

Handout 4: Assessment

2. Our Philosophy of Assessment

Teachers will know that the syllabus has been designed to be activity-based and child-centred and that appropriate coursebooks have been selected to match the syllabus. However, at present, assessment practices in schools do not match the overall goals of the new syllabus and coursebooks. Instead, they are exclusively product-based, reinforcing a belief on the part of both teachers and learners that the main goal of learning is to prepare for tests, and that tests serve to show how well the course materials (rather than the goals of the materials) have been learned. The use of the new syllabus as a reference point in teaching should help to re-orient teachers to the child-centred, activity-based methods of teaching-learning. However, the syllabus and coursebooks are not enough in themselves to transform practice in classrooms. They must also be accompanied by an assessment framework which sees tests as but one element in a wider process of assessment. This framework, in turn, should be based on a new philosophy of assessment. Assessment, including tests, must be seen above all as a way of facilitating and encouraging the learning of English. Assessment should reflect the way the language is taught in the classroom. If methods of assessment are not changed there remains a very real danger, as we have noted before, that methods of teaching will not change. Changes in assessment in our schools could, then, provide the key to the successful implementation of the new syllabus and coursebooks, providing a positive **backwash**¹ effect on teaching-learning practices.

Our new philosophy of assessment consists of a number of underlying principles.

1. Assessment methods should match teaching-learning methods.

This is the key principle. If we want teachers to use activity-based, child-centred methods in the classroom then the means of assessment must also be activity-based and child-centred. Similarly, if we want our students to develop all four skills – speaking and listening as well as reading and writing – then we must make sure all four skills are assessed. If our methods of assessment match activity-based, child-centred teaching-learning approaches, then there is a greatly increased chance of the new syllabus and coursebooks being used in the classroom as the designers intended rather than in traditional, teacher-centred ways.

2. The system of assessment should enable us to see the progress made by an individual child during his/her time in school.

Children learn English for three years in primary school. We know that they spend a lot of time on activities in the classroom as well as at home. It is important that the work a child does in class is valued and that he/she receives credit for this work at the end of Grade 5. This requires us to do more school-based assessment to count towards a child's final mark at the end of Grade 5 and to provide evidence of the progress children have made while at school.

¹ By **backwash** we mean the effect that the method of assessment has on the teaching-learning process. For example, communicative tests are likely to promote communicative classroom methods while multiple-choice tests are likely to promote the use of multiple-choice exercises in the classroom.

3. Assessment is more than just traditional testing
Teachers are used to assessment consisting of traditional paper and pencil tests, usually taken under conditions which are like those in an exam. These formal tests are often very stressful for children and many children do not show their true abilities in these tests. Formal tests do have a part to play in an assessment framework, but not the major part. There are other ways in which children can be assessed and we are recommending the use of portfolios which comprise work done in class and which may involve children in self-assessment as well as the more traditional teacher-assessment.
4. Assessment should provide opportunities for all children to demonstrate what they have learned.
Children are individuals. They learn in different ways and at different rates. If children can see that they are succeeding, they will be motivated to learn more. Assessment should, then, provide opportunities for all children to show how much they have learned in school. For this reason assessment activities throughout the year should be as varied as possible and not focus on one type of assessment or on one skill.
5. Marking in our system of assessment should have a developmental purpose: it should aim to encourage and support children to do better in future.
When children's work is graded by the teacher, this should not be a demotivating experience for them. There is nothing worse for a child than receiving a piece of work - on which he/she may have spent a lot of time and effort – covered in their teacher's red ink and corrections. Marking should be focused and limited: teachers should not try to correct every mistake in every piece of work but should focus on different aspects for different pieces of work. In one piece of work, for example, a teacher could focus on the imaginative content and organisation of ideas of a short story written by the children; in another piece of work it might be appropriate to focus on the accuracy of the writing (spelling, grammar, punctuation). But, whatever the teacher decides on, the children should be told before they begin the work what the focus for correction will be. Guidance for teachers will be given in Section 4 of this Handbook.
6. Parents and children should understand assessment practices.
*Parents and children are key **stakeholders**² in any system of education. Schools are responsible for meeting the educational needs of the children who attend them; and so they need to demonstrate to parents that the way their children are assessed in schools is based on sound educational principles, matches the syllabus and coursebooks and is also fair to all children.*

Excerpts from: “Handbook of Assessment for Teachers of English in North Cyprus Primary Schools” (2005) developed in collaboration with the British Council, Cyprus.

² By **stakeholders** we mean groups of people who have a primary interest in how something is done; in this case how education – and the sub-system of assessment – is carried out.