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AUTHOR   Marr, Mary Beth
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ABSTRACT
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were given the questions orally without access to the passages. The
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test. An analysis of variance procedure revealed that the Classroom
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Analytical Reading Inventory and Ginn 720 basal inventory
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revealed that three question types in particular tended to be passage
independent in nature. These question categories were: (1) general
information; (2) vocabulary meaning; and (3) affective. The
investigation also examined the degree to which the respective
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Mary Beth Marr
Assistant Professor
Reading Department LCB-30
SUNYA
1400 Washington Ave.
Albany, N.Y. 12222

A PASSAGE INDEPENDENCY ANALYSIS OF THREE INFORMAL READING INVENTORIES.

Mary Beth Marr
State University of New York at Albany

Kathleen R. Lyon
State University of New York at Albany

Reading specialists and classroom teachers commonly administer informal reading inventories (IRIs) to assess a student's strengths and weaknesses in reading. These inventories are also used to identify a general level of reading proficiency for placement in appropriate instructional materials. If teachers are to have confidence in the quality of these assessments and subsequent instructional decisions, they need to be certain that the measures they are using are valid.

Informal reading inventories provide a number of estimates including sight word vocabulary, oral reading accuracy, fluency, rate and comprehension. The latter was of particular interest in this investigation. Typically reading comprehension refers to an individual's ability to understand text. In recent years considerable attention has been given to passage independency, the extent to which questions can be answered correctly without reading the passages on which they are based (Johns, 1978; Pyrczak, 1972,1974). If test questions can be answered without reading the corresponding passages, it is argued that the test does not really measure reading comprehension, but rather prior knowledge. Thus, an adequate comprehension score may not reflect the extent to which a student has understood the passage, but merely his/her ability to remember information about the topic.

Researchers have found that several commonly used comprehension tests are in fact passage independent. Preston (1964), Tuinman (1973-1974), and Scherick and Hanna (1977) examined standardized reading achievement tests such as the Nelson Denny Reading Skills Test and the Cooperative English Test and found that students were able to answer comprehension test questions above the chance level without reading the corresponding paragraphs. Allington, Chodos, Domaracki and Truex (1977) found similar results when examining four diagnostic reading tests: the Spache Diagnostic Reading Scales, the Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulty and the Gilmore and Gray Oral Reading Tests. Reading comprehension exercises including the Readers Digest Skill Builder series and the McCall-Crabbs Standard Lessons in Reading have also been found to be passage independent (Pyrczak & Axelrod, 1976). In light of these findings it has become increasingly apparent that questions can in fact be passage independent thus reducing their validity as a measure of comprehension. The intent of the present study was to evaluate the passage independency of questions taken from three commonly used informal reading inventories: the Classroom Reading Inventory (CRI) Form B, Fourth edition by Silvaroli (1978), the Analytical Reading Inventory (ARI) Form C, by Woods and Moe (1977) and the Ginn 720 basal inventory (Ginn and Company, 1976). To date this type of IRI evaluation has not been undertaken. A second focus of the study was to identify passage independent question types; therefore, an analysis of student responses to specific questions was conducted.

Method

Subjects

Thirty-six fourth grade students from a rural school in upstate New York participated in the study. They were stratified randomly into one of three IRI test groups wherein there was an equal number of good and poor readers. Reading ability was determined by performances above or below grade level on both vocabulary and comprehension subtests of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

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Procedure

All children were tested individually using a randomly selected form
(A, B or C) of each inventory. Test questions were read orally to the children
according to the inventory test procedures. However, children did not have
access to the passages from which the questions were derived. The order for
presenting questions within each level (primer through sixth grade) was maintained
as in the original inventories; but the levels were presented in one of two
randomized orders to avoid making the testing task one of increasing difficulty
for the students. Children's responses to the questions were tape recorded and
later transcribed for evaluation.

Results and Discussion

Due to the unequal number of questions contained in the three inventories,
the percentage of items answered correctly was determined for each test. An
analysis of variance procedure was conducted to determine if these percentages
were in fact significantly different from one another. The results indicated
that performances across the three tests were different, $F(2,30) = 15.668$,
$p \leq .001$. The CRI was found to be the most passage independent ($\bar{x} = 26.273$)
followed by the ARI ($\bar{x} = 17.455$) and Ginn inventories ($\bar{x} = 11.455$) respectively.
Newman-Keuls post hoc contrasts revealed that each of these mean percentage scores
were significantly different from one another. These results point out that
although all three tests were found to be passage independent to some degree, the
CRI contained the greatest number of passage independent questions (26%) and the
Ginn inventory the fewest (11%). Thus, the extent to which comprehension scores
could be inflated on these tests varied significantly.

An item analysis revealed two interesting types of information: 1) the
number of children able to test out of a particular reading level by answering
passage independent questions correctly and 2) the types of questions which were
passage independent in nature.

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On the comprehension subtest of the CRI, an instructional reading level cutoff score is 60% correct. An item analysis revealed that at level #1 of the test, 50% of the children passed the instructional reading level criterion without ever reading the passages. At levels #2 and #4, 25% of the students passed the criterion score. Based upon these percentages one could predict that if one hundred children were tested, fifty would test out of level #1 and twenty-five out of levels #2 and #4 without reading the passages. These findings lend considerable question as to the validity of this comprehension measure.

The number of children passing the criterion score for the ARI and Ginn inventories was considerably less. On the ARI approximately 33% of the students scored above criterion at level #2 without reading the paragraphs. However, they did not test out of the other grade levels on this inventory. On the Ginn inventory, two children passed the criterion score at level #5, while at levels #6 and #9 only one child was able to meet the criterion without reading the corresponding paragraphs.

Of the three tests examined the CRI appears to be the least valid measure of text comprehension. It not only contains the greatest number of passage independent questions which results in students passing comprehension criterion levels without ever reading the passages. It also provides the teacher with an inflated estimate of the student's comprehension ability and thus increases the probability that the student will be placed in instructional materials at an inappropriate level of difficutly.

Examination of the types of questions which were passage independent reveals some definite patterns. The questions listed in Table 1 tend to fall into three

/ Insert Table 1 About here /

general categories: 1) general information 2) vocabulary meaning 3) affective. The general information questions appear to tap information about familiar topics or prior experiences as evidenced by the questions: Where do ants live? What are

some ways of travel found today? and Why did people run from the bulls? The

vocabulary ques..ions contain words or phrases already a part of the student's

oral vocabulary (e.g. busy, chase, fight back the tears). Hence a student does

not have to read the passages to derive the word meanings. Questions in the

affective category may elicit a word association such as that between no and sad

or feel and good which could account for the number of correct responses. Samuels

(1968) notes that strength of word association is often a salient feature in

children's guessing behavior. Examples of questions in this category include:

How did the children feel? and How do you think Mike felt when mother said no?

These data suggest that the type of question asked can signal the extent to which

it might be passage independent.

Conclusion

An evaluation of these three informal reading inventories has pointed out

significant differences between and among the tests with regard to passage

independence, characteristics of passage independent questions and the potential

to inflate composite comprehension scores. While a passage independency analysis

appears necessary in evaluating the validity of reading comprehension tests, it

is not sufficient. As Hanna and Oaster (1978-1979) point out, passage independence

is not the complement of passage dependence. That is, an item which cannot be

answered correctly when the passage is not read may not be able to be correctly

answered after reading the passage. Hence, in the construction of future comprehen-

sion tests or the revision of existing measures, authors will want to thoroughly

evaluate test questions to identify both passage dependent and independent

characteristics. Certainly the best way to identify these characteristics is to

pilot the passages and questions on a prototypical population of students for which

the test is designed. The present investigation completes the passage independency

facet of this evaluation process.

TABLE 1

PASSAGE INDEPENDENT TEST QUESTIONS

Test	Level	%Correct Response[a]	Question
CRI	P	75	How did the children feel?
"	1	100	Where do ants live?
"	1	70	What does the word "busy" mean in the story?
"	2	79	Why did the people run the bulls?
"	2	75	What does the word "chase" mean?
"	4	75	What made riding in a conestoga wagon unpleasant
"	4	91	What are some ways of travel found today?
ARI	2	79	What is meant by the phrase "fight back the tears?"
Ginn 720	5	92	How do you think Mike felt when mother said no?
"	6	92	Do the animals like living in the tree?
"	6	83	What do you think the blackbird will do with the hat?
"	11	75	What kind of person do you think Mr. Green is?

[a]n = 12

Note. Only questions which 70% or more of the students answered correctly
were reported.

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