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WEIGHTING MISCUES IN INFORMAL INVENTORIES: A PRECAUTIONARY NOTE

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Pretest

Analyze this transcript of a student's oral reading and then respond to the four questions that follow.

Oh Showed
"Look, Jack!" *shouted* Tom.
 these would
"Look at *those* wheels! It *will* be easy to move the snowman on them."¹

1. How many miscues did the student make? _____
2. How many errors did the student make? _____
3. Given a continued pattern of performance, does this level of text seem appropriate for guided reading instruction? _____
4. How might instruction be adapted to meet this student's needs?

A Prologue

Even among those who are not readily in agreement with the numerous implications for instruction being put forward in the name of a "psycholinguistic" model of reading, there is substantial support for the constructive dialogue and spirited interactions which have been generated. The enthusiasm of some, however, has, at times, been taken to such extremes that the reality of the classroom has all but been ignored. Recently, for example, my students encountered some difficulty in reconciling certain practical applications of miscue techniques with another fundamental precept of reading instruction; that is, the critical role of successful practice in connected reading toward the development of proficiency. This conflict is disturbing. Whether these concerns are real or imagined, significant or inconsequential is the topic of this brief presentation.

Some Background: Quantitative vs. Qualitative Assessment Techniques

Error analysis as applied to measurement in oral reading has a time-honored history (see Beldin, 1970). Prior to the mid-1960's it tended to focus generally on quantitative aspects. That is, a simple count of the number and frequency of errors in relation to the amount of text read. One application of this form of analysis was the development of the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI). Although the source for criterion levels of per-

¹From Friends Old and New (Scott, Foresman) 2¹ Level.

formance is obscure and validating research to support them scant, there is surprising agreement among the experts on accuracy standards for independent, instructional, and frustration levels. Powell and Dunkgeld (1971) comment on the remarkable persistence in the reading literature of the Bett's 95% word accuracy score for the instructional level. Of the eleven authorities they examined who had written in this area, only two seemed to stray far from this criterion score: Smith (1959) and Powell (1969) – and then only at the primary levels. There appears to be a somewhat greater degree of agreement on what these levels are than on the more basic question of what to count as an error when computing these scores. The classification of error types into categories is relatively straightforward. Substitutions, omissions, and words supplied are commonly recognized as definite errors, while the treatment of corrections, repetitions, and insertions varies considerably in terms of whether or not they are counted depending on whose guidelines one chooses to follow.

Informal reading inventories have found many levels of application in the classroom ranging from individual clinical diagnosis to placement in practice materials by the classroom teacher. Many authorities regard this latter task as one of the teacher's foremost responsibilities in reading instruction (Harris, 1961; Botel, Brudley, and Kasuba, 1970). Such emphasis has at its source first the awareness that optimum gains in achievement are made by pupils when reading materials are adjusted to their level of ability; and second, the understanding that the selection of inappropriate materials may be in the long run a major contributing cause of reading failure.

Goodman (1967) has defined a miscue in oral reading as an observed response which differs from an expected response. On the surface, the introduction of this term alone added little to the literature other than a new label for what had been previously referred to as an oral reading error. In descriptive, operational terms a miscue and an error are equivalent – an observed response which differs from an expected response. The significance of Goodman's work rests on the theoretical foundation and techniques for qualitative analysis which are applied to these deviations. As Goodman has expressed on numerous occasions, the term miscue is better suited than error to such a form of analysis, because it lacks the negative overtones that the student has done something wrong and also emphasizes that the direction of the analysis is positive, i.e., looking for what the student is cueing on to discover his strengths. The development of the Reading Miscue Inventory (Goodman and Burke, 1972) has extended miscue techniques from the research arena to the classroom. The potential for these qualitative techniques of analysis are far reaching both in relation to instructional programming for individual children as well as providing a new insight into the nature of the reading process itself.

The Problem

It was perhaps inevitable, as a result of their shared focus, that these two forms of analysis – quantitative (IRI) and qualitative (miscue) – would ultimately result in confusion and in some cases conflicting interpretations.

Does such conflict pose a serious problem? Are misguided interpretations leading to counterproductive decision making on the part of classroom teachers? Under careful analysis the potential dangers are readily apparent.

Smith (1971) stresses again and again the primary role of frequent successful practice (i.e., reading in real books) in the development of reading proficiency. Decisions made by teachers as to the appropriateness of materials for such practice are, therefore, crucial ones. For all its frailty, an informal reading inventory is the starting point for a large number of informed, well-intentioned classroom teachers. Those teachers who allow qualitative considerations, such as the appropriateness of meaning, to substantially influence what they score as an error will tend to disregard certain miscues which might otherwise be counted. The net effect will be to inflate percent accuracy levels. Teachers who score on a more rigid basis where each deviation from the text is counted will tend to deflate the percent accuracy score. This process can be illustrated using the transcript presented earlier in the pretest. There is a total of 18 words in this portion of the text. From a rigid, quantitative perspective this student has made four errors (a 71% level of accuracy). If, however, one ignores errors which do not change meaning substantially, it's conceivable that we could judge this student as having made no errors at all (a 100% level of accuracy). While only a small portion of text is given, even in an expanded inventory it would take relatively few such "qualitatively" influenced decisions to move percent accuracy levels from one criterion level (i.e., frustration or instructional) to another (i.e., instructional or independent). There is a parallel phenomenon in the scoring and interpretation of cloze tests. Scoring by synonym replacement will yield higher percent accuracy scores than when an exact replacement criterion is used. While it is generally conceded in the interpretation of cloze test results regarding appropriateness of materials that scoring by synonym requires different criterion levels than scoring by exact replacement (Ruddell, 1964; Miller and Coleman, 1967), no parallel adjustments have been made to the IRI criterion levels when qualitative considerations are given.

If we picture frustration, instruction, and independent levels as on a continuum with respect to a given student's ability level, we will find that teachers who are influenced by qualitative considerations will tend to place students more toward their frustration level. Teachers who operate with more rigid criteria for errors will tend to place students more toward their independent level. To an educator, sensitive to the role of successful practice, the latter seems both more defensible and easier to work with. Granted, for the diagnostic teacher, placement vis a vis an IRI is only a starting place for more complex decisions such as how instruction might be adapted to meet the needs and strengths of individual students. Nevertheless, these decisions are more easily considered in the context of student success rather than frustration surrounding inappropriate initial placement in practice materials.

More support for the adoption of a stringent criterion level is suggested in research underway at the Research and Development Center for Teacher

Education at the University of Texas at Austin. Preliminary findings seem to indicate that students in classes of teachers identified as more effective tended to make fewer oral reading errors than those students in classes of those teachers identified as less effective (Anderson and Everston, 1978). One very strong hypothesis for explaining this phenomenon is that the more effective teachers tended as a group to place their students in practice materials closer to their independent level than did the less effective teachers.

The Future

It is difficult to ascertain how widespread an influence miscue analysis has had on the scoring of IRI's and placement in materials, but there are at least superficial indications that it is growing. More basic textbooks on reading methods (e.g., Guszak, 1970) are suggesting we take into consideration whether a miscue has substantially affected meaning before counting it as an error on an IRI. Pikulski (1974), without providing specific guidelines, suggests the weighting of errors in line with miscue analysis procedures before they are counted and compared with criterion levels. How many readers of this article, after examining the transcript in the pretest, concluded that the student under consideration made no errors? While this increased sensitivity to what the reader is doing right is encouraging, it would be inappropriate to take this observation to its next logical step and conclude that the material is at his independent level.

There is no question that qualitative techniques of assessment such as miscue analysis are a far richer source of information for the discerning teacher than simple error counts. Qualitative techniques are revealing of ways in which instruction might be adapted to meet specific student needs. It would appear advisable, however, that until such time as we are able to demonstrate how qualitative analysis can better meet demands for accurate placement of students in instructional materials than simple quantitative analysis, we should strive to keep the two procedures as separate and distinct as the purposes for which they are used.

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