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# ***EAL assessment: What do Australian teachers want?***

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*Abstract: Assessing English as a second or an additional language (ESL/EAL) learners in schools is a particularly challenging area for most teachers. With so many students requiring systematic and regular EAL support, all teachers need access to appropriate and useful assessment tools and advice, but most assessment systems are imposed on teachers, rather than negotiated with them based on a contextualised and detailed understanding of their needs. Drawing on questionnaire, focus group and teacher-based classroom observation data, this paper provides a snapshot of the views of more than 30 EAL specialist teachers drawn from with a representative range of teachers from selected government, Catholic and independent schools in Victoria and NSW<sup>1</sup>. The paper concludes with a discussion of the key criteria needed for more effective EAL assessment.*

*Keywords: English as an additional language, ESL, assessment, assessment literacy, teacher assessment.*

## **Introduction**

Assessing English as an additional language (EAL) learners in schools is a particularly challenging area for most teachers. Australian schools are becoming more diverse than ever as a result of demographic changes and large-scale immigration, with rapidly increasing numbers of students from language background other than English, many in comparatively early stages of learning English as an additional

1 This project was commissioned and funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), the Catholic Education Commission, Victoria (CECV) and Independent Schools, Victoria (ISV), together with the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) and the NSW Sydney Catholic Education Diocese. We would like to acknowledge the support of all those who contributed to this research, especially Chee Lee, our research assistant for the data collection stage of the project, and the Victorian joint systems project steering group, including key liaison members, Daina Coles, Carmel Sandiford and Elina Raso, who were so patient and helpful in dealing with our numerous requests for information and assistance. We would also particularly like to thank the many teachers who gave so much valuable time and input to the project and without whose insights and experiences this report would not be possible.

language (EAL).<sup>2</sup> The majority of these students will enter straight into mainstream schooling with no well-informed assessment of their language and literacy skills, a major concern given research consistently showing it takes 5-7 years for EAL learners to catch up with their English-speaking peers on standardised literacy tests (Cummins, 1996). Consultations undertaken by the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) as part of the development of a national curriculum have highlighted the need for all teachers to understand the typical language progression of EAL learners at the various entry and transition points in the early, upper primary and junior secondary years of schooling (ACARA, 2012). Where available, specialist EAL teachers with qualifications in second language learning are used as experts to assess student learning and to address the professional learning needs of teachers who do not have knowledge and skills in how students learn in and through an additional language, however such teachers are an increasingly scarce resource. So the accessibility, validity and fairness of assessment practices (Stobart, 2005) adopted by teachers to make informed judgments about the placement and progress of EAL students in programs/classes is critical, but even more important is the provision of assessment tools and advice which can help teachers enhance student learning. However, in the TESOL field in Australia, the primary focus until relatively recently has been on developing more accurate, consistent and transparent descriptions of EAL development, such as the ESL Band Scales used in Queensland (McKay et al, 1994), the ESL Scales (Education Services, 1994) used in NSW, the Victorian EAL Continuum (DEECD, n.d.) , and more recently, the ACARA (n.d.) EAL/D Learning Progression, in order to improve reporting systems, especially definitions of the target groups for funding purposes. Much less attention has been paid to improving teacher EAL assessment literacy at all levels, despite, or perhaps paradoxically, because of a long history of standards-based assessment in Australian education.

According to a recent review of EAL assessment by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER, 2010), commissioned by the DEECD, EAL assessment (particularly summative assessment) in Victorian schools is seen by teachers as especially difficult and all kinds of assessment methods and approaches are being used. It concluded that the most appropriate EAL assessment differed for different purposes and stages of development; assessment around the first

2 EAL is the term adopted by all Australian schools as part of the national education reform agenda of developing a K-12 Australian curriculum. In this paper the term English as an additional language (EAL) may be used interchangeably with the following terms: English as a second language (ESL) or English as an additional language or dialect (EALD).

and second stages of EAL learning needing to be as individualised as possible but more standardized approaches to summative assessment are required at later stages to assist with the integration of EAL students into mainstream curriculum areas. Such assessment needs to involve speaking and listening as well as reading and writing. The report concludes that “an optimal summative assessment for beginning EAL learners is possible through a classroom assessment undertaken by teachers that is as individualised as possible, and yet sufficiently standardised to allow reliable reporting”. A more recent project investigating how and to what extent teachers currently use the ESL Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) to monitor and assess the language and literacy learning of EAL students in Victorian government schools and the obstacles they face in so doing also demonstrated the need for better teacher assessment literacy and more common ESL assessment tools (Macqueen, Harding & Elder, 2011).

As a coordinated response to the need for more effective EAL assessment, the ESL Assessment Tools and Advice project was established by the three school sectors in Victoria (the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) and Independent Schools Victoria (ISV)) as a joint project as part of the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnerships, with DEECD being the lead agency. The project aims to develop a set of English as a Second Language (ESL) assessment tools and advice to contribute to the effective assessment and planning for ESL students at different stages in their schooling, aligned against against the *ESL Standards* (VELS) and *ESL Developmental Continuum*, with the potential for alignment to other standards by other jurisdictions.

This paper reports on the results of a study which was completed as part of the second stage of this large assessment tools and advice project. The study was undertaken by researchers from the School of Education at the University of New South Wales in collaboration with EAL teachers from selected schools in Victoria and NSW. The teachers were asked try out and evaluate one or two assessment tools and models over a period of several months, with reference to their current teaching situation, then their perspectives on the tools were collected via questionnaire, focus groups and individual interviews. The researchers also gathered extensive data regarding the existing methods and approaches used by the teachers to assess the English language proficiency of their students across the curriculum, including both formative and summative assessments of students at different

stages of EAL development (early, middle and late) and different levels of schooling (K-10). Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were undertaken and informal validation of the project conducted at each key stage with EAL professional networks.

### **The problem of ESL assessment in Australia**

The drive for greater improvements in student learning is an international phenomenon, but until recently in Australia the main focus was on the development of the large-scale testing system designed to assess all learners at Year 3, 5, 7, and 9, the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). However, NAPLAN was not designed to assess EAL learners, hence their learning outcomes cannot be reliably tracked and reported. Nor is there a set of validated assessment tools to assist teachers at different stages of schooling to improve the English language proficiency of EAL learners (Cumming & Maxwell, 2004).

Internationally, despite increasing calls for all teachers to be assessment-literate, there has been comparatively little research into the teacher-based assessment of EAL students. This is partly because of the uncertain status of TESOL as a discrete curriculum area in schools and tertiary institutions, and partly because of the traditional dominance of the field by large-scale adult English language tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and their research priorities and needs.

The limited research that has been done reveals much variability, a lack of systematic principles and procedures and a dearth of information as to the impact of teacher-based assessments on EAL learning and teaching (Davison & Leung, 2009). In Australia several studies of the use of large scale criterion-referenced English as second language assessment frameworks in schools (Breen, Barratt-Pugh, Derewianka, House, Hudson, Lumley & Rohl, 1997; Davison & Williams, 2002; Davison, 2004) have revealed a great disparity in teachers' approaches to assessment, influenced by the teachers' prior experiences and professional development, by the assessment frameworks and scales they used, and by the diverse reporting requirements placed on them by schools and systems. Concerns have also been raised about, on the one hand, the ad-hoc or impressionistic nature of many EAL teacher judgments (Leung, 2004; Leung & Teasdale, 1997) and on the other hand, mechanistic criterion-based approaches to teacher-based assessment, which are often implemented in such a way that they undermine, rather than support teachers'

classroom-embedded assessment processes (Arkoudis & O'Loughlin, 2004; Black & Wiliam 1998; Davison, 2004). Research into teacher-based assessment in EAL is further complicated by the considerable uncertainty and disagreement around the concept of teacher-based assessment itself (for example, see the debate in *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 22 (4), Winter, 2003; also a review by Davison & Leung, 2009), and by its intrinsically co-constructed, and context-dependent nature (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2009; Brookhart, 2003; Brown, 2007; McMillan, 2003; McNamara, 2001; Stiggins, 2002; Wiliam, 2010). Then there is the added complication that in EAL, English language development and the pace of learning is influenced significantly by the level and nature of first language literacy and language development (i.e. linguistic interdependence), hence any assessment of language which does not take the first language into account seems inadequate.

Despite these challenges and uncertainties, as in many English-speaking countries around the world (Darling-Hammond & McCloskey, 2008), Australian teachers are being called upon to design and use more effective assessment instruments and procedures to monitor and evaluate student progress in their classroom, and new curriculum documents and professional teaching standards increasingly demand teachers be knowledgeable and skilled in assessment, able to make trustworthy assessment decisions and reliably report student progression against state-based standards. Hence, EAL teachers need to have access to appropriate English language assessment tools and materials that can be used not only to identify learners and assess and report on their EAL development in the wider school context, but perhaps more critically, be used to improve learning and teaching at each stage of EAL development, from on-arrival through to full integration into the mainstream curriculum.

In order to do this, teachers need access to a rich range of teacher-developed and validated assessment instruments and tasks and more standardised instruments so that they can mix and match their assessment strategies to suit the needs of their students and embed the assessments into their everyday learning and teaching (Davison, 2007; Davison & Hamp-Lyons, 2009). All teachers of EAL students, including those with little or no EAL teaching experience also need to learn how to develop assessment tasks/activities and assessment criteria/rubrics which are appropriate for a range of individual needs. Such instruments can be difficult and time-consuming to construct (Fox, 2008), hence many educational systems promote the establishment of a virtual assessment resource centre which can be used to compile

teacher-developed assessment materials, work samples and video clips of quality assessment practices, including self and peer assessment and teacher feedback (for example, the website developed by Glasson (2009) and colleagues for Education Services Australia, [http://www.assessmentforlearning.edu.au/assessment\\_tasks/](http://www.assessmentforlearning.edu.au/assessment_tasks/)). Such virtual resource centres also help ensure the trustworthiness of teacher-based assessments through the provision of many exemplars of performance expectations/levels, and opportunities to benchmark with other classes and educational systems through online communities of assessment practice, as is done in Queensland. The ability to draw on the expertise and experience of colleagues in very different contexts and locations is particularly important for the often isolated and diverse EAL teaching contexts in which many teachers of EAL students find themselves.

However, research in teacher-based assessment more generally demonstrates that simply having access to assessment tools is not a sufficient condition for teachers to use the data produced to inform their teaching (Halverson et al. 2005). It is essential that teachers know how to interpret the data and use it in an evidence-based approach to teaching and learning. As Griffin (2007, 2009) argues, using standardised assessment tools formatively relies on the results data having sufficient diagnostic capacity for teachers to profile students' learning both at individual and group levels. Timperley and Robinson (2001) demonstrate that teachers may attribute student outcomes not to their teaching, but to factors such as children's background that are outside the teacher's control. This is in spite of research showing that teacher and classrooms can account for up to 60% of the variance in student achievement (Alton-Lee, 2004) and that achievement gains can occur despite barriers such as low socioeconomic status and other inhibiting family factors (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Phillips, McNaughton, and MacDonald, 2004).

Given these theoretical and practical problems in developing a more effective assessment system for EAL teachers and students, it is even more important to develop agreed criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of any assessment tools and/or advice and to establish some clear directions for improvements in EAL assessment and support.

### **The Study**

As part of this study into EAL teachers' assessment attitudes and practices, more than 30 EAL specialist teachers drawn from a range of contexts were asked to try out and evaluate one to two assessment tools and models over a period of several months, with data collected

via questionnaire, focus groups and individual interviews. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were undertaken. As the study was of limited duration, and the ethical issues involved in working with students from language backgrounds other than English very sensitive and complex, no EAL students were observed, interviewed or tested directly by the researchers as part of the study, and no information about them as individuals collected. There was no intrusive use of equipment and/or the intimidating presence of researchers in any student classrooms and teacher participants were only audio-taped, not video-taped, to ensure anonymity.

A total of 32 EAL teachers participated in the study, 18 in Victoria and 14 in NSW. In line with the typical EAL teacher profile, 30 were females and two were male. Their age ranged from 26 to 65. 21 were teaching in primary schools, eight in secondary schools and five were in an Intensive English Centre. Slightly more than two-thirds of participants indicated they had TESOL qualifications. Other relevant professional experience mentioned included VCE/HSC marking, NAPLAN marking, mainstream English marking, working in adult settings, and university lecturing. The teachers' teaching encompassed working with preliterate, recent arrival, refugee, long-term Australian resident and international students as well as students with special needs (for example, deaf, intellectual disability, physical disability). The selected schools represented different educational systems: government schools, Catholic Schools and independent schools, and varied significantly in terms of student cohort, language background, size and programs offered. Collectively, the schools provided a representative range of EAL students from K-10 at all stages of EAL development.

Data sources in this study included questionnaires, focus group discussions, individual interviews, and field notes. A short 15 minute questionnaire on teacher background was used to collect demographic information about participating teachers (for example, gender, age, qualifications and teaching experiences). Discussion questions relating to what teachers viewed as the five most important qualities for EAL assessment tools to address the needs of EAL students in Australia were used as a stimulus for semi-structured audio-taped focus group discussions and individual interviews. Data was transcribed and analyzed in an ongoing and iterative process. The software package N-Vivo was used to assist with qualitative data analysis and retrieval and audio material and other assessment documentation was systematically collected, classified and uploaded on a secure UNSW research intranet to allow for immediate sharing and evaluation

within the project team. Descriptive statistical information pertaining to the participants' background and profile was analysed and reported and participants' discourse/personal reflections in discussions and interviews were summarised, categorised and conceptualized, if applicable, and presented in tables and graphs. The evaluation forms/matrix were summarised according to themes and interpreted within the framework that was developed to address the research questions. Auditory data were not all transcribed but direct citations were used as evidence to enhance credibility and ensure the validity of the researchers' interpretation and understanding. The trustworthiness of the research was then checked by triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing and critical review, and by the clear separation of data from interpretation.

### **Findings: EAL teacher perspectives on assessment**

The data demonstrated very clearly the complex professional and pedagogic contexts in which EAL assessment practices and judgements occurred. Teachers wanted to ensure they could provide their students with assessments which were positive and meaningful, and with feedback which was motivating and helpful for further learning. To do this, they wanted rich assessment information able to inform curriculum and pedagogy, and clearly communicate ESL students' developing English language and literacy proficiency to all relevant stakeholders, including the students themselves as well as their parents. They rejected a "dumbing-down" of the metalanguage used to talk about development that meant a loss of precision and insight. This 'ecological' practice perspective on ESL teaching and learning acted as implicit criteria against which teachers evaluated the suitability and value of any given assessment advice or instrument.

Within this ecology, three contexts of professional practice and decision-making were confirmed as critical sites and moments for accurate assessment of ESL learners:

1. initial needs assessment of English language levels of newly arrived students, determining access to intensive or other ESL assistance;
2. follow-up assessment of English language learning and progress at transition to mainstream, determining the nature of further ESL assistance
3. follow-up assessment of English language learning and progress within the mainstream, determining cessation of ESL assistance.

In NSW and Victoria on-arrival ESL assessment is usually administered individually by Intensive Language Centre or primary or high school ESL teachers as students enrol in school at any time

throughout the year. The everyday realities of primary and secondary schools mean that it cannot be assumed that administration of such assessments always occur in a dedicated time and space and under ideal conditions. This ecology of on-arrival assessment therefore has particular implications for the development of the assessment tools in terms of practicality and portability design:

- Teacher A: If you're testing a new student, you might be testing them in the cloakroom – you're not necessarily taking them across the school to your tiny little ESL room.
- Teacher B: I don't even have an ESL room - many teachers don't even have a room
- Teacher A: ... you have to carry it with you.

Within the context of 'ESL in the mainstream', ESL teachers experienced another set of constraints acting on their assessment practice. ESL teachers spoke of this as ESL instruction and assessment occurring "within the confines of someone else's context", a point elaborated on by this NSW secondary teacher:

Within our second phase [ESL learners], you're very much working within the confines of what's happening in the [mainstream] classroom.

These constraints meant that ESL assessment must address construct issues around connections between ESL-specific and curriculum-based assessment, in particular, the integrated assessment of language and curriculum content. In the absence of good models, however, this situation has had the effect of inhibiting the development of ESL-focused, curriculum-based assessment tools, with ESL teachers working in mainstream contexts typically implementing mainstream assessment tools and processes, such as common grade curriculum assessments or diagnostic literacy assessments, with little or no design modifications for EAL learners.

Another factor inhibiting rigour and objectivity in EAL assessment practice was found to be collaborative assessment with non-EAL teachers. EAL teachers often work with class teachers and other specialists, such as special learning needs teachers, to diagnose and determine the most appropriate educational support for students with literacy or learning difficulties. Such collaboration, involving sometimes competing conceptions of student learning and need, is as much a socio-political process as an educational one. For example, class and special learning needs teachers' assessment of recently arrived students' English learning needs and progress in primary

schools occurs on the basis of monolingual-norms of early literacy and learning progression. This situation can readily lead to conflicting opinions among professionals about appropriate educational follow-up for ESL learners, as described by this primary teacher:

I had one teacher who wanted to repeat a child in Year 1. He'd come from Iran and he'd only had one term of English and because he didn't know a single of his sounds, she wanted to repeat him in Year 1 and I said, "He's older, he's bright, he's going to pick it up" and I had to have a bit of a battle, ... you know, it can cause a lot of tension.

ESL teachers working in these contexts saw great value in development of appropriate ESL assessment instruments that could provide a rich, detailed and objective evidence base and external back-up for their professional judgements and ensure appropriate assessment of and support for ESL learning. ESL teachers saw the potential of such tools as a means of empowering their professional advocacy role within schools.

The following section captures these key practitioner perspectives which reflect experienced EAL teachers' understandings of effective EAL assessment. These perspectives draw attention to fundamental issues of validity, reliability and practicality in assessment, and to a number of the essential qualities that underpin effective assessment practice.

### **1 Need for meaningful ESL student participation in assessment tasks**

In discussing ESL student participation in grade cohort-based testing processes designed for mainstream students such as *English Online* or *NAPLAN*, ESL teachers reported fundamental difficulties experienced by newly arrived English language learners. The inability of these students to attempt or complete assessment tasks due to insufficient English prevented gaining an accurate or useful picture about the student's learning of English, and highlighted the inappropriateness of the assessment for this group of students:

I have a new arrivals child who has been in Australia for less than a year, and he's in grade 3/4, and for me there is a huge gap there... because he can't participate in any formal testing because he really doesn't understand the language, and if he does, if he did cope very well, it's not really giving us an indication of how much his understanding, so there's a bit of a gap there.

## 2 Need for probing, diagnostic ESL assessment

Meaningful participation in assessments requires student engagement in tasks at levels of difficulty that are both within and somewhat beyond their range of individual ability. Similarly, meaningful assessment information resulting from such participation requires representation and interpretation of students' pattern of strengths and weaknesses. In this context, multiple-choice formats of formal tests can give a false picture of students' capabilities just as much as test items that are incomprehensible to students. Teachers were particularly critical of multiple-choice formats which encourage correct guesswork responses that do not accurately reflect students' actual knowledge or performance:

I find when I'm doing a multiple choice type of test with my kids that, many of them, just guess and I watch them - they just , you know, sort of - because they can't understand really what's asked of them. ... and that gives a really false - yes, they may be right, but you're *never really sure* of how much they know and how much it's all simple guesswork - especially in Maths type of -. They tend to do that a lot more - the guessing - than they do with the literacy-based ones. So, I think, after my reading, you know, that they have to get three, you know, consistently right, and then it kind of alters the difficulty of it. I just think that's fantastic.

A recurring theme in teachers' discussion of assessment was the absence of, and need for, assessments that challenged and probed students' English language knowledge and skill to their limits in order to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses and suggest the most appropriate follow-up instruction. An essential quality of diagnostic assessment for learning therefore was its ability to 'stretch' students beyond normal levels of performance in order to reveal the current status of their specific learning needs and achievements. This mode of assessment, which created conditions where students were 'being stretched' and the assessment information directly used to inform teaching, was seen as creating a 'zone of proximal development' for students (Vygotsky 1978). At the same time, teachers also acknowledged the importance of such assessments challenging their own expectations of students' abilities through confirming/disconfirming feedback on student test performance.

Sometimes I'll do something, I think, "oh, its' just going to be too hard, but I just want to see" and I'm really surprised, you know, that there are some who get to that, and I think it's good for us to

realise and for other, you know, teachers to realise, that they can be stretched, you know, they're not *just at that point*. Um, yes, so I would - I'd be very interested to have something, a program.

### **3 Need for fine-grained ESL assessment information**

Implicit in the discussion above, and essential to any effective assessment feedback, is the quality of the assessment information generated by the test. Teachers frequently commented on the unhelpful, generalised nature of student reporting from standardized assessment instruments such as NAPLAN. This was due firstly to the 'hit-or-miss' nature of results from assessments that were poorly matched to ESL students' levels of English proficiency and secondly to the lack of specific diagnostic information relating to ESL teaching and learning discussed above.

I teach grade 1/2, and I did some of the 1/2's and some of my children got 100%, so that the test wasn't any good for them, but some of them couldn't get any right and they're all on the same grade, so if I were just to give them that test and they were sent away, *it's not going to give me any information. I already know who might ... which children will do well and which wouldn't. I need more information than that .*

To be useful then, ESL assessments needed to provide more than just test scores. They need to provide fine-grained, fine-tuned information about ESL students' classroom-related, receptive and productive English language capabilities in the context of their past, current and prospective English language development.

### **4 Need to show ESL improvement and growth over time**

Despite the importance of being able to show improvement in ESL learners' English as they moved from intensive into mainstream class settings and across school grades within the ESL program, ESL teachers had no shared set of assessment tools for measuring and tracking student progress and informing reporting of EAL student achievement against the Victorian EAL Continuum or the ESL Scales in NSW:

I would like somewhere in it to actually to be able to *show* the improvement and growth over time in pre and post testing, or even maybe in the case of something like this - test the same, give the same test over time ... to see what the growth is.

Assessment tools and processes that can show ESL improvement and growth over time are particularly necessary during the key transitions of primary and secondary schooling and Intensive English to mainstream classes. Facing increased curriculum language demands and unfamiliar language use contexts throughout such transitions, ESL learners are at additional risk of experiencing language learning plateaus and regressions. Teachers indicated that specific assessment tools and procedures are especially important at this time to strengthen the continuity and focus of instruction across these settings and help ensure that ESL learners did not ‘slip through the cracks’:

(It) would be valuable to have some consistent approaches so we have a sort of common language, or common tasks when we’re assessing, particularly in terms of transitions when students leave our language school and they go to a mainstream school, or to an independent school, um, we have, yeah, a clear sense of where they’ve come from and the language that’s been used by the teacher in assessing them, reporting their progress.

Other teachers reported that they had been forced to develop modified assessment tasks based on existing materials such as grade assessment tasks, regional literacy screening tools, or in one case commercial language tests. Trade-offs are apparent in the contradictory ‘comprehensive but succinct’ requirements expressed as follows in a focus group by a NSW secondary teacher:

While it needs to be comprehensive, it also needs to be succinct because we’re dealing with people that are overworked and they need to be able to look at what is a fairly brief checklist to help them identify the problems ... and ongoing.. it’s not going to happen overnight – it’s probably over.... for even a term with a student, to be able to come up with this.

To support more effective reporting of ESL learner progress through their schooling, the NSW government system had attempted to meet the conflicting demands for both detailed and technical as well as accessible and ‘user friendly’ information by adapting the ESL Scales outcome levels as broader simplified levels for school-based reporting purposes. It was intended that the descriptors of students’ English language development of this ESL reporting format would provide an appropriate level of detail for teachers to be able to identify significant ESL progress within the course of the school year and report on these to non ESL specialist stakeholders, namely teachers and parents.

While ESL teachers were reasonably comfortable using the outcomes and pointers of the ESL Scales to determine students' English language proficiency levels, there was ambivalence about the adequacy and value of a simplified version of the ESL Scales levels for public reporting of ESL learners' progress. Here, the dilemmas between generalized 'user friendly' descriptors and detailed descriptors according to different stakeholder information needs are apparent:

- Teacher A: that new reporting format has a different scale and I find it really confusing and I've had to proofread the teachers' reports... to me, it just told the parents absolutely nothing.
- Teacher B: The levelling system of one to six.... The ticks are the part where the parent will look at – it's the comment – and the comment has to be put together really well to support the ticks – and it's very hard doing the report because – I don't know whether it's because the scales aren't detailed enough – or whether –
- Teacher C: and the 'moving on'.. is very slow. You can be on it for a long time – a year, for a couple - a year or so - you can't see progression - that detailed progression that parents would probably like to see - or any progression.

### **5 Need for objective interpretation of ESL standards**

Currently, EAL teachers form their judgements of ESL student achievement from their classroom-based assessments and observations and relate these to their interpretations of the standards of the state-based framework. EAL teachers were very conscious that, in the absence of some common assessment tools and protocols, multiple interpretations of these standards frameworks abounded.

From my observation, you can give five teachers of this school a piece of writing and get them to place it on the VELs continuum and [get] five different responses – it's so subjective, so any test that would help us, ... across the board, that would be useful.

Such varied understandings of the standards means that EAL teachers are effectively 'divided by a common language', and the value and intentions of the frameworks are being undermined. Teachers therefore saw value in the development of assessment instruments and scoring and interpretation protocols that aligned teacher judgements to standards, which reduced subjectivity in assessment and strengthened the objectivity and reliability of the EAL assessment process generally.

## **6 Need for an EAL assessment package, not just an EAL test**

In considering specific assessment instruments within the landscape of EAL assessment practices, EAL teachers indicated that ‘no single measure’ would be able to address the diversity of students, proficiencies, needs and contexts within the EAL program. Rather, a comprehensive resource and framework was needed that allowed for a range of assessment strategies reflecting a coherent approach to assessment across the EAL program. This resource needed to encompass common assessment tools and procedures as well as teacher-based classroom assessment tasks, and include models, templates, exemplars, procedures and protocols around item task creation, marking and scoring, interpretation and reporting of standard said to teacher assessment judgements and instructional planning:

What I think would be really good is to have some kind of a package - um - more an evaluation package rather than a specific tool. It would be really good to have some type of coherent resource.

However, all teachers overwhelmingly rejected “testing for testing’s sake”, concluding: “The best kind of testing is what you generate yourself and that relates to what you’re doing in the classroom”.

## **7 Need for ongoing development of teacher assessment literacy**

EAL teachers’ assessment literacy, or knowledge of assessment purposes, design, implementation and quality, was found to be a key factor influencing their assessment understandings and practices. In evaluating specific tests, EAL teachers were able to apply grounded understandings of EAL learning to identify key issues of assessment validity, fairness and reliability for their EAL students. Teachers were also articulate about rationales and issues relating to their use of common classroom assessment tools and strategies.

In the absence of systemic approaches to EAL assessment, however, EAL teachers’ development of classroom- or school-based EAL assessments, were somewhat limited, localised and ad hoc. Teachers tended to rely on or adapt existing teacher-developed tasks and strategies, or commercial or system material, as models of good classroom assessment design and practice. Many teachers developed their own assessment tasks but were not confident about their quality or status.

Teachers’ knowledge about assessment was therefore mainly informal, deriving mainly from assessment artefacts encountered in the course of teaching, while their professional learning tended to be confined to informal trial-and-error implementation of classroom

assessment strategies. In this context, some teachers didn't consider that the classroom-based EAL assessments they had developed constituted valid language assessment tools. At the same time, knowledge of the wide range of available assessment-for-learning strategies documented in classroom research was generally limited.

Given its importance to the EAL teachers' role, assessment literacy must therefore be considered as a key component of EAL teachers' professional knowledge and professional development needs.

### **Implications: Criteria for effective EAL assessment**

The professional practices, perspectives and values of EAL teachers captured in this research provide a durable reference point for considering new ESL assessment possibilities and the basis for deriving essential standards and criteria for effective ESL assessment. These teachers' perspectives were synthesized to generate the following set of six criteria or professional standards which can be used to guide the development and implementation of any future EAL assessment tools and processes:

#### **1. Assessment tools and processes should be culturally accessible**

Content, language and curriculum assumed in assessments should be culturally accessible for ESL students learning in Australian schools. Assessment tasks and items should, as far as possible, reflect assumed knowledge appropriate to students' life experiences and age and stage of schooling.

#### **2. Assessments tools and processes should meet the unique needs of ESL learners**

No single test can assess the language learning needs, achievements and development of the diverse group of ESL students across their varied ages, stages and levels of English proficiency. The diverse profile of ESL students and the dynamic development of language learning throughout their schooling require systematic use of a combination of teacher- and system-developed assessment tools capable of diagnosing and English learning strengths and needs within a framework of monitoring and responsiveness. Good practice models of classroom-based ESL assessment within this framework include class language-based observation protocols, checklists, assessment task templates and models, task banks, assessment task rubrics and criteria, worked student exemplars of oral presentations or group discussions or writing.

ESL students' first language development plays a key, distinctive

role in the development of their second or additional language oracy and literacy and needs to be an integral part of the ESL assessment process if a full picture of ESL students' learning is to be obtained. Educators' lack of facility in students' home language is not necessarily an impediment to gauging students' first language competence or bilingual/biliteracy development in school. Good practice models of such bilingual assessment practices include first language background and schooling history records, home language use profiles, and Canadian-developed multilingual vocabulary tests designed to be administered by non-speakers of the language to assess bilingual students' word knowledge and reading proficiency.

The diversity of the ESL student target group poses particular challenges for appropriate assessment since their second language development can be easily confused with special learning difficulties, needs and behaviours. As with the general student population, some ESL learners also have special learning needs as a compounding but hidden factor in their English language learning, particularly in the early stages. Determining whether ESL learners have special learning needs involves a process of discriminating between general and language learning processes, and requires diagnostic tools and protocols that systematically monitor and investigate students' responsiveness to teaching, and can identify key causal factors over a period of time. Good practice models of special education assessment for ESL learners are characterised by use of a range of ESL assessment tools outlined above in tandem with special education instruments sensitive to issues bilingual learning.

### **3. Assessment tools and processes should provide useful information that informs ESL teaching**

Assessment should provide meaningful information able to shape instruction in a timely manner. Feedback from testing systems that rely on centralised marking and aggregated reporting of scores typically fails to provide sufficiently rich or detailed information and comes too late to benefit student learning. Assessment instruments and procedures that can provide timely diagnostic information and relevant teaching advice underpin the development of effective targeted ESL programs focused on student need.

### **4. Assessment tools and processes should support ESL teacher decision-making and control**

The most effective appropriate and useful assessments give teachers maximum flexibility to make decisions about the nature, type and difficulty level of tasks; the modification, administration and timing

of assessment; and options for reporting to different stakeholders. Teachers need to be able to choose from a combination of teacher- and system-developed assessment tools in order to accomplish the goals and requirements of the ESL program and meet the diverse profile and needs of the ESL target group.

#### **5. Assessment tools and processes should be easy to understand and administer**

Assessments need to be ‘teacher friendly’; that is, time efficient and easy to administer and supported by clear instructions for administration. At the same time, assessments also should be ‘student friendly’, with accessible and unambiguous task instructions supported by clear visuals where appropriate. Care needs to be taken with test administration involving IT. Students should have prior familiarity in using any computer-mediated assessment and alternative paper-based administration options should be available to ensure maximum accessibility and flexibility.

#### **6. Assessment tools and processes should form the basis of an ESL community of practice**

Sharing of assessment artefacts is a key means for building the professional capacity of ESL teachers and developing a professional culture and community of specialized assessment practice. These resources provide models and standards that help induct new teachers entering the profession into key roles and practices of the field. The development of an ESL assessment community underpins the value and status of the profession and is the best assurance of rigorous assessment practice, as well as sustained quality teaching and program delivery, to external stakeholders and the wider community.

Technology now allows the operation and development of online professional networks and communities where ESL teachers, singly or in groups across schools, clusters or regions, can share assessment models, examples and strategies, and engage in moderation processes that promote common understandings of standards and strengthen the consistency and reliability of their assessment judgements. Creating an effective online community of ESL teachers around exemplary assessment practice requires the systemic development and maintenance of an interactive website which publishes proven ESL assessment tools, procedures and advice, supported by teacher-owned assessment moderation protocols.

If these six standards or criteria are met, then the assessment advice and /or tools should not only be valid and reliable, but also accessible and useful to all.

## Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that EAL teachers in Australian schools have clearly defined and well-justified assessment needs which are not being met by the assessment tools and advice currently available to them at the system level. In considering the suitability of EAL assessment tools and advice, teacher responses highlight the wider professional and pedagogic perspectives in which EAL assessment practices and judgements take place. Teachers are concerned that there is meaningful student participation in assessment tasks and motivating feedback for further learning, as well as rich assessment information able to inform curriculum and pedagogy, and clearly communicate EAL students' developing English language and literacy proficiency to relevant stakeholders. These practitioner perspectives form a durable reference point for considering new ESL assessment possibilities, at the same time drawing attention to fundamental issues of validity, reliability and practicality in assessment, helping to reveal the key qualities that underpin effective assessment practice. As one of the informants in this study put it so eloquently:

For the ESL child, I think, as far as helping us to place them on the indicators - I don't think there's really anything that [has] done that - to assess their language proficiency, so to speak ... To have a reliable assessment tool, that we will actually assess the child and provide you with that information, I think, that is something that we definitely need, and is lacking. And for me, as an ESL teacher... I'm really longing for something like that to be around because it's otherwise a bit of a guessing game ... we're not, we're not really supported ... as yet.

As a result of these practitioner insights and needs, the next and final stage of the assessment tools and advice project has been funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) and Independent Schools Victoria (ISV), to be completed in mid-2015.

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