
Assessment in English 3 to 11

JOHN RICHMOND

ABSTRACT This article critiques the current arrangements for the assessment and testing of English in early-years settings and primary schools in England. It is broadly supportive of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. It is highly critical of the Year 1 phonics check, and of the tests of reading and of grammar, punctuation and spelling at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. It proposes a moderate revision of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, the abolition of the Year 1 phonics check, and a complete overhaul of testing arrangements at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. The article's alternative proposals for these tests would reunite the currently dismembered activities of reading and writing. The spoken language would be assessed as of equivalent importance to reading and writing. The tests and their related assessment criteria would be published in banks of online resources from which teachers could choose. All assessment and testing would be done internally, by teachers, with external moderation.

This article draws substantially on chapter 12 of Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 11: a better plan, published in 2017 by Routledge. John Richmond is the principal author.

General Principles

Curriculum and assessment have an interactive and mutual influence on one another. A central principle ought to be: decide on your curriculum first; then decide how to assess progress within that curriculum effectively. Too often, the order of priority of attention to the two things has been the opposite. But even within a right understanding of the relationship, modes of assessment have a profound effect on *what* is taught and learned in the curriculum, and on *how* it is taught and learned.

The situation in schools in England with regard to assessment for 3- to 11-year-olds in the first instance exhibits a striking irony. The government has allowed that the National Curriculum, which is for most primary schools a statutory document (and one which has been laboured over in its many versions

for many years), may become merely an advisory document for those primary schools that become academies, and for free schools. However, as the government is also well aware, it is through a system of externally imposed tests that it can exert closer control over classrooms rather than through the requirements or advice of a curriculum statement.

I offer here a critique of government-imposed tests and other assessment arrangements 3 to 11, followed by practical, educationally preferable alternatives in every case where current arrangements are unsatisfactory.

Early Years Foundation Stage

Early Years Foundation Stage Profile

One tool for formal assessment at the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is the Early Years Foundation Stage profile, which has been in operation in one form or another since 2003, and which accumulates findings about a child's achievements throughout the reception year, leading to the completion of the profile as a written document during the last term of that year.

The Early Years Foundation Stage profile (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015) is a broadly enlightened instrument. The principles on which it is based are admirable:

Reliable and accurate assessment at the end of the EYFS is underpinned by the following principles:

- Assessment is based primarily on the practitioner's knowledge of the pupil. Knowledge is gained predominantly from observation and interaction in a range of daily activities and events.
- Responsible pedagogy must be in place so that the provision enables each pupil to demonstrate their learning and development fully.
- Embedded learning is identified by assessing what a pupil can do consistently and independently in a range of everyday situations.
- An effective assessment presents a holistic view of a pupil's learning and development.
- Accurate assessments take account of contributions from a range of perspectives, including the pupil, their parents and other relevant adults (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015, p. 7).

A section of the guidance entitled 'Responsible Pedagogy' contains an eloquent statement of the right relationship between teaching and assessment:

Responsible pedagogy enables each pupil to demonstrate learning in the fullest sense. It depends on the use of assessment information to plan relevant and motivating learning experiences for each pupil. Effective assessment can only take place when children have the

opportunity to demonstrate their understanding, learning and development in a range of contexts.

Pupils must have access to a rich learning environment which provides them with the opportunities and conditions in which to flourish in all aspects of their development. The learning environment should provide balance across the areas of learning. Integral to this is an ethos which

- respects each child as an individual
- values pupils' efforts, interests and purposes as instrumental to successful learning. (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015, p. 8)

The formal profile document requires teachers to judge, at the end of a child's reception year, whether he or she is meeting or exceeding a level expected at the end of the EYFS in each of 17 'early learning goals descriptors', or is best described as being at an 'emerging level' in each of the goals.

The goals are grouped within three 'prime areas of learning': communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; and within four 'specific areas of learning': literacy; mathematics; understanding the world; expressive arts and design.

These are combined with 'a short narrative describing the pupil's three characteristics of effective learning' (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015, p. 4), which are 'playing and exploring', 'active learning' and 'creating and thinking critically' (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015, p. 19).

There is a discussion to be had about whether 17 goals and three key characteristics of learning amount to an over-complex description of a child's achievement at the end of the reception year. I would favour a simplification, leading to the reduction of the number of goals to seven, making them coterminous with the three prime and the four specific areas of learning.

The overall excellence of the intention of the profile is spoiled, as far as the judgements on literacy are concerned, by the intrusion into the learning goals for reading and writing of the government's overriding obsession with phonics. Those two learning goals (or, in my simpler model, a single goal for literacy development) could be rewritten so as to represent a broader understanding of how young children's powers of literacy develop. However, to stick to the bigger picture, the EYFS profile gives teachers at Key Stage 1 ample information as to the achievements and needs of pupils beginning Year 1.

Key Stages 1 and 2

The Government's Requirements and Plans from Summer 2016

There is no space here to comment on the shifting recent history of the government's requirements for assessment and testing at Key Stages 1 and 2. I'll confine myself to the requirements imposed from summer 2016. Unfortunately, these are no improvement on the past, and in some respects make matters worse.

Key Stage 1

Beginning in summer 2016, there have been tests for Year 2 pupils in reading and in grammar, punctuation and spelling. These tests are externally set, but marked by teachers in school. (An absurdity, in passing: the 2016 Year 2 grammar, punctuation and spelling test had to be abandoned because it had already appeared online as a practice paper. The Standards and Testing Agency seems to have been responsible for the blunder.)

Writing is assessed by teachers, with moderation, on the basis of pupils' work throughout the year.

The Year 1 phonics check, introduced in 2012, continues. The check utterly fails to represent everything we know about how a successful five- or six-year-old reader should be operating. It also utterly fails to detect a failing five- or six-year-old reader, because to be able to pronounce isolated, phonically regular words, half of them non-existent, is no guarantee of being able to read in the sense of being able to understand meaningful print.

On 3 November 2015, the then Secretary of State for Education gave a speech entitled 'One Nation Education' at the Policy Exchange think tank in London. Among other proposals, she announced a further review of assessment at the end of Key Stage 1, with the possibility that, after consultation, the arrangements in place for summer 2016 might be replaced by tests which, in addition to being externally set, would also be externally marked (as has happened from summer 2016 at Key Stage 2 – see below). Her precise words were:

to be really confident that students are progressing well through primary school, we will be looking at the assessment of pupils at age seven to make sure it is as robust and rigorous as it needs to be.

We'll be working with headteachers in the coming months on how we get this right, holding schools to account and giving them full credit for the progress they achieve. (Department for Education, 2015)

It remains to be seen whether, if Key Stage 1 does go the way of Key Stage 2, the tests will still be of reading and of grammar, spelling and punctuation, or will be organised differently.

Key Stage 2

As was the case until 2015, from summer 2016 Year 6 pupils have taken tests in reading and in grammar, spelling and punctuation. These are new tests, however, with only one version each (previously, each had two versions), but including questions designed to test higher-achieving pupils. The tests are externally set and marked. Writing – understood as being somehow separate from grammar, punctuation and spelling – continues to be internally assessed, with moderation at 25%.

Reading and Writing Dismembered

This is not the place for a detailed critique of the individual questions and tasks in the four tests at the two Key Stages, and of the assumptions behind them. A fundamental objection to the grammar, punctuation and spelling tests, however, is that they divorce those three aspects of language from the contexts in which they should be considered: actual, whole, authentic pieces of writing, read or written. And there is no justification – only, perhaps, an argument to do with cost – for the continuing decision to test reading externally but to allow teacher assessment for writing.

Assessment of Speaking and Listening Abandoned

The assessment of speaking and listening at both Key Stages, even in the unmoderated form that applied until 2015, has been abandoned completely.

**An Alternative Proposal for
End-of-Key-Stage Assessment at Years 2 and 6**

My alternative proposal for end-of-Key-Stage assessment at Years 2 and 6 takes into account the objections I have offered to the structure and format of the government's arrangements in place since summer 2016.

Two Tests at the End of Each Key Stage

It is perfectly possible to test reading and writing, in all the aspects appropriate for a given age group, using tasks involving the reading and writing of an appropriate selection of authentic texts.

I envisage two tests for each of Years 2 and 6: one for reading and one for writing. The four tests would be externally set and internally assessed, with moderation. The tasks the tests contain would be included in large online banks of resources, updated regularly, from which teachers could choose.

The tests would represent the broad range of possibilities for pupils' comprehension of and responses to texts (in reading) and for their competence and control as producers of texts (in writing).

A reading test of this kind would assess pupils' overall understanding of and response to the meaning and structure of three texts in different genres, as well as their recognition of words, their understanding of grammatical concepts and terminology, their grasp of conventions of punctuation, and their apprehension of spelling patterns and families.

Similarly, a writing test requiring pupils to write three pieces of continuous prose in different genres, with a suggested word limit for each, would assess the extent of a writer's competence, not just as a communicator of meaning and a handler of different genres, but as a user of the conventions of punctuation and spelling, and as a controller of the grammar of English.

No Need for Separate Tests on Grammar, Punctuation, Spelling and Phonics

The separate tests of grammar, punctuation and spelling and the Year 1 phonics check could then be abolished. Reading would be seen as what it is: an activity in which the decoding of words and the comprehension of meanings are complementary, interactive aspects of the same, complex process. Writing would recover its wholeness too. Grammar, punctuation and spelling would be put back where they best belong: as integral parts of the construction of meaning in the written language by producers (in the writing tests) and by receivers (in the reading tests).

Performance Descriptors Linked to the Alternative Curriculum

I would have online performance descriptors of competence in reading and writing, as the government intends at present. My descriptors would be accompanied by examples. Their purpose would simply be to help teachers and moderators decide whether a pupil had *not yet achieved*, had *achieved* or had *exceeded* an expected standard in reading and writing at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2; so there would be two performance descriptors, accompanied by examples, for each test at each level, one for achieving and one for exceeding the expected standard.

Value Talk as Highly as Reading and Writing

I would value pupils' achievements in the spoken language as of equal importance with those in reading and writing. Recognising the difficulty, however, of setting effective tests for talk externally, I would supply schools with online performance descriptors of competence in the spoken language, supported by audio-visual examples. As with the performance descriptors for reading and writing, there would be two for Year 2 and two for Year 6, demonstrating the characteristics that a pupil must show in order to achieve and to exceed the expected standard in the spoken language. The purpose of the descriptors, as with those for reading and writing, would be to help teachers and moderators decide whether a pupil had *not yet achieved*, had *achieved* or had *exceeded* an expected standard in the use of the spoken language. Assessment of spoken language would be internal, with moderation, like that of reading and writing, but on the basis of pupils' achievements over the whole of Year 2 or Year 6.

In the Longer Term: trust teachers more

At some point in the future, once teachers have become familiar with these arrangements, the government might feel secure in relying on teachers' professional judgements in making accurate assessments of their pupils' achievement in reading and writing at Years 2 and 6 without the compulsory use of externally set tasks. From that point on, the online banks of tasks would

remain, and be refreshed regularly, but it would be for schools and teachers to choose whether or not to use them. (The tasks might be helpful, for example, to newly qualified teachers teaching Year 2 or Year 6 pupils for the first time.) Whatever happens, local moderation will always be needed.

To Conclude...

Early Years Foundation Stage

The Early Years Foundation Stage profile is, overall, an excellent document, demonstrating an enlightened understanding of learning and of the relationship between learning and assessment. It is a little spoiled by the government's obsession with phonics as the only effective means of teaching early reading, and is perhaps over-complex. But it remains the only instrument teachers need in order to assess children's achievements in the Early Years Foundation Stage; in the simplified form which I have proposed it would do the job well.

Key Stages 1 and 2

The government's arrangements for testing at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 from 2016 are no improvement on those which operated until 2015, and in some respects are even less satisfactory.

The testing of reading and writing should treat these two complex activities as wholes. At present, the testing arrangements dismember them. The tasks on which pupils are tested should be available in an online bank, updated regularly, from which teachers can choose.

The spoken language should be assessed with the same rigour as reading and writing, using teachers' judgements of pupils' spoken language throughout Year 2 or Year 6.

The outcome of testing or teacher assessment should be a judgement, moderated locally, as to whether a pupil *has not yet achieved*, *has achieved* or *has exceeded* an expected standard in reading, writing and the spoken language. Online performance descriptors, with examples, would help teachers to make their judgements.

References

- Department for Education (2015) *One Nation Education*. London: Department for Education. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-one-nation-education> (accessed 7 May 2016).
- Standards and Testing Agency (2015) *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile: 2016 handbook*. Coventry: Standards and Testing Agency. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/488745/EYFS_handbook_2016_-_FINAL.pdf (accessed 7 May 2016).

JOHN RICHMOND has been an English teacher in London, an advisory teacher for English, an officer on two national curriculum-development projects in language education, and a local authority adviser. He has been a commissioning editor in educational television. He has published books and articles on English teaching and the role of language in learning. *Correspondence:* john@myproperlife.com