

NALDIC Position Statement on Assessment of English as an Additional Language

Introduction

NALDIC believes that learners of English as an additional language (EAL) are entitled to a fair and meaningful process of assessment which pays attention to their distinctive needs and supports their language learning development. It should be capable of being used to highlight EAL learners' skills, progress, and achievements, and to inform pedagogical and administrative planning. A very high priority should therefore be placed on formative assessment. This need has yet to be fully addressed in the English education system.

There are, however, English proficiency scales which have been the subject of debate in the EAL field in recent years. NALDIC believes that any EAL assessment scheme should reflect the distinctive learning trajectories of pupils with EAL. It 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. These criteria have not been met by existing EAL-oriented assessment scales used in England.

If these criteria are taken into account, it should be clear that 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.

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. These points have been little recognized in discussions about EAL assessment and it is particularly important that policy makers should take them into account.

The approach advocated by NALDIC is not yet a reality in the current national assessment framework. However, there is extensive experience in Britain, and an established body of work in the field of EAL assessment elsewhere in the world, which

could be drawn upon in order to develop an assessment practice for EAL learners, based on the following principles:

Principle 1

The assessment model would need to account for the diverse range of learners of EAL. A common national framework would take account of learners' different points of entry, provide criteria and supporting information about the varying developmental trajectories, recognise positive starting points for EAL and provide positive descriptions of growth. The framework would recognise the fact that EAL pupils bring to their learning a range of experiences, skills, knowledge and understanding in their first language which will impact on their acquisition of English.

Principle 2

The process of developing EAL assessment should be informed by a coherent and explicit theoretical basis drawn from educational assessment in general and more particularly from language assessment and testing. It should also draw on empirical research in the area of second, or additional, language assessment. It should be informed by research and by frameworks in relevant fields such as pragmatics, functional linguistics, and second language acquisition. The development of an EAL assessment framework will need to be an ongoing process of review and revision in the light of insights from research and evidence-based practice.

Principle 3

The basis of EAL assessment should be informed by evidence-based practice and research, and it should take into account the language demands of the whole curriculum. There will therefore be a need to develop a set of clearly stated descriptors of English language use - not only for the core curriculum subject of English - supported by indicative examples drawn from classroom experience. Such descriptors will enable teachers to link language learning with content, and facilitate forward planning for EAL-conscious teaching.

Conclusion

The development of the type of framework outlined above implies the commissioning of a major development initiative. Based on the experiences of colleagues elsewhere, we believe that anything less than this would be of little pedagogic value. Given the increasingly linguistically and ethnically diverse school population in contemporary European experience, the development we are advocating is key to any coherent policy for the raising of achievement and genuine equality in education which is concerned with outcomes. Therefore we believe that the resources required for establishing the EAL assessment framework proposed is a necessary investment in the education system, and that short-term or less thorough measures would be a waste of resources