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READING SKILL AND THE WAY OF ASSESSMENT

Summary: A discussion of the ways of assessment can be classified from a reading skill point of view.

Key words: assessment, reading skill, proficiency, achievement, placement, and diagnostic assessment.

Reading assessment is an understanding of the principles and uses of assessment are essential for all teachers and in particular for teachers of reading.

(Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005:179)

Reading assessments are used for many purposes, but all appropriate uses begin from an understanding of the reading construct, an awareness of the development of reading abilities, and an effort to reflect the construct in assessment tasks. The complexity of the construct of reading, as well as its development, also reveals the potential complexity of reading assessment.

Reading assessments are meant to provide feedback on the skills, processes, and knowledge resources that represent reading abilities, though it is important to note that different assessment practices may assume different theories of reading and reading development. Assessment in general can be categorized in a number of ways, and all assessment frameworks serve important purposes. Commonly, assessment has been categorized in terms of (a) norm-reference and criterion- reference testing; (b) formative and summative assessment; (c) formal and informal (or alternative) assessment; and (d) proficiency, achievement, placement, and diagnostic assessment.

Five purposes for reading assessment

1. Reading-proficiency assessment (standardized testing)

2. Assessment of classroom learning

3. Assessment *for* learning (supporting student learning is the purpose)

4. Assessment of curricular effectiveness

5. Assessment for research purposes

There is an inevitable overlap among specific test uses across these categories, but these categories, nonetheless, serve as a useful framework for organizing reading assessment.

Reading-proficiency assessment

Assessment of reading proficiency is important as a way to understand students' overall reading abilities (based on some assumed construct of reading) and to determine if students are appropriately prepared for further learning and educational advancement. Commonly, this type of assessment is referred to as *standardized testing,* although local groups and researchers also develop proficiency tests of different types. In most respects, proficiency assessment represents high-stakes testing because decisions are often made about students' future educational goals and opportunities. Alternatively, this type of assessment may lead to special education or reading-disability designations - labels that, once applied, are hard to remove from a student's record. Reading-proficiency assessment is also sometimes used for student placement, for policy decisions, for curriculum changes, or for program, teacher, or institutional evaluations.

Assessment of classroom learning

Assessment of reading improvement in classroom settings involves the measurement of skills and knowledge gained over a period of time and is commonly referred to as *summative* or *achievement testing*. Sometimes, proficiency assessments are used to measure student progress from year to year

(as in a final exam), but this type of reading assessment does not capture ongoing student gains made in reading skills in the classroom. Year-end testing actually measures growth in proficiency from year to year rather than measuring gains in reading abilities *based on what was taught in class*. Much more commonly, assessment of classroom learning uses tasks that reflect the material taught in class and the skills practiced. Typically, the teacher, teacher groups, or curriculum groups (or textbook-materials writers) develop these tests, and they are responsible for deciding what represents a measure of success, as well as what steps to take as a result of assessment outcomes.

Teachers have multiple opportunities to assess student learning at several points in any semester using common techniques (e.g., end-of- unit tests, quizzes of various types, post reading comprehension questions, etc.), but some classroom assessment alternatives are less obvious. *Informal and alternative assessment* options are central for the effective assessment of learning (e.g., student observations, self-reporting measures, progress charts, engagement and group work, group outcomes assessment, interviews), and they usually provide converging evidence over time for the appropriate summative assessment at the end of the school year. Assessment of learning can be either *normative* (how students compare to each other) or *criterion-based* (how well students perform on curriculum standards and established learning goals). These two testing purposes should lead to somewhat different tests and different scoring. To give the simplest example, normative testing would discourage every student from receiving an "A," but criterion-based tests may include all students receiving an "A."

Assessment for learning

Assessment for learning involves a type of reading assessment that is not commonly discussed and is somewhat innovative in discussions of L2 assessment. This assessment purpose is intended to support and promote student learning, in this case, the improvement of reading abilities.

Performance evaluation or a record of outcomes is not the goal; instead, the goal is to provide immediate feedback on tasks and to teach students to engage in more effective learning. In many respects, this approach appears to overlap with the assessment of classroom learning, but this is true only with respect to many of the reading tasks performed, not to the follow-up feedback and interaction between the teacher and the students. Assessment for learning engages students in their own learning and responds to indicators of nonunderstanding or weak performances with ongoing remediation and fine-tuning of instruction. There are two general types of "assessment for learning" practices: One involves the use of recognizable classroom assessment activities to provide helpful feedback for learning; the second involves specific assessment for learning practices to support students directly in their day-to-day learning.

Assessment of curricular effectiveness

Assessment of curricular effectiveness and program evaluation is not specific to reading but is relevant for the development and / or review of reading curricula. Assessment outcomes that apply to curricular effectiveness include standardized testing, cumulative records over years that indicate gains or losses in student outcomes, interviews with teachers, students, and school administrators on summative test performance, feedback from institutions that receive graduates from the program or school, and innovative assessments that highlight specific school or program goals (e.g., project work, motivation, extensive reading, writing skills, or collaboration and group work). Evaluations of curricular success and teacher effectiveness represent different types of evaluation goals and extend beyond the immediate goals of student assessment, but they are important considerations for any large-scale assessment of reading curricula as well as programmatic needs analysis. This topic will not be developed further in this chapter, but important teacher and program evaluation ideas and resources are described in Brown (1995), Lynch (1996), Rea-Dickins

& Germaine (1998), Richards (2001), and Thornton, Burch, and El-Araby (2003).

Assessment for research purposes

Assessment for research purposes is a topic that is not generally addressed in assessment chapters, but it is one that is very important for reading- research results as well as for their implications for reading instruction. Research studies sometimes use standardized assessment instruments to measure student levels or student instructional outcomes. In other studies, however, researchers develop their own reading-assessment measures for a variety of reasons. Regardless of reason, research-developed measures need to conform to expected requirements for any appropriate and fair assessment practice. The measures, first and foremost, need to be valid; that is, reliable, construct-relevant, useful, fair, and responsible (with respect to consequences). Reading research can have a powerful impact on teaching and on students' learning experiences. Assessment measures are a part of all of these research conclusions and they need to be trustworthy. Given that students are likely to perform somewhat differently even across different standardized measures (Cutting & Scarborough, 2006), it is important to ensure that tests are developed and used appropriately. The value of multiple measures in any research context must also be stressed.

As the above framework indicates, reading-assessment practices (much like all educational assessment) can cover a wide range of purposes and uses, and each purpose or use includes a number of specific tasks and measurement options.

Any single technique for assessment will necessarily be limited in the picture it can provide. . . . We should always be aware that the techniques we use will be imperfect, and therefore we should always seek to use multiple methods and techniques, and we should be modest in the claims we make. (Alderson, 2000: 270)

In this description of L2 assessment practices, for ease of explanation, we link reading-proficiency assessment with standardized testing and assessment of learning primarily with classroom-based measures. There is certainly an amount of overlap between standardized and classroom settings, and some of these instances are noted, but this simplification eliminates the need to detail all crossover points.

Reading assessment has great power to inform researchers, teachers, administrators, and policy makers. Assessment practices can significantly benefit the learning environment or they can inflict great harm. Reading assessment, therefore, needs to be treated with great care, attention, and respect. Teachers, especially, have a responsibility to understand the uses and the impacts of reading assessment and are mindful of the consequences of assessment.

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