



NALDIC Briefing Paper

Guidance on the Assessment of pupils learning English as an additional language

26 July 2005

Introduction

1. This briefing paper has been produced in the context of recommendations included in a recent DfES publication *Aiming High: Guidance on the assessment of pupils learning English as an additional language* (DfES, April 2005, 1469-2005DOC-EN).
2. Whilst the approach adopted in the 'Aiming High' document is consistent with many DfES and National Strategy publications which have been produced since the development of *A Language in Common* (QCA, 2000) this latest guidance differs in that it recommends that schools 'amend their practice' in light of information and guidance contained in it.
3. In particular, the guidance contains the following statement:

It is not recommended that specialist staff adopt separate scales or measures of performance for making a summative judgment about levels of English language fluency. Locally devised fluency scales create additional work and do not provide reliable or consistent information that can be used for tracking progress or setting targets (DfES, 2005, p14)
4. Whilst NALDIC's position on assessment has been articulated at length elsewhere¹, we feel obliged to comment directly on this recommendation as we believe it is not only contrary to established good practice with regard to assessment but most importantly, were it implemented, would lead to inequitable and unfair treatment of learners of EAL in school settings.

Background

5. For many years, schools, mainstream and specialist teachers and local authorities have made use of EAL scales or stages for tracking the language development or progress of pupils for whom English is an additional language. These scales, whilst not uniform throughout the country, have provided teachers, schools and local authorities with essential information on the progress and attainment of pupils learning EAL.
6. The multiplicity of scales has caused some problems for national comparisons of EAL learner progress and enabling teachers from different schools and regions to share common reference points. Nationally or regionally agreed EAL scales or stages have been developed and incorporated into the curriculum of most other English speaking countries including Australia, Canada, United States, and Eire.
7. Rather than developing nationally agreed EAL scales or stages, QCA produced *A language in common: Assessing English as an additional language* (QCA, 2000). This introduced very slight amendments to the National Curriculum English levels to take

¹ Further details of NALDIC's position on assessment are contained in *NALDIC Position Statement on Assessment of English as an Additional Language* (2003) Available from: <http://www.naldic.org.uk/docs/research/assessment.cfm>

account of very early stage learners of English. These amendments included two steps before learners of EAL reached NC English Level 1 and a two fold description of Level 1 NC English (Threshold and Secure) adapted to reflect some elements of the language development of EAL learners.

8. At the time of publication, it was suggested that schools and teachers may adopt these 'steps' rather than continuing to use language fluency or development scales. Despite five years of promotion by national agencies including QCA, DfES, OfSTED and the National Strategies, a significant proportion of schools have not implemented the 'QCA EAL steps' and continue to make assessments based on the language development of EAL learners. This in itself is a testament to the deeply held pedagogical concerns of professionals concerning these steps as well as an overriding concern for the well being of learners of EAL in their care. A summary of pedagogical and educational concerns are set out below.

NC English (including 'QCA EAL steps') provides an assessment of the subject English rather than an assessment of English as an additional language proficiency

9. NC English (including 'QCA EAL steps') does not adequately reflect the nature of the proficiency which teachers are trying to help EAL pupils to develop. Instead it reflects the concerns of National Curriculum English as a subject. This means that the nature of the proficiency it is measuring is substantially different from the proficiency which is required by learners to use and achieve in the context of the whole curriculum
10. For example, NC English (including 'QCA EAL steps') equates proficiency (particularly in speaking and listening) with generalised cognitive notions of: confidence; paying attention; interest; engaging the interest of others; and providing detail rather than in linguistic proficiency terms as seen in pronunciation; knowledge of vocabulary; use of tenses and structural language features; and socio-linguistic awareness.
11. National Curriculum English assumes an age-linked developmental progression in English language use. This is problematic for learners of English as an additional language who may begin learning English at any age. For example, older EAL learners may draw on their underlying common language proficiency, creativity, imagination and cultural knowledge to use a relatively limited level of English in an effective way, whereas younger EAL learners who may have far more experience of English may be judged to be at the same NC/QCA level because they are using their greater knowledge of English less effectively in terms of creativity, imagination, and response to literature.
12. Because it is measuring National Curriculum English proficiency rather than language proficiency, NC English (including 'QCA EAL steps') effectively offers nothing to class or subject teachers who wish to assess the English language proficiency of pupils in the context of a curriculum subject. It provides no support for teachers to:
 - Judge what pupils at various stages of learning EAL may be able or not able to do in English.
 - Decide what pupils at various stages of learning EAL may need to work on next.
 - Integrate English language and subject content.
13. NALDIC believes that an assessment scheme should:

clearly distinguish the EAL learner's starting point from that of a child whose mother tongue is English, and help to improve educational practice for pupils who have to learn the English language as well as the content of the curriculum. It should take account of the different entry points of learners, with respect to age and curriculum demands, and show EAL progression in the context of the full curriculum. It should specify the domains of language knowledge and skills being assessed explicitly.....National Curriculum English (subject) scales are not by themselves sufficient for the charting of EAL development. There is a need

for additional evidence-based and fully validated EAL scales for primary and secondary phases of education which are complementary to the current National Curriculum English scales. (NALDIC, 2003)

NC English (including 'QCA EAL steps') may lead to the increasing 'invisibility' of EAL learners and educational discrimination against them.

14. Although 'QCA EAL steps' allow for some additional insights into the very early EAL development of young learners, teachers have not found that they are informative with respect to older or more advanced learners. The 'QCA EAL steps' provide no additional information once the learner is beyond NC English Level 1. This is unhelpful in that much research evidence has shown that EAL learning may take seven or more years. Indeed recent research has highlighted significant differences between EAL learners' and first language learners' use of English at the end of their secondary education, even where both primary and secondary education has taken place in English schools. (see OFSTED, 2003)
15. We are particularly concerned that the collection of information about the level of English language development of pupils for whom English is an additional language is represented as '*additional work*' in the guidance and an issue unworthy of professional concern. This directly contradicts much of the DfES' own sponsored research (Cameron and Besser, 2004) and evidence from OFSTED (2005) which shows that it is essential for teachers to focus on the process and progress of additional language learning in their pupils.
16. We note that HMI's evaluation of the Primary National Strategy EAL programme draws attention to the lack of clarity in the use of the term 'advanced'. This problem arises precisely because there are no agreed EAL 'stages'. As a consequence, there is no recognised terminology which can clearly indicate what EAL level 'advanced' refers to.
17. A recent OFSTED survey of good practice in relation to bilingual pupils' writing development defined advanced bilingual learners as:

pupils who have had all or most of their school education in the UK and whose oral proficiency in English is usually indistinguishable from that of pupils with English as a first language but whose writing may still show distinctive features related to their language background. (OFSTED, 2005, p 1)

As OFSTED noted in the survey '*Bilingual learners may be unwittingly disadvantaged when their oral fluency masks a continuing need for literacy support*'. (p 1) We would argue that the lack of EAL stages which would clearly indicate such a continuing need as well as defining more closely the particular nature of the need, is a contributory factor in perpetuating this unwitting disadvantage.

18. A telling example is provided in the document:

69. A lack of rigorous analysis in some schools visited meant that issues affecting the specific needs or progress of advanced bilingual learners (or other underachieving groups) were not identified and tackled. In one school, of the 28 pupils who had attained level 2 in writing at the end of Key Stage 1, almost half (13) did not reach level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2 in 2004. The school had not realised that all these underachieving pupils were pupils with EAL. One school noted:

The proportion of EAL pupils who did not meet their target in 2004 and failed to achieve level 4 is significantly higher than EIL pupils.

However, it had not identified a clear strategy for tackling this. (OFSTED, 2005, p 23)

Had the schools in question been maintaining comprehensive assessment data relating to the long term language development of pupils learning EAL, their relative lack of

progress in National Curriculum English writing levels would have been contextualised by their EAL progress measures over the previous two years. Not only may this monitoring have exposed the issue in time for the school to take effective action but would also have provided them with a clear framework for action which could have translated into classroom strategies. For example, such information would have enabled teachers to discriminate between those pupils who were making progress in acquiring English as an additional language but were possibly experiencing more general literacy difficulties and those for whom acquisition of EAL in general was proving problematic and how to address these distinct and different needs.

19. By guiding schools not to collect information concerning this long term language learning process, the DfES may encourage schools to ignore the teaching and curriculum practices which would support these learners. This would contribute to and increase the disadvantage that EAL learners face within the education system and would be entirely contrary in outcome to the DfES stated concern for enabling all children to achieve their best.

NC English (including 'QCA EAL steps') makes it impossible to contextualise and identify 'value added' achievement of learners of English as an additional language

20. English as an additional language development scales are essential for teachers, schools and local authorities to be able to contextualise pupil achievement in national curriculum subjects and public examinations.
21. The collection of EAL levels or stages at school and local authority level has added much to the target setting and progress tracking process in local authorities and schools. For example, a number of recent reports to national data collection forums and advisory groups have noted strong relationships between the stages of language acquisition and educational attainment and in particular language stage and performance at GCSE when other background variables are controlled.
22. This sort of detailed analysis of educational achievement data is not possible to undertake without continued collection of summative assessments which consider the language development of EAL learners in sufficient detail and over a sufficient period of time to be meaningful as an instrument for analysis and school improvement. Without such data, any value added data will lack a highly significant pupil variable and one which is proven to be of significance in national and international research.
23. Many local authorities and schools would contest a position that the collection of language development data does not '*provide reliable or consistent information that can be used for tracking progress or setting targets*'. Such assessments have been relied on consistently within schools and authorities to support the planning and targeting of support for learners of EAL as well as for analysis of achievement data. Both these activities have much to add to the process of ensuring equitable attainment for EAL learners in English schools.

NC English (including 'QCA EAL steps') only is contrary to principles of entitlement to an assessment which is appropriate to the purpose

24. Assessments based on the NC English (including 'QCA EAL steps') do not reflect the differences between the language development of a first and additional language learner. In the post 16 sector this is considered inappropriate. Since 2003, all post 16 EAL learners have followed the Adult ESOL core curriculum and have been assessed according to a new suite of ESOL Skills for Life examinations. Whilst these examinations are designed to be consistent with the national framework of qualifications, they are required to be different to more general qualifications such as literacy because they need to:
 - *Meet the needs of ESOL learners living in England*

- *Acknowledge different levels of prior attainment*
- *Recognise a range of goals and assessment preferences*
- *Establish clear progression routes for learners*

(White and Simpson, 2004)

25. It is inappropriate that such a policy position should be maintained for older learners and an entirely contrary policy position maintained for learners under 16. It is particularly inappropriate when the same agency (QCA) is the lead agency in the development of two directly opposed systems.
26. Not only is this confusing for educationalists but also for learners, who are unable to identify their progress in learning EAL within statutory schooling but are 'required' to do so once they have left school. As noted in the Common European Framework of Reference
- Finally, in their learning career students of the language will pass through a number of educational sectors and institutions offering language services, and the provision of a common set of levels may facilitate collaboration between those sectors. With increased personal mobility, it is more and more common for learners to switch between educational systems at the end of or even in the middle of their period in particular educational sector, making the provision of a common scale on which to describe their achievement an issue of ever wider concern. (2001, p 17)
27. The approach taken to assessment in *Aiming High: Guidance on the assessment of pupils learning English as an additional language* appears to be in direct contradiction to a Council of Europe parliamentary assembly recommendation (2001) for 'relevant institutions to use the Common European Framework of Reference drawn up by the Council of Europe to develop their language policies, so as to ensure the quality of language teaching and learning and improve international co-ordination'.
28. NALDIC believes that 'teachers need a theoretically informed and empirically validated framework of assessment within which to work. In addition to providing sufficiently comprehensive information about EAL progression for teachers to be able to make informed judgements, such a framework would help to transform the under-represented language development needs of EAL learners in the education system by providing a central core of information for training purposes and by enhancing the visibility of EAL learners in education settings.' (NALDIC, 2003).
29. Until the necessary resources are invested in developing a national EAL assessment framework, we believe that specialist staff, mainstream teachers and schools should continue to use such separate scales or measures of EAL fluency which support them in their task of enabling learners of English as an additional language to learn and achieve equitably within the education system.

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