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Reading Comprehension Assessments

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Reading comprehension assessments generally consist of texts with accompanied questions, tasks, or activities designed to inform educators about a student's abilities, skills, or level of capacity to make meaning from, or comprehend, targeted texts. Reading comprehension assessments typically involve individual textual reading (either silently or aloud) with accompanying questions that are used to gauge a student's ability to recall explicitly stated information and to understand implied ideas or arguments represented in a text. Such information could be used for making decisions about a student's educational status and learning goals as well as for identifying best instructional supports. These assessments vary in their utility for providing such information, and some assessments are better than others for informing next steps in instructional practice.

Skills Assessed Within Reading Comprehension Assessments

Reading comprehension has long been viewed as an ability encompassing various subskills and abilities. As such, one or more of the following variables or abilities may be assessed on any given test of reading comprehension: phonological awareness (i.e., awareness of and access to sounds in oral language), graphophonemic knowledge (i.e., knowledge about the sound–print relationship that supports decoding text), lexical automaticity (i.e., ability to immediately read common sight words), reading fluency (i.e., automaticity and prosody of decoding texts), information comprehension (i.e., direct recall of and inference-making related to ideas represented in text), ability to use reading strategies (i.e., specific skills used to clarify meaning in text, such as the use of contextual clues to understand unfamiliar terms), and vocabulary knowledge (i.e., understanding of word meanings). Because of the multidimensional nature of reading comprehension, multiple reading assessments that target the various skills, some of which were just listed, are useful for gaining a composite understanding about students' abilities to make sense of and apply information from multiple kinds of texts.

The targeted skills and task design of reading comprehension assessments have historically aligned with the transformations in beliefs about what constituted reading comprehension. During the mid-1960s, for example, assessments of reading were designed to elicit a student's ability to identify the correct meaning from text. Reading assessments in recent years have focused more on a student's ability to critique and compare texts and provide a logical argument for a particular line of reasoning rather than a *correct* answer.

Classroom-Based Reading Assessments

Reading comprehension assessments are developed for both formative and summative purposes. For classroom teachers, formative reading assessments typically consist of informal reading tasks designed for a particular student or group of students. Such a task could include reading aloud a class-assigned text and summarizing (recalling key information) following the reading. Teachers observe the reading and subsequent summarization in order to gauge the student's fluency (i.e., demonstration of decoding and prosody while reading aloud the text) and sense making of key ideas presented in the text. This information is then used for selecting and/or adapting subsequent texts as well as planning future instruction.

These observational activities reflect the general practices of the Qualitative Reading Inventory, which is an assessment program widely used by literacy specialists and classroom teachers. Literacy expert Yetta Goodman demonstrated the instructional benefits of the

retroactive miscue analysis that is often used in conjunction with the Qualitative Reading Inventory. Retroactive miscue analysis involves follow-up questions after the student has read aloud the selected text; these questions help to uncover the students' thinking processes as they paused, self-corrected, or misread a particular word or phrase. Retroactive miscue analysis sessions provide teachers the opportunity to learn more about the particular abilities and strategy that students use during reading.

Teachers also use summative assessments, particularly when determining achievement or growth in reading ability at the end of unit or grading period. Such summative assessments tend to be administered to all individuals within a classroom and involve silent reading of texts followed by a standard set of questions in the form of multiple-choice or constructed response (i.e., short answer or essay items). This type of assessment is designed to provide teachers with a general picture of their students' overall learning of a concept or general level of comprehension of an informational text.

Large-Scale Reading Assessments

Within the United States, reading comprehension has long been identified as a key skill for determining academic achievement and, as such, assessing all students' abilities to comprehend grade level, academic texts (i.e., informational texts that students are expected to comprehend according to their grade level) has been an explicit imperative in U.S. educational policies. Large-scale reading comprehension assessments are standardized (consistent) forms of texts with accompanying standardized questions that are systematically administered to large groups of students. Although the standardized reading assessments are used for summative purposes, some of these are used for diagnostic, formative purposes. One of the most widely used large-scale, diagnostic reading assessments is the STAR, which is a 20-minute, computer-administered test used by K–12 schools for making placement decisions at the beginning of a school year.

Similarly, summative large-scale instruments such as those used by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium are administered for accountability purposes. Schools within districts for every state must demonstrate their ability to close the achievement gap for all students, and scores from assessments like Smarter Balanced provide information that is used to determine such growth. The high-stakes decision making and accountability efforts associated with such large-scale reading assessments have provoked a great deal of controversy over the usefulness and validity of such instruments for supporting reading growth and achievement. For example, many assessment specialists and scholars raised concerns related to cultural and linguistic bias of texts and associated items or tasks, contending that presently existing large-scale reading comprehension assessments fall short of providing adequate, culturally responsive measures of comprehension ability.

Reading Assessments for an Increasingly Diverse Student Population

The increasing use of high-stakes standardized reading assessments mandated by accountability efforts may be somewhat at odds with the proliferating linguistic and cultural diversity found in schools. These tests have potentially serious consequences for all students, but particularly those from nondominant cultures. Results from standardized reading comprehension assessments are useful to the extent that they provide stakeholders with reliable and valid information concerning students' reading abilities. However, high-stakes standardized tests have frequently been found to fail to provide such information. Such

assessments often oversimplify what is now accepted as a complex, multidimensional construct by targeting only a selected subset of skills (e.g., the ability to answer questions about explicit and implicit information in text). Such tests frame reading events as decontextualized activities (i.e., reading comprehension with no contextual purpose) and that ignore the central role of linguistic and cultural variation in shaping readers' responses to texts. In other words, many large-scale, standardized reading assessments continue to resemble a simpler, earlier view of reading comprehension as a discrete task involving little more than identifying the correct answer from a text. Failing to take cultural variation into account potentially compromises the validity of the inferences made about individual students' abilities. Such reductive and culturally unresponsive conceptualizations of reading comprehension could then have negative effects on classroom instruction, leading to both a narrowing of the curriculum and a devaluing of the perspectives of culturally and linguistically diverse students whose interpretations do not conform to expected responses.

Another serious concern is the use of assessments in English for students who are still in the process of learning the English language. For example, if students who speak Spanish as their dominant language are assessed in English, the level of complexity and pragmatic style in the phrasing of comprehension questions may inhibit the students' ability to fully express their ability to make meaning from a text. Words such as *describe* or even phrases such as *look up* that are often displayed in assessment directions require a level of pragmatic knowledge that depends on more than one's ability to understand and respond to the general meanings of a text. Such instances of pragmatic complexity bring into question the validity of such standardized assessments for determining a language learner's reading comprehension. As such, cultural responsiveness rather than the *sameness* of equality is an important consideration when using comprehension assessments for making school- and policy-based decisions that can alter the course of a student's life.

Cognitive Versus Sociocultural Views of Reading Comprehension Assessments

Reading both in and out of school comprises a range of deeply contextualized, socially situated activities in which individuals make meaning from print in different contexts, for different purposes, and as part of different participation structures. This widely accepted view of comprehension has historically been absent from the bulk of reading assessments that are overwhelmingly oriented to an individual, cognitive view of reading and thus provide scant information about individuals in relation to these sociocultural dimensions of reading. There are few instances of assessing students in social contexts; one example is the Collaborative Strategic Reading, a formative, classroom-based assessment used in gauging collaborative comprehension within the program.

Within Collaborative Strategic Reading, students are organized into cooperative groups of four members, each of whom has a specific role in supporting collective understanding of a shared text. The Collaborative Strategic Reading assessment focuses on the identification of key ideas and agreed-upon definitions of unfamiliar words (*clunks*) based on strategies that include the use of morphological knowledge (understanding of the meaning of word parts) and contextual clues. All students take notes in their own *learning log*, which captures shared ideas within the group, summarizing key points, new vocabulary, and a review statement that, according to the group, captures the full idea as well as the group's stance on this idea. Teachers generally use these completed logs to assess individuals' abilities as well as their respective correspondence to others within and across groups. Such information can be used to identify and adapt texts for future activities as well as crafting mini lessons for

strengthening strategy use or summarization skills.

Future developments of reading comprehension assessments may have a greater emphasis on collaborative abilities; such developments would align with the importance of peer discussion around a variety of challenging academic texts as inscribed in the Common Core State Standards. The next decade may bring forth new forms of assessment that more closely reflect the sociocultural, multidimensional, and dialogic nature of reading comprehension.

See also [Literacy](#); [Readability](#); [Reading Comprehension](#)

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Further Readings

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