

DISTINGUISHING READING SKILLS AND READING COMPETENCE IN EFL CONTEXTS

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Abstract: In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy, the terms *reading skills* and *reading competence* are frequently used interchangeably, despite representing conceptually distinct constructs. This conceptual ambiguity has significant implications for curriculum design, instructional methodology, and assessment practices. Drawing upon cognitive models of reading, communicative language theory, and competence-based education frameworks particularly the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, this paper critically examines the distinction between reading skills and reading competence. It argues that reading skills constitute discrete cognitive sub-processes, whereas reading competence represents an integrated, contextually situated communicative capacity that emerges through the strategic coordination of multiple skills within authentic contexts. The paper proposes a structured conceptual differentiation and discusses its implications for higher education EFL instruction and assessment. Reframing reading instruction from a skill-fragmented to a competence-oriented paradigm may enhance methodological coherence and promote higher-order literacy development.

Key words: *Reading skills, reading competence, EFL learning, reading pedagogy, competence-based education, CEFR*

Reading has long been recognized as one of the most fundamental skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, particularly within academic environments where students are required to engage with a wide range of written materials, including textbooks, research articles, and literary texts. The ability to read effectively enables learners not only to access information but also to interpret meanings, evaluate perspectives, and construct knowledge. Despite the centrality of reading in language education, the conceptualization of reading ability remains complex. Two key terms frequently appear in pedagogical and theoretical discourse: *reading skills* and *reading competence*. Although these concepts are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct dimensions of reading development and require careful differentiation.

Reading skills generally refer to the specific, teachable sub-abilities that readers employ while interacting with written texts. From a cognitive perspective, reading is not a single unified activity but rather a constellation of mental processes operating simultaneously (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Scholars working within psycholinguistic and cognitive frameworks have identified a number of micro-level skills that contribute to comprehension. These include skimming for general understanding, scanning for specific information, identifying main ideas, recognizing supporting details, interpreting discourse markers, and inferring the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary from context (Nation, 2009). Such skills enable readers to decode linguistic structures and extract information from texts in a systematic manner. One of the defining characteristics of reading skills is their procedural nature. They can be isolated, practiced, and assessed individually. For example, learners may be trained to skim passages quickly to determine overall themes or to scan texts for key facts. Instructional materials often include targeted exercises designed to develop these abilities, and comprehension tests frequently measure them through discrete-item formats such as multiple-choice questions (Alderson, 2000). Because of their measurability and instructional clarity, reading skills have

traditionally formed the backbone of EFL reading pedagogy. However, the development of discrete skills does not automatically ensure effective engagement with authentic texts. A learner may successfully complete scanning exercises yet struggle to interpret the underlying message of a narrative or evaluate the argument of an academic article. This limitation highlights the need for a broader construct capable of capturing the holistic dimension of reading ability—namely, reading competence. Reading competence extends beyond the execution of isolated skills. It represents an integrated, multifaceted capacity that enables readers to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and respond to written discourse within meaningful contexts. Whereas reading skills function at the micro-level, reading competence operates at a macro-level, synthesizing linguistic knowledge, cognitive strategies, socio-cultural awareness, and critical thinking abilities (Koda, 2005).

A competent reader does more than decode textual information. Such a reader interprets implicit meanings, recognizes authorial intention, evaluates ideological positions, and connects textual content to broader contextual frameworks. Reading competence therefore involves both understanding what a text says and analyzing how and why it conveys meaning. This interpretative dimension is particularly significant in higher education, where learners are expected to engage critically with academic and literary discourse (Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1989).

The holistic nature of reading competence is reflected in international educational frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which conceptualizes language ability in terms of communicative performance rather than isolated skills. Within this framework, reading ability is described through performance-oriented descriptors that emphasize communicative outcomes. At advanced proficiency levels, learners are expected to interpret nuance, evaluate arguments, and understand implicit meaning (Council of Europe, 2020). These descriptors illustrate that reading competence encompasses more than technical comprehension; it involves contextual interpretation and critical engagement.

The relationship between reading skills and reading competence may best be understood as hierarchical yet integrative. Reading skills constitute the foundational elements upon which competence is built. They provide the procedural tools necessary for text processing. However, competence emerges only when these skills are strategically coordinated within authentic communicative situations. In other words, reading competence is not simply the sum of individual skills but an emergent construct arising from their interaction (McNamara & Magliano, 2009). This distinction has important pedagogical implications. Skill-based instruction remains essential, particularly for developing foundational comprehension abilities among lower-proficiency learners. Nevertheless, an exclusive focus on discrete skills risks producing readers who can process texts mechanically but lack interpretative depth. Competence-oriented pedagogy, by contrast, emphasizes authentic engagement with texts, encouraging learners to analyze themes, interpret symbolism, and reflect on authorial perspective (Ur, 1996). Instructional models designed to foster reading competence often incorporate structured stages of engagement, such as pre-reading activation of background knowledge, guided comprehension during reading, and analytical reflection after reading. Such approaches support deeper meaning-making processes and align with communicative language teaching principles (Grabe & Stoller, 2011).

Assessment practices must likewise evolve to reflect this conceptual shift. Traditional comprehension tests measuring isolated skills may inadequately capture learners'

interpretative and evaluative capacities. Competence-based assessment therefore favors analytical responses, reflective writing, and performance-based tasks that require learners to demonstrate integrated reading ability (Alderson, 2000).

In conclusion, while reading skills and reading competence are closely related, they represent fundamentally different dimensions of reading development in EFL contexts. Reading skills are discrete cognitive processes that facilitate comprehension, whereas reading competence is a holistic communicative capacity encompassing interpretation, evaluation, and contextual engagement. Recognizing this distinction is essential for designing effective reading instruction, developing valid assessment practices, and promoting higher-order literacy among EFL learners. Ultimately, the goal of reading pedagogy should extend beyond the acquisition of isolated skills toward the cultivation of comprehensive reading competence capable of supporting meaningful interaction with written discourse.

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