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## AMEP TEACHERS'S VOICES – WHAT IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW

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**TEACHER 1:**  
**The New Curriculum –**  
**Poor Coverage of Listening & Speaking;**  
**Excessive Assessment & Evidence Requirements**

Despite AMEP student surveys saying that the students want more listening and speaking, the curriculum doesn't reflect that and, some teachers may argue, there is no time for that.

The curriculum I am currently required to use is 'Course in Initial EAL', a course of study designed for beginning level students with no literacy in their first language, i.e. they have never been to school. Hence, they have no print awareness as well as no English oracy.

These learners require listening and speaking as a means to later developing foundation literacy for the first time -- a difficult endeavour when one does not have transferrable literacy skills. Transferring literacy skills from one language to another, regardless of the script, makes learning the other language much easier, because once you are a reader in one language, you can easily become a reader in another.

The 'Course in Initial EAL' has no listening units of study of its six units and only one speaking unit, which is described as 'participate in extremely familiar spoken exchanges.' In fact, they need units of study in speaking and listening that cover much more than 'extremely familiar spoken exchanges'. The result is that the teachers are not pointed in the right direction in their teaching. Also, the assessment demands of this Initial level course are great, with much evidence collection, with one assessment taking at least 30 minutes per student, because the assessments must be done individually.

Progress in speaking and listening is quicker and easier, because the students are highly motivated to communicate. However, five of the six units of study are concerned with foundation literacy, which you can't develop until you can listen and speak. You need oral language to make the transition from oracy to literacy. A learner can only decode (sound out words) that he already knows very well orally.

Teachers with great agency can mediate the curriculum through using a different approach to teaching, but this takes a lot of confidence and experience. (A willingness to unpack the curriculum and put it under a bed in an unused bedroom along with the assessments.) Without this, teachers will follow the curriculum to the letter and will teach to the assessments, as assessment reigns supreme. As a teacher I will always 'mediate' both the curriculum and the assessments, but this may mean some grassroots subversion recognising that the learning of language, how to communicate and developing foundational literacy skills is the priority, not assessing. (Perhaps one can imagine the mediation as that which one had to do in 10<sup>th</sup> grade science classes when the experiments didn't work.)

Another flawed aspect of the curriculum is having to get evidence about the students learning strategies, ACSF nonsense. Students at this beginning level are required to answer the question, 'Why do you come to English class?' to name just one demand. The curriculum writers do not appreciate that adult students with no literacy in their mother tongue have learning strategies they have used successfully to live life, like listening carefully, memorising, learning through conversations with family and their community. Instead, the curriculum writers think they should push the students to develop strategies based on a highly literate approach, like copying, having word dictionaries, charting when they come to class. With students that learn how to hold and pencil and then copy, this takes all their cognitive resources. They are not noticing the meaning of the word when they copy. But these curriculum writers seem to think that copying is an effective learning strategy, rather than just a means to learn handwriting.

With less an emphasis on speaking and listening in every curriculum, this problem is further exacerbated by the LWA unit of study-based booklets. Teaching by units of study and using these booklets means the students must use Google Translate and the emphasis is on reading and writing and not listening and speaking. Even the speaking units have dialogues the students must read. When we are speaking, are we ever looking at text? Not good for language learning. These unit of study booklets encourage teachers to teach by the unit and hence to the assessment.

What ever happened to language learning for communication?

## **TEACHER 2:**

### **Pre-Literate Students and the New Curriculum**

As a very experienced teacher, I am managing to cover the work in the new EAL Framework curriculum, but it has never been so difficult to integrate effectively and in ways that are useful and engaging for students. The EAL Framework curriculum also specifies so much detail in the skills and knowledge, which ASQA mandates must all be evidenced. So documenting each assessment task is taking me around 4-5 times the amount actually spent on conducting the assessments, which all needs to be done one-to-one with students at this level, alongside teaching and supporting learning activities.

For the first time, with the new contracts looming, we are being asked to teach and assess only 2 units each term – and the same ones to all students in the class, regardless of their readiness, existing language, and when they enrolled. This lack of flexibility, perhaps to see if meeting contract KPIs is possible, is extremely challenging and frustrating to me and my colleagues. We have all found that achieving competency in all assessment tasks in both units in one term (especially when it is the first term in that Certificate Level for a student) is almost impossible for significant numbers of students.

I teach a class of 22 students who have no or very limited prior experience of formal education. Only 3 students can read a bit of their own language (making translation applications virtually useless – their languages don't have text to speech options available yet.) Most of them speak and understand almost no English on arrival. Six students have as yet untreated vision issues. They need all photocopies enlarged to help them read and copy, and have been shown how to take photos of writing on the board to enlarge for copying. Three struggle with impaired hearing.

In the class there are currently students from 8 language groups, so, except in two cases, there is someone in the room they can communicate with. With a rolling intake, about half the students have been in the class for 6 months or more, and about half have been in the class for between 4 weeks and 5 months.

Currently I am 'supposed' be teaching 2 units (one having been started last term and continuing this term): "Recognise and copy extremely familiar words" and "Recognise and copy numbers from 1 to 50."

This might seem very easy to achieve in 10 weeks. But for 5 students, copying anything is difficult. They are still learning 'kindergarten' fine motor skills: holding a pencil, making different lines and patterns; saying, understanding and recognising some spoken words. On top of this, they must learn that these can be written using symbols, and how to form those symbols. So they need to have both some familiar words and to be able to copy them. These then need to be distinguished for numbers – which are other squiggles with names and meanings.

8 of the other students still have very few 'extremely familiar words' and are learning what we mean by first name, surname, and to recognise their name written in English before they can copy it. They can copy some of the letters, but don't yet know many of the letter names or the basic sounds these letters make yet. So, just copying words is a pretty meaningless, time consuming and still quite challenging.

So of course, I have to teach them the alphabet, the sounds and handwriting skills. The alphabet was covered in Term 1, so many of the students were not here yet. Others had learned some but not all of the letters, because they are still so early in their English language and study journeys. This content isn't in the units this term, but they need to first understand and then try to produce a whole lot of spoken words just for life: simple questions like 'What is your name?' and 'Where do you live?'. For class, they need to learn 'count', 'copy' 'say' etc. But these were in last term's unit.

In the assessment task, the 'familiar' words they have to copy include their names, address and suburb. They also need to recognise an assortment of uppercase and lowercase letters in a range of fonts – say them and copy them. They also need to listen to a word starting with 'ch', a word starting with 'th' and a word starting with 'ph', and then choose the correct written word out of 'phone', 'three' and 'chair' – to

demonstrate they know letters can combine to make other sounds. They need to understand that they have an address, Australian address systems (very different to what exists in their previous locations), capital and lower-case lettering conventions and so forth.

To learn numbers and money in context, they need to know some shopping language, at least the names of things they might buy: food and the stationery they use in the classroom. Counting 1 and then 2 digit numbers, including 'teen' numbers and the difference in pronunciation between '-teen' and '-ty.' Also, they are required to do some simple additions – both orally and in writing – so need to handwrite and correctly form all digits and combine these correctly. Most need to learn some simple addition strategies because they have never done the shopping or any written maths before. In teaching, I need to introduce the notes and coins, place value, counting in 1's, 5s and 10s.

Of course, some of this is much easier for the students who have been in the class for 6 months or more. They already have some basic vocabulary to hook the learning to, and have learnt many or all of the letter shapes, names and sounds. But I need to keep these students busy, engaged and learning too, so that they are progressing and ensuring they are ready for the assessments. So, while one half have been learning their 5 or 6 new letters and sounds for this week, and are then doing handwriting – tracing, copying and writing today's letter – I pop across to the other group who have been reviewing sight-words independently using QR codes and their phones, and introduce a new consonant blend – pictures and words and speaking and practise our 'look, say, cover, write, check spelling' strategy with some of the new words. Yesterday, 7 students successfully completed the assessment task for the copying words unit. We will consolidate, and continue working with numbers – but in theory, I am not supposed to be starting next term's work "Participate in Extremely Familiar Exchanges" before Term 4.

**TEACHER 3:**  
**Certificate 2 & 3 Students and Assessment in the New Curriculum**

Since we started teaching the EAL Framework, for the first time in 20 years in the AMEP, I am feeling overwhelmed by the amount of assessment that is being asked of me. The students are also feeling this pressure.

While trying to focus on the main skills that they need, an incredible amount of time is taken up by assessment preparation. In the Certificate 2 and 3 classes that I have taught, students continually ask why we are doing so much assessment preparation? Many of them question why they must write multiple reports or give multiple presentations, when they are unlikely to need these skills in the future. They also question why they must show that they are competent in the same assessment criteria again, and again, across multiple assessment tasks.

The core unit relating to learning plans received the biggest negative response. Why do adult students, many (most in level 2 and 3) who have tertiary level learning skills, and who have had careers in their own country, need a high school style assessment asking "what are your strengths and weaknesses", "what are your goals"? Many felt that this was childish and patronising and did not improve their English Language skills in any way. They have regular discussions about employment options in class, they have SLPET, and they have an AMEP Vocational Pathways Counsellor.

They do not need to spend a term focussed on assessment.

In short, currently there is way too much focus on assessment in the AMEP. It is obvious to both students and teachers. It would benefit everyone if this was addressed as soon as possible.

## **A REGIONAL MANAGER & TEACHER 4:**

### **The Focus on Assessment**

In the region that I manage the AMEP, about 85% of the clients are EAL I and below. Many of them are from refugee backgrounds with confronting settlement issues, which include unsustainable housing, child-rearing, financial difficulties, job searching and health.

Below are some details of a conversation that I had with one teacher about her experience, which may not represent the experience of all teachers, but reflects the situation that most teachers are in.

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The teacher's class is in a fulltime course in Initial EAL. 20 students, all of whom except one, are from a refugee background. The age range is between 33 and about 60+. Many are pre-literate, having recently arrived in Australia with little or no previous education or formal learning experiences. A few of them are illiterate in their first language, so there is no transference of knowledge or skills. In addition, these students have no digital literacy skills. That is an additional challenge they face in their everyday lives, as most of the communication that they received from the government about their settlement is in English.

Having been enrolled in 22636VIC Course in Initial EAL, the students have to successfully complete a total of 6 core units, which is unachievable in the limited time given for completion, i.e., 380 training hours + 8 hours for assessments. In addition, they need access to a computer or suitable electronic device, and strong internet, to meet learning and assessment requirements. While they may be able to develop handwriting skills such as copying and hand-eye coordination, the recognition of common high frequency function words and nouns to convey familiar personal information is way too difficult for them to manage, since they cannot differentiate between the letters of the alphabet.

The so-called teaching time is insufficient because the teachers are very much focused on collecting evidence. The students are expected to 'perform' most of the time, so the joy of learning a new language at the entry level is lost. The teachers try to provide these learners with fun activities and use informal teaching methods, but are soon found focusing on performance-based learning and forgetting the underpinning principles of language teaching. These students require significant and highly structured support and prompting, extensive modelling from hand-written or typed text, and large amounts of repetition with the help of human or electronic bilingual assistance. The acquisition of one skill is not sequential or separate from another. Formative text-based tasks are used throughout the program to ensure student readiness to complete assessment tasks.

"Some say that formative assessments may help, but I seem to be testing them all the time. There is not enough room for modelling. All the class time is taken scaffolding the assessment criteria. There is some 'listen and repeat', or practising in an informal setting, but that is limited due to the pressure of having to collect evidence. The assessment is all evidence-based. One day the learner may get some things right and on another day she may get them wrong and something else right. So I'm collecting evidence all the time and that's not accepted, because the assessment outcome is binary and the student has to get everything correct in the one assessment task in order to pass. Learners often prioritise survival English and settlement skills, but assessments focus on fixed competencies. Failing a "competency" and having to repeat the assessment can reinforce feelings of inadequacy or past experiences of disempowerment. The strict assessment conditions undermine the safe, low-stress learning space essential for very low-level learners and more so the trauma-affected ones in the class".

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I think we have to acknowledge that language acquisition differs fundamentally from vocational training. Cultural differences may pose a major challenge. A refugee learner's ability to introduce themselves confidently in English is a settlement milestone, even if it does not fit neatly into a competency unit. For

the teachers, the main difficulty is trying to teach in a way that supports learners – what one may refer to as 'good teaching practice' – while also meeting ASQA's strict compliance rules and collecting all the required assessment evidence. This creates extra pressure and sometimes limits how flexible lessons can be taught to develop linguistic skills.

The AMEP was designed as a settlement and language program to support integration, employment, and community participation. Yet ASQA auditing requirements impose a vocational education lens, laying stress on compliance over pedagogy. For example, auditors may request detailed mapping of classroom conversations against unit descriptors, even though spontaneous dialogue is one of the most authentic ways preliteracy learners acquire language.

**TEACHER 5:**  
**The Five-Year Limit on Access to the AMEP**

We have just received the following advice:

*AMEP students who arrived in Australia on or after 1 October 2020 are subject to a five-year time limit on accessing the AMEP. Once this time limit is reached, students are no longer eligible to participate in the program, unless they are granted a formal extension, e.g. for serious illness or injury; death of a close family member; a traumatic experience; other compelling or compassionate reasons.*

*If a student cannot provide evidence that one of these circumstances applies, they will not be granted an extension.*

*The important thing to know is that students will finish their class on a specific date and cannot remain in class until the end of semester.*

This ruling will badly affect migrants and refugees with low levels of English, especially women, who have prioritised looking after their families and have recently started studying again, having lived in Australia for a number of years.

Recently in the last few years, Afghani women who have been reunited with their husbands in Australia have come to study for the first time in the AMEP, usually on a part-time basis (Mon/Wed/Fri 4 hours a day). These women have had no schooling. Thus, they have no literacy in their first language. They study using the curriculum 'Course in Initial EAL'. They can remain in the class for up to two years. Once they have foundation literacy, they are able to go to the next level curriculum which is the 'Course in EAL', but this is quite difficult for them and may take them a few more years to finish.

We call these learners 'emergent readers', as they have learned to read for the first time in English as another language. They do not have any transferrable reading skills from their first language. Hence their English learning progress and journey can take twice as long as a student who has literacy in their first language, as has been documented in research.

It should be acknowledged that these women have excellent learning skills for life learning and exceptional visual memory skills. They are able to pass the learner driver theory test, a test on the computer, and in English, by memorising all the possible answers to more than 5 practice tests. They do this because they are highly motivated to get their drivers' license because this was not possible in Afghanistan.

This 5-year policy will greatly disadvantage these women.

From the client files, it can be seen that adult learners who come with no schooling and hence no literacy may study for up to eight years before being able to exit the AMEP at EAL 3 level. This is the English level that allows them to study at TAFE or work at a job other than cleaner or other less skilled work. One example is an Afghani man. He studied part-time (3 days/week), working and taking care of his family. After 8 years, he went from 'Course in Initial EAL' to 'Certificate 3 in EAL' and was able to gain a disability support worker certificate that allowed him to get a better job.

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