

## MEMORANDUM

**To** Paul Sowerbutts, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority  
**From** Committee on Linguistics in Education (CLIE)  
(Catherine Walter, Chair)  
**Re** Functional Skills Draft Standards

Dear Paul,

CLIE is a joint committee of the Linguistics Association of Great Britain and the British Association for Applied Linguistics. It brings together representatives of a wide range of associations and groups involved in the teaching of English and of modern foreign languages in the UK (there is a list of members at <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/ec/cliemembers.htm>). These organisations range from those which are very much focused on the language end of the field, like the Linguistics, Languages and Area Studies Subject Centre, to those whose focus is equally on language and literature, like the National Association of Advisers in English.

We have reviewed the Functional Skills Draft Standards for English, referring for comparison to those for Maths and ICT, and we offer below some brief observations. We would be very happy to expand in writing or face-to-face on any of these points.

- Our main concern is the serious lack of clarity of many of the descriptors, which *inter alia* can lead to problems of demarcation between levels; for example:
  - In the *Speaking and listening* section, it is difficult to see the difference between 'follow the main points of discussions and make relevant contributions, respecting others' turn-taking' (Entry 3) and 'make relevant contributions to discussions, responding appropriately to others' (Level 1). Indeed, if a group of teachers/assessors were given these descriptors and asked to judge which one indicated higher proficiency, the results might well be random. There are several other examples of this kind.

This problem does not seem to arise to anything like the same degree in the Maths and ICT descriptors. The ICT descriptors economically use 'all of the above plus', which seems a worthwhile option to explore. In the Maths descriptors, it is very clear from one level to the next what is different.

You might want to explore whether 'can do' statements like those used in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages ([http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp)) would yield clearer and better demarcated descriptors.

- Sometimes a level descriptor seems to be specified by omission, in that a detail appears at a higher level when no detail was present at lower levels. For example,

- In *Reading* Level 1, the descriptor 'identify the main points and ideas and how they are organised in different documents' seems to give the only clue about what is *not* there in Entry 3, 'understand the main points of texts of more than one paragraph' (but there is still a problem in that it is not clear what these 'different documents' are, since the list of genres for each level is identical but for one item).
- The relationship between *Learning outcome* and *Coverage and range* is often not very clear (in the way that it is clear in the ICT standards, for example).
- 'Familiar': this word is often used in the *Coverage and range* descriptors, but seems to be left undefined and open to a number of interpretations. In the Level 2 descriptors, reference is made to 'others who are unfamiliar': is this what is meant throughout or not?
- No mention seems to be made of the place of accuracy in the *Speaking and listening* sections. Failure to give guidance here has the potential of being discriminatory against learners whose first language is not English, especially at the lower levels.
- Occasionally there seems to be an implication that one skill will be assessed by the deployment of another skill: for example, in *Reading* Level 2, there is 'read and summarise succinctly information / ideas from different sources'. There is solid empirical evidence that reading comprehension and summary writing are distinct skills, and the first can be at a far higher level than the second. Here again there is a risk of discriminating against learners whose first language is not English.
- We support the comments made in the draft interim report regarding
  - Clarity
  - Differentiation of levels
  - Inclusion of BSL
  - The need for inclusion of standards which recognise the multimodality (still and moving images, layout etc.) in reading and listening
  - The special requirements of valid and reliable assessments of writing and, especially, speaking.