

Optimizing ESL programs in international schools

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All schools are committed to maximizing student learning. Since English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students constitute the hub of many international schools as well as a growing population, it is incumbent upon these schools to adopt unifying standards and assessment tools commonly found in many subject areas. Surprisingly, in the field of ESL, an effort to implement unifying standards, assessments, and best practices in the classroom is woefully missing. Furthermore, current ESL assessments look almost exclusively at the development of language skills rather than including the conditions that serve as the very foundation for language development to occur. The innovative ESL assessment tool included in this article attempts to fill this gap. It is a holistic framework that integrates four optimal ESL conditions, as identified in research, for ESL programs at international schools.

Keywords: ESL; assessment; international schools; language assessment; language teaching; second language learning

Introduction

One of the strengths of international schools is the ability to implement and assess programs that enhance student learning for a culturally and linguistically diverse population. However, in the ESL area, a unified assessment tool has not been adopted. Furthermore, there isn't a unifying set of criteria that effectively assess ESL programs in international schools. Yet it is imperative for international schools to have a tool based on valid criteria in order to assess their ESL programs. As a result, schools would be making a more concerted effort to enhance language learning for ESL students.

Optimal ESL conditions

Such an assessment tool is included below. It is based on research that identifies conditions that optimize ESL programs. Current research reveals optimal ESL conditions fall into the following four categories: program, student learning, teaching and home culture. A logical step is to better understand each of these conditions, and then use these conditions as criteria to design a comprehensive assessment tool.

Program conditions

Taking a closer look at the first category, studies show that the strength of a school's ESL program is fundamental for ESL student success. Quentin's (2009) research on ESL programs leads him to conclude that an optimal factor for English language acquisition is a "strong ESL program" (137). Tsui's (2004) research also confirms Quentin's conclusions; her research reveals that non-native English students perform higher than English-only students in a variety of subjects. She based her studies on examining different ESL programs. Her research illustrates that a crucial element to the student's academic success is not so much what kind of ESL language model is used, but that it is implemented effectively. A well-articulated ESL philosophy and its accompanying guiding principles form the foundation pieces of an ESL program. The ESL program delivery is the outcome of what works best for each school, based on needs and factors unique to each context (Alderfer, 2008). Alderfer found a positive correlation between effective implementation of entering and exiting criteria and procedures, well-articulated proficiency levels and benchmarks, and effective ESL program delivery (2010).

Student learning conditions

The second category, student learning conditions, plays a key role in determining an ESL student's language development Tsui (2004), Clarke (1999), Bolanle (2007) and Duffield (2008). Bolanle's studies suggest, "motivation is the most powerful factor that determines the level of English proficiency that is attained by students" (241). Duffield's research also confirms these findings. He conducted an empirical study on ESL students to see what the major factors were that affected their learning process. Using quantitative methodology, his data reveals that authentic learning experiences and motivation are the most important determinants in the level of ESL attained among these students. In Alderfer's research (2010) some of the teachers claimed that the most important learning condition for effective English language development was the child's need for a safe nurturing environment, and unless the affect is low, language learning will not take place effectively.

Teaching conditions

Teaching conditions and pedagogy play a crucial factor in second language development and "influence ESL students' success" (McVicker, 2009). McVicker conducted lengthy surveys and then used analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical procedures, which revealed that teacher perception affects the academic success of ESL students. Interestingly, he found mainstream teachers' perceptions of ESL students is different than the ESL teachers' perceptions of these same students. His research also suggests that professional development and training are factors that positively influence teachers' attitudes, practices and perceptions towards ESL students.

Home culture conditions

The final category of conditions that affect ESL students' language development is the student's home culture. Cummins (2000) claims "children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language". Tsui's, Cummins's, and Duquette's studies emphasize that student's knowledge and skills transfer across languages from their first language (L₁) to the school language; this transfer across languages is even more effective when L₁ is promoted at school. Lastly, just as teacher perception influences student learning, parent support of the ESL program also influences the student's attitude and motivation towards learning English (Alderfer, 2008).

Criteria for ESL assessment

These four categories define the optimal conditions that need to be in place to ensure effective English language learning, unlike current ESL assessments that look almost exclusively at language skills. These four categories of conditions constitute the main criteria for the ESL assessment tool. Within each category, five respective descriptors are included. Educators can use the holistic rubric for scoring these four categories, indicating to what extent their ESL program is meeting optimal ESL conditions. More specifically, they can assess individual descriptors to recommend innovative practices that will increase student learning as well as cross reference the descriptors to inform systematic and sustainable ESL program improvement.

ALDERFER ESL ASSESSMENT TOOL: OPTIMAL ESL CONDITIONS IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

HOLISTIC RUBRIC FOR SCORING	5 Strong Foundation <i>Optimal conditions attained, continued dialogue and ongoing assessment recommended</i>	3 Strengthening Foundation <i>Continued dialogue and ongoing assessment needed</i>	1 Building Foundation <i>Strategic planning and dialogue required</i>
I. PROGRAMMATIC CONDITIONS			
ESL program design and delivery: 1. ESL philosophy 2. ESL guiding principles 3. ESL program delivery 4. ESL entrance and exit criteria 5. ESL entrance and exiting procedures 6. ESL proficiency levels 7. ESL benchmarks (i.e. in skill areas, by proficiency and grade levels)	Articulation of #1-7 in ESL program design and delivery	Most of #1-7 in ESL program design and delivery articulated	Few or none of #1-7 in ESL program design and delivery articulated
2. Implementation of ESL program design	Effective implementation of all aspects of ESL program design as listed in #1-7 above	Effective implementation of most aspects of ESL program design as listed in #1-7 above	Effective implementation of few or none of the aspects of ESL program design as listed in #1-7 above
3. Assessment of ESL program design	Effective assessment of all aspects of ESL program design as in #1-7 above	Effective assessment of most aspects of ESL program design as in #1-7 above	Effective assessment of few or none of the aspects of ESL program design as in #1-7 above
4. ESL staff	Strong core of highly qualified ESL teachers	Core of qualified ESL teachers	Few or no qualified ESL teachers
5. Resources	There are diverse, effective and sufficient resources and materials available	There are some diverse and effective resources and materials available	There are few resources and materials available
SUBTOTAL SCORE:	25-21	20-10	9-1
II. STUDENT LEARNING CONDITIONS			
1. Student motivation towards learning English	ESL student has high motivation towards learning English	ESL student usually has high motivation towards learning English	ESL student has low motivation towards learning English
2. Affective filter	ESL student is comfortable and secure enough to take risks during communicative classroom exchanges	ESL student is usually comfortable and secure enough to take risks during communicative classroom exchanges	ESL student is sporadically or never comfortable and secure enough to take risks during communicative classroom exchanges
3. Authentic learning experiences	ESL student learns through authentic learning situations that draw from the student's background and knowledge	ESL student usually learns through authentic learning situations that draw from the student's background and knowledge	ESL student sporadically or never learns through authentic learning situations that draw from the student's background and knowledge
4. Student-peer relationship	ESL student actively plays with many friends in which English is the language of play and conversation	ESL student usually plays with many friends in which English is the language of play and conversation	ESL student sporadically or never plays with friends in which English is the language of play and conversation
5. Student-school integration	ESL student actively participates in many extra curricular activities and school events	ESL student usually participates in many extra curricular activities and school events	ESL student sporadically or never participates in extra curricular activities and school events
SUBTOTAL SCORE:	25-21	20-10	9-1

III. TEACHING CONDITIONS FOR MAINSTREAM TEACHER		5	3	1
1. Teacher perception of ESL student		Teacher always has a positive perception of ESL student	Teacher usually has a positive perception of ESL student	Teacher sporadically or never has a positive perception of ESL student
2. ESL pedagogy		Teacher always employs an effective ESL pedagogy	Teacher usually employs an effective ESL pedagogy	Teacher sporadically or never employs an effective ESL pedagogy
3. Individualized instruction		Teacher always individualizes instruction to meet ESL student needs	Teacher usually individualizes instruction to meet ESL student needs	Teacher sporadically or never individualizes instruction to meet ESL student needs
4. Active collaboration		Mainstream and ESL teacher always maintain an ongoing dialogue about ESL student learning	Mainstream and ESL teacher usually maintain an ongoing dialogue about ESL student learning	Mainstream and ESL teacher sporadically or never maintain an ongoing dialogue about ESL student learning
5. Professional development and training		Teacher actively participates in ongoing professional development and training	Teacher usually participates in ongoing professional development and training	Teacher sporadically or never participates in ongoing professional development and training
SUBTOTAL SCORE:		25-21	20-10	9-1
III. TEACHING CONDITIONS FOR ESL TEACHER				
1. Teacher perception of ESL student		Teacher always has a positive perception of ESL student	Teacher usually has a positive perception of ESL student	Teacher sporadically or never has a positive perception of ESL student
2. ESL pedagogy		Teacher always employs an effective ESL pedagogy	Teacher usually employs an effective ESL pedagogy	Teacher sporadically or never employs an effective ESL pedagogy
3. Individualized instruction		Teacher always individualizes instruction to meet ESL student needs	Teacher usually individualizes instruction to meet ESL student needs	Teacher sporadically or never individualizes instruction to meet ESL student needs
4. Active collaboration		ESL and mainstream teachers always maintain an ongoing dialogue about ESL student learning	ESL and mainstream teacher usually maintain an ongoing dialogue about ESL student learning	ESL teacher and mainstream teacher sporadically or never maintain an ongoing dialogue about ESL student learning
5. Professional development and training		Teacher actively participates in ongoing professional development and training	Teacher usually participates in ongoing professional development and training	Teacher sporadically or never participates in ongoing professional development and training
SUBTOTAL SCORE:		25-21	20-10	9-1
IV. HOME CULTURE CONDITIONS				
1. L ₁ listening and speaking		Student actively listens and speaks in L ₁ at home at age-appropriate level	Student usually listens and speaks in L ₁ at home	Student sporadically or never listens and speaks in L ₁ at home
2. L ₁ reading and writing		Student actively reads and writes in L ₁ at home at age-appropriate level	Student usually reads and writes in L ₁ at home at age appropriate level	Student sporadically or never reads and writes in L ₁ at home at age appropriate level
3. Parent perception of ESL program		Parent actively supports ESL program design and implementation	Parent supports ESL program design and implementation	Parent opposes ESL program design and implementation
4. L ₁ support at school		There are sufficient L ₁ resources and materials being used by ESL student at school	There are usually L ₁ resources and materials being used by ESL student at school	There are few or no L ₁ resources and materials being used by ESL student at school
5. Parent-teacher communication		Parent and teacher maintain ongoing, effective communication about ESL student learning	Parent and teacher usually maintain ongoing, effective communication about ESL student learning	Parent and teacher sporadically or never maintain ongoing, effective communication about ESL student learning
SUBTOTAL SCORE:		25-21	20-10	9-1
TOTAL SCORE:		125-105	100-50	45-5

Conclusion

This revolutionary ESL assessment tool highlights the optimal conditions that support an effective ESL program. By addressing these conditions, educators can assess whether their ESL program is meeting optimal program design and delivery, student learning, teacher effectiveness and home culture support. Mainstream and ESL teachers can assess their teaching and student learning and use the descriptors to inform instruction. School administrators can use the descriptors as a framework for strategic planning, and it can be seamlessly implemented within each individual school's context. At a broader level, adopting a tool such as this ESL assessment makes a significant contribution at unifying assessment tools in the field of ESL within the international school community. In closing, ESL students, oftentimes the last group of students to receive benefits of school reform and exciting initiatives, deserve to have optimal ESL conditions in place at international schools.

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