

Dear Readers,

We are very pleased to introduce our fourth series of *Teaching Reading in Brief*, **Reading Assessment**. The first three articles in this four-part volume were suggested and authored by Dr. Melissa Farrall, who has long advocated for demystifying the assessments used in progress-monitoring assessments as well as in comprehensive psychoeducational evaluations. Her vision is for all members of a student's team to understand the terminology of reading assessment and fully contribute to developing a learning plan that will successfully teach the student to read. In the fourth article, Dr. Bruce Rosow discusses the invaluable assessment practice of conducting and analyzing students' performance on spelling inventories. Students' spelling opens a window to their phonological, orthographic, and morphological skills, thus providing critical information for designing effective classroom instruction and intervention. In January 2025, the Vermont Agency of Education published its *Review and Recommendations: K-3 Universal Reading Screeners Per Act 139*, which states:

Most screeners recommend that all educators within a school building be trained in screener administration and data analysis. This collaborative approach allows schools and districts to administer screeners efficiently and effectively.

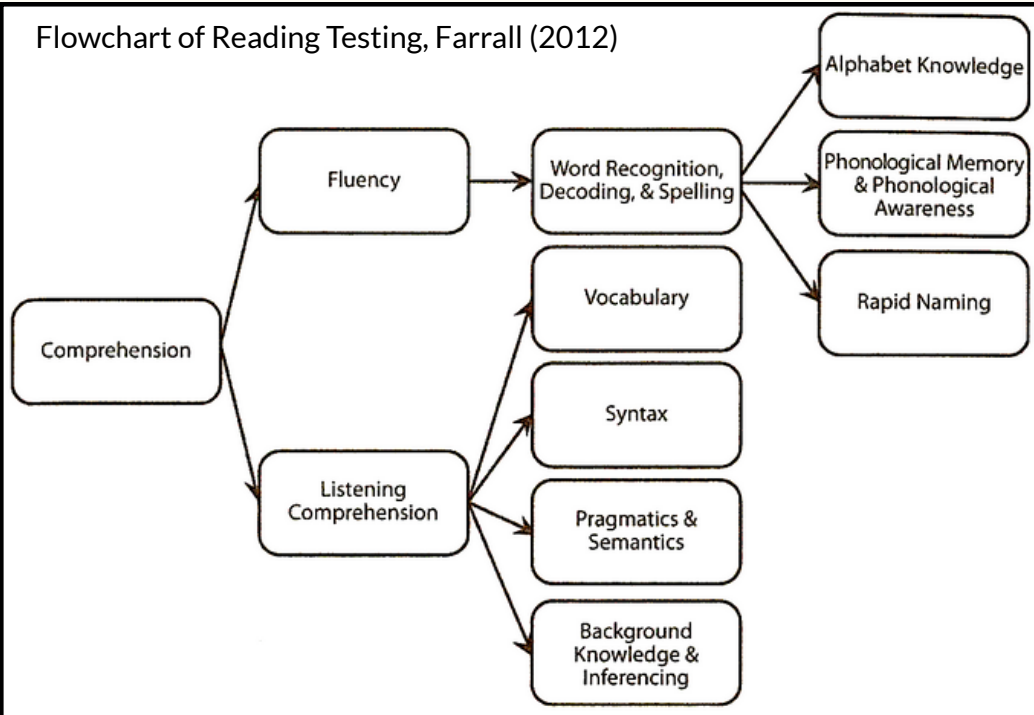
This recommendation for all educators to become skilled in administering valid, reliable assessments and analyzing student results is the core reason for our series, Reading Assessment. Both Drs. Farrall and Rosow delve into the complex skills involved in reading. They separate the discrete skills underlying The Simple View of Reading, $\text{Decoding} \times \text{Language Comprehension} = \text{Reading Comprehension}$ (Gough and Tunmer (1986), and explain how each component contributes to the ultimate goal of reading comprehension. Farrall's (2012) Flowchart of Reading Assessments below makes clear each of the areas that a comprehensive reading assessment/evaluation should include. Not only do we hope you enjoy reading this series, we encourage you to bring your new knowledge

about assessments, such as the Bell Curves, criterion- and norm-referenced tests, stanines, nonsense word decoding, Rapid Automatized Naming, Words Correct Per Minute, and much more, to your school meetings. This knowledge should help you make evidence-aligned decisions when planning reading instruction, intervention, and services for students.

Sincerely,

Brenda Warren and Dorinne Dorfman, Editors

Flowchart of Reading Testing, Farrall (2012)





TEACHING READING IN BRIEF

READING ASSESSMENT

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The Role of Assessment

by Melissa Lee Farrall, PhD

Sometimes educators contemplate assessment with a heavy heart. Assessment seems inconvenient. It takes valuable time away from instruction, and reports are often couched in statistics, jargon, and technical terminology.

Assessments, however, can be so much more than scientific terms and numbers on a page. They provide a lens through which we can measure student performance. When properly conceptualized, assessments and evaluations permit us to document strengths and weaknesses in a way that goes well beyond informal observation. Assessments help us understand the skills our students have, what skills they need to work on, and whether they are meeting our hopes and expectations for progress. Assessments also help us understand how students are performing with respect to their peers.

Have you watched

The Reading League Vermont 2025 Adolescent Literacy Leadership Webinar Series?

Last August TRL-VT hosted the second annual literacy leadership webinar, featuring four inspiring, evidence-aligned presentations by a wide range of professionals: WRVSU Superintendent **Jamie Kinnarney**, psychologist **Abby Roy**, literacy facilitator **Dr. Julie Brown**, and speech-pathologists **Cara Arduengo, Emily Detzer & Jennifer Conforti**. Your colleagues and you can watch these as well as the 2024 series free online at the [TRL-VT website](https://www.trlvt.org/).

This series of *Teaching Reading in Brief* discusses the assessment of students' reading and writing skills from kindergarten through twelfth grade. In this first issue, we will examine the basics of assessment. We will review different types of tests, the language used by evaluators, scoring systems, and the assessment of English Language Learners. The second issue will delve into the assessment of phonological processing, decoding, and encoding, which culminates in proficient reading fluency. The third issue will focus on assessing vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. The fourth issue delve into the analysis of student spelling errors to inform instruction.

Understanding the basics of different types of tests will give you greater confidence in your ability to support your students. A command of scoring systems and how those scores are derived will help you play a more significant role in team meetings devoted to the selection and interpretation of different tests, and, most important of all, what the results mean for instruction.

Curious Question

Why does English have so many irregular past-tense verbs, such as ***break/broke, buy/bought, or fly/flew***, as compared to regular conjugations like ***shop/shopped or walk/walked***?

But first, a little linguistic housekeeping is needed. Assessment terminology can be a little confusing, because different authorities use the terms in different ways. A **test** refers to a specific instrument used to determine how a student is functioning. The scope of an assessment can vary. It can be a single test, such as the *Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing, Second Edition (Pro-Ed)*. It can also be an entire battery of tests used to learn about the foundational skills that make reading comprehension possible. The term **evaluation** can also vary in scope. In the State of Vermont, it typically refers to an assemblage of tests that provide comprehensive information about a student's academic, language, cognitive, and behavioral skills.

The Tools of the Trade

There are two main ways to measure student performance in reading and language: criterion-referenced tests and norm-referenced tests. They each serve different purposes.

Criterion-Reference Tests

Criterion-referenced tests are the major tools classroom educators use to judge student performance. They help educators determine the degree to which students have mastered the skills within a particular area of study. The area of study can be expansive, such as the causes of World War II, or it can be finite, such as the VC syllable pattern. An example of a designated state criterion-referenced test is the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

Criterion-referenced tests provide various results, such as a letter grade, a rubric score, a percentage, or the number correct out of the total number attempted. Letter grades, awarded based on an overall impression, can be subjective. Rubrics and checklists provide specific criteria for scoring, which helps educators be consistent when scoring student work.

Mastery

The use of a percentage (the number correct out of the total number attempted) raises a question about what constitutes mastery. This question is important because the ease with which skills are mastered determines the pace of instruction and when an educator can move from one lesson to the next.

There is significant variation in how educators view mastery. In the domain of decoding, 95% accuracy is often considered to be mastery. While we might be tempted to think that this is a high and lofty goal, small gaps in decoding skills can undermine efforts to read fluently. Reading text with fluency presumes absolute accuracy and automaticity in lower-level skills (Kilpatrick, 2019). For example, on the criterion-based Acadience Oral Reading Fluency assessment, a minimum of 98% accuracy is considered mastery (benchmark) by the end of 4th grade. In contrast, we might accept a lesser percentage of correct responses to questions related to reading comprehension, since higher-level comprehension skills are not considered foundational.

Progress Monitoring

Progress-monitoring systems also fall within the realm of criterion-referenced tests. Progress monitoring refers to the assessment of student progress on a frequent basis as a screening for learning difficulty or response to instruction. Progress monitoring is an important tool for assessing student progress as it provides data that goes beyond the binary world of mastery. Progress monitoring documents which skills have been learned. When students can perform foundational skills with ease, less working memory is required for reading, spelling, and vocabulary, which allows them to focus on higher-level skills, such as writing composition. Progress monitoring tools include *Dynamic Inventory of Basic Early Monitoring Skills (8th edition)* and *Acadience Reading*.

Table 1: Progress Monitoring Highlights and Limitations

Highlights	Limitations
Measures response to instruction over the short term	Cannot be used for evaluation purposes
Documents the ease (automaticity) with which skills are learned and executed	Insufficient sample to determine mastery of specific skills
Can predict performance with respect to end-of-the-year benchmarks	Must monitor the same skills that are being taught
Takes little time away from instruction	Presumes a standard rate of learning
Easy to administer and score	Sometimes results in a focus on speed over accuracy and comprehension

Standardized Norm-Referenced Tests

Standardized, norm-referenced tests serve a different purpose. They do not speak to mastery, and they may not be particularly helpful in lesson planning. Standardized, norm-referenced tests are routinely used to measure academic achievement, speech and language skills, and intellectual functioning. These tests answer questions about individual strengths and weaknesses, and how a student is performing in comparison to their peer group (the norm-based group). Standardized, norm-referenced tests can be used in conjunction with other sources of information in order to determine the presence of an educational disability or specific diagnosis. Standardized, norm-referenced tests include the *Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing, 2nd Edition* and the *Wechsler Individual Achievement Tests, 4th Edition*.

The terms standardized and norm-referenced are a mouthful, and it would be helpful to unpack their meaning. The adjective *standardized* tells us that children undergoing an evaluation will experience each test in the same way, with the same tasks, directions, prompts, and time limits. Standardization is important because only in this manner can we actually make a comparison between the student's performance and that of their peers.

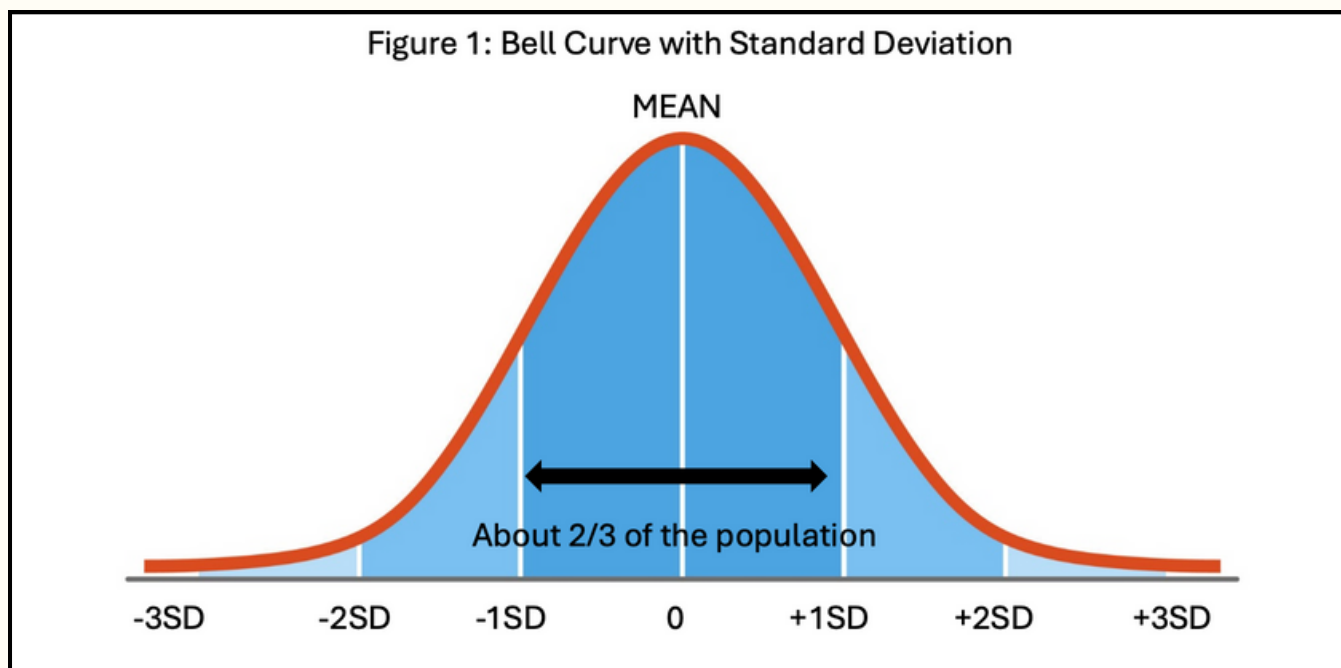
In a standardized test, the rules for test administration are carefully scripted; evaluators study these rules to ensure flawless test administration. Evaluators also do their best to provide an environment for testing that is free from distraction. Certain test items, such as those involving phonological or working memory tasks, cannot be repeated. Therefore, interruptions during testing can inadvertently result in tests that are "spoiled" and cannot be readministered.

Once we are assured that our students will have a standardized experience, we can then focus on the comparison itself. A norm-referenced test is one in which the student's performance is compared to a norm group, either by age or by grade. When using age norms, a student who is seven years old is compared to other 7-year-old students. When using grade norms, a student in second grade is compared to other students in second-grade classrooms. Most of the time, when we are measuring reading, writing, and language skills, we use age norms (Farrall, 2012).

The Bell Curve

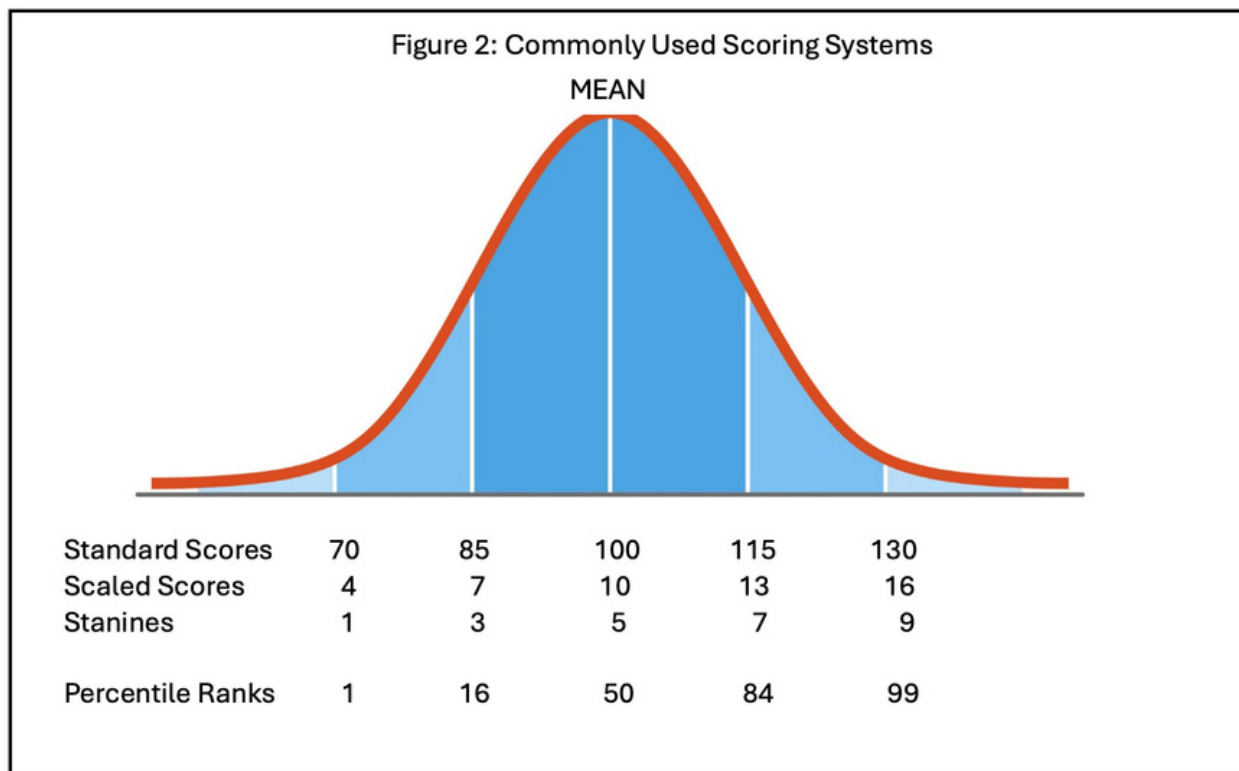
One of the most important concepts in norm-referenced testing is the bell curve. It is the bell curve that brings clarity to the scores that these tests generate. The bell curve was initially conceptualized by a French mathematician and gambler, Abraham de Moivre (1667-1754), who realized that events group around an average value (the mean) and that these events vary in accordance with a law of nature that we now identify as standard deviation.

The bell curve, also referred to as the "normal curve," reflects the reality that there are more average events than extreme ones. We have, for example, more average baseball players than exceptional ones. The bell curve enables us to reach a common understanding when interpreting and discussing student performance on a norm-referenced test.



The results of a standardized, norm-referenced test are communicated in terms of scoring systems that reflect placement on the bell curve. Different tests may use several different scoring systems. The use of different scoring systems is equivalent to converting between inches, feet, and yards. We can get the same information from equivalent units of different sizes.

The Most Commonly Used Scoring Systems



The term **standard scores** can be confusing to novices because it has two different meanings. First and foremost, standard scores refers to the category of scoring systems used with norm-referenced tests. “Standard scores” also refer to equal units that can be mathematically manipulated to compare scores over time. As a result, they can be used to measure progress.

Table 2: Type of standard score	Mean	Standard Deviation	The range that captures the middle 2/3 of the population
Standard Score	100	±15	85 to 115
Scaled Score	10	±3	7 to 13
Stanine	5	±≈2	3 to 7

Percentile Ranks

Percentile ranks are different from standard scores; they are not equal units. They do not measure skill with respect to the mean; they show the percentage of students who earn a particular score. A 3rd grader who earns a 60th percentile rank demonstrates skill that is better than or equal to 60% of the 3rd graders in the norming sample. This 60th percentile rank is a healthy, desirable score, and should not be confused with 60% on a spelling test, which is typically a failing grade.

Age- and Grade- Equivalents

At last, we come to age- and grade-equivalents. Age and grade equivalents are *not* what they appear to be. Despite their seductive appeal, they have little to do with what actually happens in a particular grade level classroom or at a particular age. Age- and grade-equivalents are based on the average grade or age placement of all the students in the norming sample who earned the same raw score (Farrall, p. 66).

Labeling Systems

Labels provide a way to categorize student performance that appeals to educators and parents alike. At a team meeting, it is not unusual to discuss the average or below-average performance of a student. Although there is some general agreement that the term average reflects the middle two-thirds of the population, test publishers are not consistent with one another. It is possible that a standard score of 89 may be designated by one test publisher as average, but designated by another as low average, and yet another as below average. It is helpful to use a common system when discussing the results of each test administered. The table below represents one possible way of labeling scores:

Table 3: Sample System for Labeling Scores				
Level of Performance	Standard	Scaled	Percentile Rank	Stanine
Very High	≥130	≥16	≥98	9
High	122–129	15	93–97	8
Above Average	116–121	14	85–92	7
High Average	111–115	13	76–84	6
Average	90–110	8–12	25–75	5
Low Average	85–89	7	16–24	4
Below Average	79–84	6	8–15	3
Well Below Average	71–78	5	3–7	2
Extremely Low	≤70	≤4	≤2	1

The term average does not mean that our student presents without needs. It is possible to meet the requirements for an average score and still have significant gaps in instruction that require assistance.

Reliability and Validity

Evaluators often engage in discussions of reliability and validity when reviewing new tests. It is their responsibility to ensure that the tests used will provide information that will be helpful in making educational decisions. Given the high stakes involved in assessing our students, we need to know that the tests we use are supported by evidence.

The term **reliability** refers to the dependability or consistency of a test. In order to have confidence in a given test, we must have evidence that the test will provide comparable results under similar conditions. Reliability is a consequence of several factors that include the skill set sampled, the length of the test, how well the directions for administration are written, and whether different evaluators can administer and score the test with the same results.

Validity refers to the collective body of evidence that a test measures what it is supposed to measure. The research provided by a test publisher helps evaluators determine what can be learned from a given test and what types of conclusions can be drawn. It is possible that a reliable test may not be valid. One gloomy example from seventeenth-century Salem was how they identified “witches” using a variety of tests that may have been reliable, but these were certainly not valid (Farrall, 2012).

Standard Error of Measurement

Since there is no such thing as a perfect test, interpreting a student’s scores in an evaluation requires a certain amount of humility. Despite what a test publisher may claim, there is no one test that will measure all the important skills that support the development of reading comprehension.

While we often speak in terms of specific scores (for example, he earned a standard score of 90 on the Reading Comprehension subtest), we cannot really establish a student’s performance with exactitude. We use the *standard error of measurement* (SEM) to discuss the measurement error that is present in the scores obtained in any test administration. Think of it as the wiggle room associated with any test score. The SEM for each test, composite, and subtest can be found in the test manual.

Because there is no such thing as a perfect test, we can never ever really obtain a perfect measure of a student’s performance.

Standardized, norm-referenced tests have a degree of imprecision (the SEM), which means we cannot obtain a student’s true score. Yet all is not lost. Test publishers permit us to speak with different degrees of confidence bands of 68%, 90%, or 95%. When we use a confidence band of 68%, we say that we have a 68% chance of capturing the student’s true score within our confidence interval (CI). Many evaluators use 90% or even 95% confidence intervals, to increase the level of confidence of accuracy in reporting the student’s scores. These larger confidence intervals, however, often result in a range of scores that is so large as to be, practically speaking, useless.

How Scores are Presented in a Report

Table 4: Sample Reading Test (SRT)	Standard Score	90% CI	Percentile Rank	Label
SRT Decoding Composite	90	84 to 96	25	Average
SRT Letter & Word Recognition	92	84 to 100	30	Average
SRT Nonsense Word Decoding	88	80 to 96	21	Low Average

During an evaluation, student scores can be presented in tables organized by skill and accompanied by an explanation of the tasks. Some evaluators organize their tables by test; others will organize their tables by domain, such as all the subtests that measure aspects of phonological processing. Typically, evaluators provide the score as generated by the test or subtest, the percentile rank, the confidence interval, and a label (for example, below average or average range). For each subtest, the evaluator should provide the following:

- a description of what the student did
- a description of what the student did not do
- a discussion of any noteworthy behaviors
- an explanation of why the skill is important

Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

We cannot discuss test design and administration without also keeping in mind the diversity of our population. Best practice in the assessment of English Language Learners (ELLs) requires that evaluations be performed by professionals who are knowledgeable about second-language acquisition, native language, literacy issues in the home, and test development. These professionals should also be versed in the acculturation process, how to support literacy development in the home, and how to conduct an evaluation in a manner that is culturally sensitive and respectful.

English-language learners are no exception to the research stating that both oral language proficiency and fluent decoding are critical for reading comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Their path to literacy may involve years of language experience and instruction. It may take ELLs anywhere from 1 to 10 years to acquire a native-like proficiency in English. Factors that affect the acquisition of English include, but are not limited to, the age of immigration, access to preschool and formal schooling in the country of birth, literacy in the home, poverty, and the need and availability of health services (Garcia, 2000).

Second language acquisition is typically discussed in terms of two thresholds of competence: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cumins, 1991). BICS is a highly modified form of the English language that is used for informal conversations and social interactions. CALP is the level of language skill needed to function academically and acquire content area knowledge.

Table 5: A Comparison of BICS and CALP	
BICS	CALP
develops between 6 months and 2 years	5 to 7 years in development
everyday social interactions	written or oral academic language
outside of school, on the playground	classroom-based; gained through instruction
spontaneous	organized into logical structures
unsophisticated vocabulary	specialized content area vocabulary
cognitively undemanding	dense in content; presumes background knowledge and higher-level thinking skills

ELLs and Phonological Awareness

As luck would have it, phonological awareness transcends language differences (Gersten & Geva, 2003). The development of early reading skills is more dependent on phonological awareness, rapid naming, and instruction than on actual English-language proficiency (Geva, Yaghoub-Zadeh, & Schuster, 2000; Lesaux & Siegel, 2003). ELLS develop their reading skill in English on the same foundation and in the same way as native English speakers. Phonological awareness and decoding instruction need not be and should not be deferred until such time as language skills are developed. When teachers understand the relationship between the speech sounds of the native language and the second language, they can adjust their instruction accordingly and teach any unfamiliar sounds or sound combinations that may cause difficulty (Geva, 2000).

Facts on the assessment of basic reading skills for ELLs:

1. An evaluation should include a thorough history that reviews the child’s language development in both the native language and the second language.
2. Parent and teacher interviews will help educators and specialists understand the acquisition of developmental and academic milestones, language usage in different settings, and opportunities for literacy instruction and experience.

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ELLs and Phonological Awareness *(continued)*

3. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 et seq.), all children are to be evaluated in their native language whenever possible.

4. Standardized norm-referenced tests cannot be translated. The process of translating a test violates standardization. There are some standardized tests that have been translated into Spanish by the publisher.

5. Many tests of academic skills are biased; they presume a certain background knowledge and command of the culture (Kritikos, 2003; Sattler, & Hoge, 2006). Test bias can be reduced by focusing on processing abilities, which include short-term and working memory, nonsense word repetition, and auditory perception, rather than on acquired knowledge, i.e., vocabulary and factual information (Campbell, Dollaghan, Needleman, & Janosky, 1997).

6. Geva (2000), an authority on assessment and instruction for ELLs, recommends assessing phonological awareness, as well as basic reading skills. Geva suggests that a comparison of L2 (English) listening comprehension and reading comprehension will permit evaluators to determine reading challenges that are due to decoding skills and not just the difficulties associated with learning English (Geva, 2000). The profiles below illustrate what can be learned from adding listening comprehension to a reading evaluation.

L2 Listening Comprehension = L2 Reading Comprehension suggests an ability to access content in print. These students are able to use their verbal thinking skills in a manner commensurate with their word recognition, thus increasing their potential for understanding what they read.

L2 Listening Comprehension > L2 Reading Comprehension suggests difficulty accessing content in print due to an inability to read the words. This is the profile that we would see in students with reading difficulties, though likely not with oral language barriers.

7. A final note: A challenge with the acquisition of English is not to be considered an actual disability unless there is an impairment in the native language as well (Willig, 1986). If, for example, an ELL student can decode while reading in Spanish, but not in English, they cannot be learning-disabled.

Closing

Understanding the basics of assessment provides more opportunities for educators to play a greater role in supporting students. In-depth knowledge of the various types of tests and their purposes enables educators to make more informed decisions about what tools they will use for assessment. Additionally, this knowledge equips educators to make better instructional recommendations based on the test results.

Please see the Appendix section for more information about assessment terminology.

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Answer to this issue's Curious Question:

These “strong verbs,” or irregular verbs, are holdouts from Anglo-Saxon verb forms. Many of these verb forms disappeared as Anglo-Saxon absorbed many loan words, especially after the Norman Conquest in 1066, when French became England’s official language for the next 300 years. Here are some past-tense verbs that were once strong, but have since become “weak” (a.k.a. regular) conjugations.

<i>Present Tense</i>	<i>Prior Past Tense</i>	<i>Current Past Tense</i>
<i>ache</i>	<i>oke</i>	<i>ached</i>
<i>climb</i>	<i>clomb</i>	<i>climbed</i>
<i>laugh</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>laughed</i>
<i>row</i>	<i>rewe</i>	<i>rowed</i>
<i>step</i>	<i>stope</i>	<i>stepped</i>

Meet the Writer and Editors



Melissa Farrall, PhD

Dr. Melissa Farrall is the author of *Reading Assessment: Linking Language, Literacy, and Cognition*, and the co-author of *All About Tests & Assessments* published by Wrightslaw. Melissa Farrall recently retired as Director for Evaluation at the Stern Center for Language and Learning in Williston, Vermont. Melissa also held an appointment as a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Neurological Sciences at the Robert Larner College of Medicine at the University of Vermont where she trained medical professionals about learning disabilities and reading. She continues to train evaluators and teaches courses on the assessment of reading, writing, and language through the Stern Center and Vermont State University.

In the past, Melissa taught the structure of language and assessment in the Language and Literacy program at Simmons College in Boston, MA, and at The Reading Institute in Williamstown, MA. She worked as a learning disability specialist in the public schools for several years. Dr. Farrall received her doctorate from Brown University in 1981 in the area of Slavic Linguistics. She received her Master's Degree from Rivier College in Learning Disabilities in 1994, and her certification as a Specialist in the Assessment of Intellectual Functioning in 1999.

Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction*.



Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., OG/A, has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.