

TEACHING LANGUAGE SKILLS



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Introduction

Many students (and teachers) consider language skills to be “very boring.” Nevertheless, living in a world that contains numerous types of communication – letters, job reports, memos, notes, resumes, application forms, emails, etc. – good language skills are not only important, but very necessary. Students entering an ABE class will most likely be presented with language study plans that they will be required to complete. In order to motivate the students, these plans should be meaningful. To a student, “meaningful” means what is important and necessary to him or her. So, an effort should be made to teach those language skills that meet the needs of the students.

How can an ABE teacher determine the language skills that an individual student needs? Pre-testing with a standardized test is the tool most ABE teachers use to assess students’ academic abilities and weaknesses. The most frequently used assessment instrument for adult students is the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). It provides an individualized diagnostic profile for each student. This profile reveals mastery or non-mastery of specific skill areas, and this information can be used to prepare appropriate and meaningful study plans. In order to use this information wisely, the teacher should be familiar with the format of the TABE Language subtest.

Understanding the TABE Language Format

The TABE objectives contain content that is considered relevant for students’ educational growth. In the Language Subtest, the examinee is required to analyze different types of writing and decide what is wrong in the written material. The writings contain adult interests, and they use forms like business letters and job reports. The content in the Language Subtest is divided into six parts: **usage, sentence formation, paragraph development, capitalization, punctuation, and writing conventions.**

These skill areas can also be included in other standardized tests that measure ability in language. However, since the TABE is used in most ABE classrooms, the teacher should be familiar with its particular language format.

After a student completes the TABE, the teacher can use the individual diagnostic profile to determine the academic remediation needed. For the language section, the profile might look like the following:

SUBTESTS	LEVEL/FORM	NO / CORRECT	GRADE LEVEL
Language	D7	32	5.5

SUBTEST	SCORE	MASTERY LEVEL	PERCENT
Usage	12/16	+	75 %
Sentence Formation	8/10	+	80 %
Paragraph Develop	7/10	P	70 %
Capitalization	1/5	—	20 %
Punctuation	2/6	—	33 %
Writing Convention	2/8	—	25 %

INTERPRETATION:

There were 55 items on the Language Subtest.

- In Usage, student answered 12 out of 16 correctly, mastery level of 75%. Can do some review.
- In Sentence Formation, student answered 8 out of 10 correctly, mastery level of 80%. No remediation needed.
- In Paragraph Development, student answered 7 out of 10 correctly, mastery level of 70%. Partial mastery. Needs review.
- In Capitalization, student answered 1 out of 5 correctly, mastery level of 20%. Skill area not mastered. Needs extensive remediation.
- In Punctuation, student answered 2 out of 6 correctly, mastery level of 33%. Skill area not mastered. Needs extensive remediation.
- In Writing Convention, student answered 2 out of 8 correctly, mastery level of 25%. Skill area not mastered. Needs extensive remediation.

(NOTE: Print materials should be at the student's 5th grade reading level.)

The above profile reveals the student's weak areas, but it does not provide enough information for the teacher to prepare a meaningful study plan. In order to select appropriate instructional materials for remediation, the teacher must be able to identify the "specific weak skills." This can be done with a "breakdown" of the six skill areas. The following is a listing of the specific skills, appropriate for ABE students, in the Language Subtest:

CATEGORY	SKILLS	CATEGORY	SKILLS
Usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nouns • Pronoun • Antecedent Agreement • Verbs • Verb Tense • Subject / Verb Agreement • Easily Confused Verbs • Choose Between Adjective / Adverb • Use of Negatives 	Writing Conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quotation Marks • City / State • Letter Part <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date • Address • Salutation • Closing • Possessives
Punctuation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End Marks • Comma • Compound Sentence • Appositive • Introductory Element • Parenthetical Expression • Semicolon 	Paragraph Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic Sentence • Supporting Sentences • Sequence • Unrelated Sentences • Corrective/ Transition
Sentence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence Recognition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete/Fragment • Run-On • Sentence Combining <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating • Subordinating 	Capitalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper Nouns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Names • Initials • Titles • Geographic Names • Title of Work

In the case of the student whose individualized diagnostic profile was used as an example, the student needs a review in the specific skills listed under Usage and Paragraph Development and extensive remediation in the specific skills listed under Capitalization, Punctuation, and Writing Conventions.

When using the TABE, it is important to correlate the remedial language assignments with the skill content measured by the test. For example, the Usage part contains the language skill “Use of Negatives.” Every level of the TABE contains items that question the use of negatives. A simple lesson on negatives will enable the students to respond correctly to those items.

Another point to consider when using the TABE as an assessment instrument is the fact that the Language Subtest uses an *integrated* approach or technique. That means the language skills are mixed together in the content. In the previous TABE edition, used years ago, the skills were more distinct. The directions would instruct the student to look for capitalization errors, punctuation errors, errors with complete sentences, quotation marks, etc. In TABE 7 & 8, the edition in present use, the skills are mixed, and this integration makes the test more difficult. Sometimes, students are not sure what type of errors they should be checking. This becomes apparent when we see a student’s test results show a very high score in reading and an extremely low score in language. Most likely, the student was not familiar with the language format and was unable to grasp its structure within the time restraints of the test. (NOTE: This is not true with ESOL students as they may have learned to read the English language without having any instruction in the mechanics of the language.)

Since the Language Subtest is integrated, the ABE teacher should make sure the students have practice with the skills in the same format as they will encounter on the test. In a later section, some tips for providing this practice will be presented.

Strategies for Teaching Language Skills

The specific language skills contained in the TABE test are also included in the Florida Adult Basic Education Curriculum Frameworks. Study plans, using checklists, can be found in the ABE Florida – 2001 Language Assessment Guide. There is a checklist for each ABE level: Basic Literacy (0.0 – 1.9), Beginning Literacy (2.0 – 3.9), Intermediate Literacy (4.0 – 5.9), and Functional Literacy (6.0-8.9). Each checklist contains the standards and benchmarks for that particular level. The benchmarks can be used to match the student’s weak areas that were revealed on the TABE. The Language Assessment Guide also contains short tests to check the student’s mastery of the benchmark. This guide is a “ready made resource,” and ABE teachers can use it for teaching language skills.

Another “ready made resource” is the ABE Florida – 2001 Language Learning Activities Resource Guide.” It contains a variety of learning activities that the ABE teacher can use in the classroom. Each activity covers a specific benchmark that is listed in the Florida Adult Basic Education Curriculum Frameworks, and the lessons can be taught on an individualized basis or as a group activity.

If the ABE teacher is using the TABE’s pre-and posttests to earn literacy completion points, then a form can be developed to include the specific skills measured in the Language Subtest. This form can be a study plan, prescription, or even a checklist. The following is an example that can be used with group instruction to check those students who have covered the particular skills.

CAPITALIZATION	STUDENT #1	STUDENT #2	STUDENT #3	STUDENT #4
Proper Names				
Initials				
Titles				
Geographic Names				
Days / Months				
Special Places				
Letter Parts				
Titles of Work				

For individualized instruction, a study plan can be made for each student. Using the student's individualized diagnostic profile, the weak skill areas can be listed along with the instructional materials that provide lessons and practice in those areas. A language study plan could be similar to the following one, showing the "punctuation" section.

PUNCTUATION	MATERIAL	DATE	% SCORE
End Marks	SV TABE Fundamentals, pp. 58-59		
Commas	PACE Language-Modules 610 & 620		
Commas & Semicolons	SV TABE Fundamentals, pp. 60-61		
Colons	PACE Language-Module 660		
Review	SV Language Skill Book, pp. 17-27 & 31-32		
Practice Tests	Building Skills with TABE, D, pp. 58-63		

NOTE: The steps in preparing a complete study plan, like the one just shown, can be found in the written work titled "Applying TABE Results in the ABE Classroom."

Using Language Assessment Tools in the Classroom

When teaching language skills, an assessment tool should be used to determine whether or not the students have mastered the skills. This is usually accomplished with some sort of test. Whether using a teacher made test or a standardized test, the teacher should pay attention to the format that is being used. Some formats are easy to understand and follow, like the one below.

- DIRECTION: Underline the correct pronoun form in each sentence.
 1. Jane and (I, me) work in the same office.
 2. The waiter gave the bill to (I, me).
 3. She is a person (who, which) can be trusted.

In this instance, the direction specifically states that the correct usage of pronouns is being tested. Also, the student has the choice of two pronouns for each item. Here is another format for testing pronoun usage.

- DIRECTION: Choose the word that best completes the sentence.
 1. Does _____ flashlight need a new battery?
 - A. we
 - B. us
 - C. our
 - D. ours

Even though pronoun usage is being tested, the direction does not mention pronouns. Also, the student has four choices for each item, making it a bit more difficult.

Now compare the two examples with the following format. This is the format frequently used on the TABE.

- DIRECTION: Choose the sentence that is written correctly and shows the correct capitalization and punctuation. Be sure the sentence you choose is complete.

1. A. Western movies always bore I.
- B. Betty and me both have blond hair.
- C. When the players finished the game, he had a party.
- D. Jack hit himself with a hammer.

The item is testing pronoun usage, but it does not mention pronouns in its direction. Also, the student's four choices are now sentences, not single words. Following the direction, the student will be checking the capitalization and punctuation, plus looking for complete sentences. It will take a while to realize that pronouns are the main targets in this item. There is a way to help students be successful with this type of format, and that is by providing practice with it. (Publishing companies have a great deal of instructional material that contains test-taking practice with the TABE format. These materials will be listed later in the "Language Resources" section.

Sentence Combining	Students should learn how to combine two or more sentences into a single sentence. In this case, the new sentence must include the important ideas stated in the other sentences, and it should be as simple and clear as possible.
Example	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Bill will be entering college in the fall.</u> • <u>Ann will be entering college in the fall.</u> • <i>Bill and Ann will be entering college in the fall</i>

Unrelated Sentence	Students should have practice selecting the unrelated sentence in a written passage. An effective passage is unified. All of the sentences must relate to and support the topic sentence. Any sentence that is irrelevant or unrelated to the main idea does not belong in the paragraph.
Example	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Measles is a highly contagious viral disease. (2) The early symptoms are fever, tiredness, sore muscles, headaches, and sensitivity to light. (3) <u>Fever is a symptom for several illnesses.</u> (4) A few days after the first symptoms, a rash appears on the skin.

<p>Easily Confused Words</p>	<p>There are some special words that are troublesome and cause confusion with their usage in sentences. Each one of these special words has a separate meaning. Learning the exact meaning of each word will enable students to use it properly in a sentence and to identify its incorrect usage in a test. Here are eight of the most common easily confused words and ones that should be taught in the classroom.</p>
<p>Example #1</p>	<p>Definitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lie –to recline, remain, stretch out, or occupy a certain place (no direct object). • Lay – to place or put down (action with direct object). <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He likes to lie on the sofa. • Lay the book on the table.
<p>Example #2</p>	<p>Definitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sit – to take a seat or rest upright (no direct object). • Set – to put or place an object (action with direct object). <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He likes to sit in the front row. • I set the table for dinner.
<p>Example #3</p>	<p>Definitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rise – to go up, get up, or move higher (no direct object). • Raise – to lift up an object or cause something to rise (action with direct object). <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sun rises. • Sue raised the flag.
<p>Example #4</p>	<p>Definitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach – to give instruction or show how to do something. • Learn – to receive instruction or find out something. <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can teach you to play the guitar. • He learned to read at school.
<p>Example #5</p>	<p>Definitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let - to permit or allow. • Leave – to go away or depart. <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will let you borrow the car. • He leaves work at 5 o'clock.
<p>Example #6</p>	<p>Definitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farther – refers to spatial distance. • Further – refers to time or degree <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The jogger ran farther today than yesterday. • Jane offered further advice to the class.

<p>Example #7</p>	<p>Definitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May – to ask or give permission. • Can – to be able, to show ability. <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May I borrow your pen? • I can run three miles a day.
<p>Example #8</p>	<p>Definitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good – an adjective telling “what kind.” • Well – an adverb telling “how” (also refers to one’s health).. <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That was a good dinner. • She did well on her test.
<p>Use of It’s and Its</p> <p>Example</p> <p>Topic Sentences</p>	<p>The use of “it” as a contraction and a possessive form is usually found in language tests. Students should learn the difference in these forms so they can use the correct spelling in their written work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its is used to show possession or ownership and has no apostrophe. • It’s is a contraction and means “it is”. <p>When selecting the topic sentence in a paragraph, students usually look to the first sentence. However, in many test items, the topic sentence is in the middle of the paragraph or at the end. Students should practice finding the topic sentences in all parts of a paragraph.</p>
<p>Example</p>	<p>Bees are attracted to flowers because they need the nectar to make honey. When they take the nectar, the bees help the flowers reproduce by carrying pollen from flower to flower. Thus, <u>bees and flowers need each other to survive</u>. It starts when the bee drinks the nectar and rubs against the flower parts that produce pollen. Some pollen sticks to the bee, and the bee carries this pollen to another flower where it can fertilize the plant. So the bee gets the nectar to make honey, and the flower has a way of making seeds for new plants.</p>
<p>Letter Parts</p>	<p>There are certain capitalization and punctuation rules that apply to the parts of a letter. Students should learn these rules because they will have to apply them in their writing, and they will encounter them in language tests. Instruction in these rules should cover the return address, date, inside address, greeting, and closing. An example exercise follows.</p>
<p>Direction</p>	<p>Proofread the following letter parts. Place a circle around each letter or mark that is incorrect in its use of capitalization and punctuation.</p>
<p>Example Letter</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">208 Sweeter drive Dover NJ 07421 july 14, 2003</p> <p>Dr. Ralph B Stevens Dover Memorial hospital 224 Crestwood road Dover, NJ 07422</p> <p>Dear Dr stevens,</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Sincerely Yours,</p>

Language Resources

There are a wide variety of instructional materials that provide lessons and practice with language skills. As previously stated, there are “ready made resources” that were developed by Florida Adult and Community Education. These resources can be found in the ABE Florida – 2001 Language Assessment Guide and the ABE Florida – 2001 Language Learning Activities Resource Guide.

Other resources include the many instructional materials developed by publishing companies. Some of the noted ones used by ABE teachers throughout the state include the materials published by:

- PACE, which has simple language lessons in the form of modules
- Steck-Vaughn’s Pre-GED Writing workbooks
- Contemporary’s Pre-GED Writing workbooks

There are several publishing companies that have developed instructional language materials that specifically correlate to the TABE. These are excellent resources because they include the same language content as is found on the TABE, and they also provide test-taking practice in the same format. This is important for ABE teachers who use the TABE pre-and posttests to earn literacy completion points. These instructional materials include the following that are appropriate for ABE students:

- McGraw-Hill/Contemporary’s Language Builders – Introductory (E Level), Intermediate I (M Level), and Intermediate II (D Level)
- Steck-Vaughn’s TABE Fundamentals in Language and Spelling – (Level E), (Level M), and (Level D)
- CTB/McGraw-Hill’s Building Skills with TABE (Reading, Language, and Spelling) – Levels E, M, and D
- Contemporary’s Skill Assessment Modules in Language – Levels E, M, and D, with two forms at each level

As the ABE teacher becomes familiar with the language resources available, the selection should be based on the needs of the students. The teacher is also encouraged to utilize a variety of teaching strategies in order to accommodate the learning styles of all the students in the class.