



## Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 16  
Issue 4 July 1976

Article 12

7-1-1976

# Development of "Reading Want Ads:" A New Informal Reading Inventory for Older Exceptional Children

Catherine Morsink  
*University of Kentucky*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Morsink, C. (1976). Development of "Reading Want Ads:" A New Informal Reading Inventory for Older Exceptional Children. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 16 (4). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol16/iss4/12](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol16/iss4/12)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



# DEVELOPMENT OF "READING THE WANT ADS:" A NEW INFORMAL READING INVENTORY FOR OLDER EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

*Catherine Morsink*

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article describes the procedures used in the development of a new reading test for older remedial readers, particularly those in special education classes. The purpose for publication of this description is to solicit feedback from professionals in the field of reading regarding the validity and utility of this concept. Four questions are of major concern:

1. Can/should an IRI based on vocabulary from several basals be used to estimate instructional level in any one of them?
2. Is it appropriate to apply a readability formula to text written in a format which approximates telegraphic speech?
3. In the opinion of those who work with older remedial readers, would a reading inventory using Want Ads content be of sufficient motivational appeal to justify its development?
4. If developed further, would this instrument be of more value if its range were extended through grade six and/or if it were normed?

Readers are invited to respond to these questions prior to the author's decision on continuation of the project.

Catherine Morsink, Ed.D.  
Department of Special Education  
University of Kentucky

### *Purpose of Informal Reading Inventory*

The teachers have long used the informal reading inventory (IRI) for diagnosing the reading needs of pupils in their class. The IRI gives the teacher an opportunity to listen to the child reading aloud, to determine his reading level, and to make observations about the way in which he attacks words and comprehends ideas.

There are three generally accepted levels of functioning which can be determined by administration of the IRI (Harris, 1962; Johnson & Kress, 1965). They are as follows:

---

\* This material was developed while the author was Training Director at the University of Kentucky Regional SEIMC.

1. *The independent level* at which the child can read without assistance. Word recognition errors are less than 2% and comprehension is 90% or better.
2. *The instructional level* at which the child can satisfactorily read when the book is used for systematic reading instruction. Word recognition errors are between 2 and 5% and comprehension is at least 75%.
3. *The frustration level* at which reading is too difficult for the child. Errors in word recognition rise above 5%, and comprehension drops to 50% or less. (The child should not be asked to read anything at this level.)

The teacher may, if she desires, also use the IRI to determine a fourth level:

4. *The hearing comprehension level*, the highest level at which the child can understand at least 75% of the material which is read to him. This level gives the teacher an estimate of the student's potential, and may be especially useful in cases where a child's oral reading is poor but his comprehension of language is good. And, in cases where the child's hearing comprehension level is equal to or lower than his oral reading level, it cues the teacher to concentrate on language development rather than word recognition skills.

#### *Need For A New IRI For Exceptional Children*

Most informal reading inventories are made by teachers from old basal readers. When the objective of the inventory is to place the child appropriately in the series used in his classroom, this material can be effective in guiding the placement decision. If, however, the child is tested in one basal series and placed in another, the vocabulary may be quite different. With the exception of the Dolch words (Dolch, 1951), each basal series beyond the primer level selects its own vocabulary in its own sequence.

Another major difficulty arises when the special education teacher attempts to measure the reading level of older exceptional children who are reading at primary levels. These students are understandably "turned off" by materials written for children of primary age level. Imaginary animals and stories about cute little kids just don't interest them.

#### *Development of Materials*

The classified ads from the newspaper were suggested as a possible source of reading materials for students of this age and reading level. Classified ads are appropriate in interest and reading level. Classified ads are appropriate in interest for this group, and are already being used in many special education classes for teaching language or career education.

The classified ads, however, do have some limitations and present some problems in the writing of an IRI. They are as follows:

1. Selection of vocabulary
2. Sentence length
3. Sentence structure

#### 4. Ad length

*Selection of Vocabulary* was a major issue. An analysis of four basal reading series (Scott Foresman, 1965; Bank Street Readers, 1965; Harper-Rowe, 1966; Betts Basic Readers, 1963) pre-primer through book two, revealed that there was a wide discrepancy among them in the vocabulary presented. Because of this, two other sources were used most heavily as a word pool from which to compose the ads. They were the Dolch 220 words (Dolch, 1951) and the "Functional Basic Word List for Special Pupils" (Tudyman & Groelle, 1963).

*Sentence Length* was also considered. In order to determine the correct number of words per sentence, it was necessary to investigate the average number of words per sentence used by children in their oral language. Loban (1963) has studied the oral language of children K-6 by measuring the number of words they use per "communication unit" (not necessarily complete sentences). He sampled between 236 and 338 children in each of the age groups. The words per unit in the lowest group at each level were of most interest for this study, since large numbers of exceptional children have language difficulty. At the kindergarten level, Loban found that the lowest group averaged 4.18 words per communication unit. The average for grade one was 4.89 per unit. At grade two the average was 5.49, and at grade three it was 6.08. These findings were used to estimate the appropriate number of words per sentence in the IRI.

These estimates of oral language were then compared with the numbers of words per sentence in the basal readers at equivalent grade levels. A survey of the four aforementioned basal series revealed that although they began with two or three words per unit in the pre-primers, they rapidly accelerated to as many as seven in the primer, twelve in book one, and fifteen in book two. Standardized oral reading tests (Gray, 1967; Gilmore, 1968) presented three to four words per sentence in the grade one selections, and five to six words per sentence in grade two. Actual sentence length used in the IRI was based on a combination of these oral and written estimates.

In order to check the appropriateness of the reading level for each sample, a test of readability was applied to the material after it was written. (Spache, 1966) The Spache formula estimates grade level by determining the number of words per sentence and the number of words used which are not found in the "Dale List of Easy Words" (Dale, 1931, revised: Stone, 1956).

*Sentence Structure* was a final consideration in the writing of individual ads. In keeping with the concept that children should read the same kind of language that they speak, studies which investigated the structure of children's oral language were consulted. O'Donnel, Griffin, & Norriss (1967) found that the highest percentage of structural patterns in main clauses of speech for children K-5 was the subject-verb or subject-verb-object (over 90% at all age levels). These structural patterns were therefore repeated as frequently as possible in the construction of the IRI. However, the format of the classified ads and the restraints imposed by limited

vocabulary and sentence length were also factors in the construction of sentences. As a result, a more abbreviated form, in which the sentence begins with a verb, was also used.

*Ad Length* was typically short in order to maintain the reader's interest and to more nearly resemble the real ads in a newspaper. Because a single ad was too short to provide an adequate sampling of words at any given grade level, several were combined in each selection. In each case, a sample of approximately 100 words was used. This made it easier for teachers to compute the child's reading level from his errors, and to find the rate in words per minute when desired.

#### *Use and Misuse of IRI*

The major value of this new IRI will be in its use by special education teachers to determine the reading levels of exceptional children who are of intermediate, junior, and senior high school ages and reading at primary levels. This information can be used for instructional grouping and for determining correct grade level of placement in reading. The inventory can also serve as a tool for obtaining diagnostic information concerning specific skill deficits of the child. Comprehension questions which follow each ad focus primarily on the recall of factual information, although they include a few questions of an interpretive nature.

The user should be aware, however, that an IRI has at least 3 limitations: 1) it is an informal estimate, and should not be considered a standardized test, 2) its estimates of rates and levels are based on very short samples and 3) it is a single observation of reading performance. Its results should be compared with other diagnostic data on a continuing basis.

#### *Information Available In IRI*

Most teachers will want to use this IRI primarily as an oral test in which the student reads the ads as he would read other printed material in the context of sentences and paragraphs. From this type of reading the independent, instructional, and frustration levels are determined. A complete IRI, however, also measures silent reading ability, listening comprehension, reading speed, and word recognition skills in addition to oral context reading.

When it is desirable to compare the child's comprehension of material read aloud with that of similar material read silently, the teacher can ask him to read the selection "to himself." She can time his reading with a stopwatch, observe difficulties such as frowning and finger-pointing, and use the comprehension questions to check his understanding. The estimate of "level" in this case would come entirely from the comprehension score, since no direct observations of word attack skills would be made.

In the case of listening comprehension, the child listens as the teacher reads aloud to him. When the selection is finished, he responds to the comprehension questions. He must answer with 75% comprehension. It is important that he responds to the questions in language equivalent to that

used in the ads, avoiding non-specific answers such as "it," "that place" or "a thing."

The measure of reading speed can be computed from any total grade-level (1, 2, or 3) sample *below* the child's frustration level. Record the total number of words in the sample, and divide it by the time (in seconds) required by the child to read the sample. Multiply this answer by 60 to obtain the rate in words per minute. Durrell (1955) provides some useful averages (silent and oral rates) against which to compare the child's reading speed. They are as follows:

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6
Oral Reading	55	80	110	135	150	170
Silent Reading	45	78	125	156	180	210

If, for example, the child reads the Book 3 selection with 100% accuracy, but reads at the rate of only 50 words per minute, this would cue the teacher to work on rapid sight recognition rather than phonetic word-attack skills.

Finally, the child's word recognition skills can be observed by using the record of errors from the want ad selections in conjunction with the word lists which follow the ads. The word lists, based on random selections from the graded Dolch list (1951), are a supplement to the inventory. By administration of the grade level word lists, the teacher can observe the child's ability to attack words in isolation and compare this skill with his ability to read words in context. She can also note whether the child recognizes these important words instantly by sight, or whether he tries to "sound them out." Recognition only by sight would indicate the need for systematic instruction in word attack skills, while too much "sounding-out" would suggest an emphasis on extended practice to facilitate more rapid recognition. All of these observations have implications for the child's remedial program.

#### *Future Development*

Development of grade level selections at fourth, fifth, and sixth grades is suggested. These upper levels may be useful in placing children who read above the primary range, or whose listening comprehension exceeds their ability to read written symbols. The upper levels might be read to the child, with comprehension questions serving as a measure of his listening comprehension. Alternate forms of the test would also increase its flexibility.

#### *Need For Further Study*

Development of this IRI led to several possible questions as to why large numbers of children in special education classes fail in reading. If the vocabulary of basal readers is so varied, then a child who moves frequently would hardly begin to learn the words in one series before being put into a whole new selection and sequence of sight words. While needing more than the usual repetition to master words, he would be receiving less.

If, as it appears, the average length of sentences in basal readers far exceeds the length of sentences which children use in speech, this poses an added problem for the exceptional child. And, when the materials are designed for children of a lower chronological age, their interest level and content may be entirely inappropriate for older students. Further controlled studies, which investigate the relationship between the vocabulary, sentence length, and interest level of materials and the success of older exceptional children in acquiring skills in reading, are needed.

FIGURE 1  
SAMPLE AD FROM LEVEL THREE (THIRD GRADE) BOOK

WANT TO FIX CARS?

Wanted—high school student to work in car shop. Can work after school and on Saturdays. Must be able to change tires and willing to learn about how cars work. 386-9357

35 words

Time \_\_\_\_\_ Seconds

Questions

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Where is this job?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 2. When could you work  
           on this job?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 3. What would you have to  
           be able to do?

Answers

- \_\_\_\_\_ Car shop  
 \_\_\_\_\_ After school,  
           on Saturdays  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Change tires, learn  
           about how cars work

REFERENCES

- American Vocational Journal*, 45 (April, 1970).  
 Betts, Emmett, and Welch, Carolyn. *Betts Basic Readers*, Third Edition.  
 New York: American Book Company, 1963. Preprimer through Book 2-1.  
 Bank Street College of Education. *The Bank Street Readers*. New York:  
 Macmillan and Co., 1965. Preprimer through Book 2-1.  
 Bond, Gail L., and Tinker, Miles. *Reading Difficulties: Their Diagnosis  
 and Correction*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957. Pp. 169-  
 174.  
 Dale, Edgar, "A Comparison of Two Word Lists," *Educational Research  
 Bulletin* (Ohio State University), 18 (December 8, 1931), pp. 484-488  
 ("Dale List of 769 Easy Words").  
 Dolch, Edward W. *Psychology and the Teaching of Reading*. Champaign,

- Illinois: Garrard Press, 1951. Chapter VI, pp. 149-184 and Appendix A.
- Durrell, Donald D. *Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulty, Manual of Directions*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955, p. 27.
- Gilmore, J. *The Gilmore Oral Reading Test*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
- Gray, W. *Gray Oral Reading Tests*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967.
- Harris, Albert J. *Effective Teaching of Reading*. New York: David McKay, 1962, pp. 120-125.
- Johnson, Marjorie S., and Kress, Roy A. *Informal Reading Inventories*. Newark: International Reading Association, 1965.
- Loban, Walter D., "The Language of Elementary School Children," *NCTE Research Report, No. 1*. Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963.
- O'Donnell, Mabel. *The Harper & Row Basic Reading Program*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966. Preprimer through Book 2.
- O'Donnell, R.; Griffin, W., and Norriss, R., "Syntax of Kindergarten and Elementary School Children: A Transformational Analysis," *NCTE Research Report, No. 8*. Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967.
- Robinson, Helen, and Others. *The New Basic Readers: Curriculum Foundation Series*. Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1965. Preprimer through Book 2-1.
- Smith, Nila B., and Others. *Graded Selections for Informal Reading Diagnosis, Grades 1 through 3*. New York: New York University Press, 1959.
- Spache, George D. *Good Reading for Poor Readers*. Champaign, Illinois: Garrard Publishing Co., 1966. Appendix, "The Spache Readability Formula."
- Stone, Charles R., "Measuring Difficulty of Primary Reading Material: A Constructive Criticism of Spache's Measure," *Elementary School Journal*, 57 (October, 1956), pp. 36-41 (revision of Dale List).
- Tudyman, Al, and Groelle, Marvin. *A Functional Basic Word List for Special Pupils*. Pittsburgh: Stanwix House, 1963.
- Wepman, Joseph, and Haas, Wilbur. *A Spoken Word Count, Children Ages 5, 6, and 7*. Chicago: Language Research Associates, 1967.