

Assessing Adult English Language Learners

Learner assessments are used in adult basic education (ABE), adult English as a Second Language (ESL), and family literacy programs for many different purposes: to place learners in appropriate instructional levels and classes, to measure their progress and motivate them to advance to higher levels, to qualify them to enroll in academic or job training programs, to document program effectiveness, and to demonstrate learner gains in order to meet accountability requirements. They also are used throughout a program to determine learners' goals and needs and to help learners to assess their own progress.

Because of these different purposes, programs use a variety of assessment instruments and procedures. This paper first explains federal accountability requirements and the assessments used to meet those requirements. It then describes measures used for other purposes, including learner needs assessment and assessment to inform teachers and learners about learners' progress.

Program Accountability

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) requires that each state report learner outcomes in the following areas:

- Improvements in English language proficiency and literacy, numeracy, and problem solving
- Receipt of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent (GED)
- Placement in postsecondary education and training
- Entry into employment or retention in employment (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Improvements in English language proficiency and literacy are reported in terms of level descriptors defined by the National Reporting System (NRS). The six levels for ESL apply to speaking and listening, reading and writing, and functional and workplace skills ranging from beginning ESL literacy to high advanced ESL. (See www.nrsweb.org for a description of the purposes and structure of the NRS and the ESL functioning level descriptors.)

A standardized assessment procedure (a test or performance assessment) must be used to measure level gains, but the choice of assessment tool is left up to each state. Some states have chosen one standardized test. Several states allow choices from a list of approved tests. Most states currently use *BEST Oral Interview*, *BEST Literacy*, *BEST Plus*, or *CASAS*. (For information about these tests, see *English Language Assessment Instruments for Adults Learning English*, page IV–31.) Adult education and family literacy program staff must follow the assessment procedures in place in their states if the program receives federal funding.

Assessment Validity, Reliability, and Appropriateness

The assessments used for program accountability must be valid, reliable, and appropriate. This has raised important questions for the field. What are features of assessments that make them valid, reliable, and appropriate? (For more detailed discussion of these issues, see American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999).

What makes an assessment valid?

Assessment is valid when the test, or other instrument, assesses what it is intended to measure, and when uses of the assessment results are only those for which the instrument was designed (Messick, 1989). This view takes into account both the validity of the test itself and the use of the test scores; a test's validity depends on what it is used for, in what contexts, and for what purposes. In terms of assessments used to fulfill NRS requirements, the answers to the questions shown below are important.

- Does learner performance match the NRS descriptors?
- How well does the test demonstrate learner progress?
- How indicative of program quality are learner performances on the assessment?

Any assessment used for NRS purposes is valid only if the inferences made about the learners on the basis of the test scores can be related to the NRS descriptors, or what the learners can do (proficiency). The assessment also must be sensitive enough to learner gains to be able to show progress, since the quality of programs is to be judged by learner performance on the assessment.

What makes an assessment reliable?

An assessment is reliable if scores are consistent when the test is repeated on a population of individuals or groups. For example, if a learner takes a test once, then takes it again an hour later and maybe another hour after that, the learner should get about the same score each time, provided nothing else has changed.

Test reliability can be affected by a number of factors: the test itself, the test administrator, the person who does the scoring, the testing procedures, the conditions under which the test is administered, or even the examinee. For example, an examinee might be feeling great the day of the pre-test but facing a family crisis on the day of the post-test.

Who has responsibility for ensuring that an assessment is reliable? The developers of the assessment must demonstrate that reliability *can* be achieved. Program staff using the assessment must administer it in the ways it is designed to be administered. Programs need to train the individuals who will administer the test so that it will be administered appropriately each time it is used, and they need to monitor its administration and scoring.

Programs also must ensure that enough time (or hours of instruction) has passed for learners to show gains.

What makes an assessment appropriate?

A good language proficiency test is made up of language tasks that replicate what goes on in the real world (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Thus *performance assessments*, which require test takers to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in ways that closely resemble real-life situations or settings (National Research Council, 2002), are most appropriate. Performance assessments generally reflect language used in the real world better than selected-response tests (e.g., true-false or multiple choice).

Performance assessments require learners to accomplish tasks that demonstrate what they know and can do. Examples of performance assessment tasks include oral interviews, oral or written reports (e.g., how to become a citizen), projects (e.g., researching, producing, and distributing a booklet on recreational opportunities available in the community), or demonstrations (e.g., filling out forms, writing a note in response to a memo from a child's teacher). Information from a variety of performance assessments provides a more complete picture of learners' abilities than can be gathered from performance on one standardized test alone (Van Duzer, 2002).

For performance assessments to be used for accountability purposes, they need to be standardized. Programs should check with their state representatives to see what assessments can be used for accountability reporting. (See *English Language Assessment Instruments for Adults Learning English*, page IV-31, for a list of some of the performance assessments used for NRS reporting. For more detailed discussion of test appropriateness, see Kenyon & Van Duzer, 2003.)

Other Uses of Assessments

Not all assessments are used for program accountability. They also may be used to determine learners' goals and needs, to place learners in appropriate instructional levels and classes, to measure learners' progress and help them move to more advanced levels, to qualify them to enroll in academic or job training programs, and to document program effectiveness. To accomplish these purposes, programs often use a variety of different assessments, including both standardized and alternative measures.

Alternative assessments include surveys, interviews, checklists, observations, teacher-developed tests, learner self-assessment, portfolios, and performance-based tests (Van Duzer, 2002). These assessments allow program administrators and teachers to learn what adults need and want to learn (in a needs assessment) and monitor their learning from classroom-based activities (in ongoing assessment). Alternative assessments may be conducted in learners' native languages if that is reasonable. For example, *surveys and interviews* are often used soon after enrollment to find out about adults' and their children's

language and literacy use at home and at work, what they believe they do well, and what they want to learn. These kinds of assessments also are used to place learners in classes. *Portfolios*, or collections of individuals' work, can include such items as book reports, notes from interviews, learners' reflections on their progress, writing samples, data from performance-based assessments, and scores on standardized tests. From *program-developed performance-based tests*, instructors, administrators, and learners can get information about how the learners use English to accomplish different tasks. Skills such as reading a chart or locating information on a schedule can be related to actual situations that learners might encounter. Authentic materials such as job schedules, pay stubs, and union contracts are often used to assess learner knowledge and skills in workplace programs (Holt & Van Duzer, 2000).

Both standardized and alternative assessments have disadvantages. Standardized tests may not capture the incremental changes in learning that occur over short periods of instructional time. This is particularly a problem in adult education programs where learners may have only a few hours per week to devote to attending classes or where instruction is focused on a limited number of learner goals. Because it takes a long time to learn a language, learners may not have enough instructional time to demonstrate gain on a standardized test.

Alternative assessments may be time consuming for both learners and teachers. In addition, data from alternative assessments do not meet federal accountability requirements, and they may not meet eligibility requirements for job training programs, higher level classes, or certification. Because of these limitations, ESL programs often use a combination of standardized and alternative assessments to assess literacy and language proficiency.

Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Assessments

The time it takes for learners to show a gain on an assessment equivalent to at least one level—as defined by the NRS—depends on both program and learner factors.

Program factors:

- Intensity of the classes (how long and how many times per week)
- Training and experience of the instructors
- Adequacy of facilities (comfortable, well-lit)
- Resources available to instructors and learners

Learner factors:

- Educational background (including literacy in the native language)
- Age
- Experiences with trauma
- Opportunities to use the language outside of instructional time
- Time and ability to attend class

Principles of Effective Assessment

For both standardized and alternative assessments, application of the following principles will produce effective assessment procedures:

1. Clearly identify the purpose of the assessment (why the learners are being assessed) and what learning is to be assessed (e.g., increased speaking proficiency).
2. Select assessment instruments and procedures that match the learning goals of the program (e.g., an oral interview to show progress in speaking skills, writing samples to show progress in writing) and that engage learners so they are interested and will strive to do their best.
3. Whenever possible, use multiple measures to present a more complete picture of what has been learned.
4. Ensure that adequate resources are available to carry out the assessments (e.g., enough materials, comfortable environment, adequately trained administrators and scorers).
5. Be aware of the limitations of the assessments selected.
6. Remember that assessment is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Share assessment results with learners and instructors, as well as with administrative staff and funders.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, the United States has made progress in creating a cohesive adult education system through legislation such as the Workforce Investment Act and through efforts to standardize learner assessment and program reporting. The areas described above represent positive steps in addressing the complexities of demonstrating learner progress.

Additional Resources for Assessing Adult English Language Learners

Ananda, S. (2000). *Equipped for the future assessment report: How instructors can support adult learners through performance-based assessment*. Retrieved May 20, 2004, from http://eff.cls.utk.edu/pdf/ananda_eff.pdf

National Center for ESL Literacy Education. (2001). *NCLE resource collections: Assessment and evaluation in adult ESL*. Retrieved December 14, 2004, from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/collections/assessment.html

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