



Appropriate assessment for low and

pre-literacy AMEP learners

Stephen H Moore



National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research

Published by the
National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research
Macquarie University, Sydney NSW 2109
for the AMEP Research Centre with the support of the Adult Migrant English Programme,
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

Appropriate assessment for low and pre-literacy AMEP learners
Stephen H Moore

ISBN 978 1 74138 274 7

© Commonwealth of Australia 2007

The AMEP Research Centre is a consortium of the National Centre for English Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University in Sydney, and the School of Educational Studies at La Trobe University in Melbourne. The Research Centre was established in January 2000 and is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Copyright

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

DTP: Helen Lavery
Printed by Macquarie Lighthouse Press

Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
Acronyms	v
Executive summary	vi
<i>Chapter 1</i>	
Introduction	1
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
Teachers' views of appropriate assessment	3
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
Learners' views of appropriate assessment	7
<i>Chapter 4</i>	
The Assessment Technique Grid	11
<i>Chapter 5</i>	
Key issues	15
<i>Chapter 6</i>	
Conclusion	19
<i>References</i>	21
<i>Appendixes</i>	
Appendix 1: Teacher questionnaire	24
Appendix 2: Focus group interview questions	26
Appendix 3: Focus group supplementary questions	28
Appendix 4: Think aloud protocol guidelines	29

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the teachers who participated in this project and appreciate their time in completing the questionnaire or providing feedback on the Assessment Technique Grid. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of administrators at Queensland TAFE, AMES West Coast and LM Training for their contributions to this research project. Special thanks must go to the learners who participated in focus groups held at Balga and Perth, WA, and Toowoomba, QLD. I would also like to thank colleagues at the AMEP Research Centre for their comments, advice and support throughout the life of this research project. I am particularly grateful to Loy Lising for her excellent research assistance.

Acronyms

AMEP	Adult Migrant English Programme
AMEP RC	AMEP Research Centre
AMES	Adult Migrant Education Service
ATB	Assessment Task Bank
ATG	Assessment Technique Grid
CASPR	Committee to Advise on Special Projects Research
CSWE	Certificate in Spoken and Written English
DIAC	Department of Immigration and Citizenship
L1	First or Home Language
SPP	Special Preparatory Programme
SPRP	Special Projects Research Programme
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TAP	Think Aloud Protocol
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

Executive summary

This research project explored the issue of language assessment of AMEP learners with a very low level of English proficiency and a background of low or pre-literacy in their first language. It investigated the views of AMEP teachers who work with this profile of learner and sampled the views of AMEP learners themselves who fit this profile.

The project discovered mixed preferences for ongoing and end-of-unit summative assessment for learners at this level of English proficiency. However, it also pointed to the strength of ongoing assessment techniques as building blocks for summative assessment tasks. The project identified a wide range of ongoing assessment types that seemed to work at this level. The principal practical outcome of the project was the development of the Assessment Technique Grid (ATG), the aim of which is to:

- systematise ongoing assessment for low/pre-literacy learners;
- link assessment techniques with pre-CSWE¹ learning outcomes and assessment tasks;
- link teacher input types with learner response types; and
- help teachers plan series of lessons.

The project provided further evidence of the difficulty of researching language assessment where the learners' level of proficiency is, in many ways, at a 'pre-language' stage of development.

Note

- 1 A foundation of two sets of four learning outcomes in numeracy and communication available prior to CSWE I

Chapter 1

Introduction

This report relates to research conducted in 2005/6 as part of the AMEP Research Centre's Special Projects Research Programme (SPRP). The overall theme of the research programme in 2005/6 was 'accommodating low/pre-literacy and interrupted education', and this particular report deals with language assessment aspects of this broader theme. It should be noted that the term 'appropriate assessment' should not be confused with 'alternative assessment', a well-established subfield of assessment (and the focus of a previous SPRP in 2000 called *Alternative assessment project: Integrating assessment and instruction*).

The project was designed in response to feedback provided by AMEP service providers indicating a need for research to be undertaken in this area. Prior to being approved by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) in late 2004, the proposed project was vetted by academics at the AMEP RC as well as by the Committee to Advise on Special Projects Research (CASPR).

Project rationale

In recent years learners in the AMEP have increasingly come from backgrounds with little or no literacy. This shift in the profile of AMEP learners has drawn attention to some of the difficulties of assessment peculiar to this group due to such matters as their unfamiliarity with the written word as a semiotic (sign/symbol) system, their unfamiliarity with the basic motor skills of writing and their lack of exposure to formal classroom instruction and assessment instruments. There has been a perception amongst AMEP service providers and teachers that the needs of these learners are quite different from the typical needs of beginner-level learners and that the way their language proficiency is assessed should be investigated more thoroughly.

Project aims

The project aimed to:

- 1 discover how low/pre-literacy learners interpret assessment tasks
- 2 discover which assessment task types work for low/pre-literacy learners and which do not
- 3 discover any features of language at this level that are particularly salient for adult learners with a Special Preparatory Programme (SPP) Youth profile
- 4 produce practical recommendations for the appropriate assessment of the learners under study
- 5 enhance the assessment-related expertise of teachers working on the project

- 6 enable engagement with academic debate in this area from an experiential basis.

Of these six goals, only the third goal was not squarely addressed, due to the participating service providers not having any substantial concentrations of SPP Youth available for investigating, thus rendering that goal beyond the scope of the investigation.

Summary of project in 2005

The project began in 2005 after receiving approval from Macquarie University's Ethics Committee (Human Subjects). A review of the literature pertaining to language assessment of low/pre-literacy learners was carried out. This was followed by the design and administration of a questionnaire to survey nationwide all AMEP teachers of low/pre-literacy learners. At the same time, focus group questions and case study protocols were developed and administered at two sites to selected groups of AMEP learners. Data collected from teachers and learners were analysed and interpreted and then formally reported at the AMEP annual conference in Sydney in September 2005 (see Moore 2005). Feedback from teachers, learners and conference attendees resulted in adjustments being made to the methodology planned for the subsequent phases of the research project. In particular, the original plan of creating new assessment tasks to formally trial in 2006 was abandoned as unworkable, given its premise of a level of language proficiency significantly higher than that found at low/pre-literacy levels.

Summary of project in 2006

In early 2006, assessment techniques discerned from the data collected from teachers and learners in 2005 were analysed and collated in the form of an Assessment Technique Grid (ATG). The grid provided a means of systematically relating teacher input types and learner response types within a framework consistent with the eight pre-CSWE Learning Outcomes (see Chapter 4 Table 2). The ATG was piloted at two sites: Logan Institute of TAFE, QLD and LM Training, SA (which provided feedback on its usefulness as a support to low/pre-literacy AMEP teachers. The ATG was formally presented at the AMEP annual conference in Perth in October 2006 (see Moore 2006). Feedback from conference attendees was generally positive and the ATG was finalised for dissemination throughout the AMEP and its language centres.

Content of this report

This report provides details of the 'Appropriate Assessment' research project by first examining the views of teachers as expressed in the nationwide survey. It then examines the views of learners as gleaned from the focus groups and individual case studies. The report then focuses on how the data from teachers and learners was incorporated in the form of the Assessment Technique Grid. This is followed by a discussion highlighting some of the key issues arising in the course of this research.

Chapter 2

Teachers' views of appropriate assessment

This chapter reports on the results of the nationwide survey of AMEP teachers conducted in 2005. It highlights their views on assessment tasks that work and those that do not, and the reasons for those views.

In May 2005 a questionnaire survey (see Appendix 1) was sent to all service providers for dissemination to teachers of low/pre-literacy learners. The target population of teachers included those currently teaching such learners as well as those with recent experience of teaching at this level. In the event, 40 AMEP teachers responded to the survey. Although they represent only a small proportion of all AMEP teachers, they were drawn from all states and territories and represented a reasonable sampling of teachers of low/pre-literacy learners.

The details of the survey are reported in the various sections below. In general terms they show an awareness of difficulties and problems of assessing low/pre-literacy learners. They also show evidence of innovation in responding to the particular circumstances of specific cohorts of learners. Lastly, they show that many teachers struggle with a sense that unreasonable expectations are made by many stakeholders regarding the rate of achievement that learners at this level can realistically attain.

How teachers typically assess this level of learner

All 40 respondents provided information about how they typically assess low/pre-literacy learners. About one-third said they employed formal assessment using CSWE documents while half that number said they used informal assessment or ongoing assessment. One-third of respondents said they also assessed through observation or monitoring. These figures are not mutually exclusive as some teachers indicated they used more than one method. What is striking is that *only* one-third of respondents rely on the formal pre-CSWE assessment tasks. Thus, a substantial number of teachers are relying on other, more informal, ways of assessing their learners. Indeed, to reinforce this point, the respondents also provided details of the type of tasks used to assess learners at this level, and a summary of these less formal tasks is provided below in the section 'Types of assessment tasks that work at pre-CSWE level'.

Different assessment tasks for learners from different language groups

Only 17 respondents identified ways in which they differentiated their assessment methods for learners from different language groups. Some teachers took account of whether learners might be familiar with a

non-Roman script, in which case more care might be given to variations in the written forms of letters (for example, *a* and *g*). Some teachers took account of cultural tendencies towards oracy and literacy and visual communication, (for example, Dinka speakers who have grown up outside of villages or towns, may 'read' environmental indicators such as cloud formation, animal behaviour and seasonal change). One teacher stated that they gave a uniform diagnostic test followed up by different formative/ongoing tests according to language group background, and then a uniform summative/end-of-course test. Other teachers selected vocabulary items that favoured a particular culture, or used content that was more culturally relevant to certain learners. Some teachers argued that it was best to give no special treatment in order to maintain reliability and consistency in assessment across all L1 groups.

Types of assessment tasks that work at pre-CSWE level

Forty respondents provided information about what tasks they felt worked at the pre-CSWE level. The following is a summary of the tasks indicated by the respondents.

- copying letters/words/numbers
- gap-filling/form filling
- alphabetical ordering
- responding orally to teacher questions or prompts
- pointing to letter or number spoken by teacher, including upper and lower case
- doing an action following a spoken prompt by teacher
- matching by drawing a line between a word and corresponding picture
- sequencing/grouping
- selecting from multiple choice options
- identifying pictures/vocabulary on a grid
- identifying relevant social sight signs
- listening and circling
- answering personal questions
- reading aloud
- writing from dictation
- naming objects/realia

Interestingly, very few teachers thought that listening, speaking or writing tasks 'worked', while only 42 per cent thought that reading tasks worked well. Thirty per cent thought that tasks involving something practical or a 'real life' issue worked well. Half of that number said interactional assessment (for example, a role play) worked well.

When asked to account for why these tasks might work at this level, 47 per cent of respondents said it was due to the tasks being familiar and achievable. Small numbers of respondents added that these tasks were

relevant to settlement issues; that they involved less pressure for learners (and were therefore not intimidating); and that for many of the tasks, feedback was immediate rather than delayed (that is, while the teacher set about marking and grading them).

The kind of assessment tasks that do *not* work at this level

There was a sense among many teachers that tasks which did not work were those that were testing beyond what the learners actually needed or beyond what they actually understood. In other words, some teachers felt that pre-CSWE learners had to be assessed in accordance with pre-CSWE learning outcomes even if these outcomes did not necessarily represent the most suitable learning outcomes for real learners at this low level of proficiency.

Forty per cent of respondents felt that formal assessment (that is, where assessment is structured and timed) was unhelpful. Thirty-seven per cent noted the problems of learners' unfamiliarity with a testing environment, including variable accent and speech rate for oral instructions or assessment. Twenty-two per cent of respondents noted the importance of context that was familiar to learners and not outside their knowledge schemata (for example, where knowing something is constrained by cultural unfamiliarity). While there was little consensus among respondents of any macro-skill (reading, writing, speaking, listening) being more problematic than another, several noted that writing presented problems with respect to different fonts which can represent some letters quite differently, (for example, 'a' and 'g' and this can be quite confusing to learners who are unfamiliar with these common variations), and that complex or vague instructions sometimes prevented learners from achieving simple and familiar tasks. Indeed, 45 per cent of respondents reported the conundrum of how low literacy seriously limits how learners can access and process even simple language.

Problems or concerns regarding assessment at this level

In one of the few instances of a consensus emerging among teachers, 55 per cent of respondents referred to unreasonable expectations of policies and institutions as being their main concern regarding the assessment of low/pre-literacy learners. Various other issues were also raised by respondents (for example, issues related to the placement of learners in classes, and learner retention of information), but no clear consensus of priority could be established among them.

Suggestions for useful 'alternative assessments' for this level

Only 25 respondents provided suggestions for non-formal assessment. Some noted that alternatives to formal assessment were needed because some learners were badly under-performing in formal testing situations. Some teachers favoured the introduction of more IT for assessing the younger and more 'progressive' learners. Interestingly, a few teachers advocated 'no assessments' apart from teacher observation in class activities. One of these respondents suggested that language assessment should include such outcomes as:

- Can form letters of the right size and can position them correctly on the lines of paper.
- Can perceive differences in size and shape of words.

The same respondent advocated extending assessment beyond language to include such indicators as:

- Regularly attends lessons.
- Arrives on time.
- Informs teacher/office if unable to attend class.
- Brings file, pencil, paper etc, every day.
- Keeps class worksheets in an orderly way to be able to retrieve them in class if required.

Again, these suggestions point to the pressures faced by language teachers who must regularly deal with many important learning issues that are not, strictly speaking, concerned with language learning.

Appropriate assessment for SPP Youth

Twenty-one respondents provided information about teaching SPP Youth, but only one-third of these actually related directly to issues of language assessment. Comments made included: informal assessment was more appropriate than formal; content should be 'sporty, fun, youthful'; and materials should be based on out-of-class youth experiences. One respondent noted that teachers might be fooled into thinking that learners possessed knowledge which, in fact, they did not – SPP Youth may have developed strategies to conceal gaps in their knowledge.

Summary

A wide range of teachers' views on appropriate assessment of low/pre-literacy learners was reported but with little clear consensus emerging. For example, while many teachers prefer ongoing, informal assessment techniques, others prefer a more structured approach of formal assessment tasks at the end of a learning phase. It should be noted that even an individual teacher might have different assessment preferences depending on the particular cohort of learners they are teaching. For example, where learners have expressed a preference for more formal testing practices, the teacher might oblige them, whereas in other classes the teacher might use only informal assessment practices.

An important finding that emerged from the teacher survey was that there is a limited number of assessment techniques that teachers consider useful at this low level of English proficiency. In other words, while these techniques can be elaborated, there seem to be no relevant assessment techniques that are not already being practised somewhere within the AMEP. Thus, one of the goals of this research project is to ensure that these techniques are made available and known across all AMEP language centres. More about this will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3

Learners' views of appropriate assessment

This chapter reports on learner feedback from four focus groups and from three case studies of individual learners performing assessment tasks.

The focus groups were designed to elicit feedback on learners' thoughts about their English language assessment. In other words, to what extent did these learners feel that their teacher's assessments were valid (measuring what they were meant to measure) and reliable (consistent from one testing to another); which assessment tasks did they like (and why) and which did they not like (and why not). The focus group meetings were not audio recorded, but the researcher took notes and followed a semi-structured interview format (see Appendix 2).

Focus groups (Balga/Perth, WA)

In June 2005, three focus groups of low/pre-literacy learners were held in Balga and Perth. Arrangements had been made with the service provider (West Coast TAFE) to allow the researcher access to groups, based on the learners' first language (L1), of between six and eight learners. It was hoped that many different language groups could participate but this would depend on the particular language group profile of the provider. In the event, three focus groups were convened, and with generally fewer members than originally sought. These were: Dinka (3); Tigrinya (8); and Arabic (3). Professional interpreters for each language group were on hand to facilitate the discussions which lasted up to 90 minutes each.

The most common assessment techniques used by teachers, as reported by their learners, did in fact match those reported by teachers themselves (see Chapter 2). Thus, learners were able to provide examples that reconciled with what the teachers claimed they were doing. As to whether these techniques gave an accurate picture of their English ability, the Arabic and Tigrinya groups agreed that they did while the Dinka group was ambivalent, noting that sometimes they forgot something that they had known the previous day so, in their view, it was difficult to know whether an assessment was accurate or not.

The Arabic group noted the problem of having limited English to process questions and instructions. In other words, the language of the instructions was often more difficult than the language actually needed to perform the task. The Dinka group described how their own lack of schooling made it difficult, in their words, 'for their brains to function well' and to retain language.

When asked which kind of assessment tasks they liked, a variety of tasks were eventually elicited (through the researcher's prompting) and a variety of reasons were given. These reluctant responses may have indicated individual learner preferences rather than L1-related preferences. There were no marked differences noted between the different L1 groups.

When asked to comment on the kind of assessment tasks they did not like, no strong dislikes emerged. In fact, it was noteworthy that all groups seemed happy with whatever the teacher did in terms of assessment. The prevailing view was that the learners were in no position to second-guess the wisdom of their teachers in this matter. Indeed, all groups expressed how grateful they were to their teachers for everything their teachers did. One learner commented, 'We are like babies needing everything'.

Focus group (Toowoomba, QLD)

To supplement the data of the focus groups held in Balga and Perth, arrangements were made to convene further focus groups in Queensland through the participating project provider, Queensland TAFE. Again, the problem of finding significant numbers of learners within targeted L1 groups studying with that provider, meant that it was not possible to capture a wide range of various L1s. Instead, the project focused in more depth on one L1 group; that is, the Dinka speakers. In August 2005, arrangements were made to interview up to 30 Dinka speakers in Toowoomba, with a view to probing more deeply into their thoughts about their English language assessment. It was envisaged that different sub-groups of Dinka speakers would be formed, constituted according to level (low pre-CSWE/low CSWE I), gender and age.

In the event, only one focus group was formed, with just six Dinka-speaking participants. Within this group there was a mixture of levels, gender and age. The reason for the stark difference between the groups that were planned and the group that eventuated was due to the political situation in the Sudan at that time: a political leader had died under mysterious circumstances just the day before the focus groups were to be held and many learners were too distraught to attend classes the following day. Those who did attend were only there, they said, because they felt they needed to get their minds off events in their homeland. This created a difficult situation for the researcher, but it was resolved through agreement among the learners, their teacher, and the interpreter to press ahead with the data collection.

The same questions were asked of these learners as had been asked of those in WA except that the questions regarding preferences and dislikes were restructured (see Appendix 3) in order to provide better examples of the range of assessment techniques commonly used.

It is important to note that the answers provided by a small group of Dinka-speaking learners cannot be generalised to the whole Dinka-speaking population nor, obviously, to the whole pre-CSWE population of learners. Nevertheless, their answers are illuminating and, as genuine AMEP learners, they deserve to be heard.

In this focus group at Toowoomba, the pre-CSWE learners indicated that 'good teaching', such as using pictures and having learners listen to cassette tapes, helped them to learn English. They stated that being able to write correct spelling from memory and produce correct pronunciation from memory were evidence of what they had learned. CSWE I learners noted several issues which they felt hindered their progress in learning English. These included materials that were taken from many sources (which might have given the impression of the syllabus being unsystematic), too many students in classes, and no awareness of when they were to be tested. As evidence of their learning they cited the revision talks of the previous day's work, which provided an opportunity to recollect recent vocabulary or grammatical structures.

When asked about any problems they could see with any of the assessment techniques used, the pre-CSWE learners repeated the comment (heard in other focus groups) that because their level of English was so low, they must just trust the teacher. CSWE I learners noted a negative effect of having unbound worksheets rather than a coursebook: it was hard for students to keep track of what had been taught and what to review. All of the focus group participants in Toowoomba agreed that they would prefer to be told at least one day in advance when they were to be assessed.

Regarding task-preference types, all the focus group learners, regardless of level, preferred 'listening and speaking' or 'listening and writing' rather than 'listening and doing an action' activities. All learners also preferred 'looking/reading and writing' rather than 'looking/reading and speaking' or 'looking/reading and doing an action' activities.

Looking more specifically at different task types, the learners provided interesting feedback on reasons for their preferences:

- **Copying** (for example, letters) was liked a lot because it was scaffolded and helped the memory.
- **Gap-filling** (for example, filling in a form) was disliked because it was difficult to do without the aid of the teacher or other English speaker.
- **Identifying alphabetical order** was liked a lot because it helped in learning the alphabet faster.
- **Using images** (for example, photos, drawings) was liked when it helped learning but disliked when it was hard to understand.
- **Using real objects** (for example, classroom objects, fruit, toys etc) was liked because it helped in learning the names of physical objects and it stuck in the mind.
- **Sequencing** numbers or pictures was liked because it helped in learning numbers and their values.
- **Talking or writing about personal information** (for example, name; address; phone number) was liked because it helped with confidence in knowing this information well; but was disliked when it was not understood.
- **Role play** was not an activity the focus group learners were familiar with, and therefore they did not have an opinion about it.

Individual case studies (Balga/Perth, WA)

In order to further probe how learners found formal assessment practices at the pre-CSWE level, three learners were observed individually and audio recorded as they performed three assessment tasks from the pre-CSWE curriculum framework. The warm-up task was Module A, Learning Outcome 3: Can demonstrate understanding of alphabetical order. The two other tasks were Module A, Learning Outcome 4: Can read social sight words and signs, and Module B, Learning Outcome 4: Can complete a simplified formatted text.

Each focus group L1 was represented. While the learner was performing the task, they were also asked to 'think aloud' in their L1 using a 'Think Aloud Protocol' (TAP) (see Appendix 4) so that, after translation, the researcher might have a better idea of how the assessment task was approached by the learner, and how appropriate it was for the learner's level of ability.

The TAPs were explained to the learner through translation, as was the nature of the research itself, and were conducted in the presence of the researcher. A warm-up task was then undertaken and feedback was given to help standardise the performances on the follow-up tasks. The learners spent about 30 minutes performing the three tasks.

In the event, it was obvious to the researcher that each learner was struggling to perform the tasks, and all were very hesitant about 'thinking aloud'. Despite encouragement from the interpreters to say out loud what they were thinking, the learners did not say much and what they did say was often a patchy blend of their L1 and English. The subsequent translation of the Arabic-speaking learner's TAP revealed nothing that the researcher could see in terms of how the learner had approached the task, nor how the task might be appropriate or inappropriate for the learner. As for the TAPs of the other case studies, despite considerable effort, the researcher was unable to locate Dinka and Tigrinya translators to translate them, and consequently they were never translated. The researcher is of the view, however, that those TAPs would likely have been as uninformative as the Arabic one, given the obvious difficulties the learners were having in performing the tasks. Moreover, all three interpreters indicated that this case study activity was very difficult for the learners.

To sum up, while the case study approach using a Think Aloud Protocol was valid on theoretical grounds, in practice it was beyond the abilities of the three subjects in question. If anything, it provided further evidence of the challenges of assessing language proficiency at the low/pre-literacy level.

Summary

While the previous chapter reported the views of AMEP teachers, this chapter has reported the views of a small sampling of AMEP learners. Teacher views are generally better known, though learner views are equally important. Indeed, one of the strengths of this research project has been its interest in finding out what low/pre-literacy learners themselves think about the issues of 'appropriate assessment'. The principal finding, however, is that for this level of language proficiency, the learners are happy to let the teachers decide how best to assess them.

Chapter 4

The assessment technique grid

As reported in Chapter 2, there appear to be a limited number of assessment techniques that are useful for measuring the proficiency of low/pre-literacy learners. Many of these techniques are listed in Chapter 2 under 'Types of assessment tasks that work at pre-CSWE level'. While these ongoing assessment procedures are valid in the classroom, the researcher felt that a mechanism was needed to link them to the more formal assessment tasks related to learning objectives specified in the pre-CSWE curriculum framework – the achievement of which permits progression to CSWE I level. The linkage was made via the Assessment Technique Grid (ATG) which was devised by the researcher and presented for feedback at the AMEP annual conference in Perth in October 2006 (see Moore 2006).

In devising the ATG, the informal assessment techniques were seen as *enabling* devices contributing to skills development for formal assessment. These were then grouped according to which learning outcome they 'fed into' (see Table 1). The table was then used to link the assessment techniques with teacher input types and learner response types (see Table 2). While assessment tasks are meant to reside in the online Assessment Task Bank, assessment techniques can simply be listed in the Assessment Technique Grid.²

Piloting the ATG

Between May and July 2006, several teachers at two sites (LM Training, SA and Logan Institute of TAFE, QLD) used the ATG with their low/pre-literacy learners. The teachers were advised that the grid was only a prototype and could be modified to suit their particular teaching circumstances. Feedback from this informal 'trailing' was reported to the researcher by several teachers. Essentially their comments were mixed: while teachers found the grid 'useful' for ongoing assessment purposes, their main pre-occupation was with *teaching* low/pre-literacy learners. That said, they agreed that informal ongoing assessment, as an integral part of good teaching, was more helpful to their learners than was formal assessment undertaken for reporting purposes. Given that at very low levels of proficiency there is little real 'communicative language' that is assessable, it seems reasonable that teachers might be more concerned with and focus on teaching rather than formal assessment.

ATG as a planning tool

Given their desire to focus on teaching rather than formal assessment, it is useful to note that the ATG can be helpful to teachers as a management tool. In addition to its usefulness in mapping out the territory of ongoing

assessment, teachers can use the ATG to plot their coverage of both teaching and assessment techniques. The variety of teacher inputs can be planned in view of the variety of learner response types. This facility can therefore assist teachers to actively plan and manage a very wide range of teaching and learning activities in their classrooms, and to sequence them in a series of lessons.

Summary

The Assessment Technique Grid is perhaps best thought of as a pedagogic tool available for use in whatever way is most appropriate to a particular teacher's circumstances. Although it has been developed with ongoing assessment in mind, it clearly has wider uses and applications.

Note

- 2 The online Assessment Task Bank is an AMEP resource set up in 2002 to provide AMEP teachers nationwide with ready-to-use assessment tasks linked to learner outcomes in the CSWE curriculum framework.

Table 1 Linking assessment techniques to learning outcomes

Activity types	Learning outcome
<p>Matching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sounds to letters/numbers • upper case to lower case (and vice versa) • same letters from different fonts • letters to words • numbers to words • words to objects (includes colours) • words to image/realia/symbols 	<p>A01 Can demonstrate recognition of alphabet and numbers.</p> <p>A04 Can read social sight words and signs.</p>
<p>Copying</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • letters • words • numbers • signs/symbols 	<p>A02 Can write alphabet and numbers.</p>
<p>Ordering/sequencing/grouping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • numbers • letters • words (alphabetically) 	<p>A03 Can demonstrate understanding of alphabetical order.</p>
<p>Responding to commands/instructions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • classroom talk • other 	<p>B01 Can respond to simple instructions.</p>
<p>Role play (including telephone interaction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teacher/student • student/student 	<p>B02 Can respond to short conversational exchange.</p>
<p>Responding to questions/providing information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal information • classroom information • daily life information 	<p>B03 Can provide basic personal information using spoken language.</p>
<p>Gap-filling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • word completion • form filling • phrase/sentence completion 	<p>B04 Can complete a simplified formatted text.</p>

Table 2 Assessment Technique Grid

	Teacher input				Learner response					
	Speaking	Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • upper case • lower case 	Images <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • photos • maps • social symbols • other 	Realia	Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pointing • drawing • gesturing • miming • other 	Listening	Speaking	Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • upper case • lower case • fonts 	Writing (on the line) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • upper case • lower case 	Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pointing • marking • drawing • arranging • gesturing • miming • other
Matching										
Copying										
Ordering										
Commands										
Role playing										
Questions										
Gap-filling										

Chapter 5

Key issues

Assessment of 'pre-language' learners

There are very few published accounts of language assessment at low levels of proficiency. The reason for this is not entirely clear, however, one can easily see that issues of validity and reliability are problematic at this level. *Validity* is concerned with testing that which you think you are testing, and nothing else (Bachman and Palmer 1996; Hughes 2003) while *reliability* is concerned with obtaining a similar performance from a candidate on a similar test in similar circumstances (Bachman and Palmer 1996; Hughes 2003). Language assessment research in the AMEP has rarely focused on low levels of proficiency (Brindley 2000; Brindley and Burrows 2001), partly because in the past the typical AMEP learner profile has been at a higher level of proficiency. One study that did focus on low level learners (Wakefield 1989) was dealing with literate learners at a beginner level rather than the very low pre-beginner level.

With regard to the issue of reliability, one needs to question whether assessment results can be reliable when many learners suffering from trauma seem prone to often regress in their learning. With regard to validity, one should make a distinction here between the pre-CSWE Module A learning outcomes (concerned with 'orientation to literacy and numeracy') and Module B learning outcomes (concerned with 'orientation to communication skills'). The learning outcomes for Module A, for example, 'can demonstrate understanding of alphabetical order', are arguably *pre-language* skills which help enable literacy development. On the other hand, Module B learning outcomes, for example, 'can respond to short conversational exchange' do appear to be concerned with actual communicative language use. In the language assessment literature, it seems to be a given that literacy assessment starts at a beginner's level when learners can comfortably wield a pen or pencil; can write on the lines of lined paper; and can easily recognise upper case and lower case printed and cursive forms (including common variations in letters 'a' and 'g'). Indeed, the macro-skills of beginners (that is, reading, writing, listening and speaking), limited though they are, lie on the same continuum as intermediate and advanced proficiency. It is debatable whether the Module A learning outcomes lie on this continuum, or whether they are prerequisites for gaining entry to it. Whichever the case, it is clear that for many adult pre-literacy learners, a great deal of time and effort is expended in achieving simple yet fundamental skills which enable and facilitate the subsequent learning of reading and writing skills. It seems, however, that these enabling skills, being at the pre-beginner level, are rarely the subject of investigation by language assessment researchers.

Teachers' priorities

Although this research project focused on 'appropriate assessment' of low/pre-literacy learners, the researcher was surprised by what seemed to be a general lack of interest on the part of participating service providers and their teachers in assessment at this level. That is not to say there was no interest, but rather that there did not seem to be a great deal of genuine enthusiasm for the project and, in fact, feedback from many teachers of low/pre-literacy learners identified *teaching* issues as being of much more concern to them than assessment issues. (Brindley 1984, provides evidence that even 20 years ago, teaching was of greater concern to AMEP teachers than was assessing). This situation seemed curious given that the project was designed in response to the expressed interest of several service providers to have such a project in the 2005/6 SPRP research cycle. So, why was a need expressed by service providers to better understand 'appropriate assessment' of low/pre-literacy learners? The answer seems to relate to the issue of 'unrealistic expectations' referred to several times already in this report.

AMEP teachers may find that their job security is linked to performance indicators such as the number of learning outcomes successfully achieved by their learners. The underlying idea here is that better teachers will achieve more with their learners than poorer teachers would. This may be fair for teachers of beginner through intermediate-level learners (that is, CSWE I to III), but it may not be fair for teachers of low/pre-literacy learners. Notwithstanding SPP and SPP Youth provisions, the 510 hours of English instruction of low/pre-literacy learners may be spent on many things which are not, strictly speaking, English language learning. For example, many teachers have to deal with settlement issues of more immediate concern to their learners. Many learners have no experience of functioning in a formal classroom setting and, therefore, do not bring what could be viewed as 'basic' learning skills to this context. They may arrive late for class; they may not know how to hold a writing instrument; they may not bring handouts from previous lessons; they may not interact 'appropriately' with classmates etc. In such circumstances, teachers are forced to address these various issues in order to be able to then proceed with language teaching. It seems to be the case that many teachers spend a considerable amount of time in dealing with non-language issues in teaching at this level. Thus, the 510-hour funding is often not spent on language skills development at all, but rather on pre-language 'learning how to learn' activities. The effect of this practice is that few learners are actually achieving the learner outcomes as quickly as provider administrators or other stakeholders might expect and demand.

Refugees as research subjects

A number of factors contributed to difficulties in conducting this research project, however, the most significant concerned the researching of refugees as subjects. It is well known that many refugee migrants to Australia have suffered severe trauma in their lives. Not only does this impact on their ability to concentrate in a language classroom setting, but it also affects their ability and willingness to interact with others in their new environment. This project found that many refugee learners were suspicious about

the motives of the researcher. They seemed perplexed that the focus of the research was language assessment and many felt that it must really be asking about how satisfied the learners were with their teachers. Many refugee learners also seemed somewhat reluctant to sign the 'Information and Consent' form (required for the research to meet ethical standards) prior to participating in focus groups or case studies. It must be said, however, that their reluctance to sign off on something so culturally unfamiliar was entirely understandable.

Another issue with research implications is that refugees are often aligned with an ethnic, religious or political faction from their homeland and this might not be apparent to their teacher (and would likely be even less apparent to a researcher). Participants in research might align their responses with those of other faction members. The issue of factions is further compounded when an interpreter is involved in relaying information between interviewer and interviewee, and the notion of being neutral does not exist in the eyes of participants. A further matter to highlight concerning refugees is their vulnerability to 'bad' news from their home country, which can easily affect their attendance at language centres. As reported in Chapter 3, this issue impacted directly on the data collection of the fourth focus group in this project.

A further issue with research implications concerned the data collection process and the practice within a focus group of deferring to the eldest male's view, even if it did not align with the views of all (or any) of the other members. Imbedded within this practice is the practice of females deferring to males and the young deferring to the old. Focus groups were also awkward because participants seemed to struggle with the very notion of research in general, let alone language assessment research in particular. Indeed the researcher felt almost equally embarrassed to be asking the focus group members about a topic which, in the context of traumatised migrants, hardly seemed to merit the importance it was being given.

As reported in Chapter 3, the use of Think Aloud Protocols (TAP) with three refugee learners was unsuccessful. TAPs used in language learning contexts often involve the use of L1 in addition to L2 and, therefore, are further complicated by the interplay of two languages both in performing the task and, simultaneously, in speaking what one is thinking while performing it. Some subjects found speaking what they were thinking strange and difficult, while others were able to do it almost effortlessly. For low/pre-literacy learners, it is important to have an interpreter present to ensure that the subject is abiding by the TAP. However, for uncommon languages, the interpreters themselves may not have a relevant qualification or be officially accredited as interpreters, thus the quality of their work is unknown. Interpreters encouraging subjects to 'speak what you are thinking', when persistent, was probably felt to be badgering, stressful and unhelpful. Even though the tasks were not a test, the conditions would have seemed very much as though they were. The tape-recorders, though necessary, might well have created even more psychological pressure on the subjects.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This report has provided a detailed account of the SPRP project 'Appropriate assessment for low/pre-literacy AMEP learners', undertaken in 2005/6. It has reported teachers' views of the assessment of learners fitting this profile, and it has also provided a sample of learners' views. It has reported on the development and piloting of the Assessment Technique Grid – the principal practical outcome of the project. Key issues arising in conducting this project have also been reported; that is: dealing with assessment of 'pre-language' learners; teachers' perceptions of 'unrealistic expectations'; and researching refugees as subjects.

As noted in Chapter 1, the project had six aims. The first aim, of discovering how low/pre-literacy learners interpret assessment tasks was, with hindsight, very ambitious. The attempt to discover this through the use of Think Aloud Protocols was unsuccessful, and it is doubtful that such knowledge could be gained except through extensive and multiple case studies of individual learners using an interpreter trusted by both subject and researcher. Even under those conditions, however, there is no certainty that the subjects would be able to reveal how they actually interpret assessment tasks.

The second aim of the project – to discover which assessment task types work and which do not for low/pre-literacy learners – was clearly achieved. Both teachers and learners voiced opinions on this topic and these are documented in Chapters 2 and 3.

The third aim was to discover any features of language at this level that were particularly salient for adult learners with an SPP Youth profile. Some relevant comments by teachers were made and reported in Chapter 2, but this aim could not be fully addressed due to the lack of sufficient numbers of SPP Youth learners at the language centres involved in this project.

The fourth aim of the project was to produce practical recommendations for the appropriate assessment of the learners under study. This aim was achieved through understanding the importance of ongoing rather than summative assessment and the value of assessment 'techniques' in relation to assessment 'tasks'. These issues were brought together in the form of the Assessment Technique Grid, which is introduced in Chapter 4.

The fifth aim was to enhance the assessment-related expertise of teachers working on the project. Although, apart from the initial survey, the project did not involve any large-scale teacher participation, the half-dozen teachers who piloted the ATG did report benefiting from their experience. The extent of this benefit, however, is difficult to ascertain. The AMEP's Assessment Task Bank (ATB) National Working Group has been provided with the findings of this research project, and will be able to discuss its

implications for the ATB itself. AMEP teachers nationwide will also be provided with an introduction to the ATG through the AMEP Research Centre's website.

The sixth aim of the project was to enable engagement with academic debate from an experiential basis in this area of assessment. This aim has been partly achieved through presentations of most of the findings at both national and international English language education conferences in 2005 and 2006. The researcher has also prepared a journal article to report this project for an international audience of applied linguists and language teacher educators (Moore 2007).

This research project has confirmed the view that researching language assessment at a 'pre-language' stage of proficiency is problematic. Future language research of AMEP learners at this level would be more beneficial for teachers if it focused on teaching rather than assessment issues.

References

- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brindley, G. (1984). *Needs analysis and objective setting in the Adult Migrant Education Program*. Sydney: NSW AMES.
- Brindley, G. (Ed.). (2000). *Studies in immigrant English language assessment*. (Vol. 1). Sydney: NCELTR.
- Brindley, G., & Burrows, C. (Eds.). (2001). *Studies in immigrant English language assessment*. (Vol. 2). Sydney: NCELTR.
- Hughes, A. (2003). *Testing for language teachers*. (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, S. H. (2005, September). *Appropriate assessment for low/pre-literacy learners: A progress report*. Paper presented at AMEP National Conference, Macquarie University, Sydney.
- Moore, S. H. (2006, October). *An ongoing assessment grid for low/pre-literacy learners*. Paper presented at AMEP National Conference, Central TAFE, Perth.
- Moore, S. H. (2007). Researching appropriate assessment for low/pre-literacy adult ESL learners: Results, issues and challenges. *Prospect* 22(2), 25–39.
- Wakefield, L. (1989). Expanding assessment procedures for low level learners. *Prospect* 4(3), 51–60.

Appendixes

Appendix 1: Teacher questionnaire

Appendix 2: Focus group interview questions

Appendix 3: Focus group supplementary questions

Appendix 4: Think aloud protocol guidelines

Appendix 1

Teacher questionnaire

Appropriate assessment

AMEP Teacher questionnaire survey (April/May 2005)

This is a voluntary survey. You do not have to participate.

Personal information and profile

Name (optional): _____

Gender (optional): _____ Age (optional): _____

Languages spoken/written other than English: _____

Name of AMEP teaching institution: _____

Experience to date in teaching pre/low-literacy learners:

- Years or months or weeks (please specify which): _____
- L1 of low/pre-literacy learners you have taught: _____

Information about how you assess or have assessed low/pre-literacy learners

(Please read all questions first before formulating your responses. This will help avoid unnecessary redundancy in your answers).

1 (a) How do you typically assess this level of learner?

(b) Do you formulate different assessment tasks for learners from different language groups?

Yes No If 'yes', please elaborate: _____

2 (a) In your experience, which kind of assessment tasks work at this level?

(b) Why do you think these kinds of assessment tasks work at this level?

3 (a) In your experience, which kind of assessment tasks do not work at this level?

(b) Why do you think these kinds of assessment tasks do not work at this level?

4 What are your main problems or concerns, if any, regarding assessment issues for this level of learner?

5 Do you have any suggestions regarding useful 'alternative assessments', if not previously mentioned above?

6 If you have any experience regarding teaching and/or assessing Special Preparation Programme (SPP) Youth (that is, 18–24 years old with 'interrupted' education), are there any considerations that you think are particularly important to take account of in assessing this type of learner?

Appendix 2

Focus group interview questions

Appropriate assessment

AMEP learner focus group questions (June 2005)

This is a voluntary focus group discussion. You do not have to participate.

The focus group was conducted through the following interpreter:

- Bilingual AMEP teacher: _____
- or
- Professional interpreter: _____

Group information and profile

Date: _____ Place: _____

Number of learners present: _____

Gender mix: _____ Age mix: _____

Common language of this group other than English: _____

Name of AMEP teaching institution: _____

Experience of participants in learning English prior to AMEP course:

Experience of participants to date in learning English through AMEP.
Range in years or months or weeks (please specify which):

Information about how participants' English is assessed

1 What are some tasks that help you learn English?

2 What are some tasks that help you to show what you learn?

3 Do you see any problems in the techniques used to assess your English ability?

4 (a) What kind of task types or assessment techniques do you like?

(b) Why do you like them?

5 (a) What kind of task types or assessment techniques do you dislike?

(b) Why do you dislike them?

6 Do you have any further comments or suggestions to make regarding the way your English ability is assessed?

Appendix 3

Focus group supplementary questions for Toowoomba focus groups

1 I prefer to do a task through:

Listening

- Listening and speaking
- Listening and writing
- Listening and doing an action (for example, pointing, drawing etc)

Looking/reading

- Looking/reading and speaking
- Looking/reading and writing
- Looking/reading and doing an action (for example, pointing, drawing etc)

2 Rate the following activities or techniques according to whether you: like them a lot (5); like them (4); no opinion (3); dislike them (2) dislike them a lot (1)

- Copying (for example, letters)
- Gap-filling (for example, filling in a form)
- Identifying alphabetical order (for example, arranging letters into alphabetical order)
- Using images (for example, photographs; drawings)
- Using real objects (for example, classroom objects; fruit; toys etc)
- Sequencing numbers or pictures
- Talking or writing about personal information (for example, name; address; phone number)
- Role play

Appendix 4

Think aloud protocol guidelines

[Translated and read to learners in their L1]

I am an English teacher who designs language tests for English language learners. I am doing some research into how learners of English do language tests. I am particularly interested in knowing about approaches and strategies that you use to answer assessment tasks. I am going to ask you to do two tasks.

I am interested in what you think about when you answer the test questions. In order to find out, I am going to ask you to THINK ALOUD while you perform the task. What I mean by 'think aloud' is that I want you to tell me in your first language EVERYTHING you are thinking while you are doing this activity. I would like you to talk CONSTANTLY while you perform the activity. I don't want you to try to plan out what you say or to try to explain what you are saying. Just act as if you were alone in the room speaking to yourself. What is more important is that you keep talking, and talk clearly and loudly. If you are silent for any period of time I will remind you to talk by saying, 'What are you thinking?'. Similarly, if you begin to speak softly, I may ask you to speak louder. You will be audio-taped while you work on the task so that I have an accurate record of what you said.

Do you understand what I want you to do?

