

## Initial Assessment in Galway Adult Basic Education Service

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In Galway Adult Basic Education Service (GABES) Initial Assessment is just one element of our integrated assessment framework. All students are given an Individual Learning (ILP), the cover of which you can see on the left hand of Slide 1. The diagram on the right gives a synoptic view of the relationship between Initial Assessment and other elements. Briefly, the student is assessed, given a level on the scale of 1-3, a short-term plan is designed for the student, and after 8 weeks a short-term review takes place, using the same assessment system which is incorporated into the ILP book, pages seven to eleven. Crucially, the assessor and short-term plan designer will need ample experience of working in adult literacy, expertise in language and an empathetic approach.

Because of the frequently negative associations with formal schooling, we try to make the initial assessment as informal as possible. The appointment or interview lasts for between 30 minutes and one hour and constitutes a combination of subjective self-assessment and objective expert assessment carried out by the assessor. We gather background information and observe the student reading and writing. For reading exercises, we use texts such as *Challenger 1, 2 and 3*. Initial assessment is then linked to on-going progress and monitored through the ILP. In GABES we believe it is important to have a structured and integrated framework, but given that adult reading and writing always takes place in a context of situation and culture, time and place, literacy can only be assessed in terms of such context. Thus in our framework, there is both systematicity and what Street (1995:2) calls 'specificity of literacies in particular places and times'.

The initial assessment document is five pages long and is usually completed after the student leaves the interview. As can be seen in the diagram on Slide 3, we assess the student's *can do* skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening and numeracy, their level of confidence in relation to these specific core skills, and their general confidence. We also gather essential contextual information.

Slide 4 shows the first page of the Initial Assessment document. As you can see it is based on the ITABE system at levels one to three. Given that adult basic education services have been completing these ITABE-type forms for the last few seven years, I am not going to dwell on them here as far as the specific cognitive skills are concerned. Suffice to say that levels for reading, writing, speaking, listening and numeracy are established based on the performance of the tasks listed on the left hand side.

Confidence is clearly a difficult phenomenon to measure. However, we simply attempt to capture, firstly, people's confidence in relation to the execution of the specific cognitive skills, and then judge general confidence levels by recourse to indicators of confidence

expounded by Charnley and Jones (1979) and by recourse to indicators that we have noticed in our own centre, especially with regard to change.

Slide 6 shows one of the pages of the Initial Assessment document that deals with confidence in executing the specific core skills of reading and writing. Again, the measurement system is similar to that of ITABE. Here, you will notice that the levels of difficulty of the task or possible anxiety in performing the task increase as you go down. A level is then established.

As mentioned previously, general confidence is assessed by recourse to indicators suggested by Charnley and Jones in their 1970 study *The Concept of Success in Adult Literacy*. As you can see, on the left hand side of Slide 7, I have added *metaphorical voice*, by which I mean the confidence, or lack of, to speak up and speak out and reveal one's true feelings and attitudes. On the right, I have placed more specific indicators of changes that we see in general confidence level. We find that as learners gain confidence, their physical bearing may change. They may begin to stand straight rather than slouch, and they begin to make eye contact. This is not the same, of course, for all learners, and this is why we have included a long list of possible indicators here. We notice also, for example, that people begin to make more of a contribution in the centre. They may move from a 1:1 to a group class or begin to suggest learning themes.

I referred earlier to the systematicity and specificity of our framework. Just as we believe that it is necessary to have a structured and uniform framework that captures levels in the performance of core skills, we also consider that information on the context and situation of the student needs to be gathered to complete the initial assessment picture. As you see here on Slide 8, we sub-divide contextual information into schematic knowledge and self-awareness.

This diagram on Slide 9 synthesizes the concept and the process. The concept of schemata, the plural of schema, was originally used in psychotherapy and psychology (see Bartlett, 1932). It refers to the units of information that we have internalized and which influence or worldviews. In linguistics, schematic knowledge is further sub-divided into knowledge of form and content (see Yule, 1995: 85-86). The former may refer to the format of text types of genres that we have internalized throughout our lives, first through the stories our parents tell us and then in education, in society and work. Narrative, for example, is a framework repeated since the time of the court jesters. It has a set format: Situation, Problem, Response, Evaluation (SPRE). Take the following story (adapted from Edge, J, 2002):

***There once was a king so wealthy he paved the streets of his country in gold...*** > that's the Situation

**but** (there is always a “but” or a “however” in depressed and rainy Anglo-Saxon and Celtic culture),

**but he got a rash and was very disturbed...** > That’s the Problem

**So** (the Response)

**So he put an ad in the Galway Advertiser for a rashologist, and...**

The Evaluation is next...

**the rashologist fixed the king’s dermatitis and fell in love with his daughter and they all lived happily ever after.**

There are six other macro text types and there are a multitude of micro frameworks such as shopping lists, timetables, etc.

Take another genre or text-type – the procedure. The commonest text-type procedure is the recipe. It has a goal, say **How to make a Spanish tortilla**. It has materials or ingredients. In this case, **potatoes, eggs and olive oil** (which, by the way is vocabulary that can be pre-taught). And it has sequential steps that include grammatical forms such as the adverbs **then** and **later** and uses either the **present simple tense** (*you slice*) or the **imperative** (*slice*).

So we assess our students for an awareness of these internalized text-types or genres, because reading and writing is not just about phonemes and graphemes; it’s also about the internalized frameworks or genres or text-types that help the reader predict what’s coming next or write or say what should come next.

Schematic knowledge of content, on the other hand, refers to everything in our culture that we have internalized. If you are Irish a lot of your brain will be occupied by phenomena such as the famine, the Celtic Tiger, Gay Byrne, the Catholic Church, drink, *please* and *thanks*, *fish and chips*, poverty in the fifties and sixties, rain, cloud, the GAA, Italia 90 and so on.

It is important in assessment to know what students know about their world, especially when their reading and writing goals are more specific. Say a waiter comes in to the centre to ask for help with menus. The schematic knowledge of content here includes all the background knowledge about the food the restaurant prepares, and how they prepare it, food in general and the language associated with the food and the restaurant. In this case, the schematic knowledge of form would be that of the micro text type or genre, the menu.

While we measure the student’s knowledge of schematic form and content, measurement is not the most important issue for us with regard to background knowledge. What is

important is that with an awareness of the background knowledge with which the student comes to the reading and writing *event* (see Heath, 1983), we can devise a short-term plan and the first few lesson plans for the tutor. We will know if the *meaning* of a particular text can be *comprehended* by reference to background knowledge.

This is why we use a top-down approach in adult literacy, instead of the bottom-up phonic approach used with children (see Goodman 1970 for the distinction). We use what the student already knows, even if that is just social sight words, to forge a link (eventually) with formal literacy. In other words we go from the vernacular or social to the formal and academic.

The importance of schematic background knowledge to the reading *event* demonstrates how the application of formal testing – such as the reading age test, is not appropriate or useful in adult literacy. The reading age test depends upon correlation between general learning development and background knowledge and reading. While you may be able to correlate progress in reading with progress in learning for a school-going child, you cannot do this for an adult, because the latter's background knowledge is not controlled any more by syllabuses. Furthermore, reading age tests depend heavily on the counting of polysyllables: children progress from one syllable to two and three, but adults with literacy difficulties frequently show a different pattern: it is often monosyllabic, syntactic words like *their* and *there* and *were* and *where* that cause difficulty rather than denotative or lexical words such as *telephone*.

Student's self-awareness is the second part of the contextual framework that we monitor. On Slide 9 you can see many of the possible indicators of self-awareness, such as attitudes and feelings in general, and attitudes and feeling towards learning and education. The individual who presents for assessment in adult literacy will usually be able to express what he or she sees as the difficulty and the reasons for such. These may not always be expressed in a rationalised fashion, but there are still clear indications or clues as to the reason for the difficulty. Sometimes, the individual will say he or she has dyslexia, without ever having been assessed by a psychologist or literacy specialist. In these cases, we will make an appointment for the learner to undergo a screening test for dyslexia, but only after he or she has been a few weeks in a learning programme in the centre.

The student may not be aware of learning style and the assessor can gauge this from a few simple questions or activities. The student is also assessed for learner autonomy, which is the degree to which the student would like to self-direct his or her learning.

In the Initial Assessment document we establish levels in all the specific skills, confidence and context and we pinpoint the student's long-term goal. We summarize this on page three of the ILP and call it "Initial Assessment Summary". You can see this page on Slide 14. Essentially, it is a summary of information and level-setting established from the five pages of the Initial Assessment document.

With the information summarized, the assessor devises a short-term plan for the student, and hands this over to the tutor with lesson plans for the first three or four classes. As you see here on Slide 15, a short-term goal is established, and specific strategies for the core skills are suggested. The tutor and student then elaborate on this plan, paying attention to the learner's needs with his or her specific context in mind.

After a minimum of eight weeks, the tutor carries out a review of progress and establishes if there has been a level increase. This is done by using the same initial assessment document, now incorporated into the ILP on pages 15-20. On Slide 17 you can see the first page of the review. I have highlighted in yellow the spaces where the level increase, if there is one, on the same lines as the ITABE system.

Before I finish, there is just one more important element that I must mention, and that is the recording of texts and activities used and achievements attained. Students like to see what the level increase really means as far as the work they are doing is concerned: *What does it mean in terms of their daily lives? What can they do and what can they hope to do?* For this purpose we ask our tutors and students to record in the ILP the texts they have used, the activities they have performed and the objectives achieved. You can see an example of this on Slide 20.

As far as achievements are concerned we generally notice the same priority that was highlighted by the Charnley and Jones study that I mentioned previously. Adult literacy students who took part in the survey mostly expressed their concept of success and achievement in the following order:

- É Affective personal achievement (I feel more confident)
- É Affective social achievement (I get on better with í )
- É Socio-economic achievement (I was given more responsibility at work)
- É Enactive Achievement (I joined the library)
- É Cognitive achievement (I can read í )

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To summarise then: Initial Assessment in Galway Adult Basic Education Service is part of a systematic and individualized on-going measurement of level and progress. The context of the person is of vital importance to the preparation of an individual learning plan and our ethos of literacy as social practice. We record achievements and recognise the importance of the students' personal growth and the development of so-called "soft-skills". But, crucially we acknowledge the importance of accountability and therefore monitor closely changes in level in the specific core skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and numeracy.

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