

## **Adapting Early Literacy Assessment Tasks**

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### **Short Abstract**

The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) is a universal, structured literacy approach being used in over 930 primary schools in New Zealand with the support of literacy specialists including speech-language therapists (Gillon et al., 2024). It sits within a Multi-Tier System of Support (MTSS), which addresses the needs of learners at Tier 1 and 2, and literacy-focused Tier 3 support for complex learners. The BSLA team have developed novel online assessment tasks to monitor the phoneme awareness, word decoding, encoding, and narrative abilities of children (Scott et al., 2023). These are being used to (a) describe children's early progress in foundational language and early literacy skills using strengths-based language; (b), help teachers to identify the next steps for learning; and (c) identify children who require Tier 2 support after 10 weeks of teaching. This presentation focuses on how these tasks have been adapted for children with additional learning needs taking into consideration communication, physical, and visual complexity, and how the data is used to inform teaching practices. Optimising the literacy outcomes for children who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is critically important, particularly for the power it brings in terms of precise and autonomous expressive communication (Clendon & Gillon, 2018). Comprehensive assessment is central to providing responsive high-quality literacy instruction.

### **Long Abstract**

The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) is a universal, structured literacy approach being used in over 930 primary schools in New Zealand with the support of literacy specialists including speech-language therapists (Gillon et al., 2024). It sits within a Multi-Tier System of Support (MTSS), which addresses the needs of learners at Tier 1 and 2, and literacy-focused Tier 3 support for complex learners. The BSLA team have developed novel online assessment tasks to monitor the phoneme awareness, word decoding, encoding, and narrative abilities of children (Scott et al., 2023). These are being used to (a) describe children's early progress in foundational language and early literacy skills using strengths-based language; (b), help teachers to identify the next steps for learning; and (c) identify children who require Tier 2 support after 10 weeks of teaching. This presentation focuses on how these tasks have been adapted for children with additional learning needs taking into consideration communication, physical, and visual complexity, and how the data is used to inform teaching practices.

Communication Access: Several of the standard BSLA assessment tasks (e.g., letter-sound knowledge, phoneme identity, phoneme blending) are already accessible to most children as they don't require a spoken response. However some tasks have been adapted as follows:

- Non-Word Reading: the target nonword is presented with three distractors and the children are asked to point to the target word (e.g., “*show me tid*” when presented with *tif, tid, tud, and tov*).
- Oral Narrative: the children can retell the story using their AAC system and the listening comprehension questions are presented as multi-choice.

These adaptations are similar to those described in previous research (e.g., Erickson et al., 2008). Other adaptations for communication include ensuring the children have their augmentative and alternative communication systems (AAC) present, that task instructions are kept simple and consistent, and that reminders are included for children to use their inner speech.

Physical Access: For children with physical needs who are unable to directly select their response by touching or pointing to their choice, the BSLA assessments can be administered via partner assisted scanning. In addition, teachers are asked to provide children with access to an appropriate writing tool for the Non-Word Spelling task. This could be a pen or pencil, but could also be an alternate writing tool such as a keyboard, iPad, or partner assisted alphabet array.

Visual Access: Visual access has also been considered in BSLA with high contrast versions of tasks, and versions with fewer choices available when needed.

Optimising the literacy outcomes for children who use AAC is critically important, particularly for the power it brings in terms of precise and autonomous expressive communication (Clendon & Gillon, 2018). Comprehensive assessment is central to providing responsive high-quality literacy instruction.