

Assessment ESOL Action Research Report

**Center for Literacy Studies
The University of Tennessee**

**Pat Sawyer
edited by Charlotte Duncan**

March 2, 2000

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1999–2000 program year, seven ESOL peer trainers; Pat Sawyer, ESOL Coordinator; and Dr. Connie White, Associate Director at the Center for Literacy Studies, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, took part in an action research project. Their goal was to try out various ESOL assessment instruments, to draw conclusions from this research, and to assist the Center for Literacy Studies in writing a report, including recommendations, about ESOL assessment. This work was suggested by the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Office of Adult Education. Hope Lancaster, Program Manager, provided assistance.

The U.S. Department of Education has mandated a uniform outcome-based reporting system that requires that all states collect data for programs funded under Adult Education. The assessments that determine these outcomes must be “valid and reliable.” They must be in the form of standardized tests or other means that meet these requirements if they are to report learner gains in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, along with additional skills related to workforce assessment.

Two assessment instruments, the Oral Basic English Skills Test (BEST) and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) were chosen for the piloting as they were the only standardized tests mentioned in the National Reporting System (NRS) report that would be acceptable to determine participants’ functioning levels.

The BEST, developed by language testing professionals at the Center for Applied Linguistics, is a measurement tool designed for adult ESOL learners at the survival and preemployment English language skills level. The BEST uses real-life materials and tasks to measure performance of basic language competencies. The CASAS was begun in 1980 through a partnership of the California Department of Education and a consortium of adult education agencies in California. This test has been approved and validated by the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor and meets the mandates of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act.

Current practice and theory seem to recommend using a combination of commercially-available and program-developed alternative assessment instruments. We believe that the first principle in constructing an assessment system is that one should always “do no harm.” We want our students to complete their testing procedure with a positive feeling of accomplishment and a belief in themselves and their ability to learn English. Keeping that in mind, we recommend the following assessment instruments and practices, which will give clearly stated criteria for (a) entrance to placement in the program, (b) progress within the program, and (c) exit to the mainstream English curriculum.

We recommend that Tennessee Adult Education ESOL programs adopt the Oral BEST to meet the NRS requirements and that the literacy section of the test also be used for reading and writing assessments. (The NRS is in the process of adopting the literacy section of the BEST.) We also recommend that all ESOL teachers receive training in administering the BEST. This

training can be done at the ESOL Institute, TAACE, and regional meetings, using a module developed by the Center for Literacy Studies.

HISTORY OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

At an Adult Education Supervisor's meeting in 1998, Tennessee Adult Education Supervisors requested that the Center for Literacy Studies, University of Tennessee, assist the state in developing an ESOL assessment process through program incentive grants. These program incentive grants would use an action research program to identify which assessment would be most beneficial in our ESOL programs. It was decided that the work should be done with a group of ESOL practitioners in an incentive grant process that would identify an assessment process for ESOL learners, incorporate the process into the state plan, produce training materials, and work with the state office to provide training in the assessment process.

At the same time, it was decided to develop an ESOL Peer Trainers' Network made up of a group of exemplary ESOL instructors who were willing to lend support to other ESOL teachers and provide leadership and training regarding teaching ESOL and work-related basic skills. These peer trainers were then asked to apply for an ESOL Program Incentive Grant to try out assessment instruments in their classrooms with materials provided by the Center for Literacy Studies. Those grant recipients were to document the results two times per month on the ESOL listserv, attend a meeting to draw conclusions from the research and assist the Center for Literacy Studies in writing a report, including recommendations, about ESOL assessment.

The CASAS and the Oral BEST were selected as the tests to pilot, as these were the two standardized assessment instruments selected by the NRS (National Reporting System) as the two acceptable standardized tests for adult ESOL programs.

The first order of business was to order materials for each peer trainer and to arrange for training by a certified CASAS trainer. (To purchase CASAS material, one must first be trained in administering their tests.) The group met in Nashville for a day of excellent training by a CASAS trainer and left the session feeling very positive about the CASAS program. Five peer trainers chose to pilot the CASAS Life Skills ESOL program because they were interested in the fact that all CASAS assessment is linked to competencies and instructional materials that focus on learners' goals. Two of the peer trainers chose to pilot the Oral BEST.

As previously stated, ESOL grant recipients were to document their findings two times each month on the listserv. The following section of this paper will be devoted to various excerpts from the peer trainers' listserv comments.

PEER TRAINERS' LISTSERV COMMENTS

The first peer trainer to report on the listserv was Ellen Bourne. Ellen is an ESOL teacher in Nashville, Tennessee who, after teaching ESOL for five years, decided to return to school for her Master's degree in Education. Before becoming an ESOL teacher, Ellen was a freelance writer for 10 years.

Ellen had chosen to pilot the CASAS; and her first report was to inform everybody on the listserv that the CASAS is not simply a test for placement "...but a system to assess, place,

instruct, and track students.” She continued by writing that “CASAS also provides accountability for the funding sources about how well teachers are teaching and how well students are learning with its pre- and posttests.”

The test is culturally biased, at least in the use of names, none of which indicated any other nationality other than white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant names.

- Since the test must be proctored, it really messes up your teaching schedule (90-minute classes) to be testing one set of students for such a long time when the others have already taken the test.
- Some students were mildly annoyed that we took this kind of time on the tests even though I explained the need and the use of the results.
- At one site where I teach, we have the luxury of a “tester” who tests and brings the student to the classroom where their level is being taught. *I can't imagine teachers being able to spend this time with every student in an open-enrollment situation without assistance in testing.*

• *Let's put our heads together to come up with a solution that may free trained ESOL teachers (We are a rare breed!!) to do what they do best—TEACH.*
(Heather Nicely)

Heather Nicely, an experienced ESOL teacher and supervisor in the Kingsport, Tennessee, adult education programs, sent the above comment and a report via the listserv. She was also concerned with the time away from teaching that was involved with the CASAS testing. She did note that “...this testing business is cumbersome but will be required soon to document, via tests, the levels of our students and the progress they make.”

From the beginning of this action research project, the problem of how to test an ESOL class without losing our students was a common theme. One of our peer trainers said that the third time she tested, she had only 3 of the original 18 students who had started with her. As most adult ESOL teachers know, our students have a limited amount of time to spend in class, and they expect that time to be worthwhile to them.

CONCERN ABOUT THE “BUBBLE SHEET”

Sandra Fugate, an experienced ESOL peer trainer who teaches in Claiborne County, wrote the following:

I attempted to test two of my students with the CASAS Appraisal. They had never seen a bubble sheet. The appraisal said that if they had trouble filling out items 1–5, to discontinue testing and try assessing with another form. I pursued a couple of pages of the Listening test. They could not keep up with the tape. These two students had completed the 4th grade in Mexico. They were discouraged, and so was I. I am undecided about the CASAS at this point.

After reading this message on the listserv, Ellen Bourne replied,

I suggest that you spend a considerable time preparing levels below advanced to take this type of test. Most of my intermediate students have not been to college and have no facility with filling out a bubble sheet. Because the students were upset with the testing process, I gave them a page with lots of different facial expressions on it and asked them to circle the way they felt when they took the test. We talked about how frightened we can become when we take a “test,” but I reminded them that they all took a test when they were placed in the program and this was a similar test and so forth. We also talked about how we don’t like change, but a change in the types of test we take is coming next fall. Teachers and students alike will have to change....Anyway, I felt better about it all after we talked as a class.

STUDENTS’ LEVEL OF COMFORT WHEN BEING TESTED

Diane Cohn, a peer trainer from Franklin, Tennessee, who teaches ESOL and is also working with a pilot program developed by McDonalds restaurants wrote,

For the writing part of the assessment, most students got so nervous listening to it that they didn’t know what they were supposed to write. When they were being tested on the reading part of the test, those who have had very few years of formal schooling or none at all felt very depressed and inadequate. Several students just quit listening and put their pencils down. Our fear is that students will feel so bad about themselves after an assessment that they will give up and not return to class.

One peer trainer, Anne Pittman from Memphis, TN, was able to select 10 students and isolate this group from the rest of the ESOL students for testing purposes. Her first experience was positive; but, at a later time, Anne reported, “ My group is now wearying of the testing process. In spite of great promises of dedication through March 2, my attendance was way down last night. This, of course, could have been serendipitous, but I don’t think so.”

Anne’s first comment on the listserv was a positive one. She wrote, “The students who have been in my class are actually rather excited by the process and feel that they are participating in a bit of Tennessee history. We like the CASAS and are really enjoying the process of our assessment pioneering.

TIME TO MAKE A FINAL DECISION

The peer trainers who were piloting the CASAS and the BEST assessments felt that they were ready to complete the project by the time we all met March 2, 2000, in Nashville. At this time, none of us knew what final decision our group would make. Each peer trainer had been asked to write a final report on her experiences with the assessment she was piloting and then to read it to the group at the meeting.

Cindy Barnett, our ESOL peer trainer from Henry County, Tennessee, was the first to report on her experiences with the Oral BEST. In several of Cindy’s listserv messages and at our meeting in Nashville, Cindy emphasized the importance of training for the person who would be administering the BEST. Some of Cindy’s comments are as follows:

- The BEST manual emphasizes the importance of the examiners becoming thoroughly familiar with the procedures and scoring rules, especially for the oral section. It is recommended that one practice giving the test to colleagues or volunteer students. The more you use this test, the more comfortable you become with it. (The Center for Applied Linguistics distributes a training video that was developed by Clackamas Community College in Oregon City, Oregon. This training video can be used with the Oral BEST Interview Short Form.)
- My overall impression after giving the BEST to 10 students is that it's a very good test. Once you become familiar with the questions and the scoring, it's not too hard or time consuming to give.
- There are two forms of BEST available, B and C, so you could use one for the pre- and one for the posttest.
- The BEST would be excellent for placing new students. It can also be used to provide diagnostic feedback. For example, my student who didn't score well on the handling money questions was proficient at telling time. Many others had some trouble following directions on a map.
- Many of my students were smiling as they finished the test and said it wasn't as hard as they thought it would be and they felt they had done well. The student who really gushed about it happened to be the one who scored the lowest. The Oral BEST seems to make the students feel good about what they CAN do and doesn't focus on what they can't."

Connie Mayes, our ESOL peer trainer from Sevier County agreed with Cindy. Connie wrote the following in her listserv reports:

- I, too, think the BEST tests what we need to know, and it only takes about 15 minutes. Students don't seem to mind it. I have also given this test to some of my advanced students and have seen interesting results. Since correct grammar is essential to getting the top score, I have been finding deficient areas in some students. It has also been an eye opener for them.
- All in all, I am pleased with it. I make notes as I give the test and use that information with the scores so I can determine what I need to teach. So far in my testing, the students' scores match my observations of my students. I ask new students to come in for a private interview ahead of their class so I can evaluate them.
- I like the BEST because it does not disrupt my class and it is SHORT.

FINAL PHASE OF THE ACTION RESEARCH PILOTING PROJECT

| | |
|------------|--|
| CASAS pros | Good customer service |
| | Cross-referenced materials on what to use once students are assessed |
| | Class profile is helpful for instructor's planning |
| | A well-organized system that works for teachers and administrators |

The levels are useful for accountability
 Accurate for literacy (reading)
 Adequately tests listening and reading
 The manual gives LOTS of information

| | |
|------------|--|
| CASAS cons | <p>Does not test writing and product Time, time, time—takes too much time to administer Too costly May intimidate or chase off students Leaves us with a feeling of “surely there is something better” May not be user friendly (difficult for students to take) Caucasian cultural bias</p> |
| BEST pros | <p>Relatively inexpensive Not intimidating to students Students feel good about taking it Easy to score The complete series of tests, the Short Form of the BEST, the Oral BEST, and the Literacy BEST, takes only 75 minutes (there would seldom be a time when you would give all of these at one time) The Oral BEST takes about 15 minutes The literacy test can be taken without the teacher being a part of the procedure The literacy test is short and tests life skills The BEST has a grammar section Students can see relevance of the test Is even helpful for nonreaders Was developed for ESOL students</p> |
| BEST cons | <p>Cannot discriminate among highest levels Has to be given one-on-one Must be teacher administered—not appropriate for volunteers to give unless a volunteer is highly trained Some questions about the BEST’s definition of “fluency” Scoring is subjective unless teacher is thoroughly familiar with the test</p> |

During our discussions of these pros and cons, Diane Cohn mentioned that she had been giving the literacy section of the BEST to her students. She was very enthusiastic about this experience and had many positive things to say about the literacy portion of the BEST. She had chosen to pilot the CASAS and was in the enviable position of being able to compare the two instruments.

THE FINAL DECISION

After reading reports from other states, discussing the pros and cons of our own research, and then again remembering our first principle to “do no harm,” we decided to recommend the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) as the most appropriate assessment for adult ESOL programs in Tennessee.

The BEST will work as an excellent test for ESOL students at all six levels. It will NOT be effective though as an exit test at the ESOL Advanced Level because it is designed only for the lower levels (see Appendix C—Carol Van Duzer). Therefore, after discussing this with a representative from the Center for Applied Linguistics (the distributors for the BEST), we are recommending that the following test be used as an exit test for the ESOL Advanced Level:

TABE (Tests of Adult Basic Education), Level M, Form 7 and 8, Reading Test (see Appendix D for address and information)

FINAL COMMENT

My thanks to the excellent work done by the ESOL peer trainers of Tennessee and the wonderful assistance of Dr. Connie White at the Center for Literacy Studies, The University of Tennessee, and of Hope Lancaster, Project Manager, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Office of Adult Education.

Pat Sawyer
Center for Literacy Studies
The University of Tennessee

SIGNATURES

Cynthia W. Barnett

Ellen Bourne

Diane Cohn

Sandra Fugate

Connie Mayes

Heather Nicely

Anne Pittman

Pat Sawyer

Connie White

Appendix A: BEST Information

Start-Up Kit (with training video) is \$200.

Basic English Skills Test
Center for Applied Linguistics
4646 40th Street NW
Washington DC 20016-1859

Contact:

Laurel Winston
(Tel) 202-362-0700
(Fax) 202-362-3740

Training for Tennessee ESOL teachers in the use of the BEST will be given at the ESOL Summer Institute on June 20, 2000.

Appendix B: Peer Trainers Reports

Testing the CASAS: Ellen Bourne, Nashville Metro

Program tested: Nonintensive ESOL classes, day classes two days a week, three hours of instruction per day (two teachers, 90 minutes per teacher); nondefined curriculum. Students drawn mostly from the Vanderbilt University area, Nashville; very few are employed; conversation/communication the traditional goal of instruction; open enrollment.

Stated purpose: Assessment, instruction, accountability (life skills) through use of appraisal, pre- and posttests; program must teach skills that are tested if to be used for accountability (in other words, depends on program and test fit); originally designed for ABE students.

Numbers and level tested: Seven intermediate students took the ESL Appraisal Form 20 (languages represented: Ukrainian, Spanish, Indonesian, Polish, Russian, and Chinese). Four others took either the listening or the reading appraisal tests. Six advanced students took the ESL Appraisal Form 20 and were pretested on Form 37 (languages represented: Turkish, Korean, and Chinese). Seven other students took all or part of the appraisal test, (they weren't given on the same day) but no pretest (languages represented: Korean, Japanese, and Italian).

Students took the listening and reading and writing appraisal tests. I did not administer the oral test.

| Administration | |
|----------------|------------|
| Appraisal | |
| Listening | 25 minutes |
| Reading | 30 minutes |
| Writing | 5 minutes |

| Administration | |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| Pretest | |
| Reading | approximately 60 minutes |

Cultural Issues:

Content/Format: pictures universal

Language bias: Some bias in that no students referred to in the articles for testing have non-Anglo names; vocabulary pretty stiff for an appraisal for all levels: convenience, combination, hazardous, released, irritant, internal.

Task bias: Mass of personal identification information required on appraisal sheet overwhelming for intermediates; confusing to have other information on the sheet that students do not fill out (placement into program, agency, class, and so forth); use of bubble answer sheet a new concept and difficult concept for intermediates; use of medical form that they do not fill out but, rather, answer questions about, which was confusing for some.

| Range/Breadth of Content | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Age | adult |
| Language type | basic skills; life skills, employability |
| Language domains | broad coverage and depth |
| Language skills | four basic skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening |

Documentation/manuals:

Interpretive: Wealth of information available from the training session. All materials listed below were obtained from the training session.

Skill level descriptors for ABE; raw to scaled score conversion tables; competency coding system; competency lists; thorough administration information; individual student profiles showing test content by item; instructional materials guide (listening textbook and publisher; and more.

Comments: If we are to use the assessment, we must take into account that needs and goals for different sites, times, and locations around the state are different. At one site, I have wives and husbands (who will never work in this country) of Vanderbilt postgrad students. The advanced levels are quite high and these students could easily take graduate work (many are professionals, doctors, lawyers, and the like.) but opt for our free program instead of paying tuition at the universities. These students have no trouble with the CASAS. But for other levels below advanced or high-intermediate, teachers would have to teach test-taking techniques: how to prepare emotionally for test taking; how to follow directions; how to use bubble answer sheets; how to take a test without using a dictionary; how to read for content, such as the most important information or sentence in an article. If we are to posttest with the same test, I also think that we will begin teaching to the test rather than to the other needs students may have. I think this is a fair and accurate test for advanced-level students and perhaps for the beginning levels with their mostly pictorial type of test, but the middle levels seem to fall through the cracks in terms of the issues above and in terms of vocabulary for appraisal testing.

Recommendations: The test is too time consuming. Perhaps volunteers could be trained to test students; however, since it is difficult to predict when new students will appear, this method of test administration might prove hard to manage. Teachers could be trained to administer the test, but most of them are too busy teaching to spend a lot of time assessing (unless, of course, they are convinced that the test contains all of the learning they want for their students). Trying to corral students for this lengthy test while the rest of the class is in session seems counterproductive.

Perhaps we could use the BEST for lower levels and break out the CASAS for the upper levels. Alternatively, perhaps neither instrument should be used for placement but, rather, as a starting point for progress after the class is established and as a posttest.

Teachers need to be familiarized with the test and its contents and with the process for answering (use of answering sheet). The emphasis must be changed from a communications (oral) competency to a literacy competency.

Scoring:

Of 11 advanced students who took the appraisal, all had raw scores of 17 or higher (out of 20 questions) that translated to a scaled score of 227. This put them into pretest 37 and posttest 38. Scores on the pretest ranged from 25–38 out of 40 questions.

Of eight intermediate students who took the appraisal, raw scores ranged from 13–3 (out of 20 questions). Four students had a raw score of 13 (scaled score = 218 = form 35); one student had a raw score of 12 (scaled score = 216 = form 35); one student had a raw score of 10 (scaled score = 211 = form 33); one student had a raw score of 8 (scaled score = 194 = form 31). This class had wide discrepancies in the listening portion of the appraisal instrument as well.

CASAS Assessment: Diane Cohn, Williamson County

To evaluate the CASAS Assessment, I tried to look at the pros and cons of the instrument itself. What is so wonderful about the CASAS is the fact that there are so many levels. A beginning student, in particular, can show a lot of progress, which is good in the age of accountability. I really liked the literacy-level tests, forms 27 and 28. All of the students who took that test felt good about what they knew. This is so crucial at this level, and I don't think we've really had a good instrument at this level before. Another good factor is that the Appraisal answer sheets are very easy to grade. Any time-saving factor is truly appreciated by the teacher. Perhaps the best factor about the CASAS is the fact that it tests reading, writing, and oral comprehension. This is essential in trying to understand our ESOL students, and it gives us a better overview of their abilities. The CASAS also is organized in helping the teacher know exactly what skills the student doesn't know and then has all these skills cross-referenced with teaching materials. That is a huge plus.

St. Thomas Hospital literacy classes in Nashville use the CASAS in their workplace assessment. They use the CASAS Workforce Systems Appraisal in Reading/Math to determine if an employee is at the required level of his or her job. If the employee does not make the required score, set by both the teacher and the supervisor, they are required by management to enroll in the program for a minimum of 8 hours a month. They then retest after 12 hours of class time. The teachers in this program like the CASAS assessment because it is skill specific. They then can teach the necessary skills in the class that relate to the student's job.

Overall, I don't think that there is another test on the market that has so many levels and, at the same time, has all of the skill cross-referenced for the teacher. Both of these factors are central for our ESOL teacher.

The cons about the CASAS can be summarized in one word—TIME. A teacher has to give two tests to each student, one an appraisal and then the reading test before the student's level can be determined. Each test takes at least 90 minutes to administer, taking into account filling out the forms and reading the directions. This is very time consuming, especially when you consider that most ESOL teachers teach one or two classes a week. This takes an entire week of their instructional time for assessment.

Another big problem with the CASAS for me was the administration of the test. I have had CASAS training, I read the manual at least three times, and I still felt insecure about

administering the test. How would the average part-time teacher feel who teaches one or two classes a week? I have several questions that I hope my colleagues can answer.

1. Do I use the reading appraisal score to determine the reading test form? If so, where in the manual tells me that?
2. How do I use the listening score in my assessment?
3. Do I give the same reading test form again as a posttest? Again, where in the manual does it tell me that?
4. How do I use the class profile? I don't understand all the symbols, and I can't find any explanations in the manual.

In one instance in particular, I question the results of the CASAS. Student A took test form 31, received a 220 score, which put her into Intermediate Basic Skills level. Student B took test form 33, received a 210 score, which put her into Beginning Basic Skills. Student B functions at a higher level in class than Student A and placed higher on the Appraisal, yet her assessment is lower than Student A's. This doesn't make sense to me.

Another drawback to me about the CASAS is the recommended 60 teaching hours before one can posttest. I feel this would be a nightmare in bookwork, and one would be testing and retesting continuously.

The bottom line with the CASAS is –IS THE CASAS USER FRIENDLY? Can a teacher use it efficiently and find what they need to know? I keep thinking about the majority of part-time ESOL teachers who teach one class at night. How would they feel about the time involved in giving the CASAS? Would they feel qualified to give it? I haven't even touched on the cost of the training. Would districts be willing to pay for CASAS training in a field that has a majority of part-time teachers that come and go? And is the CASAS an efficient assessment in a field where the teacher never has enough time? Does the assessment take away too much instructional time? Can we get the similar results by using another assessment?

What have I learned from using the CASAS? I have learned that giving this test takes a lot of class time and preparation time. This was time I was happy to give, but I'm not sure the average teacher has that much available. I learned that in reading how to give the test, the more I read, the more confused I became. It took me several readings of the manual each time before I actually administered the test. I learned that I had to give up almost an entire week of instructional time to administer this test to my advanced group. This group only meets two days a week. I learned that, when my students come to my class, I want them to walk out feeling successful. I'm not sure that taking the CASAS had that effect on them. Finally, I learned that I want one instrument that doesn't take so much time to assess my students when they come to class. I'm not sure I can say that about the CASAS Assessment. As you can see, I have asked more questions than I have answered, which sums up my feelings about the CASAS—ambiguity.

Report on the CASAS Assessment: Heather Nicely, Kingsport

General comments:

The students who took the CASAS in the Kingsport City Schools Adult Education program were mostly adults; all were enrolled in the Adult ESOL class(es) in the Adult Basic Education program. Those taking the listening portion of the ESL Appraisal, Form 20, took it as a group, at either Lee School, Dobyns-Bennett High School, or the Kingsport Even Start program. The reading portion of the ESL Appraisal, Form 20, was mostly group administered as

well. The next level of test, the reading test on Levels A–D, was administered once as a group; the remainder of the time, it was administered one at a time as the students reappeared in the ESOL class.

Things I noticed about the test included that the dictation portion was something the student either could handle or could not. Only a few students just wrote down a word or two; most either got to all of the words or could write nothing. I did not administer the oral portion of the test, but I looked it over; I came to the conclusion that it might reveal things about the English ability of the student to an experienced teacher but would not be of much help to a beginning teacher. Most students, even the fairly fluent ones, took longer than one hour to complete the second reading test. That may have been a factor of their scores on the ESL Appraisal test, qualifying them to take a fairly difficult test the next time. When we did the practice items as a group, even though I pointed out where the practice boxes were, many students marked the practice items rather than the correct box. There was a marked similarity in the scaled scores on the reading portion of the ESL Appraisal and the reading test levels A–D.

Student comments included wondering why a test was being given before there had been many lessons (that from a newly enrolled student). Some said the reading portion was fairly difficult. I thanked them profusely for being “guinea pigs” for the state of Tennessee as we tried to ascertain which test would be best used for accountability in the adult education program.

A test of this type would be a burden for a single ESOL teacher handling all the needs of students from other countries. Testing would occupy a great deal of time and take away from teaching time. In the evening-class situation in my program, I would have to depend on our regular testing person to do the ESOL testing so that I would be able to concentrate on the lessons in English that my students need and want.

Results of the BEST Test Research: Connie Mayes, Sevier County

The Basic English Skills Test (BEST) oral test is a short test that gives score for listening comprehension, communication, fluency, and an overall student-performance level. It is easy to give and takes about 15 minutes. Students do not seem to mind taking the test.

Pros of the BEST:

1. Easy to give
2. Easy to score
3. Short test
4. Results in useful information
5. The scores are useful for placement of student
6. Can be used for all levels of students
7. Easy to show gains

Cons of the BEST:

1. Tester must almost memorize the test
2. Pictures are very dark
3. Must be given one-on-one
4. Recommendation of posttesting in 6 weeks

I don't think there are a lot of cons for this test. For ESOL, we need something short and simple that gets the job done. The BEST is easy and to the point. Our students often don't know what or why we are doing something, and they don't understand when we try to explain. If we spend a lot of time testing, they will simply not return to class. The recommendation of the posttesting at 6–8 weeks is impractical for me—I would be testing all the time and not teaching—and I think the students would quit coming if I do too much testing.

As I test the students when they come for their preclass interview, I have found it fairly easy to use the BEST,. Some students show up for class unannounced, and then I try to get them after class. Since the test is short, this is fairly easily accomplished.

I have tested new students and long-time students. For the most part, the results have been what I expected. Something interesting, though, is that a student who cannot read and write is able to get a high score on this test because it is an oral test. The teacher might not want to use the test score for placement of this student. I don't consider this a problem.

Based upon my experience, I recommend that the state adopt the BEST test for their reporting purposes. We can easily give them the scores they want, and it should be easy to show gains with this test as all these skills are part of our curriculum.

Results of Action Research on the Oral BEST: Cindy Barnett, Henry County

The Basic English Skills Test (BEST) is a standardized, criterion-referenced test designed to test listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing skills at an elementary level. It is intended for use with limited-English-speaking adults for whom information on the attainment of basic, functional language skills is needed. It was originally developed in 1982 as a part of the Office of Refuge Resettlement Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) Project. Two forms of the BEST are currently available from the Center of Applied Linguistics. The test results are reported in Student Performance Levels (SPLs). The BEST is designed to provide information for purposes of placement, progress, diagnostic, screening, and program evaluations.

The BEST consists of two sections: the Oral Interview Section and the Literacy Skills Section. I have not seen the Literacy Section, so I can only report on my experience with the Oral Section.

The Oral BEST is an individually administered, fact-to-face interview that includes a series of simulated real-life listening comprehension and speaking tasks, such as telling time, asking for and following directions, counting money to pay for items and verifying change, and conversing socially at an elementary level. A reading task (completion of a short biographical data form) serves as a screening device to identify students for whom the Literacy Section may be appropriate. It takes about 15 minutes to administer.

The examiner must become thoroughly familiar with the procedures and scoring rules before administering the Oral BEST. It's a good idea to practice giving it to colleagues or student volunteers. You must follow the instructions exactly. The specific language of the test questions to be spoken aloud by the examiner is printed in boldface. You may repeat each question only once if the student doesn't understand or asks for repetition or clarification. You may not rephrase the question.

The Oral BEST tests listening comprehension, communication (comprehensible and grammatically correct responses), and fluency. These scores are added to give the total score. It's

easy to add the score. The total is a scaled score, which is then correlated with the SPLs, using the correlation chart included in the manual. An overall pronunciation score is given separately.

In using the Oral BEST to measure progress, one of the two versions available could be used for the pretest and the other for the posttest. The manual recommends at least six to eight weeks between tests. Since my classes only meet for two hours twice a week, I would probably wait 16 weeks; and 16 weeks would be a natural division of the school year.

I administered the Oral BEST to 11 students and soon began to feel comfortable with it. I feel it's a very good test and was made just for students like mine. It is easy to administer, and it takes only 15 minutes per student. It assesses basic functional language skills. Since it is performance based, it can easily be tied to curriculum and instruction.

It was not an intimidating test for students, who are in the intermediate and upper-beginning levels of ESOL. In fact, I think it made the students feel good about what they were able to do. My student who scored at the lowest SPL level, Level 1, came away from the tests all smiles saying how easy it was and how well she felt she had done on it. I think it's important that our test not make our students feel inadequate about themselves or their abilities. The administration and scoring instructions for the Oral BEST say to make the student feel as comfortable as possible by maintaining a pleasant manner and tone of voice.

Every effort should be made to give the examinee a positive attitude towards the test. Once the test begins, the examiner should be careful not to give any indication to the examinee as to whether an answer is right or wrong; all responses should be accepted with a smile and a nod. Remember that this is a testing and not a teaching situation.

I have not been able to administer the test to my migrant farmworker students, who are in Mexico now. They are at the literacy and beginning levels. I think the Oral BEST would be quite appropriate for them. I was interested to read the entry on the NIFL listserv by Heide Spruck Wrigley, Senior Research Associate for Aguirre International, which Pat Sawyer forwarded to us on Feb. 18. She said that it can be difficult to assess progress for beginning ESOL students. She suggested choosing an assessment instrument that "captures how well students are able to communicate in spoken English (verbal proficiency)." She said the first component of an assessment framework should be oral proficiency assessments for spoken English for ESOL. "The BEST seems to work for many programs."

I think it would also work for ours, and I recommend it for the Tennessee adult ESOL programs.

Appendix C: Solicited Comments

Heide Spruck Wrigley: Senior Research Associate, Aguirre International

“Just a couple of words of caution. If you want to pick up gains for beginning ESOL students, you really will need to select an assessment that captures how well students are able to communicate in spoken English (verbal proficiency). So that will mean at least two assessments (one for verbal proficiency and another for picking up the changes in literacy skills). In addition, if you have folks at the very lowest level, the gains they make may not show up on a standardized test; so it can easily look like they have not learned much of anything when, indeed, they have.

My suggestion would be to develop an assessment framework that minimally combines the following:

1. For ESOL: Oral proficiency assessments for spoken English for ESOL (the BEST seems to work for many programs).
2. For first-level literacy learners: an alternative assessment for students new to literacy that combines a demonstration of what students can do (portfolios), student self-assessments (can-do lists, for example), and teacher assessment.

Carol Van Duzer: National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

In response to a question asking if the TABE could be used for ESOL students at the advanced level:

“As far as the TABE is concerned, I think you are right to suggest that it be given to students who test at SPL (Student Performance Level) 6 and above or top out of the BEST Oral or the BEST Literacy. Texas gives the Oral BEST. If students score less than 5 on the reading and writing screening portion, they are not given the BEST Literacy. Those students with scores higher than 5 on the screening also take the BEST Literacy. Those who top out on the Oral BEST are usually moved over to the TABE.”

APPENDIX D: RESOURCE

TABE (Tests of Adult Basic Education)
Level M, Forms 7 and 8
Reading Test

This test was normed in 1993 and will test levels of accomplishment for students working at the 3.6–6.9 grade level.

CTB/ McGraw-Hill
Customer Services
20 Ryan Ranch Road
Monterey, CA 93940-5703

The consultant for Tennessee is
Tom Cannon
615-855-3662
tcannon@ctb.com

You may also call the Atlanta, Georgia, office at 770-622-4300.

Appendix E: Student Responses

Student Responses After Taking The CASAS Appraisal

I felt this test good for me because I think I need to get used to listen to different kinds of person, voices and speed. I hope that tape voice more clearly. I can easy listen.

I think that this test is good, very good at everybody because is much practice and I'm wanted that every months end a test to be better. I think I need more practice because my test is not very good but I will try to studied more.

I like the test because I need to know about who many learned and if I go well in my study.

I like the test because for me it was so hard and is very important for know how is my label and what can I do for better my English.

I like the tess but I things is a little hard for me when I was listen.

I think the test is good but Part two for me was unclear or was more difficult to understand what really wanted.

I felt it was difficult for me especially listening. This test let me know that I need to study more English. Thank you so much.

It's make me crazy. It's tape just like a telephone call. For foreigners sometime understand not only what they say but what they do (action and face). So, this is good practice, but it's hard.

I had a headache.

I think that test is needed for us (me?) twice a year. So we can know how much we learned and the parts we have to improve.

I think it wasn't a very hard test. It was sometimes to slow for easy questions. I could go faster. I think it is good to do those test to control how much the students are learning, and it didn't made me feel bad. I think you should keep going on such tests.

I like test.

I think it is a best thing what we take a test. Because I could know how I understand my English ability. But this test is a little hard for me. I like to take a test.