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READS: Reading Evaluation and Decoding System In Support of Informed Reading Instruction

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Abstract: READS or Reading Evaluation and Decoding System is an attempt to evaluate second language learners reading proficiency accurately. The analysed results could be used to gain a deeper understanding of the learners' reading standards. READS is made up of three components; Encoder, Analyzer and; Decoder. The principle behind READS is similar to the notion of assessment by Routman (2003), in which she assesses the data collected, evaluates the data and then makes the necessary adjustments in her teaching instruction to meet the needs of the learners. With READS, ESL teachers can administer the test and the scores obtained from the test can then be analysed. The results obtained can then be cross-referenced with the Reading Matrix to find out the band in which the learner belongs. After that, the teachers, learners and even parents can refer to the Descriptors of Reading Abilities to decode the learners' ESL reading abilities. Learners who are identified as below standard or at academic warning can then be given early intervention through appropriate reading instructions. As the current evaluation system does not provide specific information with regards to learners' reading proficiency, ESL teachers could now use READS as a formative assessment to assist their learners achieve competence in ESL reading. Teachers wishing to try READS, must use the test instrument in conjunction with the Reading Matrix, Performance Standards and Descriptors of Reading Abilities to gain accurate information with regards to their learners' reading proficiency and consequently plan reading lessons tailored to the needs of their learners.

Keywords: ESL reading, reading evaluation, reading assessment, reading instruction, reading standards, reading matrix, reading instruction intervention.

Introduction

Reading is an essential skill. In modern societies, the issue of literacy has been pushed further and today it means nothing if one could read. Nonetheless, pupils still find difficulty to read especially if it is in the second or foreign languages. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), (2002) believes that reading is not

merely a goal but an essential tool in education and the development of individuals both within and outside the confines of school. Even the European Commission (2001) of the European Union recognises that reading skills play a central role in an individual's learning at school. So the question is how do we measure the standard of reading? In recent years, many countries have established standards for reading achievement to provide teachers and schools with a clear vision of what learners should accomplish. Standards are statements of what every learner is supposed to know and be able to do at each grade level (Zarrillo, 2007). According to Temple, Ogle, Crawford and Freppon (2008), standards can provide good guidance and direction for teachers to focus on important elements of the reading curriculum that the pupils have not mastered.

Consequently, the teachers' instruction should be standards driven (Zarrillo, 2007). In other words, all the instructional decisions, materials chosen and how learners are grouped should be aimed at enabling every learner to achieve each of the standards for a particular grade level. Ultimately, assessment would be required to determine to what extent each learner has achieved the standard for each grade-level. Therefore, the ESL teachers must assess each of their learners to determine who has (and who has not) met this standard. This is what formative assessment is all about, which is to aid instruction.

As researchers, we will often ask ourselves how we could help the classroom teachers to evaluate their students reading standards, analyse the data (scores) and decode what it means in terms of abilities. If we could do this, then we will be able to help teachers make informed instructional decisions for their learners.

Assessment and Informed Instructional Decisions

Assessment can be broadly categorised under two main forms; summative and formative. Brown (2001:402), states that formative assessment is 'the observation of the process of learning, as opposed to the product' while the Florida Centre for Instructional Technology cited in Uwe Dippel and Renate Karchner-Ober (2006) describe formative assessment as on-going assessments, reviews, and observations in a classroom. In contrast, summative assessment is normally carried out at the end of a program or instructional sequence and is used to formally quantify the product of learning (Croker, 1999). Earl (2003) labels this kind of assessment as "Assessment of Learning" with the

sole purpose of reporting to parents and students about students' progress. Not much emphasis is given on the mastery of particular ideas or concepts since the scoring is too simplistic.

However, the current assessment system in Malaysian schools (and probably in many other countries too) award grades score (either letter or numbers) to the learners and this mainly cater as a summative assessment. These grades cannot indicate clearly the reading standards and abilities of the learners. At best, it does perhaps suggest that some learners perform better than others. Unfortunately, this method is often used for placement purposes. Though the learners may have the same grade, it does not necessarily mean that the learners possess the same level of reading proficiency. This is noted by Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot (2002) who insisted that the purpose of assessment is not merely to measure but to improve standards and this is what formative assessment should be. Farr (2003), went further to state that a test must inform and guide the teaching we intend to measure and assessment is the starting point for good instruction and to provide supportive instruction. With this information teachers too could provide learners with more accurate information with regards to their standards and abilities. Learners then would be more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They could then monitor their own progress (Temple, Ogle, Crawford and Freppon, 2008).

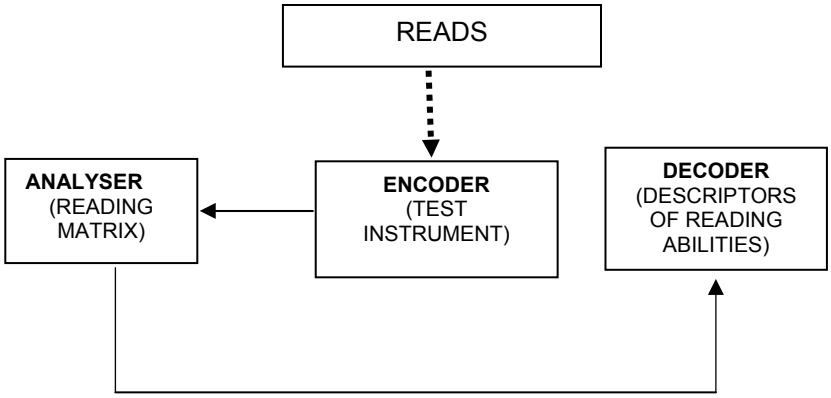
The need to relate assessment to standard is further emphasised by Caldwell (2002), whose advice on connecting instruction and assessment according to standards should be heeded. If teachers are really concerned on improving the reading standard (proficiency) of their learners in a systematic manner then it is essential that they link their reading instruction to a reliable system that would allow them to make informed decisions with regards to the instructional decisions they make. The '***system'*** that the writers are suggesting in this article is called READS or Reading Evaluation and Decoding System.

Reading Evaluation and Decoding System

Reading Evaluations and Decoding System or in short READS is fundamentally an elaborated reading comprehension testing instrument which provides more than just grades and scores. READS is made up of three components as shown in Figure 1. The

basic principle underlying READS could be found from the concepts proposed by Routman (2003). According to her, a good assessment should not only be able to gather reliable and valid data (scores) but also capable of evaluating these data to inform the teachers on the capabilities of their learners. This information would then be more useful as it would enable the teachers to make the necessary adjustments in their teaching instruction to meet the needs of the learners especially in a mixed ability classroom which is the norm now.

Figure 1: Composition of Reading Evaluation and Decoding System



With READS, English Second Language (ESL) teachers can administer the test and the scores obtained from the test can then be analysed. The analysis obtained can then be cross-referenced with the Reading Matrix to find out the band in which the learner belongs. Subsequently, the teachers, learners and even parents can refer to the Descriptors of Reading Abilities to decode the students' ESL reading abilities. Students who are identified as below standard or at academic warning can then be given early intervention through appropriate reading instructions (Wasburn-Moses, 2006). Based on the current status quo of the assessment of English language in Malaysia, we develop READS to be used on learners from year 7 to year 11 in Malaysian secondary schools.

Developing the Content for Encoder (Test Instrument)

This Test Instrument was developed based on the concept that reading standards are dynamic. They are not static. Learners at any educational levels are likely to be at

different stages in their learning and development, i.e. learners come with diverse abilities, interests and attitudes (Ediger, 2009) and to be progressing at different rates. The 60 multiple-choice reading comprehension questions of the Test Instrument comprise of 15 UPSR level (Primary School Assessment Examination) making up 25% of the test, 30 PMR level (Lower Secondary Assessment) constituting 50% of the test questions and 15 SPM level (Malaysian Certificate of Education) constituting 25% of the test questions. The proportion of the questions was based on the distribution of the difficulty level of test that is; 25% easy, 50% average and 25% difficult (Mok, 2000).

The Test Instrument used in this study was piloted and proven to be valid and reliable. According to Gay and Airasian (2003), content validity is determined by expert judgement. This Test Instrument was evaluated by five content experts who checked the type of texts used, length of text, difficulty level of texts and questions, type of vocabulary used in the text, rubrics and distractors. In terms of reliability, Popham (2002) states that when a test consists of multiple choice items, the most commonly used internal consistency approaches are the Kuder-Richardson procedures. In this study, the KR20 was found to be within the range of 0.78 to 0.85 for all educational levels which is consistent with Diederich cited in Oosterhof (2001:74) who proposes that 'if a teacher's test requires a full class period to complete (approximately 50 minutes), its Kuder-Richardson reliability should be between 0.60 and 0.80'.

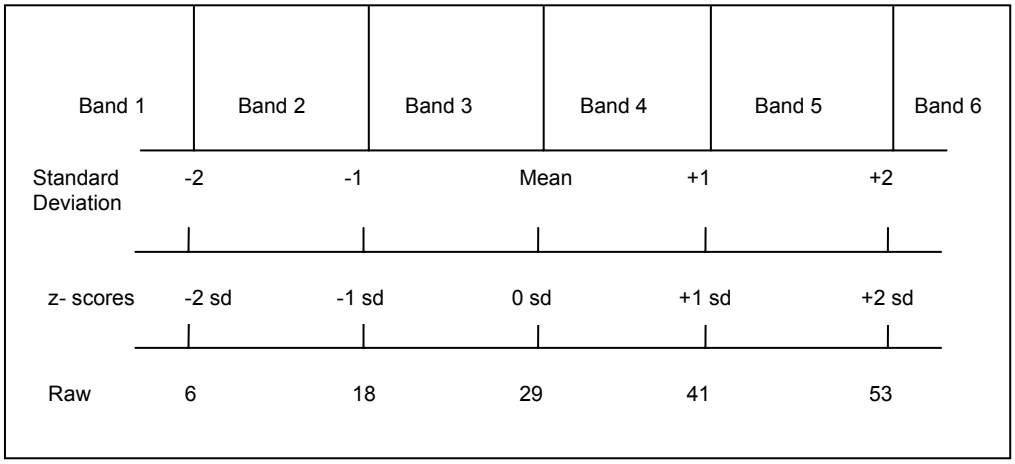
Time Allocation to Administer READS on Learners

A pilot study was conducted to determine the time allocated for the test. 90 Year 11 respondents comprising of 30 high, 30 average and 30 low performers sat for the test. The average time taken by the three groups of performers to complete the test was decided as the time allocated for the test i.e. 70 minutes.

Determining the Cut Scores for Performance Bands

According to Wylie and Tannenbaum (2006), 'there is no absolute, unequivocal cut scores. There is no single correct or true score'. We conducted a few pilot tests to ensure that the cut score for each performance band is accurate and able to identify the true reading abilities of the learners. After careful consideration, we decided to establish cut scores based on z-score (refer to Figure 2).

Figure 2. Cut Scores based on z-scores



Developing the Analyser

A Reading Matrix or Analyser refers to a chart which acts as a reading indicator to indicate the reading abilities of learners at a particular educational level i.e. Year 7 to Year 11 in Malaysian secondary schools. The idea of Progression through the levels by Horton (1990) in which the criteria of levels of proficiency and age were taken into consideration in gauging the learners' progress was adopted. How the Reading Matrix works will be explained in the following section i.e. Using READS.

Developing Performance Standards

The Performance Standards adapted from the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE), (Illinois State Board of Education, 2004) were developed to suit the Malaysian secondary school learners (refer to Appendix A). The four levels of reading performance of the Year 10 respondents were developed based on the Performance Bands and Reading Performance Indicators.

Developing the Decoder

The Descriptors of Reading Abilities for Band 1 to Band 6 acts as the Decoder. These indicators were developed based on the respondents' reading performance on the test conducted. North's 'Reading Scale for the Council of Europe Framework' cited in Alderson (2000:132-134) was adopted as the model to arrive at the Descriptors of

Reading Abilities.

The quantitative analysis of respondents' test was carried out to identify the Year 10 learners' reading standards. The reading standards were interpreted based on quantitative and triangulated by using the qualitative data. The study gathered qualitative data through interviews. Two respondents from each Performance Band were selected to examine what they are capable of and what they are not capable of. The combination of the two forms of data resulted in the Descriptors of Reading Abilities (refer to Appendix B). The ESL teachers can refer to the Descriptors of Reading Abilities to gain accurate information with regards to the learners' reading standards and consequently plan their teaching instruction tailored to the needs of the learners.

Guidelines to Use READS

Teachers who intend to use READS need to adhere to the following steps:

Step 1: Conduct the Test. Learners are given 70 minutes to complete the Test.

Step 2: Use the test scores to identify the learners' reading abilities. The total score of each test is 60 marks. From the test scores, the learners are categorised into the various bands (Band 1 to Band 6 refer to Table 1).

Table 1: Performance Bands and the Scores

Bands	Band 6	Band 5	Band 4	Band 3	Band 2	Band 1
Scores	54 - 60	42 – 53	30 - 41	19 - 29	7 - 18	0 - 6

Step 3: Identify the learners' reading abilities by using the Reading Matrix (refer to Table 2). Match the learners' reading performance against the Reading Matrix and then correlate them to the Performance Standards and Descriptors of Reading Abilities of Band 1 to Band 6.

Step 4: ESL teachers can refer to the Performance Standards to find out what learners from the different performance levels of reading achievement could or could not do. Next, refer to the Descriptors of Reading Abilities of Band 4 and Band 6 to identify the learners' specific reading abilities.

Example:

Based on the learners' educational levels, learners in Year 10 should correspond to Band 5 to "meet standard" (Learner X). In this case, Learner X1 is identified as "below standard" by one band. On the other hand, Learner X2 is identified as "above standard" by one band (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2 : Charting Reading Performance I

LEVELS						
Year 11						X
Year 10				X1	X	X2
Year 9				X		
Year 8			X			
Year 7		X				
BANDS	1	2	3	4	5	6

Above Standard

Below Standard

Meets Standard

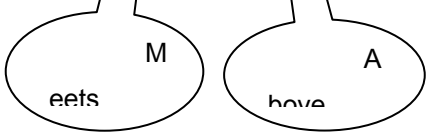
Using READS

For the benefits of teachers the following examples are provided to ensure that they can use READS correctly. Table 3 is a sample of how to identify a learner's reading ability by using the Reading Matrix provided.

Sample 1: Learner: Anna, Year : 10, Score: 55/60, Band 6

Table 3 : Charting Reading Performance II

LEVELS						
Year 11						X
Year 10					X	Anna
Year 9				X		
Year 8			X			
Year 7		X				
BANDS	1	2	3	4	5	6



The reading ability of Anna who is a Year 10 learner should correspond to Band 5 to **"meet standard"** but in this case, Anna is **"above standard"** by one band because she is in Band 6 (refer to Performance Standard and Descriptors of Reading Abilities of Band 6). By referring to the Performance Standard, it is noted that learners who are **"above standard"** at their educational levels demonstrate advanced knowledge and skills in reading. Thus, the English language teacher should expose her to reading texts one level higher than her reading ability. This should be done to help her progress further.

READS' Forte

From the tests we have conducted we have ample evidence that the system we produce is not only accurate and precise but it could also be administered quickly and economically. READS was able to gauge the learners' reading proficiency and their standard of reading. On the other hand, the current test given by ESL teachers only indicated the learners' performance in that particular test. Even so, their tests indicate only the learners' performance without showing what the students can or cannot do.

Evaluating at Micro Level

The Test Instrument used in READS is a generic test which can be used to evaluate the reading proficiency of any learner from Year 7 to Year 11. For instance, a learner in Year 7 can also be given the same test. If he is a 'good' learner, he will be able to answer some of the questions at PMR level (Malaysian Year 9 Standardised Assessment and in this case average level passages and questions) and SPM level (Malaysian Year 11 Standardised Assessment and this case higher level passages and questions). On the other hand, if he is a 'weak' learner, he may only answer some of the questions at UPSR level (Malaysian Year 6 Standardised Assessment and in this case lower level passages and questions). Similarly, this same test can also be given to Year 11 learners. If the Year 11 learner is a 'weak' student, he may not be able to answer some of the UPSR or PMR levels comprehension questions. In short the comprehension test developed proved to be quite versatile besides being reliable.

With READS, the ESL teachers can evaluate the learners' reading proficiency at the micro level or individual level and at the same time READS can also be used to evaluate at the macro level or group level.

Firstly, the test scores obtained from the test conducted are categorised into Performance Bands (Band 1 to Band 6). The benchmarking results would be able to classify the respondents into their various performance standards. At the individual level, the ESL teachers can match the respondents' performance to the Reading Matrix to find out whether the respondents exceed the standard, above the standard, below the standard or at academic warning (refer to Table 2 and Table 3). A single Reading Matrix is able to indicate the secondary school learners' reading proficiency at all educational levels (Year 7 to Year 11). This single Reading Matrix in the form of a table is simple and easy to use and able to indicate almost accurately what the learners could do or could not do.

Next, the teachers can decode the learners' reading performance by referring to the Performance Standards to find out what the learners at each level of reading performance are able to do or not able to do. The Performance Standards used could indicate whether the learners 'meet standard' for any educational level. This standard was the result of an in-depth study of the four performance levels of reading achievement suggested by the Prairie State Achievement Examination (Illinois State Board of

Education, 2004).

Finally, the teachers can also refer to the Descriptors of Reading Abilities to get a clearer picture of the specific reading ability of each learner. It is not surprising to know that the teachers do not know what the learners can do or cannot do because there are no indicators enclosed together with the curriculum to be used as a guide to indicate the learners' specific reading abilities. It would be very helpful if the teachers are provided with clearly defined sets of descriptors in which teachers can measure and assess learners' reading performance. This is where the developed set of descriptors is able to serve the purpose of providing explicit information about what the learners are able to do at each Performance Band.

Evaluating at the Macro Level

On the other hand, at the group level, the ESL teachers can find out the reading achievement of specific group of learners. We were able to compare the reading performance of the respondents according to school location, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Though there were some learners who failed, i.e., they were at academic warning, there were no descriptors to inform the teachers which sub-skill of reading this group of learners cannot handle. Therefore, by benchmarking the learners' reading abilities, the teachers can track learners' achievement and make adjustment to their teaching instruction. From the findings, we came up with the profile of the different groups of learners of i.e. Exceed Standard Performers, Above Standard Performers, Below Standard Performers and Academic Warning Performers. These profiles are similar in numerous aspects of the outcomes specified in the OECD (2003). A research conducted by Valencia and Buly (2005) in a typical north-west United States school district found six distinct profiles of students who failed the test. They added that teachers will need to provide appropriate instruction to meet the varying needs of the students. Thus, the profiles of these learners can be used as predictors for teachers and even District/State Education Department to predict which groups of learners are performing, which groups of learners are deteriorating and which groups of learners need help. By knowing the profiles, they can then plan what needs to be done to improve or upgrade the ESL reading standard.

Conclusion

As the current evaluation system does not provide specific information with regards to learners' reading proficiency, ESL teachers could now use READS as a formative assessment to assist their learners achieve competence in ESL reading. Teachers wishing to try READS, must use the test instrument in conjunction with the Reading Matrix, Performance Standards and Descriptors of Reading Abilities to gain accurate information with regards to their learners' reading proficiency and consequently plan reading lessons tailored to the needs of their learners.

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Appendix A

Performance Standards for Year 10 Respondents

Above Standard	• Learners able to achieve the learning outcomes related to the sub-skills of reading to be achieved by learners in Year 11. • Learners able to fulfil the requirements specified in the Malaysian English Language Syllabus and Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension.
Meet Standard	• Learners able to achieve the leaning outcomes related to the sub-skills of reading to be achieved by learners in Year 10. • Learners able to meet the requirements specified in the Malaysian English Language Syllabus and Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension.
Below Standard	• Learners not able to achieve the learning outcomes related to the sub-skills of reading to be achieved by learners in Year 10. • Learners have gaps in reading at their educational level (Year 10), partially meeting the requirements specified in the Malaysian English Language Syllabus and Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension.
Academic Warning	• Learners not able to achieve the leaning outcomes related to the sub-skills of reading in Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9. • Learners have major gaps in reading at their educational level (Year 10), not meeting the requirements specified in the Malaysian English Language Syllabus and Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension

Appendix B

Sample of Descriptors of Reading Abilities: Literal Sub-skill

Difficulty Levels	Sub-skills of reading	BAND 6 (54 – 60) raw score	BAND 5 (42 – 53) raw score	BAND 4 (30 – 41) raw score	BAND 3 (19 – 29) raw score	BAND 2 (7 – 18) raw score	BAND 1 (0 – 6) raw score
Literal Low level (Year 6)	Identifying supporting details in texts.	Can locate the supporting details **very well**. Can find directly stated information easily.	Can locate the supporting details **very well**. Can scan directly stated information in the text.	Can locate the supporting details **very well**. Can find answer directly stated in the text.	**Can** locate the supporting details **very well.** Can find answer directly stated in the text but not sure of the answer.	**Can** locate the supporting details **satisfactorily.** Can understand only a few phrases. Guess answer.	**Can hardly** locate the supporting details. Can understand only a few words. Guess answer.
	Idenifying main ideas in texts.	Can locate the main ideas **very well**. Skim text to look for answer.	Can locate the main ideas **very well**. Skim text to identify the answer.	Can locate the main idea **very well**. Reread text to skim for the answer.	Can locate the main ideas **very well**. Reread text to look for the answer.	**Can** locate the main ideas **satisfactorily.** Can understand only a few phrases. Guess answer.	**Can hardly** locate the main ideas. Can understand only a few words. Guess answer.
Literal Mid level (Year 9)	Identifying supporting details in texts.	Can locate the supporting details **very well**. Can locate answer directly stated in the text.	Can locate the supporting details **very well**. Can scan directly stated information in the text.	**Can** locate the supporting details **very well.** Can identify key words to locate the answer.	**Can** locate the supporting details **moderately well.** Can identify key words in the question and answer.	**Can hardly** locate the supporting details. Do not understand the question. Guess answer.	**Can hardly** locate the supporting details. Do not understand the text and question. Answer through pure guessing.
	Identifying main ideas in texts.	Can locate the main ideas **very well**. Skim text to look for answer.	Can locate the main ideas **very well**. Skim text to identify the answer.	**Can** locate the main ideas **very well.** Skim text to locate the answer.	**Can** locate the main ideas **moderately well.** Reread text to locate the answer.	**Can hardly** locate the main ideas. Do not understand the question. Guess answer.	**Can hardly** locate the main ideas. Do not understand the text and question. Answer through

					Not sure of the answer.		pure guessing.
Literal High level (Year 11)	Identifying supporting details in texts.	Can locate the supporting details **very well**. Skim text to look for answer.	**Can** locate the supporting details **very well.** Read text to scan the answer.	**Can** locate the supporting details **satisfactorily**. Can locate answer from the text but not aware of the specific meaning of some details.	**Has difficulty** locating the supporting details. Do not know the difference of some specific details.	**Can hardly** locate the supporting details. Cannot find answer in the text. Guess answer.	**Can hardly** locate the supporting details. Do not understand the question. Answer through pure guessing.
	Identifying main ideas in texts.	Can locate the main ideas **very well**. Skim text to look for the answer.	**Can** locate the main ideas **very well.** Skim text to locate the answer.	**Can** locate the main ideas **satisfactorily.** Skim text to locate information.	**Has difficulty** locating the main ideas. Reread text to locate the answer.	**Can hardly** locate the main ideas. Cannot find answer in the text. Guess answer.	**Can hardly** locate the main ideas. Do not understand the question. Answer through pure guessing.