

Report on Teacher Feedback from the First Calibration of Reading and Writing Assessments

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This report summarises feedback responses of the teachers involved in the first nationally representative calibration of asTTle reading and writing papers in November 2000. Both teacher and student responses are positive.

Table of Contents

Reading Assessments.....	1
Question 1	1
Question 2	2
Question 3	2
Question 4	2
Format	2
Relevance/Content/Coverage.....	2
Administrative matters.....	3
Length	3
Difficulty.....	3
Question 5	3
Writing assessments.....	3
Question 1	4
Question 2	4
Question 3	5
Question 4	5
Question 5	7
Concluding Comment	7

Five hundred schools, a nationally representative stratified sample, were invited to participate in the first calibration of the asTTle reading and writing assessments conducted in November 2000. Half the schools were asked to administer reading and half the writing papers. Of this population 246 schools (119 writing and 127 reading) participated. Each teacher who administered papers to a class of students was given a feedback form.

Approximately 600 classes were involved. A total of 218 replies were received on the Reading assessment, and 247 responses to the Writing assessment. This represents a return rate of 78%.

Responses were in the nature of comments to prepared questions. The comments were

generally coded using a “Yes”, “No”, “Both yes and no”, or “No answer”. The category “Yes” indicates a favourable or positive response to the question, a “No” an unfavourable or negative response to the question, and “Both yes and no” indicates a response that contains both positive and negative comments. “No answer” includes comments that were incapable of meaningful interpretation. (For example, “*Dictation and editing*” which could have been either a positive comment or a negative one).

Reading Assessments

Question 1

Was the content appropriate for the age level and ability of the students?

There is a high degree of satisfaction with the content of the reading paper. Of course, it is not possible to meet the needs of every student and every class, as summed up by one teacher who wrote “*Difficult to find a test suitable for a 3 year cross-section. Most year 5’s had problems*”. The consensus is that the content covers an appropriate range for the students in question.

Table 1
Was content appropriate for age and ability of students?

	Yes	No	Both	No answer	Total
N	170	22	20	6	218
Percentage	78	10	9	3	100

Comments indicating a favourable response included: “Overall I believe the content was appropriate for Year 7 students. The children felt the tests questions were

fairly easy to okay in difficulty” while there were those who felt otherwise “It was too difficult for about half the class” and “*I thought it was appropriate but students felt it was easy and boring*”.

Question 2

Was the content interesting and engaging for students?

Again, there was strong support for the interest level and degree of engagement the tests provided. One teacher captured the spirit of some of the comments by stating: “*Students said they liked the topics, they were interesting. The rugby question was great for a few in the class. The content’s interest relates to the individual.*” There was good feedback about the format/layout of the tests (particularly the use of visual stimuli) as a way of engaging the students, and also the variety of genres. “*Yes – children showed a keen interest. Good variety, visually good and the use of different genre*”

Table 2

Was content interesting and engaging?

	Yes	No	Both	No answer	Total
N	175	24	12	7	218
%	80	11	6	3	100

While it was the case that the overwhelming majority was happy with the material’s level of interest, the project writers need to keep equity issues constantly in mind when constructing assessment items: “Most of it was. Some of the girls rebelled at quite a lot of the boy focussed activities” and “Needed more variation of interest for boys and girls”

Question 3

Was the level of difficulty across the paper appropriate?

While there is considerable support for the tests in terms of their level of difficulty, there were more negative or ambivalent comments on this question than the previous two questions. The nature of the class and the students in it seemed to dictate the response,

particularly with the two extremes of the class.

- “Yes – they felt safe entering the harder sections e.g. they said the print didn’t suddenly get smaller or the script pieces didn’t get very much longer”.
- “The language in some questions was too difficult & therefore not understood e.g. literary techniques – rephrased into simpler language my students would have been able to answer – the children actually were confused by the language in some of the questions”.
- “It allowed the less able to participate but also challenged the more able.”

Table 3

Was the level of difficulty appropriate?

	Yes	No	Both	No answer	Total
N	145	51	12	10	218
%	67	23	6	5	100

The comments above Table 3 indicate the real difficulty of pitching the paper at the right level.

Question 4

Is there any other general comment you would like to make about this paper?

The responses were wide and varied. They fell into 5 main categories – the format of the tests; the relevance content and coverage of the material; administrative matters; length; and difficulty of the assessments.

Format

On the whole, the format of the tests (including the use of visuals) was well received, with 25 comments such as:

- “Page layout and format appealed to children, “Well laid out – spacious”
- “Visually it was well set out. Realistic visuals that relate to everyday situations/events”.

However, there were 15 suggestions for improving the format mainly about the possible use of colour, and the nature of the response formats such as:

- “I asked the kids if they liked shading the bubbles as opposed to writing comments/answer. They said they would rather tick the bubbles”
- “Will any of the publications have coloured photos etc?”

Relevance/Content/Coverage

Responses here were fully supportive of the relevance of the material for students and

teachers, the coverage of material in the NZ Curriculum statement, and the content (subject to the equity caveat mentioned earlier).

- “I liked the varied formats of scenarios presented & they seemed to be relevant for the children – ‘real life contexts’”.
- “Great to have NZ cookbooks used, NZ animals etc. & real names so children aren’t stumped and turned off.”
- “Very impressed with the way it uses “real-life” English examples to test (& covers a range of objectives from the English curriculum).”

Administrative matters

There was one mismatch between the student booklets and the teacher’s administration copy that clearly caused confusion for many students and teachers alike, with over 32 comments. (“How birds build their nests” Practice 4). Once that was removed, the general consensus was that the instructions and administration of the tests were good.

- “Very easy to administer and to do as a student.”
- “Children appeared to follow instructions easily.”

However, one or two mentioned that the administration time allowed was insufficient or was more involved than expected

- “A lot of preparation i.e. reading to the class”
- “Easy, although time consuming, to administer.”

Length

Of those who commented about the length of the papers, 12 commented on them being too short, while three said they were too long.

Difficulty

15 respondents repeated or amplified their earlier comments (Question 3 above) about the difficulty of the paper.

Question 5

What was the student’s response to the paper?

The percentages in the third column represent the percent of a particular class as recorded by their teacher. The class size is unknown. It is difficult to say whether teachers polled their class, or just gave a single comment from a consensus.

A clear majority of the students enjoyed the experience. On other matters (difficulty and length) there was a division of opinion,

which may reflect the ability/motivation of the student or class. Comparisons with PATs were frequent and favorable.

- “They said it was fun – can we do it again – please thank the people for letting us do it”
- “The response was generally positive with even the low ability readers feeling they had some success”
- “They were very pleased with themselves to be involved in such an important activity. I told them they were special.”
- “They were quite keen on it. “Awesome” was one response. They thought it was much better than the PATs.”

Any matters regarding difficulty, length, instructions and suggestions have all been covered above in Questions 1-4.

Table 4

Student responses to paper

Comment	N	% Of Class
Liked or enjoyed	170	70% + 95%
Disliked	38	5% + 5%
Mixed reaction	26	25%
No reaction	9	
Matter of fact resignation	1	
Liked format	6	
Too much reading	1	
Easy	18	
Boring	11	
Hard	18	
Challenging	6	
Vocabulary too hard	3	
Started off easily but got harder	6	
Too long	8	
Too short	6	
Length acceptable	2	
Better explanations needed	12	
Suggestions made for improvement	3	

Writing assessments

In this section, there were eight different test papers (A to H) and the teachers’ responses have been coded according to the paper they responded to. Some teachers did not indicate the paper sat, and these have been coded using ‘Not indicated’.

Question 1

Was the content appropriate for the age level and ability of the students?

Just over two-thirds of responses indicated that the content was appropriate for the level and ability of their class – “*Hit the middle mark*” – but most did not make any further comment. Examples of those who responded with both are “*For most yes, but some struggled*” or “*Task 1& 2 were okay but Task 3 was quite difficult and the students struggled with this*”. A teacher from a very rural school noted however that “*...there are some children for whom the content is outside their experience i.e. postcodes, baskets, picnics and parks*”.

Table 5

Was content of writing paper appropriate to age and ability of students?

Paper	Yes	No	Both	No answer	Total
A	16	2	10	1	29
B	17	7	7	0	31
C	19	6	5	0	30
D	25	2	4	0	31
E	21	3	2	0	26
F	18	7	6	2	33
G	26	3	2	1	32
H	23	2	5	0	30
Not indicated	8	1	1	0	10
N	173	33	42	4	252
%	69	13	17	2	100

Of those who wrote ‘No’, several commented on the ESOL or special needs students who would have found this difficult. “*Not for most of them as our school has a large number of ESOL and special needs students*”, while others simply found it too hard or “*Somewhat easy*”.

Question 2

Was the content interesting and engaging for students?

Table 6

Was the content of the writing paper interesting and engaging?

Paper	Yes	No	Both	No answer	Total
A	15	3	11	0	29
B	23	5	3	1	32
C	22	6	2	0	30
D	14	7	8	2	31
E	20	2	3	0	25
F	23	4	4	2	33
G	27	2	3	0	32
H	23	4	3	0	30
Not indicated	7	2	1	0	10
N	174	35	38	5	252
%	69	14	15	2	100

While most of those who agreed often felt no further need to amplify their comment, there were several comments that stood out.

- “One student commented that ‘It was a super way to do a spelling test!’”
- “The personal data on back page on ‘reading’ really engaged them!”

Those who responded with a No or Both gave quite specific feedback about what was engaging and interesting, and what was not.

- “My most talented writers found it hard to get started as the stimulus constrained them initially”.
- “The dictation and editing was not that interesting for the students but it was testing their spelling and editing skills. The writing narrative section was of interest to most of the pupils”.

Question 3

Was the level of difficulty across the paper appropriate?

Table 7

Was the level of difficulty in the writing paper appropriate?

Paper	Yes	No	Both	No answer	Total
A	18	3	7	1	29
B	15	9	5	2	31
C	21	5	4	0	30
D	17	9	4	1	31
E	21	3	1	1	26
F	18	6	6	3	33
G	24	5	1	2	32
H	24	6	0	0	30
Not indicated	7	1	2	0	10
N	165	47	30	10	252
%	65	19	12	4	100

The response to this often reflected the ability or level of the class. As one teacher remarked “*For Y5 & Y6, but at Y7 not many found it difficult*”, while another said “*Yes for the mid-range. Does not allow for students above/below average*”. However, most of the “Yes” respondents left their answer just like that.

Other teachers commented on specific parts of the paper that were difficult compared with the rest, as in “*I feel the written task was inappropriate*” and “*... spelling didn’t have a wide range of abilities*”.

Question 4

Is there any other general comment you would like to make about this paper?

Comments were spread fairly evenly over all eight of the papers. As is shown in the table below, the most frequent comments related to three areas:

- a) problems or difficulties in administering the papers
- b) what was clearly seen by teachers as a mismatch between what the Task claimed to be assessing and what the teachers thought it assessed, and
- c) problems with the time allowed (either for the whole paper, or for sections of the paper).

The first of these included comments like “Some confusing instructions for the administrator.” and “The initial reading was great but the story/flow was lost on the second reading when we had to wait for a couple of slower children.”

The second relates to the content/coverage/relevance of the assessment task, and is summed up by the comments “The dictation appears to be a spelling test, and the children asked why do we need the story etc” and “I felt the skills being assessed in Task 3 was in developing an argument rather than the skill of ‘writing’”.

In the third category, there was no unanimity of opinion about the length of the paper or sections of the paper – where one teacher felt that the time allowed was too much, another would say that insufficient time was allowed. “Test took longer than 1hr 10mins due to explaining administration side – took around 1hr 20mins.” while another teacher commented, “Time allocated was too long for the writing task. Most finished within ten minutes”.

There were a number of teachers who suggested improvements according to what they consider good practice in the classroom – using dictionaries for editing; having more buildup/planning time and less writing time; draft writing on every second line, hence needing more space for writing; including more New Zealand or Pacific content; encouraging better spelling by checking as you go rather than at the end; need to include the use of visuals and sparking the imagination by being more creative.

Technical Report 7: Evaluation First Trial

Table 8
General comments regarding the writing paper (Question 4)

Comments	Writing Papers								Unknown	Total	
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H			
Format	Good/ Liked		1	1		2		2	1		7
	Not liked						1				1
Relevance/ Content/Co verage	Good	4		1	1	1	1	2	1		11
	Not appropriate	5	3	3	6	2	5	3	4	1	32
Difficulty	Too easy				1				1		2
	Too hard	1	2					1		1	5
	Need to cater for extremes			1							1
Length	Too short i.e. had time to spare	2	1		4				4	2	13
	Too long i.e. need more time	2	2	1	1	2	4	5	3		20
	Just right					1			1		2
Administrative matters	User Friendly	1			2	2	2	3	2		12
	Problems	5	5	14	6	6	9	4	4	2	55
Other		3	2	1	3	2	1	3	3		18
No Answer		9	14	10	11	10	12	12	9	4	91

Question 5

What was the student’s response to the paper?

The 149 positive responses represented almost a half of all valid responses. Although the majority of responses indicated that students enjoyed the papers, there were many that included comments about some aspect of the paper. For example, “Enjoyed variety of tasks – would have liked 40 rather than 30 minutes to write”. Equally there were others who expressed the contrary view. “The 30 minute written task was well judged (after 20 minutes majority had finished)”. The controlled pace of the paper was a frustration for some. For example, students

Table 9

Student response to writing paper

Comment	N	Percentage
Positive		
Liked or enjoyed	149	48.4
Length acceptable	4	1.3
Not threatened by paper	3	1.0
Liked format	1	0.3
Negative		
Too long/more time needed	13	4.2
Boring	8	2.6
Hard	8	2.6
Suggestions for improvement	8	2.6
Restricted/frustrated by time allowed/lack of choice...	6	1.9
Too short/less time needed/had time to spare	4	1.3
Daunted by all the blank pages	4	1.3
Better explanations needed	4	1.3
Disliked	3	1.0
Apprehensive	3	1.0
Neutral/Mixed		
Easy	27	8.8
No reaction	20	6.5
Mixed general reaction	18	5.8
Liked specific parts/disliked other parts	14	4.5
Challenging	6	1.9
Matter of fact resignation/got on with it	5	1.6
Totals	308	100

“became impatient in the dictation and editing tasks as they had to wait for others. Enthusiastic about the narrative writing”.

“They found the first two exercises fairly easy and the third one both challenging and fun!” seemed to sum the feelings of those who felt that the paper was good in parts and tough in others.

Concluding Comment

Both of the papers were well received by the teachers and the students. Roughly two-thirds to three-quarters of all responses were favourable and positive. It is a daunting task to construct instruments that meet the requirements and interests of everyone, and probably not realistic to expect to do so. There are some small areas for improvement suggested by the participants, including a close examination of the balance to ensure interesting material for girls and boys.