

Guidelines on Internal Assessment for Academically Low Achievers (ALAs)

Junior Secondary Level

This set of guidelines for secondary schools on internal assessment of performance of academically low achievers in the subject of English has been prepared by the English Section of the Advisory Inspectorate Division, Education Department. Comments and suggestions are most welcome and can be addressed to:

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Introduction

The purpose of these guidelines is to suggest to teachers some practical hints on developing and selecting assessment methods that would cater for the range of student abilities within a school in general and, more specifically, the needs of students who are unable to cope with the English curriculum designed for the majority. For the rest of this paper, such students will be referred to as Academically Low Achievers (ALAs).

The guidelines will first look at the major types and purposes of assessment commonly used in Hong Kong schools. This will be followed by a discussion on the relationship of teaching, learning and assessment with reference to the needs of ALAs. Suggestions will then be given on how, in addition to normal tests and examinations, internal assessments for the subject of English can be a combination of assignments, projects and class participation. The guidelines will conclude with a suggested list of reading on assessment-related issues worldwide and in Hong Kong so that interested teachers can further enrich themselves on the subject.

Types and Purposes of Assessment

Assessment is an integral part of effective teaching and learning. It involves making considered judgements of students' performance in relation to their learning. In Hong Kong, as in other parts of the world, assessment is essential in providing information to a variety of users (e.g. teachers, parents, employers, etc.) for a variety of purposes. In the remaining paragraphs of this section, some major types and purposes of assessment will be briefly outlined.

Assessment can be seen as an ongoing process in which teachers assess students' performance to monitor progress, determine strengths and weaknesses, and correspondingly devise ways of assisting students in making further progress. Such information on student progress, strengths and weaknesses is equally useful to teachers, parents and students in planning follow-up action for remedial, reinforcement or enrichment purposes. Assessment of this type can be conducted informally through means such as marking and providing feedback on students' assignments, observing and recording individual students' participation and performance in class as well as engaging students in discussions with the teachers about their own learning. The assessment can be carried out over a continuous stretch of time as teaching and learning are taking place and serves primarily a **formative** purpose.

On the other hand, **assessment can be periodically administered in the form of tests and examinations to provide records of overall progress to students and their parents at important intervals, such as at the end of a term or school year.** It provides a summary description of students' performance and progress in learning. The information gained can be used as a basis for planning further learning in a subsequent phase of schooling, or for determining student placement into higher forms. This type of assessment is conducted formally and serves a **summative** purpose.

At times, **assessment is required to select certain proportion of students for employment or for the next stage of education,** e.g. selection of secondary students for tertiary education on the basis of their performance. Such an assessment usually involves rank-ordering students based on some sort of scores and fulfills a **comparative and selective** purpose.

At other times, assessment can be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of educational objectives or to predict how students may perform in future studies. Despite such a variety, the types and purposes of assessment outlined so far do not mutually exclude each other. Rather, they should be seen as complementary in nature. For example, the information obtained through formative assessment can contribute to the summary description of students' achievement at the end of the school term. Alternatively, a single assessment can be used to serve more than one purpose. For instance, an end-of-term examination can serve both a summative and comparative purpose since the results not only inform parties concerned of how well students perform but also provide the necessary comparison in streaming students into different ability groups.

The choice of assessment procedures at any particular period or time during the learning process relies heavily on teachers' intended purposes, which should be considered within the context of teaching and learning. The next section will thus be devoted to exploring the interdependence of teaching, learning and assessment.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

As previously pointed out, assessment is an integral part of effective teaching and learning. This applies equally well to all school situations, whether there are able or average students, mixed-ability groups or groups with large proportions of ALAs.

Generally speaking, ALAs are characterised by their weak foundation and low motivation to study: they lack study habits, tend to be passive and have a low self-image of themselves due to low academic attainment. In this regard, assessment which is comparative and selective in nature usually puts ALAs in an unfavourable position when they are compared with others who experience minimal or no learning difficulties. It may appear inevitable that ALAs will be continually streamed into a lower band. Results of summative assessments often reflect how poorly ALAs have done. It seems obvious that the summative, comparative and selective nature of assessment, though unavoidable for its purposes at particular intervals of the learning process, has a more negative than positive impact on the ALAs' day-to-day learning experience. Needless to say, assessment that reflects little successful learning is demoralising to both teachers and students and easily undermines the quality of teaching as well as learning in the long run.

However, assessment which is formative in nature focuses on students' strengths and areas for improvement. It enables teachers to decide what kind of learning experience they need to provide for all students, let alone the ALAs. Educationalists generally believe that students' sense of pleasure and achievement during the learning process is essential, for it positively reinforces and thus encourages further learning. Successful learning will in turn generate confidence that leads to enhanced self-esteem. The sense of enjoyment and achievement easily enlivens classroom learning and provides incentive for teachers to further enrich the quality of teaching. This is particularly important in schools with ALAs. Seen in this light, any assessment that may in one way or another arouse motivation, maintain interest and boost confidence in learning would enable students and teachers alike to derive from it maximum benefits. The next section will concentrate on some concrete means towards achieving this end in the learning of English.

Methods of Assessment

As discussed above, **teaching, learning and assessment are inter-dependent parts of an instructional cycle.** It naturally follows that, just as teachers plan for the learning experience they will provide for students in their schemes of work, an assessment component needs to be incorporated as well. This section will suggest some assessment procedures which are closely related to classroom teaching and learning and the various purposes they can serve. It will not be surprising if some of these procedures have already been used by teachers perhaps for quite some time, as the present focus is on how to use them in a pressure-less manner to bring forth and reinforce successful learning. It should be noted that teachers are by no means required to use all the procedures; nor should they be confined to the ones being mentioned here when planning their assessment. They are encouraged to select or combine the more feasible ones flexibly or even develop procedures of their own to take account of the particular context of their school.

Assignments Assignments are a natural follow-up to classroom teaching and learning. They can be given as classwork or homework to complement and reinforce classroom learning. When setting assignments for English, teachers should attach due emphasis to ensuring the mastery of language elements such as grammar and structures as well as their application for communicative purposes. Assignments should also be geared to students' language abilities and at the same time relevant to their interests and needs in everyday life. Where possible, each exercise should have a specific language focus/objective. To give students a sense of progress and achievement, assignments should be carefully sequenced from easier ones to the more difficult. Greater emphasis can also be placed on classwork during which teachers can provide immediate, on-the-spot feedback and support to enhance students' performance.

Assignments for English should take a variety of forms. Apart from written practice, other types of work such as reading story books or newspapers, listening to English songs or the media, collecting information for a particular purpose and engaging in drama or role plays can also be given to provide meaningful as well as enjoyable activities for language use. Assignments requiring students to integrate various language skills can also be set for the ALAs. For example, students can be asked to read part of a story at home and then express their feelings or experience through creating pictures with captions, or prepare a short, simple oral summary to share with the class on the following day.

On the other hand, completing an assignment without gaining any feedback from the teacher is in itself an exercise devoid of meaning. More importantly, it is the quality of the feedback that holds the key to promoting learning. To provide students with a sense of achievement and thus motivation, specific, constructive as well as encouraging comments can be written in the margins of their exercise books for more concrete feedback. Acknowledging students' strengths is as important as pinpointing their weaknesses or areas for improvement. Some schools already require teachers to give marks for students' daily assignments to form part of the end-of-term English score. However, the importance of qualitative remarks in providing formative feedback and assessment should not be overlooked.

For more details concerning the design and marking of assignments, please refer to “**Guidelines on Setting Assignments of English - Towards a Homework Policy**” (1993) prepared by the English Section of the Advisory Inspectorate.

Project Work Project work in the English classroom can be looked upon as an extended assignment requiring integrated use of various language skills. It can be carried out on an individual or group basis, with greater scope of student independence in and responsibility for their own learning.

As an extended activity, project work provides opportunities for language input exercises, information search, note-taking, group discussions, oral presentations and writing. There is ample room for assessment to take place throughout the various stages of preparation and presentation, both for formative and summative purposes. What is worth considering here is perhaps how teachers could assess a group project particularly when the group comprises students of mixed abilities. Under such circumstances, members of the same group could be assessed individually for their effort and contribution during the process. When assessing the finished product, greater emphasis could also be placed on assessing content and organisation rather than on the quality of language alone, since the writing is likely to be the responsibility of one or two individuals only. In any case, project work should be aimed at encouraging cooperation rather than competition among students so that even the ALAs can approach it with greater interest and without fear of failure.

For further advice on the processes of group work and project, please refer to “**Project Work in Schools**” (1990) published by the Institute of Language in Education.

Class Participation Meaningful class participation often leads to more active learning. Observing students’ participation and performance in class over a continuous stretch of time can tell us a great deal about their pace and quality of learning.

Class participation can range from individual to team work. Paying attention is a form of participation, so is the nod of a head in response to teachers’ remarks, a volunteer response or contribution of one’s ideas in a group activity. The degree of participation is a clear indication of students’ interest in and attitude towards their own learning. A record of observation on this aspect helps teachers much in designing and adjusting their classroom strategies. It also enables teachers to take note of students’ attitudes and the efforts being made by them in learning the language so that necessary encouragement can be given wherever appropriate. Students’ performance in class is best assessed through continuous, informal observations. In the English classroom, teachers’ focal points may include students’ ability to acquire grammar and vocabulary items, the frequency and quality of their oral response or their ability to integrate various language skills in achieving communicative purposes in written assignments and in role-plays, etc.

In reporting student performance, both quantitative as well as qualitative remarks will be useful. For example, while teachers may take note of how often a student answers questions in class, remarks can also be made on whether teacher support is necessary or how increasingly articulate the student has become. Wherever possible, teachers may consider keeping a record of some sort in charting students’ progress. The record can be as simple as notes taken on the spot or a personal teaching diary of some general impressions.

An alternative is for teachers to keep progress cards for individual students. It may be difficult for teachers to observe every student and to report on every aspect of his learning within a specified period. To make the task of reporting more manageable, teachers can divide their teaching time into observation cycles, for example, each lasting a week. Within one such cycle, teachers can focus on a small group of students and highlight in the record cards only one or two significant aspects (e.g. progress

made, learning difficulties detected, etc.) relevant to each student for follow-up action. In the next cycle, another group of students will be observed and reported on.

It is also useful to remember the teacher's role as a language facilitator, particularly in providing support to the ALAs. In the face of student silence or hesitation, teachers should be ever sensitive and ready to simplify or rephrase their questions, provide additional prompts or help students to build on and complete partially constructed answers. As noted above, there is no greater reinforcement than teachers' praise and encouragement in acknowledging student effort or success in classroom response and interaction.

Tests and Examinations

In Hong Kong schools, tests and examinations are commonly used as a means of summative assessment administered formally at the end of a term or school year. They may also serve a comparative purpose of streaming students into different ability groups. The main difficulty seems to lie in devising an assessment instrument that could cater for a wide range of student abilities without placing any ability group in a disadvantageous position. This problem is particularly acute in the junior levels where ALAs or students in remedial groups may be allowed to study less, concentrating on what are generally known as the "core items" in the schemes of work as specified by individual schools with reference to student abilities.

Most schools in Hong Kong devise a common paper for all the students. To cater for the ability of the ALAs and at the same time maintain a discriminatory mechanism, it is suggested that the paper could center round the "core items" specified in the schemes of work, leaving not more than 20 to 30% for the "optional items" which could have been mastered by the more able students. Taking the paper as a whole, questions could also be graded from easy to difficult, with an approximate ratio of 4:4:2 among easy, medium and difficult items. This can be expressed diagrammatically as:

40% easy items	40% medium items	20% difficult items
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Alternatively, schools may wish to devise separate papers for different ability groups and apply a scaling strategy for comparison of scores across the groups. As regards the allocation of places for students in S4, schools adopting separate papers for mixed ability groups may wish to consult the Education Records and Junior Secondary Education Assessment Section of the Education Department for technical information and advice on scaling strategies for rank-ordering purposes.

It is also desirable to provide a language skills profile to more accurately reflect students' performance across the skills on top of their mastery over language usage. Where possible, assessment procedures should comprise components of reading, writing, listening, speaking as well as integrated language use. Better still, separate papers can be devised for the testing of usage as well as individual language skills to reflect student achievement in these areas.

As a general practice, a range of tasks could be provided within the same skill component / paper to cater for the diversity in student abilities. This would normally require the inclusion of additional questions or tasks which are simple enough for the lower ability group while others are sufficiently challenging to distinguish the more able students. In so doing, the amount of testing time required might have to be adjusted accordingly. For more specific examples of techniques in designing Writing, Reading and General English (Usage) papers to cater for the range in student abilities, please refer to pages 38 - 43 of **“Handbook on Remedial Teaching of English in Secondary Schools”** (1990). Based on the same principles demonstrated in the examples, similar design can also be adopted for the Listening papers. Integrated use of language can easily be tested in various papers through questions or tasks that require students to write with reference to some reading in-input (reading + writing), take notes from taped material (listening + writing), make oral summaries of material read (reading + speaking), carry out a role play or discussion in pairs or groups (listening + speaking), etc.

Insofar as testing of oral ability is concerned, the following hints can be useful in helping students to relax and thus perform better during an oral test or examination. The students could first be greeted in a friendly manner, with light-hearted and reassuring conversations to establish rapport. Questions not readily answered could be simplified or rephrased. Students should not be interrupted unless the teacher is certain that this would help them to express ideas more coherently. Teachers should also avoid recording marks during the test as the gesture could be frightening to some students. Last but not least, more questions requiring factual information rather than argument or complicated reasoning could be directed at the less able students.

As discussed, the various methods of assessment have each a separate role to play in informing teachers of the strengths and weaknesses of their students. Teachers are strongly advised to discuss among themselves as to how they would select/combine the various assessment procedures, or the relative weighting they would attach to each in serving the variety of purposes they deem fit.

***The Junior
Secondary
Education
Assessment
System (JSEA)***

It is worth noting in passing that there is, in fact, a strong link between internal assessment at S1-S3 level and the Junior Secondary Education Assessment System (JSEA). JSEA is a mechanism through which Secondary 3 students are allocated places for studies in Secondary 4. Schools participating in the JSEA may conduct internal summative assessment of their Secondary 3 students in much the same way as those at other levels. This normally means that they have either two or three sets of internal assessment results per school year. In calculating the overall total for the year, it is advisable to give each set of results equal weighting. Schools need to submit an order of merit of their Secondary 3 students, though scores of individual students are not required.

To ensure fairness to all students in comparing their results, teachers are reminded of the need to conform to their marking schemes so that consistency in marking can be achieved.

Conclusion

Throughout this discussion, a great deal of importance has been attached to the relationship of teaching, learning and assessment. Rather than viewing internal assessment as an end-of-the-line business, teachers should look upon it as the beginning of another phase of teaching and learning because new strategies may have to be applied based on the information and feedback obtained in the assessment.

While schools and teachers need to monitor and assess students' performance regularly, care must be taken to avoid overuse of pen-and-paper tests and examinations. When too much time is placed on these, valuable time and effort will be taken away from the teaching and learning process itself and may lead to undue pressure being placed on some students, particularly the ALAs. The mystical belief that "tests and examinations make students learn more through working harder" is more notional than real and should best be dispensed with as soon as possible.

Curriculum development is an ongoing process, so are teaching, learning and assessment procedures. Teachers are thus encouraged to keep abreast of developments in assessment issues through their own initiatives in professional enrichment. It is with such a spirit that a suggested reading list is provided at the end of this paper for teachers who are interested in further exploration into assessment-related issues.

Suggested Reading List

- Allison, D. and Lee, M. (eds.) 1990. *Project Work in Schools*.
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