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A SHORT-CUT TO TESTING PASSAGE COMPREHENSION

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In this study the feasibility of administering the Woodcock Passage Comprehension Test in written rather than oral form was examined.** In their short life the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests (Woodcock, 1973) have quickly found wide-spread usage. A critical review of the tests by Tuinman (1978) points out various limitations to the claims made by Woodcock for his tests, but nevertheless recognizes this battery as an important and useful contribution to the field.

A feature of these tests which particularly appeals to those working with high school students is the availability of K-12 norms. In addition, the norming data provided has many unique features. Three kinds of Grade Level Scores, for example, are provided:

“Easy Reading Level, (E) the grade level at which the subject is predicted to perform with 96 percent mastery the tasks performed with 90 percent mastery by average pupils at that grade.” (Woodcock, 1973, Manual p. 32).

“Reading Grade Score, (R) the grade level at which it is predicted the subject will perform at 90 percent mastery those reading tasks on which average pupils at that grade level would also demonstrate 90 percent master.” (idem, p. 31).

“Failure Reading Level (F), the grade level at which the subject is predicted to perform with 75 percent mastery of the tasks performed with 90 percent mastery by average pupils at that grade.” (idem, p. 32).

It should be pointed out that Woodcock also presents data which seems to indicate that the E, R, and F levels closely match Bett's independent, instructional and frustration level.

Not all of the five tests included are equally useful for, or usable by, the

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**Permission to reproduce the test was obtained from the publisher.

pressed-for-time secondary reading specialist. The Letter Identification Test becomes fairly meaningless after the primary grades, since five (out of forty-five) items make up the difference between Grade 4 and Grade 12 placement. The Word Comprehension Test measures Verbal Analogy, which is perhaps a useful measure of a general verbal factor, but is misplaced in a reading test. The Word Identification Test (pronouncing sight words) and the Word Attack Test (decoding nonsense words) are useful, but require oral administration. So does the Passage Comprehension Test, at least as presented by Woodcock.

As mentioned above, we set out to examine the possibility of providing secondary teachers with a quick and accurate measure of passage comprehension, (one of the most meaningful reading scores) by using the Woodcock Passage Comprehension Test in written rather than in oral form.

PROCEDURE

One hundred eighth grade students were randomly selected from an eighth grade school population of 425. Half of those students were assigned to the Oral-Written (OW) group. They received Woodcock's Passage Comprehension Test (Form A) first in oral form and, after one to two days' delay, in written form. The remaining students (WO) took the same test first in written form, then in oral administration.

Oral administration proceeded according to Woodcock's directions. The student read a passage with one word deleted. He/she then told the examiner the answer.

In the written form students were supplied with an answer sheet containing 80 blanks. Since the oral administration indicated that items below 21 were too easy, students were told to begin with item 21 in the written form. Students wrote their answers in the appropriate blank on the separate answer sheet.

Woodcock recommends establishing a basal and a ceiling level by finding the points where a child makes five consecutively correct and incorrect responses respectively. The manual notes that, in some cases, this procedure results in "false" basals (i.e., the child actually can *not* do all the items below the basal) or "false" ceilings (i.e., the child *can* do some items beyond the ceiling item). Our administration of the written and oral forms clearly showed that false basal and ceiling levels are quite common.

The written tests were scored *as if* they were oral tests. That is, a basal level was established in terms of the first five consecutive correct answers. Even if some items below the basal were missed, credit was given for all items preceding the basal. This scoring method was used to make scores on the written form comparable to those on the oral form.

Alternately, the ceiling was established by noting the first sequence of five incorrect responses. No credit was given for correct answers beyond the ceiling level.

RESULTS

For oral administration (combined over OW and WO), $X = 64.77$ and $s.d. = 9.84$. Administering the test in written form led to nearly identical results, $X = 64.86$, $s.d. = 10.40$. According to Woodcock's Manual, raw score of 65 is equivalent to an Easy Reading Level of 6.4, a Reading Grade Level of 8.7 and a Failure Reading Level of 12.9.

The product-moment correlation between the oral and written scores was .82. This value appears low if interpreted as a test-retest reliability coefficient. It is doubtful, however, that administering the test once, in a form for which it wasn't intended, influenced this coefficient. Woodcock (1973, Manual, p. 58) reports a Test-Retest Alternate Form reliability ($n = 102$) of .79. Unfortunately, no same-form test-retest coefficient is provided.

DISCUSSION

It took about 25 minutes to administer the Passage Comprehension Test in written form (as opposed to 13 minutes on the average orally). Since it is possible to test a large number of students simultaneously, the written form saves large amounts of time. We think that the resulting scores are every bit as valid as those obtained by following Woodcock's original format.

A reliability of approximately .80, with a resulting standard error of measurement in the neighbourhood of about 4, is not ideal. Six to eight raw score points ($1.5 - 2 SE$) can make a large difference in the Reading Grade Score. This is true particularly in the higher grades. This comment, however, also applies if one used the test orally, according to Woodcock's directions. The standard errors reported in the manual are based on split-half reliabilities, not on much lower test-retest coefficients.

Finally, the results of any reading test should be viewed with caution and checked against the teacher's intuition. This test is no exception. With that caveat in mind, the written administration of the Woodcock Reading Tests provides a quick and informative assessment of students' reading achievement.

The reading profession should encourage the publishers to make the test available in this form.

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