

Reading Assessment Framework in pre-A1 ESOL classes in England for LESLLA learners

EALTA Migration & EDI SIG

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Dr Rim Day

Objectives

- Set the context
- Understand why current reading assessments often fail LESLLA learners
- Explore findings from my recent research
- Identify practical, fair assessment alternatives

Set the Context

- **LESLLA** “Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults”: An adult learner with interrupted schooling and limited **L1 literacy, Print awareness & Learning skills.**
- **LASLLIAM**: A new reference guide of the Council of Europe on: “Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants”

Pre-A1 level/Pre-entry ESOL

- Lowest ESOL level in England
- High proportion of LESLLA learners (Robinson, 2017)
- Mixed groups: literate + LESLLA learners (Rocca et al., 2020)
- Non-accredited, no standardised descriptors or assessment tools

Assessment Landscape

- Practitioners' efforts are admirable and deserve recognition
- Written tests often disadvantage LESLLA learners and fail to show their knowledge
- Consequences: exclusion from education, benefits, or visa pathways
- Most tools are self-designed → inconsistent quality, subjective criteria, no shared framework
- No alignment with national models (unlike Entry Levels)

Mixed-Method Participatory Action Research

- Stakeholders:
 - 25 ESOL practitioners and managers
 - 8 LESLLA learners (Phonemic Awareness Tasks PATs + reading tasks)
 - Analysis of existing assessment tools
- Aim: Evaluate **credibility, reliability, and fairness** of current reading assessments

What Practitioners Report

- Current tools are **unsuitable** for LESLLA learners
- Assessments are **not research-based**; many reflect institutional habit
- No shared criteria → wide variation across colleges
- Practitioners feel unsupported in assessing early literacy
- Hard to capture “micro-achievements” typical of LESLLA learners
- Many tools assume strong L2 oral skills
- Instructions often form a barrier: learners can read the text but not understand the task

Findings from Assessment Sample Analysis

- Assessment used: **Online holistic – self-designed** or **Entry1 adapted** assessment.

Common issues:

- Replicate Entry-level formats (text-heavy, passage-based)
- Assume alphabetic knowledge
- Ignore print-awareness stages
- Fail to assess oral/visual literacy
- Biased toward literate learners → emphasise what LESLLA learners cannot do
- Results appear negative → learners seem “not progressing”

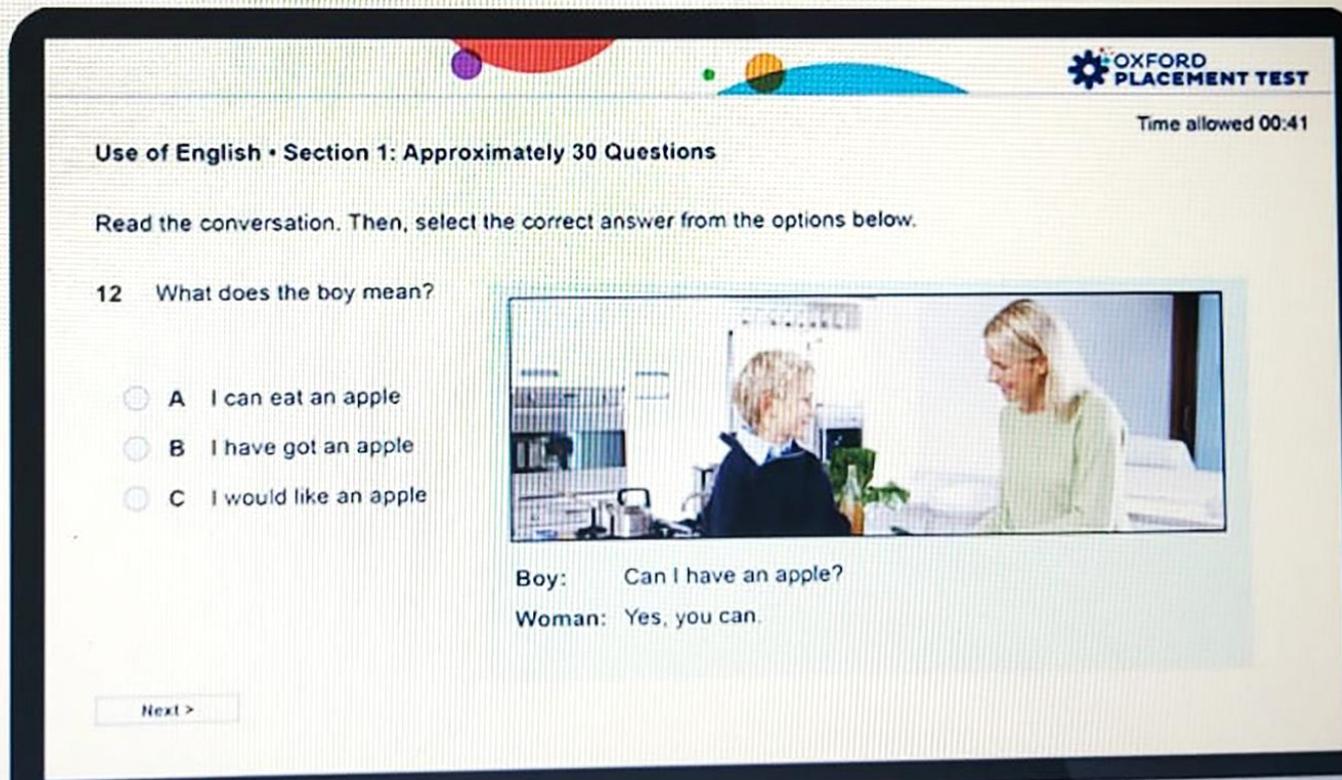
Practitioner quote:

“The randomly used materials are hit and miss and do not always show the progress these learners make.”

Online Holistic Materials

Part 2 – Focus on meaning

Test takers need to understand the meaning communicated in a short dialogue. The meaning tested may be explicit, or it may be implied, where the meaning is understood from context.



The screenshot shows a digital test interface for the Oxford Placement Test. At the top right, the logo for 'OXFORD PLACEMENT TEST' is visible. Below the logo, the text 'Use of English • Section 1: Approximately 30 Questions' is displayed. To the right of this text, a timer indicates 'Time allowed 00:41'. The main instruction reads: 'Read the conversation. Then, select the correct answer from the options below.' Question 12 asks: 'What does the boy mean?'. Three radio button options are provided: A 'I can eat an apple', B 'I have got an apple', and C 'I would like an apple'. To the right of the options is a video player showing a boy and a woman in a kitchen. Below the video, the dialogue is transcribed: 'Boy: Can I have an apple?' and 'Woman: Yes, you can.' At the bottom left, there is a 'Next >' button.

OXFORD
PLACEMENT TEST

Time allowed 00:41

Use of English • Section 1: Approximately 30 Questions

Read the conversation. Then, select the correct answer from the options below.

12 What does the boy mean?

A I can eat an apple

B I have got an apple

C I would like an apple



Boy: Can I have an apple?

Woman: Yes, you can.

Next >

E1 Adapted Materials

Lost
Large black dog,
called Spot.
Please phone 0766
387982 if you see it

What has been lost?



NHS

18 June 2011
District Hospital,
Church Road,
Hillbury,
H24 3LS
01392 686712

Dear Mrs Simms,

You have an appointment with the consultant, Mr Dawkins, at Hillbury District Hospital on 7 July 2011, at 10:45.

Please come to reception in the Bronte Building.

If you are unable to attend, please contact the number shown at the top of the letter.

Yours sincerely,

District Hospital Administration Services

 **Read the letter. Circle the answer.**

- | | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Who is the letter to? | the hospital | Mrs Simms | NHS |
| 2 | When is the appointment? | 7 July 2011 | 18 June 2011 | 25 August 2011 |
| 3 | What time is the appointment? | 1:35 | 2011 | 10:45 |
| 4 | Where is the appointment? | July | Mr Dawkins | Bronte Building |

Self-designed Materials

Letters and sounds

Aa Bb Cc ___ Ee Ff Gg ___ Ii

Jj ___ Ll ___ Nn Oo Pp Qq ___ Ss

Tt ___ Vv Ww Xx ___ Zz

Match pictures and letters.

a c t f p d sh



Match letters and words.

1. A

2. C

3. D

4. E

5. F



car

dog

egg

fish

apple

Sounds - a e i o u



m_n



b_n



m_p



s_n



t_n

Self-designed Materials

Reading

My name is Agnes and I come from Poland. I live in Scotland with my husband and my children. I have one son and two daughters.

Writing

Reading

I am Ali.

I live in Huddersfield.

I like cooking and shopping.

I have two children.



Name:	Ali
Address:	
Likes:	
Family:	

Inappropriate Materials to LESLLA

Pictures and model answers are important, but..

- Pictures often misleading or out of context
- Instructions missing or written for literate learners
- Multiple-choice tasks contain misleading elements
- Assessment design assumes literacy skills (skimming, scanning)
- Tasks do not reflect how LESLLA learners process text
- Textual composition often unintentionally biases against low-literate learners

Multimodal Semiotic

- أوصل



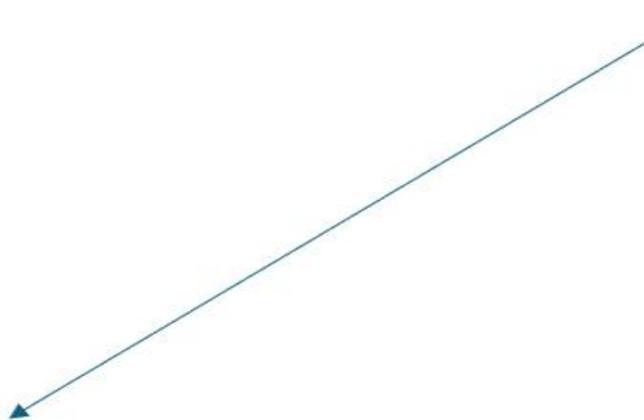
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Multimodal Semiotic



د-ر-أ-و

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(Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Pennycook, 2001)

Insights from the Study

- Separating literate and non-literate learners during assessment is essential
- LESLLA learners need more time, tailored support, and appropriate tools
- Tutors need training in early-literacy assessment design
- Frameworks must reflect pre-literacy development, not Entry-level formats
- Traditional questions fail to reveal actual competencies
- Little alignment with LASLLIAM or reading acquisition stages

4.1.1. Language and Print Awareness

Descriptor	
4	Knows that cohesive devices are important for understanding texts (e.g. "he"; "then").
3	Can synthesise phonemes into a word with a complex syllabic structure (e.g. "d-r-i-n-k" into "drink").
	Can analyse words with a complex syllabic structure (e.g. "plant" into "p-l-a-n-t").
	Can synthesise spoken words into short and simple sentences.
2	Knows that the word order of the sentences in different languages can differ (e.g. place of the verb).
	Can analyse short and simple spoken sentences into words (e.g. "This-is-my-house").
	Knows that a phoneme corresponds to a grapheme.
1	Can analyse words with a simple syllabic structure into phonemes (e.g. "map" into "m-a-p").
	Can identify the order of phonemes (e.g. initial and final) in words with a simple syllabic structure.
	Can identify rhyming words in the target language (e.g. "book-cook, late-plate").
	Knows that some phonemes in the target language can differ from phonemes in the first language (e.g. the number of vowels; p-b for Arabic speakers).
1	Can synthesise phonemes into words with a simple syllabic structure (e.g. "c-a-t" into "cat").
	Can show the direction of the script in the language they are learning (e.g. from left to right and top to bottom for Latin and Greek script).
	Can distinguish linguistic signs (like written words) from non-linguistic signs (like icons or symbols).
1	Can identify some initial phonemes of a spoken word (e.g. the initial phoneme of their own name).

4.1.2. Reading

Descriptor	
4	Can read fluently words with a complex syllabic structure (e.g. "shirts").
	Can read short and simple phrases fluently by using automated reading processes.
	Can read, phrase by phrase, a short, simple text.
	Can read frequent maths symbols (+, %, comma) in simple texts (like advertisements).
	Can use punctuation marks as an aid to understand a text.
	Can read simple two-clause sentences with an unknown word.
3	Can read short and simple sentences, if the words are orthographically simple.
	Can recognise frequently used punctuation marks (e.g. full stop, question mark).
	Can read words with frequent combinations of graphemes and frequent (bound) morphemes fluently (e.g. str-; -rk, plural s).
	Can read short and simple texts, if the sentences are few and have a simple syntactic structure.
	Can read frequent words fluently by using automated reading processes.
	Can read with some effort orthographically complex words (e.g. multisyllabic words, words with consonant clusters, or words with irregular spelling).
2	Can read practised words and new short words with a simple or highly frequent syllabic structure by applying the grapheme–phoneme correspondence (e.g. "son", "sera").
	Can relate a grapheme to the corresponding phoneme in orthographically simple words (e.g. "hat"; "book").
	Can read practised words by recognising highly frequent combinations of graphemes.
	Can read single practised words with a simple syllabic structure by synthesising syllables (e.g. "ora", "doctor").
	Can recognise most graphemes in a word, including visually confusing graphemes (e.g. b and d or f and t in Latin, ϕ and φ in Greek or Л and П in Cyrillic).
	Can recognise graphemes in different frequently used fonts and printed formats (e.g. italic).
1	Can identify and read their own writing.
	Can distinguish upper- and lower-case letters in practised words.
	Can read numerals up to 10 in digits.
	Can recognise numerals in personally relevant texts like an address.
	Can recognise practised sight words (e.g. days of the week).
Can recognise some graphemes in practised words (e.g. initial letters in own name).	

<https://www.leslla.org/latest-news/2022/7/15/new-reference-guide-on-literacy-and-second-language-learning-for-the-linguistic-integration-of-adult-migrants-laslliam-available>

Importance of LASLLIAM



- Provides micro-achievement descriptors suited to Pre-A1
- Helps tutors identify small steps in early literacy development
- Guides creation of relevant teaching and assessment tasks
- Supports individual learning profiles tailored to LESLLA needs

Practitioner-focused Recommendations

- Separate literate and LESLLA learners during assessment; offer longer courses
- Develop a standardised Pre-A1 framework tailored to LESLLA learners
- Review and redesign materials for low-literate learners
- Integrate fine-grained PATs to assess:
 - sound–symbol knowledge
 - word recognition
 - basic letter–sound associations
- Use LASLLIAM “can-do” statements as learning goals
- Include performance-based assessment (profiles, portfolios, observation)

Why PATs Matter

- LESLLA learners often move from **holistic** → **analytical** reading strategies during intervention.
- Existing assessments fail to capture this gradual shift.
- PATs reveal progress often **invisible in traditional reading tests**.
- Show improvements in:
 - grapheme-phoneme awareness
 - syllable recognition
 - decoding simple words
- Essential for tracking early reading development in low-literate learners.

Organisational-Level Recommendations

ESOL providers should:

- develop **Pre-A1 assessment frameworks** tailored to LESLLA needs
- offer **webinars and expert-led training**
- standardise assessment criteria but allow flexibility for learner contexts
- prioritise equitable assessment in quality assurance processes

Policy-Level Recommendations

Policymakers should:

- collaborate with researchers + educators to redesign ESOL assessment frameworks
- support **pilot programmes** to test new tools in real classrooms
- fund **professional development** focused on LESLLA assessment literacy
- avoid punitive assessment systems tied to benefits / residency outcomes
- ensure longer learning programmes for LESLLA learners to reflect real progress trajectories

Questions



Thank you very much!

rim.day@sunderland.ac.uk