

Arguing the case for a simple view of literacy assessment

Peter Westwood*

Macau, China

This paper presents a concise model of literacy assessment based on the “simple view of reading” and the “simple view of writing”. The approach targets directly the key skills and knowledge involved in reading, writing and spelling. It stands in contrast to the less precise and potentially more subjective ‘always-in-context’ and ‘always-authentic’ approach to assessment favoured by the New Literacy Studies movement. This writer argues that if teachers directly (rather than indirectly) assess the component skills involved in reading and writing they are in a much stronger position to make educationally relevant decisions and to tailor their instruction more precisely to students’ individual needs. This approach is not restricted to the assessment of children with learning difficulties but has relevance in all contexts where accurate assessment of basic literacy is required.

Introduction

Very few educators would argue against the notion that assessment is an essential component of the set of practices that make up effective teaching of literacy. Regular assessment of students’ learning provides vital information to teachers, parents and others on the effectiveness of a teaching program or method over time and reveals the progress being made by individual students. Based on such assessment data, teachers are in a position to adapt and modify their daily teaching practices and materials to bring about improvements where necessary. Assessment also helps identify those students who are achieving extremely well and therefore need extension work that will motivate and challenge their abilities to the full. Equally important, assessment helps identify as early as possible those students who are struggling to master reading, writing or spelling and therefore require further investigation and additional support.

There is very little disagreement among educators concerning the above principles. However, the nature, scope and format of the assessment process have become the focus of debate, reflecting, on the one hand, the beliefs of those who subscribe to a cognitive, skills-based, explicit teaching orientation (e.g. Graham, 2000; Hempenstall, 2001; Rose, 2006) and, on the other hand, the views of those who regard themselves as members of the so-called ‘New Literacy Studies’ (NLS) movement (e.g. Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Cho, 2006; Luke & Carrington, 2002; Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008). It is worth examining these different perspectives in some detail.

*Email: sepsw@yahoo.co.uk

Divergent views on the nature of assessment

Educators who believe in a cognitive, skills-based approach to instruction in literacy believe that component skills and specific areas of knowledge related to reading, writing and spelling are easily identifiable, teachable and assessable (the *instructivist* viewpoint). For example, they believe that word recognition skills and phonic knowledge can be directly taught and assessed objectively and the results of such assessment will indicate precisely what students know and what they still need to learn (e.g. Hempenstall, 1996; Pullen, Lane, Lloyd, Nowak, & Ryals, 2005). Similarly, students can be explicitly taught strategies to help them interpret and understand passages of text and their level of comprehension can be assessed (e.g. Pressley & Hilden, 2006; Woolley, 2007). While some information on students' knowledge and skills can be obtained through informal observation methods, it is also very necessary – particularly when working with low-progress readers and writers – to supplement such informal observations by the application of appropriate tests or probes. The most accurate and objective information on students' knowledge and skills can be readily obtained by assessing directly each area of knowledge or skill with appropriately focused tasks or tests.

Those who take a very different view of assessment regard such testing as an undesirable 'reductionist' approach (i.e. artificially reducing a complex behaviour such as text reading into its component subskills) (Luke & van Kraayenoord, 1998); but it is actually the most objective, accurate and manageable way of determining the precise knowledge, skills and strategies that students possess. The use of tests to evaluate specific aspects of students' abilities has a long history of proven efficacy, dating back to at least the work of Schonell and Schonell (1950). Diagnostic testing, in particular, has always involved the careful breakdown of complex behaviours into observable and assessable subskills.

In contrast to the instructivist orientation described above, educators subscribing to the NLS movement are strongly against assessment procedures that are separated in any way from holistic acts of reading or writing for genuine purposes of learning and communication (e.g. Badger & Wilkinson, 1998; Nutbrown, 1999; Paratore & McCormack, 2007; Tierney, 1998; Whitehead, 2007). For example, Macrine and Sabbatino (2008) believe that there is an undesirable disparity between the way that reading is assessed through testing and the holistic way that NLS theorists think it should be taught.

The principal objections of NLS are directed at all forms of 'benchmarking' assessments using multiple-choice formats and to all forms of standardised testing. They also appear to be critical of many of the forms of testing that instructivist teachers tend to use in their classrooms. They argue that much testing typically involves students in contrived and artificial literacy tasks rather than engaging them in 'real' and meaningful acts of comprehension, reflection, expression and communication. Two staunch NLS disciples (Badger & Wilkinson, 1998) believe that in Australia the typical forms of literacy assessment currently in use tend to cause minority students to achieve very poor results, thus maintaining a socio-culturally induced achievement gap between those who are attuned to school routines, expectations and values and those who are not. These and other critics of testing in schools call instead for "authentic assessment" that matches more closely students' life experiences, interests and values. Whitehead

(2007), for example, argues that assessment practices should be “ecologically valid” (p. 434) and Nutbrown (1999) states:

Current assessments of literacy do not reflect the literacy which is fundamental to children in day-to-day living. If new assessment instruments are to be developed they will need to achieve a degree of authenticity by setting tasks in a meaningful context. (p. 35)

Disciples of NLS are highly critical of any attempt to reduce literacy to a set of technical skills such as word recognition, phonic decoding and comprehension that can be taught explicitly and assessed in isolation. Their view is clearly echoed in the document *Resolution on literacy assessment*, promulgated by the International Reading Association (2003), wherein it is stated: “Definitions of reading based on a hierarchical sequence of discrete skills lead to inappropriate assessment and foster inappropriate instruction” (p. 2).

Those who are against testing of component skills such as word recognition and phonics believe instead that all forms of assessment must involve authentic literacy activities and that skills must be assessed always in context (Fiderer, 2008; Thurman & McGrath, 2008; Valencia, 1997). For example, children’s spelling ability should only be assessed within the context of their daily written work, and should never be tested with decontextualised graded word lists or norm-referenced tests. Similarly, word recognition skills should not be assessed by presenting words in isolation, because ‘real reading’ of text is always supported by contextual cues and phonic knowledge should be explored only through careful inspection of running records of children’s reading miscues and their invented spelling while writing, never by applying formal phonics tests. This insistence on ‘always authentic’ and ‘always in context’ actually makes the process of assessment very much more difficult, much more subjective and, potentially, extremely superficial. The obsession with ‘wholeness’ is an impediment to swift and accurate appraisal of students’ existing skills and instructional needs.

It should be explained here that the NLS movement has mutated from what was previously identified more narrowly as the ‘whole language’ movement. It represents a *social-constructivist* perspective on literacy learning that is in contrast to the skills-based, cognitive perspective that underpins instructivist pedagogy. Subscribers to the NLS perspective are chiefly concerned with the social and cultural contexts within which children acquire (or fail to acquire) literacy and how various forms of literacy are valued and utilised in different communities. Thus, NLS defines literacy as “social practice” rather than a set of specific competencies (Cho, 2006) – but quite what this means for methods of instruction and assessment is never made entirely clear in their literature. While a social and cultural view of literacy may help teachers appreciate how learners’ backgrounds, beliefs, expectations and value systems impact upon literacy learning and students’ motivation, the cognitive and psychological perspective has many more immediate and useful implications for teaching, assessment and intervention.

Two of the most practical models that have evolved from the cognitive, skills-based perspective are the “simple view of reading” (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990) and the “simple view of writing” (Beringer et al., 2002). Both have immediate implications for how literacy skills should be assessed.

The “simple view of reading”

The “simple view of reading” suggests that just two areas of skill – decoding and language comprehension – are involved in the process of reading and are sufficient to account for individual differences in students’ reading ability (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). This simple view has gained great popularity with cognitive psychologists (e.g. Catts, Hogan, Adlof, & Barth, 2003), with educators who favour an instructivist rather than constructivist approach (e.g. Tan, Wheldall, Madelaine, & Lee, 2007) and with some government education systems (e.g. in the UK: Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2006). Taking a simple view of reading means that it is unnecessary to try to accommodate or account for socio-cultural and environmental influences when attempting to evaluate children’s reading skills. Assessment simply focuses on what is important in the reading process – decoding and comprehension.

In the UK, the “simple view of reading” has been adopted officially within the *National Literacy Strategy* to provide the framework for teaching and evaluating reading in primary schools. In the strategy it is stated that:

Learning to read . . . involves setting up processes by which the words on the page can be recognised and understood, and continuing to develop the language processes that underlie both spoken and written language comprehension. Both sets of processes are necessary for reading; but neither is sufficient on its own. (DCSF, 2006, p. 2)

The “simple view of reading” can be readily accepted as a viable starting point for assessment because it has obvious practical implications (Roberts & Scott, 2006). Wren (2003) describes the model as “powerful”. Its practical value is that it highlights the two key areas on which to focus explicit instruction, guided practice and assessment. In the case of decoding, the aim over time is to increase students’ automaticity in phonic decoding and word recognition. In the case of comprehension, the aim is to increase vocabulary and syntactical knowledge and to teach effective strategies for extracting meaning from text. The simple model is thus entirely compatible with the principle proposed by Gilbertson and Ferre (2008) that all assessment must lead to effective intervention. Tan et al. (2007) attest to the value of the model for identifying instructional priorities when working with low-progress readers in remedial contexts.

There have been some suggestions that perhaps the “simple view of reading” should also include a component representing *fluency* in oral reading (Adlof, Catts, & Little, 2006; Joshi & Aaron, 2000; Roberts & Scott, 2006) because fluency seems as closely correlated with overall reading ability as are decoding and comprehension (Carver, 2000; Klinger, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007; Neuman, Ross, & Slaboch, 2008). However, fluency in oral reading is almost entirely dependent upon rapid word recognition and on how easily the material is understood. In other words, fluency is simply a product of efficient decoding and language comprehension, not a separate area of competence. Nevertheless, because much of value can be discovered about a student’s reading strategies through listening to him or her read aloud, a ‘simple view of assessment’ should certainly include attention to oral reading fluency. An Australian study by Galbraith and Clayton (1997) discovered that an alarmingly high 65% of students in Year 4 could not reach mastery level in reading fluency. Undoubtedly, this lack of fluency would have a negative impact on their comprehension of text and on their motivation to read. Sometimes attention to

fluency needs to be a specific focus in a student's literacy program, particularly in terms of increasing rate of reading and expression for those who read much too slowly. The strategy of 'repeated reading' has proved to be a very powerful way of increasing students' fluency and confidence in reading aloud and has much to commend it as sound practice (Mandlebaum, Hodges, & Messenheimer, 2007).

The "simple view of reading" assessment

Based on the points above, a "simple view of reading" assessment for purposes of intervention and tailoring instruction to address individual needs comprises just the following areas of knowledge and skill: phonic decoding ability (including where necessary an assessment of phonological awareness), immediate word recognition, comprehension and fluency.

Checking phonic knowledge and skills

This assessment must cover not only a knowledge of all simple *single* letter-to-sound correspondences but must also extend to automatic recognition of orthographic units represented by commonly occurring groups of letters such as digraphs, consonant blends, prefixes, suffixes and other readily pronounceable components of words. Any gaps in a student's knowledge represent areas of weakness that should be identified and remedied. It is also necessary to check that a student can apply the phonic knowledge he or she possesses to decoding words in print. If phonic skills appear to be significantly weak it may be necessary to assess the student's underlying phonological subskills (see below).

Unfortunately, teachers do not appear to be particularly proficient at the moment in assessing phonic skills at the level of an individual student (Office for Standards in Education, 2008). It is suggested that teacher education courses should provide much more training and *firsthand experience* in this important form of assessment (Al-Otaiba & Lake, 2007).

Checking phonological subskills

With young children (and with older students who appear to have great difficulty in mastering phonic skills) it is necessary to investigate their phonological awareness. There are numerous published tests available for this purpose (e.g. Munro, 1998); but often these tests tend to go into rather too much detail for practical teaching purposes by examining phonological awareness in a variety of forms (e.g. auditory discrimination, phoneme identification, phoneme exchanging, alliteration, rhyming etc). The two phonological skills that are crucial for developing effective decoding and spelling ability are *segmentation* (breaking spoken words down into component sounds) and the reverse skill of *sound blending* (putting a sequence of sounds together to produce a word). These two skills should form the core of phonological assessment because they are easily tested and easily taught. Such teaching results in significantly improved decoding and reading (e.g. Yeh & Connell, 2008). There are many tests available for assessing segmentation and blending, including the Phonemic Segmentation Fluency Test within the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) battery (Good & Kaminiski, 2002) and the Yopp-Singer Test of Phoneme Segmentation (Yopp, 1995).

Checking sight vocabulary

This assessment can be achieved by using one of the readily available lists of the 100 or more most commonly occurring words (e.g. Gunning, 2001; Westwood, 2008a). Regardless of what critics may say about the need to test word recognition always in the context of sentences, in this case presenting each word separately is a perfectly valid and accurate method of determining whether a student in the early stages of learning to read can recognise all the key words instantly. Indeed, if a student can only identify (guess?) a word with the help of context it cannot really be claimed that the word is known.

Checking comprehension

It is obviously essential to check that students are able to extract correct meaning from what they read. Whether or not a passage of text is understood by a reader hinges on a number of factors, the most important being the difficulty level of the text in terms of its underlying concepts, vocabulary, sentence complexity and cohesion (McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2002). Comprehension is also influenced by factors such as word recognition, reading fluency, the students' prior knowledge of the topic addressed in the text and the student's ability to maintain attention and effort to a task without becoming distracted.

Many published tests purporting to measure comprehension are available (e.g. Lamont, 2003; Neale, 1999) and most of these provide a valid overall indication of an individual's level of comprehension. Most tests are not particularly effective, however, in providing detailed information on the different component skills and processes involved in comprehending (e.g. interpretation, prediction, inference, integration of information, reflection, critical thinking) and reveal little about the reader's thought processes while reading (Edwards, Turner, & Mokhtari, 2008; Snyder, Caccamise, & Wise, 2005; Wilson, Martens & Arya, 2005; Woolley, 2008). For this reason, when assessing low-progress readers, a teacher needs to go beyond the scores from such tests to examine individual performance in more detail.

An approach to assessment of comprehension at the individual level can be based on an informal reading inventory. Informal reading inventories – comprising passages of text at different levels of complexity – are invaluable for sampling students' reading abilities across a wide range of genres. Having a student read aloud from suitable passages can provide immediate information on fluency, decoding skills, self-monitoring and self-correction (Nilsson, 2008). Questioning the student before, during and after reading can reveal the extent to which the student understands what is read and can link the information with prior knowledge. It is also possible to observe the strategies the student uses when seeking to make meaning or when meaning is lost. Using informal inventories in this flexible way facilitates a dynamic and interactive approach to assessment. It is possible by such means to find out much more about students' thinking processes and their use of particular strategies for unlocking text (DeBruin-Parecki, 2007; Guterman, 2002). Dynamic assessment of reading usually involves a student in: (1) reading a text aloud; (2) reflecting or commenting on the information; (3) answering questions that cover different aspects or levels of comprehension; and (4) retelling or summarising what was read (Blachowicz, 1999). During this process the teacher can provide as little, or as much, support and guidance (scaffolding) as is necessary in order to

probe the student's capabilities and to determine his or her instructional needs (Macrine & Sabbatino, 2008).

Checking fluency

As indicated above, any assessment of a student's reading ability should include consideration of oral reading fluency. Oral reading fluency – as measured in terms of words read correctly per minute – is easily determined and can provide a powerful pre- and post-intervention measure for detecting reading improvement over time (LeVasseur, Macaruso, & Shankweiler, 2008). Daly, Bonfiglio, Mattson, Persampieri and Foreman-Yates (2006) remark that:

Oral reading fluency is a legitimate instructional target in its own right because it serves as a necessary prerequisite to independent reading comprehension. Indeed, oral reading fluency is the single best measure of reading competence for students learning to read. (p. 323)

Several reading assessment instruments include a fluency measure, most notably DIBELS, an early literacy assessment for kindergarten to Year 3 that is becoming more widely used in Australian contexts (Galletly & Knight, 2006). However, it is a simple matter to investigate reading fluency by using any classroom text material that is at the student's independent reading level.

The “simple view of writing”

The “simple view of reading” has been joined more recently by a “simple view of writing” (Beringer et al., 2002) suggesting that the active creation of written text involves just two areas of skill – lower-order transcription skills such as handwriting and spelling, on the one hand, and the self-regulated thinking and planning that are involved in generating, constructing, sequencing and expressing ideas, on the other. The more automatic the lower-order skills become, the greater will be the cognitive capacity available to the writer for thinking, composing and revising. Assessment may first look specifically at mechanical transcription skills (handwriting, spelling) and must then explore the more important area of students' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies when writing and editing.

Of the lower-order skills, handwriting has been a neglected topic in recent years but is now beginning to attract more research attention (e.g. Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, Moran, & Saddler, 2008; Medwell & Wray, 2007). Even in this age of computers and word processing, handwriting remains an essential skill to be taught in schools. It is reported that some 23% of students have significant difficulties with handwriting (Graham et al., 2008) and that poor handwriting and spelling interfere with the composition process by draining too much cognitive effort away from creative and expressive aspects.

Spelling is now also receiving rather more attention in curriculum policy and assessment documents, in the media and in educational research. Several writers have observed that for the previous 30 years the education system increasingly de-emphasised formal spelling instruction in schools in favour of an incidental approach (e.g. Foorman et al., 2006; Griffiths, 2004; Wallace, 2006). Poor or uncertain spelling can impact negatively on students' writing by making them too cautious over the words they choose to use and by taking attention away from the creative aspects of composing text.

Obviously the cognitive and metacognitive skills and processes involved in expression through writing are more difficult to assess directly and objectively. Assessment in this area not only involves observation of students at work but also necessitates talking with students about the strategies they use when planning, composing and revising. This form of assessment merges very closely with the “conference approach” to writing (Graves, 1983) and satisfies the principle that assessment should combine elements of *assessment of learning* and *assessment for learning* (Edwards et al., 2008).

The “simple view of writing” assessment

Checking handwriting

Assessing a student’s handwriting skills requires careful observation, not only of samples of typical written work produced but also direct observation of the student in the act of writing to note such aspects as grasp of writing instrument, sitting position, rate of writing, letter formation, self-correction and legibility of product. Copperplate neatness is not necessarily the main consideration here; what is important is that the student has a style of writing that he or she finds easy to produce. Automatic and swift writing is closely correlated with the quality and quantity of work a student produces and is also correlated with accuracy in spelling (Cripps, 1990; Graham & Harris, 2005). It is never too late to help students develop an easier style of handwriting and there is evidence that by doing so their written work improves in length and quality (Christensen, 2005). Handwriting can only become swift and automatic if students frequently engage in writing, are motivated to do so and receive relevant corrective feedback.

Checking spelling skills and strategies

Students’ spelling ability can be assessed formally, for example by the use of dictated graded word tests or diagnostic spelling tests, and can also be monitored less formally by examining the errors that are made in students’ unaided written work (Bissaker & Westwood, 2006). The most valuable information for teaching purposes will be obtained by combining both these forms of assessment.

There is, of course, a close and reciprocal relationship between phonic knowledge and spelling ability, in that the encoding of words requires careful attention to sounds within words and to matching these sounds to appropriate groups of letters (Ehri, 2000; Westwood, 2008b). When a student’s spelling is particularly weak it is advisable to assess his or her phonemic awareness and to check phonic skills as suggested above under reading.

Talking with students about their strategies for learning new words, for tackling difficult words and for proofreading and self-correcting errors will reveal much about their strengths and weaknesses and their specific instructional needs (Apel & Masterson, 2001).

Checking writing strategies

To discover how students approach the task of writing, it is necessary to create relaxed situations where they can reflect upon and discuss together with the teacher, their own methods for tackling various forms of writing, ranging from expository

style to descriptive and creative topics (Liu, Parker, & Lara, 2001). Teachers need to use enabling-type questions to probe this area; for example:

- When you have chosen your topic, how do you then begin to work?
- Do you plan the whole story first, or do you just start writing?
- What do you think are the most important things to consider when you write?
- Is it a good idea to change sentences or ideas around as you write and when you have completed a story or report? Why?
- What do you do when you get stuck for ideas?

Assessment at the individual student level will reveal those most in need of additional strategy training for writing purposes and who need more frequent and descriptive feedback and guidance from the teacher. Studies have shown conclusively that teaching students effective strategies for different forms of writing results in significant improvement (e.g. Graham & Harris, 2005).

Conclusion

The key purpose of assessment in literacy is to provide teachers with accurate information concerning the knowledge, skills and strategies that individual students have already acquired. Armed with this knowledge, teachers are in a strong position to provide instruction that will help each and every student progress to the next level of competence. In this paper it is argued that to obtain this information most easily and most accurately in the domain of reading it is desirable to focus directly on the main interrelated processes involved, namely word recognition, phonic decoding, fluency and comprehension. In the domain of writing, the focus should be upon the strategies the writer already knows and uses and on the lower-order transcription skills. By focusing directly on these key processes and skills and by using tests and tasks specifically designed to reveal competence or lack of competence in fundamental skills, teachers can gain much more accurate information than they would obtain from informal holistic observation of students at work on so-called ‘authentic’ tasks. Van Kraayenoord, Barnett, Roberts and Moni (1999) comment that, “Unless teachers take an analytic and diagnostic approach to individual students’ responses to the [assessment task], the information gained about students’ strengths and weaknesses may not be very precise or useful for instructional purposes” (p. 67). They also comment that teachers appear to use many ways of assessing students’ abilities, but not all of these are really effective for guiding the teaching program.

Coyne and Harn (2006) observe that assessment practices contribute to higher levels of literacy achievement only when they (1) answer important questions for teachers and schools and (2) enable informed, data-based instructional decisions to be made. The “simple view of assessment”, as described in this paper, will indeed answer important questions for the teacher and will assist with instructional decision making far more effectively than the alternative holistic and highly subjective approach.

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