

Accurate Assessment of Literacy Skills: A Possible Task for Educators

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members of the English Department continued the legacy, but decided to investigate literacy learning practices outside Deaf Education. They began to study the most recent pedagogical and assessment practices in literacy learning. To add to the task, the Department, composed of three instructional groups (Development English, freshmen and Sophomore English, and Junior and Senior English courses), employed different means of teaching and different assessment instruments in each group. Understandably, students who progressed through the groups were confused. To deal with these challenges, the Department established an Assessment Committee to tackle the following tasks:

- Establish continuity in curriculum
- Demonstrate continuity in testing and assessment
- Reflect the most current pedagogical practices

Abstract

With the increasing emphasis on high-stakes testing in post secondary institutions, educators are frustrated and perplexed as to how to present an accurate measurement of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing learners' literacy skills. This problem exacerbates particularly when attempting to assess the literacy skills of those students who represent diverse ethnicities, cultures, and learning styles. This paper will discuss alternative approaches to traditional high-stakes assessment. The paper will include a discussion of how to develop students' self-assessment, how to create literacy portfolios, and offer real-world assessments to determine literacy growth. The paper will also discuss the process of changing views and attitudes about appropriate and accurate assessment that assists both students and educators in understanding literacy growth.

Introduction

History of Assessment Practices at Gallaudet University

Struggling with the same dilemma that all teachers of English face, how to teach and to assess the literacy skills of their learners, the members of the Department of English at Gallaudet University have spent decades trying to teach and apply the most appropriate tool to assess students' English skills. In the past ten years, the

This investigation and self-assessment of the Department's practices caused a paradigm shift in the approach to teaching English. Similar to most English Departments, the methods of assessment were language tests: tests of parts of speech, sentence patterns, grammatical structure, verb tense, and verb patterns, and a written language test. These kinds of tests provided a survey of students' understanding of grammar, verb tense and patterns, and structure, essentially, a language assessment. Yet, the Department members knew this assessment was not getting at the heart of our students' abilities to use language. Further, students knew the tests weren't testing their abilities. Although students could pass vocabulary and grammar tests with remarkable scores; they could not read nor write.

The existing tests were based on memory rather than understanding. Some faculty members doubted that memorization was a means for a person who did not have a spoken language to acquire written English. The tests results verified these notions; students did not "own" English. They simply memorized what was necessary to pass the exit exams. They did not care about the importance of acquiring a language; nor did teachers ask them to care. At least, the means of assessment used did not ask them to care. English was simply a barrier test to pass to enter other courses. The impact, significance, and ability of English to provide power in a culture were not recognized. With the real-

ization that emphasis on the atomistic aspects of English was not helping students — and the understanding the English literacy, not just language, was important—members of the Department began to investigate new theories and practices in literacy learning. The faculty adopted the view that (1) literacy is the ability to gain fluency in a language and to recognize the contexts and values that give a language power (Gee, 1991) and that (2) language and literacy acquisition occur when there is a social/cultural need to use English. (Vygotsky, 1934/1986)

Teaching practices changed. Teaching now integrated more interaction between teaching and student and student and text. Teachers became facilitators rather than lecturers. Teachers helped students to build their literacy skills by scaffolding (Bruner, 1996) our lessons. Faculty established structures for students to connect their language learning to purposeful, real-world uses. Finally, the faculty members followed the belief that frequent, in-depth interactions are essential elements in thought and language development (Bakhtin, 1981).

The assessment committee searched for an accurate means to assess students' literacy skills (a test that would inform teachers and students of the use and understanding of reading, writing, and thinking abilities. Further, the Committee knew the Department needed a test that was normed and validated to help to compare its student population with others. Finally, any assessment tool must provide data that would inform and satisfy federally mandated requirements since Gallaudet University is a federally funded institution.

The Department needed a reading assessment instrument that did more than test vocabulary or short answer questions based on a brief narrative. The Department needed a reading comprehension test. The Degrees of Reading Power by Touchstones Applied Science Associates was viewed as the appropriate assessment instrument. The DRP is a MAZE test (as opposed to CLOZE test) that provides progressively challenging lengthy narratives with key words missing. Students may select the appropriate word to fill in the blank from a supplied list. All selections could fit, thus, requiring the reader to understand the text and to employ reading skills such as context clues. The DRP requires the reader to think and to interact with the text, thus reinforcing the notion that reading is an interactive process of meaning making. Further, to promote the concept that writing is a process of thinking and reflecting, members of the Department developed, tested, and normed the Gallaudet Written Exam (GWE). The fifteen years of development of the GWE resulted in a modified holistic test that informs both students and teachers of students' abilities to convey meaning through written English.

Although the Department now uses these tests as placement and achievement tests, they recognize that

no test is perfect. These tests are not high stakes tests. No longer do the results of these tests determine exact placement in a course or whether or not a student passes or fails a course. College entrance exam scores, interviews with teachers, and first-week in class assessments verify or invalidate placement. Further, the results of these tests are part of a full semester of assessments of students' abilities. Nonetheless, faculty strive to locate better assessment tools. The process is lengthy and arduous, but worthwhile. The English Department is now investigating a means to provide, as Elbow (2002) states, "A motion picture of a student's ability rather than a snap shot." The remaining portion of this seminar will invite you to participate in the application of the following literacy assessment instruments: The Literacy Portfolio, The Degrees of Reading Power, and The Gallaudet Written Exam.

One Alternative Assessment: Literacy Portfolios

Literacy portfolios have been created by many students as an alternative assessment. Some faculty members in the Gallaudet University English Department have been using literacy portfolios for a variety of reasons. Literacy portfolios can provide students and teachers with opportunities for on-going assessment. Assessment for portfolios can be done on a weekly basis so students can continually see their progress. Literacy portfolios can also provide students with opportunities for self-assessment. When students self-assess, they retain more of what they learn since they reflect on their learning processes. Literacy portfolios can show growth over a period of time, complement standardized measures and document what students do in class.

One Definition of a Literacy Portfolio

Literacy portfolios can be defined as purposeful collections of students' reading and writing tasks that show the students' efforts, progress and achievements during an academic year. Students must also include evidence of self-assessment and help select their portfolio items (Nickerson, 1996).

Students learn to be responsible for their own learning

Students who develop and maintain literacy portfolios can learn how to reflect on their own work in their portfolios in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses in reading and writing. This allows them to see their own strengths and build on their weaknesses. This process helps students become self-assessors and more responsible for their own learning processes.

What should students include in their literacy portfolios?

Students can include a variety of items in their literacy portfolios. They often include multiple drafts of

essays, reflection papers that discuss the essay drafts, interviews, attitude surveys, reading logs, and reaction papers to a variety of reading selections.

Multiple Drafts of Writing Assignments and Reflection Papers

When students write multiple drafts of their work, they reflect on their writing, revise their ideas, organization, and grammar structures, build on their strengths as a writer and (hopefully) become more confident. Students who self-assess engage in metacognitive strategies when they reflect on their own learning and become aware of their own cognitive processes for their reading and writing abilities. Students can ask themselves questions, such as 'How has my essay improved from the first to the last draft?' or 'How have my ideas changed since I read new information on this topic?'

Interviews

Teachers may want to interview students throughout the year in order to focus on the strategies students use while they read and write. During this process, students and their teachers become aware of the students' strengths and weaknesses. Questions on interviews can include ones such as, 'What do you do before you read a new selection?', 'What are your strengths related to reading and writing?' and 'What are your weaknesses related to reading and writing?'

Attitude Surveys

Attitude surveys help students think about their own feelings related to reading and writing. Students who have created literacy portfolios in our classes have documented their opinions on various surveys. These surveys enable students to see how their attitudes change over a period of time. Students may also want to complete attitude surveys that might include questions such as the following. Students read statements such as, "Books should not be read except for class requirements" and then are asked to circle their response ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Reading Logs

Students in our classes were asked to keep a record of reading selections they read and the length of time they read during two-week periods. After the students documented what they read and how long they read, they were asked to analyze their reading logs. As soon as students analyze what they have read and how long they have read, most students realize that they can and should improve their reading habits. Maintaining Reading Logs enables students to focus on their reading habits.

Reaction papers to reading selections.

Students can include reactions to reading selections they read and discuss in class. These reaction papers allow students to focus on metacognitive strategies, new topics or adding information to their existing knowledge of topics, and their feelings related to topics. Students often want to share their feelings about what they have read and reaction papers enable students to express themselves. These reaction papers also help students document what they learn in class over time.

Benefits of Using Literacy Portfolios

Students who develop and maintain literacy portfolios can typically see the following benefits when they use literacy portfolios. They can learn to assess their reading and writing abilities. For reading, the students increased their abilities to integrate new information with their prior knowledge for various topics and they learned strategies to help them comprehend text more fully than before. For writing, the students increased their knowledge of various topics that enabled them to come up with more ideas for their written work, they developed confidence as writers and they learned to assess the content and organization of their writing. The use of literacy portfolios can help students become engaged learners as they assess their reading and writing abilities.

The students documented some of their learning activities in their literacy portfolios (Au, 1994; Valencia, 1990). The students became aware of two aspects of their reading habits when they documented what they read and how much time they spent reading for their Reading Logs as other researchers have suggested (Au, 1994; Valencia & Place, 1994). As a direct result of documenting their reading habits and then assessing them, many of the students increased their motivation to read more and a wider variety of materials. The students also documented many of their ideas related to self-assessment.

Students who develop and maintain literacy portfolios reflect on their learning (Camp, 1990; Raines, 1996; Tierney et al., 1991). Many students who use literacy portfolios change their attitudes about reading and writing. When students change their attitudes and become more positive, then they typically become more responsible for their own learning processes. When students go through a process to develop and maintain their own literacy portfolios, they learn to become more independent in what they do. This independence is a goal that all educators share.

One Reading Assessment: The Degrees of Reading Power

The Gallaudet University Department of English has used the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test for many years as one of our assessment tools. Since the fall of 1999, the DRP has also been used as a placement tool (along with the GWE, which will be discussed later in this paper), replacing a test developed in-house that tested for specific reading skills such as locating the main idea and making inferences. Students initially placed in non-credit developmental English courses also have to achieve a specific score on the DRP as part of the requirements to qualify for credit English courses (along with an acceptable GWE score).

The DRP is a MAZE test produced by Touchstone Applied Science Association (TASA). For more in-depth information on the DRP, see the TASA website at <www.tasaliteracy.com>. A MAZE test is similar to a CLOZE test, in which every Nth word in a passage is removed; the reader then must supply the missing word. A MAZE test also removes words from a passage, but selects key words. DRP tests consist of nonfiction passages (arranged from easiest to hardest) in which selected sentences have a blank replacing a word. The test taker must then select which word fits the blank best from 5 choices.

The DRP tests many different skills that are involved in reading. As with any reading activity, students who can draw on real-world knowledge will have an easier time. Readers need to understand strategies writers use, such as repeating information for emphasis or to ensure clarity. It is important to have the ability to recognize context clues, such as indicators for how information is related, either within or between sentences or from one paragraph to the next. In other words, a test taker needs to understand the relationships indicated by key words such as coordinating and subordinating conjunctions and words and phrases used to indicate transition. Understanding such clues is necessary for correctly answering many questions, such as ones where the reader must supply a word that is a synonym or antonym for another word in the passage. In other words, the DRP requires test takers to not only understand what they are reading but also make reasonable inferences from information given to supply what is missing.

The DRP is primarily a measure of surface reading comprehension. Scores range from 15 to 99 DRP units. The DRP score is given for three different reading situations:

- **Independent**—the level of reading materials the student can handle on his/her own.

- **Instructional**—the level of reading materials the student can handle with some help.

- **Frustration**—the level of reading materials the student can not handle at all.

The score difference between independent and frustration is 11, except at the extreme ends of the scale. At Gallaudet, faculty members use the instructional level as the number for placement purposes since our goal is to place students in courses that are appropriate to their skill levels.

In addition to providing DRP tests, TASA also rates reading materials for DRP levels to allow appropriate matches between a reader and reading material. Most college textbooks are 70 DRP or higher. Students testing below this level can then be advised what this means and encouraged to seek tutoring to understand reading material in content courses, and to learn strategies to increase their comprehension of difficult texts. Students should also be advised what reading materials are available that will challenge them (so they learn to read more difficult material) while not frustrating them so much they give up. Some examples of lower-level books (and ones that are fun!) are *Harry Potter*, which has a DRP level of 55 and *Charlotte's Web*, which has a DRP level of 50. Not all books or other reading materials with DRP scores in the 50s are for children, though; *The Old Man and the Sea* has a DRP level of 50, but is clearly written for adults.

The DRP is a useful tool, but alone presents only a partial picture of a student's literacy skills.

One Writing Assessment: The Gallaudet University Writing Test and Scale

A group of five faculty members of the English Department at Gallaudet University met for the first time in 1994 to develop the Gallaudet Writing Scale (GWS), an assessment tool for use when evaluating students' writings. The members were Dr. Marcia Bordman, Mr. Terry Coye, Dr. Leslie Rach, Mr. Truman Steele, and Dr. Anne Womeldorf. Drs. Karen Kimmel and Tonya Stremmlau eventually joined the committee. The GWS was ultimately in place and ready for distribution in 1998. It has been used with success ever since. Like the DRP, the GWS has been used as a placement tool in some instances.

The GWS is a 6-level, 7-band categorical scale for the holistic assessment of impromptu essays written without help by Gallaudet University undergraduates (attached). Students' writings are evaluated for competence in writing on rhetorical and syntactic levels, for their awareness of audience and for their use of language in addressing the question. Students' writing competence is rated from "cannot be rated," which

qualifies as “0” on the GWS to “clear competence,” which qualifies as “6” on the GWS. The goal of the GWS is to provide a reliable and simple means of gauging the general level of writing ability of students at varying levels of skill. The goal is also to provide trained raters quick, easy and reliable scoring of a student paper, to provide uniformity in evaluation, and to make evaluation specific with numbers. The use of the GWS has provided a wealth of information for research and for assessing the literacy of students. It has also resulted in greater satisfaction among professors and students alike.

The Gallaudet Writing Scale Handout explains that:

much of the general design of the scale and some descriptors and terms provided in the scale are taken from or adapted from the *Test of Written English Scoring Guide*, copyright 1990 Educational Testing Service. This rubric, however, is not connected in any way to TWE anchor papers nor is it endorsed by the Educational Testing Service. All anchor papers and interpretations of this rubric are established by Gallaudet University for its own purposes. Ongoing assessment of the GWS may lead to further revisions and new versions of it (Gallaudet University Department of English, 1996).

The GWS was developed specifically for use in evaluating the writing performance of students in Gallaudet English courses under test conditions. It is also developed for use in other conditions and in other courses at the university.

The GWS is currently in use for all writing tests throughout the English Department. In certain courses, the GWS scores are used to assess students’ writing for grading decisions. To illustrate, in freshmen and sophomore writing courses, students’ final grades are determined by their GWS results, as well as by coursework, assignments, and projects.

In developmental English courses, the GWS scores are used solely for placement purposes. Students taking the exam have to get a certain score to qualify for a freshmen English course. Students normally have to achieve a GWS score of “3” to qualify, along with the appropriate DRP score.

The use of the GWS is not restricted to testing. It can be used as writing assessment tool for students’ writing projects such as research papers, creative writing assignments, and more. It is also used to evaluate students’ writing portfolio and in-class written work.

The use of GWS has been successful in providing a valid, reliable and simple means of gauging the general

level of writing ability of students at varying levels of skill, providing trained raters quick, easy and reliable scoring of student papers, providing uniformity in evaluation, making evaluation specific with numerical results, providing language to trained raters to discuss papers with each other and with their students, providing specific data for research, and providing all interested parties a useful writing assessment tool. We hope that other departments will begin to use the GWS to evaluate student writing.

Appendix A

Gallaudet Writing Scale (Version 3.1)

Clearly demonstrates competence in writing on both the rhetorical and syntactic levels, though it may contain occasional errors. A paper in this category

- Shows an awareness of audience: uses an appropriate level of discourse and offers ideas that go beyond the merely expected, that are personal to the writer, or that will interest the reader.
- Addresses the question impressively: uses relevant, judiciously selected and organized support, though it may slight parts of the task of developing support.
- Demonstrates fluency in language: displays syntactic variety and effective sophisticated word choice and variety, though it may have occasional errors or awkwardness.

Demonstrates clear competence in writing on the syntactic level, though it may contain occasional errors, and at least minimal competence on the rhetorical level. A paper in this category

- Shows an awareness of audience: uses an appropriate level of discourse and offers ideas that go beyond the merely expected, that are personal to the writer, or that will interest the reader.
- Addresses the question impressively, though perhaps not impressively: uses relevant support for its thesis but may slight parts of the tasks of developing and organizing ideas.
- Demonstrates fluency in language: displays syntactic variety and effective sophisticated word choice and variety, though it may have occasional errors or awkwardness.

Demonstrates minimal competence in writing on both the rhetorical and syntactic levels, though it may contain some serious weakness or lack of expected element or quality. A paper in this category

- Shows a developing awareness of audience: may attempt an appropriate level of discourse, but ideas rarely go beyond the merely expected.
- Addresses the question but slights parts of the

task: demonstrates adequate organization and uses some details to support its thesis and illustrate its ideas. Connections between sentences or ideas occasionally may be missing or unclear.

- Demonstrates adequate but undistinguished or inconsistent facility with syntax and usage: contains syntactic variety and generally demonstrates control of vocabulary and idiomatic phrasing, though it may contain some minor errors or an occasional serious error which obscures meaning.

Demonstrates some developing competence in writing, but remains flawed on either the rhetorical or syntactic level or both. A paper in this category

- Shows little or no awareness of audience.
- Addresses the question but not adequately: its thesis may be weak or obscure, support for generalizations may be insufficient or lacking, and digressions and inconsistencies may occur; organization and development may be formulaic; connections between sentences are often missing, unclear, or misleading.
- Contains errors that obscure meaning, or an accumulation of minor errors; often contains language that does not express the writer's apparent intention; demonstrates limited and inconsistent control of idiomatic language and vocabulary.

Suggests incompetence. A paper in this category occasionally shows some understanding of syntax and topic, but it contains errors that obscure meaning and an accumulation of minor errors. Additionally, it may be seriously flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses:

- Failure to organize or develop: may use repetition in place of organization.
- Little or no detail, or irrelevant specifics.
- Use of ideas that are irrelevant, illogical, unfeasible, or immature.
- Little or no syntactic variety.

Demonstrates incompetence in writing. A paper in this category contains serious and persistent errors in usage and sentence structure and may be illogical or incoherent or reveal the writer's failure to comprehend the questions.

Cannot be evaluated. A paper in this category so seriously deviates from the expected result that the writer's skill cannot be evaluated. Blank, severely underdeveloped, illegible, and off-topic papers fall into this category.

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Testing Service. This rubric, however, is not connected in any way to *Test of Written English* anchor papers nor is it endorsed by Educational Testing Service. All anchor papers and interpretations of this rubric are established by Gallaudet University for its own purposes.

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