

Using the POWER Assessment for Pre-Literacy

Introduction

As federal and state funding for adult education programs nationwide continues to decline, particularly for programs for adults with disabilities, some instructors of Beginning Adult Basic Education (ABE) are experiencing an increase in the number of students who have mild intellectual disabilities and other low-level literacy skills. This often results in a quandary when instructors discover their new students lack verbal skills and are unable to read print on CASAS assessments at Skill Level A or the Beginning Literacy Reading assessments.

The focus of this digest is to inform instructors of Beginning ABE about the purpose of the CASAS POWER (Providing Options for the Workplace, Education and Rehabilitation) performance assessment. The *POWER Assessment* is composed of basic skills linked to *CASAS Competencies* and serves as an alternate assessment for students who have intellectual disabilities. Therefore, the assessment items are based on alternate achievement standards. The alternate achievement standards relate to pre-literacy or pre-reading skills. The pre-reading skills are posited as steps in development of literacy skills with placement on the CASAS scale score continuum preceding CASAS Skill Level A.

The following sections briefly discuss the context and the purpose for which the *POWER Assessment* was designed, a definition of pre-reading skills and the benefits of using POWER for pre-literacy assessment for students who have intellectual disabilities and other low-level literacy skills as a step toward advancing along the continuum of literacy development.

Context and Purpose

More than six million individuals in the United States have an intellectual disability. Close to four million are non-institutionalized. There have been social and legal commitments to the “most integrated setting feasible” as a result of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the 1999 *Olmstead v. L.C.* case. In this Supreme Court case, the court said people who have disabilities have the right to live in their communities. The outcome has meant that all states need to help people who have disabilities leave institutions. Continual growth of decentralized and flexible community services has occurred ever since with independent living and community integration a goal for all (Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 2011). The WIA, Title II funded adult education program has been one of the partners in these community-based services that provides adult basic skills to adult students who have intellectual disabilities.

CASAS has had assessment instruments for adults with intellectual disabilities since the early 1980s. These assessments for pre-beginning literacy were linked to the CASAS scale score continuum using the Rasch theoretical model of measurement. The assessments were paper-and-pencil based using black-and-white line drawings. They were updated with color photographs during the last ten years.

Alternate standardized performance-based assessment instruments were created as well at approximately the same time. The U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, defines performance assessment as “testing that requires a student to create an answer or a product that demonstrates his or her knowledge or skills.” (p. 203).

The intended purpose of the *POWER Assessment* is to measure skills within NRS Educational Functioning Level 1, Beginning ABE Literacy, for adult education populations with intellectual disabilities. This assessment measures basic literacy for students who have intellectual disabilities in the context of adult life and work skills that are relevant to preparing for and transitioning to the community and supported or independent work environments.

Basic skills measured on the *POWER Assessment* specifically target pre-reading and beginning reading and communication skills for students who have intellectual disabilities and who are native speakers of English. The assessment instrument is designed for the individual with no or minimal reading and writing skills and who has little or no comprehension of how print corresponds to spoken language. Assessment forms are available at three CASAS skill levels corresponding to categories of intellectual disability – AA (mild), AAA (moderate), and AAAA (severe). Skills assessed at the upper range of the *POWER* assessments (CASAS Skill level AA) begin to address recognition of basic letters, numbers, and familiar words and phrases in a performance setting.

Definition of Pre-Reading Skills

Houston, Otaiba, and Torgeson (2006) describe three stages that represent the common path toward ability to read proficiently: pre-reading, learning to read, and reading to learn. In the pre-reading stage, individuals develop fundamental language skills necessary for learning to read and acquire print awareness. In this stage, communication is the key to learning vocabulary and verbal thinking skills essential for reading comprehension.

The stance taken in development of the *POWER Assessment* is similar to what Downing (2006) claims as reading — a very functional life skill or literacy skills that have value to even those with the most complex disabilities. Downing claims that the act of reading can be narrowly defined as decoding and reading print or more broadly defined as including listening and communication. She asserts that the value of teaching reading, even if it is something as simple as sharing information, should not be questioned. Teaching emergent literacy skills is an important step in learning more advanced literacy skills for all students (Downing, 2006).

Likewise, the *POWER Assessment*, and subsequent instructional intervention, is an important step in assessing and teaching emergent literacy for adult students who have intellectual disabilities. A functional context for test items in alternate assessments for students who have intellectual disabilities is considered sound educational practice as long as there is an academic content match present (Flowers et al., 2009; Kearns et al., 2005). This allows one to use alternate assessment scores to make inferences about CASAS Competencies and learner achievement of targeted content standards to which assessment items are aligned. Performance-event tests or predetermined tasks related to the content

standards required for all students is one means suggested for assessing students who have intellectual disabilities.

Aligned with performance and academic content standards, POWER assesses skills used in real world contexts and measures the level of assistance or supports that individuals who have intellectual disabilities enrolled in adult education need if they are to perform basic functional pre-reading and beginning reading and communication skills related to community and workplace contexts.

Benefits of Using Power for Pre-Literacy Assessment

Multiple options exist for individuals who have disabilities to participate in state testing programs for accountability purposes. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), students who cannot participate in state assessment systems without accommodations must be provided with alternate assessments. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) up to one percent of all tested students are permitted to count as proficient on alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (Flowers et al., 2009). Similarly, the CASAS *POWER Assessment* was designed to offer an alternate assessment of less complexity to measure applied pre-reading skills for adults who have intellectual disabilities.

The *POWER Assessment* also provides an alternate standardized assessment tool for adults with intellectual disabilities who often start literacy programs unable to read print and are difficult to assess adequately with a paper-and-pencil format. POWER offers the capability to report student functioning level on a scale score continuum and measures applied reading skills on aspects of intellectual growth which range from pre-symbolic to beginning literacy levels.

The *POWER Assessment* is used to measure progress within NRS Educational Functioning Level 1. The level is described in full in the Federal Register (Vol. 73, No.9 / Monday, January 14, 2008 / Rules and Regulations, p. 2321). The description for basic reading and writing for Beginning ABE Literacy is summarized below.

- Individual has no or minimal reading and writing skills
- May have little or no comprehension of how print corresponds to spoken language
- May have difficulty using a writing instrument
- Individual at upper range of this level can recognize, read and write letters and numbers but has a limited understanding of connected prose
- Individual has little or no ability to read basic signs or maps
- Individual can provide limited personal information on simple forms
- Individual can handle routine entry level jobs that require little or no basic written communication skills

Test administrators of POWER directly observe the skills as they are performed by the learner. This presents an advantage in using an observation-based assessment for students at the pre-literacy stage of learning. Performance of standards-based skills allows the test administrator to observe academic content standards and life and work skills in action while at the same time measure the level of

assistance required to perform functional skills. Another advantage in using the *POWER Assessment* is the ability to integrate “assessment” with the instructional phase. Students are not frightened at the prospect of being “tested” as they perform instructional tasks in the classroom and/or within community and workplace settings. A standardized rubric of five physical and verbal prompt levels measures the level of assistance required to perform a task on the *POWER Assessment*. For many students who have intellectual disabilities, this assessment environment promotes growth toward ability to use a paper-pencil beginning literacy assessment.

Another critical factor in the ability of students who have intellectual disabilities to acquire beginning literacy skills is the teaching and assessment of pre-beginning content standards that are related to the CASAS Competencies. Information on the relationship of CASAS Content Standards and CASAS Competencies is available at www.casas.org. The underlying content standard links for academic learning for the *POWER Assessment* are available in the *POWER Test Administration Manual*.

Table 1 identifies the CASAS Pre-Beginning Reading Content Standards that are taught within the context of the basic skills and competencies assessed on *POWER Assessment* Form 304 (CASAS Skill level AAA), Employment Preparation Skills Summary. These are pre-literacy academic content standards that need to be learned prior to ability to learn beginning literacy reading skills such as phonics, vocabulary, and general reading comprehension. While the majority of the content standards on the *POWER Assessment* are at the pre-reading level, a few of the beginning reading content standards are introduced for some of the more difficult task items as shown in Table 1.

Implications

Instructors of Beginning Adult Basic Education (ABE) should not hesitate to consider low-level literacy assessment options available such as the CASAS *POWER Assessment* for students at the pre-literacy or pre-reading stage of learning. Many of the competencies assessed on these assessments are already being taught as part of the contextualized beginning literacy curriculum. The assessment items offer multiple opportunities to demonstrate interaction and communication skills that are demonstrated through formative assessments already occurring in their classrooms. Teaching of competencies and underlying content standards on assessments such as the *POWER Assessment* is an enabler to advancing up toward the beginning literacy level.

References

Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C.A. § 12101 *et seq.*

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Table 1. Pre-Beginning Reading Content Standards by Test Item – POWER Employment Preparation - Form 304

	Test Item by Competency ▶	Content Standards ▼																																
		0.1.4 Interacts courteously	0.1.1.c Listens attentively	7.5.6 Uses strategies to communicate	4.4.1d Acknowledges friends, staff	0.2.4 Communicates appropriately	4.6.1a Interacts/accepts assistance	4.6.4a Deals with frustration	4.6.1b Responds to criticism	4.6.5a Uses language specific to work	0.1.1 Uses appropriate non-verbal	0.1.4 Identifies appropriate language	0.1.2 Uses language for information	4.8.1a Maintains acceptable contact	4.8.1d Resolves conflict relationships	4.8.1b Maintains appropriate contact	7.5.2 Uses strategies for self-esteem	7.5.7 Identifies constructive ways	7.5.5a States personal needs	4.8.1e Participates in social activities	3.5.9 Identifies practices for physical	3.5.9 Identifies healthy choices food	4.8.1g Demonstrates dependability	0.2.1a Responds appropriately personal	7.1.2b Identifies assigned tasks	4.4.1a Attends tasks until completed	4.4.6a Detects/corrects errors in work	2.3.1a Communicates time to hour	3.4.7a Responds to safety directions	2.1.8 Uses communication device	4.8.1f Participates cooperatively			
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30			
RO	Pre-Beginning literacy / Phonics																																	
RO.1.1	Use picture ID and context to make predictions about content in material			•						•	•	•	•					•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•		•						
RO.1.2	Listen attentively to speaker and directions	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.3	Use non-verbal communication skills to convey information, needs, and wants (See also L1.1)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.4	Use verbal communication, including alternative communication systems, to convey information, needs, and wants (See also L1.2)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.5	Ask questions for clarification and understanding of directions (See also L2.5)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.6	Recognize when it is appropriate to speak/respond	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.7	Follow one-step oral directions	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.8	Follow two-step oral directions	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.9	Understand that printed words provide information									•																								
RO.1.10	Distinguish letters from words (See also R1.2)									•																								
RO.1.11	Recognize and name common letters and sight words (own name, doctor, SSN, etc.)	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•						•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.12	Identify and sort common words in basic categories (e.g. colors, shapes, foods)	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•						•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.13	Match oral words to printed words (See also R1.4)	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•					•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
RO.1.14	Respond to who, what, when, where, and how questions (See also L3.4)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

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		0.1.4 Interacts courteously	0.1.1.c Listens attentively	7.5.6 Uses strategies to communicate	4.4.1d Acknowledges friends, staff	0.2.4 Communicates appropriately	4.6.1a Interacts/accepts assistance	4.6.4a Deals with frustration	4.6.1b Responds to criticism	4.6.5a Uses language specific to work	0.1.1 Uses appropriate non-verbal	0.1.4 Identifies appropriate language	0.1.2 Uses language for information	4.8.1a Maintains acceptable contact	4.8.1d Resolves conflict relationships	4.8.1b Maintains appropriate contact	7.5.2 Uses strategies for self-esteem	7.5.7 Identifies constructive ways	7.5.5a States personal needs	4.8.1e Participates in social activities	3.5.9 Identifies practices for physical	3.5.9 Identifies healthy choices food	4.8.1g Demonstrates dependability	0.2.1a Responds appropriately personal	7.1.2b Identifies assigned tasks	4.4.1a Attends tasks until completed	4.4.6a Detects/corrects errors in work	2.3.1a Communicates time to hour	3.4.7a Responds to safety directions	2.1.8 Uses communication device	4.8.1f Participates cooperatively
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
R0.1.17	Describe common objects and events in both general and specific language	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•			•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•		•	•	
R0.1.18	Read days of the week (See also R4.3)									•										•			•		•	•		•			
R0.1.19	Read months of the year									•										•			•		•	•		•			
R0.1.20	Comprehend first, second, third, etc. (See also R4.1 and M1.1.1)	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
R0.1.21	Comprehend prepositions, i.e. toward, away, etc.	•	•							•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
R0.1.22	Read a ruler (See also M1.1.1)									•																					
R0.1.23	Read dials, gauges, etc. (See also M1.1.1)									•																					
R0.1.24	Recognize coins (See also R4.4)									•																					
R0.1.25	Recognize dollar bills, dollars and cents (See also R4.4)									•																					
R0.1.26	Comprehend directions, i.e. up, down, right, left	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•			•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•		•	
R0.1.27	Recognize name and numbers of objects (See also M1.2.9)	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•			•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	
R0.1.28	Identify and classify objects, people	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	
R0.1.29	Recognize differences in numbers, i.e. telephone social security, address	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
R0.1.30	Recognize and discriminate pictures of men, women, police, etc	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	
R0.1.31	Read written time (See also R4.2)									•																					
R0.1.32	Recognize kind of interaction appropriate for different circumstances	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
R0.1.33	Use simple written form to convey information, needs, and wants	•						•	•	•				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	
R0.1.34	Use pictures and context to make predictions about content in material (See also R6.1)	•	•		•			•	•	•								•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	
R0.1.35	Form basic opinions about a variety of presentations and media					•		•	•																						
R0.1.36	Recognize cause and effect relationships for a simple procedure	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
R1	Beginning literacy / Phonics																														
R1.2	Recognize that letters make words and words make sentences																														
R1.3	Read from left to right, top to bottom, front to back																														

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R1.4	Relate letters to sounds	•																				•									
R2	Vocabulary																														
R2.1	Interpret common symbols (e.g., restroom signs, traffic signs; #, ▶, ↑)	•	•		•		•	•	•		•	•					•	•	•			•	•		•	•	•		•		
R2.2	Read basic sight words (e.g., the, is)					•	•	•	•			•					•	•	•					•	•		•	•			
R2.3	Interpret common high-frequency words and phrases in everyday contexts (e.g., signs, ads, labels)	•	•		•		•	•	•		•	•	•				•	•	•			•	•		•	•	•		•		
R2.4	Use capitalization as a clue to interpret words (e.g., names, place names, other proper nouns)								•																						
R2.6	Interpret basic abbreviations (e.g., Mr., apt., lb.)	•	•		•				•		•	•	•					•						•	•	•	•				
R2.7	Interpret abbreviations in specialized contexts (e.g., tsp., bnfts.)								•		•	•	•					•					•	•		•	•				
R3	General reading comprehension																														
R3.2	Read and understand simple sentences that contain familiar vocabulary								•			•																			
R3.6	Interpret simple written instructions	•	•		•		•		•		•	•										•	•		•	•	•	•		•	
R3.12	Use supporting illustrations to interpret text						•		•			•			•		•	•				•	•		•	•	•	•			
R3.13	Use contextual clues to determine the meaning of words and phrases (e.g., Save \$10 on your next purchase)	•	•		•		•		•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•			•	•		•	•	•		•		
R4	Text in format																														
R4.1	Read numbers								•				•	•				•	•			•	•		•	•		•			
R4.2	Read clock times								•				•	•				•	•			•	•		•	•		•			
R4.3	Read dates								•				•	•				•	•			•	•		•	•		•			
R4.4	Read money amounts								•				•	•				•	•			•	•		•	•		•			
R4.5	Read simple handwriting								•				•					•						•							
R4.6	Interpret simple forms (e.g., appointment sign-in sheet, class registration)								•				•					•				•			•			•			

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R4.8	Interpret information in charts and tables (e.g., bus schedules)									•									•						•											
R4.9	Interpret maps, diagrams, and graphs									•									•																	
R4.10	Interpret written materials using formatting clues (e.g., headings, captions, bullets, print features such as bold)									•				•					•																	
R5	Reference materials																																			
R5.1	Find a word or number in an alphabetical, numeric, or other ordered listing (e.g., telephone directory, list of part numbers)									•				•												•	•									
R5	Reference materials (continued)																																			
R5.3	Locate information organized in groups or categories (e.g., in a department directory, catalog, on a Web page)																		•						•			•								
R5.4	Use a picture dictionary	•			•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
R5.5	Use a simplified dictionary or glossary																																			
R6	Reading strategies																																			
R6.1	Predict the content of a text from title, pictures, type of material																		•	•																
R6.2	Scan simple text (e.g., ads, schedules, forms, paragraphs) to find specific information									•									•	•					•											