

Re-evaluating Reading Assessment: Transforming Current Practices for Assessing EFL Learners' Reading Skills at the Undergraduate Level

Tayyaba Tajamal
tajamaltayyaba@gmail.com
Lecturer, Department of English
Foundation University, Islamabad
Ph.D. Scholar

International Islamic University, Islamabad

Corresponding Author: * Tayyaba Tajamal tajamaltayyaba@gmail.com

Received: 02-03-2025

Revised: 29-03-2025

Accepted: 05-04-2025

Published: 01-05-2025

ABSTRACT

Teaching Reading skills is very important, thus testing reading skills is also very critical. The present study evaluates the trends in testing reading skills by focusing the question papers of reading comprehension section taught in various courses at undergraduate level (BS-English). The study explores what trends are being followed by the teachers to design reading skills papers. What tools/techniques they are using to measure students' reading skills? This research will subsequently enable teachers how to evaluate students' reading skill. The researcher has used Mixed Method approach. Data is collected through quantitative and qualitative method. Quantitative data is collected through questionnaires and qualitative data is collected through documents. Purposive sampling technique is used. Forty (40) teachers who were teaching the reading course and Ten (10) question papers were selected as sample from five (05) universities of Lahore. The data collected through questionnaires is analyzed by using SPSS Statistics. Qualitative data is analyzed through document analysis. The framework for analysis of question papers is based on the criterion mentioned in CEFR to evaluate the performance level of reading skills. The findings of questionnaire reveal that teachers are less aware about how and what reading skills they are evaluating in papers. The outcome of questionnaire validates the analysis of question papers. The analysis of question papers determined; those are not precisely measuring students' reading skills. Question papers are just designed to test reading comprehension knowledge not the skill. The significant recommendation is that teachers should design question papers by setting receptive and productive tasks. They should keep in mind students' abilities, selection of texts, and structural and lexical difficulty of the text and the six main levels of CEFR to test reading skills.

Keywords: EFL learners; Reading skills; Reading comprehension; Language testing; Testing reading skills

INTRODUCTION

Language teaching is not only difficult for EFL learners but language testing is also a very critical phenomenon. As language teaching needs techniques and methodologies to teach; simultaneously language testing also requires some testing techniques and framework to test the language skills for EFL learners. Schellekens (2011, p. 2) stated that language testing plays very significant role to test the learners' language skills. Tests are very important tools to measure the learners' achievement according to the required standards. They also put their effect on classroom practices in order to determine whether the learners have learnt the language skills or not. The primary purpose of testing/tests is to promote learning and recognize learning needs. After recognizing the learning needs, the tests help the teachers to modify their teaching methodologies as teaching and learning are inter-related to each other. Tests help the teachers to find out how effective the learning is taking place.

Arung (2013, pp:3-4) described that test is a measuring tool to assess the learning objectives of a specific course or skill. He defines that testing is a way of asking questions to find out the responses of learners and to evaluate those responses with some specific criterion. Tests have different purposes as to measure the learners' progress towards the specific objectives of the course or skill, to identify the weaknesses of the learners, to improve those weaknesses, to compare the learners' performance to the other learners, to promote learners in the next class and to evaluate the curriculum.

Anderson (1990, p. 426) stated that reading and testing are two areas in applied linguistics. Both come side by side when test experts and teachers design tests to check the reading ability of learners. Test designer (experts or teachers) plays very fundamental role in this context. He/she has to decide what he/she wants to test in reading ability. Which skill he/she wants to focus in reading skills; skimming, scanning, intensive reading and extensive reading etc. What techniques he/she will use to check the reading ability of learners i.e. Mcqs, Fill in the blanks, True/False or cloze test etc. After having such decisions, the test designer has to focus what framework he/she will use for marking a reading test.

Hughes (1989, pp.48-52) elaborated that a test for any language skill should be constructed by following a set of specifications. Test specifications refer to some specific standards, benchmarks and rules which a test taker should follow while designing any test. These test specifications include the information about purpose of test, kind of test, ability/skill to be tested, content, format, timing, criterial levels of performance and scoring procedures.

English is considered as non-native language for foreign learners. There are four skills in English language; Listening; Speaking, Reading and Writing. The researcher has focused in this paper reading skill in English language. The main focus of this research is to identify the trends in testing reading skills at undergraduate level (BS-Programs) in Pakistani context. Various courses are taught in universities named as Functional English, English-1, and English-2 etc. in different departments as English course. Reading skill/reading comprehension is taught as one of the course contents mentioned above. Academic Reading and Writing, Advanced Academic Reading and Writing, Reading and Study Skills, Literary Reading and Grammar: Syntax and Communication Skills are teaching specifically to BS-English Students. The researcher focused BS-English program at undergraduate level. The rationale to choose BS-English program is to identify the testing trends directly in reading courses.

This research will enable test designers (experts and teachers) how to test learners' reading skills of BS-English program. It will help them to find out the techniques which should be used in a reading test to measure the reading ability of learners. Moreover, it will also give awareness to them about the marking rubrics in a reading test.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To find out the trends followed by the teachers to measure the learners' reading skills at undergraduate level.
2. To find out the techniques used by the teachers to measure the learners' reading skills.

Research Questions

1. What trends are being followed by the teachers to measure the learners' reading skills at undergraduate level?
2. What techniques are used by the teachers to measure the learners' reading skills at undergraduate level?

Delimitations of the Study

Keeping in view the resources and time, the study is delimited to BS-English program at undergraduate level and to the 5 Universities of Lahore.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Arung (2013, p.5) described that language proficiency can be tested through the four skills of English language among EFL learners. Testing reading skills is considered very easy in a first glimpse but it becomes very complex at various levels and according to the types of tests. It is good for a test designer to

decide what to test and measure, type of test, identify the level and ages of testee in a reading test because according the level of testees the complexity of the test to measure reading skills increased.

Schellekens (2011, p.15) indicated that reading skill is difficult to test in formally as well as informally. Reading skill is observed as a receptive or passive skill. Reading test involves multiple techniques to assess reading ability i.e. multiple-choice items, fill in the blanks, true/false and reading comprehension questions etc. Therefore, it is assumed that reading is not only the complex phenomenon for the reader but it is also complex and challenging for the test designer to design reading test.

Hughes (1989, pp.116-124) categorized the operations for testing reading skills. These operations are of different levels of skills. He classified the operations for testing reading w.r.t Macro skills, Micro skills and grammatical abilities.

Testing macro skills in a reading test involves:

Scanning of text

Skimming of text

Identification of arguments from text

Recognizing the supporting details from the text

Testing micro skills in a reading test includes:

Identifying the parts of speech

Guessing contextual meanings of unfamiliar words

Recognizing the word relations i.e. analogies

Understating the sequencing events (introduction, development, transformation and conclusion of the idea)

Testing reading skills at grammatical and lexical level involves the understanding the significance of tenses. (Hughes, cited above) discussed about the different techniques which should be used to measure the learners' reading ability according to their level. Test designer should design multiple choice items, gap-filling items, short answer questions, guided short answer questions, cloze tests, information transfer items and matching items in a reading test. Such techniques minimize the writing skill of the testees which is the necessary part of a reading test. According to him reading test should only measure the learners' reading ability directly. The writing skill should not be measured maximally in a reading test.

Tsagari et al. (2018, pp.26-28) stated that a reading test is designed by using receptive tasks and productive tasks. Receptive tasks refers to the reception of the ideas. It is assessed through receptive tasks that L2 learners have to choose answers from a set of options, guess the answer and produce the correct answer after reading the text. It is not required from them to produce language on their own. These tasks involve Mcqs, True/False, matching columns or sequencing questions. These tasks measure the reading skills directly and assessment for receptive tasks is very clear. The purpose of productive tasks is that the learners have to produce language on their own. These tasks are writing short answer questions, gap-filling items, information transfer questions and summary writing. Productive tasks measure the reading skills indirectly because it includes writing skills also. Assessment for productive tasks become ambiguous because the teacher has to focus on grammar, vocabulary and spellings whiling assigning the marks.

Hughes (2003) suggested that selection of text in a reading test is very crucial and critical aspect. Test selection should be according to the level and age of the learners. Test designer should select text by focusing the following categories:

Test designer should focus the type of text; what type of text he/she should select to test the reading ability of leaners. Text type includes non-literary text as articles from newspapers, magazines and journals, letters and advertisements. It also includes literary text as novels, dramas, short stories, poems and plays.

Test designer should also pay attention to the forms of the text to measure the learners' reading skills. The form of text will help the test taker to identify the learners' ability in descriptions of text, exposition of text, argumentation of text, instructions and narration of text.

Test taker can also assess the learners' reading ability from graphic features. It includes the description of charts, tables, diagrams.

Topic of reading test should also be focused according to the level of learners. It should be familiar to the learners.

Test designer should select text according to the operations which he/she want to assess i.e. micro-level, macro-level and grammatical level. The selected text should measure the reading tasks directly.

Length of the text should also be chosen according to the level of learners. An appropriate length should be chosen.

METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive in nature. Descriptive research is used to describe the current situation of some phenomenon. The researcher has used Mixed Method approach which is the amalgam of both quantitative and qualitative data. The population of the study includes 80 teachers from the 5 universities of Lahore. Purposive sampling technique is used. In order to select the samples for data collection, the researcher personally went to universities, visited the department of English and selected teachers purposively who were teaching the learners of BS-English. The sample of the study included forty (40) teachers.

Quantitative data is collected through questionnaire. The researcher has designed questionnaire to check the trends in testing reading skills at undergraduate level. The quantitative data is tabulated and analyzed by using SPSS Statistics version 17.0. Qualitative data is collected thorough document analysis (question papers). Ten (10) question papers are selected from teachers who were teaching the courses of reading skills as Academic Reading and Writing, Literary Reading & Syntax, Reading and Study Skills directly. Question papers of the course Communication Skills were also selected in which all four skills of English Language are taught at BS-English. Reading skill is focused from the question papers of communication skills. Qualitative data is analyzed through document analysis. As here, documents refers to the question papers. The framework for analysis of question papers is based on the criterion mentioned in CEFR to evaluate the performance level of reading skills. The researcher developed themes and codes according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) criterion to test reading skills for qualitative analysis.

Tsagari & et.al (2018, pp. 26-28) describes the framework to test reading skills in CEFR. According to the framework reading skills are tested in terms of receptive tasks and productive tasks. Receptive tasks include multiple-choice questions, true/false items, matching tasks or sequencing items. Productive tasks include short answer questions, information transfer items or summary writing questions. The framework to analyze question papers is developed accordingly.

Data Analysis

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (document analysis) strands of the study.

RESULTS/ ANALYSIS

This section details the analysis of the questionnaires administered to the teachers. The questionnaire aimed to gather data on their practices and beliefs regarding the teaching and testing of reading skills at the undergraduate level. The data was analyzed using SPSS Statistics. The following analysis is based on trends which teachers are using to test/measure the reading skills at undergraduate level (BS-English) through questionnaires.

Table 1

Importance of Reading

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
1	Reading skills are important to teach.	40	5.00	.000	0.00
2	Teaching reading skills improve vocabulary.	40	5.00	.000	0.00
3	Teaching reading skills is good to improve sentence structure.	40	5.00	.000	0.00

Table 1 describes the teachers' opinion about the importance of teaching reading skills at undergraduate level. It is analyzed from the table that all teachers have their strong opinion that reading skills improve vocabulary and sentence structure. The Mean value in the table shows that 100 % teachers are agreed to the importance of reading.

Table 2
Paragraph Selection

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
4	I select fictional text to measure learners' reading skills (fantasy stories).	40	3.70	1.90	0.30
5	I select reading text based on the topics of 'Social Sciences' (Psychology, Sociology, and Geography).	40	3.20	2.02	0.32
6	I select reading text related to the concepts of 'Natural Science' (Biology, Chemistry).	40	1.30	1.07	0.17
7	I select literary paragraphs/text to check learners' reading skills (Novel, Drama and Prose).	40	4.00	1.75	0.28
8	I select paragraphs/text from poems to check learners' reading skills.	40	1.70	1.54	0.24
9	I select non-literary paragraphs/text to test learners' reading skills (Magazines, Newspapers etc.).	40	4.50	1.34	0.21

Table 2 presents the teachers' preferences for selecting reading texts. It is observed from the analysis of the table that 80 % teachers prefer to select literary and 90% teachers select non-literary text. They do not prefer to select fictional text, text related to the topics of social sciences, natural sciences and poems. The low standard deviations suggest that teachers' responses are generally close to the mean values, indicating a degree of consistency in their preferences.

Table 3
Length of the Text

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
10	I prefer to use only one paragraph in reading test.	40	4.50	1.34	0.21
11	I do not prefer to use multiple paragraphs in reading test.	40	3.50	1.96	0.31
12	I prefer to choose reading text 500 or more than 500 words in reading test.	40	3.30	2.00	0.32
13	I do not prefer to choose reading text up to 1000 and more than 1000 words in reading test.	40	2.00	1.75	0.28

Table 3 interprets the teachers' ideas about the length of the text which should be selected for a reading test. It is observed from the analysis that 90% teachers use only one paragraph for a reading test. 66% teachers prefer to choose text within 500-600 words. The findings indicated that most teachers prefer using a single paragraph in reading tests, with a tendency towards texts of 500-600 words. There is a general disinclination to use multiple paragraphs or longer texts (1000+ words). According to Hughes (2003), relying solely on short texts may not adequately assess students' ability to sustain attention, process complex

information, or engage in extensive reading, which are crucial reading skills. He suggested that test designers should select text according to the level and age of the learners.

Table 4
Reading Process

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
14	I prefer to use Bottom-up process to measure reading comprehension.	40	4.50	1.34	0.21
15	I do not prefer to use Top-down process to measure reading comprehension.	40	3.50	1.96	0.31

Table 4 discusses about the reading process that which process the test designer should choose while designing the reading test. It is found from the analysis of the table that 90% teachers use Bottom-up process whereas 70% teachers use Top-down process. Anderson (1990) and Bottom-up processing involves decoding text from the smallest units (letters, words) to larger units (sentences, paragraphs), while top-down processing involves using prior knowledge and expectations to understand the meaning of the text. An effective reader employs both processes. The data suggests a potential over-reliance on bottom-up processing, which indicates that teachers are primarily assessing lower-level decoding skills rather than higher-level comprehension skills (Anderson, 1990; Schellekens, 2011).

Table 5
Reading Tasks/Operations: Macro –Skills

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
16	I design questions in order to extract detailed information of the given text/paragraph in reading test.	40	4.80	0.88	0.14
17	I design questions in order to locate specific information from the given text/paragraph in reading test.	40	4.80	0.88	0.14
18	I design questions to grasp the main idea/theme/gist from the given paragraph/text in reading test.	40	4.60	1.22	0.19
19	I design critical/creative question from the given text/paragraph in reading test.	40	2.80	2.02	0.32
20	I design compare and contrast questions from the given text/paragraph in reading test.	40	3.00	2.03	0.32
21	I design questions of analytical reasoning from the given text/paragraph in reading test.	40	2.30	1.90	0.30

Table 5 describes the readings tasks to check the macro-skills of learners in a reading test. It is determined from the analysis that 96% teachers design questions for skimming and detailed reading, 92% teachers design items for scanning. While 56% teachers design critical questions, 60% participants design compare and contrast questions and only 46% teachers design analytical reasoning in reading test. The emphasis on skimming, scanning, and detailed reading, while acknowledged as essential macro-skills (Hughes, 1989), should not overshadow the necessity of cultivating critical thinking, comparison/contrast, and analytical reasoning. The neglect of these higher-order skills is a damage to students, hindering their capacity for deep engagement with texts, sound evaluation of information, and the formation of independent interpretations. This pedagogical imbalance, favoring lower-level macro-skills, ultimately limits students' ability to

effectively apply their reading skills in both academic and real-world contexts, where critical analysis and interpretation are paramount.

Table 6

Reading Tasks/Operations: Micro-Skills

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
22	I design questions to identify parts of speech in the given paragraph/text in reading test.	40	1.20	0.88	0.14
23	I design questions to check the grammatical/lexical appropriacy from the given text/paragraph in reading test.	40	1.20	0.88	0.14
24	I design questions to guess the contextual meanings of the words from the given text/paragraph in reading test.	40	3.00	2.03	0.32
25	I design questions to find out the synonyms/antonyms of the words from the given paragraph in reading test.	40	3.70	1.90	0.30

The data presented in Table 6, unequivocally demonstrates a systemic failure to adequately assess micro-skills in reading tests at the undergraduate level. While a mere 24% of teachers report designing items to identify parts of speech and grammatical ability, the reality is that the majority neglect these fundamental building blocks of reading comprehension (Hughes, 1989). This neglect is not simply an oversight; it actively undermines students' ability to decode text accurately and efficiently, thereby impeding their overall comprehension. Furthermore, the long-term consequences of this deficiency extend beyond reading, potentially hindering students' broader language development, given the crucial role these micro-skills play in both reading and writing acquisition (Tsagari et al., 2018).

Table 7

Reading Tasks/Operations: Micro-Skills

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
26	I design sequencing items in reading test.	40	3.70	1.90	0.30
27	I design multiple choice questions in reading test.	40	3.50	1.96	0.31
28	I design gap-filling items in reading test.	40	3.30	2.00	0.32
29	I design True/False items in reading test.	40	3.20	2.02	0.32
30	I design short answer questions in reading test.	40	4.40	1.45	0.23
31	I design analogies in reading test.	40	2.90	2.02	0.32
32	I design information transfer questions in a reading test.	40	3.40	1.98	0.31
33	I design a cloze-test in a reading test.	40	1.40	1.22	0.19

Table 7 denotes the reading techniques which the teachers use in reading test to assess the reading ability of learners. It is found that 74% teachers design sequencing items, multiple choice questions, gap filling items, short answer questions, information transfer items but only 24% teachers design cloze test and

analogies in reading test. The statistical values in table verifies that low standard deviation means the values in statistical data set are very close to the Mean value. The analysis shows that while the teachers utilize a variety of techniques, the less frequent use of cloze tests and analogies might indicate a missed opportunity to assess specific aspects of reading ability, such as understanding text coherence (cloze tests) and recognizing relationships between ideas (analogies). A more balanced approach, incorporating a wider range of techniques, could provide a more comprehensive assessment of students' reading skills.

Table 8
Marking Rubrics

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
34	I provide detailed instructions in reading test.	40	4.10	1.69	0.27
35	I do not prefer to give marks when learners answer the questions by using their own words in reading test.	40	2.10	1.81	0.29
36	I prefer to give 70% marks to content and 30% marks to grammar in reading test.	40	3.40	1.98	0.31
37	I do not prefer to check spellings in reading test.	40	2.70	2.00	0.32
38	I prefer to check one/two word answer for the questions in reading test.	40	2.60	1.98	0.31
39	Précis writing can be effective part of reading comprehension.	40	5.00	.000a	0.00
40	Précis writing checks the reading skills only.	40	3.80	1.86	0.29
41	I do not agree that traditionally designed reading comprehension tests measure reading skills rather than writing skills.	40	2.70	2.00	0.32
42	I prefer to test reading skill through integrated skill/Indirect Testing (50% or less marks to reading skill).	40	3.90	1.81	0.29
43	I prefer to test reading skill as Discrete-point skill/Direct Testing (100% marks to reading skill).	40	3.40	1.98	0.31

Table 8 illustrates marking rubrics for reading test. The analysis shows that 42 % teachers do not prefer for learners to use their own language while giving the answers of productive tasks. 68% teachers prefer to give marks to content rather than grammar in reading test but at the same time 53% do not check spellings in a reading test. 100% teachers agree to design précis writing questions in reading test because they think that précis writing is a good part for reading comprehension. 78% teachers said that reading skill should be tested as integrated skill and Discrete-point skill as well as it can be assessed through direct testing and indirect testing.

Document Analysis

The data is collected from question papers for document analysis. The theoretical framework to analyze question papers is based on CEFR's framework to test the reading skills. CEFR's framework to assess the learners' reading skill is based on receptive tasks and productive tasks. So, the researcher herself developed the codes accordingly for document analysis.

Code 1: Receptive Tasks

It is found from the analysis of question papers that teachers have not designed receptive tasks in reading tests at undergraduate level. As receptive tasks involve multiple-choice questions, true/false items, matching items and sequencing tasks. But it is observed from the analysis of question papers that any of the above receptive tasks are not included in reading test in 10 question papers. The complete absence of receptive tasks in the question papers represents a significant deviation from recommended assessment practices. This finding, coupled with the quantitative data from the questionnaire, suggests that while teachers may be aware of a variety of assessment techniques, but they do not consistently apply them in their actual assessment practices. This discrepancy raises concerns about the validity and reliability of the reading assessments.

Code 2: Productive Tasks

The analysis of question papers show that teachers have designed productive tasks in reading tests at undergraduate level. Productive tasks involve short answer questions, gap-filling items, information transfer items and summary writing. It is noticed that short answer questions are designed in reading test with the name of reading comprehension question. Short answer questions are designed to assess the macro-skills of learners in question papers. All the teachers have assessed macro-skills of learners while designing critical questions, argumentative questions, skimming/thematic questions, compare-contrast and scanning items in reading test. Only 01 teacher has designed question of summary writing and 01 teacher has designed question for reading for ideas in test. On the other hand, it is also found that gap-filling items and information transfer items were not designed in the productive tasks as well. Micro-skills are not being assessed even through productive tasks. Hughes (1989) and Tsagari et al. (2018) recommended to design productive tasks to measure the students' reading comprehension that will purely involve students in active reading. The heavy reliance on short answer questions, primarily focused on macro-skills, indicates a potential imbalance in the assessment of reading skills. While short answer questions can be useful for assessing certain aspects of comprehension, they may not be suitable for evaluating other important reading skills, such as the ability to extract specific information, make inferences, or understand text structure. Furthermore, the absence of gap-filling and information transfer items suggests that students are not being assessed on their ability to use contextual clues or transfer information from the text to other formats, which are valuable real-world reading skills.

Code 3: Reading Techniques/Strategies

It is examined from the question papers that only short answer questions are used to assess the reading skills at undergraduate level. Short answer questions are used to evaluate macro-skills of learners in these reading test. No other reading strategy i.e. sequencing items, multiple choice questions, gap-filling items, true/false, analogies, information transfer items and cloze-tests was used. It is also observed that only macro-skills are being assessed in reading test. There is only one paragraph of reading comprehension with question and answers. Teachers have also designed the questions which are simply referring to theoretical questions for reading processes, types of reading, definition of reading, techniques to improve reading and features of reading etc. on the other hand quantitative results showed in Table 7 that 74% teachers design sequencing items, multiple choice questions, gap filling items, short answer questions, information transfer items and 24% teachers design cloze test and analogies in reading test. However, while comparing the question papers the scenario is different. Measuring reading comprehension in question papers is restricted to short answer questions often times. The discrepancy between the techniques reported by teachers in the questionnaire and those observed in the question papers is a significant concern. This suggests that teachers may not be implementing the assessment strategies they believe to be effective. The over-reliance on short answer questions in the question papers, coupled with the inclusion of questions that test theoretical knowledge about reading, indicates a potential lack of practical application of reading assessment principles. This inconsistency could be attributed to several factors, including a lack of training, time constraints, or a misunderstanding of how to effectively assess reading skills.

Code 4: Paragraph Selection

It is noticed from the analysis of question papers that teachers have selected literary paragraphs (Novel, Drama and Prose) and non-literary paragraphs (Magazines and Newspapers) to design papers.

Code 5: Length of Text

It is observed from the analysis of question papers that teachers have used only one paragraph to assess learners' reading ability and this is aligned with the quantitative results where teachers said that they do not use multiple paragraphs in question paper. The words for one paragraph ranges from 500-600 words. They did not select paragraphs of 1000 or more than 1000 words.

Code 6: Marking Rubrics

Analysis of the question papers indicates that reading skills are often assessed through indirect testing methods. Hughes (1989) argues for the importance of direct assessment of all English language skills. At the undergraduate level, reading skills are evaluated as an integrated skill. However, the question papers lack detailed instructions for the reading comprehension section. Furthermore, these papers reveal that reading comprehension assessment frequently incorporates writing skills, as evidenced by the inclusion of thematic short answer questions following reading passages. Contrary to this, Hughes (1989) and Tsagari et al. (2018) suggest that reading comprehension assessments should primarily focus on activities that do not involve writing. When short answer questions are used, they should ideally be limited to one- or two-word answers. Additionally, précis writing, which inherently tests writing skills, was found in the reading comprehension question papers. Notably, 50% of the marks in the question papers are allocated to the reading/reading comprehension section, likely due to its assessment as an integrated skill.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed a significant gap between what constitutes effective reading skills assessment, as outlined in frameworks like the CEFR, and actual classroom practices at the undergraduate level in the Pakistani context. While teachers acknowledge the importance of reading skills, their understanding of how to assess these skills comprehensively appears to be limited. Several key issues emerge from the analysis:

Predominance of Indirect Testing: The research confirmed that reading skills are primarily assessed indirectly, often integrated with writing skills. This approach contradicts established recommendations that emphasize the importance of direct testing to accurately measure reading proficiency (Hughes, 1989). The over-reliance on short answer questions, which inherently involve writing, exemplifies this issue.

Lack of Varied Assessment Techniques: The study highlighted a lack of diversity in assessment methods. Teachers predominantly use short answer questions, neglecting other valuable techniques such as multiple-choice questions, gap-filling items, and sequencing tasks. This limited range of techniques restricts the assessment of different reading sub-skills and may not provide a complete picture of students' reading abilities. As Alderson (2000) argues, a variety of tasks is needed to tap into the complexity of reading.

Neglect of Micro-Skills: The findings indicated that teachers primarily focus on macro-skills (e.g., skimming, scanning) while neglecting micro-skills (e.g., identifying parts of speech, understanding word relationships). This focus on macro-skills at the expense of micro-skills may hinder students' overall reading development, as both are crucial for effective reading comprehension (Grabe, 2009).

Issues with Question Paper Design: The analysis of question papers revealed several shortcomings, including a lack of detailed instructions and a tendency to test theoretical knowledge about reading rather than actual reading ability. This suggests that teachers may not be adequately trained in designing effective reading assessments.

Misconceptions about Précis Writing: A significant misconception exists regarding the nature of précis writing, with teachers viewing it as a reading skill. The study correctly points out that précis writing is a writing skill and should be assessed accordingly.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the prevailing trends in testing reading skills at the undergraduate level in the selected Pakistani universities are deeply flawed, characterized by the assessment of reading as an integrated skill, a heavy reliance on indirect testing methods that emphasize writing, and a lack of variety

in assessment techniques. Teachers consistently focus on macro-skills while neglecting micro-skills, and question paper design frequently lacks clarity and detail.

The implications of these findings are significant. Such inadequate assessment practices can lead to an inaccurate evaluation of students' reading abilities, which can, in turn, hinder their academic progress. It is therefore crucial that teacher education programs equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to design and implement effective reading assessments. Furthermore, universities should provide ongoing professional development opportunities to ensure that teachers remain updated on the latest research and best practices in language testing.

A paradigm shift in reading assessment practices at the undergraduate level is urgently needed. Educators must move away from outdated methods that prioritize lower-level skills and indirect testing. A concerted effort is required to embrace a more holistic approach, one that integrates a variety of assessment techniques and gives balanced attention to both macro- and micro-skills. This shift necessitates: Explicit, targeted training for teachers on designing and implementing diverse assessment methods that align with current research and best practice; the development and enforcement of clear assessment guidelines and standards and the incorporation of ongoing assessment and feedback into the learning process, to support both student learning and teacher development.

Ultimately, reading assessment should empower students to become proficient, engaged, and critical readers. This can only be achieved if assessment practices are aligned with the best practices in the field, and if teachers are provided with the support and resources, they need to implement these practices effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following are the recommendations of the study:

- i. To accurately measure reading ability, teachers should prioritize assessment tasks that isolate reading skills, minimizing the influence of writing. This can be achieved by designing receptive tasks (multiple-choice questions, sequencing items, analogies, true/false, matching items) in reading tests, as outlined in the CEFR and recommended by Hughes (2003), because receptive tasks inherently require learners to read and comprehend the text.
- ii. Reading skill should be tested through direct testing and discrete-point testing, as these methods provide a more accurate and focused measure of reading ability, isolating it from other skills like writing.
- iii. Both macro and micro skills should be evaluated in reading tests for EFL learners to provide a comprehensive assessment of their reading proficiency.
- iv. Reading skill should be taught as one subject, and simultaneously assessed comprehensively. It should not be taught by dividing it into sections across multiple courses at the undergraduate level.
- v. When designing tasks for reading tests, teachers should provide detailed instructions for both receptive and productive tasks. Receptive tasks primarily measure reading skill, while productive tasks also involve writing. Therefore, for productive tasks, teachers must give very clear instructions for task completion and marking, aligning with CEFR guidelines. For example, teachers should explicitly specify the allocation of marks for grammar and content in reading test items.
- vi. If teachers choose to use productive tasks, they should design tasks that minimize the writing required, such as information transfer items and gap-filling items. In the case of short answer questions, teachers should limit responses to one or two words.
- vii. Précis writing should not be included as part of reading skill assessment, as it primarily assesses writing ability and does not directly measure reading comprehension. It should therefore be assessed as a writing skill.
- viii. Reading comprehension, by definition, focuses on understanding text; therefore, reading tests should assess reading ability exclusively.

REFERENCES

- Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing reading*. Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, J. C. (1990). Testing Reading Comprehension Skills (Part One). *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 6(2), 425-438.
- Arung, F. (2013). Language Testing & Evaluation. ResearchGate, RG.2.1.4171.8484(RG.2.1.4171.8484), 1-18.
- Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hughes, A. (1989). *Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hughes, A. (2003). *Testing for Language Teachers* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Schellekens, P. (2011). *Teaching and Testing the Language Skills*. Cambridge ESOL, 1-23.
- Tsagari, D., & et al. (2017-2018). *Hand Book of Assessment for Language Teachers*. Erasmus.