

Assessing Programmatic and Instructional Effectiveness of the English as a Second Language Program at IUPUI

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Background and Purpose

The English as a Second Language (ESL) Program, housed in the Department of English at the IU School of Liberal Arts at IUPUI, has as part of its mission statement the following two goals:

- Offer the campus valid, reliable, and timely testing of English language proficiency to incoming students who are non-native speakers of English (both internationals and permanent residents).
- Provide ESL students who require it with English support so that they can more fully participate in their academic courses of study.

Since the ESL program's establishment in 1985, student enrollments, student needs, program policies, course curriculum, and testing procedures had all seen significant changes. However, there had been no recent program-wide evaluation to ensure a coherent unity among the various components of the ESL program and that student needs were being met. As a result, we were wrestling with fundamental programmatic questions about the validity and adequacy of our placement testing and curriculum. With the ESL program testing and teaching more than 500 students each year, we felt it was essential to conduct a review of the program to ensure we were meeting the high standards we expected. Consequently, the ESL Program applied for and received an IUPUI PRAC (Program Review and Assessment Committee) grant in 1999 to review and assess our program.

Method

The first two questions of this review focused on placement testing: (1) is our test battery both valid and reliable, and (2) are students appropriately placed into ESL classes based on test results? To answer these questions we used a variety of methods:

- a) both a quantitative and qualitative review of test results and placement decisions for all students over the previous year.
- b) a program-wide review of student evaluations from all courses over the previous year.
- c) interviews with teachers concerning the level of the students in their classes.

The last two questions of the review focused on the ESL Program curriculum: 3) do our classes address the language needs revealed by the placement test, and 4) do students have the academic language they need once they finish their ESL courses? To answer these questions, the following methods were used:

- a) both a quantitative and qualitative review of placement decisions, course goals, and final grades for all students over the previous year.
- b) a program-wide review of student evaluations from all courses over the previous year.
- c) interviews with teachers concerning the content and goals of classes.
- d) statistical reports from the Office of Institutional Research comparing ESL course performance with subsequent performance in academic classes.

Findings and Use

With regard to the placement testing questions, we found several issues that needed to be addressed:

- a) Students were being placed into an academic speaking and listening course although the oral interview was not standardized, and so was not reliable, and we had no test to evaluate academic listening proficiency.
- b) We had only one form of the standardized test used to evaluate reading and grammar skills; furthermore, scores from the test were not properly normed before placement decisions were made. This raised concerns about the potential for student cheating and the potential of misinterpretation of results – or at least the inability to compare results with national norms. In addition, it was clear that this paper and pencil test was outdated and did not clearly address academic English skills.

Nevertheless, both teacher interviews and student evaluations did not reveal any patterns of students being inappropriately placed into ESL classes.

Based on these results, we chose to move to a new computerized ESL Placement Test for academic English. This addressed concerns about test focus and skills evaluation as well as accurate scoring and norming. An additional advantage was that the new test allowed placement

testing to be done flexibly on a rolling basis in the Testing Center by staff trained in testing protocol and security, rather than being offered by ESL teachers on a restricted number of dates.

With regard to the curriculum questions, a couple of important issues also came to light:

- a) At higher proficiency levels, graduate students were not well served by being placed into classes with undergrads.
- b) One of our courses had a reading emphasis, but students were placed into it mainly due to writing needs.
- c) One of our lower level courses was expected to do too much for the number of credit hours it had.
- d) Several of our courses needed a stronger emphasis on academic language skills.

On the positive side, statistical data showed that both the average GPA of ESL students in ENG W131 and in their “next” writing class (e.g., W132, W231) were both higher (but not significantly so) than the “regular” students who did not go through the ESL Program, highlighting that our program was successfully preparing ESL students for academic success.

Based on these results, we more clearly segregated our courses for graduate and undergraduate students, reworked the curriculum for all of our courses to address the specific academic language needs that students have, expanded the credit hours of the overworked lower-level course, and reworked our placement of students into courses to ensure students were receiving the language support that their placement tests showed they needed.

Success Factors and Helpful Hints

Several factors lead to the success of this program review and should be considered by other units looking at conducting a self-review:

- a) Being willing to critically review what we were doing, even if it implied there were shortcomings and change would be required.
- b) Having a lead person in charge of overseeing all stages of the review who was provided with adequate release time from other responsibilities.
- c) Gathering data, both quantitative and qualitative, from a wide variety of sources, including teachers, students, and administrators.
- d) Taking time to consider the implications of the review results and facilitating discussion among vested parties (in our case, program teachers) about the results.
- e) Developing a formal response to the review that outlines specific steps to be taken within specific timeframes.