

Keynote Address

Assessing Comprehension Ability

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In attempting to understand what is involved in the process of comprehension, researchers over the years have proposed and developed various theories and models of comprehension. The prevailing orthodoxy has changed from bottom-up theories, to top-down and finally to an interactive view of comprehension. At the heart of the different theories and models is the interaction of the readers/listeners' conceptual abilities and process strategies, their linguistic knowledge and their content knowledge.

Drawing on the work of researchers in the fields of cognitive psychology and language assessment (e.g. Goodman 1967, Kintsch and van Dijk 1978, Rosenshine 1980, Perfetti 1999, Field, 2004, Grabe 2004, Cohen and Upton 2006), I will start the presentation by providing an overview of how theories of comprehension have evolved since the 1960s and how they have impacted on language teaching and assessment. I will next propose a framework of processing levels that aims to assist test developers in establishing the cognitive validity of their L2 reading tests at the different levels in the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). I will then apply the model to Cambridge ESOL Main Suite examinations, i.e., KET, PET, FCE, CAE, and CPE, to show how the reading processes may differ from CEFR levels A2 to C2 within an assessment context. I will conclude by giving practical advice on writing reading and listening test items.