

## COMPREHENSION SKILLS IN READING TASKS

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Alessandra Baldo<sup>(\*)</sup>

*Abstract:* This article reports data from a study into the separability of reading skills. Based on a study conducted by Alderson (1990), teachers of English as a foreign language were presented a list of reading skills and were asked to identify what three reading tasks were measuring in terms of the list. A comparison between the teachers' responses and the objectives established by the author of the tasks has been interpreted as evidence of the unitary view of reading, as opposed to the multidivisible view of the process.

*Keywords:* Reading; reading skills; reading strategies; unitary hypothesis; multidivisible hypothesis

*Resumo:* Este trabalho apresenta um estudo sobre a possibilidade de separação entre as diferentes habilidades de leitura. Com base em um artigo realizado por Alderson (1990), apresentou-se a professores de inglês como língua estrangeira uma lista de habilidades de leitura e pediu-se que identificassem, em três atividades de compreensão leitora, qual ou quais habilidades estavam sendo testadas. O resultado da comparação entre as respostas dos professores e a habilidade testada em cada tarefa de acordo com seu autor foi interpretada como evidência em favor da visão do processo de leitura como indecomponível, em oposição à hipótese da multidivisibilidade.

*Palavras-chave:* Leitura; habilidades de leitura; estratégias de leitura; hipótese unitária; hipótese da multidivisibilidade

Most research into reading skills and strategies, particularly regarding the foreign language reader, has focused on the advantages a skill-approach can bring to enhance readers' performance (CARRELL, 1985; CARRELL et al., 1989; RAYMOND, 1993). However, there are some problematic theoretical questions to such an

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(\*) Professora de Língua Inglesa e Língua Portuguesa da Universidade Estadual do Rio Grande do Sul e da Universidade de Caxias do Sul e Doutoranda do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Linguística Aplicada da Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul.

approach that deserve attention. The first one lies in the concept itself: what are the best parameters for defying reading skills? What is the difference between a reading skill and a reading strategy? The second one is more complex since it deals with the psychological reality of reading skills. Data from research has shown that there is no evidence for the separate existence of skills. As a clearer understanding of such questions is vital to the understanding of the reading process, this study addresses these issues by analyzing EFL teachers' responses to a questionnaire on reading skills.

### 1. Reading skills/strategies or reading skills and strategies

While some authors use the terms skills and strategies interchangeably (ALDERSON, 2000; GRABE, 1991), others prefer to establish a specific set of conditions to tell the difference between them. Weir (1998) is among the latter ones. According to him, the confusion between what constitutes a skill and what constitutes a strategy "may be due simply to the fact that the skills proponents did not attempt to separate skills from strategies". However, he understands that it is important to have a general acceptable division, and puts forward the following differences:

Skills	Strategies
Text-oriented	Reader-oriented
Deployed unconsciously	Conscious decisions taken by the reader
Do not represent a response to a problem	Represent a response to a problem

In order to illustrate text-oriented components and reader-oriented components, the author selects from Munby's taxonomy of reading skills items such as understanding the communicative value of sentences and understanding relations between text through lexical cohesion devices as text-oriented since they would focus on the text, and items such as interpreting text by going outside of it and skimming as reader-oriented to the extent that they would focus on the reader rather than on the text.

Although such parameter may seem theoretically sound at first, an attempt to apply it to real-life reading is at least complex. It is not an easy task to state that the effort a reader makes, for instance, to understand the communicative value of sentences within a given text should be classified as a text-oriented skill if one assumes that as it is

the reader who is trying to understand the text, the skill should be defined as reader-oriented, and not as text-oriented.

By the same token, at times it seems extremely difficult to know when a mental activity is deployed unconsciously and when it is deployed consciously. As the line which divides them is blurred, the second condition is also problematic. Furthermore, it might be the case that the same reading component is used sometimes unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, depending on the type of reading tasks readers are dealing with. Let us consider, for instance, the interpreting-text-by-going-outside-of-it component, classified as a strategy by Weir. It might well be the case that readers naturally lean on their background/world/encyclopedic knowledge to understand a text, without being aware of it. Actually, it has been argued that background knowledge is an intrinsic part of text interpretation. In that vein, interpreting a text by going outside of it would rather be classified as a skill. If so, a distinction between skills and strategies in terms of consciousness/ unconsciousness would be proven rather fragile.

A crucial issue regarding the last parameter is related to the definition of problem. Weir cites failure to understand a word and failure to find the information one was looking for as examples of problems which would demand strategies to be solved – such as skimming, for example. However, it is interesting to note that sometimes readers do not know a specific word in a text and such situation does not represent a problem to them. They oftentimes are able to capture its meaning by the context, as an automatic and natural operation. The same question arises once more: if a problem is always something readers are conscious of – and Weir understands so – it might be the case that the mental activity they engage in when faced with, for instance, an unfamiliar word cannot be called an strategy after all.

Using another approach, some authors have studied the difference between cognitive and metacognitive strategies (AKYEL & SALATACI, 2002), based on the assumption that metacognitive strategies “function to monitor or regulate cognitive reading strategies” (DEVINE, 1993). According to them, cognitive strategies are restricted to a binary division, bottom-up and top-down strategies, and metacognitive strategies include “checking the outcome of any attempt to solve a problem, planning one’s next move, monitoring the effectiveness of any attempted action, testing, revising and evaluating one’s strategies for learning”. Unfortunately, there is no consensus as

to what these metacognitive strategies are: while Grabe (1991) considers skimming and recognizing the most important information in text metacognitive components, Devine (1993) explains that skimming is a cognitive ability, and that to assess the effectiveness of skimming for gathering textual information is a metacognitive strategy.

There is considerable material on reading skills and on reading cognitive/metacognitive strategies in the literature, and a quick look at them suffices to show the dissimilarities among the taxonomies. As the objective here is simply to make the EFL teacher aware of such divergences and, therefore, aware of the complexity surrounding the reading process, rather than to provide examples of such differences at length, we now turn to the second most significant theoretical issue in a reading-component approach.

## **2. The Multidivisible Hypothesis versus the Unitary Hypothesis**

Not only there has been a debate on the difference between reading skills and strategies, but also the very existence of skills/strategies<sup>1</sup> has been open to question. Some authors hold the view that when reading takes place, it is possible to verify different skills and strategies. In other words, they understand that reading can be divided into skills and strategies. Among the proponents of what has been called the *Multidivisible Hypothesis* are Carr and Levy, Weir and Grabe. Carr and Levy (1990) understand that “the mental operations are distinguishable and empirically separable from each other” during reading, while Weir (1989) remembers that skills “have been recommend by Lunzer et al. (1979) and Vincent (1985) as a means of structuring reading syllaby” and argues that they “are probably still the best framework for doing it.” Although he recognizes the problems attached to it – namely, the lack of consensus in defining skills and the psychological reality of different skills – he concludes that the approach is valid to the extent that it is a useful tool both for teaching materials and tests. Similarly, Grabe (1991) points out that a “reading components” approach is a useful approach to the extent that it leads to important insights into the reading process.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms interchangeably, as we have just argued that there is no firm distinction in the literature between them.

However, in opposition to this view of the reading process there is evidence from research suggesting that it is not possible to confirm the separate existence of skills. Lunzer et al. (1979), based on the analysis of reading tests, advocate that there is no evidence that distinct separate skills exist, and that reading is actually a single, global aptitude. In a study conducted by Alderson (1990), groups of experts were presented a long list of reading components and asked to identify what items in an English for Specific Purposes reading text were measuring in terms of the list. The lack of agreement on assigning particular skills and strategies to particular test items was taken as evidence of the Unitary Hypothesis. As Alderson (1990) concludes, "at least part of the reading process probably involves the simultaneous and variable use of different, and overlapping, skills." There is also an alternative view, which states that it is possible to verify the existence of two basic separate skills in reading, vocabulary and reading comprehension. As described in Weir (1998), the studies carried out by Davis (1944), Farr (1968) and Rost (1993) have arrived to this conclusion. Based on such findings, a bi-divisible, rather than a unitary view of reading, would be more appropriate.

### 3. The study

In order to further investigate the psychological reality of reading skills, six EFL teachers – either professors or post-graduate students at a Brazilian University – were presented a simplified version of Munby's taxonomy of reading skills (1978) and asked to analyze three reading tasks in terms of the skills tested. The methodology was based on a previous study carried out by Alderson (1990), described above.<sup>2</sup> The subjects were free to choose one single skill or many of them in each task. The skills selected from Munby's list were twelve out of nineteen, as some of them, such as "extracting salient details to summarize" and "transcoding information to diagrammatic display", were irrelevant to the study. The subjects were presented a list with the following skills:

(a) deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items; (b) understanding explicitly stated information; (c) understanding

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note the differences between the two studies. In Alderson's study, experts were asked to judge items on a reading test. In our study, the reading tasks were taken from a book, and there was only three of them to be judged.

information when not explicitly stated; (d) understanding the communicative value of sentences; (e) understanding relations between parts of a text through grammatical cohesion devices; (f) interpreting text by going outside of it; (g) identifying the main point or important information in discourse; (h) distinguishing the main idea from supporting details; (i) extracting relevant points from a text selectively; (j) using basic reference skills; (k) skimming; (l) scanning to locate specifically required information.

The reading tasks were taken from the book by Aebersold and Field (1997), *From Reader to Reading Teacher – Issues and Strategies for Second Language Classrooms*. The first two tasks were related to a text entitled *Dish Soap for Dinner*, and the third one was related to a text entitled *Modern Fathers Have Problems and Pleasures*. After reading the first text, five reading tasks were presented. Only two of them were selected for the study, and the skills tested, according to its author (vocabulary and identifying the main idea), were omitted. Similarly, only one of the activities was selected from the ones designed for the second text, and the skill tested (skimming) was omitted once more. The objective was to compare the skill/skills chosen by the subjects and the skill tested in the reading task according to its author. An agreement between the two responses would give support to the multidivisible hypothesis, since it would show that a division among the skills to the purposes of teaching and testing is possible. Otherwise, a lack of agreement and, most importantly, a belief that there was more than one skill being practiced/tested in the reading tasks by the participants would be taken as evidence of the unitary hypothesis, since it would suggest that such a division among the components implicated in reading is not to possible.

#### **4. The data**

As stated above, each reading task was designed to practice a specific reading skill: task one was related to vocabulary (in Munby's terms, this would mean skill *a* in the simplified list above, deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items), task two was concerned to identifying the main idea (this would correspond to skill *g*, identifying the main point or important information in discourse), and task three to scanning (skill *l*, scanning to locate specifically required information). These skills were written in capital letters and in bold in

the beginning of the comprehension activities (however, as already mentioned, the participants did not have access to it.)

The results in terms of a comparison between the EFL teachers' evaluations of the skills being tested in each one of the three reading tasks and the skill stated by the author of the activities are shown in the tables below, divided by tasks.

<b>TASK 1</b>	
<b>Skill(s) tested according to study subjects</b>	<b>Skill tested according to the author</b>
(1) Understanding explicitly stated information Identifying the main point or important information in discourse Scanning to locate specifically required information	Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items
(2) <i>Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items</i> Scanning to locate specifically required information	Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items
(3) Understanding explicitly stated information Scanning to locate specifically required information	Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items
(4) Understanding explicitly stated information Understanding the communicative value of sentences Identifying the main point or important information in discourse Scanning to locate specifically required information	Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items
(5) Understanding explicitly stated information Scanning to locate specifically required information	Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items
(6) Understanding explicitly stated information Using basic reference skills Scanning to locate specifically required information	Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items

Table 1: Comparison between skill(s) tested in reading task 1 according to the subjects' perspective and to the author's perspective.

<b>TASK 2</b>	
<b>Skill(s) tested according to study subjects</b>	<b>Skill tested according to the author</b>
(1) Understanding information when not explicitly stated <i>Identifying the main point or important information in discourse</i> Extracting relevant points from a text selectively	Identifying the main point or important information in discourse
(2) Understanding explicitly stated information <i>Identifying the main point or important information in discourse</i> Distinguishing the main idea from supporting details	Identifying the main point or important information in discourse
(3) Understanding information when not explicitly stated <i>Identifying the main point or important information in discourse</i>	Identifying the main point or important information in discourse
(4) Understanding information not explicitly stated <i>Identifying the main point or important information in discourse</i> Skimming	Identifying the main point or important information in discourse
(5) Understanding information when not explicitly stated <i>Identifying the main point or important information in discourse</i> Distinguishing the main idea from supporting details Extracting relevant points from a text selectively	Identifying the main point or important information in discourse
(6) <i>Identifying the main point or important information in discourse</i> Distinguishing the main idea from supporting details	Identifying the main point or important information in discourse

Table 2: Comparison between skill(s) tested in reading task 2 according to the subjects' perspective and to the author's perspective.



<b>TASK 3</b>	
<b>Skill(s) tested according to study subjects</b>	<b>Skill tested according to the author</b>
(1) Understanding explicitly stated information <i>Scanning to locate specifically required information</i>	Scanning to locate specifically required information
(2) Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items Understanding explicitly stated information <i>Scanning to locate specifically required information</i>	Scanning to locate specifically required information
(3) Understanding relations between parts of a text through grammatical cohesion devices Using basic reference skills	Scanning to locate specifically required information
(4) Understanding explicitly stated information <i>Scanning to locate specifically required information</i>	Scanning to locate specifically required information
(5) Understanding explicitly stated information <i>Scanning to locate specifically required information</i>	Scanning to locate specifically required information
(6) Extracting relevant points from a text selectively <i>Scanning to locate specifically required information</i>	Scanning to locate specifically required information

Table 3: Comparison between skill(s) tested in reading task 3 according to the subjects' perspective and to the author's perspective.

What first emerges from our data is the participants' belief that there was always more than one reading skill being practiced/tested in the reading tasks they were asked to examine. None of the respondents have found possible to isolate a single reading skill in the reading tasks. There was a variation between two to four skills chosen to each task, depending on the subject and on the task. There are, moreover, two other important things to note.

The first one deals with the extent to which the skill selected by the author of the reading activities was among the skills tested in the tasks according to the study participants. In that vein, a lack of agreement between the author's objective and the participants' evaluation of such

objective(s) was verified in task 1. Analyzing the data, it is possible to note that only one out of six respondents have considered that the item was focusing on vocabulary, the tested skill in the activity. It seems that the most plausible explanation to the mismatch between the teachers' perspective and the author's perspective would be in terms of task construct. An analysis of the activity indicates that vocabulary is not indeed the primary skill practiced/tested. Despite the author's intention, the skills most focused seem to be the ones selected by the EFL teachers, namely identifying explicitly stated information and scanning, given the nature of the task. In order to show this clearly, the activity is transcribed below (the text related to this activity, *Dish Soap for Dinner*, is presented at the end of the article).

### Vocabulary

**Complete the sentences. Find the right words. Circle the letter of your answer.**

<p>1 The dish soap was a ____ from a soap company a. letter b. free sample c. mailbox</p>	<p>3 There was a picture of two lemons on the ____ a. soap company b. label c. salad</p>
<p>2 The company wanted people to ____ the soap a. try b. eat c. mail</p>	<p>4 What can we learn from Joe's story? Read labels ____ a. fast b. happily c. carefully</p>

On the other hand, it is possible to notice considerable consensus as far as tasks 2 and 3 are concerned. All the ELF teachers have understood that one of the skills tested in activity 2 was identifying the main idea in a discourse, in correspondence to the author's objective, and only one of them did not choose scanning to locate specifically required information as one of the components tested in task 3.

The second point which deserves attention is the agreement concerning the skills tested in each comprehension activity among the participants. Although a mismatch between the skill tested according to study subjects and according to the author of the comprehension activity was noticed in task 1, the same does not apply regarding the participants' choice of reading skills tested in each one of the three activities analyzed.

Having a list made up of twelve different reading skills, the participants have limited their choices to only five of them in task 1. Among these five, scanning to locate specifically information was cited by all the subjects, and understanding explicitly stated information by all but one. Besides them, understanding the main point or important information in discourse was selected by two respondents, using basic reference skills by one respondent, and understanding the communicative value of sentences by another one. In general terms, the data show that there is a consensus as to the most prominent skills in activity 1 according to the EFL teachers, namely scanning and understanding explicitly stated information.

A similar situation was found in tasks 2 and 3. The participants made use of six different skills from Munby's list when analyzing activity 2, but only two of them have appeared more frequently in their answers: all the subjects have chosen identifying the main point or important information in discourse as one of the skills tested, and only one of them did not point to understanding information when not explicitly stated as another skill involved in the reading activity. The skills distinguishing main idea from supporting detail and extracting relevant points from a text selectively have appeared twice in the participants' responses, while skimming and understanding explicitly stated information have appeared just once. It is interesting to note here that the second most mentioned skills – distinguishing main idea from supporting detail and extracting relevant points from a text selectively – are directly related to the most mentioned skill, identifying the main point in discourse. Even if we understand that there are differences among them, there is always a focus on localizing important information in the text. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that the two skills most cited by the participants are also related, since identifying the main idea in discourse usually implies understanding information not explicitly stated.

In task 3 analysis, the participants resort to the following six reading skills: scanning, understanding explicitly stated information, deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items, understanding relations between parts of a text through cohesion devices, using basic reference skills and extracting relevant points from a text selectively. However, there has been an agreement regarding just the first two: scanning was chosen by five participants as one of the skills tested, and understanding explicitly stated information by four of them. The

other four skills were cited once only. Once more, the data shows considerable consensus regarding the skills tested in the activities among the study subjects. The tables below summarize the study findings regarding both (i) the extent to which the skill chosen by the author of the reading activity was among the participants' chosen skills and (ii) the agreement among the participants concerning the main skills tested in each activity.

T A S K 1		<b>TASK 1</b>
	<b>Skill tested according to the author:</b> Deducing the meaning of unfamiliar Lexical items	<b>Main skills tested according to study subjects:</b> Understanding explicitly stated information Scanning to locate specifically required information

T A S K 2		<b>TASK 2</b>
	<b>Skill tested according to the author:</b> Identifying the main point or important information in discourse	<b>Main skills tested according to study subjects:</b> Identifying the main point or important information in discourse Understanding information not explicitly stated

T A S K 3		<b>TASK 3</b>
	<b>Skill tested according to the author:</b> Scanning to locate specifically required Information	<b>Main skills tested according to study subjects:</b> Understanding explicitly stated information Scanning to locate specifically required Information

According to our initial hypothesis, in case the subjects understood that there was more than one skill being tested in each reading task, this would be an evidence of the impossibility of separating reading into components, at least for the purpose of teaching and testing. If so, the data would give support to the unitary view of the reading process. The fact that none of the respondents was able to single out a specific reading skill as *the* skill tested in the activities can be seen as evidence

both of (i) the complex cognitive operations employed in reading and of (ii) the overlapping which occurs among such skills during reading.

Therefore, it does seem that reading is a global and non-divisible activity. However, this is quite different from arguing that there are not such things as reading skill/strategies. The point we are trying to make is that different skills/strategies are employed during reading, and the nature of such skills cannot be defined a priori. Although it would appear natural that certain kinds of readings would activate specific skills, it is possible that readers' profile and background interfere in the reading process and therefore different skills may be activated by different readers when facing the same reading task. This tentative explanation would justify both the general consensus reached by the study participants regarding the main skills tested in each reading activity and, at the same time, the participants' choice for quite particular skills. Naturally, further research to provide evidence of this hypothesis is needed, as it would be inappropriate to draw generalizations due to the limited number of participants in the study.

### **Text 1: Dish Soap for Dinner**

Joe came home from work and opened his mailbox. In his mailbox he found a yellow bottle of soap – soap for washing dishes. The dish soap was a free sample from a soap company. The company mailed small bottles of soap to thousands of people. It was a new soap with a little lemon juice in it. The company wanted people to try it.

Joe looked at this free bottle of soap. There was a picture of two lemons on the label. Over the lemons were the words “with Real Lemon Juice”.

Joe was happy. “I’m going to eat a salad for dinner”, he thought. “This lemon juice will taste good on my salad.” He put the soap on his salad and ate it.

Soon Joe felt sick. He wasn’t the only person who got sick. A lot of people thought the soap was lemon juice. They put the soap on fish, on salads, and in tea.

Later they felt sick, too. Some people had stomachaches. Some people went to the hospital. Luckily, no one died from eating the soap.

What can we learn from Joe’s story? Read labels carefully. And don’t eat dish soap for dinner.

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