

Emmett A. Betts on Informal Reading Inventories

Jerry L. Johns

Emmett Betts has been recognized by the International Reading Association for his work with informal reading inventories (IRIs). Prior to his death in 1987, I spent some time discussing IRIs with him, and he shared some major points that teachers and teacher trainers ought to keep in mind.

The idea of an IRI apparently came to Betts during the writing of his 1920s master's thesis on students' solving of long division problems. Students were at different levels in their math abilities, and it occurred to Betts that the teacher is like a coach. When a student is learning to high jump, for example, the coach must first determine how high the youngster can jump. Instruction is based on what the student can already do. Betts then applied what he knew about graded spelling lists to the development of graded reading passages, and by 1935 the IRI was being used in his reading clinic.

I asked Betts to estimate the percent of students who are asked to read books that are too difficult. After noting that he had visited hundreds of schools, Betts said that about 40% of students are placed in books that are too difficult. He thought wider use of IRIs would help teachers choose more appropriate materials.

As to the validity of the criteria for reading levels, numerous investigators have debated the "best" criteria. Betts directed Killgallon's 1942 dissertation, generally regarded as the empirical basis for the oft-quoted numerical criteria for word recognition and comprehension. Betts, however, said that missing 1 word in 20 (the instructional level) was already established by his own studies and the work of Thorndike. "Killgallon went with the criteria already established."

Betts noted that the criteria "have nothing to do with giving an IRI. They're the outcome. It's those behavioral characteristics, those symptoms," like finger pointing and tension, word-by-word reading, and ignoring punctuation, that are the clues. The percentages, he noted, follow from the behaviors.

Betts's emphasis on behavioral characteristics made me wonder why he established numerical criteria. "I'm sorry I did!" he said.

While comprehension is the payoff in reading, percentages are not the key. What is meant, for example, by 90% comprehension? What kind of comprehension (literal, critical, or creative) is being considered? Betts suggested that it is wiser to look at the verbal and nonverbal clues in performance.

The importance of IRIs, according to Betts, is that they're a means to train teachers to be perceptive about student behavior. He stressed the need for trainers to demonstrate, not lecture on, the IRI. Since IRIs are "no more valid than the person who gives them," teachers need to learn the basic strategy. "You can't have feedback from the student unless you've got some feed," he said. The IRI provides that, thanks to Betts.

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Author(s): Jerry L. Johns

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