

Reviewed by Jennifer Jordan
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The author of *Reading Assessment: Linking Language, Literacy, and Cognition* in the opening pages lays out the intended purpose of this book and the targeted audience. She claims this book is designed as a graduate-level text in a reading assessment or general assessment course. She goes on to state:

> Evaluators who wish to assess reading skill require expertise not only in statistics, test development, test administration, and the precepts of good report writing; they also require expertise in how reading develops and in the complexities of reading comprehension. In particular, evaluators

require a knowledge of the structure of language, for language is the stuff from which print is made. (p. 3)

The book is organized from more general topics to more specific. The beginning looks at the role language plays in one’s ability to learn to read and then the five areas (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) determined by the National Reading Panel (2000) are looked at with assessment materials discussed. As I began to read this text it became clear to me that Farrall holds a more behaviorist view of reading development rather than a constructivist view. This is illustrated throughout the book by the topics she chooses to discuss (and exclude), the amount of time she spends on each topic and the assessments she chooses to discuss as exemplary materials. I am not implying that one philosophy is better than the other, just pointing out the fact that this textbook clearly is clearly in the behaviorist camp.

By starting off explaining different reading theories and ideas about reading acquisition, the reader develops a strong understanding of how we got to where we are today. Starting the discussion with John Locke and moving through the accomplishments of B.F. Skinner, Noam Chomsky, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey and others situates the reader. Discussion introduces the different stages of reading (Chall and Ehri) and theories of reading development (Spear-Swerling). This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the history of reading instruction.

Next, the focus shifts to the reader and the importance of oral language. As with any textbook/course the reader should be the focus of instruction. Language is defined and differing theories of language acquisition are discussed in general. Each stage of language development is examined and the speech expectations for children from birth to school-age are neatly laid out. A small section on voice and language disorders is present, but would need to be supplemented with further instruction or additional readings. The author also discusses the linguistic and cultural diversity of students and how those variables affect a reader’s ability to learn. “Three group risk factors that are associated with challenges in reading: low
income, schools with high rates of poor performance, and linguistic differences” (p. 47). These risk factors do not necessarily cause reading failure, but seem to be barriers for learning. The author goes on to assert that teachers’ attitudes toward students with different dialects or languages other than their own sometimes act as a greater barrier than the actual dialect itself. We know that in many ways all children learn in similar ways. So the question may be: How do reading assessments take into account the linguistic and cultural differences that our students bring to school? Cultural sensitivity and knowledge of your students must play a large role in assessing their ability to learn. An assessment should be deemed valid and reliable for all groups that are being tested.

The next section of the book moves into statistics, test development, test administration and report writing. Much of this section examines the differences between criterion-referenced and norm-referenced tests and the associated terms (floor and ceiling effects, reliability, validity, bell curve, stanines, grade norms, etc.). My hope is that a graduate-level student would be required to take a separate statistics or assessment course where these topics would be explored more deeply. Discussion of how to build rapport with the students and making sure you understand the assessment yourself are useful tips for novice assessors. A sample report template is provided and the author reminds the reader that reports should not only provide assessment results, but provide instructional suggestions. Without this component of the report it is virtually useless. Why have a student spend possibly hours completing assessments for us and then not provide support for the student’s learning? The chapters do a good job of providing a surface level understanding, but as I read this section I kept thinking that a reading assessment course shouldn’t be the place to learn this material.

A discussion of Response to Intervention (RTI) and the role of intellectual assessments (IQ) follows. The history of the discrepancy model in determining special education services are documented and the author discusses the reasons why we have moved to a response to intervention model. She chooses two curriculum-based assessment tools to highlight for RTI: DIBLEs NEXT and AIMSweb. The expectations for student performance are explained as
well as the purpose of the tests. These tests are designed for monitoring student progress, not diagnosing the reasons why students are not performing in a certain way. Albeit, these tests do not assess “real” reading and many in the reading world have questioned the proliferation of these assessment tools. Generally there is no comprehension component, which many would argue is the reason for reading, and speed is valued over all else.

According to Farrell, “the use of the term fluency should not be understood as reading with intonation and phrasing; fluency in the CBM world is strictly interpreted as the speed of a given task, usually skill per minute” (p. 110). Why would we assume that encouraging readers to read more quickly will help them become better readers and that of they are reading more quickly they are better readers? We know that readers come in all shapes and sizes and I have worked with students in our reading lab who are very slow readers, but comprehend everything they read. While I have also experienced working with readers who read very quickly without phrasing and did not comprehend much of what they have just read. Progress monitoring and RTI are valuable ideas, but we must provide our schools and teach our students which assessments are valid and appropriate to support all learners.

Next, the author examines each of the five areas (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) as determined by the National Reading Panel (2000) as imperative focuses for explicit teaching. Each area is defined, relevant assessment tools are listed, and the positives and negatives of some are discussed. Although the assessment tools are listed, little if any, time is devoted to allowing students to work with the assessments. Even having example pages from some of the assessments with more discussion might be helpful.

The author spends a large amount of time discussing the topics of phonics as the chapter on decoding is 40 pages in length. The weight given to this topic may unintentionally lead the reader to think that phonics is the most important factor in reading. As only 26 pages are devoted to the comprehension chapter, the reader may come to the conclusion that comprehension is not as important as phonics. Hopefully that is not the message the author
intended to convey since most researchers in the reading world would argue that reading is non-existent without comprehension. Perhaps the explanation is that assessments of comprehension tend to be “messier” than assessments of phonics. The chapter on phonics lists several very straight-forward tests that can be used to determine if a child has an understanding of phonics. I was somewhat surprised that Words Their Way, by Bear et al. was not included in the chapter on phonics or in any other chapter for that matter. Perhaps Bear et al.’s assessment is too time consuming or requires an understanding of how each individual child develops with their spelling and writing. Additionally, there is very little talk of Individual Reading Inventories (i.e. QRI-5) and running records as instruments to assess comprehension. Excluding these types of assessments which require the assessor to understand where a student is in their reading and/or writing development seems to be a gross omission in a text that is used to prepare future teachers to support our children who struggle with literacy.

“As students of assessment, reading, language, and cognition, we should not feel the need to embrace one philosophy of education to the complete exclusion of another. We need, however, to make our decisions based on careful reading of research, our knowledge of children as learners, and our knowledge of the tools of assessment” (p. 26). Unfortunately, this text gives attention to the knowledge of children as learners in the beginning chapters, but their voice is pushed to the background when the discussion of different assessment tools begins. Although the author attempts to show both sides to every topic (assessment tool) she tends to overlook research that is counter to her beliefs and places the spotlight on research that supports her aim. This text can be considered a good resource for teachers, administrators, and school psychologists who hold a more behaviorist philosophy of teaching and learning. For more constructivist instructors and school leaders there are most likely other texts that are most closely aligned to their aims available to consider.

About the Reviewer

Jennifer Jordan is a clinical Assistant Professor of Education at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville.
Her scholarly interests include the professional development of pre-service elementary teachers, emergent literacy, and the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. She is particularly interested in how language shapes literacy development, especially writing development, in the early years of school.