

TEACHING, TESTING, 1...2...3...4....

When Chris Clark and I were first approached in the fall of 2006 to work on development of new curricula for the upcoming ELSA 4 and 5 classes in B.C., we were excited but a little bit overwhelmed by the project. However, starting in January 2007, we sat down and began to gather information about how we envisioned the curricula, and what we would need to do in order to accomplish our vision.

First we had to establish what CLB levels were involved at each ELSA level. From Wes Schroeder at Western ESL Services in Vancouver, we learned that his assessors place clients into ELSA levels on the assumption that when someone scores at a certain level on a given skill on the Canadian Language Benchmarks Placement Assessment (CLBPT), this suggests that they have demonstrated 70% mastery of the competencies at that level. In their ELSA class, they will consolidate the remaining 30% mastery of competencies at that ELSA entry level, and will spend the remainder of their time working on 70% mastery of CLB competencies at the *next* level. In other words, students coming into ELSA 4 classes should already have 70% mastery of CLB 4 competencies, and will spend the majority of their time working on competencies at CLB 5. Similarly, a student entering ELSA 5 will have demonstrated 70% mastery of competencies at CLB 5, will consolidate the remaining 30% and work on achieving 70% mastery of competencies at CLB 6. Therefore, it seemed logical to design a curriculum for ELSA 4 that had some language outcomes and activities aimed at CLB 4 levels, but with a heavier emphasis on language outcomes and activities aimed at CLB 5 levels; the same approach would be applied to the ELSA 5 curriculum.

In order to wrap our heads around this, we started by compiling and combining the language outcomes (the "What the person can do" column for each benchmark level in each skill) from the 2 CLB levels involved at each ELSA level. For the ELSA 4 curriculum, we combined outcomes from CLB 4 and 5, and for the ELSA 5 curriculum, we combined outcomes from CLB 5 and 6. Once that was done, we gathered input from ELSA teachers at VCC and elsewhere through members of the ELSA 4 and 5 Project Advisory Committee regarding possible themes and topics on which teachers could build lesson plans at the appropriate levels. After we had assembled an initial list and had it reviewed by these same people, we started the process of developing lesson ideas around each topic, incorporating grammar, functions, vocabulary and pronunciation, and finding and suggesting resources to help to do this. These theme and topic pages form the backbone of the curriculum, but we also included an explanation of how we arrived at the language outcomes for each ELSA level, descriptions of the general abilities of learners at each level, information about needs assessment, and so on. Finally, after 6 months, the curricula were ready, and with a huge sigh of relief, we delivered them to Settlement and Multiculturalism for distribution to ELSA providers around the province.

But our work wasn't over. After a break of a few months, we were asked to develop new Progress Tests for both ELSA 3 and ELSA 4 to replace the old ELSA 3 Exit Test, as well as a completely new ELSA 5 Exit Test. We analyzed and picked apart the old ELSA 3 Exit Test to see what we could still use, and applied the same 30%/70% approach to design the tests that we had used to develop the curricula. In other words, since students at the end of their time in ELSA 3 should have had ample time and opportunity to develop and practise skills at CLB 4, most of the tasks on the ELSA 3 Progress Test are aimed at that level. In the same way, the tasks on the ELSA 4 Progress Test are aimed at CLB 5. Once we had developed these tests, we field-tested them on students at VCC and other ELSA providers, such as Immigrant Services Society, S.U.C.C.E.S.S., the Burnaby English Language Centre, Burnaby School District and the Kamloops Cariboo Regional Immigrant Society. While we were mostly interested in testing students at the target levels (ELSA 3 and 4), we also tested students at the next higher level to make sure that our tests were not too difficult. The feedback we received from teachers was also very valuable, and as a result of this feedback and the item analyses we did for Listening and Reading, we made several revisions to the first drafts before sending in our final copies with accompanying materials to Settlement and Multiculturalism.

We are now working on the ELSA 5 Exit Test, which is a completely different undertaking. This test has higher stakes for students, since their results will be accepted as pre-requisites for many of the applied programs at VCC and Camosun College in Victoria that have been analysed using the Canadian Language Benchmarks. For those students who want to continue ESL studies, their ELSA 5 CLB profile will determine their placement into fee-paying classes at Advanced levels and higher in other ESL programs, since students who are successful on the ELSA 5 Exit Tests will have minimum benchmarks of 6 in 3 out of the 4 skills, and may go as high as CLB 7 or 8. Consequently, some tasks on the ELSA 5 Exit Tests will identify students working at CLB 6, some will identify those working at CLB 7 and some will identify students who are able to demonstrate proficiency at CLB 8. The field-testing must also be very rigorous, since we want to be sure that the tests are functioning as they should. We have finished designing all the tests and will begin our field-testing in April, but this time we are only testing students who are in ELSA 5 and we hope to get as much information and feedback as we can before finalizing the tests before the end of June.

We would like to thank everyone on the Project Advisory Committee, the Project Manager, Dale Hunter, ELSA Department Head at VCC, and the teachers who have participated in the field-testing for their advice, suggestions, comments and support. But most of all, we would like to thank the ELSA students, who have acted as our guinea pigs and who are, after all, the reason why we're all here.