

What Students Know and What Students Need to Know



In the Video

The video begins with students using a simulated time clock. Gershon explains that since many of them will work in factories, time clocks are “in their future” if they do not already use them.

At the end of the video, students role-play an interview, thus practicing the exchange of personal information so important in so many business and school situations.

Assessment in the class is ongoing. Gershon seldom introduces a concept without checking to see what students already know. He asks: “what is this?” “how do you spell?” and reminds students of previous lessons or situations they might have been in where they would have heard or used the English he is ready to teach or review.

Questions for Reflection

- Where do your students need to speak English?
- How do you determine if your students understand what someone is saying?

What Students Know and What Students Need to Know

It is the first day of class. The teacher looks at the students and the students look back at the teacher. Both have a perception of what ESOL students know and what ESOL students need to know.

The teacher's perception is based on class level, placement testing, and experience. The students' perceptions (and therefore their goals and expectations) are based on their concept of school, their need to communicate with English speakers, and their desires to become a part of the culture they are living in. Some of the students can read but not speak. Some can speak but not read. Some are fluent in speaking English and use that ability to hide the fact that they are limited in listening comprehension. Others struggle in all areas. Many students need specific English phrases and vocabulary for their jobs. Others feel the need to reconnect with children who are already beginning to be comfortable in their new language. ESOL textbooks have topics and grammar content for each level, but some or all of this material may not be applicable for this class.

Starting to teach a class without any assessment is a bit like buying a present for a person you've never met. Perhaps you decide to pick out a sweater because most people could use one. So, you pick out a kind of average sweater, one that's not too large and not too small, but chances are, it's not going to fit that person very well. It might be far too big, it might not fit at all, or it might be an absolutely horrible color for that person. At best, the person might appreciate the gift but secretly wish you'd given them something more appropriate.

The same thing happens when you start teaching when you haven't properly determined the needs of the learners. Yes, you might teach them something they might appreciate, but it won't be a good fit with what they need the most. At best, you'll have the "one-size-fits-all" approach to learning. If, on the other hand, you figure out exactly what each student needs through assessment, you can tailor your lessons to fit each student. You can teach the whole class the content that they most pressingly need, and you can organize your lessons so that the more proficient and less proficient ones are all challenged.

- Karen Hilgeman, Adult Learning Resource Center

What Students Know: Ability Assessment

There are many ways to find out how much English students know.

Standardized Tests

Either before students are enrolled in class - or shortly after - most programs require an achievement pre-test placement test. If the Illinois Community College Board funds the program, the test given is either the BEST Literacy Test, the BEST Plus, or the CELSA. The BEST

Literacy and CELSA are written tests while the BEST Plus is an oral test. These tests measure students' knowledge of English.

They have been standardized on students in ESOL classes across the United States. They may be used to determine class placement and, with post-testing, proof of progress. Teachers don't usually find these tests specific enough to define what should be taught.

Textbook-Based Tests

ESOL textbooks frequently include tests, usually a placement test at the beginning of the book and assessment tests before each section. For teachers who structure their curriculum around a workbook, these tests can indicate what students need to cover in detail and what can be omitted.

Teacher-Made Tests

If teachers develop their own curriculum, they can design tests for that curriculum. One method is to write a checklist of curriculum goals: specific language goals (such as grammar concepts, syntax and vocabulary) as well as functional goals (such as responding to requests for personal information). The teacher tests the students to check progress toward these goals both before and after instruction. The tests may be written or based on responses given by the student to the tester.

Tester: Tell me your address.

Student: I live at 53 North Grove Avenue

Teacher Observation

- Dated observations, which focus on specific criteria, are also useful as assessment tools. Before instruction, listen and take notes. Later in the course, listen to the task again and observe both the improvement and the areas where work still needs to be done.

Here are some examples:

- Can students exchange greetings and good-byes? Watch how they greet other students who are not part of their language group. Notice how they greet the teacher. Is the interchange culturally and socially correct as well as grammatically correct?
- Do students know how to write an absence note for a sick child? Ask them to try. Look at the mistakes. Teach. Have them try again.

How well do they do on the tasks you give them in class: pair work, groups, working individually? All the time you are in the classroom, you are assessing your students informally. All the time students are working on something, you should be walking around, listening, helping, encouraging, correcting. Look to see if they've got it. When you are assessing, you are looking for patterns... not just one student missed the idea, but are most still struggling? That's the sign that they need more practice, more review, a re-presentation. Review, especially, is good for assessment. You see what students have retained and what they need more explanation or practice with.

- Laurie Martin, Adult Learning Resource Center

Teachers are not the only ones who assess students. Feedback from outside the class is valuable if it is available. When the ESOL class is on a job site, the workplace supervisor may report progress and problems to the teacher. Students themselves may bring back stories about being misunderstood at school or at a doctor's office. If an ESOL student is taking content classes at the same location, the content-area teacher can give input on the ESOL student's needs and successes in the academic classroom.

Assessment structures teaching. It is a bridge between wished-for goals and student realization of those goals. It addresses the questions: "Why am I teaching this?" and "Are students learning?"

I think we are assessing our students all the time, especially in the production stage. We are constantly assessing them. We start out with a goal... we assess them during practice to see if they're getting the idea of what is going on. And we are also assessing them when they do production. We might not think we are, but we are. How would you know what to continue teaching if you are not assessing what is going on in the classroom?

- Ditra Henry, College of Lake County

What Students Need to Know: Needs Assessment

I am trying to bring reality into the classroom, removing the walls. You have to get in there and speak with native speakers of English. My classroom is an attempt to imitate reality to a certain extent.

- Gershon Wolf, Jewish Vocational Services

If you want to order a pizza, you need to spell your name, you need to give your address.

- Betsy Kubota, William Rainey Harper College

The most common response when teachers ask ESOL students what they want to learn in class is, "English." Even asking, "Do you use English in stores? At work?" may not generate enough useful information to guide the curriculum. Teachers need to listen to the students. What do they have questions about? What do they want to talk about? Teachers can ask them where they heard English that they didn't understand, ask if they have ever tried to say something in English and were not understood.

If the class takes place at a workplace, talk to supervisors about what language students need to use. If the program has support staff helping students with everyday living issues, ask them what English language exchanges and circumstances have caused the most problems for students.

Most conversation between ESOL students and native speakers occurs in formal business situations. A police officer stops a car making a wrong turn and asks for a license. A bank teller needs to correct a deposit or withdrawal slip. A school secretary needs to fill out an emergency form. A sales clerk needs to know size and color. Teachers should think of common, everyday instances where someone in an official position might need to request details. Teachers can also consider where a student might need information. Does the bus stop at this corner? When does the movie begin? How much does the sweater cost? Will it rain tomorrow? Finally, teachers should remember those casual interchanges with people at work or in the neighborhood: "How are you doing?" "Cold, isn't it?"

Gershon Wolf from Jewish Vocational Services tells a story that illustrates how important small talk can be:

In 1985, I had a student named Bela who got a job after 7 months in a shoe store and she had been through about a month of "How's it going" (in class). Guess what the first question the manager asked her? He gives her a little inventory thing to do and after 45 minutes he comes back and goes: "How's it going?" And she comes back with "Pretty good. How's it going with you, boss?" "Not too bad." And they had a little small talk. She came running to class...and she was so proud of herself. A month later, she got a promotion and the manager told her... "I got all these people from other countries and I ask them: "How's it going?" and they just stare - but you - you're normal!"

Sometimes the teacher must think beyond the current worldview of the student. Students may be living in a Latino neighborhood and going to Latino stores and Latino doctors. They may feel that their first language is serving them quite well in these situations. The teacher should encourage students to realize that they may not always live in the same place. Their doctor may send them to an English-speaking specialist. There may be stores in an English-speaking neighborhood with a greater selection and lower prices. English classes should attempt to address both immediate and future needs and encourage students to step out into the English-speaking world.

Some Activities for Ability and Needs Assessment

My City Or Town

Purpose: Ability assessment

Materials: Tape recorder

Procedure: Send students to a quiet spot and ask each one to speak into a tape recorder for a minute or so about the city or town they came from. Listen to the tape for pronunciation, vocabulary choice, grammar, and just simple energy and desire to speak English. After six weeks of class, have them each do it again and let them listen to both tapes. They will be pleased and surprised at the improvement.

Interview

Purpose: Ability assessment

Materials: Teacher's aide

Procedure: This activity can be done with any topic area that the teacher has or is planning to cover. This example uses the topic of personal information.

Ask a volunteer or teacher's aide to interview students requesting personal information such as name, address, telephone number, etc. The teacher may want to create a checklist to help the volunteer know what questions to ask. The volunteer should then suggest that the student take a turn: "Ask me." The last step is for the volunteer to make written notes about speaking ability and any specific problems with grammar and syntax.

Where I Wish I Had English

Purpose: Needs assessment

Materials: Pencil, paper, markers

Procedure: Ask the class to draw situations where they have needed English. Then, if English levels are high enough, encourage them to discuss the pictures they drew. If the students' English is not advanced enough for discussion, just share or hang the pictures on the bulletin board or wall. The pictures should give the teacher some ideas about topics to address in class.