Identifying Skills and Addressing the Gaps for Struggling ESL Literacy Learners

An Action Research Project Summary Report

Overview

Finding ways to increase support for learners experiencing learning difficulty within their ELL Literacy programs requires understanding of language and literacy as well as acquisition processes and ways to observe those processes. Someone once said: a good teacher must also be a good assessor. Though the purpose and form might vary, assessment is always part of the teaching and learning process. *Identifying Skills and Addressing the Gaps for Struggling ESL Literacy Learners* builds on the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association's work to support adult English language learners experiencing learning difficulties through the development of a three-part assessment tool that determines the specific skill and competency gaps of struggling ESL literacy learners.

Research Design

Over the span of the project, two language instructors from CIWA and 3 instructors from the local ESL community collaborated with learning support services to find ways to develop background knowledge, understand theory, and collect information to develop a set of ESL literacy assessment tools and models for ESL literacy assessment for adults. The team also invited input from ESL practitioners who work in the foundational literacy field in Alberta and Nova Scotia.

The set of assessment tools developed during this project are based on the CLB Literacy outcomes. They are intended for use by a learning support specialist as part of the learner needs assessment for ESL Literacy learners, by instructors to track learner progress and next steps, and by learners as they are supported to develop self-assessment skills. The corresponding classroom assessment tools are designed for use by classroom instructors to monitor learners' progress for specific learning outcomes.

The checklists that were developed over the two-year project consist of the following 4 outcomes:

1) Reading: Interpret messages
2) Reading: Interpret signs, notices and labels
3) Writing : Write messages
4) Writing: Write instructions

Lessons Learned

As the project unfolded, instructors identified the following as having contributed towards enhancing their understanding and experience on the subject:

- Developing assessment tools for specific learning outcomes helps instructors plan and organize targeted learning activities both for groups of learners and for one-on-one tutoring contexts
- Focusing on one specific task helps students to succeed on a task and stimulate first-time learners' motivation for further learning
- Oral language practice and vocabulary reinforcement as well as using real life situations (e.g. writing a "Get well" message to a teacher or a "Welcome the new baby" card to a classmate) provides a complete task comprehension for inexperienced learners and learners with low oral skill; as a result, oral comprehension gives a strong basis for completing a writing task
- The assessment checklist works well within a small class of 5-7 students; for a larger class, it is advisable to divide students into two-three groups for quality assessment
- Making connections for literacy learners between a written word and a spoken word is crucial at the foundational literacy level; first language support and acting out the concept can provide additional resources to make such connections
- Using letter tiles for building words, allocating large blank spaces for students to write in, having learners write on one line etc. are ways to ensure success with designing assessment activities for struggling literacy learners
- Appreciation of why a learner may struggle with a specific outcome is an enriching experience because it enables instructors to learn how to address learning gaps that are not performance related or quantifiable; for example, when some learners were instructed to highlight information on a bill, their beliefs about not writing or tracing

anything on the bill didn't allow them to complete the task which was not a result of lack of understanding or competency but rather the result of a cultural belief

- Training and support for language instructors working with literacy populations ensures that they are better equipped to address the learning needs of their students when designing curriculum, delivering instruction and implementing assessment practices
- Better understanding of the challenges faced by struggling learners ensures that teachers are more aware of the gaps students may have in their learning process and mitigates the risk of instructors making a wrong decision in terms of their teaching and assessment practices, potentially discouraging learners from engaging in the long term

Recommendation and Implications

Training for instructors on the use of the tools

The ESL Assessment Tool Kit contains a User Guide that demonstrates how to use the various tools contained in the package; however, we recommend face to face dialogue and hands on training as the best way to absorb the use and effectiveness of the tool. We would also hope that users of the tools might find new ways of using the tool in their planning and assessment of learners thereby helping learners to also become familiar and comfortable with the tool as a learning guide.

Training and orientation for program administrators

Training and orientation for the use of the tools should also extend to program administrators so that they are aware of the learning and assessment process required to help learners in low literacy classrooms progress and achieve their learning goals. As a result, they would be more informed and prepared to take make informed decisions when designing the policies in their programs.

Online hosting of the tools

The entire assessment toolkit and accompanying guides will be available on CIWA's website at www.ciwa-online.com. Additionally, the tools will also be added to forums and websites such as the CALP portal, Tutela and other ESL repositories, where instructors can freely access and share their experiences with the use of the tools, asks

questions about the tools and share ideas about how to use the tools that would best support the instructor, tutor and the learner.

Outcomes

The following outcomes were achieved as a result of the research project activities:

Learner Outcomes

- 100% of learners who were involved in the pilot were assessed by their instructors as making progress
- 100% of learners demonstrated greater involvement in their learning after one on one assessments that helped them progress in their learning

Instructor Outcomes

- 100% of instructors increased their knowledge
- 100% of instructors and learning support specialist who were involved in the pilot continued at different stages with recommendations as a result of piloting the tools with their learners
- 100% or of instructors who used the tool with their learners indicated in their feedback that they increased their knowledge about assessment for literacy learners

Community of Practice Outcomes

- 100% pf pilot participants who also served as advisory committee members gave feedback that the tools that they piloted also helped them in their classroom planning and delivery skills
- 100% of the feedback from ATESL and Literacy and Learning Symposiums gave feedback that participants increased their knowledge of ESL literacy learners and understand how to better assess their learning gaps

Conclusion

The project gave us a unique opportunity to build a much-needed ESL literacy assessment tool kit that we hope will become an integral part of instructor planning and evaluation of learner progress. As a result of this experience, those involved in the project both as researchers and instructors came to realize that there was value in these tools beyond how effective they are as observation and assessment tools. A member of

the research team commented that working on these tools helped her expand her observation skills, teaching strategies and ability to better understand her students' learning difficulties. We hope that once these tools are used by a wider group of ESL instructors, that the same sentiment will be expressed by more instructors who are working with low literacy ESL learners.