

Initial ESOL Assessment in Scotland: a short study

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Executive Summary

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Introduction

The three specific objectives of the project were to:

- investigate and appraise existing ESOL assessment materials available for use within different sectors
- improve awareness of these materials through production of a guide, and
- consider the need for any new or additional materials and make recommendations as appropriate.

This study includes information from the following organisations about their initial assessment processes:

- Anniesland College, Glasgow
- Falkirk Community Services
- Fife Adult Guidance & Education Services
- Glasgow ESOL Forum
- Glasgow Metropolitan College
- Jewel and Esk Valley College, Midlothian
- Langside College, Glasgow
- North Highland College, University of the Highlands and Islands
- Stevenson College Edinburgh
- Tower Hamlets College, London
- Workers' Educational Association Scotland.

In addition to the organisations listed above, another two community-based providers of ESOL were approached. However, with the first of these, each area and sometimes each tutor took a different approach and the task of gathering the disparate materials was not feasible in the project timescale. No response was received from the second provider. Information was also requested from tutors working for two training providers but these organisations were using initial assessment tools from the colleges with which they have close working relationships. These materials are included.

Investigating and appraising existing ESOL assessment materials available for use with different sectors

Although in many areas and organisations in Scotland there is a great deal of expertise and effective practice in ESOL, some providers are not so experienced and in some cases are new to the provision of ESOL.

Both experienced practitioners and those with limited experience have had to adapt rapidly to recent developments, including:

- the increase in numbers of ESOL learners
- additional ESOL funding from the Strategy and expectations to respond quickly with new provision, and
- the new SQA ESOL National Qualifications (NQ) Framework.

With the exception of the preparation provided by the SQA for the new ESOL qualifications, training to date has not facilitated a national perspective or approach to aspects of ESOL provision. Also, since not all providers are involved in delivering SQA qualifications, the organisation's impact has been limited. As the work of the ESOL National Panel and Working Groups progress, more guidance and support will be available. This study indicates the wide variation in frames of reference, quality, standards of procedures and assessment tools that currently prevails across Scotland.

Of the ten organisations that have submitted material, three used the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) when assessing new learners. One used *Skills for Life* materials, which, like the SCQF, relate to the Common European Framework of References for Languages. Of the others, the most frequently used levels are the general English language teaching (ELT) levels which have traditionally been used throughout ESOL provision.

The need for any new or additional materials

The *Skills for Life* assessment tools used in England and Wales have been difficult to obtain but are of high quality and provide detailed guidance and support notes. The initial assessment tools are only part of a range of resources that support each stage of learning. There are also materials for language skills checks, diagnostic assessment and to exemplify levels.

There is commercially produced material available but it is in use in only three of the Scottish organisations sampled here.

This study provides examples of a variety of assessment materials, but these are not necessarily consistent in terms of level. Nor do they always relate either to the SCQF or Scottish context. In some cases, organisations do not appear to have clear criteria that teachers and tutors can apply to speaking and writing

assessment, nor procedures to ensure standardisation with other assessors in the organisation.

Movement of learners between providers, as is frequently the case in some urban areas, is not helped by the lack of standardised initial assessment practice. Examples of this problem, established through discussion with organisations which submitted materials, are described in the study.

The study offers a selection of materials, but there remains the issue of quality, and of accurate interpretation of levels. In addition, some material used for assessment of reading could not be included because of copyright issues. This includes the only material used to assess reading for Academic ESOL courses.

There are only five levels of ESOL in the SCQF framework. Two SQA units which cover ESOL literacies are mapped to the SCQF. However, a number of generally larger organisations believe that a greater number of levels is necessary and so opt to continue with the traditional ELT scale.

The detailed assessment of beginner ESOL literacy learners is frequently postponed until learners have joined a class. This may be due to there being insufficient materials at that level to make an accurate assessment.

Recommendations

1. A pack of initial assessment tools be developed for Scotland's ESOL providers which relates to the SCQF levels and clarifies the relationship with the ELT levels used in provision.
2. The tools should reflect effective practice in initial assessment in Scotland, cover speaking, listening, reading and writing, and contain grammar tests for carrying out further diagnostic assessment.
3. The tools should be supported by clear criteria for assessment of speaking and writing and contain exemplars of the different levels.
4. The varying levels of ESOL literacy learners should be addressed and tools devised to more clearly distinguish these levels at an earlier stage in the initial assessment process.
5. The tools would include materials that could be used to assess entry to academic ESOL courses and vocational and academic college courses such as NC, HNC and HND.
6. The use of the materials would be optional for providers, but should be promoted through the roll-out of training events.

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