

## CHAPTER 4



# *Step 2: Assessing Instructional Placement*



After the teacher interview, direct observation, student interview, and examination of permanent products have been completed, the evaluator is now ready to conduct the evaluation of student academic performance. This is done by administering a series of probes taken directly from the curriculum materials in which the student is being instructed. Materials for this part of the evaluation can be selected on the basis of the information gathered during the teacher interview and the review of permanent products. For example, examination of the last student mastery test in math (chapter test, unit test, end-of-book test) may provide indications of which types of computational probes need to be given. Likewise, teacher-reported information, such as the student's current placement in the basal reading series, helps to establish which reading probes to give. Data obtained about the expected and actual levels of performance will further guide the construction of test probes.

Assessment in some academic areas will be very similar across children (although books from which specific probes are taken will vary according to the curriculum being instructed); however, different types of probes may be used in different cases. For example, in reading, some cases may only involve administration of passages from the texts; other cases may require basal word lists and/or probes of phonics in addition to passages.

It is important to recognize that although the specific data collected on academic performance may vary according to the needs of an individual case, the procedures employed for the data-collection process should be the same. Described in the next section of this chapter are step-by-step

instructions for assessing individual academic skills using curriculum-based assessment (CBA).

## READING

Conducting an evaluation of reading has two major objectives:

1. To determine if the student is appropriately placed in the curriculum materials. Many times, students fail to master material but are passed on through the reading series without any remedial efforts.
2. To establish baseline reading levels that can serve as comparison points for monitoring progress through the reading curriculum.

The assessment of reading skills involves the administration of short oral reading probes taken from the basal reading series in which the student is being instructed. A reading CBA is very similar to an Individual Reading Inventory (IRI). The one critical difference is that an IRI is not typically taken from a specific curriculum, but is usually cross-curricular. Additionally, IRI's are not usually designed to be sensitive to continual measurement across time.

### Using a Basal versus Literature-Based Series

One of the issues that frequently arises in conducting an evaluation of placement in the reading curriculum is whether a literature-based or basal reading series needs to be used. Basal reading series are designed with some control for grade-based readability. Thus, the approximate grade level for each book of a basal series is indicated by the publisher. Although within each book the readability of material will vary greatly, the overall grade levels noted by the publisher of the reading series are used to determine the reading level of that particular book of the series. Literature-based reading series are anthologies of literature and are not designed to have careful control of graded reading levels. In other words, a book used in the third grade of a series may vary widely in its readability. No attempt is made to control vocabulary or skill development, as is done in basal reading series. School districts have increasingly moved toward the use of literature-based reading series combined with whole-language instruction in reading.

In conducting an evaluation of instructional placement in reading, it is important to use a set of reading passages that are controlled for readability level regardless of which reading series is used for instruction. In

mended that a comparable basal reading series or a set of passages controlled for readability by grade level be used. It is possible to use the literature-based series, but one needs to carefully check the readability level of the passage before using it in the assessment. Passages used should be  $\pm 1$  grade level from the level that the evaluator is assessing. In other words, if the evaluator is assessing grade 2, the passage should range in readability from grades 1–3.

Determining the readability of passages can be done with the use of current computer technology. Most word processing programs (e.g., WordPerfect™, Microsoft Word™) offer a built-in readability formula that can be accessed easily. Common formulas used to calculate readability include the Fry (1968), Gunning (1952), and Flesch (1957) indices. These values offer some general indication of the difficulty level of the reading passages.

In general, the purpose of this step in the assessment process is to determine a student's instructional reading level within curriculum materials. When working in a literature-based reading series, the assessment process may require the use of material that is outside the curriculum of instruction, such as a comparable basal reading series. Given that the objective is to find out where in a graded set of materials a student's reading skills fall, this approach is perfectly acceptable. Evaluators should not be concerned about the apparent lack of a link to the curriculum of instruction, given that the reading material used for assessment is likely to be comparable to the instructional material.

### **Constructing Oral Reading Probes**

1. For each book in a reading series, the evaluator should select three 150–200 word passages (for first through third grades, 50- to 100-word passages)—one from the beginning, one from the middle, and one from the end. This will provide a total of three passages for each book in the basal reading series. To facilitate the scoring process, the evaluator should retype the passage on a separate sheet with corresponding running word counts placed in the right-hand margin.

For preprimers and primers, shorter passages may be used. In addition, the differentiations between preprimers may not be salient enough to warrant separate probes for each individual book. In these cases, it is recommended that only the last of the preprimer books be used for purposes of assessment.

Another issue that sometimes emerges is that a basal reading series

may have more than one level assigned to a single book. Although it is only necessary to assess by book, and not level, some examiners may wish to create a series of probes for each level within the book. This is a perfectly acceptable practice, but may lengthen the assessment period considerably.

Passages selected should not have a lot of dialogue, should be text (not poetry or plays), and should not have many unusual or foreign words. It is not necessary to select passages only from the beginning of stories within the text.

2. The evaluator should make two copies of each passage selected. One passage will be used for the child to read and the other copy will be used to score the child's oral reading. The evaluator may consider covering his or her copy with a transparency or laminating the probe so that the copy can be reused.

3. For each probe, the evaluator should develop a set of five to eight comprehension questions. These questions should include at least one "who," "what," "where," "why," and inference-type question. Although comprehension questions will be developed for each probe, only one passage from each level of the series will be used in the assessment. Idol et al. (1986) and Howell et al. (1993) offer excellent suggestions for developing comprehension questions.

The issue of whether to administer comprehension questions in a CBA is rather controversial. Results of a number of validation studies have consistently suggested that evaluating comprehension is usually redundant to assessing oral reading rate (e.g., Deno, Mirkin, & Chiang, 1982). Correlations between measures of comprehension and oral reading rate are consistently higher than .70. Many practitioners, however, are very uncomfortable with not assessing comprehension skills. Anyone working with students referred for academic problems has come across occasional students known as "word callers." These pupils have superb decoding skills and may read very fluently, yet have significant deficiencies in reading comprehension. Failure to assess comprehension skills for such a student could lead one to erroneous conclusions about the student's reading level. Many practitioners accurately point out that the process of reading itself is a matter of comprehension and not fluent oral reading. Essentially, these individuals are questioning the content validity of this measurement procedure.

Given the amount of time the assessment of comprehension adds to the evaluation process, this is not a small matter to resolve. There is a significant portion of the literature that would permit one to ignore the assessment of comprehension altogether. However, all of this literature is correlational in nature and is difficult to apply to individual cases. Clearly, one will miss the mark for some students if comprehension is not assessed.

oral reading skills have comprehension levels that are equal to or lower than their reading fluency levels. Thus, for those students who are referred for reading problems and found to have oral reading rates substantially below expectations, an assessment of comprehension is unnecessary and not recommended.

Despite the evidence that oral reading rate will typically reflect the top levels of reading comprehension, making an assessment of comprehension unnecessary, it is recommended that a screen for comprehension problems be part of the CBA. This is done by randomly selecting one of the three passages at each level of the series and administering a comprehension check only for that passage. In this way, the evaluator can feel more comfortable with the relationship between oral reading rate and comprehension. The comprehension screen will also provide the evaluator with additional information on the depth of a student's reading difficulties.

The comprehension screen is not designed to take the place of a needed full evaluation of a student's reading comprehension skills. The key indicator for when comprehension should be assessed is most likely found in comparing teacher interview data and the reason for referral against the observed oral reading rate. Should a student be referred for a reading problem and be found to have oral reading rates consistent with grade-level expectations, a full assessment of comprehension skills is necessary to confirm the suspected reading problem. Assuming that the reason for referral is valid, an assessment of comprehension skills should reveal a significant reading deficiency. If this is not found, then one needs to question the validity of the reason for referral.

## **Administration and Scoring of Oral Reading Probes**

1. The evaluator should begin with the book in which the child is currently placed. (Which book this is should have been indicated during the teacher interview.)

2. For each book of the basal reading series, the evaluator administers first the probe from the beginning, then the one from the middle, and finally the one from the end.

Before beginning the assessment, the evaluator should tell the child that he or she is going to be asked to read and should do his or her best. If the evaluator is going to ask comprehension questions for that particular passage, the child should be told before beginning that he or she will be

asked a few questions after the passage is read. The evaluator should then give a copy of the first probe to the child, make sure the stopwatch is ready, instruct the child to read aloud, and start the watch.

As the child reads, the evaluator should mark the following errors on the sheet:

a. An error of omission should be marked if the student leaves out an entire word. For example, if the line is "The cat drinks milk," and the student reads, "The drinks milk," the evaluator should mark an error. If the student omits the entire line, the evaluator should redirect the student to the line as soon as possible and mark one error. If the evaluator cannot redirect the student, the omission should be counted as one error and not as an error for each word missed.

b. An error of substitution should be marked if the student says the wrong word. If the student mispronounces a proper noun, the evaluator should count it as an error the first time, but should accept as correct all subsequent presentations of the same noun. For example, if the line is "John ran home," and if the student says "Jan" instead of "John" four times, it is counted as only one error.

If the student deletes suffixes such as "-ed" or "-s" in speech patterns, the deletion should not be counted as an error. The evaluator may, however, choose to make a note of it for subsequent oral language instruction. If a student mispronounces a word, the evaluator should give the child the correct word, and instruct the child to go to the next word if he or she hesitates.

c. An error of addition should be marked if the student adds a word or words not in the passage.

d. Repetition of words should not be marked as errors.

e. Self-correction should not be marked as an error.

f. After a pause of 5 seconds, the evaluator should supply the word and count the pause as an error.

*Note:* If comprehension questions are administered, the evaluator should proceed to paragraph 3a.

3. At the end of a minute, the evaluator should stop the child. If the child is in the middle of a sentence, he or she should be allowed to finish, but in either case, the evaluator should mark where the child is at the end of a minute on the probe.

4. The evaluator should count the number of words that the child gets correct in a minute, as well as the number of errors. If the child reads for a minute, then the number of words (correct or incorrect) is the rate

3a. The evaluator should allow the child to finish reading the *entire probe*, marking where the child is at the end of each minute. The evaluator should allow the child to look at the probe while the comprehension questions are asked. It is important to make a note of whether the child rereads or scans the probe when answering the questions. This information may be useful in determining if the child has effective strategies for retrieving information recently read. The percentage of questions answered correctly is the comprehension score for that probe.

4a. The evaluator should count the total number of words read correctly in the passage, as well as the number of errors. These numbers are divided by the total time the child takes to read the entire passage, using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Number of words (correct or errors)}}{\text{Number of seconds read}} \times 60 = \text{Words per minute}$$

5. Following the scoring procedures outlined, the evaluator should score each probe. The *median* correct, *median* errors, and comprehension score are the child's scores on that book. The median score is the *middle* of the three scores on the probes.

The reason the median score is used, rather than the mean, is to control for any potential effects of difficulty of passages within a book. Although there should not be significant changes across the three probes from a single book, one may occasionally have selected a passage that is either too easy or too hard in comparison to the overall level of the particular book. Using the median score controls for any variance that may be due to such an extreme score.

6. Using the criteria for placement, the evaluator should move either up or down the series and give the next set of three probes. A student may be instructional in words correct but frustrational in comprehension and/or errors. The evaluator needs to look at all three measures and decide if the student's scores are within the instructional level. For example, if a student's median words correct and errors are well within the instructional level, but comprehension is below instructional level, the evaluator may decide that the student's performance is instructional but that a more in-depth evaluation of comprehension skills is needed. Likewise, if student's median words correct are in the instructional range and the error rate substantially exceeds instructional level, the evaluator may view the student's performance as frustrational, especially if the comprehension

level is less than expected. When the evaluator finds that the child is within the criteria for instructional level, the evaluator moves up the series; if not, the evaluator moves down.

Criteria for frustration, instructional, and mastery levels are provided from the literature and displayed in Table 4.1.

There are several other ways in which one can determine criteria for instructional level. One would be to collect local norms within a particular district or school. The process for collecting these norms is complex and interested readers should consult an excellent description of the procedure by Shinn (1988, 1989). Examples of norms obtained from various settings are provided in Chapter 7 (see Tables 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3). The norms on these tables are given for illustrative purposes only and should not be equally applied to all other settings.

An important distinction between the collection of local norms and those used by Fuchs and Deno (1982) is that the norming of CBA in a district may not be able to suggest the best place in which a child should be instructed. The recommended reading levels of Fuchs and Deno for mastery, instructional, and frustrational levels are based on a "best guess" approach for instruction. Where a student is expected to begin instruction should be at a point at which material has not yet been completely mastered (mastery level), but also is not too difficult (frustration). Thus, although a student may be found to be in the 16th percentile in reading according to local norms, the decision as to where instruction should begin is made by seeing where the student's oral reading rates fall in comparison to students in other grades. For example, if a fourth-grade student's reading places him at the 16th percentile compared to other fourth-graders, but at the 38th percentile compared to third-graders, and at the 75th percentile compared to second graders, it seems that placement at the third-grade level would be meaningful. If local norms are not available, however, decisions based on the Fuchs and Deno criteria for instructional level are acceptable.

TABLE 4.1. Revised Placement Criteria for Direct Reading Assessment

Grade level of materials	Level	Words correct per minute	Errors per minute
1-2	Frustration	< 40	> 4
	Instructional	40-60	4 or less
	Mastery	> 60	4 or less
3-6	Frustration	< 70	> 6
	Instructional	70-100	6 or less
	Mastery	> 100	6 or less

Note. From "Developing Goals and Objectives for Educational Programs [Teaching Guide]" by L. S. Fuchs, and S. L. Deno, 1982, Minneapolis: U.S. Department of Education Grant.



at the instructional level. In second grade materials, 70 words correct per minute is instructional. Thus, for example, a third-grade student who is found to read at 60 words correct per minute in third-grade materials is at a frustrational level. The same student when tested in second-grade material may be found to read at 70 words correct per minute, which is mastery. The problem is that the student appears not to have an instructional level. In this case, one would interpret these findings in light of the change in difficulty of material that occurs between second and third grade, along with the ensuing increase in expected performance. This student would be viewed as having an instructional level somewhere between grade 2 and 3 material.

7. The evaluator should continue to give probes until the median scores for at least two sets of scores are instructional, *and* the one above them is frustrational.

The optimal pattern would be something like this:

- ◆ Level 7—Frustration
- ◆ Level 6—Instructional
- ◆ Level 5—Instructional
- ◆ Level 4—Mastery

Often, this exact pattern will not be obtained. Some children never reach a mastery level and will have a long series of instructional levels. After three consecutive instructional levels, it is unnecessary to continue further. *The child's placement is at the highest instructional level.* The evaluator also may have to use his or her judgment about instructional, frustration, and mastery levels. The criteria provided are not specific cutoffs, but should be viewed as gradual changes. For example, a child scoring at 58 words correct per minute (where 50 is mastery) on one level and 61 on the next is probably close to mastery on both levels.

### Interpreting Reading Probe Data

The results of the reading assessment should provide an indication of the level in the reading series where instruction would be most profitable. Defined as the "instructional level," this is the place in the curriculum series where a student is likely to be challenged but make progress if he or she is taught at that level. In contrast, placement in curriculum materials that are at a higher level would be frustrational and too difficult for students to