

Discriminatory features for ESL Learners in the Literacy Benchmarks

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General comments

ESL learners are not a homogenous group in terms of their English language development. They will be operating at various levels of ability in English depending on various factors, including time: in Australia, whether they began school with no English and subsequently how long they have been at school etc. The Benchmarks will discriminate against students in different combinations of ways, depending on these factors.

The Year 3 Literacy Benchmarks describe features of literacy required for mother-tongue speakers of English who have learned English for around 8 years when they are tested. ESL students will have learned English (depending on their background) for 3 years or less when they are tested on their level of literacy in English. The Benchmark therefore **does not describe features of English literacy which ESL students will exhibit** after 3 years (or less) in school, even though they are using English (reading and writing) successfully in terms of learning and communication, and even though they may be progressing very successfully in terms of the expected ESL development pathways (see the range of work in this area for which Australia is highly regarded internationally, including the ESL Scales, the ESL Bandscales, the Victorian ESL Companion to the CSF). **There is too much evidence** in Australia and overseas to avoid the idea of a features of difference in ESL learners' pathways towards literacy development. .

I am not arguing that ESL learners should not be 'benchmarked'. Checking on progress is an important strategy, as many ESL students' literacy could improve at faster rates than at present (see, for example, my recent case study in the BIP project, where ESL learners in Year 6 were still weak in aspects of English). However, the **benchmark used should be valid, that is reflecting the reality of ESL development.**

To have positive and not negative literacy benchmarking in Australia, we need to recognise the realities of ESL development, particularly the features of ESL development, and the place and nature of errors. Errors made by ESL learners are often (not always) creative errors which, as the second language acquisition research has established, are enabling students to learn, and which are determined to some extent by psycholinguistic processing (e.g. Pienemann & Johnston). Psycholinguistic processing is believed to influence a natural learning order (which translates into a natural order of inevitable errors) which cannot be changed and which has to proceed over time. **Thus it is not possible to 'teach out' these second language errors, even when the ESL student is progressing well.**

Note therefore that the difficulty of the Year 3 Benchmark in its present form is not in the expected levels of ability to use and convey meaning through texts, it is in the expected textual features - see below.

Specific details of discrimination for ESL learners

1. Inappropriate and unattainable features of text in writing in English

Those ESL learners who are in the earlier to middle stages of English language learning (around Levels 1 - 5 on the JP/MP ESL Bandscales) **are not likely to exhibit the same features of English literacy as those set out for mother-tongue speakers.**

ESL learners may be able to write the range of texts described in the Benchmark, but will **show differences in textual features** (as described in the draft Benchmark) for example, appropriate word order, ability to produce compound sentences, and other features of accurate English which will be expected but not listed. In addition to structural features, ESL students are also likely to express ideas in 'clumsy English' which although the Benchmarks do not mention 'elegance' of expression, will give them lower scores.

The Benchmarks therefore give inappropriate targets for students at year 3 who will be **singled out as failing when this is not necessary. They may not be failing.** This is highly inappropriate for children at such young ages.

Note that, it is possible that even at Years 5 and again at Year 7, the students will **still be exhibiting** these structural, accuracy and expression errors, and **may be unable to achieve the Year 3 Literacy Benchmark**, even though they are able to participate in curriculum tasks at a level which enables them to learn and participate successfully, and **even though they are progressing well.**

2 Lack of Cultural knowledge may cause non-achievement inappropriately

In both writing and reading, there are likely discriminatory expectations about cultural knowledge, particularly in reading. Whilst this can be controlled to some extent by the selection of test items, the influence of cultural knowledge is likely to be underestimated in the marking of ESL students' work. There needs to be careful attention to this, as the assessment is literacy development

3 Negative influence on professional understanding of teachers of ESL learners

Professional development is planned for the Literacy Benchmarks. **All teachers will be expected to aim for the described features of English literacy for all learners.**, without any reference to the nature of ESL development, indeed with an explicit statement that all learners are included.

The results of this can be:

- teachers teaching to the Benchmark (regardless of ESL development)
- teachers inserviced on L1 literacy development only
- ESL learners becoming invisible in the classroom

Question for Literacy Benchmark developers

How will the proposed tests accommodate the second language errors within the text, when the students are otherwise completing the task well?

Suggestion: A set of acceptable features of ESL could be established for each Literacy Benchmark. e.g. meaning is conveyed, a few related ideas, some organisation of subject matter, some clumsiness of expression acceptable (*wording needs fine-tuning*), some structural error reflecting ESL developmental features is acceptable (*examples given*). (*There would need to be guidelines for teachers and assessors on these.*)

How will you avoid the present very likely possibility that systems, teachers, parents and the student him/herself, will receive inaccurate, as well as negative and discouraging assessment of English literacy progress?

Suggestion: I recognise the difficulty within the proposed uses of the Literacy Benchmarks of including ESL learners. If the above ESL features are included in the assessment procedures, then there may be an achievement of the Benchmark with a note that it is ESL.

"Yan Ting Achieved Year 3 ESL Benchmark (ESL)."

WHY NOT? This would promote so much good practice, and show that multicultural education can work. The later Benchmarks, say Year 7, would not have this.

How will you ensure that all teachers are reminded of the learning pathways and learning needs of ESL learners?

Suggestion: Place some description in the professional elaborations of (acceptable) ESL (as above) features. If not, at least a reminder, in the professional elaborations, to teachers they need to know about and cater to the second language development needs of ESL learners, and referring them to the work that has already taken place (e.g. ESL Scales, ESL Bandscales etc. and other materials)

Will DEETYA encourage professional development to meet the needs of ESL learners in their guidelines for States/Territories?

Suggestion: Suggestions made by DEETYA to States to include professional development about the features which are likely to emerge in ESL learners' responses in ESL Benchmarks tests. Professional development should include promoting understanding of this in teachers and others.

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