

NO-STRESS METHODS FOR ASSESSING READING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

Assessing reading comprehension is a central component of language education; however, traditional assessment practices often create anxiety and negatively affect learners' performance. In response to this challenge, no-stress or low-anxiety assessment methods have gained increasing attention in modern language pedagogy. This article presents an original, plagiarism-free academic discussion of no-stress methods for assessing reading comprehension in ESL and EFL contexts. It explores the theoretical background, key principles, practical assessment techniques, and pedagogical benefits of stress-free assessment. The study argues that no-stress assessment methods provide more valid insights into learners' reading abilities while promoting motivation, confidence, and learner autonomy.

Key words: reading comprehension, assessment, low-anxiety testing, formative assessment, ESL/EFL

Introduction

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in foreign language learning and a major indicator of learners' academic success. Assessment of reading comprehension allows teachers to monitor progress, identify difficulties, and adjust instruction. However, traditional testing methods such as timed exams, multiple-choice questions, and high-stakes assessments often generate stress and anxiety among learners.

Research in educational psychology suggests that anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing and reduce comprehension performance. As a result, learners may demonstrate lower achievement not because of limited reading ability, but due to

assessment-related stress. This has led educators to seek alternative approaches that assess reading comprehension in a supportive and learner-friendly manner. No-stress assessment methods aim to evaluate comprehension without creating pressure, thereby providing a more accurate representation of learners' reading skills.

Theoretical Foundations of No-Stress Assessment

No-stress assessment is grounded in several educational theories. Affective Filter Theory emphasizes that emotional factors such as anxiety and fear can block language input and performance. When assessment conditions are relaxed, learners are more likely to demonstrate their true comprehension abilities.

Constructivist learning theory also supports low-stress assessment by viewing learning as an active and meaningful process. From this perspective, assessment should be integrated into learning activities rather than separated as a stressful evaluation event. In addition, formative assessment theory highlights continuous feedback and reflection instead of one-time summative testing.

Principles of No-Stress Reading Assessment

No-stress assessment methods are guided by several core principles:

1. **Low anxiety environment:** Assessment tasks should minimize pressure and fear of failure.
2. **Focus on meaning:** Emphasis is placed on understanding ideas rather than recalling isolated details.
3. **Formative orientation:** Assessment is ongoing and supports learning progress.
4. **Learner involvement:** Learners actively participate in assessment through reflection and self-evaluation.
5. **Flexibility:** Multiple assessment formats are used to accommodate different learning styles.

These principles help create a supportive atmosphere in which learners feel comfortable demonstrating comprehension.

No-Stress Methods for Assessing Reading Comprehension

Reading Journals

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Reading journals allow learners to reflect on texts in a personal and informal way. Instead of answering test-like questions, learners write short entries about what they understood, what surprised them, and which parts were difficult.

Example: After reading a short story, students write a journal entry answering prompts such as:

- What is the main idea of the text?
- Which character did you like most and why?
- What new words or ideas did you notice?

The teacher assesses comprehension based on clarity of ideas and relevance, not grammatical accuracy. This reduces anxiety and encourages honest responses.

Retelling and Oral Summaries

Retelling requires learners to explain the content of a text using their own words. This method focuses on global understanding rather than memorization.

Example: After reading an article, learners work in pairs. One student retells the text orally, while the other listens and asks simple clarification questions. The teacher observes whether key ideas, events, and relationships are correctly conveyed.

This method is especially effective for lower-level learners who may struggle with written tests.

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers help learners visually structure information from a text. They are useful for assessing comprehension without requiring long written answers.

Example: After reading a narrative text, students complete a story map that includes:

- Setting
- Main characters
- Problem
- Solution

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For expository texts, learners may create a mind map showing main ideas and supporting details. Correct organization indicates successful comprehension.

Collaborative Discussion

Group discussions allow learners to negotiate meaning together in a supportive environment. Teachers assess comprehension through observation rather than direct testing.

Example: Students read the same text and discuss questions such as:

- What message does the author want to convey?
- Do you agree with the author's opinion? Why or why not?

The teacher listens for accurate references to the text and meaningful contributions. The collaborative format reduces fear of making mistakes.

Open-Ended Response Tasks

Open-ended tasks give learners freedom to respond creatively and personally to a text.

Example: After reading an article about environmental issues, learners answer questions such as:

- What is the most important problem mentioned in the text?
- How is this issue relevant to your country?

There is no single correct answer, which lowers stress and encourages deeper engagement with the text.

Portfolio Assessment

Portfolios involve collecting learners' reading-related work over a period of time. This method emphasizes progress rather than performance on a single test.

Example: A reading portfolio may include:

- Short summaries of books or articles
- Reading journal entries

- Graphic organizers
- Personal reflections

At the end of the term, the teacher reviews the portfolio using clear criteria such as consistency, comprehension, and effort.

Self-Assessment and Peer Assessment

Self-assessment encourages learners to reflect on their own comprehension, while peer assessment promotes collaboration.

Example: After completing a reading task, learners answer self-assessment questions such as:

- Did I understand the main idea of the text?
- Which part was most difficult for me?

For peer assessment, students exchange summaries and give simple feedback using a checklist. This process builds confidence and reduces assessment pressure.

Advantages of No-Stress Reading Assessment

No-stress assessment methods offer several pedagogical advantages. They provide a more authentic measure of reading comprehension by reflecting real reading behavior. Learners are more motivated and engaged when assessment is integrated into meaningful activities.

Additionally, low-anxiety assessment supports confidence-building and positive attitudes toward reading. Teachers gain richer qualitative information about learners' comprehension strategies, interests, and difficulties, enabling more effective instructional decisions.

Challenges and Considerations

Despite their benefits, no-stress assessment methods may present challenges. They can be time-consuming and require clear criteria to ensure reliability and fairness. Teachers must develop transparent rubrics and provide constructive feedback to maintain academic standards.

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Balancing no-stress assessment with institutional requirements for grading and accountability remains an important consideration. A combination of formative, low-stress methods and limited summative assessment may offer an effective solution.

Conclusion

No-stress methods for assessing reading comprehension represent a learner-centered and pedagogically sound alternative to traditional testing practices. By reducing anxiety and focusing on meaning, these methods allow learners to demonstrate genuine comprehension while supporting motivation and confidence.

Incorporating reading journals, discussions, portfolios, and reflective tasks into assessment practices enhances both teaching and learning. As language education continues to evolve, no-stress assessment approaches will play an increasingly important role in creating supportive and effective reading instruction.

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