

Introduction to Assessment and Adult English Language Learners

Published by the Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy (MCAEL)

By Lynda Terrill in collaboration with MCAEL staff

*... the term assessment in a broad sense [means]: to find out what learners want, know, and can do at the beginning of instruction (needs, placement, and diagnosis), throughout instruction (ongoing progress), and at the end of instruction (achievement and outcomes). **

For larger or smaller programs, for those funded by state-administered federal monies or funded by other sources, for those whose sole mission is to provide adult ESOL instruction in Montgomery County or those who provide diverse services to the local community—assessing adult English language learners may seem like a complicated and, sometimes troublesome, requirement. In fact, while determining assessment policy and procedures can be complicated, a well considered and implemented assessment structure helps develop and maintain a quality program and benefits all stakeholders – especially the learners.

The following questions and answers provide a brief introduction to assessment in adult ESOL. For more information, see other MCAEL documents (e.g., *Adult ESOL Fact Sheet: Assessment with Adult English Language Learners*, *Bibliography: Adult ESOL Assessment*, and *Adult ESOL Assessment Glossary*).

❖ **People talk about “assessment” all the time; what does it mean?**

Assessment encompasses more than standardized tests such as CASAS or BEST Plus. Assessment within a program should:

reflect the mission and goal of the program; legal requirements; needs of the learners and other stakeholders; the principles of adult learning, second language acquisition, language learning pedagogy, and literacy development for adults; and instructional objectives and activities. (Standards for Adult Education ESL Programs, TESOL, 2003. p. 22)

Assessment activities do take time and program resources. However, an effective assessment plan can help consolidate a program’s mission, requirements, needs & goals for all stakeholders, principles of adult learning and instruction to develop a successful program.

Reflection: What are the strengths and challenges of your current assessment plan?

❖ **Who are the stakeholders? Why is assessment important?**

As they enter a program, learners often want to know their level of English proficiency and as they continue in the program, they also want to see how they are progressing. Teachers and program administrators as well as funders need to know about assessment policies and outcomes so they can improve their program and make sure their resources are being spent wisely. Employers and would-be employers, and the community at large all also have a reasonable need to know that learners are making progress in English language proficiency.

Reflection: Who are the stakeholders for your program?

❖ **Where and how does assessment fit in with the other elements of adult ESOL instruction?**

What is the benefit to the program and the learners?

Adult ESOL instruction is comprised of many interrelated parts including

- program mission,
- structure and administration,
- curriculum and instructional materials,
- the learners — demographics, language proficiencies, and needs and goals,
- educational staff — skills, knowledge, experience, conditions & expectations of work,
- and assessment — of the learners, the staff, and program itself.

Assessment policies, procedures, and tools can help focus and manage all aspects of instruction. Because of this, program administrators and education staff should plan carefully and explicitly about assessment.

Reflection: Can you think of ways planning for and using appropriate assessments could help with other areas of your program?

❖ **How does needs assessment fit into the big assessment picture?**

Whether a program decides to adopt a standardized test, uses an in-house test or performance measures, or uses another tool, gathering and acting on learners' expressed needs and goals is crucial to developing and delivering appropriate instruction—instruction that will really help the learners make use of the limited time that they have to study English. In fact, when programs and teachers ask adult learners what they need and want, some of the apparent confusion related to assessment tends to disappear. For more information on needs assessment see:

- *Needs Assessment for Adult ESL Learners* at www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/Needas.html;
- "Needs Assessment and Learner Self-Evaluation" from the *Practitioner Toolkit: Working with Adult English Language Learners* at www.cal.org/caela/tools/program_development/elltoolkit/Part2-5NeedsAssessment&LearnerSelf-Evaluation.pdf

Reflection: What do the instructors/staff in your program do to find out what learners want to know? How well do you feel this is working to identify learners' goals?

❖ **How can information gathered from assessments be used?**

Well-formulated assessment tools and procedures can provide information about:

- what learners need and want
- levels of English proficiency at intake
- placing individuals in class
- what individuals need to learn
- throughout instruction
- at the end of instruction

Also, teachers and program administrators can determine whether the curriculum and instruction is providing hoped-for outcomes. By having appropriate assessments in place, a program can find out if they really are assisting the learners with their goals rather than guessing or just relying on anecdotes alone. From general information related to learner performance (such as how many individuals move to a higher level each semester or year or how many learners meet individual goals), funders and the wider community can decide whether the program is adequately serving the community.

Reflection: What information do you currently gather from assessments? What other information would you like to gather?

❖ **What are the first steps in setting up, adapting, or improving a program's assessment policy, procedures, and tools?**

1. Convene a group of small group of volunteers (e.g., teacher/s, program staff, volunteers, former students, funders, and others) to review assessment options. If this is not practical, at least one or two staff members should review the tests or test literature. They should consider the possible tests based on what they know about the learners' needs, goals, and circumstances. *Note: MCAEL will be able to provide some background to help jumpstart this process.*
2. Review current literature about assessing adult learners generally and adult English language learners specifically. Adult English language learners in adult education programs should be evaluated by what they know and can do.

Reflection: Do you have such a group in place? If not, who do you think should participate?

❖ **Where can programs find specific assessment information related to Montgomery County, Maryland, and the Federal government, and individual tests or procedures?**

Luckily, there is a wealth of information to help programs find assessment information. Here are some resources to search first:

- Maryland Adult Literacy Resource Center www.umbc.edu/alrc/index.html, especially the standards page from www.umbc.edu/alrc/standards.html
- National Reporting System Web site. www.nrsweb.org/, especially *State Assessment Policy Guidance* (revised January 14, 2010) at www.nrsweb.org/docs/pubs/AssessmentPolicyGuidance.pdf

Reflection: Do you know other resources that may be helpful? If so, what are they?

* Van Duzer, C.H. & Berdan, R., *Perspectives on Assessment in Adult ESOL Instruction, Review of Adult Learning and Literacy Volume 1, 1999.* Available from <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=521>