Asking the Right Questions: How to Select an Informal Reading Inventory

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As teachers, we believe that good and appropriate assessment drives good and appropriate instruction. Yet schools today are caught up in an assessment frenzy without allowing sufficient time for the particular instruction each child needs, and preoccupation with accountability pervades most of this assessment activity. In this climate, the individual needs and preferences of both teachers and students suffer.

Although large-scale standardized achievement tests do provide the most easily gathered accountability data, and, although valid, relevant standardized tests can furnish useful achievement data, these data are not particularly helpful for classroom instructional purposes. Inordinate amounts of instructional time go into practicing and preparing for the required accountability tests (Jennings & Rentner, 2006), which might in turn take precious days to administer.

A Multitude of Options

Keeping in mind that information from informal assessments is essential to provide specific and appropriate data concerning the skills and strategies of individual students, our graduate class, "Literacy Diagnosis and Instruction," explored various diagnostic assessment options that can help guide literacy instruction for specific students in specific contexts (see Flippo, 2003). A combination of several informal and authentic assessment procedures can provide very effective tools for teaching younger through older elementary grade students. Unfortunately, a certain amount of confusion greets teachers in choosing among the many assessment tools now available (Paris & Carpenter, 2003).

Informal Reading Inventories (IRIs) are an assessment tool that typically assesses individual students' word recognition, oral reading, strengths, weaknesses, fluency, and comprehension through graded word lists and passages. IRIs may have their critics (e.g., Applegate, Quinn, & Applegate, 2002; Walpole & McKenna, 2006), but they have become the most commonly used assessments of elementary grade students' reading (Johnston, 1997).

An Abundance of IRIs

The history of IRIs goes back to the work of Emmett Betts (1946), who is frequently credited with the development of IRI techniques, although some reading researchers trace their use even further back (Beldin, 1970). Generations of classroom teachers and reading specialists have found IRIs especially useful, as evidenced by the fact that some of these have attained their 8th, 9th, or 10th editions.

Texts and other professional books that focus on literacy assessment provide comprehensive information about using and administering IRIs in the classroom (e.g., Cooper & Kiger, 2005; Flippo, 2003; Reutzel & Cooter, 2003). The IRIs themselves also provide much of that information in their manuals for administering the assessment. Specific help, however, is sadly lacking in selecting an IRI, even though the popularity of commercially available IRIs has grown steadily over the years, with new ones appearing constantly (Paris & Carpenter, 2003). Our class's goal in this context was to help teachers narrow the offerings to those most appropriate for their classroom students' needs, their teaching philosophy or perspective of reading, and the variety of conditions in which they teach.

Searching for the Good Questions

A search of various databases using descriptor phrases such as selecting IRIs, selecting IRIs for classroom use, choosing IRIs, guidelines for selecting/choosing/
buying/purchasing IRIs, and help with selecting IRIs yielded chiefly the modestly disappointing insight that finding the right IRI can involve choices analogous to those involved in buying a car or computer. The best choice for one particular teacher and his or her students and situation is not necessarily the best for another. Lacking still were good questions to ask.

To develop appropriate review questions, we studied over the course of a semester many of the major IRIs, looking at their different features, foci, attributes, scoring, directions for analyses, and implied philosophies of reading, as well as their more obvious qualities (e.g., grade levels covered, number of forms available, length of passages, subject matter used, and so on). Given our criteria of widely used IRIs representative of what is commercially available, we concentrated on IRIs that had undergone multiple editions, such as the Informal Reading Inventory (Burns & Roe, 2007), Reading Inventory for the Classroom (Flynt & Cooter, 2004), Basic Reading Inventory (Johns, 2005), Qualitative Reading Inventory (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006), Classroom Reading Inventory (Silvaroli & Wheelock, 2004), The Stieglitz Informal Reading Inventory (Stieglitz, 2002), and Analytical Reading Inventory (Woods & Moe, 2007).

During the semester, each of the authors of this article took notes on each IRI considered, noting questions that came to mind, things we liked about a particular IRI, things we did not like, items that were unclear, and points we considered especially important about each. When every IRI had been carefully reviewed, each reviewer's notes were compiled and discussed. Out of this process we painstakingly distilled our initial set of questions.

Over the next two semesters, 71 teachers (all graduate students) who subsequently took the Literacy Diagnosis and Instruction course at our urban university used these questions to review IRIs as part of the course. Based on their suggestions, we deleted, modified, or collapsed several questions. Generally speaking, the teachers who have used the evolving list of questions have found it to be a successful discussion and selection tool. They have indicated that using the questions helped them narrow their choices and ultimately select the one IRI best suited to their philosophy and concerns about elementary classroom reading assessment.

Questions Teachers Can Ask

Above and beyond a simple question of utility, selecting (and using) the most suitable IRI involves an extra learning curve not unlike getting the hang of using a computer, a power tool, or a VCR. It is helpful to get a feel for the author's approach to designing and constructing IRIs, choice of material, grasp of the real conditions under which students learn, ability to adapt to a variety of assessment needs, and so on. We therefore asked ourselves, what are the five most salient characteristics an IRI should have? Benefiting from the aforementioned feedback, we settled finally on five criteria, or clusters: content, the passages used, measuring comprehension, IRI administration, and interpretation of the results, along with subsequent instruction based on those results. These would all combine to help us address the final consideration: an IRI's overall suitability. When questions fit into more than one cluster, we grouped them in the step we agreed fit best.

Teachers may naturally want to add their own questions to customize our list for an even better fit with their specific classroom needs, students, and contexts—or choose other descriptors and categories for their own purposes. Some may want to delete questions to make the list more manageable. Such modifications would embody our objective—to assist teachers in choosing appropriately from the various IRI assessment options.

We might justifiably contend that the actual process of designing review questions for an assessment instrument is an excellent learning opportunity for teachers, empowering them and enabling their professional development. By constructing, deleting, revising, or discussing questions with which to review an assessment instrument, teachers can continually develop their awareness of three things: what is most important to assess for their students, the best way to assess it, and the experience of culling helpful insights to provide the best possible instruction for each child. Selecting the questions to ask, the discussions ensuing, and examination of various IRIs benefited the teachers participating in the literacy diagnosis classes synergistically—as they indicated over the semesters when we developed these questions. Those in subsequent semesters continue to benefit from the discussion. In Figure 1 we share our questions and the steps along the way as you review
Figure 1
Questions to Ask

Step I: Examine your own reading instruction and assessment beliefs or perspective. Indicate with a check mark whether a particular IRI is relevant or suitable for your classroom needs.

Step II: Review the content:

1. What does this IRI measure?
2. What specific reading behaviors does it assess?
3. If the IRI is grade-specific, is there a variety of assessments for each?
4. What grade levels and range(s) are included?
5. Are the word recognition lists embedded in sentences or text, or are they out of context?
6. Is this IRI available in other languages for my ELLs?

Step III: Questions about passages:

7. What are the sources of the passages? Are they written for the IRI or are they from actual published children’s texts or literature?
8. Are both expository and narrative texts, in various genres and subject areas, used for the student readings?
9. Are the readings interesting and appealing to students of all levels?
10. What length are the passages?
11. Is the material culturally, linguistically, and cognitively appropriate for all my students?

Step IV: Measuring comprehension:

12. Do the reading passages rely heavily on background knowledge for comprehension?
13. Does the opening of the passage provide sufficient information to assist students with little schemata?
14. Do the comprehension questions include all areas of comprehension—literal, inferential, and critical?
15. Are there enough comprehension and vocabulary questions per selection?
16. Are metacognitive questions included?
17. Does the IRI include pictures or illustrations appropriate to the text, or other commonly used context aids?

Step V: Administering the IRI:

18. Overall, is the IRI easy to use and understand?
19. How are data collected on each student? Are the data sheets provided adequate?
20. Do you have to purchase parallel forms of the IRI, or are they included?
21. Does the author provide an explanation of each subtest?
22. What criteria are used to determine independent, instructional, and frustration levels? Do I agree which miscues (errors) will be counted?
23. Can a teacher easily administer this IRI with her or his own choice of reading selections?

Step VI: Interpreting results and instructional follow-up:

24. Does the IRI provide instructions for interpreting the results?
25. Does it provide suggestions for instruction?
26. Is this IRI going to help me understand the needs, strengths, skills, and strategies of my students?
27. Will the information I learn about my students be worth the time it will take me to administer this assessment?

Step VII: Reflections on Overall Suitability:
an IRI for suitability. In Figure 2 we introduce a chart to illustrate the review process we suggest.

Multilingual IRIs

Teachers should carefully determine when it is appropriate to administer assessments in English for their English-language learners (ELLs). With an increase of ELLs in the general education classroom, some teachers may want to purchase IRIs available in more than one language. We hope the authors and publishers of the many IRIs coming onto the market will see the same opportunity we do to help classroom teachers and their ELLs from many diverse linguistic backgrounds by providing such sorely needed multilingual IRIs. For example, Flint and Cooter (1999) published an English and Spanish combination IRI, English-Español Reading Inventory for the Classroom, and Johns (1997) published the Spanish Reading Inventory.

Taking a Professional Stance in Assessment

Use of the questions proposed, or other questions that teachers want to ask, is important in selecting the most appropriate IRI for a teacher’s classroom from those available. These questions demystify the selection process, help teachers reflect on their own values regarding what is important to each of them and what is important for their particular students, and allow teachers to take some active control and a professional stance on their students’ assessments and instruction.

Teachers of reading want to know where they are going to know when they get there. Cochran-Smith’s and Lytle’s (1993) work suggested that intentional and systematic inquiry by teachers about their own questions, classrooms, and work with students result in meaningful growth and learning for the teachers involved. We believe the development and use of questions for selecting assessment tools will help achieve this and the other goals mentioned.

The whole purpose of literacy instruction is to help students acquire and enjoy the lifelong habit of reading. Our students need this to function successfully not only in school but everywhere else: It is their right and our responsibility. We urge teachers to consider the options, to find or make time to assess their students’ reading skills, strategies, and abilities using informal classroom assessment. This information will help teachers provide the most appropriate instruction for each child.

References


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