CAREFUL VERSUS EXPEDITIOUS READING: THE CASE OF THE IELTS READING TEST

Dr K. Sarojani Devi Krishnan
Northern University of Malaysia
MALAYSIA
sarojani@uum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

There has been growing concerns over the validity in the testing of reading. This issue is of utmost importance as valid test instruments with proper administration will produce results which reflect students' true reading abilities. What more, in Britain and many other countries in the world, international English Language tests such as the IELTS have been used as a gateway for university entrance for international students before they are admitted to a university course. If these tests are not valid, this could have a serious impact on students' performance on a course at the university. This study aims to investigate the item types in the IELTS Reading tests based on Urquhart and Weir's (1998) four-cell matrix on reading types and Khalifa and Weir's (2009) model of reading. An item analysis was conducted on 14 recent IELTS reading tests by two informed test-takers. The findings show that the items are imbalanced in terms of the types of reading tested. This raises the issue of whether the IELTS reading test is a valid reading test for testing academic reading. The findings of this study have implications for test designers involved in writing university entrance tests, as well as on the teaching and testing of reading.Key words: Art, artist, society, social reality

Keywords: reading, testing of reading, reading ability, valid reading test

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, most research on reading tend to concentrate on careful reading at the local level while careful reading at the global level and expeditious reading are largely ignored. Careful reading is defined as the type of reading that readers engage in to comprehend every part of the contents of a text, whereas expeditious reading refers to the processing of a text by readers quickly, selectively and efficiently (Urquhart and Weir, 1998). Reading at the local level refers to comprehending propositions at the microstructure level such as meaning of lexical items and pronominal reference, while the global level is defined by Urquhart and Weir (1998) as the understanding of microstructures beyond the microstructure level, that is at the macrostructure level which involves main ideas and supporting details. However, Weir, Yang and Jin (2000) argue that both careful and expeditious reading are required of undergraduates to accomplish academic reading tasks at the tertiary level.

Due to the overriding attention given to research in careful reading, and in particular at the local level, expeditious reading has somewhat been ignored. This has led to the conceptualization of theories and construction of models concentrating on careful reading. This implies that existing models of reading may fail to describe how skilled readers process their reading activities in real life situations. Further to this, there is an implication to the testing of reading which concerns the instruments used to test the

reading ability. Davies (1968: 5) states that "the good test is an obedient servant since it follows and apes the teaching". However, this may not be necessarily true. Good teaching may be followed by poor testing and *vice versa*. In fact, both teaching and testing should be supportive of one another to achieve beneficial backwash, that is the positive effect of testing on teaching and learning. Therefore, in assessing reading ability, it is important to ensure that the test instrument should be valid, that is, it should measure accurately what it intends to measure. For this purpose, it is of utmost importance that the test instruments are designed in line with what the test intends to measure so that with proper administration of these instruments, test scores reflect students' true reading abilities.

In many countries in the world including the UK, international English Language tests such as the IELTS (International English Language System) has been used as a gateway for university entrance for international students before they are admitted on a university course. These language tests which include a reading component, are regarded as critical tools that provide receiving institutions with a measure of students' reading ability as a valid indicator of their English Language proficiency. If these tests are not valid, this could have a serious impact on students' performance at the university and their ability to cope on a course. This study aims to investigate whether the IELTS reading test tests reading ability comprehensively.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are:

1. to determine the skills/strategies employed in responding to 14 recent IELTS reading test; and
2. to determine whether the items in the IELTS reading tests are adequate in testing reading ability comprehensively.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the skills/strategies that are employed in responding to test items of 14 recent IELTS reading tests?
2. Are the items in the IELTS reading tests adequate in testing reading ability comprehensively?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interest and preponderance of research in careful reading in the past by psychologists, language testers and instructors has resulted in the framing of reading models to describe reading. However recent research by Cohen and Upton (2006), Hawkey (2006) and Weir, Green, Hawkey, Maniski, Devi, Unaldi and Zegarac (2007) suggests that careful reading alone is inadequate for undergraduates to accomplish academic reading tasks at the university. Expeditious reading is also important and required of undergraduates to accomplish academic reading tasks.

Also, because previous models concentrate on careful reading, testing instruments which claim to test the reading ability are questioned for their content validity, that is in terms of what the instruments claim to measure. As test instruments may well normally be based on sound theories of reading, it is first important to identify the skills/strategies involved in the reading process so that valid and comprehensive instruments can be designed to test the reading ability.

The nature of reading

Urquhart and Weir (1998:14) define reading as "dealing with language messages in written or printed form". In a similar vein, reading has been defined as "…the process of receiving and interpreting

information encoded in language" via media such as print and others by using different processes and according to various purposes (Grabe, 2002:212).

In terms of a cognitive process, Urquhart and Weir (1998:37) view reading as "a cognitive activity; it largely takes place in the mind, and the physical manifestations of the activity, eye movements, subvocalisation, etc. are comparatively superficial". In this research, reading is viewed as a cognitive process in which readers employ different skills and strategies or their combinations in achieving text comprehension.

Types of reading

The orthodox view of reading as adopted by psychologists, language testers and teachers is based on a slow, incremental view of reading for comprehension. As pointed out by Rayner and Pollatsek (1989), the focus is on the skilled reader where the reading process is concerned. However, careful reading models provide very little account of the experiences of skilled readers when engaged in other kinds of reading such as expeditious reading. Careful reading involves comprehension of the contents of every part of the text while expeditious reading includes strategies like scanning, skimming and search reading which involve processing texts selectively, quickly and efficiently.

Urquhart and Weir argue that research on L1 and L2 reading in the past tend to concentrate on careful reading at the local level, and to some extent has ignored expeditious and careful reading at the global level, that is the ongoing meaning representation and text representation level (Carver, 1997; Perfetti, 1999; Enright, Grabe, Mosenthall, Mulcahy-Ernt and Schedl, 2000; Stanovich, 2000; Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Khalifa and Weir, 2009). Rosenfeld, Oltman and Sheppard (2004) and Weir *et al* (2000) suggest that the types of reading demanded of undergraduates at tertiary level involve both careful and expeditious reading.

Urquhart and Weir (1998) provide a four-cell matrix to describe the differences between careful and expeditious reading skills and strategies at the local and global levels.

This framework outlines the two main types of reading, namely, careful and expeditious reading and the different categories they contain. The sub-divisions of reading assume that different skills and strategies are employed by readers according to the different purposes of reading. Different purposes of reading include search reading (reading to find information), reading for basic comprehension, reading to learn, and reading to integrate information across multiple texts (Enright *et al*, 2000). These purposes of reading should be taken into account when describing reading ability comprehensively. This framework is supported by Grabe (2002) who claims that to capture a complete picture of the reading process, reading should also be defined to include purposes of reading, components of reading ability and the key processes in reading comprehension.

Urquhart and Weir (1998) describe the different skills and strategies classified under careful and expeditious reading below. Careful reading at the global level is generally associated with reading to learn which involves reading material of the textbook variety. It is not a selective process whereby the reader aims to read and grasp most of the information in the text and based on the main points, builds a macrostructure. For careful reading at the local level, the strategies employed by the reader include

Expeditious reading at the global level comprises skimming and search reading. Skimming involves the reader to grasp the gist of the text, i.e. what the whole text is about.   As the reading process is selective, the reader builds a macrostructure with minimal information from the text. Search reading on the other hand, is related to locating information based on predetermined topics and the reader does not necessarily make an attempt to build a macrostructure of the whole text. Expeditious reading at the local level refers to scanning which involves selective reading. This includes locating a specific date, word, phrase, figure, name, date of specific events or items in an index and the reader disregards parts of the text which are irrelevant.

Skills and strategies

In the literature, the terms skills and strategies are used interchangeably to describe the reading activity. Cohen (1998) and Urquhart and Weir (1998) define 'strategies as conscious problem-solving activities while 'skills' refer to abilities that are automaticised and performed mostly in a subconscious manner. Carrel (1989) suggests that inefficient use of reading strategies, besides other factors like lack of proficiency in the target language and vocabulary, can have an impact on learners' target language proficiency. The right combination of skills or strategies employed is essential to enhance readers' effective comprehension of a text.

Models of reading

Research on reading in the past has attempted to construct theories to create an understanding of the processes involved in reading comprehension. Since the 1960s, two classes of models emerged: process models and componential models. In process models, a sequential pattern is followed which involves a series of activities, one followed by the other. Alternatively, readers may also be non-sequential in their processing activities. Some examples of process-based models include models of Gough (1972), Just and Carpentar (1987) and Rayner and Pollatsek (1989). Current processed-based models include bottom-up, top-down and interactive models.

Bottom-up models involve the reader to comprehend a written text by working his or her way upwards in a hierarchical manner. The reader processes the smallest linguistic units, gradually working his way upwards as he compiles these units together to decode and comprehend the higher units (Dechant, 1991). Top-down models require that readers do not need to recognize each word but understand a portion of the text and unfamiliar words through the use of background knowledge and textual clues (Gove, 1983). The weakness of the top-down model is that it does not describe how the actual reading process starts for the reader. Interactive models emerged as a result of a combination of insights from the bottom-up and top-down models. This hybrid reading model was proposed by McCormick (1988), and further developed by Kintsch (2004) which is known as the construction-integration model of text comprehension. Further to this, Stanovich (2000) developed his popular interactive-compensatory model which suggests that a specific weakness in a reader in a particular skill can be compensated by strengths in other skills.

Componential models provide a description of the components assumed to be involved in the reading process with little or no explanation of how these components interact with one another, or of the development of the reading process over time (Urquhart and Weir, 1998). These models attempt to model the reading ability rather than the process of it. One recent componential model that has emerged is Khalifa and Weir's (2009) multi-divisible model. In this model (see Figure 1 below), they outline the cognitive processes which contribute to reading according to the different purposes. Hence, the different components of reading at different levels of processing can be regarded as a synthesis of views of cognitive processes that occur in reading comprehension.

The model below describes the various levels of processing which incorporate the use of different skills and strategies on the part of the reader to achieve comprehension. The central core of the model comprises the various elements of processing. On the left, is the goal-setter which acts as the central executive for metacognitive activity. Its function is to select the most appropriate type of reading strategy to achieve comprehension of the text. Khalifa and Weir's model in some aspects represent the four-cell matrix on reading types (see Table 1 above). This model was used as a framework in this study to investigate the different types of reading tested in 14 recent IELTS tests. The model suggests that the reading construct is made up different skills and strategies as represented by the different categories of careful and expeditious reading.

Testing of reading

A primary focus on careful reading in previous research has resulted in the development of high stakes tests which assess careful rather than expeditious reading (Jin Yan, 1998; Weir *et al,* 2000; Zhou, Weir and Green, 1998). In one of the few studies that has attempted to base its tests on a more comprehensive construct of reading, The Test for English Majors in the People's Republic of China Validation Project, it was found that candidates performed differentially across careful and expeditious purposes of reading (Zhou *et al*, 1998). This implies that if, as Jin Yan (1998) suggests, research instruments which test reading ability do not include items on expeditious reading, the product of these tests may not reflect the actual reading ability of students.
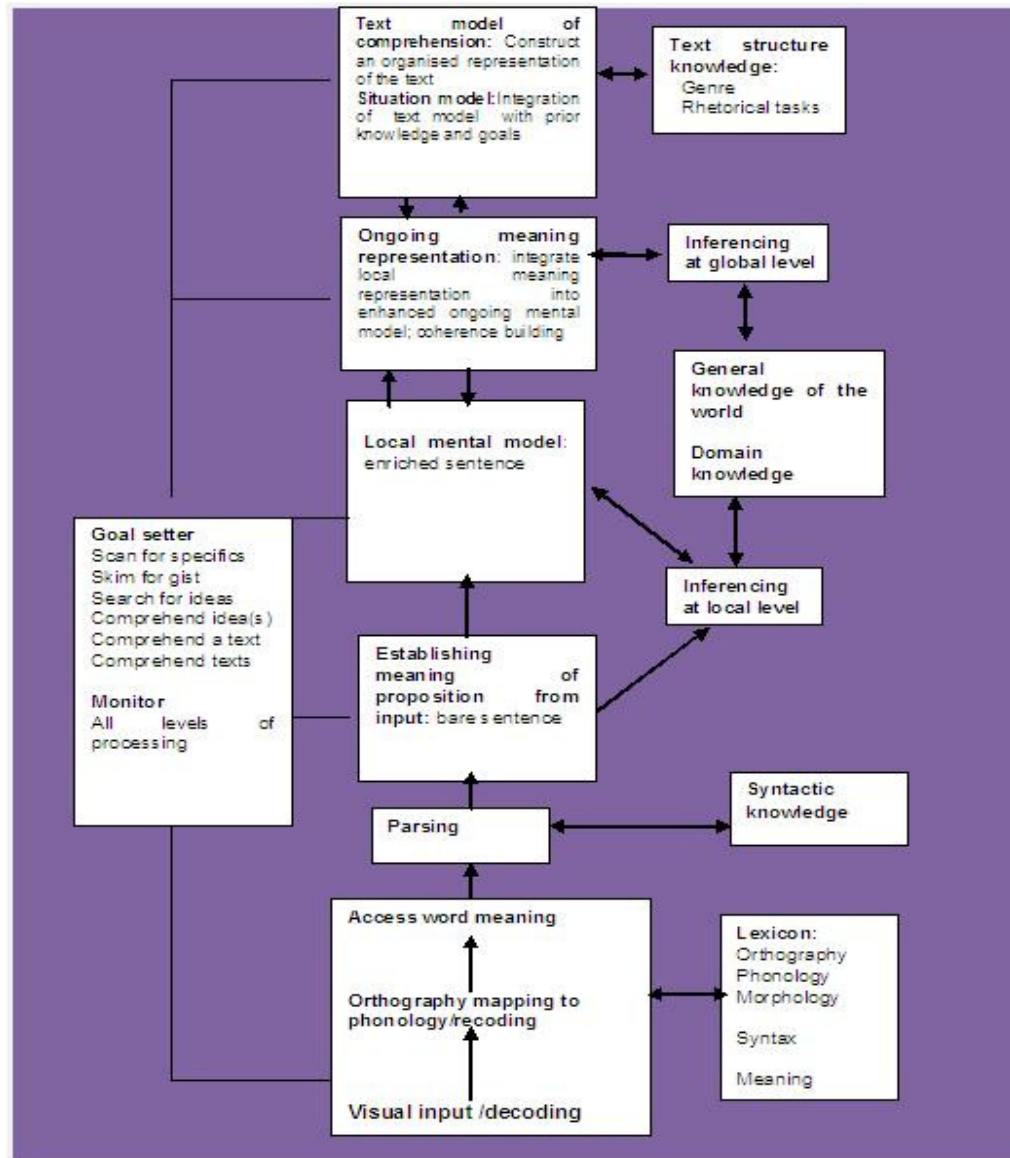

Figure 1 Model of reading   [*Source:* Khalifa and Weir (2009)]

Even international university entrance tests do not seem to provide sufficient evidence of being able to test comprehensively the reading ability of students. Urquhart and Weir (1998) find that one-third of the items in some of the reading modules in the British Council/UCLES (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate) ELTS test focus on the microlinguistic level, that is the lower order level of reading. Weir (1990) also claims that a number of items at the microlinguistic level are noted in the more recent IELTS test as well as in the Test in English for Educational Purposes (TEEP). Urquhart and Weir (1998) find that this is also the case in many other tests of international standing and good repute, including TOEFL and hence call for urgent investigation of such low order elements where the testing of reading ability is concerned. One possible danger of including items of low order in reading comprehension tests when the actual purpose of the test is to gauge the ability of candidates to understand the main ideas and important details is that some candidates might be disadvantaged. In other words, the product of these tests may provide inaccurate indicators to reflect the actual abilities of candidates, hence may have a serious impact on candidates' performance when they embark on a course later at the university. This clearly suggests the need for further investigation into the valid assessment of reading ability.

This study was an attempt to investigate whether the reading ability is tested comprehensively in 14 recent IELTS reading tests. The types of skills and strategies employed in responding to test items were investigated. The findings would depict whether the test is comprehensive in terms of adequacy in the number of different test items it included.

METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted was a combination of both the quantitative and qualitative designs to address both the research questions above.

Sample

Two informed test-takers were involved in this task. The two test-takers comprised two researchers, a Turkish male and a Malaysian female (the researcher) at the Centre of Research in English Language and Assessment (CRELLA), University of Bedfordshire, United Kingdom.

Instruments

A reading cognitive parameter matrix and a reference key was developed, informed by Urquhart and Weir's (1998) four-cell matrix through focus group discussions to record the strategies used by the two informed test-takers. The matrix consists of different categories of careful and expeditious reading across the local and global levels and incorporating a taxonomy of skills and strategies in reading for academic purposes. The matrix was used following three piloting stages.

Procedure

The two informed test-takers completed the 14 IELTS Reading tests under test-like conditions within a maximum of an hour for each test. Immediately after responding to each test item, they noted the strategies they employed by recording the test item number in the column corresponding to the careful and expeditious categories of the matrix table as appropriate. The completed matrix tables were compiled separately for each test-taker and the data analysed manually by the researcher.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, the first test-taker who is the researcher herself analyzed all the 560 items while the second researcher responded to 556 items with four items missing from his analysis. One possible reason why the four items were missing was that the second researcher might have forgotten to fill out the item numbers in the matrix table. Based on the findings, the following key points were noted:

1. About 77% of the items in the IELTS tests tested careful reading as against expeditious reading (23%). This imbalance of item distribution suggests that the focus of IELTS reading tests is more on careful reading, which supports the conclusion in the literature review and discussion above that test instruments claiming to test the reading ability of undergraduates tend to concentrate on careful rather than expeditious reading. In contrast, the findings of the study reported above in chapter four are that undergraduates see expeditious reading skills as being more relevant and appropriate to their academic reading tasks at the university. IELTS tests', which overemphasize careful reading items, appear to be neglecting the expeditious reading needs of undergraduates' in accomplishing their academic reading tasks at tertiary level.

Further to this, it is worth noting that test items, whether careful or expeditious, across the local and global levels are not separated in IELTS Reading tests and candidates are allotted one hour to complete all test items. This implies that no time constraints are imposed on candidates when responding to expeditious reading items. As a result, candidates are not encouraged to employ expeditious reading strategies although they are supposedly required to do so. Nevertheless, the nature of some expeditious reading items may encourage test takers to employ expeditious reading strategies: some examples of these include matching words or finding similar words. Therefore, it is important not only that expeditious readings items be separated from careful reading items when assessing students' reading, but also that time constraints should be imposed when administrating expeditious reading tests. These factors, which would seem to be critical and might have a profound impact on performance were taken into consideration in this study in the administration of the reading test enhancing its validity.

To sum up, this finding lends further support to Urquhart and Weir's reading matrix by suggesting the need to incorporate both careful and expeditious reading to describe the reading ability comprehensively.

2. Out of the careful reading skills and strategies, 70% of the items focus on basic comprehension, 71% of the items test reading comprehension at the local level (within the sentence), while only 0.8% (7 items) test text model representation which require reader's understanding of main ideas and supporting details to form a coherent whole. There were no items testing at the situation model level, that is, requiring candidates to build a representation of the content in a text and relating it to mental models of real life situations through the use of background knowledge. This implies that IELTS tests include very few items testing at the higher level of cognitive processing.

CONCLUSION

In essence, the findings of the present research show that the IELTS reading tests concentrate on careful reading at the local level (in addressing research question 1). This is supported by the literature review which claims that expeditious reading is somewhat ignored while the focus of research is more on careful reading. Furthermore, based on Khalifa and Weir's 2009 framework, both careful and expeditious reading skills and strategies across the local and global levels should be tested to describe the reading ability comprehensively.

In addressing the second research question, the findings show the IELTS tests are not balanced in terms of the types of items they contain. The implication of this is that these tests may not test comprehensively the reading ability hence their product may not reflect the actual ability of students. Hence it is suggested that there is a need to develop a complete instrument by incorporating adequate items on careful and expeditious reading across the local and global levels of comprehension.

REFERENCES

Carrell, P.L. (1989). Metacognitive awareness and second language reading, *Modern Language Journal*, *73*, 121-133.

Carver, R.P. (1997). Reading for one second, one minute, or one year from the perspective of rauding theory, *Scientific Studies of Reading*, *1*, 3-43.

Cohen, A.D. (1998) . *Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language*, London: Longman.

Davis, F.B. (1968). Research in comprehension in reading, *Reading Research Quarterly, 3/4*, 499-545.

Dechant, E.V. (1991). *Understanding and Teaching Reading: An Interactive Mode,* New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Enright, M.K., Grabe, W., Koda, K., Mosenthal, P., Mulcahy-Ernt, P. and Schedl, M. (2000). *TOEFL 2000 Reading Framework: A Working Paper*. TOEFL Monograph Series 17, Princeton: ETS.

Gove, M. K. (1983). Clarifying teacher's beliefs about reading. *The Reading Teacher, 37*, 3, 261-66. Grabe, W. (2002) Foundations for L2 reading instruction, *The Language Teacher (Online).*

Grabe, W.and Stoller, F.L. (2002). *Teaching and Researching Reading*, London: Longman.

Hawkey, R. (2006*). Impact theory and practice: Studies of the IELTS test and the Progetto Lingue 2000*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jin Yan (1998). An applied linguistics model of Chinese undergraduates' EAP reading and its operationalizations in the Advance English Reading Test, a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Linguistics, Shanghai, China: School of Foreign Languages, Jiao Tong University.

Just, M.A. and Carpenter, P.A. (1987). *The Psychology of Reading and Language Comprehension.* Allyn and Bacon : Boston, Massachusetts.

Khalifa, H. and Weir, C.J. (2009). *Examining Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kintsch, W. (2004). The construction-integration model of text comprehension and its implications for instruction. In R. Ruddell & N. Unrau (eds) *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*. (5th ed), Delaware: International Reading Association.

McCormick, T. W. (1988). *Theories of Reading in Dialogue: An Interdisciplinary Study,* University Press of America, New York, x, 399 pages. 0819171689. Location: Dallas SIL Library.

Perfetti, C..A. (1999). Comprehending written language: A blueprint of the reader. In M.C. Brown & P. Hagoort (eds), *The Neurocognition of Language*, Oxford University Press: New York, 167-208.

Rayner, K. and Pollatsek, A. (1989). *The Psychology of Reading,* New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Rosenfeld, P., Oltman, P. and Sheppard, K. (2004). Investigating the validity of TOEFL: A feasibility study using content and criterion-related strategies, *TOEFL Research Report*, RR-71.

Stanovich, K. E. (2000). *Progress in Understanding Reading*. The Guilford Press: New York.

Urquhart, S. and Weir, C.J. (1998). *Reading in a second language: Process, Product and Practice.* Essex: Pearson Education Ltd.

Weir, C.J., Hughes, A. and Porter, D. (1990) Reading Skills: Hierarchies, implicational relationships and identifiability, *Reading in a Foreign Language, 7,* 505-10.

Weir, C.J. Yang, H. and Jin, Y. (2000). An empirical investigation of the componentiality of L2 reading in English for Academic Purposes. S*tudies in Language Testing, 12.*   Cambridge University Press.

Weir, C.J., Green, T., Hawkey, R., Maniski, T., S.Devi, Unaldi, A. and Zegarac, V. (2007). *The relationship between the academic reading construct as measured by IELTS and the reading experiences of students in their first-yearof study at a British university,* The British Council/IELTS Research Project.

Zhou, S. Weir, C.J. and Green, R. (1998). T*he Test for English Majors Validation Project*, Shanghai: Foreign Language Education Press.

Weir, C.J., Yang, H. and Jin, Y. (2000). An empirical investigation of the componentiality of L2 reading in English for Academic Purposes. S*tudies in Language Testing, 12,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Table 1. Four-cell matrix on types of reading

Reading Types	Global level	Local level
Careful Reading	a Establishing accurate comprehension of explicitly stated main ideas and supporting details across sentences b Making propositional inferences c Establishing how ideas and details relate to each other in a whole text	a Establishing accurate comprehension of explicitly stated main idea or supporting details within a sentence b Identifying lexis c Understanding syntax
Expeditious Reading	a Skimming quickly to establish discourse topic and main ideas, or structure of text, or relevance to needs b Search reading to locate quickly and understand information relevant to predetermined needs	a Scanning to locate specific points of information

Source: Urquhart, A.H. and Weir, C.J. (1998)

Table 2. Reading cognitive parameter matrix

Reading Strategies/ Task Types	Expeditious Reading Skills/Strategies			Careful Reading Skills/Strategies					
	Skim	Search	Scan	Explicit Within Sentence (EWS)	Implicit Within Sentence (IWS)	Explicit Across Sentences (EAS)	Implicit Between Sentences (IBS)	Text Model (TM)	Situation Model (SM)

Reference Key

EWS: Explicit within sentence
Establishing basic propositional meaning at sentence level through explicitly- stated ideas in the text. Basic comprehension questions are used to assess lexical, syntactic, and semantic abilities and the ability to understand important information presented in sentence-level propositions.

IWS: Implicit within sentence
Inferencing by creating information, which is not explicitly-stated in a sentence. Understanding information in a sentence may require addressing conceptual gaps by constructing a message from both what is explicitly-stated and from our stored knowledge. Such inferences are necessary for a full understanding of the sentence.

EAS: Explicit across sentences
Establishing meaning through explicitly-stated ideas across sentences.

IBS: Implicit between sentences
Inferencing meaning which is not explicitly-stated between sentences in a text.

TM: A Text model
Creating a text model. Constructing an organized representation of the text including main points and supporting details; an integrated understanding of how supporting ideas and factual details of the text form a coherent whole.

SM: A Situation model
Answering questions based on a situation model. Addressing conceptual gaps by constructing a message from both what is explicitly-stated and from our stored knowledge. Building a situation model involves the reader forming a representation of the content, relating the contextual information of a text to mental models of corresponding real life situations.

Source: Urquhart and Weir (1998)

Table 3. Summary of item analysis for 14 IELTS reading tests

	SKILLS AND STRATEGIES									**Total analysis**
	Expeditious Reading			**Careful Reading**						
	Skim	Search reading	Scan	Explicit Within Sentence	Implicit Within Sentence	Explicit Across Sentences	Implicit Between Sentences	Text Model	Situation Model	
Test-taker 1	69	7	90	298	11	56	25	4	0	**560**
Test-taker 2	0	44	44	276	26	115	48	3	0	**556**
Total Cognitive Skills	69	51	134	574	37	171	73	7	0	**1116**
Subtotals: Expeditious versus Careful reading	**254 (22.8%)**			**862 (77.2%)**						**1116**

Test-taker 1 is the researcher.
Test-taker 2 is a staff member of CRE