mCLASS Flex: The Power of Choice

Flexible literacy assessment options
to reach all your early readers

Center for
Early Reading
Amplify.

Literacy instruction is not one-size-fits-all, and neither is literacy assessment

There is common agreement that literacy instruction cannot start and stop with daily doses of one-size-fits-all core curriculum. In a classroom of students with highly varied reading skills, literacy instruction must support students of all levels with differentiated core instruction, enrichment activities and reading intervention. To do this, teachers require timely information about what students need. Formative assessment must be as efficient as possible in providing this information so that instructional time is spent on the right areas that will improve reading development for a given child.

Just like instruction, *literacy assessment should not be one-size-fits-all.* Formative assessment should also be flexible to student needs in order to be as informative and efficient as teachers require. Beginning readers' self-regulation and reading skills can progress rapidly and at wildly varying paces. A flexible formative assessment that can match a young reader's different developmental stages would allow teachers to select the method best suited to gather the information necessary to track students and target instruction.

We at Amplify keep a dedicated focus on developments in literacy research and pedagogy and always seek to improve our products and services accordingly. Based on evolving thinking about online assessment for *certain* readers, we have integrated our new Flex functionality into our existing mCLASS observational platform. mCLASS Flex brings both observational *and* online administration modes to our research-based assessments. With the new mCLASS, educators have more choice when meeting the needs of every child in their classrooms, whether this choice happens at the district, building or classroom level.

mCLASS Flex: Empowering teachers with data-driven assessment choice for every reader

Research shows that observational assessment is the best way to measure early literacy skills for beginning or off-track readers. Yet for stronger and older readers, the time necessary for observational assessment can lead to lost time for teachers to support students who are most in need of additional help. The new mCLASS Flex capability allows educators using mCLASS:DIBELS Next or mCLASS:Reading 3D to maximize instructional time by making the best use of assessment time based on student need.

mCLASS assessments are predictive of important outcomes, and with Flex, teachers can choose the best method for administering the assessment based on the needs of each reader. In either modality, teachers assess the same critical skills and are able to immediately see equivalent results that can be analyzed across students regardless of mode. Teachers can thereby address the needs of their diverse classrooms of learners as efficiently as possible.

Assessment needs to be developmentally appropriate and measure the reading skills pertinent to the age, goals and aptitude of the reader. The proper mode of assessment is a function of where a student is progressing or struggling at various stages of literacy learning. To that end, there is in-depth research that can guide educators as they determine the appropriate assessment mode for every student, at every turn.

When observational assessment is best for students

Critical early reading skills, like phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle and oral reading fluency (Good, Simmons & Kame'enui, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgesen, 2002), are, in most cases, better assessed observationally. Such skills are often best gauged when a teacher can hear a student sound out a word or manipulate sounds. For the youngest readers struggling with these elemental skills, observational assessment is the developmentally

appropriate mode.

The value of data-informed instruction is based on the information being detailed, relevant and reliable. For younger readers who lack self-regulation skills, computer-based assessments fall short (Kegel, Kooy-Hofland & Bus, 2009). Without a teacher there to engage the student, the results of computer-based assessment can conflate literacy skills with the ability of the student to focus. Students come with varying familiarity with technology. While some students may be comfortable with touchscreen devices, others may not be familiar and many have poor skills using a laptop or desktop operated with a mouse or trackpad—the most common platform for computer-based assessment.

Additionally, if an online assessment is not designed to evaluate the full range of the five big ideas of reading (as identified by the National Reading Panel), it won't generate an accurate, actionable report for at-risk readers detailing where they are struggling (Clemens, et al., 2015). It is especially important for teachers who are supporting struggling readers to be able to identify exactly where and how that student is struggling. Teachers get this information from directly observing a student reading. Teachers can then understand and internalize their observations and apply insights to ongoing targeted instruction. This approach is at the heart of keeping younger and struggling readers progressing towards literacy—and hopeful futures.

All of these issues indicate the importance of observational assessment with *the youngest students*. While issues like self-regulation and familiarity with technology become less pressing as students enter upper elementary grades, they do not disappear entirely. Further, when trying to support *struggling students in these older grades*, teachers still need the data and benefit from the shared experience of directly observing students to understand exactly what type of support and intervention to provide.

Taking time to provide intervention that is informed and targeted for the students who need support the most is time well spent. Evidence of the long-term risks of unmitigated struggle in early/elementary grades is manifold. Ninety percent of struggling readers will continue to struggle at the end of elementary school if they are not provided intervention (Juel, 1988). Seventy-four percent of students who are poor readers in third grade will be poor readers in ninth grade. In general, struggling readers have a higher risk of academic failure and school dropout (Francis et al., 1996; Shaywitz et al., 1999; Slavin, 1994; Walker & Shinn, 2002; Torgesen & Burgess, 1998). Research has also shown that poor reading skills are correlated with a low motivation to read, and this relationship is established early (Morgan et al., 2008).

Becoming a successful reader requires a large volume of reading both in and outside of school (Stanovich, 1986). It is critical that students feel successful and therefore motivated to read from a young age. We need to focus time and resources on preventing academic difficulties and must set up our school service delivery systems to be prevention oriented rather than reactive.

When online assessment is best for students

The assessment choices for older students progressing towards literacy are just as consequential. Stronger readers who can self-regulate should be tracked, but do not necessarily need the close attention of observational assessment. In the absence of alternative options, teachers might observe these readers by default, using time that could be spent working closely with struggling reads. Alternatively, they may use an online assessment that forces them to administer online with every student—a disservice to struggling readers. Or, they do two different assessments. But in many cases, this causes them to lose the ability to compare all students in a classroom and to track the same students longitudinally across grade levels.

When it comes to reading, our chief concern at Amplify is providing *every* child an opportunity to become a fluent reader. Our approach to assessment involves methods that are developmentally appropriate for each child. We have extended our research-based assessments, DIBELS Next and Reading 3D, to offer an online option for assessing in the same skill areas. Teachers can invest time more wisely by using online assessment with on-track students. And teachers may decide that a student who received online assessment requires further attention and can use observational assessment in later progress monitoring and/or benchmarks.

Research validates the assertion that online assessment is an effective choice with students that demonstrate as on track. As students mature, they can sustain attention and complete tasks on their own. Beginning in second grade, students are working, both silently and independently, on applying reading mechanics or foundational skills to fluent reading and comprehension of increasingly complex texts (Hiebert, 2014). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated equivalence between paper-based and computer-based tests in both reading speed (Dundar & Akcayir, 2012) and comprehension

(Dundar & Akcayir, 2012; Higgins, Russell & Hoffman, 2005; Pomplun & Custer, 2005). Finally, online assessment offers the benefit of improved standardization of how the assessment items are presented, as well as more feasible data collection where time with trained teachers is limited. We have found that this type of resource constraint becomes more problematic in the upper elementary grades.

There are different ways of testing online. But unlike item-level adaptive systems, our online assessments provide item-level reporting. This allows teachers to know exactly which item was given and what the student's response was to that item. Results are based on each subskill—directly measured rather than inferred through an algorithm. While on-track students move through a rigorous assessment that will track and confirm their continued progress, teachers are freed to devote close attention to struggling readers. *The net effect of assessment choice is that teachers can tie both online and observational results to personalized instruction for all students in their classrooms, regardless of individual skill levels.*

While some concern remains that students with minimal computer experience might be at a disadvantage, online assessment remains a valid and sometimes superior choice for advanced readers. In this case, it is worth preserving the online option by providing explicit training and pre-tests for readers who are candidates for computer-based assessments. Research has shown that as students age, computer-skill disadvantages tend to fade, suggesting that with time comes more computer exposure and ease of use (Pomplun & Custer, 2005).

What matters most when vetting literacy assessment options

As we know, literacy instruction and intervention are insufficient and less likely to be effective if not informed by timely understanding of student needs. The right formative assessment will allow teachers to target resources effectively and retain as much time as possible for delivering them. Vetting assessment options against sound pedagogy and research-based technological integration is of the utmost importance if you want to create equal literacy opportunity for all your students.

When vetting literacy assessment options, please keep in mind the following:

- *Assessment must be easy to use.* Assessment tools must be reliable, valid and screen, monitor and analyze what matters. They must be feasible to implement and provide data that lead to clear, specific and appropriate instructional recommendations that will improve students' overall outcomes (Glover & Albers, 2007).

- *Assessment must tie to instruction.* Assessments must be technically sound and produce detailed analysis predictive of important outcomes so that teachers can make wise instructional and intervention decisions accordingly.

- *Both observational and online assessments must track granular reading skills.* Adaptive assessments typically skip over core reading subskills. Many assessments altogether omit subskills in their exercises and instead use data to make shaky inferences about them. These assessments also cannot provide item-level results for teachers to review in order to precisely target instruction, given their adaptive nature. Such assessments will not produce a detailed picture of a student's literacy development, nor will they guide teachers to where a student is getting stuck. If assessment is going to inform strategic instruction and intervention, it must be precise and cover and report on all core literacy subskills.

- *By giving teachers assessment options, students can get the personalized instruction they need.* Assessment options broaden the scope of developmentally appropriate modes of measuring student skill with greater efficiency towards the goal of meeting all students' diverse needs at once. Online assessment for stronger readers lets teachers pay closer attention to those who need it most—struggling readers.

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