



## How student development and prior learning influences student performance of assessment tasks

Like other subject areas EAL learning is a progression. However, unlike most other subjects, where learners typically begin learning in the early years of school building knowledge, understanding and skills as they move through each school year, EAL learning can commence at any year level. Some EAL learners may begin learning English on commencement of school in Prep/Foundation, while others may begin at different year levels such as years 3, 5, 8 or 9. It all depends on when the student arrives in Australia, and of course it can also be at different times of the year, not just the start of a year.

But commencing at different points of schooling is only part of the story. Different ages at commencement of EAL learning means different EAL learners have very different characteristics, prior learning experiences and knowledge of the world when they begin their EAL learning journey. These include differences in age-related cognitive capacities, different knowledge of the world based on their prior life and learning experiences, different levels of literacy skills in first language(s), different levels of self-awareness as learners and different needs in terms of the level of English proficiency needed to participate in mainstream classrooms. In short, EAL learners of different ages have different capacities, and different learning strategies and identities as learners to draw on as they learn EAL. This is reflected in the EAL AusVELS and the EAL developmental continuum by the provision of 3 separate bands (Band A Lower primary, Band B, Middle to upper primary and Band S Secondary) to identify EAL learning and the standards expected for EAL students at different stages of learning.

Age and experience-related differences in EAL learners contribute to performance of EAL (and other subject) assessment tasks. In this activity, this is most evident in Sample G, written by a Year 1 student in the early stages of developing literacy. The student's status as a novice writer is evident in the text, for example the immature letter formation, and lack of familiarity with the written forms of key topic vocabulary. These components of the student's literacy skills limit the capacity to complete the task, no matter what the level of student's English language.

However, because this student is in the early years of schooling, he or she is perhaps not too far behind some native English-speaking peers in the development of literacy skills. With sufficient support the task of reaching the performance level of English-proficient students is achievable, as the student is not so far from the target. This is even more the case for the Year 2 EAL student who wrote Sample F. In the case of the Year 5 EAL student who wrote Sample D, there are fewer problems when compared to the texts of the younger EAL students. However, this student will be expected to meet higher standards of English in mainstream Year 5 classes. So while the frequency of errors is not so great as in the other texts, the nature of some of them, such as writing words that are unrecognizable or difficult to identify, and the lack of basic punctuation, are likely to be judged quite severely when Year 5 expectations are applied to the student's work. Consequently, there is greater urgency in supporting this student to master these areas of written English.

Performance of assessment tasks by EAL students may well be influenced by the student's stage of development and prior experience. For example, a student who has worked with recipes in their first (or other) language(s) may find writing a recipe in English less challenging than a student who has never previously encountered recipe texts. It is important that language knowledge and skill is the focus of assessments of EAL student language use, but it is also useful to understand how the student's prior experience has influenced their performance of the task, in order to best understand the significance of what the student has done. It is also important to make assessments that are informed by the expectations that will be applied to the student and their classmates in their learning across the curriculum. You may have noticed that the teacher's comments about Samples D, F and G were qualified at some point with the comment '*at this year level*' or '*at this stage of learning*'.

Contextual knowledge like this is an essential part of trustworthy assessments of EAL learners in classrooms.