On the Accuracy of Iranian EFL Students' Reading Self-assessment and their Level of Reading Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

Reviewing the literature on self-assessment as an alternative method of assessment we find advocates claiming for the accuracy of the students' self-assessments in general with little focus on their level of proficiency. With an eye on the students' level of reading proficiency, the present study aimed at investigating the relationship between students' reading self-assessment (as a formative and alternative method of assessment) on the one hand, and teacher assessment (as a formative type of assessment) as well as students' final examination scores (as a summative and traditional method of assessment) on the other. To this end, 65 students of Islamic Azad University- Tehran South Branch were selected to participate in this study. Initially, participants received PET test as pretest for assigning them into different levels of reading proficiency. Based upon the results of the pretest, participants were assigned to elementary and intermediate levels. Throughout the whole semester self-assessment questionnaire was employed for five times. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation were the data analysis techniques performed. The results of the study revealed a significant relationship between the intermediate learners' self-ratings and teacher assessments; however, the results indicated no significant relationship between elementary learners' self-assessments and teacher assessments. Also, the correlations between students' self-assessments and their final examination scores were not significant for both levels. Therefore, given the teacher assessment as the yardstick, the accuracy of the intermediate levels and the inaccuracy of the elementary learners' self-assessments could be concluded. Finally, the low correlation between the learners' self-assessments and their scores on traditional final examination led the researcher to attribute it to the different nature of these two assessment types.

1. Introduction

Recently, we are witnessing a gradual tendency towards employment of new assessment procedures. Alternative assessment techniques incorporate, to some degrees, an integration of assessment and learning; test makers believe that new assessment procedures influence learning a lot (Brantmeier, 2005; Collins & O'Brien, 2003; O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce, 1996; Morgan, Dunn, Parry, & O'reilly, 2004; Shaaban, 2005; Weeden, Winter, & Broadfoot, 2002).

Let's consider reading skill as an example. Reading strategies (see, for example, Appendix A) adopted by readers in attacking a text play a major role in their comprehension or success. Emphasizing on the role of reading strategies, Grabe (2002) asserts that "A critical component for comprehension is the ability to use appropriate reading strategies and to know when to use them and in what combinations, depending on different reading purposes and tasks." (p. 281). This highlights the importance of teaching reading strategies in classrooms. Moreover, investigating classroom procedures in Iran, we realize that most measurement methods in reading assessment are still based on the psychometric perspective using conventional measures of reading comprehension. In contrast, a more insightful technique for conceiving both the product and process of learning demands new alternative methods of assessment.

Presumably, there is much support in favor of self-assessment technique. However, various aspects of this new and seemingly well-supported technique need further examination. An exemplar aspect has to do with the *age* of the assessors. Weeden, et al, (2002) regarding the question 'can students self-assess?' believe that "there is evidence that some learners of all ages do have a degree of skill at self-assessment" (p.84). However, it seems that insufficient amount of evidence is available for teachers in this regard and that the language proficiency *level* of the students deserves further investigation. Accordingly, in this study, firstly, and as a replication of previous works it was aimed at investigating the relative *accuracy* of the learners' self-assessment by comparing their self-ratings with some other criteria. By accuracy, here, it is meant the closeness of the students' scores on their self-ratings to their gained scores on traditional final examination or teacher assessment. It should be reiterated that due to the need for the self-assessment scores to be checked against a criterion, the choice of traditional final examination and/or teacher assessment, here as a yardstick, is taken for granted. Secondly, as the major point of departure in this study, it was aimed at investigating the relative *appropriacy* of employing self-assessment technique for students with different language proficiency levels. That is to find the relation between different levels of reading proficiency and their accuracy of self-ratings.

Based upon the above-mentioned considerations, the following two sets of null hypotheses were formulated:

1- (a). There is no significant relationship between *elementary* students' reading self-assessment and *teacher assessment*.

(b). There is no significant relationship between *intermediate* students' reading self-assessment and *teacher assessment*.

2- (a). There is no significant relationship between *elementary* students' reading self-assessment and their *final examination scores*.

(b). There is no significant relationship between *intermediate* students' reading self-assessment and their *final examination scores*.

2. Literature Review

As an umbrella term, assessment encompasses two distinct concepts: the formal, traditional, summative, teacher-controlled assessment on the one hand, and the more informal, formative, learner-controlled assessment, on the other. The latter as the current mainstream includes diverse procedures also known as *alternative assessment*. These emerging alternative methods of assessment comprise of self-assessment, peer-assessment, portfolio, etc. Contrary to traditional, final exam methods, alternative assessment techniques are more cognitive and constructivist in nature. The distinct feature of the assessment (versus traditional testing) is the potentiality for focusing on the models that students construct for themselves and their understandings (Gipps, 1994).

According to Harris & Bell (1986, as cited in Weeden, Winter, & Broadfoot, 2002) we may think of assessment as a continuum from teacher controlled to learner controlled (see appendix B). However, I would like to modify the continuum as one in which there are teacher controlled and learner controlled at the two extremities while placing standardized tests at the center.

Self-assessment, according to McMillan (2004) refers to students' evaluation of their progress in knowledge and their improvement in learning. Interestingly enough, early studies have proven a positive relationship between students' self-assessment and their language proficiency test scores. (LeBlanc and Painchard, 1985, Bachman and Palmer, 1989, Hargan, 1994, Ross, 1998, and Brantmeier and Vanderplank 2008).

According to Patri (2002) self-assessment has gained much attention in recent years owing to the growing emphasis on learner independence and learner autonomy. In their study, Xiaohua and Canty (2013) conclude that both tests and self-assessment have a significant impact on students' progression and, further, they highlight on the different advantages and disadvantages of each. They call for the implementation of self-assessment technique at the expense of its major weakness, i.e., taking more time and effort. They believe that what is gained by this technique is much more worthwhile. They claim that it provides opportunity for the students to becoming critical thinkers which ultimately results in their learning independently. (p.114)

Drawing upon metacognition, self-assessment technique incorporates students' thinking about their inner behavioral changes as well as progression. Accordingly, Bouirane (2015) asserts that "there is a positive correlation between metacognitive language learning strategies use and achievement." (p.119) Hence, presumably, it supports the idea that self-assessment technique should have a positive impact on students' learning. This is that repeatedly advocated by the scholars in the field. (Brantmeier, 2005; Collins & O'Brien, 2003; O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce, 1996; Lambert & Lines, 2000; Shaaban, 2005; Weeden, Winter, & Broadfoot, 2002). Moreover, learner motivation as an accelerating factor in learning is also dealt with in self-assessing one's learning behavior. Needless to say, teachers have to carry the burden in promoting student motivation in the teaching/learning context (AlAzoumi, 2014). In her classic work, Brantmeier (2005) investigated 88 Spanish students' self-assessed ability and enjoyment. She concluded, in her study, that self-assessment together with motivation, anxiety and metacognition, may result in a progression in L2 reading comprehension. Further she found "the higher the level of self-

assessment, the higher the level of enjoyment." (p. 494)

McNamara & Deane (1995) assert that although self-assessment may seem inappropriate at first, it can yield accurate judgments of students' linguistic abilities. Further support is provided by Blatchford (1997, as cited in Ashton, 2014, p. 107). Comparing student self-assessments with standardized tests, he "found significant correlations for learners at age 16 but not at age seven suggesting that younger learners are less capable of accurate self-assessment." (p. 107).

Besides, in support of teacher assessment, Paleczek, Seifert, Schwab & Gasteiger-Klicpera, (2015) held that "the correlations between teachers' assessment of reading and students' abilities measured by standardized tests can be described as moderate." (p. 2201). However, Begeny, Krouse, Brown, & Mann, (2011, as cited in Paleczek, et al., (2015, p. 2201) found that "teachers are not always able to accurately assess the abilities of their students and tend to make inaccurate judgements about their students' reading abilities."

Paleczek, et al., (2015) investigated the accuracy of teachers' assessment and children's self-assessment of their reading. Their study incorporated third grade children considering their L1 in mixed classes of L1 as well as L2 children of 22 different languages. The results for both L1 and L2 children showed moderate correlation between teachers' assessments and the test results. However, children's self-assessments revealed lower correlations with the test results. Also, it was revealed that L2 children tend to overestimate their abilities.

At a large-scale study on self-assessment conducted by Johansson (2013), 351 teachers and 5271 Swedish third-grade students participated. The results of this study revealed that the correlation between students' self-assessment and their test scores (0.58) was similar to the relationship between teacher ratings and self-assessments (0.59). (p. 9) That is, "the magnitude of the correlation between student self-assessments and teacher judgments/test scores was similar and amounted to about 0.6." (p. 1) In addition, a slightly higher correlation was found between teachers' judgments and students' test scores.

To sum up, according to Brown (1998), self-assessment (a) can be directly integrated into the language teaching and learning processes, (b) provides personalized assessments for each student, (c) is suitable for assessing learning processes while those processes are occurring, (d) requires little extra time or resources, (e) involves students in the assessment process, (f) fosters students' reflection on their own learning processes, (g) encourages student autonomy, and (h) increases students' motivation. Brown (2004, p. 278) summarizes the features of self- assessment with regard to its fulfillment of some major factors involved in assessment as follows: (a) moderate practicality, (b) low reliability, (c) moderate face validity, (d) high content validity, (e) high washback, and (f) high authenticity. However, according to Brown (1998) "The disadvantages can also be minimized by using a variety of other types of information (e.g. teacher assessments, peer assessments) in making decisions about the students' placement, progress, or promotion" (p. 54).

3. Methodology

In the present study, the researcher tried to find out whether there were any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' reading self-assessment (as an alternative method of assessment) on the one hand, and teacher assessment as well as students' final examination score (as a traditional method of

assessment), on the other. To accomplish this purpose and hence to collect appropriate data for the study, the following procedures were followed. In the first step, a group of 90 students in Islamic Azad University (Tehran, South Branch) were selected as the participants. Next, a Preliminary English Test (PET) was conducted to all participants. PET is internationally used for assessing intermediate English learners. It was used for ensuring the homogeneity of the students at the onset of the study in addition to assigning them into two levels of Elementary and Intermediate. Using the reading part of the PET test in this study, the researcher treated the learners with their marks within 25 to 49 (out of 100) as elementary level participants. Next, those with their marks within 75 to 99 (out of 100) were chosen as intermediate level participants. As a result of this and the following factors, the number of participants decreased. In fact, 25 students were eliminated from the initial population since some of the students had too low scores in their pre-test, some were ranked within the first and third portion of the population, some were absent from the class, and some did not attend the post-test session. Therefore, there remained 35 elementary as well as 30 intermediate students (based upon the results of the pretest). All participants enjoyed the same teaching material, i.e., 'Select Readings' edited by Linda Lee and Erik Gundersen (2002). At the first three sessions of the semester, besides following the routine classroom procedure, students were informed of some introductory issues in reading skill as well as some ideas regarding good/successful readers. Fifteen minutes in each of the first three sessions were allotted to introducing such ideas to the learners as: what reading skill/comprehension is, what the features of good/successful readers are, and some of the strategies successful readers make use of when attacking a reading text (see Appendix

A). In fact, it was intended that the learners be more aware of this study and that especially both the learners and the teacher have the chance to share the required criteria for the ratings. Believing that students should be more aware of the criteria of the marking scheme, the researcher aimed at involving the learners in generating the criteria and standards upon which they will be assessed. During the whole semester participants were required to assess their level of reading skill/comprehension against a validated self-assessment questionnaire at the end of each reading class (see appendix C). That is, they were supposed to assess their own performance on reading tasks at the end of each session. The self-assessment questionnaire was conducted 5 times during the whole semester to each of the participants (readers). Also in each session, the teacher gave students an overall score regarding their ability in handling the reading tasks they encountered during the class time. That is, having gathered the questionnaires, the teacher provided both an overall score (as the teacher rating) and some comments and feedbacks based on the students' weaknesses and strong points.

4. Analysis and Discussion

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (Pearson correlation) were used. Accordingly, in order to carry out the present study and based on the dada gathered, the following analyses were conducted.

The first set of analyses was done to find the degree of go-togetherness of the students' self assessments and teacher-assessments in elementary group. The correlation coefficient is presented in table 1 which is .105. It can be seen that there is low correlation between students' self-assessments and teacher-assessments. A comparison can be made with the study conducted by Johansson (2013) with Swedish

third grade students in which a moderate correlation was found between students' self-assessments and their teachers' judgments of the students' general reading literacy abilities. However, probably we can highlight on the existing difference between the two samples' age factor.

Table 1: The Correlation Coefficients of the Students' Self-Assessments and Teacher-Assessments in Elementary Group

		Elementary Teacher
Elementary self	Pearson Correlation	**.105**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.549
	N	35

The descriptive statistics are displayed in table 2.

Table 2: The Descriptive Statistics of the Students' Self-Assessments and Teacher-Assessments in Elementary Group

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Elementary self	16.5543	4.28845	35
Elementary Teacher	10.9029	2.18625	35

The second set of analyses was done to find the degree of go-togetherness of the students' self assessments and teacher-assessments in intermediate group. The correlation coefficient is presented in table 3. It can be seen that there is high correlation between students' self-assessments and teacher-assessments, i.e. .385, which is significant on the level of .05.

Table 3: The Correlation Coefficients of the Students' Self-Assessments and Teacher-Assessments in Intermediate Group

		Intermediate Teacher
Intermediate self	Pearson Correlation	**.385**(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.036
	N	30

The descriptive statistics are displayed in table 4.

Table 4: The Descriptive Statistics of the Students' Self-Assessments and Teacher-Assessments in Intermediate Group

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Intermediate self	16.9133	4.35326	30
Intermediate Teacher	15.2867	2.72191	30

The third set of analyses was done to find the degree of go-togetherness of the students' self assessments and their final examination score in elementary group. The correlation coefficient is presented in table 5, i.e. -.022. It can be seen that there is low correlation between students' self-assessments and their final examination scores in elementary group. Again, we witnessed a distinction between Johansson's (2013) finding and that of the present study. The study by Johansson (2013) showed a moderate relationship between third grade students' self-assessments and their test scores on PIRLS 2001 standardized reading test. However, besides the differentiation between the two samples' age factor, we can refer to the different nature of the two reading proficiency tests.

Table 5: The Correlation Coefficients of the Students' Self-Assessments and their Final Examination in Elementary Group

		Elementary Final
Elementary self	Pearson Correlation	**-.022**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.902
	N	35

The descriptive statistics are displayed in table 6.

Table 6: The Descriptive Statistics of the Students' Self-Assessments and their Final Examination in Elementary Group

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Elementary self	3.3109	.85769	35
Elementary Final	6.0571	3.09594	35

The fourth set of analyses was done to find the degree of go-togetherness of the students' self assessments and their final examination scores in intermediate group. The correlation coefficient is presented in table 7, i.e. .066. It can be seen that there is low correlation between students' self-assessments and their final examination score in intermediate group.

Table 7: The Correlation Coefficients of the Students' Self-Assessments and their Final Examination in Intermediate Group

		Intermediate Final
Intermediate Self	Pearson Correlation	**.066**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.730
	N	30

The descriptive statistics are displayed in table 8.

Table 8: The Descriptive Statistics of the Students' Self-Assessments and their Final Examination in Intermediate Group

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Intermediate Self	3.3827	.87065	30
Intermediate Final	26.1667	3.60156	30

Overall, the results revealed a significantly high correlation for only the intermediate group and only when the correlation is made between students' self-assessments and teacher judgments on their reading skill/comprehension ability. That is, there revealed merely low correlations between each of the three other sets of correlations. Presumably, there is a contradiction between findings of the present study with those of other investigations mentioned before. For example, as it was mentioned earlier, Johansson (2013) has found relatively moderate correlations between the same sets. Still, another study conducted by Ashton (2014) on three different languages, found moderate correlations between the same sets. Despite the findings, it was concluded that "although there are positive statistically significant correlations between the learner self-assessments and test data and learner and teacher assessments for all three languages, this does not give the full picture in terms of the accuracy of ratings." (p. 113) However, readers are cautioned against hasty comparisons of the separate studies on the findings due to the existing differences pertinent to them.

5. Conclusion

Based upon the results of the statistical analyses the following conclusions can be made:

Firstly, since the results showed no significant relationship between the learners' reading self-assessment and teacher assessment at elementary level but a significant relationship at intermediate level, we can conclude that the first null hypothesis of the study is not rejected for elementary level but that it is rejected for intermediate level:

"There is no significant relationship between *elementary* learners' reading self-assessment and teacher assessment."

"There is a significant relationship between *intermediate* learners' reading self-assessment and teacher assessment."

Secondly, since the results showed low correlation between the learners' reading self-assessment and their final examination for both proficiency levels, we can conclude that the second null hypothesis of the study is rejected:

"There is significant relationship between *elementary* learners' reading self-assessment and their final examination."

"There is significant relationship between *intermediate* learners' reading self-assessment and their final examination."

To wrap up, based upon the results, the following points are in order:

Firstly, there revealed different results for the correlations between student self-

assessments and their scores on teacher assessment. The correlation between elementary students' self-assessment and teacher assessment was low whereas it was high for intermediate learners. Thus, we were unable to reject the null hypothesis of the study for the elementary learners. This shows that, given the teacher assessment scores as the yardstick, the higher the level of proficiency, the more accuracy in students' self ratings. Moreover, the comparison of self-assessment mean scores of each group with those of the teacher assessments led the researcher to conclude that presumably lower group learners overestimate their own language ability more than higher group learners.

Secondly, the correlation between students' self-assessment and their traditional final examination for both elementary and intermediate groups revealed to be low. In other words, given the traditional final examination as the yardstick, both groups (elementary and intermediate) could almost self assess themselves. Probably, here, the low correlation between the learners' self-assessments and their scores on traditional final examination can be attributed to the different nature of these two assessment types: one an on-going formative process and the other a one-shot summative performance.

Finally, based upon the results it could be concluded that elementary students are not much liable in self-evaluating themselves. On the other hand, it showed that intermediate learners are more accurate in their self ratings compared to lower groups. In other words, comparing self-assessment scores with teacher assessment as well as final examination scores led the researchers to conclude that elementary learners overestimate their reading ability more than intermediate learners. And, that intermediate learners are relatively more accurate in

pinpointing their strengths and weaknesses. It could be suggested that students in higher levels may evaluate their reading ability more accurately than students in lower levels.

Moreover, the researchers were impressed by the way students delved into learning reading comprehension/skill strategies. They were busy evaluating their strengths and weaknesses motivated by the technique. They were absolutely interested in the method probably because, as learners, they were more valued comparing to the routine methodological practices which are teacher-dominated. That's why we believe self-assessment technique well draws upon the humanistic and constructive approaches to language learning.

Furthermore, due to the occasional deviations of the self-ratings, and because of the availability of the diverse alternative assessment techniques, it is recommended that self-assessment technique to be used in conjunction with the teacher's feedback since the combination of the two or more feedback perspectives would increase the reliability of the results.

Using this technique, students were required to be active and play a role in their language learning/evaluation. Autonomous learning is one of the cornerstones of language learning and embedding self-assessment technique contributes to promoting autonomy in language learners. Surprisingly, by the end of the semester, students had reported the reading course to be more fruitful and informative than ever before. In fact, most of the learners reported significant development in their learning, which of course demands separate research. So, a further study could determine the effect of the students' self-ratings on their reading improvement. It is our recommendation to continue using the knowledge gained through this project and to investigate possible

progression of each proficiency level resulting from employing self-assessment technique.

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Appendices:
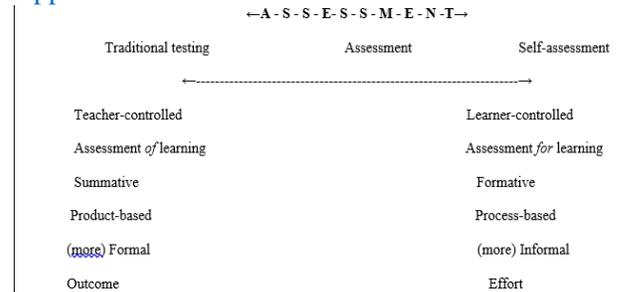
Appendix A: Reading Comprehension Skills/Strategies

Reading Comprehension/Skill Strategies

The reading strategies introduced to the learners at the first three sessions (each session fifteen minu... are as follows:

1. Identifying the purpose in reading:
   By doing so, we know what we are looking for and can weed out potential distracting information. Identifying the reading purpose is a must and prerequisite to identifying and hence adopting a speci... reading technique.
2. Using graphic rules and patterns to aid in bottom-up decoding (especially for beginning level readers);
3. Using efficient silent reading techniques for relatively rapid comprehension (especially for intermediate to advanced level readers);
4. Skimming the text for main ideas:
   It refers to the quickly running of one's eyes across a whole text for its gist. Skimming gives readers the advantage of being able to predict the purpose of the passage, the main topic or message.
5. Scanning the text for specific information:
   It refers to quickly searching for some specific piece or pieces of information. The purpose of scanning is to extract specific information without reading through the whole text.
6. Using semantic mapping or clustering:
   This strategy helps the reader to provide some order to the chaos in the text. Outlining, classification or clustering is the typical of this strategy.
7. Guessing when you are not sure:
   Learners can use guessing to their advantage to:
   - guess the meaning of a word
   - guess a grammatical relationship (e.g., a pronoun reference)
   - guess a discourse relationship
   - infer implied meaning (i.e., read between the lines)
   - guess about a cultural reference
   - guess content messages
8. Analyzing vocabulary:
   There are several techniques which are useful in analyzing a word we do not immediately recognize:
   -look for prefixes (that may give clues), suffixes (that may indicate what part of speech it is), and roots (that are familiar).
   - look for grammatical contexts that may signal information.
   - look at the semantic context (topic) for clues.
9. Capitalizing on discourse markers to process relationships:
   A clear comprehension of many discourse markers which signal relationships among ideas expressed through phrases, clauses, and sentences greatly enhances learners' reading efficiency. Below are some of the 'discourse markers' categorized and listed according to the notion or meaning they carry:
   I. *Enumerative.*
   Introduce in order in which points are to be made or the time sequence in which actions or processes to place.
   Example: first(ly), second(ly), one, two, …, a, b, c, …, next, then, in the first place, …, subsequent... eventually, in the end, to conclude, … .
   II. *Additive.*
       A. Reinforcing.

   - guess a grammatical relationship (e.g., a pronoun reference)
   - guess a discourse relationship
   - infer implied meaning (i.e., read between the lines)
   - guess about a cultural reference
   - guess content messages
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I. *Enumerative.*
   Introduce in order in which points are to be made or the time sequence in which actions or processes took place.
   Example: first(ly), second(ly), one, two, …, a, b, c, …, next, then, in the first place, …, subsequently, eventually, in the end, to conclude,
II. *Additive.*
    A. Reinforcing.
       Introduces a reinforcement or confirmation of what has been preceded.
       Example: again, also, moreover, furthermore, in addition,

    B. Similarity.
       Introduces a statement of similarity with what has preceded.
       Example: equally, likewise, correspondingly,
    C. Transition.
       Introduces a new stage in the sequence of presentation of information.
       Example: now, well, incidentally, by the way, O.K., fine,
III. *Logical sequence.*
    A. Summative.
       Introduces a summary of what has been preceded.
       Example: so, so far, altogether, overall, then, thus, therefore, in short, to sum up, to conclude, to summarize.

Appendix B: Assessment as a Continuum

←-A - S - S - E - S - S - M - E - N -T→

Traditional testing	Assessment	Self-assessment

←--→

Teacher-controlled	Learner-controlled
Assessment *of* learning	Assessment *for* learning
Summative	Formative
Product-based	Process-based
(more) Formal	(more) Informal
Outcome	Effort

Appendix C: Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Student Name ---------------   Date ----------

Instructor Name ---------------   Class ----------

Subject of the Reading Text ------------------------   Group ----------

This is the (first □ second □ third □ fourth □ fifth □) time I receive this questionnaire.

Rating Scales:
1= Never,   **2** = rarely,   **3** = Sometimes,   **4** = Most often,   **5** = Always

Item	Evaluator	
	Student	Teacher
1. I can understand the main idea of the text.		
2. I can find details or some specific information in the text.		
3. I can understand information when it is not said directly in the text.		
4. I can understand relations between the sentences.		
5. I can understand vocabularies and idioms in the text.		
Total score		
Total score (divided by 5)		
Comments:		