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THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF INFORMAL READING EVALUATION

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Many persons have developed the understanding that the evaluation of a given student's reading ability must take the form of the administration of a commercial, standardized reading test. Though the results of a standardized test can be valuable, secondary teachers need to develop an evaluation model which encompasses a number of factors. These aspects would include commercial tests, informal techniques, observational devices, and the study of past reading performance data accrued by a reader.

In many ways, informal reading tests may be more useful and practical than the typical standardized reading achievement test. In the *first* place, the validity and reliability of such instruments vary considerably. *Second*, since they are norm-referenced with a large general population they are unlikely to measure those exact skills and competencies which have been promoted by a particular content teacher. *Third*, there are many aspects of reading skill development which cannot be evaluated by a timed, pencil-and-paper test that is not related to current class materials.

Because of these inherent limitations, all secondary teachers should be aware of the role and nature of various informal reading techniques and devices for the purpose of collecting pertinent data which will serve as a basis for formulating appropriate teaching strategies.³ The purpose of this article is to describe the procedures for constructing and administering informal measures. Attendant explanations relating to the proper analysis of the test results and how this information may be used for improving reading instruction are included.

The Oral Reading Test

After determining the grade level difficulty of a given text or article being used by the class, ask each student to read orally from the material. Each student should be asked to read a 200-word passage. During the oral reading exercise the teacher should make a careful analysis of all oral reading errors (omissions, substitutions, or refusals) committed during the reading exercise. If he/she makes more than ten errors, the reading material may be at frustration level for the student and should not be used for that student. If the reader makes fewer than four oral reading mistakes, the printed matter may be too easy.

A Sight Word Test

Using the same material alluded to in the previous section, a formal sight vocabulary test can be constructed. By the use of a systemized sam-

pling technique, a collection of 30 sight words can be employed. These words can be selected by listing every eighth word in a typical 250 word passage of the book or article. This technique should prove to be a good sampling device since both simple as well as more complex words will be chosen. Each word selected can be printed on three by five inch pieces of white cardboard and flashed, one at a time, for one to two seconds for each word. The student who is reading at the readability level of the book should be able to pronounce correctly at least 23 of the 25 words which are flashed. Those who cannot demonstrate competency at this level should use easier books.

The Cloze Procedure

One of the most efficient methods of evaluating the vocabulary and concept formation of students is to administer a cloze test.² The following steps should be observed in developing the test:

1. Select a 425-word passage from a book or article which has been determined to be at grade level difficulty.
2. Duplicate the passage leaving the first sentence intact. Beginning with the second sentence, leave every eighth word blank until there are fifty blanks in evidence. (The only exceptions to this practice would be first and last words of sentences and proper nouns.)
3. Ask each student to complete the test, writing the most appropriate word for each of the blanks on the test. Only answers which correspond exactly with the words from the original source should be counted.
4. The following standard should be used in evaluating test performance:
 - 0-18 correct—book or article is too difficult for the student.
 - 19-25 correct—book is proper for the reader.
 - 26-50 correct—material is too easy for the student.

It is important to employ the results of the cloze test with the data derived from other evaluative techniques before decisions are made concerning a student's reading ability.

Group Informal Reading Inventory

A quick assessment of a given student's ability to read and comprehend classroom reading matter involves the selection of four to five pages of material to be read silently by all class members. A ten-question test should be constructed and administered. Questions used for checking comprehension should include literal and interpretative type items.¹ All students who score at a level of at least 80 percent on the test can probably use that reading book or article for everyday assignments. Any student who scores below 70 percent might possess serious reading problems and may have great difficulty in "handling" the books or other materials from which the test was taken. These readers will need several types of differentiated reading aids if assignments are to be completed successfully.

Functional Reading Test

One of the best methods of determining the ability of a learner to use a content textbook is to construct an examination which requires him/her to

locate data of a precise nature. Approximately ten questions which are similar to the following may be constructed:

1. On what page(s) would you find information about Sterling J. Morton?
2. On what page does Chapter 3 of Part III begin?
3. Examine the map on page 287. Which city in Brazil has the largest population?
4. Look at the graph on page 49. In what year did Nebraska have the most confirmed tornadoes?
5. How many chapters does this book contain?

Any student who misses more than two items on the ten-question test may need corrective reading instruction with respect to certain aspects of functional reading skill development.

Summary

Reading evaluation for secondary students must be broader in scope than the use of one or more commercial standardized instruments. The informal reading tests which have been described in this article will provide all content teachers with valuable tools for evaluating such important aspects as a learner's instructional reading level, vocabulary proficiency, and comprehension abilities. The data from these techniques should be used with results obtained from other evaluative devices to help each teacher develop appropriate lesson plans for every student.

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