Questions and Answers
to Dr. Lance Gentile, author of the OLAI-2

What is the role of standardized testing in the schools, in your opinion?

I do not advocate replacing standardized tests with other types of measures. Instead, my encouragement to those working in RTI, Value Added Assessment (VAA), and other programs is to supplement required formal tests using an informal multiple measures, criterion referenced assessment that can demonstrate growth over shorter intervals. This type of assessment can be used to document progress and show the effectiveness of an instructional approach or to adjust the approach for a particular student or group of students based on the results. So when it comes to VAA and passing results on to the next year’s instructor, informal multiple measures or criterion-referenced assessment provide an indication of where to begin teaching and/or how to build on the previous year’s work.

Is the level of language used in OLAI-2 also required for understanding common instructional directions?

Absolutely. The most common syntax is the foundation of clear receptive and expressive communication (listening and speaking in the native as well as the target language). If students do not control these structures they cannot narrate (i.e., tell or retell a story) and they will be unable to read expository/information-based text. This skill is basic to comprehension in both literary and academic content and must be acquired early for students to learn how to analyze and interpret text.

One approach I encourage teachers and specialists to use every day to build story into the brain is Shared Narrative.

What would you say to teachers who have struggling students but do not feel they have time to respond to individual needs?

Somewhere we find or make time to do other “more important” things, like skill and drill activity or teaching for the test but we can’t manage to organize more powerful, meaningful and long lasting interactions. When we limit or remove purposeful “talk” from the instructional curriculum we are doing nothing to strengthen students’ language acquisition and their ability to read and write to learn suffers mightily (more about this below in other responses).

What if the child or student is weak in his/her native language?

This is an increasingly widespread issue. It has its roots in several areas of development, social, psychological, cultural and experiential. Nevertheless, the most logical answer is: It is the school’s responsibility to make up for these weaknesses by directly addressing them through instructional modifications. Teachers and specialists must learn to interact differently with these students. This is why I train teachers to use the Oral Language Acquisition Inventory and become familiar with the Oracy Instructional Philosophy, Design and Activities.
Dr. Gentile, do you have any age-of-acquisition norms for syntactic forms?

Yes. These are fairly consistent across years of research. Stage I (going beyond the babbling stage) is referred to as Holophrastic, single word or the Proto stage, i.e., original, early or face-to-face development (at 10-12 months children use one word utterances). Stage II is the Transition stage (children move beyond the holophrastic utterances and begin using two words and mini-sentences), Stage III The Combining or Telegraphic Stage (from ages 2-3). Children begin mastering grammatical word order, expand sentences using cohesive links and add prosodic/sound differences. i.e., negatives, and questions (multi words or morphemes.) Stage IV Recursive Stage (3 and a half years and beyond. Children begin using complex sentences with more than one clause preceded by prepositions, conjunctions, relative pronouns, adverbial connectors. Prosodic use expands as well (i.e., commands and exclamations). These are the basis of subordination which means there is a linking or coordination of ideas based on using both grammatical and prosodic structures. Stage V Toward Adult Language (4 years and beyond). At this stage vocabulary expands enormously, grammatical morphemes are still being steadily acquired and new sentence structures begin to emerge as well as stylistic patterns appropriate to varied social communication situations.

From here on advanced levels of language acquisition depend on multiple, meaningful social interactions and decontextualized or purposeful conversations between students and competent users of the language. Later these levels may be enhanced through more challenging and diversified literary and academic reading and writing experiences.

Are there any suggestions for underachievers experiencing reading difficulty on the high school level?

Yes. But, it is difficult working with teachers and specialists at this level for a couple of reasons: in the upper grades teachers have to cope with as many as 35-40 students in a classroom and not uncommonly there are several different languages spoken as well as multiple levels of language and literacy development. To increase the burden an instructor may have to learn to cope successfully with a wide range of students’ negative learning behavior. Also many subject area teachers or specialists may be quite inflexible in their approach, i.e., they may believe they are hired to teach their subject rather than their subjects. So they tend to do what they have always done because they may not know anything different or what they think they know just “ain’t” so or what they do know, even if it’s not working, is safe and they feel in control by continuing to do it.

My Oracy Instructional Approach is focused on showing these professionals some ways to modify their work with expository or information-based text that includes whole class and small group work using: Cloze activities, Critical Dialogues emphasizing a triangular curriculum (literary, academic and multimedia to teach content). Each of these is used to conduct decontextualized/purposeful conversations with the goal of developing motivation, expanded and refined sentences, higher order thinking and gradually introducing more challenging reading and writing activities.

Working with students at this level can be nerve wracking because many have experienced embarrassment and failure with literacy and have acquired habituated, negative learning behavior over several years that drive them into fight or flight responses. These negative responses are difficult to change and require a consistently,
gentle but firm hand, to reverse students’ aversive thoughts, self-talk, and body language.

I also show teachers and specialists how to apply the Neurological Impress Method using taped passages or audio books to develop fluency. This is one of the most important instructional approaches to student’s becoming literate because oral language (ear and voice, two major conduits to the brain) have to process written text fluently before the black “squiggles” on a page of text can be broadcast smoothly.

To reduce the tedium of reading and writing academic assignments a student’s oral language has to mesh with the language that appears in textbooks. Usually this requires a good deal of practice in and away from the regular classroom by “joining up™ with specialists, parents and others in the community.

For more supportive reading, three articles by Dr. Lance Gentile appear in the California Reader on lancegentile.com under Related Articles.