



# Assessing English

*Assessment of English is necessary but should not only (or always) be 'high stakes' i.e. assessment which holds individuals or schools to account. On a day-to-day basis, assessment of English should primarily be to understand what students know and can do in order to support their future learning.*

There are four main purposes for assessment:

- to help students while they are learning
- to find out what students have learnt at a particular point in time
- to identify any significant problems that individual students might be experiencing or address any causes for concern
- to reflect on the effectiveness of the taught curriculum with groups of students against defined goals.

UKLA accepts the need for assessment at all stages of education but argues that it should be formative and diagnostic as well as summative:

**Formative assessment** helps to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses and provides feedback that can move learning forward.

**Diagnostic assessment** identifies learners who may require extra support, gaps in understanding or areas of the curriculum which need further attention.

**Summative assessment** measures what individuals and groups have learned. This is an important aspect of a nation's, local authority's or school's responsibility.

Assessment in educational contexts refers to informed judgements made by educationalists concerning individual student performance and the attainment of defined learning goals. It covers both classroom-based assessment as well as large scale external tests, examinations and standardised tests (Harlen, 2004).

The focus of assessment should not simply put pressure on schools to improve

results: it can have a negative impact on learning and teaching when what is assessed only focuses upon what can be assessed easily.

### **Formative assessment**

Formative assessment can be defined as assessment *for* learning. Formative assessments are designed to monitor students' learning at any stage in a teaching sequence. They give teachers the chance to address gaps in understanding. They also offer opportunities to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses and provide feedback that can move learning forward. Formative assessment is a cyclical process in which information is gathered in relation to students' progress towards agreed goals. This information is then used to identify the appropriate next steps to maximise learning, and the action needed to take these steps. This includes clear feedback to students (CAN, 2006; Marshall, 2012; Torrance, 2012; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018). Formative assessment can also be diagnostic, helping to identify groups of students with common strengths or weaknesses so that more challenging learning and teaching or additional support can be planned for.

### **Diagnostic assessment**

Diagnostic assessment can be defined as assessment *about* learning. Apart from its more technical use in identifying particular students' difficulties with learning, diagnostic assessment usually refers to analysing evidence of the impact of the taught curriculum (and sometimes the pedagogical approach) on groups of students against learning goals. It enables the teacher to find out if there are gaps in learning or general misconceptions which then need to be planned for. Any assessment must comprise collating evidence and weighing it up in the light of specific criteria. Evidence can be observational, collection of examples of work or more formal assessment processes including standardised assessments and tests.

### **Summative assessment**

Summative assessment can be defined as assessment *of* learning. Summative assessments are often carried out at the end of a period of teaching: yearly, termly, half termly or more frequently, often informed by tests such as end of key stage tests (commonly called SATs). Although some summative assessments can be used formatively, they are generally used to monitor and sum up the progress of individuals and groups and to identify attainment at specific ages or stages. This information can then be used for reporting purposes. Summative assessment can help students, support staff, parents/carers, senior leadership teams, governors, local authorities and governments keep track of students' learning, both individually and as part of certain groups. It can, alongside contextual factors, be used as part of school evaluation and improvement. Some formative assessment information can inform summative judgements.

UKLA is not opposed to summative testing, but would strongly argue that tests should provide valid data, and not just measure what can most easily be measured. Students' intellectual and creative achievements in language cannot adequately be tested by short, summative tests. Teachers' formative assessments give a

much more rounded picture of students' achievements and evidence shows that teacher assessments are able to produce summative assessment that can equal or even exceed external tests in terms of reliability and validity (Black and Wiliam, 2012; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018). At the same time, research indicates that teacher assessment can tend to favour particular groups (Akala, 2018, Gillborn, 2008) so it needs to be moderated by other professionals e.g. teacher colleagues, unit leaders, heads of English departments.

### Validity and reliability

The *validity* of an assessment is defined in terms of how well what is assessed corresponds to the learning outcomes that it is intended to assess (Gardner, 2012; Stobart, 2012). One form of validity is *consequential validity*: the validity of an assessment is reduced if inferences drawn on the basis of the results are not justified (Gielen *et al.*, 2003). For example, an assessment of word decoding skills may be perfectly valid as an assessment of decoding but not valid if it used to make a judgement about reading more generally. Likewise, in England, the phonics screening check is only valid as an assessment of learners' understanding of phonics and not, as some politicians would have it, as an assessment of their reading more generally.

The *reliability* of an assessment refers to the extent to which the same result would occur if it were repeated in other contexts (Black and Wiliam, 2012, Verhavert *et al.*, 2019). Reliability can be reduced if, for instance, the outcomes are dependent on who conducts the assessment or if the assessment is administered where some groups of students are offered more support than others.

### Sources

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Hargreaves, E., Gipps, C. and Pickering, A. (2018) Assessment for learning: Formative approaches, in T. Cremin and C. Burnett (eds.) *Learning to Teach in the Primary School* (4th Edition). London: Routledge.

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Marshall, B. (2011) *Testing English: Formative and Summative Approaches to English Assessment*. London: Continuum.

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## **School example: primary**

### **Assessment in English at Blue Drive Primary School**

At Blue Drive Primary School, we know that assessment is integral to our teaching and learning cycle and is an essential part of effective classroom practice. We have policies for formative, summative and diagnostic assessment in spoken language, reading and writing.

The school is clear that making progress in spoken language, reading and writing is interrelated so that understanding what is read can be enhanced through talk as well as writing. This means that evidence of progress for one mode of language, e.g. reading, can be found in another mode, e.g. what children say or write. We have a planned three year cycle of professional development to revisit these areas to make sure that we're keeping up to date with current requirements.

After considerable discussion and professional development time, all staff understand what progress in spoken language, reading and writing looks like. To support this we have agreed to use a range of continuums which plot progress in a range of strands identifying what this might look like in age stages up to the end of primary school. We have progression grids for spoken language, reading (including decoding) and writing.

Our spoken language progression grid moves from *Inexperienced speaker/listener* to *very experienced speaker/listener*. Our reading progression grid has the following strands: *Reading skills including decoding and fluency, Range of reading, Engagement and response*, and *Comprehension*. Our writing progression grid contains the following strands: *Transcription (including spelling), Handwriting and presentation*, and *Engagement and composition*. Planning is linked both to the national curriculum and to the progression identified as a focus for each year's units of work. We often include English objectives in cross curricular work.

### **Assessing Spoken Language**

#### ***In the moment:***

We aim for assessment and feedback in spoken language to happen in the ongoing talk in the classroom. Adults respond in various ways to what children say, implicitly giving feedback on the effectiveness of their talk, modelling ways of talking and appropriate vocabulary for that particular context. In any lesson or conversation with children we are constantly on the lookout for when a child talks/responds in a way that they haven't before. If we remember we write the utterance down verbatim on a post it note and stick it into a 'spoken language achievement book' where each child has a page.

***Summative:***

At the end of term the class teacher goes through the evidence collected and, along with her knowledge of each child, makes a judgement about where the child is on the spoken language progression grid and what would be the best focus to help the child continue to make progress. Data on the stage of development and achievement of the stated criteria is recorded and collated on the school's tracking system. The progression grid also helps teachers to identify any areas of the spoken language curriculum that need more attention.

**Assessing Reading*****In the moment***

Assessment and feedback happen mainly during reading lessons. During dedicated phonics sessions we listen to how children respond and what they write on their whiteboards and give feedback in the moment if they have shown they are learning well or need misunderstandings sorted out.

During sessions that are dedicated to comprehension it is what children say in relation to the text that is important in providing evidence of comprehension. In particular if a child says something that shows they have improved their literal comprehension, or made inferences by drawing on evidence in the text or beyond it we make a note on a post it note or the guided reading planner.

Evidence from comprehension activities such as clarification or visualisation that is recorded in exercise books is also looked at to see if teaching needs adjusting in the next session for the child/group/class. Comprehension activities in books are monitored and oral feedback given if needed. We do not write extensive feedback in books.

***Summative:***

A range of evidence is collected to make summative judgements about reading progress at the end of each term based on the Reading Progression Grid.

In the Home Reading Journal we record the books that children take home for reading practice. These are colour coded using Book Band colours. Children (and parents/carers) also write down texts that have been read and enjoyed at home. Teachers monitor these Journals but are not expected to make written comments in them.

Every term (and more often for children not making good progress) children are assessed using a commercially produced graduated running record system. These running records and comprehension checks provide rich evidence for decoding, fluency and comprehension. They are carefully calibrated, based on Reading Recovery levels and help to track children's progress within the Book Bands. They help to indicate next steps for each child.

Guided reading notes, post its, activities recorded in exercise books, progression records, children's comments as well as the teacher's knowledge of the child all contribute to a judgement about where the child is on the Reading Progression

Grid and what would be the best focus to help the child continue to make progress. Data on the stage of development and achievement of the stated criteria are recorded and collated on the school's tracking system.

Twice a year teachers meet together for moderating reading attainment. We bring evidence of reading from a few children in each class and use national criteria as well as the school's progression grids to agree what children have attained. This ensures consistency of judgements across the school and with national standards.

At the end of Key Stage 1 and 2 the reading test is administered. This evidence combined with all the evidence mentioned above informs the teacher's summative judgement about whether children have reached the Expected Standard or are Working Towards or at Greater Depth in reading.

## **Assessing Writing**

### ***In the moment:***

Assessment and specific feedback happen mainly when children are engaged in composing and drafting. Teachers work with small groups giving feedback and support based on what children are doing in the act of writing. If a particular piece of writing shows a child has made some significant progress, whether in effectiveness, grammar, spelling and/or presentation a note is made on the page so that the child is clear what has been successful (and it can be also used when summative judgements need to be made).

Every term the class teacher has a one to one discussion with each child where they choose together the piece that has pleased them the most and talk about why as well as what the next steps for the child will be for the next term. Children can bring in writing they have done at home to this meeting if they would like to.

### ***Summative***

A range of evidence is collected to make summative judgements about writing progress at the end of each term based on the Writing Progression Grid. Evidence considered is from writing across the curriculum and from all points in the planning, drafting and publishing process.

Twice a year teachers meet together for moderating writing attainment. We bring evidence of writing from a few children in each class and use national criteria as well as the school's progression grids to agree what children have attained. This ensures consistency of judgements across the school and with national standards.

At the end of Key Stage 1 and 2 teachers make a summative judgement about whether children have reached the Expected Standard or are Working Towards or at Greater Depth in writing.

## **School example: secondary**

### **Assessment in English at Peacehaven Community School**

*“You don’t fatten a pig by weighing it, do you?”*

Wise words spoken by my first head of department some 25 years ago. So why are so many schools still focusing on the weighing rather than the fattening? At Peacehaven we tried to move away from the weighing (testing) to focus on the fattening (skills and knowledge).

#### **A whole school focus on reading**

As reading for pleasure is a key indicator in educational success (Sullivan and Brown, 2015), improving engagement with reading had to be a priority. Peacehaven School is a rapidly improving school but one which has historically suffered from low literacy levels. Great progress has been made with the introduction of a school wide Drop Everything and Read programme where all children (and their teachers!) in years 7-9 read for fifteen minutes every day. This is supported by Accelerated Reader, a well-stocked library and a fabulous librarian. And this perhaps exemplifies the beliefs which underpin assessment in the school: any quantitative data needs to be backed up with qualitative diagnostics and a personal, dialogic touch.

#### **A change in data gathering – a focus on information not on spreadsheets**

There has historically (or traditionally) been an overreliance on quantitative data gathering in the school. After consulting with staff, data collection has been reduced from six times a year to just three data entry points. This has allowed staff to focus on what really matters – the teaching. Within English we are encouraged to ‘sample mark’ books looking at around five in each class and then focus our teaching on the most common errors. It is a quick and focused way to approach progress and improvement in the classroom and again demonstrates that the cycle of assessment and teaching is part of a cycle of learning. As a school and a department we have tried to move away from assessments as ‘bench marking’ tests but more as an integral part of an information cycle.

#### **Assessing Reading**

Alongside the literacy drive which focused on nurturing reading for pleasure, the school also promotes oracy in the classroom. We were lucky enough to be part of the ‘Faster Read’ project based at Sussex University (Sutherland *et al.*, 2018). The team was already well trained in making the different reading comprehension strategies explicit in our teaching. The rich group talk which is the bedrock of comprehending texts has been built into all of our schemes of work and students’ understanding of their reading is assessed informally as teachers circulate the different reading groups. Comments are written in students’ books on post it notes on the areas of understanding, inference and synthesis of ideas and noted on teachers’ mark sheets.

Formal, summative assessments remain at the end of each module and we have found that, as a result of our literacy drive, students are more confident in tackling these and demonstrate stronger abilities in being able to track themes and 'Big Ideas' across the text and synthesise different ideas. Complex concepts like narrative voice and narrative arc beginning to make sense to students, even those who were previously low attainers.

### Assessing Writing

The drive for promoting oracy across the school has been carried into our teaching of writing where we also look to formative assessment strategies like peer assessment and generating success criteria in class. Any piece of writing the students undertake in years 7-9 is modelled, discussed, broken down and drafted before a final version is written and assessed. Success criteria may focus on a different aspect of writing, for example sentence structure or vocabulary and figurative language. Self-assessment against the success criteria is a key part of the assessment process. Whilst we initially found that this process took time, the results and the growing confidence of the students has been impressive.

### Other changes

A key part of the change in assessment was clearing away as much admin as possible from faculty meetings so that time could be given over to moderating students' work. This has ensured a consistent approach in assessment across the team.

Summative assessments in both reading and writing are also used to adjust the next schemes of work so that misconceptions and mistakes can be addressed either faculty wide or in individual classes.

What we are trying to foster is an approach that understands that assessment and teaching go hand in hand. There is no point in changing the assessment procedures if you don't also look at the teaching in the classroom.

### References

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See also

**UKLA bookshop** [www.ukla.org/shop](http://www.ukla.org/shop)

*Handbook of Teaching Early Reading: more than phonics*  
by Sally Elborn

*English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19* series edited by John Richmond

*Beyond Words: Developing children's response to multimodal texts*  
by Eve Bearne and Cary Bazalgette

*Teaching Writing Effectively: Reviewing practice*  
by Eve Bearne, Liz Chamberlain, Teresa Cremin and Marilyn Mottram

*Making an Impact 1: Raising Standards in Writing*  
by Rebecca Kennedy and Eve Bearne: professional development materials  
accompanying *Teaching Writing Effectively*

*Active encounters: Inspiring young readers and writers of non-fiction 4-11*  
by Margaret Mallett

*Dyslexia and Inclusion: Supporting classroom reading with 7-11 year olds*  
by Rosemary Anderson

*Miscue Analysis in the Classroom* by Robin Campbell

*Storyline: Creative Learning Across the Curriculum* by Carol Omand

**UKLA website** [www.ukla.org/resources](http://www.ukla.org/resources)

*Writing Fact Cards and professional development activities*

*CLPE Reading and Writing Scales*

both on: <https://ukla.org/resources/collection/professional-development>

*Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan*

by John Richmond

*Articles by Margaret Clark, including:*

*Synthetic Phonics and Baseline Assessment.*

*Are these assessments and screening checks good for our health?*

*The Phonics Screening Check: Intended and unintended effects on early years classrooms in England.*

Two articles on Writing Miscue Analysis by Eve Bearne