

# Making Changes That Matter: Assessment Materials in the Academic ESL Reading Classroom

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## Background and Beginnings - The Reading Curriculum Project

How do we know our students are comprehending what they are reading? How do you approach a reading course? How would you change a reading curriculum if you had the ability to do so?

In the 2017-2018 academic year, the ESL-Academic (ESLA) program at Whatcom Community College embraced these questions and found a few more questions to add in the process. Over several quarters, both our program director and our ESLA faculty had noted that students were “passing” reading courses but still struggling to comprehend what they read as they progressed to the next proficiency level. Instructional hours were being devoted to helping students read well, but in the end, some students were just not succeeding at this rather illusive and invisible skill. Traditionally, typical assessments include measuring skills and knowledge acquired over time as connected to course content (Grabe & Jiang, 2013, p. 7). However, these assessments were not sufficient.

ESLA faculty opened up a dialogue on how to incorporate alternative assessment. Grabe and Jiang explain (2013):

A key issue for informal reading assessment is the need for multiple assessment formats (and multiple assessment points) to evaluate a wide range of student performances for any decisions about student abilities



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or student progress. The many small assessments across many tasks helps overcome the subjectivity of informal assessment and strengthens the effectiveness and fairness of informal assessments. (p.7)

The question became, were we accurately and fairly measuring our students' reading comprehension?

## **Development of Reading Assessment Tools**

Reading instructors in our intensive English program began to search for ways and means by which we could determine horizontally across levels and vertically within our program whether our college prep students were actually understanding what they were reading. Often times our students would progress through our intensive reading classes by completing homework, such as vocabulary logs, discussing what they have read, and passing tests, without having improved their reading comprehension abilities. We began to question and discuss how we might better use class time for our students to read and demonstrate their abilities to comprehend level-specific reading passages. Our reading instructors scrutinized several aspects of our traditional instructional modes and methods resulting in some dramatic changes

Another ongoing task we addressed is the level-appropriateness of the reading texts we ask our students to buy. While many publishers describe their reading texts as for "beginning", or "low intermediate" students, or even by students' vocabulary level, we have found that there is a variation in the difficulty of some passages in some of the texts our students use. In order to gain a standardized tool by which we could measure almost any and all reading passages for their level of acceptability for our students, we have taken to employing the readability statistics feature on Microsoft Word. By scanning reading online passages or pasting them into Word documents and employing the Spelling & Grammar feature, we are able to see each passages' Flesch Kincaid (FK) scores. By determining through norming practices what range of FK scores describe our program's reading levels, we have been able to gain a clearer, shared idea of the level in which our readers belong.

There is continuing discussion among our instructors about the appropriateness of FK scores, which measure reading passages on the American education grade system, that is, Grades 1 to 12 and beyond. Investigating further into measures of text difficulty, we encountered Lexile, ATOS, DRP Analyzer, and Pearson's Reading Maturity Metric, to name a few. At this point, owing to its ease of use, we have incorporated Microsoft's readability statistics and, specifically, its FK scores to measure the difficulty and appropriateness of reading passages for our students.

The most interesting and important development that we have implemented is weekly Reading Ability Checks, a streamlined assessment tool which would be used at every proficiency level to assess students' reading abilities apart from themed reading units and contextualized articles studied in class. These are short reading passages which the students have not seen or studied before on high-interest topics. The RACs are written at the readability level of a given intensive course with short multiple choice comprehension questions that test whether the student understood the basic elements of a reading (i.e. main ideas and the key details, etc.). Students were asked to take three RACs per class and to achieve an average of 70% or higher on these assessment tools as an additional requirement to pass the course.

Developing the RACs was an enlightening shared experience for our faculty in that we focused on alternative and effective assessment practices. We gained "a powerful tool" as Grabe and Jiang write "[...] to support student learning and to motivate students more effectively" (2013, p.14). We used online sites, such as [breakingnewsenglish.com](http://breakingnewsenglish.com) and [readworks.org](http://readworks.org), which have scores of topical and engaging passages of interest to our students. Then, working in pairs or threes and using the reading statistics feature on Microsoft Word, we would adapt the already abbreviated and modified readings so that they would be appropriate for our readers. For example, we determined that an FK score between 4 and 5.9 is a Level 3 student in our 5-level Intensive academic ESL program; therefore, we would have to edit and simplify an article appearing on, say, [readworks.org](http://readworks.org). This is not a simple task. However, after using simpler synonyms, reducing or eliminating passive constructions and turning adjective clauses

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to adjectives, a passage's FK score can be brought into line with the parameters we have set to define our program's reading levels. This task helped us value readability in all materials.

## Looking to the Future

Initial results show that there seemed to be correlations between passing rates in RACs and overall grades in reading courses. At the end of the quarter, pass/fail decisions were clear to both the instructor as well as the students. The assessment tool was working! It should be noted that the same 3 students who did not pass, improved tremendously in the second session of the same course and moved up to the next proficiency level with confidence in their reading skills.

Reading is an invisible skill. In ESL pedagogy it can be approached in so many ways, yet at the heart of all quality instruction is fair and accurate assessment. Casanave notes, "We understand something about reading comprehension, but we know little about how comprehension comes about, which is what instruction in reading is intended to address" (1988, p.285). In the ESLA program at WCC, what started with a series of unanswered questions has resulted in a curriculum change that produced more motivated students who applied their energy to reading for understanding and focused reading curriculum. This supported instructors in their goals of improving the readability of passages for students and improving student reading performances. Surely, there will be more changes to come, but for the time being, the ESLA program collectively rolls up their sleeves and is getting to work on making meaningful and accurate reading assessment a priority and an achievable goal.

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