The Kerr Meyerson

Assessment of Basic Learning Abilities

Revised:

A Self Instructional Manual

Second Edition

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PART I
Assessing Individuals on the ABLA-R Test

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

A major difficulty in teaching basic skills to persons with severe intellectual disabilities is to decide what should be taught to whom. Why are some individuals capable of performing a certain task while others of the same developmental level are unable to perform that task even after hundreds of attempts? Why are certain individuals successful at mastering some training tasks, yet unable to perform seemingly similar tasks even after hundreds of trials? How can teachers know which types of tasks an individual can readily learn to perform? Psychologists Nancy Kerr and Lee Meyerson devoted considerable time to the study of such questions. They noted that successful performance of many self-care, educational, and work-related tasks require the ability to imitate simple actions of a teacher, to recognize the difference between the positions of objects (position discriminations), between the appearance of objects (visual discriminations), and between various sounds (auditory discriminations). For example, for a person to be capable of a simple visual discrimination they must be able to recognize the difference between two sights, such as a picture of a bat verses a picture of a ball. For a person to be capable of a simple auditory discrimination they must be able to recognize the difference between two sounds, for example, the spoken words "bat" and "ball". If a person does not have the ability to make such visual and auditory discriminations, then tasks which require these abilities will be very difficult for that person to learn.

Kerr and Meyerson developed a practical, easy to construct, and easy to use instrument called the Assessment of Basic Learning Abilities test (ABLA; formerly called the AVC test) which measures the ease or difficulty with which an individual can readily and reliably learn to perform the position, visual, and auditory discriminations involved in many daily tasks. As indicated in the research papers listed in the bibliography, the ABLA test is an extremely useful tool for assessing and teaching many individuals with profound, severe, or moderate intellectual disabilities, and for many children with autism, all of whom are referred to as students or clients in this manual.

This manual is designed to provide "self-instruction" in the administration of the ABLA-R and its use for matching the difficulty of various training tasks to the learning abilities of clients. Study exercises are presented throughout the manual to assist you in achieving mastery of ABLA-R administration and task classification.
The Levels of the ABLA-R and What They Tell You

The ABLA-R is made up of six separate tasks (or levels) which are presented to a client in a specific order to assess the client's ability to readily learn those tasks. The first task is an imitation task. Each of the remaining tasks require a student to make the correct response when given two options (called two-choice discriminations). The tasks were chosen because they were thought to reflect most of the two-choice discrimination tasks typically found in curricula for individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. Each level requires only that a student be able to put an item into a container. Let’s first consider ABLA-R Levels 1, 2, and 3. Carefully study the description of these three levels, and then complete the study exercise on the next page.

A Brief Description of ABLA-R Levels 1, 2, and 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>TEST TASK</th>
<th>EVERYDAY EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Level 1 Imitation      | When given a piece of foam, can the student imitate the teacher placing the foam into a container? | -Children playing Follow-the-Leader.  
                        |                                                                            | -Rolling a ball from one person to the other.                                    |
| Level 2 Position       | When presented with a yellow can and a red box in a stable position, can a student consistently place a piece of foam into the container on the left? | -Turning on the cold (vs. the hot) water tap.  
| discrimination         |                                                                            | -Placing a fork on the left side of a plate when setting a table.                |
| Level 3 Visual         | When presented with a yellow can and a red box in randomly alternated left-right positions, can a student consistently place a piece of foam into the can? | -Locating own printed name on the blackboard.  
| discrimination         |                                                                            | -Finding a particular shirt in a closet when the location changes each time it is replaced. |
Study Exercise #1

Before reading further, try to answer the following questions correctly. The answer key is provided below for your reference.

1. Each of the following tasks is an everyday example of one of the ABLA-R levels. Which level is each task?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>ABLA-R Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. The student is given one piece of Lego at a time and is required to copy the teacher by placing one piece onto another.</td>
<td>___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. A measuring cup and a drinking glass are placed in front of the student along with a spoon. The two containers change positions such that sometimes the cup is on the left and sometimes it is on the right. The student must consistently place the spoon into the measuring cup.</td>
<td>___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking turns stirring cake batter.</td>
<td>___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Putting pencils in a pencil box that is bolted to the desk.</td>
<td>___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Locating the family car in the parking lot when it is parked in different places on different days.</td>
<td>___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. On repeated trials, a metal ring with several keys on it is placed in front of the student. Each time the student is required to pick the ring up and hang it on a hook that is located on the wall beside the door.</td>
<td>___________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ANSWER KEY

Study Exercise #1

a. LEVEL 1.  b. LEVEL 3.  c. LEVEL 1.  d. LEVEL 2.  e. LEVEL 3.  f. LEVEL 2.
Now that you have had a brief introduction to ABLA-R Levels 1, 2, and 3, let’s briefly consider Levels 4, 5, and 6. Carefully study the description of Levels 4, 5, and 6 presented below. Then complete the Study Exercise on the next page.

A Brief Description of ABLA-R Levels 4, 5, and 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>TEST TASK</th>
<th>EVERYDAY EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 4</strong>&lt;br&gt;Visual Identity&lt;br&gt;Match-to-Sample Discrimination</td>
<td>When presented with a yellow can and a red box in randomly alternated left-right positions, can a student consistently place a small yellow cylinder into the can, and a small red cube into the box?</td>
<td>-Sorting socks into pairs.&lt;br&gt;-Restocking a partially emptied salad bar.&lt;br&gt;-Filling containers that are partly full.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 5</strong>&lt;br&gt;Visual Non-Identity Match-to-Sample Discrimination</td>
<td>When presented with a yellow can and a red box in randomly alternated left-right positions, can a student consistently place a purple-colored piece of wood shaped like the word <em>Can</em> into the can, and a piece of silver-colored wood shaped like the word <em>BOX</em> into the box?</td>
<td>-Placing a cup with a saucer.&lt;br&gt;-Putting a pencil with a piece of paper.&lt;br&gt;-Matching the printed word <em>CAT</em> to a picture of a cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 6</strong>&lt;br&gt;Auditory-Visual Combined Discrimination</td>
<td>When presented with a yellow can and a red box in randomly alternated left-right positions, can a student consistently place a piece of foam into the correct container when the teacher requests either &quot;red box&quot; or &quot;yellow can&quot;?</td>
<td>-Responding appropriately to the spoken words ’Stop' and ’Go'.&lt;br&gt;-Responding to requests such as ’Stand up' vs. ’sit down'.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Kerr, Meyerson, and Flora (1977) originally included Level 5, auditory discrimination, which was the same as Level 6 except that the yellow can and red box remained in the same position from trial to trial in Level 5, rather than being randomly alternated from trial to trial as in Level 6. However, in four studies involving 188 clients, all but 4 who passed the original Level 5 also passed the original Level 6. Therefore we deleted the original Level 5 because it did not typically provide information about a students’ learning ability beyond that provided by Level 6. Sakko, Martin, Vause, and Martin (2004) demonstrated that the Level 5 listed in Table 1 was a good replacement task for the original Level 5.*

**The names of each of the six levels provide an over-simplified description of the types of discriminations that are involved at each level. For a more detailed description of each level, see Appendix 1.**
Study Exercise #2

Before reading further, try to answer the following questions correctly. The answer key is provided below for your reference.

1. Each of the following tasks is an everyday example of one of the ABLA-R levels. Which level is each task?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>ABLA-R Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Pairing up several actual objects with individual photographs of each of them.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Lining up at a door when a buzzer rings, and sitting in a desk when a bell rings.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Pairing up a pencil with a sheet of paper.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Returning utensils to a utensil drawer in the kitchen, after cleaning them, so that each knife, fork, and spoon are placed with the other knives, forks, and spoons.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. When shown several shoelaces, several shoes, several pair of pants, and several belts, the student is able to place a belt with a pair of pants, and a shoelace with a shoe.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Across trials, a card with the letter “A” printed on it and a card with the letter “C” printed on it are placed in randomly alternated left-right positions in front of the student. If the teacher says, “A”, the student picks up the A card, and if the teacher says, “B”, the student picks up the B card.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ANSWER KEY
Study Exercise #2

The ABLA-R discrimination tasks are arranged from Level 1, least difficult, to Level 6, the most difficult. This is referred to as a difficulty hierarchy. An individual who has passed a particular level will be successful when tested on the lower levels of the hierarchy. Further, an individual who has failed a particular level will not be successful when attempting higher levels. As illustrated in Table 1, performance on the ABLA-R provides a clear indication of the kinds of daily training tasks the student will be able to perform with relative ease.

Consider, for example, the case of Jane, a trainee with a moderate intellectual disability in a job placement program in her home town. Jane often performs training tasks incorrectly. Sometimes she doesn't attempt the tasks at all, but simply stares at the teacher. Some of the staff believe that Jane is just "being difficult". Others believe that she doesn't understand instructions; and some staff think the tasks are just too hard for Jane.

John, one of the staff, decided to assess Jane on the ABLA-R. Jane passed the first five levels, but failed Level 6. How is this information useful?

At a basic level of understanding, Jane could ‘see’ the difference between two objects, such as the can and the box. John knows this to be true because independent of the left–right position of the can, Jane was able to place the foam into the can consistently when tested at Level 3 (as described on p. 2). However, Jane had difficulty telling the difference between two simple instructions. When presented with the auditory cue of either "yellow can" or "red box" (during the test at Level 6, as described on p. 4), Jane could not consistently place the foam into the correct container.

Of course, in everyday living, teachers seldom request students to complete tasks using boxes and cans, unless they are employed in a recycling depot! Therefore, this information is of value to the teacher only if it can be applied to typical training tasks presented to students. Fortunately, one of the most significant merits of the ABLA-R is that the student's test performance can be used to predict the type of daily tasks that a student will be able to learn with relative ease. This ability of ABLA-R test results to predict a student's performance on other tasks is called predictive validity.

Because Jane passed Level 3, for example, John knew that Jane could complete everyday Level 3 (visual discrimination) tasks, such as recognizing when vegetables are free from dirt, when washing them. Because Jane had passed Level 4, visual identity match-to-sample, John could predict that Jane would readily learn everyday, Level 4 (visual identity match-to-sample) tasks, such as sorting silverware at a restaurant. On the other hand, because Jane failed Level 6 (auditory discrimination), John knew that she would experience great difficulty mastering a Level 6 task, such as being able to discriminate between the words "cream" versus "sugar" spoken by a customer in the cafeteria on the job site.
Study Exercise #3

Before reading further, study the preceding material until you can answer the following questions correctly. Complete the exercise by filling in the blanks with the correct words or circling the correct answer where appropriate. The answer key is provided on p. 8 for your reference.

1. The ABLA-R contains a simple ______ task and 5 ______ - ______ discrimination tasks which are presented to the student in a specific order.

2. Level 1 assesses a client's ability to ____________.

3. Level 2 is a _______ discrimination.

4. Level 3 is a two-choice _______ discrimination.

5. Level 4 is a visual identity______ to _______ discrimination.

6. Level 5 is a visual non-identity ______ to ______ discrimination.

7. Level 6 is an ______ plus ______ combined discrimination.

8. As a student moves from one level of the ABLA-R to the next highest level, the tasks increase in ________.

9. If a student fails Level 3 of the ABLA-R, the student is likely / not likely to pass Level 4.

10. If a student passes Level 3 of the ABLA-R, the student is likely / not likely to pass Level 2.

11. Performance on the ABLA-R will / will not indicate how the student is likely to perform on other similar discrimination tasks.

12. The original Level 5 was deleted from the ABLA-R test because most clients who passed Level 5 passed / failed Level 6.

13. The new Level 5 is a good addition to the ABLA-R test in part because it is more/ less difficult than level 4 and more/ less difficult than Level 6.

14. The ABLA-R discrimination tasks are arranged from Level 1, the least difficult, to Level 6, the most difficult. This is referred to as a difficulty ________________.
ANSWER KEY
Study Exercise #3

1. IMITATION; TWO-CHOICE.  2. IMITATE.  3. POSITION.  4. VISUAL.
5. MATCH; SAMPLE.  6. MATCH; SAMPLE.  7. AUDITORY; VISUAL.
8. DIFFICULTY.  9. NOT LIKELY.  10. LIKELY.  11. WILL.  12. PASSED.
13. MORE; LESS.  14. HIERARCHY
Chapter 2

GUIDELINES FOR USING THE ABLA-R

The Testing Materials

All of the materials required for the ABLA-R can be easily constructed with everyday household items (see Figure 1 on the next page). Two containers are necessary to administer the ABLA-R, a yellow can and a red box (diagonal white stripes on the box are optional). In addition to these containers, there are five test objects which will be presented to the student during the assessment: a small piece of irregularly shaped foam that is neither red nor yellow in color, and that is approximately 5 cm in diameter; a small yellow wooden cylinder approximately 9 cm long and 3 cm in diameter; a small red cube with dimensions of approximately 5 cm x 5 cm x 5 cm, the cube should have red and white stripes if the box is striped; a silver-coloured piece of wood that has been shaped into capital letters spelling the word BOX (approximately 5 cm in height, 1.2 cm in thickness, and 18 cm in length), and a purple piece of wood that has been shaped into the upper- and lower-case word, Can (approximately 2.5 cm in height, 0.5 cm in thickness, and 9 cm in length).

Stop!!

For best results, you should have the ABLA-R testing materials in front of you while studying the remainder of this manual. If your agency has already prepared test materials, we encourage you to have them in front of you. Otherwise, we suggest that you make the test materials before continuing to study this manual.

The Testing Environment

Ideally, you will have had some interaction with the student before the assessment. Unfamiliar faces can often cause unusual responses from the student, especially when the tester is requesting specific task demands. Similarly, it is desirable to administer the assessment in a testing area that is commonplace to the student. The testing room should contain a flat surface or table upon which the assessment materials may be placed, and should be relatively free of distractions.