

School-based Assessment and Special Provisions in Multicultural Contexts

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Abstract

This paper examines how Queensland's system of externally moderated school-based assessment for Years 11 and 12 enables instruction and assessment to occur in multicultural contexts. It explores ways in which schools may apply special provisions to make reasonable educational adjustments for students with specific educational needs, including those arising from socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic factors.

The use of standards descriptors as referents for making and substantiating judgments about student achievement, enables schools to develop and implement instruction and assessment to suit their local contexts whilst producing valid and reliable results for certification. The use of standards descriptors allows schools to apply special provisions, that is, to design and implement inclusive learning and assessment programs for students with special educational needs, whilst maintaining the intent and rigour of the syllabus.

This presentation will make reference to an Australian Research Council linkage project that the Queensland Studies Authority participated in. It will incorporate examples of school practice, to explore the ways that schools design and implement instruction, assessment and provide special provisions, in multicultural contexts.

Keywords

- Special provisions
- Standards descriptors
- School-based assessment
- Reasonable adjustment

Introduction

In Queensland, Australia, a system of externally moderated school-based assessment has operated in years 11 and 12 since 1972, when external examinations were abolished. In this system, teachers are responsible for teaching students, developing and implementing assessment instruments and for making judgments about student achievement for reporting and certification purposes. These activities are conducted in partnership with the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), a statutory authority of the Queensland Government, responsible for managing Queensland's system of externally moderated school-based assessment and senior secondary certification.

External moderation involves a rigorous set of quality assurance processes to ensure comparability, that is, that judgments made in schools across the state, match the syllabus standards descriptors. Central to the moderation process are review panels of experienced teachers; appointed, trained and credentialed by the QSA. Review panels review work programs and sample folios of student work, submitted by schools. They use 'consensus moderation' techniques to provide advice to schools about the appropriateness of schools' judgments about student work relative to the syllabus standards descriptors. Schools use this advice to make decisions about the interim and relative achievement of all students, including those whose work was not sampled in the moderation process.

Syllabus standards descriptors are central to both school-based assessment and the moderation process. They describe how well students have achieved the syllabus dimensions and objectives. Teachers use the syllabus standards descriptors as referents for making standards-based judgments about student achievement. Complementing this process, review panels use the same syllabus standards descriptors as referents for substantiating school judgments about student achievement, in the moderation process. These processes enable schools to develop and implement instruction and assessment to suit their local contexts whilst producing valid and reliable results for certification.

Alignment of Teaching, Learning and School-based Assessment

In order to promote quality learning outcomes, syllabuses require the close alignment of what is taught, how it is taught, what is assessed and how it is assessed. Teachers use the processes and requirements described in syllabuses, to develop courses of study, which are a school's formal plan of how a course will be delivered and assessed. A course of study must meet all syllabus requirements in order to be approved by the QSA. Courses of study consist of a course organisation, an outline of intended student learning and an assessment program and are contextualised to take into account the characteristics of a school (such as resources and location) and its students. This allows schools to implement inclusive and culturally appropriate learning experiences and assessment.

The following example relates to a sample course of study designed from the *English for ESL Learners* trial syllabus. The syllabus requires that in designing a course of study, schools must incorporate the general objectives; apply the course organising principles; include the areas of study 'language for academic learning' 'language of literature' and 'language of the media' in each year of the course; and include a range and balance of texts across the areas of study. Appendix 1 is an extract from a sample program of study developed from this syllabus. It illustrates the course organisation, and shows the integration of the syllabus requirements listed above into units of work. Each unit of work is then fully developed to show how it aligns with the objectives of the course. Learning experiences are identified that take into account the characteristics of the school (such as resources, teacher expertise,

location) and the needs and interests of students. *As English or ESL Learners* is a course of study for students for whom English is not their first or home language, learning experiences must be tailored to account for this.

A study into ‘Improving Engagement in Learning and Transition to Mainstream Schooling for Newly Arrived African Youth in the Middle Years of Schooling’ was conducted by researchers from the Queensland University of Technology in conjunction with the QSA in an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project, culminating in 2008. An aspect of the study involved the identification of a range of ‘pedagogical approaches that can be used to enhance essential learnings for students who arrive as refugees from Africa’ with little, no or severely interrupted schooling (Dooley et al 2009, 5).

The following are some of the strategies identified:

- Teacher-directed learning
- Close monitoring of students’ performance of tasks
- Pre-teaching of vocabulary before requiring students to apply the new language in some task
- Explicit teaching of grammar
- Material, procedures and assignments broken down into smaller and more manageable segments
- Extensive scaffolding
- Limited choices
- Allowing students to select tasks and topics that are personally meaningful

(Dooley et al 2009, 141-2)

These pedagogical strategies may have broader application beyond the middle years of schooling, and be used to enhance learning outcomes for students from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They illustrate a range of approaches that could be used to assist students to achieve the objectives of the *English for ESL Learners* syllabus.

Learning experiences need to align not only to the objectives of the course, but to the assessment of the course. Teachers plan to ensure that learning experiences will develop the student knowledge and skills necessary to undertake the assessment.

Teachers develop assessment instruments to determine the extent to which students have achieved the objectives of the syllabus. Appendix 2 is an extract from an assessment instrument designed to assess student achievement in the course of study depicted in Appendix 1. It embeds some of the pedagogical strategies identified in the ARC Linkage Project cited above. For example, the instrument is extensively scaffolded and is broken into smaller segments. Further, student choice is limited in that the texts to be analysed, the ‘Sorry Day Parliamentary Addresses’ are determined by the teacher. For some students, these strategies alone will not ensure that they can demonstrate their knowledge and skills in responding to the assessment instrument. Schools are required to enact special provisions to ensure that all students are able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Educational Equity – the policy context

Government policy at both the national and state level, commits to promoting equity in education to improve educational outcomes for all Australian students. The Melbourne

Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians commits Governments and school sectors to promoting equity and excellence in Australian schooling and to support all young Australians to become successful learners; confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens. (MYCEETYA 2008) Complementing this, curriculum development and assessment in Queensland is underpinned by the *QSA Equity Statement* which states that ‘All young people have a right to gain an education that meets their needs, and prepares them for active participation in the creation of a socially just, equitable and democratic society’.

This policy context supports the enactment of special provisions to ensure that assessment is equitable for all students.

Special Provisions

In Queensland, schools are responsible for making decisions about special provisions. This responsibility is directed by the Australian Government *Disability Standards for Education 2005* which describe the obligations of education providers in ensuring that students with disabilities are able to ‘participate in the learning experiences (including the assessment and certification requirements) of the course ...on the same basis as a student without a disability and without discrimination’ (Australian Government 2005, 23).

The *QSA Policy on Special Provisions for School-based Assessments in Authority and Authority-registered Subjects* provides guidance to schools about making special provisions. It identifies the principles and guidelines that schools are to apply in making decisions about the implementation of special provisions.

Special provisions involve making reasonable adjustments to assessment requirements and/or conditions of assessment for students with specific educational needs. Specific educational needs, according to the Policy, include but are not limited to:

- Students with disabilities that have a physiological basis
- Students with educational needs arising primarily from socioeconomic, cultural and/or linguistic factors where there may be some form of educational disadvantage, such as students:
 - of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds
 - with language backgrounds other than English
 - who are migrants or refugees
 - from rural and remote locations
- Students whose difficulties in accessing learning do not appear to be directly or primarily attributable to educational disadvantage arising from impairment, or to socioeconomic, cultural and/or linguistic factors or psychological needs
- Students with identifiably different patterns of educational development and orientation

Reasonable adjustments may involve altering the assessment conditions or altering the form of presentation of the assessment instrument or the student response to an assessment instrument, to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

The following examples of school practice illustrate the notion of ‘reasonable adjustments’ for students with specific educational needs arising from socioeconomic, cultural or linguistic factors. These examples are in the context of delivery of the course of study developed from the QSA trial syllabus *English for ESL Learners* depicted in Appendix 1.

- In the unit ‘The Classics: then and now’, students are required to produce a spoken/signed response for assessment purposes. Students would typically present their responses to this task to a live audience (their class peers) for the purpose of efficiency. As the syllabus does not require that students present their text to their class, a teacher may make a reasonable adjustment for a student with a fear of public speaking to allow them to present their text to the teacher, or to film themselves presenting their text.
- In the unit ‘Social issues and different political and national audiences’, students are required to produce a written or spoken/signed text in response to the environmental issue of whaling. As the syllabus does not stipulate the audience for the persuasive text, a teacher may allow students to select an audience that is culturally appropriate to them. Whilst one student may identify the audience to be their local community group, for another student this may be culturally inappropriate. That student may instead elect to produce a text to persuade a younger audience such as siblings.
- In the unit ‘Who am I? A search for identity’, students are required to produce a written text for assessment purposes. A student may be provided the opportunity to select and analyse a text that matches their own cultural background or interests.
- In the unit ‘Sense of identity’, a student may be given the opportunity to select a text that is written in their first language and is also available in English translation. Students are required to analyse how the theme ‘identity’ is represented in a literary text.

In some of these examples, a reasonable adjustment involves students selected texts to respond to. The teacher is responsible for ensuring that over the course of study, the syllabus requirements for a range and balance of texts across the three area of study of the syllabus is met.

The above examples are not exhaustive. Other reasonable adjustments may involve allowing additional time for students to complete assessment tasks and allowing students to listen to an audio recording of a text or providing a reader to communicate a text (in instances where reading is not the skill being assessed).

Regardless of the special provisions enacted for students with specific educational needs, judgments about student achievement must be made using the syllabus standards descriptors. The syllabus standards descriptors may not be modified. This allows schools to ‘maintain the academic requirements of the course or program and other requirements or components that are inherent in or essential to its nature’ (Australian Government 2005, 15) and to comply with QSA quality assurance processes for senior certification.

Conclusion

Externally moderated school-based assessment gives schools the flexibility to design and implement instruction and assessment which take into account the characteristics of a school and its students. It enables schools to provide special provisions to students with specific educational needs, including those arising from socioeconomic, cultural or linguistic factors, ensuring equitable opportunities for all students. The rigour and intent of syllabuses is maintained by ensuring that judgments about the achievement of all students are made and substantiated with reference to the syllabus standards descriptors.

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Appendix 1: English for ESL Learners – sample course organisation

| Semester | Focus | Area of Study | Time | Assessment |
|----------|--|---|--------------|---|
| Yr 11 S1 | <p>Who am I? A search for identity</p> <p>How prominent Australians from a range of backgrounds deal with their cultural identity.</p> | Language for academic learning | 8 – 10 weeks | 1) Analytical Written assignment (600 – 800 words) |
| | <p>The immigration debate:</p> <p>Looking at how language choices are influenced by position(s) on a social issue</p> | Language of the media | 8 – 10 weeks | 2) Persuasive text Individual spoken task 3 – 4 minutes (Power point presentation) 3) Reflective text Written supervised Seen question 500 – 600 words |
| Yr 11 S2 | <p>The Classics: then and now:</p> <p>A study of the influence of audience, time and place upon the telling of a story</p> | Language of literature | 8 – 10 weeks | 4) Analytical text Written assignment 600 – 800 words |
| | <p>How advertising works:</p> <p>Constructing texts in order to persuade</p> | Language of the media | 6 – 8 weeks | 5) Imaginative text (response to literature) Group spoken task 2 – 3 minutes each speaker 6) Persuasive text Written supervised unseen question 500 – 600 words |
| Yr 12 S3 | <p>Social issues and different political and national audiences:</p> <p>The ‘Sorry Day’ parliamentary addresses.</p> | Language for academic learning/ language of the media | 8 – 10 weeks | 1) Analytical text Written assignment 800 – 1000 words |
| | <p>Environmental issues: whaling</p> | | 8 – 10 weeks | 2) Reflective text Written assignment 800 – 1000 words 3) Persuasive text Group spoken task 3 – 5 minutes each speaker |
| Yr 12 S4 | <p>Pride/Bride and Prejudice: internationalisation of film and television</p> <p>The influence of culture upon text: telling the same story from different perspectives</p> | Language of the media/language of literature | 8 – 10 weeks | 5) Analytical text Individual spoken task 7 – 10 minutes 6) Imaginative text Written supervised unseen question |
| | <p>Narrative texts and reflections of identity</p> | | 3 – 4 weeks | 600 – 800 words 7) Analytical text Individual spoken task |

Appendix 2: English for ESL – sample assessment instrument

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| Context and Task: | <p>Read and examine the accompanying speeches (from the 'Sorry Day' Parliamentary Addresses) then use the guidelines below to <i>analyse</i> the ways they have been constructed/developed so as to persuade / position their audience. You will need to focus particularly on the significant language choices and how these are used by the speaker to emphasise their arguments.</p> <p><u>Suggested strategies for analysing the speeches</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read the accompanying speeches carefully. Feel free to highlight and write notes on the speeches as you read.• Establish what the topics / subjects of the speeches are.• Establish what each speaker's central contention / position on that topic is. What is the argument on the topic / subject that each speaker is asking listeners to agree with?• Using the focus questions in the analysis guidelines, look at how particular language choices, including structural and textual features, work to support the speaker's position on the topic and encourage the listener to agree/support. <p><u>Suggested guidelines for planning and writing an analytical exposition</u></p> <p>Introduction - in the first two or three paragraphs, identify briefly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the speaker(s), speeches and where they were delivered;• the subject matter / issue / topic;• the article's central idea / main contention / point of view – what ideas do each speaker encourage their listeners to support, i.e. what arguments are listeners encouraged to agree with on this topic / issue / person / group?• particular representations of individuals / groups / times and places / concepts / relationships the reader is encouraged to support <p>Body – account for <u>how</u> this argument has been developed through language choices in the speech</p> <p>Some focus questions to guide your analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• selection and omission – who is and is not quoted or interviewed; whose voice is not heard? Whose opinion is emphasised? Which points of view are most supported?• Use of 'loaded' words and phrases – what connotations / associations do these words have?• Appeals to emotions; negative / positive word connotations• Use of stereotypes; characterising a person, group or place, thereby reinforcing the representation being made of the qualities this person, place or group is assumed to have• Use of tone (e.g. authoritative, reasonable, sarcastic, patronising etc) and the effect of this <p>Conclusion: provide a brief summary of your findings about the arguments made in the speeches.</p> |
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