

ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION TEST DESIGN: INTEGRATING AUTHENTIC VISUAL MATERIALS TO IMPROVE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: Entrance exams play crucial role in determining students' academic futures. However, there has been inappropriacy in the test format and content which fails to reflect real-world language use when traditional testing methods are used. This article attempts to explore how features of authenticity can bridge this gap when applied in reading comprehension tests. In response to this concern, this article attempts to clarify how the authenticity and its application can address this issue in tailoring test items designed to assess reading skills in the English language in the entrance exams. In particular, it examines the notion of authenticity, its characterization and application in designing test items which more effectively assess reading comprehension. It also mentions that, the term authenticity has long been studied thoroughly in countries abroad but requires more meticulous investigation and practical application in the language testing context in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: reading comprehension, authenticity, closed-ended test items, test details, infographics

Authenticity is a key quality of language test items as it is a distinctive feature that should be present in the relationship between the passage and the reader. In this sense, Widdowson defined as a 'genuine input' in the use of texts that are not simplified and tasks that encourage test takers to perform in a 'real-world' context. [1].

Bachman and Palmer [2], experts in the field of language assessment, raised concerns about the content with which test takers would perform in

the test, claiming that it would define to what extent they would engage in the language use outside the test environment. Building on this idea, they further introduced the term target language use (TLU) to describe the context in which language is used in the real world, wherein test takers will use the language.

Expanding on this perspective, Bachman [3] claimed that authenticity is a characteristic which demonstrates to what extent test tasks are similar or look like to target language use (TLU) tasks. In this regard, an authentic assessment entails activities and tasks which students are likely to encounter in real life situations.

In terms of designing test items for reading comprehension it is important to note that the fact that texts that are produced or available in the real world are quite different, especially when considering the complexity, target audience, and amount of information [4]. This underscores the need to carefully select reading materials that maintain a balance between authenticity and other relevant factors.

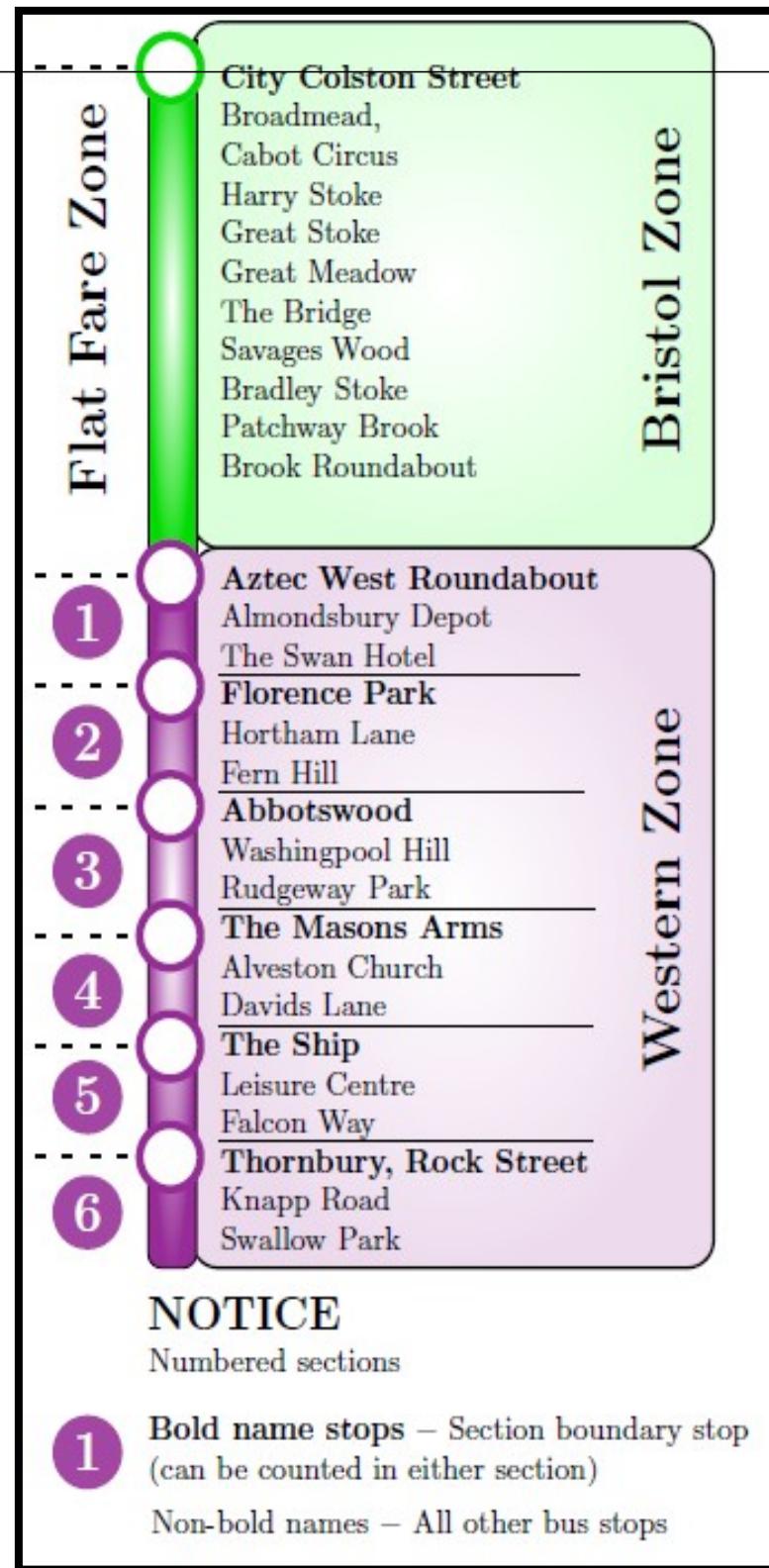
There are a number of contributing factors involved in maintaining the authenticity of the task, as follows [5]:

- the language of the test should be kept natural;
- provide a context for the items rather than making it isolated;
- choose meaningful – relevant and interesting topics for the learner;
- present items in a storyline or in episodes so as to keep thematic organization;
- tasks should resemble real world tasks.

In recent years, the shift towards authenticity in Uzbekistan's language testing environment has brought about a number of noticeable changes. Several decades ago, foreign language testing items designed to assess applicants consisted of boring and artificial grammar-based multiple-choice

items accompanied by short reading passages that lacked spontaneity and naturalness. Since then, in line with developments in language assessment research, numerous changes and approaches have been implemented to improve the quality of test materials.

One of the recent changes was to integrate authentic graphics, charts, diagrams, and infographics together with reading passages to prompt the test taker to analyze and synthesize the given content simultaneously. O'Malley and Valdez Pierce [6] make a related argument proposing various approaches that can enhance the authenticity of the tasks: reports, drawings and diagrams, interviews, inventories of work place items, logs, simulations and models with descriptions. As a result of this and other studies, several modifications were made to the reading test items designed to assess the applicants for university entrance exams.



Sample 1. Read the guide about the fare system in the West of England and answer the questions according to it.

A flat fare structure is in place in the Bristol Zone. This means that wherever you travel in that zone, the price of a single journey will be the same – £2.00. Single fares in the Western Zone are based on the distance you are travelling.

Distances are calculated using 'fare stage' sections rather than individual bus stops, with each section being one-mile long. If you travel up to 3 miles it'll be £2.30, 4-6 miles will be £3.30. Here is an example route and some of the fares along it:

From Aztec West

Roundabout to the

Rudgeway Park would

cost £2.30 as you are

travelling in three

sections (numbers 1, 2

and 3 - the Rudgeway

Park is classed as section

3 in this example as it's

where you are getting off the bus). From the Masons Arms to Thornbury, Rock Street would also be £2.30 as you are again travelling in three sections (4, 5 and 6 - The Masons Arms is counted as section 4 in this example as it's your boarding point). In the other direction, from Swallow Park to Rudgeway Park would cost £3.30 as you are travelling in four sections (6, 5, 4 and 3).

1. A passenger wants to travel from Almondsbury Depot to Washingpool Hill.

How much will he have to pay for his trip?

A)£2.30 B) £2.00 C) £3.00 D) £3.30

3. As stated in the guide, within the Western Zone

A) the distance is calculated for every section you pass
B) you should pay the same fare as in the Bristol Zone
C) the fare system requires passengers to pay £2.00
D) every bus stop is counted as one mile long

2. How much will the fare be for the route starting from Knapp Road to Abbotswood?

A) £2.00 B) £2.30 C) £3.00 D)£3.30

4. As stated in the guide, in the Bristol Zone

A) the same fare is on regardless of the bus stop
B) passengers pay for every bus they pass
C) single journey will cost less than £2.00
D) three bus stops are equal to one section

The above presented infographic and the text (Sample 1) are taken from an authentic – real life guidebook for the passengers travelling in the territories of West of England and Bristol city [7]. Certain differentiations and

adaptations have been implemented to this material such as replacing a few difficult words in the text with B1 level alternatives and changing complex sentences into simple versions. Overall, the names of bus sections, the length and the content of the text and graphic remain almost unchanged. The multiple choice items created based on this material are intended to test scanning skills and simulate the applicant to choose the correct option from the given stem presented as a problem-solving scenario. This approach aligns with “constructivist learning principles” proposed by Jonassen [8] who suggests that integrating assessment tasks into situations involving problem-solving scenarios improves engagement and fosters deeper cognitive processing.

Sample 2. Look at the guide about open day sessions at Durham university and answer the questions according to it.

Durham Difference

This session will introduce the university and its values, vision and goals. It will introduce you to our academic staff. Our current students will share their experiences about what it means to become a member of university community.

Careers & Enterprise

This session is about exploring your job opportunities whilst studying a subject you enjoy. It's also about gaining a qualification and developing skills and experience that can lead to a fulfilling and rewarding career. Find out how we support students, how we work with employers and the types of opportunities available to students during and after their studies.

Student Guide

Find out about fees, and government loans. This session will provide basic factual student finance information, explaining region-specific privileges and the application process.

Support Service

Here you will find a specialist who supports at any time during your studies if you are struggling with academic or personal challenges. It operates as an addition to the support offered in colleges and academic departments. Our teams of advisors help students to manage any difficulties impacting study or wider university life.

Open day sessions	Activities				Location (for each of the activity)
					
Time	9.am-10.am	10.50am-11.50am	12.30pm-1.10pm	2.50pm-3.50pm	
Durham Difference	✓	✓	✓		Ground Floor, Room 4B
Careers & Enterprise	✓		✓	✓	Lovalls Lecture Hall
Student Guide	✓	✓		✓	Holmes Lecture Hall
Support Service		✓		✓	Dunelm House

 = Presentations,  = Tours,  = Exhibitions
 = Drop-in sessions (for those who have a private individual question and have not made prior booking to attend)
 ✓ = Available activities at given time and place

1. A student would like to know more about the expenses of studying at this university and whether there are any financial benefits.

Which of these sessions is the most suitable for him?

A) Durham Difference B) Careers & Enterprise

C) Student Guide D) Support Service

2. Students who have problems with their studies or personal life need advice. Which session should they attend?

A) Durham Difference- Exhibition

B) Careers & Enterprise - Presentation

C) Student Guide - Drop-in session

D) Support Service - Tour

3. A parent wants to take his child to a session to learn about the university goals and student life. What time and where should they go?

A) Holmes Lecture Hall at 9:00 am

B) Lovalls Lecture Hall at 12:30 pm

- C) Dunelm House at 10:50 am
- D) Ground Floor, Room 4B at 9:00 am

The chosen reading passage (Sample 2) is taken from an open day guidebook [9] and the items correspond to the criteria of providing authenticity in the task [5]:

- It maintains authenticity through the use of relevant topic area '**university open day sessions**' that applicants are most likely to encounter in the future; The items are composed based on the passage together with **appropriate visual and real-life context**, not being confined in the text format;
- multiple choice questions mainly pose students to analyze the problematic case and **make informed decision** by scanning both text and table (visual);

Improving the authenticity of language tests is crucial for both building learner's real world language proficiency and ensuring the validity of test results. This article attempts to address this case by presenting a strong evidence that using real-world visual aids may enhance reading comprehension. It analyses the approach of using real world examples with theoretical foundation. However, key points for improvement include avoiding the dependence on multiple choice forms, the absence of empirical validation and the limited contextual discussions. Future research should concentrate on measuring the efficiency of authenticity-based evaluation. Alternative question formats should be explored to better capture the complexity of real-world language use. Comparative studies between different educational systems would also be valuable in understanding how authenticity can be adapted to diverse testing environments.

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**INGLIZ TILI FANIDAN O'QIB TUSHUNISH BO'YICHA YOPIQ TEST
TOPSHIRIQLARINI TAKOMILLASHTIRISH: AUTENTIK VIZUAL
MATERIALLLAR ORQALI SAMARALI BAHOLASH**

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