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# THE PROCESS OF OBSERVING ORAL READING SCORES

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Oral reading has a varied history of interpretation (12) and is presently under scrutiny in terms of characteristics rather than quantity (5). Despite the doubt that controversies generate, the identification and tabulation of oral reading errors dominate decisions generated in practice using informal reading inventories. In practice, informal reading inventories depend on identification, scoring, and interpretation of oral reading errors. Controversies are usually ignored perhaps in the hope that the expert judgment of reading specialists overcomes the difficulties. Beldin (1) explores the controversial history of informal inventories. From early studies to the present, doubt surrounds scoring criteria (7, 9, 10). This study examines the process of identification and scoring of oral reading errors by well-qualified reading specialists.

## THE STUDY

Seventeen reading specialists listened to a single playing of an audiotape recording of a child reading orally a hundred and thirty-three word passage. The passage was at the child's independent reading level according to other assessments which included a retelling of the story and responses to conventional comprehension questions. They were asked to mark the errors on a typed script of the passage and count only those errors they would use to derive an oral reading word recognition score in an informal reading inventory.

## SUBJECTS

Since the purpose of this study was to examine the scoring and interpretation practices of well qualified reading specialists, the subjects who were selected evidenced a high degree of training and experience. All subjects had held positions as classroom teachers, reading clinicians, and reading consultants for substantial periods of time. At the time of this study all subjects were employed as reading specialists. All but two subjects held the master's degree with an emphasis in reading or higher graduate degrees. The two subjects who did not hold the master's degree were about to complete the requirements for this degree. All subjects held certification as reading specialists.

## PROCEDURES

**Instruction to Subjects**

Subjects were given a typed script of the one hundred and thirty-three word passage to examine before listening to the tape. They were instructed to prepare to listen to an audiotape recording of a child orally reading the passage on the typed script. They were asked to mark the typed script in the manner they do when they administer the oral reading paragraphs of an informal reading inventory. They were informed that the tape would be played only once to stimulate the actual testing situation. They were alerted that following listening to the tape and marking the typed script, they would be given time to analyze their tabulations. They were asked to decide whether this passage is at the child's independent, instructional, or frustration level, and to identify and describe each error they marked.

**The Tape**

The tape recorded oral reading passage was read in a midwestern dialect at 49.2 words per minute. The tape was recorded on excellent equipment which produced a high quality, low distortion recording. Thus, this tape was easily heard by the subjects.

**The Responses**

Table 1 displays the errors recorded by the subject in this study. The reading specialists varied considerably in describing oral reading errors.

*TABLE 1*  
TYPES OF OBSERVED RESPONSE

Response	High	Low	Mean	S.D.
Total Markings	14	5	8.5	2.7
Total Errors	14	1	6.3	3.5
Substitutions	4	0	1.7	1.4
Insertions	6	0	1.5	1.5
Omissions	1	0	0.1	0.3
Repetitions Counted as Errors	6	0	1.9	1.5
Repetitions Not Counted As Errors	2	0	0.1	0.5
Corrections Counted as Errors	6	0	0.5	1.5
Corrections Not Counted As Errors	6	0	1.9	2.2
Sight Word	3	0	0.2	0.7
Mispronunciations	2	0	0.3	0.6
Successful Word Analysis Attempts	4	0	0.2	1.0

Six of the seventeen respondents estimated the material to be at the reader's independent level. Five subjects rated the material at the reader's instructional level, while the remaining six felt the material was at the reader's frustration level. Since the material was at the reader's independent level, about sixty-four percent of the subjects in this study underestimated the reader's performance.

### IMPLICATIONS

Controversies surrounding reading assessment are real and cannot be ignored. No one can deny the facility for productive judgment that reading specialists develop through training and experience. But errors in judgment do exist as this brief study demonstrates. The difficulties in identification, description, and scoring of oral reading errors have several obvious sources that warrant further investigation. The quality of the error must be evaluated.

The oral reading selections of an informal reading inventory are usually administered without the aid of a tape recorder. This forces the examiner to rely on a rapid script marking technique and memory. This study emphasizes the need for tape recording the oral reading segment of informal inventories.

A second source of error lies in the examiner's listening capabilities. Reliability checks should be carried out periodically to establish the degree of adequacy or inadequacy the examiner brings to the assessment task. Poor hearing, inability to attend, and inattention to acoustic conditions are important factors in assessing the examiner's competency. The memory, listening capabilities, and willingness to attend to test conditions are sources of variation in oral reading assessment that seldom receive attention.

Scoring techniques account for a third source of disagreement in error identification. Obviously, different criteria are available. Betts (1946), Spache (1963), Gray (1963), Gates and McKillop (1962), Gilmore (1968), and McCracken (1963) represent some of the more widely used systems of assessment that rely on scoring criteria. Reflected in the responses of the reading specialists in this study is the general disagreement about treating repetitions and successful corrections as errors. In addition, concern must be given to the classification of errors that reflect differences in dialect between the reader and the examiner.

We must be careful in this critical stance not to throw the baby out with the bath water. The informal reading inventory is probably the best reading assessment tool available. Our objective should be to make it work for us and to make it into a better tool to aid in structuring productive learning situations. We need well-trained reading specialists, but judgment is an outcome of knowledge. Reading specialists must be willing to grapple with controversies and modify practice. Oral reading error identification must be approached in light of new knowledge.

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