# Teaching and Testing the Language Skills of First and Second Language Speakers

**Philida Schellekens 2011**

**Produced for Cambridge ESOL**

## Abstract

It has been government policy in England to have a single framework to accredit the English language skills of both native speakers and migrants and refugees. In this paper I take stock of this practice in the light of research on language learning and teaching methodology. This research demonstrates that there are not only substantial differences between the learning trajectories of first and second language speakers but also between the types of skills that need to be mastered. This concerns major aspects of learning, e.g. the development of grammar and vocabulary, listening and reading skills. Taken cumulatively, it is striking to see how many aspects of language learning and use are affected. The evidence, as it presents itself, is that the current adult standards and exams, such as Skills for Life, Key Skills, GCSE and Functional Skills, do not provide an appropriate vehicle to assess the language skills of second language speakers. General principles of the validity, reliability and effectiveness of testing are not adhered to. The evidence calls into question whether test scores give an accurate reflection of the candidate's level of language skills. This means that they cannot be relied on to give employers and education & training organisations reliable information on which to make recruitment decisions. Last, poorly designed standards and tests have affected classroom practice and indeed the standards and contents of teacher training. This paper suggests that what works for first language speakers often does not in the second language classroom or in the test situation. This has major implications for the effectiveness of classroom provision, value for money and the ability of employers to recruit a suitably skilled workforce.

## 1 Introduction and rationale

The context of this paper is the government's strategy to improve the literacy, numeracy and language skills of the adult population in England. Much work has been done since the introduction of the Skills for Life strategy in 2001 and more recently through the development of Functional Skills. These initiatives are intended to provide a framework for the accreditation of the English language skills of adult learners, ie people who are 16 or older[1]. This target group consists of two distinct categories[2], the first being learners who are native speakers of English. The second category consists of migrants and refugees who are entitled to settle in the UK and who need to learn English for social interaction and employment. While the two categories of learners have the same end goal: to use English

[1] In some cases, schools can also offer Skills for Life qualifications for 14 to 16 year olds.

[2] For definitions of terms used in this paper, see appendix 1.

which is appropriate for the occasion and with fluency and accuracy, their learning trajectories are by no means identical.

Tests form important instruments in the nation's education and training framework. They should not just measure achievement and provide assurance that someone has met the required standard; tests also influence classroom practice. If they are well-constructed, they promote effective learning, help identify learning needs and inform the planning and delivery of teaching. It is thus in the interest of standards setting and funding bodies, teachers and learners, and the taxpayer who part-funds language provision, to have tests which assess skills accurately and effectively. A third consideration is the principle of appropriateness and fairness. These aspects will be addressed in this paper.

### 1.1. The structure of this paper

| | |
|---|---|
| Section 1 | Rationale and context for this paper |
| Section 2 | Overview of the key features of first and second language use and their coverage in English language qualifications |
| Section 3-10 | Research evidence to substantiate the evaluation of the key features |
| Section 11 | Conclusion |
| Section 12 | Appendices: terminology, definitions and bibliography |

## 2 Overview of learner features and coverage in English language exams

The table below provides an overview of key language learning features and the extent to which these are covered in government standards and tests such as Skills for Life, Key Skills, GCSE and Functional Skills. English language features are identified key in column 1. Columns 2 and 3 contain an overview of how these features are handled by first and second language speakers. Column 4 reviews the extent to which the standards and tests address the feature from the perspective of second language learning. Column 5 refers to the section where supporting evidence on a particular topic can be found.

| **Language feature** | **The learners** | | **National literacy/English language standards and tests** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | People whose first language is English: | People whose first language is not English: | Evaluation of effectiveness and appropriateness for second language learning | Supporting evidence |
| Vocabulary | • have good knowledge of the everyday vocabulary of English and have automatic recall of it.<br>• may lack more formal language.<br><br>• know which chunks of words go together e.g. '*it depends on, I am applying for* ' | • are unlikely to know all commonly used vocabulary in a text or spoken interaction. Even a low percentage of unknown words affects the ability to understand written texts, task instructions and spoken English.<br>• on average need exposure to new vocabulary items of 6-7 times before they acquire the meaning of a word, e.g. *name, house,* or *employment.*<br><br>• need to learn not just individual words but also how they fit together into chunks of language | • Standards and tests assume that learners already have the necessary vocabulary to take tests<br>• Exams often contain vocabulary that is rarely used and which is crucial for the understanding of a passage. This affects the ability of a second language reader to understand a text or conversation, even if their general vocabulary is good for their level.<br>• Task instructions and questions are often above the level of the text and affect the ability to perform tasks.<br>• Corpora, such as the British National Corpus, are a useful tool to control for rare words. They should be used to control for vocabulary load. | Section 4 |

| **Language feature** | **The learners** | | **National literacy/English language standards and tests** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | People whose first language is English: | People whose first language is not English: | Evaluation of effectiveness | Supporting evidence |
| Grammar | • can use and understand English fluently, even if they do not use standard English or use the full register of formal language. | • often struggle with grammar right up to level 2/GCSE level, e.g. with accuracy, word order, tenses and third person s as in *he work**s*** etc. | • The standards describe function and context rather than the level of language, accuracy and appropriateness to be achieved, e.g. *'speak clearly to be heard and understood in simple exchanges'* SfL E1-SL; *use written words and phrases to record or present information* SfL E2-Wr).<br><br>• Common stages of language development, well attested in linguistics research, are not used as a tool to assess the learning of English. This is an opportunity missed to promote effective language learning. | Section 5 |
| Communication: Speaking | • have no problems speaking English, know which structures to use and have appropriate stress, pronunciation and intonation.<br><br>• have a wider range of listening than speaking but not markedly so.<br><br>• may have a limited range of register, often confined to colloquial/informal. | • often have real problems producing English, especially grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, intonation and vocabulary choice. These affect comprehension directly.<br><br>• speak at a much lower level than they are able to understand. This is especially marked in the early stages of language learning, ie up to level 1.<br><br>• need to have language skills at level 1 and above before they can handle register meaningfully. | • The standards for Skills for Life, Functional Skills, GCSE and Key Skills assume the learner can already use English accurately. Because the standards lack the developmental sequence of language use, they do not reflect the learning needs of second language speakers adequately.<br><br>• As a result, poor identification of strengths and weaknesses for speaking. | Section 6-8 |

| **Language feature** | **The learners** | | **National literacy/English language standards and tests** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | People whose first language is English: | People whose first language is not English: | Evaluation of effectiveness | Supporting evidence |
| Communication: Listening | • can understand everyday language effortlessly.<br>• have no problems in identifying individual words when they hear spoken English.<br>• can rely on their listening skills to understand language for learning, e.g. follow explanations, instructions, feedback on progress etc | • often have problems understanding spoken language<br>• find it hard to detect individual words in a stream of sound<br>• do not know the meaning of words<br>These reasons often impact on each other, making it very difficult to understand spoken language<br>• these aspects affect not just their ability to carry out listening tasks but also to understand language for learning. | • Listening is limited to comprehension activity.<br>• The standards (and the ESOL curriculum) lack reference to listening as an individual skill. This is a significant weakness as listening is a key skill to development.<br>• A sound focus on listening as a distinct skill and, within that, lexical segmentation would benefit the learners enormously and would promote effective learning. | Section 7-8 |
| Reading | • will know the meaning of commonly used words if they can decode (ie read) them.<br>• may not be able to skim, scan and read for detail.<br>• may have problems with the spelling of English because it is an opaque language, ie its spelling often does not reflect its pronunciation. | • may find that, once they have decoded a word, they do not know its meaning.<br>• already know how to skim, scan, and read for gist if they can read in their own language but cannot apply these skills in their new language<br>• need knowledge of syntax, vocabulary and speaking/listening skills to be able to read in their new language rather than learn to read for gist, skim and scan. | • Too much variation in the level of complexity in Skills for Life tests affects second language speakers disproportionately.<br>• The test framework for reading based on subskills such as read for gist skim, scan, etc, has been shown not to be productive for second language speakers. (There is also no evidence that it works for native English speakers) | Section 9 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | • The opaque spelling of English and proportion of unfamiliar words affects performance disproportionately. | | |
| Fairness, effectiveness and reliability | • The government-sponsored standards and exams were designed for this target group | • The standards and exams were not designed for this target group and do not reflect the development of language skills well | • The standards and tests distort test results and the teaching of ESOL in the classroom<br>• Tests and exams need to be introduced which reflect second language acquisition properly. There is a wealth of research on this aspect which has been is simply ignored. | 10-11 |

## 3 Learning English as a child and as an adult

This section contains a review of some of the major aspects which distinguish first and second language acquisition.

There is a large body of research on how people learn their first and subsequent languages in child and adulthood. For example, Lightbown and Spada (2006) show that children acquire their first language in remarkably consistent stages. Cognitive development plays an important role, e.g. children only start to use adverbs of time such as 'tomorrow' when they have developed an understanding of time. Another major factor which contributes to language development is repeated exposure to words and phrases in context. As young people expand their knowledge of the world, they learn to understand and use the language that goes with particular contexts. By the time they reach adulthood, most people have acquired their first language to a very high standard. They have a well established command of the language, and production and understanding will be automatic. If they have weaknesses, the underlying cause is often a lack of exposure to situations where more formal language is required. This can result in an inability to handle the full range and register of the language, such as using formal language during a job interview or writing a letter.

By contrast, people who learn English as an additional language face a very different learning trajectory. They need to master aspects that first language speakers are able to apply automatically, such as the grammar of the language, word order, pronunciation, stress and intonation and, as their language skills grow, the use of English which is appropriate for the context. In addition, they do not just have to learn a huge number of individual words but also chunks of words that go together in a particular way, e.g. '*by the way, I am applying for…, it depends on…* etc. And their English language is often influenced by their mother-tongue.

The iceberg picture below exemplifies the difference between first and second language acquisition.

Since native English speakers already have language competence, their main objective when attending literacy courses is to improve their ability to handle the skills of reading, writing and speaking and listening. By contrast, the priority for second language speakers is to develop their language competence as well as the four skills. Indeed and as we shall see, there is growing research evidence that learners cannot achieve the latter without the former. This means that the learning load, stages of achievement and strategies for learning are essentially different from that of first language speakers, especially in the early stages of language learning.

You will find below an exploration of some of the major areas of language learning which second language speakers need to get to grips with, such as vocabulary, grammar and listening.

## 4 Vocabulary

One of the areas in which first and second language speakers differ substantially is their handling of vocabulary. While native English speakers can be expected to know commonly occurring words, this is by no means certain for second language speakers. The text below exemplifies how first and second language speakers vary in their knowledge of vocabulary in the context of reading. This text originates from a bank of national literacy tests which all learners are expected to take to pass their Skills for Life and Key Skills exams. Candidates are expected to read the text and answer five questions. The design of the test is the responsibility of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Authority (QCDA, formerly known as QCA), the regulatory body for publicly funded qualifications in England.

> Fire officers and police are investigating an explosion that reduced a restaurant and several shops to rubble. One unidentified man was taken to Jubilee Hospital in Park Street after the blast, which involved gas or flammable materials and which is being treated as suspicious.

Level 1 Test Paper QCDA website http://www.qcda.gov.uk/10708.aspx

While native English speakers may not be fluent readers, if they can decode words (ie identify individual letters and assemble them into words), they are very likely to know their meaning, apart from perhaps the word *flammable*. By contrast, second language speakers may be able to decode a word but not know its meaning. This means that, having made the effort to read, they are no further in understanding the text. This is very likely to happen with the text above, as Leech, Rayson and Wilson's (2001) word frequency list shows. This is based on the 100-million word British National Corpus and provides the following information on the vocabulary in the paragraph above: *investigate* (55 occurrences per 1 million words), *explosion* (22), *reduce* (178), *rubble* (fewer than 10), *identify* (133), *blast* (10), *flammable* (fewer than 10) and s*uspicious* (14)/*suspicion* (23). In other words, many of the items in this text are rare. To demonstrate the range of frequencies, the most commonly found nouns in the British National Corpus are *time* (1833 occurrences per million); *year*

(1639); and *people* (1256). We can say that, the lower the frequency of the words, the less likely learners are, statistically speaking, to have encountered them. This is particularly relevant for second language speakers who, compared to first language speakers, are much more likely not to have encountered words before.

This lack of exposure is likely to affect learner scores substantially in the test situation. Tests which contain too many unknown words do not discriminate well as to what the learners know. Instead, they are likely to produce test results which show major failure. It appears that unfamiliar topics and the vocabulary associated with them disadvantage second language speakers disproportionally. Indeed, several studies have demonstrated this point, identifying a limit to the ability of second language speakers to deduce the meaning of new words in context. Research by Laufer (1992) and Nation (2002) indicates that most learners find it difficult to infer the meaning of new words, if they know fewer than 95% of the words of a text. Khalifa and Weir (2009) suggest an even higher percentage of 97% to enable ease of reading, especially for higher levels of language skills. If we take the QCDA reading test above we find that only 77% of the words are likely to be known at Level 1. This is substantially lower than the threshold levels identified in the research literature.

This leaves teachers in a quandary as to how to best to prepare students for tests such as Skills for Life, Key Skills, GCSE and Functional Skills. Teachers often opt to use texts with lots of new vocabulary on the basis that it provides the learners with the opportunity to learn many new words. Yet Nation's (2001) meta-analysis of studies on vocabulary learning shows that learners need to encounter a word many times before they know its meaning. Most new vocabulary is learnt after six or seven occurrences.

At the lower end of the vocabulary spectrum, O'Keeffe et al (2007) report that the most commonly used words in English make up more than 80% of all the words used in spoken and written texts. This common core consists of 2,000 words. It seems obvious that teaching and testing should promote the learning of these words as a matter of priority, especially at lower language levels. O'Keeffe et al also comment on the types of common words that need special attention, such as functional words[3] and chunks of words which go together, e.g. *get a job* and *make coffee.* The concern is that the current standards, ESOL curriculum and tests for GCSE, Skills for Life and Functional Skills do not address core vocabulary.

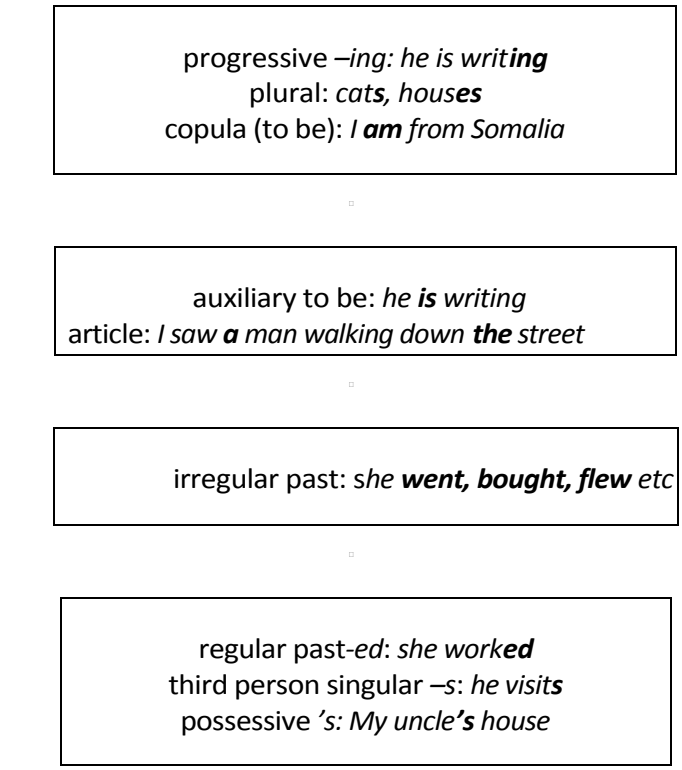
[3] Functional words have little or no vocabulary content, e.g. *I, you* and *was.*

# 5 Grammar

The second feature by which we can easily distinguish native and second language speakers is the structure of the language they produce. For second language speakers we can analyse language in terms of production which:

- is accurate and follows the rules of English
- is influenced by the learner's first language
- conforms to a typical pattern of language development which does not reflect English or the first language

Until the 1960s the influence of the first language was thought to be the main source of errors made in the second. But many research studies have shown that learners make mistakes in their new language which do not reflect their first language at all. Intriguingly, learners follow similar patterns of language development regardless of their first language. Larry Selinker (1972) was the first to use the term 'interlanguage' to capture the gradual development of language acquisition as learners progress from pre-Entry upwards. Interlanguage is not static: it changes as the learners develop their ability to use English. Authors such as Lightbown and Spada (2006) and Rod Ellis (1994) provide much evidence of the typical development of grammar, of which one sequence is presented in the boxes below:




Krashen's (1977) sequence of the order of morpheme acquisition

While previous studies had identified the grammatical features described above, Krashen (1977) was the first to put them into groups. This reflects the fact that second language speakers acquire the features in each box at more or less the same time regardless of their first language (Ellis 1994). So, for example, a beginner can be expected to say: *I writing*; followed later by: *I am writing*. This grammar sequence is by no means the only one for which there is empirical evidence. There are similar sequences for the acquisition of negatives and negative sentences, relative clauses etc (Lightbown and Spada 2006).

The existence of these sequences of acquisition provides an ideal base to devise standards, assess language skills, and plan for and reflect on learning. Yet none of national literacy strategies, standards, exams or the ESOL curriculum makes use of these sequences. Thus a real opportunity is missed to reflect language acquisition and to promote effective language learning in the classroom.

## 6 Communication skills

All government-sponsored standards and exams categorise speaking and listening as one skill. For example, in the Skills for Life and Key Skills exams they are treated as 'communication'. The rationale for this approach is not clear and there is, to my knowledge, no research evidence to support it; nor is it applied in other countries. On the contrary, language used by first **and** second language speakers indicates that speaking and listening are two distinct skills. For example, many young and adult first language speakers who perform below the expected norm in spoken communication show differences in their ability to speak and understand. Their spoken language skills and command of register are typically well below their ability to understand spoken language. That is why traditionally the two skills of speaking and listening have been assessed separately.

The decision to treat the skills of listening and speaking as one entity is particularly problematic for second language learners because there is often a major difference in their level of competence in speaking and listening, normally of at least one level. So typically, a learner may be at Skills for Life Entry 3 for listening and Entry 2 for speaking. This creates a problem during an integrated speaking and listening assessment: candidates may have understood a dialogue or a question but may lack the language to report back or respond appropriately. Thus the listening score is 'polluted' by the candidate's lower speaking skills. As a result, the speaking score may be accurate but the listening skills are rated below the actual level. In the interest of fairness and reliability, standards and exams to test listening and speaking should be reviewed at the earliest opportunity.

## 7 Listening skills

There are two aspects to listening. If we look at the national standards and tests, we see that by listening is meant comprehension. While this is no doubt an important skill, it is not the only one required to achieve understanding. Underpinning the skill of comprehension is that of understanding a stream of sound and converting the speech signal into sounds, words and sentences. This process is similar in nature to readers decoding written text in order to understand its meaning. As John Field (2003) says in his article on listening, it is remarkable that native speakers manage the first process so fluently, namely to identify individual words consistently while they listen to spoken English. Second language speakers, however, find this hard to do. This is a real problem as, without the ability to decode the stream of sound, comprehension cannot take place. You may well have experienced this yourself, trying to understand what an Italian or French waiter is saying to you. Moreover, listening is a most important skill, perhaps ***the*** most important for migrants and refugees, both to learn the new language and to survive in their new environment.

The predicament that second language speakers face is that, even if they know the words when they see them written down or hear them in isolation, they may not recognise them when they hear them in connected speech. This is largely because the boundaries between words in spoken English often cannot be detected because words merge into each other (Field 2007). To make matters more complicated, emerging research evidence indicates that the principles of segmentation vary across languages, which may explain why learners from some language groups have more difficulty with this aspect than others. The good news is that there are rules for lexical segmentation in the same way that there are rules for grammar (Field 2007). Second language speakers can benefit greatly from being taught how these rules operate. The bad news is that, despite the importance of this aspect as the key to comprehension and learning, it is simply absent from the Skills for Life, Functional Skills and GCSEs national standards and exams.

Of real concern is the fact that the ESOL curriculum follows this narrow focus on comprehension, lacking strategies to learn to decode the stream of sound. There is minimal attention to only one small aspect of listening, that of word stress. Instead it prescribes the functions which the learners need to carry out for the Skills for Life exams. For example, Entry 3 has 13 descriptors for listening, of which three examples here: Listen for the gist of information or narrative in face-to-face interaction or on the phone (1c); Listen for detail in narratives and explanations (2a); Listen for relevant and new information in face-to-face situations or on the phone (3b). Even at Entry 1, which is at the very beginner level, the learners are asked to recognise context and predict general meaning (1a); listen for gist (1b-d) and detail 2a-b) rather than learn how spoken English fits together.

## 8 Reflecting the second language learning trajectory

Section 3 started with an overview of the acquisition of English, both as a first language learnt in childhood and as a second language learnt later in life. We saw that the essential difference between the two groups is that first language speakers already have the underpinning skills to understand and convey meaning; whereas second language speakers need to acquire these underpinning skills. For example, a first language speaker can apply the principles of lexical segmentation and grammar (without necessarily knowing the rules); whereas second language speakers often cannot. The evidence presents itself that the Skills for Life, Functional Skills and GCSE standards and tests reflect the profile of first language speakers. However, the match for second language speakers is problematic. Two snippets from the new GCSE for English Language, introduced in September 2010, exemplify the approach.

**GCSE Subject criteria for English language OFQUAL (2009)**

Assessment objectives

17 All specifications in English language must require candidates to demonstrate the following:

**A01 Speaking and listening**

- Speak to communicate clearly and purposefully; structure and sustain talk, adapting it to different situations and audiences; use standard English and a variety of techniques as appropriate
- Listen and respond to speakers' ideas and perspectives, and how they construct and express meanings
- Interact with others, shaping meanings through suggestions, comments and questions and drawing ideas together
- Create and sustain different roles.

**Study of spoken language**

- Understand variations in spoken language, explaining why language changes in relation to contexts
- Evaluate the impact of spoken language choices on their own and others' use.

These subject criteria describe what the learners should do with the language to communicate effectively; not the underpinning skills needed to achieve communication. So, for example, there is no identification of the necessity to pronounce words and chunks of words clearly enough for the listener to understand them; or the types of language which would enable the learner to 'speak clearly and purposefully'. A second consideration is that many second language speakers can communicate very effectively in their first language. The only reason why they cannot do the same in English is that they lack the underpinning language skills.

The same pattern of skills identification can be seen in the grade descriptions, e.g. see Grade A performance:

| Grade | Description |
|---|---|
| A | Candidates select suitable styles and registers of spoken English for a range of situations and contexts, showing assured use of standard English where appropriate. They confidently vary sentence structures and choose from a broad repertoire of vocabulary to express information, ideas and feelings in an engaging manner. They explain expertly, and evaluate persuasively, how they and others use and adapt spoken language for specific purposes. They initiate conversations and demonstrate sensitive listening through contributions that sustain and develop discussion. They recognise and fulfil the demands of different roles, whether in formal settings or creative activities. |

The assumption in this grade description and the criteria above, is that the candidate is already able to use the language. This is clearly not the case for second language speakers. The functional approach we see here is also reflected in the Skills for Life standards and ESOL core curriculum, which has minimal reference to the nuts and bolts of the language.

By contrast, international English exams, such as the Cambridge ESOL and Trinity exams set criteria both for function and for language use. For example, the First Certificate in English sets out criteria for effective speaking, such as expressing and justifying opinions, projecting the voice, and turn-taking strategies. In addition, there are also criteria for language, e.g. for FCE:

## Assessment

Candidates are assessed according to the following criteria: Grammatical Resource; Vocabulary Resource; Discourse Management; Pronunciation; Interactive Communication.

Cambridge ESOL (2008)

These guidelines are not just useful preparation for the exam, they also promote attention to the use of English in the classroom. This is in line with recent research evidence that explicit attention to language promotes effective learning. (N Ellis 2006; Ammar and Spada 2006; Mennim 2003; Schmidt 1990).

# 9 Reading

The skill of reading is hard to assess, both in class and in the test situation. Although is it often described as a 'passive' skill, it is nothing of the sort: reading often involves multiple processes in which the reader is actively engaged. For example, a question may test candidates' comprehension of a paragraph. A typical sequence of skills application and the impact on the successful outcome of the task is outlined below:

- Learner 1 is unable to decode the words within the sentence, so cannot answer the question
- Learner 2's working memory is fully occupied with reading words and sentences, which leaves no 'brain space' for comprehension
- Learner 3 has understood the paragraph but does not understand the question and comes to the wrong conclusion as to the answer
- Learner 4 can decode, read the paragraph for meaning, understands the question correctly and gives the right answer

The test item above engages the candidates in a sequence of four processes which only produce the correct answer if the learner manages all of them. Thus, reading is not just a complex process for the reader, it is also challenging for the test setter. This is because test items are only effective if they are set with a clear understanding of their purpose and of the skills which are being tested. Tests such as the National Literacy Test show that it is not easy to achieve construct validity and reliability over time. The pass scores for this test vary significantly from test to test, indicating that the level of difficulty is not stable. While it is often argued that grade adjustments counter-balance the variability of the difficulty of these tests, it has a significant impact on the learners. In my experience as a teacher, learners feel bewildered by the range of scores they get for practice and exam tests. Even those who take and pass a difficult exam feel deflated if their score was low. There is also the concern that an increase in test difficulty affects second language speakers disproportionally because as, we saw on p. 9, learners find it hard to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words.

## 9.1. The sub skills approach

So far we have looked at the reliability of reading tests. A second consideration is the understanding of the concept of reading and the parameters that standards writers and policymakers set for the testing of this skill. A major feature of government-sponsored standards and exams, including Skills for Life, GCSE and Functional Skills, has been the dissection of reading skills into subskills such as skimming, scanning, reading for gist and for meaning. Weir and Khalifa (2008a) comment that this categorisation is based on the competencies which skilled readers deploy. This type of reader can choose which approach to take, depending on the reason and purpose for which they read a text. However, we need to question whether this taxonomy can be applied with equal validity to the process of learning to read. For instance, Koda (2005) found that unskilled readers are unable to adjust processing mode, i.e. they read word-for-word regardless of the purpose for which they read

a text. This implies that certainly at the lower and intermediate levels a skills based approach is not relevant.

Researchers such as Walter and Swan (2009) question the value of the skimming, scanning and reading for gist approach when teaching second language speakers. This is because there is little evidence that teaching these skills promotes effective reading development. Walter's studies show that language learners do not have a reading defect, as they can read for meaning perfectly well in their own language. There is strong evidence that the command of the new language is the key to reading in it. In her study, learners with a lower-intermediate level of English could not access their comprehension skill because they suffered from overload. They were fully occupied with decoding at word and sentence level and had little spare working memory capacity to process meaning. It was only when they reached an upper-intermediate level of English that they were able to 'unlock' their comprehension skill. Walter and Swan come to the conclusion that the value of teaching skimming, scanning etc is questionable 'as the justification for a variety of relatively unproductive classroom activities'. The introduction of the sub-skills approach in government-sponsored exams has had a major impact on delivery in the classroom, with many teachers spending much time training their students in these techniques. This takes up valuable learning time which, as Walter and Swan say, is not productive. It appears thus that setting test questions to assess the ability to skim, scan etc are not the best way of establishing how well the language learner can read. This has important implications not only for testing but also for the teaching of English, where, as we saw earlier, significant negative backwash occurs.

While there is as yet no decision on the application of Functional Skills to people whose first language is not English, it is interesting to explore how well the new standards would match the profile of this target group. Here are the Functional Skills standards for Entry 3 Reading (QCDA 2007):

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Entry 3** | Independently read and understand straightforward texts for a purpose. | • understand the main points of texts (including diagrams or graphical representations). Written texts are of more than one paragraph at this level<br>• obtain specific information through detailed reading<br>• scan texts and use organisational features to locate information (for example contents, index, menus)<br>• use strategies to read and understand texts in different formats (for example web page, application form)<br>**in texts that inform, instruct, describe and narrate, on paper and on screen.** |

It appears that, like its predecessors, the Functional Skills standards rely heavily on the sub-skills approach of testing the ability to read for gist etc. In the light of the evidence produced above, it would appear that these standards would need to revised if they were to be adopted to test the skills of second language speakers. It is also worth pointing out that there is no research evidence to show that the sub-skills approach is effective with first language speakers.

Walter and Swan are not alone in their judgement that the command of the new language is key to the ability to read it. Grabe (2009) summarises several studies which shed further light on the processes involved. Studies carried out by Verhoeven over 15 years and others in the USA, Canada and elsewhere indicate that learners transfer some skills from their first language into their second: primarily the pragmatic, phonological and word-decoding knowledge they have learnt in their first language. This explains why learners who can already read, even if another script, master reading English much more quickly than people who cannot read at all. However, other skills are not transferable from the first language and need to be in place before learners can tackle reading in their second language. Verhoeven, Geva (2006) and others agree that a well-developed knowledge of syntax, vocabulary, oral proficiency and listening comprehension in the **second** language support the development of reading skills in L2. Grabe concludes that some level of second language proficiency must be developed before first language reading skills can be transferred.

We can conclude that the current framework of skills such as skimming, scanning etc does not provide a suitable framework for testing the reading skills of second language speakers. An alternative option for an overarching framework would be a cognitive processing approach as this provides 'a more productive theoretical basis for establishing what reading comprehension really involves' Weir and Khalifa 2008b). Grabe echoes this point by describing reading as a unified construct, in which the same cognitive processes are involved regardless of the subskill applied.

## 10 The time needed to achieve

The aspects presented so far indicate that the learning load to achieve government-funded qualifications is far greater for second language speakers than for native English speakers. This is because native speakers have many of the building blocks of English in place, for example a command of vocabulary and grammar, and the ability to speak and understand the language. These skills support native English speakers with the learning of other skills such as reading and writing and the use of formal register. By contrast, second language speakers need to put in substantial amounts of time to learn to understand spoken English and master the grammar. As we have also seen, second language speakers need to encounter new vocabulary repeatedly to acquire it. These facts explain why people whose first language is not English take much longer to achieve the same goals as native English speakers.

Literature is scarce on the length of time needed to acquire another language, not least because learners show great variety in the progress that they make. What we can say is that language learning is a time-consuming business. Two investigations into this aspect of language learning testify to this. Data have been collected since the mid 1980s at Canberra College of Technical and Further Education in Australia. These indicate that it takes on average 1765 hours of learning for learners (including a proportion of learners with no literacy skills in the first language) to progress from pure beginner level to the point where they can undertake study of another subject or take on a job with routine communication requirements. The Center for Applied Linguistics in the United States (2003) found that 'it would take 500-1,000 hours of instruction for an adult who is literate in the native language but has not had prior English instruction to reach the level of being able to satisfy basic needs, survive on the job, and have limited interaction in English'.

The concern with the current standards from Entry 1 to Level 2 is that the points of accreditation are set so wide that it takes a very long time for the learners to achieve them. This is especially the case for learners working towards Entry 1, where the standards and exams are simply not sufficiently fine-grained. This problem persists across the levels, with higher up the chain the transition from Entry 3 to L1 also being problematic. Even though the learners are learning, the ostensible lack of progression and achievement of qualifications is de-motivating for teachers and learners alike. There is anecdotal evidence that a substantial proportion of learners opt out of learning English because they feel stuck in the same level. Or providers are under pressure to exclude learners because the lack of achievement makes them an unattractive funding proposition.

## 11 Conclusion

In this paper I have reviewed some of the major aspects that typify the language use and learning trajectories of second language speakers of English and contrasted them with those of first language speakers. Many of these aspects are well-evidenced in the research literature, although it has to be said that the literature on second language acquisition is rather more substantial than that on adult first language speakers.

Taken individually, the research evidence on aspects such as vocabulary learning, grammar, speaking, listening and reading demonstrates that the government-funded tests, standards and ESOL curriculum, as they are at present, do not reflect adequately the learning trajectory of second language speakers. Taken cumulatively, it has been striking to see how many aspects of learning are affected, primarily the underpinning skills such as vocabulary, grammar, lexical segmentation pronunciation and intonation. However, the impact of these underpinning skills on the macro skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing is also marked. The evidence, as it presents itself, is that the standards and exams were designed to capture the needs of first language speakers (even if with hardly any evidence to demonstrate validity). Their claim to validity for second language

speakers, ie that test scores give an accurate reflection of the candidate's true level of language skills, really is problematic. This is because the learning development of second language speakers differs in many respects from that of first language speakers, both in the processing of language, cognitive development and the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing to be learnt.

The question is whether it matters that there is a bias against second language speakers. After all, these tests have been applied since Key Skills were introduced in 2000. The evidence presented here suggests that the practice of having the same standards and exams for first and second language speakers should be reconsidered for multiple reasons. The first is the principle of *fairness.* Candidates are entitled to tests which do not discriminate against individuals or groups of candidates. Employers are entitled to have reliable information on the candidate's language skills. The websites of organisations such as the Department for Business Education and Skills and the Qualifications Curriculum Development Agency show that they cover aspects such as race, gender and disability equality but that they have not yet addressed the concept of fairness in relation to language testing. It would, in this context, be interesting to see how native English speakers (and their parents) would react if they were asked to take language exams aimed at second language speakers. This does not mean necessarily that standards and tests are inadequate; but rather that tests designed for one group should not be applied automatically to another and without regard for *unfair* consequences.

Secondly, there is the question of *reliability*. Unfortunately, government departments do not collect data on achievement by target group, so it is impossible to analyse the results of first and second language speakers for reliability of outcome. However, as we saw, several aspects of the national literacy test affect second language speakers' scores disproportionally. In addition, there has been substantial and unacceptable variation between awarding bodies in terms of the complexity of tasks and achievement outcomes. Reliable standards and exams which match the development of language skills should increase the reliability of tests across the awarding bodies.

The third criterion is that of *effectiveness*. We have seen that the subskills approach does not provide an effective framework to test and teach English to second language speakers. Yet it dominates the teaching of reading in the classroom. Other skills, such as listening, are taught as comprehension. This may be suitable for native English speakers who can already understand English but, as we have seen, this is not the right approach for second language speakers. The latest OFSTED thematic report on ESOL (2008) reported that, 'while now satisfactory, the proportion of provision that is good or outstanding [ ...] remains too low'. Inspectors still find too many examples of classroom practice that is not effective. This is not just de-motivating for the learners, it is also not effective use of resources, largely paid for by the tax payer.

So what is needed to develop a coherent framework for the testing of English language skills? The government is advised to take on board the implications of research on language acquisition; and to design standards and tests which are fit for purpose. In short they need to produce standards and tests which:

- reflect the learning trajectory of second language speakers
- are well-constructed and reliable
- promote effective learning
- deliver value for the tax payer's money
- give an accurate picture of the skills of the individual and which is meaningful to employers, schools, colleges and not least the learner him or herself.

Dr Philida Schellekens
August 2011

## Appendix 1: Definitions of terminology

In this paper people whose first language is not English and who attend English language classes are referred to as 'language learners' or 'learners'. Where comparisons are made between categories of learners, e.g. speakers of other languages and people whose first language is English, the former are referred to as 'second language speakers'. This is for the pragmatic reason that this term is easier to understand than the alternative 'other language speakers'. This does not imply that any other language skills that the learners have are ignored. I have also assumed that both categories of native English speakers and second language speakers do not have any learning difficulties or disabilities.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is the term used to refer to post16 English language provision for migrants and refugees. The term English as an Additional Language (EAL) refers to English language provision for pupils in primary and secondary school education.

The term 'government-funded is used to refer to standards and exams, such as GCSE, Skills for Life, Key Skills and Functional Skills, which fall under the aegis of government departments in England and Wales.

## Bibliography


Ammar, A. and Spada, N. (2006). 'One size fits all? Recasts, Prompts, and L2 Learning'. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. 28/4: 543-574.

Cambridge ESOL (2008). *Reviewing FCE and CAE.* Cambridge: Cambridge ESOL. http://www.cambridgeesol.org/assets/pdf/fcecae review10.pdf

Center for Applied Linguistics *(*2003). *Adult English Language Instruction in the 21st Century*. http://www.cal.org/caela/eslresources/languageinstructionEng.pdf

Department for Business Education and Skills. http://www.dius.gov.uk/ http://www.berr.gov.uk/index.html

Ellis, N. (2006). 'Cognitive perspectives on SLA: the associative-cognitive creed.' *AILA Review* eds, Bardovi_Harlig, K. & Dornyei Z. vol 19.

Ellis, Rod. *(1994). The Study of Second Language Acquisition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Field, J. (2003). 'Promoting perception: lexical segmentation in L2 listening.' *English Language Teaching Journal* 57/3.

Field, J. (2003). *Psycholinguistics*. London: Routledge.

Field, J. (2008). *Listening in the Language Classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

QCDA (2007). *Functional Skills Standards.* London: QCDA. http://www.qcda.gov.uk/libraryAssets/media/QCA-07-3472-functional-skillsstandards.pdf

Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a Second Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khalifa, H and Weir, C (2009). *Examining Reading.* Cambridge: UCLES/Cambridge University Press.

Koda, K (2005). *Insights into Second Language Reading*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Laufer, B (1992). 'How much lexis is necessary for reading comprehension?' *Vocabulary and Applied Linguistics.* Eds Arnaud, P. and Béjoint, H. (eds) Macmillan.

Leech, G., P. Rayson and A. Wilson. (2001). *Word Frequencies in Written and Spoken English*. Harlow: Pearson.

Lightbown, P. and N. Spada. (2006). 3rd edition. *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mennim, P. (2003). 'Rehearsed oral L2 output and reactive focus on form.' *English Language Teaching Journal* 57/2.

Nation, I. S.P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ofqual (2009). *GCSE Subject Criteria for English language.* London: OfQual /08/3995 http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2009-03-gcse-englang-subject-criteria.pdf

OFSTED (2008). *ESOL in the Post-compulsory Learning and Skills Sector: an Evaluation.* London: OFSTED Ref No: 070229.

O'Keeffe, A. McCarthy, M. And Carter R. (2007). *From Corpus to Classroom: Language Use and Language Teaching.* Cambridge University Press.

QCDA (2007). *Meeting the Challenge: Achieving Equality for All.* London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. http://www.qcda.gov.uk/15500.aspx

Schellekens, P. (2001). *English as a Barrier to Employment, Education & Training*. London: DfES.

Schellekens, P. (2007). *The Oxford ESOL Handbook.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schellekens, P. (2010). 'Cause and effect: the impact of the Skills for Life strategy on language assessment'. Studies in Language Testing 31. Eds Taylor, L. and Weir, C. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Selinker, L. (1972). 'Interlanguage.' *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 10/2: 209–31.

Schmidt. R. 1990. 'The role of consciousness in second language learning'. *Applied linguistics* 11/1.

Walter, C. and Swan, M. (2009). 'Teaching reading skills: mostly a waste of time?' *IATEFL Conference Selections.* Ed. Beaven, B. Canterbury: IATEFL.

Weir, C and Khalifa, H (2008a). 'A cognitive processing approach towards defining reading comprehension'. *Research Notes 31.* Cambridge: Cambridge ESOL.

Weir, C and Khalifa, H (2008b). 'Applying a cognitive processing model to main suite reading papers'. *Research Notes 31.* Cambridge: Cambridge ESOL.