown, 2003, p. 8).

Bachman's research (1995, p. 350) highlighted several elements that are susceptible of influencing the candidate's score measurement i.e. the communicative language ability (involving issues related to language competences, such as those of grammatical, textual, illocutionary and sociolinguistic nature; strategic competencies and psychosociological mechanisms), the test method (implying issues connected to the environment, the rubric, the input, the expected response, and the relationships between input and response), personal characteristics (such as the candidate's cultural background and knowledge, his/her cognitive abilities, sex and age) and random factors (these regard the interactions between the previous three elements and also the errors that might occur during the measurement process). In order to assure the accuracy of a testing process, all these elements should be taken into consideration. In addition, assessors should also have in view the practical usefulness of the tests and their positive and negative effects. Brown (2003, p. 248) also states that "the variety of assessment techniques and item types and tasks is virtually infinite in that there is always some possibility for creating a unique variation"; however, he appeals to caution as the "overzealous urge to be innovative" might distract teachers "from a central focus on achieving the intended purpose and rending an appropriate evaluation of performance". Different aspects regarding test use should also be envisaged when designing tests, and the acknowledgement of the responsibility to create adequate and appropriate tests also plays a key part in ensuring the observance of standards (Brown, 2003, p. 248).

There are also other ways of assessing the students' language skills, which implement different criteria. For instance, although informal assessment is usually seen as a stage that grants students the opportunity to practice, scholars argue that it involves the teacher's constant monitoring (and praise) of the students' performance of daily classroom tasks, without grading them or without outlining a picture of their skills. In scholars' view, this assessment type is mainly formative (as it focuses particularly on the learner's improvement of his/her language skills), and may take the shape of marginal comments made by the teacher on the student's papers, the teacher's pieces of advice or suggestions regarding various issues encountered by students, such as difficulties in pronouncing certain words or in note-taking, incidental comments or responses, use of encouraging structures (see Ruiz-Primo, 2011).

In addition, Ur (2009, p. 37) considers that even homework assignment is a useful means of informal assessment as it "may in fact function as a test if the teacher's main aim in giving it is to find out whether the learners have learned some language or not". In the same scholar's perspective, the same function can also be fulfilled by "questions asked during the routine give-and-take of classroom interaction", as well as by "some textbook exercises" (Ur, 2009, p. 37). The scholar also adds that, as far as formal assessment is concerned, it does not always include tests but also projects, portfolios, or even systematic observations of a learner's frequency of oral performance or participation in class.

In Brown's perspective (2003, p. 251), alternative forms of assessment are extremely useful especially because in this case, learners do not feel the same pressure and stress as they do during an exam; moreover, the same scholar adds that they also contribute to the "effort to triangulate data about students".

Scholars have found that, in general, assessment has two major functions i.e., formative and summative (see Perera-Diltz and Moe, 2014). The former is aimed at supporting and encouraging the learner in his/her ongoing development process and therefore takes place during the skill formation process and involves the teacher's feedback, the learner's acknowledgement of the feedback and the continuation of his/ her learning process and improvement (see Cullinane, 2011).

Andrade and Cizek (2010, p. 6) characterized formative assessment as a process that requires the collaboration between its main actors (i.e., learners and teachers) and that is aimed at apprehending the students' learning process and conceptual framework and at pinpointing those elements that are vital to the teaching and learning processes, such as strengths, weaknesses and spheres of improvement and development. The same scholars add that formative assessment furnishes precious information that can be capitalized by teachers in instructional planning and by learners in the expansion of their understanding and increased achievement.

In addition, Cheng and Fox (2017, p. 5) explain that this type of assessment "is in line with assessment for learning" and, since it is carried out collaboratively and concerned with "the direction in which teaching and learning should go", no mark should be related to it.

As far as summative assessment is concerned, scholars explain that it aims to quantify the learner's knowledge acquisition and academic achievement at the end of a course/ unit and focuses on the proof of the learner's accomplishment level of the respective learning objectives, without always providing with assistance for further progress. In this regard, Cheng and Fox (2017, p. 5) underline that this type of assessment "is in line with assessment of learning".

Brown (2003, p. 271) coins the phrase alternatives in assessment, which, in his perspective, is more appropriate than alternative assessment. He also highlights several advantages entailed by these alternatives in assessment, such as the opportunity to expand daily classroom activities and the employment of authentic contexts or of veridical reproductions of the real world, which highlights their nonintrusive and multiculturally sensitive nature (when administered adequately); they also furnish relevant and helpful data on the learners' strengths and weaknesses and put the limelight on both processes/procedures and results/products, demanding learners to capitalize their higher-level reasoning and problem-solving abilities (Brown, 2003, p. 271).

According to the above-mentioned scholar, teachers should have in view four main guidelines in order to efficiently implement self- and peer-assessment tasks. First, learners should be informed about the assessment goals. Second, the tasks should be coherently and precisely defined. Third, equitable performance/skill assessment should be encouraged. Fourth, follow-up tasks should be assigned for constructive washback (Brown, 2003: p. 276). He also presents several tasks that can be carried out by learners, focused on the four main language skills. As far as the reading skills are concerned, he suggests the following:

"Reading passages with self-check comprehension questions following. Reading and checking comprehension with a partner. Taking vocabulary quizzes. Taking grammar and vocabulary quizzes on the internet. Conducting self-assessment of reading habits. Setting goals for creating/ increasing opportunities for reading" Brown (2003, p. 277).

Cheng and Fox (2017, pp 11-12) explain that high-quality assessment should furnish results focused on student learning. In these scholars' perspective, high-quality assessment is characterized by elements such as alignment (concordance between curriculum, instruction, standards and assessments), validity (adequate inferences, uses and assessment consequences), reliability (consistent, stable and dependable assessment results), fairness (equal opportunities demonstrating achievement; comparably valid scores), consequences (triggered by the use or misuse of assessment results), practicality and efficiency (information entailed and collected by assessment) (Cheng and Fox, 2017, pp 11-12).

3. Assessing reading

Teaching experience and research in the field have highlighted that successful reading activities should be based on clear explanations, instructions and time limits provided by the teacher. By observing learners while they perform reading tasks (individually, in pairs or in teams), teachers can collect useful information about their skills and development. In order to help learners understand how to tackle a certain type of reading activity, when checking their answers, teachers

should also ask for justifications, i.e., ask learners to specify the details or part of the reading text that helped them decide on a particular option. The roles of prompter and controller are extremely useful to teachers especially when pointing out or directing learners to certain features of the text construction and structure, aimed at clarifying ambiguities or checking the learners' comprehension. Moreover, the integration of technology into English language teaching and assessment will boost the students' performance (see Maruntelu, 2018; Nadrag Dan, 2008). Carefulness is also required when providing feedback, so as to avoid learner demotivation or distraction.

According to Eunhee Jang (2017, p. 164), the assessment of reading skills should be centered on measuring the learners' automaticity in processing essential encoding skills; it should also evaluate their ability to selectively notice and analyze significant data, and to identify, retrieve and organize information in order to create mentally a meaningful and logical representation of the text. In addition, Brown (2003, p. 185) stresses that teachers should require learners to assimilate the rules for understanding a text, but show them precisely what to do: first, the processing of distinct letters, words, and phrases requires the ability to understand and use essential bottom-up strategies, while comprehension is based on top-down strategies (which are driven conceptually); second, adequate content and formal schemata (i.e., background information and cultural experience) should be acquired and strengthened by learners as part of the top-down approach, in order to perform interpretations efficiently.

The same scholar further professes that "the assessment of reading ability does not end with the measurement of comprehension" as a reader may comprehend the message at sentence level, but lack the ability to connect sentences and understand the entire/ overall message, due to insufficient practice of the "strategies for noting the discourse conventions of that genre" (Brown 2003: 185). Therefore, consideration of the different types of written texts (i.e., academic reading, job-related reading and personal reading), of the different angles of the reading ability, of the precise tasks usually employed in the assessment of reading, and of the impalpable nature of reading is necessary.

In his turn, Harmer (2007, p. 283) makes a clear distinction between extensive (i.e., reading longer texts for pleasure) and intensive (i.e., reading certain texts from textbooks in order to shape receptive skills, such as skimming, scanning, reading for detailed comprehension or reading for inference) reading.

In Kilpatrick's perspective (2015, p. 77), reading comprehension should be approached based on "the simple view of reading", as it pays "proper instructional attention" to "each of the key components involved in learning to read"; thus, reading comprehension engages "two broad skills: word-level reading and language comprehension", which "can be further subdivided based upon research into the various components influencing those broad skills".

Brown (2003, p. 188) specifies the following criteria that should be taken into account when assessing reading skills: identifying the purpose for reading a certain text; bottom-up decoding by applying spelling rules and conventions; grasping meaning by employing lexical analysis; guessing meaning when the learner is unsure; grasping the main ideas by skimming the text; extracting specific information by scanning the text; rapid processing by employing silent reading techniques; exploring/ using charts, marginal notes, semantic maps or outlines for comprehending and retaining various ideas or pieces of information; discriminating between literal and implied meanings; processing relationships by using discourse markers.

When it comes to extensive reading (i.e., books, reports, lengthy essays, short stories and articles), teachers can ask learners to perform a wide array of tasks, usually focused on meaning – which, in ESP, often raises challenges in terms of terminology and equivalences (see Chirobocea, 2016) – involving activities such as interpretation, scanning, skimming, information transfer, note taking, outlining, editing, impromptu reading plus comprehension questions, summarizing and responding, short-answer tasks, ordering. Furthermore, the employment of authentic materials will contribute to the enhancement of the learners' English skills (see Nadrag Dan and Chiru, 2016).

The assessment of perceptive reading skills usually involves tasks such as reading aloud, written response (i.e., reproducing in writing what has been read), multiple choice, picture-cued items. As far as selective reading skills are concerned, they can be assessed by tasks focused on multiple choice, matching, editing, (error identification and correction), picture-cues, gap filling.

Regarding interactive reading skills, their assessment involves longer texts and tasks that combine form-focused and meaning-focused goals, more attention being paid to the latter. Such instances are represented by cloze tasks (such as multiple-choice cloze tests, C-tests, close-elide), impromptu reading plus comprehension questions (i.e., reading followed by various text comprehension questions), short-answer tasks (i.e., open-ended reading comprehension questions) (see Kolodziejska 2003, p. 36). Tasks should be designed based on the assessment objectives and a key to, and scoring of these tasks should also be drawn up.

4. Research methodology

This section of the paper designs a case study to be conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022, with two groups (i.e., a control and an experiment group) of students from the Bachelor's degree program in the Economics of Trade, Tourism and Services, who have similar English proficiency levels (i.e., upper-intermediate).

The research methods employed will be the experiment and the observation.

This case study will verify the following hypotheses: H1. The employment of adequate assessment techniques furnishes learners the necessary backwash in order to further enhance their reading skills. H2. The employment of adequate assessment techniques provides teachers valuable evidence that contribute to the enhancement of their teaching techniques, meeting thus the learners' needs and contributing to their overall progress.

The experiment will be preceded by an initial reading assessment, in order to establish the level of the reading skills of each group involved in the experiment.

During the practice stage, students from both groups will solve reading tasks on the topics of "Tour Operators", "Dealing with Guests" and "Travel Agencies". However, the experiment group will receive Microsoft forms in order to practise reading; this group will also benefit from feedback and more practice activities, while with the control group, traditional teaching and assessment methods will be employed.

Consideration of various text genres (and, implicitly, the schemata associated with them) and of particular tasks usually employed in reading assessment, scrutiny of the reading purposes, strategies and means to retain information, and examination of different facets of the reading ability, as well as reading assessment performed by inference and adequate time limits (see Brown 2003, pp. 186-187) will be the main elements underlying the reading activities carried out with the experiment group.

The reading assessment criteria taken into consideration will be those proposed by Brown (2003, p. 188), as follows: establishing the reading objective; bottom-up decoding by applying spelling guidelines and conventions; grasping meaning by employing lexical analysis; deducing meaning of certain words or phrases (when the reader is unsure); skimming for essential ideas; scanning for particular information; rapid processing by employing silent reading strategies; grasping and retaining information by means of charts, marginal notes, semantic maps or outlines; identifying literal and implied meanings; processing interconnections by exploiting discourse markers.

Moreover, for the experiment group, the organization of different assessment tasks will be based on four types of reading performance, also tackled by the above-mentioned scholar i.e., extensive reading (for the assessment of the overall understanding of a text), perceptive (dealing with the elements of larger sections of discourse and thus learning how to read and become literate in ESP), selective reading (aimed at verifying whether the student is able to identify lexical, grammatical and discourse particularities of language within very short texts/sentences) and interactive reading (with texts of various lengths, aimed at negotiating meaning and at identifying significant traits in order to retain the processed pieces of information) (Brown, 2003, p. 189).

The experiment will end with a final module test, aimed at comparing the level of the reading skills of each group involved in the experiment.

5. Findings

We expect that the findings of the experiment conducted with the two groups (i.e., the control and the experiment group) of students from the Bachelor's degree program in the Economics of Trade, Tourism and Services will highlight the validity of the two research hypotheses. Thus, this experiment will probably emphasize that the employment of adequate assessment techniques furnishes learners the necessary backwash in order to further enhance their reading skills, and that it also provides teachers important evidence, contributing to the enhancement of their teaching methods and techniques, meeting thus the learners' needs and contributing to their general progress.

6. Conclusions

Ideally, tests should have feasible objectives and be based on comprehensive research conducted into a field of study. Moreover, criteria such as validity, reliability, face value and practicality should underlie tests. The assessment activity should also be based on the teacher's previous experience with and observation of the respective students; in addition, s/he should notice the mistakes students usually make and explain them while teaching.

It is noteworthy that the social and technical evolutions (and even crises) entailed some important changes as far as tests are concerned. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a new dimension the assessment activities, with a special focus on online testing, which, among others, put Microsoft and Google Forms in the limelight. Moreover, having in view the new generations' penchant for technical devices, teachers have to continuously adapt to these new technological breakthroughs and endeavor to incorporate them into their teaching and assessment activities, in order to support students in their English acquisition journey.

7. References

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