Annual Report for Assessment of Outcomes 2012-2013
For English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

Professional Competence, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

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Subject Area Committee Name: **English for Speakers of Other Languages**

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For LDC/DE: Core outcome(s) assessed: **Professional Competence, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving**

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1. Describe <u>changes that have been implemented</u> towards improving students' attainment of outcomes that <u>resulted from recent outcome assessments</u>.   These may include but are not limited to changes to content, materials, instruction, pedagogy etc. Please be sure to **describe the connection** between the assessment results and the changes made.

The two outcomes addressed by our program last year were **cultural awareness** and **self-reflection**. Our assessment for these outcomes was deemed excellent by the Learning Assessment Council, so we have left it in place as a tool for the same level. Many other instructors have also freely adopted this assessment and similar ones. As the SAC assessment committee and the LAC recommended, we have continued to develop techniques to move more students to the mastery level of these outcomes. We feel that the best way to do this is to encourage instructors at all levels to select lessons that develop cultural awareness and self-reflection, as well as take advantage of the many offerings PCC has for fostering a more culturally aware environment. These include encouraging students to attend the variety of activities offered by the Office of International Education and the Multicultural Center. We have kept the SAC informed of the necessity of continuing this work in order to remain in compliance with these core outcomes. We have encouraged the continuation and expansion of these lessons, as well as the sharing of successful ideas for teaching these outcomes at each level between instructors and departments.

For <u>each outcome assessed this year</u>:

2. Describe the assessment design (tool and processes) used. Include relevant information about:
   - The nature of the assessment (e.g., written work, project, portfolio, exam, survey, performance etc.) and if it is direct (assesses evidence mastery of outcomes) or indirect (student's perception of mastery). Please give rationale for indirect assessments (direct assessments are preferable).
   - The student sample assessed (including sample size relative to the targeted student population for the assessment activity) process and rationale for selection of the student sample. Why was this group of students and/or courses chosen?

- Any rubrics, checklists, surveys or other tools that were used to evaluate the student work. (Please include with your report – OK to include in appendix). Where appropriate, identify benchmarks.
- How you analyzed results, including steps taken to ensure that results are reliable (consistent from one evaluator to another.

This year we assessed two core outcomes: **professional competence** and **critical thinking and problem solving**. We chose to assess these skills in ESOL classes at two different levels: professional competence in Level 4 Writing, and critical thinking and problem solving in Level 6 Reading. We felt that at these two levels, our students' English was suitably advanced to reliably assess for these skills. In addition, the Course Outcome and Content Guide for these levels demands instruction in these skills, so we had a certain amount of confidence in our students' ability to succeed.

A. Professional Competence

Assessing for professional competence is a challenge for many LDC departments, especially ESOL. We recognize that we are not directly teaching "competence" in any specific profession, with the exception perhaps of our Vocational ESOL classes. We do, however, teach general job and career skills, especially in the lower levels. These include workplace etiquette, proper professional communication, completion of job applications and other forms and many other skills that will assist our students in procuring and maintaining employment. Our committee thus felt we could find a lesson that could produce results that demonstrated competence in some of these skills. We believe we have accomplished this with our selection of the "writing a formal email" outcome from the Level 4 Writing Course Outcome and Content Guide. A "formal email" is a suitable "professional email"-- appropriate for workplace correspondence and acquisition of employment. We feel that writing a proper, grammatically correct email with a suitable professional tone is essential in most modern workplace environments. Thus, this skill is taught in every Level 4 Writing class, and it is emphasized and developed further in subsequent levels. Indeed, email correspondence is a required component of nearly every course in our program.

We collaborated with every instructor teaching Level 4 Writing during the Winter 2013 term, a total of nine instructors spanning all four campuses. Although there is a posted lesson that many instructors use, we gave individual instructors leeway in how to approach the teaching of this skill. In order to evaluate students' levels of achievement of this core outcome, the instructors submitted the handout they gave to the students and a set of printed emails from all the students in their classes. We compiled the results from all of the students, a total of 84. Student and instructor identifiers were removed at the beginning of this process to ensure anonymity. A rubric was then created to classify the skills relevant to the two outcomes as "emerging," "developing," or "mastering." We determined that there were three approaches to assessing this assignment. The first was to study the email itself and judge its competence. We examined whether it had a desirable format, by analyzing if it incorporated correct grammar and sentence structure, spacing, salutation, and closing. We assessed the content as to whether or not it conveyed an appropriate, polite message to the instructor in a concise, succinct, professional manner. The second approach involved assessing how successfully technology was utilized. Did the email arrive? Was it sent from an appropriate email address, such as PCC? Did it contain an appropriate subject line? The third approach consisted of looking at the assignment instructions the instructor gave them. Did the student follow them exactly? Were there any parts missing or done inappropriately? The SAC assessment committee reconvened and created the following rubric. We then analyzed the results individually and normed them together:

Level 4 Writing – Professional Competence

	Emerging	Developing	Mastering
Produced a correctly formatted, professional email	14	44	26
Successfully accessed available technology and sent an email	0	0	84
Successfully interpreted written and visual guidelines	5	34	45

B. Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

This assessment was first performed in Spring/Summer 2010. The assessment was carried out in Level 5 Writing at the time, and the assignment and results received praise from the LAC. We found at this point that this was a strength for our program, as we all make a conscious effort as a program and as individual instructors to include a critical thinking component in our classes. We thought we'd revisit this outcome using the same assessment questions in Winter 2013. This time, we chose a different level. Level 6 is the first level in credit-only Academic ESOL, so we hoped that the students would have enough English at this point to effectively demonstrate their progress in this outcome. We also feel that the Level 6 Reading CCOG already matches many of the skills listed in this outcome. By the completion of this class, all passing students will be able to:

1. Make logical inferences, predictions, connections, and conclusions
2. Relate readings to personal needs and experiences
3. Distinguish fact from opinion and fiction from non-fiction
4. Express in one's own words ideas and opinions related to readings

Level 6 ESOL CCOG (http://www.pcc.edu/ccog/default.cfm?fa=ccog&subject=ESOL&course=160)
Updated 2009

We feel that the above skills demonstrate our instruction of critical thinking and problem solving at this level. We waited until the latter part of the term to perform our assessment, so that the instructors would have had enough time to integrate these skills into their instruction.

Unlike the professional competence assessment, the critical thinking and problem solving assessment was prescribed directly by the assessment committee. In week 7 of the 2013 Winter term, all of the instructors teaching Level 6 Reading district wide (a total of seven sections) were given the following assignment for their students:

Please take 20 minutes and answer the following questions as completely as possible. You may use the back of this paper if necessary.

What are your goals?

What obstacles may prevent you from reaching your goals?

How can you overcome these obstacles?

As we mentioned in our 2010 report, even though the questions may be very open-ended and not related to any discipline or specific type of goal, it allows students to access their life-experiences and demonstrate how they can identify problems and issues and develop methods to address them. In 2010, we also emphasized the ability to clearly communicate these ideas as an important part of critical thinking. We continue to value this ability, but due to students' various writing abilities in this course, we rated responses based less on mechanics and more on effective and complete content. Our rubric assesses for the following skills:

1. Identifies goals clearly
2. Identifies obstacles that are relevant to stated goals
3. Presents solutions which are clearly connected to stated obstacles and which are realistic or achievable

We classified these goals into three categories, matching the first three categories from our 2010 rubric. Those designated "emerging" showed little critical thinking, "developing" showed some critical thinking, and "mastering" showed a highly developed level of critical thought. We received responses from 102 students in classes spanning all four campuses. Again, student and instructor identifiers were removed at the beginning of this process to ensure anonymity. The SAC assessment committee reconvened and created the following rubric. We then analyzed the results individually and normed them together:

Level 6 Reading – Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

	Emerging	Developing	Mastering
Clearly Identifies and States a Goal	0	14	88
Connects Obstacle to Stated Goal	17	37	48
Presents a Realistic and Achievable Solution to Obstacle	32	23	40

3. Provide information about the results (i.e., what did you learn about how well students are meeting the outcomes)?
   • If scored (e.g., if a rubric or other scaled tool is used), please report the data, and relate to any appropriate benchmarks.
   • Results should be broken down in a way that is meaningful and useful for making improvements to teaching/learning.   Please show those specific results.

A. Level 4 Writing – Professional Competence

	Emerging	Developing	Mastering
Produced a correctly formatted, professional email	14	44	26
Successfully accessed available technology and sent an email	0	0	84
Successfully interpreted written and visual guidelines	5	34	45

Our assessment of the professional competence of Level 4 Writing students indicates that the students are, for the most part, demonstrating moderate to high levels of success in their ability to interpret guidelines (both written and visual) in order to produce and send a formatted, professional e-mail. Less than 17% of the responses suggested that students possess only "emerging" skills in this ability, whereas 52.4% of student responses evidenced a "developing" level of competence, and 31% of

student responses demonstrated a "mastering" level of competence. Additionally, 6% of the responses suggested that students possess only "emerging" skills in their ability to successfully interpret written and visual guidelines in order to produce a correctly formatted, professional e-mail, while 53.6% of student responses demonstrated high levels of competence in this area.

B. Level 6 Reading – Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

	Emerging	Developing	Mastering
Clearly Identifies and States a Goal	0	14	88
Connects Obstacle to Stated Goal	17	37	48
Presents a Realistic and Achievable Solution to Obstacle	32	23	40

Our assessment of the critical thinking and problem solving skills of Level 6 Reading students indicates that the students are, for the most part, demonstrating moderate to high levels of success in both identifying and stating their goals, as well as connecting obstacles to their stated goals. The vast majority of student responses (86.3%) displayed a "mastering" level of being able to clearly identify and state a goal while only 13.7% of the responses revealed a "developing" level of being able to clearly identify and state a goal; not one of the responses indicated that the students were unable to clearly identify and state a goal ("emerging"). In addition, although 16.7% of the responses implied that the students possess only "emerging" skills in their ability to connect an obstacle to a stated goal, the majority of the responses indicated students possessed either a "developing" level (36.3%) or "mastering" level (47.1%) in this area. However, when considering student responses to presenting a realistic and achievable solution to an obstacle, nearly 31.4% ("emerging") were unable to successfully do so. This may be attributed to the fact that the prompt was fairly 'open-ended' and did not clearly specify that the students' solutions should directly address their particular obstacle or obstacles. By modifying the prompt to reflect this, the rates of students demonstrating "developing" and "mastering" levels of this skill may well improve.

Part 3: Provide information about the results (i.e., what did you learn about how well students are meeting the outcomes)?

- **If scored (e.g., if a rubric or other scaled tool is used), please report the data, and relate to any appropriate benchmarks.**

- **Results should be broken down in a way that is meaningful and useful for making improvements to teaching/learning.   Please show those specific results.**

Overall, we are pleased with student results. The tasks which were chosen for assessment are ones which are familiar to us from our own classrooms; the professional email is, as mentioned, one of our core outcomes for Level 4 Writing, and the self-reflection exercise is a standard exercise type for several instructors at various levels. We have seen students perform well at these tasks before and are satisfied that they continue to do so.

Outcome 1: Professional Competence

The Professional Email assignment may appear simple, but presents particular challenges to ESOL students. As described earlier, students are asked to write an email to their instructor following fairly standard guidelines. This assignment is, for many students, an introduction to several important concepts: the expectation of clear and frequent communication on the part of employers; the need for professional emails to be sent from an appropriate email address; the expectations for salutation, greeting, capitalization, and so on. Many students who do use email use it strictly informally, and usually with the standards of their home countries, so this information is new. Importantly, though, many students at this level simply do not use email; many have never even used a keyboard before. Many require assistance to log into MyPCC, and would, without this assignment and others like it, never access the system which is becoming the predominant way the college communicates with students.

Figure 1 below shows the percentages of student assignments rated as Emerging, Developing or Mastering the skill of **professional competence.** Results are given for each of the subskills as well as the overall total.

Figure 1: Professional Competence Outcomes

	Emerging	Developing	Mastering	Number of Responses
Professional Competence Subskill 1 Produce a correctly formatted professional email	Many grammatical, mechanical, and tone errors 39%	Some errors in grammar or tone 52%	Few or no errors 31%	84
Professional Competence Subskill 2 Successfully accessed technology to send email	No email sent 0%	Emsil sent from non-PCC email address 0%	Email sent from MyPCC 100%	84
Professional Competence Subskill 3 Successfully interpreted written and visual guidelines	Missing many required elements (subject line, salutation, etc) 6%	Has most requited elements (missing no more than two) 40%	Has all required elements 54%	84

Discussion

The assignments indicated high levels of competence. We found that **nearly all** students are showing some degree of competence at a task that is quite challenging for adults who, in some cases, have never routinely used a computer before and have no access to computers in their home life. This improvement marks significant evolution within ESOL.

It is worth noting that Subskill 1, unlike 2 and 3, includes purely linguistic skills. Some of the errors we noted were grammar errors such as subject-verb agreement or plural/singular errors. Other problems were those of tone - some emails were excessively chatty or divulged personal information. Errors of this type are not surprising at this low level. (In some countries, for example, it is entirely appropriate to discuss one's gastrointestinal tract publicly; with increasing acculturation, errors of this type will decrease.) We believe this is the reason for the relatively lower number of "Mastering" responses.

As students progress through our program, the expectation that they use the MyPCC system increases as well. More and more, instructors expect students to use email to communicate, and many – perhaps most – instructors continue to require email assignments at higher levels, though such assignments are not in the CCOGs of higher-level writing classes. Results of this assessment indicate the importance of continuing to do so, as well as the importance of providing sample letters for students to use as models. When the Assessment Committee presents this report to the SAC, we will also mention the value of ongoing brief discussions of expected tone in and frequency of professional email communication.

Outcome 2: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

The assignment used to assess this outcome has been used before – in 2010, when we first assessed for critical thinking. We found that the assignment, rubric and report were useful and remained relevant, so we chose to repeat the assignment at a higher level rather than reinvent the wheel. This also allowed us to test a hypothesis from 2010 – that some of the Emerging responses were more a function of student's lower English levels and less a true reflection of lower critical thinking skills.

Figure 2 below indicates results for this outcome.

Figure 2: Critical Thinking Outcomes

|	Emerging	Developing	Mastering	Number of Responses
Subskill 1: Clearly identifies goals and states a goal	No goal stated; language incomprehensible 0	Goal stated not specific / realistic; goal unclearly stated 14%	Specific, achievable goal stated in comprehensible language 86%	102
Subskill 2: Connects obstacle to stated goal	Obstacle not stated clearly; obstacle unrelated to goal 17%	Obstacle presented is tangentially related to goal 36%	Named obstacle is clearly one which prevents student from reaching goal 47%	102
Subskill 3: **Presents realistic and achievable solution to obstacle**	Solution too general or unclearly stated 31%	Solution is related to obstacle, but may not be realistic 23%	Named solution is achievable and specific to student's situation 39%	102

Discussion

As we discussed in 2010, this assignment demands scaffolding – each further response is built on the previous. We expected that the number of "Mastering" responses would decline with each level of response, and once again, this expectation correlated to the findings. Another similarity to our 2010 results was the extremely high numbers of students writing sensitive, insightful, and meaningful reflections on their own lives – writing that reflects some strong critical thinking skills within our program.

It may be interesting to look back at this comment from 2010:

> It was only when students were asked to hypothesize about possible future consequences that we see real decline in the quality of responses. This may have something to do with the grammatical challenges of the conditional form (a challenging grammar point not fully covered until Level 6, and one which often takes more than a year to master).

Figure 3: Comparing 2010 (Level 5) and 2013 (Level 6)
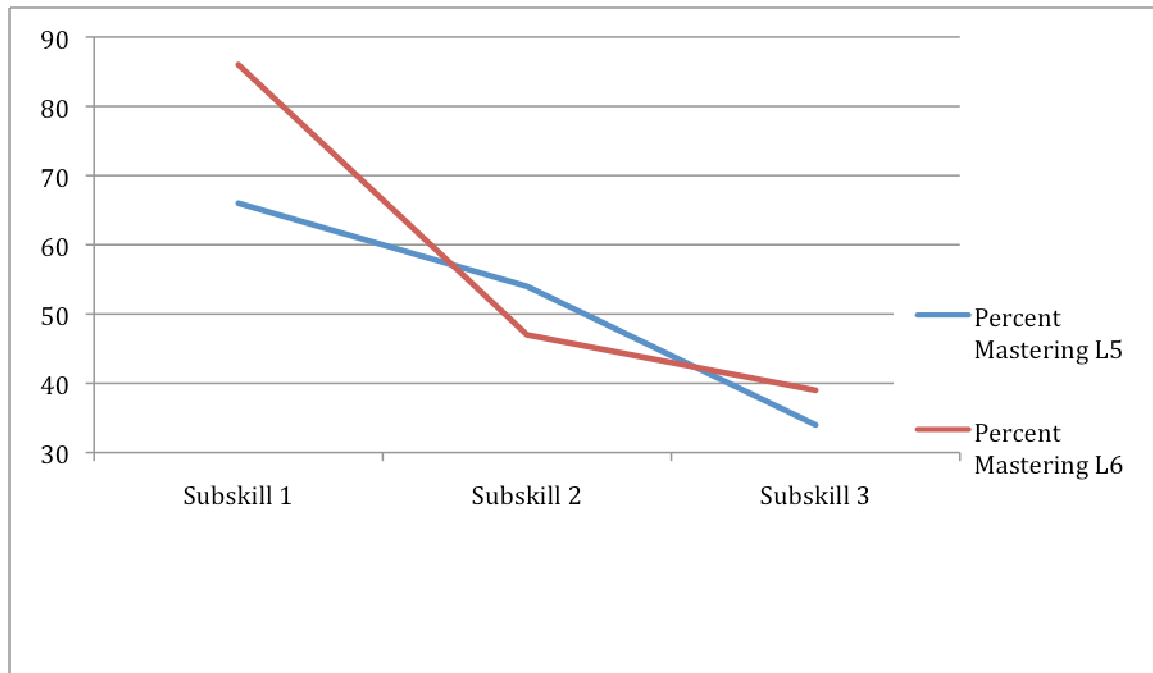
The graph above compares the percentage of "Mastering" responses in 2010 to 2013. We had predicted that language proficiency affected student success, and indeed students one level higher within the program were significantly better at expressing their ideas. The drop in quality of writing for the final question – "How can you overcome these obstacles?" – was in fact less at Level 6, but by only a few percentage points. The most significant difference is the better quality of responses for "Clearly identifying goals," as can be seen above.

It is also possible that the tighter rubric we used this year, the larger sample size, and the fact that three different assessors rated the samples affected these outcomes.

Summary

We feel confident that these results confirm that ESOL is doing a good job of meeting PCC's goals for students in the areas of professional competence and critical thinking.

4. Identify any changes that should, as a result of this assessment, be implemented to help improve students' attainment of outcomes. (These may include, but are not limited to, changes in curriculum, content, materials, instruction, pedagogy etc).

Although the ESOL program emphasizes both encouraging and aiding students in the use of technology (i.e., e-mail) at every level, the assignment that we used to demonstrate our meeting of this core outcome is a representative example of the type that most ESOL teachers in our program would implement in their classes. Considering this, our results clearly illustrate that the ESOL department is successfully promoting the effective use of technology in order to effectively produce, format, and send an appropriate e-mail.

All things considered, these results provide strong evidence that the ESOL program is successfully helping students to meet the core outcomes using technology effectively, and indicate that there is very little need to significantly alter the curriculum.

In light of the fact that the ESOL program actively promotes critical thinking skills and problem solving at all levels, the assignment that we used to demonstrate our meeting of these core outcomes is a representative example of the kind that most of the instructors in our ESOL program would use in their classes. Taking this into consideration, the results of our assignment are evidence that the ESOL department is successfully promoting critical thinking skills and problem solving in order to identify and state a goal, connect an obstacle to a stated goal, and present a realistic and achievable solution to an obstacle.

Considering this, these results strongly suggest that the ESOL program is successfully assisting students in meeting the core outcomes of critical thinking skills and problem solving, and that there is no real need to change the curriculum dramatically.

5. Reflect on the effectiveness of this assessment tool and assessment process. Please describe any changes to assessment methodology that would lead to more meaningful results if this assessment were to be repeated (or adapted to another outcome). Is there a different kind of assessment tool or process that the SAC would like to use for this outcome in the future? If the assessment tool and processes does not need to be revised, please indicate this.

The professional email assignment was an effective tool for assessing professional email writing and mastery of the appropriate technology requirements. It provides a strong example that could be easily adapted for other courses and levels of ESOL.

While many ESOL students are proficient users of email technology, the correct content and formatting for professional emails is new to many. This assessment demonstrates that most students are mastering or developing the skills and confidence necessary to send professional emails.

One change that could lead to more meaningful assessment results in this area would be for the instructors to repeat the professional email assignment, varying the topics of their assignments throughout the term. A comparison of the different emails might provide a more accurate assessment of students' improvement in their ability to produce professional emails.

The assignment guidelines provided sound models for students to follow and elicited professional-looking and appropriately worded emails. The results indicate that most students have a clear understanding of how to format, word, and send professional emails. However, some responses were ranked as weaker based on unclear writing or a lack of the required formatting. Repeating the process throughout the term would allow students more time to work on the less familiar requirements of the professional rather than personal email.

This assessment fits well into ESOL writing courses. It could easily be adapted for any other ESOL level with adjustment to the level of difficulty in the content being delivered and the variety of messages being communicated. One improvement could be for the SAC to agree to requiring professional emails at all times (not only when specifically assigned) from students and giving appropriate feedback when students fail to adequately format and word their emails.

The critical thinking and problem-solving assessment addressed personal goals, their obstacles, and potential solutions to those obstacles. This assessment tool is appropriate for reading classes, in which critical thinking and recognition of problems and solutions in written materials are a major focus. The intentionally open-ended personal goal questions are easily applicable to different readings and their related discussion topics. ESOL students are very diverse in ethnicity, age and economic circumstances, so the goals they present are equally diverse.

The area suggesting the greatest need for critical thinking development involved the realistic solutions students tried to provide to the obstacles in the way of achieving their personal goals. One change that could be made to this assessment tool would be to clearly state in the prompt that students' solutions should directly address the obstacles they listed. Many students addressed their solutions to their stated goals rather than obstacles to their goals, resulting in lower rated answers. It may also be that developing solutions to the obstacles to their major life goals is an on-going process that may be too difficult a topic to grapple with in a brief assignment.

Overall, the critical thinking and problem-solving assessment tool fits well into any level of ESOL reading classes.