Task types on reading comprehension for proficiency test in English for undergraduate students in Cuba (Original).
Tipos de tareas de comprensión de lectura para exámenes de certificación en inglés para estudiantes universitarios en Cuba (Original).

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Abstract

This article provides information and practice on the task types undergraduate students will come across in the proficiency reading test in English language. An explanation of each task type is followed by some guidelines that give students the opportunity to practice the skills needed to complete the task, and help them to develop strategies for completing these tasks in the test. This proposal is used as a didactic material for non-philologists undergraduate students in their self-preparation to achieve the necessary competence in this skill to overcome the graduation requirement (A2) and being formed as competent professionals. It has been implemented by the Language Center of the Universidad de Granma since 2020-2021, and it constitutes a suitable material for distance learning.

Keywords: tasks, reading comprehension, proficiency, english.

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece información y práctica de la tipología de ejercicios que se les evalúa a los estudiantes universitarios en el examen de certificación en idioma inglés, en la habilidad de comprensión de lectura. Se explica cada tipo de tarea y se brindan indicaciones metodológicas que les permiten a los estudiantes practicar las habilidades y desarrollar las estrategias necesarias para resolver estas tareas en el examen. Esta propuesta se utiliza como material didáctico para los estudiantes universitarios no filólogos en su autopreparación en aras de lograr las competencias necesarias en esta habilidad, de manera tal que les permitan vencer el requisito de graduación (A2), y formarse como un profesional competente. Esta investigación ha sido aplicada por el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad de Granma, desde el curso académico 2020-2021. Constituye, además, un material idóneo para la educación a distancia.

Palabras claves: tareas, comprensión de lectura, certificación, inglés

Introduction

English language has acquired relevant importance in professional training, mainly influencing the academic and scientific spheres. In this direction, the Ministry of Higher Education of the Republic of Cuba (MES), has proposed the policy of improving the training process in English for students of Cuban higher education, aimed at graduating competent professionals in the language. For this, since 2016, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2002) has been adopted as the common basis that guides the national policy on the design of standards, foreign language courses, instruments of assessment, teaching methodologies and didactic materials.

Undergraduate students, then, must obtain and demonstrate the communicative competencies that express their abilities to understand and express themselves orally and in

writing in English with efficiency, initially at a basic level equivalent to an A2 and moving towards an intermediate level equivalent to a B1, following the structure by levels established for Cuban higher education. This allows them to use this language as an instrument of academic, labor and research training in their respective careers to expand their knowledge and general culture, and express their national identity.

In accordance with the methodological indications of the MES for the development of English courses at different levels, this objective is achieved, among other aspects, with the didactic treatment of the four skills of verbal activity (reading comprehension, listening comprehension, oral expression and written expression,) in an integrated way. This presupposes, at the same time, the need to develop each one of them efficiently so that it allows the student to achieve the desired communicative competence.

Based on this goal, teachers of the Language Center, at the Universidad de Granma, have carried out important research dealing with the didactical treatment to the teaching-learning process of English (Aguilera *et al*, 2021; Carrazana *et al*, 2021; Domínguez *et al*, 2022 and 2023; Núñez *et al*, 2022; Pérez *et al*, 2022).

However, the results in the proficiency exams, as well as the evaluations applied to students in English courses since 2016-2017, have shown that one of the most difficult skills to students is reading comprehension.

On the other hand, there have been researchers who have approached reading comprehension using the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) with very good results (Biggerton, 2012; Domínguez, 2014; Evans, 2009; McCarter and Ash, 2001; Núñez *et al*, 2022; Taylor and Wright, 2017; Van Geyte, 2011). Nevertheless, in Cuba, these valuable contributions have not been contextualized yet and English teachers do not have a concrete

methodology or, at least, guidelines to prepare undergraduate students with the types of tasks used in the reading module of the proficiency test. This way, the student would be able to identify, comprehend and interpret the task in order to solve it with the purpose of mastering this skill.

In this sense, an epistemological analysis of this topic has been carried out, which has allowed the assumption of some positions set by the aforementioned researchers and academics, whose educational practice over the years using the IELTS has showed excellent results in order to identify, explain and exemplify these types of tasks. Therefore, this analysis allows contextualizing all those studies to the current Cuban university educational reality, taking into account the real needs of the students, as well as their potentialities and weaknesses.

That is why, this article provides information and practice on the task types undergraduate students will come across in the proficiency reading test in English language. It is intended to serve as didactic material for students in their self-preparation in order to achieve the necessary competencies in this skill and overcome the graduation requirement, and thus contribute to the formation of a competent professional. In the same way, it constitutes an invaluable didactic instrument for English teachers in the preparation and teaching of their classes for the different levels.

Materials and methods

The proposal was applied for the first time in 2022, as a ¨support strategy¨ to a sample of 25 students who had not been accomplished the graduation requirement (A2), belonging to the Mechanic Engineering major, at the University of Granma. After achieving satisfactory results in the proficiency test in July 2022, in which a 94.6% promotion was obtained, it was decided to

generalize this didactic intervention for the preparation of these students, as part of an Intensive Course in English, designed and implemented for this purpose at the Universidad de Granma.

Theoretical methods were used, such as documentary analysis, to collect written information on the subject; analysis-synthesis, which went through the entire research process; inductive-deductive, to derive conclusions and establish generalizations through the analysis of particular elements about the research object, as well as to verify its behavior during the development of the research. Similarly, empirical methods and techniques were used, which allowed characterizing the current state of the teaching-learning process of reading comprehension in English at the Universidad de Granma and determining the existing shortcomings. Furthermore, statistic technics were used to process and interpret the results derived from the application of the empirical methods and technics.

Throughout the entire research, the dialectical –hermeneutic approach has been present, which has allowed a scientific logic in a transition from the comprehension to the explanation and interpretation of the process.

This proposal was based on the communicative approach, task based work, action oriented approach and student centered.

Results and Discussion

In Cuba, it is used the IELTS for the preparation of proficiency exams in English for listening, reading, speaking and writing skills, to measure knowledge and skills of university students in the four skills in that language.

The reading module is the second exam to be assessed after listening. In general, to achieve a good score that leads to a higher level in the mastery of reading, one of the main skills to learn is how to look at the text but without reading it. This is achieved using scanning and

skimming reading techniques, which are present in the different types of taks proposed in this work.

Eleven types of questions are commonly used in exams. That is why, the analysis of the following types of tasks is suggested to develop this ability in order to prepare Cuban university students for the aforementioned exams, in order to overcome the graduation requirement and contribute to the achievement of a communicative competence in English language:

1. *Short answer questions*: In this type of exercise, students are given a number of questions that can be answered in a few words, usually one to three, taken from the text. The instructions will tell you how many words to use for each series of questions.

Guidelines for short answer questions

• Read the instructions carefully.

• Skim through all the questions quickly (skimming). As long as you do:

✓   Underline the keywords.

✓   Decide what information you need to find in the text.

✓   Pay particular attention to "Where" and "Who" questions, which indicate that it is necessary to look for specific information such as places and people.

✓   Read the first question and decide which part of the text you need to read.

✓   Read that part carefully to find the answer.

✓   You can use your own words, you don't have to write the whole sentence but it has to be grammatically correct.

• If you do not know the meaning of a word, read the other questions as they may have vocabulary related to each other that would help you infer the meaning.

• The answer can be one, two or three words, but not more.

• If you think you need more than three words, your answer is probably wrong.

• If the answer requires a number, it can be written as a numeral (eg: 4), or a word (eg: four), or a combination of a number and a word (eg: 4 million).

• A hyphenated word (ex: brother-in-law) counts as one word. You will not be asked to use contractions.

• To meet the maximum number of words required, it may be necessary at times to change the form of the word; that is, you can use a noun as an adjective (e.g.: in the text it can appear… the documents about the house… and it can be transformed into the house documents). Similarly, a verb can be omitted (there is a variety of reasons… it can be changed to various reasons).

• The answers to these types of questions usually appear in the same order that the information appears in the text.

• Sometimes the instructions will ask you to use words taken directly from the text.

2. *Sentence completion*: A number of incomplete sentences must be completed by adding a word or phrase from the text. The number of words to be completed will be specified in the instructions, so they must be read carefully.

Rarely, you should change the grammar of the words or phrases you have selected to match the sentence. However, the most common is that if the correct word or phrases are selected from the text, the grammar will be correct as well. The words that are needed to answer and complete will normally be consecutive words and not words found in different parts of the text.

Guidelines for sentences completion

• Read the instructions carefully.

• Read quickly through the entire given sentence halves. As long as you do:

✓ Underline the keywords.

✓ Try to infer what information you need.

✓ Think about the grammatical form as well as the vocabulary to follow from the root.

• The information will be in the same order as the questions.

• Sentences will refer to information in the text, but these will be paraphrased and will include synonyms (words or expressions that represent the same thing) and antonyms (words or expressions that represent the opposite). The text should then be scanned for sentence paraphrases in order to find the section and information you need.

• Time is very important in the exam, since you will have to answer 40 questions, containing three reading passages in one hour. In this type of exam question, you will have to look for detailed information, so it will be necessary to use the scanning technique.

• In the exam, you should not try to use prior knowledge about a special topic. You should always answer according to the information given in the text.

• You must analyze sentence by sentence and determine in each case what information is needed to complete it.

• Find where the information should be in the text and read it carefully.

• Special attention should be paid to synonyms and parallel expressions because the questions do not normally use the same words as in the text.

• Sentences must make sense both logically and grammatically.

• As with short answer questions, it is not required to answer with a hyphenated word (eg, non-smoker), nor with contractions (eg: They've).

• If the answer requires a number, it can be written as a numeral (eg: 4), or a word (eg: four), or a combination of a number and a word (eg: 4 million).

• For type two questions, the answer can be one, two or three words, but no more.

• If you think more than three words are needed, your answer will probably be wrong.

3. *Summary completion*: In this type of question, you will be given a summary or notes of a text, but information that must be completed will be missing. To do this, the ability to understand the main ideas of a section of a text or understand details must be demonstrated. The summary consists of sentences about a text related or connected to each other. Information can usually be found in a specific part of the text, but not in the same order.

Guidelines for summary completion

• Take into account that each sentence in a text serves a purpose and in some way each one is related to the previous one; therefore, it is essential to understand how sentences are related to each other.

• To carry out this type of exercise it is very beneficial to use your knowledge of grammar, since it will be easier if you can predict the type of word you need to complete within the summary.

• Analyze the purpose for which the text was written and to whom it is directed.

• Self-prepare and exercise by doing exercises of this type against the clock, which would help to achieve the time required to do it during the exam.

4. *Multiple- choice questions*: This type of exercise has three or four possible answers to choose from but only one is correct. The instructions must be read correctly to identify the type of question that is being dealt with, as they can appear in three ways in the reading test:

Type 1. Where there is a possible answer.

Type 2. Where there are multiple responses for only one selection.

Type 3. Where there are multiple answers and a selection for each of them.

In these questions the beginning of a sentence may appear, which must be completed with a choice of four that they provide. Similarly, you may be presented with a question and asked to find two, three, or four items on an answer list. Similarly, you may be asked to identify facts or opinions in texts.

Multiple-choice questions can assess both overall knowledge of the text and specific information. This implies that the student must be able to use skimming or scanning techniques in the text, as necessary.

Guidelines for multiple-choice questions

• Read the instructions carefully and check how many letters you need to select.

• Read all the questions and the answer options they give you using skimming. As you do so, underline the keywords. This will help you locate the section of the text where the answer appears.

• Try to get an idea of the topic you are going to read about from the vocabulary that appears in the questions.

• Look at illustrations or diagrams that appear in the text.

• Go back to the first question. Decide if you are looking for specific information or if the question requires you to understand the full text. Then use skimming or scanning to find the answer.

• Read the most important part of the text carefully.

• Do not leave any questions unanswered.

• Eliminate improbable answers.

• Make sure you read all the answers, don't stop when you find one that you think is correct.

• Watch out for answers that are almost identical.

• Don't just think about doing the minimum work to ensure a pass, or just doing the exercise by guessing at random.

• If you are faced with a question that you don't know the answer to, don't try to guess it. Continue answering the next question and when you finish it go back to the previous one. In this type of exercise, the questions are in the same order that the information appears in the text. If you still feel insecure, just do your best.

5. *Table / diagram completion*: On the exam, another possible exercise is to complete a table or flow chart (a series of steps connected by arrows) with blank spaces inside. It will be

necessary, then, to read a reading passage to find the missing information. Answers may be in a specific section of text, but they are unlikely to appear in the same order as the blanks. How many words of the text should be used will also be notified.

These questions require an answer with specific information and in the reading test, two types of them can appear to complete tables or diagrams.

Type 1. With a selection of possible answers.

Type 2. Without a choice of possible answers.

These questions require that:

• Insert a word or phrase in the middle of a sentence.

• Insert a word in the middle and another word at the end of a sentence.

• Write the words or phrases that are not in sentences.

• Write a letter that represents a word or phrase.

Guidelines for Table/ Diagram Completion

• Read the instructions carefully.

• Look at the table or diagram carefully as the information that already appears in them can help not only with the type of answer you are looking for, but also with the way you write that answer.

• Examine the heading, title, or subtitles, if they appear.

• Use scanning to save time and help find specific information quickly, for example places, names, phrases; this way you don't have to read the whole text and you can ignore irrelevant information.

• Try to get an idea of the topic.

• Use the style or format of the text to help you find the areas in the text you are looking for, for example: capital letters, numbers, italics, bold letters, quotation marks, and other visual information.

• Decide which section of the reading passage the exercise refers to.

• Anticipate grammatical forms and vocabulary.

• If you are provided with a box with possible answers, try to infer a match and eliminate the unlikely answers.

• If the question is in table form, try to figure out the best way to read it, horizontally or vertically.

• Keep the same style that appears in the table or diagram. For example, if the name of a person is in capital initial letter, then the answer should be the same. If the table only uses the capital letter for the first letter of the name only, the same operation must be performed. In the tables, you can find many types of information, but the most common are dates and years.

6. *Matching information*: The idea is to find the correspondence between specific information with the section of the text in which it is found. These questions require you to match information to a list of names, places, categories, descriptions, and so on. The information is generally numbered and the categories are given a letter each. On the sheet where the answers are written, the letter should be written next to the numbers.

Guidelines for matching information

• Read the instructions carefully.

• Read the given categories and through scanning locate them in the text and underline them.

• When you have located the name, read carefully to see what is said.

• Look at the list of categories and see if you can match.

• Remember that the same words are not likely to be used in the text as in the questions; therefore, you must search for synonyms and parallel expressions.

• Note that sources can be referenced in more than one place in the text.

• The categories given in the assignment are not listed in the same order in which they appear in the text.

• Check the instructions to see if the categories can be related to one or more options.

• You may find information that tends to be confusing and that cannot be related to any given category.

7. *Matching Headings*: You must choose the most appropriate title for each paragraph of a given selection. There are always more titles on the list than are really needed. There are two types of questions to relate a title to the corresponding paragraph:

Type 1. Choose the titles by paragraphs or sections of a text.

Type 2. Choose a title for the full text.

Type 1: questions require the meaning of a paragraph to be summarized in order to relate it to a bank of possible titles. You may be asked on the test to match a title to each paragraph or section of the text, or to just a selection of paragraphs.

Type 2: questions require the full text to be summarized.

Guidelines for matching headings exercises:

• Read the instructions carefully.

• Make sure you know which paragraphs or sections to summarize.

• Read each paragraph or section and try to summarize in your own words what it is about.

- Another way may be to read the first sentence of the paragraph, since the main idea is expressed in the topic sentence and this frequently appears in the first sentence of the paragraph. Reading this sentence can help you choose the correct title.

- Read the last sentence of the paragraph, as it provides a conclusion to the main idea and can then lead to determine the correct title as well.

- Read the information that appears in the middle of the paragraph, as it develops the main idea through an example, a definition, the analysis of the idea, the description of the point under discussion, etc. Using this route, it may be possible to understand more clearly what the main idea is and, therefore, to determine the appropriate title more easily. This information can only be obtained quickly by developing reading and scanning skills.

- Look through the list of titles that give you the best option.

- Make sure that the title you choose for each paragraph or section summarizes the entire paragraph and not just an idea of it.

- If you have to search for a title for the full text, read the entire text before looking at the list of titles provided.

- Try to summarize the text with your words by getting a general idea of the complete text on the subject of the same.

- Read the options with the titles they give you and select the best answer.

8. *Paragraph selection*: In this type of question, the information given must be related to a specific paragraph or section of the text. This type of exercise requires that you use scanning in the text to locate the information you need.

Guidelines for paragraph selection

• Read the questions carefully first.

• Then use the skimming technique to get an idea of the structure of the text and the topic in general.

• Apply scanning to search for specific information.

• Look for synonyms and parallel expressions because different ideas are likely to be expressed in parliaments than they are expressed in the text.

• Generally, each paragraph has a sentence that summarizes the main idea (s) in the paragraph (the topic sentence). This sentence can help you match the information given to the paragraph in which it appears.

9. True, False, Not given questions: The skill needed in this case is to compare a sentence with information from the text and decide if it is true, false, or does not appear.

TRUE if the text confirms the statement

FALSE if the text contradicts the statement

NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to know from the text

Guidelines for True, False or Not Given questions

• The first step is to think that all the information in the text is true, what must be analyzed then is whether the sentences that are provided are also true or not.

• If they are true, then the student should be able to find a sentence in the text that confirms that same information. For this, you will be given a list of sentences.

• If the text confirms the sentence, your answer must be "True". If the text contradicts the sentence, your answer must be "False". If it is impossible to know if the sentence is true or not, according to the text, your answer should be "NOT GIVEN¨.

• Do not use your own opinion to answer the questions.

- Keywords can help you find the correct sentence to read. It may also be the case that the sentence has been changed in some way or paraphrased so that the connection between the two sentences is not so obvious.

10. *Yes, No, Not Given questions*: In a very similar way to the previous type, in this case you must compare the sentences given with information from the text and decide if it is Yes, No, or Does not appear . On the test, you may be asked to show that you understand the points of view expressed in a text. To do this, you will be given a list of sentences that represents one opinion each. Then you have to read the text to find out if the author expresses these opinions or not.

If the writer shares the opinion in the sentence, the answer will be Yes. If the writer contradicts the sentence, the answer will be NO. If it is impossible to know what the opinion of the writer on that subject is, according to what appears in the text, the answer will be Not Given.

Guidelines for Yes, No or Not Given questions

- Read the instructions carefully.

- Use the skimming technique to read all the sentences and get an idea on the topic.

- Read the first sentence carefully. Underline the keywords in a way that allows you to understand the main idea.

- Find the section of the text that relates to the idea or fact given to you.

- Once you have found the relevant section in the text, proceed to determine if the sentences agree or contradict the writer's opinion or do not appear in the text (YES, NO, NOT GIVEN).

- The information in the text will appear in the same order as in the list of declarations.

- To help determine if something is NOT GIVEN, look up synonyms and paraphrases. If nothing appears, the answer will probably be NOT GIVEN. Nevertheless, even if you find the paraphrases, be careful, as the topic may be mentioned but not related to the statement.

- Throughout the test, the answers should depend on the information in the reading passages, not on the students' own ideas. This is especially important with this type of question: never reflect your own opinion, always consider only what is in the text.

11. *Classifying*: In the exam, you may be asked to classify information in some way. In fact, this is a type of question for selecting information from a text. You will be asked to identify a letter that represents one of the classifications for each item in a sentence list.

Guidelines for classifying exercises

• Read the instructions carefully.

• Make sure you know how many classifications there are and which letters to use.

• Read the classifications carefully and be sure not to confuse the letters that each represents.

• Read the statements / phrases or words next to the question numbers and underline keywords.

• Start with the first statement and work one at a time, searching the text to find where the information is mentioned.

• The questions will not necessarily be in the same order as in the text and the wording will likely be different in the text; therefore, you will have to search for synonyms and parallel expressions.

• When you have located the reference in the text, read it carefully and select your answer.

• Don't leave any statement without a letter.

From a qualitative point of view, the most significant achievements are:

Students:

- Increasing intrinsic motivation when facing a new didactic alternative in the dynamics of the teaching-learning process of reading comprehension in English, as this process reveals their academic and professional needs.

- Gradual progression of development levels of reading comprehension in English, based on the identification, comprehension and interpretation of the types of tasks, as an expression of the integrative logic that characterizes this process.

- Development of efficient reading from a student centered dynamic as self-manager of his or her own textual processing.

- Increasing skill development levels for the processing of written information in English that contribute to students´ efficient academic training.

- Achievement of cognitive independence and self-management of knowledge to solve problems and situations characteristic of their specific training contexts using this foreign language as an instrument of study and culture.

Teachers:

- Contribution to the transformation of traditional didactic approaches in the teaching-learning process of reading comprehension in English, based on a new reading logic in order to develop holistic-comprehensive learning.

- Dynamization of the teaching-learning process of reading comprehension in English to satisfy students´ needs and interests.

- Contribution to the improvement of the teaching-learning process.

- Contribution to professional improvement.

Regarding the scientific and technological aspect, the application of this proposal has a noticeable impact since students, by obtaining better results in their learning, are more efficient in their studies and will be more productive in their future profession by having greater capacity and ability, especially searching and processing technical scientific materials that contribute to perfecting their work.

The social impact of this work lies in the fact that it contributes to the improvement of the teaching-learning process of reading comprehension in English language. It contributes to satisfy students´ academic and professional needs, which allows them to strengthen the level of access to the information written in this foreign language in order to become a competent professional worldwide. In the same way, for English teachers, it constitutes a new teaching material, since, up to now, in our country, it is inexistent any kind of materials with concrete methodological indications for the didactic treatment of the four English language skills, according to the CEFR.

Conclusions

1. This article provides information and practice on the task types undergraduate students will come across in the proficiency reading test in English language in order to prepare them to pass the exam.

2. Students will be able to identify, understand and solve the different tasks in the reading comprehension test.

3. English teachers will have a teaching material for the didactic treatment of this skill.

4. This proposal contributes to achieve a communicative competence in English language in undergraduate students, so they can solve situations in their academic and professional environment using this foreign language as an instrument of study, work and culture.

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