

Optimizing EAL Programs in International Schools

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All schools are committed to maximizing student learning. Since English language learners (ELLs) 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 English as an Additional Language (EAL), an effort to implement unifying standards, assessments, and best practices in the classroom is woefully missing. Furthermore, current EAL 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 EAL assessment tool included in this article attempts to fill this gap. It is a holistic framework that integrates four optimal EAL conditions, as identified in research, for EAL programs at international schools.

Keywords: EAL, assessment, international schools, language assessment, language teaching, second language teaching, ELLs

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 EAL area, a unified assessment tool has not been adopted. Furthermore, there isn't a unifying set of criteria that effectively assess EAL programs in international schools. Yet it is imperative for international schools to have a tool based on valid criteria in order to assess their EAL programs. As a result, schools would be making a more concerted effort to enhance language learning for EAL students.

Optimal EAL Conditions

A condensed version of such an assessment tool is included below. It is based on research that identifies conditions that optimize EAL programs. Current research reveals optimal EAL 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 EAL program is fundamental for EAL student success. Quentin's (2009) research on EAL programs leads him to conclude that an optimal factor for English language acquisition is a "strong EAL 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 EAL programs. Her research illustrates that a crucial element to the student's academic success is not so much what kind of EAL language model is used, but that it is implemented effectively. A well-articulated EAL philosophy and its accompanying guiding principles form the foundation pieces of an EAL program. The EAL 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 EAL program delivery (2010).

Student learning conditions

The second category, student learning conditions, plays a key role in determining an EAL 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 EAL 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 EAL 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 EAL 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 EAL students. Interestingly, he found mainstream teachers’ perceptions of EAL students are different than the EAL 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 EAL students.

Home culture conditions

The final category of conditions that affect EAL 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 EAL program also influences the student’s attitude and motivation towards learning English (Alderfer, 2008).

Criteria for EAL Assessment

These four categories define the optimal conditions that need to be in place to ensure effective English language learning, unlike current EAL assessments that look almost exclusively at language skills. These four categories of conditions constitute the main criteria for the EAL assessment tool. Within each category, five respective descriptors are included. A detailed explanation for each descriptor, available in the uncondensed version of the assessment tool from the authors, provides holistic rubrics of each of the descriptors; however, a general overview can be attained by following the condensed version, included in this article. Gaining this kind of overview reveals to what extent a school’s EAL program is meeting optimal EAL conditions. Schools can then make informed decisions to guide and inform systematic and sustainable EAL program improvement.

ALDERFER EAL ASSESSMENT TOOL: OPTIMAL EAL CONDITIONS IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

HOLISTIC RUBRIC FOR SCORING	Strong Foundation <i>Condition met effectively</i>	Strengthening Foundation <i>Condition usually in place and oftentimes met effectively</i>	Building Foundation <i>Condition not in place and/or not met effectively</i>
I. PROGRAMMATIC CONDITIONS			
1. Program design includes articulation of: EAL philosophy, EAL guiding principles, EAL program delivery, EAL entrance and exit criteria, EAL entrance and exiting procedures, EAL proficiency levels, EAL benchmarks (i.e. in skill areas, by proficiency and grade levels)			
2. Implementation of EAL program design			
3. Assessment of EAL program design			
4. Professional EAL staff and sufficient staffing			
5. Abundant and high quality EAL resources available			
II. STUDENT LEARNING CONDITIONS			
1. Positive student motivation towards learning English			
2. Low affective filter			
3. Authentic learning experiences			
4. Positive student-peer relationship			
5. Positive student-school integration			
III a. TEACHING CONDITIONS FOR MAINSTREAM TEACHER			
1. Positive teacher perception of EAL student			
2. EAL pedagogy understood and implemented			
3. Individualized instruction articulated and implemented			
4. On-going active collaboration			
5. Professional development and training opportunities accessed and attended			
III b. TEACHING CONDITIONS FOR EAL TEACHER			
1. Positive teacher perception of EAL student			
2. EAL pedagogy understood and implemented			
3. Individualized instruction articulated and implemented			
4. On-going active collaboration			
5. Professional development and training opportunities accessed and attended			
IV. HOME CULTURE CONDITIONS			
1. L ₁ listening and speaking at home			
2. L ₁ reading and writing at home			
3. Positive parent perception of EAL program			
4. L ₁ support at school			
5. Positive parent-teacher communication			
RECOMMENDATIONS:	<i>Optimal conditions attained, continued dialogue and ongoing assessment recommended</i>	<i>Continued dialogue and ongoing assessment needed</i>	<i>Strategic planning and dialogue required</i>

Conclusion

This revolutionary EAL assessment tool highlights the optimal conditions that support an effective EAL program. By addressing these conditions, educators can assess whether their EAL program is meeting optimal program design and delivery, student learning, teacher effectiveness and home culture support. Mainstream and EAL teachers can assess their teaching and student learning and use the rubrics to inform instruction. School administrators can use them 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 EAL assessment makes a significant contribution at unifying assessment tools in the field of EAL within the international school community. In closing, EAL students, oftentimes the last group of students to receive benefits of school reform and exciting initiatives, deserve to have optimal EAL conditions in place at international schools.

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