

## **Supporting Non-Proficient Adolescent Readers: Identifying and Addressing *Why* They Struggle**

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Proficiency in reading impacts all subjects across the secondary curriculum. Adolescents differ in their reading proficiency (Snow, 2002) and, therefore, differ in their levels of academic success. Some students demonstrate deep knowledge and vocabulary in class discussions but read slowly and inaccurately. Other students are fluent readers who nevertheless do not understand what they read. These students seem to be proficient readers yet fail to meet grade-level expectations. The variability in reading proficiency among adolescent readers is clear—word recognition, fluency, oral language, vocabulary, general knowledge, higher-order thinking skills, cognitive capabilities, and motivation (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Snow, 2002)—but it is not always easy to pinpoint *exactly why* an adolescent reader struggles. One thing is certain, though: students in grades 6 and above who read proficiently can expect greater academic success and economic opportunities.

Across the country, states have implemented college- and career-readiness standards to ensure that by high school graduation, all students have acquired the knowledge, skills, and work habits they need to succeed in college, career, and life. The overarching goal of instruction is for students to read increasingly complex grade-level-appropriate materials independently and proficiently. Students' progress toward meeting this critical goal is measured by end-of-year assessments of reading.

Each year, secondary teachers await the assessment scores for validation of students' achievement, administrators anticipate improved scores and higher graduation projections, and parents hope their children's academic performance is on track. Each year's results indicate mixed results—success for some, improvement for others—but still too many adolescent readers remain non-proficient. The end-of-year assessment results tell which students are not reading proficiently, but fail to answer the critical question of *why*. Without knowing and addressing the *why*, educators cannot improve the proficiency of adolescent readers. The purpose of this paper is to explore the causes of non-proficient reading as well as possible solutions for helping adolescent students in grades 6 and above learn to read well and find reward in reading.

## **What Are the Necessary Components of Reading?**

The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990) proposed that reading comprehension is the product of two mutually dependent components: decoding and linguistic comprehension. Each component is necessary but not sufficient alone. This means that inefficiency in one or both components leads to overall reading failure.

### Decoding

The ability to read increasingly complex grade-level-appropriate material assumes that students have mastered the lower-level skills of reading, such as decoding and fluency. Decoding is the ability to translate symbols on a printed page into their spoken equivalents. The goal of decoding instruction is for the reader to be able to recognize words accurately and instantly (Ehri, 1991). Instant word recognition, or automaticity, leads to fluency. Fluent reading frees the reader's cognitive resources to attend to meaning (Perfetti, 1985). Adequate decoding provides the reader access to the meaning on a printed page, but increased decoding ability alone will not increase reading comprehension without a corresponding level of linguistic comprehension.

### Linguistic Comprehension

Linguistic comprehension is the ability to derive meaning from sentences and texts through listening. Meaning is dependent on the reader's general vocabulary and prior knowledge. For literary and informational text, meaning is also dependent on a specialized language that is different from the language of everyday conversation. This complex and necessary language is known as academic language. Literary and content-specific vocabulary and morphology (e.g., prefixes, roots, suffixes) as well as grammar and syntax comprise academic language (Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2012; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Without adequate linguistic comprehension, the reader receives little reward for his or her effortless decoding. The contrast between the two components of reading distinguishes the possible causes of non-proficient reading and creates four distinct learner profiles.

## What Are Learner Profiles?

The table below presents the four different learner profiles that Simple View of Reading suggests. Students may have 1) adequate linguistic comprehension and decoding, 2) adequate linguistic comprehension but inadequate decoding, 3) inadequate linguistic comprehension but adequate decoding, or 4) inadequate linguistic comprehension and decoding (Aaron, Joshi, & Williams, 1999; Catts, Hogan, & Fey, 2003).

<b><u>Profile 1</u></b> Adequate linguistic comprehension Adequate decoding	<b><u>Profile 2</u></b> Adequate linguistic comprehension Inadequate decoding
<b><u>Profile 3</u></b> Inadequate linguistic comprehension Adequate decoding	<b><u>Profile 4</u></b> Inadequate linguistic comprehension Inadequate decoding

*Four learner profiles based on the two components of reading comprehension (Aaron et al., 1999; Catts et al., 2003).*

### **Profile 1**

Students with adequate listening and reading comprehension are more than likely able to read grade-level-appropriate and increasingly complex text independently and proficiently.

### **Profile 2**

Students with adequate linguistic comprehension but inadequate decoding may be students with diagnosed or undiagnosed dyslexia (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003). Here, inadequate reading comprehension is unexpected in relation to adequate linguistic comprehension, which may be at or above grade-level expectations. The cause of poor reading comprehension for these students is probably the lack of automatic decoding and fluent reading.

### **Profile 3**

Conversely, students with inadequate linguistic comprehension but adequate decoding are able to read fluently and spell accurately. However, they struggle to understand what they are reading, or what they are listening to (Hogan, Adlof, & Alonzo, 2014). Poor listening and reading comprehension suggest that these students may have a language-based learning disability.

**Profile 4**

Students with inadequate linguistic comprehension and decoding may be garden-variety poor readers (Stanovich, 1988) who may always struggle with either or both components. These students may have strengths in other cognitive abilities (e.g., spatial-oriented skills, problem-solving ability; musical ability).

**Profile Considerations for English Language Learners**

English Language Learners (ELLs) may exhibit any one of the four profiles. It is important to ascertain their linguistic comprehension and decoding skills in their first language as well as in English. Assuming ELLs have had sufficient instruction and experience to learn English, their learner profiles in English most likely will mirror their learner profiles in the first language (García & Godina, 2004). Consequently, if they have a history of linguistic comprehension or decoding difficulties in learning to read in their first language, they will experience the same difficulties in learning to read in English. ELLs with limited exposure to English may struggle to read English simply because of lack of English language proficiency.

**Additional Profile Considerations**

The majority of non-proficient readers will match Profiles 2, 3, or 4, but some students may struggle with reading for reasons other than linguistic comprehension or decoding. For example, they may have executive function issues (e.g., attention, monitoring, remembering details, organizing information); have difficulties quickly understanding and responding to information (i.e., slow processing speed); or lack motivation; all of which, alone or in combination, can result in inadequate reading comprehension, regardless of proficiency in linguistic comprehension and decoding. A reader with adequate linguistic comprehension and adequate decoding could therefore exhibit inadequate reading comprehension for one or more of these reasons.

**What Are Learner Personas?**

Learner personas are representations of students with the traits and behaviors of the four different learner profiles. Learner personas can help identify the causes of non-proficient reading and the instructional needs of real students who share the same traits and behaviors. Because the learner persona who represents Profile 1 is a proficient reader, that persona is not described.

**Darnell (Profile 2)**

Darnell has inadequate decoding yet adequate linguistic comprehension. He is a conundrum to his teachers. His hand is always the first one to go up to answer a question. He has a robust vocabulary that he displays during class discussions. When engaged in a debate, his deep knowledge and keen logic are evident. His arguments are sound and perceptive. For these reasons, his teachers are perplexed by Darnell's "unexpected underachievement" (Ferrer, Shaywitz, Holahan, Marchione, & Shaywitz, 2009). In spite of his strong oral language skills and engagement during class discussions, Darnell's written work demonstrates little initiative or effort. Although he has worked diligently, his work is rarely complete and has many spelling errors. In a self-effacing manner, he avoids reading aloud whenever possible by deferring to his peers. When he does read aloud, he misreads words, and his reading is labored and disfluent. A less self-assured student emerges.

**Linda (Profile 3)**

Unlike Darnell, Linda reads accurately and fluently and is eager to read aloud at any time. She writes immaculately and is a competent speller. However, Linda does not comprehend most of what she reads beyond a literal level of understanding. She is unable to integrate information in a text with her background knowledge to infer an answer to a question about the text, and she does not understand the nuances of language (i.e., shades of meaning) or nonliteral language (e.g., idioms, metaphors, similes). She has difficulties following oral directions and processing and integrating information during class discussions. Her written compositions are well organized but lack maturity and depth. Her teachers see Linda as a motivated student, but they are concerned that she eventually will give up in frustration. Linda exemplifies Profile 3, the learner with adequate decoding but inadequate linguistic comprehension.

**Tyler (Profile 4)**

Tyler demonstrates inadequacies in both decoding and linguistic comprehension. Tyler's inadequacies are due to his high mobility, which has disrupted his learning, created gaps in his knowledge, and impacted his motivation. His mother is a single parent who for years has taken advantage of one-month free rent offers that have often required Tyler to cross school and district zones several times during a school year. Inconsistency across various curriculums means that Tyler is either bored and acts out because the same content is being presented, or he is lost and stops paying attention because the content is more advanced. He will go to any length to avoid

reading and writing, both of which for Tyler are labored and full of errors. He prefers listening to text read aloud and oral discussions and presentations, but he lacks Darnell's overall depth of knowledge and vocabulary. Tyler does display pockets of insightful knowledge and has gained "street smarts" as a result of protecting his three younger siblings and assisting his mother with household chores and responsibilities.

#### **Izabella (Profile 4)**

Izabella, whose first language is Spanish, sometimes has difficulties following oral directions and the flow of a class discussion and does not always understand nonliteral language. Her decoding of English words with reliable and frequently recurring patterns is improving, but she struggles with less-frequent and irregular patterns. Her written work is progressing but continues to show spelling, syntactic, and semantic errors that sometimes interfere with her communication. With her difficulties in linguistic comprehension and decoding, she seems to exemplify Profile 4. Nonetheless, Izabella reads fluently in Spanish and can comprehend texts at both literal and inferential levels in Spanish. In her first language, Izabella exemplifies Profile 1. Currently, her English language proficiency designation is Level 3, according to WIDA Performance Definitions. All her teachers are pleased with her progress and realize that Izabella's continued progress in understanding and decoding English is paramount to her academic success. Because her greatest instructional need is to learn to read and write English well, her persona at the present time mimics Profile 4. As she receives the explicit instruction she needs in English, she will begin to exemplify Profile 1.

#### **How Does Assessment Inform Instruction?**

Many secondary students are just like Darnell, Linda, Tyler, and Izabella. Although state-mandated assessments indicate these students have not met the standards, they do not provide information about *why*. Fine-grained and valid assessments that measure the underpinnings of the components of reading comprehension can identify the underlying issues. Both lower-level reading skills (e.g., word recognition, spelling, syntactic awareness) and higher-level reading skills (e.g., listening and reading comprehension) should be measured. Students' performance on these assessments will identify their strengths and weaknesses, that is, identify the *why*. Addressing the underlying causes of non-proficient reading through personalized evidence-based instruction will have a positive effect on students' understanding of course content and on their college and career readiness.

**Darnell's instructional focus:**

On word recognition and reading comprehension assessments, Darnell's scores were below those of his peers. However, his score on a listening comprehension assessment was well above those of his peers, which suggests that he has the necessary vocabulary, syntactic awareness, general knowledge, and critical thinking to comprehend when the demands of decoding are removed. Lack of accurate and automatic decoding is *why* Darnell seems to be underachieving. His most pressing instructional needs are explicit, systematic decoding and spelling instruction that will develop accurate and fluent reading and improve his spelling. He will benefit also from morphology instruction (i.e., study of Latin and Greek word parts), which will serve two purposes: aid his accurate and automatic decoding of long words and further his growth in academic vocabulary. Decodable text will help Darnell build fluency. Exposure to grade-level-appropriate complex text will continue the advancement of his vocabulary, syntactic and general knowledge, and critical thinking. He may need to listen to this complex text, but it will be of greater interest to him than decodable text.

Persona	Strengths	Weaknesses	Instructional Needs
<b>Darnell</b> (Profile 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vocabulary</li> <li>• syntactic knowledge</li> <li>• listening comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• word recognition</li> <li>• spelling</li> <li>• fluency</li> <li>• reading comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decoding and spelling</li> <li>• fluency practice with decodable text</li> <li>• morphology</li> <li>• listening to and analyzing increasingly complex text</li> </ul>

**Linda's instructional focus:**

Linda's word recognition assessment score was well above those of her peers. But on vocabulary, syntax, and reading comprehension assessments, Linda's scores were below her peers' scores, which is *why* she is a non-proficient reader. She needs explicit, systematic instruction in grammar and vocabulary. Morphology instruction will be helpful in furthering her academic vocabulary. Most importantly, Linda needs to learn skills (e.g., identifying and understanding similes) and strategies (e.g., making an inference based on a simile) that are needed to read increasingly complex text. Initially, she will require intensive scaffolding when reading complex text. Concrete examples (i.e., specific, picturable), graphics, and repetition are essential scaffolding strategies for Linda.

Persona	Strengths	Weaknesses	Instructional Needs
<b>Linda</b> (Profile 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word recognition</li> <li>• spelling</li> <li>• fluency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• integration of information</li> <li>• vocabulary</li> <li>• nonliteral language (e.g., idioms, metaphors, multiple meanings)</li> <li>• syntactic knowledge</li> <li>• listening and reading comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vocabulary and morphology</li> <li>• nonliteral language</li> <li>• grammar</li> <li>• skills and strategies for understanding increasingly complex text</li> <li>• scaffolded reading of more complex text</li> <li>• concrete examples, graphics, and repetition</li> </ul>

**Tyler's instructional focus:**

Tyler's assessment scores of lower- and higher-level reading skills are all below those of his peers. The disruptions in his learning and the resulting gaps in his knowledge and lack of motivation explain *why* Tyler is a non-proficient reader. His greatest instructional needs are intensive, explicit, and systematic decoding and spelling instruction. Although, he does show a relative strength in listening comprehension, he still needs explicit, systematic instruction in vocabulary, morphology, and grammar. Decodable text is important for the development of his fluency. Listening to and analyzing increasingly complex text will advance Tyler's academic vocabulary, syntactic awareness, and general knowledge. Text that matches his interests and pockets of knowledge will be motivating. Most of all, Tyler needs consistent and sustained instruction.

Persona	Strengths	Weaknesses	Instructional Needs
<b>Tyler</b> (Profile 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "street smarts"</li> <li>• pockets of insightful knowledge</li> <li>• relative strength in listening comprehension</li> <li>• oral discussion and presentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• motivation</li> <li>• gaps in knowledge</li> <li>• word recognition</li> <li>• spelling</li> <li>• fluency</li> <li>• vocabulary</li> <li>• syntactic knowledge</li> <li>• reading comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decoding and spelling</li> <li>• vocabulary and morphology</li> <li>• grammar</li> <li>• decodable text for fluency</li> <li>• opportunities to listen to and analyze complex text that matches interests and pockets of knowledge</li> <li>• consistent and sustained instruction</li> </ul>



**Izabella's instructional focus:**

Not surprisingly, Izabella's scores on assessments of lower- and high-level reading skills in English were below those of her English-speaking peers, which is *why* she struggles with reading proficiency in English. Her instructional needs are explicit, systematic instruction in English decoding, spelling, and grammar. Additionally, Izabella needs opportunities to read decodable texts to increase fluency and appropriately texts in English to increase her vocabulary, background knowledge, and understanding of nonliteral language. Morphology instruction will be helpful in increasing her academic vocabulary and will be of interest to Izabella because many Latin-based affixes and roots in English are the same or similar in Spanish. As Izabella gains fluency and language proficiency in English, she can begin to read increasingly complex text with scaffolding that will decrease as she gains reading proficiency in English.

Persona	Strengths	Weaknesses	Instructional Needs
<b>Izabella</b> (Profile 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lower- and high-level reading skills in Spanish</li> <li>• Level 3 English language proficiency</li> </ul>	In English: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• word recognition</li> <li>• spelling</li> <li>• fluency</li> <li>• vocabulary</li> <li>• nonliteral language</li> <li>• syntactic knowledge</li> <li>• listening and reading comprehension</li> </ul>	In English: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decoding, spelling, and fluency</li> <li>• vocabulary and morphology</li> <li>• nonliteral language</li> <li>• grammar</li> <li>• opportunities to read texts independently</li> <li>• more complex text as fluency and language proficiency increases</li> <li>• scaffolding with concrete examples and graphics</li> </ul>

*The Appendix provides a master synopsis of all four personas' strengths and weaknesses and instructional needs.*

**Summary**

Reading proficiency is the key to academic success and economic opportunities, and time is of the essence where non-proficient adolescent readers are concerned. Fine-grained assessments can identify students' strengths and weaknesses in critical reading skills and create learner profiles. Learner profiles, exemplified by personas, can guide the delivery of the personalized instruction that will meet the learning needs of non-proficient readers. Knowing and addressing the *why*, the underlying cause, will improve students' ability to analyze and comprehend increasingly complex text, leading to greater proficiency and academic success, as well as the economic opportunities that follow.

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**APPENDIX**

<b>Persona</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Instructional Needs</b>
<b>Darnell</b> (Profile 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vocabulary</li> <li>• syntactic knowledge</li> <li>• listening comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• word recognition</li> <li>• spelling</li> <li>• fluency</li> <li>• reading comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decoding and spelling</li> <li>• fluency practice with decodable text</li> <li>• morphology</li> <li>• listening to and analyzing increasingly complex text</li> </ul>
<b>Linda</b> (Profile 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• word recognition</li> <li>• spelling</li> <li>• fluency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• integration of information</li> <li>• vocabulary</li> <li>• nonliteral language (e.g., idioms, metaphors, multiple meanings,)</li> <li>• syntactic knowledge</li> <li>• listening and reading comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vocabulary and morphology</li> <li>• nonliteral language</li> <li>• grammar</li> <li>• skills and strategies for understanding increasingly complex text</li> <li>• scaffolded reading of more complex text</li> <li>• concrete examples, graphics, and repetition</li> </ul>
<b>Tyler</b> (Profile 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “street smarts”</li> <li>• pockets of insightful knowledge</li> <li>• relative strength in listening comprehension</li> <li>• oral discussion and presentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• motivation</li> <li>• gaps in knowledge</li> <li>• word recognition</li> <li>• spelling</li> <li>• fluency</li> <li>• vocabulary</li> <li>• syntactic knowledge</li> <li>• reading comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decoding and spelling</li> <li>• vocabulary and morphology</li> <li>• grammar</li> <li>• decodable text for fluency</li> <li>• opportunities to listen to and analyze complex text that matches interests and pockets of knowledge</li> <li>• consistent and sustained instruction</li> </ul>
<b>Izabella</b> (Profile 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lower- and high-level reading skills in Spanish</li> <li>• Level 3 English language proficiency</li> </ul>	In English: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• word recognition</li> <li>• spelling</li> <li>• fluency</li> <li>• vocabulary</li> <li>• nonliteral language</li> <li>• syntactic knowledge</li> <li>• listening and reading comprehension</li> </ul>	In English: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decoding, spelling, and fluency</li> <li>• vocabulary and morphology</li> <li>• nonliteral language</li> <li>• grammar</li> <li>• opportunities to read texts independently</li> <li>• more complex text as fluency and language proficiency increases</li> <li>• scaffolding with concrete examples</li> </ul>