Examining Reading

Research and practice in assessing second language reading
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Examining Reading

Research and practice in assessing second language reading

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Abbreviations

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adj</td>
<td>Adjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AERA</td>
<td>American Educational Research Association</td>
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<td>ALTE</td>
<td>Association of Language Testers in Europe</td>
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<td>AOG</td>
<td>Assessment &amp; Operations Group</td>
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<td>APA</td>
<td>American Psychological Association</td>
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<td>AWL</td>
<td>Academic Word List</td>
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<tr>
<td>BEC</td>
<td>Business English Certificates</td>
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<td>BNC</td>
<td>British National Corpus</td>
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<td>BULATS</td>
<td>Business Language Testing Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAE</td>
<td>Certificate in Advanced English</td>
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<tr>
<td>CB</td>
<td>Computer Based</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBT</td>
<td>Computer Based Testing</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEF</td>
<td>Common European Framework</td>
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<td>CEFR</td>
<td>Common European Framework of Reference</td>
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<tr>
<td>CELS</td>
<td>Certificates in English Language Skills</td>
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<td>CELTA</td>
<td>Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults</td>
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<tr>
<td>CET</td>
<td>College English Test</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFA</td>
<td>Confirmatory Factor Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>Candidate Information Sheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLA</td>
<td>Communicative Language Ability</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLB</td>
<td>Canadian Language Benchmarks</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPE</td>
<td>Certificate of Proficiency in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRELLA</td>
<td>Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTT</td>
<td>Classical Test Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUP</td>
<td>Cambridge University Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DELTA</td>
<td>Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIALANG</td>
<td>Diagnostic Language (Assessment)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIF</td>
<td>Differential Item Functioning</td>
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<tr>
<td>EAL</td>
<td>English as an Additional Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAP</td>
<td>English for Academic Purposes</td>
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<tr>
<td>EBAFLS</td>
<td>European Bank of Anchor Items for Foreign Language Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a Foreign Language</td>
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<td>ELT</td>
<td>English Language Teaching</td>
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<td>EPS</td>
<td>Examination Processing System</td>
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<td>ESM</td>
<td>Electronic Script Management</td>
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Abbreviations

ESOL  English for Speakers of Other Languages
ESP  English for Specific Purposes
ETS  Educational Testing Service
FCE  First Certificate in English
GEPT  General English Proficiency Test
GM  General marking
GPC  Grapheme–Phoneme Correspondence
GRE  Graduate Record Examination
IATM  Instrument for the Analysis of Textbook Materials
iBT TOEFL  Internet Based Test of English as a Foreign Language
ICFE  International Certificate in Financial English
ICR  Intelligent Character Recognition
IDP  International Development Program
IELTS  International English Language Testing System
IF  Item Facility
IIS  IELTS Impact Study
ILEC  International Legal English Certificate
ILTA  International Language Testing Association
IRT  Item Response Theory
ITC  International Test Commission
IW  Item Writer
IWGs  Item Writer Guidelines
KET  Key English Test
KR-20  Kuder-Richardson 20
L1  First Language
L2  Second Language
LCE  Lower Certificate in English
LIBS  Local Item Banking System
MCQ  Multiple Choice Questions
MQC  Marking-Quality Coordinator
N  Noun
NCME  National Council on Measurement in Education
OMR  Optical Mark Reader
PARA  Partnership for Accessible Reading Assessment
PB  Paper Based
PET  Preliminary English Test
PMS  Performance Management System
PRD  Project Research and Development
QMS  Quality Management System
QPP  Question Paper Production
QPT  Quick Placement Test
RITCME  Recruitment, Induction, Training, Co-ordination, Monitoring, Evaluation
Abbreviations

RNIB  Royal National Institute for the Blind
SAQ   Short Answer Questions
SD    Standard Deviation
SE    Standard Error
SEM   Standard Error of Measurement
SILT  Studies in Language Testing
SO    Subject Officer
SVO   Subject Verb Object order
TEEP  Test in English for Educational Purposes
TEFL  Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TESOL Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TKT   Teaching Knowledge Test
TLX   Task Load Index
TM    Test Method characteristics
TOEFL Test of English as a Foreign Language
TOEIC Test of English for International Communication
TTR   Type-Token Ratio
UAT   User Acceptance Test
UCLES University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate
UETESOL University Entrance Test in English for Speakers of Other Languages
UN    United Nations
VDT   Visual Display Text
VDU   Visual Display Unit
VP    Vocabulary Profiler
VRIP  Validity, Reliability, Impact, Practicality
VSO   Verb Subject Object order
WPM   Words per minute
YLE   Young Learners English Tests
Series Editors’ note

*Examining Reading* is the second volume in the Studies in Language Testing (SiLT) series that addresses the approach used by Cambridge ESOL in the assessment of language skills, the first being SiLT 26, *Examining Writing* by Shaw and Weir (2007). This volume sets out to describe and evaluate how Cambridge ESOL tests different levels of reading in English as a second language across the range of examinations it offers spanning the Reference Levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) from A2 to C2, through focusing largely on the five examinations in the Cambridge ESOL Main Suite (KET, PET, FCE, CAE, CPE). As with *Examining Writing* (2007), it does so by presenting an explicit framework that structures the approach to validation according to a number of dimensions or parameters. It utilises the same theoretical framework as *Examining Writing* which was originally proposed by Weir (2005) and which seeks to take account of both the aspects of cognition, related to the mental processes the individual needs to engage in order to address a task, and the features of language use in context that affect the ways in which a task is addressed. The authors also look at the practical assessment issues related to the marking and scoring of reading tests. As with *Examining Writing* therefore, this volume explores the triangular relationship between three critical internal dimensions of language testing tasks – the test takers’ cognitive abilities, the context in which the task is performed and the scoring process. Set alongside these are the twin external dimensions of consequential validity and criterion-related validity.

Cambridge ESOL has been involved in the assessment of reading skills ever since it launched its first English language examination in 1913. Since that time we have seen a significant development in our understanding of the reading construct from its early conceptualisation as an integrated skill, assessed largely by translation and even reading aloud tasks, through to the approaches documented in this volume.

When the CPE was introduced in 1913, reading as a skill in its own right did not feature explicitly among those to be examined. The history and most recent revision of CPE is well documented in SiLT 15, *Continuity and Innovation: Revising the Cambridge Proficiency in English Examination 1913–2002* (Weir and Milanovic 2003). The volume explains how the approach to the design of CPE in 1913 was based on *The Practical Study of Languages* (Sweet 1899) and candidates spent over twelve hours on a demanding set of activities that included translation to and from English, an essay on
Examining Reading

a topic such as Elizabethan travel and discovery, an English literature paper, English phonetics, dictation, reading aloud and conversation. While various reading skills were required throughout the examination, the skill itself was not singled out for particular attention as it would be today nor in the way that phonetics, grammar, reading aloud and conversation were singled out in the 1913 examination.

Little changed in relation to the assessment of reading for the 1938 version of CPE other than the introduction of an alternative to the English Literature paper focussing on General Economic and Commercial Knowledge. Candidates had to read extensively in order to engage with these papers but did so outside the context of the examination room, clearly extremely powerful with regard to the impact of the test on learning/teaching. Summarisation and explanation were required of candidates when tackling some of the questions in both of these papers. Typically, candidates had to choose between summarising a passage, which included defining the meaning of words and phrases in the text, and explaining a poem in detail including a focus on style and diction.

The Lower Certificate in English, introduced in 1939 and later known as the First Certificate in English (1975), tackled reading in a slightly different way. In its paper entitled Prescribed Texts, candidates had to read up to four prescribed texts typically taken from what we would today refer to as the classics of English literature but what would then have been closer to contemporary fiction. In the examination candidates had to answer questions on two of the texts. A short excerpt from each was presented and candidates were asked a number of open-ended questions, sometimes requiring close inspection of the text itself and sometimes a broader interpretation. In the Composition paper Part C was mandatory and required candidates to answer some short questions focusing on the meaning of vocabulary in a text, propose a title for it and summarise a part of it. Some of these activities would be familiar in reading tests today.

The 1955 variant of CPE introduced a Use of English paper and reading was tested both in this paper and in the English Language paper (introduced in the place of the Composition paper in 1945), though it was not referred to as reading in either. Short answer comprehension questions, summarisation and vocabulary questions were all used. From the 1940s to the mid 1970s relatively little changed on the surface but behind the scenes a revolution was taking place that would mark a radical shift in an approach that had been changing gradually since 1913.

There was much talk internally in the 1960s that the Cambridge approach lacked objectivity, that is, that it was in some way behind the times, that it needed to focus more explicitly on the four skills and that it was time to start making use of more ‘scientific’ methods of assessment, i.e. multiple choice questions, analysis, and, importantly, the demonstration of test reliability.
This affected CPE gradually at first in that multiple choice questions were introduced into the 1967 variant of the Use of English Paper. The focus was largely on vocabulary and the extent to which the questions were subjected to analysis was limited, but an important statement had been made. The 1975 release of both FCE and CPE made a much bolder statement. Cambridge exams now explicitly tested the four skills of Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing. Both Listening and Reading were introduced in their own right. At the same time, the Use of English paper continued with its micro focus on grammatical and lexical knowledge. The reading construct, though not defined as such at this stage, involved reading a number of short passages and answering multiple-choice questions on them. The focus was on explicit and implicit meaning at both levels. There were also 25 discrete-point multiple-choice vocabulary questions. The reading construct appeared to reflect a combination of reading skills along with a knowledge of vocabulary, sometimes of a somewhat esoteric nature.

The FCE and CPE examinations changed relatively little in the next 21 years; however, as before, there was significant activity behind the scenes. The work of the Council of Europe in its Modern Languages programme, the emergence of the Threshold level, and the rise of the communicative language teaching movement all happened in the 1970s and 1980s and impacted on the Cambridge approach to language testing. In addition, an important study carried out in the late 1980s was to have quite a powerful influence on the shape of things to come. Bachman et al (1995) carried out a Cambridge-sponsored study entitled *An Investigation into the Comparability of Two Tests of English as a Foreign Language* (SiLT 1). While ostensibly looking at the comparison between FCE and TOEFL in order to establish an empirical link between the level systems of each examination, this study actually ended up providing an in-depth critique of the Cambridge approach with specific reference to the then well developed and documented psychometrically-oriented approach as demonstrated by the TOEFL. Significant issues in relation to reliability and validity emerged which were addressed vigorously with the 1996 release of the FCE and subsequent release of CPE in 2002. Apart from a range of measurement issues not particularly relevant to this discussion, a much sharper focus on test construct definition and validation emerged. Where test construct had had to be pieced together post hoc from test specifications in earlier releases of FCE and CPE, there were now explicit statements on test construct. The Reading paper in particular, underwent fairly radical revision and its construct was defined as ‘Understanding the propositional, functional and sociolinguistic meanings at word, phrase, sentence or discourse levels and of reading outcomes relevant to FCE takers (i.e. gist, specific information, detail, main idea, deduced information).’ Measures were put in place not only to develop test content with systematic reference to the underlying construct but also to validate the nature of that construct. It
Examining Reading

is this important step that has taken us to the work described in this volume and the others in this series. The volume on Writing assessment has already been published as SiLT 26, and parallel volumes on Speaking and Listening are currently in preparation for publication over the next two years.

More recently, we have also seen the emergence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Learning, Teaching and Assessment (Council of Europe 2001) which encourages examination providers to map their certification to the Framework. Khalifa and Weir examine how Cambridge has approached this task in significant depth when exploring criterion-related validity. The approach taken by Cambridge seeks not only to establish the relationship with the Framework as a one-off study, but to deploy a methodology that ensures a long-term and continually verifiable relationship which is surely in the overall best interests of test users.

Skills assessment at Cambridge is now underpinned more formally than ever by a validation framework based on Weir (2005) and building on the work of Bachman (1989) which informed validation activities in the 1990s, as well as the VRIP approach developed by Cambridge in the 1990s. The approach outlined in this volume not only allows Cambridge to determine where current examinations are performing satisfactorily in relation to a range of relevant validity parameters, it also provides the basis for improvement and the construction of an ongoing research agenda. It provides an important benchmark against which test developers can evaluate the effectiveness of their respective approaches and it offers test users a model of what to expect from responsible examination providers.

Michael Milanovic and Cyril J Weir
Cambridge – April 2009
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