



Support Document

Learning for LIFE: An ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework
DEVELOPING AN IN-HOUSE PLACEMENT
ASSESSMENT

DEVELOPING AN IN-HOUSE PLACEMENT ASSESSMENT

Placement assessments are a key factor in the success of a program. They allow programs to:

- determine learners' English language and literacy proficiency
- assess learners' content knowledge
- distinguish between learners who are part of the intended target audience and those who are not
- group learners in classes by ability

The most effective placement tools are tailored to the program they are designed for, incorporating the context, vocabulary and level of language appropriate to the program.

The purpose of this tool is to guide ESL literacy program providers in developing an effective in-house placement tool.

This tool can be used by:

- ESL literacy program administrators
- ESL literacy curriculum designers

There are five parts to this tool:

- an overview
- guidelines for oral interviews
- guidelines for an oral reading component
- guidelines for a reading and writing component
- implementation considerations

Overview

An in-house placement assessment or placement component to accompany a standardized assessment provides specific information to enhance program effectiveness. When designing such a tool, give careful consideration to the findings from your learner and community needs assessments (see *Stage 1: Understand Needs* in the ESL Literacy Curriculum Framework). Ensure that the placement tool aligns with the program purpose and assesses learners in the areas that the program will focus on. Questions that focus on aspects of the learner profile, such as years of education, background, goals and prior training should be included to assess whether or not learners are part of the target audience. Questions that identify literacy skills and content knowledge will help you effectively place learners in program levels.

When you design your in-house placement assessment, consider including the following:

- an oral interview
- an oral reading component
- a reading and writing assessment section
- a marking tool that relates directly to program levels

Guidelines for Oral Interviews

The oral interview helps to identify participants for the program by assessing oral ability and determining background and prior learning experiences. Questions in an oral interview that focus on specific program-related information help to ensure a good match between program and learner. For example, in a family literacy program, questions may gather information about how many children the learner has and their ages; for a specific workplace program, questions may focus on prior training, certificates received and work experience outside of Canada.

An oral interview can also include tasks that help determine literacy in first language, such as responding to the prompts: “Can you write your first name for me in your language?” “Please write the numbers 1-10 in your language.” If it is possible, first language oral interpreters should be present for the oral interview to ensure understanding and to gather detailed information.

Sample oral interview question sheet

Name: _____ Date: _____

Note to assessor: This portion of the placement assessment focuses on **gathering background information**, not on assessing English language ability. Give the learners any necessary prompts to help them understand the questions. Rephrase the questions and model as necessary. Note answers and observations under comments. You can have the learners write their response to numbers 9 and 10 on the back of this sheet.

Question:	Comments:
1. What is your name?	
2. Where are you from?	
3. When did you come to Canada?	
4. Did you go to school in your country?	
5. How many years did you go to school in your country?	
6. How old were you when you stopped going to school?	
7. What job do you want to do in Canada?	
8. What language(s) do you speak?	
9. Can you write your name for me in your language?	
10. Can you write the numbers 1 to 10 for me in your language?	
11. Did you go to another school in Canada? (If so, where? For how long?)	

Guidelines for an Oral Reading Component

The oral reading component helps to determine awareness of print without requiring the learners to read instructions or write. Learners are asked to identify items, pictures, letters and then words in a one-on-one setting. The assessment should begin with concrete examples that learners are familiar with such as labels or signs that learners are likely to have already encountered in daily life (e.g. a Coke can, a no smoking sign). After concrete, hands-on manipulatives, use photos or diagrams and then move on to print materials. Reading tasks should get progressively more challenging to test a range of ESL literacy phases. Instructions should be given orally and demonstrated. Adjust the phrasing of the instructions if they are not understood.

Examples of skills to focus on in an oral reading component are:

- Can the learner identify common symbols on objects that he/she is likely to encounter in daily life?
 - e.g. *What is this?* – Show the learner a Coke can.
- Can the learner identify one shape in a group of three?
 - e.g. *Point to the circle.* – Show a picture with a circle, square and triangle on it.
- Can the learner count the number of objects in a picture (up to five)?
 - e.g. *How many?* Show a picture with four of the same object such as a pencil.
- Can the learner identify certain letters in the alphabet?
 - e.g. *Point to the B. Point to the S.* Show the learner the alphabet in large print.
- Can the learner identify his/her own name in a list?
 - e.g. *Show me your name.* Show the learner a list with three to five names, including their own.
- Can the learner read basic sight words?
 - e.g. *What does this say?* Point to a word in a list of basic sight words in large print.
- Can the learner read a short paragraph?
 - e.g. *Can you read this?* Show the learner a short paragraph. Watch for the ability to decode words.
- Can the learner understand what he/she reads in the paragraph?
 - e.g. *What was the story about?* Ask particular questions related to the story to determine comprehension.
- Can the learner read words or text specific to the focus of your program?
 - e.g. *Can you read this?* Show the learner words and then a short text.

Guidelines for a Reading and Writing Component

The reading and writing component of a placement assessment helps to assess learners' abilities in English literacy. Assessment tasks in reading and writing should progress across the benchmark levels of a program. Provide tasks that increase in complexity as learners progress through the assessment, in order to give all learners a chance to demonstrate what they know. Questions at the higher levels will involve reading for meaning and information as opposed to decoding.

When designing the reading and writing tasks, ensure the focus is on identifying the reading skills and not background or cultural knowledge. Put the necessary supports in place so that learners can complete the task. Aim to use relevant vocabulary and content that most learners are familiar with.

Process for creating a reading and writing assessment

1. Determine the range of levels in your program.
2. Identify the outcomes you will focus on in your program.
3. Include tasks that target the outcomes at each level, beginning with the lowest level and progressing to the highest. Ensure that there is a balance of tasks from each level.
4. Determine the type and amount of support to be given with each task.
5. Create instructions for each task, stating the criteria for each task and including visuals when appropriate.
6. Determine the scores for each task and total score for assessment.
7. Design your marking tool.
8. Train the assessment administrators for consistency of marking.

Sample reading and writing tasks that relate to outcomes at Foundation Phase

- identify same/different shapes by circling or crossing out
- match similar letters, shapes or pictures
- copy letters or simple words directly beside an example

Sample reading and writing tasks that relate to outcomes at Phase I

- copy simple sentences
- fill in basic personal information
- match basic words to pictures
- identify specific words in a short text
- complete short sentence stems

Sample reading and writing tasks that relate to outcomes at Phase II

- read a short basic text and respond to questions with short answers
- select words to form a word box to complete simple sentences
- write simple sentences
- locate purpose and key information in short texts

Sample reading and writing tasks that relate to outcomes at Phase III

- fill in authentic forms
- interpret and compare information from short texts, charts or graphs
- identify purpose and key information in longer texts
- infer meaning from texts
- produce a focused writing sample

Marking tool

A clear, standardized marking tool should accompany the placement assessment. Key things to consider and include are as follows:

- Clear indicators of the conditions for each task in the assessment should be detailed on the marking tool.
- Instructions detailing the assessment administrator's prompts for each question should be outlined and described clearly. ESL literacy classes will involve extensive support for the learner, so prompts are necessary in the assessment.
- Scores should be included for each task and for the assessment as a whole.
- The marking tool should relate scores to Phases or program levels for ease of placement.
- Clear explanations of how the score determines the learner's placement level should be provided.
- All assessment administrators should be trained in the assessment and marking tool to ensure consistency.

This sample provides a model for a marking tool, and differentiates abilities between Phases. In your program, it may be necessary to further differentiate within the Phases.

Sample placement assessment marking tool

Instructions: Mark each section according to the conditions and points listed. If the learner scores 8/10, then he/she has demonstrated the outcome for that level. If the learner scores 8/10 on both tasks for the level, then he/she is ready for the next level. Continue marking the sections until the scores are consistently below 8/10.

Learner Name: _____ Date: _____

Section	Conditions and points	Score	ESL Literacy Phase demonstrated
A	Conditions: Learner must circle only one object in the row Points: 1 point for each correct object circled	____/ 10	Foundation
B	Conditions: Spelling must be copied accurately; letters should be recognizable; Points: 1 point for each word copied correctly. Do not deduct for capitalization errors.	____/ 10	Foundation
C	Conditions: Learner must circle only one object in the line Points: 1 point for each word placed correctly. ½ point for correct word used but copied incorrectly	____/ 10	Phase I
D	Conditions: Words must be recognizable. Points: 1 point for each word used. Do not deduct points for spelling or messy letters	____/ 10	Phase I
E	Conditions: Learner must circle only one answer per line Points: 1 point for each correct answer circled	____/ 10	Phase II
F	Conditions: Sentences must be related to the topic Points: 2 points for each sentence written correctly. Deduct half a point for incorrect spelling or punctuation	____/ 10	Phase II
G	Conditions: All information must be accurate, legible and written in the boxes Points: 1 point for each correct item included. No point if the item does not meet the conditions	____/ 10	Phase III
H	Conditions: Answers should be in complete sentences. Spelling and punctuation should be correct Points: 1 point for each sentence. ½ point if the sentence includes spelling or punctuation errors	____/ 10	Phase III

Placement level: _____

Implementation Considerations

There are several factors that can influence the successful implementation of your placement assessment. Consider the following:

- time
- content
- setting
- learners' impressions
- resources

Time

Learners should be able to complete the placement assessment in a reasonable period of time. If the assessment has different sections, these may need to be completed at different times. If an assessment is too long, learners may be unable to complete the assessment or may not demonstrate their true abilities.

Time also needs to be considered from a program point of view. Design a placement tool that is manageable in your particular context, incorporating as many of the above recommendations as possible.

Content

Move from concrete to abstract. Begin with real objects that connect to the learners' lives before moving to more abstract reading and writing tasks such as a story about a fictional person. Tasks should include content that learners are likely to be familiar with. Relate the tasks on the placement tool directly to the type of program. In a workplace program, tasks should involve document use and reading schedules. An academic preparation test should focus more on identifying the main topic and supporting details in a text.

Setting

It is ideal if placement assessments can be done one-on-one. If this is not possible, they should be done in a non-threatening environment and tasks should be explained clearly, one at a time.

Learners' impressions

Stop the learners when they still feel successful so that the assessment is a positive experience. If a learner attempts a task that is too difficult, provide lots of prompts so the learner feels able to complete it, but do not mark it for the final score.

Resources

Consider the resources available in the program when designing the placement assessment. Only design the oral interview to include a first language interpreter if first language interpreters are accessible in all the languages likely to be represented. Include an oral reading component if there is sufficient time, enough instructors and the space to do one-on-one assessments. Consider the resources available for marking when designing the length of the assessment.