

Readsters Responds

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Question: What specific assessment(s) do you recommend for determining what a reader's needs are? For RTI in our K-4 building, we want to match the very best intervention for each student's needs.

Submitted by Luana Baltozer

While this seems like a fairly simple question the answer is not at all simple. Reading is a complex activity involving many skills and abilities executed simultaneously. So, determining a student's needs is not always simple.

Screening Assessments

Screening assessments, such as DIBELS ORF, AIMSWeb ORF, Fountas and Pinnell, DRA, and others are helpful to identify students who are reading below grade level. These assessments provide a score indicating overall reading ability. The DIBELS and AIMSWeb ORF scores are proxies for reading comprehension scores. The Fountas and Pinnell, DRA, and similar assessments provide a reading level score that approximates the student's reading comprehension compared to a benchmark. These are overall reading comprehension scores, and they do not indicate the specific reason a student is reading below grade level.

Students who are not reading at benchmark or on grade level need further assessment to determine why their scores are low.

Components of Reading

The Simple View of Reading formula presented by Gough and Tunmer in 1986 demonstrates that a student has to know how to read familiar and unfamiliar words (decoding). A student also has to know or infer the meanings of the words read and be able to use the words to construct meaning from the text, which is language comprehension. (To read more about the Simple View of Reading go to <http://readsters.com/SimpleView>.) Students who are not reading at grade level may have a decoding weakness or a language comprehension weakness, or may be weak in both. The screening assessments tell us only that the student is reading below an established benchmark. They do not tell us whether the student is reading below benchmark due to weaknesses in decoding, language comprehension, or both. Instruction to improve decoding (phonics) is very different from the instruction needed to improve language comprehension (generally, instruction in vocabulary, memory, comprehension strategies, etc.).

Common Use for Screening Assessments

Many schools with an RTI model use screening assessments to determine which students are not reading at grade level, and then select their intervention instruction based only on a screening score. For example, those who use DIBELS ORF or AIMSweb ORF may decide that all students who are “at risk” will be placed in *Reading Mastery*, while “strategic” students will receive fluency instruction with *Read Naturally*. Schools that use Fountas & Pinnell or DRA will often place their students in instruction at a certain reading level based on the student’s score. Both these strategies assume that a single score measuring reading comprehension can identify a student’s reading weakness and appropriate intervention. Unfortunately, that is not the case and many students receive instruction that does not help them become strong readers.

Diagnosis Beyond Screening Assessments

The Simple View of Reading formula tells us that students with strong reading comprehension have both strong decoding and language comprehension skills. It also tells us that students who score below expectations on a reading comprehension assessment are weak in decoding, language comprehension, or both. The Simple View and other research inform us, as well, that decoding and language comprehension are separate abilities and must be assessed with separate tools.

Our recommendation is to use the screening assessment as a tool to identify those students who need further assessment because their reading comprehension scores are below grade level. Further assessment will identify whether the student has weaknesses with decoding, language comprehension, or both. Quick decoding assessments are readily available. We discuss the components of a good decoding assessment below. Quick language comprehension assessments are not so easy to find. Assessing language skills usually requires a full-blown assessment that takes more time and expertise than most classroom teachers or reading coaches have. However there is a way to “back” into whether the student has language comprehension weaknesses without having to administer a complete language comprehension assessment. We explain this below.

Assessing and Diagnosing Decoding Weaknesses

Many teachers diagnose decoding weaknesses based on students’ “miscues” made while reading aloud. Our experience is that this does not adequately identify decoding weaknesses because students can use context to guess words that they would misread if the word were read in isolation. (For example, many students read “dot” as “don’t” in a word list, but we have never seen this mistake when students read the word “dot” in context.) The best way to diagnose decoding weaknesses is to have students read both real and nonsense words out of context in a list. Error analysis will identify students’ specific weaknesses in phonics. Most often these are short vowels, digraphs, multi-syllable words,

vowel teams, or r-controlled vowels. A number of decoding assessments are available as subsets of larger, often formal, assessments. Your school may have one. We like to use the Diagnostic Decoding Surveys. (For a complimentary copy of the Diagnostic Decoding Surveys go to: <http://readsters.com/ComplimentaryDDS>.)

Some students also have weaknesses in pre-reading skills areas such as phonological awareness (the ability to identify, blend, segment, and manipulate syllables, onset/rimes, and phonemes) and letter awareness (the ability to identify letter names, primary consonant sounds, and short vowel sounds). Most often these students are in kindergarten or first grade, but occasionally older students who are “at risk” are also missing foundational pre-reading skills. We are developing an easy-to-administer assessment of pre-reading skills called Pre-Reading Probes. You are welcome to use a draft form, and we’d appreciate any feedback you have to provide. (To download a complimentary copy of the Draft Pre-Reading Probes go to: <http://readsters.com/PreReadingProbesV5>.)

Assessing and Diagnosing Language Comprehension

Comprehension has to do with the ability to derive meaning from words, whether spoken or written. It depends on an individual’s ability to understand and interact with the concepts being presented. Background knowledge and vocabulary play a huge part in comprehension and both tend to be domain-specific. As mentioned above, it is difficult to find an assessment tool that quickly identifies comprehension weaknesses and strengths. However, there is a way to “back” into this information.

If you have a reading comprehension score and a decoding score, you can identify those students who need to build language comprehension skills. Two examples follow:

- When a student has high decoding scores and low reading comprehension scores, the problem is inevitably some element of language comprehension. This student clearly can decode the words, but fails to achieve adequate reading comprehension. The reasons can be many, including not understanding the words, not connecting ideas, inadequate background knowledge, poor memory, etc.
- The student with low decoding score and low reading comprehension could have one of two problems. Decoding may be the only weakness, in which case strong decoding instruction will raise the student’s reading comprehension commensurate with the student’s improvement in decoding. If both decoding and language are weaknesses, decoding instruction will improve reading comprehension, but the improvement will be less robust than if decoding is the only weakness. The student with both weaknesses generally will need intervention to address both the decoding and language weaknesses before adequate improvement in reading comprehension is attained.

Even though oral language skills are more difficult to quickly assess than decoding skills, they are often much more obvious to teachers. Therefore, it is often easy for a teacher to verify low language abilities in a student with low reading comprehension scores, whether or not decoding skills are a factor. For example, the teacher might say, “He understands everything I tell him, but can’t remember anything when he reads” about a student who has only decoding weaknesses. However, if the student has language weaknesses the teacher might state, “He can’t follow directions, has trouble telling me sequence of events from a read aloud story, and doesn’t know the meaning of common words.”

Brief Comments on Decoding and Comprehension Instruction

Decoding instruction is straightforward teaching of phonics, with ample practice to achieve accurate reading. Some students develop fluency at the same time they learn to decode and others will need fluency instruction after they have developed strong decoding abilities.

Comprehension instruction can be much more complicated. Students must be provided the opportunities to increase their background knowledge and understanding of our language (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure) in order to implement the reading strategies they have been taught. Unfortunately comprehension instruction is often focused on “strategies” and not enough on building students’ overall language skills (both with spoken and written language) and background knowledge. Without the appropriate balance between content and strategy instruction, students’ ability to effectively comprehend text is likely to continue to be below expectations.

For struggling readers, decoding and comprehension need to be taught separately. Decoding instruction focuses the student’s attention on reading the words accurately based on the spelling patterns in the words. When teaching decoding, using context to determine a word is discouraged. Comprehension instruction should occur at the oral language level until a student can decode well enough to read the text accurately with automaticity. Comprehension instruction should focus on having the student think about the subject matter, remembering literal parts of the text, making inferences, drawing conclusions, connecting ideas within the text and to background knowledge, understanding the meaning of unfamiliar words, etc.