



Reading Tests: challenges for multilingual and EAL learners and the development of an alternative

“Unlocking Potential”

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Acknowledgements:

- ◆ This workshop is based on my observations over many years of working with EAL and more advanced bilingual learners. It draws on the many analyses I have made over the years, at KS3, 4 and 5 to find problem areas in assessments. This work has supported colleagues by encouraging them to consider the language alongside content both in their lessons and in all assessments. Our students' results speak for themselves...
- ◆ Additional detail can be found in Jean Conteh's book, *The EAL Teaching Book* (2nd edition, 2015), Chapter 6, Pages 134 – 8

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Aims:

- ◆ To identify problem areas in standardised baseline reading tests
- ◆ To outline the development of an alternative end of year reading assessment to assess progress
- ◆ To consider the implications for assessments across the curriculum.



Background:

- ◆ Set in the heart of Bradford
- ◆ First Voluntary Aided Muslim Girls' Secondary in 2001
- ◆ 100% Ethnic Minority backgrounds – Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Middle East, North Africa...mostly born in Bradford (MABL)
- ◆ At least 90% use other L1s in their everyday lives – Urdu, Pushto, Punjabi, Hindko, Arabic...
- ◆ Oversubscribed – 120 places, well over 600 applicants each year
- ◆ 45.5% FSM
- ◆ But generally achieving higher than national average in GCSE



Setting the scene:

Many of our students amaze mainstream colleagues by their ability to **read fluently** when **decoding** and recognising words. However, regularly at least 25% in Year 7 have RAs 3 years lower than CA.

Colleagues are equally amazed at how many students read without comprehension... which is a particularly important consideration in assessment tasks.



Baseline Reading Tests

- ◆ All students in KS3 are assessed for Reading and Spelling ages in the first week of the school year.
- ◆ This information is always shared with all colleagues so that they can be aware of the proficiency of students in their classes. This should enable colleagues to provide appropriate tasks and adjust their expectations appropriately.
- ◆ This data is especially valuable for new Year 7 classes, SEN, EAL, G&T, free school meals ... students
- ◆ Also useful for showing student progress from one year to another



Which tests?

- ◆ **Vernon spelling test**
- ◆ **Until 2011 NFER Nelson Group Reading Test II (Form C or D)**
 - 48 sentences – choosing one of 5 answers to fill a space to complete each sentence.
 - relatively quick ...and intended to test basic understanding
 - same test could be used at the end of an academic year to show progress
- ◆ **But would it?**
- ◆ **Were these standardised tests a clear indication of ability?**



Discrepancies:

- ◆ **Spelling ages** were generally higher than Reading ages and usually showed progression from Year 7 and 8 to Year 9
- ◆ **Reading ages** showed many anomalies:
 - in the Year 7 top set, the student with highest KS2 English score had the lowest RA
 - students made widely varying amounts of progress
 - some students had lower RAs at the end of the year than at the beginning (Did they fully understand the sentences? or were they just guessing at an answer?)
 - recent arrivals invariably achieved only a few correct answers, even though oral skills might seem good (BICs not CALP)



Continued...

- danger of misinterpretation leading to lowest set, 'SEN' label, low expectations, perpetual underachievement...
- at the end of the year, EAL students may still have a low RA even though there should be no cause for concern because they have made significant progress in other areas of the curriculum.

e.g a student with only 2 years of English language experience entered school with a B for KS2 English but achieved L4c in English and L5 in science by the end of Y7 yet ...

RA in September Y7 7:06

RA in September Y8 6.05

Can these tests be valid?



Problem areas:

- ◆ One year only 5 words out of 48 were almost always correct
- ◆ Lack of general cultural knowledge – e.g. saddle, bolt, gale, theatre, tulip
- ◆ Idiomatic language
- ◆ Homophones
- ◆ Incorrect grammatical use e.g. prepositions, plurals, subject/verb agreement
- ◆ Wrong word association e.g. ‘chemist’ confused with ‘clinic’ for buying toothpaste
- ◆ Unusual/old-fashioned polysyllabic words (fruit being sold from a ‘barrow’)
- ◆ Confusion over similar words
‘department’ / ‘apartment’, ‘praise’ / ‘price’, ‘prize’



Conclusions:

- ◆ Although the NFER tests were standardised, perhaps they were only appropriate for testing monolingual English speakers because most sentences assumed prior knowledge of English culture.



Developing an Alternative Test

- ◆ Attempt to eliminate cultural bias
- ◆ Based directly on what had been taught in the curriculum
- ◆ Subject teachers provided 6 key words ranging from basic to advanced
- ◆ Produced a similar test to NFER
- ◆ Word choices made to ensure students had to use a wide range of knowledge about words when selecting the correct answer
- ◆ May be fairer

Task: Look at the tests to identify the reading skills needed to select the correct words



Skills:

- ◆ Distinguishing between homophones (write, right) or
- ◆ Similar sounding words (pleasure, leisure, treasure, measure; white, light)
- ◆ Words from the same context (pilgrim, journey, pilot)
- ◆ Words with similar combinations of letters (digits, gadgets, fidgets)
- ◆ Same beginnings (obligation, obedient, obstruction, objective)
- ◆ Comprehension through grammar and syntax



Results:

- ◆ The test was challenging for most students
- ◆ **High % scores** useful for identifying students who:
 - were gifted and talented
 - could retain what they had learned across the curriculum
- ◆ **Low % scores** included students who
 - had learning difficulties
 - had poor attendance, lacked motivation and/or poor behaviour
 - were new to English and making good progress – errors highlighting areas still needing further support
 - were new to English and making less progress than expected - suggesting more formative tests should be made to determine the most appropriate support



Continued...

- ◆ The tests were based on the principles of good EAL practice: activated prior knowledge, provided a rich contextual background, encouraged comprehensible output, drew the learner's attention to form and function, developed learner independence
- ◆ The test could also identify words and concepts across the curriculum causing most difficulty
- ◆ Mainstream colleagues could be informed of areas that may need to be re-taught or differentiated

- ◆ But it was specific to one school's curriculum and not standardised



2011 onwards...

NFER New Group Reading Tests

- ◆ 'Not culturally biased'
- ◆ 20 sentence completion tasks
- ◆ 4 passages in different genres to test comprehension

Results in for Year 9 group one year

- ◆ Results recorded on a data base with colour-coded highlighted entries for above 114 higher average standardised score (G&T) students; entries below the 85 lower average standardised score (SEN); students who have made rapid progress over the previous year or achieving a lower score than the previous year



SA Sept 13	RA Sept 13	Progress	Standard	SA Sept 14	RA July 14	Progress	Standard
12:01	11:11	Y	96	13:07	11:06	-5	87
11:02	10:09	Y	93	13:04	11:00	3	89
13:10	12:08	Y	99	15:06	12:03	-5	91
12:01	12:05	Y	100	14:00	10:03	-27	85
				14:07	11:06		87
14:04	10:09	Y	91	15:00	11:11	14	89
	10:09	Y	93	13:00	11:00	3	88
14:00	08:09	R	84	14:07	08:08	-1	74
11:08	10:03	Y	88	13:10	11:06	15	88
13:07	11:00	Y	95	15:03	12:03	15	92
14:00	11:00	N	92	15:00	11:11	11	89
14:07	10:03	Y	88	15:06	11:00	9	86
15:10	12:05	Y	99	15:10+	11:06	-13	88
13:04	11:11	Y	96	14:02	10:03	-20	83
				15:10	12:03		92
				11:04	09:00		80
	10:09	R	93	14:02	13:02	29	101
15:10+	13:06	Y	109	15:10+	14:03	9	105
14:02	10:00	N	86	15:03	09:06	-6	79
11:00	11:11	Y	96	09:08	11:00	11	91
				14:04	11:06	39	88
15:06	15:00+	Y	116	15:03	15:00+	0	120
13:02	11:00	Y	92	14:07	11:11	11	89
15:10+				15:10+	11:06		86
13:04	11:11	Y	96	15:03	13:06	19	101
13:10	10:00	R	89	13:02	12:03	27	92
14:04	11:11	Y	99	15:10	12:03	4	93
14:07	12:08	Y	102	15:10+	13:06	18	103



Task 1:

- ◆ Look at the sentence completion tasks
- ◆ At which number do students start to make errors?
- ◆ Use the previous analysis to think of some reasons why?
- ◆ Write down some examples
- ◆ Share results



Some reasons for errors 1:

Sentence completion errors could be:

- ◆ **cultural vocabulary;**
- ◆ **misheard words;**
- ◆ **wrong word family for the sentence;**
- ◆ **a word related to the vocabulary in the sentence but not right for the context etc**
- ◆ **Unfamiliar words**
- ◆ **Old fashioned words ...**



Task 2:

- ◆ Look at the passage completion section
- ◆ Which passage do you think students generally found most challenging?
- ◆ Why?
- ◆ Which passage do you think students scored most highly on?
- ◆ Why?
- ◆ Which of the old Afs in reading were the weakest?
- ◆ If an alternative test was to be developed, what passages of text might be appropriate?



Reasons for errors 2:

Passage completion errors could be

- ◆ Unfamiliarity with the topic
- ◆ Weak Afs – Afs 3 (inference and deduction) and 5 (writers use of language) weakest
- ◆ Unfamiliarity with more classical vocabulary
- ◆ Trying to remember the text rather than going back to skim, scan or close read for the answer
- ◆ Not reading the initial text!



Why do students struggle to read?

When we read we use:

- ◆ **Phonics** – letters into sounds into words; but English has many inconsistencies and they have to be learned;
- ◆ **Word recognition** – basic sight vocabulary; but some students do not have a good sight vocabulary or they are **unable to recognise words they have heard** in written form
- ◆ **Grammatical knowledge** - features of sentences or recognising how word families fit in the sentence (syntax); but many students do not hear good examples of English anywhere except school.
- ◆ **Knowledge of context** – the other clues on the page; but many students lack reading experience and/or cultural vocabulary...



Additionally they may:

- ◆ Be recent arrivals
- ◆ Not have good role models at home
- ◆ Have a short concentration span
- ◆ Rush as they read or go straight onto the questions
- ◆ Have hearing, sight, speaking difficulties or other special need
- ◆ Have been absent for long periods or attended many schools
- ◆ Not have been motivated by previous reading materials...



Reading is important because:

- ◆ All our students should have the reading skills to enable them to function in society outside/ after school socially, personally and practically, as well as academically.
- ◆ **In every assessment across the curriculum, students have to be able to read and understand the questions then write a logical response which answers the question.**



Assessments across the curriculum:

- ◆ What are the implications ?

By analysing test papers

- ◆ The **weakest responses** can be found
- ◆ The **language barriers** in those questions can be deduced
- ◆ Findings can be **disseminated** so that colleagues become aware of the language which is difficult
- ◆ A **Glossary** of exam language can help
- ◆ Inhouse CPD can teaching colleagues **strategies** for tackling exam questions – text marking, planning, scaffolding, modelling ...