

Standardized Reading Assessment Tools: Indispensable, Though not without Limitations

Yuhua Luo

Jiangsu Second Normal University, Nanjing 211200, Jiangsu, China

*“The man who does not read has no advantage over the man who cannot read.”
-Mark Twain*

READING ability is fundamental to individuals’ academic success and lifelong learning as it plays a pivotal role in knowledge acquisition, thinking skill development, and even social participation. Reading is a complicated cognitive process, and reading ability is deemed an intricate construct, ranging from the mastery of lower-level processing like decoding skills to that of higher-level processing like reading comprehension (Sprenger-Charolles & Messaoud-Galusi, 2009). The issue of how to scientifically and systematically assess students’ reading proficiency has been a highly debated topic in the education research community.

Globally significant assessment programs, such as Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), have respectively developed structured, standardized reading assessment frameworks. They typically have standard test items and grading criteria surrounding dimensions like information acquisition, text comprehension, inferential reasoning, and critical evaluation, capable of quantitatively revealing students’ reading proficiency and the gaps in them (OECD, 2019). The introduction of assessment tools like these has produced reliable evidence for reading instruction improvement and reading education-related policies, while also accumulating extensive data for cross-cultural comparative studies on reading literacy development across all education phases.

The specific benefits of standardized reading assessment tools for reading education have been fully discussed in the literature. They can assess intangible reading ability with operational approaches, forming the basis for teachers’ curriculum adjustment while serving as reliable teaching evaluation tools. At the same time, the results of assessments

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from different education systems can be used by researchers to determine factors influencing reading education outcomes and by policy makers to evaluate the effects of current educational modalities and reforms (Cordero et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, existing reading assessment tools are not without limitations. Most standardized assessments measure reading as an outcome, unable to evaluate the reading strategies and emotional motivations arising in the reading process (Afflerbach, 2016). The strategies used, cognitive approaches adopted, and even hurdles encountered in reading can hardly be assessed through multiple-choice or short-answer questions, which hinders accurate and comprehensive appraisals of student reading proficiency. Another issue concerns variations in language and cultural contexts, which lead to the differences in the content, structure, and representation of text as well as student reading behavior and motivation (Wang & Guthrie, 2004). Hence, the application of established reading assessment tools in different countries, particularly in non-Indo-European language-speaking nations and developing countries, often faces issues in reading text translation, cultural adaptation, equivalence of item difficulty, and more. As a result, the validity of assessments has been compromised (Grisay et al., 2009). For example, there are significant differences in organization and representation of information between Chinese and English reading materials; introducing English reading assessment frameworks to the Chinese education setting may present the risk of lowering their validity.

Despite their limitations like these, reading assessment tools remain valuable devices for evaluating students' reading ability and assisting reading teaching improvement. Still, "less ideal assessment" is much desirable than the "absence of assessment," which should be the agreed notion underpinning all debates on reading education reform. *The Lack of Standardized Chinese Reading Proficiency Assessment Tools in Chinese Basic Education: The Current State, Causes, and Solutions* in this issue describes the current state of Chinese reading proficiency assessment in basic education students, analyzes the underlying causes of the lack of established Chinese reading assessment tools, which include education culture-related factors, technical issues, and education policy-related factors, and make suggestions correspondingly (Cheng, 2025). While the article lacks data-supported analysis as a non-empirical study, it highlights the importance of reading assessment tools, offering valuable insights for the improvement of reading assessment mechanisms in Chinese language education.

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Correspondence to:

Yuhua Luo
Jiangsu Second Normal University
Nanjing 211200
Jiangsu
China

E-mail: luoyuh@126.com

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