LET’S GET HIGHER SCORES ON THESE NEW ASSESSMENTS

Timothy Shanahan

During the past few years, all of the U.S. states have either adopted new educational standards in reading or are currently engaged in such an endeavor. No Child Left Behind requires that the states test students to find out if they are meeting the educational standards. Accordingly, new standards require new tests.

The Common Core State Standards are widely touted as being more rigorous than what they replace, and the states that are going it alone have sometimes increased the challenge level, too (e.g., Indiana, Texas). If the new tests are to accurately reflect the new standards, then it seems evident that these tests will need to be harder than in the past (e.g., a smaller proportion of students will “meet or exceed” state standards).

Many states are now working together in consortia to develop new tests. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) have each released sample items (www.parcconline.org; www.smarterbalanced.org), and these samples clearly reflect higher challenge levels. These tests look different than previous tests, and they ask very different questions. Not surprisingly, many principals and teachers want to know how they can teach students to answer these new kinds of questions.

However, in a previous column, I explained the futility of teaching and practicing such questions (Shanahan, 2014). I’m referring to the widespread idea of analyzing test scores to determine how kids do with particular types of questions, and then providing scads of practice items so that kids will do better with such questions on the next test.

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The problem with this very popular approach is that it doesn’t work. It has never worked. And it won’t work any better with the new assessments on the horizon. It’s as effective as pushing the elevator button multiple times to hurry it along or turning the thermostat to 90° to make a room warm up faster.

Why do so many teachers and principals implement such a futile practice? As the pressure for higher test scores has mounted, teachers and principals feel like they have to do something, and they have no idea what else to do. There is a kind of logic to it, as well: The students are practicing something that at least looks like it could improve test scores.

Practicing the wrong thing is never a good idea, and spending one’s school day answering a plethora of main-idea, supporting-detail, or drawing-conclusions test questions is definitely the wrong thing. And it will be just as fruitless to practice “describing a character,” “providing evidence,” or “identifying a theme” questions for these new tests. It would make sense to do this if students performed poorly on tests because they lacked the skills underlying those questions, but that’s rarely been the case. As I explained in that earlier column, performance on the various question types explains none of the variance in student performance on standardized comprehension tests.

So what would improve scores? Analyses of test performance (ACT, 2006) suggest that outcome variance is due not to the questions but to the passages. On reading comprehension tests, it matters how well students read the passages that they will be questioned about. If you want higher test scores, then teach your students to read the test passages better.

To do that, it would help to think about what readers must do to read test texts effectively, then work to boost their ability to do those things well.

The Interpretation of Vocabulary in Context
One of the most obvious things readers must accomplish while reading is to interpret word meanings. Research shows the importance of vocabulary knowledge in reading and that vocabulary instruction can improve reading comprehension (NICHD, 2000). Despite that, research also reveals why vocabulary instruction usually exerts a limited impact on reading test scores (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). If the instruction teaches the meanings of words used on the test, big gains accrue. But if other words were taught—words not in the passages—then there would be no reason to expect improvement. Clearly, the explicit teaching of word meanings is a good idea (as is wide reading, another important vocabulary stimulus), but reliance on those practices alone is probably not sufficient to improve reading scores.

If students know the meanings of all the words in the test passages, then vocabulary would not be an issue. But let’s assume that they won’t know all of those words and that it would be impossible for a teacher to intuit which words were going to show up on the test.

To excel in that situation, students would need to be adept at figuring out the meanings of vocabulary words from context alone. Research shows that it is possible to teach students this kind of interpretation (Baumann, Edwards, Boland, Olejnik, & Kame’enui, 2003), yet I wonder how much such teaching takes place.

For instance, it’s common practice to preteach vocabulary to prepare students to read a selection. That’s okay as long as the words so taught were neither defined explicitly in the text by the author nor cued sufficiently to allow a determination of meaning from context. My own informal perusal of teacher and textbook lessons suggests this often isn’t the case. Instead of requiring students to deal with vocabulary interpretation—the skill that should help on a test—we emphasize the teaching of specific words, knowledge that may not help on a particular test. Research shows that teaching words improves knowledge of those words, but teaching students how prefixes and suffixes work and how to use context improves students’ abilities to deal with unknown words (Baumann et al., 2003). In that study, those skills were taught explicitly and systematically as a supplement to the teaching of specific words. I would suggest augmenting such lessons with opportunities to apply those skills during shared and guided reading.

Making Sense of Sentences
Obviously, there is more to text interpretation than words. To make sense of an author’s message in an extended text, it is imperative that readers make sense of the sentences, too.

There are many things that can make sentences difficult. Particularly long sentences place demands on memory uncommon in oral language. They require that readers read and reread the sentence to coordinate the beginning information with what follows.

Similarly, sentences that use passive voice may be harder to interpret because readers may struggle to determine

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who the subject of the sentence is. For example, students may be confused by this passive-voice sentence: “It was determined by Roosevelt that the Chancellor’s message did not require an immediate response from the State Department.” The trick is to figure out which word is the verb (determined) and then who it was (the subject of the sentence) who did the determining.

We assign texts that include such sentences, but the guidance usually offered to help students unpack them successfully is dubious. Another aspect of grammar that often challenges reading comprehension is the inclusion of dependent clauses. Look, for instance, at the following fourth-grade example.

“The women of Montgomery, both young and older, would come in with their fancy holiday dresses that needed adjustments or their Sunday suits or blouses that needed just a touch—a flower or some velvet trimming or something to make the ladies look festive.”

I suspect many students wouldn’t be able to interpret that sentence on a first try. But how many teachers would guide them to break that sentence down, take it apart, and make the necessary connections needed to understand it?

What should happen? First, let’s make that sentence matter, something we can do simply by asking a question about it (e.g., “What did the women of Montgomery do?”). Second, even if such a question were raised, if a student couldn’t answer, another student or even the teacher often would. So, let’s not tell them what it means.

What is needed is guidance in how to take this sentence apart in a meaningful way. For example, the information between the commas in a sentence is often an extra idea, so setting aside a phrase like “both young and older” and reading the sentence again without it can help clarify the meaning. Another possibility would be to break a sentence up at the punctuation points and at words like and, or, and that.

With that kind of effort, a student might be able to make sense of the independent clause (“The women of Montgomery…would come in with their fancy holiday dresses that needed adjustments”), and then they could turn their attention to one of the dependent clauses—a clause that depends on the reader to connect it appropriately to the independent clause for interpretation. The phrase “or their Sunday suits or blouses that needed just a touch” only makes sense if you recognize that it has to be connected to something else in the sentence; in this case, “The women of Montgomery…would come in with…their Sunday suits or blouses that needed just a touch.”

There is a substantial research base showing the effectiveness of sentence combining and sentence reduction in improving students’ writing and reading comprehension (Mellon, 1969; O’Hare, 1973; Straw, 1978). Such lessons, at one time, were commonplace in many American classrooms. Perhaps it’s time for their rediscovery.

As with context instruction, the teaching of sentence reduction offers students a third alternative. What I mean is that students usually understand a test passage or they do not; they often have no other options. These approaches tell students that when they do not understand what they read, they can take actions to remedy that problem—actions that do not require outside resources or help.

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Sustained Silent Reading

Reading comprehension tests usually require that students silently read a text of some length, from beginning to end, without anyone saying anything. No teacher will stop them at the end of the page to ask what they have read so far. There will be no opportunity to ask anyone for help or to hear what anyone else may be thinking. Students have to engage the text and sustain concentration.

Recently, I was teaching a fifth-grade social studies class in a local suburban district. I asked the students to read the first section of the chapter silently. Immediately, several hands shot up. The kids wanted to tell to me I was doing it wrong. They patiently explained that they didn’t read social studies silently. They took turns reading the paragraphs aloud and then they’d discuss it. The kids knew I hadn’t taught children in a while and they wanted to keep me on the straight and narrow.

But if, whenever the text gets challenging, we have the kids read it aloud—in pieces—when do they learn to sustain effort, concentration, and memory in the ways those are required by the tests (and by other reading as well)?

Don’t get me wrong. Oral reading practice, if handled properly, can be an important stimulus to improved fluency and, consequently, to improved reading comprehension (NICHD, 2000). Engaging students in oral reading practice in which they take on challenging texts with rereading and feedback is a great idea that can improve reading levels (Kuhn et al., 2006). I think such
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practice should be a daily occurrence in elementary school classrooms.

But silent reading practice matters, too. Admittedly, I do see such silent reading during classroom observations. I just can’t tell, from what I see, whether the students are really improving in that essential reading skill or whether they are languishing. In many situations, I doubt whether the teacher knows, either.

Sadly, I’m finding that few teachers have any idea how to teach students to engage successfully in this kind of extended silent reading. That doesn’t mean that children in their classroom can’t read silently successfully—only that those who cannot are not likely to improve much in that regard with current practices. There is a difference between teaching students to read silently and just handing out such assignments.

Try an experiment. Give students the first sentence from a text and ask them to read it silently. Explain to them that they should say the words in their head—that is, they should think the words—without saying them aloud. I recognize the value of illustrations, of course, but we need to focus student attention on silently reading the sentences. If they can answer the questions from the pictures, they will—which isn’t the point of this kind of practice.

There are studies of guided silent reading procedures (Rasinski, Samuels, Hiebert, Petscher, & Feller, 2011; Reutzel, Petscher, & Spichtig, 2012) that have reported positive results. Both of these studies focused on the use of computerized materials that gave students practice with increasingly long segments of text. Whether delivered by computer or by a teacher (as in my homely example), too few students are getting the opportunity to figure out how to engage in the kind of sustained silent reading that they will be expected to do during testing.

Likewise, I would argue for providing such practice with texts as challenging (in terms of the readability or language demands) as the texts that will be used on the tests. If the students are to be tested with texts at 700 Lexile levels, then it would be sensible to teach them to read texts of similar or higher challenge levels.

**Conclusions**

The idea of having students practice answering test questions is ubiquitous and ineffective in raising test scores. Consider focusing instruction on those things that actually make a difference in test performance. Teach kids how to figure out the meanings of words on the basis of morphology and context. Teach them to figure out the meanings of complex sentences by breaking those sentences into parts. Teach them to sustain their concentration during the silent reading of challenging and extensive texts. Teach those things well, and you will see improved test performance; the side benefit to be derived from this kind of test prep would be that your students would become better readers to boot.

**References**


