

Introduction

1 Chapter

Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996), winner of the 1987 Nobel Prize for Literature and the 1986 National Book Award, became poet laureate of the Library of Congress in 1991. Brodsky, a former Soviet citizen, had been sentenced to hard labor in Siberia in 1964 for “social parasitism” and “decadent poetry.” Upon his exile from the Soviet Union in 1972, he emigrated to the United States where he became a citizen.

Brodsky never could understand the apathy of Americans toward poetry. His quote, “I don’t know what’s worse, burning books or not reading them” (Ohnemus, 1991, p. 9) expressed his sheer puzzlement over American reading habits. Brodsky believed that literature, in particular poetry, was essential to a culture and that the downfall of the Soviet Union was a result of its efforts to censor its writers and poets. According to Brodsky, empires did not stand by virtue of their legions, they were united by their language (Billington, 1996). The Soviet Union was destined to fall because it denied its linguistic and literary heritage.

As poet laureate in the United States, Brodsky recommended that inexpensive anthologies be made available to the public in places such as hotels, airports, and even supermarkets in the hope that they would become a source of

inspiration for those who were lonely, in fear, or spiritually in need. Brodsky made this recommendation with a sense of urgency. In what was an amazingly prescient statement, Brodsky said that “there is now an opportunity to turn the nation into an enlightened democracy...before literacy gets replaced with video” (Ohnemus, 1991, p. 9).

Brodsky would have been sorely pained to read the National Endowment for the Arts report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, published in 2007. This study presented a somber picture of American literary habits; from 1985 to 2005, American spending on books dropped 14%. Americans in almost every demographic group were reading less than their predecessors 10 and 20 years ago, and as they aged they read less and less. According to this study, almost half of Americans between the ages of 18 to 24 did not read for pleasure; only 67% of college graduates read voluntarily, a decline of 15 percentage points over the past 20 years.

The statistics from 2007 are grim: Most individuals ages 15 to 24 are spending only 7 to 10 minutes per day reading voluntarily. This does not mean, however, that these readers are focused and engaged in what they are doing. Fifty-eight percent of middle and high school students are

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multitasking with electronic media at the same time that they read.

Educators in the United States are now faced with the immense task of working with a population that is increasingly diverse and that has other forms of stimulation competing for its attention and time. In addition to reading less, Americans are reading less well. Although the National Assessment for Educational Progress scores for 2009 represented a slight increase from 2005, the average reading scores for 17-year-olds were less than the scores earned in 1992 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). As interest and skill in reading decline, we have access to more information in print than ever before. We must ask whether we can realize our potential as a nation if we do not read and think deeply about what ails us.

As educators, we are faced with building a workforce from a population that is increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, and preparedness for learning. While our task may seem to be awe inspiring (and there is not an educator who goes home at night unexhausted), we have a growing body of research on what it takes to turn children into readers. This research, however, does not always make it into training programs for educators where research-based methodologies are often presented as an instructional alternative: "You can do this or you can do that."

It is not unusual for teacher training programs to produce a variety of specialists who are each expert within their own domain. We have regular education teachers, special educators, speech and language pathologists, and psychologists (just to name a few) who each claim (or relinquish) responsibility for their own piece of a child's education. It is not possible, however, to separate out language from reading, and we do our children a disservice when we attempt to offer piecemeal solutions that, as J. O. Willis, head of the Specialist in the Assessment of Intellectual Functioning Program at Rivier College, has said, are then integrated with a staple (personal communication, January 14, 2005). Findings must be integrated thoughtfully with comprehensive conclusions and

recommendations. Although on the surface children with poor reading comprehension may all look the same, they have different strengths and weaknesses. Each child requires instruction that is designed to meet his or her unique needs as a learner and that is delivered in a timely fashion. This is where evaluators come in.

A Field Under Assault

The field of assessment is currently under assault. Evaluations are considered costly in terms of time and resources. Some say that evaluations are irrelevant and that the dissection of strengths and weaknesses does little to inform instruction (D. Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, Lipsey, & Roberts, 2001). Much of the criticism may be well deserved. In some cases, evaluations are not comprehensive; in other cases, evaluations may stop short of being helpful. Excessive use of jargon, seemingly contradictory results, recommendations for the same old same old . . . No wonder teachers have been known to complain "I would rather have a tooth extracted than attend another evaluation team meeting."

When I first became a learning disabilities specialist with a resource room of my own, I had tested all of two children. I knew little about tests as products, and I had no experience in linking recommendations to research-based practices. In fact, I was encouraged during my training to focus more on modifications and accommodations than on reading remediation. To this day I see evaluations that conclude with recommendations for additional time without considering the root cause of the problem—that is, the inability to read. As a trainer who works with teachers at the graduate level, I see many educators who have not been taught about the role of language in reading or about the instruments that they use to test children.

Integrated Approach

This text is presented as an integrated approach to reading assessment; it is intended as a graduate-level text in a reading assessment or general

assessment course. 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.

In the past, component approaches to reading assessment have been criticized. By dissecting reading and language skills into discrete units, some believe that we lose sight of the big picture—the interaction that occurs between the reader and the text. Language, however, is remarkable for its connectivity. Vocabulary development is related to phonemic awareness and to syntax. Spelling is related to vocabulary. Expressive language skills are related to written expression, and receptive language is related to reading comprehension. While we may seek to measure discrete abilities, we need to think about language as a system and peel the onion one layer at a time.

The Text

Each chapter begins with a review of the theory and then moves into a discussion of issues related to assessment and the tools of the trade. Inclusion of specific test instruments is not necessarily a recommendation for use; sometimes tests are discussed because they have much to offer the field of assessment. In other cases, tests are discussed to illustrate weaknesses and potential problems in interpretation. Many chapters include case studies; all chapters include review questions that are designed to provide opportunities for basic skill development, critical thinking, and what it all means for a living, breathing child.

Chapter 2 begins with a review of reading theory and the stages of reading acquisition. How we define ourselves as educators and the controversies associated with reading reflect, at the most basic level, the difficulty associated with trying to understand how humans think and what

the mind does in its efforts to process print and make meaning.

Chapter 3 focuses on theories of how children acquire language, the stages of language development, and a brief discussion of communication disorders. A knowledge of the structure of language permits us to understand both typical and atypical language development as a foundation for success in the classroom and for understanding print—written language that has been stripped of its prosody and potential for clarification.

Chapter 4 examines the issues associated with the assessment and instruction of children who are linguistically and culturally diverse. The process by which students with limited English proficiency and culturally diverse backgrounds are identified for special education is fraught by confusion over second language acquisition and actual language disorders. What does it mean to assess phonemic awareness in an English-language learner (ELL)? Are delays in decoding a function of ELL status, or are they indicative of a more serious problem with print? Why is it that children who appear to be proficient conversationally struggle with reading comprehension? How can we be proactive in our assessment and, at the same time, respect the linguistic and cultural differences that make us rich as a nation?

Chapter 5 on statistics and test development moves us into the realm of criterion-referenced and norm-referenced tests. Experienced evaluators may find some of this content familiar; novices in the field will find discussions of mastery, norm-referenced tests, and scoring systems as well as reliability and validity. This chapter also addresses concerns regarding measuring progress, floor and ceiling effects, and age and grade equivalents. In the assessment marketplace, it is consumer beware.

Chapter 6 focuses on test administration and report writing. A top-down approach to testing helps ensure that we use our time as evaluators well and that we do not subject children to more tests than are required. A template provides a skeleton for report writing that permits us to work efficiently, reduce the potential for errors, and at the same time produce a report that is highly

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individualized. Of course, the communication of test results in a manner that can be understood by parents and other educators is paramount to this discussion.

Chapter 7 brings us to progress monitoring and its potential for responding to children's need with greater efficiency. As a profession, we like the practicality of counting whatever is deemed countable. It is easy to do and easy to score, and there are many benefits to monitoring children's response to instruction. Unfortunately, not everything that is important is countable, and progress monitoring may not answer all questions regarding a child's need for instruction. Perhaps we should be thinking of what progress monitoring and comprehensive evaluations together have to offer.

Chapter 8 focuses on intellectual assessment and the relationship between intellectual ability and academic achievement. It would be a shame to assess reading without understanding what the field of cognition can tell us about how children learn. While we may not be partial to the discrepancy method for identifying learning disabilities, cognitive assessment can tell us much about verbal knowledge, spatial thinking, memory, and processing speed. In some cases intellectual assessment helps us understand why children do the things they do.

Chapter 9 examines oral language assessment with the goal of satisfying the hidden language specialist that resides deep within those of us in the field of reading. In particular, we look at the relationship between listening comprehension and reading comprehension, and the different ways in which they can be assessed. We also study the respective roles of vocabulary, syntax, abstract and figurative language, and inferential thinking, and how each skill relates to reading. I continue to be amazed by the all-important role that vocabulary plays not just in comprehension but also in decoding.

Chapter 10 delves into the underlying processes (and their associated controversies) that support the development of decoding and spelling: phonemic awareness, phonological memory, rapid

naming, and orthographic processing. The chapter begins with a discussion of dyslexia and what it is about phonological processing that makes it hard for some children to perceive speech sounds and learn to read. We look how phonemic awareness develops and what to do with the myriad of tests that each purport to measure these all important skills. This chapter examines rapid automatized naming, an underlying process that is often overlooked in reading assessments, together with new tests that are forging into the less understood (and less researched) area of orthographic processing.

Chapter 11, the longest chapter in this text, reviews what current research and technology have to say about the dual route model, word recognition, and word attack, culminating in a discussion of reading fluency. As part of our exploration of print-based skills, we examine the usefulness of print awareness and alphabet skills as predictors of reading as well as issues (and yes, the debate) related to the assessment of noncontextual word reading. Terminology and concepts related to phonics are explained as vehicles for error analysis and communication with parents and other educators. The chapter concludes with a discussion of eye movements, reading automaticity and fluency, and the different ways in which they are assessed.

Chapter 12 discusses the Kintsch Model of Reading Comprehension, inferential thinking, working memory, background knowledge, and vocabulary. In this chapter we review different types of comprehension tests and issues related to how reading comprehension is conceptualized. Are we measuring a child's ability to learn new content from a passage, or are we measuring the sum total of passage content and a child's background knowledge? Is it possible to tell the difference? Given that different tests of reading comprehension may provide dramatically different results for the same child, this chapter provides a critical look at what tests actually measure and what they do not.

Chapter 13 strays from the arena of formal assessment to informal reading inventories (IRIs),

and it discusses whether IRIs are really standardized tests in disguise. We examine the history and debate associated with reading levels, what the research has to say about miscue analysis and errors, and the use of running records. In the end, this chapter closes with a discussion of readability and of the many factors that make texts easy or hard to understand.

Chapter 14 shifts away from reading per se to a discussion of written expression and spelling, skills that are often overlooked in the field of reading. While you might be tempted to say “rightly so,” most children with reading challenges struggle with writing, and most children with decoding challenges struggle with spelling. Given the importance of written expression and spelling as tools for enhancing reading and decoding, we would be remiss to ignore them. The assessment of written expression, however, is complicated by a fundamental lack of agreement as to what written expression is and how it should be measured. Each time we test writing skill, we have to be aware of the limitations and the strengths of the instruments that we are using.

This textbook concludes with a discussion of illiteracy in Chapter 15. As educators, we have to understand the burden that reading failure places on society, on the family, and on the individual.

Before we begin, you might wish to take the pretest presented next.

Survey of Knowledge: Assessment and Reading

1. What is the primary purpose of a norm-referenced, standardized test?
2. What does the term standard deviation describe?
3. When is a test considered to be reliable?
4. Johnny earned a standard score of 98 on the reading comprehension test when it was read to him. Explain why this score is not valid.
5. Johnny earned a standard score of 90 on the Anybody-Can-Do-It Reading Test in 2009; he earned a standard score of 85 on the same test in 2010. Explain to all concerned whether Johnny has made progress or whether his skills have declined. Presume a standard error of measure of ± 5 .
6. What does it mean to have an insufficient floor?
7. What is the structure of language?
8. List the components of a comprehensive reading evaluation.
9. Why is it important to test reading fluency?
10. Identify the six syllable patterns.
11. List four different ways of testing reading comprehension.
12. What is dyslexia?
13. What is a double deficit?

