Introduction to the Adolescent Literacy Inventory

The world is changing rapidly—and the implications are clear. In order to be prepared for the new literacy demands of the 21st century our students must be able to function skillfully and flexibly in an information-rich society, which means they must possess skillful and flexible literacy skills. It is not enough to comprehend text at literal levels. Instead, students must be able to inquire, make complex inferences, think critically, and problem-solve. Thus, our reading assessment and instruction must contribute to the reading abilities adolescent students will need to function and prosper in the new global economy.

Youth who are thoughtful and skillful readers are higher achievers in school than their less competent peers (Grigg, Daane, Ying, & Campbell, 2003). Furthermore, competent reading ability in adolescence leads to empowered citizenry (Hofstetter, Sticht, & Hofstetter, 1999) and greater professional opportunity in adulthood (Sum, Khatiwada, McGlaughlin, & Tobar, 2007).

The Adolescent Literacy Inventory is an assessment that helps us understand how well students read, understand, and critically evaluate ideas in content text. With this knowledge we can customize instruction in relation to the ever-increasing reading skills and strategies that youth must acquire to take their place as critical citizens and opportunity seekers both in the United States and on the world stage.

The Adolescent Literacy Inventory (ALI) offers teachers, diagnosticians, and reading specialists high-quality reading assessment that will help middle and high school students realize their potential as readers in the 21st century. The ALI combines time-tested approaches to reading diagnosis with our most current understanding of reading and reading assessment in providing detailed information to improve teaching and reading.

Although the ALI shares many proven features with useful reading inventories, it is also a one-of-a-kind assessment tool. Unlike many reading inventories, the ALI is a diagnostic tool designed specifically for adolescents. And, unlike many other reading inventories, it assesses academic literacy—the skills and abilities needed for success in school settings. To be a successful reader in middle and high school, adolescents must be able to read fluently, comprehend meaningfully, and understand content vocabulary found in textbook prose. To assess these abilities the ALI uses actual textbook passages from the four core content domains: English/language arts, science, social studies, and math.

Like all reading inventories, the ALI is designed to be administered individually. A one-on-one administration of the ALI will yield useful diagnostic information about a student’s literacy needs and abilities with the kind of text most commonly required in secondary school. Users will discover how well students (1) decode words, (2) understand vocabulary in context, (3) read with appropriate speed and accuracy, and (4) comprehend what they read.

The ALI offers a range of administration options depending on the goals of the user and the needs of the student. For example, it can assist a content teacher in deciding whether a particular student has the reading ability commensurate with the reading level of the required textbook or whether alternative texts and other support materials are needed. It can reveal to a skilled literacy coach what textbook reading strategies a student is using and whether new ones will improve performance for the student. The ALI can also be used as one important indicator to help determine the most effective instructional placement or setting for a student and the most responsive literacy interventions.
The Adolescent Literacy Inventory is a formative, classroom-based assessment, not a standardized, norm-referenced instrument. Although the assessment features and procedures of the ALI were developed based on sound and rigorous research evidence and it was piloted with middle and high school students, it does not possess the kind of normative data of a standardized reading test, such as Gates-McGinitie or Nelson-Denny. Before a standardized test is made available to schools and teachers, it is given to a large number of students, called the norm group, who represent the group for whom the test was intended. The norm group’s scores on the test are transformed statistically into standard scores, such as percentiles and stanines. These standard scores allow teachers and schools to compare their students with a national group of students or with other similar students in their state. So while no such comparisons can be made with the ALI, it has the advantage over norm-referenced tests of assessing the unique strengths and needs of adolescent readers. In addition, student reading is situated in texts most like those read by adolescents in school.

Nor is the ALI standardized in the sense that every user and every student must adhere to exactly the same administration procedures. Instead, the ALI is designed to offer users maximum flexibility. Because reading diagnosis is as much an art as an exact science, users need flexible assessment options, depending on the desired information about a student’s literate practices and the available time frame. The ALI also allows users to learn about a student’s literate behavior in ways that are impossible with norm-referenced, standardized instruments. For example, one-on-one assessment means that users can probe student understanding more deeply after asking a question, exploring a student’s reasoning for giving a response, or interact with a student while preparing to read a textbook passage, during reading and meaning making, and after the passage has been read.

The Adolescent Literacy Inventory was developed in response to the increasingly widespread concern among middle and high school teachers about how best to assess their students’ handling of the authentic challenges of academic reading. Reading inventories have a long history, and there are many available to teachers today. But none targets the actual everyday kinds of reading and literacy demands being placed on youth in secondary content classrooms. Most reading inventories assess a student’s ability to decode words in isolation using stand-alone word lists. Most reading inventories check fluency and comprehension based on generic passages, some developed or chosen only in accordance with an estimated readability level to represent grade-level difficulty. And most reading inventories leave little or no room for interactions beyond the prescribed administration procedures.

Because academic literacy at the secondary level requires so much more than the ability to decode isolated words, the ALI checks for actual understanding of academic vocabulary in context through maze placement passages. Because successful reading at the secondary level means being able to understand textbooks, the ALI offers fluency and comprehension checks with intact passages taken directly from popular content-area textbooks used in states across the country. And because it’s so important for teachers, specialists, and diagnosticians to know more than a student’s responses and scores, the ALI creates and encourages numerous opportunities for interactive assessment. These interactions allow a user to go beyond a score or response to uncover students’ underlying reasoning, clarify their misconceptions, and promote students’ reflection and metacognition.

The unique features and flexible procedures of the Adolescent Literacy Inventory will be explained in detail in subsequent sections. In the next section, a research rationale for the ALI is given based on the best current thinking about adolescent literacy and literacy assessment.

REFERENCES

