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Mapping James Moffett: Formative Assessment and Common Core Standards for the Contemporary Language Arts Classroom

Jonathan Marine and Ruth Nathan

Abstract: *In this article, we argue for an expanded conception of language assessment based on the principles of James Moffett and centered on outfitting teachers with useful information with which to guide their practice and optimize student learning. Importantly, we begin the article by demonstrating that Moffett's interest in assessing language growth occurs much earlier than previously thought. Then, we sketch a composite view of Moffett's evolving views on assessment as drawn from works across the span of his career while also investigating the many thinkers who influenced his ideas in order to situate them in the historical and educational context from which they emerged. Next, we present a selection of his growth sequences in order to take up both the principles which undergird them and their potential value for pedagogical practice while also mapping them to Common Core Readiness Anchor Standards (CCRAS). Finally, we discuss the implications of Moffett's work for writing assessment, educational policy, and national assessment standards.*

"External testing is nor more necessary for learning in school than for learning out of school."

—James Moffett, *Detecting Growth in Language*, p. 1

Introduction

Put plainly, summative and standardized assessments do little to inform or change teaching practices and instruction and can negatively impact students' self-efficacy and motivation. While most assessment in the United States is *summative* in nature (see Kibble) and focused on measuring the *outcomes* of student learning for comparative purposes, much scholarship attests to the limited impacts of summative assessment on student performance and their motivation to learn (see Harlen et al; Koenka).

However, *formative* assessment, monitoring students' learning in order to provide feedback that can be used to improve teaching and learning (Bennett; Black & William), offers teachers an expanded conception of the purpose of assessment as well as the opportunity to measure and assess student writing proficiency and progress in order to modify instruction and maximize student learning and development. Research on formative assessment has demonstrated its positive impact on learning, and its potential impact on student learning and achievement as supported by effective formative assessment practices in the classroom (see, for example, Afflerbach et al.; Gormley & McDermott; Lapp and Fisher). Yet, as Rysdam and Johnson-Shull note in their 2016 article on

reframing written response, “conversation about teacher response to student work has gotten short shrift in our scholarly discussions about writing instruction” (70).

Especially in the early grades, assessing students’ writing for the purposes of formative feedback is an under-researched topic (Skar et al.). While some scholarship has, for example, tried to utilize student self-assessment in order to support teachers’ efforts to formatively monitor and adjust curriculum and instruction (Rogers et al.), there is limited research that centers on designing formative writing assessment tools for use by classroom teachers. As a result of the underutilization of formative writing assessment and the underreported nature of young learners’ writing assessment, there exists both a research gap and a practical-knowledge gap (Marsh). Teachers’ enactment of formative writing assessment is simply not sufficiently covered by the research base. One potentially rich source of actionable, theoretically informed formative language and writing assessment is the work of James Moffett.

Moffett and Assessment

James Moffett was a ground-breaking thinker, teacher, author, and theorist of language learning who impacted the fields of English Education, Language Arts, and Composition and who had a lasting impact on the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the National Writing Project (NWP), and the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL). Moffett’s career was spent advocating for an expanded perspective on the teaching of the language arts and writing that derived its authority not from mere tradition but from a well-informed modern understanding of the linguistic and cognitive development of learners (Blau). However, over the course of his career, Moffett also sought to incorporate principles of mindfulness, spirituality, and holistic education (Durst; Marine & Rogers). As a result of arguing for what was at the time a radically expanded conception of the teaching of language, in the later stages of his career Moffett was increasingly focused on educational assessment and policy (War-nock) because he believed that language learning was deeply interwoven into how we discern our sense of self, civic duty, and purpose and meaning in life.

Moffett’s only complete work dedicated to assessment, *Detecting Growth in Language*, decried standardized testing, arguing that assessment should instead take place by teachers for teachers’ and students’ benefit. Offering a “what to look for” approach, Moffett described growth in all aspects of language use, from whole texts to vocabulary development, stance, sentence structures, and the use of meta-language (e.g., conjunctions, relative pronouns, transition words, punctuation, paragraphing) to tie statements together across sentences, paragraphs, and entire discourses. Encapsulated in twenty-six growth sequences which holistically describe growth in language use relative to the overall intent of a given speech act or text, *Detecting Growth* offers a broader view of what counts as assessable behavior and language use in the classroom in order to help teachers assess for themselves their students’ growth in language.

Yet Moffett’s attention to assessment and evaluation began much earlier than 1992 (the year *Detecting Growth* was published). Further still, the many thinkers and theories which influenced his ideas on assessment and evaluation have never really been taken up or explored by scholars. Accordingly, in this essay, we seek to first demystify some

of the influences on Moffett's ideas about evaluation and map the network of resources from which to draw a composite understanding of his theories on assessment before discussing how the growth sequences in *Detecting Growth* might be of use to contemporary classroom teachers.

In the following, we begin by sketching Moffett's evolving views on assessment drawn from works across the span of his career while also investigating the many factors which influenced his ideas and beliefs. Then, we situate his growth sequences in relation to Common Core standards before discussing their implications for pedagogical practice. Finally, we consider the implications of his work for writing assessment and educational policy and especially for national assessment standards. This account of Moffett's views on assessment and their potential value for classroom teachers, to quote Moffett, is "meant to be utilized, not believed... [we] are after a strategic gain in concept" (Moffett, *Teaching the Universe*, 15).

A Complicated Career, A Complicated Life

James Moffett wrote more than ten books and thirty articles and book chapters over the span of a one-of-a-kind career during which he bucked academe in order to impact more directly the teaching of language which he saw as the epicenter of education. During his life, he made a wide variety of contributions to, and impacts on, many different movements and fields, including the 1966 Dartmouth conference (Dixon; Miller), the progressive education movement (Burgess et al.), the National Council for the Teachers of English (Spalding et al.), and language education in Australia (Sawyer 2010). As a result of these numerous and diffuse areas of impact, mapping Moffett's evolving ideas on assessment is as challenging as understanding the many diverse influences which shaped his work and thinking on assessment throughout his lifetime.

The basic timeline of his thoughts on assessment as found in his published works, however, runs rather linearly from his landmark paired 1966 publications, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* and *Student-Centered Language Arts*, across the teaching guides for the four levels of his language learning curriculum, *Interaction*, in the 1970s, through the four editions of *Active Voice* in the 1980s, and ending in 1992 with his only publication dedicated to language assessment, *Detecting Growth*. In trying to codify and understand the arc of his career, scholars have noted how following the Kanawha County protests of *Interaction* in 1973, Moffett increasingly turned "away from the mainstream in the teaching of English" (Durst, 112) in order to focus not only on meditation, mindfulness, and spirituality, but also on assessment, policy, and society as enmeshed, implicated, and interanimating with one another (see Moffett, *Universal Schoolhouse*). Yet, what this progression and these accounts have never truly addressed is the central event upon which Moffett's ideas with regard to assessment hinged: his involvement in, and refusal from, an effort to catalog behavioral objectives for the U.S. Department of Education in 1969.

As Moffett shared in the second chapter of *Coming on Center* (1st edition), entitled "Misbehavioral Subjectives," in 1969, he convened for five days with other leaders in English education and administration in order to write behavioral objectives for the U.S. Department of Education's "Catalog of Representative Behavioral Objectives, Grades

9-12.” After realizing that the principles on which the objectives were based were not only overly rigid, but unproductive and even potentially harmful to students, Moffett agreed with the session leaders to leave the group and write a response to be included in the report based on the initiative (eventually published in 1970 as Chapter Nine of *On Writing Behavioral Objectives for English*).¹

In that response, in which he proclaimed that “we are being MacNamara-ed,” Moffett trenchantly deconstructed the underlying premise of the effort; namely, to reduce the teaching and learning of English to *only* behaviors which are explicitly observable (116). Arguing that “insisting that desirable behaviors be observable... rules out a great deal of learning,” Moffett movingly critiqued the construct of observational objectivity and the value of behavioral objectives and, in doing so, demonstrated how language learning is far too complex an enterprise to interrogate using only stimulus-response methodology, particularly across short time spans (111).

What is most interesting about this moment in time, besides Moffett committing a kind of professional *harai karai* in order to maintain his own integrity and commitment to the basic principles of learning in which he believed,² is that shortly after this incident, in 1973’s second edition of *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13*, Moffett first shared twenty-four of the twenty-six growth sequences which would comprise *Detecting Growth in Language*. We know of no other scholarship which has denoted the emergence, almost twenty years earlier than most accounts suggest, of Moffett’s vision for assessing growth in language in this much earlier publication. And this discovery helps to bind the timeline of Moffett’s career with respect to evaluation and assessment much more tightly to this early controversy. It was clearly in response to this incident in 1969 that Moffett decided to try and take on devising an actionable (not to mention, *measurable*) series of constructs with which to assess growth in the language arts. The fact that the growth sequences were also republished in the third edition of *Student-Centered Language Arts* in 1983, shortly after *Misbehavioral Subjectives* in 1981, lends further credence and proof to this new account of the emergence of Moffett’s theories on language assessment.

To be clear, this is not to say that Moffett’s response was the only factor influencing his ideas. To the contrary, one only has to review the plethora of scholarly citations in his central theory, articulated as early as 1968 in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, to understand the vast array of philosophers, scientists, and educators who influenced his professional and personal life.³ His consideration of philosophers like Susan Langer furthered his belief in the basic and pervasive human need to symbolize and invent

1. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED072465>

2. Moffet notes he was offered the Presidency of NCTE as an effort to assuage his critique.

3. Psychologists (e.g., Piaget, Babette Whipple, Vygotsky, Robert Ornstein, Howard Gardner, Wendell Johnson, Roger Brown), sociologists (e.g., Basil Bernstein), English educators (e.g., Walter Loban, Carolyn Fitchett), linguists (e.g., John Mellon, Francis Christensen, Peter Rosenbaum, Kellogg Hunt) the anthropologist, H.E. Harlow, educational researchers (e.g., Janet Emig, Donald Graves, Mia Shaughnesy, Sonda Pearl, Adela Karliner, James Britton, Nancy Martin), and cognitive neuroscientists (e.g., Ursula Bellugi).

meanings. While from George Herbert Mead he drew the belief that verbal experience is central to what one is able to think, an idea that is also central to the work of another developmental psychologist whom Moffett cites repeatedly: Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky famously formulated the concept of ZPD, the Zone of Proximal Development, which represents the distance between what a student can do on their own and what they can accomplish with the support of someone more knowledgeable about the undertaking. In this way, Moffett was also influenced by Piaget, whose ideas contributed to Moffett's theories of abstraction. Piaget's vast experimental work encouraged Moffett's understanding of development as incurred through the slow decentering of one's ego; of being able to see alternative perspectives, of standing in others' shoes.⁴

It is precisely these influences, along with the adjacent material in Moffett's oeuvre, which positions his work in *Detecting Growth* to serve teachers in the classroom interested in language assessment. For Moffett's growth sequences are not just evaluative categories but in fact an entire series of pedagogical principles which can be found interwoven into not only his other theoretical work, but also undergirded by the many activities and assignments which he (and his many collaborators) devised across his career, particularly in *Interaction*. In fact, many of Moffett's assignments presuppose the types of growth in language which *Detecting* seeks to illuminate, making his program uniquely suited to classroom teachers not only interested in a broader view of what counts as assessable behavior and language, but also the types of classroom activities which can support and promote the same types of growth which Moffett's sequences seek to measure.

Moffett's Growth Sequences

"This book is meant to help K-12 teachers assess verbal learning without external tests, by their own observations of learner activities and products" reads the first sentence of *Detecting Growth* (vii). It's a potent encapsulation of the premises undergirding Moffett's work in the book; namely, that assessment or evaluation is (or should be) *internal* to the classroom and based on the *observations* of teachers as they watch students perform language *naturally* as part of their everyday classroom activities. Compare this vision of assessment to the other state and national assessments which dominate education at the moment (like Virginia's SOL, or Maine's MEA, the New York's Regents Exam, or Texas's STAAR); rooms full of students quietly, individually filling out standardized, routinized examinations and never once talking or interacting with one another. This isn't to say these types of exams don't have a place or a purpose. It's merely meant to provoke a comparison to the lively, interactive, and kinetic world of classroom language use in which students actually live and learn and in doing so affirm the simple and undeniable fact that assessments which are not a part of everyday classroom activity *are not learning*; they are merely evaluations of the learning which has ostensibly *already* taken place. Moffett's proposal is delivered in his typical, casual "homespun style," (Blau) but the

4. For a more thorough account of Piaget's influence on Moffett, see "The Theoretical Genealogy of Steiner & Moffett," in *Toward a Re-Emergence of James Moffett's Mindful, Spiritual, and Student-Centered Pedagogy*, Peter Lang, 2023.

premise is even more revolutionary than when he first proposed it: learning and assessment should be one and the same.

Another element of Moffett's radical proposal in this book is the expanded range of 'linguaging' behaviors which he believes should be accounted for in assessment. Most national or state-level standardized assessments rely heavily on writing for evaluation. However, Moffett convincingly situates writing as only one element in the spectrum of language arts, much as it is only one way in which we display or demonstrate our knowledge, learning, and growth. And this (what might be called) 'standardized myopia' is why Moffett believes it is vital language arts teachers learn to "detect growth constantly as they witness students discussing or performing, read or hear their writing, watch or listen to their tapes, listen in on or sit in with groups, confer with individuals, and register individuals' patterns of choice in their activities, materials, and partners" (*Detecting*, vii). What Moffett tries to facilitate with his sequences, then, are *ways of looking* for and at growth. The twenty-six sequences are presented as lenses through which to detect and think about the many different and idiosyncratic ways in which students grow, not directions or routines for how to perform assessment, not only because of the infinite array of ways in which growth might be detected, but also because Moffett "trusts teachers' experience and native perception" in a manner which external assessments endemically (and purposefully) seek to abrogate from the assessment process (vii).

This is all to say that, even before we look to Moffett's sequences for specific advice on detecting growth in language and the practical value they might hold for classroom teachers, it is important to acknowledge the drastically expanded perspective Moffett both offers and augurs insofar as how teachers might approach assessment. This shift in mindset is valuable on its own. In his critique, Moffett asserts that "national assessment exists to embarrass schools into improvement by comparing scores" (2). Conversely, for Moffett, assessment is *about* teachers, *for* teachers, and intended as a way to support learning, not weigh or compare schools, classes, or students against one another.

Furthermore, Moffett reminds us that detecting growth in language is subtle work. Because thought is invisible to us until translated into acts or words, and since we can only see, read, or hear the language part, it's easy to forget the many processes which underlie its incarnation (6). There are a million contextual factors augmenting the process by which a thought or feeling manifests in language, and Moffett's main point is that we cannot, we must not, "just focus on language forms as if these existed alone" (6). The need to account for the entire spectrum of language arts *as* students learn is why he insists we situate assessment in the classrooms where learning is actually taking place and position it as a springboard to formatively adjust, individualize, and shape how teaching and learning transpires thereafter.

Growth Sequences #1–5

What perhaps delimits the uptake of Moffett's sequences is both the assumed knowledge of the system of thought and theory which undergirds them (and which is in some ways

required to understand them) and the complexity of operationalizing them.⁵ Take the first five sequences, for example:

1. Toward generalizing more broadly while elaborating more finely
2. Sending toward more general and more differentiated audiences
3. Toward increasing awareness that that people create what they know and that this knowledge is partial
4. Toward increasing awareness that meaning resides in minds, not in words, and that different people may see the same things differently, verbalize the same ideas differently, and interpret the same words differently
5. Toward increasingly sensitive judgment about when explicitness or implicitness is more appropriate in composing and comprehending.

There is a lot going on here. Sequence #1 revolves around the “dual function of abstracting”—namely, that we both abstract *from* the stimuli which abound our experiences, turning them *into* thoughts, compressing those thoughts into memory, and then, once a sufficient number of experiences collate with one another, fomenting generalizations, or rules and beliefs by which we then navigate and understand the world around us. But we also abstract *for*, parceling out a selection of that experiential data which we feel best fits our rhetorical purpose as we interact and communicate with others in a manner attuned to a given audience. But that complex, cognitive latticework only matters insofar as we are *aware* of these processes and are able to adjust that awareness to account for “differentiated audiences” (sequence #2), all of whom also undergo their own abstractive processes (sequence #3) and mean different things even when they say or use the same words (sequence #4), all of which has implications for how we shape and present our ideas (sequence #5). Having now gotten a sense of the intricacy at work in just the first few sequences, one is entitled to ask how any of this might benefit language arts teachers looking to detect growth in language in their own classrooms?

The answer lies in decreasing egocentrism (for which it again bears noting that Moffett relied heavily on Piaget and Vygotsky); the ability for our students to see the world through others’ eyes, account for others’ experiences, and leveraging that sensitivity and empathy to navigate how they communicate with their peers in order to garner the reactions they desire. Imagine, for example, a student telling a joke and expecting their audience to laugh or reading aloud a ghost story they’ve written and expecting their audience to cower in fear, or any one of a number of anticipated responses that accompany a student’s act of speech or writing. It isn’t to say that students should be able to garner the exact reaction they want with every communication they proffer so much as their ability to track those reactions and modify their discourse in real time based on the results.

5. It is important to acknowledge from the onset that a serious limitation of this article is that not all of Moffett’s growth sequences and Common Core standards can be discussed here largely owing to space constraints. Instead, a select array of interesting, representative intersections will be examined as to provide what we hope is a promising jumping-off point for further inquiry.

This isn't simply audience awareness, either; it's also responsiveness and consideration of the experiences on which *their own perspectives* are based and the decentering of one's ego regarding how to express those experiences and the feelings and thoughts which emanate out of them in rhetorically savvy ways so as to achieve the reactions which they seek at any given moment from any given audience. A teacher who observes a student puzzled or frustrated by an audience response would do well to coach them through the kaleidoscopic perspectives governing the reception of their 'language,' much as the same teacher might benefit from tracking (read: detecting over time) how that student develops (read: growth) in subsequent exchanges of similar discourse. Of particular note in this regard is Moffett's suggestion to let students develop their own portfolios comprised of their work created over the course of an entire school year in order to allow both student and teacher to 'detect growth.'

Moffett's Growth Sequences and the CCRAS Standards for Reading

Moffett's Growth Sequences also align quite neatly with Common Core Readiness Anchor Standards (CCRAS). Take Growth Sequence #8 and CCRAS Reading Standard #1, for example (Table 1).

Table 1

Moffett's Growth Sequences and the CCRAS Standards for Reading

Moffett Growth Sequence #8	CCRAS Standard for Reading #1
Toward concepts of broader applicability, of larger membership, and of greater internal complexity of subclasses.	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

This CCRAS makes clear the need for highly specific vocabulary to both maintain cohesion and write in a formal style. And in Growth Sequence #8, Moffett demonstrates that vocabulary and concepts develop along the same trajectory as mental growth generally—toward broader generalization and finer elaboration. At first concepts are limited, as when a young child might refer to all water vessels as *boats*, but as writers (and readers) come to have experience with many types of boats, the particularity of a concept's subclass enhances communication by bringing specificity to the fore. Vocabulary and concept development is crucial for forming a cohesive argument, as it is for composing narrative, expository, and descriptive texts. From using appropriate synonyms to choosing words that reflect the desired tone given one's audience and purpose, the student writer benefits from a broad conceptual understanding. Let's take a look at some examples drawn from across different developmental periods:

Example - 3rd Grader: Even though we are young, we can help out in the community. We could give ideas for making the city a better place for kids. (Kem-

per et al., 137) [note the specificity of the type of community being referred to: “the city”]

Example - Middle School Student: “I also dropped daphnia (brine shrimp) into the dish, and observed the way the hydra eats.” (Kemper et al., 180) [note the desired tone given the use of “observed”]

Example - Adult: “The skull [from a T. Rex] will be sold in a live auction, a suitably old-school sendoff for a predator who bestrode the world 76 million years ago. But the skull which, which weighs 150-plus pounds and measures about 4 ½ feet long, seems much more than just an object. It isn’t precisely a work of art, and Maximus was once alive. As someone with no interest in dinosaurs, I can’t explain the appeal.” (Cronin) [note how the desired tone is maintained with the choice of “bestrode” over “walked,” for example]

Note not only how the conceptual borders widen as the writer ages in these examples, but also how much more complex the overlaying of subclasses becomes. A word like “community” may at first be daunting to taxonomize adeptly for a third grader, but as they learn and grow they come to place themselves, and the endless varieties of different *types* of “communities,” in stark contrast to and with one another. By middle school, the writer knows that bringing up a specific type of shrimp begets a parenthetical explanation for their reader. And the adult writer in this example is interweaving all manner of subordinate and superordinate classes with one another: T. Rex, predator, skull, art; the writer is able to subtly communicate that the objects referred to in the writing exist in multiple classes and subclasses at once.

But it isn’t just that Moffett’s Growth Sequences align with CCRAS standards so much as the multiple growth sequences can be seen to cohere in specific CCRAS standards *at the same time*. Take Growth Sequences #18, #19, and #20 and the same CCRAS for Reading #1 (see Table 2).

All of these standards require the use of valid reasoning when reading and understanding arguments. The expansion of clause options as articulated in Growth Sequence #18 helps create cohesion, link major sections, and allow for varied syntax. To that end, Growth Sequences #19 and #20 add notions of versatility and expansion of rhetorical possibilities. As student growth continues from early elementary grades through high school, the language used to support “valid reasoning” requires the use, first, of linking words to connect opinions and arguments to reasons (Grades 1-4), but then quickly moves into the use of much more versatile words, phrases, and clauses by 5th grade.

In point of fact, the development of an argument (CCRAS Standard for Writing #1) requires an ever-expanding use of meta-language; language that encompasses the varied techniques writers use to join statements—from the use of pronouns, coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, and relative pronouns to transitional words, punctuation and paragraphing. Meta-language directs readers or listeners on how to take and relate statements. By expanding the repertory of clause-connecting options, by increasing versatility in constructing sentences, and by using and responding to the full rhetorical possibilities for tying ideas together, language users relate their analysis, reasoning, and evidence to one another, thereby logically enabling them to support an argument’s

claim. The rhetorical functions of these grammatical tools metamorphosize into an array of options for use in subtle communication through embedded meaning with important distinctions and modifications.

Table 2

Moffett's Growth Sequences and the CCRAS Standards for Reading

Moffett Growth Sequences #18, #19, #20	CCRAS Standard for Reading #1
Expanding the repertory of clause-connecting options as follows: String of separate independent clauses, each a sentence. Clauses conjoined by coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or) and time-apace conjunctions Clauses conjoined by logical subordinating conjunctions and fused by relative pronouns Clauses reduced and embedded in each other.	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Toward increasing versatility in constructing sentences, exploiting more nearly the total resources inherent in modifying, conjoining, reducing, and embedding clauses; and toward increasing comprehension of sentences of such range.	
Toward and responding to the full rhetorical possibilities for chaining statements by grammar, transitional words, punctuation, paragraphing, and organizational form according to the commitment of the whole discourse.	

Moffett's Growth Sequences and the CCRAS Standards for Writing

Moffett's Growth Sequences also align with CCR standards for Writing as well. Take a look at Growth Sequence #18, 2, and 3 and CCR Standard for Writing #4, for example (Table 2).

Table 3

Moffett's Growth Sequences and the CCRAS Standards for Writing

Moffett Growth Sequence #18, 2, and 3	CCRAS for Writing
Growth Sequence # 18: Expanding the repertory of clause-connecting options as follows: A. String of separate independent clauses, each a sentence B. Clauses conjoined by coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or) and time-space conjunctions C. Clauses conjoined by logical subordinating conjunctions and fused by relative pronouns D. Clauses reduced and embedded in each other. #2: Sending toward more general and more differentiated audiences. #3: Toward increasing awareness that people create what they know and that this knowledge is partial.	Writing #4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

The CCRAS for Writing #4 asks for “clear and coherent writing” and points toward growth in using transitional and connective devices, punctuation, paragraphing, parallel structure, repetition, and so on. Similarly, Moffett's Growth Sequence #18 calls teacher's attention to “expanding the repertory of clause-connecting” options, including stringing independent clauses together, coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions fused by relative pronouns, and embedded clauses. Viewed in this way, every sentence is a story unto itself, leaving readers the task of understanding what the writer is saying and seeing the relationships between ideas in order to understand the broader topic or story. The writer's task is to guide the reader through the many important interrelationships found across their ideas by utilizing an array of different connective devices which signal varying logical, temporal, and hierarchical relations.

Coherent writing requires sentences (whether one clause or many) to relate to one another according to the context of the whole discourse. As clauses are conjoined or embedded, they require certain meta-communicative words—conjunctions such as *but*, *or*, *although*, *because*, *unless*, and relative pronouns like *who*, *which*, and *where*, or conjunctive adverbs like *then*, *now*, *therefore*, *for example*, and *likewise*. As Moffett astutely suggests, “the statements *are* the communication, and these connectors meta-communicate about how to take and relate the sentences” (Moffett, *Detecting* 48-49). In order to demonstrate some of these connections in action, let’s take a look at the work of a former 3rd grade student in one of Dr. Nathan’s classes who we will call Lizzy:

The Roly Polies by Lizzy

When I first saw roly polies, I was two. They lived in a bush with dirt and flowers. They crawled all over me, but they didn’t sting me. So, I’ve like roly polies since I was two!

Most people think roly polies are insects, but they’re not. They’re crustaceans. They are similar to insects because they have three body parts. They both have antennae and they both hatch eggs. They are not similar to insects because they have seven pairs of legs instead of six pairs.

Roly polies start their lives as eggs. Then they become mancas [pillbugs] and finally change into adults. Mancas [pillbugs] must molt to grow. They shed exoskeletons that cover their bodies.

As I said, roly polies get around on seven pairs of legs. Some roly polies dig holes underground in soil. roly polies need to avoid the heat and come out at night. Their bodies dry out quickly. They roll up to keep moisture inside their bodies. They search for moist places to rest period.

Just like insects, roly polies have to eat. They enjoy eating rotting wood and dead animals, plants, and dead plants. Sometimes they eat other roly polies. When they eat, they do it with their mandibles. They use their strong moving parts to break down dead plants and leaves when they eat.

Some insects are friends and some are pests. Roly polies are nice. They don’t bite. That makes them good for kids. For example, they roll in your hand, and when you put them down, they come unrolled. They are fun to watch and play with. In some ways they’re pests because they can eat live plants. When the plants are in my mom’s favorite flower bush or vegetables, it’s bad.

It was fun writing this report. Now I have a new life skill. I wanted to study Roly polies because I’ve always loved to play with them. Now I understand why they act the way they do.

We see here that Lizzy is far beyond simply stringing independent clauses together. She has learned to meta-communicate—to relate statements to help her readers understand her complex ideas. The use of “As I said,” in the sentence “As I said, roly polies

get around on seven pairs of legs,” reminds the reader that she’s said this previously and signals that she is including additional context and clarification. Conversely, the use of “Just” in her sentence, “Just like insects, roly polies have to eat,” shows degree. It functions as a cohesive device by indicating similarity and helps connect the idea of roly polies needing to eat with the concept of insects having the same need. Cohesive devices like this aid in the flow and organization of Lizzy’s ideas and communicate to the reader that there is a shared characteristic between the two groups and are representative examples of the type of languaging ability which Moffett describes in growth sequence eighteen.

Similarly, the adverbial phrase, “for example” in the sentence, “For example, they roll in your hand, and when you put them down, they come unrolled,” serves as a signal that the following information will provide a specific instance or illustration of the previous statement. “Now,” in the sentence “Now I understand why they act the way they do,” functions as an adverb that indicates a change in Lizzy’s understanding or perception. She has gained insight (perhaps as she wrote her research report?) about why roly polies act the way they do; her “new life skill” has led to new revelations which she is in turn trying to communicate to her reader.

All of these connecting devices help Lizzy to transition more smoothly between her ideas and enhance the overall coherence of her sentences. They also help to demonstrate how Moffett’s growth sequences align with CCRAS. And most importantly they showcase how a teacher might, over time, detect a student’s growth in language as they utilize increasingly complex languaging skills. It is important to again note that Moffett’s growth sequences are undergirded by one of the only fully developed theoretical models of first language learning (*Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, 1968) and connected to a host of activities, lessons, and pedagogical practices (*Student-Centered Language Arts*, 1968, 1976, 1983, 1991); few assessment standards contain the pedagogical theory and resources which Moffett’s work offers.

By exploring Moffett’s Growth Sequences and their compatibility with Common Core Readiness Anchor Standards, we also hope to underscore the significance of careful close reading in identifying language development. The more teachers are aware of these signs of growth, the better equipped they are to notice and name them for children. That the CCRAS can be seen as inclusive of such dexterous and sophisticated meaning making through language demonstrates quite strikingly how Moffett’s growth sequences may be an important but little-known assessment *and* pedagogical tool with which to approach classroom language learning in ways that align with the state standards that many teachers are charged with accounting for in their classroom practices.

Conclusion

What does all of this mean for contemporary educators seeking an expanded perspective on language learning assessment and evaluation? First, it means that there is a startling complexity to be found in state standards often perceived as intrusive to and cloistering of pedagogical practice. State standards are intended as conceptual guidelines, even if they are sometimes wielded as constraints, and there remains room within each standard to approach growth in language holistically. Secondly, the work of James Moffett, and

especially his militant reaction to the onset of the behavioral standards in the 1960s and 70s (which, not incidentally, may be seen as a forebearer of modern CCRAS) contains special value for language arts teachers tasked with managing classroom learning *and* standardized assessment benchmarks. That one of the most visionary and iconoclastic minds in language learning turned his attention to assessment, not only at the end but throughout his career, and the paucity of attention which that work has garnered, is an opportunity to re-attend to Moffett's nuanced and sophisticated ideas about language learning and especially his thoughts about *detecting growth in language*.

Of course, this article can only scrape the surface of that potential. There is simply too much going on in Moffett's twenty-six Growth Sequences (nine of which were reviewed in this essay) to summarily encapsulate the scope of this work. To that end, we have provided three appendices which attempt to chart many more of the CCRAS (for writing, reading, as well as speaking, listening and language) in conjunction with Moffett's growth sequences. Undoubtedly, further research on these sequences and their development over Moffett's career would unveil valuable insights which might further their potential use and applicability in concert with state standards in contemporary classrooms. That his works, including *Detecting Growth in Language*, have been recently made available in open access through the WAC Clearinghouse only adds to the urgency, and accessibility, of this endeavor.⁶

Moffett spent a great deal of time contemplating the unique demands of language on learners and especially for young learners. As he put it:

[L]earners need to know that they can respond to mixed signals at once and don't have to select only one to respond to... [yet] only awareness and a larger perspective will permit them to make some whole in their minds of the mixed signals. Then they can respond to the whole at once. (*Detecting*, 31–32).

In the same way, as teachers of writing we must respond to the *whole student at once* by wading through the ambiguity of the individualized and often idiosyncratic growth of our students and attending to the uncanny variety of ways in which their language abilities might grow. In this way, Moffett's growth sequences serve as a powerful guide; a North Star in a storm of standardization and bureaucracy (Marine & Rogers). Assessment, as Moffett argued, exists (or should exist) *for the teacher*. Viewed in this way, assessment becomes a tool with which to better understand how to *work with students* to promote growth and learning. But to do so, we must first account for students in the assessment process, for as Moffett noted, "as soon as others want the results of learning more than the learner, the game is over" (*Detecting*, 27).

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6. <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/landmarks/moffett/>

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Appendix A – CCR Reading Standards and Moffett's Growth Sequences

Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading	Moffett Growth Sequence Number(s)
1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.	1, 5, 7, 8, 13, 15
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.	1, 5, 7
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.	2, 3, 4
4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.	3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13, 16, 24
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole	13, 18, 19, 20
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.	3, 4, 6, 7
7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.	1, 3, 4

Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading	Moffett Growth Sequence Number(s)
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.	3, 4, 5, 26
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.	3, 4, 18, 19, 26
10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.	4, 23, 24, 25

Appendix B – CCR Writing Standards and Moffett's Growth Sequences

Common Core Anchor Standards for Writing	Moffett Growth Sequence Number(s)
1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.	1, 2, 5, 6, 13, 17, 18, 19, 26
2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.	1, 2, 5, 6, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.	1, 5, 13, 17, 24, 26

Common Core Anchor Standards for Writing	Moffett Growth Sequence Number(s)
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6,13, 16, 18, 19, 26
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.	1, 2, 5, 6, 13, 16, 18, 19, 26
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.	2, 3, 4, 18, 26
7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.	8, 9, 10, 14, 23, 26
8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.	3, 4, 6, 26
9. Draw evidence from literary and/or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.	3, 6, 26
10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

Appendix C – CCR Speaking and Listening Standards and Moffett's Growth Sequences

Common Core Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening	Moffett Growth Sequence Number(s)
1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.	4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 18, 19
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.	3, 4, 5, 13
3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.	3, 4, 5, 12, 20, 25
4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	3, 4, 5, 6, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 23, 26
5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.	2, 14, 18, 19, 26
6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.	5, 6, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 23, 26