LITERACY EVALUATIONS AND THE DYSLEXIC STUDENT

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Reading Really Is “Rocket Science”
(Dr. Louisa Moats)

• The ability to assess content from printed text involves a complex interplay of underlying skills and abilities.
• The ultimate objective for any literacy evaluation is therefore to determine where that process is breaking down, identifying any areas requiring targeted (or even specialized) instruction.

How Do We Comprehend?

Before specific comprehension strategies can readily be applied, certain precursor skills must be intact. ALL MUST BE ASSESSED!

Comprehension Strategies

Prior Knowledge
Language Skills (including Vocabulary)
Word Recognition Fluency/"efficiency" (Speed + Accuracy)
Pre-literacy Skills (e.g., phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, reading conventions, etc.)
What About Dyslexia?

“Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction.”


Simple View Of Reading

(Gough and Tunmer, 1986)

Word Recognition (Accuracy and Automaticity)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good Word Recognition</th>
<th>Poor Word Recognition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good Language Comprehension</td>
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Assessment Scoring

• **Standardized assessments** are scored relative to a student’s “population” (by age or grade).
  ➢ Indicate how a student performs relative to same-age (or sometimes same-grade) peers.

• **Criterion-referenced assessments** provide scores pertaining to specific tasks.
  ➢ Use to systematically look at patterns of errors in order to isolate specific instructional needs.

**BOTH ARE CRITICAL!!**
Why is Phonological Awareness Important?

- Reading/spelling are language-based activities, involving a continuum of skills (Phonological Awareness) – ranging from rhyming and isolating word & syllables, to sound (phoneme) isolation & manipulation.
- Proficient decoders and spellers understand that words are made up of sounds (phonemes), and are able to isolate and manipulate these phonemes within words (Phonemic Awareness).
- Typically the origin of struggles for dyslexics.

Phonological Awareness Continuum

[Adapted from “Phonological Awareness Instructional and Assessment Guidelines,” D. J. Chard and S. V. Dickson, 1999]

Assessing Phonological Awareness

- Should be done on purely phonological (sound-based) level.
- Can be assessed be a variety of professionals (psychologist, SLP, Reading/Special Education Teacher).
- Assessment tools include:
  - CTOPP-2 (Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing);
  - The PAT-2 (Phonological Awareness Test) – standardized only through ages 3-9;
  - The KTEA-3 (Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement);
  - The Intermediate Phonological Awareness & Reading Profile (non-standardized, typically for secondary level students).
Why are Word Recognition Skills Important?

- There are over 1 million words in the English language!
- Proficient readers possess an adequate sight word vocabulary, and the ability to read unfamiliar words through a mastery of:
  - The sound/s associated with various letters and letter patterns (Sound-Symbol Correspondences); and
  - The orthographic patterns governing how letters are arranged in words.
  - Both tend to be areas of difficulty for dyslexic individuals.
- Even seemingly “minor” word reading errors can dramatically impact the meaning of printed text.
- Spelling (encoding) is the “inverse” of reading, necessitating a mastery of phonetic concepts.

Assessing Word Recognition and Spelling (Including Phonetic) Skills

- Must assess a student’s ability to read/spell both phonetically regular and irregular words – including made-up words.
- Important information can also be gleaned through an error analysis across all reading assessments and activities.
  
  **Often the pattern of errors is as important as the scores.**

Assessing Word Recognition/Spelling (cont’d)

- Commonly used assessments include:
  - Standardized Achievement “Batteries” (WIAT-III, WJ-Ach-III, KTEA-3);
  - Skill Inventories, Criterion-Referenced (WADE, Gallistel-Ellis Test of Coding Skills, CORE Assessments) and Standardized (WIST);
  - Standardized Reading/Writing Assessments (GORT-5, WRMT-III, TOWL-4);
  - Informal Reading Inventories (e.g., the QRI-6 and Jerry Johns) – non-standardized, more curriculum-related, similar to what would be encountered in the classroom.
Why is Fluency Important?

- Takes into account both speed and accuracy, making it an indicator of reading “efficiency” or automaticity.
- Is critical to maximizing comprehension:
  - Fluent readers read with meaning, with appropriate phrasing and intonation/prosody.
  - Non-fluent readers must devote so much attention to the word identification process that little or no capacity is available for applying critical comprehension strategies—especially for students with dyslexia, who tend to have more limited working memory capacity.
- Typically very weak for dyslexic individuals.

Assessing Fluency

- Fluency should be checked—and recorded—at regular intervals.
- Utilize a variety of assessment tools to assess the various, intertwined, facets of fluency, focusing on:
  - **Reading rate**—typically as words per minute (wpm);
  - **Reading accuracy**—both the percentage of words correctly, and correct words per minute (referred to as cwpm or wcpm); and
  - **Prosody**—including phrasing and intonation/inflection, reflecting spontaneous speech.

Assessing Fluency (cont’d)

- **Standardized** measures of reading fluency provide less frequent but more precise measures of reading rate and accuracy relative to same-age/grade peers over time.
  - Examples include the **GORT-5**: the Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE-2), Test of Silent Word Reading Fluency (TSWRF), Test of Silent Contextual Reading Fluency (TSCRF); plus Achievement “Batteries” (WIAT-III, WJ-Ach-III, KTEA-3).
  - Repetition permitted varies by assessment, but typically not done more than one time/year. All have multiple forms.
  - The **TOWRE-2** also includes made-up words.
### Assessing Fluency (cont’d)

- **Reading inventories** can provide supplemental measures of wpm and cwpm for more lengthy and content-specific passages – similar to what would be encountered in class.
  - Examples include the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI-6) and Jerry Johns Basic Reading Inventory.
  - Can be repeated as frequently as desired, but only a limited number of passages are provided at each grade level.
  - Implementation time varies by passage length (generally longer for older students).
  - Uses grade-leveled text, both narrative and more technical (expository). The QRI-6 contains specific Literature, Science, and Social Studies passages.

### Assessing Fluency (cont’d)

- **Standard progress monitoring** tools offer quick, reliable measures of reading rate and accuracy (wpm and cwpm) on an ongoing basis.
  - Examples include the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) or AIMSWeb.
  - Typically done weekly or bi-weekly.
  - Takes <5 minutes to implement/record.
  - Measurements include Oral Reading Fluency, Nonsense Word Fluency, and Initial Sound Fluency.
  - Should be viewed in terms of trend lines, as fluctuations are to be expected.

### Assessing Fluency (cont’d)

- Don’t forget to assess prosody as well, including:
  - **Inflection/intonation** - does the student read as if s/he were speaking? Does it sound “flat”?
  - **Phrasing** – does the student pause appropriately based on punctuation?
  - **Pacing** – does the student adjust his/her reading pace based on the denseness and complexity of the text?
  - Does the student appear to be **engaged** in the text?
  - Often the best way to assess prosody is to listen to the student read without looking at the text.
Why is Vocabulary Important?

- Receptive vocabulary is the greatest predictor of reading potential.
- For unknown words, the reader must rely entirely on decoding strategies.
- Not surprisingly, comprehension improves as a function of vocabulary instruction.
- Dyslexic students frequently have strong vocabularies – although a weak vocabulary can be a secondary consequence, due to “reduced reading experience” (IDA, “Definition of Dyslexia”, 2018).

Assessing Vocabulary

- Receptive vocabulary is often most critical to assess.
- Typically implemented by Speech & Language Pathologist, although embedded in certain reading/writing assessments.
- Commonly used assessments include:
  - Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) – receptive;
  - Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT) – expressive;
  - “Embedded” measures – KTEA-3 (Reading Vocabulary), Test of Written Language (TOWL-4).

Why Is Comprehension Important?

- Comprehension is an active, complex process, involving a variety of skills.
- The ability to access content from text is the ultimate purpose of reading.
- Typically an area of strength for dyslexic individuals, although reading comprehension performance can be weak due to difficulties with foundational skills (especially word recognition and fluency) – or as a secondary consequence of dyslexia, due to “reduced reading experience” (IDA, “Definition of Dyslexia”, 2018).
Assessing Comprehension

• Comprehension is notoriously difficult to assess.
  - There is no single measure of "reading comprehension" – it varies by
text length and type.
  - Other contributing factors – such as decoding difficulties, a weak
vocabulary and a limited knowledge of syntax – must first be ruled out.
  - Bright students are often able to correctly guess the answer to
questions without even reading the text.
  - Prior knowledge (or a lack thereof) can impact scores significantly –
dyslexic students frequently use as a compensatory strategy.
• For dysfluent readers, focus especially on listening
comprehension skills – although many students also struggle
with attention, which makes extended listening difficult.

Assessing Comprehension (cont’d)

• Commonly used assessments include:
  - Standardized Achievement “Batteries” (WIAT-III, WI-Ach-
III, KTEA-3);
  - Standardized Reading Assessments (GORT-5, WRMT-III);
  - Reading Comprehension Assessments (TORC, GSRT);
  - Informal Reading Inventories (e.g., the QRI-6 and Jerry
Johns) – non-standardized, more curriculum-related,
similar to what would be encountered in the classroom.
• Look for examples of applications of specific
comprehension strategies (e.g., deriving the main
idea, making inferences), to isolate any struggles.

Other Critical Skills

• Prior Knowledge:
  - Can enhance comprehension – but only when drawn upon
appropriately.
• Working Memory: the amount of information an
individual can mentally manipulate simultaneously.
  - Required for both the application of non-mastered
phonetic concepts and comprehension strategies;
  - Tends to be weak for individuals with dyslexia.
• Phonological Memory: the # of sounds an individual
can retain (e.g., /s - p - l - ā – t/ in splat).
  - Involved in decoding/encoding longer words.
Other Critical Skills (cont’d)

• **Rapid Automated Naming (RAN):** the ability to rapidly name familiar visual symbols (e.g., letters and numbers).
  ➢ Struggles are frequently indicative of reading struggles – likely a reflection of how well a student either can retrieve phonological information, or integrate auditory, visual, and verbal modalities. However, it can also reflect attentional, executive functioning, language, or even math issues. 
  ➢ Tends to be weak for individuals with dyslexia, likely impacting their ability to master sound-symbol correspondences and word patterns (e.g., syllables and morphemes).

• **Executive Functioning:** mental skills that help the brain organize and act on information – to plan, organize, remember, prioritize, initiate, pay attention, and problem-solve.
  ➢ Frequently weak in students with attentional and learning issues.

Separating the “What” from the “Why”

• **Diagnostic assessments** provide the “why” – a “label” for the disability (e.g., dyslexia or dysgraphia).
  ➢ Often critical in qualifying for services;
  ➢ Can help determine what specific services a student requires, especially with regard to intensity.

• **Instructional assessments** provide the “what” – what specific skills a student has, and where s/he struggles.
  ➢ Critical for defining the scope & sequence of instruction, other required supports, and for finding a matched group of peers.

• **Progress monitoring** charts performance on a frequent, ongoing basis.

Although “labels” help drive services, it is the “what” that defines his/her individualized education program.

What About Writing?

• In the same way that reading comprehension ability is impeded by poor/dysfluent word identification, written expression requires a mastery of foundational spelling skills, plus syntactical and grammatical structures.
  ➢ Often dyslexic students struggle with writing because they are focused on spelling (or limit their word use to those words they can spell) or other “mechanics” of writing.

• **Commonly used assessments include:**
  ➢ Standardized Achievement “Batteries” (WIAT-III, WJ-Ach-III, KTEA-3);
  ➢ The Test of Written Language (TOWL-4).
Putting it All Together

• The ability to assess content from printed text involves the interplay of various underlying skills and abilities.

• No Single Assessment – Or Assessment Type – Can Paint A Complete Picture Of A Child’s Reading Ability Or Progress!