



ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION ASSESSMENT: A FOCUS ON EVALUATION IN UNICERT® LUCE

TOMÁŠ HAMAR¹ – ZUZANA PEKAŘOVÁ²

¹ Ústav lekárskej terminológie a cudzích jazykov, Lekárska fakulta, Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, Špitálska 24, 813 72 Bratislava, tomas.hamar@fmed.uniba.sk

² Ústav lekárskej terminológie a cudzích jazykov, Lekárska fakulta, Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, Špitálska 24, 813 72 Bratislava, zuzana.pekarova@fmed.uniba.sk

Abstract

This article presents an in-depth analysis of reading comprehension tests across multiple academic institutions included in the UNICert® network based in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, focusing on their structure, task types, and effectiveness in assessing students' abilities. Through the examination of various test versions, the study identifies common trends, challenges, and opportunities for improvement in reading comprehension assessment practices. Key findings reveal the importance of task diversity, clarity in instructions, and integration of skills such as critical thinking and writing. Recommendations for enhancing reading comprehension assessments are provided, emphasizing the need for balanced task complexity and alignment with learning objectives. By implementing these recommendations, academic institutions can develop more robust assessment strategies that accurately evaluate students' reading comprehension skills and support their overall academic success.

Keywords

reading, reading comprehension, testing, UNICert®, Language for Specific Purposes

Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2020, 28) underscores the importance of incorporating real-life tasks, purposefully selected notions and functions, and addressing real-world communicative needs in language teaching and assessment. This approach involves creating learning activities and assessments that mirror authentic scenarios, selecting essential linguistic concepts for specific communication goals, and tailoring language instruction to equip learners with skills relevant to practical communication. The emphasis on real-life tasks reiterates the framework's commitment to aligning language learning experiences with everyday situations, promoting proficiency that extends beyond the classroom.

Constructive alignment, as necessitated by the *Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), involves harmonizing teaching, learning, and assessment. This perspective involves constructing meaning through "top-down" methods, working from higher levels of comprehension back to the sentence and word levels. This process entails establishing learning objectives derived from new descriptor scales and descriptors. It also includes connecting assessment tasks and classroom projects, ensuring that exams mirror the skills, competencies, and activities cultivated in the classroom, while addressing the defined learning objectives. Recent research on reading (see e.g. Smith, 2004; Alderson, 2005; Javorčíková et al., 2021) also diverges from the traditional "bottom-up" approach, where reading is perceived as a skill directed by the teacher, progressing from word and sentence comprehension to grasping the overall meaning of the entire passage. Instead, there is a shift toward a more comprehensive cognitive approach, viewing reading as a learner-driven process that is student-centred. As stated by Kšišanová, this evolution in pedagogy suggests that a teacher should be mature enough to feel comfortable relinquishing control, providing students with ample space for their own creative ideas and development, and supporting them in following their own learning path at their own speed (2018, 4).

Currently, the majority of language learners are pursuing programs outside the field of philology, for instance, computer science, business analytics or medicine. In light of this, it is pertinent to introduce a new methodology for imparting reading skills to students not specializing in philology. Moreover, according to numerous experts, proficiency in reading stands out as the foremost language skill essential for the academic success of students (see e.g. McDonough – Shaw, 1993; Javorčíková – Kováč, 2018; Javorčíková – Kováč, 2021). In the realm of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), the importance of language proficiency and background knowledge is even more specific to the domain of reading comprehension. Clapham's research (1996, 10), for example, demonstrated that in reading comprehension, "language proficiency levels appeared to be just as significant as background



knowledge,” and operationalizing specificity consistently across different disciplines proved challenging. Thus, it is difficult to consistently apply a standardized measure or approach for assessing and defining specificity in various academic fields. The challenge lies in establishing a uniform method to quantify and address the specificity of content or information across diverse disciplines, making it a complex task in the study of reading comprehension.

1 Reading in a foreign language

Reading in one's native language and in a foreign language cannot be merged into a single category. When reading in a foreign language, numerous additional variables arise (caused, for example, by differences between transparent and non-transparent languages, distinct text organization, other aspects of the text, cultural artifacts contained in the text, etc.), which the student must acquire for a correct understanding of the text (see e.g. Hankerová et al. 2022). Alderson (1984; 2005, 24), based on available research, states that there is a certain language level that needs to be overcome for readers to be able to transform reading skills from the native language into the ability to read in a foreign language (the author refers to it as the so-called *language threshold*).

Cummins (1979, 1991) suggests that learners of a foreign language have an advantage in tasks related to text compared monolingual students. because they have more experience working with text (known as *academic language proficiency*), which serves as the foundation for working with text in both languages and possibly others. According to the author, there is no need to teach students reading strategies in a foreign language if they have already acquired them while learning to read in their native language – these abilities automatically transfer to reading in a foreign language. However, if these abilities are lacking, the author suggests it is necessary to first strengthen literacy in the native language. The reverse approach (i.e., if reading skills automatically transfer from one language to another, it should be logically possible to first increase literacy levels in the foreign language and thereby in the native language) is, according to Cummins, not feasible due to sociolinguistic and socio-political reasons.

Therefore, reading is not just a process; it is also the outcome of this process, a product – the product of reading is the comprehension of the text. Understanding a text in a foreign language requires working with the text based on acquired knowledge. Text comprehension is mainly influenced by the vocabulary acquired, complex language skills (such as knowledge of grammar, morphology, syntax, etc.), as well as reading strategies and skills (referring to knowledge of the external and internal composition of the genre being read, working with nonlinear texts, and so on). In scholarly literature, there is an increasingly discussed question of whether reading in a foreign language is more influenced by the ability to use the foreign language or the ability to read well in a foreign language. Alderson (2005, 24) emphasizes the importance of both factors, but in line with Gavora (2012, 52), he adds that mastery of the foreign language is ultimately more crucial for reading in a foreign language than reading skills in the native language.

There are many theories regarding comprehension of a text, all of which may be equally correct or incorrect (Alderson 2005, 6), making the assessment of this product challenging. For instance, questions related to texts often assess what the reader remembers from the text, which depends on the reader's ability to memorize rather than their ability to thoroughly understand the text. They evaluate logical thinking or complex understanding of the text, even though a text often contains not just one meaning understood uniformly by all readers but multiple layers of meanings, as emphasized by Gavora (2012, 59). Therefore, Halliday (1979) and Widdowson (1979) prefer the term *potential meaning*, found in the text and interpreted by readers based on their prior knowledge and experiences. For these reasons, the process of understanding the text is complex. In this article, we will only delve into its most significant aspects. According to Gavora (2012, 51), understanding the text involves interpretation, searching for and finding the meaning of the text, explaining the text based on world knowledge, as well as various cognitive abilities and skills. Smith (2004, 13) perceives comprehension more as a state than a process or set of skills. The author also states that the reader needs to connect new information with acquired knowledge to understand it, which is the essence of learning. Understanding the text occurs at the sentence level (decoding characters, understanding words, inferring meanings of unknown words, and so on) and at the text level (relationships between individual sentences in the text). However, the only *visible* outcome of all these processes is the comprehension of the text. And since reading comprehension is the aspect of reading that is visible and measurable, it is the primary focus of interest for testers of foreign languages. The next section of the article delves deeper into this topic.

1.1 Testing reading comprehension in the context of Language for Specific Purposes

Even students with mastery over technical terms often find themselves frustrated when reading technical English (Cohen et al., 1988, 152). Scholars such as Selinker and Trimble (1974 81-82) attribute much of this difficulty in



reading comprehension to the intricate structure of such writing. The challenges they encounter extend beyond mere technical vocabulary. Surprisingly, nontechnical words within technical writing can sometimes pose greater difficulties for students than technical ones. These could include adverbial phrases, conjunctions, or words used in anaphoric reference. Ismailova et al. (2018) states that according to the research findings, survey results, and interactions with students, it was observed that “many learners faced challenges in defining a theme, identifying a problem, and grasping the main idea of a text while articulating their own opinions. Additionally, they encountered difficulties in locating key words and concepts that illustrate the topic and the author's viewpoints.”

Conventional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) training, however, might not adequately equip students with the necessary rules and guidelines for interpreting articles or tense use (Cohen et al., 1988, 153). Consequently, across various texts and specialized fields, long groups of words performing a single grammatical function, such as noun phrases, prove challenging for nonnative readers to discern. Native speakers, on the other hand, seem to effortlessly analyse such structures, often doing so automatically (ibid. 159).

According to Alderson (2005, 62), various genres are expected to be handled in terms of performance in the following order: journalistic text (which will be read the fastest and with the greatest accuracy), literary text, and finally, specialized, scientific text (which respondents are anticipated to read more slowly compared to the preceding genres and with greater inaccuracies). Alderson elsewhere (1988, 169) states that the very notion of general texts may be called into question. Even if they were to exist, the traditional assumption that performance on such texts could predict performance on more specialized texts is highly dubious. The author adds (ibid.) that this may not pose a significant issue when all readers, along with the tester, share the same cultural background and hold numerous cultural presuppositions. However, in EFL, particularly at the tertiary level (in our conditions usually LSP.), such a scenario is unlikely to occur frequently.

Readers bring their background knowledge into the comprehension process, and this knowledge varies from reader to reader. Consequently, there can be no singular text-bound comprehension, but rather a multitude of interpretations (see e.g. Smith, 2004; Alderson, 2005; Gavora, 2012, Kováč, 2018). However, research (see Alderson – Urquhart, 1988; Alderson, 2005) indicates that the prominence of background knowledge in comparison to linguistic proficiency is not as pronounced as originally thought. The explanation likely combines the influences of linguistic proficiency and background knowledge to fully account for the results (Alderson – Urquhart, 1988, 180).

When engaging with constructed response questions in reading, one must navigate through distinct sections that demand various cognitive skills. A primary focus lies in the adept interpretation of new information, whether presented visually, graphically, or textually. This entails not only extracting explicit details but also discerning implicit nuances within the content. Additionally, the process involves the application of background knowledge, seamlessly integrating prior understanding to illuminate and contextualize the new information. An essential aspect of tackling these questions is the ability to mediate perspectives, requiring readers to comprehend and analyse the viewpoints of authors, speakers, or subjects. Furthermore, a discerning eye for reading between the lines becomes imperative, as responders are tasked with identifying biases, opinions, and subtle nuances that may influence the overall message or intent behind the presented material (see e.g. Gavora, 2012; Kováč, 2019). Overall, these constructed response questions demand a multifaceted approach, combining analytical skills, contextual understanding, and the ability to navigate through diverse perspectives.

Moreover, it has been demonstrated that certain groups of students may be disadvantaged when tested on subjects outside their academic field. In the instruction of reading skills to foreign students, diverse text types are employed. These encompass training texts, specifically crafted to align with the students' comprehension level and their proficiency in vocabulary and grammar. Additionally, authentic texts are introduced as students enhance their fluency in the foreign language (Azimov, 2015). What unifies these approaches is the emphasis on a learner-centric language training system. This underscores the rationale for the evolution and advancement of a personality-oriented foreign language teaching methodology, which coexists with cognitive and communication methodologies. The following key points are applicable across all approaches to instructing Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) to foreign students not specializing in philology:

- I LSP students gain proficiency in general language skills as part of their pre-university training, with exceptions such as bilingual schools. Furthermore, they are introduced to specialized language during their university studies.
- II Specialized language classes emphasize texts as the central focus, and LSP training primarily relies on texts derived from specialized textbooks and study materials chosen based on students' courses.



- III The primary practical goal of teaching LSP is to enhance their ability to perform essential cognitive processes that contribute to the functionality of various language skills. This involves utilizing a foreign language (and texts) to broaden their horizons, aiming to cultivate future specialists with a comprehensive scientific outlook and a profound understanding of the world around them.

After examining numerous reading comprehension test tasks dedicated to LSP, Douglas (2000, 245) concludes that these tasks encompass a broad spectrum of specificity, involving diverse input types such as tables, photographs, extended case studies, and highly realistic texts. The tasks also provide situationally relevant purposes for processing input data and include response types ranging from realistic and genre-specific to tasks with extremely limited responses. Despite this diversity, there is a notable variation in assessment criteria, with most tests relying on traditional, linguistically oriented categories. The author (*ibid.*) adds that the development of communicative and specific purpose assessment criteria poses a challenging and problematic aspect of LSP testing. This issue is expected to be a key focus of research and development in the years to come (as discussed in *Discussion*).

If general tests were found to be discriminatory against a significant group, such as economists, or if they resulted in capable readers within their own academic fields being denied further study, then these practical advantages would not be sufficient to ensure the survival of general tests in tertiary LSP. Consequently, many instructors opt to create their own tests based on their knowledge and experience. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, UNICert® LUCE groups at tertiary education institutions focus on LSP. Reading comprehension naturally forms a part of both instruction and assessment. Tasks are always tailor-made for specific groups of students to mitigate the potential issues that general tests could present. At UNICert® II level (B2 according to the CEFR), the examination spans approximately 150 minutes. Within this level, there is a dedicated segment focusing on reading comprehension, which takes about 50 minutes. The duration of examination at UNICert® III level (C1 according to the CEFR) extends to a minimum of 200 minutes. A substantial portion of this level involves the reading comprehension section, requiring approximately 60 minutes of examination time. These details are sourced from the UNICert® Framework guidelines (2022). Understanding the read text must respect the above-mentioned specifications, particularly addressing the following aspects (Šikolová – Mikuláš, 2016, 35):

- I linguistic (testing relevant linguistic means typical for specific purposes of general, professional, and academic discourse according to the given testing level),
- II content-related (the test assignment must encompass topics relevant to general, professional, and academic discourse at the specified testing level),
- III formal (it also assesses orientation in the structure and organization of the text within genres typical for general, professional, and academic discourse according to the given testing level).

UNICert® LUCE specializes in its documents by specifying the desired proficiency standards, criteria, and objectives of reading comprehension for each level, thus delineating what students should achieve at a particular proficiency level (note: UNICert® also offers Levels I and IV; however, as there are currently no accredited programs in Slovakia and the Czech Republic at these levels, they will not be discussed in this article.).

- UNICert® II: *“The candidate is able to quickly comprehend a read text correctly and articles closely related to their field of study or interests based on the reading purpose. They can choose the appropriate technique for reading based on the context. The candidate can also read extensive instructions, such as those in a manual. They are capable of reading shorter passages from textbooks, articles with simple or modified language, and, with the use of a dictionary, can select a suitable relevant expression.”* (Šajgalíková – Chmelíková, 2018, 37).
- UNICert® III: *“The candidate is able to comprehend complex, stylistically differentiated, and lengthy texts with an emphasis on knowledge of specific terminology. They have acquired techniques for rapid reading (e.g., skimming and scanning) and can selectively, comparatively, and systematically organize information in the text. They can grasp interconnections, establish a sequence of events, and identify logical relationships. The candidate is capable of recognizing both objective and subjective formulations by the author, distinguishing explicitly and implicitly expressed ideas. Based on the reading, they can understand specialized information in complex, richly informative texts equipped with numerous stylistic devices.”* (Šajgalíková – Chmelíková, 2018, 41).

A study was undertaken to analyse test tasks in UNICert® LUCE accredited programs, aiming to determine how reading comprehension is assessed, whether it aligns with the previously mentioned standards, and to suggest potential measures for improvement in the future. All findings and recommendations will be detailed in the following chapter.



2 Material and methods

In this study, the primary focus was the analysis of tasks related to reading comprehension. All accredited institutions within the UNICert® system provide samples of examination tests and copies of completed test sheets or papers required for the UNICert® examination. All these documents are archived at the UNICert® LUCE centre, which has been located at the Institute of Medical Terminology and Foreign Languages, Faculty of Medicine, Comenius University Bratislava, since September 2022.

These tests constituted the research sample. A total of 21 tests were analysed, spanning various fields such as medicine, architecture, agriculture, pharmacy, natural sciences, humanities, and more. The analysis, conducted using coding techniques, centred on the types of tasks utilized in the tests and the specific skills or competencies they aimed to evaluate. It is important to note that this study is part of a larger research project currently being undertaken, which involves a deep analysis of tests within the UNICert® network.

A total of 21 tests were analysed from six distinct UNICert® LUCE accredited programs utilized for testing in the academic years 2020/2021 and 2022/2023. As previously mentioned, for larger projects, a different coding method is utilized. However, as this article serves an informative purpose only, detailing the system would be unnecessary. Instead, the institutions were randomly assigned numbers from 1 to 6. Institution No. 1 provided four tests (two with the same structure but different texts, and two completely different), No. 2 provided two tests, No. 3 provided one test, No. 4 provided three tests (all with the same structure but different texts), No. 5 provided three tests (all with the same structure but different texts), No. 6 provided eight tests (five with the same structure but different texts, and three different). It is noteworthy that one test from Institution No. 1 was missing one out of the three texts used for testing.

3 Results

The following chapter presents the results of the analysis, which serves an informative purpose. Its aim is to illustrate how various workplaces in tertiary education test reading comprehension in Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) and provide recommendations. Essentially, it examines how different workplaces approach the same task based on the specific characteristics of their fields and other relevant factors. To maintain anonymity, specific data such as mentioning "pharmacists". Instead, general terms like "scientists" were used.

Institution No. 1

Institution No. 1 utilizes three texts per test, all sourced from the same field. The texts do not correlate with each other. Structure No. 1 was employed twice with different texts. All details are provided in Table No. 1.

Table 1 Structure of the reading comprehension section of the exam test for Institution No. 1.

I	<p>Text 1: Four items are dedicated to evaluating true/false/not stated understanding. Additionally, five items necessitate sorting information from the text, with three options provided for each task. Furthermore, four items involve gap filling from options, with six options provided for selection.</p> <p>Text 2: Four items are designated to assess true/false/not stated understanding. Moreover, three items focus on sorting information from the text, with six options provided for each task. Additionally, six items are dedicated to gap filling without options, allowing only one word per blank.</p> <p>Text 3: Four items prompt sentence completion from options, with six options provided for each task. Furthermore, six items present multiple-choice questions, with three options provided for each question. Additionally, three items require gap filling without options, permitting a maximum of two words per blank.</p>
II	<p>Text 1: Seven items are dedicated to assessing true/false/not stated understanding. Additionally, six items involve gap filling without options, permitting a maximum of two words per blank.</p> <p>Text 2: Four items focus on gap filling without options, allowing only one word per blank. Furthermore, four items prompt sentence completion from options, with six options provided for each task. Additionally, five items require matching information with a paragraph.</p> <p>Text 3 is missing, its structure and content are not included in the analysis.</p>
III	<p>Text 1:</p>



<p>Six items are dedicated to matching information with a paragraph. Additionally, six items involve gap filling without options, permitting only one word per blank.</p> <p>Text 2: Five items focus on matching information with a paragraph. Furthermore, five items involve gap filling without options, allowing only one word per blank. Additionally, four items require sorting information from the text, with four options provided for each task.</p> <p>Text 3: Seven items involve gap filling without options, allowing only one word per blank. Furthermore, six items assess true/false/not stated understanding.</p>

The provided versions outline the structure of reading comprehension tests for different specializations within the same academic year. Each version presents three texts, each with distinct tasks aimed at assessing reading comprehension skills. Text 1 typically includes true/false/not stated questions, sorting tasks, and gap filling exercises. Text 2 often focuses on gap filling and sentence completion tasks, while Text 3 varies in task types, including gap filling, matching information, and true/false questions. Despite variations in task complexity, all versions aim to evaluate students' reading comprehension abilities across different subject areas within the same academic year.

Institution No. 2

This institution provided two tests. Test one consists of three texts. In this exam, Text 1 presents students with a combination of tasks: 6 items require them to fill in the missing paragraph, with one distractor included, while another 8 items prompt them to find synonyms within the article. Text 2 features 10 multiple-choice questions, each offering just 3 options for selection. Text 3 challenges students with 15 items, tasking them to identify which paragraph states specific information, alongside 9 true/false questions. While the structure is adequate, there are areas for improvement. More distractors should be incorporated, particularly in true/false exercises. "Not stated" options should be added, and multiple-choice questions ideally should have 5 options per question. Additionally, using 15 statements for matching paragraphs may be too lengthy, and the task of finding synonyms, while valuable for language use, should be considered in the context of text length.

In Test 2, the structure mirrors that of Test 1, albeit with variations in the tasks assigned to Text 1. Text 1 in this instance comprises 5 items of gap filling, where students are restricted to filling in a single word with no provided options. Additionally, another 5 items prompt students to determine the veracity of statements with true/false responses.

Institution No. 3

Institution No. 3 has chosen to merge writing and testing reading comprehension together, a decision that warrants scrutiny. This approach raises concerns as it limits our insight into students' understanding of the text. While students are required to utilize arguments from the article in their writing, they possess the autonomy to choose their arguments, potentially resulting in varied levels of comprehension. Moreover, the use of three texts further complicates assessment. For the first two texts, two tasks are employed: open-ended questions with lengthy responses. Text 2 includes an additional task involving the interpretation of a graph. Text 3 presents a non-linear format, comprising a table serving as the basis for another open-ended question – a lengthier essay response.

While essays are undoubtedly valuable for students in this field, they may not be the most effective option for assessing reading comprehension alone. This approach poses challenges as it does not provide a clear indication of students' understanding of the text. Moreover, although critical thinking is essential, relying solely on open-ended questions may not fully gauge students' comprehension levels. However, the inclusion of non-linear text formats, such as tables, is a commendable addition, as it encourages students to navigate complex information, which is a skill highly valued in their field.

Institution No. 4

This institution integrates reading comprehension and language use, which represents an improvement over the previous approach that included writing tasks. This method provides deeper insights into reading comprehension. The institution sent three tests, all of which follow the same structure with different texts. The test comprises 5 texts, each with distinct tasks. In Text 1, students encounter gap filling from options, with 4 options per item, totalling 15 items. Additionally, for Text 2, students face 10 true/false statements, where the inclusion of "not stated" would be beneficial. In Text 3, students engage in word formation within a text, consisting of 10 items. For Text 4, students are tasked with filling in the missing sentence, with 5 options provided, including 1 distractor.



Including more distractors would improve the task. Lastly, Text 5 involves filling in missing words, comprising 10 items with no options provided.

Institution No. 5

Institution No. 5 submitted three tests, all adhering to the same structure, featuring two texts each. Text 1 entails gap filling with no options, where students can use a maximum of 3 words in the summary, facilitating the practice of mediation skills, which is commendable. Text 2 comprises 5 multiple-choice questions (with 4 options) and 5 items requiring students to identify which paragraph contains specific information. In Text 3, students encounter 5 true/false statements. The recommendations for improvement were specified above.

Institution No. 6

Institution No. 1 utilizes three texts per test, all sourced from the same field. The texts do not correlate with each other. Structure No. 1 was employed twice with different texts. All details are provided in Table No. 2.

Table 2 Structure of the reading comprehension section of the exam test for Institution No. 6.

I	This version involves only one text, featuring 8 multiple-choice questions with just 3 options each. Additionally, there are 6 open-ended questions designed to integrate reading and writing skills. Specific recommendations were mentioned when discussing other institutions.
II	This version employs two texts. Text No. 1 is utilized for three tasks: first, filling in the missing sentence without distractors; second, determining the truth or falsehood of statements after reading the text; and third, writing 7 definitions of terms. This sequence may present challenges as students who struggle with the initial task of recreating the text by inserting sentences may encounter difficulties with subsequent tasks. In Text No. 2, there are 15 gap-filling items, with no options provided and the required number of words not clearly specified, which is suboptimal.
III	Text 1: Students are presented with two extracts on the same topic. They are tasked with answering 10 true/false items, followed by defining four terms and responding to one open question aimed at fostering critical thinking by comparing various approaches to the same concept. Text 2: Text 2 starts with 10 true/false statements, followed by 15 gap fill exercises where students are required to fill in one-word answers with no provided options.
IV	Text 1: Students are presented with two extracts on the same topic. They start with defining four terms and responding to one open question aimed at fostering critical thinking by comparing various approaches to the same concept. Text 2: Text 2 begins with 10 true/false statements, followed by 15 gap fill exercises where students must provide one-word answers without options. At the conclusion of the test, students are instructed to rephrase another text according to the instructions. This activity allows students to practice mediation skills and integrates reading with writing, while still assessing reading comprehension.

The provided versions illustrate a progression in test design, showcasing improvements in assessing reading comprehension and writing skills. Version I demonstrates a balanced approach with a single text featuring both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Version II introduces two texts, but with varying effectiveness; while Text 1 presents a cohesive sequence of tasks, Text 2's gap-filling items lack clarity. However, Versions III and IV display notable enhancements. In both, students engage with two texts, each offering distinct tasks that promote critical thinking and integration of reading and writing skills. Version IV further advances by incorporating mediation skills through text rephrasing, culminating in a comprehensive evaluation of students' abilities.

3.1 Summary

The analyses of reading comprehension tests from different institutions highlight a progression in test design and assessment approaches within the same academic year. Institution No. 1 utilizes three texts per test, each sourced from the same field, but without correlation. While Structure No. 1 is repeated with different texts, there's room for improvement, particularly in including more distractors and "not stated" options. Institution No. 2 provided two tests, both involving three texts each. While Test 1 has a suitable structure, Test 2 could benefit from clearer instructions for gap-filling items. Institution No. 3 integrates writing and reading comprehension, which poses challenges in assessing comprehension solely. However, the inclusion of non-linear text formats is commendable. Institution No. 4's approach, integrating reading and language use, shows improvement. Institution No. 5's tests exhibit consistency and commendable tasks, like gap-filling with mediation skills practice. Institution No. 6 shows evolution, with Version IV particularly notable for integrating reading, writing, and mediation skills effectively.



These analyses underscore the efforts to refine reading comprehension assessment strategies, aiming for comprehensive evaluations of students' abilities.

4 Discussion and pedagogical implications

While this study offers valuable insights into reading comprehension assessment practices within the UNICert® network, it is important to recognize its limitations. Firstly, the sample size may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other institutions and educational contexts. Additionally, the study's scope may be constrained by time limitations, data availability, and the depth of analysis achievable within the given parameters. Language and translation issues, as well as the potential impact of external factors such as changes in curriculum or educational policies, could also affect the interpretation of the results. Furthermore, the subjective nature of interpreting test structures and effectiveness underscores the need for cautious interpretation. It is worth noting that while there exists a wealth of tests from all institutions in the UNICert® LUCE history, this analysis primarily focuses on current data, as conducting a comprehensive analysis of the entire dataset would require considerably more time and resources. Despite these limitations, this study provides a foundational understanding of current reading comprehension assessment practices and highlights opportunities for future research, particularly in exploring innovative approaches such as scenario-based assessment to address evolving educational needs.

UNICert® has shifted its focus towards the adoption of scenario-based assessment, aiming to enhance students' critical thinking abilities and proficiency across the four modes of communication. This approach involves presenting learners with thematically coherent scenarios, encouraging them to engage in purpose-driven tasks that reflect real-world challenges. By integrating critical thinking into the assessment process, UNICert® aims to better prepare students for the complexities of academic and professional environments. Additionally, emphasizing proficiency in the four modes of communication—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—ensures a comprehensive evaluation of language skills essential for success in diverse contexts.

Scenario-based assessment, as highlighted by Purpura (2016, 200), extends beyond traditional integrated skills assessments by emphasizing the integration of skills within a thematically coherent, socially familiar, purpose-driven scenario. While previous approaches have focused on skill integration and performance, scenario-based assessment orchestrates this integration by framing tasks within a scenario that reflects real-world contexts. Participants engage in a sequence of subtasks designed to mirror the cognitive processes underlying the overarching scenario goal. This approach not only assesses learners' abilities to understand source material and communicate ideas but also evaluates their application of these skills in authentic contexts.

Within the UNICert® framework, the approach to teaching and testing reading comprehension is closely aligned with the development of critical thinking and other skills. The educational paradigm has shifted from isolating and working on distinct linguistic skills such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking, to a comprehensive framework that emphasizes the four modes of communication: reception, production, interaction, and mediation. This strategic shift underscores a focus on the aims inherent in various communication situations. Importantly, the four modes of communication do not replace the traditional language skills; rather, they offer a different and more targeted perspective on the dynamics of communication situations. This holistic approach within the UNICert® framework aims to equip learners with a multifaceted set of language competencies, fostering a deeper understanding and practical application of language in diverse real-world contexts. Some examples illustrating these principles are provided in the following sections.

4.1 Example No. 1: Critical evaluation of a research paper in an ESP class

In the critical evaluation of the research paper, a meticulous focus on key findings is paramount to extract the core contributions. The paper adeptly navigates existing literature gaps by addressing specific nuances that have been overlooked or understudied. Definitions presented in the paper are meticulously interpreted, revealing a nuanced understanding that serves as a foundation for the subsequent analysis. Stakeholders, a crucial aspect often overlooked, are thoughtfully discussed, shedding light on how the research affects various actors within the field. The research's strength lies in its comprehensive analysis of factors and parameters, presenting a well-rounded understanding of the topic. However, the acknowledgment and critical evaluation of study limitations demonstrate a commitment to transparency and intellectual honesty. As the oral presentation unfolds, the ability to seamlessly weave through these aspects showcases not only a profound understanding of the subject matter but also an analytical prowess that invites engagement and discussion. The ensuing question and answer session becomes a platform to further underscore the depth of comprehension, allowing for a dynamic exploration of the current state of research, gaps, limitations, and potential avenues for improvement. In this context, meticulous preparation



becomes the linchpin, ensuring the delivery of a compelling and informative presentation that reflects analytical skills and proficiency in navigating complex research terrain.

4.2 Example No. 2: Critical evaluation of a research paper in an ESP class

In crafting a critical review of a scientific paper, it is essential to approach each section with a thoughtful and analytical mindset. The introduction sets the stage by providing context, background information, and specific expectations from the paper chosen by a student. It is crucial to integrate relevant references to position the study within the broader scientific landscape and to summarize the key components effectively.

- I During the *observation phase*, students should consider the adequacy of background information provided by the authors and evaluate if the introduction effectively communicates the research gap or question. Then they share their initial thoughts or reactions, fostering a personal connection to the material.
- II In the *summary section*, students offer a concise yet comprehensive overview of the paper, emphasizing key findings, methods, and outcomes. They assess whether the key findings were clearly presented and aligned with the study's objectives. Students also evaluate the paper's logical sequence and overall structure.
- III The *commentary section* is the core of students' analysis, focusing on strengths and weaknesses in the research design and methodology. They evaluate the writing style and structure, identifying any flaws that may affect comprehension. Students formulate questions for the authors based on their analysis.
- IV Students *conclude* by providing an overall impression of the paper, reflecting on personal takeaways and considering potential practical implications. They assess the paper's contribution to the field, reflecting on how it influenced their understanding of the topic, and derive personal insights or lessons.
- V Students *integrate* their perspective, share personal experiences or connections to the topic, while avoiding fixating on a singular "right way" to write the review. They embrace their unique style and approach while maintaining an open mind, curiosity, and trust in their instincts.
- VI In *group discussions*, students lead a critical discourse on their chosen paper, actively participate in discussions on papers selected by others, and foster a collaborative environment valuing diverse perspectives. They approach the critical review and discussion with a blend of objectivity and personal engagement, recognizing that their unique insights contribute to a richer academic discourse.

4.3 Testing reading within the UNICert® framework

The assessment process for LSP within UNICert® involves multiple components to gauge proficiency comprehensively. Initially, candidates are presented with a dossier, a selection of documents or materials pertinent to the field, although not exhaustive due to time constraints. This allows them to demonstrate their ability to extract key information efficiently. Subsequently, a 90-minute listening session provides an introduction to the topic, requiring candidates to comprehend complex audio material related to their field of study. Following this, a 45-minute case study segment involves analysing three articles in depth, assessing the candidate's capacity to synthesize information and draw conclusions. The writing assessment, spanning 90 minutes, presents a topic from a different angle, demanding candidates to express their insights clearly and cogently. Finally, the speaking component, conducted on a separate day as part of the C1 exam, extends over 240 minutes and evaluates the candidate's ability to articulate ideas verbally, engaging in discussions relevant to their specialized field. Collectively, these assessments offer a comprehensive evaluation of the candidate's language proficiency in the context of specific purposes.

During the reading section of the UNICert® exam, students focus on constructed response questions, which are divided into sections dealing with the following aspects:

- I *Interpreting new information*: students need to be ready to analyse and comprehend new information in diverse forms, including visual, graphic, and textual content.
- II *Bringing background knowledge to bear*: students enhance their understanding of the reading material by connecting it to their existing knowledge; they relate what they know to the information presented in the text.
- III *Mediating perspectives*: students demonstrate the ability to understand and convey different perspectives presented by authors, speakers, or subjects within the reading passages.
- IV *Reading between the lines*: students develop the skill of identifying biases and opinions embedded in the text; they look beyond the surface to discern underlying attitudes and viewpoints.



During the exam, students need to remember, the reading section not only tests their literal comprehension skills but also assesses their ability to critically engage with the material. They practice interpreting various types of information and navigating through nuanced perspectives to ensure readiness for the challenges posed by the constructed response questions.

Conclusion

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of reading comprehension tests across various academic institutions within the UNICert® network in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. It delves into their structures, task types, and efficacy in gauging students' abilities. Through scrutinizing different test versions, common trends, challenges, and avenues for improvement in reading comprehension assessment practices are identified. Key findings underscore the significance of task diversity, clarity in instructions, and the integration of skills like critical thinking and writing. Additionally, the article advocates for the adoption of scenario-based assessments to cater to the evolving needs of future educational landscapes.

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