

Weston College (2021) Final Report on the OTLA Phase 7 (English) Project – Assessment for Learning. London: ETF.

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For further information regarding the OTLA Phase 7 (English) programme and this project go to https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-7/.

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Contents

Final report - Assessment for Learning	2
Appendix 1 – The project team	7
Appendix 2 – The ESOL Initial Assessment	8
Appendix 3 – Case Study: HK (Pre-Entry)	16
Appendix 4 – Case Study: PP (Entry 2)	17
Appendix 5 - Case Study: FP (Entry 3)	18

Final report - Assessment for Learning

Weston College

This project engaged with a nationally significant issue in prison education: how to assess the English ability of ESOL learners.

Summary

Are ESOL learners best served by the BKSB English Initial Assessment? The disconnect between learners' levels at assessment and their performance in classes suggested there might be a better approach. This project developed an Initial Assessment specifically for ESOL learners. The purpose of this was to ensure ESOL learners get into the right class, first time, every time. In turn, this would maximise class time and facilitate achievement.

The project ran at HMP Maidstone, a Foreign National Prison (FNP) holding up to 600 male prisoners. As an FNP, HMP Maidstone holds residents who are ESOL learners and Functional Skills (FS) English learners. The ESOL learners are almost entirely low (Entry) level. As far back as 2011 and in the Coates Review, it was highlighted that ESOL learners have even greater difficulty than other prisoners in accessing education and, therefore, benefitting from reducing reoffending initiatives.

Further, there are consistently a significant number of non-native speakers of English across the prison estate in the UK. The ESOL Initial Assessment designed at HMP Maidstone could be deployed nationally to improve access to education for ESOL learners all over the country. Finally, the ESOL Initial Assessment is analysed by a trained person rather than a computer, making it more personalised.

Rationale

During a nine-month period prior to the pandemic, it was found that 40% of learners allocated to ESOL classes at HMP Maidstone were either transferred or withdrawn. Although mostly transferred to a different level of ESOL or to FS English, this nevertheless represents an inefficiency in lost or misdirected classroom time.

As a result, HMP Maidstone joined the OTLA 7 project for the academic year 2020-2021 with the aim of developing an Initial Assessment (IA) specifically for ESOL learners. This ESOL IA would run during Education inductions, which are held in the Virtual Campus (a facility with a suite of computers for accessing assessments and short-course learning modules). Learners identified as FS English would take the BKSB English Initial Assessment as normal but those identified as ESOL would take the newly developed assessment.

Page 2 OTLA Phase 7 (English)

The ESOL Initial Assessment (see Appendix 2) has three elements:

- A verbal pre-screen: This comprises five questions graduated in difficulty, easiest first. The idea is to quickly and effectively ascertain whether a learner is pre-Entry ESOL, Entry-level ESOL or FS English. If a learner is pre-Entry ESOL, there is no need to go further as this learner will not be able to produce meaningful work at the next stage.
- 2. A writing activity: There are two options here a lower level and a higher level. Based on the verbal pre-screen, Entry-level ESOL learners try either writing activity. This allows the learners' level to be accurately determined for the purposes of allocation to class.
- 3. A reading activity: There are four reading activities, each at a different level pre-Entry, Entry 1, Entry 2 and Entry 3. These can be used to further differentiate if the writing result for a particular learner is ambiguous. The reading can also be useful for potential maths learners because the mathematics classes require a certain level of literacy in English for understanding the examination questions.

The purpose of this approach was to investigate whether giving ESOL learners an initial assessment designed specifically for them would improve the accuracy of their assessed level and therefore provide more accurate information to the prison's Activities department (the group responsible for allocating prisoners to work and education). The procedural aim here is to minimise inefficiencies in and disruption to prisoners' education while in custody.

Approach

The ESOL Initial Assessment is designed to be run in a face-to-face induction context. The Oral Pre-Screen is a filter to categorise the language needs of learners to direct them to the correct Initial Assessment. (see Appendix 2)

With the increased prevalence of Covid and the reintroduction of lockdown, the team at HMP Maidstone established a partnership, with a digital media provider. Using a large part of our project budget, this external partner was engaged to create 'How to Complete ESOL Initial Assessment' videos in February, when we were unable to see learners face-to-face. From the beginning of March 2021, this digital content was made available on a dedicated prison TV channel which is played on the sets in prisoners' cells.

As a result, we were able to send Writing assessments to all new receptions and help to overcome the limitations prevailing at the time. Subsequently, a reasonable number of samples have been obtained. It is clear that there is a considerable number of both ESOL and Functional Skills English learners in the establishment, indicating that the ESOL IA may be useful. At this stage, and with the restrictive circumstances, one particular imperative was to establish the nature of the link between the result obtained on the ESOL IA Writing and the work produced in the activity packs that currently form the backbone of our provision.

Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

ESOL teachers at HMP Maidstone attended a series of online training sessions with CC Consultancy via the ETF. These sessions developed the reflective process where a team came together to step back from practice, assess an issue, and determine what might work better for our learners, in reference to the ETF's Professional Standards. The sessions informed the project's design of the ESOL Initial Assessment materials by helping to sharpen the focus on intended outcomes of the assessment.

Through the digital media content and the decision to send out the ESOL Initial Assessment Writing to all new receptions, the team was able to monitor the accuracy of the assessment results by cross-referencing learners' performance with their subsequent work on their ESOL packs (where enrolled). As there has been found to be a tight match between assessment level and pack level, ESOL learners' progress has been facilitated by the assessment.

The ESOL Initial Assessment (see Appendix 2) has proven effective for Functional Skills English learners. The Writing assessment allows these learners to produce language samples that can be accurately assessed. This offers an alternative assessment for learners not suited to the BKSB English Assessment. Further, there has been an historic issue with pre-Entry ESOL learners being conflated with illiterate learners. This does not reflect the reality: ESOL learners are literate in their first language but may not be in English; illiterate learners cannot read or write in any language. The ESOL Initial Assessment identified such learners at the earliest opportunity, opening the door for greater partnership working with the Shannon Trust, the organisation that oversees the 'Turning Pages' literacy programme for native speakers in prisons.

Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

In this section, there are three levels to consider: local, regional and national. At the local level, there has been collaboration between the project team, an external digital media provider, the prison governor and the LSM (Learning & Skills Manager). In addition, further collaboration with prison partners was required to ensure the digital context was available on the prison's Media Channel.

At the regional level, other establishments have a high proportion of ESOL learners, such as HMP Elmley. In the near future, the ESOL Initial Assessment could be expanded to these establishments. The Ministry of Justice's Regional Education Management Team have taken a keen interest in the project and recognise its potential wider significance. At Weston College, the Lot (Regional) Director is also the project Lead. The involvement of these teams in the project connects it to a regional network of practitioners and stakeholders.

Page 4 OTLA Phase 7 (English)

Nationally, the CPD training sessions relating to OTLA 7 projects have involved collaboration and discussion with practitioners across the country, including FE Colleges and the voluntary sector. The Initial Assessment designed at HMP Maidstone has national significance: if rolled out across the country in all prisons, the assessment resulting from this project may transform the access of ESOL learners to the high-quality, meaningful education provision in secure settings.

Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

Of the 100 learners who have completed an ESOL Initial Assessment Writing task, 53 have been returned after the Media Channel video was introduced. This is in a period of two months, as compared to 47 returned in three-and-a-half months prior to that. This suggests that the video has helped to engage ESOL learners.

All three case studies detailed in the appendices 3/4/and 5 show that the ESOL Initial Assessment Writing elicits work from learners that accurately matches their true abilities. The case studies feature learners at different levels, and so we can conclude that not only is the Writing effective, but also that the Oral Pre-Screen is effective in determining whether a learner is pre-Entry. HK's lack of productive vocabulary and challenges in reading basic sentences and pronouncing letter sounds are characteristic of a pre-Entry learner. However, during support sessions, HK has shown clear progress in retaining some basic vocabulary such as 'chair' and 'table'. Also, his ability to form his own sentences based on examples from reading texts has improved. (see Appendix 3)

In the case of FP, this learner was correctly identified as being at the lower end of Entry 3 via the ESOL Writing Assessment (see Appendix 3). He then progressed through the entire suite of Entry 3 learning packs which were created by College teaching staff for the purposes of remote learning during pandemic restrictions. For example, in earlier packs, he struggled to use past simple verbs accurately. However, his accuracy in using past simple regular and irregular verbs improved markedly across the packs. By the end of the course, he was differentiating correctly between when to use past simple and past continuous.

Learner PP, at Entry 2, lies between HK and FP in current language ability. He was accurately assessed at Entry 2 and his work on the early Entry 2 packs confirm his level. As he has only completed two packs so far, it is difficult to say whether or not he has made progress. However, the other two case studies demonstrate that allocating a learner to the right level facilitates rapid progress, even in the absence of face-to-face teaching. (see Appendix 4)

Learning from this project

The ESOL IA Oral Pre-Screen allows a clear differentiation between pre-Entry ESOL, Entry-level ESOL, and Functional Skills English learners. At the next assessment stage, the ESOL IA Writing is effective at eliciting work that enables accurate assessment of the learner's level. Finally, the ESOL IA Reading can help to establish

whether or not an ESOL learner may have the literacy level required to meaningfully engage with an Entry Maths course.

Based on the case studies detailed in the appendices, and the wider sample of work from ESOL learners, using the ESOL IA for ESOL learners would facilitate accurate allocation to courses. Additionally, the Writing Assessment is suitable for FS English learners and enables accurate level assessment. As such, the ESOL IA is ideally positioned to improve the accuracy of the information given to an establishment's Activities / Labour Allocations department.

In turn, this would reduce the number of transfers between classes, thus maximising the learners' time on their respective courses. It is reasonable to suggest that if a learner is placed on the right level course, first time, it would ensure that they are maximally appropriately engaged from the outset. This would be a positive factor in encouraging them to continue with their studies.

However, a constraint in this project was the fact we were unable to run the ESOL IA in its usual context and track learners as they are allocated to courses. Nevertheless, the evidence in the case studies and in the writing samples from new learners strongly suggests that the ESOL IA would be effective identifying the kind of support learners could benefit from, and which ESOL / English class is most suited to their current level and educational needs.

Finally, the next steps in the project are, firstly, to run the Initial Assessment as part of a face-to-face Education Induction and monitor the outcomes. Secondly, we will use the remainder of the project budget to run a 'sharing best practice' or dissemination event. The aim of this event will be to explain how the ESOL Initial Assessment works. Those attending will be Weston College teaching staff and managers across the South-East region, prison governors, Learning & Skills Managers, and Heads of Reducing Reoffending. This event will underscore the importance of partnership working, something that has been enhanced during the course of the project.

Page 6 OTLA Phase 7 (English)

Appendix 1 – The project team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	
Project Lead	Theresa Moore	Lot Director, Weston College	
Deputy Lead	Dani Hooker	Curriculum Manager, HMP Maidstone	
Project team	Richard Hammond	Lecturer in ESOL, HMP Maidstone; Regional Teaching Team; Staff Mentor	
	Tara Noe	Lecturer in ESOL, HMP Maidstone	
	Steve Wellstead	Lecturer in Mathematics, HMP Maidstone	
	Georgia Finch	Learning Facilitator, HMP Maidstone	
Project Mentor	Rachel Öner (ccConsultancy)		
Research Group Lead	Claire Callow (ccConsultancy)		

Appendix 2 – The ESOL Initial Assessment

Oral Pre-Screen

English/ESOL Pre-Screen Assessment

Purpose:

To determine if a learner is pre-entry ESOL, Entry ESOL or Functional Skills English so that they may complete the appropriate initial assessment. If the Inductions Tutor / Assessor determines that a learner is **above** Entry level, they would take the BKSB English Assessment even if they are an ESOL learner. This is because the ESOL Initial Assessment materials are designed to differentiate between Entry levels to facilitate the most accurate allocation to available classes. At present, there are only pre-Entry and Entry ESOL classes available.

Guidance for assessors:

Learners are to be asked 5 questions, designed to elicit full sentence responses.

Follow-up questions may be asked to gain more insight into level.

Pre-screen questions:

- 1. Do you speak any English? How much?
 - 2. How did you learn English?
 - 3. What did you do yesterday?
 - 4. Tell me about your home country?
- 5. What are some differences between your country and the UK?

Note: Question 3 is designed to elicit past tense.

Assessment criteria:

Pre-entry: cannot, or struggles to communicate.

ESOL: Limited range, errors in grammar and/or word choice

Functional skills: Speaks more naturally, few or no errors

*Learners determined to be pre-entry are not appropriate for maths at any level

Writing

N.B. The text below is condensed to save space and, for brevity, only one exemplar is included here.

Page 8 OTLA Phase 7 (English)

ESOL Writing Initial Assessment

Purpose:

The ESOL writing initial assessment is to be used to determine the ESOL level (pre-Entry to Entry 3) a learner is currently writing at. The assessment may also be used to determine if a learner is writing at a Functional Skills English level.

The writing level can be used to determine which class a learner is to be allocated to.

Guidance for assessors:

- There are two writing assignments available. The induction tutor is to assign one based on the pre-screen.
- Learners are to be encouraged to answer the question in full with complete sentences and/or paragraphs.
- Learners may be given the second writing assignment if the first is found to be too easy or difficult.

The writing assessment is not graded. Level is to be determined by holistic impressions, and based on the writing assessment criteria.

If learners are unable to write, the Inductions Tutor must confirm whether the learner is functionally illiterate (has English fluency) or unable to write due to inability to understand or speak English (pre-Entry). Functionally illiterate learners must improve their literacy skills by working with a Shannon Trust mentor before joining education.

Name: Pri	son number:	Date:
ESOL Writing Initial Asso	essment – Pre-	entry / Entry 1
What do you like about where you l	ive?	
What do you dislike about where yo	ou live?	
Think about:		
PeopleBuildingsWeatherFood		

Page 10 OTLA Phase 7 (English)

Name: Prison number:	Date:
ESOL Writing Initial Assessment -	Entry 2 / Entry 3
Tell us about your hobbies and interests (free time ac Write about:	ctivities, including sports).
 A hobby or interest you had when you were you A hobby or interest you have now, and why you A hobby or interest you would like to start in the 	u enjoy it.
Please write as much as you can. Write on the lines l	below.

ESOL Writing Initial Assessment Criteria

Purpose:

The ESOL writing assessment criteria is to be used to determine which ESOL level is most appropriate for new learners.

The criteria may also be used to determine if a learner may need to complete an additional writing task.

N.B. Some exemplars have been adapted from materials kindly provided by the City of Glasgow College. This is referenced at the bottom of the relevant pages.

Writing Initial assessment criteria

Pre-entry

- Unable to produce coherent writing.
- Single words.
- Very simple sentences with little to no range.

Entry 1

- Can produce simple sentences.
- Very limited range.
- Range of errors including use of capital letters, spelling, grammar, a lack of punctuation and incorrect word order.

Entry 2

- Able to produce longer, grammatically correct sentences; i.e. using correct word order such as *subject verb object*.
- May write a simple paragraph.
- Errors are likely and could include capital letters, spelling, grammar, incorrect punctuation and incorrect word order in more ambitious sentences.
- Can spell common, simple words accurately.

Entry 3

- Able to write at least one paragraph.
- Can use compound sentences.
- Uses linking words beyond and/or/but.
- Range of vocabulary and grammar.

Page 12 OTLA Phase 7 (English)

Exemplar 1

Pre-entry

Cannot be understood. Doubtful that candidate speaks English.

Points:

- Very poor handwriting.
- Spelling may be from own language (ie. 'Mai').
- Fails to produce even basic, relevant English words (e.g. job).
- Only recognizable words are copied from question.

Please write a paragraph about yourself
Examples: Where you are from, your job, age, family, likes/dislikes, hobbies, etc
hi Forom Romenio.
MON GEOM IS COSTRUCTOR
in my family is mercy cilder an hon

Reading

N.B. Only one Reading assessment is included here for brevity.

ESOL Reading Initial Assessment

Purpose:

The ESOL reading initial assessment is to be used to determine a learner's ESOL reading level.

Guidance for assessors:

- Learners should be given the reading assessment most appropriate to the level indicated in the pre-screen and/or writing assessment. The writing assessment will be done before the reading assessment.
- If a learner completes the reading assessment quickly and gains full marks, you may wish to give them the next level up.
- Learners who struggle with or are unable to complete the assessment may be given the next level down.
- For learners attempting the Entry 2 and Entry 3 assessments, please remind them to answer in sentences where required as this forms part of the assessment criteria. Pre-Entry and Entry 1 learners do not have to (attempt to) answer in sentences.
- Marks are to be given for the correct answer only. There is no penalty for additional information unless it is clear that the learner has copied whole passages with no evident understanding.
- In the Entry 2 and Entry 3 assessments, no whole or half marks are to be awarded for one-word or otherwise partial answers where sentences are required.
- To be suitable for a course at the level of the assessment, a learner should not drop more than three marks on Entry 1, four marks on Entry 2 or five marks on Entry 3.

	Minimum reading initial assessment marks			
Assessed level	Pre-entry	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3
Pre-entry		maximum 4		
Entry 1		5 of 8		
Entry 2			10 of 14	
Entry 3				11 of 16

Page 14 OTLA Phase 7 (English)

The Reading assessments have been adapted from materials kindly provided by the City of Glasgow College.

Name: Date:
ESOL Reading Initial Assessment – Entry 1
Time limit: 10 minutes
Read the text and answer the questions.
My name is Mujaheed Ali and I'm 36 years old. I come from Pakistan but I live in Lowestoft, England now. I'm married to Samira. I have a shop in Lowestoft. My wife is a nurse and she works at the local hospital. I've got two children. My son, Salman, is 8 and my daughter, Maryam, is 6. My children go to school near our shop. We live in a two-floor flat above the shop. In the afternoon I like playing with my children and reading with them. In the evening I have dinner with my wife and then we watch TV. At the weekend, I play football for a team called Lowestoft Athletic.
How old is Mujaheed?
2. Who is Mujaheed married to?
3. What city does Mujaheed live in?
4. Where does Mujaheed's wife work?
5. How old is Mujaheed's daughter?
6. What two things does Mujaheed do in the evening?
7. What football team does Mujaheed play for?
Total (out of 8)
Adapted from materials kindly provided by the City of Glasgow College

Appendix 3 – Case Study: HK (Pre-Entry)

Who, what and when?

HK is a native Spanish speaker. Through the ESOL Initial Assessment Oral Pre-Screen, it was quickly identified that his level is pre-Entry. We began working with him on 28th April 2021. HK participates enthusiastically in support sessions on the wing. These sessions are held whenever we are on his wing. Sessions last from 15 to 20 minutes.

Findings

HK's work in these support sessions has confirmed the pre-Entry level from the Oral Pre-Screen. Although his spoken range of English is very limited, he shows excellent retention of single-item vocabulary items, such as 'chair' and 'table'. This indicates that the pre-Entry work he is being engaged with is at the appropriate level. This provides further real-world evidence that even the Oral Pre-Screen alone can yield an accurate level assessment.

Main points from HK's pack feedback

- 1. Letter sounds: HK is working on letter sounds, especially as they diverge from Spanish.
- 2. Common words / identifying common objects: HK's working vocabulary is very limited, although he shows good retention.
- Writing upper case and lower case letters: HK needs to improve use of these. As Spanish uses the Latin alphabet, this may indicate a limited education in his own language.
- 4. Reading simple sentences: HK is focusing on reading simple sentences in adapted texts designed for those starting their learning journey in English.
- 5. Pronunciation: HK is reading simple sentences out loud to develop pronunciation skills.
- 6. Sentence formation: HK is able to form his own sentences based on examples he reads. This is a very slow process, as befits a pre-Entry learner.

Page 16 OTLA Phase 7 (English)

Appendix 4 – Case Study: PP (Entry 2)

Who, what and when?

PP is a native Polish speaker. He took the ESOL Initial Assessment Writing on the 28th April 2021and was provisionally identified as an Entry 2 learner. The Oral Pre-Screen and Reading Assessment were carried out on 5th May, confirming this level.

Findings

PP's Initial Assessment Writing is at a sound Entry 2 level. His writing shows errors characteristic of an Entry 2 learner but with some grasp of natural English wording in places. Verbally, PP is able to express and assert his intended meanings, including the use of humour. Although this might lead to the conclusion that he is working at a a higher level, his Entry 2 Introduction pack confirms his status as Entry 2. This is another encouraging example of a close match between the Initial Assessment Writing and the learner's actual level. This match is further confirmed by the emergence of similar issues in both the IA Writing and his pack work.

Main points from PP's pack feedback

- 1. Following instructions: In one activity in the Introduction pack, PP did not follow instructions.
- 2. Spelling: There is a range of spelling mistakes in PP's writing. Some errors are in attempting more sophisticated language but others are due to mistaking plurals for possessives and vice-versa (see below).
- 3. Plurals / possession: PP mixes plurals and possessions. For example, he may use the word 'country's' when he means 'countries'. It is unclear at this stage whether this is a spelling error or a grammatical misunderstanding.
- 4. Sentences: At times, PP write very long sentences with a number of different ideas. His writing would benefit from improved use of punctuation, division of ideas into discrete sentences, and...
- 5. Conjunctions: Using conjunctions more often and accurately would help PP to organise his writing.

Appendix 5 – Case Study: FP (Entry 3)

Who, what and when?

FP is a native Spanish speaker who took the ESOL Writing assessment in December 2020. He was sent the ESOL IA Writing at the same time as the Entry 3 Introduction Pack (the first of 7, including a 'Completion Package' comprising Pack 6, a Practice Pack and a Mock Exam). He completed the entire Entry 3 course on 27th April 2021.

Findings

FP's initial pack work was at a lower Entry 3 standard and was assessed at a lower Entry 3 level based on his Writing Initial Assessment. This shows that, in this case, there is a tight match between the work FP produced in the IA and in his initial packs. Moreover, the specific areas for development identified in FP's IA Writing are consistent with the areas for development that emerged in his packs.

Main points from FP's pack feedback

- Use of conjunctions: FP has a tendency to use a comma to separate two clauses or ideas where a conjunction is required grammatically (or, in some cases, the use of a semi-colon, which is beyond ESOL Entry 3). Advice and information was given to FP on the packs and in the feedback summaries. This lead to FP using relatively short compound sentences in some writing activities.
- 2. Past simple: In the earliest packs, FP often did not use past simple when it was required by writing tasks. After feedback was given, he started to use past simple more but had trouble forming past simple irregular verbs. He was provided with an irregular verb list to assist him with spelling and writing accurately in the past. Although not perfect, his accuracy in using past simple developed over the course of the packs and, in single-item grammar exercises, his use of past simple is solid for Entry 3. There is even evidence of differentiating between past simple and continuous correctly in later packs.
- 3. Spelling: FP makes (mostly minor) spelling mistakes that do not impede the reader's understanding of intended meaning. However, some misspellings are of basic words. In feedback, FP was advised to keep a 'spelling dictionary' to record words with the correct spelling, and to refer to this when needed. However, because different activities require different words, spelling errors continued to feature in FP's work throughout the series of packs. It is unclear whether this is a fossilised learning issue or simply a function of his level.

Page 18 OTLA Phase 7 (English)

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