Reviewed work:


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*Reading Assessment: Linking Language, Literacy and Cognition* aims to shed light on the concept of literacy, especially the skill of reading. It offers the reader a comprehensive source on literacy development, taking into account numerous reading-pertinent issues. This volume is organized into 15 chapters each dealing with a specific issue on reading assessment. Each of these chapters starts with a theoretical perspective, which is then elaborated in the rest of the chapter. As the author of the volume asserts, the book takes an integrated approach to reading assessment in that reading and its assessment are considered from varying strands of research. In the beginning chapter, Farrall highlights the significance of reading and its assessment but states that in many contexts, especially in American contexts, the time spent on reading in pre-university classrooms is limited. She also warns that the practice of reading assessment has been under assault for various reasons (including being costly and mostly irrelevant to instruction). Farrall then moderates this claim by saying that although these reasons are not completely accurate, assessment is however challenging for most teachers, which is why they consider it largely irrelevant to teaching.

Chapter 2 touches on theories of reading acquisition. Farrall first discusses different views on reading and its acquisition, referring to prominent figures in the development of thinking about reading (for example, John Lock and Rousseau advocating nurture and nature respectively, Skinner supporting empiricism, Chomsky referring to cognitivism, and Vygotsky calling for constructivism). Various models of language acquisition, such as the three-cueing system by Pearson (1976)—which is based on the premise that readers are expected to create meaning by integrating syntactic, semantic, and graphophonemic information in the text)—and the rope
model of Scarborough (2001)—which highlights the importance of language comprehension and word recognition in reading development—are then described. In conclusion, the author rightly says that none of these theories and models is perfect. Reading acquisition is much more complex and cannot easily be summarized in a model.

Chapter 3 aims to reach a comprehensive understanding about the nature and structure of language by studying the stages of language development in children. It specifically investigates oral language and its role in the development of reading and writing. This chapter is a superb source for readers wanting to gain a comprehensive picture of varying stages of language development. The discussion moves from the very beginning stages (vegetative sounds, which are preliminary meaningless sounds articulated by young children) to the final complex stages (the school stage in which children deal with complicated patterns such as embedded and passive structures). In chapter 4, the author moves away from a purely linguistics position (in which mention is made of only linguistic issues such as reading proficiency, scanning and skimming strategies, and the like) and takes a social and cultural stance. To put it more specifically, this chapter deals with the difficulties educators and learners might face while teaching and learning reading and writing in a class. The main sources for these difficulties are learners’ varying social status, dialects, accents, and also personal problems such as inherent disorders. In describing these factors, the author also refers to Cummins’ (1984) notion of CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) and BICS (basic interpersonal communicative skills). She argues, for instance, that learners from a lower social status usually have more difficulty learning CALP than those from higher social positions. Finally, the chapter touches on the issue of the assessment of reading and writing, rightly saying that whatever approach is to be taken, it should be ongoing and both formal and informal.

Chapter 5 takes into account different types of tests and also various concepts relating to test development. Here the author first elaborates on norm-referenced tests (NRT), in which the students’ performances are compared with one another and are not based on any specific criterion, and criterion-referenced tests (CRT), which measure performance of students against specified criteria. She then deals with the two important features of reliability and validity that need to be taken into consideration by each test developer regardless of the type of test. Finally, the chapter ends with the point that a comprehensive assessment of reading need to not only provide information about individuals’ skill levels with regard to others of the same age or grade (NRT), but should also tell us how much a person knows (CRT). Though this conclusion is reasonable, it becomes very challenging when it comes to practice. Based on Brown (2005), in a single test it is actually difficult or even impossible to achieve the purposes of both NRT and CRT. Chapter 6 is in line with the preceding chapter and focuses on test design and administration, arguing that reading assessments should incorporate the two important components of word recognition and receptive language. The chapter also offers constructive suggestions about the test administration and reporting of scores, which could be a great help for teachers, especially novices. For example, Farrall recommends taking into consideration the age and grade of students in test administration, and using a template in score reporting. Chapter 7 specifically focuses on individuals who have problems in reading and explains the concept of Response to Intervention (RTI), which is a process by which the required mediations and assistance are provided for students with reading disabilities with the purpose of removing the need for any special education. Chapter 8 highlights the important issues of intelligence and
individual differences in assessment and instruction. After elaborating on the concept of IQ and how it is measured, the author refers to individual differences and finally concludes that intelligence assessment along with awareness of individual differences can offer valuable information about students’ learning and also help teachers find a match between instruction and students’ differences.

Though chapter 9 is entitled ‘Oral Language Assessment,’ it does not appear to be dedicated to oral language. The chapter in effect aims to convey that there is a high correlation between the reading ability of individuals and other strands of language, such as vocabulary, syntax, pragmatics, and so on. Consequently, if someone has difficulty reading a text, his/her receptive knowledge should be examined to determine whether weaknesses in oral language compromise the ability to comprehend. Chapter 10 describes the underlying processes which lead to reading comprehension. By noting the underlying processes, the author means phonological awareness and phonemic awareness, pointing out that phonological-related deficits lie at the heart of reading deficits. She also rightly argues that knowing about underlying cognitive processes helps us determine reading difficulties and in turn lead us to design effective instruction to treat the difficulties. Chapter 11 describes how to practically assess emergent literacy, decoding, and fluency. Knowing about skills pertaining to fluency and decoding, the author argues, can greatly assist coping with reading challenges.

As the title ‘Comprehension’ suggests, chapter 12 deals with problems that individuals might face in comprehending a text. Put another way, the chapter explains why some children have no problem in learning to read, but face problems in reading to learn. To address this point, issues such as vocabulary knowledge, practice, and inferential thinking are delineated. It is also argued that due to lack of consensus over the real nature of comprehension and how to measure it, no clear standard has ever been offered for assessing reading comprehension. However, what is evident is that our ability to measure comprehension hinges on what we know about the processes underlying the comprehension process (Duke, 2005). Chapter 13 describes the advantages and disadvantages of Informal Reading Inventories (IRI), arguing that though these inventories can provide detailed information about children’s reading abilities, they are not sufficiently reliable and valid to be used in high-stakes decision-making. Therefore, some other alternatives such as running records, readability formulas, and miscue analysis should also be used to introduce more expertise into reading assessment. In chapter 14, the other aspect of literacy, writing, is touched upon. Having explained the importance of writing, the author maintains that learning to write and writing assessment are multidimensional in that varying strands such as spelling, handwriting, mechanics, organization, and syntax need to be taken into consideration. Finally, in chapter 15, the paramount importance of being literate is argued, contending that while respecting those who are illiterate, nowadays it is truly difficult to live without being literate.

**Concluding Remarks**

The volume is a praiseworthy source for those who wish to gain a basic understanding about literacy. It presents many of the primary theories and concepts on literacy, including the nature of literacy and its definition, literacy problems and disabilities, the measurement of literacy, and
how to treat deficits in literacy, among others. However, one noticeable weakness is that the author devotes only one chapter to the skill of writing. Literacy embodies both reading and writing and since the title of the book uses this term, it could be expected that the author would have dedicated more chapters also elaborating on this aspect of literacy. Nevertheless, this volume is strongly recommended in that it not only embodies many constructive discussions on literacy but also employs a user-friendly style of writing, so that the issues raised in it may be easily understood.

References


About the Reviewer

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