



CRITERION REFERENCED ASSESSMENT AS A GUIDE TO LEARNING -
THE IMPORTANCE OF PROGRESSION AND RELIABILITY

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Criterion referenced assessment as a guide to learning – the importance of progression and reliability

One of the aims of criterion referencing is to focus on individual, differentiated assessment. By moving away from norm-referencing, to a system which describes what students know, understand and can do, assessments can be used to provide feedback and to inform future teaching and learning needs. Where assessment is carried out based on descriptions of levels of performance, we need to define 'success' at a given level. In England, level descriptions set out the expected standards of performance. They describe the types and range of performance that students at a particular level should characteristically demonstrate. The level descriptions create an age independent scale which allows for differentiation and assessment of progression for each curriculum subject. The detailed curricula are set out in the Programmes of Study for each subject and are age specific for each stage of learning. One advantage of age independent scales of performance is that they allow for overlap between age groups and differentiation at any particular age. The assumption is that it is possible to define progression in a given subject and that an age independent scale of progression exists. It could be argued that for some subjects progress is more easily defined, whereas for others definitions of progress may be more problematic.

There are a number of difficulties related to this model of teaching, learning and assessment. When levels of performance are described in holistic terms, requiring interpretation and human judgement, there is a danger that reliability will be compromised. For 'true' criterion referencing, experts would not accept criteria which could allow a range of interpretations. However it could be argued that 'no criterion, no matter how precisely phrased, admits of an unambiguous interpretation', (William, 1993). The development of criteria which would not allow a range of interpretations would be challenging and arguably such criteria would be too numerous, narrow and unmanageable.

In order to reconcile the problems of 'unreliable' human judgements and the need for rigorous assessment, it is necessary to develop a shared understanding of holistic descriptions of performance. Those involved in assessment, test development, teaching and curriculum development need to understand levels of performance and the nature of progression in the curriculum and to develop an understanding of standards of performance within a community of practice. Such a body of knowledge would help to increase the credibility of valid, reliable assessment of what students know, understand and can do in the context of transparency, clarity and shared understanding.

CRITERION REFERENCED ASSESSMENT AS A GUIDE TO LEARNING THE IMPORTANCE OF PROGRESSION AND RELIABILITY

Introduction

The introduction of outcomes based education has led to new challenges in curriculum development and integrated assessment. The need for clearer teaching objectives and more valid assessments can lead to a number of potential difficulties. It is a challenging task to assess performance in a meaningful, manageable way while ensuring reliability and fundamental progression in the curriculum. O'Neil (1994) suggested that problems stem from a failure to define outcomes clearly and to describe how they can be demonstrated for assessment. Criterion referenced assessment of a more complex curriculum poses a great technical challenge as can be seen from the experience of implementing the national curriculum and assessment procedures in England.

Criterion referenced assessment

One of the aims of criterion referencing is to focus on individual assessment based on descriptions of performance across a range of levels. While norm-referencing provides information about an individual's performance against that of others, criterion referencing is an attempt to provide information about standards by describing the knowledge and skills which are characteristic at a given level of attainment. Brown defined criterion referenced assessment as,

An evaluative description of the qualities which are to be assessed (e.g. an account of what pupils know and can do) without reference to the performance of others.

(Brown, 1988, p.4.)

Assessments based on descriptions of levels of performance can be used to provide feedback and to inform future teaching and learning needs. For such a system to be effective it is important that teaching programmes are aligned with the expected outcomes which are clearly described.

In any scale of performance descriptions it is necessary to define success at a given level and as Ridgway commented,

...the definition of mastery is not always clear. It would be impractical to expect candidates to attain perfect scores on every aspect of every task on which they were tested....So [we] are faced with the task of making decisions about the level of success which counts for mastery. (Ridgway, 1988, p.59)

In England, the detailed curriculum is set out in *programmes of study* for each subject and these programmes of study are age specific for each stage of learning. (appendix 1 p.11 extract from programme of study for writing at key stage 3). There are three key stages between the ages of 5 and 14 years: key stage one - ages 5 – 7; key stage two - ages 8 – 11; key stage three - ages 12 – 14. The programmes of study provide the basis from which units of work can be developed for teaching and everyday assessment. Details of the curriculum are documented nationally so that teachers can plan their teaching, giving pupils opportunities to show what they know, understand and can do.

Alongside the programmes of study are the *level descriptions* which provide 'benchmarks' and set out expected standards of performance (see appendix 2, p.12 level descriptions for writing). They describe the types and range of performance that pupils working at a particular level should characteristically demonstrate. For continuous assessment teachers judge which level description best fits a pupil's performance. By indicating expectations at particular levels and progression in the subject, the level descriptions can help to inform planning for teaching and learning. The level descriptions are used in the development of national test mark schemes. For example, in national tests for English, the mark schemes for writing are derived from the criteria of the level descriptions which are applied to the specific writing tasks in the test (see appendix 3, p.13 extract from national test mark scheme for writing at key stage 3). A range of marks is available for a given level and the marker judges how much of a description the pupil has achieved and awards marks accordingly. In such mark schemes the level descriptions are fundamental to the criterion referenced assessment.

In other subjects, such as science, the links between the level descriptions and the national test mark schemes are not so transparent. Different elements within structured questions may address different levels and content, even different domains within the subject, therefore it may be difficult to classify some questions as 'at a particular level'. In such circumstances standard setting is done by determining 'thresholds' in total test scores, initially by judgemental means and subsequently using statistical equating to support judgements. In subjects such as writing, where the mark schemes are more directly related to the level descriptions, the standard setting also involves setting thresholds judgementally and statistically, but with more transparent links to levels of performance.

Progression

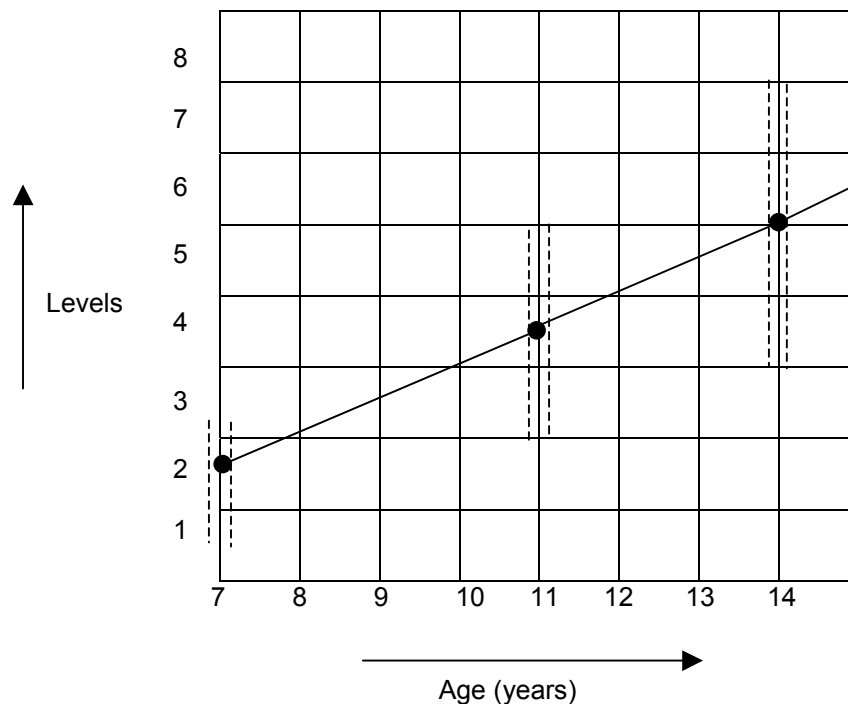
In 1988 a Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) was set up by the Secretary of State for Education in England. The group was asked to advise on practical considerations governing assessment within the national curriculum. TGAT proposed that assessment should be an integral part of the educational process, continually providing feedback about performance and progress and 'feedforward' about the next steps for teaching and learning. It was suggested that,

criteria for assessment and levels of performance should be related to expected routes of educational development, giving some continuity to a pupil's assessment at different ages and thereby giving a detailed picture of each pupil's progress'.

(TGAT Report, 1988, 1.91.)

One of the advantages of the age independent scale proposed by TGAT is that a common set of benchmarks apply across the age ranges, as in England across key stages 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 1 Sequence of attainment between ages 7 and 14 years
(adapted from 104, figure 1, TGAT Report, 1988)



Another advantage is that it allows differentiation at any particular age and as Wiliam comments,

the age independent scale was the result of a clear priority to provide a system that allows students to experience progression (in order to promote a view of attainment as incremental rather than as fixed) and that ensures that the focus was on progress, rather than on absolute levels of achievement.

(Wiliam, 2001, p.7.)

The alternative is to have a different scale for each phase of education with age specific levels of attainment. One problem with age specific scales is that a pupil could make real progress, but their reported grade could be the same or lower. This type of feedback has been shown to have a negative impact on learners. Dweck (1986) has shown that a situation where learners achieve the same levels at ages 7, 11 and 14 can reinforce the notion that ability is fixed and this can have a negative effect on motivation and self esteem.

The age independent model is based on an assumption that it is possible to define progression in a given subject. It could be argued that for some subjects e.g. mathematics, progress is more easily defined because of cumulating content, whereas, for English, it is more problematic because it is based on qualitative skills. In the early stages of national assessment in England, detailed and prescriptive criteria, called statements of attainment, were introduced to define performance at a given level. Assessment against such detailed criteria proved to be difficult and time-consuming and the system was criticised for being too mechanistic (Hall, 2002). Consequently the system was revised and replaced by a process which required more holistic judgements based on generic descriptions which led to problems in defining progress. Rather than detailed 'atomistic' criteria, the generic level descriptions set overall standards and it could be argued that this is more a system of 'standards referencing' rather than criterion referencing. The level descriptions were more abstract and general and required interpretation based on the programmes of study for each age group. This meant that there was a danger that they could be interpreted differently based on the programme of study for each key stage.

Reliability

The effective implementation of an age independent scale depends on the reliable application of the criteria for each level of performance irrespective of age and marker. Difficulties can arise when there is tension between the taught curriculum and the levels of attainment used for assessment. Wiliam (1995) pointed out that, in England, such tension arose because the assessment levels were age independent while the programmes of study, which set out the taught curriculum, were age specific. This meant that there were programmes of study written for pupils aged 5 to 7 years, 8 to 11, and 12 to 14 and this led to discontinuity. This tension was considered during a review of assessment in England in 1993 (Dearing) and the future of the age independent scale was questioned. It was recommended that the model should be retained but as Wiliam argued,

The idea of the ten level scale survived, but the comparability of levels between key stages (so necessary to ensure progression) was lost.
(Wiliam, 2001, p.15.)

The development of more holistic level descriptions, which need to be interpreted alongside the programmes of study, creates problems because when criteria for assessment require interpretation reliability may decrease. Where national assessment is based on continuous assessment and on national testing, the impact of inconsistency varies between the two forms of assessment. In the context of setting test standards the level criteria are only part of the process, since there are statistical data and expert judgements to be taken into account when test thresholds are set for levels of performance. However, when the level descriptions are used for teacher assessment, or for continuous assessment in a more formative context, then reliable interpretation of the performance descriptions becomes more important. For 'true' criterion referencing, experts such as Popham (1980) would not accept criteria which could allow a range of interpretations. In the English national curriculum for writing, at level four, pupils are expected to write in a way which is 'interesting, conveying meaning clearly in the chosen form for an intended reader'. This criterion could be interpreted differently across the key stages, depending on the programmes of study. Wiliam (1993) argued that, 'no criterion, no matter how precisely phrased, admits of an unambiguous interpretation'. He goes on to state that for a criterion to be useful for distinguishing levels of performance 'we have to use norms, however implicitly, in determining the appropriate interpretations,' and therefore, 'the criterion is interpreted with respect to the target population'. As Angoff (1974) commented, 'one only has to scratch the

surface of any criterion-referenced assessment system in order to find a norm-referenced set of assumptions lying underneath’.

It is essential that those who apply the scale to pupils’ performances should have a mutual understanding of the knowledge, skills and processes described at each level. Inconsistency between one age group and another can cause problems for any discussions about progress between teachers, schools and at a national level. There is a need for continuity in assessment and in curriculum planning with an emphasis on progression and in order for such continuity to be achieved it is important that there is clear understanding about what pupils know, understand and can do. In order for an age independent scale to function reliably across different age groups, then the curricula of those groups should be compatible. The danger is that for different age groups, or phases of education, the interpretation of performance descriptions may become age dependant and that decisions made about levels of performance may be based on an inherent system of norm referencing within the phase rather than being based on progression through a common set of levelled criteria. As Pollitt (1994) warned,

We are in danger of implementing a system of tests that behave like thermometers, all pretending to measure on the Celsius scale, but which actually each have their own freezing point and each their own idea of what constitutes a nice summer’s day.

(Pollitt, p.69.)

The TGAT report recognised the importance of moderation as an essential part of an assessment system to ensure consistency of judgements.

We are all as individuals, persuaded that those things which occur frequently in our experience are ‘normal’.... In the absence of equally powerful external evidence, teachers’ expectations become the teachers’ standards....In the absence of a close definition of what to look for and how to observe it, we look for confirmation of our expectations.

(TGAT Report, 1988, X.65.)

Concerns about reliability have increased in England with the publication of league tables of schools’ national test results. This open accountability has raised the stakes in national curriculum assessment and there is currently an initiative to calculate ‘value added measures’ for schools to measure the progress made by pupils as they progress from one phase of schooling to

another.

Discussion and conclusions

Difficulties can arise when level descriptions do not give clear definitions of progress or do not relate to realistic progression. Cox (1995) criticised level descriptions in the national curriculum in England because he felt they did not have the carefully defined progression that was necessary to allow reliable interpretations. He complained that they were too general and abstract. For example, one of the criteria included in the level three description for Number and Algebra was 'development of mental strategies'. Cox argued that such a criterion needed to be more clearly defined to avoid a range of interpretations and to ensure that progression could be identified. Sainsbury and Sizmur (1998) suggested that in order to maintain consistency it is necessary to look beyond the words of the level descriptions, to the understanding which exists among educators so that a common 'yardstick' can develop. As Wiliam (1993) pointed out, 'there then develops a case law of curriculum designers and test developers'. To those groups could be added 'teachers', since their case law is developed at the point of teaching, learning and assessment.

When deciding which criteria should be addressed at each level it is important to remember that the levels describe the performance and not the child. It is therefore necessary to approach the process of developing performance descriptions from children's actual performance. When setting out to define levels of performance one approach could be to decide how many levels there should be, a decision which may be made for a range of educational, political and social reasons. As an initial guide, draft criteria could be selected in consultation with teachers who would then be asked to suggest how many of their children could be expected to achieve each level. Those criteria would then be evaluated using a pre-test, possibly using data from an initial pilot year. The children's actual performance (e.g. answers to questions as well as mark distributions) would be used to improve the draft criteria. The performance of those with the median score within each level could be used to define performance at that level. Pre-test data could also be supported with information from classroom performance to prevent level criteria from becoming too narrowly restricted to those covered by the pre-test. The initial normative approach could then give way to criterion referencing once the scale has been determined. If descriptions are written without reference to empirical data on pupil performance, there is a danger that unrealistic standards will be set. This was the case when the national curriculum was introduced in England.

Once the scale of performance is set the interpretation and application of holistic performance descriptions is a challenging task. One risk in developing holistic performance descriptions is that if the criteria become more abstract and complex, requiring greater interpretation, then the assessment can become less objective. Sizmur and Sainsbury (1997) argued that this need not be the case,

The better we understand the nature of the subject, how it is taught, how pupils learn and make progress in it, the better we are able to rate specific pieces of work in terms of quality. Level descriptions are in one sense a means of imposing coherence on diverse elements of attainment.

(Sizmur, & Sainsbury, 1997, p.11.)

They advised that teachers need to get to grips with the scale that lies behind the level descriptions, to understand thoroughly how to apply them in their assessment and to understand levels of performance and the nature of progression. Hall (2002) suggested that 'teachers need to interpret loosely framed level descriptions through a well-defined community of practice'. As William (1996) commented, 'there is no way of establishing comparability of standards other than through the professional judgement of a community of experts'. Resources and time are needed to develop a shared understanding of progression in the curriculum and to enable reliable assessment to become part of an integrated educational process.

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En3 Writing

Knowledge, skills and understanding

Composition

- 1 Pupils should be taught to draw on their reading and knowledge of linguistic and literary forms when composing their writing. Pupils should be taught to:

Writing to imagine, explore, entertain

- a draw on their experience of good fiction, of different poetic forms and of reading, watching and performing in plays
- b use imaginative vocabulary and varied linguistic and literary techniques
- c exploit choice of language and structure to achieve particular effects and appeal to the reader
- d use a range of techniques and different ways of organising and structuring material to convey ideas, themes and characters

Writing to inform, explain, describe

- e form sentences and paragraphs that express connections between information and ideas precisely [for example, cause and effect, comparison]
- f use formal and impersonal language and concise expression
- g consider what the reader needs to know and include relevant details
- h present material clearly, using appropriate layout, illustrations and organisation

Writing to persuade, argue, advise

- i develop logical arguments and cite evidence
- j use persuasive techniques and rhetorical devices
- k anticipate reader reaction, counter opposing views and use language to gain attention and sustain interest

Writing to analyse, review, comment

- l reflect on the nature and significance of the subject matter
- m form their own view, taking into account a range of evidence and opinions
- n organise their ideas and information, distinguishing between analysis and comment
- o take account of how well the reader knows the topic.

Planning and drafting

- 2 To improve and sustain their writing, pupils should be taught to:
- a plan, draft, redraft and proofread their work on paper and on screen
 - b judge the extent to which any or all of these processes are needed in specific pieces of writing
 - c analyse critically their own and others' writing.

Appendix 2 Level descriptions for writing, the national curriculum for English (QCA)

Level	Performance Criteria for Writing
1	The writing communicates meaning through simple words and phrases. The pupil may show some awareness of how full stops are used. Letters are usually clearly shaped and correctly oriented.
2	The writing communicates meaning using some features of a narrative or non-narrative form appropriately. The choice of vocabulary is apt and interesting showing some awareness of the reader. Ideas are developed in a sequence of sentences, sometimes demarcated by capital letters and full stops. Simple, monosyllabic words are usually spelt correctly, and where there are inaccuracies the alternative is phonetically plausible. In handwriting, letters are accurately formed and consistent in size.
3	The writing shows evidence of organisation, imagination and clarity. The main features of the chosen form are used appropriately, beginning to be adapted for a reader. Sequences of sentences extend ideas logically and words are chosen for variety and interest. The basic grammatical structure of sentences is usually correct. Spelling is usually accurate, including that of common, polysyllabic words. Punctuation to mark sentences – full stops, capital letters and question marks – is used accurately. Handwriting is joined and legible.
4	The writing is lively and thoughtful with ideas sustained and developed in an interesting way and organised appropriately for the purpose and the reader. Vocabulary choices are often adventurous and words are used for effect. The pupil is beginning to use grammatically complex sentences, extending meaning. Spelling, including that of polysyllabic words that conform to regular patterns, is generally accurate. Full stops, capital letters and question marks are used correctly, and pupils are beginning to use punctuation within the sentence. Handwriting style is fluent, joined and legible.
5	The writing is interesting, conveying meaning clearly in the chosen form for an intended reader. A more formal style used where appropriate. Vocabulary choices are imaginative and words are used precisely. Simple and complex sentences are organised into paragraphs. Words with complex regular patterns are usually spelt correctly. A range of punctuation, including commas, apostrophes and inverted commas, is usually used accurately. Handwriting is joined, clear and fluent.
6	The writing generally engages and sustains the reader's interest, showing some adaptation of style and register to the chosen form, such as the use of an impersonal style where appropriate. The pupil uses a range of sentence structures and varied vocabulary to create effects. Spelling is generally accurate, including that of irregular words. Handwriting is neat and legible. A range of punctuation is usually used correctly to clarify meaning, and ideas are organised into paragraphs.
7	The writing is confident and shows an appropriate choice of style in the chosen form. In narrative writing, characters and settings are developed and, in non-fiction, ideas are organised and coherent. Grammatical features and vocabulary are accurately and effectively used. Spelling is correct, including that of complex irregular words. Work is legibly and appropriately presented. Paragraphing and correct punctuation are used to make the sequence of events or ideas coherent and clear to the reader.
8	Pupils' writing shows the selection of specific features or expressions to convey particular effects and to interest the reader. Narrative writing shows control of characters, events and settings, and shows variety in structure. Non-fiction writing is coherent and gives clear points of view. The use of vocabulary and grammar enables fine distinctions to be made or emphasis achieved. Writing shows a clear grasp of the use of punctuation and paragraphing.

Appendix 3 Extract from 2001 KS3 English Test Mark Scheme for Paper 1, Section C.
National Test for Writing, age 14 years (QCA)

<p>Question number 4a</p> <p>Marks available 33</p>	<p>Some writers, like the journalist who wrote about the eclipse, are able to make readers share their experiences by the way they write.</p> <p>Write about an experience that you think you will never forget.</p> <p>In your writing you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ select details about what happened to interest the reader; ▪ describe your thoughts and feelings about what happened at the time; ▪ explain why the experience still seems unforgettable to you now. <p>Try to make the reader share the experience through your choice of detail and use of language.</p>	
Performance criteria	Level	Mark
<p>Some of the pupils' ideas are clearly expressed and their writing has some features of organisation or form which are appropriate to a piece of personal writing. The basic grammatical structure of some sentences is correct and some punctuation is used accurately. The spelling of simple words is usually accurate and the handwriting is mostly legible, though there may be obvious weaknesses in the formation of some letters.</p>	<p>-</p> <p>below</p> <p>4</p> <p>+</p>	<p>2</p> <p>4</p> <p>6</p>
<p>The pupils' ideas are generally clear and mostly organised in an appropriate form for a piece of personal writing. There is some use of grammatically complex sentences and pupils are beginning to use descriptive words effectively although this may not be maintained. Punctuation to mark sentences is mostly used accurately and pupils are beginning to use punctuation within the sentence. The spelling of simple and common polysyllabic words is generally accurate. Handwriting is mostly clear and legible.</p>	<p>-</p> <p>4</p> <p>+</p>	<p>8</p> <p>10</p> <p>12</p>
<p>The pupils' writing is clearly expressed and structured in an appropriate form for a piece of personal writing. Pupils try to engage the reader's interest by such means as expression of feelings or description of setting or events. A reasonably wide vocabulary is used though some words may not be used precisely. Simple and complex sentences are usually organised into a clear structure or paragraphs. A range of punctuation, including commas and apostrophes, is usually used accurately. Spelling, including that of words with complex regular patterns, is usually accurate. Handwriting is generally clear and legible in a fluent style.</p>	<p>-</p> <p>5</p> <p>+</p>	<p>14</p> <p>16</p> <p>18</p>
<p>The pupils' writing is interesting and engaging in parts, using an appropriate style and form for a piece of personal writing describing events and feelings. A varied vocabulary, a range of simple and complex sentences and appropriate paragraphing contribute to the effectiveness of the writing, though the same quality may not be evident throughout. A range of punctuation is usually used correctly to clarify meaning. Spelling is accurate though there may be some errors in difficult words. Handwriting is in a fluent and legible style.</p>	<p>-</p> <p>6</p> <p>+</p>	<p>20</p> <p>22</p> <p>24</p>
<p>The pupils' writing is confident, organised and written in an appropriate and engaging style and form for a piece of personal writing. Although the subject matter may be relatively unsophisticated, the reader's interest is built up by a range of grammatical features and the effective use of vocabulary. Paragraphing and correct punctuation are used to make the ideas clear. Spelling, including that of complex irregular words, is correct. Handwriting is in a fluent and legible style.</p>	<p>-</p> <p>7</p> <p>+</p>	<p>26</p> <p>28</p> <p>30</p>
<p>The pupils' writing engages and maintains the interest of the reader by presenting a coherent piece of personal writing with distinctive structural or stylistic effects. The precise use of a range of vocabulary and grammatical structures enables clarity and emphasis to be achieved. Pupils show a consistent grasp of the correct use of paragraphing and a range of punctuation. Spelling, including that of complex irregular words, is correct. Handwriting is in a fluent and legible style.</p>	<p>-</p> <p>above</p> <p>7</p> <p>+</p>	<p>31</p> <p>32</p> <p>33</p>