



How to assess comprehension – with Dr. Kelly Powell-Smith

Reach All Readers Podcast #243

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Powell-Smith.

Kelly Powell-Smith: Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to have the opportunity to talk with you. I've been listening to your podcast and I'm really a fan.

Anna Geiger: Oh, thank you. I'm, I'm excited to talk to you about CFOL because I get so many questions from people about comprehension assessment.

But before we do that, could you introduce yourself and talk to us about your history in education?

Kelly Powell-Smith: Sure.

Well, I've always been interested in education and students and their development. That started way back in my undergraduate days, where I got a degree in developmental psych from UC, Santa Barbara. I was trying to figure out what I was going to do with that degree, and I took a class in special education and I really got excited about that sort of intersection of education and psychology. That led me to pursue a degree in school psychology at the University of Oregon.

This was sort of at the height of a lot of work happening around curriculum-based measurement. And so at my time there, I was part of a leadership training program in CBM and also one in severe disabilities, which might sound inconsistent, but both of those worked around a problem solving approach to supporting students in schools. And so there was a lot of consistency across those.

I also had the great opportunity to learn about reading, and so I sort of fell in love with all things reading, reading assessment, reading intervention. I did my dissertation on a parent tutoring program and reading.

So I hung around there for a while, working on some research, and then took a job at the University of South Florida in their school psychology program, which was also very nicely aligned with sort of a problem solving approach to supporting students. Which now I think is really, a lot of people see that in MTSS as the sort of cyclical approach and tiered services.

I got the chance to work with a lot of great people in Florida. There were some big initiatives happening at the time around reading. There was the Just Read Florida Initiative and of course Reading First was happening. And I got to work with some folks at the Florida Center for Reading Research. We did training all over the state in what was known as DIBELS at the time, it later became Acadience Reading.

And, somewhere along the way, Roland Good and Ruth Kaminski said, you're doing all this training, why don't you come work for us and be a senior research scientist? And so I actually took them up on the offer despite the fact that I was tenured at USF.

Part of it was, I was super excited about this really unique opportunity to work sort of from the ground floor up on some projects they really wanted me to support, and one of those was some diagnostic assessments. I was excited about that, and also, we really decided we didn't want to stay on the East

Coast. My husband and I and all our families are on the West Coast. And so we found our way back to Eugene, interestingly enough.

I stayed at what initially was called Dynamic Measurement Group with Ruth and Roland, it later became Acadience, and I worked for them for 17 years, from 2006 to 2023, when I left to take my job at Mount St. Joseph University in the reading science program.

It's really been a privilege to have this journey, which I feel like has some really common threads throughout and lots of connections over time that have remained constant. One of those is work in reading. I love my work at MSJ, and it's just such a delight and a privilege to mentor doctoral students in their research.

Anna Geiger: In the other parts of the series, we've talked a lot about assessment, particularly Acadience, because that is the one I'm most familiar with through some work that I did in the Mount St. Joseph Reading Science Certificate program with Dr. Stephanie Stollar, a class that you're teaching now. A lot of people ask me for a quick comprehension assessment and I usually tell them, I don't really think that you can really find one that's quick. We do know that the ORF assessment, on Acadience, for example, correlates very well with comprehension. What can a universal screener tell us about children's comprehension?

Kelly Powell-Smith: That's a great question because I think there are still misunderstandings around what ORF as an assessment is meant to do and what it can tell us.

So one of the things we know from lots of research is that it's highly correlated, like in the 0.9 something range, with reading comprehension assessments. So it's telling us something about reading comprehension.

But I think when it comes to universal screening, you know, we have oral reading fluency we can sort of add to, to try to triangulate what we know about a child's comprehension as part of that screening.

So if you do something like a retell, that adds information to what you already know about the student's automaticity and their accuracy. Can they talk about what they've read? And then if you have a MAZE assessment to add to that, it adds like another piece. What is their silent reading comprehension?

So I think the intention with having those measures, which I think isn't talked about enough, is to triangulate what we know about a child's reading. So can they read for meaning, at an adequate rate with a high degree of accuracy? That's a lot of information to get in a pretty short period of time.

One of the things I think is not typically captured because we're screening and we want it to be quick, is some sort of indicator of prosody. And we talk about people observing that, but people don't often capture it because they're not prompted to do so. But it is something you can capture and it is an important piece of reading fluency.

Anna Geiger: So, when we look at the ORF, the accuracy and the rate, those things combined are the correlation to comprehension. Is that correct?

Kelly Powell-Smith: Yeah, just ORF by itself without retell and MAZE is correlated like 0.9. So it tells you a lot already about a child's reading comprehension and it's an indicator. I think that's the really important thing for people to keep in mind. It might not point to why a child is not comprehending.

For example, if they're not decoding accurately, that's a strong signal that they're not comprehending or if they're reading so disfluently, so slowly, that all of their cognitive energy is going towards that decoding piece it makes it very hard to comprehend. So if those two pieces aren't in place, that does give you something about why, but there could be other reasons why that aren't necessarily captured by a screener.

And we have to keep in mind that it's an indicator, in the same way a thermometer is an indicator of overall health.

Anna Geiger: And I think also sometimes, I know it's rare, but it happens that kids could have a really good ORF score but not do well in the retell, right? So they were decoding, but they weren't thinking about it.

So that's why having the retell is a really nice add-on. It's not in all universal screeners, but Acadience has the one minute retell where you basically have a set of numbers on your score sheet and you're just running your pencil through the numbers, as they say words that go with the passage. It's a lot easier to do than it sounds. It's subjective, but I think it helps you get an idea of whether or not they're paying attention to what they're reading.

So we can learn a few things about comprehension from a screener, but what can we not learn about a student's comprehension from the quick screening measures?

Kelly Powell-Smith: Well, I think let's, I'll go back to retell.

One other thing I wanted to mention about it is that it also signals to the student that every time we read, we read for meaning. And I think that's a really important message that sometimes gets lost in like, "Well, I don't want to do the retell because it's another minute." But I think it's an important communication to the student that when we sit and read, we read for a purpose. And that purpose is to get meaning from text.

So that aside, if a child doesn't do well on the retell, you might not really know why. It could be that they weren't paying attention as they were reading. It could be they don't have the language skills to be able to communicate back to you what they learned from the passage. It could be they didn't understand the vocabulary, so they might be able to decode the words, but they don't understand what they mean. So there could be a lot of reasons why a student might not do well on either the oral reading fluency part or the retell part, and likewise with the MAZE.

Anna Geiger: So, people often ask me, as I said earlier, for a quick comprehension diagnostic assessment, and I usually tell them that's a fairytale. Am I right about that?

Kelly Powell-Smith: Well, not quick in the same way that a universal screening measure is intended to be quick, but I think we can be more selective about how we spend our assessment time and how diagnostic assessments are used. So I think some are quicker than others. I know one of the things we were going to talk about was the Comprehension, Fluency, and Oral Language (CFOL) diagnostic available from Acadience.

And I will tell you that one of the intentions behind the development of that was to provide something that was intended to be relatively brief. And I say relatively because relative to other diagnostic

assessments. So we're not spending an hour, that's not the intention is to spend an hour assessing the child.

Anna Geiger: Why was CFOL created?

Kelly Powell-Smith: Well, there are a few instances where users of what was DIBELS at the time, later became Acadience, would ask, what do we do next if I'm not sure what to do for instruction?

And that was a question that was continually asked, and this was one of those instances where Ruth and Roland really wanted to be responsive because they were like, well, they're right. You know, it would be really helpful to have something, but we want to be careful about what we build because we want it to be used correctly, and we want it to be a tool that fulfills the goal, which is relatively brief, instructionally informative, and captures key things about comprehension that would be helpful to teachers. And of course, teacher friendly. So that was the intention behind building that.

Anna Geiger: So what are the components of CFOL and why were those chosen to be part of the assessment?

Kelly Powell-Smith: Yeah, that is another great question because I felt like we spent so much time considering what should be included. We desired to capture those high likelihood contributors to reading comprehension breakdowns since we know many skills underlie reading comprehension.

People have talked for quite some time, actually since like the 1940s, about comprehension being this multidimensional thing. So we shouldn't be assessing it in a single unitary way. We need to be sort of trying to capture those key contributors.

So we set about to do that. There are actually seven domains, as we sort of refer to them when we do training. Story coherence and text structure. Does the child understand that there's an organization to passages both narrative and expository?

And then we had some more, what I would call sort of what people think of as more traditional reading comprehension tasks. Could they read a passage and retell it? If we prompt them during the retell, could they give us more information? Because the idea was to extend past what's available in the screener.

When you do retell with Acadience Reading K-6, you don't prompt the child very much to give you more past that one initial prompt. So this is a way where we could do sort of scaffolded prompting and see if the child would give you key pieces of information. So there are some reading tasks that are like that on the assessment with different levels of passages.

And then if the child is not a reader, then we have some listening comprehension activities that are sort of the same structure where we're looking for key things for the child to tell you back in a retell or to answer key questions. So those are a couple of important things that were included.

And then we have syntactic knowledge and grammar section, because we know syntax is a key variable in students reading comprehension. In fact, if I were to quote my friend and colleague, Julie Van Dyke, she would say, "Syntax is the glue that holds words together." And that sentence level comprehension is really critical, because if students don't have it, their whole situation model falls apart. So that's important as well.

Morphological awareness is another key area that we assess, because we know that is a facilitator of several key things that contribute to comprehension, word reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, spelling, word reading accuracy, all those things. And also a child's understanding of morphology helps them to understand when we add affixes to words, what does that do grammatically in a sentence? So that was an important indicator.

And then vocabulary and word knowledge. Can a child tell you what a word means? Can they just tell you if a word means more than one thing?

And all of these tasks have scaffolding in them, so the assessor can attempt to prompt the child and extract information. The assessment is dynamic, I think that's one of the really unique things about it, is that you can teach within the test, and we talk about the judicious use of teaching within the test.

So we don't want to go full into instruction because that's not the purpose. But if we give certain scaffolded prompts, can we actually get the child to provide a correct response? And so that kind of gives you a sense of how much support they might need in the instruction, which is a really important piece of information for teachers to have.

And then the last domain is fluency. And that might sound funny to people. It's like, well, don't we already get that from our screener? And yes, but as I already mentioned, one of the things that's not typically captured is prosody.

And so one of the things that we did was we looked across a whole bunch of different rubrics to capture important key things that you would expect in a fluency rubric, and we built our own rubric from across those. It captures things like pacing and expression and the kinds of errors a child makes. Do they preserve meaning or do they not preserve meaning? And so really goes beyond just getting at words correct per minute and accuracy, which is a wonderful screening and progress monitoring tool, but in that screening moment, you're not going to capture some of these other things that we're trying to capture. And prosody in particular is a really, it's a signal as to whether the child is attending to syntax. So it's another thing that points back to that importance of syntax. It's more important than people often realize.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. Interesting. So if there was someone, let's say they had a second grader who was doing fine with phonics, but comprehension was poor and they wanted to find a comprehension diagnostic and they got their hands on CFOL, what would you recommend for them to do?

Because I would guess not go through it front to back - is it divided by grade level and then how would they decide what sections to administer and how long a session should be and all of that?

Kelly Powell-Smith: That is a really great question. Again, I would just point to this idea of wanting to be really intentional about what we choose, and try not to undertest or overtest with a student.

There is guidance in the assessment manual around this. First of all, you wouldn't give the whole thing because some students can read and so you wouldn't give them the listening sections.

Some tasks are too easy. There are grade level designations that we've sort of assigned to the tasks, and they're a guidance. They're not rules set in stone because you might have a child who really is severely struggling and would function better at some of the tasks that are lower.

The idea is to get information that informs instruction. So that's like the central piece of information. So the guidance in the manual gives you places to start. Some of that guidance is anchored to, like, if you're giving Acadience and you have a reading composite score, it'll help point you a little bit to where

to start. But you don't have to have using Acadience to use this diagnostic. You could use other screeners.

Between the grade level designations, and there's also a checklist that educators can use that kind of runs down some key indicators that a child might be having a difficulty in a particular area, and so if you had a lot of check marks in one particular section, I would say go assess that section.

Anna Geiger: Gotcha.

Kelly Powell-Smith: There's some thinking involved. It's not as straightforward as the child's this grade level so give these tasks.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. So you're saying there's something in there that basically is like some pre-work the teacher can do to figure out what would be the most helpful section to work on?

And also, I just want to reiterate for some people listening. Some teachers are confused by the difference between a screener and a diagnostic or a benchmark assessment. The point of this is not to put them at a grade level, correct? It's just to figure out what to teach next.

Kelly Powell-Smith: Yeah, and just to go a little bit farther in that particular idea. One of the things I think that's an important message to send is don't give it if you don't need to. I've found that in some places, teachers are told they have to give a diagnostic if the child comes up below or well below benchmark, and I don't really understand that because every minute you spend testing is a minute taken away from instruction.

So if you know what to do instructionally, just go do it. Don't give a diagnostic unless you really need that information. A lot of times people do, but sometimes they don't and they know what to do and then don't spend more time testing.

Anna Geiger: Well, in that vein, can you talk some more about mistakes you've seen when it comes to assessing comprehension?

Kelly Powell-Smith: Yeah. One of them is assessing too narrowly, just doing question answering, for example. I think we are all starting to realize that comprehension assessments of that nature are really just getting at the product of comprehension, not the underlying skills. That's too narrow. That's part of what we do on the CFOL assessment, but it shouldn't be everything you do because there could be other things that are causing the difficulty.

On the flip side of that, I think we see people overtesting. I've had people come and tell me they gave all the parts of CFOL that were relevant to the child's level of skill. So if the child's reading, they didn't give the listening part, but they gave everything else. And I was like, how long did that take you? Over an hour? That's too much testing. We need to think about how we could trim this down and be more strategic in our choices.

Anna Geiger: Can you give me an example of something on the checklist that might direct you to a particular part of the assessment?

Kelly Powell-Smith: Oh, that's also a great question. Well, some of them are signals that you might have from your screener.

So let's say you're observing a child during their retell and they give you information that's out of order, for example. That might be a signal that you want to go check on some things in CFOL. It might be the syntax section. It might be the text structure section that you might give. That's one example that you could get from an assessment you're already giving just by being a keen observer of what the student is doing.

You might have information from classroom instruction if it's clear to you that the child doesn't understand certain words that are coming up in text.

Now, one of the things you might just go do right away is say, well, I'll just go teach more vocabulary to the student. But it could be that it's unusual enough that you think there might be something else going on and that might lead you to then assess that as a section in in the CFOL assessment.

The key thing I like to tell people when they're using that checklist is to look not just at, oh, okay, I observed this once in the classroom instructional setting or in retell, for example. But what if you're seeing it across multiple things? What if you're seeing stuff out on the playground, for example, that tells you the child's having trouble communicating? That would be an important signal, and if it was consistent in particular with other things you were seeing in the classroom.

There are just a couple of examples.

If they're retelling things out of order, or you might see that also in their writing. They might not organize their sentences in a way that makes sense.

Anna Geiger: So the point is that there is maybe not quick, but efficient comprehension, diagnostic assessment when you do some pre-work to take what you already know about the student, what you've seen in other settings across the classroom, about what particular things you have questions about that can lead you to the section of the assessment that you can administer.

But then of course, it's all for naught if nothing is done after. Can you give some examples of types of remediation that teachers can provide after kids score poorly on particular parts of the assessment?

Kelly Powell-Smith: Yeah, I think that's a really great question. I wanted to mention, I'm working with a school district now, and one of the things we're having conversations about when we meet is how did you decide what sections to give of the assessment?

Then we've been talking about, okay, now what? What do we do now that we know this information?

And I feel like we're in a better place than we were probably several years ago in terms of the what to do next. There are linkages to instructional recommendations in the manual itself. We did a lot of work trying to align some things people could do with what they might find as areas of weakness from the test results.

Part of that was because we were really concerned that people might take the information and either not know what to do, which means they spend all this time assessing for nothing, or they might misinterpret the information. This means this about the child's cognitive skills, for example. And we didn't want to go there. We wanted to say, you see this, this is where you go instructionally. So we tried to really do that.

But as you know, as you can imagine, those things become stagnant because it's not a living document continuously being added to, and since the time it was published or developed, a lot more has come along.

For example, the area of syntax has just sort of exploded in the last couple of years, and so there are a lot of things that teachers can go reach for. I think of Nancy Hennessy's *Reading Comprehension Blueprint* and the activity book that goes with it as a resource that educators could go to that would give them a blueprint, as she says, for what they might do instructionally.

There are folks like Nancy Eberhardt and Margie Gillis who have these wonderful syntax and comprehension materials that people could go access. Those are great resources.

I think more is coming in terms of resources that people could put their hands on pretty quickly.

If they're IDA members, in the second issue of the two-part issue on syntax, the spring 2025 issue, has sort of a compiled set of resources at the back issue that are related to syntax and its role in comprehension. It covers everything from here are some technology tools you could access. Here's some information about additional assessments. Here is some information if you have multilingual learners. It's really a nice piece of information and it's a living document.

Anna Geiger: On the assessment, does it have like, you know, a particular score for each section then to say this score indicates that they need remediation, or this score indicates they're doing well? How do those break down?

Kelly Powell-Smith: That's also a great question because it's not like your screener where you have a benchmark that's a criterion referenced target you're aiming for or above it would be even better, right?

The way this assessment is organized is - the best way I could describe it, is it's normative, but it's not intended to be a norm referenced test in the way that we think of most traditional norm referenced tests.

I refer to the information that's provided on what's called the score analysis page as interpretive anchors. So in the validation study, we were able to get means and standard deviations so that we could anchor scores to those. So how far from the typical did this child score helps us to interpret it, but not so much at the individual task level. That's helpful sometimes instructionally, but in terms of is this a domain I should be concerned about?

I'll use syntax and grammar as the example. There are multiple tasks there. If the child just didn't do well on one, well we might incorporate some of that into our instruction. Let's say it's pluralization, for example. But if all the other ones were fine, then I wouldn't say that syntax and grammar overall were an area of concern.

But what if they were low on all of them? That would be a pretty strong signal that this is an area we need to attend to in our instruction.

Anna Geiger: So just to recap some of the things we talked about. A universal screener is like a thermometer. It tells us if there's maybe a problem with comprehension, but it can't dial in and tell us specifically the issue.

So if a child maybe has good accuracy, perhaps even good words correct per minute, but they're not doing well in the retell or the MAZE, that's definitely a sign that we need to dig deeper with comprehension. Or just if we're doing regular class instruction and we think, I just don't think this kid is

getting it. They're not understanding; they're not able to have discussions about it. They're not able to answer the questions.

Then we want to dig deeper and find out what's going on. We can turn to a comprehension diagnostic assessment, which is not intended to pinpoint their grade level, but is to help us figure out what to teach next.

One example of that would be CFOL: Comprehension, Fluency, and Oral Language. Unlike the screener, it is not free, but it is affordable. It's a big kit that you would get. And you could start by looking at the checklist at the beginning, which will show you where to start in the diagnostic.

You don't need to go through the whole thing, but think about what would be most useful for your student and then afterwards, Acadience provides recommendations for remediation.

There are also other resources, like you mentioned Hennessy's book and the book she co-wrote with Julia Salamone. And then the Literacy How series by Margie Gillis and Nancy Eberhardt. I will see if I can find other resources as well.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about assessing comprehension or anything in general?

Kelly Powell-Smith: I would like to see more research in this area. In particular, if people are using, I'll say CFOL specifically, but any assessment, if there are others that are intended to be used in a similar manner. I would like to see more applied research - so the usage of it, linkage to intervention, and then what happened? What were the outcomes? It's really kind of like a program evaluation.

For example, I haven't approached the school I've been working with about this, but I think it would be potentially a really nice project for them to think about, okay, we've been doing this, this work for a couple of years now, do things look different? Do our classroom teachers feel more confident in their work with students?

It's important not just for in that specific example, but I think this is the kind of work that researchers really need to be doing. I love research that's more lab, like what did we find out? The scientist in me loves that, but I also feel like we really need to do more work on how this actually rolls out in schools and then what happens afterwards, like how do we keep it going? What are the sustainable practices?

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much for talking to us about CFOL. I think these are questions a lot of teachers have, and I hope that this gives people a lot of clarity as to where to move next for comprehension assessment.

Kelly Powell-Smith: Well, it has been really a wonderful experience, and it was so nice to meet you and have the opportunity to talk with you.

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much.