

LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENTS

(Information taken from Curriculum Framework for English and an Additional Language (EAL) and Literacy, Academics, and Language (LAL) Programming, June 2011 Draft – Section 7: Assessment of EAL and LAL Learners. Available at www.edu.gov.mb.ca)

Although participation in such assessments is required for EAL learners, educators and parents should consider the validity and reliability of assessments that may assume a certain level of English language proficiency or understanding of Western or even mainstream Manitoba culture. Students may not be able to accurately demonstrate what they know and can do for a number of reasons. For example:

- Many students and parents have experienced more traditional large-scale examinations in their home countries and are not familiar with the formats and procedures of the Manitoba assessments.
- Learners in the early stages will need more time to process their language and thoughts, but may be reluctant to ask for additional time, even when it is permitted.
- Learners may have good reading skills in their own language but these skills may not be evident because the assessment tools are based on the language they are learning.
- Reading proficiency is often demonstrated through written answers; however, productive skills in a language usually take longer to develop than receptive skills, and students may comprehend more than they are able to demonstrate.
- Unfamiliar vocabulary, paraphrasing, and unfamiliar expressions in academic language may confuse students who actually “know” the answer (McKay).
- Questions or performance tasks that are designed for Manitoba first-language speakers may be embedded in cultural experiences or topical knowledge that newcomers are not familiar with (e.g., camping trips, seasonal trips, or leasing a car).
- All of these considerations will be intensified for LAL learners whose limited school experience may seriously affect performance.

These factors may result in parents and schools drawing inaccurate conclusions about students’ abilities and progress or the effectiveness of instruction. Although teachers attempt to prepare all students in their classes for large-scale assessments, additional explanation and preparation, in addition to the use of permitted accommodations, may be necessary to help learners perform at their best possible level.

Although it is not wise to judge an EAL learner’s progress against assessment criteria that are normed for first-language speakers, parents and learners often want and sometimes need to see how the student’s English language skills compare to grade-level expectations. This information can contribute to an appropriate educational plan.