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From a Teacher

The development of proficiency tests was originally a selfish endeavor. A new state mandate a few years back required that all teachers use at least two different types of pre and post tests. The amount of student growth from those tests would be one factor in the new teacher evaluation system. I was teaching middle school Spanish and needed a practical way of measuring communicative language ability. The tests needed to be sensitive to the progress made by novice level students in one year with only three classes per week. I also wanted the tests to be of the type that would be a strong motivator for me to provide acquisition-rich classroom experiences, while also encouraging students to engage in those activities that will best develop their proficiency.

I chose tests that would be quick and easy to administer and to score, while also giving me objective data. For one of the measures, I decided to test reading fluency with speed readings, which would provide me with data on speed and comprehension. The texts and quizzes also served as a speed reading course for eighth grade. For the other measure, I would use speed rewrites of stories the students had never heard. From this I would have a total written word count. I also included one subjective evaluation, assigning the rewrites a global rating from 1-6.

We all know how much administrators love data in this day and age and I was able to deliver in full. On my end-of-year report to my administrator (evaluator) I concluded:

Writing and reading fluency increased significantly among 7th grade students over a period of 6 months.

I was able to make simple charts. Here is a section of a chart reporting on speed reading averages.

|	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Growth	Growth Rate (%)
Reading Speed on Harder Story (words per minute)	123	191	67	55
Comprehension Score (%) on Harder Story	57	77	19	34

From the charts, I could draw more detailed conclusions, e.g.

Reading speed increased dramatically, not reaching sufficiency (150 words per minute) on the pre-test text and exceeding sufficiency on the post-test.

Reading comprehension score was below sufficiency on the pre-test and above on the post-test.

These results, a product of these testing methods, were one of the major reasons I earned "Exemplary" ratings (the highest rating offered) in all four categories on my teacher evaluation.

When I later taught in a private school, there were no testing requirements, but I still used these tests. They served as a diagnostic, providing me with the information that the range of abilities of the eighth grade students was all over the place. It was easy to enter the data and create graphs. See the sample below.

8th Grade September 2016
Fluency on Easy Reading

Comprehension Score (%)

Speed (words per minute)
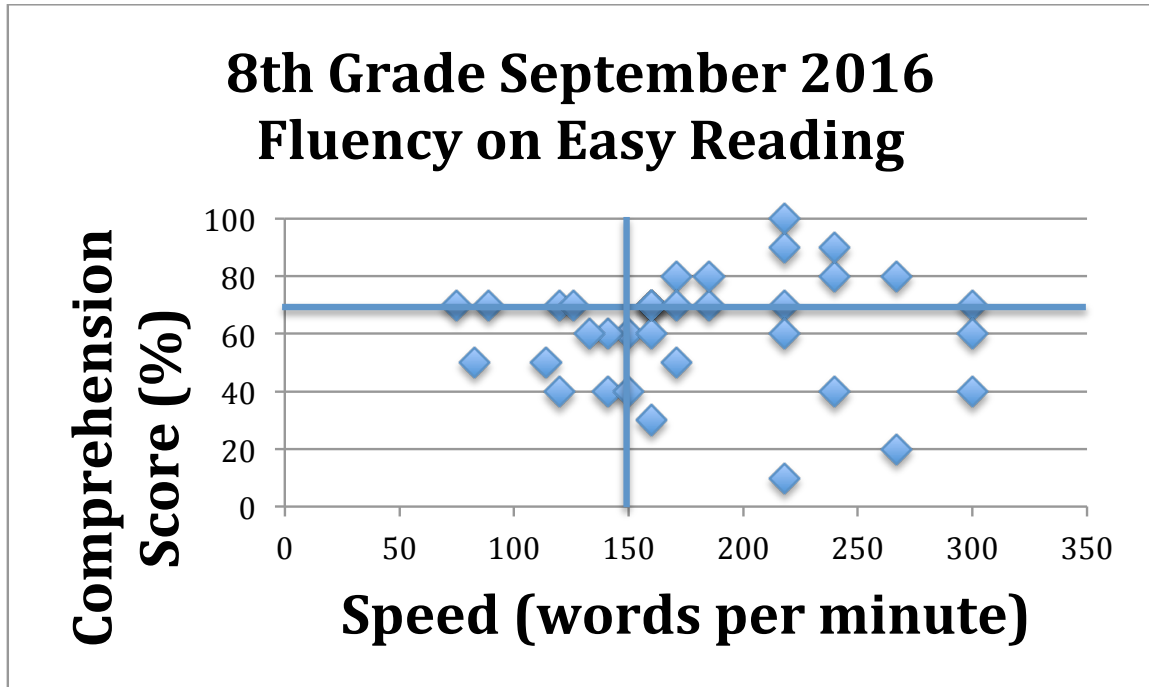
I shared the diagnostic results with my administrator so that he would be sympathetic to the challenges of teaching a group of such diverse abilities. The results also beg the question: How is it that some of these students have had years of language study, but can't read a short passage based on the highest frequency vocabulary?

That year, I was required to give a final exam, so I used these tests and based final exam grades on improvement from the pretest, giving everyone a fair chance at success.

In addition to giving these communicative tests, the high school placement exam I had to administer when working in a public school was a discrete-item, 100 question grammar (30 conjugations!) and 100 question vocabulary test. The private school I taught in required I administer the National Spanish Exam, half of which is a discrete-item grammar and vocabulary test. My classes in both schools were communicative all year-long, but three weeks before the exams was spent on explicit grammar instruction.

The results?
- My students scored as well on the placement exam as other schools in my district that spent the year explicitly teaching the content on the exams.
- On the National Spanish Exam, the class as a whole did better than the year prior and this was their first year in a truly communicative class.

My students got two for one. They could communicate AND perform on old school tests. This is a much more efficient way to prepare students for traditional tests. In most cases, I just had to show students how to organize familiar language into charts and had to teach a little grammar vocabulary so they would understand the instructions (that was the first time they were hearing the "C word"). Most of the vocabulary was familiar after a year of communicating around topics of student interest. In fact, students enjoyed Spanish so much that they were motivated to do well and many studied an optional review packet. Now, imagine how well my students would have done if those exams had been proficiency-based!

I have personally field-tested the stories and procedures in this book and the results have served me well, so much that I hope more teachers will benefit from these testing methods. Heeding the suggestions of language teaching historian, Diane Musumeci (1997), that teacher method and textbooks include theory, we'll first review the constructs and terminology of communicative language teaching, proficiency, and testing. Without a clear definition of proficiency and its components, how could we ever measure it?

Next, the Proficiency Guidelines from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) are explained and critiqued. Then, improved testing methods are discussed, namely Savignon's 1972 study that started the communicative movement in testing and tests that I designed in the same spirit. Finally, recommended are practical tests of proficiency that use stories as the starting point.

The testing methods outlined in this book enable communicative language teaching.