Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English Language Competency of Migrant Learners in Further Education and Training

Part 1: Research Report

2021

Contents

Foreword

SOLAS, ETBI and CMETB are delighted to present this rigorous and carefully presented research and the accompanying guidelines and toolkit.

Competence in English language, along with strong literacy and numeracy, is a necessary foundation for development and success in life, work and learning in Ireland.

The Further Education and Training Strategy 2020 – 2024 centres on three core strategic pillars: *building skills; fostering inclusion; and facilitating pathways.* These strategic pillars are underpinned by four enabling themes, with learner and performance focus being of particular relevance in the context of this research.

This publication comprises a suite of resources that will support tutors and co-ordinators. We are confident that the guidelines and toolkit will facilitate continued good practice in the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners.

It is clear from the research undertaken that good practice in language assessment is nothing new to those working in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision across our ETBs. A practical assessment system is provided here to inform and direct initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency across all Further Education and Training (FET) provision. This system retains and builds on the good practice already evident in the sector.

It is important to highlight that this research has opted to use the term migrant learner for a number of important reasons. Firstly, the in-depth research conducted failed to suggest a viable alternative. Secondly, the resources developed as part of this research are aimed at learners whose first language is not English and who are accessing a wide range of FET courses and not just English language related programmes. Consequently, it was deemed more appropriate to use the term migrant learner given that an ESOL learner is solely learning English for personal, social or economic reasons, whereas a migrant learner can be undertaking studies in any field of learning and may or may not require English language supports.

Notwithstanding the use of the term migrant learner, ardent efforts have been made, throughout this research to acknowledge and mitigate any negative connotations associated with continued use of the term.

The widespread use of this resource across all types of FET provision, will contribute to ever stronger and more responsive approaches to the language needs of migrant learners, enabling them to achieve their learning goals, maintain and further develop their skills and grow in confidence.

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Acknowledgements

Glossary of Acronyms

Acronym	Definition	Description
ACELS	Accreditation and Co-ordination of English Language Services	Legacy function of QQI which currently has responsibility for the creation and implementation of an inspection system for English language programme providers nationally.
AEGIS	Adult Education Guidance and Information Service	The Adult Education Guidance and Information Service provides adults with the support, information and guidance to enable them to make decisions regarding education, training and career choices.
AEO	Adult Education Officer	The Adult Education Officer is responsible for the overall management of an ETB's adult education programme and is a member of the ETB's senior management team.
ALOA	Adult Literacy Organisers' Association	The representative body for Adult Literacy Organisers providing collective representation on issues relating to basic and core skills, including ESOL programmes provided by Adult Literacy Services nationally.
ALO	Adult Literacy Organiser	Adult Literacy Organisers are responsible for the day-to-day management and co-ordination of an ETB's Adult Literacy Service.
BKSB	Basic and Key Skills Builders	UK based company that specialises in developing educational products designed to improve basic English and maths skills.
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative	Part-time provision for young people (16+) and adults who have less than leaving certificate standard of education.
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages	International standard, established by the Council of Europe, for describing a person's language ability across a six-point scale.[1]
CELTA	Certificate in English Language Teaching	Initial teacher training qualification for teaching English as a foreign or second language.
CLB	Canadian Language Benchmarks	12-point scale used to describe levels of English language ability in Canada in reading, writing, listening and speaking.
CLBPT	Canadian Language Benchmark Placement Test	A standardised assessment test designed to measure the English language proficiency of migrants in Canada.
CSO	Central Statistics Office	National statistics office which collects, analyses and reports on key statistics relating to people in Ireland, society and the economy.
DELTA	Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages	Internationally recognised English teaching qualification aimed at experienced English language teachers.

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[1]   Please refer to Appendix 4 for details of the six-point scale that the CEFR refers to or for more detailed information click here.

Acronym	Definition	Description
DERA	Digital Education Resource Archive	The UK's digital archive for government or other state organisations published documents.
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	It funds and creates policy for the higher and further education and research sectors and oversees the work of the state agencies and public institutions operating in these areas.
EFL	English as a Foreign Language	Learning English in a non-English speaking country.
ESL	English as a Second Language	Learning English in a country where English is the official or dominant language.
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages	Learning English as a second or additional language to achieve functional competence in personal, social and work-related settings.
ETB	Education and Training Board	The 16 Education and Training Boards are responsible for the delivery of Further Education and Training in Ireland.
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland	Representative body for the 16 Education and Training Boards.
EU	European Union	Union of countries working together to promote peace and develop a unified European economy and monetary union, while breaking down barriers and combatting discrimination.
FCE	First Certificate in English	General English qualification at B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages awarded by Cambridge University.
FET	Further Education and Training	Post-compulsory education and training programmes provided up to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications.
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation	The EU's primary law regulating how private citizens' data is controlled and processed by companies and organisations – came into force on 25th May 2018.
IAT	Initial Assessment Tool	A tool used to assess a learner's suitability for a particular course at point of entry.
ILO	Intended Learning Outcomes	Statement stating what a learner will achieve upon successful completion of a particular unit or topic of study.
ILP	Individual Learning Plan	Individualised plan for learners, setting out learning goals, highlighting progress and achievement across programmes of study undertaken.
ITABE	Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education	An intensive training programme aimed at adults who are educationally disadvantaged. The programme provides a group of 6 – 8 learners with 6 hours of tuition per week.
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association	Former representative body for Vocational Education Committees, replaced by ETBI following the 2013 merger of the Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) to form Education and Training Boards.

Acronym	Definition	Description
MIPLOs	Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes	Minimum knowledge, skills and competency a learner must obtain and demonstrate in order to successfully achieve a QQI accredited award.
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency	Independent Irish charity committed to supporting people with literacy and numeracy difficulties to take part in society and have access to relevant learning opportunities.
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications	10 level system used for the development, recognition and awarding of qualifications in Ireland.
PD	Professional Development	An ongoing process of professional skills development, upskilling and reskilling.
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate	Full-time programme for young people and adults. Provided mainly by PLC colleges, these programmes lead to QQI accredited major awards at levels 5 and 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications.
PLSS	Programme and Learner Support System	A collection of 3 online databases designed to provide an integrated approach to the collection of key data on Further Education and Training programme outputs, outcomes and performance across the 16 Education and Training Boards.
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland	Independent state agency promoting, maintaining and developing the Irish National Framework of Qualifications.
RRP	Refugee Resettlement Programme	Programme providing up to 20 hours of tuition per week to newly arrived Programme Refugees over 52 weeks.
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Skills Service	SOLAS manages, co-ordinates and supports the delivery of Further Education and Training programmes and services by Education and Training Boards.
SLD	Specific Learning Difficulty	Term used to refer to a difficulty with certain aspects of the learning process.
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees	Global organisation committed to protecting the rights and saving the lives of refugees forced to flee their homes.
VEC	Vocational Education Committee	Former providers of Further Education and Training Services in Ireland, replaced in July 2013 by Education and Training Boards.
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme	Full-time education programme designed to support long-term unemployed adults.

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Executive Summary

1. Project Purpose and Context

This report outlines the research and findings of the SOLAS research project designed to develop **good practice guidelines and toolkit to support the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners and to provide a universal definition of ESOL literacy** for application within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. The main outputs from this research project are a set of **eight guidelines** on initial and ongoing assessment, a **standardised toolkit** which operationalises the guidelines, along with a universal definition of **ESOL literacy**. Both the guidelines and toolkit reflect the knowledge, input and requirement of ESOL co-ordinators, tutors and learners throughout the various consultations that formed a fundamental part of this research project.

This research project is in response to **Goal 2** of the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019,*[2] in particular, the strategic objective to support Active Inclusion across all aspects of the *Further Education and Training (FET) Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2014 – 2019.*[3]

This research also follows through on a number of recommendations made in the most recent report on ESOL provision in Further Education and Training entitled *English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 -3 in ETBs.*[4] In particular, this research addresses the recommendations contained in **Section 3** of the report – **Recommendations for Assessment:**

1. The development of a new assessment tool is not recommended at this point.

2. **A national protocol for ESOL initial assessment** should be developed: assessment procedures and outcomes should be reviewed, based on tasks which conform to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) descriptors.[5]

3. All ETBs should put in place a **structured process for formal assessment of language competency** when learners enter provision.

4. A **structured professional development programme on assessment** is needed, with reference to assessment tools that reference the CEFR. The Scottish ESOL Assessment Tool could be adapted for this purpose.

5. There should be a **clear definition of ESOL literacy** devised as part of the national protocol for ESOL assessment and the professional development programme on assessment should address this issue.

6. Consideration to be given to **optimal deployment of the PLSS** to enable the correlation of data relating to language competency, education levels, ethnic background and economic status.

7. **Language entry criteria** and **structured interview material** for all FET courses should be devised at national level for use in all ETBs.

2   SOLAS (2014) "Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the FET Strategy in full, click this link.
3   Ibid.
4   SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 - 3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the report in full, click this link.
5   An overview of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is included in Appendix 4.

While this research primarily responds to recommendations 1 to 5, references are made to recommendations 6 and 7.

Finally, the contents of this research report, in particular the guidelines and toolkit, are targeted at both ESOL co-ordinators and tutors, as well as other personnel involved directly or indirectly in the provision of Further Education and Training (FET) services and supports to migrant learners.

2. Research Methodology

The research and consultations underpinning the guidelines and toolkit contained in this report took place between May and December 2019.

A detailed **online survey** was circulated to all 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) at the outset to gather basic information regarding existing practices in the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners. The primary purpose of this survey was to gain a better understanding of the national landscape in respect of both initial and ongoing assessment, as well as capturing some preliminary background data in relation to ESOL literacy and how this issue was been dealt with by ETBs. The issues identified in the survey were followed up in greater detail at the **regional engagement sessions** with ETB ESOL co-ordinators and tutors. While these two aspects of the research formed the bulk of the work undertaken, a number of important elements were included as part of the research and were as follows:

- **Desk research**

  - International literature review of current national and international practices in relation to initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency and approaches to ESOL literacy.

- **Field work**

  - 6 regional engagement sessions with ETB ESOL programme co-ordinators and tutors. Representatives from 14 of the 16 ETBs participated in semi-structured focus groups following the schedule outlined in Appendix 1. These sessions took place in June 2019.

  - Semi-structured focus group with the Regional Skills for Work Co-Ordinators in June 2019.

  - 4 learner focus groups took place with 64 learners representing 4 ETBs in October 2019. The purpose of these focus groups was to gather first-hand data from migrant learners regarding their experiences of initial and ongoing assessment, as well as ascertaining how these processes could be improved to make them more learner-centred and responsive to specific learner needs, skills and abilities.

3. Key Questions

The initial online survey, which was circulated to ESOL co-ordinators or personnel with direct responsibility for the day-to-day management of ESOL provision, raised a number of important questions that required further discussion at the regional engagement sessions. As such, a detailed thematic analysis of the results of the online survey was undertaken to ensure that discussions, at the regional engagement sessions, were as focused as possible and yielded meaningful data, in terms of next steps regarding the development of good practice guidelines. The questions that emerged from this thematic analysis, as presented below, coupled with the responses received at the various regional engagement sessions, face-to-face interviews and learner focus groups, informed the development of the guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment.

1. What are the key needs, challenges and concerns regarding ESOL Initial Assessment?

2. What works best in ESOL initial assessment?

3. What should be included in the guidelines and toolkit on ESOL Initial Assessment?

A full discussion of each of these questions is included in **Section 3** of this research report.

4. Findings of International Literature Review

Ever since the Department of Education and Science[6] **White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life**[7] allocated responsibility for the provision of publicly funded ESOL provision to the then Vocational Education Committees (VECs)[8] Adult Literacy Services, provision has remained largely detached from any nationally co-ordinated policy framework. Despite numerous reports and recommendations having been made in the intervening period between the White Paper's publication in 2000 and 2018, a co-ordinated national policy on ESOL is yet to be determined and agreed upon.

In 2018 SOLAS published a comprehensive report on ESOL provision entitled, **English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 – 3 in ETBs**,[9] which included **27 wide-ranging recommendations** covering areas such as funding and eligibility criteria, assessment, curriculum development, accreditation and staffing. SOLAS, in collaboration with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), ETBs and other stakeholders, is currently in the process of implementing each of these 27 recommendations. This research project is responding in part to the 7 recommendations (see **Section 1** above) in relation to initial and ongoing assessment, as well as addressing the issue of ESOL literacy. In other words, the development of good practice guidelines and toolkit for the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners will provide a platform for the implementation of these 7 recommendations.

The literature review on initial and ongoing assessment in the Irish context offers little in the area of models of best practice or even consistency in approaches to these processes. Both the online survey and regional engagement sessions highlighted that ETBs are operating on a more localised basis in the absence of national guidance or standards. Consequently, the literature review had to rely on international models of best practice in terms of establishing a baseline for the development of a standardised model of initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency for the Irish context.

There appeared to be widespread agreement that the Scottish model[10] of initial and ongoing assessment had much to offer. This was also emphasised in previous research funded by SOLAS and published in 2018.[11] In fact, not only did it emerge as the most viable baseline model, given the similar profile of migrant learners accessing ESOL provision in Scotland, the online survey and regional engagement sessions highlighted that up to eight ETBs were already using the Scottish model either as-is or an adapted version of it. To all intents and purposes, such an approach seems to be largely fit for purpose and capable of wide-spread adaptation to and dissemination in the Irish context. Conversely, the literature review established that industry-standard initial assessment tools traditionally used in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL)[12] sectors, were generally found to be unsuitable for wholesale use in the ETB environment.

In addressing the suitability of these industry-standard initial assessment tools, the literature review also examined the important issues of **validity and reliability** in initial and ongoing assessment. One of the conclusions drawn from this analysis was that any assessment of validity and reliability of a particular tool needs to be contextualised in terms of the setting in which the said tool is to be applied. In other words, just because a tool works in one environment, it does not automatically follow that it is suitable for application in another environment. It is precisely this argument that rendered the more EFL/ESL focused initial assessment tools unsuited to the ETB ESOL environment. Furthermore, the literature review also cautioned on the need to ensure that any standardised initial or ongoing assessment tools are **criterion-referenced** rather than being norm-referenced.

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6   Now the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

7   Department of Education and Science (2000) "Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education," Dublin: Government Publications. To view the white paper in full, click this link.

8   On 1st July 2013 the existing 33 Vocational Education Committees merged to form 16 Education and Training Boards. For more information visit the Department of Education and Skills website by clicking here.

9   SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 -3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the report in full, click this link.

10   https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/cdl24-ESOL-Initial-Assessment-main-pack.pdf

11   SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 -3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the report in full, click this link.

12   For a brief discussion on the differences between EFL, ESL and ESOL please see Section 2.8 page 59.

In respect of ESOL literacy and the aim of this research project to arrive at a universal definition, a review of the relevant literature found that the primary focus was on defining literacy in the traditional sense; that is dealing with native speakers with literacy difficulties. The reality is that literacy, an already complex issue, becomes even more complicated when a learner does not speak English sufficiently. In such cases, the language barrier can initially mask an underlying literacy difficulty, and this prompts questions around which issue to prioritise – the language barrier or the literacy difficulty. Ultimately, this was not an easy issue to address, especially considering that ESOL literacy learners are not a homogenous group, and in this respect, a review of the literature found that Burt, Peyton and Adams (2003)[13] provided the most helpful categorisation of different levels of ESOL literacy difficulties. These levels are considered in the context of developing both a universal definition of ESOL literacy and the development of a set of guidelines and toolkit for the initial and ongoing assessment of both the English language competency and literacy needs of migrant learners. This is discussed further in **Section 4**.

Finally, in relation to use of the term migrant learner, the literature review highlighted the lack of an appropriate alternative. It was, therefore, deemed appropriate to continue using the term migrant learner in the context of this research's wider focus on supporting non-native English speakers looking to access wider FET provision and not just ESOL supports. Notwithstanding concerns regarding use of the term, existing definitions were used to arrive at a broader definition which better fits the context of this research and which attempts to mitigate against negative connotations associated with existing use of the term.

5. Conclusions

Both the online survey and regional engagement sessions highlighted the need for consistency of approach to the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency across ETBs. As such ESOL co-ordinators and tutors who participated in either the online survey or regional engagement sessions broadly welcomed the commitment to develop good practice guidelines and toolkit for the initial assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners. That being said,

they were extremely clear and vocal in their wish to have a standardised Initial Assessment Tool (IAT) developed, but only in a way that was both learner-centred and easy to administer. Neither co-ordinators nor tutors appreciated the prospect of an onerous process which would require them to complete and maintain a time-consuming amount of additional reports and templates as part of any new approach to initial and ongoing assessment. Overarchingly, the primary request from co-ordinators and tutors was the development of a standardised IAT, one which was designed to assess all four core language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking.

This demand for a comprehensive initial assessment of all four core skills was firmly backed up by the international literature review, particularly by the analysis of international models of good practice. Of note was the Scottish model of initial and ongoing assessment. This particular assessment tool assesses all four core skills and also includes a separate tool for use with ESOL literacy learners. The data gathered from ETBs through the online survey highlighted that up to eight ETBs were already using the Scottish model, either as-is or a localised version of it. In fact, this was no surprise given that a suggestion for adaption of the Scottish model to the Irish context was made in SOLAS' 2018 review of ESOL provision nationally.[14]

Furthermore, the consultations carried out as part of the research also firmly highlighted the need to assess learners on what they actually know, not what they don't know, and to link the new initial and ongoing assessment toolkit to the **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**. By aligning the toolkit to the CEFR, it will deal with the issue of assessing learners on what they know since it will allow for clear referencing to the 'Can do' statements as contained within the CEFR and which are adapted and included in **Section 6 (Part 3: Toolkit)** of this research report.

Finally, in relation to the initial and ongoing assessment processes, the research highlighted one contradiction which needed to be addressed. As alluded to earlier, co-ordinators and tutors were unequivocal in their wishes for both a time-friendly and comprehensive assessment of all four core language skills. In reality, it is not possible to achieve both of these wishes without compromising the integrity or quality assurance of the wider initial

13   Burt, M, Peyton, J.K. and Adams, R (2003) "Reading and adult English language learners: A review of the research," Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. To view the full text click here.
14   SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 -3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To review the report in full, click this link.

and ongoing assessment processes. Surely, it is preferable to ensure that the formal assessment processes are rigorous enough to provide better accuracy in terms of ascertaining a migrant learner's language level at point of entry and to accurately check their rate of progression on an ongoing basis. It would also be more beneficial for a tutor to have a complete picture of what levels, issues, etc. they will be faced with when starting a new programme. Such a process will inevitably take time and cannot be rushed. Conscious of this, and ensuring that the processes are as learner-centred and user-friendly as possible, it is for this reason that the guidelines contained in this research report advocate a staged process to initial and ongoing assessment, whereby the processes are flexible enough for the various elements of the assessments to be conducted over multiple sessions, rather than completing them in one sitting.

Turning to ESOL literacy, or more specifically providing a universal definition for application across all 16 ETBs, similar trends emerged, whereby there was no consistent approach to the interpretation of ESOL literacy amongst providers. By extension, there was also a lack of consistency in the provision of supports or the signposting of learners to the most appropriate supports. As such, there was a strong reliance on the international literature to point the way in terms of arriving at an agreed universal definition and approach to supporting migrant learners with literacy difficulties. In this respect, the model adopted by Burt, Peyton and Adams (2003)[15] was extremely useful and relevant and is suitable for application in the Irish context. Equally, it is important to highlight, in the context of providing literacy supports, the existence of good practice guidelines for the initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 1 to 3[16] and the forthcoming publication of similar guidelines at NFQ levels 4 to 6.[17] Combined, these three sets of guidelines and toolkits form a continuum of initial and ongoing assessment for use across the full range of Further Education and Training (FET) programmes provided by ETBs.

6. Assessment Strategy

The assessment strategy for assessing the English language competency of migrant learners **up to NFQ level 4**[18] as outlined in this research report consists of the following tools and supports:

- **Mechanism for initial assessment**

- **Mechanism for ongoing assessment**

- **Procedures and templates for recording and monitoring assessment results**

The initial and ongoing assessment toolkit contains practical tasks that are relatable to typical everyday personal, social and work-related scenarios encountered by migrant learners.

Initial Assessment

The following tasks and resources are provided as part of the initial assessment toolkit:

- **Initial interview questions**

- **Graded reading tasks at CEFR levels A1 to B2**

- **Graded writing tasks at CEFR levels A1 to B2**

- **Specific ESOL literacy assessment tasks**

Ongoing Assessment

Programme co-ordinators and tutors all have an important role to play in monitoring the ongoing development of English language competency as established in the initial assessment process. They also have a role to play in ensuring that any additional supports required are provided in a timely manner. The process for ongoing assessment outlined in this research report takes full cognisance of this. In addition, the method of ongoing assessment proposed in this research report includes a summative function whereby elements of the ongoing assessment conducted at the end of one programme of learning acts as the initial assessment for the next programme.

15   Burt, M, Peyton, J.K. and Adams, R (2003) "Reading and adult English language learners: A review of the research," Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. To view the full text click here.
16   SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.
17   SOLAS (2020) "Final Report: Assessment of adult literacy and numeracy programmes at NFQ levels 4, 5 and 6: initial and ongoing," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).
18   The focus of the research guidelines and toolkit has been limited to programmes up to and including NFQ level 4 but provides a model for the future development of additional resources to cover NFQ levels 5 and 6.

Recording Assessment Results and Outcomes

This research suggests that both the results and outcomes of the initial assessment processes should be recorded using the <u>Individual Learning Plan</u> (ILP) (See **Section 6.2 (Part 3: Toolkit)**) which is prepared for and with each learner and is updated regularly to take account of rates of progression as outlined in the ongoing assessment process, and the provision of additional supports, where required. The ILP template provided has been designed as a 'living' document which will be completed on an ongoing basis throughout a programme of learning.

7. Recommendations

This research project is cognisant of the additional demands that these guidelines and toolkits will place on ESOL co-ordinators and tutors, while possibly also having resource implications for ETBs. Additional national and local supports and structures may therefore be required to ensure that these guidelines and toolkits are implemented in a coherent and supported manner across the wider Further Education and Training sector. As such this research report is recommending that the following supports be put in place to assist ETBs with the implementation of these guidelines and toolkit:

1. **ESOL Framework:** SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), in consultation with relevant stakeholders, should advance the development of a **national ESOL framework** which includes the wider reforms necessary to ensure a joined-up, comprehensive support system is put in place for the benefit of those migrant learners seeking access to FET provision.[19] SOLAS' 2018 review of ESOL provision[20] also recommended that this national framework should lead to the development of **local ESOL Frameworks** within each of the 16 ETBs.

2. **National Piloting:** The guidelines and toolkits contained in this research report should be piloted in a small number of ETBs.

3. **ESOL Audit:** In conjunction with the piloting and evaluation of the guidelines and toolkit a detailed **national ESOL audit** of existing unaccredited and accredited programmes should be carried out. In relation to accredited programmes, both the contents of this research report and the processes contained therein should be considered in the context of reviewing existing and/or developing new QQI accredited ESOL awards as a result of the ongoing review of QQI standards and awards at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 1 - 4. This includes an assessment of the role of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in relation to these QQI accredited programmes. The new ETBI/SOLAS working group on the development of unaccredited ESOL programmes also has a role to play in this audit, in terms of ensuring equality of access and opportunity for all migrant learners irrespective of the ETB attended or the certification status of the programme being pursued.

4. **Co-ordination Structures:** SOLAS, ETBI and DFHERIS should develop and implement an appropriate **co-ordination structure** for the delivery of the ESOL Service at national and individual ETB level, and which extends across the wider FET Service, to ensure that a standardised approach to the delivery of a quality and responsive service is achieved. At a minimum, those directly involved in the development and implementation of the initial and ongoing assessment process should be *au fait* with the varying language support needs of all migrant learners.

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19   SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To review the report in full, click this <u>link</u>.
20   Ibid.

Section One:
Introduction and Rationale

1.1 Project Aim and Rationale

This research report provides a comprehensive set of **guidelines on the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners**. It is focused specifically on those learners seeking access to both accredited and unaccredited English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and other relevant Further Education and Training programmes.

These guidelines have been developed as a result of a comprehensive consultation process with ESOL co-ordinators, tutors and migrant learners across the sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs), as well as other invested stakeholders such as the regional Skills for Work Co-ordinators. Both the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) were also consulted and provided useful guidance in terms of existing resources and research in the areas of initial and ongoing assessment of ESOL and ESOL literacy learners.

This research report also contains a **toolkit** which has been specifically designed to support both the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners. This toolkit is accompanied by **guidance notes** to support both co-ordinators and tutors on its practical implementation.

The guidelines and toolkit contained in this research report are in response to the key actions and recommendations outlined in the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 to 2019*[21] and the SOLAS report *English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 - 3 in ETBs.*[22] While both the guidelines and toolkit are influenced by these key actions and recommendations, additional national and international research has helped inform and shape the final structure of this research report. A detailed analysis of the results of this research, along with the outcomes of an extensive consultation process with ESOL co-ordinators, tutors, learners and other concerned stakeholders is provided in this report. Consequently, this research report has been designed to support co-ordinators and tutors in the practical implementation of the guidelines and toolkit.

1.2 Structure of Research

The research is divided into **three parts** to allow co-ordinators and tutors to dip in and out by referring to the parts that are of most relevance to their particular needs and those of the learner. The three parts are as follows:

Part 1: Research Report

Part 2: Guidelines on Initial and Ongoing Assessment

Part 3: Toolkit on Initial and Ongoing Assessment

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21   SOLAS (2014) "Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the FET strategy in full, click this link.
22   SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 - 3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To review the report in full, click this link.

For ease of reference each of these three parts are sub-divided into sections as outlined below:

> **Part 1: Research Report**
>
> **Section 1** provides an **introduction and rationale** to the development of good practice guidelines on the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency of migrant learners to include, rationale, core objectives and purpose, guiding principles, quality assurance conditions and external influences.
>
> **Section 2** contains an **international literature review** of theory and good practice in the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners. This literature review also includes an analysis of good practice in relation to ESOL literacy and how best to assist migrant learners presenting with literacy difficulties.
>
> **Section 3** provides a **detailed analysis of the results of the online survey, regional engagement sessions, engagement with external stakeholders and learner focus groups.** The contents of this section form a solid foundation for the development of good practice guidelines and toolkit for the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners accessing FET provision.
>
> **Section 4** discusses the development of a **universal definition of ESOL literacy** for application across all 16 ETBs and draws together the results of the international literature review and the various consultations that formed part of this research project.
>
> **Part 2: Guidelines on Initial and Ongoing Assessment**
>
> **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)** outlines **eight guidelines** for the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners to include both the rationale and general principles underpinning these guidelines. In addition, this section also includes details of a number of special considerations, as well as the limitations, challenges and risks to the implementation of these guidelines.

> **Part 3: Toolkit on Initial and Ongoing Assessment**
>
> **Section 6 (Part 3: Toolkit)** contains a range of **standardised forms and templates** to assist co-ordinators and tutors in recording, interpreting and reviewing the results of the initial and ongoing assessment tools.
>
> **Section 7 (Part 3: Toolkit)** contains the full **initial and ongoing assessment toolkit** to include resources, support materials and scoring rubrics to assist with the practical application and correction of the toolkit.

Finally, co-ordinators and tutors are encouraged to make use of the toolkit contained in **Section 7 (Part 3: Toolkit)** of this research report; however, it is recognised that ETBs may, in response to specific local circumstances, need to adapt the materials contained in this toolkit to develop customised solutions. This was recognised early in the consultation process when co-ordinators and tutors stated that any newly devised Initial Assessment Tool (IAT) needed to be flexible enough to allow for changes to be made without compromising the overall integrity of the assessment process. Notwithstanding any such modifications to the IAT, it is advised that amendments are aligned to the core principles and criteria underpinning the good practice guidelines contained in this research report.

1.3 Limitations of Research Project

In the absence of an ESOL policy or framework, individual ETBs continuously strive to provide localised solutions to address specific needs as and when they arise. It is neither the intention nor the desire of this research to remove such localised responses, but rather is an attempt to enshrine these models of best practice – as presented through the various consultations that took place – in a good practice approach to the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners. That being said, the intention is to structure this approach in such a way that it allows for divergence, without affecting the overall validity or reliability of the process, so that ETBs can continue to respond to specific and unique local circumstances.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that this research report outlines initial and ongoing assessment processes that are suitable for use with migrant learners accessing entry onto FET programmes up to and including level 4 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This

is in keeping with the priorities of the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019*,[23] its successor strategy Future FET: Transforming Learning – The National FET Strategy 2020 – 2024,[24] SOLAS' recent review of ESOL provision nationally,[25] as well as the 2013 Department of Education and Skills *Operational Guidelines for providers of adult literacy programmes.*[26] Each of these documents advocate the provision of ESOL supports to migrant learners up to and including NFQ level 3 or A2[27] equivalent on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR).

Notwithstanding the above priorities, it is important to highlight that FET is a diverse environment and spans a broad variety of provision ranging from unaccredited programmes to NFQ level 6, and traverses adult literacy, Youthreach, PLC, VTOS, BTEI, Skills for Work and training services. For ease of reference, **Figure 1.1** outlines the current range of FET provision.

Figure 1.1 Overview of FET Provision[28]
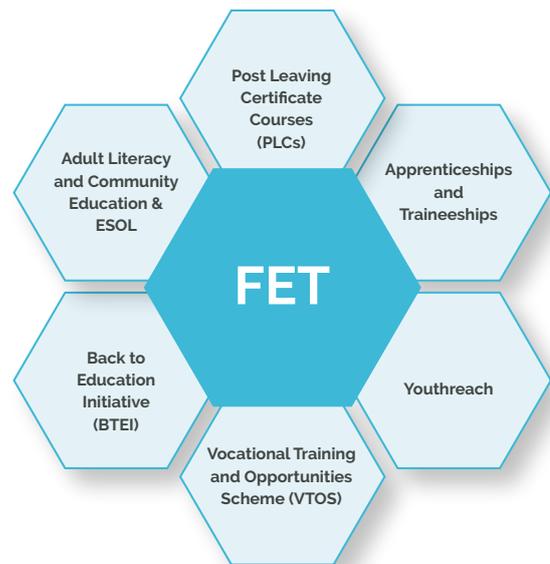
As a result of this diverse profile of FET, it would be impossible to expect that one tool would be capable of addressing the various initial and ongoing assessment requirements of each of these programmes. As such, and in keeping with the FET Strategy,[29] Operational Guidelines[30] and recent SOLAS review[31] the toolkit provided in this research is particularly suited to and focused on the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of those migrant learners looking to access ESOL and other FET programmes up to and including NFQ level 4.

23   SOLAS (2014) "Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the FET strategy in full, click this link.
24   SOLAS (2020) "Future FET: Transforming Learning – The National FET Strategy 2020 - 2024," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the FET strategy in full, click this link.
25   SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 -3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To review the report in full, click this link.
26   Department of Education and Skills (2013) "Adult Literacy Programme: Operational Guidelines for Providers," Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. To view the full guidelines visit the Department of Education and Skills website at https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Adult-Literacy/Adult-Literacy-Programme-Operational-Guidelines-for-Providers.pdf
27   There is a lot of discussion and dissention amongst ETBs regarding the mapping of QQI ESOL qualifications to the CEFR and whether or not ESOL QQI level 3 as it currently stands is the equivalent of A2 standard on the CEFR.
28   SOLAS (2020) "Final Report: Assessment of adult literacy and numeracy programmes at NFQ levels 4, 5 and 6: initial and ongoing." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).
29   SOLAS (2014) "Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the FET strategy in full, click this link.
30   Department of Education and Skills (2013) "Adult Literacy Programme: Operational Guidelines for Providers," Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. To view the full guidelines visit the Department of Education and Skills website at https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Adult-Literacy/Adult-Literacy-Programme-Operational-Guidelines-for-Providers.pdf
31   SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 - 3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To review the report in full, click this link.

1.4 Developing Guidelines for Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English Language Competency

The guidelines outlined in this research report are underpinned by a number of core principles and criteria. These are aimed at assisting co-ordinators and tutors across all ETBs in the implementation and interpretation of the guidelines and associated toolkit consistently and coherently.

1.4.1 Guiding Principles of Language Assessment

The guiding principles outlined in this section, which are influenced by the **principles of language assessment**,[32] underpin the entire approach to the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency. In total, there are **eight guiding principles**; four of which are informed by the principles of language assessment referenced above, and four influenced by this research project's companion guidelines on the initial and ongoing assessment of adult literacy and numeracy at NFQ levels 1 to 3[33] and levels 4 to 6.[34]

The **eight guiding principles** of initial and ongoing language assessment adopted in this research report are:

1. **Learner-centred:** Initial and ongoing assessment should be focused on the **specific needs, skills and goals** of migrant learners, while also considering their **previous educational backgrounds and experiences. Additional needs** in relation to literacy and numeracy also need to be considered when supporting learners to develop their basic English language competency.

2. **Practical:** As a core principle of language assessment, **practicality** refers to the various administrative aspects of the assessment process from administering the assessment tasks to learners to marking the completed assessments. Other factors, which would be of greater relevance to learners, include the time allotted to completion of the assessment and the user-friendliness of the instructions provided.

3. **Reliable:** It is important to ensure that assessment tasks are both consistent and trustworthy. In other words, if an assessment is **reliable**, it should be possible to administer the same test to learners of a similar baseline on multiple occasions in similar conditions and expect similar results to emerge. From a co-ordinator or tutor's point of view, the scoring mechanism must also be consistent and easy to interpret and apply.

4. **Valid:** For an assessment to be considered **valid** it must measure precisely what it sets out to measure. As such, learner performance in the assessment must be the key variable, and the assessment tasks must be structured in such a way that it yields meaningful data about the learner's language ability.

5. **Authentic:** Initial and ongoing assessment should be grounded in relevant, everyday social, personal, work-related and/or culturally relevant scenarios which are typically encountered by migrant learners as integrated and informed members of wider Irish society.

6. **Washback:**[35] While initial and ongoing assessment should focus on learner needs, it is equally important to ensure that assessment tasks are designed in such a way that they positively influence a tutor's approach to programme delivery. It must also be reflective of the various learning styles of learners, while also actively encouraging learners to improve their English language competency.

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32   Douglas Brown, H & Abeywickrama (2010) "Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practices," New York: Pearson Longman.
33   SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.
34   SOLAS (2020) "Final Report: Assessment of adult literacy and numeracy programmes at NFQ levels 4, 5 and 6: initial and ongoing." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).
35   For a definition of washback in assessment see Buck, G (1988), "Testing listening comprehension in Japanese university entrance examinations," JALT Journal 10, pp.15-42. To view the full article click here.

7. **Voluntary:** Learners need to be advised that completion of any initial or ongoing assessment tool is completely **voluntary** in nature but is designed to ensure that their learning experience is enhanced through the provision of relevant and targeted learning solutions and supports. In line with relevant data protection regulations, learners must be able to give their **informed consent** and make informed decisions regarding their participation in the assessment process.

8. **Confidential:** Learners should be reassured that their personal data, including their assessment results, are stored securely and are only shared with relevant personnel with their express and informed consent.

1.4.2 Underlying Assumptions in Initial and Ongoing Assessment

In developing good practice guidelines as part of this research report several underlying assumptions have been made and which are fundamental to the successful implementation of a co-ordinated approach to initial and ongoing assessment.

1. Assessment tasks are aligned to the intended **Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes** (MIPLOS) of relevant component awards at levels 1 to 4 on the NFQ.

2. The approach to initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners is **standardised** across all sixteen ETBs.

3. The assessment materials and resources provided as part of the toolkit are **quality assured** and **benchmarked** against international standards; namely the CEFR.

4. The **assessment materials** provided in the toolkit are utilised by all sixteen ETBs but can be adapted to suit specific local contexts and needs of individual ETBs and their learners. When responding to unique local circumstances requiring customised resources, ETBs are advised to adapt the resources contained in the toolkit presented in this research report rather than developing their own resources from scratch. This is to ensure that such resources remain benchmarked to the good practice standard as recommended in this research.

5. The process for **administering the initial and ongoing assessment tasks** is determined by individual ETBs but should be considered in a manner that does not compromise the reliability or validity of the overall process.

1.4.3 Quality Assurance Conditions for Initial and Ongoing Assessment

In devising guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency and the associated toolkit, it was important to ensure that the various guidelines, materials and resources provided conformed to several core quality assurance principles and standards.

1. All materials and resources were designed in an **age-appropriate and culturally relevant** manner to ensure their suitability for use with adult migrant learners from a diverse range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

2. The approach to initial and ongoing assessment outlined in this research report is **holistic** in nature and **provides a complete picture** of a learner's English language competency at a point in time and traverses the core language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

3. Materials and resources provided are **appropriate** for learners undertaking language-focused courses at NFQ levels 1 to 4 and are benchmarked to the CEFR.[36]

36   Any references to equivalences between NFQ level ESOL awards and the CEFR are for the purpose of providing a baseline level and are solely the opinion of the author of this research report and/or other personnel consulted in the course of the research.

4. Materials and resources provided represent **authentic, real-world based scenarios** linked to common everyday personal, social and work-related situations encountered by migrant learners while remaining **culturally sensitive** and sufficiently general.

5. The initial and ongoing assessment processes are designed and conducted in a way that **assesses learners on what they actually know**, and not on what they don't know at a particular point in time.

6. Materials and resources contained in the toolkit are **regularly reviewed and updated** to ensure they remain relevant and appropriate to the needs of migrant learners. In developing these materials, the focus was on the application of skills in real-life scenarios and not just in the learning environment. This approach is in keeping with the Council of the European Union's *key competences for lifelong learning.*[37]

1.5 Defining Initial Assessment of English Language Competency

A review of the existing international literature on initial assessment highlighted that definitions of the concept of initial assessment are as many as they are diverse. The most relevant definition, in the context of this research project, is the one provided by the Adult Literacy Organisers' Association (ALOA), and although it relates specifically to the assessment of literacy and numeracy skills, it is still relevant in the context of assessing English language competency. The ALOA definition states that initial assessment should simply be viewed as a learner's starting point on the wider learning journey and as such should be:

> carried out in the manner described [to] ensure a common understanding between the provider and the learner on initial assessment needs and the correct placement in an appropriate learning programme.[38]

In practical terms, initial assessment should be an **ongoing process** which produces meaningful data allowing for informed decision-making regarding the type and level of supports to be provided for learners.[39] Furthermore, initial assessment should be an ongoing process that commences at pre-entry stage, continues after a learner commences and ultimately settles into a relevant programme of learning.

It is equally important to recognise that initial assessment can take many guises and it is highly likely that a meaningful, inclusive and learner-centred approach will include a combination of the different methods, which are outlined in **Figure 1.2**.

Figure 1.2 Forms of Initial Assessment

Initial Screening

Placement Testing

Diagnostic Testing
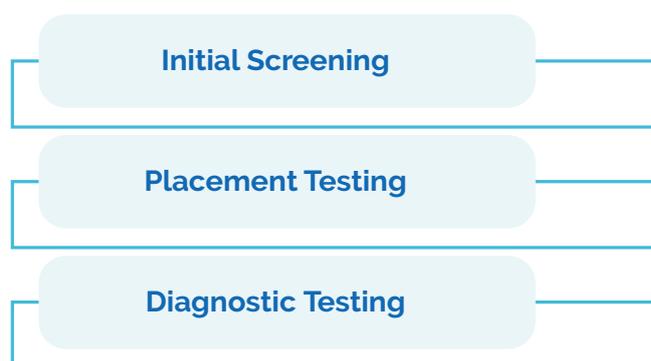
Initial Screening is primarily concerned with **identifying which learners require support** by providing and indicating an approximate level of their skills.[40]

Placement Testing is used at pre-course stage to **establish a learner's baseline academic or skills level** in order to ensure accurate course placement.

Diagnostic Testing is a more robust, in-depth form of initial assessment aimed at identifying learner strengths, weaknesses and specific learning needs.

1.6 Purpose of Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English Language Competency

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the core focus of publicly funded ESOL programmes is to provide English language supports to migrant learners to enable them to integrate socially, economically and culturally into local and wider Irish society. In recent years, the profile of migrant

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37 Council of the European Union's (2018) "Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning," To view the full report, click here.
38 ALOA (2014) "Initial Assessment in the Literacy Service," To view the full report, please click here.
39 Knell, S and Scogins, J. (2000) "Adult Literacy Assessment Tool Kit," Illinois Literacy Resource Development Center, p.2.
40 Department for Education and Employment (2001), "Initial Assessment of Learning and Support Needs and Planning Learning to Meet Needs," Sheffield: Raising Standards Division: Study and Good Practice Transition Team, p.17. To access full report, please click here.

learners seeking language support has diversified, with ETBs now catering for economic migrants, programme refugees and asylum seekers on an ongoing basis. In addition, there is now also a much greater focus on and need for relevant provision for migrant learners in employment, especially those migrants occupying low-skilled roles primarily in the manufacturing, food production, retail and hospitality sectors. For example, Census 2011 highlighted that just over 38% of migrant workers were employed in the food and accommodation sectors.[41] It is, therefore, important that initial and ongoing assessment remains responsive to the diverse and complex needs of all migrant learners.

Consequently, it would follow that, given both the diverse and complex nature of ESOL provision, coupled with the multifaceted remit of Further Education and Training (FET), approaches to the initial assessment of English language competency require a combination of some or all of the different forms of initial assessment as outlined in **Figure 1.2.** Such an approach is firmly in line with the assertion that, 'to be effective, assessment must recognise the diversity of learners and allow for differences in style and rates of learning.'[42] The specific details of the initial assessment process, as well as ongoing assessment, being recommended in this research report, are outlined and discussed in greater detail in **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines).**

In deciding the best approach for a robust initial and ongoing assessment process, sight must not be lost of the **primary purpose of initial assessment** of English language competency which is, **to establish a baseline assessment of a learner's English language skills at pre-entry stage so that appropriate supports can be put in place in an effective, timely and pro-active manner.**

Additionally, in relation to the **ongoing assessment** of language competency, it is important to qualify its purpose in the context of learners pursuing accredited courses through QQI or other providers. Most migrant learners will pursue ESOL accredited component modules at levels 1 – 4 on the NFQ at some point on their learning journeys with ETBs. It is, therefore, neither the intention nor the desire of the guidelines and toolkit outlined in this research report to either duplicate or replace the assessment requirements of these QQI programmes. Instead, it

is intended that the process of ongoing assessment will allow programme co-ordinators and tutors to monitor a learner's progression, identify whether additional literacy or numeracy supports are required and to encourage collaboration amongst co-ordinators and tutors throughout the entire duration of a programme of learning. This approach conforms to the one outlined in the recently published guidelines on the initial and ongoing assessment of adult literacy and numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3 where it is stated that assessment measures outlined therein were formative in approach and designed to:

> complement the assessment for the accreditation process by providing practical supports for a range of additional purposes not directly related to accreditation.[43]

In fact, the need for such an approach is more profound in terms of assessing language competency given numerous sectoral calls for language assessment to be benchmarked against the CEFR.

Equally, ongoing assessment could have a summative function at the end of a course by acting as the initial assessment for the next level of programme a learner is progressing to. As such, this will help address one of the more pertinent challenges with existing QQI ESOL awards, namely the significant gap between levels. The ongoing assessment, completed as a summative assessment, will signal whether or not a learner requires additional supports, such as a bridging programme, before progressing from a level 3 to a level 4 programme, for example.

Notwithstanding the purposes of ongoing assessment, the resources and materials used to facilitate this process must focus on assessing a learner's ability to apply their learning in real-world scenarios in Ireland, rather than providing them with 'holiday English,' which is also one of the core issues with existing QQI ESOL component awards.

1.7 Components of Initial and Ongoing Assessment

In keeping with the guidelines on initial assessment of literacy and numeracy at NFQ levels 1 - 3[44] the guidelines and toolkit outlined in this research report

41   Power and Szlovak (2011), "Migrants and the Irish Economy," The Integration Centre. To access the full report, please click here.
42   Alberta Education (2012), "Assessment Tools & Strategies: Language Proficiency Assessment," Canada: Alberta Education, p.3. To view the full report, please click here.
43   SOLAS (2018) Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report. Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.
44   SOLAS (2018) Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report. Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.

are comprised of three interconnected components of initial and ongoing assessment:

1. **Methods of assessment** concerns the specific activities and tasks a learner is required to complete as part of the initial and ongoing assessment processes. These activities may include informal interviews, reading comprehension tasks, or graded writing tasks.

2. **Supporting materials** include companion paper-based or online resources such as links to external documents and resources, to include for example, the CEFR or Scottish model resources.

3. **Recording templates** are contained within the research report and are designed to assist programme co-ordinators and tutors to record and track individual learner performance in the initial and ongoing assessment processes.

Each of these components are addressed in detail throughout this research report.

1.8 External Influences on Initial or Ongoing Assessment Performance

Before proceeding to look at the initial and ongoing assessment processes in detail, it is important to briefly address the critical issue of external influences on assessment performance, or more precisely their negative impact on learner performance.

The **latency effect**[45] highlights that, in the real world, not all learners will perform to the best of their abilities in more formalised or semi-formalised testing environments. As such, assessment results can be skewed and could potentially adversely impact both learner performance and future levels of engagement with providers. This underperformance has many potential causes, but some of the more common reasons may relate to the issues highlighted in Figure 1.3.[46]

As a result of the latency effect on learner performance in initial and ongoing assessment environments, the entire process needs to be viewed and conducted as a staged, ongoing process rather than a once-off occurrence. As such, initial assessment should occur throughout a learner's initial weeks on a programme of study. This will be outlined in detail in **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)**.

Figure 1.3 Examples of latency effect on learner performance in assessments

Illness	Late arrival	Fear
Stress	Lack of confidence	Inexperience of formalised assessments
	Previous negative educational experiences	
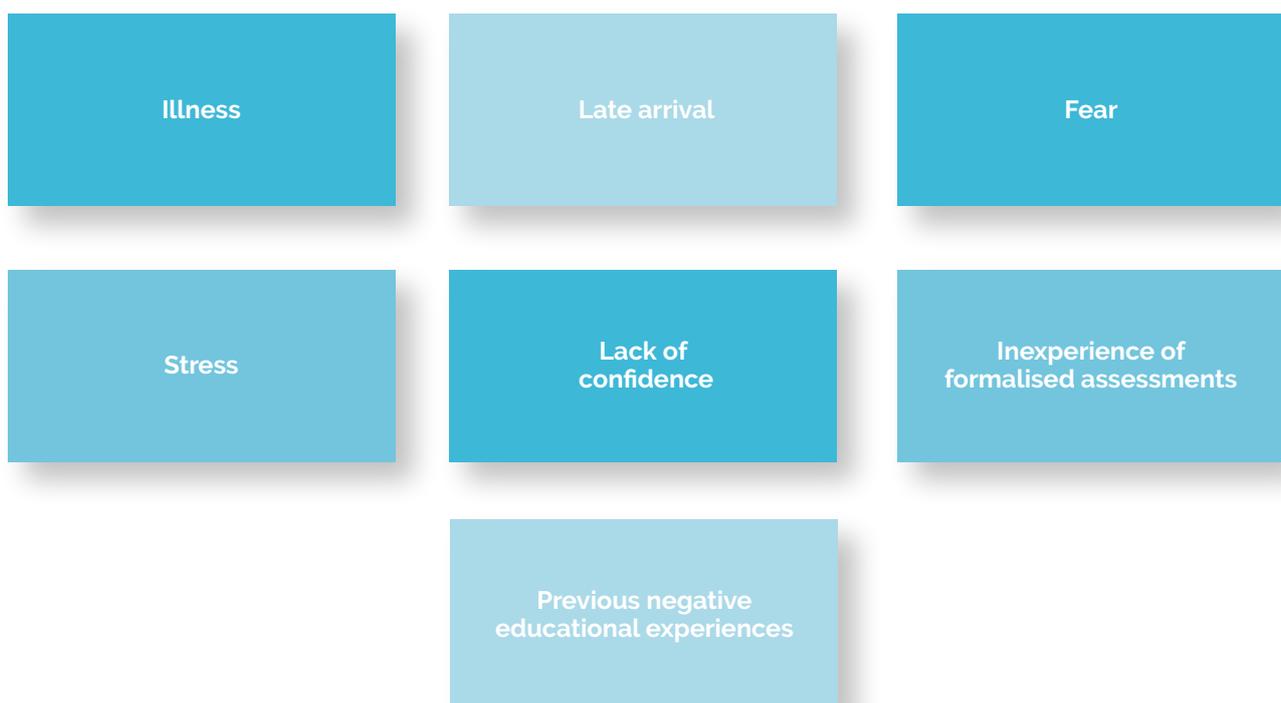
45 For a much fuller discussion of the latency effect please see Section 2.6.1 p. 34
46 These reasons are drawn from anecdotal experiences of ESOL tutors as well as discussions with tutors as part of the Regional Engagement sessions.

Section Two:
International Literature Review

2.1 Background to Literature Review

Understanding the background to and development of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision in Ireland, at both the strategic and implementation levels, is intrinsic to establishing a solid baseline position for the need for good practice guidelines and toolkit for the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners. Moreover, as it is normally a migrant learner's first interaction with an ETB, it is equally important in this literature review, to outline the need for a standardised approach to a staged initial and ongoing assessment process that is firmly learner-centred and which has a clear and meaningful purpose, which is in turn communicated to the learner from the outset. This discussion takes the form of a theoretical overview of the purpose of and need for a standardised initial and ongoing assessment process, as well as a broad synopsis of the different types of assessment processes that could be utilised.

Furthermore, in setting the scene and outlining the purpose of and need for a standardised model of initial and ongoing assessment, whatever format it may take, it is important to highlight that pre-course assessment can take a number of different forms; initial screening, placement tests and diagnostic testing being the most prominent. Consequently, this poses questions around the differences between these three primary forms of initial assessment and which, if any of them, is most relevant or suited to the context of Further Education and Training (FET) provision for migrant learners. Alternatively, perhaps, in viewing initial and ongoing assessment as a staged process rather than a once off occurrence, there may be a role for each of them. This remains to be seen and as such, a number of key issues will be assessed throughout this literature review, as well as throughout this research, with a view to providing a comprehensive set of good practice guidelines for a wholly learner-focused model of initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency.

Finally, in relation to ESOL literacy, this literature review draws on both national and international research in this area to formulate, in **Section 4**, a universal definition of ESOL literacy in the context of publicly funded FET provision. In so doing, it is envisaged that this definition will be applied across all sixteen ETBs and will assist in determining the appropriateness and timing of relevant literacy supports for migrant learners. As part of this analysis, the wider research project will draw conclusions based on the results of both this literature review and the results of the extensive consultation process with ETBs and other concerned stakeholders regarding their experiences of engaging and working with ESOL literacy learners. Such an approach will help ensure that both ESOL and literacy tutors are reassured that the definition arrived at here will be sympathetic to and compatible with, not only the specific needs of migrant learners but also their cultural backgrounds and prior educational experiences in their home countries.

2.2 Who are migrant learners in the FET context?

From the outset, this literature review commences with a brief clarification of what exactly is meant by the term 'migrant learner' in the context of publicly funded FET provision in Ireland. It is not, however, meant to be an in-depth analysis of the complex issues concerning the rights and responsibilities of different migrant groupings, but rather is designed to provide a broad overview in order to outline the context behind the use of the term 'migrant learner' throughout this research project.

To contextualise, migrant learners are both the focus of and beneficiaries of the endeavours of this research project; namely the development of good practice guidelines and associated toolkit for the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency in the context of providing appropriate ESOL support and also to assess suitability for follow-on mainstream progression options as provided through the full gamut of ETB

FET provision. Firstly, however, what is meant by the term 'migrant learner' in this context?

While the Oxford English Dictionary defines a migrant as a 'person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work,'[47] this may be an overly simplistic and somewhat narrowminded interpretation of the term, particularly in the context of the present research project. Furthermore, it does not provide any real insight into the different types of migrants normally resident in a given state, and by extension potentially looking to access ESOL and other FET opportunities. In reality, it has to date proven difficult to arrive at a sufficiently comprehensive definition of the term 'migrant learner,' especially one which sympathetically clarifies the complexities of migration. Rather than viewing this as a criticism of existing research in this area, what it actually highlights is the extremely complicated and diverse nature of migration, and by extension previous efforts to contextualise such complexities in a meaningful and easily understood manner. In fact, the United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs argues that there is no clear formal legal definition of the term international migrant, but does, however, contend that:

> most experts agree that an international migrant is someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status.[48]

While this definition does at least, at a purely basic level, refer to the issues of legal status in migration, it fails to identify the distinct differences between the different types of migrants captured using this very term.

To clarify, in the context of FET provision in Ireland, the main groups of migrants accessing ETB FET provision are economic migrants, programme refugees and asylum seekers. Before proceeding it is important to clarify some of the key differences between these three distinct groups of migrants, as it can have considerable implications on their respective relationships with ETBs, as well as impacting the type of programmes and services they can access. Different migrant needs are outlined below, and the resulting initial and ongoing assessment process will be cognisant of and sympathetic to these different requirements.

An economic migrant, at a purely simplistic level, can be best defined in terms of the aforementioned Oxford English Dictionary definition, in that such migrants tend to relocate to Ireland of their own volition for primarily economic motivations. Conversely, neither programme refugees nor asylum seekers have a choice in their relocation; rather they tend to be relocated or relocate out of necessity. In more precise terms, programme refugees are selected for resettlement to Ireland as part of its membership of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Refugee Resettlement Programme (RRP). As their refugee status is already determined under the 1951 Refugee Convention,[49] they are automatically designated as refugees upon arrival to Ireland and do not need to apply for refugee status here. Refugees[50] selected for resettlement under this programme have certain rights in terms of access to FET opportunities, particularly in relation to English language supports. These specific requirements need to be carefully considered in the wider initial and ongoing assessment process. Asylum seekers fleeing persecution or the fear of persecution in their home countries are distinct from programme refugees since they arrive in Ireland seeking refuge. Recent important legislative changes regarding access to FET provision for asylum seekers[51] need to be considered in the context of the initial and ongoing assessment process.

In summary and notwithstanding the evident flaws with existing definitions of the terms 'migrant' or 'international migrant,' it remains the intention of this research project to continue to use the term 'migrant learner' in reference to those accessing or looking to access relevant FET provision, and who may require initial and ongoing assessment of their English language competency. The justification for this can be best expressed through the words of Morrice, Shan and Sprung (2018) when they state that use of the term migrant is warranted since it 'captures the greater complexities, fluidity and temporaneous nature of migration [...].'[52] In the interest of complete clarity and transparency, it is the intention to broaden the basis of the definitions presented in this literature review to take account of the various issues outlined in relation to reasons for and the duration of displacement or relocation. It is, therefore, being proposed by the author of this report that a migrant learner is **someone who changes his or her country**

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47   The Oxford English Dictionary can be accessed online by clicking on the link.
48   United Nations (n.d.) "Refugees and Migrants: Definitions," To access the full definitions, please click on the link.
49   To view the full text of the 1951 Refugee Convention, please click on the link.
50   For more information around the educational entitlements of programme refugees, please click the link.
51   For more information around the educational entitlements of asylum seekers, please click the link.
52   Morrice, L, Shan, H and Sprung, A. (2018), "Migration, adult education and learning," Studies in the Education of Adults, 49(2), p.129. To access the full article please click on the link.

of usual residence either through choice or necessity on either a temporeanous or more long term basis and who is seeking access to relevant FET supports due to their status in Ireland. This definition, it is felt, more accurately accounts for, and is more reflective of the issues relating to the nature of and duration of migration, something which has been lacking in existing definitions. Accordingly, this definition may be useful when referring to migrant learners accessing initial and ongoing assessment of their English language competency.

Despite the justification for the continued use of the term 'migrant learner' outlined above, it is recognised and acknowledged that the term is contested and considered inappropriate by some practitioners due to negative associations with the use of the term. However, the term is used here as there does not appear to be a more appropriate term and the development of a more acceptable term is beyond the scope of this current research project, and possibly even outside the remit of the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. Notwithstanding this, in proposing a definition of migrant learner which fits the context of this research, ardent efforts have been made to negate the negative aspects of the existing use of the term migrant learner.

2.3 Evolution of ESOL Provision in Ireland

The challenge presented by this research project is to produce a set of good practice guidelines and associated toolkit for the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners accessing FET provision as provided by ETBs. Consequently, there is a need to outline how we arrived at this point through a brief overview of the evolution of publicly funded ESOL provision in Ireland.

The *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education (2000)* published by the then Department of Education and Science (now the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) was the Irish government's first policy document to openly highlight the need for 'basic literacy and language education for all immigrants.'[53] This development occurred at a time when net inward migration, primarily from within the European Union (EU) accession states, was becoming a common feature of the growing and evolving Irish economy. In real terms, this recognition paved the way for the allocation of responsibility for the provision of publicly funded ESOL provision to the then Vocational Education Committees (VECs) as part of their core adult literacy provision. Since then net inward migration to Ireland has grown exponentially to the extent that there are now migrants residing across the Republic of Ireland from over 200 countries worldwide.[54] Consequently, the need for access to more relevant, meaningful and responsive ESOL provision has never been more apparent than it is today. Although this has long been the case and has been long recognised by ETBs, other state agencies and concerned stakeholders, government policy was slow to emerge to adequately respond to this significant and pressing need.

Soon after the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) published an important report in direct response to the White Paper. Entitled *English for Speakers of Other Languages: Policy Guidelines and Supports for V.E.C. Literacy Schemes* (2002), this timely report presented several important recommendations concerning the provision of suitable ESOL provision that would allow migrants to 'function autonomously in […] society.'[55] Subsequently, in 2007 the then Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) published a detailed report containing a number of recommendations relating to the development of a more strategically focused and responsive model of ESOL provision. One of the more pertinent recommendations related to the need for a more 'coherent national ESOL Service.'[56] This call for coherence recognised the need for the development of a national ESOL Service which was sufficiently equipped to meet the immediate personal, social and work-related needs of migrant learners.

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53   Department of Education and Science (2000) "Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education," Dublin: Government Publications. To view the white paper in full, click this link.
54   Central Statistics Office, visit www.cso.ie
55   National Adult Literacy Agency (2002) "English for Speakers of Other Languages: Policy Guidelines and Supports for V.E.C. Adult Literacy Schemes," Dublin: NALA, p.6. To view the full report, click here.
56   Irish Vocational Education Association (2007) "ESOL: A survey of its provision in the VEC Sector," p.2. To view a summary of the report, please click here.

In 2008 Horwath Consulting was jointly commissioned by the Department of Education and Science and the Office of the Minister for Integration to prepare a detailed report on ESOL provision nationally. The resultant report was entitled *Development of a National English Language Policy and Framework for Legally Resident Adult Immigrants*,[57] and amongst its numerous recommendations, it called for the development of a national ESOL Policy.

Furthermore, given that there remain ongoing skills shortages across a number of core sectors nationally,[58] as well as new and emerging industries, there is a pressing need to address these skills shortages by opening these sectors to the significant and ever-growing migrant population. Attempts are being made in this regard within the context of the Migrant Integration Strategy where a commitment is made to 'increase migrant participation in specific areas (such as in entrepreneurship or public sector employment).'[59] That being said there is a need to ensure that:

> a balance is achieved between the need for industry to innovate and invest in new processes to reduce dependence on low skilled labour and ensure that labour shortages do not result in lost commercial opportunities or value-added to the economy.[60]

This can and will only happen over time and is conditional on the development of a coherent national ESOL Service firmly driven by a national ESOL framework which commences with a standardised approach to a staged initial and ongoing assessment process that places learners at the heart of the process, and which provides them with a meaningful launchpad for accessing additional FET opportunities that best position them to take advantage of employment opportunities in these growing and emerging sectors. This

approach was strongly advocated for by the Migrant Integration Strategy when it stated that 'follow-on programmes will be delivered to enable migrants to acquire more intensive language skills to assist their integration into the workplace.'[61] Such a move would have the distinct advantage of ensuring more sustainable employment in the longer term for migrant workers. Thankfully, however, as a direct result of the recently published review of publicly funded ESOL provision provided by ETBs,[62] SOLAS remains committed to the development of a coherent ESOL framework for the sector. This is an extremely welcome development and will, over time, bring about clear results for all migrant learners along the lines of those outlined here.

In 2013 the Department of Education and Skills (now the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) commissioned a review of the Adult Literacy programme which culminated in the publication of revised *Adult Literacy Operational Guidelines for Providers.*[63] In reaffirming the target profile group and needs of adult ESOL learners, these revised guidelines specified that ESOL provision should prioritise low-skilled and unemployed migrants and that provision should be focused on progressing learners to an A2 standard of English on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), or QQI level 3. Further to this, SOLAS published its inaugural *Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy for the period 2014 – 2019.*[64] Within this strategy document, it was once again reiterated that core ESOL provision should be focused on low-skilled and unemployed migrants. In 2017 the Department of Justice and Equality launched the *Migrant Integration Strategy*[65] which also confirmed the importance of language acquisition for migrants seeking to play a more active role at all levels of Irish society. Consequently, ETBs were viewed as having an extremely important role to play in the attainment of this goal.

57   Horwath Consulting Ireland (2008) "Development of a National English Language Policy and Framework for Legally-Resident Adult Immigrants," Dublin: Horwath Consulting. The full report is available from the Department of Education and Skills Website at https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/horwath_final_report.pdf

58   For details of specific skills shortages in the Irish economy see: Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and Forfás (2005) 'Skills needs in the Irish economy: The role of migration. To access the full report, click this link.

59   Department of Justice and Equality (2017) 'Migrant Integration Strategy – A Blueprint for Future,' p.9, Dublin: Government Publications. To access the full strategy, please click this link.

60   Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. "Review of Economic Migration Policy: Report of the Inter-Departmental Group, p.38. Dublin: Government Publications. To access the full report, please click this link.

61   Ibid.

62   SOLAS (2018) English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 -3 in ETBs, Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To review the report in full, click this link.

63   Department of Education and Skills (2013) "Adult Literacy Programme: Operational Guidelines for Providers," Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. To view the full guidelines visit the Department of Education and Skills website at https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Adult-Literacy/Adult-Literacy-Programme-Operational-Guidelines-for-Providers.pdf

64   SOLAS (2014) "Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the FET strategy in full, click this link.

65   Department of Justice and Equality (2017) "The Migrant Integration Strategy: A Blueprint for the Future," Dublin: Government Publications. To view the full strategy, please click here.

Most recently, in 2018 SOLAS published the outcomes of a comprehensive review of publicly funded ESOL provision entitled ***English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 – 3 in ETBs.***[66] In this detailed report, twenty-seven wide-ranging recommendations were made relating to the core areas of funding and eligibility criteria, assessment, curriculum development and programme and accreditation and staffing. The FET sector continues to implement these recommendations with this research report forming part of the implementation process.

Given that a national policy has been slow to materialise over the past decades, it is perhaps, understandable that research reports would address similar themes. The most recent report from SOLAS[67] highlighted the ongoing need for action across a number of areas including initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency.

While this section sought to provide a brief historical overview of the organic evolution of ESOL provision from 2000 onwards, the next section of this literature review complements this with a similar overview of the development of the awareness of and call for the instigation of a standardised approach to the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency. This will, in turn, be followed by a more comprehensive, high-level analysis of initial and ongoing assessment as a concept, and how it has, to date, been dealt with and discussed in the relevant literature on this topic.

2.4 Approaches to Initial Assessment of Language Competency in the Irish Context

As the approach to ESOL delivery has evolved organically over the past twenty-five years, ETBs have, up to now, been required to address the needs of migrant learners without recourse to

good practice guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment. While the preliminary findings of the primary research conducted as part of this project, by means of a detailed online survey of ESOL tutors, found that most ETBs currently assess migrant learners formally and informally upon entry, there was an expressed desire among research participants for a more structured and standardised approach to the overall initial and ongoing assessment process. The results of the online survey will be outlined and discussed in detail in **Section 3**.

The desire for a more structured and standardised approach to initial and ongoing assessment, and which is aligned to relevant international models of good practice, is not a new one. In fact, going right back to the **White Paper on Adult Education** (2000), consistent calls have been made for a more joined-up and strategically rooted approach to how ETBs engage with learners throughout their entire learning journey, from point of entry onwards. More recently, the FET Strategy, 2014 - 2019 outlines the need for migrant learners to be initially assessed at point of entry to the ETB. The FET Strategy[68] provides a clear policy for ESOL provision in committing to provide 'clear policy for ESOL provision with priority to low-skilled and unemployed migrants,'[69] and which included a process to 'assess language competency on entry of learners to ETB provision.'[70]

This commitment to much-needed reform of this key aspect of wider FET provision, as exemplified by this present research project, clearly echoes the recommendations presented in the revised ***Operational Guidelines for Providers of Adult Literacy Programmes*** (2013), especially in terms of the recommendation that 'a separate assessment should be carried out for ESOL learners.'[71] Moreover, this recommendation followed on from the clear calls made by tutors via the Horwath Report (2008) for 'assessment of proficiency in English [to] be the starting point for referral to classes, instead of using nationality and background.'[72] The final report's recommendations acknowledged and endorsed this call when it stated the need for an 'independent

66   SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 -3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the report in full, click this link.
67   SOLAS (2018) English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 -3 in ETBs, Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To review the report in full, click this link.
68   SOLAS (2014) "Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019," p 100. Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/ Further Education and Training Authority. To view the FET Strategy in full, click this link.
69   Ibid.
70   Ibid
71   Department of Education and Skills (2013) "Adult Literacy Programme: Operational Guidelines for Providers, Dublin: Government Publications," p.8, Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. To view the full guidelines visit the Department of Education and Skills website at https://www.education. ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Adult-Literacy/Adult-Literacy-Programme-Operational-Guidelines-for-Providers. pdf
72   Horwath Consulting Ireland (2008) "Development of a National English Language Policy and Framework for Legally-Resident Adult Immigrants," p.59, Dublin: Horwath Consulting. The full report is available from the Department of Education and Skills Website at https://www.education.ie/en/ Publications/Policy-Reports/horwath_final_report.pdf

standardised test for assessment prior to and after commencing language tuition.'[73] Of particular note here is the call for initial assessment 'prior to and after commencing language tuition,' something which is a cornerstone of the recommendations contained in this research report. In other words, as will be referred to on an ongoing basis in this report, initial assessment, and by extension ongoing assessment, will be viewed as a staged process that should continue until after a learner commences on an appropriate programme of learning.

Returning to the current overview of the development of initial and ongoing assessment policy and procedures, it is equally pertinent to note that the Horwath Report also recommended that the development of any initial assessment process should 'assess the level of competence on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).'[74] This was something the research was particularly mindful of during the data analysis process. For now, it is important to briefly mention that the alignment of both initial and ongoing assessment tools and actual programme modules to the CEFR has long been a desire of ESOL tutors nationally. The virtues and value of aligning these assessment tools to the CEFR will be highlighted throughout this research report.

Immediately prior to the joint commissioning of the Horwath Report, the IVEA produced multiple reports and recommendations relating to ESOL provision, many of which directly related to calls for the development of a standardised initial assessment process. For example, a detailed working group report on lifelong learning, entitled ***Pilot framework for educational provision for asylum seekers, refugees and minority linguistic groups***, recommended that initial assessment be carried out, stating that 'following an initial interview, assessment should take place in a non-threatening environment.'[75] Similarly, NALA's policy guidelines and supports for V.E.C. Adult Literacy Schemes (2002) recommended that the first stage of a learner's interaction with service providers should be an initial assessment aimed at identifying 'current competence in the four language skills.'[76] These guidelines were quite detailed and comprehensive in terms of outlining the purpose of and approaches

to conducting initial assessment and will assist in the discussion on the good practice guidelines outlined in **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)**.

As previously highlighted, SOLAS is firmly committed to supporting, through the commissioning of this research project, the development of good practice guidelines and toolkit to support the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of those migrant learners seeking access to FET opportunities provided by ETBs. It is therefore the express aim of this research to bring about the realisation of 'a national protocol for ESOL initial [and ongoing] assessment'.[77] as recommended in the recently published review of publicly funded ESOL provision.

Notwithstanding the commitment to support development in ESOL provision within the Irish FET sector, it is also useful to look at international models of good practice in this regard. In so doing, the hope is that this research project can learn from these models and provide a robust initial and ongoing assessment process and associated guidelines for successful implementation in the Irish context. Before proceeding to look at such examples, the next section of this literature review will strive to provide a high-level analysis of initial and ongoing assessment as a concept, and how it is discussed internationally in the relevant literature. This will allow for, when it comes to assessing the chosen good practice models for relevance to the Irish context, benchmarking them against key thinking on the subject.

73   Ibid, p.97
74   Horwath Consulting Ireland (2008) "Development of a National English Language Policy and Framework for Legally-Resident Adult Immigrants," p.97, Dublin: Horwath Consulting. The full report is available from the Department of Education and Skills Website at https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/horwath_final_report.pdf
75   Irish Vocational Education Association (2001) "Pilot framework for educational provision for asylum seekers, refugees and minority linguistic groups: An IVEA working group report Volume 1: Lifelong learning," p.23, Dublin: IVEA. To view the full report, please click the link.
76   National Adult Literacy Agency (2002) "English for Speakers of Other Languages: Policy Guidelines and Supports for V.E.C. Adult Literacy Schemes," Dublin: NALA, p.20. To view the full report, please click the link.
77   SOLAS (2018) English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 - 3 in ETBs, Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report, please click the link.

2.5 What is Initial and Ongoing Assessment? A Theoretical Analysis

> 'Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.' (Einstein)

What is meant by the concept of initial assessment? In posing this question at the outset, it is sure to spark some controversy since the literature on this subject is both equally diverse and divisive. It is not, however, intended to promote or cultivate controversy, but rather outline the core problems openly and transparently, so that it will be possible somehow to arrive at an acceptable response and solution to the ongoing and growing calls for an initial and ongoing assessment process to be developed and implemented.

There are areas of contention in the literature surrounding initial and ongoing assessment of language. It is neither the intention nor wish to get bogged down in a high-level discussion of these specific issues, but rather it is hoped that this analysis can arrive at a sufficiently coherent and acceptable understanding of what initial and ongoing assessment is and what it is not so that it can be contextualised in the overall development and framing of good practice guidelines.

The extent of this challenge can be best represented with reference to the English author and counsellor Craig D. Lounsbrough's assertion that:

> sometimes we can't quite put our finger on something important because we've all got our fingers wrapped around a bunch of other things that are not important.[78]

In other words, there is a need to contextualise the concept of initial and ongoing assessment by identifying and actively promoting the core components of the overall process, while at the same time triangulating back to the immediate needs of migrant learners accessing FET opportunities.

For example, according to a 2014 publication by the Adult Literacy Organisers' Association (ALOA) on initial assessment of literacy and numeracy in general, it should essentially be viewed as a learner's starting point on the wider learning journey and should be:

> carried out in the manner described [to] ensure a common understanding between the provider and the learner on initial assessment needs and the correct placement in an appropriate learning programme.[79]

While, in the context of a review of the existing literature, this definition could be considered as aspirational rather than setting out what exactly initial assessment is. In other words, it better defines the purpose or intention of initial assessment and viewed in this context could be quite effective and user-friendly. Notwithstanding this, this definition was chosen as a starting point since it was devised by the ALOA, which is the representative body for Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs), who are responsible for the management of ETB ESOL provision.

In a similar vein, the UK Department for Employment and Learning (2006) states that initial assessment:

> first and foremost [is] a process, it is not just the administration of a single test such as one of the commercially produced assessment tools (often labelled initial assessment test). This ongoing assessment can also be defined in the same way. The initial and ongoing assessment process may, therefore, include the appropriate administration of such an assessment tool to provide a baseline assessment. On its own, however, such a test provides insufficient data for a tutor to determine accurately a learner's strengths and weaknesses, and therefore the most appropriate level of [qualification] for the learner to work towards.[80]

This particular definition perfectly and explicitly outlines what exactly initial, and indeed ongoing, assessment is and should be viewed as.

What the definitions of initial and ongoing assessment discussed here aim to communicate is that initial assessment should be viewed as a staged process or package of measures that span a learner's initial interactions with an ETB, from pre-entry stage to the early stages following commencement of a

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78   https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/fingers
79   Adult Literacy Organisers' Association (2014) "Initial Assessment in the Literacy Service," p.12. To view the full report, please click here.
80   Department for Employment and Learning (n.d.) "Essential Skills Good Practice: The Assessment Process," p.5, London: Crown Publications. To view the full report, please click here.

relevant programme of learning. In a sense, initial assessment should be seen as a 'dynamic, ongoing process in which data and information collected are used for systematic decision-making about services being provided.'[81]

Furthermore, any good practice guidelines produced on foot of this research project need to be not only equal but also equitable, since according to the UK Department of Education and Employment (2001):

> initial assessment is the process of identifying an individual's learning and support needs to enable the design of an individual learning plan which will provide the structure for their learning.[82]

This assertion, while reaffirming the intended purpose of initial assessment, also helps identify some of the more pertinent challenges of implementing a standardised approach to initial assessment, and by extension ongoing assessment. First and foremost, it alludes to initial assessment as a process, and this is precisely what it should be, rather than employing it as a once-off procedure which commences and concludes at the pre-entry stage of a learner's interaction with a service provider.

With the components of initial and ongoing assessment established, the research will now look at the different formats that such assessments could take, an analysis which will be returned to in **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)** of this research project, when making recommendations in terms of best practice guidelines for the initial assessment of English language competency.

2.5.1 Initial Screening

Simply put, initial screening can be best described as an assessment or testing process that aims to 'identify those who may need support and to indicate an approximate level of their skills.'[83] Based on both anecdotal evidence and evidence highlighted in previous SOLAS funded research on the initial assessment of literacy and numeracy at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 1 to 3[84], this form of initial or ongoing assessment tends to be conducted in the context of deciding whether or not to accept a learner onto a specific course or refer them onwards to another more appropriate programme or service.

2.5.2 Placement Testing

A placement test, used at the pre-course stage of a learner's initial interaction with a service provider, can be best described as a test that is administered to 'determine academic or skills level of a student, particularly a new student, in order to place them in the correct class.'[85] In most instances, such placement tests tend to take place at the registration phase as a measure for determining what the learner already knows and the level they are currently at. As referenced in the new guidelines for the initial assessment of literacy and numeracy at NFQ levels 1 to 3, placement tests can be best employed to 'decide on the best environment for the individual [and to] open [the] Individual Learning Plan.'[86]

81   Knell, S and Scogins, J. (2000) "Adult Literacy Assessment Tool Kit," Illinois Literacy Resource Development Center, p.2.
82   Department for Education and Employment (2001), "Initial Assessment of Learning and Support Needs and Planning Learning to Meet Needs," p.6, Sheffield: Department for Education and Employment. To view the full report, please click here.
83   Department for Education and Employment (2001), "Initial Assessment of Learning and Support Needs and Planning Learning to Meet Needs," p.17, Sheffield: Department for Education and Employment. To view the full report, please click here.
84   SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.
85   The Collins English Dictionary can be accessed online at https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english
86   SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," p.8, Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.

Diagnostic testing is a more thorough, in-depth approach to initial assessment, whereby the core objective is to identify a learner's main strengths, weaknesses and learning needs. It is often confused with the formative or ongoing assessment but is slightly different in that diagnostic assessment is designed to 'look back to understand the [learner's] current position.'[87] Used at the start of the learning journey, it is intrinsic to the development of an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) since it helps identify, in consultation with the learner, their specific learning needs and break these down into short, medium and more long-term goals. In summary, the purpose of diagnostic assessment is 'to provide a detailed assessment of a learner's skills and abilities against the requirements set out in the National Standards.'[88]

2.6 Purpose of Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English Language Competency

In terms of next steps, ascertaining what the initial and ongoing assessment process is aiming to achieve is core to deciding what approach or combination of approaches to adopt as part of a wider assessment process. While the purpose of initial and ongoing assessment is now known in a broader, more general sense, there is a need to focus on the more specific purpose and objectives of the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners. It has been determined that initial and ongoing assessment should be conducted in partnership with learners, and equally should assess them on what they know, not what they don't know. It is equally relevant and logical to expect that the core purpose and objectives of ETB ESOL provision align with these principles.

Furthermore, as a result of this more diverse profile of migrant learners accessing ETB ESOL provision, and in order to make service provision more aligned and responsive to these diverse and complex needs, it is important that any good practice guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment process reflect these needs. As recommended in this research,

this will take the form of a single tool that can be administered across either single or multiple sessions. Irrespective of this, any such tool needs to accurately profile learners and determine their specific learning needs, while also taking account of their previous educational experiences in their home countries. In other words:

to be effective, assessment must recognise the diversity of learners and allow for differences in style and rates of learning.[89]

Consequently, it follows that, in order to meet such diverse needs, particularly in relation to being sensitive to different learning styles, a range of approaches to initial assessment will be required. This will be explored further when it comes to recommending good practice guidelines for the standardisation of the initial assessment process **(Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)).**

2.6.1 The Latency Effect in the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency

The latency effect of initial and ongoing assessment on learner performance and the wider learner experience needs to be considered in the interest of providing a level playing field for all migrant learners, regardless of their previous educational backgrounds or experiences. The reality is that not all learners will perform to the best of their abilities in formal or near-formal testing environments. In other words, a more formal approach to the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency may not be in a learner's best interest as it may present unintentional barriers, thereby affecting their overall performance. In such cases, the assessment outcomes will not be a true reflection of the learner's actual level of ability, thereby going against the purpose of conducting the assessment in the first place.

Issues such as writing styles and conventions, different dialects, or rates of speech could cause a learner to panic and underperform in the initial or ongoing assessment. In some instances, it may also take learners time to recall their previous language-learning knowledge, in instances where they have previously learnt English. This could be due to a multitude of factors such as fear, stress, or a general lack of confidence or inexperience in more formal learning environments. Conversely, initial gains

87 Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (n.d.) "What is Diagnostic Assessment?," Belfast: CEA. To access the full text, please click here.
88 Department for Education and Skills (2003) "Diagnostic Assessment Materials: Literacy, Numeracy, Dyslexia, ESOL," p.20, United Kingdom: Department for Education and Skills.
89 Alberta Education (2012) "Assessment Tools & Strategies: Language Proficiency Assessment," Canada: Alberta Education. To view the full document, please click here.

in language proficiency at the start of a learner's learning journey may recede or slow as the learner navigates the early phases of their learning journey.

As a direct consequence of this latency effect, initial and ongoing assessment as a process needs to be qualified by the strong caveat that it is by no means an exact science, and tutors, in recognising this, need to be prepared to reassess a learner after only a few weeks on a course. It is for this very reason that initial and ongoing assessment needs to be and must be viewed as a staged, continuous process rather than a once-off occurrence. Initial and ongoing assessment, therefore, should take place across a learner's interactions on a programme of study.

2.6.2 Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English Language Competency: Concluding Remarks

While the primary purpose of this theoretical analysis of initial and ongoing assessment as a process was to distinguish between the different forms of initial and ongoing course assessment appropriate to the adult learning environment, it also served to address the widely recognised contention that initial and ongoing assessment should be seen as a staged process that is ongoing over a period time and which strives to determine the most suitable learning supports to provide migrant learners. Consequently, it would follow, that rather than favouring initial screening over placement testing or placement testing over diagnostic testing, it would be best to employ a number of these approaches as part of any standardised initial and ongoing assessment process.

Therefore, in moving towards the development of such a standardised process of initial and ongoing assessment, the next section of this literature review will start looking towards this end goal through a broad analysis of several international models of initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency.

2.7 Initial and Ongoing Assessment in Practice

2.7.1 Scottish Model of ESOL Initial Assessment

The Scottish model of initial assessment of English language competency is arguably one of the more relevant examples to the Irish context given that both jurisdictions are English speaking and cater for a similar profile of learners. In this regard, this brief analysis will provide a detailed outline of how the initial assessment process operates across Scotland.

The Scottish model comes complete with a comprehensive assessment pack which includes guidelines, a step-by-step outline of how to conduct the assessment process, as well as containing all relevant assessment materials. Firstly, however, in the interest of complete clarity, and considering earlier discussions regarding the purpose of initial and ongoing assessment, it is important to highlight that the materials provided in the assessment pack:

> are based on the principle that the main purpose of initial assessment is to ensure that all ESOL learners are placed in the most appropriate learning opportunity in order to make progress towards their specific language learning objectives and to achieve their personal, educational, or employment goals.[90]

This approach aligns well with the earlier suggestion that initial, and by extension ongoing, assessment should be focused on more than just the educational needs of the learner, but should in fact favour a more holistic, learner-centred approach that addresses the personal, social, work-related and cultural needs of migrant learners looking to better integrate into the local and wider Irish society.

In assessing the various stages of the Scottish model, it is also pertinent to highlight that the concept of initial assessment envisaged is one that is the 'first stage in a process of diagnostic assessment and the development of an Individual Learning Plan.'[91] The complete assessment pack contains a wide range of resources which assess all receptive and productive skills. The entire initial assessment process, however, is centred on an informal interview with the learner and is rightly viewed as:

> play[ing] a vital role in gathering information about the learner's past experiences and in establishing their aims and aspirations for the future.[92]

90   Education Scotland (2010) "ESOL Initial Assessment Pack," p.2, Scotland: Crown Publications. To view the full assessment pack, please click here.
91   Ibid.
92   Ibid.

In other words, the overall process is dictated by the outcome of this informal interview, since the learner's performance will inform the level of reading and writing tasks to assign. In addition, and most importantly, the informal interview is used to help put the learner at ease and make them feel more confident about and comfortable with the wider, more formalised aspects of the initial assessment. This approach should help negate the latency effect on the learner as previously discussed. Also, of note with the wider Scottish model is the fact that the assessment of a learner's awareness of both key vocabulary and grammatical concepts are in-built into the wider process, rather than assessing them independently.

Furthermore, while the assessment pack itself contains a comprehensive initial assessment process, the guidance notes stipulate that, upon completion of the process, further diagnostic assessment should take place as soon as the learner is allocated a place and commences on an appropriate course. This is to ensure that the course is meeting and continues to meet the specific learning needs of the learner, and if not, it allows for adjustments to be made at the earliest possible stage of the learning journey. In so doing, the learner is firmly placed at the heart of an ongoing process and therefore, as determined earlier in this literature review, conforms to best practice. It also established the Scottish model as a staged ongoing process that spans a learner's entire interactions on a programme of learning.

In terms of interpreting the results of the initial assessment, the guidelines also provide useful direction and guidance. It is stated that the 'levels indicated are entry points to learning at that level.'[93] This is a key consideration when it comes to interpreting the results across all four productive and receptive skills, especially in terms of benchmarking scores against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Ultimately any attempts to align or benchmark an initial assessment tool to the CERFL must be approached with extreme caution and with sensitivity given that there are considerably significant differences between the lower and upper ends of a particular level on the framework; more so as the levels progress and learners moves towards independent or proficient levels of competency. For example, there is a considerable gap between a learner at low B1 (B1.1) and a learner at the upper end of this level (B1+). Therefore, in stating that the initial assessment result

is at the entry point of that particular level, it further highlights that it is a staged process and reaffirms the importance of ensuring that ongoing assessment takes place.

In addition, the Scottish model also caters for those ESOL learners who may have an underlying literacy or numeracy difficulty, henceforth referred to as an ESOL literacy learner, with the inclusion of a separate ESOL literacy initial assessment. This assessment is specifically designed to be carried out on a one-to-one basis with the learner in instances where there is enough evidence to suggest that there may be an underlying literacy difficulty in the learner's native language, possibly as a result of the informal interview task. That being said this specific assessment comes with a caveat in relation to beginners' learners since:

> a learner who does not complete the beginners' task does not necessarily have a literacy difficulty. It may be that they simply have no English at all, although the literacy tasks should be completed to check this.[94]

2.7.2 English Model of ESOL Initial Assessment

The ESOL initial assessment pack, which is solely at entry-level, was developed by way of a grant received from the UK's Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) in 2010. The rationale behind the development of this tool was to replace what was considered an overly long and unwieldy process of initial assessment which often resulted in the inaccurate placement of learners. In fact, the rationale statement which prefaces the initial assessment materials states that:

> students were been transferred on a regular basis from class to class and from level to level after the first week of their training.[95]

This new tool, however, was viewed as offering a solution to these issues by helping to improve the accuracy and usability of the overall initial assessment tool.

This assessment tool sets out to assess all four productive and receptive skills and score learners across the UKs entry levels one to three. It is important to note that this particular initial assessment only sets out to assess learners at these entry levels, and neither is it aligned to or

93   Education Scotland (2010) "ESOL Initial Assessment Pack," p.27, Scotland: Crown Publications. To view the full assessment pack, please click here.
94   Ibid.
95   5E Ltd (n.d.) "ESOL Assessment," p.1, London. To view the full assessment pack, please click here.

benchmarked against the CEFR. That being said, the tool contains both visual and more text-oriented elements and the limited guidance notes provided in the pack advise that it caters to visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners.

The assessment pack contains some limited guidance for the user rather than detailed implementation strategies. Regardless of this, the tool is well structured, and its administration can be easily understood even at a quick glance. The tool commences with a number of reading tasks which start with the recognition of common everyday signs and notices, then advancing to basic sight word recognition, before progressing further to a more structured short text where the narrator provides very basic personal information and is accompanied by a number of entry-level questions based on the text. These reading tasks are then followed by a short listening and speaking assessment which is divided into four sections, which aim to elicit basic personal information from the learner while focusing on basic knowledge and usage of the simple past, present and future tenses. The final section of the tool focuses on writing and offers a range of tasks from writing names and address, to filling in blanks in logical sequences, before requiring the learner to complete a limited free writing task.

The limited guidance notes do not stipulate which order the assessment tasks should be completed, but based on the layout of the tool, it would follow that the learner starts with the reading tasks, then the listening and speaking, before finally completing the writing tasks. That being said, there is nothing stopping an assessor from starting with the listening and speaking tasks and then focusing on the reading and writing materials.

The guidance notes state that the assessment was tested over a two-month period and the feedback received from tutors, students and management was largely positive. For example, tutors stated that it was more concise and effective in giving a more accurate assessment of a learner's entry-level, while learners themselves stated that it was a more straightforward tool and reduced the upheaval of constant learner transfers once a course had started. Finally, management was particularly delighted that staff got involved in the process, rather than continuing to rely on existing outdated and inaccurate materials.[96]

2.7.3 Canadian Model of ESOL Initial Assessment

In Canada, when looking to access publicly funded ESOL provision, learners are required to attend an authorised language assessment centre and complete an assessment of their English language level. This test, entitled the Canadian Language Benchmark Placement Test (CLPT), is described as:

> the national standards for describing, measuring and recognizing second language proficiency of adult immigrants and prospective immigrants for living and working in Canada.[97]

It is task-based in approach and assesses all four productive and receptive skills. Most importantly, it is aligned to the twelve-point Canadian Languages Benchmarks (CLB) scale[98] encompassing basic, intermediate and advanced language abilities. Within each of these three levels, there are four ability levels – initial, developing, adequate and fluent, and each of these ability levels are accompanied by the equivalent of 'can do' statements outlining what the learner is expected to be able to achieve at each of these levels. Furthermore, attempts to align the CLB to the CEFR have been made, but a discussion on this is outside the scope of this research project.

From start to finish the CLPT takes one and a half hours to complete and results are issued immediately upon completion and places learners on the CLB scale. It is important to note that:

> as a general rule, the benchmarks assigned to a learner at the time of placement [...] mean[s] that the learner has achieved, and demonstrated the level of communicative ability associated with most or all (traditionally, 70 to 100%) of the descriptors for the benchmarks assigned in each of the four skills.[99]

In reality, this means that a learner should ideally be placed:

> into a course where they mainly focus on acquiring the competencies associated with the CLB level following the level, they have already completed.[100]

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96   5E Ltd (n.d.) "ESOL Assessment," p.1, London. To view the full assessment pack, please click here.
97   Red Seal (2009) "Language Benchmarking: Language Benchmarking of the Red Seal Trades (continued)," http://www.red-seal.ca/others/ l.1ng.5.1g.2b.2nchm.1rk.3ng-eng.html
98   Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2012) "Canadian Language Benchmarks: English as a Second Language for Adults," Ottawa: Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. To view more details on the CLB, please click here.
99   Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2013) "National Language Placement and Progression Guidelines," p.3, Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada. To view the full text, please click here.
100 Ibid.

2.7.4 Review of Commercially Produced Initial and Ongoing Assessment Tools

It is interesting to note that one of the core criticisms of commercially produced placement tests was, as highlighted in the consultation process with ETB ESOL tutors, that these types of placement tests overly focus on grammar and vocabulary. For example, some put considerable focus on the use of English by testing learners on their knowledge and awareness of grammar and vocabulary. This is something that will be considered further when discussing the results of the consultation process and when outlining best practice guidelines in the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency.

Notwithstanding the criticisms levelled above at the more commercially produced assessments, these tests do have their merits in the ETB sector in the overall formative assessment process. One of the key positives of these tests is that they are aligned to the CEFR and as such are valid and reliable in terms of what they are setting out to achieve. However, as an initial or ongoing assessment tool in the ETB context, they are not the most appropriate mechanism for assessing English language competency or compatibility to a specific level of ESOL provision. In other words, there is a consensus across the ETB sector that such commercially produced tools are not suitable for the purpose of initially or continuously assessing low-skilled and unemployed economic migrants, programme refugees and asylum seekers. In fact, in research supported by the Department of Education and Science (now the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) entitled, 'Is there more than what's the score?' it is stated, in relation to the use of putative initial assessment tools, that they:

> must not be used in isolation and must be part of an initial needs and skills check which commences with an informal, welcoming, semi-structured interview that gives scope for self-assessment.[101]

While it is difficult to argue against the sentiment behind this statement, it is important to highlight that tutors need to know their audiences extremely well when it comes to administering initial and ongoing assessment tests. In other words, these more commercially produced initial assessment tests are more geared toward learners in the English

for Speakers of Other Languages (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) sectors, and who are pursuing more academically focused studies or careers. On the other hand, ESOL learners are looking more towards the vocational and functional language skills that will allow them to operate, even at the most basic level, in everyday personal, social and work-related scenarios so that they can more effectively integrate into local and wider Irish society.

2.8 Validity and Reliability in Initial and Ongoing Assessment

This literature review has, to date, focused on the purpose of and structure of initial and ongoing assessment tools for the assessment of English language competency at point of entry. Equally important, however, to the development of a standardised initial and ongoing assessment process, is to ensure the assessment is both valid and reliable. In other words:

> an assessment tool has to be measured against the ability of a centre to use it and to respond to it with appropriate support for the learner.[102]

As stated, all forms of assessment, regardless of what they are seeking to measure, must be both valid and reliable. Both concepts are vitally important in ensuring that an assessment process is both accurate and robust and stands up to scrutiny. Equally, they can also help ensure that external negative factors, such as cultural bias, do not compromise the standing of the overall assessment process.

Assessment validity is about ensuring that the assessment, initial and ongoing assessment in this instance, achieves precisely what it sets out to achieve. On the other hand, reliability ensures that the assessment yields results that are consistent over a period of time, irrespective of the content, different learner profiles, or external environmental factors. It is often argued that assessments tend to favour one of these measures over the other. For example, there is a school of thought which claims that:

> a standardised test prioritises reliability whereas the approach favoured in New Zealand [for example] in which assessment tools are

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101 Educational Disadvantage Centre (n.d.), "Is there more than what's the score?," p.7. Dublin: St. Patrick's College. To view the full report, please click here.

102 Educational Disadvantage Centre (n.d.), "Is there more than what's the score?," p.27, Dublin: St. Patrick's College. To view the full report, please click here.

designed by tutors in relation to specific courses give priority to validity.[103]

In light of this assertion, there is value in ensuring that any newly devised standardised English language initial assessment process is devised by, or least in collaboration with, ESOL tutors who are *au fait* with the varying language support needs of all migrant learners. In fact, this is what this research report is attempting to achieve.

In cases where providers do not have the resources or expertise to develop their own in-house initial assessment tools and look towards the more established commercially produced options, it is very important that such tools meet the validity and reliability requirements prior to their adoption and implementation. In other words, just because an assessment instrument works in one environment, it does not necessarily follow that it will seamlessly transfer across to another environment.

Providers should take care in all cases that any tool being used is aimed at ESOL learners as distinct from English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. ESL refers to learners who are learning English in a country where English is either the official or dominant language. On the other hand, EFL refers to learners who are learning English in a non-English speaking country. ESOL, it is often argued, is interchangeable with ESL with some adding the caveat that ESOL may insinuate that a learner is in fact learning English as a third or fourth language and not just as a second language.[104] EFL or ESL courses, in general, tend to be delivered through private English language schools[105], whereas ESOL is the publicly funded tuition provided by ETBs to migrant learners. Accordingly, one can deduce the difference in target groups between private providers and ETBs. It could also be argued that these more commercially produced initial assessments are more academically and professionally focused, whereas there is a need for ESOL specific initial assessment instruments to be developed and aimed specifically at the broader personal, social, work-related and cultural skills and needs of migrant learners typically accessing publicly funded English language provision.

Assessments that emphasise the use of multiple-choice more than other ways of assessing increase the risk of 'guesswork,' thereby potentially impacting the reliability of the assessment instrument concerned. In practical terms, a learner could completely guess an answer to a given question at a particular point in time, but if you get the learner to re-take the same assessment at a later point, they may well provide an alternative answer to the same question. It could of course be argued that this could happen with any assessment and indeed it could, but if this were to occur multiple times across the same assessment test, whereby the learner answers multiple questions correctly through guesswork, it could skew their overall result and score them at a higher level than they actually are. This in turn could cause multiple difficulties for management, tutors, other learners and the learner themselves once they start a programme of learning.

Notwithstanding these important issues, it is important to highlight that the more competency-based initial and ongoing assessments, in striving to remove the guesswork element, could also present some serious reliability issues. In particular, it is vitally important that these assessments should avoid relying on norm-referencing in determining learner performance. Instead, they should focus more on criterion-referencing whereby the focus is more on assessing a learner against a pre-determined, fixed set of criteria. In other words, it is about 'measur[ing] a student's performance based on mastery of a specific set of skills.'[106] Conversely, norm-referencing is more concerned about comparing assessment scores in terms of performance against the so-called average student. It, therefore, begs the question as to how, in the context of assessing English language competency, you can norm-reference performance against the hypothetical average learner? In an attempt to better understand the precise issue here, some concrete examples might be of benefit.

Paediatric Growth Charts are norm-referenced assessments that measure or track a child's growth over a period of time against or in comparison to children of a similar age.[107] On the other hand, the official driving test is criterion-referenced since it determines whether a driver has 'mastered the skills required to drive on the road safely.'[108] Based,

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103 Educational Disadvantage Centre (n.d.), "Is there more than what's the score?," p.27, Dublin: St. Patrick's College. To view the full report, please click here.

104 Reading Horizons (2015) "What's the Difference Between ESL, EFL, ESOL, ELL and ESP?" https://www.readinghorizons.com/blog/what-s-the-difference-between-esl-efl-esol-ell-and-esp

105 As part of the consultation process, numerous private language schools were contacted and asked to engage in the consultation process, but no responses were received. The purpose of this invitation was to gain a better understanding of the initial and ongoing assessment processes employed in this sector.

106 Hawker Brownlow Education and Brigance Special Education (n.d.). "Quick Reference Guide: Criterion-referenced vs. Norm-referenced Assessment." To assess the full document, please click here.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

therefore, on these concrete, practical applications of norm- and criterion-referencing, it would appear logical that any standardised initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency would be criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced. Like the driving test, the aim of the initial and ongoing assessment process is or should be to assess whether or not a learner has mastered the skills associated with the four productive and receptive skills at a particular benchmark or level, for example, the CEFR. In this way, it will be more straightforward for an ESOL tutor to make a more informed decision about what type and level, of course, to assign a learner to.

Furthermore, it could also be argued that in these instances a learner's previous assessment performance also has a vital role to play and should not be easily dismissed when determining where to assign a learner to. In fact, research has suggested that initial assessment of a learner's ability should be measured against both a pre-determined criterion (Criterion-referenced) and a learner's previous assessment performance (Ipsative assessment).[109] It may not always be possible to do so as some learners may have had no previous educational experience and may never have been assessed at any level in the past. Notwithstanding this, criterion-referenced initial assessment, if properly constructed, should be enough to allow for accurate judgement calls to be made about a learner's ability to perform at a particular level on the CEFR, for example.

2.9 What is ESOL literacy?

In this final section of the literature review, the area of ESOL literacy will be assessed in terms of commentary on both national and international literature on the topic. To recap, the overarching aim of this research project is to devise best practice guidelines for the initial assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners and develop a standardised initial assessment toolkit. It was also the objective to provide a universal definition of ESOL literacy which will be applied across all sixteen Education and Training Boards. Moreover, as outlined at the outset of this literature review, it is the firm intention, in offering up such a definition, that it will be sympathetic to both the nature of literacy difficulties and the previous experiences of ESOL learners experiencing literacy or numeracy difficulties.

Spiegel and Sunderland (2006) state that a basic literacy learner can be defined as 'someone who is still learning to read a short simple text and struggles to write a simple sentence independently.'[110] While this, at least on the face of it, may seem straightforward to detect, the reality is that it may not be as straightforward when it comes to non-native speakers. The reality is that for many learners, particularly for those coming from countries that don't use the Roman script, an underlying literacy difficulty may initially be masked by the more visible language difficulty. As such the literacy difficulty may only emerge over time as language competency improves and the expectation is that learners should be more independent in terms of their reading and writing skills. In fact, this reality strikes to the very core of the issue presented here in this research project, and as such justifies the need for the development of a universal definition for ETBs, as evidenced during the sectoral consultation sessions with ETBs. The reality is that ETBs interact with literacy learners in a variety of ways, as will be outlined in detail in **Section 4**, but it would appear that very few ETBs are adopting a standardised approach. Essentially, the core of the challenge facing ETBs revolves around the question – which do I prioritise first – the language barrier or the literacy difficulty? The answer to this question is not straightforward since ESOL literacy learners are not exactly a homogenous group. For example, the underlying literacy difficulty may relate to the fact that they never learnt to read or write in their native language or it may be that they are literate in their own language because it uses a different script.[111] This latter point raises another issue with formulating a universal definition of ESOL literacy, in that does use of a script other than the Roman script make a learner illiterate in English? This point will be considered in greater detail when it comes to arriving at a universal definition in **Section 4**.

109 Educational Disadvantage Centre (n.d.), "Is there more than what's the score?," Dublin: St. Patrick's College. To view the full report, please click here.
110 Kirsh, J. (n.d.) "Working with ESOL learners with basic literacy needs," https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/teachers/staff-room/teaching-articles/working-esol-learners-basic-literacy-needs
111 Ibid.

As ESOL literacy learners are not a homogenous group it is somewhat difficult to categorise the different types of ESOL learners and the literacy issues that they tend to present with. The table below, adapted from Burt, Peyton and Adams (2003)[112] attempts to categorise the main types of ESOL literacy learners that present themselves to ETBs looking for support.

Figure 2.1 ESOL literacy levels

Literacy Level	Description of Literacy Difficulty
Pre-literate	Learners native language has no written form (typical of many indigenous American, African, or Pacific Languages)
Non-literate	Learners have had no literacy instruction – may be due to limited or no previous educational experience
Semi-literate	Learners may have had limited literacy instruction as a result of limited previous educational experience
Non-alphabet literate	Learners can be completely literate in a language such as Chinese which uses a non-alphabetic script
Non-Roman alphabet literate	Learners can be completely literate in a language such as Arabic or Russian which uses a non-Roman script
Roman alphabet literate	Learners can be completely literate in Roman script languages such as French, Spanish and German. These learners can also follow left to right writing conventions and can recognise letter shapes and fonts. These learners may need support with specific issues such as sound-syllable correspondence.

Source: Felix-Lund (2013) [113]

Based on the literacy levels outlined in Figure 2.1, ESOL literacy difficulties can be quite complex and diverse, and this presents challenges for ESOL tutors in attempting to provide appropriate supports to learners. However, as a starting point in the process of assessing a non-English speaking learner's literacy level, an ESOL tutor should:

> identify the strengths learners bring and build upon these in program design and instruction. For example, if learners have strong oral skills, use this as a vehicle for developing literacy or metacognitive skills.[114]

While this research project is not concerned with programme delivery, it is concerned with the initial and ongoing assessment of migrant learners, including ESOL literacy learners, and as such the existing strengths and skills of the learners could be utilised, as outlined above, to enable and facilitate the initial and ongoing assessment process. The Scottish model, as discussed earlier in this literature review, recognises this when it suggests that assumptions should not be made around beginner level learners being illiterate if they are unable to complete the reading and writing aspects of the initial assessment tool. It could simply be that they have no knowledge of the English language. After all Lund (2013) states that:

> an effective needs analysis focuses on and builds on learners' accomplishments and abilities, rather than deficits. It is important not to make assumptions about what your students do or do not know.[115]

Therefore, the Scottish model's suggestion that, in the case outlined above concerning a beginner level learner, it would be no harm to conduct the separate ESOL literacy assessment to confirm whether there is an underlying literacy difficulty.

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112 Burt, M, Peyton, J.K. and Adams, R (2003) "Reading and adult English language learners: A review of the research," Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. To view the full text click here.
113 Felix-Lund, M. (2013) "A Handbook for tutors working with adult ESOL literacy learners," p.7. M.A. Portland State University. To view the full text, please click here.
114 Ibid, p.9.
115 Felix-Lund, M. (2013) "A Handbook for tutors working with adult ESOL literacy learners," p.9. M.A. Portland State University. To view the full text, please click here.

In referencing the Scottish model above, it is timely here to highlight that the Scottish Executive's ESOL Strategy caters for ESOL literacy learners and defines them as:

> a person who has little or no literacy in English and who may or may not have literacy in another language and whose spoken English may range from basic to fluent.[116]

Similar to the Scottish model of initial assessment, outlined above, which was considered particularly relevant in the Irish context, so too could this definition of ESOL literacy be considered extremely relevant and useful in the context of what this aspect of the wider research project is trying to achieve; to devise a universally accepted and understood definition of ESOL literacy for application across all sixteen ETBs. The rationale for this is that the definition provided is very broad, yet easily understood and perfectly incorporates the various categories of ESOL literacy learner as outlined in **Figure 2.1.**

In drawing this discussion to a conclusion, it is, therefore, the expressed intention of this research project to utilise the Scottish definition of ESOL literacy as a basis and inspiration for the development of a universal definition for application in the Irish context. The formation of this definition will, however, be reserved for **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)** of this research report since, as previously stated, the definition arrived at needs to be reflective of the specific needs of ESOL literacy learners as identified by tutors, and as such needs to be widely accepted for it to add value to the theory on this important issue. This can only happen following a detailed analysis of the results of the sectoral consultations with ETBs. This analysis will take place in **Sections 3 and 4**, and the development of an informed definition of ESOL literacy will take place within **Section 4.**

2.10 Conclusion

This literature review highlighted the core national and international thinking on the topics of initial and ongoing assessment of English Language competency, and the wider topic of engaging with ESOL literacy learners. In so doing, ardent attempts were made to link the theory back to concrete examples. For example, in relation to initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency, numerous European and international models were presented to help highlight how initial and ongoing assessment takes place in different jurisdictions. The presentation of these various international models was by no means an attempt at endorsement but rather were chosen for their relevance to the Irish context. Any further determination in terms of their relevance or usefulness in the Irish context has been reserved for a later stage of this research project.

In relation to ESOL literacy, a similar approach was adopted, in that the focus here was to outline existing thinking on the subject, rather than make any firm commitments or judgements in terms of developing a universal definition of ESOL literacy for application in the Irish context. Such an approach, as evidenced above, would have been entirely premature and inappropriate as it is important to take account of the experiences and expertise of ESOL tutors from across the ETB sector, and such a discussion was outside the remit of this literature review and has been reserved for **Section 4**.

In summary, this literature review highlighted the previous work undertaken to move to a national ESOL policy, definitions of language assessment, reviewed a number of international approaches to English language assessment and reviewed a number of tools. The definition of ESOL literacy was also highlighted. It is the hope and intention of this research project to build on the learning gained here from the international research on both of these important issues and to respond through the formation of appropriate solutions that are relevant to the Irish context and which will be easily implemented in the Irish context.

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116 Education Scotland (2010) "ESOL Initial Assessment Pack," Scotland: Crown Publications. To view the full assessment pack, please click here.

Section Three:
Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English Language Competency

3.1 Background to Initial and Ongoing Assessment Research Project

Ever since the publication of the Irish government's **White Paper on Adult Education**[117] allocated responsibility for public ESOL provision to the then Vocational Education Committees (VECs) Adult Literacy Services, consistent efforts have been made by numerous stakeholders to provide more meaningful, effective and responsive language supports to migrant learners. Since then, however, provision has remained largely ad-hoc in nature, but the need for a more standardised and structured approach has become more and more apparent due to the increasingly more diverse learner profile that has emerged in recent years. Consequently, the assessment guidelines and toolkit contained in this research report are just part of a much wider response to these needs but are important components since they address a learner's interaction with an ETB from pre-entry stage right through their initial participation on relevant courses, as well as their progression to other ESOL or wider FET programmes.

References have been made to the diverse and complex learner profile that now exists across ETBs.[118] As a result of this, a more responsive, flexible and meaningful approach to initial and ongoing assessment is warranted. While it is important to acknowledge that many ETBs have developed localised solutions and responses to address the specific needs of migrant learners, particularly in relation to initial assessment, there is a clear need and desire for a more structured, standardised and co-ordinated approach to both the initial and ongoing assessment of migrant learners.

In terms of contextualising the need for these guidelines and toolkit, **Section 3.3.** provides an overview of the current national situation in relation to initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency as captured through an initial ongoing online survey of ESOL co-ordinators, followed up by face-to-face regional engagements with ETB co-ordinators and tutors. Learners were also consulted through learner focus groups as part of the wider data gathering process.

Firstly, however, **Section 3.2** defines English language competency in the context of this research report.

3.2 Defining English Language Competency

In the interest of clarity, it is useful to outline what exactly is meant by English language competency at this stage. Douglas College, Canada, in its English Language Competency Policy defines English language competency as a 'defined level of skill in reading, writing speaking and listening in English.'[119] As such, the ability to communicate in a given language is considered to be a key lifelong learning competency. This is particularly the case in terms of the European Union's (EU) **Key Competences for Lifelong Learning**, where language competency is:

> based on the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate

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117   Department of Education and Science (2000) "Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education," Dublin: Government Publications. To view the white paper in full, click this link.
118   Given the diverse and complex learner profile that now exists across ETBs, it brings to mind the further complexities associated with the terminology used to categorise non-native English speakers accessing FET provision. As referenced elsewhere in this research, the term migrant learner is used, and existing definitions have been broadened to make the term more focused on a learner's pursuit of wider FET provision and not just ESOL supports. At the same time ardent efforts have been made to reduce the negative connotations associated with existing use of the term.
119   Douglas College (2019) "English Language Competency Policy," p.1 https://www.douglascollege.ca/sites/default/files/docs/English%20 Language%20Competency%20Standards%20Policy.pdf

range of societal and cultural contexts according to one's wants and needs.[120]

Furthermore, as with all other competencies within the framework, this language competence consists of a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. **Table 3.1** summarises the key knowledge, skills and attitudes in terms of language competence.

Table 3.1 Language Competence – Knowledge Skills and Attitudes

Language Competence – Knowledge Skills and Attitudes	
Knowledge	Requires: • knowledge of vocabulary and functional grammar, • awareness of main types of verbal interactions and registers, • knowledge of societal conventions, • knowledge of cultural aspects of language, • knowledge of the variability of language.
Skills	Includes ability to: • comprehend spoken messages, • initiate, sustain and conclude conversations, • read, understand and compose texts, Learners should also be able to acquire language skills formally, non-formally and informally.
Attitudes	Positive attitudes include: • appreciation of cultural diversity, • interest in languages and intercultural communication, Also includes respect for each other's mother tongues and appreciation for a country's official language as a common framework or mechanism for interaction.

Source: European Commission (2019)[121]

It is in keeping with this description that language competency is viewed in the context of this research report.

3.3. Overview of Existing Initial and Ongoing Assessment Practices – Online Survey Analysis

Table 3.2 Do ETBs currently formally assess migrant learners at point of entry?

Does your ETB formally assess all migrant learners prior to accepting them onto ESOL/ other relevant courses? (n=25[122])		
Yes	**No**	**Don't know**
21 (84%)	3 (12%)	1 (4%)

While **Table 3.2** highlights that 84% of ETBs currently formally assess migrant learners at point of entry, the regional engagement sessions further confirmed that all sixteen ETBs assess all migrant learners in some form at point of entry. The discrepancy between these two forums relates to respondents' interpretation of the concept of formal assessment, all of which is essentially accounted for in the 16% of respondents who stated that they didn't formally assess all migrant learners, or they didn't know whether or not these learners were assessed or not. Furthermore, **Table 3.2** highlights which FET programmes migrant learners are currently being assessed for.

120 European Commission (2019) "Key competences for lifelong learning," p.7, Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. To view the full document, please click here.
121 European Commission (2019) "Key Competences for Lifelong Learning," p.7, Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. To view the full document, please click here.
122 While there are only 16 ETBs, a total of 25 responses were received to this and most of the questions contained in this survey. This means that multiple responses were received from some ETBs. The justification for this was that, despite the fact that ETBs are organisations that work across multiple counties, there are different practices in place in different counties within the same ETBs. This is a legacy issue of the old VEC structures where each county operated as an independent, standalone organisation.

Table 3.3 FET programmes currently assessing migrant learners on entry

FET Programme	No. of Respondents (n = 21) [123]
Adult Literacy (Excluding ESOL)	12
ESOL	21
Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)	13
Community Education	1
Family Learning	6
Skills for Work	10
Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE)	6
Youthreach	3
Post Leaving Certificate (PLC)	3
Training Services: Apprenticeships/Traineeships etc.	2
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	6

From the data in **Table 3.3**, it is interesting to note that of the 21 respondents, 100% of them are currently assessing all learners looking to access ESOL programmes, while 40% are assessing for the Skills for Work[124] programme where there are increasing numbers of migrant workers being supported. This can be largely explained by significant numbers of migrant learners currently occupying low-skilled roles in accommodation and food, industry and retail sectors.[125] [126] Numbers are also relatively high, as expected, for adult literacy (excluding ESOL) and BTEI representing 57% and 62% of respondents respectively.

In relation to the formal assessment of English language competency at point of entry, **Table 3.4** outlines what skills areas are being assessed in these assessments.

Table 3.4 English language skills areas being formally assessed by ETBs

English Language Skills Area	No. of respondents (n=21) [127]	% of respondents
Reading	20	95%
Writing	21	100%
Listening	18	86%
Speaking	18	86%
Grammatical Awareness	14	67%
Intercultural Awareness	1	5%
Digital Literacy	1	5%
Other	4	19%

The other category (19%) includes an assessment of comprehension skills, literacy and numeracy levels and ability to engage with certified programmes.

In relation to specific assessment tools currently in use, a wide variety of tools are employed as outlined in **Table 3.5**.

Table 3.5 Initial assessment tools currently used by ETBs

Initial Assessment Tool	No. of Respondents
Cambridge ESOL Tool	2
Oxford Quick Placement Test	4
BKSB	1
Scottish model of Initial Assessment	2
Locally Devised Initial Assessment	4
Locally Adapted Initial Assessment	2
Other	6

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123 Responses to some of the questions in the survey were anonymous, it was not possible to establish how many ETBs the 21 respondents actually represent.

124 Skills for Work is a national programme which provides training programmes for full-time or part-time low-skilled employees.

125 SOLAS (2020) "Spring Skills Bulletin 2020: Profile of Non-Irish Nationals in Employment in Ireland, Quarter 2 2019. Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.

126 For a more detailed analysis of employment and unemployment trends amongst Ireland's migrant population see the ESRI report of June 2020 on 'Origins and Integration: A Study of Migrants in the 2016 Irish Census.' To view the full report click here.

127 Responses to some of the questions in the survey were anonymous, it was not possible to establish how many ETBs the 21 respondents actually represent.

The other category above (6 respondents) accounts for those who stated that they use a variety of tools to include some of those outlined elsewhere in **Table 3.5** and locally devised approaches.

In relation to the various tools outlined above, 81% of these tools are currently aligned to the CEFR while 9.5% are not. The remaining 9.5% accounts for respondents who were unsure whether their particular tool was aligned to the framework. This is not a surprising finding given that 43% of respondents stated that they are using pre-existing recognised or industry-standard English language assessment tools or resources.

In terms of satisfaction with their existing initial assessment tools, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not satisfied and 5 being very satisfied. The average rating was 3.48, broadly meaning that respondents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their existing initial assessment tools. **Tables 3.6a and 3.6b** below highlight some of the core strengths and weaknesses with existing tools as identified by respondents to the online survey.

Table 3.6a Core strengths of existing initial assessment tools[128]

Core strengths of existing initial assessment tools
Can tell very quickly learner levels by assessing their abilities
Can see how competent a learner is using grammar
Assessment is learner-centred, provides accurate information and is accessible to all learners
All four skills are assessed, meaning learners are placed in the most appropriate class for their level
Assessments are easy to use
Assessments are aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)
Assessments rely on objective scoring in the main
Having a validated score of the CEFR has been useful to students when they are being referred to other statutory agencies

Assessment can be administered by any member of the team, but marking and analysis is conducted by specific staff
Low churn of learners (less than 2%) who report that they were placed in the wrong class, or teaching staff reporting learners as being misplaced
Individual profiles are created from the assessment and although time-consuming, the learner is placed on the correct programme
Informal approach rather than being overly time-consuming

Table 3.6b Core weaknesses of existing initial assessment tools[129]

Core weaknesses of existing initial assessment tools
Need for an assessment that is more relevant to the Irish context
For weaker learners, layout can be challenging, and tests can be overly academic, particularly for learners who may be near fluent but have poor literacy skills
Lack of common single tool being used across the ETB sector; would like a standardised tool which is recognised across FET
Tool should be able to assess those on apprenticeship programmes
Tool should be aligned to the CEFR and adaptable to various FET settings and contexts
Need for a more rounded assessment through observation of speaking and listening, with a specific focus on formal writing skills, reading comprehension and literacy skills – weighted against formal education and experiential learning
Assessment can be labour intensive
Subjective scoring of certain parts of the assessment can be an issue
With multiple-choice questions, learners could just be guessing or copying
Existing standardises assessments such as Oxford or Cambridge disadvantage students who do not have the Roman script and who are not used to the testing environment
Tests assume learners can read and follow conventions of standardised quantitative testing

128 The data presented here represent individual comment provided by respondents to the online survey.
129 The data presented here represent individual comment provided by respondents to the online survey.

Some concerns around whether an initial assessment can accurately capture a learner's level and needs in one session – needs to be an embedded process
Many variations in existing tools and approaches across all areas of FET provision
If you are a low-level learner, the assessment process can be quite intimidating

The online survey also looked at the primary purpose of initial assessment and asked respondents to identify, in order of importance, the top three purposes. **Figure 3.1** outlines the top three purposes based on the collated results of the online survey.

Figure 3.1 Purpose of initial assessment (in order of importance)
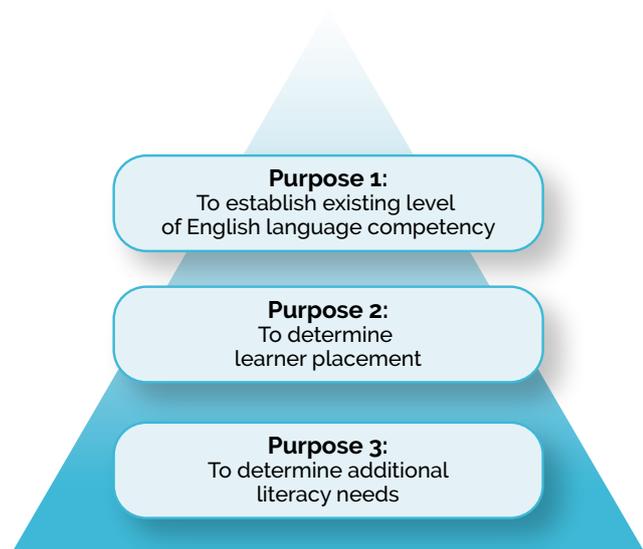
Central to the initial assessment process is the learner and part of this important relationship involves regular and ongoing communication with them at the various stages of the initial assessment process and beyond. In this respect, the online survey focused not on the level of communication with learners, but more specifically on the type of information provided to the learner following completion of the initial assessment process.[130] **Table 3.7** summarises the key findings.

Purpose 1:
To establish existing level
of English language competency

Purpose 2:
To determine
learner placement

Purpose 3:
To determine additional
literacy needs

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130 The initial and ongoing assessment process being proposed in the research report is discussed in full in Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines).

Table 3.7 Information provided to learners during the initial assessment process

What information is provided to the learner during the initial assessment process?	Respondents (n=25) [131]	% of respondents
No information provided	1	4%
Assessment score only	8	32%
Detailed analysis of assessment result	4	16%
Details of the course/ programme they will be placed on	20	80%
Details of additional literacy/ numeracy needs (where required)	2	8%
Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)	2	8%
Other	3	12%

The other category above refers to alternative or additional information that is communicated to the learner as a result of the initial assessment process. These include an indication to the learner of their language level benchmarked to the NFQ and instances where learners are duly notified if the assessor is unsure of their baseline level of competency in a particular skill such as reading or writing.

In relation to staff training in either the development or use of initial assessment tools, it is interesting to note that 52% of respondents confirmed that they had received some level of training, while 36% stated that they had not received any training in this area. The remaining 12% were unsure whether relevant training had been provided by their respective ETBs. In further clarification of this, the online survey sought to identify specific details of the type of training provided. This training ranged from informal in-service training to reliance on the skills and

expertise of internal staff, to attendance at external training events. **Table 3.8** summarises the main features of the various training sessions provided or attended by survey respondents.

Table 3.8 Type of training on initial assessment development/usage received

Type of training received on the development/ use of initial assessment tools
In-house training provided by experienced/ qualified staff members
Member of staff working in the English department of a university as a tutor and researcher was responsible for the development and implementation of initial assessment
Staff from another ETB provided training on the Scottish model of initial assessment
IELTS assessment with a language school tutor
Through experience and learning gained from M.A. in Applied Linguistics
Covered as part of the Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA)
Staff member(s) undertook 3 days PD in language assessment with Cambridge University in conjunction with the National University of Ireland, Maynooth

One of the primary concerns and needs emerging from this research project is the need to develop an initial assessment process that is aligned to the CEFR. In this regard, the online survey sought to clarify some of the existing issues in relation to the use of the CEFR within individual ETBs to include awareness of the framework and its application. **Tables 3.9a and 3.9b** outline details of the various training received by ETB personnel in relation to the use and interpretation of the CEFR.

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131 While there are only 16 ETBs, a total of 25 responses were received to this and most of the questions contained in this survey. This means that multiple responses were received from some ETBs. The justification for this was that, despite the fact that ETBs are organisations that work across multiple counties, there are different practices in place in different counties within the same ETBs. This is a legacy issue of the old VEC structures where each county operated as an independent, standalone organisation.

Table 3.9a Provision of training on the use/ interpretation of the CEFR

Have relevant staff received training in the use/ interpretation of the CEFR	Respondents (n=25) [132]	% of respondents
Yes	10	40%
No	12	48%
Don't know	3	12%

Table 3.9b Type of training provided on the use/ interpretation of the CEFR

Type of training received on the use/ interpretation of the CEFR
Staff member received training of the CEFR as part of the TESOL programme
In-house training provided by experienced/ qualified resource staff
CEFR covered as part of the CELTA/DELTA programme
Staff members attended relevant sessions on the CEFR at NALA ESOL Conferences
Staff member worked in a university in Poland
CEFR was covered as part of the M.A. in Applied Linguistics programme
Staff members attended an ACELS workshop

Table 3.9a highlights that only 40% of respondents identified that relevant staff had undertaken training in the use and interpretation of the CEFR, while 48% had not received any training in this area at all. There is, therefore, a clear need for training to be provided to relevant staff in ETBs and this will be discussed further in relation to the guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment.

In attempting to quantify some of the wider issues relating to the initial assessment of English language competency, 2018 statistical data provided by ETBs yielded some interesting results, highlighted below.

Firstly, in relation to the percentage of migrant learners who were formally assessed prior to course entry in 2018, individual responses ranged from 0% to 100%, with the average result 75% across a total of 24 respondents.

In addition, regarding the level of communication with learners following the initial assessment process, **Table 3.10** provides some interesting findings.

Table 3.10 Level of communication with learners following initial assessment

n = 25[133]	Yes	No	Don't Know
Are details of previous language/ other learning experience(s) recorded as part of the initial assessment process?	15 (60%)	9 (36%)	1 (4%)
Are the results of the initial assessment communicated to the tutor prior to course commencement?	24 (96%)	1 (4%)	–

The online survey also posed an interesting question around whether ESOL initial assessment results should be recorded on the PLSS[134] system. Out of a total of 25 responses received, only 24%[135] agreed that initial assessment results should be recorded on PLSS, while 36% said no and the remaining 40% didn't know either way. In clarifying the reasons for their choice, **Table 3.11** summarises the main points raised.

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132 While there are only 16 ETBs, a total of 25 responses were received to this and most of the questions contained in this survey. This means that multiple responses were received from some ETBs. The justification for this was that, despite the fact that ETBs are organisations that work across multiple counties, there are different practices in place in different counties within the same ETBs. This is a legacy issue of the old VEC structures where each county operated as an independent, standalone organisation.
133 ibid
134 PLSS is an integrated suite of software applications which have been designed to support an integrated approach to the planning, collection and reporting of data relating to FET programmes provided by the 16 Education and Training Boards, This system helps track programme outputs, learner outcomes and progression.
135 Given that only 24% of respondents stated that they would like to see the results of the initial assessment recorded on PLSS, no further recommendations will be made in respect of this within this research project.

Table 3.11 Reasons for (not) recording ESOL initial assessment scores on PLSS

Reasons for recording ESOL initial assessment scores on PLSS
When migrants/refugees transfer from one ETB to another it will ensure that the new ETB will have accurate information
It would be interesting to monitor progression over time, but information would need to be updated on an ongoing basis to track progression accurately
It would be useful to other ETB services to see English scores and levels of students are expressing interest in other courses
It has benefits to record these scores, along with literacy levels, but staff are already overwhelmed with the existing volume of PLSS reporting
PLSS is already time-consuming to maintain
There would be several issues especially in relation to equality and GDPR
It would not reflect nuances in actual skills levels or changes over time

Looking at the specifics of developing good practice guidelines for the initial assessment of migrant learners, the online survey sought to identify some of the main issues and difficulties in formally assessing migrant learners, while also ascertaining what the most important factors are in developing guidelines and toolkit for initial assessment. For each of these questions, respondents were asked to identify their top 3 issues, difficulties and priorities in this regard. **Tables 3.12a and 3.12b** outline the response provided.

Table 3.12a Top 3 difficulties for ETBs in formally assessing migrant learners

What are the main issues/difficulties for ETBs in formally assessing migrant learners prior to course placement? (Top 3)	Respondents (n=25) [136]	% of respondents
Staff training is required in the area of initial assessment	14	56%
Not enough time to administer, correct and follow-up on assessment	13	52%
Not enough staff to administer, correct and follow-up on assessment	11	44%

Table 3.12b Most important factors in developing good practice guidelines and toolkit

In developing guidelines and a toolkit detailing good practice in initial assessment of English Language Competency of Migrant Learners, what 3 factors are most important?	Respondents (n=25) [137]	% of respondents
Benchmarked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)	17	68%
Assess suitability for courses	16	64%
Is accessible and user friendly	16	64%

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137 Ibid

Finally, survey respondents were asked to outline what type of standardised initial assessment guidelines and toolkit they would like to see produced as a result of this research project. **Figure 3.2** below outlines the most pertinent responses received.

The final question posed in the online survey related to the format of the best practice guidelines and toolkit. Out of 25 respondents, 22 (88%) stated that they would prefer the guidelines and toolkit to be available in both online and paper-based format. **Table 3.13** provides a full outline of the responses provided.

Figure 3.2 Types of standardised ESOL initial assessment guidelines

Toolkit that does not take days to administer - easy to use and not time consuming

Toolkit which is more thorough in asessing all skills, highlighting weak areas

Assessment that covers all productive and receptive skills

Assessments should be learner-centred, accessible; required trained staff to administer

Less focus on scoring and more focus on skills

Assessment should be aligned to the CEFR

Online and Paper-based assessment with instructions in learners native languages

Sensitive to learners previous experiences in life, work and education and literacy needs

Assesses all four skills, yet is flexible to be used with low and high level learners

Assessment must be valid, reliable. flexible and effective

Culturally appropriate, simple to use and relevant to Irish context

Less grammar based

Features graded reading tasks and samples of writing and audio of spoken language for training purposes

Table 3.13 Format of initial and ongoing assessment guidelines and toolkit

What format should the guidelines take?	Respondents (n=25) [138]	% of respondents
Online guidelines	3	12.5%
Online toolkit	4	16%
Paper-based guidelines	2	8%
Paper-based toolkit	3	12%
Guidelines and toolkit available both online and paper-based	22	88%

In contextualising the results of the online survey, a thematic analysis was carried out which identified a number of key issues which warranted further exploration. These issues were formulated into three clear questions that would be posed at the regional engagement sessions. While **Table 3.14** identifies the three questions, a detailed analysis of the responses to these questions is reserved for **Section 3.4**.

Table 3.14: Thematic analysis of online survey results – Questions arising for regional engagements

Thematic analysis of online survey results – Questions arising (for regional engagements)
1. What are the key needs, challenges and concerns regarding ESOL initial and ongoing assessment?
2. What works best in ESOL initial and ongoing assessment?
3. What should be included in the guidelines and toolkit on ESOL initial and ongoing assessment?

3.4 Overview of Existing Initial and Ongoing Assessment Practices – Regional Engagement Analysis

The aim of the regional engagement sessions was to follow up on the online survey by delving further into some of the more pertinent findings and issues raised, especially in relation to the needs, challenges and concerns on the development of good practice guidelines and a toolkit on initial and ongoing assessment. In addition, these engagements sessions also posed questions about what these good practice guidelines might look like.

A diverse range of adult education tutors participated in the regional engagement sessions, all of whom had some level of interaction with migrant learners on a regular basis. 54% of respondents were either Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs) – 29% or ESOL tutors – 25%, which was encouraging given that these are the two key personnel supporting learning on their learning journey from the point of entry onwards.

The engagement sessions were primarily focused on identifying the specific needs, challenges and concerns regarding the initial assessment of English language competency of migrant learners looking to access relevant FET programmes. The feedback gathered from participation at the various engagement sessions was analysed using thematic analysis. As a result, several key themes have emerged, and which were grouped in terms of needs, challenges and concerns. Moreover, these key themes were further categorised under more specific headings as outlined in **Figure 3.3.**

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Figure 3.3 Key themes (and sub-themes) emerging from Regional Engagement Sessions
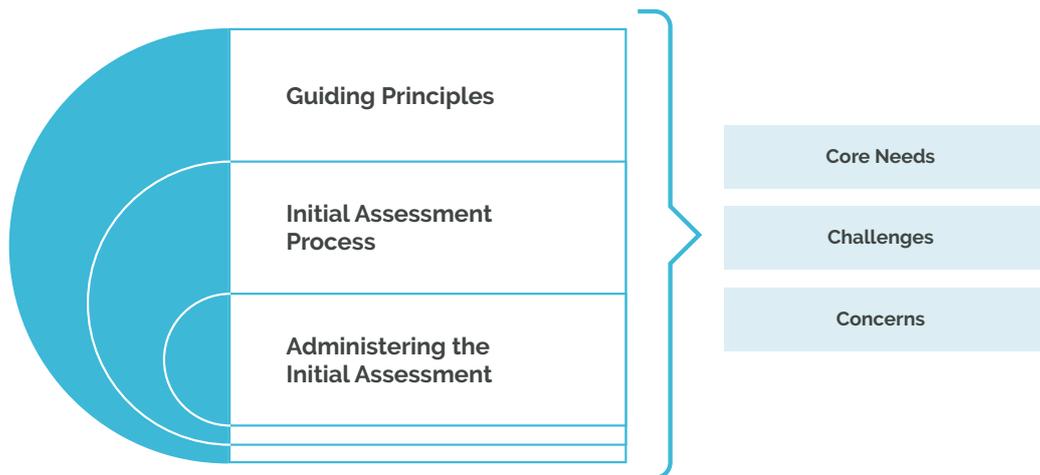
It is also important to highlight that themes outlined in **Figure 3.3** stemmed from questions arising from a similar analysis of the results of the online survey; questions which were posed at the regional engagement questions as a means of both structuring and prompting discussions on the **core needs, challenges and concerns.** These questions have already been outlined in **Table 3.14,** but are summarised below for ease of reference:

4. **What are the key needs, challenges and concerns regarding ESOL initial and ongoing assessment?**

5. **What works best in ESOL initial and ongoing assessment?**

6. **What should be included in the guidelines and toolkit on ESOL initial and ongoing assessment?**

Figures 3.4 to 3.10 outline the key findings of the thematic analysis under each of the thematic headings identified in **Figure 3.3.**

3.4.1. Guiding Principles of Initial Assessment – Core Needs

Figure 3.4 Guiding Principles – Core Needs
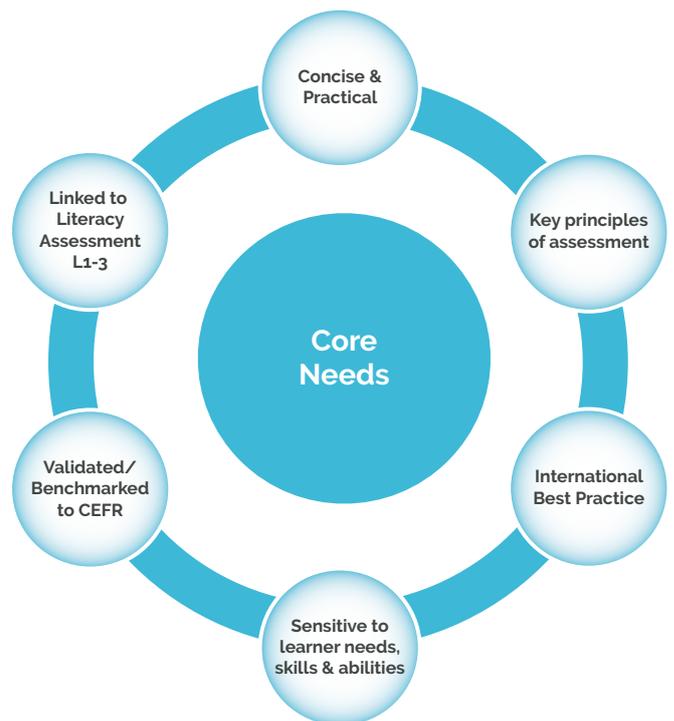
Need 1: Concise and Practical Initial Assessment

Throughout the various regional engagement sessions, it became apparent from early on that not only did ESOL tutors want a standardised Initial Assessment Tool (IAT) to emerge as a result of this research project, but they wanted a tool that was concise in content and practical in approach. Given the diverse and complex profile and background of migrant learners, and cognisant of their previous educational backgrounds and experiences, it is vitally important that a standardised IAT is devised and administered in a wholly sensitive and learner-centred manner. It is, therefore, important that the IAT is sufficiently broad enough to provide an accurate assessment of a migrant learner's language ability at point of entry and on an ongoing basis thereafter. Equally, it is important to ensure that the content of the IAT is as practical as possible in terms of content and as such relates to situations and scenarios typical of the day-to-day interactions and activities of migrant learners generally.

Need 2: Conform to the key principles of assessment

While the international literature[139] made reference to the importance of validity and reliability in initial assessment, the results of the regional engagement sessions highlighted a deep-rooted desire to develop an IAT that can be 'measured against the ability of a centre to use it and respond to it with appropriate supports for the learner'.[140] In fact, the notion of producing a valid and reliable IAT is intrinsically linked to the above-referenced need for a more concise and practical tool. In other words, it is essential that the IAT achieves precisely what it sets out to achieve, but in a wholly concise and practical manner. Furthermore, it is vitally important that the intention of the IAT is also explained to the learner from the outset. Equally, both learners, service co-ordinators and tutors need to be satisfied that the results of the IAT are reliable over time irrespective of external influences such as testing conditions and who is administering the test. There is, therefore, a need for a more consistent approach to both the development and implementation of an IAT.

Need 3: Conform to International Best Practice

The international literature review outlined several international models of initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency. In this regard, it is important to highlight, that throughout the regional engagement sessions, the Scottish model of initial assessment was mentioned and discussed on numerous occasions. In fact, at present, up to eight ETBs are using the Scottish model, adapted versions of it, or locally devised models informed by it as their primary model of initial assessment. As also outlined in the literature review, the profile of migrant learners residing in Scotland is broadly similar to those migrant learners living in Ireland, so it is not surprising that Irish ESOL tutors are gravitating towards this particular model.

There are, of course, clear benefits from modelling the Scottish approach as it is a tried and tested model and as such will assist tutors here in avoiding the common pitfalls associated with the development of IATs. That being said, it is of course important not to forget the significance of both validity and reliability in initial assessment, and this needs to be to the fore if attempting to replicate the Scottish model and making it more relevant to and meaningful in the Irish context.

Need 4: Sensitive to Learner Needs, Skills and Abilities

Throughout the literature reviews, there was much discussion around the importance of designing an IAT that was sensitive to the needs, skills and abilities of migrant learners, while also considering their previous educational backgrounds and experiences. In both the online survey and the regional engagement sessions there was a clear sense that any standardised IAT should assess learners on what they actually know, and not on what they don't know. Equally, the literature review highlighted the importance of the latency effect on learner performance in initial assessment and the potential negative impact it could have in more formalised testing environments. Therefore, in developing a user-friendly, concise and practical IAT that conforms to both international best practice and the key principles of assessment, it is vital that the needs, skills and abilities of migrant learners are not overlooked.

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139 See Section 2 of this research report.
140 Educational Disadvantage Centre (n.d.), "Is there more than what's the score?," Dublin: St. Patrick's College. To view the full report, please click here.

Need 5: Validated/Benchmarked to the CEFR

Throughout this research report and across the wider ESOL community there has been much discussion concerning the need to align existing and future ESOL programmes to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFL). While the issue of programme development is beyond the remit of this research project, it is worth noting that it is being addressed as part of the ongoing national review of existing awards at NFQ levels 1 – 4 by QQI.

In both the online survey and regional engagement sessions there were repeated calls for the alignment of any newly developed IAT to the CEFR[141]. As a result, contact was made with EAQUALS[142] – experts in the use and implementation of the CEFR – and they advised that it would be a much longer-term project than the scope of the present research project to align the resultant toolkit to the framework. This is due to the fact that the IAT would require significant testing and piloting to ensure consistent and reliable alignment to the CEFR. This research does not, therefore, address this problem, but rather supports the view that it is better to take the time to get the process right rather than rush the process for the sake of a more immediate solution.

Notwithstanding this, the IAT being developed as part of this research represents an important first step. It can be further developed through extensive testing and piloting and would benefit from input from relevant expert groups such as EAQUALS, as well as learning from results of other ongoing projects currently being undertaken by relevant stakeholders such as SOLAS and QQI. It is also worth noting that the Scottish model, which is the basis for the initial and ongoing assessment model outlined in this research, is aligned to the CEFR. There is, therefore, clear merit in engaging with relevant personnel within ESOL Scotland as part of this wider discussion.

Need 6: Linked to Literacy Assessment at NFQ Levels 1 to 3

This relates to the need to develop good practice in initial and ongoing assessment across the NFQ at levels 1 to 6, and not just addressing the assessment of English language competency in isolation. While this research report is solely concerned with the issues of initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that the guidelines presented in **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)** are operating out of the same general principles and purposes as the companion guidelines on the initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy at NFQ levels 1 to 3[143], and at levels 4 – 6[144]. It seems, therefore, logical to align and connect this research to these existing guidelines, especially where there is an overlap. Notwithstanding this, it is important, at the same time, to continue to recognise the uniqueness of ESOL provision within the wider remit of Further Education and Training.

3.4.2 Guiding Principles of Initial Assessment – Challenges

Figure 3.5 Guiding Principles – Challenges

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141 Any references to equivalences between NFQ level ESOL awards and the CEFR is for the purpose of providing a baseline level and is solely the opinion of the author of this research report and/or other personnel consulted in the course of the research.
142 EAQUALS is an international not-for-profit organisation whose mission is to encourage and foster excellence in language education globally. For more information on EAQUALS visit their website https://www.eaquals.org/
143 SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.
144 SOLAS (2020) "Final Report: Assessment of adult literacy and numeracy programmes at NFQ levels 4, 5 and 6: initial and ongoing." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

Challenge 1: Understanding Learner Motivation

One of the more interesting concerns that arose early on during the regional engagement sessions was the need to understand learner motivation for participating in ESOL programmes. While much of the understanding of motivation to date has been anecdotal at best, the learner focus group provided a platform for this to be assessed in a more meaningful and considered manner through direct engagement with the learners themselves. Accordingly, the outcomes of this discussion with the learners will be outlined in greater detail in the next section when the results of the learner focus groups are analysed.

Challenge 2: Assessment between levels/Rates of Progression

Initial assessment is not an exact science due to the multitude of external, moving factors such as the fact that migrant learners are not a homogenous grouping since they all progress at different rates, as well as other issues already outlined in greater detail in the international literature review. It has been stated on a number of previous occasions in this research report that initial assessment should be viewed and conducted as an ongoing process that spans a learner's initial stages on an appropriate programme of learning. It should not, therefore, be a once-off process merely conducted at the point of entry.

Equally, efforts should be made to assess learners at the end of a programme of learning rather than assuming that successful completion of one programme automatically implies that they are ready for progression to the next level. This may well be the case, but it may also transpire that a learner requires further support with certain skills before they can progress further. For example, the current QQI ESOL level 3 component module has a limited focus on some of the core skills areas. Consequently, it would be difficult to accurately determine whether a learner is ready to progress in terms of their reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities. As a solution to this, it would be more prudent and effective to assess learners at the end of a course with the proposed methodology from this report, in addition to the relevant QQI assessment requirements.

Challenge 3: Progression Pathways

When it comes to providing realistic and meaningful progression pathways, it is important that ESOL learners have access to appropriate progression routes. Work underway on the review of awards at levels 1 - 4 coupled with a commitment to quality learner pathways in the new Further Education and Training Strategy should strengthen the range of progression routes available to ESOL learners. Progression should be conceptualised not only as a linear and upwards process, horizontal and downwards progression should also be considered as equally valid options depending on learner goals and needs e.g. it might be expected that some learners, having demonstrated progression in the English language competency up to NFQ level 4, might need to drop back to courses at level 3 or lower if they are starting a specific discipline. In an era of lifelong learning and encouraging progression within and outside of FET, meaningful progression pathways can encourage migrant learners to progress and take advantage of new and emerging FET opportunities at higher levels. It is important that the development of a standardised IAT takes account of the importance of realistic and meaningful progression pathways. There are also numerous additional social, economic, personal and emotional benefits for both providers and learners, as well as for the wider economy and society in championing such a joined-up approach to learner progression.

Challenge 4: Learner Readiness

The notion of learner readiness presented itself at quite an early stage of the regional engagement sessions, and the fact that some tutors felt that certain learners were not assessable or not ready for assessment at a particular point in time, is a cause for concern, and one that needs to be addressed. Out of concern for the learners, tutors were wary of an emerging process which somehow, either intentionally or otherwise, forced migrant learners to undergo some form of initial assessment as a condition of their acceptance onto a FET programme. While it is the express intention of this research to put in place guidelines for the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency, co-ordinators and tutors were deeply concerned that, a one size fits all approach would be foisted on then.

Such an outcome would be completely unworkable and counter-intuitive in many instances. Much of the concern expressed related to the latency effect on learners as discussed in **Section 2**. As such, tutors have called for an IAT that is both sensitive and adaptable to each learner's unique set of circumstances. Many circumstances have already been explored elsewhere in this section and are reiterated here again in an attempt to understand the seriousness with which these issues need to be taken in the context of this research project.

The findings also further acknowledge the interconnectedness of the various principles outlined to date in this research report. The guidelines will be mindful of the fact that there are existing background issues and circumstances that could either skew a learner's initial assessment performance or prevent their participation in the first place. Equally, it also highlights the pre-determined principle that initial assessments need to be an ongoing process, rather than a once-off isolated occurrence.

Challenge 5: Additional Needs

A certain percentage of migrant learners accessing programmes of learning are likely to present with additional needs such as literacy difficulties in their native language or needs relating to Specific Learning Difficulties (SLDs) such as Dyslexia. There is, therefore, a clear need for greater awareness of, and responsiveness to, these needs. The commitment to learner supports in the new FET Strategy[145] is to be welcomed and it is hoped that a coherent and consistent approach to learner supports will be of benefit to all learners in FET.

In terms of literacy difficulties, these can often be more difficult to identify amongst the migrant population due to the language barrier. For example, difficulties with reading and writing could potentially be wrongly attributed to a lack of or limited English language competency, where in reality the difficulty relates to an underlying literacy difficulty in the native language.

In other words, the lack of or limited English language competency is masking the underlying literacy difficulty in the learner's native language. In reality, this can be a difficult issue to discern from the start, but what it does reinforce is that initial assessment must be an ongoing process. This will help ensure that literacy difficulties, once identified, can be addressed in a timely and efficient manner. Equally, it highlights the additional importance of ensuring synergies exist between this research project and the previous and forthcoming work on initial assessment of literacy and numeracy at NFQ levels 1 to 3 and 4 to 6.

Challenge 6: Communicating with learners with no English language competency

What if a learner presents for initial assessment and has no English language competency at all? How can this learner be assessed? Also, firmly linked to Challenge 5 above, the fact that some learners may be unsuitable for initial assessment needs to be recognised and accounted for. Administering and initial assessment for the sake of 'box-ticking' is counter-intuitive at present and potentially damaging to the learner-tutor relationship. Such a scenario also suggests many of the aforementioned principles in this section, in particular learner readiness, sensitivity to learner needs, skills and abilities and most overtly, assessing learners on what they know, not what they don't know.

In responding to the potential occurrence of such a scenario, any newly developed IAT needs to be cognisant of and capable of adapting to specific local issues, and flexible enough to allow tutors to apply the principles of initial assessment in an appropriate and meaningful manner.

Challenge 7: Assessing Learners with Spiky Profiles[146]

The simple reality is that there is no such thing as the 'perfect' learner. Furthermore, the fact that language competency is spread across four core skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – highlights the uniqueness of learning a language over any other skills or disciplines. For example, it is extremely unlikely that any language learner would have the same level of competency across all four core skills. In referencing the CEFR, a learner could be A2 in listening and speaking, but A1 or below in reading and writing. This reality also firmly ties this issue to **Challenge 2** above which relates to assessment between and across levels.

If such a learner presents, then what is the most appropriate level to assess them at? This is not a straightforward question to answer, but what it does highlight is that both co-ordinators and tutors need to be given the flexibility to address such issues locally in the context of the wider learner population and type of provision and supports on offer. In practice, what the guidelines contained in **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)** of this research report attempt to do is to set a strategy that is flexible enough to cater for all levels of learners seeking access to English language support programmes.

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145 SOLAS (2020) "Future FET: Transforming Learning, The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020 -2024" Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full strategy click here.
146 Figure 9, p51 in SOLAS (2021) "Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ Levels 4-6 in ETBs: Background Report" Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

### Challenge 8: Subjectivity of Initial Assessment

One of the core challenges raised at the various regional engagement sessions was the perceived subjectivity of certain aspects of the initial assessment process, especially in relation to the assessment of listening, speaking and writing. The concern raised was that an assessment of these skills is primarily subjective in nature, and there is very little that can be done to remove this barrier. In reality, however, it is possible in language teaching to establish clear criteria for identifying behavioural indicators of knowledge and achievement. Assessment should not and must not depend on an assessor's impression or personal opinions but should strive for objectivity. This is, in fact, a core rationale for developing a standardised approach to the initial and ongoing assessment process. In other words, the existence of a standardised approach to initial and ongoing assessment will ensure that assessors can agree on levels. That being said, the real issue with the subjectivity of initial and ongoing assessment actually relates to the issue of alignment to the CEFR, since without such alignment it would actually be extremely difficult to agree on levels in a completely objective manner.

Challenge 9: The Reliability Factor in Initial Assessment

The reliability of initial and ongoing assessment has already been identified as a key need of the sector, but equally, it has been identified as a key challenge in terms of developing a fair and consistent learner-centred model of initial assessment. Challenges in the form of the subjectivity of certain aspects of the process can pose serious challenges to the core principles of assessment, in particular reliability and validity. However, as also identified in **Challenge 8** above, specific steps can be taken to enhance the reliability of the assessment process by enhancing the objectivity of scoring. Once again these are factors that will be seriously considered and very much to the fore of the guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency.

3.4.3 Guiding Principles of Initial Assessment – Concerns

Figure 3.6 Guiding Principles – Concerns
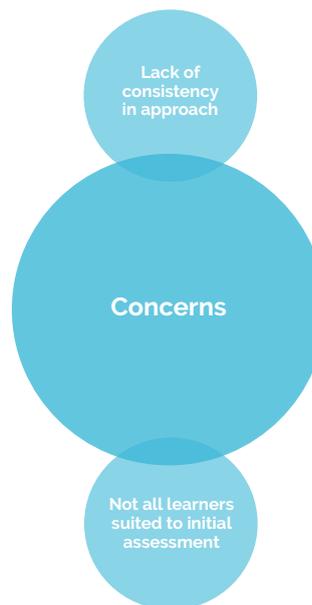
Concern 1: Lack of Consistency in Approach to Initial Assessment

One of the overarching concerns and frustrations identified by participants throughout the data gathering process was the lack of consistency in approaches to initial assessment. As has already been identified earlier in this section, there are several approaches to initial assessment in place across the sixteen ETBs. It is, however, the express aim of this research to bring about a more consistent and standardised approach to the entire initial assessment process, but in such a way that still allows for flexibility so that unique and individual local issues can be adequately addressed.

Concern 2: Not all learners are suited to formal Initial and ongoing Assessment

Already identified in multiple guises earlier in this section, the fact that some migrant learners may not be ready or suited for formal initial and ongoing assessment for a variety of reasons has also been identified as a key concern amongst co-ordinators and tutors. The way to manage this is to, provide a clear and unambiguous definition of what exactly initial assessment is and how it should be conducted in the context of various complex circumstances through the guidelines. The goal is to ensure that the process remains flexible, concise and learner-centred, while being sensitive to the many, and ofttimes, complex needs of migrant learners. In so doing, the value of more informal methods of assessment, such as observations or informal interviews, needs to be both acknowledged and valued in the context of providing definitive guidance

on initial and ongoing assessment of all learners. The importance of and value of informal assessment was referenced in detail in the ***Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report***.[147]

3.4.4 The Initial Assessment Process – Core Needs

Figure 3.7 Initial Assessment Process – Core Needs
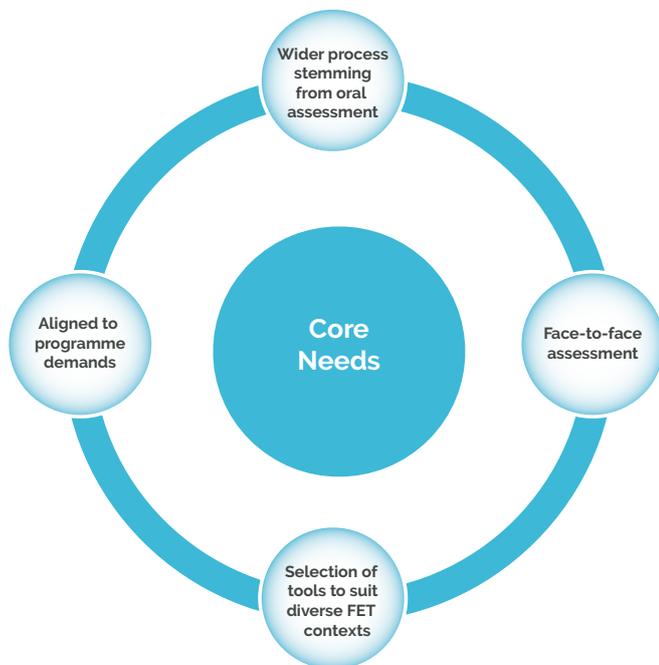
Need 1: Wider process stemming from Oral Assessment

One of the clearest calls made throughout the regional engagement sessions was the need to introduce a staged initial assessment process. Initial assessment must not become a once-off process, conducted at the point of entry alone, thereby basing all future decisions regarding a learner's competency levels be made based on the results of that once-off assessment. Instead, it should be instigated as a staged process in which all four core language skills are assessed. Given that the data-gathering stage of this research project identified a certain affinity with the Scottish model of initial assessment, ETBs could potentially take inspiration from this approach.

In the Scottish model, learners are assessed on their spoken and listening skills first and based on the results of this an informed decision is made regarding the level of reading and writing tasks to be assigned. Furthermore, it is a flexible model that allows for the entire process to take place across

a single or multiple session, depending on specific learner profiles or needs. It would, therefore, seem logical to adopt such an approach in the Irish context and this is something that will be considered further when outlining the guidelines.

Need 2: Face-to-face assessment

Somewhat linked to Need 1 above, inspiration, amongst co-ordinators and tutors, for the need for face-to-face assessment came from the Scottish model, where it is clear that initial assessment should take place on a face-to-face basis. While limited resources may not allow for each ETB to conduct all aspects of the initial assessment on a one-to-one basis, the speaking and listening components should most certainly follow this model. In fact, if the principle set out in Need 1 is adhered to, the reading and writing aspects of the assessment could be conducted in a group setting without compromising the integrity of the overall process.

Need 3: Selection of tools to suite diverse FET context

FET is an incredibly diverse area with provision ranging from unaccredited programmes to programmes accredited up to and including NFQ level 6. As such it may not be possible to identify or design one single IAT to cater for learner or programme needs across such a vast array of levels. Therefore, it may be more prudent and realistic to set out a range of tools that could be utilised at various levels across the entirety of FET provision. While the limited timeframe for completion of this project does not allow for the creation of a broader range of tools to achieve this goal, the tools created here can adequately deal with the core need in relation to ESOL at an unaccredited level and accredited level up to QQI level 4, while paving the way for the future development of additional tools up to QQI level 6.

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147 SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.

Need 4: Aligned to programme demands

Any newly devised IAT cannot be developed independently of programme aims, objectives and learning outcomes. Instead, the IAT must be cognisant of the demands and requirements of individual programmes – both certified and uncertified. In reality, however, much of the developments in respect of programmes are wholly outside the control of this research project. As such, the IAT must recognise this reality and remain flexible enough to be reverse engineered, if required, to suit the specific requirements, especially the threshold levels, of newly validated programmes by QQI.

3.4.5 The Initial Assessment Process – Challenges

Figure 3.8 Initial Assessment Process – Challenges

Challenge 1: Screening Vs Initial Assessment

As discussed in the literature review, it needs to be recognised that there is a differentiation between the purposes and process of both initial screening and initial assessment. As such a determination needs to be made, in the context of this research, as to which approach is required and most appropriate, if not a combination of several or all of these approaches. The final determination on this will be made when outlining the guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment.

### Challenge 2: Lack of appropriate tools at lower levels

One of the many challenges identified in the course of the regional engagement sessions with tutors was the lack of appropriate tools at lower levels. It was felt that most of the existing industry or locally devised tools were aimed at learners at higher levels, or certainly at levels above A1 on the CEFR. There was a broad consensus that no suitable tools currently exist for use at A1 or below. This is something that tutors want addressed as part of this research project given that ETBs are now dealing with more and more migrant learners at beginners or pre-beginners level. Therefore, in designing an appropriate toolkit for the initial assessment of English language competency, this factor will be given serious consideration and appropriate measures will be outlined to assist tutors to engage with migrant learners. Aligning assessments to the CERF should also run in tandem with the alignment of programmes to the framework. Programmes developed to meet the requirements of revised award standards should also be cognisant of the CERF.

Challenge 3: Grammatically correct Vs Social English

There is a widely held belief that overcorrection of errors can be counter-productive and negatively impacts learner performance and progression. Consequently, this raises questions around where the balance lies in terms of what and when to correct and indeed what not to correct in terms of initial assessment to encourage learners to build their confidence so that they can engage in the learning process and reach their full potential. Consideration, in the context of developing an IAT and scoring rubrics, needs to be given to the grammatical correctness of learner responses balanced against the social acceptability of utterances and general language usage. This challenge is also firmly tied to the aforementioned principle of assessing learners on what they know and not on what they don't know.

3.4.6 Administering the Initial Assessment – Core Needs

Figure 3.9. Administering the Initial Assessment – Core Needs
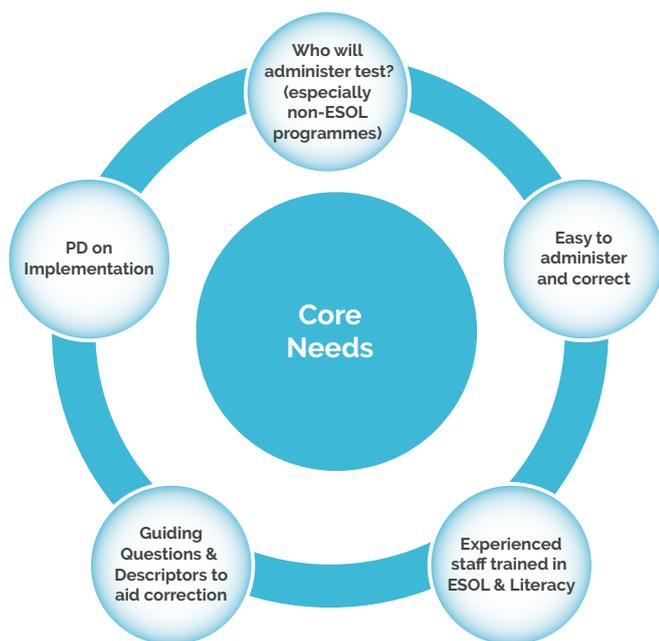
Need 1: Who will administer the test?

A major concern voiced by both co-ordinators and tutors at the regional engagement sessions was if the initial assessment of English language competency was to be extended across the wider FET services, who would be responsible for administering the IAT? Accordingly, there is an understandable concern amongst ESOL co-ordinators and tutors on this issue, with the primary concern centring around Need 3 – experienced trained staff, while also being linked to Need 5 in terms of Professional Development (PD) on the implementation of the guidelines and toolkit contained within this research report. A further linked concern relates to the fact that there is currently no dedicated ESOL Co-Ordinator role within ETBs. As a result, initial assessment is currently carried out, in many instances by personnel with no specific qualifications or background in ESOL provision or by personnel managing a wide range of programmes. While this issue is largely outside the scope of this research project, **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)**, outlines a minimum suggested staffing structure that would be required to make the proposed initial and ongoing assessment framework operate effectively nationally and within individual ETBs.

Need 2: Initial Assessment should be easy to administer and correct

This seems logical and as such warrants, very little explanation or clarification, except to say that in attempting to reduce the subjectivity of the initial assessment process, any scoring rubrics developed must be simple, logical and easy to interpret, and can be applied consistently and transparently. Training may, therefore, be required in the interpretation of results and this is something that needs to be considered when implementing the results of this research project.

Need 3: Experienced staff trained in ESOL and Literacy

Considering earlier discussions, this need is also fairly self-explanatory in that the unique status of ESOL and language teaching needs to be identified and recognised across all ETBs. Measures must also be put in place to ensure that initial assessment is carried out by suitably qualified personnel (e.g. those qualified in the areas of ESOL and Literacy).

Need 4: Guiding questions and descriptors to aid correction

This need has also been attended to earlier in various guises, particularly in terms of developing a scoring rubric to assist co-ordinators and tutors with the correction and interpretation of the results of the initial and ongoing assessment tools. As already stated in relation to Need 3 – experienced trained staff – any such rubrics need to be easily interpreted by those administering and correcting the assessment results. The development of an agreed framework of levels, firmly linked to the CEFR, is also required to assist in addressing this issue.

Need 5: Professional development on the implementation of the IAT

Linked to all the various principles discussed, there has been a clear call from co-ordinators and tutors for PD on the implementation of the guidelines and toolkit contained in this research. This is something that will be discussed in **Section 5 (Part 2: Guidelines)**.

3.4.7 Administering the Initial Assessment – Concerns

Figure 3.10 Administering the Initial Assessment – Concerns
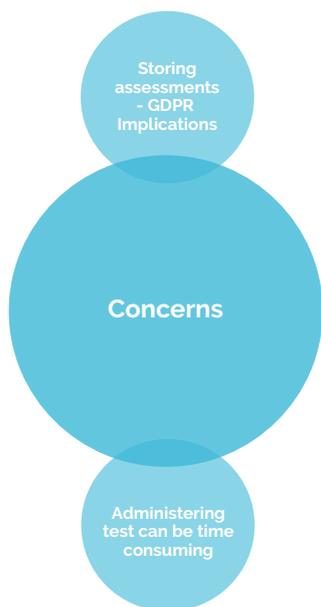
Concern 1: Storing of assessments – GDPR implications

Throughout the regional engagement sessions, numerous concerns were voiced around the storing of individual learner initial assessments and the GDPR implications in terms of access and retention periods. In determining best practice guidelines, clarification will be provided on this to assist co-ordinators and tutors.

Concern 2: Administering tests can be time-consuming

Numerous concerns were also raised over the amount of time it could potentially take to administer an initial or ongoing assessment that sets out to assess all four core language skills. This is a consideration that will be taken seriously and will be dealt with alongside other principles already discussed. These include ensuring that initial assessment is a staged, ongoing process and is learner-centred, time-efficient and sensitive to the varying complex needs of migrant learners.

3.5 Overview of Existing Initial Assessment Practices – Learner Focus Groups

The aim of the learner focus groups was to hear first-hand from migrant learners themselves regarding their experiences of initial assessment and to gain feedback from them on how ETBs could improve the process to make it more learner focused. The following section outlines the key findings from the various focus groups held.

In total, four ETBs participated in the learner focus groups and **Table 3.15** outlines details of the participating ETBs, number of learners and their levels of English/programmes of study.

Table 3.15 Learners who participated in learner focus groups by ETB/level

ETB	No. of learners	% of total participants	Level of English/ Programme of study
Laois and Offaly ETB	11	17.2%	Ranging from QQI ESOL Levels 1 - 3
Kilkenny and Carlow ETB	25	39.1%	Ranging from QQI ESOL Levels 1 – 5
City of Dublin ETB	15	23.4%	6 = Intermediate /B2 9 = QQI Level 4 ESOL
Limerick and Clare ETB	13	20.3%	5 = First Certificate 8 = Absolute Beginners
Total	**64**	**100%**	**-**

The learner focus groups looked at a number of key questions, primarily in relation to initial assessment, but also in relation to learner motivation, certification and progression issues – all issues firmly linked to initial and ongoing assessment and emerged either through the online survey, regional engagement sessions or both. **Table 3.16** details the questions that were posed to learners during each of the four focus groups conducted as part of this research project.

Table 3.16 List of questions posted at leaner focus groups

Learner Focus Group Questions
1. *What ESOL programme (uncertified/certified) are you currently studying?*
2. *What does ESOL mean to you?*
3. *What motivates you to attend ESOL classes?*
4. *Now that you are attending an ESOL class are you happy with it? Why/Why not?*
5. *Did you have to complete a test/assessment before attending ESOL classes?*
6. *If yes, was this test helpful/useful for you?*
7. *How could the initial assessment be improved for future use?*
8. *Should you be tested/assessed at the end of a course (before you move up to the next level)?*
9. *Is certification important to you?*
10. *If so, is QQI certification relevant to your needs?*

Each of these questions will now be discussed in terms of the learner responses provided. These responses have been collated and randomised so that no individual learner or ETB can be identified.

1. **What ESOL programme (uncertified/certified) are you currently attending?**

   All sixty-four learners who participated in the focus groups were attending a diverse range of uncertified and certified ESOL programmes from absolute beginners up to QQI level 5. This also included 5 learners who were preparing for the Cambridge First Certificate Examination (FECE). Some of the focus groups were mixed with learners from a range of these levels, while others contained learners from one level only. The forum proved slightly more challenging in some instances where absolute beginners were mixed with learners at much higher levels. Notwithstanding this, all learners were free to participate, and most of them contributed in some form through the focus group sessions.

What does ESOL mean to you?

ESOL co-ordinators and tutors are aware of what ESOL means and how it differs from other forms of English language teaching such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL), but do learners availing of ESOL programmes have a similar understanding?

After explaining to learners that the acronym ESOL stood for English for Speakers of Other Languages, they were asked what this meant to them on a personal level. Most learners responded to this question with several key words emerging from the wide variety of responses provided. **Figure 3.11** highlights the main keywords that emerged.

Figure 3.11 What does ESOL mean to you? Key words

2. **What motivates you to attend ESOL classes?**

   As with questions one and two above, this question was primarily asked to add context to this research project in terms of the wider reform of ESOL provision, while at the same time helping the learners become more relaxed within the focus group setting. Notwithstanding these motivating factors, this question produced some very relevant and pertinent information regarding the wider research project. Furthermore, this issue of learner motivation was raised on numerous occasions during the regional engagement sessions with ESOL co-ordinators and tutors and was considered by many as worthy of further analysis.

The responses received firmly aligned to the keywords that emerged from the previous questions, outlined in **Figure 3.11**. Overall, a very high level of responses was received from the sixty-four participants, but in collating the responses several key trends emerged as outlined in **Figure 3.12.**

Figure 3.12 What motivates learners to learn English?

- Communicate with people in various settings - makes life easier
- English is an International language
- Help me find a (better) job
- Help improve myself/my skills (reading & writing)
- Create new opportunities in Ireland - important for integration
- Help progress to Further Education & Training/Higher Education
- Help meet different people - learn about different cultures
- Provides a social outlet and opportunities for new experiences - cannot stay at home
- Tried to learn by myself, but didn't work
- If you don't learn the language, you cannot do anything

While each learner had their own personal reasons and motivations for learning English, the reasons outlined in **Figure 3.12** offer an accurate summary of the primary reasons, and as such provide valuable insight into the learners' mindset. These findings, therefore, are particularly useful in terms of developing a relevant, meaningful and learner centred IAT.

3. **Now that you are attending an ESOL class are you happy with it? Why/Why not?**

    100% of learners who attended the various learner focus groups confirmed that they were happy that they were attending English classes and agreed that they were having a significant and positive impact on both their English language competency levels and their integration into the local and wider Irish society.

    Broadly speaking the learners' reasons for being happy with their respective courses are firmly aligned to their motivations for attending classes in the first instance. In other words, this could be construed as confirmation that the learners' expectations are being met by the courses they are

attending. In particular, learners appreciated the opportunity provided to them to avail of these courses free of charge and recognised their value in terms of assisting their integration into Irish society while aiding them with achieving their own personal goals for their new lives in Ireland. One of the more interesting comments made during the focus groups sessions related to a learner who stated that any class, whether or not it was at the correct level for them, was better than no class at all as it still gave them an opportunity to learn and practice their English language skills.

4. **Did you have to complete a test/ assessment before attending classes?**

    All learners who participated in the learner focus groups confirmed that they had to complete some sort of initial assessment before commencing ESOL courses. The structure and approach of this assessment varied greatly and ranged from the completion of an application form to the completion of a specific reading and writing task. In all instances, regardless of the approach adopted, the learners confirmed

that they were only assessed on two of the four core language skills at most: primarily reading and writing. Although, some learners clarified that they did participate in a short informal interview/conversation with the co-ordinator at the initial contact stage. In one instance, learners completed the PLSS form as part of an interview process, and the learners' performance was used to assess their spoken competency.

In terms of reading and writing skills assessment approaches varied greatly amongst the four ETBs and ranged from reading comprehension tasks to writing short descriptions about themselves or writing a description of a given photograph or image. In one ETB, learners were required to answer the first forty questions on the Oxford Quick Placement Test.

In other instances, learners were unsure whether or not they had completed an initial assessment at point of entry, but this may have been due to the fact that these particular learners were a number of years studying with the ETB and may well have forgotten that they had completed some sort of initial assessment. In reality, however, what this does seem to confirm is that in almost all instances initial assessment was conducted as a once-off occurrence.

5. **If yes, was this test helpful/useful for you?**

All learners participating in the focus groups confirmed that, where they recalled completing an initial assessment at point of entry, they found the process useful and mostly accurate in providing an assessment of their English language competency. This was further confirmed by learners when they agreed that they were subsequently placed on the correct and most appropriate course as a result of the initial assessment. However, in one particular instance, following a brief discussion, a number of learners agreed that the scoring of the assessment was largely subjective and only really provided an estimate of their English language level across a limited range of skills; although they did also appear to suggest that such an assessment was broadly accurate in nature. A particular example highlighted related to listening skills, where one learner suggested that it was one of the biggest difficulties facing migrant learners when learning English, yet there wasn't any real focus on this skill in the initial assessment process. Again,

as previously highlighted, there are methods for giving an objective picture of a learner's competency level across the core skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

In relation to the administration of the initial assessment, or more specifically the instructions issued to learners, it was felt that such instructions were good, while in other instances it was felt that the instructions were too confusing.

In summary, learners felt that some form of initial assessment was beneficial in assessing their English language competency at point of entry but felt that some enhancements were required to make the process easier and more focused on their specific needs and skills. These particular points will be explored in the questions to follow. Firstly, however, it is important to highlight that learners appreciated the purpose of this assessment. In particular, they appreciated the clear objective to make the initial and ongoing assessment processes more meaningful and focused on both their needs and previous education experiences and backgrounds.

6. **How could the initial assessment process be improved for future use?**

As seen from the responses to question 6, learners were largely content with the initial assessment they completed at the point of entry. Notwithstanding this, many of the learners provided some very useful and practical suggestions for consideration as part of the development of the guidelines and toolkit. **Figure 3.13** summarises the key suggestions provided by learners.

Figure 3.13 Learner feedback for developing standardised initial assessment

More grammar	Assess all 4 skills	Writing assessment = Describe a picture
Assess speaking and listening	Exisiting assessments can be too academic	Need Irish based assessment
Need to support learners looking to learn and progress	Need to address subjectivity of assessment	Assessment should be about determining starting point
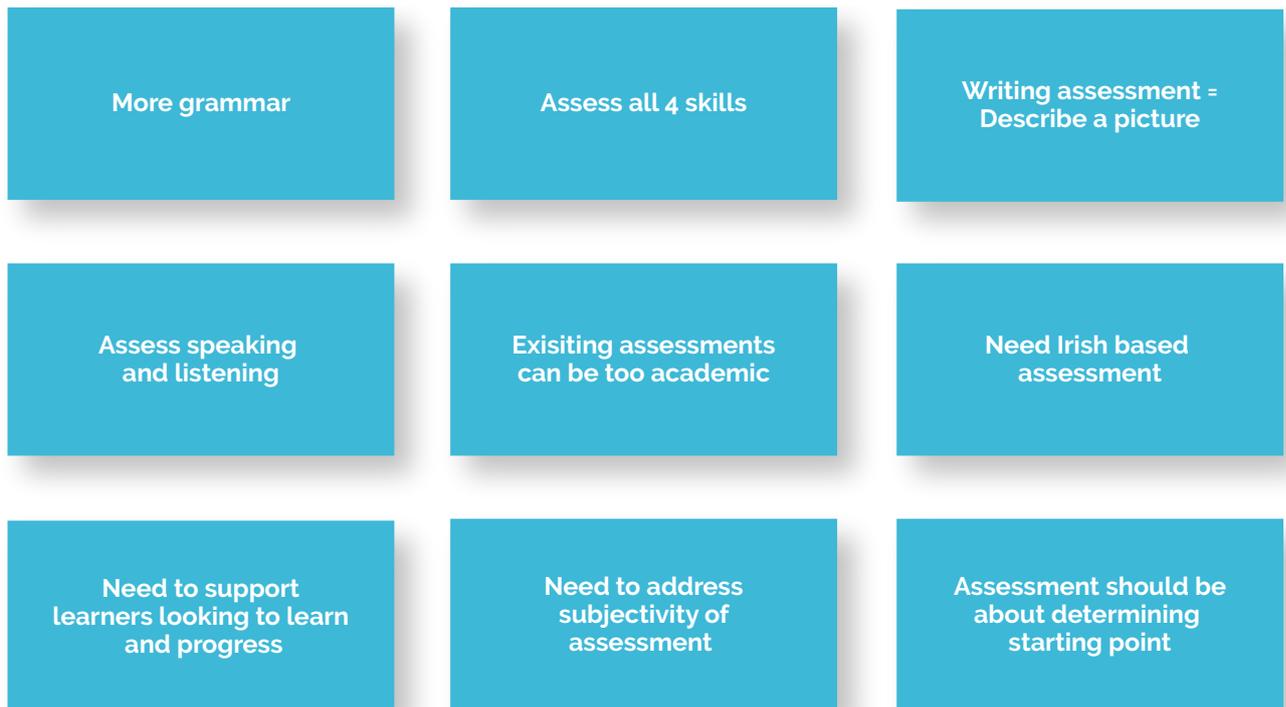
In outlining the learner feedback as per **Figure 3.13,** it is important to highlight that it may not be possible to address or satisfy all these particular needs. While it will be prioritised, this feedback will be balanced against the results of both the online survey and the regional engagement sessions. In addition, the final structure of the guidelines and toolkit will also be informed by the international literature review.

Finally, in terms of the need for initial assessment to be a staged, ongoing process, learners agreed that this would be a more logical and meaningful approach to the process, but more importantly, they sensed that it would be more beneficial to them in the long term.

7. **Should you be tested/assessed at the end of a course (before you move up to the next level)?**

One question posed during the learner focus groups related to the need for more ongoing assessment, in particular assessment at the end of a course and prior to the commencement of another. On this point, learners broadly agreed that assessment at the end of each course would be beneficial as it would help ensure that learners are ready for progression and that the most appropriate advice and supports are provided. In reality,

what this means is that an end-of-course summative assessment could act as the initial assessment for progression to a course at the next level. While this would be a break from current practice across most ETBs, whereby decisions regarding progression are made by tutors, the learners recognised that communication with and between tutors is important since they know their learners the best and are well-positioned to help make such important decisions. However, based on the deliberations that took place, it would seem to suggest that a two-pronged approach would be most suitable and appropriate at this stage – a more structured post-course assessment combined with tutor feedback in terms of balancing the subjectivity of the wider process.

8. **Is certification important to you?**

This question presented some important findings which could also help clarify some of the issues relating to learner motivation. At first, all learners responded that improving their English was their first consideration when seeking out ESOL courses. Upon further reflection and after some short discussions, learners clarified that they felt certification was valuable in terms of proving their standard of learning especially when it came to seeking employment or applying for courses at higher levels. In this regard,

learners were asked to rank these priorities in terms of importance and improving their levels of English unanimously came out on top, with certification in second place. In other words, certification was a beneficial bonus for all sixty-four learners who participated in the focus groups. This would suggest that the priorities of learners relate to their ability to apply their learning in real-life scenarios. Furthermore, this firmly aligns the need to apply learning in real life with the concept of competence as enshrined in the European Commission's Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, where it is stated that competence is:

> based on the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts according to one's wants and needs.[148]

In conclusion, this firmly aligns these guidelines on the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency with the companion guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy at levels 1 to 3[149] and levels 4 to 6.[150]

9. **If so, is QQI certification relevant to your needs?**

Following on from question nine above, the learners were asked to comment on the relevance of QQI certification in terms of their specific needs. Broadly speaking, learners were happy with the QQI certified courses they were pursuing or had previously completed and felt that they were generally relevant to their day-to-day personal and social needs.

3.6 Consultation with Regional Skills for Work Co-ordinators

Six Regional Skills for Work Co-ordinators were engaged as part of the wider consultation process. The purpose of this engagement session was to ascertain, from their perspective, the initial and ongoing assessment needs of learners in low-skilled employment accessing or seeking access to the Skills for Work programme. In this regard, the key takeaway was that specific training requirements tend to vary from employer to employer. Therefore, both formal and informal approaches to initial and ongoing assessment are required. The overarching requirement of the co-ordinators was that any newly devised Initial Assessment Tool (IAT) should have a workplace focus.

The co-ordinators also raised a valid concern around the practical implication of the imposition of a more formalised approach to initial and ongoing assessment and the outcomes of the assessment. This concern related specifically to the size of the company and the number of learners engaged or engaging in the Skills for Work programme. In other words, if you have a small company with only 6 or 7 learners availing of the Skills for Work programme and they are all initially assessed at different levels, the reality is that they will all end up in a mixed level group since the requirement for Skills for Work courses to run is a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 8 learners. This will, therefore, need to be considered in terms of the practical implementation of the initial assessment process being proposed in this research. In contrast, the ongoing assessment process doesn't present as many issues as the initial assessment.

Furthermore, a subsequent issue raised, which is also linked to the needs of the employer versus the needs of the employee, was the need to better educate or inform employers on issues related to literacy skills. This is an issue that needs to be considered at a wider level, and outside the remit of this research project, in terms of employer engagement with the FET sector.

148 European Commission (2019) "Key Competences for Lifelong Learning," p.7 Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. To view the full document, please click here.
149 SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click here.
150 SOLAS (2020) "Final Report: Assessment of adult literacy and numeracy programmes at NFQ levels 4, 5 and 6: initial and ongoing." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

Section Four:
Defining ESOL Literacy

4.1 Introduction

In the SOLAS review of ESOL Provision,[151] one of the recommendations on assessment stated that:

> [t]here should be a clear definition of ESOL literacy devised as part of the national protocol for ESOL assessment and that the professional development programme on assessment should address this issue.[152]

While this issue was automatically included in the scope of this research project, it became very clear from an early stage in the consultation process with ESOL co-ordinators, tutors and other concerned stakeholders that this was an emerging issue. This was wholly due to the fact that many of the ETBs consulted identified a growing number of ESOL literacy learners accessing or seeking access to ESOL provision. Furthermore, what emerged from the outset was the considerable variations in categorising, dealing with and referring ESOL literacy learners both within and across ETBs, therefore, further highlighting the need for the issue of clarity around the definition of ESOL literacy to be dealt with in the context of initial and ongoing assessment.

4.2 Existing Practices in relation to ESOL literacy – Online Survey Analysis

There were a number of questions specifically related to ESOL literacy included in the online survey circulated to ETBs at the outset of this research project. In keeping with the objectives of the wider survey, the aim of these specific questions was to gain a baseline understanding of approaches to ESOL literacy within ETBs, and what emerged was a wide range of approaches and responses, both within and across ETBs. These results are outlined as follows:

> Firstly, when asked which programmes ETBs were currently assessing learners for, out of a total of 21 respondents, 12 (57%) respondents stated that they assessed migrant learners for accessing adult literacy programmes (excluding ESOL), while 13 respondents (62) stated that they assessed learners seeking access to BTEI Programmes and 6 respondents (28.6%) assessed migrant learners accessing ITABE programmes. **Table 4.1** provides a full overview of the responses received, thus contextualising the level of responses specifically relating to literacy-focused programmes compared to more ESOL-focused courses.[153]

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151 SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 -3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/ An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the report in full, click this link.
152 Ibid.
153 Please note that Table 4.1. is a repeat of Table 3.3 p46.

Table 4.1 FET Programmes currently assessing migrant learners on entry

FET Programme	No. of Respondents (n = 21) [154]
Adult Literacy (Excluding ESOL)	12
ESOL	21
Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)	13
Community Education	1
Family Learning	6
Skills for Work	10
Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE)	6
Youthreach	3
Post Leaving Certificate (PLC)	3
Training Services: Apprenticeships/Traineeships etc.	2
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	6

Taking this line of inquiry, a level deeper, a further question was posed in relation to methods of initial assessment used with ESOL literacy learners, or more specifically whether or not they use the same assessment tool or an adapted tool when initially assessing these learners. **Table 4.2** outlines the responses received.

Table 4.2 ETBs using separate/adapted ESOL Initial Assessment Tools

Does your ETB have a separate/adapted version of the ESOL initial assessment tool that is used with migrant learners with literacy difficulties in their native language? No. of Respondents (n = 21)[155]	
Yes – a separate initial assessment is used	3
Yes – a simplified/adapted version of the initial assessment tool is used	4
No – the same initial assessment tool is used with all learners	13
No – migrant learners with a literacy difficulty in their native language are not formally assessed	2
Other	3

From the data presented in **Table 4.2**, most services are either using the same initial assessment tool with all migrant learners, whether or not they have an underlying literacy difficulty or not. The other category (3 respondents) relates to services using either their mainstream literacy assessment tool, the specific Scottish ESOL literacy Initial Assessment tool,[156] or meeting with the learner individually in instances where a literacy difficulty is identified.

Furthermore, in relation to how ESOL literacy learners are currently referred within ETBs, **Table 4.3** presents some interesting findings.

Table 4.3 How ESOL literacy learners are currently referred within ETBs?

How are ESOL literacy learners currently referred in your ETB? No. of Respondents (n = 25[157])	
They are referred to the ESOL Service for English language supports	9
They are referred to the literacy service for literacy supports	3
They are referred for English language supports, and group/one-to-one literacy supports	12
Other	1

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154 This includes at least one response per ETB.
155 This includes at least one response per ETB.
156 Education Scotland (2010) "ESOL Initial Assessment Pack," Scotland: Crown Publications. To view the full assessment pack, please click here.
157 This includes at least one response per ETB.

Based on the data presented in **Table 4.3**, in most instances, a dual approach is adopted whereby learners are referred for English language supports, and group or one-to-one literacy supports (48%). In relation to the Other category, this related to one respondent who stated that ESOL literacy learners were referred to the Key Skills Service which delivers both literacy and language supports, hence learners are only referred to one service for both types of supports.[158]

In an effort to quantify the number of migrant learners being identified as ESOL literacy learners, the online survey requested information in this respect based on the 2018 statistical returns. There was a wide variety of responses received with services catering for anywhere between 30 to 1,500 ESOL literacy learners throughout 2018. These figures firmly highlighted the extent of the issue and adequately quantified the anecdotal evidence around the considerable number of migrant learners being identified as ESOL literacy learners. Furthermore, a follow-on question asked respondents to highlight what percentage of these learners were formally assessed prior to their entry onto a course. While responses ranged from 0% to 100%, the vast majority of respondent services stated that all learners were assessed to some degree, including those identified as ESOL literacy Learners. However, it is important to qualify these results by stating that some respondents provided a number of learners rather than an overall percentage, while others stated that they didn't know what the percentage was. As such it was not possible to identify a median score in this instance.

In summarising the results presented in the online survey, it is apparent that ESOL literacy is a growing area and as a result, there is a need for appropriate measures to be put in place to better equip services to deal with these learners, many of which are outside the scope of this present research report. However, what this report can do is provide a starting point for a more meaningful and focused discussion on these issues, as part of the wider agenda on the reform of ESOL provision, by offering up an agreed definition of ESOL literacy, and one which can be accepted and applied across all 16 ETBs. Furthermore, within the wider context of this research project, which is primarily concerned with the initial and ongoing assessment of migrant learners, this agreed definition can positively impact how all migrant learners are assessed both initially and on an ongoing basis.

4.3 Existing Practices in relation to ESOL literacy – Regional Engagement Analysis

At the regional engagement sessions with ESOL co-ordinators and tutors, two key questions were posed in relation to ESOL literacy in terms of following on from the results of the online survey, while also identifying key considerations and issues in terms of identifying ESOL literacy learners and providing appropriate supports.

Firstly, participants at the regional engagement sessions were asked the question; 'What is ESOL literacy?' and **Table 4.4** summarises the key feedback provided.

Table 4.4 What is ESOL literacy?

What is ESOL literacy?
• Illiterate in the native language
• Literate in the native language, but needs to learn a new script
• No written form of native language
• Inability to read or write in English (but can speak well)
• Inability to read or write in the native language
• People with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLDs)
• Includes digital literacy
• Mirrors standard literacy with the possible added complication of not being familiar with the Roman Script

Based on the feedback provided, what is clear is that there is a wide range of diverse, yet interconnected interpretations of what exactly ESOL literacy is. The fact that all of this diverse feedback is equally valid and relevant in the context of defining ESOL literacy, it highlights how complex this issue is and makes the development of an agreed definition of ESOL literacy difficult. This issue will be dealt with in more detail in the next section when it comes to developing an acceptable definition of ESOL literacy in the context of ETB ESOL provision.

Finally, the second question in relation to ESOL literacy is related to the level and types of supports provided to ESOL literacy learners and how ETBs should engage with these learners. Similar to the responses to question one, a wide variety of feedback was received, all of which are summarised in **Table 4.5.**

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158 This particular example relates to one particular ETB. Nationally, it appears, that different arrangements exist across different ETBs as evidenced in Table 4.3.

Table 4.5 How should ETBs engage with ESOL literacy learners?

| How should ETBs engage with ESOL literacy learners? |
| --- |
| • 1:1 teaching for people who are complete beginners |
| • Extra hours for more consistent learning in order to support progression and build confidence |
| • Specific ITABE classes, in addition to core classes |
| • Smaller groups |
| • Themed and informal entry routes |
| • Specialised classes relevant to everyday scenarios |
| • Prioritise functional English |
| • Improved access to Guidance Service |
| • Relevant professional development for staff |
| • Be conscious of vocationally focused Vs academic learners and provide suitable classes |

While not explicitly highlighted by respondents, the concept of 'learning to learn' is of particular relevance in the context of ESOL literacy supports given that many ESOL literacy learners tend to have no or limited strategies for learning. In many instances, these learners lack the organisational and behavioural skills required, mainly due to limited previous educational experiences. Cultural differences may also account for some of the issues experienced. In subsequent feedback provided following the consultation process, it was highlighted that such organisational, behavioural and cultural skills need to be taught, modelled and constantly reinforced within ESOL literacy tuition.

Despite the wide range of feedback received, what is clear is that specialised, more focused support is required to adequately address ESOL literacy issues and to provide a holistic approach to appropriate interventions, which includes support from the Adult Education Guidance and Information Service (AEGIS). Equally apparent is the need for relevant Professional Development (PD) to be provided for co-ordinators and tutors so that they are better equipped to deal with issues relating to ESOL literacy.

4.4 Towards a definition of ESOL literacy

In the literature review **Section 2 (Part 1: Research Report)** a definition of basic literacy was provided which stated that a basic literacy learner can be defined as 'someone who is still learning to read a short simple text and struggles to write a simple sentence independently.' Based on the results of both the online survey and regional engagement sessions, it is clear that this definition is overly simplistic and does not account for the wide range of contributory factors as identified through the consultation process. As such, a more explicit definition is required; one which encapsulates the multitude of factors involved in defining the concept of ESOL literacy. With reference back to the literature review section of this research, Burt, Peyton and Adams (2003) offer the best direction in this respect when they attempt to categorise the main types of ESOL literacy learners, which as highlighted in the literature review is suitable for adoption to the Irish context. For reference purposes, the various literacy levels are summarised in **Figure 4.1**, but for more information refer to **Section 2 (Part 1: Research Report)**.

Figure 4.1 ESOL literacy Levels

Pre-literate	Non-literate	Semi-literate	Non-alphabet literate

Non-Roman alphabet literate	Roman alphabet literate
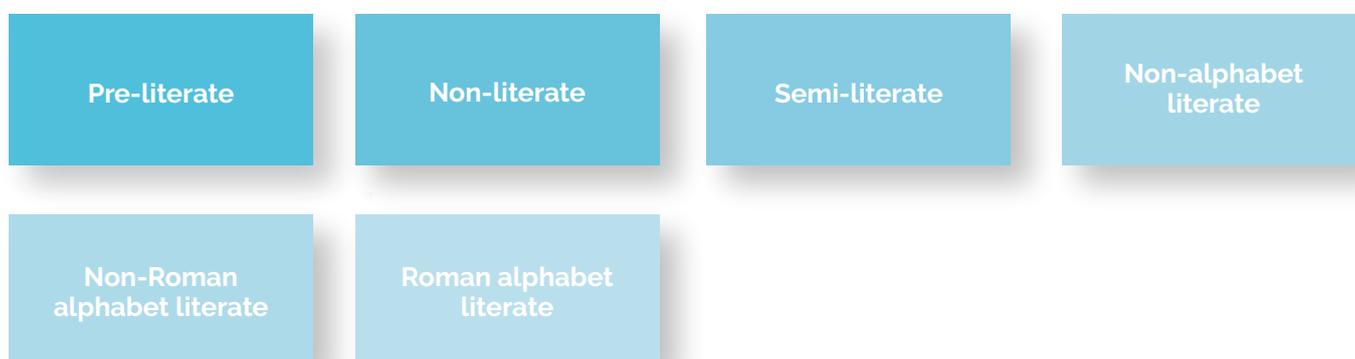
This is a very practical approach to not only identifying ESOL literacy needs, but also categorising them in terms of the level of difficulty, and by extension the type of interventions or supports required. Equally, the Scottish model of initial assessment defines an ESOL literacy learner as:

> a person who has little or no literacy in English and who may not have literacy in another language and whose spoken English may range from basic to fluent.[159]

This is an extremely clear and straightforward definition. Moreover, it is helpful in the context of this research project arriving at an acceptable definition of ESOL literacy for adoption and application across all 16 ETBs.

Furthermore, in a 2019 project in the United Kingdom, the Learning and Work Institute, in partnership with Learning Unlimited published a research report entitled 'New to ESOL and New to Literacy Learning.'[160] In this report, the authors opted for the terms 'new to ESOL' and 'new to literacy' in place of the more traditional 'pre-entry' terminology. In fact, the report highlighted '[a] lack of clarity regarding the definition of 'pre-Entry' ESOL, with many practitioners rejecting this terminology.'[161]

Additionally, in the context of the United Kingdom's Skills for Life – the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills[162] – the concept of categorising literacy learners as 'emerging,' 'consolidating' and 'established' as part of the diagnostic or initial assessment process began to emerge.[163]

While the Scottish model's definition outlined above sheds some light on the complex subject of defining ESOL Literacy, it can be further refined with reference to Burt, Peyton and Adams (2003)[164] model and the Skills for life model (2001).[165] Equally, the concepts of 'new to ESOL' and 'new to literacy'[166] can help further focus attention, with the definition being proffered here relating specifically to those ESOL learners who are 'new to literacy'.

With this in mind, this research project offers the following definition of ESOL literacy as truly representative of the different levels of literacy difficulties learners may face, as well as taking full consideration of the feedback provided during the consultation process:

> ESOL literacy is an umbrella term used to describe a migrant learner who is new to literacy (and possibly also new to ESOL) and has little or no reading or writing literacy skills in English and/or their own native language, while their spoken English language competency may range from pre-A1 to C2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Inspired by the in-depth work of Burt, Peyton and Adams (2003)[167] and the UK Skills for Life Strategy[168] such literacy difficulties may be categorised as outlined in **Figure 4.1.** As such, when assessing an ESOL literacy learner, either initially or on an ongoing basis, the assessment tool used must be capable of assessing learning as outlined below.

159 Education Scotland (2010) "ESOL Initial Assessment Pack," Scotland: Crown Publications. To view the full assessment pack, please click here.
160 Learning and Work Institute (2019) "New to ESOL and New to Literacy Learning. To view the full report, please click here.
161 Ibid
162 Department for education and skills (2001) "Skills for Life – the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills: Delivering the vision 2001 – 2004. To access the strategy, please click here.
163 National Foundation for Educational Research (2004) "Diagnostic assessment within the Skills for Life strategy." To access the full report, click here.
164 Burt, M, Peyton, J.K. and Adams, R (2003) "Reading and adult English language learners: A review of the research," Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. To view the full text click here.
165 National Foundation for Educational Research (2004) "Diagnostic assessment within the Skills for Life strategy." To access the full report click here.
166 Learning and Work Institute (2019) "New to ESOL and New to Literacy Learning. To view the full report, please click here.
167 Burt, M, Peyton, J.K. and Adams, R (2003) "Reading and adult English language learners: A review of the research," Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. To view the full text click here.
168 National Foundation for Educational Research (2004) "Diagnostic assessment within the Skills for Life strategy."

Furthermore, these levels are qualified by a series of guiding questions, aimed at assisting co-ordinators or tutors to categorise an underlying ESOL literacy issue in a highly practical and user-friendly manner.[169] The benchmarking statements, added to the model, will help co-ordinators or tutors determine whether the learner is an emerging literacy learner or a consolidating literacy learner:

Emerging Literacy:

1. **Pre-literate**

   Does the learner's native language have no recognised written form?

2. **Non-literate**

   Has the learner had any previous literacy instruction in the native language and/or English?

> **Benchmark:** *The learner has considerable difficulty in producing text and or understanding/ interpreting text independently.*

Consolidating Literacy:

3. **Semi-literate**

   Has the learner received limited/interrupted literacy instruction in the native language and/or English?

4. **Non-alphabet literate**

   Is the learner a speaker of a language that typically uses a non-alphabetic script?

5. **Non-Roman alphabet literate**

   Is the learner a speaker of and literate in a language that typically uses a non-Roman script, such as Arabic or Cyrillic?

6. **Roman Alphabet literate**

   If the learner is literate in the Roman script, then is the literacy difficulty linked to specific issues such as sound-syllable construction or correspondence, for example dealing with Phonics?

> **Benchmark:** *the learner shows some level of skill and independence in reading and writing but in a way that is not aligned to the normal conventions of English and the use of the Roman script.*

Established Literacy:

In relation to the 'established literacy' category, the learner has no major difficulties with language production, understanding and/or interpreting skills outside of those typically expected of a learner who is 'new to ESOL.' In such instances, a learner should be encouraged to complete the standard initial assessment contained in the toolkit provided, so that their starting level on the CEFR can be determined and they can be streamed to the most appropriate level of tuition by their respective ETB provider.

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, ESOL literacy is a complex issue, and as such is very difficult to define or contextualise in an easily digestible format. This issue was highlighted in the literature review, and further accentuated in the context of the present discussion, whereby existing definitions of either literacy or ESOL literacy insufficiently address the intricacies of the issues, particularly in the context of working with adult learners. The definition proffered here is most representative of the specific issues and concerns highlighted during the consultation phase of the research.

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169 Burt, M, Peyton, J.K. and Adams, R (2003) "Reading and adult English language learners: A review of the research," Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. To view the full text click here.

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Appendices

1. **Appendix 1: Schedule of Regional Engagement Sessions**

2. **Appendix 2: Sample Agenda for Regional Engagement Sessions**

3. **Appendix 3: Online Survey**

4. **Appendix 4: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Common Reference Levels**

Appendix 1:
Schedule of Regional Engagement Sessions

Region	ETBs	Location	Date
North-West	• Donegal • Mayo, Sligo & Leitrim	FET Building, MSLETB, Swinford	Tuesday 25th June 2019, 11:30am – 3:30pm
Mid-West	• Galway & Roscommon • Tipperary • Limerick & Clare	Limerick Education Centre, Dooradoyle Road, Limerick	Wednesday 5th June 2019, 11:30am – 3:30pm
North-East	• Cavan & Monaghan • Longford & Westmeath • Louth & Meath	FET Campus, Dublin Road, Cavan	Monday 10th June 2019, 11:30am – 3:30pm
South-East	• Wexford & Waterford • Kildare & Wicklow • Laois & Offaly • Kilkenny & Carlow	Dolmen Hotel, Carlow	Wednesday 12th June 2019, 10am – 1pm
South	• Cork • Kerry	Cork Training Centre	Tuesday 18th June 2019
Dublin	• City of Dublin • Dublin/Dun Laoghaire	Ballymun	Thursday 20th June 2019

Appendix 2:
Sample Agenda for Regional Engagement Sessions

Good Practice Guidelines for Initial Assessment of English Language Competency of Migrant Learners

Regional Stakeholder Engagement Agenda

Limerick Education Centre, Dooradoyle Road, Limerick

Wednesday 5th June 2019, 11:30am – 3:30pm

Region: Mid-West

ETBs: GRETB, TETB, LCETB

1. Welcome and Introduction
2. Project Overview
3. Review of initial survey re. ESOL Initial Assessment
4. *Discussion:* Needs, Challenges and Concerns regarding ESOL Initial Assessment
5. *Group work:* What works best in ESOL Initial Assessment – Review of sample tools
6. ESOL Initial Assessment Guidelines and Toolkit Development – What is needed?
7. *Discussion:* What is ESOL literacy?
8. *Group Work:* How should ETBs engage with ESOL literacy learners?
9. Conclusions and Next Steps

Appendix 3:
Online Survey

> **Good Practice Guidelines for Initial Assessment of English Language Competency of Migrants**

SOLAS has commissioned Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB) to develop guidelines and a toolkit which will detail good practice in the initial assessment of the English Language Competency of Migrant Learners across all sixteen Education and Training Board (ETBs).

The purpose of this survey is to gather background information about how ETBs currently assess the English Language Competency of Migrant Learners at initial point of entry to the ETB. The information provided in this survey will be collated and further discussed at the regional engagement sessions with ETBs. This survey should, therefore, be completed by ETB personnel directly responsible for the day-to-day co-ordination of ESOL provision, particularly the initial assessment process. The survey also looks at the area of ESOL literacy and aims to gather information around the current level of understanding, as well as processes in place for responding to the needs of Migrant Learners presenting with additional literacy needs.

This survey should take approximately 30 minutes to complete and all responses provided will be subject to the Data Protection Acts 1998 and 2003, and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018. The GDPR stipulates how data should be processed, stored and disposed of. All data collected as part of this survey will be stored on a secure, password protected platform to which only the research will have access. Collated data will be anonymised, and all data will be deleted in full following publication of the final research report and associated documentation.

By Proceeding to complete this survey you are confirming that you have read and fully understood the information outlined above in the Data Protection notification. Please choose the relevant option below to proceed.[170]

I agree _____ **I disagree** _____

1. Name of ETB*

2. Name of person responsible for completing this survey (This should ideally be the person(s) with direct responsibility for the day-to-day co-ordination of ESOL, in particular the initial assessment of migrant learners.)*

3. Email address of person(s) completing this survey*

4. Position within ETB*

_____

170 Asterix means that these are compulsory questions.

5. Does your ETB currently formally assess all migrant learners prior to accepting them onto ESOL/other relevant courses?*

   Yes _____ **No** _____ **Don't know** _____

6. For which of the following programmes is ESOL Initial Assessment carried out?

   Adult Literacy (Excluding ESOL) _____

   ESOL _____

   BTEI _____

   Community Education _____

   Family Learning _____

   Skills for Work _____

   ITABE _____

   Youthreach _____

   PLC _____

   Training Services: Apprenticeships/Traineeships/Contracted Training _____

   VTOS _____

7. If you answered 'Yes' to question 6 above, does your ETB use a formal initial assessment tool with migrant learners prior to acceptance onto a course?

   Yes _____ **No** _____ **Don't know** _____

8. What skills does your ETB currently assess during the initial assessment process?

   Reading _____

   Writing _____

   Listening _____

   Speaking _____

   Grammatical Awareness _____

   Intercultural Awareness _____

   Digital Literacy _____

   Other _____

9. If you answered 'Yes' to question 8 above, what initial assessment tool does your ETB use?

   Cambridge ESOL tool (e.g. https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/general-english/) _____

   Oxford Quick Placement Test _____

   BKSB _____

Scottish model of ESOL Initial Assessment Tool _____

Locally devised Initial Assessment Tool _____

Locally adapted Initial Assessment Tool _____

Other _____

10. Who is currently responsible for the initial assessment of migrant learners in your ETB?

Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) _____

ESOL Co-Ordinator _____

Resource Worker _____

ESOL Tutor _____

Adult Guidance Counsellor _____

Adult Guidance Information Officer _____

Administrative Staff _____

No formal assessment currently carried out _____

Other _____

11. Is your ETB's initial assessment tool aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)?

    (For more information on the CEFR please click on the link: https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale)

    Yes _____ **No** _____ **Don't know** _____

12. How satisfied is your ETB with its current ESOL initial assessment tool?

    1 = Not satisfied, 2 = Somewhat satisfied, 3= Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4 = Satisfied, 5 = Very satisfied

    Not satisfied   **1 2 3 4 5**   **Very satisfied**

13. Briefly outline the strengths of your ETB's current initial assessment tool.

14. Briefly outline the weaknesses of your ETB's current initial assessment tool.

15. What is your ETB's primary purpose for initially assessing migrant learners? (Please tick all responses that apply)

    To determine placement level _____

    To establish existing level of English language competency _____

    To help plan tuition on PLSS _____

    To determine additional literacy/numeracy supports _____

    To provide information to the learner _____

    To provide information to the tutor _____

    To help develop Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) _____

    To determine the learner's level of motivation and commitment _____

    To help learners set goals (long, medium and short term) _____

    To design new/review existing programmes _____

    To help learners prepare for work experience placements _____

16. Please rank the following purposes for ESOL Initial Assessment in order of importance, with 1 being the most important and 10 being the least important.*

    To determine learner placement _____

    To establish existing level of English language competency _____

    To help plan tuition of PLSS _____

    To determine additional literacy/numeracy supports _____

    To provide information to the learner _____

    To provide information to the tutor _____

    To help develop Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) _____

    To determine the learner's level of motivation and commitment _____

    To help learners set goals (long, medium and short term) _____

    To design new/review existing programmes _____

17. What information is provided to learners following the initial assessment process?
    (Tick all applicable boxes).

    None _____

    Assessment score only _____

    Detailed analysis of assessment result _____

    Details of the course/programme they will be placed in _____

    Details of additional literacy/numeracy supports (where required) _____

    Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) _____

    Other _____

18. Have you, or any relevant ETB staff (e.g. tutors, resource workers, etc.) received training in the development/use of ESOL initial assessment tools?*

    Yes _____ **No** _____ **Don't know** _____

19. Please describe the training in terms of format, duration and provider.

20. Have you, or any relevant ETB staff (e.g. tutors, resource workers etc.) received training in the use/interpretation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages?*

    Yes _____ **No** _____ **Don't know** _____

21. Please describe the training in terms of format, duration and provider.

22. Does your ETB have a separate/adapted version of the ESOL initial assessment tool that is used with migrant learners with literacy difficulties in their native language?*

    Yes – a separate initial assessment tool is used _____

    Yes – a simplified/adapted version of the initial assessment tool is used _____

    No – the same initial assessment tool is used with all migrant learners _____

    No – migrant learners with a literacy difficulty in their native language are not formally assessed ___

    Other _____

23. How are ESOL literacy learners currently referred in your ETB?*

They are referred to the ESOL Service for English Language Supports _____

They are referred to the Literacy Service for Literacy Supports _____

They are referred for both English Language Supports and group/one-to-one Literacy Supports ___

Other _____

24. Approximately how many migrant learners attended ESOL/other relevant courses in your ETB in 2018?*

25. Approximately what percentage of these learners were formally assessed prior to entry onto a course?*

26. Approximately what percentage of these learners were classified as ESOL literacy Learners?*

27. Are details of the learner's previous language/other learning experience(s) recorded as part of the initial assessment process?

Yes _____ **No** _____ **Don't know** _____

28. Are the results of the initial assessment communicated to the tutor prior to course commencement?

Yes _____ **No** _____ **Don't know** _____

29. Should ESOL initial assessment results be recorded on PLSS?*

Yes _____ **No** _____ **Not sure** _____

30. In relation to Question 30 above, please give reasons for your answer.*

31. What are the main issues/difficulties in formally assessing migrant learners prior to course placement?*

None _____

Not enough time to administer, correct and follow-up on assessments _____

Not enough staff to administer, correct and follow-up in assessments _____

Staff training is required in the area of initial assessment _____

Other _____

32. In developing guidelines and a toolkit detailing good practice in the initial assessment of the English Language Competency of Migrant Learners, what 3 factors are most important? (Please rank in order of importance, with 1 being the most important and 3 being the least)*

Assess suitability for courses _____

Benchmarked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) _____

Linked to programme outcomes/entry requirement _____

Is accessible to and user friendly for the learner _____

Provides diagnostic information about the learner's existing level of English _____

Provides diagnostic information about additional literacy/numeracy needs _____

Is culturally appropriate/relevant _____

Assess the learner's strengths/weaknesses _____

Provide information about the learner's interests _____

Relates to the learner's previous academic/professional experiences _____

Other _____

33. What type of standardised ESOL Initial Assessment guidelines and toolkit would you like to see developed as a result of this project?*

34. In relation to Question 34 above, what format should these guidelines take? (Tick all relevant boxes)*

Online guidelines _____

Online toolkit _____

Paper based guidelines _____

Paper based toolkit _____

Guidelines and toolkit available both online and paper based _____

Thank you for your time in completing this survey.

Appendix 4:
Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Common Reference Levels

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international framework, designed by the Council of Europe, to describe proficiency in a foreign language at six core levels: A1 and A2 (basic users), B1 and B2 (independent users) and C1 and C2 (proficient users). The original framework was published in 2001 and has been updated on a number of occasions to reflect new and emerging developments in the field of language acquisition, such as online interactions and linguistic competence.

The updated version of the framework now includes, in addition to the six core levels, a pre-A1 level for many of the scales identified in the framework, as well as 'plus levels' – A2+, B1+, B2+. For further details of the most up-to-date version of the CEFR please refer to both the original 2001 version[171] and the updated 2020 Companion Volume,[172] both available from the Council of Europe website.

For ease of reference, the table below provides a summary of the level of language proficiency a learner has achieved at each of the six core levels of the framework.

Proficient User	C2	Can • Understand with ease virtually everything heard or read, • Summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation, • Express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can • Understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning, • Express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions, • Use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes, • Produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

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171 To access the full 2001 version of the CEFR, please click the link.
172 To access the updated 2020 version of the CEFR Companion volume, please click the link.

Independent User	B2	Can • Understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation, • Interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party, • Produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can • Understand the main point of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. • Deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken, • Produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest, • Describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can • Understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment), • Communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters, • Describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can • Understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type, • Introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has, • Interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Source: https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale