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Comprehensive and Responsive Assessment

by Dr. Alfred W. Tatum and Deborah J. Short

The 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading report (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001) presented a disappointing picture of the reading performance of middle school students. The NAEP data showed that 70 percent of students entering secondary school are reading below grade level. As a result, state and national governments have focused a great deal of attention on the improvement of middle school students' reading. One result of this attention is an increase in mandated testing for school districts throughout the United States. Assessments are critical in planning responsive instruction for students who struggle with reading and writing. However, assessment results often are not used as part of diagnostic teaching (Walker, 2008).

What is diagnostic teaching? It is a continuous cycle of activities, in which educators

- *assess* the reading and writing abilities of students
- *interpret* the data according to the students' baseline information (and for English learners, their second-language acquisition level), curriculum, and instructional practices
- *adjust* instructional techniques and materials, either to reteach skills or strategies the students have not mastered or to teach new skills or strategies to advance student knowledge
- *re-assess*
- *re-interpret*.

Ideally, this cycle becomes a three-dimensional spiral as students strengthen and build upon their reading and writing skills.


Reading and writing assessments help teachers construct an understanding of how students are developing, and thus provide critical information that allows them to make important instructional decisions (Afflerbach, 2007). Afflerbach notes that responsive teachers need to examine the consequences, usefulness, roles, and responsibilities related to assessments, as well as the reliability and validity of the assessments (Afflerbach, 2007).

This point is particularly important for the assessment of students who are English learners (EL). Standardized tests that aim to measure knowledge of academic content (e.g., science, math) generally are not sensitive to second-language literacy development. As a consequence, some educators may incorrectly interpret data from these measures as evidence that students lack content mastery. A closer look might show, however, that the students performed at the normal pace of the second-language acquisition process (Abedi & Lord, 2001; Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003). Tests results also are confounded by aspects of EL students' diversity (e.g., native-language literacy, educational history). Further, the tests may require knowledge of cultural experiences that many EL students have not had. The outcome of all this is that for EL students, many tests do not measure what they are intended to measure.

Using Assessments to Plan Instruction

To plan responsive instruction, assessment must be ongoing. The assessment plan must include both formal and informal measures to gauge student progress and determine the effectiveness of instructional programs and their impact on students. All students can benefit from a diagnostic assessment at the start of the school year. Instruction in reading and writing can be more carefully tailored to the students' needs when teachers know, for example, that students have strong decoding skills but lack understanding of specific comprehension strategies, such as determining importance or inferencing. EL students also benefit when teachers know the extent of their native-language literacy skills, because many of these skills transfer to English literacy acquisition (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). In addition, EL students who have strong home-literacy experiences and opportunities generally achieve better English literacy outcomes than do those without such experiences (Goldenberg, Rueda, & August, 2006). Therefore, effective assessment practices include the initial testing of students' native-language literacy as well as their English literacy.

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To capture students' varied reading, writing, and linguistic abilities and interests, assessment plans must endeavor to create comprehensive student profiles that

1. capture students' concept of reading
2. identify students' strengths and weaknesses at both the word level and text level
3. assess students' acumen for reading narrative and expository texts
4. gauge students' affective responses to reading and writing activities
5. involve students in the assessment process and use their voices to adjust instructional practice and assessment practices, if necessary.

Using these five dimensions to develop more comprehensive profiles increases the likelihood that assessment practices will be of maximum benefit to students. Comprehensive profiles allow teachers to focus attention on whether students view reading as a word-calling task, or on whether they strive actively to construct meaning as they read. They give teachers ways to become aware of students' reading fluency, observe their reading for meaning-changing and non-meaning changing miscues, and assess their comprehension-monitoring strategies. Additionally, the profiles guide teachers in examining the texts students read to determine whether the content engages their interest.

Responsive instruction for ELs may be more complicated than for native English speakers. In general, EL students attain word-level skills, such as decoding, word recognition, and spelling, in a way similar to their English-speaking peers. For text-level skills, such as reading comprehension and writing, however, the situation differs because of EL students' more limited oral English proficiency and knowledge of English vocabulary and syntax. Given the important roles that well-developed listening and speaking and extensive vocabulary knowledge play in English reading and writing success, literacy instruction for EL students must incorporate extensive opportunities for language and vocabulary development. In particular, it must teach language and writing skills directly and explicitly. Students' writing, for example, can improve when teachers model a range of writing forms and techniques, review writing samples with students, and use Academic Language Frames to help students expand their English usage. Writing can also improve when teachers simply have students copy words or text until they gain more proficiency (Graham & Perin, 2007). Discussion and repeated practice with words and sentence patterns familiarizes EL students with English language conventions, such as how words and sentences are arranged in oral and written discourse (Garcia & Beltran, 2003).

Applying the Research: *INSIDE Language, Literacy, and Content*

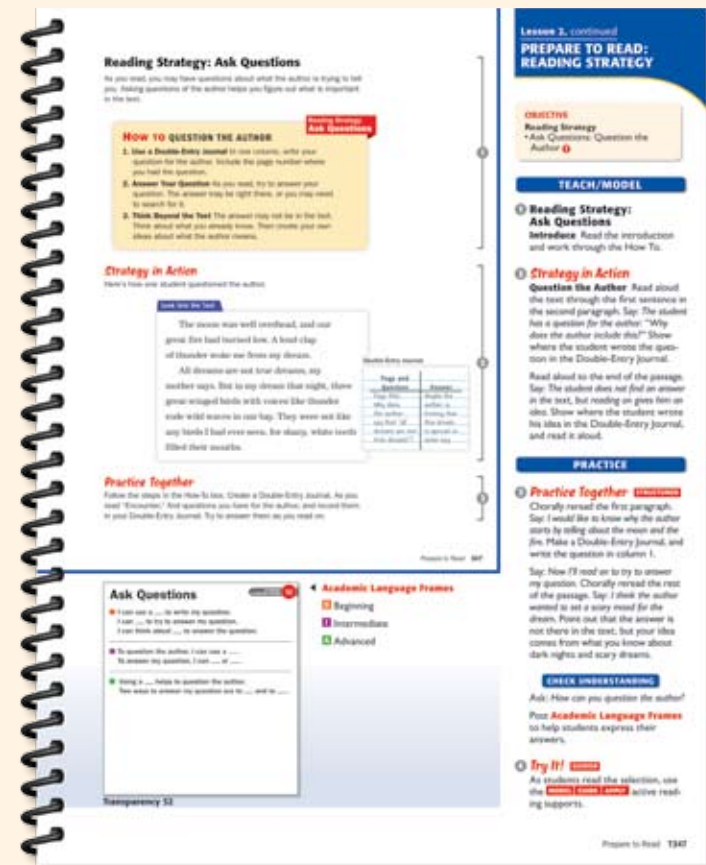
Inside Language, Literacy, and Content provides a robust array of tools for both formal and informal assessment to support teachers in understanding their students' needs and monitoring their progress.

Diagnostic and Placement Assessments Students entering the program can take a Phonics Test and a Lexile Placement Test. If the Phonics Test indicates that a student needs support with fundamental reading skills and decoding, placement is in Level A or B. Students who have acquired basic decoding skills will proceed to the Lexile Placement Test. This assessment provides a recommended placement in Level C, D, or E.

In addition to these placement tools, the program includes recommendations for further diagnostic assessment with standardized instruments from a number of test publishers. Such measures can give additional information on students' strengths and instructional needs in phonics, decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, language, and writing. The instructional plan also provides consistent support for informal diagnosis of student needs. Lessons include frequent checks for understanding and many opportunities for students to demonstrate their skills through a variety of oral and written responses; as they observe and evaluate these steps of the plan, teachers engage in continuing diagnosis of students' needs and progress.

Formal Progress Monitoring The main formal assessment of student progress in *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* is at the unit level. Levels A and B include Unit Quick Checks after every unit of instruction to evaluate progress on phonics and decoding, spelling, word recognition, vocabulary, and grammar. More extensive Unit Progress Tests are provided after every third unit, covering phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, word recognition vocabulary and morphology, comprehension, grammar, and writing.

Informal Progress Monitoring The program provides a wealth of resources and daily support to help teachers monitor student progress informally. Lessons include a Check Understanding step to assist teachers in quickly determining if students understand the skill. In addition, lessons are constructed so that at each step of the learning process, all students respond in ways that demonstrate how successfully they are learning the strategy or content objectives. Students respond in a variety of ways, including graphic organizers, Academic Language Frames and sentence frames, choral responses, written responses, gestures, and others. This interactive lesson structure gives teachers continual opportunities to note students' successes and areas of need. When students have difficulty with a strategy or concept, lessons provide specific suggestions for corrective feedback, addressing student needs immediately.



The Check Understanding step of the lesson includes an Academic Language Frame that supports students in responding and enables the teacher to informally evaluate each student's understanding of the strategy.

Affective and Metacognitive Measures Responsive assessment includes surveys of students' attitudes toward reading and writing and their self-assessments of achievement. *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* includes interest surveys, inventories related to the behaviors of reading and writing, metacognitive measures in which students can share the strategies they are using to determine the meaning of words and comprehend selections, and student self-assessments that lead to goal-setting.

Summative Assessments The program also includes at the end of each level a test that measures achievement on the standards taught in the program and typically tested on high-stakes tests. At Levels C–E, a mid-level test is available to get a read on how students are doing earlier in the school year.

Reteaching The program includes reteaching prescriptions for the informal and formal progress-monitoring tests

and for the summative assessments so that teachers can take corrective action.

Fluency Assessment Each week students can practice fluency with a passage, excerpted from the reading selection. This same passage can then be used for a timed reading in which the words-correct-per-minute (WCPM) fluency rate is calculated. Students are encouraged to graph their fluency rates over time so they can see the evidence of their improvement. Fluency development in the core materials is supported by daily fluency activities including listening, choral reading, partner reading, and recording, with emphasis on intonation, phrasing, and expression. Additional technology support for fluency practice and assessment of WCPM rates is provided in the Online Coach at levels C–E (see pages PD61–PD63).

Conclusion

Inside Language, Literacy, and Content provides a full range of tools for formal and informal assessment that support teachers in diagnosing their students' needs and using assessment to continually monitor students' progress, adjusting instruction as needed for optimum progress for striving readers and English learners.



With the Online Coach, students can record their own reading of a selection and evaluate their reading fluency in words correct per minute.