

The Reading Ability of English Language Learners

Leon R. Dreyfus, Ph.D.
Questar Assessment, Inc.

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The ability of English language learners (ELL) to read in English is critical to their success in the mainstream classroom.

The MAC II Test of English Language Proficiency utilizes the technology of the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) program to assess the reading ability of English language learners (in grades 4 through 12). DRP tests are criterion-referenced measures of reading comprehension. They utilize a unique format to evaluate a student's performance on a fundamental comprehension task and report the results on a scale of text difficulty. The information provided by DRP tests allows you to set standards for reading achievement in terms of the materials students are expected to read (e.g., textbooks, newspapers), to monitor student progress toward achieving those standards, to adjust instruction to accommodate student ability, and to select materials appropriate to the ability of each student. All of this can be done for English language learners as well as for native English speakers.

The panels on the accompanying pages show the reading ability of a broad sample of students in the fall of the school year. The panels on the left show the ability of native English speakers (NES) and those on the right show the ability of English language learners (ELL). The NES data were taken from our DRP norms (Fall, 1999) and the ELL data from our MAC II norms (Fall, 2000). Each panel shows raw frequency on the vertical axis and instructional DRP scores ($p=.75$) on the horizontal axis. The dotted vertical lines in each panel represent the range of materials in DRP units that students can be expected to encounter in each respective grade. Although the scales for NES and ELL are different to accommodate the different ranges of scores, the vertical reference lines in each row are the same (i.e., the instructional demands for NES and ELL are considered comparable in each grade).

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from these data. First, there is a range of reading ability among NES and ELL in every grade. Second, the average reading ability of the ELL is well below the average for NES in the same grade (25 to 30 DRP units). Third, whereas the average ability of the NES is well within the range of materials that students in the grade are expected to read, the average ability of the ELL in each grade is substantially below that same range of materials. Fourth, over successive grades, the abilities of students, both NES and ELL, increase, but the abilities of ELL, on average, remain considerably lower than the abilities of NES. Fifth, although the average ability of ELL students remains well below the average for NES and below the level of materials that students in those grades are expected to read, there are among the ELL in the upper

grades a number of very good readers (e.g., those in grades 11/12 at $DRP = 75$ and beyond).

These data can be used to inform a variety of decisions that must be made about ELL. First, they can be used to inform the placement decision to insure that students with comparable reading abilities are placed in appropriate instructional groups. Second, performance on the DRP portion of the MAC II can also be used to monitor students' progress. This progress can be measured against local standards, the materials students are expected to read, the reading ability of students in mainstream classrooms or against all three. Third, the information provided by DRP tests can be used to inform instruction. In addition to adjusting instruction to accommodate the range of student ability, teachers can select materials that are more consistent with students' reading abilities. And finally, students' reading ability, as measured by the DRP portion of the MAC II, can also be used to inform the exit decision. Given the importance of reading competence to success in the mainstream classroom and the wide differences in ability separating the NES and ELL populations, the consideration of DRP test information in the exit decision may be its most critical use.





