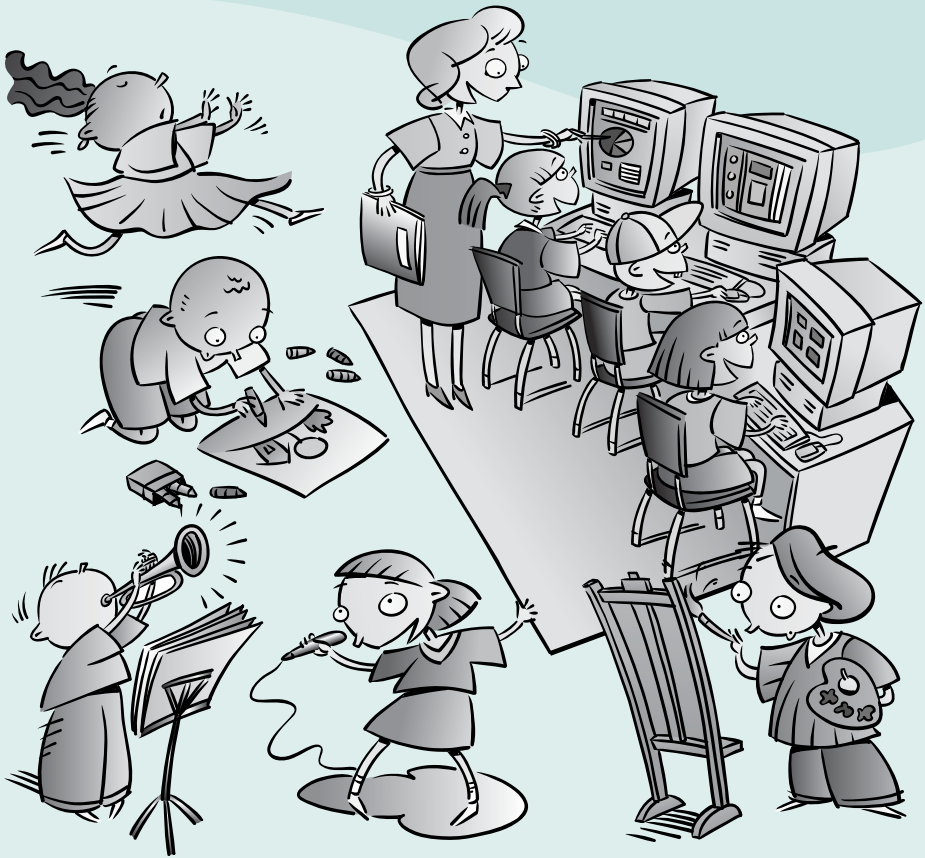


Understanding ESL Learners: Assessment



According to Alberta Learning, the purpose of ESL assessment is to

- identify strengths and weaknesses of individual students,
- adjust instruction to build on students' strengths and alleviate weaknesses,
- monitor the effectiveness of instruction,
- provide feedback to students and parents or sponsors, and
- make decisions about the advancement of students to the next level of the program.

—*ESL Senior High Guide to Implementation (2002)*

Purposes of Assessment of ESL Learners

There are five main purposes of assessment of ESL learners: (1) screening and identification for Alberta Learning’s funding, district tracking and monitoring, (2) placement of ESL students in appropriate programs, (3) program evaluation at school, district and provincial levels, (4) monitoring of attainment of expected goals and standards and (5) monitoring of student progress with respect to language development and the learning of content.

1. Screening and Identification

Screening and identification involve formative assessment techniques. To complete a formative assessment, teachers should

- ensure that students’ required documents are complete, including school registration, immigration/study permit papers, immunization and medical history, education history and family profile;
- be aware of the child’s first/home language, transience, educational gaps;
- determine the potential for post-traumatic stress, which is common in children from wartorn countries;
- be aware of the student’s original culture and also of gender issues related to that culture; and
- administer formal and informal assessment to obtain a broad sample of the student’s proficiency in oral, reading and writing skills. To do this, the teacher should
 - interview the child,
 - collect and examine English writing samples to determine level of English proficiency and
 - collect writing samples in the student’s first language and have someone familiar with the educational system in the student’s country of origin examine and score the samples.

The chart below identifies various language proficiency tests.

Commonly Used Language Proficiency Tests

Test	Supplier	Age Group	Description	Skills
Language Assessment Scales (LAS)	CTB/McGraw-Hill www.ctb.com Pre-LAS	(ages 4-6), LAS (ages 7-12), LAS-O (ages 12-adult)	Individually administered, tape-mediated oral test. Small group administered reading and writing tests: students generate answers in test booklets.	Oral: vocabulary, listening comprehension, story retelling, minimal sound pairs, phonemes Reading and Writing: vocabulary, fluency, reading for information.
Woodcock-Munoz Language Survey (WML)	Nelson Thomson Learning www.nelson.com	K-adult	Individually administered battery of 4 sub-tests, easel format. Provides BICS and CALP scores.	Picture vocabulary, verbal analogies, letter-word identification, dictation

This list is not meant to be comprehensive or prescriptive. Rather, it is meant to identify some of the proficiency tests currently marketed in North America for ESL students. It should be noted that most of these tests have been developed and used in American educational settings and, therefore, are norm-referenced to students in the United States.

2. Placement in Appropriate Educational Program

Alberta Learning’s recommendation of age-appropriate placement for new immigrants is based on current research stating that lack of content knowledge and required skills is not reason enough to warrant placing newcomers in lower than age-appropriate grades. Lack of fluency in English does not indicate limited intelligence. Depriving children of the opportunity to interact with age-appropriate peers can hinder their adjustment to their new life. (Law and Eckes 1995)

In some districts, students with limited schooling or proficiency in both English and their first language are placed in a literacy class before being mainstreamed into age-appropriate classrooms. The criteria for placement in these programs are determined by individual districts.

3. Program Evaluation: School, District and Provincial Levels

Important and useful data collected using various assessment tools as well as standardized assessment tests at district and provincial levels assist with evaluating teaching and learning strategies and the rate of growth of English language learners over time. It is important to note that in standardized tests, the role of language and culture in test performance is not recognized.



Cautions and recommendations for standardized testing

- Comparing ESL students’ scores to test norms is a questionable practice, because norms are generally based on mainstream, monolingual or English-proficient students.
- There is limited opportunity to assess first-language proficiency or to administer diagnostic tests in first language.
- Standardized assessment of ESL students generally tests both content knowledge and language proficiency. Changes in scores are difficult to disaggregate.
- ESL students are disadvantaged by their lack of experience with culturally specific objects, situations or viewpoints in test items.
- Methods for administering tests may be unfamiliar to ESL students. Scoring and recording methods may be intimidating. Students may lack test-taking skills and familiarity with testing formats.
- Instruction received by ESL students may have been modified. If students have not studied the curriculum to be tested, it would be unfair to compare their results to a norm.
- Oral instructions given prior to tests may be more complicated than the test itself.

4. Accountability and Attainment of Expected Goals and Standards

As Davies (2000) notes, evaluating and reporting are at the point in the classroom assessment cycle when the learning pauses, the evidence is organized and evaluated by comparing it to the subject specific learner outcome and goals. The results of the evaluation are shared in a formal reporting process.

Reporting of expected goals should

- include second language learner outcomes and content area goals, and
- reflect the skills for the student’s identified level of English language learning in listening, writing, reading and speaking.

5. Monitoring Student Progress to Review Language and Content Learning

Teachers must gather evidence of how a student approaches, processes and completes tasks over time. Teachers must also assess social skills, literacy skills, language acquisition and attitudes. In addition, teachers must consider students’ learning styles, language proficiencies, cultural and educational backgrounds, and grade levels.

Schools with an intercultural orientation can promote alternative forms of assessment rather than emphasize standardized tests and, therefore, can encourage teachers to view assessment as an opportunity to advocate for their students.

When language instruction is integrated with content instruction, teachers should use a variety of assessment strategies that distinguish between students’ language abilities, growth and mastery of subject outcomes. Teachers of ESL students are increasingly turning to alternative performance-based assessment approaches, which involve a variety of assessment methods and varied student activities, as listed below.

Assessing the Language Strands

Methods of Assessing Oral and Auditory Skills	Student Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • oral interview, reports • picture-cued descriptions and stories • records of student interactions • story/text retelling • audio- and videotapes • dramatization: improvisation, role plays, puppet plays, readers theatre, skits, interviews • slide, overhead and PowerPoint presentations • dictation 	Oral
	<p>Communication Does the student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initiate communication with peers? • speak on specific topics? • share anecdotes or tell stories? • participate in two-way conversations (paired or groups) using turn-taking skills, etc.? • express personal ideas, points of view? • communicate intent? <p>Grammar and Vocabulary Does the student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vary sentence type and construction? • pay attention to grammatical features, e.g., prefixes, suffixes? • demonstrate a repertoire of word choices? <p>Body Language Does the student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communicate through appropriate facial expressions and gestures? • understand the use of social space?
	Auditory <p>Communication Does the student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • follow directions? • ask for clarification? • paraphrase and/or retell? • demonstrate understanding by performing tasks? • write orally dictated passages or notes? • use appropriate gestures and body language? • respond to differences in register and tone of voice?



Assessing the Language Strands (cont'd)

Methods of Assessing Reading and Writing Skills	Student Activities
	Reading
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retelling • response journals • anecdotal records • comprehension questions • reading strategies checklists • reciprocal teaching • student-made dictionaries • think alouds • miscue analysis • running records • reading logs • student manipulation of information, e.g., unscrambling pictures, sentences • story/concept mapping 	<p>Oral Fluency Does the student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attend to phrasing/chunking? • read with the proper stress, intonation and rhythm? • sound out unfamiliar words? • self-correct? <p>Comprehension Does the student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • link to prior knowledge? • predict, retell, infer, recall main ideas and supporting details? • understand sequence and patterns of discourse? • use pictures, graphs, charts, diagrams?
	Writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning logs • dialogue journals • summaries • unedited student written work • close procedures • samples of completed work from a variety of sources e.g., lab reports, interviews, graphic organizers 	<p>Communication Does the student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • write for a variety of audiences and purposes? • write on specific topics? • demonstrate a variety of written formats? • follow the writing process: prewrites, drafts, shares and responds, revises and publishes? <p>Grammar, Vocabulary and Mechanics Does the student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manipulate verb tenses? • vary sentence construction? • pay attention to agreement, number, word order, parts of speech? • pay attention to word forms, e.g., prefixes, suffixes? • demonstrate a repertoire of word choices? • pay attention to punctuation and spelling?

—Karen Roth, Anne O’Byrne, ESL team, Calgary Board of Education, January 2003

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