The Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English Literature Review

The Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English project has been developed in consultation with leading academics and in consideration of current national and international research in the area of early years literacy. As this literature review indicates, the tools developed for this project reflect recent developments in early years teaching and assessment practices, and in some instances offer innovative examples of testing materials that could guide future research. This review will situate the Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English project within current research, focusing on the domains of early literacy, reading, and speaking and listening, to highlight the project's importance within the growing field of early years literacy studies.

Research has recently focused on the importance of early intervention and diagnosis for those students struggling with literacy, and those surpassing expectations. According to Raban (1997), studies have indicated "that children who start school with less knowledge about literacy than others can soon begin to experience a sense of failure, especially as they are presented with increasingly difficult texts" (Raban 23). Raban and Ure (1996) suggest that research has also identified the need to capture a wide range of abilities in those early years so that curriculums can be adjusted accordingly and no-one is left behind (Raban and Ure 7). Bailey and Drummond (2006), in their study of early literacy intervention in the United States, write of one group of students for whom early diagnosis is essential, a group who "may be low-achieving and who may benefit from specific attention" (Bailey and Drummond 151).

> "These students likely do not have the most dramatic difficulties in the class, but without receiving monitoring and modification to instruction, they may continue to struggle and eventually fall into a higher risk group" (Bailey and Drummond 151).

The Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English have been developed in response to the identified need for early intervention and diagnosis in both low and high-achieving students. Such a diagnosis can provide essential information that will help prevent students from falling into higher risk groups, and enable further progress for those students already excelling.

As current research suggests, assessment has an important role to play in this early intervention. Wheldall and Madelaine (2009) argue that "effective intervention for children struggling to learn to read and to spell is predicated upon accurate and meaningful assessment" (Wheldall and Madelaine 1). Westwood (2009) similarly suggests that

> "the role of assessment in literacy during the early years of schooling continues to receive increasing attention in the field of educational research. Assessment, it is now commonly argued, is essential to the practice of effective teaching of literacy" (Westwood 3).

Raban and Ure also argue that

> "some children's needs and difficulties may be easy to overlook and other children's special talents and interests may remain hidden. However, careful observation and assessment will reveal these differences" (Raban and Ure 7).

A recent United States study into the response-to-intervention (RTI) framework found that for those children who have difficulty learning "small-group intervention, additional assessment to determine precise intervention targets, teacher professional development, or targeted individual intervention might be initiated" (VanDerHeyden et al., 1997, 233). Yet, as this study also suggests, the application of RTI is complicated by "the relative paucity of adequate progress-monitoring measures that are sensitive to the short-term skill development that occurs as a result of specific support or intervention" (VanDerHeyden et al. 234). Bailey and Drummond write of the difficulty of developing "carefully tailored instruction" (Bailey and Drummond 150). This difficulty is due to the fact that interventions need to diagnose students both accurately and effectively, and to be based on more than teachers' perceptions of at-risk students – a perception that "can have long-term negative effects on student performances in some instances" (Bailey and Drummond 153). The tool suite provided by the Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English provides a highly useful addition to teachers' judgment, thereby helping teachers to avoid the damaging effects of misdiagnosis.

Although recent research has stressed the importance of teaching early literacy authentically and in context, there is a general acknowledgement of the need for simple, directed assessment tasks that allow for easy and accurate diagnosis of student abilities (Westwood, 2009, 5). There is value, in a "simple view of reading", where emphasis is placed on the over-arching skills of decoding and comprehension (Westwood 6). Scull (2010) similarly argues for "the importance of both decoding and comprehension in primary school curricula" (Scull 87). According to Westwood, it is essential to concentrate on these central reading skills because they provide teachers with more accurate data. He states that

> "by focusing directly on these key processes and skills and by using tests and tasks specifically designed to reveal competence or lack of competence in fundamental skills, teachers can gain much more accurate information than they would obtain from informal holistic observation of students at work on so-called 'authentic' tasks" (Westwood 11).

For these skill areas to be assessed successfully, particularly in the early stages of development, there must be a focus on oracy. As McCabe (2009) writes, "much research finds that reading problems derive from problems in oral language acquisition" (McCabe 364). Current research has proposed effective ways to improve oral language and emergent literacy skills through what McCabe describes as "various interventions on distinct aspects of literacy-related oral language" (McCabe 369.) Westwood divides these literacy-related oral skills into the following areas: phonic knowledge and skills (such as knowledge of simple

letter-to-sound correspondences, recognition of orthographic units), phonological subskills (such as segmentation and sound blending) and vocabulary. The Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English have been designed for the purpose of simple and direct diagnosis in all these skill areas. In their coverage of AusVELS Foundation to Level 4, these tools focus on the decoding and comprehension skills required for successful reading practices, as well as the phonic and phonological skills required for literacy development more generally, and in both oral and written formats as appropriate.

Although simple and direct, these tools also reflect the importance of what Raban (1997) describes as "interacting with print in meaningful contexts" (Raban 24). Such interaction requires assessment tasks that are both culturally inclusive and relevant to students, which has been an aim in both the design and selection of material for this project. Meaningful interaction also requires an approach to literacy that is "more inclusive of children's experiences of the world and their ability to make meaning from their environment" (Raban 22). The project tools try to reflect these experiences, notably through the inclusion of tasks assessing students' knowledge of 'environmental print' and 'concepts of print'. As Raban argues, establishing students' awareness of the concepts of print is particularly important when considering the "differences in the way that literacy is organised in different cultures and communities" as well as the way "literacy has different values and functions in people's daily lives" (Raban 23). McCabe highlights the value in tasks focusing on concepts of print when she states that "although preschool children seldom pay attention to print in various types of storybook reading, *explicit referencing of print* is one way to significantly increase such attention" (McCabe 370).

All early literacy, early reading, and speaking and listening tasks developed for this project are delivered one-to-one. Raban and Ure suggest that one-to-one assessments have the added advantage of helping to address parents' concerns about assessment procedures and to reassure them "that we have realistically and systematically appraised their child's progress and learning style" (Raban and Ure 9). Perhaps the most significant value offered by individual assessment tasks is the way they prioritise the role of oracy in comprehension. As Scull (2010) writes, in recent research "comprehension instruction is described as best achieved through collaborative, conversational approaches ... that support a flexible, opportunistic use of strategies" (Scull 88). Scull categorises these strategies as follows: literal, inference, reaction/evaluation, child's experiences and extending knowledge (Scull 94). When discussing comprehension monitoring, Scull writes that "students' ability to recall and summarise information - as well as to infer from texts they have read, evaluate information and identify the important from the unimportant - is central to this process" (Scull 88).

The comprehension skills mentioned by Scull closely resemble those used in the Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English reading set (both oral and written): retrieving information, linking information across the text, inference, demonstrating a global understanding, and reflecting on the text (which includes justifying personal opinions and expanding on prior knowledge). The speaking and listening tasks also require students to recall and summarise the information they have heard. In the setting up of most of the tasks, in particular oral reading and writing, teachers are directed to spend time discussing the topic and establishing prior knowledge. Prediction questions are also asked in several of the oral reading tasks, and where possible in the written tasks. Through her research, Scull found that "through prediction, teachers encouraged students to use their prior knowledge to facilitate their understanding of new ideas encountered in the text", and further that her results "indicate

higher levels of performance when students were required to insert prior knowledge or draw on personal experiences" (Scull 99). These tools have forged more innovative ground by modeling positive methods of interaction for teachers and foregrounding those reading skills that may receive less attention in some classrooms. By covering an array of important reading skills, these tools guide teachers towards targeted and thoughtful interactions with their students. Furthermore, because of the variety of reflective questions that require students to evaluate their ideas and build on prior knowledge, these tools may even help to prepare

> "the young reader to challenge the monologic concept of text meanings and shift towards 'polysemic' readings [as well as the] 'difficult task of struggling to come to an active, personal and individual interpretation of meaning, and to engage in a personal search for unification" (Scull, Harrison qtd in Scull 101).

Current research has also highlighted the importance of assessing the metacognitive skills of their students, those skills that enable students "to see and hear enactments of those inner mental processes that are the essence of literate behavior so they can appropriate them and deploy them for themselves" (Wells qtd in Scull 96). Because written assessment tasks complicate the teacher's ability to assess these skills, questions relating to the metacognitive process were taken up more appropriately in the Speaking and Listening Tools for this project, and will be discussed further on in relation to these tools.

The innovative Speaking and Listening Tool suite developed for this project assesses students in the areas of both conversation and presentation. These tools consist of video footage of pair discussions and presentations, from which students are asked a series of questions. These questions have been developed to prioritise listening skills. In this way, these tools reflect a growing field of study, which argues that listening skills are being neglected in classroom contexts. In the *International Journal of Listening*, Beall et al. (2008) write that "although listening skills have been linked to literacy at an early age and long-term academic success" listening instruction is scarce in primary and secondary education (Beall et al. 129). Jalongo (2010) states that "despite the fact that listening is the language skill that hearing children and adults use most, it is the one that is taught the least – an inverse relationship between the real world and the classroom" (Jalongo 11). She also argues that this neglect is being reflected in assessment, further undermining the importance of these skills in the classroom. "Even when listening is part of the written and taught curriculum, it sometimes is neglected in assessment, and this tends to diminish its relative importance in today's test-driven curriculum" (Jalongo 11). The lack of interest in teaching and assessing listening skills is derived from the belief that interactive skills do not need to be taught. According to UK academic Jones (2007), there is a general assumption "that because talk is interwoven into the fabric of the classroom and daily life in general, competency develops 'naturally' and without the need for explicit teaching" (Jones 569). To address this, Jones argues for "the importance of rigorous planning for speaking and listening and the need to plan in specific and regular opportunities for assessing this area" (Jones 569).

The Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English Speaking and Listening Tools promote the importance of teaching and assessing these skills. More specifically, they highlight the particular skills needed to interact successfully and model how these interactions could take place in a classroom setting. As Beall et al. suggest, teaching students how to communicate effectively is not an easy task: " … the ability for teachers to elicit effective listening from their students is vital, yet it is one of the more difficult tasks that teachers face on a daily basis", partly because "students bring a variety of listening and learning styles into the

classroom" (Beall et al. 124). Jones gives credit to Professor Robin Alexander's recommendations for improving students' interactive skills through dialogic teaching, which are conveyed in four key areas: *collective*, *reciprocal*, *cumulative* and *supportive* (Jones 571). Although a formal assessment cannot easily model successful interaction in all these areas, it can prioritise dialogic teaching in both the setting up and format of the task. The Speaking and Listening Tools, for example, encourage a *collective* approach in that they involve a dialogue between teacher and student, in preparation of and during the assessment. This is particularly the case with the pair discussion tasks, which are also *reciprocal* in approach; that is, they require the teacher to listen to the ideas and alternative viewpoints of their student. These tasks are also *cumulative* in that they highlight the importance for the student of building on the ideas of their peers. Video format, as "visible listening", is an important pedagogical component because it uses the "documentation of experiences … as the basis for discussion and interpretation" (Jalongo 11, 12). The video footage provided for these tasks is both 'authentic', in that it is a largely unrehearsed video of students discussing a topic, and 'successful', in that the students are interacting well together. Such modeling is useful to teachers and students; it allows both to evaluate those skills enabling positive interaction in an assessment context, as well as to question what improvements could be made. These benefits also apply to the video footage of the presentations. The metacognitive focus of these tasks could usefully be used as part of a broader teaching program in which students are encouraged

> "to learn about the social elements of talk, the expression of feelings, the development of relationships and how additional aspects, such as body language, work together with talk in order to develop such relationships and affect or sharpen communication" (Jones 572).

Metacognitive awareness, as suggested earlier, is a growing field in early literacy studies because it enables students "to evaluate progress and set targets for improvement" (Jones 572). Jones argues that talk is fundamental to the idea, as promoted by Vygotsky, "that when the process of learning is brought to a conscious level, children become aware of their own thought processes that helps them gain control over *how* they learn" (Jones 571). These Speaking and Listening Tools, by making an analysis of communication skills part of assessment tasks themselves, encourage students "to think about their thinking and to articulate thoughts about their learning" (Jones 572). Indeed, such an approach addresses the ongoing issue, as found in a 1998 German study, that "many students do not have a clear concept of listening as an active process that they can control" (Beall et al. 128). This study further found that

> "students report greater listening comprehension when they use metacognitive strategies such as asking questions prior to listening, managing interest in the subject, and using elaboration strategies to apply the information" (Beall et al. 128) .

Effective speaking and listening is more likely, as Jones argues, when children know "what kind of talk [is] required" and when there is "an appropriate selection of topic, which allow[s] children to build on their previous knowledge and understanding" (Jones 573). Scull also argues the value in setting up the task, in creating "opportunities for students to discuss topics at length using spoken language in which all contextual details are supplied, where information is sequenced and temporal, and where everything is made clear to the listener" (Scull *Teaching*). Framing is used in the Speaking and Listening Tools where a discussion of the subject would not interfere with the task items. Furthermore, the "kind of talk" required

for these tasks is, to some extent, modeled in the videos themselves. Topics were selected on the basis that they were relevant and interesting to students, and would therefore be likely to inspire discussion. As Scull writes, "speaking and listening is best taught when teachers engage students in talk that is purposeful and meaningful to the students themselves" (Scull *Teaching*).

The Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English project makes a valuable contribution to early years literacy, as is evident from the way it reflects current national and international trends in the field of early years research. The project tools foreground the importance of directed assessment for diagnosing specific areas of difficulty for low-achieving students, and excellence in high-achieving students. The Reading Tools address the array of skill areas encompassed in decoding and comprehension. Although directed, these tools encourage student engagement with the selection of relevant topics, and by contextualizing print and literacy within wider social and environmental contexts. The Reading, Writing and Early Literacy Tools draw on prediction and students' prior knowledge, a technique shown to produce "higher levels of performance" (Scull 99). The focus on oracy in one-to-one assessments not only allows teachers to engage more attentively with each student, it promotes collaborative approaches to learning. The Speaking and Listening Tools address the lack of attention commonly given to interactive skills in the classroom, encouraging *collective*, *reciprocal* and *cumulative* approaches to learning. The video format of these tools, along with the task items, models successful teaching and learning practices. By drawing on metacognitive skills, these tools further allow students to gain control over their learning.

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