

Making Reading Comprehension Questions : Some Ideas

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Abstract

The General English course at Shinshu University has been implemented since April, 2006. Reading, both extensive reading and short texts, forms an important part of the course. The development of the course books is an ongoing process. An issue involved in this process is: How can the reading activities in the course book be further developed? Also, are the reading tasks (questions and activities) offering varied and holistic stimuli for the learners?

With these questions in mind, it is the purpose of this paper to undertake a study of the reading comprehension tasks in the General English course books, contrast them with an international general English text book and then seek to offer some suggestions based on the findings. The aim is to broaden material developer's choices when writing and reviewing the course book material, from the perspectives of structural variety and skills and strategies employed by the learners to complete the tasks.

1. Introduction

A motivation behind this paper is to explore the nature of reading comprehension questions; the varieties of structure available, the advantages to each specific structure, the reading strategies and skills involved in answering the question type and their application.

The paper is in four parts: a general background of reading skills and strategies and how they are assessed, a review of the question structures available, an analysis of the types of questions used for reading comprehension activities from two textbooks and some suggestions for sets of questions for the Shinshu University General English textbooks. At the time of writing, there are three Shinshu University General English text books: one for the first and second semesters of year one and a text book for each semester of year two.

2. General background of reading skills and strategies

Firstly, the definitions of reading skills and reading strategies need to be addressed. The context of reading will influence the reader and types of skills and strategies employed. Therefore, the context in this paper is reading and answering questions. Whether students are 'reading and answering questions', or 'reading to answer questions' is also debatable.

There are also many purposes for reading. I will use the broad definitions given by Wallace (2006) of: reading for survival, reading for learning and reading for pleasure. The purpose in this paper is 'reading for learning'. More specific purposes for reading are given by Grabe and Stoller (2002) and are represented in figure 1.1.

1. Reading to search for simple information
2. Reading to skim quickly
3. Reading to learn from texts
4. Reading to integrate information
5. Reading to write (or search for information needed for writing)
6. Reading to critique texts
7. Reading for general comprehension

Figure 1.1 Purposes for reading (Wenden, 1987:7-8 in Grabe and Stoller (2002, p. 13))

The figure above shows generic purposes, and hints at skills or strategies needed to satisfy these.

Next, the definitions of skill and strategy will be discussed. There is confusion in defining these two terms, with some theorists questioning if they are separately identifiable. Whether skills can be measured independently has been questioned by many researchers, such as Grabe and Stoller (2002) who raised the issue of the highly complex nature of answering reading test questions. They claimed that the process varies from reader to reader, so that in the same test, one reader may be applying one skill, but another may be applying a few skills.

Alexander and Jetton (2000, pp. 295-6) defined the term ‘strategy’ as ‘a form of mental processing that deviated from traditional skills-based reading’ but then go on to state that ‘any distinctions between skills and strategies that seemed apparent then have begun to fade, leaving many to wonder where skills end and strategies begin’.

The term skills has been defined as ‘information-processing techniques that are automatic...applied to a text unconsciously for whatever reasons..’ (Paris, Wasik and Turner, 1991, p.611). This can imply that ‘skills’ are outside of the realm of explicit teaching and therefore, it would not be possible to assess these consistently. Spearitt (1972) identified four types of skill, those being: recalling word meanings, drawing inferences from content, recognising the writer’s purpose and tone and mood. However, there are various doubts as to whether skills can be measured separately or ranked in a hierarchy of difficulty (Grabe and Stoller, 2002, p. 49).

Grabe and Stoller (2002) present definitions for reading skills and strategies. Skills are defined as linguistic processing abilities that are relatively automatic in their use and combinations, such as word recognition and syntactic processing. Strategies are defined as a set of abilities under conscious control of the reader, such as skipping an unknown word while reading or rereading to reestablish text meaning. Wallace (2006, p.57) adds confusion to the blurring of definitions when she states ‘it might not be preferable to talk of teaching specific skills but of developing reading strategies’.

The above definitions then, identifies ‘strategies’ as something that can be classified, taught and assessed. Rubin (1987:20) categorises strategies under four general sections below:

- cognitive learning (clarification/ verification; guessing/ inductive inferencing; deductive reasoning; practice; memorisation; and monitoring);
- metacognitive learning strategies (choosing, prioritisation, planning, advance preparation, selective attention and more);
- communication strategies (including circumlocution/ paraphrasing, formulae use, avoidance strategies and clarification strategies)

- social strategies

Table 1.1 gives some more specific examples of reading strategies. The strategies have not been placed in order of importance; their order is arbitrary and the numbers are for organisational purposes only.

Top-down and bottom-up processing are common terms used with reference to reading skills. These terms are classified as 'models of reading', frameworks to create a general understanding of the reading comprehension process (Grabe and Stoller, 2002, p.31). Recent research does seem to indicate that bottom down models are favoured with regard to L2 reading for interpreting the many processes involved. In general, this model suggests that 'all reading follows a mechanical pattern in which the reader creates a piece-by-piece mental translation of the information in the text, with little interference from the reader's background knowledge' (ibid. p. 32). This is in contrast to the general definition of top-down models, which assume the reader is guided by his or her goals and expectations.

Of course, the assumption that readers do not involve background knowledge in the process of reading cannot be guaranteed, but it serves as a relatively neutral starting point upon which to deal with teaching and assessment of reading and its strategies. It is also worth mentioning that the nature of questions and strategies involved can be varied to cover both models of reading.

3. Question types

There are various question types available for teaching reading and testing comprehension. Within the context of this paper, (the General English course text books development) both developing reading comprehension and assessment are important.

Table 1.2 provides a general set of examples from Alderson (2002, pp. 205-233) and even though it is not exhaustive, it does give a broad overview of the choices available. As shown, the question

Reading strategy covered		
1. Specifying a purpose for reading	8. Using discourse markers to see relationships	15. Checking comprehension
2. Planning what to do/ what steps to take	9. Taking steps to repair faulty comprehension	16. Identifying difficulties
3. Previewing the text	10. Connecting one part of the text to another	17. Making inferences
4. Predicting the contents of the text	11. Paying attention to text structure	18. Critiquing the author
5. Posing questions about the text	12. Judging how well objectives were met	19. Critiquing the text
6. Finding answers to posed questions	13. Guessing the meaning of a new word from context	20. Rereading
7. Connecting text to background knowledge	14. Reflecting on what has been learnt from the text	21. Summarising information
Table 1.1 Sample reading strategies from Grabe and Stoller (2002)		

types section covers both formats and content. The middle column suggests possible strategies employed during each question type, but it is a suggestion only, and not intended as definitive guide. There are many issues related to this point, such as the difficulty of identifying specific strategies and skills, and whether these entities can be separately taught and assessed (see Alderson, 2005, pp. 306-7 for further elaboration on this).

An important issue concerning the variety of questions and ‘reading skills and strategies’ involved is: Can such strategies be taught and assessed individually? Also, should questions for reading comprehension be structured according to possible skills and strategies they cover? Stanovich (1980) raised the issue of compensation in reading tests, suggesting that students lacking in one skill may use others to overcome the problem. Lennon (1962) tried to identify what could be measured in reading, and his conclusion was that only ‘general reading ability’ could be measured. This is an ambiguous result, which does not clarify or validate the range of question types (and related reading strategies) above. More recently, Rost (1993) supported the findings of Lennon by also concluding that only ‘general reading competence’ could be measured. This adds strength to

Question type	Suggested reading strategies involved	Information
standard multiple choice	1, 6-8, 13, 17-19, 21	a generic type with potential to cover many reading skills depending on content
multiple choice cloze	3, 4, 7-11, 13, 15, 17, 20	two or three choices in the cloze
standard cloze	3,4, 7-11, 13, 15, 17, 20	can also be a cloze summary
sentence completion	1-4, 7-11, 13, 15, 17	complete unfinished sentences, free choice
information transfer: notes/ summary/ diagram/ flow chart/ table completion	1-3, 5,6, 10, 12, 14-17, 20	use information and put into another form such as a chart or table
choosing headings	1-5, 10, 13, 15, 17, 20, 21	matching headings with texts
identification of writer’s attitudes/ claims	1, 3, 5-11, 13, 15, 17, 18-21	short answer or longer answer, and can also be placed in any type of structure
nonsense words	1, 3, 7-11, 15-17, 20	scrambled letters, guess meanings
matching lists	1, 3, 7-17, 20, 21	matching headings, titles to extracts
matching phrases	1, 3, 7-17, 20, 21	paraphrasing
ordering tasks	1-4, 7-12, 15-17	scrambled words, sentences, paragraphs, texts
dichotomous tasks	1-7, 11-15, 17, 19-21	questions with only 2 possible answers (and a third choice, such as N/A or not given)
free-recall	7, 9, 10, 14-15, 18-19, 21	students read, then write down all they can remember

Table 1.2 Sample question types from Alderson (2005, pp. 205-233)

the argument that rather than try to write or use questions based on the possible skills they cover, material developers should focus on structural variety, such as those in table 1.2. Other studies

undertaken using test-taker introspections illustrated that when answering test questions, the process varied between readers, and that the process was highly complex (Alderson, 2002).

The information above, then, answers the two questions just posed. In other words, it is difficult to measure individual skills and strategies, and questions cannot really be targeted for these individually. This is an advantage for the General English course, as time spent choosing and writing questions targeting such issues would consume a lot of time and energy. Also, the focus of question writing can be based more on the variety of structure and content without having to grade tasks according to a hierarchy of skills and strategies. This argument is further supported by Alderson et al's (1991) (cited in Alderson, 2002, p. 97) research into reader strategies by analysing protocols of test-takers, which concluded that no relationship could be found between strategies used and item (question or task) types. They also found that there was no relationship between item difficulty and the reader's ability to understand main ideas, direct statements and inferences. So, this can indicate that despite variety of question type, general understanding is not disrupted, giving further support to employing variety of items in a reading comprehension activity.

4. What skills and strategies are being measured?

Another issue surrounding this area is whether comprehension questions actually specifically measure readings skills, or other general skills. Various studies and research has been carried out in this area, with some interesting implications for materials writers and designers. Even though this may not be the main aim of reading comprehension questions for the General English course material at all times, it is worth covering.

Bachman et al (1989) analysed the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) reading subtest to see if linguistic competence and grammatical competence were being tested, or reading competence. The result showed a high percentage of item difficulty (almost 70%) related to grammar and to academic and topical content.

Another International English language test, IELTS (International English Language Testing System) was studied by Alderson (1993) to look for similar issues. He found that the test correlated more to communicative grammar tests than academic reading tests. This also supported Bachman et al's (1989) results, illustrating the close relationship between academic reading and the ability to use grammar.

The above indicates that official reading tests are not testing specifically reading, but general academic ability. This information is positive for the General English course, as, by its definition, the aim is to develop general English ability. So, the reading comprehension questions have multiple purposes, serving not only to develop reading skills but develop other skills relevant to the academic and topical contexts.

There is also the general issue of what is being tested: reading ability or intelligence. A long-standing definition of reading was that 'reading is reasoning' (Thorndike, 1917). This has been criticised by Carver (1974) who found that most reading tests were more like reasoning tests. He found high correlations between reading and intelligence tests, questioning the definition of a 'reading test'. The suggestion with regard to these findings was that, according to Alderson, (2002, p. 102) 'intelligence tests should seek to measure intelligence and that reading tests should measure reading, not reasoning. With this in mind, sensitivity has to be applied when writing questions, i.e. are the questions testing intelligence, or the reading abilities of the student?

5. Question content

So far, the issues of testing individual skills and strategies have been covered with the validity of comprehension questions to improve general English ability and the value of varied question types. Another issue regarding question construction is content, in the form of vocabulary.

Research has questioned the role of vocabulary importance in reading comprehension testing. Johnstone (1984) suggested that testing vocabulary might measure prior knowledge rather than lexical knowledge. This suggests that vocabulary should play a less dominant role as content in question construction. There is also the issue of whether students should use dictionaries. In the General English course at Shinshu University, there is no specific rules on whether students use dictionaries in class during reading comprehension tasks. In fact, it is common to see them being used in class.

There are researchers who have shown that dictionaries have little impact on the test scores of students (Bensousen et al, 1984), so the issue of dictionary use may not be relevant with regards to improving student ability or in the context of constructing questions. However, the issue of vocabulary is important, especially strategies involving vocabulary such as paraphrasing and inferring the meaning of words from context. Such examples illustrate a positive inclusion of vocabulary in questions, using lexis to use a variety of strategies and skills rather than simple word recollection and retention.

Of course, vocabulary is an important issue, with many language learners' goals being to improve their word level. Vocabulary building can be a daunting task. Hazenbarg and Hulstijn (1996) argued that about 10,000 word families at minimum were needed to minimally comprehend university-level L2 texts. Unfortunately this cannot practically be implemented, but Grabe and Stoller (2002) suggest that we can focus on the 2,000 to 3,000 most common words as a base for word-recognition automaticity, and then focus on vocabulary that is appropriate to specific topics and fields of study. This idea fits well with the General English course books, which cover topics suitable for the majors of the students taking the course. The learners vocabulary is also supported by an extensive reading (ER) program, but, ER lies outside the realm of this paper's focus.

Reading comprehension questions are important, but the content of the reading material also has a large impact on the reader. The reading material itself is not part of this paper, but it should be mentioned briefly, as quite often, question writers are also the reading material authors or selectors, as in the case of the Shinshu University General English course.

Issues such as genre of text can have a big impact on the reader. Grabe and Stoller (2002, p. 80) emphasise this point by stating that learners need to recognise and use text structure signalling devices and discourse organisation as ways to comprehend texts better. This is further supported by Goldman and Rakestraw, (2000, p.325) who discuss the role of focus on genre structure interventions and readers' awareness of how to identify different genre structures, have a role in improving memory and learning context. Wallace (2006, p.93) also emphasises the role of different genres as offering opportunities for different activities in while-reading tasks. Structure awareness can be dealt with at the question level as long as there is suitable structure in the text. Grabe and Stoller (2002, p. 80) go on to state that while some students intuitively acquire text structure knowledge, some do not, so it is the responsibility of the teacher (or material and course book writer) to inform them about such matters and how to look for these.

Familiarity of reading, material being tested and level of language proficiency are other issues to be considered when writing comprehension questions. There are some concerns regarding specialised texts, whether subject knowledge is being tested or reading ability (Grabe and Stoller (2002, pp.

102-3). Also, if two different texts are being used at the same time (as in the case with the General English course), is this fair to all students when being assessed? With the General English course, most reading comprehension sections are not assessed as part of the course, but it is still worth considering when developing the material.

Hock (1990) carried out a study on this and found that comprehension of a specific area of a text could be predicted by both familiarity with the test content and language proficiency, but that language level was more effective. This implies that, as comprehension question writers, the focus needs to be on the language level rather than directing attention to the subject matter; in essence, a subjective rather than objective approach to the text when making questions.

6. Types of reading activity

According to Wallace (2006, p.86) there are three main types of reading activity: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities. She claims that 'most contemporary reading materials reflect these stages, though in rather different ways' and states that these three activity types are 'now a common feature of discourse about reading'.

6.1. Pre-reading activities

This type commonly involves the reader looking for specific information in the text, reading quickly, scanning the text for the answer. Obviously, the aim here is for scanning and/ or skimming tasks, common issues related to reading. A common criticism of this task is that quite often, these questions do not have a clear motivation, as Wallace (ibid) illustrates 'Why, for example, should the reader read to find the number of different types of secondary school in England, rather than any other information'. This example does show the possibility of arbitrary content, but if such questions are part of the dominant tests taken by students, they should be included.

Other pre-reading tasks involve preparing the reader for the article and also encompass Frierean approaches, which can involve using visual material to raise issues surrounding the text (see Alderson, 2005, pp.103-5 for more information). Examples include brainstorming, posing questions about what the reader wants to know and guessing content from the headline. Issues in your major (Shinshu University, 2006) features such tasks in the form of vocabulary questions, where the student finds the meaning of some specific vocabulary before reading the text. Such tasks serve not only to compensate L2 linguistic or sociocultural inadequacies, they also 'activate existing schematic knowledge' (ibid).

6.2. Whilst-reading activities

Wallace (2006, p.93) defines the general aim of these tasks is 'to encourage learners to be flexible, active and reflective readers' and to promote a 'dialogue between reader and writer'. She goes on to highlight the role of these activities as replicating the process which occurs spontaneously in mature readers, that being, 'to use evidence of what has preceded to predict the continuation of a text' (ibid, p.95).

The above indicates a strong validity to support readers who are not advanced and are nearer to a beginner level. This demographic is indicative of the students undertaking the General English course at Shinshu University. It would therefore be beneficial to have these types of activities in the General English course books, and it could be expected that such activities feature in the books.

6.3. Post-reading activities

These are defined as activities at the end of the reading comprehension text, and, as Wallace (ibid, p. 100) puts it, 'traditionally the major, often only, kind of post-reading activity consisted of questions

which followed a text. Indeed, many course books still adopt this well-tried formula'. This then, leads us to the expectation that the majority of reading comprehension questions are of this variety. While the author does not say whether they are good or bad, she does state that 'the activity needs to be motivated by the genre, the context of learning and the likely learner purpose' (ibid).

To summarise, there are three reading activities, which all serve different valid purposes, when applied appropriately. It could be concluded that there is a case for the application of all three in reading comprehension questions, with a view to broadening variety and challenges for the reader.

7. An analysis of the types of questions used for reading comprehension activities from two textbooks

7.1. Aim

The General English course book 'Issues in your Major' was chosen out of the three university course books because it was the most recent, being published in October, 2007. Therefore, it represented the most up-to-date vision of content in the course. In order to evaluate these questions, another sample text was used to compare and contrast the results. The text chosen was 'American Headway 2' by John and Liz Soars (2001). This book was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it is an internationally used book, and therefore could be perceived as a 'standard' example of a four skills English text book. Also, it is used as a supplementary text in the General English course. Some issues at stake when analysing the two text books were:

- Do the text books offer a broad range of question or task structures?
- Are there similarities in question structures, location and reading activity?
- If American Headway represents an international standard, how can the reading comprehension tasks in 'Issues in your Major' be improved?

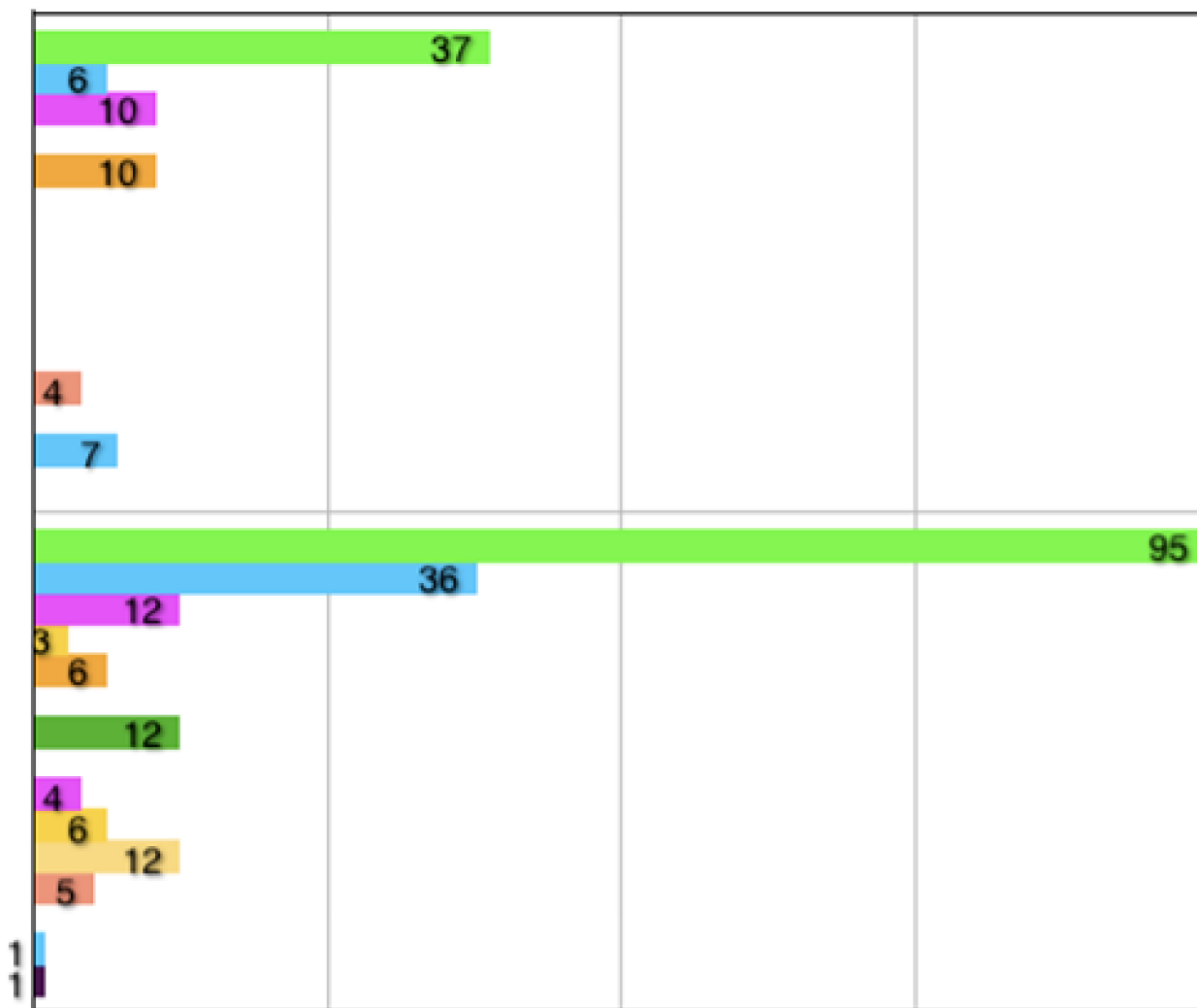
7.2. Method

Five reading comprehension articles were chosen from each book at random. Reading comprehension questions and tasks were examined on three levels: the question structure (from table 1.1), the type of reading activity (pre-, while- or post-reading) and position on the questions in relation to the reading text. The results and implications for these will be discussed following the data. The analysis did not cover a categorisation of skills and strategies for matters discussed before, namely the difficulty in separating such items and the general consensus that a variety of skills and strategies are employed in all questions. Also, the items were recorded as individual activities, for example one question with five cloze activities would be counted as five rather than one because it would involve the reader carrying out five short tasks.

7.3. Results

As can be seen in figure 1.2, there are some clear differences in the two text books. Firstly, the five articles in American Headway 2 (AH2) feature 95 questions, while those in Issues in your Major (IYM) has 37. When considering that both books sampled five reading comprehension sections each, the average number of tasks the reader completes is 19 and 7.4 respectively. In other words, American Headway has almost three times the number of tasks for readers to engage in. This could indicate that more activities need to be included in the Shinshu University text book, if AH2 represents an international standard and IYM's goal is to be in line with the international standard.

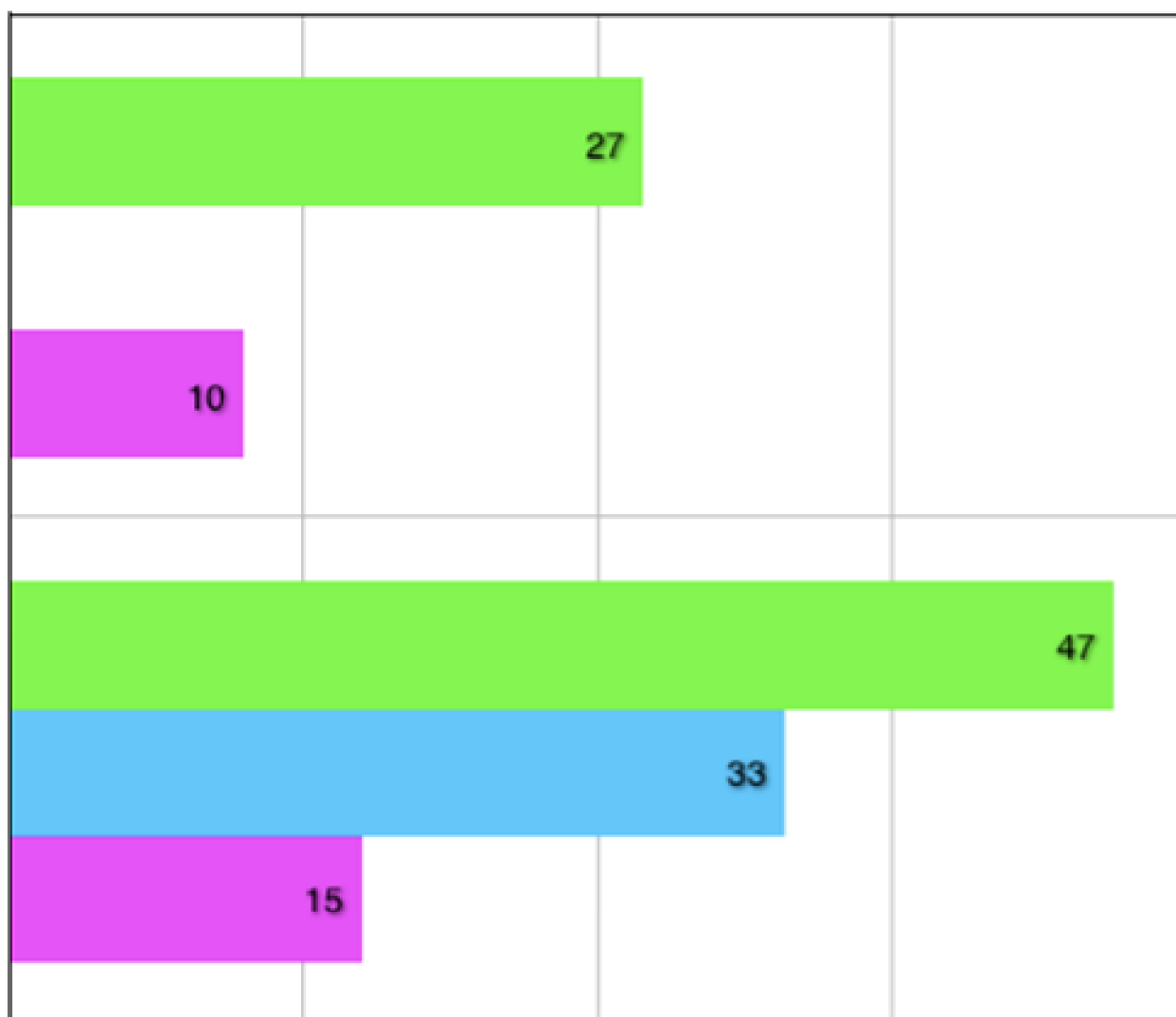
Secondly, a look at the variety of question types reveals another difference. AH2 features nine types, while IYM has only five types. This is nearly double the quantity. Again, in comparison to AH2,



this could suggest that IYM could benefit from more question variety in its reading comprehension texts. A dominant type of question used in AH2 but not featured in IYM is ‘information transfer’. This involves the reader taking some information from the text and applying it to a different situation. This could be responding to a photograph, interpreting charts or making charts from information in the text.

Interestingly, AH2 employs very few multiple choice questions (0.1% of total questions), while IYM has a relatively large proportion of them (19%). One reason that could explain the lack of these is the amount of space and time consumed in writing these. Another recent issue is the reliability. Some researchers have claimed that multiple choice questions can be answered without reading the text (Wallace, 2006, p.100; Alderson, 2006, p. 211) and that there can be a high degree of guessing the answer (Hughes, 2000, p. 60). Hughes (ibid) also highlights the aspect that multiple choice questions only test the reader’s ability to recognise rather than use the content of the questions. In fact, it has been argued that this question type measures a separate ability (Alderson, 2005, p. 211). With these points to consider, there is still validity for multiple choice in the General English course questions as they can be assessed quickly and these questions still feature heavily in international tests, such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), IELTS and TEOFL. These tests are taken by students of Shinshu University for various motivations.

Figure 1.2. Charts showing question types and quantity of reading comprehension questions from American Headway 2 (Oxford University Press, 2001) and Issues in your Major (Shinshu University Language Education Centre, 2007).

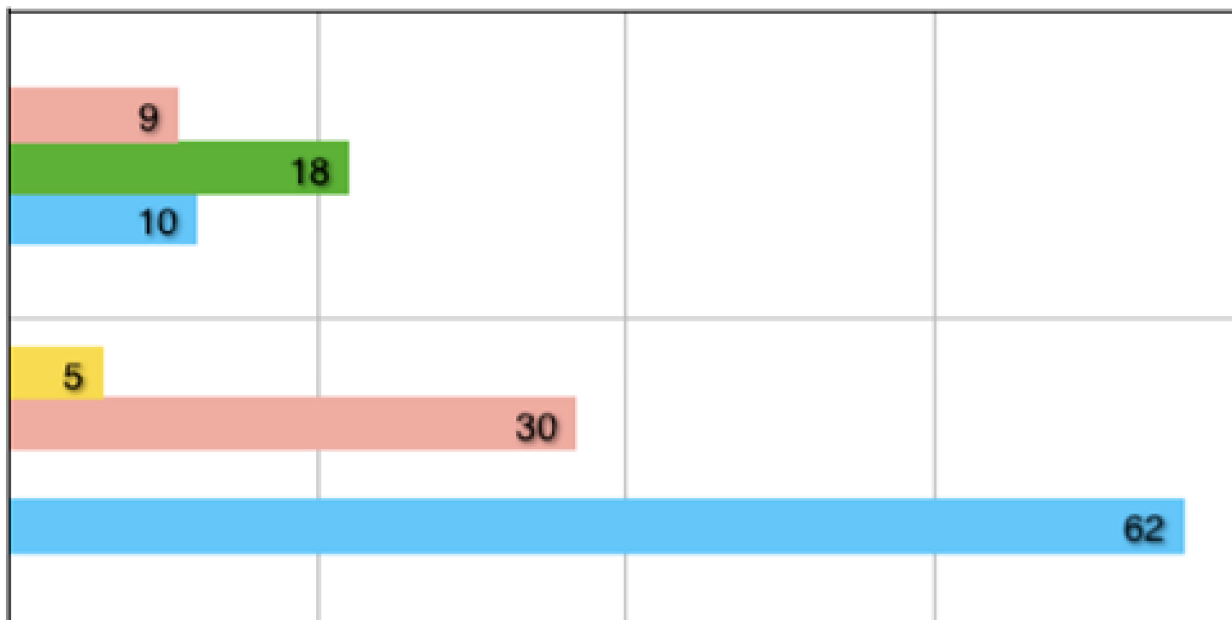


The second set of charts also reveal some interesting comparisons between the two books. Both textbook reading comprehension exercises featured pre- and post- reading activities, with more questions appearing in the latter activity section. This suggests that IYM is in line with contemporary, international textbooks. However, where AH2 contains 17 while-reading questions, IYM does not contain any. As the chart for AH2 illustrates, there is a constant increase in volume of questions from pre- to post- reading items, while IYM has a similar pattern but without any while-reading activities. Considering the benefits of such activities, as discussed above, it would be strongly recommended to make these an part of the question activity types.

A possible reason for this anomaly could be accounted for by presentation issues. Often, such activities are placed inside the text, disrupting the flow of an academic style block of text. Also, as mentioned by Wallace (2006) earlier, the post-reading task is dominant, and still the activity type of choice for many textbooks. However, this issue can be addressed in all the Shinshu University textbooks. Alderson (2005, p. 51) does add support to these question types when he claims that ‘inserting questions in the text after the relevant information (post-questions) has a greater effect’.

Figure 1.3. Charts showing question activity types and quantity from American Headway 2 (Oxford University Press, 2001) and Issues in your Major (Shinshu University Language Education Centre, 2007).

Finally, the charts dealing with question location in relation to the reading text will be examined. As can be seen, there are marked differences in the location of questions when contrasting the two books. AH2 has the majority of questions on the left side of the text (65%) followed by after text



questions (32%) and finally, in the text questions (3%). The General English course book was very different, with questions on the right side of the text being the largest group (49%), then questions on the left side of the text (27%) and lastly, after text questions (24%). What these results say about the textbooks is not so clear. As both books have a tendency to locate questions to the side of the text, this could indicate the importance of position for ease of looking at questions and reading at the same time. Whether the questions are on the left or right could be stylistic issues, or maybe based on previous decision makers. Either way, there is consistency for both books to place the majority of items at the side of the reading comprehension text.

Notably, ILYM has a relatively even spread of question positions, with the smallest percentage location being 24%. This is in sharp contrast to AH2, which has only 3% of one position, and a very dominant position of 65% (in contrast to ILYM's dominant question position of 32%). A possible reason for this could be ease of use and systematic approach on behalf of AH2, which has over three different levels in the series and the focus on one specific position could be motivated by international textbook protocol. It could suggest, that a dominant position of questions may be advantageous or conducive for reading as dealing with questions could be automated. However, this is purely speculative and will not be covered in any more detail beyond the point of recognising a different pattern to ILYM.

Figure 1.4. Charts showing question location in relation to the reading comprehension text and quantity from American Headway 2 (Oxford University Press, 2001) and Issues in your Major (Shinshu University Language Education Centre, 2007).

7.4. What do the results tell us?

So, from looking at the results of the analysis, we can conclude that there are some marked differences between the two texts, and that both texts do not utilise a full range of items available. From looking at the array of questions, activity types and positions of questions, it can be concluded that all the university textbooks would benefit from more variety in question types and reading activities. Also, in comparison to AH2, more activities could be included in the comprehension question activities. In addition, there should be more variety in structure, more mini tasks in each question and more variety in location of reading task if a goal of ILYM is to be closer to an international, general English text book. It could be argued that ILYM has more variety in location, so could have less variety in location and structure to be in line with AH2. However, such decisions will not be discussed in this paper.

7.5. What can be done to address these issues? Some suggestions.

The implications of the results are mentioned in the results analysis. More specific information will be discussed below. The general suggestion that something should be done is simple. Question structures and activities in this paper provide ideas and guidelines. It is also worth discussing some examples which can consider other aspects of reading comprehension questions, such as student motivation, implementation types and targeting specific aspects of reading.

Firstly, I will cover an example of approaching reading comprehension in the classroom. At present, the reading comprehension tasks in the General English course are not assessed. There are various reasons for this, such as time constraints in the classroom and time consumed in marking. Therefore, I suggest using the reading comprehension tasks as timed, individual activities, which are marked by the student. This would reduce the fear of timed tests and focus the students on the task at hand. The results could be given to the whole class, by the teacher, or by students or groups of students as a class activity. The results could then be used as a self development and assessment log, which would provide a more transparent approach to the reading comprehension tasks.

This, of course, depends on the questions being structured to ensure that strategies have been taught and that steps have been made to keep background knowledge out of the content. Without background knowledge and questions being used as intelligence tests rather than reading skills (as discussed previously by Carver (1974); Alderson, 2005).

Next, I will cover some issues surrounding question types. The question structures presented by Alderson (2005, pp. 205-233) provide structure only, they do not provide an insight into the content. For example, a multiple choice question can be written to assess grammar, cohesion, paraphrasing skills and so on. The content of the questions is highly diverse, and the implications of this is also broad.

For example, Alderson and Alvarez (1977) presented a series of activities using nonsense words. They focussed on encouraging semantic information rather than more standard syntax and morphology. Such examples included: hyponymy (grouping of nouns), opposites, gradeable antonymy (grading a group of words) and complementarity (complementary relationships or situation). (Examples of Alderson and Alvarez (1977) can be seen in Alderson, 2005, p. 346.)

Grabe and Stoller (2002, p. 78) stated that 'common ways to promote fluency through instruction are timed- and paced-reading activities, extensive reading...' reinforcing the suggestion of timed comprehension activities. Such an approach does not have to involve the entire set of questions. The approach is flexible enough to be implemented on any time scale. Of course, for classroom management, this is already an important part of all classroom practice, but strict timing could heighten the time students have with the comprehension tasks.

Wallace (2006, pp. 114-5, 116, 119, 120-1) offers other approaches with the aim of increasing critical reading. She reviews the SQ3R technique (survey, question, read, recite, review, from

Robinson in 1946) and highlights the benefits of having students provide their own questions, statements and hypotheses, not just for answers but to raise more questions. Alternative readings of texts and parallel discourses are also covered, as well as other ways texts could have been written. All these ideas could be incorporated into various question types, with varying control of answer

Reading techniques	How the aim is conveyed	Understanding meaning	Assessing the text
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being dictated by the question structure and content.

There are also simpler points to consider when writing questions. Alderson (2005, p.39, 41) gives four contexts that make a task demanding: text topic, text language, background knowledge and task type. He also highlighted a difference between good and bad readers, with good readers tending to use meaning-based cues and bad readers tending to use word-based cues. This is worth considering when putting content into questions. Another obvious, but commonly overlooked point is also raised by Shohamy (1984, cited in Alderson, 2005, p. 86) who emphasises that the language of the question should be easier than the passage.

There is also the issue of textually explicit and implicit question types. Explicit types have the information and answer in the same sentence, and implicit types involve the reader to combine information across sentences and between the text and external knowledge to get the answer. Obviously, both have advantages, but a mixture, or at least a consideration of these types can serve to provide more diversity in the question making process.

The following table is a summary of reading comprehension types from Gellet (1981:12-13) cited in Anderson, 2005, p. 313). It covers a variety of activities which could be considered when writing questions and activities for the General English course.

7.6. Conclusion

All of the questions introduced and reviewed in this paper, when examined in the contexts of the brief analysis hope to present the issue of writing comprehension questions for reading in a clearer light. Various considerations have been covered and examined in the context of the Shinshu University English course books, with some suggestions aimed at enhancing the development process of the textbook evaluations and improvements. Unfortunately, it is not possible to offer a perfect approach to such fields of English education, given the organic nature of language pedagogy, student demographics and institutional requirements. However, it is hoped that some insights into reading comprehension questions can be gained in order to benefit the Shinshu University General English course books and materials.

1. SENSITIZING 1. Inference: through the context Inference: through word formation 2. Understanding relations within a sentence 3. Linking sentences and ideas: reference linking sentences and ideas: link words	1. AIM AND FUNCTION OF THE TEXT 1. Function of the text 2. Functions within the text	1. NON-LINGUISTIC RESPONSE TO THE TEXT 1. Ordering a sequence of pictures 2. Comparing texts and pictures 3. Matching 4. Using illustrations 5. Completing a document 6. Mapping it out 7. Using information in the text 8. Jigsaw reading	1. FACT VERSUS OPINION
2. IMPROVING READING SPEED	2. ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT: DIFFERENT THEMATIC PATTERNS 1, Main idea and supporting details 2. Chronological sequence 3. Descriptions 4. Analogy and contrast 5. Classification 6. Argumentative and logical organization	2. LINGUISTIC RESPONSE TO THE TEXT 1. Reorganizing the information: reordering events Reordering the information: using grids 2. Comparing several texts 3. Completing a document 4. Question types 5. Study skills: summarizing Study skills: note-taking	2. WRITER'S INTENTION
3. FROM SKIMMING TO SCANNING 1. Predicting 2. Previewing 3. Anticipation 4. Skimming 5. Scanning	3. THEMATIZATION		

Table 1.3 Reading comprehension types from Gellet (1981:12-13) cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 313)

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