

Learning Assessment: ESOL

English for Speakers of Other Languages is an 8-level program that aims to move students seamlessly from true beginner to college-level English. ESOL's sequence moves from Basic ESOL (Levels 1-3) to Transitional ESOL (Levels 4-5) and Academic ESOL (Levels 6-5).

Basic ESOL classes integrate the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Transitional ESOL classes are designed to be a bridge to the higher academic levels, and Academic ESOL classes have the performance expectations typical of any comparable PCC class (high-level vocabulary, grammatical correctness, cited sources, appropriate use of media, etc).

Critical thinking is a core part of every ESOL class and is included on the Course Outcome Guides for all ESOL classes. Some skills may allow for more emphasis on critical thinking than others – Writing assignments, for example, often allow more scope for students to demonstrate their critical thinking abilities – and critical thinking is more difficult to demonstrate at the lowest levels, when students lack the linguistic ability to fully express their ideas. However, ESOL instructors are aware that our students may not have been exposed to the type of critical thinking which is a cornerstone of the American educational system and continually strive to include a critical thinking component into each class.

ESOL's Critical Thinking Assessment

For this assessment exercise, Level 5 writing courses across the district set a short writing-response assignment to their classes. The assignment was identical to one that an ESOL instructor has been using for several terms and consisted of three questions:

“What are your goals?”

“What obstacles may prevent you from reaching your goals?”

“How can you overcome these obstacles?”

These questions were thought to be appropriate for Level 5, where our emphasis is on life and workplace English skills. Even though it's not related to any discipline and draws only on student's life experiences for evidence, this exercise allows us to see how students identify the problem or issue to be considered and how they understand implications and consequences. We also include the ability to clearly communicate these ideas as an important part of critical thinking.

Ten classes submitted student responses to these questions. I chose 5 responses from each class at random to rate, and used the following rubric to group them into “Emerging” – showing little critical thinking; “Developing” – showing some critical thinking; and “Mastering” – showing a highly developed level of critical thought.

ESOL's Assessment Rubric

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

Results

1. Identifies goals clearly		
Emerging:	Developing:	Mastering:
4	13	33
Example responses:		
<p>When I was young, I wanted to be a teacher, because my parents were a teachers.</p> <p>To be successful in future.</p> <p>I want study.</p> <p>I believe that I got goal.</p>	<p>My goals will be speak English clearly.</p> <p>I would like to learn more English.</p> <p>I hope I can going to college in America.</p> <p>My goals need to read and write.</p> <p>My goals are done ESL and continue study.</p> <p>To know more grammar and practice to get GED.</p>	<p>My goal is to travel different place in the world. I want to learn cultur of different people, and see beautiful views.</p> <p>My dream goal is pro soccer player. The reason I concern about soccer is my dad always taught me and encourage how I going to be soccer player because he knows I have talent and skills to become soccer player.</p> <p>My goal is to become a dental assistant after I graduate from college.</p> <p>After I graduate I will be a midwife, so I will go to a four year of college. First I want to get my bachelor degree. I can work and continue my school.</p> <p>My goal is to get a bachelor degree in law. To reach that is not easy. It takes time to be a lawyer, almost 5 years at the University without the training. It makes people to read a lot of books, and know the Constitution for their country. They have to learn more about the psychology of people.</p> <p>I want to be a missionary. Also be a good wife and mother.</p>

Comments:

First, half of the responses that were rated “Emerging” seem to show misunderstanding of the question, as they both seem to address a past goal rather than a future one. Obviously, the foundational skill of language will always be an issue when evaluating ESOL student’s critical thinking.

It’s clear that the length of response is a good indicator of the degree of critical thinking illustrated. The instructors who offered this exercise later in the term, and those who instructed students to write longer responses, allowed students to demonstrate a higher degree of critical thought. This is an obvious insight – brief response times elicit rote responses – but is worth keeping in mind!

2. Identifies obstacles that are relevant to the stated goals		
Emerging: 7	Developing: 16	Mastering: 27
Example responses:		
I don't know! Financial aid Be lazy Vocabulary Do more homework, preview the grammar	Being English my second language make my goal harder than it's. The English language. English ability. (5 total naming language) Sometimes I scared. My health. Being on time every day and doing all the homework. Financially problems. The immigration reform. My obstacle may be myself. If I'm being lazy, not try so hard, I won't make or achieve my goals.	When I have stress, I couldn't study. Financial problems is the most concern. I have financial problems and babysitter problems. I need to bring my transcript from Mexico. My obstacles is afraid to speak English, my difference cultures, my form (body, skin), my knowledge, the way I think. My boyfriend wants us to marry next year, and I'm kind of worried about the whole situation, because when two people are married the chance to have a baby is high, and that is kind of a problem. I don't have enough time to come to school, and level 6-8 are too expensive. First of all I will born the baby next September, so I am going to stop school for while. Second, after baby born I have to take care of her. I knew that I won't have much time to study. My job is obstacle. I have to work, take care my babies after work and cooking. So I don't have enough time to take more than one class in one term.

Comments:

Here, I looked at the correlation between the named *problem* and the named *obstacle* – meaning the same response (“financial problems”) could be considered “developing” in one case and “mastering” in another. For example, “Financial problems” seems to be a clear obstacle to the goal of “Complete all levels of ESOL to level 8,” but not so clearly related to the general “Be successful in the future.”

It is worth noting, maybe, that financial difficulties, balancing family obligations, and finding time to study while working were the top 3 obstacles named by all students. This correlates with our findings in our recent Program Review and these issues continue to be ones ESOL tries to address.

3. Presents solutions which are clearly connected to stated obstacles and which are realistic or achievable		
Emerging: 19	Developing: 14	Mastering: 17
Example responses:		
<p>I don't know (5 responses)</p> <p>Study harder (5 responses)</p> <p>No response (4 responses)</p> <p>I can't, there is no way to overcome this obstacles.</p> <p>Classes are too expensive but it's worth it.</p> <p>I'm 100% positive I will jump these obstacles.</p> <p>Working hard on myself.</p>	<p>I need help understanding, so I can get my homework done.</p> <p>I need to find a coach who knows how to train mentally and physically.</p> <p>I need a job and financial support.</p> <p>I will continue to apply for Finance. Also to work harder to achieve.</p> <p>I pray to God.</p> <p>It won't be easy, but the best way is to learn everything about English such as grammar, reading, pronunciation and of course financial aid is a very important support for me.</p> <p>Continue studying at PCC.</p>	<p>Maybe quit one of my jobs. Get a loan or financy. Find a cheap day care.</p> <p>Now I just take one class a term. Step by step, my children will grow up, and I will have more time to take two or three classes a term.</p> <p>I will solve these problems to talk to my mother-in-law to help me watch the baby, find a part time job and I will share all these problems with my husband and figure out other ways to make easier for me.</p> <p>I tried my best to get scholarship for the children who are low income. If it is possible to work for the adopt family. I know that English is important so first I only study until level 8.</p> <p>(To improve listening) I try to listen to TV news and drama and cartoon. I always turn on the TV.</p> <p>Go to Mexico, get letters and transcrip with the requisites that educational American system requests. Talk to my counselor and choose my best vet.</p> <p>I try to make a schedule that not waste each minute. I am always strict with myself.</p>

Comments:

Again, *mastering* responses depended less on the response than on its relation to the stated obstacle. For the obstacle of “poor writing,” then “study extra grammar in the book and keep a journal” was counted as a *mastering* response. For the more general obstacle of “The English language,” “Continue studying” was counted as a *developing* response, as it lacks specificity but has appropriate consequences. “Study harder” was given as a general solution to a hodgepodge of problems, and unless the named obstacle was specifically related to poor studying habits, I counted it as an *emerging* response. Critical thinking includes the ability to synthesize and use data and evidence, so any responses that seemed to discount existing evidence (i.e., “laziness” as an obstacle can be solved simply by “working harder”) were classified as *emerging*.

4. Communicates effectively		
Emerging: 7	Developing: 27	Mastering: 16
Example responses:		
<p>I want to become a pharmaceuticals work in lab I don't expect problem</p> <p>I will continuous to apply for Finance also to work hard morder to achieves.</p> <p>My goals will be speak English clearly because I live in USA. I like to come to English every day to improve it. My obstacles is afraid to speak English, my difference cultures, my form (body, skin), my knowledge, the way I think. I try to go to the class every day, talk with American people, participe some activitys in the community, speak English outside class, practice English at home more often.</p>	<p>My goals are finish ESOL level 8, get better job, and have better communication with everybody. I don't have time to come to school and to do homework. Levels 6-8 are to expensive. Maybe quit one of my jobs. (Overcome obstacles) Get a loan or financy. Find a cheap day care.</p> <p>My goal is to become a Dental assisting, After I graduate from college. After few months I will have my baby and it is obstacles me to graduate from college on time, because I have to take care of my baby, and take my baby to appointments. So I can overcome with skipping one semester and start to college again from second semester, when my husband will be very to take care of little baby.</p>	<p>My goals are continuing my English class at the PCC to get to the college. I would like to be an social worker, or work in an office where I can use the computer, printer, scanner machine. Because I like to contact with the people around the world. After 1975 there are a lot of Vietnamese who success and live overseas, so I can contact with them and my English better. My obstacles that may prevent me to reaching my goals are the financial aid, the time to practice more and more English. I need more help from the volunteers to write more English and practice to speak.</p> <p>My goal is to be a tutor for orphans at Ray foundation for disabilities and orphanages in Pattaya, Thailand. The obstacles which may prevent me from reaching my goal are my weakness in English grammar and writing. I intend to continue my education in English reading, writing and grammar.</p>

Comments:

This section is somewhat difficult for an ESOL teacher to rate, as experience leads us to interpret student writing more than non-ESOL instructors would. The *emerging* response above which includes “My obstacles is afraid to speak English, my difference cultures, my form (body, skin), my knowledge, the way I think,” for example, is fairly clear for an ESOL instructor to understand: the writer is expressing the emotional difficulty of suddenly experiencing life as an ethnic minority, physically different from the majority, and the difficulty of culture shock. This requires a fair amount of inference, however, and I classified it as *emerging* in terms of “Communicates effectively” though the same response was *mastering* in terms of identifying obstacles.

Two major difficulties in the student responses were vocabulary and tense shifting. At this level (Transitional ESOL) it is not surprising that these problems were prevalent through the responses.

Conclusions

Summary of findings

Rubric	Emerging	Developing	Mastering
Identifies goals clearly	4	13	33
Identifies obstacles that are relevant to the stated goals	7	16	27
Presents solutions which are clearly connected to stated obstacles and which are realistic or achievable	19	14	17
Communicates effectively	7	27	16

Before completing this task, ESOL set itself a number of goals and discussed some limitations. First, we were aware of the obvious: while critical thinking is an outcome we actively address in every class, its expression is limited by language problems. Therefore, working with a lower-level class like Level 5 posed inherent difficulties. However, we were also confident that our students at these levels **are** engaged in coursework that stimulates critical thinking and **do** have the ability to express that, despite limitations. I believe that the findings above support that presumption. The fewest “Mastering” responses were in the dimension of “Communicates effectively” – and, even here, a reader familiar with the idiosyncrasies of second-language writers could infer most meanings with confidence.

Second, we were aware that at the lower, non-academic levels, the first step of the critical thinking process – “Identifies, summarizes (and appropriately reformulates) the problem/question/work assignment,” in the words of Washington State University’s Critical Thinking Project – is the most crucial. We expected students to demonstrate a better ability to take this first step than to take the later steps. This is exactly what I found when looking at the responses. This is encouraging, as one of the goals of Level 5 ESOL is to give students ongoing support in assessing their needs and finding resources to meet those needs; it would seem we are succeeding.

This assignment demands scaffolding – each further response is built on the previous, so it would be expected that student achievement weakens with each level of response. This expectation also was matched by the findings. However, the decline in quality was very low for the second response. 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).

Overall, I believe that ESOL is doing a good job of choosing assignments that model and require critical thinking skills. I will present these findings to our SAC in the Fall, and hope to follow up by repeating this exercise at different levels. Critical thinking is a skill we in ESOL prize, but can feel frustrated by. Teaching a language, teaching a culture, and trying to connect our students to needed resources seems to dominate our classes, but this exercise demonstrates how deeply integrated critical thinking is to all those teaching goals.