

## Assessing ELLs' Reading Comprehension Across Multiple Text Levels

Standardized, grade-level reading tests often fail to capture English language learners' (ELLs) true comprehension because the linguistic complexity of the texts—advanced vocabulary, idioms, and syntax—can exceed a learner's current English proficiency. Informal assessments administered across the year provide continual snapshots of what students can comprehend and help target instruction to specific needs rather than relying on age- or grade-based generalizations (Colorín Colorado, “Using Informal Assessments”).

When ELLs are required to read only the same grade-level texts as their peers, results can underestimate comprehension and overestimate language barriers. Experts caution that assessment should occur at an accessible language level so learners can demonstrate what they actually understand, instead of being measured primarily on their ability to navigate dense language (Colorín Colorado, “Assessment for English Language Learners”). In short, a low score on a one-size-fits-all reading test may reflect text difficulty rather than the student's capacity to make meaning.

Using passages at multiple difficulty levels within informal assessments—commonly through an Informal or Qualitative Reading Inventory (IRI/QRI)—offers a finer-grained picture of a student's reading profile. With IRIs, students read leveled passages and respond through retellings and comprehension questions, enabling teachers to determine independent, instructional, and frustration levels (Reading Rockets, “Informal Reading Inventory”). This diagnostic approach helps educators match students with appropriate texts and instruction, providing more precise information than a single grade-level probe (Reading Rockets, “Informal Reading Inventory”).

Research and expert guidance consistently recommend aligning assessment tasks to a learner's current English proficiency (Colorín Colorado, “Using Informal Assessments”; Reading Rockets, “Types of Informal Classroom-Based Assessment”). Empirical evidence with adolescents likewise shows that text difficulty meaningfully affects measured comprehension for some learners. Lupo and colleagues studied ninth graders and found that while many students could comprehend challenging texts with instructional support, a subset reading well below average—many identified as English learners—benefited from easier versions. For these students, down-leveled passages revealed comprehension that would be obscured by harder texts (Lupo et al.). This supports a responsive assessment model: when learners are not ready for complex texts, using accessible passages can more accurately capture understanding, while

other students may demonstrate deep comprehension through scaffolded engagement with grade-level texts (AdLit).

In practice, multi-level informal comprehension probes—using retells and a range of questions (explicit, implicit, and evaluative)—allow teachers to identify the highest level at which students can comprehend with support and to adjust instruction accordingly. Periodic reassessment captures growth over time. This approach avoids inferring ability from age or grade alone and yields a more individualized and accurate portrait of an ELL’s reading development (Colorín Colorado, “Using Informal Assessments”; Reading Rockets, “Informal Reading Inventory”).

#### Works Cited

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