



BRIEF

When Less Is More: A Comparative Analysis for Placing Students in Adult Literacy Classes

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KEY FINDINGS:

- Lengthy testing procedures appear not to be necessary for placement of students in adult literacy classes.
- Measured by the degree of mismatch, the TABE Locator, which requires 37 minutes to administer, predicted actual placements as well as or better than the combined TABE Reading and Mathematics tests, which with the Locator take six times as long to administer.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Programs with no more than four distinguishable levels of instruction should consider using the TABE Locator, which is more effective for placement than the full TABE tests or the TABE Comprehension and Vocabulary tests combined.
- Surveys of self-placement procedures, wherein students look at the program materials and decide on their own where they might best begin, offer some support for this placement method. A small amount of instruction might allow most students to make reasonably reliable judgments of their abilities and at the same time demonstrate to them that they will be treated like partners in a learning process rather than like school children.
- Another alternative to lengthy placement tests is simply moving students to their more appropriate instructional levels after a few class periods of observation.

INTRODUCTION

Ideally, adult literacy students should be placed at the instructional level corresponding to their abilities. But because abilities are seldom known from prior instructional experience, a battery of tests is usually administered. The most widely used such test is the TABE (Tests of Adult Basic Education), a norm-referenced, multiple-choice exam. This procedure has several problems, however.

First, many potential enrollees are intimidated or discouraged by lengthy tests. Second, the reliability of the tests depends on when in the instructional period the individuals take the tests. Finally, given that adult basic education programs are commonly divided into at most four broad levels, it is doubtful whether all the time and effort expended in formal testing is justified.

This report presents the results of a study that examined whether the TABE Locator, which is shorter to administer, could be as accurate an

indicator of placement as any of the full-length TABE or TALS (Tests of Applied Literacy Skills) tests.

METHODOLOGY

TABE tests, TALS tests (norm-referenced tests that use functional literacy tasks to measure literacy ability for daily life), oral reading tasks (reading passages, recalling facts, making inferences, and decoding), and a background questionnaire were administered to 168 students, all of whom attended ABE or GED classes in White Plains, New York, in 1991-1992.

The instructional placements predicted by the tests for each student were then compared with their actual placements. Two statistical tests for mismatch were used. First, the absolute differences between predicted placements and actual placements were summed for each test and the means computed. Second, Cohen's Kappa coefficient for nominal scales was used.

Two regression analyses were conducted. Each used actual placement as the dependent variable and the various test results as the predictors. The first regression analysis consisted of two phases. First, all test results were used as predictors. Those that turned out to be statistically insignificant were dropped, and a reestimation was conducted. The second regression analysis consisted of running separate linear regression models for each test in order to provide independent measures of each test's predictive validity.

IMPLICATIONS

To economize on testing costs and time and also to retain students, hard-pressed program providers should consider using less lengthy tests, or even self-evaluation by students. One such recourse is the TABE Locator, which is shorter and yields placement results that are as reliable as the lengthier tests. Adult literacy providers should also bear in mind, however, that there could be some other test that would outperform even the Locator.

FURTHER READING

- Development Associates, Inc. (1992). *Executive summary of the first interim report from the national evaluation of adult education programs*. Arlington, VA: Author.
- Ehringhaus, C. (1991). Teachers' perceptions of testing in adult basic education. *Adult Basic Education, 1*(3), 138-154.
- Venezky, R., Bristow, P., & Sabatini, J. (in press). *Measuring gain in adult literacy programs: Enduring issues and a few answers*. Technical Report, National Center on Adult Literacy, University of Pennsylvania.

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