

Assessment of reading

Advice guide



Skilled reading requires a series of complex cognitive processes to come together with automaticity. Due to this complexity, strategies for assessment of reading must be targeted and diagnostic to form an accurate picture of reading behaviours and ability.

Background

Assessments and tools, such as running records or benchmarking kits, provide an instructional and independent level for reading. These tools align with the three-cueing system (meaning, syntax and visual) and are used to gain information on reading ability (accuracy rate and an analysis of a reader's errors and self-corrections). However, relying on these assessment tools could mean opportunities to diagnose reading behaviours accurately and specifically are overlooked.

Language comprehension is much greater in complexity than just literal and inferential understanding. Errors in word recognition are not solely reliant on decoding skills.

Since the cognitive processes involved in reading are far more complex than the three-cueing system can capture, assessment strategies need to be more targeted and sensitive to form an accurate picture of what a student can do.

Understanding the evidence base

The science of reading largely draws upon Scarborough's (2001) reading rope (Figure 1), which explains linguistic/language comprehension includes background knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, language structures, verbal reasoning and literacy knowledge.

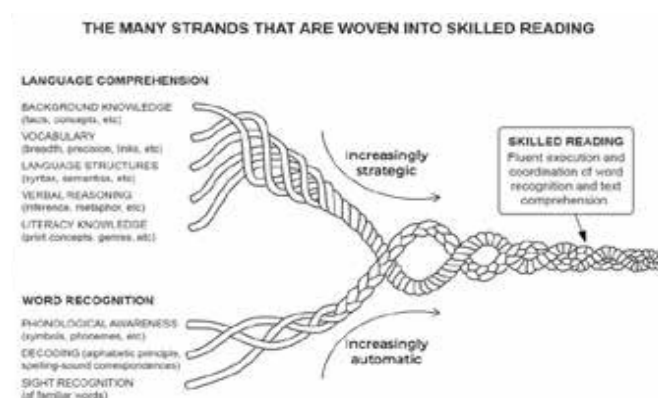


Figure 1 Scarborough's reading rope

Scarborough's model highlights phonological awareness, decoding and sight recognition as key skills of word recognition and skilled reading occurs when each of the strands weave together with automaticity to produce fluent, skilled reading.

Teachers need a deep understanding of how the complex cognitive processes of reading develop, and how the many components work together as students read increasingly complex texts skilfully, strategically and critically. Understanding the evidence base supports teachers to become diagnostic in their observation and analysis of students' reading behaviours.

The curriculum context

The NSW syllabuses set the expectation for student achievement at a point in time. Syllabus outcomes and content are the focus for planning, programming, teaching, learning and assessment.

The National Literacy Learning Progression supports teachers to become diagnostic in their observation and assessment of students as they learn to read. It describes common developmental and learning pathways for Kindergarten to Year 10 students. The progression has links in the NSW English K-10 syllabus, supporting teachers to understand reading behaviours and make evidence-based decisions about future learning.

Teachers can focus on particular components of reading in relation to the National Literacy Learning Progression sub-elements using PLAN2. Before, during and after reading instruction, teachers can set up and use Areas of focus in PLAN2 to monitor reading development and evaluate the impact of their instruction.

Scenario 1

Consider the following scenario, adapted from Oakhill, Cain and Elbro (2015), of a student reading a short passage from the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability. The transcript is annotated with sequences of dots indicating the student's hesitation or failure to read a word.

Student: "The lion's final act was in ...

Teacher: progress

Student: progress. Jack st- stood ... wanting

Teacher: waiting

Student: waiting to clear the ring. The ... thud ... thunder outside the circle ... no ... circus tent had made the lions rested

Teacher: restless

Student: restless. Saturday

Teacher: suddenly

Student: suddenly Tina the lion ... tamer

Teacher: trainer Student: trainer ... st- ...

Teacher: stumbled

Student: stumbled. Her whip fell. The young

Teacher: youngest

Student: youngest lion sp- ...

Teacher: sprang

Student: sprang to ... toward ...

Teacher: towards

Student: her. Jack left ... Jack leaped ...

Teacher: swiftly

Student: swiftly inside the cage ... cranking

Teacher: cracking

Student: cracking his whip – that doesn't make sense 'cracking his whip'. Oh yeah ... I get it ... cracking his whip with great ... skill. His

Teacher: prompt

Student: prompt act- ... action

Teacher: enabled

Student: enabled Tina to get

Teacher: regain

Student: control quickly. After that ... brief ... ad- adventure Jack decided on

Teacher: upon

Student: his fut- ... future work.

The teacher then asks the following questions.

Question	Student response
Where did the story take place?	Er ... at the circus
What was Jack waiting for?	To take the lions away.
Why were the lions restless?	'cos of the storm ... the thunder.
Who finished the act?	Tina did. She regained control of the lions.
What did Jack decide after this adventure?	That he would become a lion tamer.

By listening to the student read aloud and asking questions about the text, the teacher has had an opportunity to observe the following reading behaviours in consideration of the evidence base and the National Literacy Learning Progression.

- The student has moved away from the basic phonic code and is working with the extended code. However, they are having trouble applying their phonic knowledge and blending to read unknown words.
- The student's fluency is poor and is impacted by their difficulties with blending. This lack of fluency has the potential to impact their understanding of the text.
- The student substitutes the word 'tamer' for 'trainer', which indicates they are applying their background knowledge about circuses to problem solve during reading.

- The student's exclamation of 'that doesn't make sense!', coupled with their substitution of 'tamer' for 'trainer' indicate they are monitoring their understanding of the text. The student demonstrates a high standard for coherence.
- Despite the student's difficulties with word recognition (lower strands of Scarborough's reading rope), they offer an acceptable sometimes quite full and insightful answer for every question.

Determining an assessment pathway

The student's reading is slow and full of errors and their fluency is poor. Decoding requires significant effort and it seems unlikely they can also consider the meanings of the words they are struggling to read or connect the sentences to make sense of the passage as a whole.

The student has the requisite background knowledge and vocabulary around the topic of circuses to support a basic understanding of the text. However, they are relying on those strategies to solve the words they come across, rather than having solid decoding strategies.

Additionally, if the student were to apply those strategies to a text where they did not have the requisite background knowledge and vocabulary, they may experience difficulties. The first step in diagnostic assessment is determining where this student has gaps in phonic knowledge and blending skills.

The [Phonics diagnostic assessment](#) (available via ALAN) would be the best tool to start this investigation. It will automatically update the student's PLAN2 data.

The teacher could also use the [Fluency assessment tool](#) in the Universal Resources Hub to understand the fluent reading ability of the student. The tool uses a fluency scale to assess expression, volume, rhythm, phrasing, smoothness and automaticity.

In this instance, fluency is an important skill to assess because we know it is the bridge between word recognition and language comprehension.

While vocabulary has not held the student back in this instance, the teacher might decide to use the vocabulary assessment tools to track and monitor the student's vocabulary knowledge.

Scenario 2

Observe the differing reading behaviours of another student reading the same passage.

Student: The lions' final act was in progress. Jack stayed ... stood waiting to clear the ring. The thunder outside the circus tent had made the lions restless. Suddenly Tina the lion tamer stumbled. Her whip fell. The younger

Teacher: youngest

Student: youngest lion sprang towards her. Jack leaped swiftly inside the cage cracking his whip with great skill. His prompt action ...

Teacher: enabled

Student: enabled Tina to regain control quickly. After that brief adventure Jack decided upon his further

Teacher: future

Student: work.

Question	Student response
Where did the story take place?	In the circus tent.
What was Jack waiting for?	The lions.
Why were the lions restless?	Because ... um ... can't remember
Who finished the act?	The seals
What did Jack decide after this adventure?	His future work (<i>can you tell me anymore?</i>) No, that's all.

In this scenario, the teacher has had the opportunity to observe the following reading behaviours in consideration of the evidence base and the National Literacy Learning Progression.

- The student reads fluently, attending to punctuation as they read.
- The student's phonic knowledge and sight recognition are robust and come together with automaticity.
- The student recognises when an error is made and is able to implement strategies to self-correct their reading.
- Although the student remembers some superficial information from the story, their other answers were either failures to remember, repetitions or fragments of the wording, fabricated or misinterpreted.

Determining an assessment pathway

This student has very few difficulties in reading the words and their reading appears more fluent. They read with appropriate intonation, hesitate rarely, and make few errors. The student pays attention to punctuation and their teacher might expect them to have constructed a firm mental model of the scene depicted in this text, but the student's responses when questioned paint a different picture.

The pathway for assessment will look different for this student. The teacher would be less likely to need to assess this student's phonological awareness and phonic knowledge.

Similarly, the student's fluency shows sufficient progression of skills. The teacher might monitor their fluency using the Fluency assessment tool, but initial indication is showing this might not be of concern for improving the student's reading.

Further exploration could show the student is experiencing difficulties in their vocabulary knowledge. This refers to the language comprehension skill in the strand in the upper part of Scarborough's reading rope. Use tools for assessing vocabulary (from in the Universal Resource Hub) to determine if this is an issue in preventing this student from understanding the text.

Consider questioning the student further to probe their ability to make local cohesion inferences and locate and understand information from the text.

Observation shows the student does not have a high standard for coherence. They have not been able to make any global cohesion inferences, nor are they monitoring for deep understanding across the whole text

The teacher might choose to record these observations as annotations in programming documents or in PLAN2 and use this information to plan individualised instruction for each student.

Next steps for reading instruction

Depending on what is revealed by observation or through the use of the assessment tools, teachers can access relevant evidence-based resources for reading instruction in the Universal Resources Hub.

For example, teachers might explore fluency, phonological awareness and phonics resources for some students. For other students they may explore inference resources with a focus on teaching language comprehension through exposure to rich texts, think alouds and deep discussion during reading. This is not an exhaustive list, and teachers are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the resources available. Use and adapt these resources to suit the individual learning needs of students.

Summary

- There needs to be a shift in thinking to assess the processes of reading rather than the product of reading.
- Reading is what happens when a series of complex cognitive processes come together with automaticity.
- The National Literacy Learning Progression supports this understanding and student progress can be monitored using PLAN2.
- Assessment strategies need to be sensitive, nuanced and targeted to form an accurate picture of what a child can do.

A range of support, assessment tools and resources are available, and teachers should feel empowered to apply their expertise to the diagnostic observation and assessment of students as they learn to read.

References

- Neale, M. D. (1997). *The Neale Analysis of Reading Ability – Revised (NARA-II)*. Windsor: NFER-Nelson.
- Oakhill, J., Cain, K. and Elbro, C. (2014). *Understanding and Teaching Reading Comprehension: A handbook (1st ed.)*. Routledge.
- Scarborough, H.S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickson (Eds.), *Handbook for research in early literacy (pp. 97-110)*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Professional learning and resources

- [Lead learner series](#) – Assessment of reading
- [Assessment of reading podcast](#)
- [Universal Resources Hub](#)
- [Lesson advice guides](#)
- [Literacy and numeracy](#)

About this resource

This lesson advice guide has undergone a rigorous quality assurance process. This ensures the guide provided to schools is relevant, of high quality and underpinned by evidence-based practice. This resource has been developed to support K-6 teachers when implementing the NSW English K-10 Syllabus.

Advice on use

This lesson advice guide provides teachers with guidance on the components of explicit lessons when developing students' literacy skills. It includes background information, an overview of the evidence base and advice on the components of explicit lessons.

While the advice and suggestions in this resource can be used with all students, they are particularly aimed for use with students in K-6.

This guide can be integrated at any point in a teacher's teaching and learning cycle and can be adapted for use across different classroom contexts.

Differentiation

When using this resource in the classroom, it is important for teachers to consider the needs of all students, including [Aboriginal](#) and EAL/D learners.

EAL/D learners will require explicit language support and scaffolding, informed by the Enhanced EAL/D enhanced teaching and learning cycle and the student's phase on the EAL/D Learning Progressions. For further information, visit [English as an additional language or dialect](#).

Learning adjustments enable students with disability and additional learning and support needs to access syllabus outcomes and content on the same basis as their peers. Teachers can use a [range of adjustments](#) to ensure a personalised approach to student learning.

A range of tools to identify, assess and challenge [high potential and gifted learners](#) are available to support teachers in the classroom. Identifying contributors to achievement helps teachers identify and target areas for students' growth and improvement. A differentiation adjustment tool can be used to plan effective teaching strategies.

Additional resources

Professional learning opportunities are available at [Literacy and numeracy professional learning](#).

[Reading guides](#) to support conversations about best practice for teaching reading.

[Professional learning pathways](#) help to make decisions about building capability.

Alignment to system priorities and/or needs: [Literacy and numeracy priorities](#), [Our Plan for NSW Public Education](#), [School Excellence Policy \(nsw.gov.au\)](#), [Literacy and Numeracy practice guide](#).

Alignment to School Excellence Framework: Learning domain: Curriculum, Literacy and numeracy focus.

Teaching domain: Effective classroom practice, Explicit teaching, Leading domain: Educational leadership:

Leading teaching and learning

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