Reading Assessment System in ESOL Courses for Low-Literate Learners

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Abstract

This paper draws on the findings of a qualitative study exploring the reading assessment materials and criteria used in pre-A1 ESOL classes in the UK and their suitability to low-literate language learners. Open-ended questionnaires and multifunctional analysis of materials were used to investigate current practices and views. The findings reflect the struggle low-literate learners experience throughout reading assessments, and the need for separating literate from low-literate learners, adaptations to assessment materials to ensure fair assessment and the development of descriptors/criteria that capture the small steps achieved by this population.

Keywords: Low-Literate, Reading Assessment, Pre-A1 ESOL, LESLLA

Introduction

The Context

According to World Demographic Profile (2021), although the rate of illiteracy is reduced slowly worldwide (Young-Scholten and Kreeft Peyton, 2020), 75% of the population worldwide are living in poor or conflicted areas with limited access to formal education or literacy in their mother tongue. Unfortunately, women are more disadvantaged in this case (World Demographic Profile, 2021). Most of the women who were forced to migrate to different countries are illiterate (Young-Scholten and Kreeft Peyton, 2020).

These learners arrive in host countries with no/low literacy and/or no/limited formal education in their first language and are required to learn a new language and are referred to in literature and research as Literacy Education and Second

Language Learning for Adults learners (LESLLA learners henceforth[2]). Tutors who teach and support this population of learners identify some of the unique challenges they face which include a lack of print and language awareness and a lack of study and learning skills. These learners are placed on beginner language classes (Young-Scholten and Kreeft Peyton, 2020), such as pre-entry English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in the United Kingdom (Robinson, 2017). ESOL classes at this level are more diverse than at other levels with regards to learners' educational background, schooling experiences and their command of literacy in their first language (Simpson, 2016). This is due to the diverse background they come from. Some would have acquired basic functional literacy skills on their journeys and some will arrive with no literacy skills at all. Educational language policies vary across countries in relation to provision and formal language qualifications and requirement. The discussion in this paper will focus on the situation in England, particularly the North East of England, with brief reference to other areas and countries.

ESOL Policy Since 2010

Illiterate or low-literate adult migrants need to become literate in the second language (L2) to be able to integrate in the host society and meet their daily needs. This means that it is essential that the research in the ESOL field should involve a focus on policy and practice to meet the needs of these learners (Simpson et al., 2008). The UK has special requirements of formal language proficiency for naturalisation, entering the country and obtaining the right to remain (Simpson, 2021). During the coalition government in the UK between 2010 and 2015, ESOL became central to government social integration policy, while in the last general elections (Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Goverment [MHCLG], 2019), ESOL was indirectly mentioned in the Conservative manifesto which outlined the importance of English language teaching to enhance integration and support migrants (Simpson, 2021). However, inconsistency has been an issue in the funding and policy support for migrants' English language teaching in the UK.

England's policies toward ESOL are different from Wales and Scotland. More recently, policy strategies have been developed in Scotland and Wales to underpin their ESOL approaches, such as addressing the aspects of qualifications and funding at a national scale (Simpson, 2021). In England,

2 LESLLA is an international forum that includes researchers who share similar interests in adult immigrants with limited schooling before entering the host country in which they live and the development of second language learning (Faux & Watson, 2018)

however, it is unclear where the responsibility for ESOL rests. Students' needs are poorly met because of the lack of support and fragmentation of the field, which shows that the ESOL aspect in adult education is still neglected (Simpson, 2021). This has worsened following the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. ESOL policy in England is shaped with reference to five published papers since 2014, which are all addressed in the Communities Strategy Green Paper (2018) that focuses on segregated communities and the significance of promoting British values, also stressed in the Casey Review (2016). The paper introduced a commitment to establish good practice in ESOL to support the action plan for integrated communities (MHCLG, 2019). The action plan includes guidance on how ESOL provision should be supported by the cooperation of different providers (Simpson, 2021). However, the report and the action plan include proposals and intentions of changes rather than commitments to action. In addition, the national ESOL strategy in England still shows no signs of materialisation, and the funding is still limited to support the strategy (Simpson, 2021). Based on the Green Paper's findings, the Learning & Work Institute (L&WI), placed an emphasis on partnership work locally and regionally under the commission of the Department of Education. The main source of funding for ESOL comes from the adults' skills budget of the Education Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). This is connected with Further Education (FE) college provision, and it does not fund practices that are not part of the FE domain (Higton et al., 2019). Funding for ESOL has dropped from £203 million in 2010 to £90 million in 2016, whereas the demand for free ESOL classes is still high and it requires more supply (Martin, 2017). As a result, a significant part of ESOL provision does not rely on government education policy and its funding, it depends on third sector organisations, including community and voluntarily groups. This suggests that there has been lack of resources, cohesion and consistency in supporting and funding ESOL since 2012 (Simpson, 2021). This becomes especially problematic when considering the delivery of non-accredited courses because even though pre-entry courses are not accredited, they are delivered in settings like Adult Community Education or FE, which means that features of formal learning, including assessment, remain (Education and Training, 2021a).

Assessment

Assessment is an important aspect for language teachers and second-language acquisition (SLA) researchers. From a pedagogic perspective, assessment is a continuous process that aims to document the skills and knowledge of learners to help teachers improve learners' skills (Gronlund, 1993). Teachers make use of assessments to reflect on learners' starting point, and monitor their progress,

which means assessment is an integral process to teaching and learning (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006). In language learning processes, testing is the most common type of assessment used. In such tests, learners need to respond to tasks set for the purpose of assessment, and then tutors will quantify the learners' responses to summarise their performance. The number that is quantified from the assessment is used to determine whether learners are competent to use the language in real-world communication (Fulcher, 2015) or pass a test. From a research perspective, an assessment is 'a systematic and replicable technique that allows researchers to elicit, observe, and interpret indicators of L2 knowledge … with underlying standards of practice that govern its development and use' (Norris and Ortega, 2013, p.573). SLA researchers benefit from assessment because it helps them describe the L2 features learners have acquired over time, deduce grammatical representations of learners, describe what have been acquired and what not and illustrate the changes that learners have gone through during a study (Norris and Ortega, 2013).

In England, ESOL awarding bodies have developed assessments to levels ranging from A1 to C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). As for LESLLA learners, they normally start on a pre-A1 ESOL course, which is a non-accredited course and does not involve a standardised assessment (see ESOL Policy since 2010 for more details). Therefore, in-house assessment is developed by providers to assess such learners in pre-A1 learners (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006; Education and Training, 2021a). However, the process is not simple, particularly with regards to LESLLA learners who often have difficulties reading and writing in their mother language, lack the experience of schooling in home country and consequently are not familiar with testing. In addition, some learners might be speaking a language that does not have a written script (Florez and Terrill, 2003).

Reder (2015) highlights the difficulties LESLLA learners face when learning to read and write in a second language for the first time. LESLLA learners struggle in second-language classes because they are trying to acquire literacy and second lanague at the same time in an unfamiliar instituitional context, in which learners are exposed to implicit assumptions about how the education experience and literacy are connected (Reder, 2015). Although the topic of how low-literate learners acquire a second language has been of interest to many researchers, such as Kurvers, Van Hout, and Vallen (2006), and Young-Scholten and Naeb (2013), little research has focused on the assessment materials that are used in ESOL institutions and their suitability for LESLLA learners. Studies

have shown that low-literate learners face challenges when they are aiming to be literate for the first time (Kurvers et al., 2006; Young and Naeb, 2013), but in a second language they require longer time than literate people to move a level up. Carlsen (2017) believes that this group is not provided with a fair chance in testing in language classes because the current national policy in the UK mandates that all adult educational courses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland be accredited and learners should be formally assessed to move to the next level, including ESOL courses (Higton et al., 2019). Funding to ESOL providers will be awarded when learners' achievements of qualification is provided (Higton et al., 2019). Therefore, providers are required to tailor their courses targeting the Skills for Life qualifications, which pose a problem to LESLLA learners who might take them more than a year to achieve A1 Level (Entry Level 1), the lowest qualification level in all assessment modes: reading, writing, listening and speaking (Allemano, 2013; Simpson et al., 2008; Simpson, 2015). This is problematic for learners at the lowest level, where some students bring with them a wide range of prior literacy knowledge while others have almost no experience of literacy in their mother language and very poor English language skills. The main barrier to assessing beginner readers appears to be the process of assessment itself (Allemano, 2013), which will be discussed further in the literature review. In other words, an inherent feature of typical traditional assessment in language classes is being able to recognise print and have a basic level of study skills that allow you to understand instructions which is not the case with LESLLA learners. By the time such learners take the level-promotion test, they are mostly able to make meaning from a text, yet they fail typical institutional assessments. Their failure to demonstrate their knowledge is because such tests are based on familiarity with tests materials and procedures as well as the presupposition of literacy. Aspects which will be further explained in the literature review. Studies conducted during the previous decade have shown the importance of expanding the CEFR to include assessment descriptors below A1 to capture the progress that such learners achieve (Gonzalves, 2017; Carlsen, 2017) because they have complex needs and they can make slow progress, especially at the beginning of their language learning journey (Tammelin-Laine, 2014).

Having established the main issues in relation to assessment of LESLLA learners, this paper focuses on the assessment materials and criteria that ESOL institutions in England use to assess their low-literate students and how suitable the assessment materials and criteria are for the LESLLA context. It adds to the increasing research on fair assessment for low-literate ESOL learners (Bagna et

al., 2017; Carlsen, 2017; Carlsen and Rocca, 2021; Gonzalves, 2017; O'Sullivan et al., 2021), focusing on the suitability of the reading assessment tools to LESLLA learners in the pre-A1 ESOL. It also analyses the materials and criteria used in assessing learners and examines how effective they are in capturing the progress of learners.

Literature Review

Most ESOL bodies in the UK have stressed the importance of supporting language learning to enhance migrants' social integration because of the incoherence of the national policy regarding the ESOL provision (NATECLA, 2016). The current policy of the UK government states that all adults are required to work for a qualification in the post-16 education in England, including ESOL courses. Therefore, providers are required to provide courses targeting the Skills for Life qualifications, which involves assessment to measure leaners' progress and readiness to move to the next level, meet the national requirements, and receive the funding based on evidence of learners' achievement. However, the assessment seems to be a problem for LESLLA learners (Simpson et al., 2008; Allemano, 2013).

The majority of awarding bodies have developed very good practices in the assessment of English language skills of higher ESOL learners in the last few decades (Bedford, 2003; Khalifa and Ffrench, 2009; Stoynoff, 2009). Yet, there is still less focus on pre-entry assessments compared to other ESOL levels (Allemano, 2013).

Low-literate/educated ESOL learners, according to Robinson's (2017) report, lack some knowledge and skills that literate learners have. These include metalinguistic knowledge, knowledge of language, its operation, structure and use based on a functionalist perspective, and educational and study skills, the skills acquired by being in an educational setting (Allemano, 2013). In addition, ESOL courses in the UK are all accredited (Higton et al., 2019); thus, it is unsurprising that the process of examination is a major barrier to assessing the level of LESLLA learners because they are not used to being in a formal testing environment, and therefore, the accreditation policy is problematic to such learners (Allemano, 2013; 2018). When the tests used in assessment are standardised, then the concept of what should be measured and how to measure are clear (Faux and Watson, 2018). However, the pre-A1 provision is less formal than the higher levels of ESOL, as it is not accredited and there are no standardized tests for this level in England (Education and Training

Foundation, 2019). Therefore, each institution develops its own assessment standards to assess its learners through the initial registration process to determine the new students' level in English and the periodic assessment that determines the progress and promotion of learners (Allemano, 2018). Yet, the exam practices used are not based on research and their validity might be questionable (Allemano, 2018). Moreover, the methods used to demonstrate the wider outcome of achievements of learners are less developed (Education and Training Foundation 2019).

Theoretical Perspective: Social Practice Theory and Cognitive Processing Approach

Social practice theory focuses on the link between social situations and practice, including in the field of knowledge making (Schwab, 2010). The theory has had a noticeable influence on the teaching of literacy as Barton, Hamilton and Ivanovic (2000) and Grieve (2007) indicate, yet it had less influence in the design of tests, even though test designers have taken authentic reading as a main consideration in test design (Schwab, 2010). For example, a test may contain a restaurant menu with learners required to scan it in order to find delivery times or skim it to find vegetarian meals. Learners might also read for details to choose a meal after reading its ingredients or they might read critically to compare between different meals (Schwab, 2010). Hellerman (2006, p.379) has emphasized this idea by stating that 'Linguistic processing is embedded within and inseparable from social practices or routines in which individuals are engaged'. In addition, Grieve (2007) argues that even though assessment approaches usually include the skills that learners can do in a class, that does not necessarily mean that those learners have improved their literacy practices in everyday life. Faux and Warson (2018) emphasised the importance of relating the tasks to topics of the learners' social context that they have studied in class, such as health, family, transportation, etc. This can help learners get a sense of understanding in the uses and functions of prints. This view has been supported by Wallace (1992), and Cooke and Simpson (2008), who connected literacy assessment with socio-cognitive practice. Successful readers need to be able to decode what is written, deal with long texts, relate these discourses to cultural and social contexts and be critical when reading. To assess learners' abilities, test designers need to understand how L2 readers process the text and how they relate the written text to their lives (Schellekens, 2007).

Khalifa and Weir (2009) argue that the cognitive processing approach is of great importance in understanding the process of reading. They suggest that

cognitive psychologists and language theorists have done a wide range of studies to recognise what is involved in the process of reading. The context plays an interlinked role with the process of reading according to Khalifa and Weir (2009). They also discussed this point in relation to the validity of context of the various item types that can be found in an examination paper. This is a main point in the process of testing reading, in the sense that the contextual clues that readers require are usually not clear in the examination paper (Khalifa and Weir, 2009; Flores, 2021a). LESLLA learners might struggle to make meaning from the modes used in the test questions, such as written instructions, images or semiotics (Flores, 2021b), especially when learners do not have 'a significant sight word vocabulary, the ability to decode at word level as opposed to phonemic or even alphabetic decoding' (Allemano, 2013, p.69). This can affect the ways that LESLLA learners respond to test tasks. This has a vital impact on the level of interpretations, understanding and deduction that readers go through when they encounter a reading text.

Assessment in ESOL

To understand the challenges that face low-literate learners while learning a L2 and doing an assessment in the Pre-A1 ESOL course, it is important to specifically understand the assessment process. Based on the current ESOL policy, ESOL provision in England includes different phases and purposes of assessment (Higton et al., 2019). Assessment in ESOL can be divided into five phases: screening, initial/placement, diagnostic/tracking progress, formative/on-going and summative/level promotion/final assessments (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006).

In many post-compulsory education classes in England, learners with various literacy background might share the same class and aim to achieve the same qualification (Allemano, 2013). This has led unintentionally to raised average scores because literate people find the tests clear and straightforward due to their higher level of literacy skills (Allemano, 2013). According to Lambert and Lines (2000, p.53), the average score is determined by the 'cumulative frequency graphs showing the proportion of candidates at certain scores'. With the increase of European migrants in the UK who are generally well-educated, literate and use the Roman alphabet, the success/failure boundaries in ESOL assessments increased accordingly for all learner groups (Allemano, 2013). In other words, when educated/literate learners who are beginning to learn the host language are placed in the same classes as LESLLA learners, they often score higher in assessments in comparison to LESLLA learners.

Consequently, when an average score is used to determine the pass/failure mark, it is usually higher than what LESLLA learners are able to achieve (Allemano, 2013).

Bagna et al. (2017) suggest that there is a need to establish an assessment framework for pre-A1 level to establish homogenous classrooms to separate learners with literacy skills from those who lack them. O'Sullivan et al. (2021) state that some aspects should be taken into consideration when developing a test. For example, the context and the learners themselves should be considered when designing a test because these two aspects can have an impact on the performance in tests. Test development processes should first consider the population that aims to take the test from a 'physical, psychological and experiential' (O'Sullivan et al., 2021, p.262) point of view. In addition, not only language ability needs to be considered by test developers, but also the cognitive processing that learners go through to complete the test (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

The current ESOL awarding bodies in the UK, such as Ascentis, City and Guilds and Edexcel accredit students from Entry level 1 to level 2; pre-A1 is not accredited and does not have a standardised assessment (NATECLA, n.d., web). In the A1 level, which is the lowest standardised test in ESOL, candidates in the reading assessment might be asked to scan a text to find certain information, deduce meaning of new vocabulary or 'follow referencing within a text' (Allemano, 2013, p.73). Such skills can exist in the repertoire of readers of other languages, but those who lack these skills in other languages remain at a disadvantage when doing a reading test. In A1 reading tests, learners are expected to do tasks that include choosing the correct answer from a selection of distracting possibilities; thus, they have to exclude the wrong answers. Moreover, candidates might be asked to distinguish between a true or false statement or answer open-ended questions in a written form. These tasks could create a burden on candidates in reading and understanding the tasks, which affects the validity of tests. Moreover, the rubric that is used in A1 reading tests could be more of a challenge for learners than the test itself, which is an example of what Kortez (2008, p.221) called the construction of 'irrelevant variance', which is considered a significant threat to validity, specifically for assessments with constructed answers and contextualized scenarios (Geisinger et al., 2013).

Due to the unsuitability of the lowest level of standardised reading assessment for LESLLA learners, each ESOL provider develops their own assessment materials. Looking back at Kortez (2008), three main aspects that affect validity,

the one relevant to LESLLA learners is that the test is 'measuring something that should not be measured' (Kortez, 2008, p.220). It seems that the texts in the reading tests are related to learners' previous knowledge, but some tasks can hinder learners from demonstrating their ability to extract meaning and understand the text (Allemano, 2013). Allemano (2013, 2018), and Carlsen and Rocco (2021), add that due to the lack of experience in reading as well as the support of social practice, LESLLA learners are unable to relate the assessment tasks to the knowledge they gained from the texts and to demonstrate this through writing answers, in the same way as more educated learners might do. In other words, the complexity of the tasks hinders low-literate learners from accomplishing the tasks in exam, even though they might be within their real-life skills. Thus, the testing methods used with low-literate learners should be reviewed and developed to be able to demonstrate the true ability of those learners (Allemano, 2013, 2018; Carlsen and Rocco, 2021).

Spiegel and Sunderland (2006) indicate that literacy is being assessed in pre-A1 classes. The literacy assessments usually check the left-right orientation, matching letters, sound-symbol correspondence, differentiating between words and numbers, recognising words, differentiating between the upper and lower case and assessing basic knowledge of learners in the letter-sound association (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006). This is called a phonological awareness assessment, and is mainly used with learners at the lowest level of literacy to ensure they can make meaning from sounds in words and then in sentences. This includes tasks for recognising sounds in a poster, identifying pictures based on the initial sound, matching same sounds together, reading simple words and extracting meaning from a small text, and recognising some common basic genres (Faux and Watson, 2018). Although these assessment practices seem valid for learners who are familiar with testing procedures, they remain problematic for LESLLA learners. As pre-A1 assessment is being in-house designed, it is worth stating that ESOL tutors are not professional test designers, especially for LESLLA learners. Due to a lack of standardised assessment for the pre-A1, those in-house designed assessments are being used to assess the literacy and proficiency levels of students and are described by Flores (2012b, p.157) as 'less-than-perfect in-house assessments'. These are used as initial assessments that help determine the level of learners based on the number of questions that are answered correctly by candidates. However, students responses are not deeply evaluated or analysed during the process of assessment (Flores, 2021a). Such assessments are usually designed using various multimodal aspects, such as photos, clipart images, lines, numbers,

words, boxes and spaces, and with different layouts. The marking usually depends on numbers, while the answer format varies based on the different layouts and components of the questions (Flores, 2021b).

Challenges of Low-Literate Learners in Assessment

Failing/passing an assessment might have considerable consequences for LESLLA learners in terms of access to labour, education, benefits, family reunification, as well as their right to remain in the UK (Carlsen and Rocca, 2021). Kurvers et al. (2015) believe that LESLLA learners face specific challenges in the process of second language learning as they progress slower and their outcomes are lower than educated learners. Their benefits from language courses are less and their performance in tests is lower (Carlsen, 2017). The lack of success can be attributed not only to the lack of the skills tested, but also to lack of experience of testing and familiarity with tests formats that are used in language tests (Allemano, 2013). One of the most important reasons behind their failure is their lack of conceptual constructs of the test they undertake (Allemano, 2013).

There is a dearth of research on this learner population (Andringa and Godfroid, 2019); thus, the learning needs of LESLLA learners is less investigated than those of educated learners (Tarone, 2010; Allemano, 2018). Some providers use the process of portfolio-based assessment, while others prefer the examination process of all the language skills. The examination process is the most used technique to assess low-literate learners because it gives learners more in-class learning time and it reduces the record keeping, as well as the evidence of in-lesson achievements of learners. Allemano (2013) suggests that this is problematic for learners when it comes to the tests themselves, especially the reading test. This is despite the fact that both types of learners who are exposed to the examination process can read for meaning in real life situations. Allemano (2013) and Flores (2021c) conclude that low-literate learners need assessments that assess what they know, not what they are unable to produce.

Flores (2021a) conducted a study in the USA that examined the meaning-making process in language as well as literacy standardised assessments from the perspectives of LESLLA test-taker. Findings revealed that there is a tension between the intended and expected meaning of the studied visual and textual prompts of assessment and the responses of test-takers to these prompts. Assessment practices and textual composition have been unintentionally biased against learners with low literacy. Thus, Flores (2021a) suggests that

during test design and the development of an evaluative framework, the level of literacy of test-takers and the test socialization should be considered (Flores, 2021a). Without test literacy, even simple multimodal questions, such as the multiple-choice ones, can be complex for LESLLA learners because they lack knowledge about test genres and multimodal components of tests required to read the questions and answer them in the expected manner (Flores 2021b). Therefore, it is important to investigate the topic of test materials and criteria used to evaluate the language level of learners, as the topic of textual and visual designs of adult L2 and literacy learners in not widely studied, especially in texts used in the reading assessment. The lack of appropriate test design to this group affects not only meaning-making for test-takers, but also how learners' responses are evaluated (Flores, 2021b).

Having established that there is no standardised assessments in pre-A1 level in England and in-house assessment are being designed by tutors who lack experience in test tool design, LESLLA learners face challenges when being assessed in L2. Therefore, this paper will investigate the types of materials used in assessing reading in the pre-A1 level in England and analyse them in terms of the test genre, the semiotic resources utilised when designing the materials, and the criteria used to evaluate the test-takers' level.

Theoretical framework

The suitability of assessment materials and criteria will be assessed considering the Multi-Modal Critical Discourse Analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020; Pennycook, 2001), which provides a way to study the language and semiotic modes, like visual media, in a systematic and multi-layered way.

Social semiotics investigates the significance of social and cultural backgrounds in explaining meaning-making as a social practice. Semiotics is related to the signs and codes in social life, but social semiotics also covers the implications of social processes that form codes of communication and language. The crucial implication is that meaning-making is related to power, and as power shifts, meaning-making in languages also can change (Halliday, 1978; Hodge et al., 1988). Based on a multimodal perspective of social semiotics, meaning making is based on different modes which include resources that are determined based on a cultural and social basis (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). Such modes include texts, images, symbols, sounds, gestures and music. Each mode can convey the same meaning as the other but realising the meaning can differ from one mode to the other. For example, the mode of written texts uses words to convey

a message, while images do that based on their layout, colour, prominence, and composition (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). Such modes are multimodal because texts cannot be dissociated from the materials for which they are designed and images cannot be dissociated from the colour from which they are made (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). The social semiotics critical multimodal theory focuses on how semiotics can carry meaning through assumptions, intentions, as well as ideologies (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen, 2003). Also, language is used in terms of semantic, contextual, functional and semiotic aspects (Pennycook, 2001). The reading tests will be assessed through the lens of the systematic functional linguistics developed by Pennycook (2001) to investigate the genre elements of tests, the semiotic resources, including the multimodal composition and components, to investigate whether the tests are fair and valid for LESLLA learners. This study will utilise the multimodal critical discourse approach to analyse the assessment tools and criteria of the in-house designed reading assessments in pre-A1 ESOL courses in England. In the analysis, the grammar of visual design will be used as a concept to reflect on the images used in reading tests because visual designs generally reflect interaction, composition and representation. The images used in reading tests are tools of interaction between the test-takers and designer, while the composition of the visual images determine the relationship between the semiotics and the test questions. Composition is similar to grammar as it allows the depictions of people, places and objects to take part in the meaning-making process. Visuals as meaning-making semiotics are different from texts and speeches, but they are socially constructed and contribute to constructing meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). Grammar and syntax can be considered as two combined elements of meaning-making. As language grammar depicts how words are combined in phrases and sentences to make meaning, visual grammar reflects the way in which elements like things, individuals and places are combined to create statements of various complexity.

The Study

This study aimed to evaluate the materials and criteria used to assess the reading skills of LESLLA learners to answer the following questions:

1. What are the existing materials that are currently used to assess LESLLA learners?

    a. Initial assessment

b. Tracking progress/ learning gain (summative, formative) within the same level

c. Progression to other levels

2. What are the criteria used to design the assessments?

a. Initial assessment

b. Tracking progress/ learning gain (summative, formative) within the same level

c. Progression to other levels

Research Method

This research investigated the suitability of reading assessment materials and criteria used in pre-A1 ESOL courses in England. To do so, ESOL managers and tutors were approached to take part in the research. As an ESOL tutor in the North-East of England, I had contacts with ESOL managers and tutors in the region. Contact with local stakeholders was established via LinkedIn or WhatsApp and via email sent to ESOL, LESLLA and NATECLA forums that include a considerable number of ESOL practitioners in England with a wide range of experience. ESOL teachers and managers were asked to send samples of the reading assessment materials they use for the pre-A1 level and the criteria of success/failure. A convenience sample technique was used when approaching ESOL tutors and managers.

10 experienced ESOL tutors and managers who teach or have taught the pre-A1 level responded. All were aware of the accreditation aspect of the ESOL provision and the lack of standardised assessments for the pre-A1 level. They worked in different settings,such as colleges and community centres, and had between 2 to 15 years of experiences in teaching ESOL and between 1 to 9 years of experience in teaching the pre-A1 level.

As there are no standardised assessments for this level (Young Scholten and Naeb, 2020), practices vary. Some participants provided links to the online assessments that they used to assess their pre-A1 learners, while others sent the assessment documents via email. In terms of the content analysis of the materials, only a few samples were analysed.

Reading tests were analysed through the critical multimodal social semiotic analysis based on the grammar of visual images (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020) and the systematic functional linguistics (Pennycook, 2001). Data analysis for the test tools were organised based on the different types of test questions, that appeared in the shapes of multiple choice, fill in the spaces, matching, circling the correct answer and questions that required short written answers. For each of the genre questions, the research examined the content of the questions/instructions, the clarity of such questions/instructions/images/signs, the space provided for learners to respond to the test questions and the expectancy to perceive such questions/instructions correctly by LESLLA learners who are becoming literate for the first time but in a second language and lack testing literacy skills. All test elements were examined in terms of meaning-making for learners who will in their turn respond to them in a written form. Findings have implications for pre-A1 ESOL tutors who are responsible for designing test tools may help tutors understand how LESLLA learners make meaning from the reading test questions and how they respond to them using a written form of answers. Establishing these findings can be significant for critically reflecting on assessment materials and criteria, task prompts and other ways of communication between test designers and learners. This will provide a clear view of the literacy, language and communication tools that should be considered by test designers and evaluation framework developers to ensure that the assessment is not biased against LESLLA learners.

Participants were provided with an information sheet to clarify the aim of the study, stress the voluntary participation of the sample and the possibility to withdraw from the study if they wish to do so, without the need to justify their withdrawal. In the consent form, it was made clear that by providing the assessment materials and criteria, they give consent to take part in the study. The identities of participants remained anonymous, and their data was used confidentially for the purpose of the study only.

Analysis

Overview of existing materials

This section will focus on examples of the materials used in colleges in the UK to assess the reading skill in pre-A1 ESOL classes and the criteria used to design these materials.

Existing materials used for initial assessment

Based on the responses received, teachers indicated that when learners have no knowledge of English, they are enrolled in pre-entry courses without initial assessment as some colleges in England do. Others stated that there is no specific criterion used to design the materials, they adapt existing materials or self-design them. Thus, assessment practices vary. Assessments used can be divided into three categories: online holistic assessments, self-designed assessments, and adapted Entry level 1 assessments.

1. One college used the ESOL Scotland Assessment Framework as a guidance to design their own assessment materials at the beginning of the course and the level promotion, but they added images and instructions to them. The Scottish literacy assessment includes identifying letters and sounds, reading signs and numbers, and reading a short paragraph. However, there are no instructions for the test questions or even images in the ESOL Scotland Assessment Framework, as a tutor has to set the test with each learner individually and explain the tasks to learners. Even though this might be effective, it is not practical, especially in England due to the lack of funding. Thus, some tutors have adapted it and added written instructions to avoid this issue.

2. Another practise presented the use of holistic online assessments, such as Straightforward Quick Placement (2020), which is used by some colleges to determine the level of learners. All learners, no matter what their levels are, will sit this initial assessment and the evaluation is based on their score.

3. One tutor indicated that adapted Entry level 1 assessment practices are used for both initial and level promotion assessments. The failure in the E1 initial assessment indicates that the learner is in a beginner level (pre-A1). For example, here are some questions adapted from Excellence Gateway initial assessment that has been used in one of the colleges. This assessment includes four ads and multiple-choice questions that learners have to answer based on the texts. The answers are presented in photos rather than words.

Self-designed assessment materials/print awareness tasks

Most tutors' answers reveal that each teacher, organisation, or college develop their own reading assessments for complete beginners. This often includes activities such as: add the missing letter from the alphabet, match words with

numbers, match words with pictures/signs, read a short paragraph to the tutor, answer questions from the paragraph (very short answers are required), match a picture with the letter with which the word starts, add a missing sound to a word (a picture provided), read a short paragraph and fill in a table with information from the text (see examples below). In the first examples (*Figure 1* and *Figure 2*), learners are required to fill the gaps with the missing letters in a self-designed assessment (Activity A) and in an adopted activity from the Scottish Pre-entry Assessment Framework (Activity B). Instructions are written in English and are usually read by the tutor.

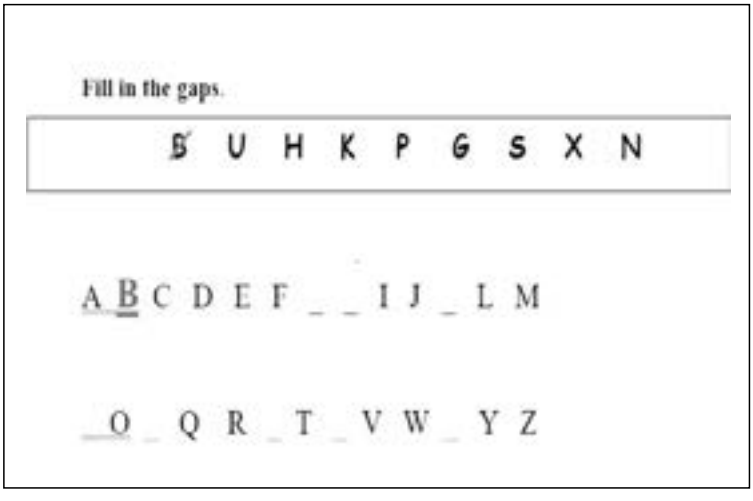


Figure 1. Activity A

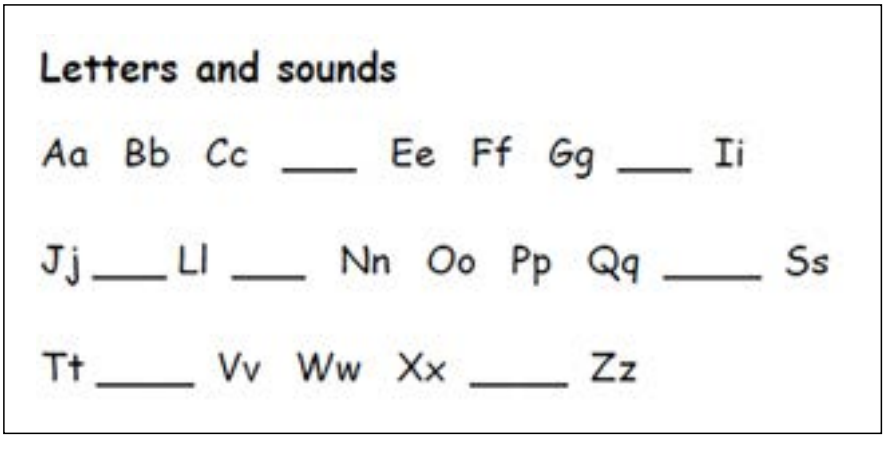


Figure 2. Activity B

Activity A is from an assessment that includes a set of directions including photographs and hand-written matching lines/answers. The words 'fill in the gaps' and 'match pictures with letters' are written in bold to emphasise the importance of the instructions. In this task, it is not clear in the instructions what learners should put in the gaps. In the top box, missing letters are written, and enough space is left between one letter, but without lines to separate letters, which can be confusing in terms of recognising that each letter stands by itself and is not part of a word. Also, all letters are in upper-case, which is an indication that learners have to write letters also in upper-case. Yet, this might be confusing because LESLLA learners might write the lower-case form of the previous letter. Also, the lines provided for answers are so short, which indicates that the answer should be short (just a letter).

A model answer is provided to show learners how they need to respond to the task using a different colour (blue). However, this task genre can be recognisable for learners with testing skills as they might be aware of the need to fill what is in the box in the empty spaces. For LESLLA learners, it might be unclear what they need to do (Flores, 2021b), especially as the test stops at the letter N, and does not continue to the end of the alphabet. In contrast, in the Scottish assessment (Activity B), both upper- and lower-case forms are written; thus, it is less confusing to learners as they need to write them both rather than only one form. Also, the space provided is bigger, which gives more space to write both forms of the missing letter. Moreover, the task includes all letters of the alphabet from Aa to Zz. Furthermore, written instructions are replaced with verbal ones, which may be clearer for LESLLA learners, but is impractical in classrooms as initial assessment cannot be done on an individual basis due to lack of funding (Simpson, 2021).

In Activity C (*Figure 3*), learners are required to choose from the box a letter, with which each word in the pictures starts.

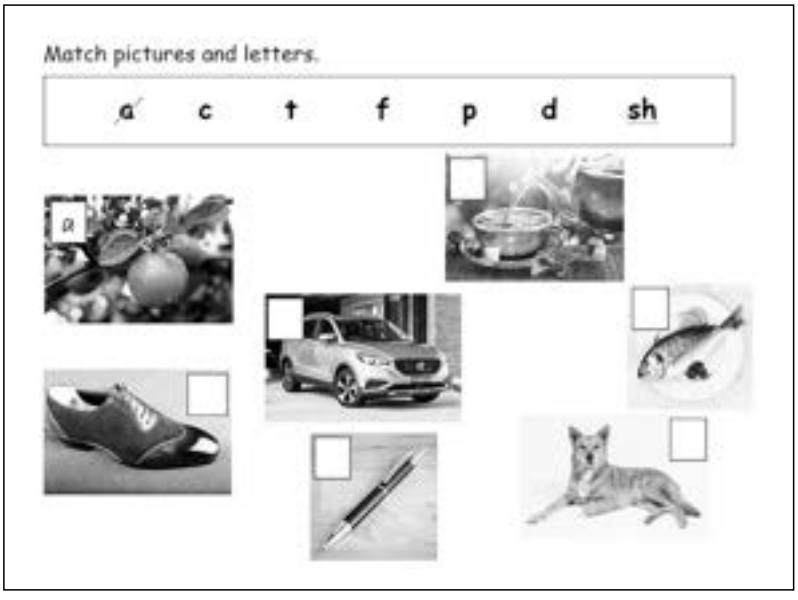


Figure 3. Activity C

The use of photos can make the task easier for the learners, but the fact that they are out of context is problematic to LESLLA learners (Flores, 2021b; Faux and Watson, 2018; Kurvers, 2015). Print awareness activities are challenging to LESLLA learners if they do not have a topic-based context (Faux and Watson, 2018). Therefore, the images in this activity should be related to a context that is studied in class, such as family or health. Also, it is not clear if the first picture is an apple or a plum which is confusing to learners. This is problematic especially as LESLLA learners interpret images in unexpected ways (Flores, 2021b), which affect their response to test tasks. In this task, the written instruction and also the seven letters in the box are written in bold, then, seven pictures are presented underneath with a box next to each picture, in which learners need to answer. The space provided is small to indicate that a letter is only needed for an answer. The model answer could be a guidance for learners. The layout of the question is based on the Real and Ideal concept of grammar of visual design (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020) where the question and pictures represent the Ideal or the general information, while the empty boxes where answers should be written are the Real or the specific information. The layout reflects the fact that learners have to read the question and look at the pictures and then write the answers, which should be related to what is above. However, according to Flores (2021b) knowledge of test genre and multimodal component is essential to read the

instructions and answer in the expected manner. Without testing literacy, responding to the question can be a challenge because images, demonstrated answers and bolding to differentiate instructions from the task are not helpful aspects for LESLLA learners because they lack not only test but also visual and multimodal literacies (Flores, 2021b) .

The complexity of Activity D (Figure 4), a self-designed task, is in the double action that is required; first to match the letter with the image and second the picture with the full word. The instructions do not make clear that two actions are required, although the model answer reveals that to be the case. The letters, photos and words are not horizontal; more vertical space is required between letters and words to have this activity more organised. Again, some images are misleading.

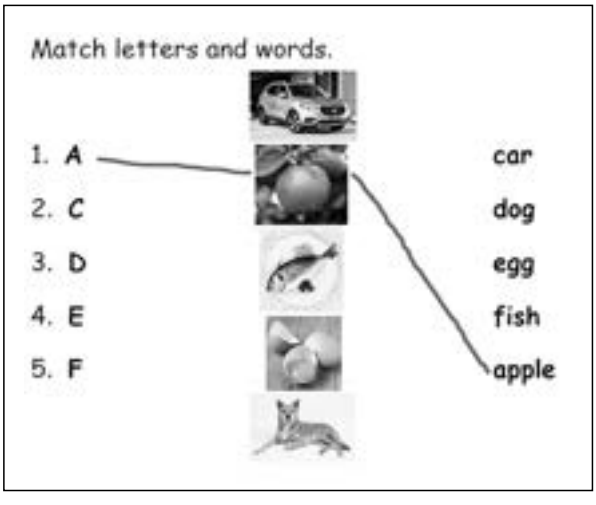


Figure 4. Activity D

A harder activity (E, *Figure 5*), a self-designed task, is shared by participants also used in initial assessment of LESLLA learners in Pre-A1 level, in which they have to add the missing vowels to the following words.

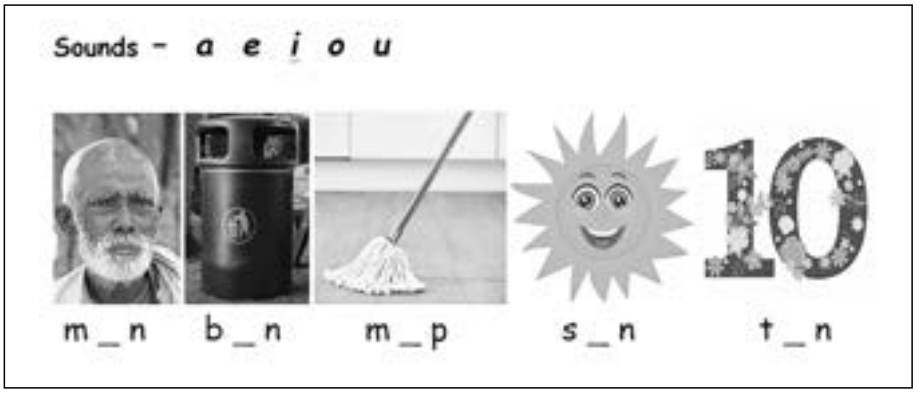


Figure 5. Activity E

The issues noted in the previous tasks also exist in this activity. These include the lack of a contextualised topic, the spacing between words and between the sounds of the top, the small spaces provided for the answers, the lack of LESLLA learners' abilities to interpret images in an expected way, and the lack of visual and multimodal literacies, especially with the picture of number 10 that includes flowers, personalised and unfamiliarity with the man in the picture. Yet, what is most problematic is that LESLLA learners are not fully aware that sounds in a word are divided into beginning, middle and end sounds (Schwarz, 2008, cited by Faux and Watson, 2018). Therefore, LESLLA learners might struggle to recognise what is required and respond in an expected way.

Self-designed assessment materials/Comprehension Tasks

Another example of the tools used in initial assessment is the following activities, a self-designed one (Activity F, *Figure 6*) and another from the Scottish Pre-A2 assessment framework (Activity G, *Figure 7*). Learners are required to read the text, extract information from it to fill the table (Activity F), while they need to read and copy in the other one (Activity G).

Reading

I am Ali.

I live in Huddersfield.

I like cooking and shopping.

I have two children.

Name:	Ali
Address:	
Likes:	
Family:	

Figure 6. Activity F

Reading

My name is Agnes and I come from Poland. I live in Scotland with my husband and my children. I have one son and two daughters.

Writing

_____

_____

_____

Figure 7. Activity G

It is important to provide recognisable images to trigger the responses of learners. The image of Ali in Activity F reflects ethnic diversity in the test task, and it is used by the tutor as a means to ensure diversity and inclusiveness to be appealing for learners. Also, the inclusion of people from an everyday situation has a positive impact on LESLLA learners in terms of response rate compared to tasks without such images (Flores, 2021c) as in Activity G. Moreover, the layout of the activity utilises the Ideal and Real principle of reading tasks starting from left to right and from top to bottom. The heading is at the top, 'Reading', the image and then answer are in the table at the bottom. According to the grammar of visual design (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020), the heading (Activities F and G) and the image (Activity F) are the general information (Ideal), while the table (Activity F) and the line (Activity G) where the specific information should be written are the Real. This layout gives learners the indication that they have to read the instructions and image (Activity F), and then write their responses below, which should be in reference to the top general information (Flores, 2021c). The main point in these tasks is that the contextual clues that readers require are not clear in the tasks, especially Activity G, which is problematic according to Khalifa and Weir (2009). LESLLA learners might struggle to make meaning from the modes used in the test questions, such as written instructions, images or semiotics (Flores, 2021a), especially when learners do not have 'a significant sight word vocabulary, the ability to decode at word level as opposed to phonemic or even alphabetic decoding' (Allemano, 2013, p.69). This can affect the ways that LESLLA learners respond to test tasks. This has a vital impact on the level of interpretations, understanding and deduction that they go through when they encounter a reading text.

Online Holistic Assessments

All forms of online holistic assessments are based on written instructions, which are sometimes accompanied with images to simplify the task for test-takers, such as in Activity H (*Figure 8*). To analyse the suitability of such tasks it is important to remember that LESLLA learners are unlikely familiar with terms found in L2 written texts, or even in their L1 (Faux and Watson, 2018). Therefore, words like dialogue, phrase, conversation, and options are new to LESLLA learners, especially those who speak a language that does not have a written form, which means they speak a language that does not have reference to grammar or rules, and words that describe written texts do not exist in their L1 (Faux and Watson, 2018). Furthermore, the complexity of multiple-choice multimodal is often overlooked by teachers who choose to use such an assessment with LESLLA learners who lack the knowledge of test genre as well as multimodal component, which is required to answer such a question in the right and expected way.

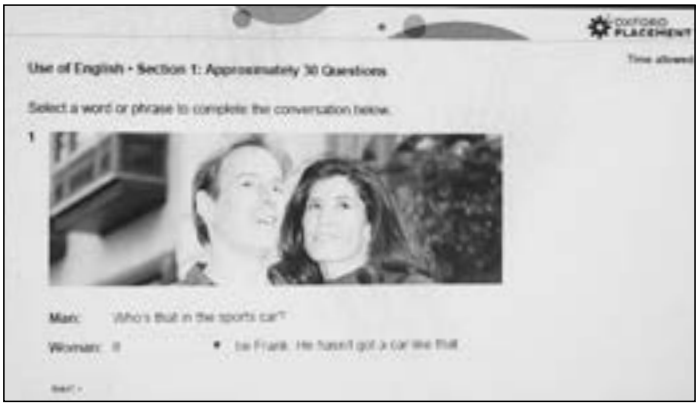


Figure 8. Activity H

Flores (2021c) argues that tests are interpreted in a socially constructed manner. Therefore, the test genre aspects cannot be identified by LESLLA learners, like reading all the misleading components of multiple-choice task, and know how to respond to such as a task and choose the correct answer, especially as semiosis is biased towards literate learners. What's more images may not be interpreted in a transparent way, as assumed by test designers (Flores, 2021b). Here, the chosen image may be misleading or misinterpreted because it presents a man and a woman in front of a building (*Figure 8*), and a woman and a child talking in the kitchen (*Figure 9*). The questions focus on the form of the sentence and on deducing meaning from a short conversation, but the images do not give any clues about that, they only refer to the man and woman/woman and child who are taking part in the conversation.

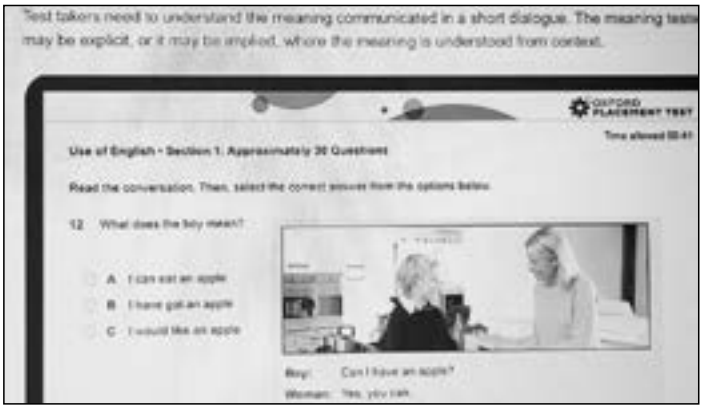


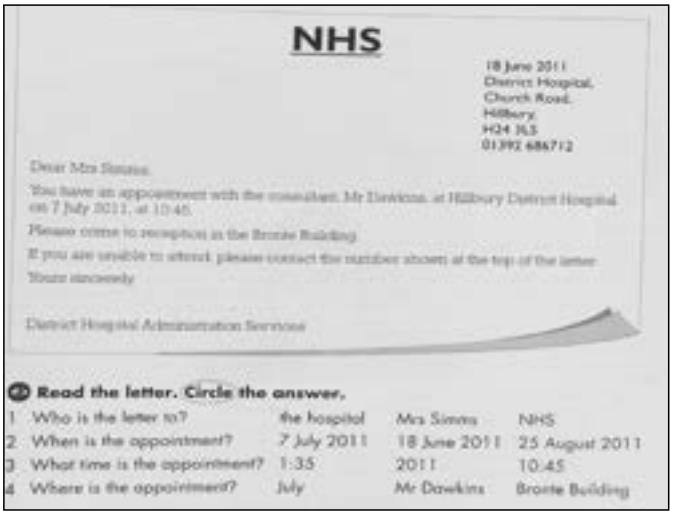
Figure 9. Activity I

Adapted Entry Level 1 (E1) assessment

Similarly, materials in E1 assessments are designed based on the assumption of literacy. This can be clear in an example from Excellence Gateway E1 assessment and ESOL Activities' book (Activity I, *Figure 10)*. The board pins and coloured backgrounds are used with the ads to indicate that the four texts are adverts or notes. This concept might be familiar to those with schooling experience, but it might not be to LESLLA learners. It is unclear how learners should respond to the task. Learners with schooling experience might anticipate that a tick in the small boxes underneath the images is required for the right answer, but learners without schooling experience might not. Moreover, even though most people are born with the ability to see, their understanding of images, or more specifically here of the test design, multimodal and visual components of the test is based on learning and habit. As LESLLA learners are experiencing formal education for the first time, it cannot be assumed that the test instruction, design, and visual multimodal components are clear for them.

Figure 10. Activity I continued

In the other activity (*Figure 11*), a letter about a hospital appointment is used with instructions written in bold with the use of the eye semiotic to instruct test-takers to read and a circle to instruct them to circle the correct answer. The symbols might not be interpreted as instructions by LESLLA learners, although test designers intended to use recognisable symbols, but such semiotics may not be understood by LESLLA learners (Flores, 2021b). Both tasks require test-takers to skim and scan the texts to extract information, which are skills that require time to acquire. As LESLLA learners are new readers and writers, they might be unable to respond to the questions in the expected way, even though they are required to only tick or circle the correct answer, rather than write a full answer.


NHS

18 June 2011
District Hospital,
Church Road,
Hillbury
H24 3L5
01392 686712

Dear Mrs Simms,

You have an appointment with the consultant, Mr Dawkins, at Hillbury District Hospital on 7 July 2011, at 10:45.

Please come to reception in the Bronte Building.

If you are unable to attend, please contact the number shown at the top of the letter.

Yours sincerely

District Hospital Administration Services

2) Read the letter. Circle the answer.

1	Who is the letter to?	the hospital	Mrs Simms	NHS
2	When is the appointment?	7 July 2011	18 June 2011	25 August 2011
3	What time is the appointment?	1:35	2011	10:45
4	Where is the appointment?	July	Mr Dawkins	Bronte Building

Figure 11. Hospital note

Finally, this study supports Flores' (2021b) findings that rubrics should be designed to consider not only the correct and incorrect answers, but should also allow space for different interpretations from learners that could be recognised or valued. Also, ESOL tutors should embed in their courses practices to ensure that LESLLA learners acquire visual, test genre and multimodal literacies to prepare them for assessment where such literacies are required.

Conclusion

This was a small-scale study that focuses on the assessment materials and criteria used in pre-A1 ESOL classrooms and their suitability to low-literate ESOL learners at the pre-A1 level. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to other groups of learners in different contexts. The findings show that the materials used at this level are not suitable for low-literate learners because even though those learners are proficient enough to extract meaning from a text, they are not able to show this in the assessment because the reading assessment is a challenge itself as it is believed the tasks are hindering learners from revealing their knowledge due to the materials' focus on measuring what learners cannot do rather than measuring and capturing the small steps, when compared to literate learners, achieved by them. Thus, this study recommends separating literate from low-literate learners in pre-A1 level, especially in the process of assessment. In addition, a review should be undertaken of the materials used to assess low-literate learners because what is being used may be suitable for the beginner level, but only for those with a literate background. According to

Allemano (2013), low-literate learners cannot transfer what they learn into the examination setting due to the complexity of tasks. Thus, assessments cannot show the real progress that low-literate learners make, especially with the lack of a descriptors/criteria that show the small steps achieved by low-literate learners in the initial, tracking progress and level promotion assessments.

A glimpse of light is the ongoing project funded by the Council of Europe to create descriptors below A1. The Literacy And Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LASLLIAM)[3] reference guide which focuses on 'can-do' statements that can be used as learning goals at the pre-A1 level. It also promotes the use of individual profiles for assessment at all levels for low-literate learners.

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3 Read more at https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/working-groups#{%2222597847%22:[2]}

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