

**Connecting ESL Communities and Professionals**  
*A Project of ATESL with funding and support from AHRE*

Workshop Forum #3

**ESL Assessment**

**Thursday, November 23, 2006**

Grant MacEwan College, Alberta College Campus, Board Room (#627)

11:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

**Executive Summary**

**Participants**

1. Representative from the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration, University of Alberta
2. Independent Consultant, Calgary
3. Program Coordinator, NorQuest College, Edmonton
4. Representative from Immigrant Language and Vocational Assessment-Referral Centre, Calgary Immigrant Aid Society, Calgary
5. Representative from Language and Vocational Assessment, Language Assessment, Referral and Counselling Centre, Catholic Social Services, Edmonton
6. Representative from Centre for Foreign Trained Professionals, Bredin Institute, Edmonton
7. Representative from Lethbridge College, Lethbridge
8. Justine Light, ESL Instructor, NorQuest College, Edmonton and President, ATESL
9. Gayle Taylor, Settlement Officer, CIC, Edmonton
10. Carolyn Dieleman, Manager, Language Training, AHRE, Edmonton
11. Valerie Parr, Consultant, Innovative Language Programs, AHRE, Edmonton

This third workshop in the series was designed to create a forum for discussion on the topic of second language assessment. The day followed the usual format with three one-hour sessions and time allowed before and after sessions for networking and information exchange. The focus questions that were used to guide the discussion during each of the sessions were sent out to participants prior to the workshop for their review. The questions and discussions were intended to be both philosophical and practical in nature.

During the first session, each participant was asked to give a brief presentation about his/her particular knowledge of, experience with and interest in assessment. The discussion then turned to the role that assessment plays in the learning process, the importance and goals of assessment, the expertise required to achieve these goals, and whether these goals are the same or different in the area of second language acquisition from other areas of learning.

The focus questions for the second session were aimed at examining how learner progress is measured. Participants shared information about the kinds of assessment tools they're currently using, the processes involved in developing and administering these tools and how their effectiveness is evaluated in terms of consistency, validity, and reliability. Details about who gets assessed, when, how often and by whom were exchanged. The last part of this session asked about the roles that various individuals and organizations play in the assessment process and about who is responsible for assessment.

The focus of the third session was on the follow up aspect of assessment. For example, how, when, by whom and to whom do assessment results get communicated? What are the various lines of communication? Participants were asked to reflect on how important, efficient, consistent and effective these reporting processes are and how they could be improved. The discussion also looked at what opportunities exist, if any, for ESL learners to contribute to and play an active role in the assessment process. The last part of the day led participants to provide input on opportunities that exist for ESL professionals to share their knowledge, experience and resources in the area of assessment and/or to further develop expertise in this area. Recommendations for future training opportunities were then solicited.

This workshop forum provided an excellent opportunity for individuals involved in different areas of assessment to come together and share information. It became apparent as session one got underway that it was an ambitious task to unravel the various strands of assessment and to follow an organized pattern of discussion. The types of assessment discussed were both formative and summative, including placement, ongoing, proficiency and exit testing. Key points brought forward during the focus sessions were the usefulness of the CLB's, the need for greater consistency and transparency in

interpreting and describing levels of language learning, using assessment to inform the teaching process and to create learning plans or “learner pathways”, and the need for more and better communication/collaboration between the many stakeholders such as assessors, researchers, instructors, program administrators, employers, professional associations, learners, and funders. A large part of the discussion also focused on the role of assessment in content-based instruction, processes and strategies in second language learning, assessment issues as they relate to English in the workplace language training and foreign trained professionals and, finally, the need for ongoing professional development, including developing and implementing resources, in the area of assessment. It was evident that given the complexity of this topic and the weight of the impact that it has on so many that this is a topic which requires further discussion and initiatives which allow individuals and organizations involved in assessment to work collaboratively.

## **Report on Focus Session Discussions**

### **Issues and Concerns**

#### Placement testing versus proficiency testing

- CLBA is viewed as a higher stakes proficiency test (to be accepted to certain types of ESL/academic/career programming, for example) when it was designed for the purposes of placement rather than proficiency
- We have little understanding of the language proficiency of learners at the end of a program and of the progress the learner has made; we need to develop ways of assessing this progress so that we can determine if the program is right for the target group

#### The learning process

- While the emphasis of assessment is usually on providing helpful feedback to the learner, the training provider also needs to understand the assessment process so that they can adjust their training
- Programs need to know exactly what skills and language functions are required of the students in order to create accurate descriptors and assessments; there are many instructors who do not have a working knowledge of the CLB and so there is a lack of consistency between programs and even between classes within a program as to what the

- levels mean – there isn't a common shared concept; knowledge of the CLB needs to be more common knowledge
- Learners should be provided with specific descriptors so that they understand their learning plan; the “can do” lists in the CLB guide are an excellent tool (as a starting point for portfolio assessment or as a springboard for discussion between instructors and students)
  - Assessment plays an important role in the learning process (i.e. determining gains made in and across programs and with different groups of learners, establishing attainable objectives, determining whether objectives have been achieved, and, most importantly, providing learners with feedback regarding their progress and performance). Training in the area of proficiency-based assessment for those in the field is an ongoing need. That being said, course objectives and lesson objectives need to be clear to both instructors and learners in order for assessment to take place. Time needs to be allotted to instructors to provide meaningful and appropriate feedback, either in writing or face-to-face, to learners based on individual and course goals.
  - Assessment can be both formal and informal and involves, at the very least, pre-testing, mid-point testing and post-testing; mid-point testing is very useful and informs the teacher as to whether or not adjustments need to be made to the material that is being taught in order to meet the learners' needs

#### Curriculum, Materials and Professional Development

- Organizations and institutions have applied for funding to develop small scale assessment tools; however, the tools themselves expire quickly without ongoing development and research
- We need to know what kind of information is useful and helpful to learners and teachers; feedback needs to be solicited
- Teachers need to be informed about aspects of language development and assessment in order to provide meaningful feedback to students
- Curriculum and assessment development and redevelopment is essential to address the shifts in learner demographics
- We need to develop awareness of various perspectives of assessment (from referral centres, programs and classrooms)
- Teachers should have the opportunity to become familiar with the CLB as well as assessment criteria so that they are able to predict where students are going to score. At the same time, teachers and assessors need to be

- aware that because of their constant exposure to learner language, they may be more sympathetic and understanding than other listeners.
- Programs also need to assess the language requirements/outcomes of particular settings (e.g., workplace). One method is to speak to graduates of a program and ask them to identify the areas in which they feel they are deficient and then further develop the curriculum to address these deficiencies.
  - General ESL is too vague; we need better descriptors because language content usually takes the form of a textbook or a teacher's personal interpretation of the requirements
  - Assessors have a very high turnover (usually every 2-3 years) but it is very expensive to train an assessor (\$5000-\$8000 each)

#### Transparency & Consistency

- Assessment needs to be consistent and related to the CLB
- Professional development is necessary to keep teachers informed of current research and how it applies to teaching. This is often skipped over because of time constraints
- There needs to be consistency in the use of terms and the interpretation of the CLB across ESL programming.
- Schools need to clearly define their program content and activities using the CLB
- The assessment centers would benefit from detailed descriptions of programs and part-time courses (with reference to the CLB) so that they can refer students to the right program. At the current time, the assessment centers are overwhelmed by both the increasing number of immigrants and the increasing demand for placement testing as an entrance requirement to many programs

#### Diversity of goals, student demographics

- Everyday assessment by teachers in the classrooms is sometimes difficult because students have a variety of goals and come from very different educational backgrounds

#### Content-Based Teaching

- Learning content as well as language helps students to measure their progress (since they can list the things they've learned and it is hard to see upward movement in language alone)
- It may be more motivating and it seems less random

- Teachers need to learn new concepts but they don't need to be subject matter experts
- Gives validation to students' prior learning experience
- Need to use "knowledge framework" to show students how to make sense of texts and make the content accessible (for example, organization, discourse markers)
- Difference between "learning to read" (which is often very frustrating) and "reading to learn" (which is more motivating and meaningful)
- Need to know what the language requirements are for the various professions so the focus is on the tasks and what the learners need to achieve; this requires going out and talking to employers to discover what the workplace requirements are and the language employees will need to perform his/her job successfully in that environment
- There is the need for a greater understanding of the merging of content with process; NorQuest delivers a course entitled *Content-Based ESL Instruction*; there is a University of Alberta TESL course, *Principles and Practice in Content . . .*, which focuses on how to teach content through strategies
- The successful movement of ESL learners into mainstream programs is dependent on there being a greater correlation between what ESL learners are taught in general ESL programs and what is being taught in mainstream programming
- In content-based instruction, it is easier for the learner to identify the progress that is being made and the expected outcomes
- Need more ESL teachers who are curriculum developers in order to combine process and content (such as in an EWP program); Essential Skills also interweaves content with the language learning process
- Foreign trained professionals are particularly focused and want to zero in on acquiring the language they need to describe their knowledge and expertise and to work in their given professions
- ESL teachers need to be able to teach content which is a shift in mindset and requires an understanding of the fact that this can be done without being a subject matter expert
- How can content be built into the ESL curriculum? A knowledge framework is required – teach learning strategies, the process of analyzing content, intercultural nuances contained in the material, etc.
- Learners often don't do well on the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) because of the lack of workplace (content area) knowledge

- A key question is when to introduce authentic materials – how do you know when learners are ready for it and when can you safely introduce it

#### Standardized testing & the Canadian Language Benchmarks

- We need to understand how the CLB relates to skills required in various trades and professional capacities
- Many programs use standardized tests (such as TOEFL or IELTS) or language proficiency tests designed for native speakers of English such as the CPT (Acuplacer) or the CAT test. These are not appropriate and do not address the specific competencies necessary for the students' situation. Some programs allow ESL learners more time to complete native speaker proficiency tests or use the CELT/SLEP tests.
- Some tests (such as the CELBAN or the project being developed for engineers by the EMCN) target certain professions but it may not be feasible to do this for all professions and trades
- There may be some over-testing of students when institutions require a CLB placement score and a standardized test score
- Stage 1 (CLB 1 – 4) focuses on learning to read while Stage 2 (CLB 5 – 8) focuses on reading to learn

#### **Recommendations and Potential Solutions**

##### Collaboration between assessment centres and ESL providers

- Secondment of instructors to an assessment centre; instructors could work for a while at an assessment centre while assessors would work in ESL schools (many issues still to be worked out, such as salary equivalence, test security and prevention of conflict of interest); training and knowledge of the assessment tools/functions would remain with the assessment centre while at the same time there would be an increased awareness about the assessment process flowing out to and becoming a part of the organizations where the instructors work
- A partnership between assessors and instructors would help create consistency in the use of the CLB and would increase the knowledge of both the instructors and the assessors
- Align the standardized tests and the CLB in order to obtain a better understanding of what each is testing and to be able to use terms and language everyone can understand in the same way. In this way, for example, one could compare the TOEFL and the CLB.

- Benchmark the standardized tests and use these instead of the CLBA for proficiency tests. One issue that needs to be resolved is that the TOEFL is primarily for academic purposes
- Levels within programs need to be very clearly benchmarked and the language needs to be transparent and consistent
- Create satellite assessment centres which are easily accessible and make use of computerized referral services
- Test development requires a strategic plan. Funding is needed for a continuous period of time to develop, pilot, train, validate, and to further develop tools. Testing is an area that given the initial and ongoing funding it requires (i.e. 3-5 years depending on the scale and plan) can eventually sustain itself (e.g. Educational Testing Services). A centralized, concentrated, and ongoing effort is required. Perhaps the creation of a national committee of test developers who would work together to address the assessment needs of language assessment would be helpful.
- Recertification is a must and something that should be implemented in Alberta. Many assessors work in isolation and do not obtain feedback about their assessment skills and decisions.

#### Portfolio assessment

- Gives concrete samples of learner progress and capabilities
- Portfolio assessment has the potential to help students and teachers organize concrete examples of progress and to provide feedback

#### Professional development

- Engage in ongoing discussions about the application of the CLB to the classroom environment (must not be a one-shot deal because learner profiles are in a constant state of flux)
- Clarify the skills required addressed/required in each of the CLB levels and in each of the skill areas by gathering samples from the levels and discussing how each relates to the Benchmarks
- Create a resource of learner samples by asking instructors to collect samples of learners' work and give them PD time to gather together and discuss, compare and develop a consistent framework of language competencies required at each of the levels in each of the skill areas; compile samples into an organized, easily accessible resource that is revisited as a staff for updates/revisions on a regular basis
- Often we wait for others to initiate and/or fund professional development because of a lack of time and resources

- Professional development is a shared responsibility between the employer and employee. It needs to be written into the employees' contract and made part of the workplace. Incentives are often necessary to encourage participation in professional development activities. Need to support and encourage buy-in from employees. Employers must value PD. Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are needed to prompt participation.
- Need to provide a variety of multi-faceted opportunities and initiatives that bring people from different organizations and programs together.
- ATESL should develop an online resource where teachers can access the contact information of subject area experts and, possibly, partake in online conferences (to eliminate travel costs) and other such PD activities
- Formal professional development is also available at universities. The University of Alberta currently offers courses on assessment and content-based instruction, and many other subjects. There is a possibility of exploring different modes of delivery for those who cannot attend classes. A stand alone course that offers CLB training might be useful.
- Issue of how we keep the expertise once the staff are trained; need ongoing PD and opportunities to share expertise
- There are often limited funds and the focus is usually on a big conference which requires a lot of funding dollars rather than on smaller scale initiatives.
- ATESL membership registry is an excellent way of disseminating information and bringing people together; ATESL has a role to play in creating forums for discussion and in providing a means by which information and resources can be shared.
- Use technology to bring people together
- Accreditation and licensure – need a reason to keep our standards high – recalibration/refresher; ATESL may want to set some parameters around maintaining accreditation status
- Combine research and programming; encourage program administrators and instructors to bring individuals who are involved in research into the ESL classroom; this kind of collaborative work serves as a catalyst for the instructor and the researcher to come together to learn from one another

#### Learner Pathways/Program design

- Consider different modes of delivery (such as e-learning) based on students' individual goals, strengths and background (for example, a student high in reading but low in fluency might take more speaking

classes) or increasing portions of time in different skill areas to meet different needs

- Encourage learners to get their individual language learning needs met by exploring learning opportunities outside the classroom through, for example, volunteer placements, involvement in community groups, etc. and/or bring volunteers into the classroom
- Have one-on-one meetings between the instructors and the learners at the mid-point and end of programs. It is a good idea to use the “can do” checklist in the CLB.
- Learners may have expectations of their language proficiency and can be extremely discouraged if they do not receive the placement score they need to enter a specific program. Assessors and teachers need to be equipped to counsel these students and to help them develop a plan to achieve their goals.
- Graduated entry programs: some schools allow learners to take some upgrading/college courses while improving their English
- Increase flexibility of programs so learners can concentrate on the areas and skills they need to develop
- Need a more descriptive, common language
- Need more assessors to manage the increased number of referrals; because of this increased demand, there isn't adequate time to do an individual learning plan or to ensure that the learner knows what he/she needs and where to go to get it; assessors are assuming that learners are going out the door knowing why they needed the assessment and where they're going from there with it
- There is an increase in the number of highly educated second language learners, and these learners want a precise idea as to what they need to learn, how long that training will take and where to go to get it
- There is a lack of consistency in giving descriptors to students that they can understand and take from one institution to the next
- It is also a challenge for the ESL instructor to be able to give an accurate description to the learner of the level he/she is at, the progress that needs to be made to get to the next level and, at the end of the course, to assess and explain to the learner whether or not this has been achieved