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Assessing ELLs in New Zealand primary schools:  
Gaps between the literature, policy, and practice

# Overview

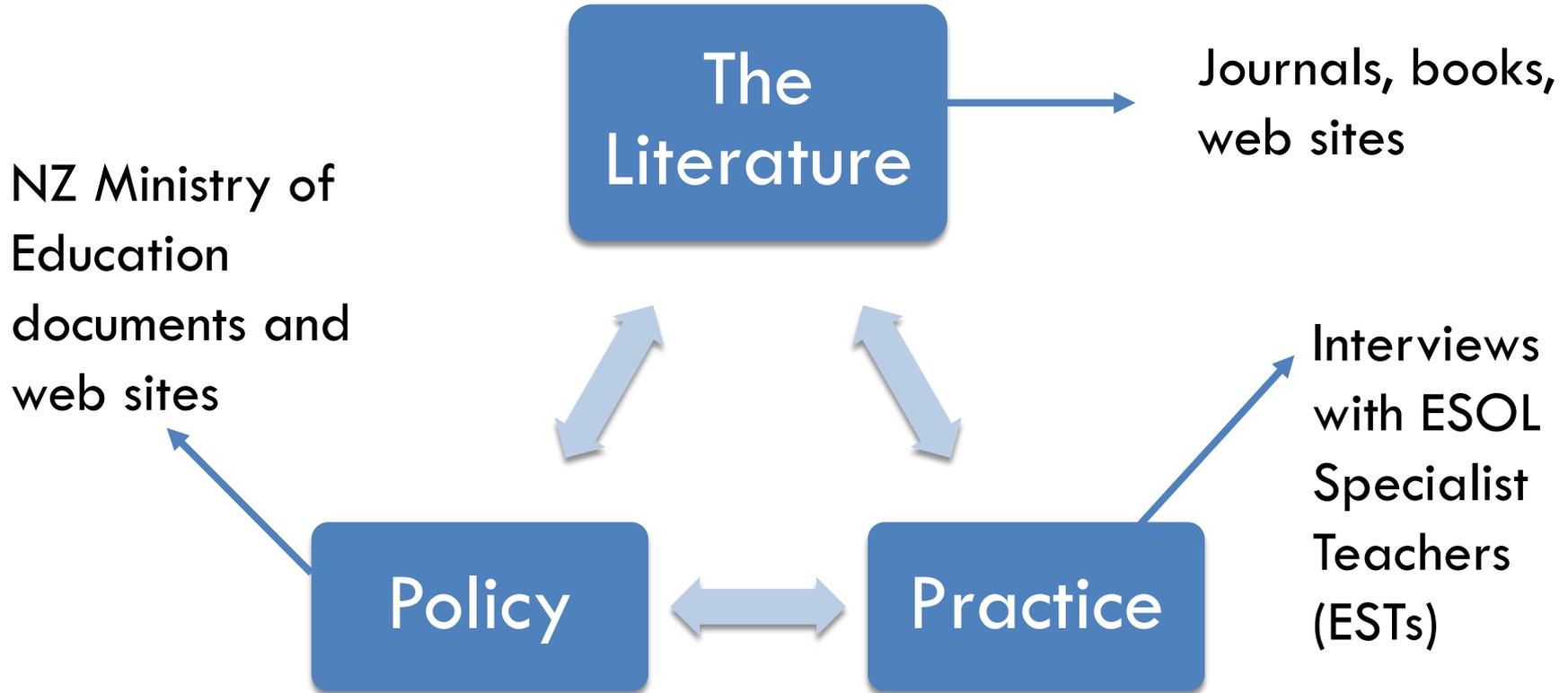
“Assessment refers to the different ways of collecting information about a learner’s progress and achievement.”

(Thornbury, 2005, p. 18)

- **Context and Background**
- **The literature, policy and practice**
- **Where are the gaps?**



# The literature, policy, and practice



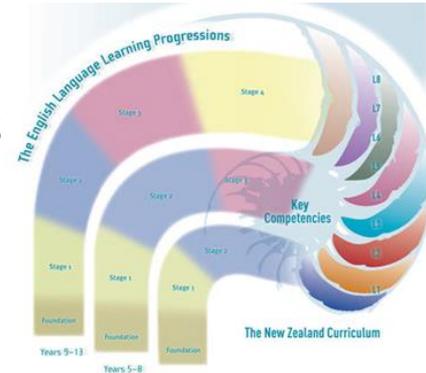
# Context:

## Assessment of ELLs in NZ primary schools

“ESOL funding is available to schools for the provision of English language support for migrant and refugee background students with the highest English language learning needs.”

[\(Ministry of Education, 2014\)](#)

- ❑ Usually assessed on entry to a school
- ❑ Assessed against National Standards for Literacy and Mathematics
- ❑ Assessed in curriculum areas
- ❑ Assessed twice yearly for ESOL funding against the English Language Learning Progressions (ELLP)



# The importance of accurate ELL assessment

- “Accurate assessment of language proficiency is important because these children may seem to be speaking English with ease when actually they are not fully capable of understanding or expressing themselves in complex ways and still lack vocabulary skills, auditory memory, ability to follow sequenced directions, and other markers of proficiency.”



National Association for the Education of Young Children (2005, p. 5)

# Assessment for ESOL funding eligibility



## Prior to 2013:

- Comparison with native-speaker cohort (year group)
- **From 2103 (mandatory from 2015):**
  - Make an Overall Teacher Judgement (OTJ) about the level of English according to the [English Language Learning Progressions \(ELLP\)](#)

# The wider context: Standards and OTJs

**Poskitt &  
Mitchell  
(2012, p. 54)**

**N.Z. Ministry of  
Education (n.d)**

“Critical to the implementation of National Standards in New Zealand is the notion of standards and the centrality of the OTJ.”

“An overall teacher judgment (OTJ) involves drawing on and applying the evidence gathered up to a particular point in time in order to make an overall judgment about a student’s progress and achievement.”

# Dependable teacher judgements

Klenowski &  
Wyatt-Smith  
(2010, p.  
113)

(my  
emphases)

” ...standards-referenced assessment relies on teacher judgement that can be made dependable if standards are promulgated in appropriate forms and teachers have the requisite conceptual tools and professional training.”

# Concerns about OTJs

Poskitt &  
Mitchell  
(2012, p. 61)

## OTJs can be problematic unless:

- Teachers are clear about what constitutes an OTJ
- They have common understandings of standards
- Such understandings are supported by clear criteria and exemplars of student work
- Teachers engage in moderation processes

# Background: Research with three ESOL Specialist Teachers (ESTs)

Qualitative study:  
Semi-structured interviews

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
<b>Years of ESOL experience</b>	16	20	29
<b>No. of funded ELLs 2015</b>	30	50	67
<b>Role in the assessment of ELLs for ESOL funding</b>	Assesses ELLs together with mainstream teachers.	Proactively assists mainstream teachers.	Collaborates with mainstream teachers as required.

# The previous system



- ❑ “It wasn’t helpful in terms of our practice.”
- ❑ “It didn’t match the current thinking about the National Standards.”
- ❑ “Teachers felt pressured for scores to improve each time.”
- ❑ “Too many criteria – a lot of reading and interpreting to be done.”
- ❑ “Variable interpretation of criteria.”
- ❑ “Scoring errors – lots of adding points.”
- ❑ “The other one was just a joke – you just think of a number.”

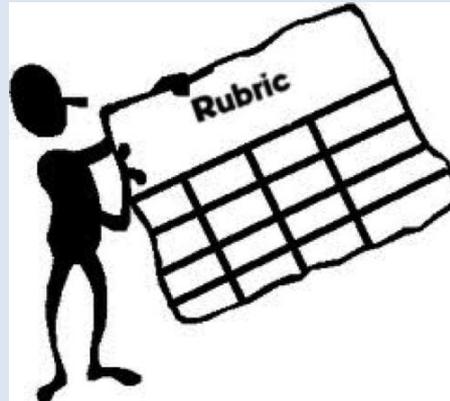
# Why the ESTs prefer ELLP assessment:



- “The new system gives us a model for pulling the teachers in.”  
“The huge advantage is we’re sharing information.” (A)
- “It’s not so much the document, it’s more involving mainstream teachers more with the assessment. The impact for these students on teaching is surely going to be far more positive in terms of knowing those learners and how we go from there with that knowledge.” (B)
- “I think this system helps you plan more for ‘where to next’” (C)

# Key concepts from the Literature

- The purpose of assessment
- Approaches to assessment
- Application of assessment principles



# One central idea in the literature



The illustration features a hand pointing to a document with a 'B+' grade, a lightbulb thought bubble, and a person thinking. The document is tilted and contains text, with a red arrow pointing to the word 'Good!' written in red. The lightbulb is yellow and glowing, and the person is a black silhouette. The background is a light blue sky with a grey hill and a clock tower.

**THE PURPOSE  
OF ASSESSMENT  
IS TO IMPROVE  
LEARNING.**

# Approaches to assessment

Harmer (2015,  
p. 408)

Brown &  
Abeywickrama  
(2010, pp. 6-7)

- **Formative** (measures the student's abilities as part of a process) **vs** **Summative** (measures the product of a student's learning)
- **Formal** (systematic, planned sampling techniques) **vs** **Informal** (embedded in classroom tasks)

# The place of formative assessment in NZ

Poskitt &  
Mitchell,  
(2012, p. 54)

- “New Zealand values the central role of formative assessment in improving learning and teaching, and the professionalism of its teachers.”

# Assessment principles

- Validity
- Reliability
- Practicality
- Authenticity
- Fairness
- Sensitivity
- Washback
- Security
- Usability
- Transparency

- “Perhaps the most important quality of any test is how **practical** it is to administer.”

(Baxter, 1997, p. 27).

- “**Validity** is certainly the most important single characteristic of a test.”

(Farhady, 2012, p. 37)

# Prioritising Principles

Brown  
(2001,  
p. 389)

- “If in your language teaching you can attend to the **practicality, reliability and validity** of tests of language, whether those tests are classroom tests...or final exams, or proficiency tests, then you are well on your way to making accurate judgements about the competence of the learners with whom you are working.”

# Defining questions: Assessment principles

- **Validity:** Does the assessment measure what it is intended to measure, and can inferences be made from the results which are appropriate, meaningful and useful?
- **Reliability:** Will the assessment give consistent and dependable results for similar students in similar contexts?
- **Practicality:** Does the assessment require reasonable amounts of time, money, human and other resources?
  - (adapted from Brown & Abeywickramama, 2010)

# Policy: The purpose of assessment

Ministry of  
Education  
(n.d.)

[TKI  
Assessment  
web site]

- “The primary purpose of assessment is to improve students’ learning and teachers’ teaching as both respond to the information it provides.”

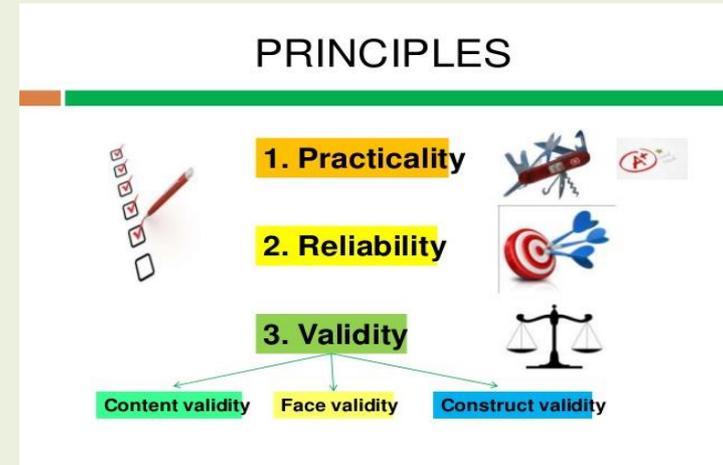
# Policy: Approaches to assessment

Ministry of  
Education (n.d.)  
[TKI Assessment  
web site]

- Assessment can be thought of along a formative/summative continuum.
- A good teacher practises formative assessment constantly on an informal basis through classroom observation and interaction.
- Ideally, both the teacher and the student will gain information from the assessment and use it collaboratively to plan future learning activities.

# Policy: Prioritising principles

- **“All assessment tools and processes ... should be reviewed against three criteria – validity, reliability and usability\*.”** (Ministry of Education, 2005, p.10)
- “The extent to which an assessment tool is practical and yields results that users can easily understand, interpret, and make generalisations from.”



# POLICY: Assessing against the ELLP

- **Teachers will...** “use a wide range of assessment tasks, activities and observations to make an OTJ (overall teacher judgment) with reference to the various descriptors on the ELLP matrices.”
- **These tasks will...** “include formative and summative assessments, standardised tests and both formal and informal observations.”
- **The process of formulating an OTJ is...** “based on your school’s usual age-appropriate assessment tools, activities, and observations”, and “should not be seen as additional to the school’s normal assessment schedule but as an integral part of it.”

# Gathering information

- Opportunities for oral language assessment
- Opportunities for writing assessment
- Opportunities for reading assessment



# MOE PD opportunities for teachers

- Workshops for ESOL Specialist teachers (ESTs)
- Online Professional Learning modules:
  - [Using The English Language Learning Progressions](#)
- ESOL Online web site
- Online teacher forum



# Practice: Teachers' perceptions of the purposes of ELLP assessment

	Tchr. A	Tchr. B	Tchr. C
Rating of overall language proficiency	✓	✓	✓
Rating of specific language skills	✓	✓	✓
Monitoring/progress	✓	–	✓
Placement	✓	–	✓
Diagnostic	–	✓	✓

# Practice: Teachers' approaches to assessment

Is ELLP assessment used for summative and/or formative purposes?

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
Summative/ Achievement	-	✓	✓
Formative	-	-	-

# Formative or summative?

□ “I see more formative as what I’m doing during the lesson...when I’m observing how they’re managing..” (B)

□ “I don’t think ELLP [assessment] is used to give student feedback, but I think some teachers use it at parent interviews.” (C)

# Formal or informal?

- “The Listening is the trickiest one, and it’s all guesswork really.” (A)
- “A lot of schools... are relying on the running record, and for the writing, we’ve got the writing exemplars” (C)
- “The teacher might have to tell me what they’re doing in the class” (A)
- “Where it might be open would be assessing Listening and Speaking...I think teachers tend to rely on observation in the classroom.” (C)

# Awareness of Assessment Principles:

## Planning assessment – Teacher A

**Validity**

- Must be needs-based
- Use effective tools e.g. video
- Must tap into what teachers are already doing

**Practicality**

- Speed – should be able to be done quickly
- Timing – should be done after other assessments

# Planning assessment – Teacher B

**Practicality**

**Validity**

**Reliability**

- Must be manageable for the classroom teacher, in terms of time
- Is it part of what teachers already do?
- Does it tell us what we're wanting to know?
- Is it reliable – does it give the same results as other classroom-based assessment, relative to cohort?

# Planning assessment – Teacher C

**Validity**

- Start with prior knowledge about learners
- Select assessments known to be useful

**Reliability**

- Eliminate assessments that are too difficult
- Ensure students won't be stressed by assessment

**Practicality**

- Don't plan to assess too much in one session

# Delivering assessment – Teachers A & B

## Validity

- Ask the right questions (A)
- Focus on assessment of academic, not social, language (All)

## Reliability

- Strive for consistency by the assessor (B)
- Assess ELLs away from the mainstream class (B)

# Delivering assessment – Teacher C

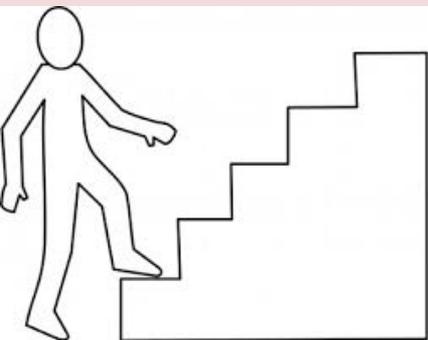
## Reliability

- ❑ Make the assessment within the reach of the learner
- ❑ Give encouragement and positive feedback for all attempts
- ❑ Provide a quiet, private environment
- ❑ Turn assessment into a game
- ❑ Not in front of their peers

# Practice: Assessment tasks/measures used

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
Listening	Oral Interview on curriculum topic, video-recorded	Oral Interview on curriculum topic, video-recorded	Teacher observations
Speaking			
Reading	Running Records; match with 'PM Reader' levels	Running records; match with 'Ready to Read' levels	Running records; other assessments done for Nat. Stds.
Writing	Independent Writing sample, mainstream class	Unassisted writing done for English curriculum	Unassisted writing sample/s

# Practice: Arriving at an OTJ



- “The big struggle I think they’ve had is...it’s not a level of where they’re working at, it’s an achieved level.” (B)
- “There might be different interpretations – it’s not standard across the school.” (C)
- “I don’t trust the teachers... they’d have everyone on Stage 2.” (A)
- “Mainstream teachers rate too highly, in general.”(B)
- “Reading’s a funny one – and it’s flaming wrong!” (A)

# Practice:

## Sourcing assessment tasks



- “It’s the Oral [language assessment] - that’s the tricky one.” (A)
- “I remember this feeling of reinventing the wheel... why didn’t they (MOE) trial tools and recommend tools?” (B)
- “It’s the Listening and Speaking that’s the hard one, really.” (B)
- What do we (schools) do for Listening and Speaking?” (B)

# Practice:

## Using the descriptors in the ELLP matrices

- “Some of the descriptors are confusing for mainstream teachers e.g. minimal pairs.” (A and B)
- “Some things seem to be positive and some things seem to be negative – it doesn’t make sense to me.” (A)
- The descriptors on the matrices I don’t think are thorough – “I guess they wanted to make it user friendly and not too onerous, but in a way maybe that’s made it hard to define between one stage and another.” (B)
- “We had to learn how to interpret the descriptors” (C)
- “It’s curious – the Reading descriptors are not on what the child can do, but on the text type, and it seems to be out of step with the other three modes.” (C) (Also A and B)

# Practice:

## ELLP assessment and mainstream teachers

**“Sometimes, it is just time pressures that lead us to use a quick and familiar assessment.”**

(Spiller, 2009, p. 9)

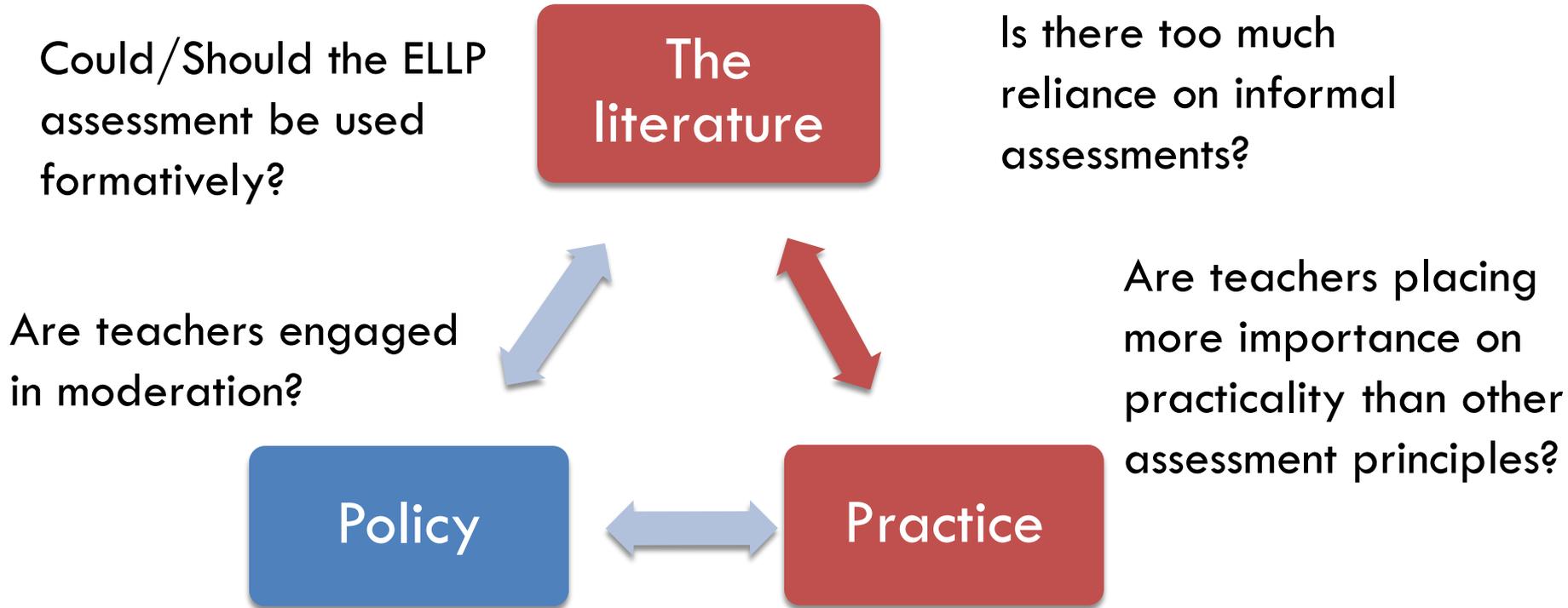
- “There’s an element of resistance still by some [mainstream teachers]” (A)
- ‘There’s a great variation in the reliability of the mainstream teachers’ [judgements]’ (B)
- “I feel like it’s still in the learning stages” (B)
- “I don’t know that I’m happy with what we’re doing at the moment – it’ll be ongoing” (B)
- **“For some of them this year, it’s at least a third of their class so we’re talking about quite time consuming” (C)**

# Practice: Professional Development for ESTs



- **Participation in trial for ELLP assessment (A)**
- **ESOL Online discussion forum (B)**
- **Ministry of Education ELLP workshops (for ELLP as a teaching and learning tool) (All)**
  - **MOE workshop for new scoring system (All)**
  - **ESOL Online PD materials (All)**
  - **PD specific to number and appropriateness of assessment tasks for ELLP assessment (None)**

# Gaps between the literature and practice



# Gaps between policy and practice

Principles

Are teachers using “a wide range” of assessment tools to rate learners against the ELLP levels?

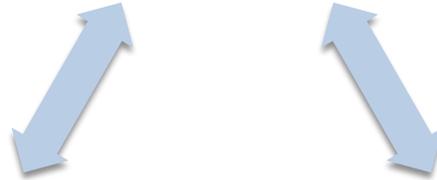
Is enough guidance/PLD given to teachers about which assessment tasks to use and how to arrive at OTJs?

Policy



Practice

Do teachers have a clear understanding of the ELLP descriptors?



# How could the gaps be closed?

- ❑ Provide specific **assessment tasks and tools** to use when making OTJs about ELLs (esp. Listening and Speaking).
- ❑ Make **clear connections** between the information gained from assessment tasks and ELLP levels.
- ❑ Provide **release time for mainstream teachers** to source and/or plan appropriate tasks for ELLP assessment.
- ❑ Provide **time for PLD and moderation**.
- ❑ Provide **time and more support for ESOL specialists** who are expected to play a leading role in ELL assessment