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Asking the Right Questions: An Updated Checklist to Facilitate the Evaluation of Informal Reading Inventories

Kathleen McGrath, Kayla Jaehn, Stephanie Kowalski, MaKayla Olden McGee, Jessica Templin

Abstract

Informal Reading Inventories (IRIs) can be a valuable tool for examining reading abilities, determining instructional strengths and needs, and ultimately, facilitating high-quality instructional decisions. Arguably, in the current educational climate, with emphasis placed on evidence-based instruction, progress monitoring, and the evaluation of program effectiveness, the formative information provided by IRIs is even more important for responsive instruction. However, finding an IRI that will meet assessment needs for all students can be a complex task. Educational professionals, especially advanced literacy specialist candidates, should be knowledgeable about IRIs, the particular assessment information that can be gleaned from them, as well as the nuances across IRIs that lend advantages and disadvantages to different contexts and different children. Our hope is that the Informal Reading Inventory Evaluation Checklist (IRIEC) will be a helpful and user-friendly resource in facilitating this critical thinking.

Background

There are many challenges facing educators of the 21st century. Reform initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, and the Common Core State Standards, have led to a heightened focus on educational accountability. Despite the best intentions of many, we have entered an era of what some have termed a “testing frenzy,” (Flippo, Holland, McCarthy & Swinning, 2009) where the emphasis has been placed on the prolific evaluation of student progress and program effectiveness through use of formal measures such as standardized tests. While formal measures provide valuable summative information, many educators argue that these measures are limited in terms of the formative information they may provide, or in their ability to guide instruction (Gillet, Temple, & Crawford, 2011; Lipson & Wixson, 2003; Nilsson, 2013; Spinelli, 2008; Stiggins, 2004).

According to Manzo & Manzo (2013), the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) is the “quintessential performance-based assessment” (p. 241). IRIs are individually administered formative assessments that provide “windows” of insight into reading abilities including decoding skills, sight word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. They typically include graded sight vocabulary word lists and passages ranging from the preprimer level to middle or high school levels. Students may read these passages orally or silently, then produce a retelling and respond to comprehension questions. Oral readings allow educators to perform a running record and subsequent miscue analysis, which provide

information as to abilities across phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, including rate, accuracy, and prosody (i.e., pitch, tempo, intonation). Additionally, IRIs might include measures of prior knowledge, as well as provide insight into the student’s engagement with text.

Nilsson (2013) asserts that the IRI continues to be a valuable tool for examining reading abilities, determining instructional needs, and guiding instruction (see also, Allen & Hancock, 2008; Applegate, Quinn, & Applegate, 2006; Ford & Opitz, 2008; Kennedy, 2004; Li & Zhang, 2004; Luckner & Bowen, 2006; McIntyre, Rightmyer, & Petroski, 2008; Rush, 2004; Spear-Swerling, 2004). First, IRIs are versatile and flexible; educators can probe multiple ages and instructional ranges, use IRIs as pre/post measures to gauge literacy growth, or use them in combination with other measures to provide a comprehensive picture of a student’s literacy abilities. Second, by their inherent nature, IRIs allow insights not possible with assessment options, particularly computerized assessments where students work independently and often under time constraints. Instead, sitting side-by-side, teachers can both hear and see what strategies the child is using or not using. Finally, IRIs offer a relatively quick and inexpensive assessment option as compared to other options.

Although IRIs have been touted as a valuable resource in evaluating reading abilities and informing instruction, they have also come under harsh criticism, some arguing that their “utility is severely limited” (Spector, 2005, p. 601) by their lack of reported reliability and that the IRIs that do report reliability do not adequately meet the minimum criteria established by Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (as cited by Spector, 2005, American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). In fact, Spector cautions, “any test—no matter how informal—has the potential for harm if the information it provides is imprecise or misleading” (pp. 599–600). Others have noted additional limitations of IRIs including the extensive training and professional development required for effective selection and administration of IRIs, as well as the accurate interpretation of their results (Paris & Hoffman, 2004; Nilsson, 2013).

In contrast, Manzo and Manzo (2013) argue that “it is this kind of thinking that poses the greater danger to the vitality of the field and the consequent services that reading educators are equipped to provide to children” (p. 242), purporting that IRIs are useful tools that should be considered as a series of options to be used purposefully and flexibly to inform instruction.

In the last decade, it is clear that authors of IRIs have considered the criticisms put forth by Spector (2005)

and others (e.g., Walpole & McKenna, 2006), and many have addressed the issues of validity and reliability raised in this body of work. As well, there have been many edition updates that have increased the potential of the IRI to become a cost-efficient instrument with even greater applications. Nonetheless, educators and researchers are advised to become “informed and critical consumers of IRIs in order to make smart choices in selecting IRIs and choosing specific IRI components well suited to their needs” (Nilsson, 2013, p. 228).

These issues are particularly critical for the consideration of literacy-specialists-in-training. Indeed, ILA Standard 3 requires candidates “use a variety of assessment tools and practices to plan and evaluate effective reading and writing instruction” (IRA, 2010) and that “teacher educators who specialize in literacy play a critical role in preparing teachers for multifaceted assessment responsibilities: (IRA, 2010). Becoming informed and critical consumers of IRIs should be an important part of a literacy specialist’s training.

In 2009, Flippo et al. took on this task through the development of a checklist that would guide the thoughtful analysis of an IRI. This checklist provides practitioners not only with a quick and easy means for evaluating IRIs, but facilitates informed decisions about the suitability of a given IRI relative to assessment and instructional need.

Eight years later, in the wake of tremendous educational reform initiatives, as well as the current climate which reflects a heavy focus on testing, our team, in a similar graduate class activity, collaborated to update the checklist, mindful that the Informal Reading Inventory continues to be an effective tool for assessing reading abilities, providing formative information, and informing instruction.

Our Take

In the Fall of 2015, our team participated in the capstone course of the Advanced Literacy Specialist program, *Reading Difficulties: Identification and Intervention*. The goal of this course was to explore assessment and instruction from the lens of Response to Intervention Tier III.

As one of our class activities, we were given the article written by Flippo et al. (2009), as well as their checklist for use in evaluating several popular IRIs, identified by Applegate et al. (2006), as the most widely disseminated IRIs. These included: Analytical Reading Inventory, 10th edition (ARI; Woods & Moe, 2014); Bader Reading and Language Inventory, 7th edition (B-RLI; Bader & Pearce, 2013); Basic Reading Inventory 11th edition (BRI; Johns, 2012); Classroom Reading Inventory, 12th edition (CRI; Wheelock, Campbell, & Silvaroli, 2011); Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory, 6th edition (ESRI; Ekwall & Cockrum, 2013); Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System: Grades K-2 (Fountas, 2008); Qualitative Reading Inventory-6 (QRI-6; Leslie & Caldwell, 2017); Reading Inventory for the Classroom, 5th edition (RIC; Flynt & Cooter, 2007).

With the ultimate goal of sharing our evaluation with the rest of the class, each team chose one of the IRIs and used the checklist to facilitate its evaluation. While using this checklist, we found that we had many suggestions about how it could be updated to reflect what we were learning in class,

as well as the current educational climate. As students, and also as teachers, we wanted more clarification on certain questions and more applicable questions to aid in the comprehensive evaluation and selection of an IRI.

During the subsequent class debriefing, we discussed specific ways the checklist had guided our evaluations and possible ways it could be updated to better capture the nuances across IRIs that lend advantages and disadvantages to different contexts and different children. We felt invited to do so based on the suggestion made by Flippo et al. (2009): “Teachers may naturally want to add their own questions to customize our list for an even better fit with their specific classroom needs” (p. 80).

Our Process

Over the next semester, our team worked to update the original checklist, using the twelve steps, as outlined by Stufflebeam (2012), for developing a sound evaluation checklist.

These steps include:

- (1) Focus the checklist task
- (2) Make a candidate list of checkpoints
- (3) Classify and sort the checkpoints
- (4) Define and flesh out the categories
- (5) Determine the order of categories
- (6) Obtain initial reviews of the checklist
- (7) Revise the checklist content
- (8) Delineate and format the checklist to serve the intended uses
- (9) Evaluate the checklist
- (10) Finalize the checklist
- (11) Apply and disseminate the checklist
- (12) Periodically review and revise the checklist (pp. 2-3).

The final product of our work can be seen in Figure 1: Informal Reading Inventory Evaluation Checklist (IRIEC).

We use the following sections to outline and discuss this process: (1) Checklist creation, (2) Checklist field-testing and revision, (3) Final checklist development.

Checklist Creation

Initially, we met to discuss potential revisions to the checklist as well as to begin brainstorming our ideas for its update. We also completed a review of the literature on IRIs. During our brainstorming session, we determined what we wanted to take from the original checklist, then began adding our own ideas and questions, which were based upon our review of the literature, with the goal of keeping the integrity of the original checklist. Mindful that the educational climate has dramatically changed in the last decade, we considered how recent initiatives might have impacted revisions of IRIs during this timeframe and how expanded questions might help educational professionals make informed decisions about IRI adoption.

For example, Nilsson (2013) points out that federal guidelines specify that schools receiving Reading First grants must utilize screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based instructional assessments that have proven validity and reliability (Department of Education, 2002). In light of the heavy criticism of IRIs’ traditional handling of this aspect, as well as the fact that many IRI authors have addressed this issue, our update includes explicit questions for the consideration of content validity and reliability that were

implicit in the questions of the original checklist.

We also considered specifications in Guidance for the Reading First Program (Department of Education, 2002) that require the evaluation of students in the five critical areas of reading instruction (i.e., comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, phonemic awareness, and phonics) as defined by the National Reading Panel (NRP; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) as well as to screen, diagnose, and monitor students' progress over time. We expanded some of the original questions to capture more nuanced differences, relative to the five critical areas of reading instruction, across IRIs. We also expanded questions to allow for evaluation as to the suitability of a particular IRI to capture progress over time.

The Common Core Standards-ELA were also considered in our update, specifically its call for an interdisciplinary approach to literacy instruction with a greater emphasis on informational text (National Governors Association Center, 2010). We included questions that would capture insights as to the IRIs ability to provide a lens into students' abilities for handling the specific demands for successful reading of expository text.

Additionally, we considered factors illuminated by Nilsson's (2013) evaluation of eight IRIs including evidence of content validity, provision of passage genre options, passage length, provision picture and graphic supplements, provision of comprehension/recall measures, form equivalence/reliability, and measurements of vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. Also given thought were extraneous variables that can impact comprehension including measures of prior knowledge (Bader, 2013; Johns, 2012; Leslie & Caldwell, 2017; Wheelock, Campbell, & Silvaroli, 2011; Woods & Moe, 2014), emotional status (Woods & Moe, 2014), and level of engagement (Johns, 2012).

After the initial brainstorming session, we classified and sorted our questions and developed categories including: (1) *Overall assessment needs*, (2) *Technical aspects*, (3) *Content and skills assessed*, (4) *Comprehension* (5) *Administration* (6) *Interpretation* (7) *Ancillary supports* (8) *Reflection*. Although most of the categories were easily identified, we deliberated about designating a separate category for comprehension because it can be categorized as a skill area and therefore, could have been included in the *Content and skills assessed* category. It was decided that because there are so many aspects involved in comprehension (e.g. monitoring, visualizing, inferencing), a separate category was warranted to better capture the many nuances involved in comprehension.

To clarify each category, we developed working definitions that were used to finalize our categories. As well, we continued to add, subtract, and rewrite the questions to better reflect our categories and their respective definitions. Ultimately our working definitions were abridged to form our headings.

After the checkpoints had been grouped, a determination was made regarding the ordering of the categories. Our categories start with broad considerations of the IRI, move to more focused considerations of individual aspects, and then end with an overall reflection of the IRI as a whole. The logic behind this decision is as follows: if the IRI could not suit broad needs, such as its ability to assess specific age/

grade level(s) or specific student populations, the evaluator might stop there and move on to another IRI. If broad needs were met, the evaluator could progress through the checklist to consider more focused issues that differ across IRIs. The final reflection section allows for the evaluator to consider the IRI holistically.

Once the checklist categories and individual checkpoints have been appropriately sequenced, Stufflebeam (2012) recommends that the checklist be reviewed by potential users who are instructed to provide written, critical reviews of the checklist. This feedback is then utilized to continue to refine, clarify, and more fully develop the checklist.

Checklist Field-testing and Revision

The first iteration of field-testing took place during the spring of 2016, with a group of seventeen Advanced Literacy Specialist candidates who were participating in a clinical level diagnostic course entitled: *Reading Difficulties: Identification & Intervention* — the course we had taken the prior semester prior. Because this course is the capstone course in the program, we felt the participants would have enough background knowledge on IRIs to be able to critically analyze our draft and to be able to provide useful feedback on its continued development.

The class was divided into groups of two to three students; each group was given one IRI to review, using the checklist as a guide. Groups were asked to highlight any questions that were unclear, poorly worded, or unnecessary. As well, we asked each group to provide any additional comments or feedback that would be helpful in our continued revision of the checklist.

We took the feedback that we received from the graduate students and continued to update and add points that were necessary. The students thought it might be more applicable to keep the language teacher-friendly. We agreed it was important to keep the checklist teacher-friendly, yet wanted to keep it technically specific for clarity. We changed some of the wording to reflect this suggestion, but were mindful that our wording needed to be specific enough to be helpful to other educational professionals who might be involved in the review of an IRI including literacy specialists, school psychologists, and administrators.

After reflecting upon the revisions made during the first iteration of our field-testing, another draft was created for a second iteration of field-testing that included two elementary level classroom teachers and two certified literacy specialists. This group was asked to review the checklist and provide feedback as to its practicality, as well as highlight any questions that were unclear, poorly worded, or unnecessary. We asked one certified literacy specialist and a graduate of our program to use the checklist as a guide to evaluate the newest edition of the Qualitative Reading Inventory-6.

Although feedback was positive and suggested that the checklist was a helpful tool they could use in the future to better evaluate IRIs and their assessment process, there were additional recommendations for revision. For example, we added questions regarding the extent of technical support, such as on-line forms, websites, blogs, on-line frequently asked questions, and YouTube™ links.

Final Checklist Development

We accessed a checklist template from Microsoft Word™, created a final draft, and used this draft for our final iteration of field-testing. During this iteration, the research team used the checklist to evaluate the following IRIs: Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory, 6th edition (ESRI; Shanker & Cockrum, 2013), Qualitative Reading Inventory-6 (QRI-6; Leslie & Caldwell, 2016), and Reading Inventory for the Classroom, 5th edition (RIC; Flynt & Cooter, 2007).

During the final iteration, we discovered that we needed to develop questions that would allow for the evaluation of other extraneous factors not addressed during earlier drafts. For example, when analyzing the Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory, 6th edition (ESRI; Shanker & Cockrum, 2013), we realized we needed to include questions as to the IRI's ability to assess dictionary skills, visual and auditory letter knowledge, and whether there was ELA Common Core alignment. After examining Reading Inventory for the Classroom, 5th edition (RIC; Flynt & Cooter, 2007), we added sub-questions about report writing and interest/attitude surveys. Finally, after reviewing, the Qualitative Reading Inventory-6 (QRI-6; Leslie & Caldwell, 2017), we expanded our questions regarding validity and reliability (see Figure 1 for Informal Reading Inventory Evaluation Checklist).

Future Considerations

We have reached the steps Stufflebeam (2012) refer to as “*apply and disseminate the checklist*” as well as “*periodically review and revise*” (p. 10). He writes, “Whenever one disseminates a checklist, it is wise to invite feedback describing and assessing the applications...it is always desirable to invite users to provide critical feedback, since checklist development is an ongoing process” (p. 10).

It is in the spirit of the invitation extended by Flippo et al. (2009), that we invite educational professionals who might use this checklist to evaluate and customize it as necessary to best suit assessment and instructional needs as well as changing trends in education.

Concluding Comments

IRIs can be a valuable tool for examining reading abilities, determining instructional strengths and needs, and ultimately, facilitating high-quality instructional decisions. However, nuances across IRIs lend themselves better to particular contexts, circumstances, and students. Determining “best fit” can be a complex task. Educational professionals, especially those charged with making critical assessment decisions, should be knowledgeable about IRIs and their potential for facilitating high-quality instruction. Our hope is that educators charged with evaluating and selecting IRIs will find this updated checklist user-friendly and a helpful resource in determining the IRI that will best suit assessment goals and needs.

Figure 1

Informal Reading Inventory Evaluation Checklist

Informal Reading Inventory: _____

Edition and Year: _____

Evaluator: _____

Date of Evaluation: _____

The IRIEC is designed to aid in the evaluation of an Informal Reading Inventory (IRI). The following questions were developed to help educational professionals (1) consider the IRI broadly, (2) consider more focused aspects such as the IRI's ability to illuminate specific reading abilities, and (3) reflect on the IRI as a whole. Taken together, these elements will illuminate which IRIs might best suit specific assessment needs, goals, and purposes.

Place a checkmark where appropriate

Overall Assessment Needs	
	Does the IRI align with what you are assessing?
	Does the IRI include the grade level or range of grade levels you would like to assess?
	Does the IRI include assessments for pre-readers?
	Does the IRI address diverse populations
	English Language Learners?
	Students with IEP/504 plan?
	Does the IRI align with Common Core State Standards (e.g. ELA/Lexile)?
	Does this IRI overlap with classroom assessment and/or outside testing?
	Can the IRI be used for group assessments?
Technical Aspects	
	Has content validity been established? __ Research based? __ Field tested?
	Has reliability been established? __ Research based? __ Field tested?
Passages	
	Does the IRI include a balance of expository and narrative passages?
	Consider the length of passages. Are they adequate?
	Are passages high interest and relevant?
	Do the reading passages rely heavily on background knowledge for comprehension? Does the IRI include pictures or illustrations appropriate to the text or other commonly used contextual aids?
	Are the passages available in alternate languages?

Figure 1

Skills Assessed	
	Background knowledge?
	Predicting?
	Sight Words?
	Concepts about print?
	Word analysis skills (e.g. chunking, beginning/ending sounds, context clues)?
	Letter knowledge/alphabets?
	Fluency? __Accuracy __Automaticity __Prosody
	Writing?
	Listening comprehension/Listening capacity?
Comprehension Skills & Strategies	
	Do the comprehension questions assess __background knowledge? __explicit comprehension? __implicit comprehension?
	Are there enough comprehension and vocabulary questions per selection?
	Does the IRI assess comprehension strategies? __Monitoring? __Visualizing? __Inferencing? __Connecting? __Predicting? __Questioning? __Synthesizing? __Summarizing
Administration	
	Does the author provide explanations for each subtest?
	Are tips for preparation or administration given?
	Does the author provide multiple uses for subtests?
	Are the data sheets provided adequate?
	Is there a way to determine at what level to start passage administration (e.g. word lists?) __ sight words embedded in sentences or phrases? __ sight words embedded in text? __ sight words out of context?
	Can a teacher easily administer this with his/her own choice of reading selections?
	Do you agree with the miscue analysis procedures?

Figure 1

Interpretation	
	Are instructions provided for interpreting results?
	Are the results of this IRI going to prove to be an effective use of my time?
	Does the IRI provide suggestions for instruction?
	Does the IRI provide specific guidelines for determining different levels?
	Provides template to report findings (e.g. administration, colleagues, and/or parents)?
	Does the IRI provide suggestions for specialist referral options?
Ancillary Supports	
	Are all forms included with original purchase? <input type="checkbox"/> Is a disk included? <input type="checkbox"/> Are there multiple forms of each test per level
	Are there technology supports? <input type="checkbox"/> on-line forms? <input type="checkbox"/> website? <input type="checkbox"/> blog? <input type="checkbox"/> on-line training support?
	Does the IRI have a glossary of assessment terms?
Reflection	
	Overall, is the IRI easy to use, understand and suit my purposes for assessment?
Additional Notes	

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