Program Planning and Assessment for ESL/ELD Learners

Curriculum expectations and assessment criteria established for native speakers of English are not appropriate for students who are learning the language, especially those who are in the early stages of second language development. These students cannot be expected to perform at the same level in English as their peers, or to be as effective in communicating their learning. Also, recent newcomers cannot be expected to have developed the same knowledge and skills as their peers who have been immersed in the Ontario Curriculum throughout their years of schooling. Therefore, teachers at all grade levels and in all subjects need to adapt program, including assessment and evaluation, for ESL/ELD learners. See below for more information on:

- Ministry Policy
- Stages of Development in ESL and ELD
- Aligning Expectations with Stages of Development
- Curriculum-Based Assessment
- Literacy Assessment

Ministry Policy
Teachers are required to adapt program, including expectations where appropriate, to meet the needs of ESL/ELD learners, according to this policy statement from the Ministry of Education:

As the linguistic diversity of Ontario’s student population continues to increase, many students in our schools require support in learning English to enable them to achieve the curriculum expectations in all subjects and at all grade levels. Programs must be flexible in order to accommodate the needs of students who require instruction in English as a second language or English literacy development, and teachers of all subjects are responsible for helping students develop their ability to use English.

Appropriate modifications to teaching, learning, and evaluation strategies must be made to help students gain proficiency in English, since students taking English as a second language at the secondary level have limited time in which to develop this proficiency. (Teachers should bear in mind that it may take up to seven years for a student to acquire a level of proficiency in reading, writing, and abstract thinking in a second language that is on a par with the level mastered by speakers of a first language.)

*The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: Program Planning and Assessment, 2000* (page 10).

The Ministry curriculum document for ESL/ELD in Grades 9-12 provides more detailed guidance for teachers of all subjects:
The successful integration of students who are learning English into the academic and social life of the school requires all teachers to work together to support them. Although many students become proficient users of English for most day-to-day purposes within two years, students may require up to seven years to catch up to first-language English speakers in their ability to use English for academic purposes. Participation in ESL and ELD courses assists second-language learners to make rapid progress; however, students who arrive as beginning learners of English during their high school years may not have enough time to catch up to their peers by the end of Grade 12. Reading textbooks, participating in academic discussions, or writing essays or examination answers may be much more difficult for these students than for first-language English speakers. Their relatively limited vocabulary may make reading some textbooks difficult, and in some cases, inexperience with complex sentence patterns may make it difficult for them to write as fluently as some of their peers. Most students who have completed their ESL and/or ELD courses will therefore continue to need support from their subject teachers to achieve success.

Students who are learners of English will have the best chance to succeed in classrooms where there is opportunity for extensive oral interaction with English-speaking peers. In evaluating achievement, it is important for teachers to recognize the value of the content and the organization of ideas in students’ written work, as well as grammar, spelling, and word choice. In addition, teachers must provide instruction on specific features of English for those students whose written English indicates a need for such assistance.

Second-language learners need access to their first language as a tool for learning and thinking, at least until they are sufficiently proficient in the second language to use it for a wide range of academic purposes. The first language is the foundation upon which English proficiency is built. An insistence on “English only” may limit students’ intellectual activity to their level of proficiency in their second language. Students’ first languages therefore have a place in the classroom alongside English, and students may use their first languages in a variety of ways: for example, by consulting bilingual dictionaries, by making notes or preparing outlines and first drafts in their first languages, or by working on specific activities with first-language peers before transferring to English.

Another way to help second-language learners succeed is to design lessons and activities and choose resources that recognize students’ background knowledge and experiences. The subject teacher can also use the wealth of linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom by encouraging students to share information with each other about their own languages and cultures. In this way, all students are enriched with a greater awareness of language and culture, and all students have a sense of belonging.

In some courses, students in the early stages of learning English and/or at the early stages of development in English literacy will need program adaptations in order to be successful. Appropriate adaptations include:

- Modified expectations (e.g., modification of some or all of the course expectations);
- A variety of instructional strategies (e.g., extensive use of visual cues, graphic organizers, peer tutoring, strategic use of students’ first languages);
- A variety of learning resources (e.g., use of visual material, simplified texts, and bilingual dictionaries);
- Modified assessment strategies (e.g., granting of extra time; use of oral interviews and tasks requiring completion of graphic organizers and cloze sentences instead of essay questions and other assessment tasks that depend heavily on proficiency in English).

Note: When learning expectations in a course other than ESL and ELD are modified, or accommodations to the learning environment are made, this must be clearly indicated on the student’s report card.

The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development, pages 8–9.

Stages of Development in ESL and ELD

ESL and ELD students learn English and develop their English literacy skills according to a predictable developmental sequence. Teachers need to familiarize themselves with the stages
of development and adapt the instructional program, including assessment and evaluation, accordingly.

**Elementary teachers (Grades 1–8)** should use the new Ministry of Education resource Document for ESL/ELD, grades 1-8 (forthcoming) as a guide to program planning and assessment for ESL/ELD learners.

**Secondary teachers (Grades 9–12)** should use the overall and specific expectations of the ESL or ELD courses as a guide to program planning and assessment for ESL/ELD learners.

**Aligning Expectations with Stages of Development**

To be meaningful, **expectations should be attainable**, and based on **opportunity to learn** the relevant knowledge or skills. To require an ESL/ELD learner to perform at a level beyond his or her present stage of development in English is futile, and will lead to frustration and disappointment for teacher and student alike. In some programs, therefore, the expectations for ESL/ELD learners may be different from the expectations for students who begin the program with a lot more knowledge of English and/or background knowledge and experience.

Expectations may require significant modification for students in the early stages of ESL/ELD. Modification may include **revised expectations**, **fewer expectations**, and the substitution of **alternative expectations** that may be more appropriate for an ESL/ELD learner. As students move along the continuum of second language acquisition, they will need fewer modifications.

The following example for Grade 5 Science and Technology shows how expectations may be modified to meet the needs of students at different stages of development in ESL or ELD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How to Interpret Stages or Levels of Proficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A student at Stage 1 (elementary) or enrolled in ESL A (secondary) is <strong>developing</strong> the proficiency described for that stage of development. This student may arrive in the school with <strong>no knowledge of English</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Stage 2/ESLB student has completed Stage 1/ESLA and is <strong>developing</strong> Stage 2/ESLB proficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Stage 3/ESLC student has completed Stage 2/ESLB and is <strong>developing</strong> Stage 3/ESLC proficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Stage 4/ESLD student has completed Stage 3/ESLC and is <strong>developing</strong> Stage 4/ESLD proficiency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modified expectations for Grade 5 Science and Technology

Earth and Space Systems: Weather

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHICH STUDENTS?</th>
<th>WHICH EXPECTATION?</th>
<th>WHY?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students who have had several years of immersion in a Canadian school setting, including Stage 4 ESL learners</td>
<td>Grade level expectation from the Ontario Curriculum: describe the water cycle in terms of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation</td>
<td>This expectation is attainable for students who have had the opportunity to develop the required level of proficiency in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3 ESL learners</td>
<td>Revised expectation: demonstrate understanding of the water cycle by labelling a diagram using appropriate vocabulary and completing a series of sentences using cause/effect and sequence vocabulary to explain the cycle</td>
<td>Students at this stage need some support to demonstrate their learning in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 ESL learners</td>
<td>Revised expectation: demonstrate understanding of the water cycle by labelling a diagram, using appropriate vocabulary selected from a list: e.g., evaporation, condensation, precipitation</td>
<td>Students at this stage need considerable support to demonstrate their learning in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 ESL learners</td>
<td>Alternative expectation: demonstrate understanding of basic weather vocabulary and sentence patterns by matching illustrations and captions: e.g., it’s raining, it’s hot, etc.</td>
<td>The grade level expectation is not attainable for students who are just beginning to learn basic vocabulary and sentence patterns in English.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following example for Grade 9 Canadian Geography (next page) shows how expectations may be modified to meet the needs of students at different stages of development in ESL or ELD. **Note that the expectations for each level of ESL and ELD are exit criteria.** Students are expected to reach that level of performance at the end of the course. At the beginning of the year or semester, students are only just beginning to develop the specific skills described in the expectations for each course.
Modified expectations for Geography of Canada, Grade 9, Applied (CGC1P)
Understanding and Managing Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHICH STUDENTS?</th>
<th>WHICH EXPECTATION?</th>
<th>WHY?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students who have had several years of immersion in a Canadian school setting, including students in ESL D/ESL E</td>
<td>Grade level expectation from the Ontario Curriculum: use communication skills (e.g., letter writing, debating, consensus building) effectively to promote environmental awareness</td>
<td>This expectation is attainable for students who have had the opportunity to develop the required level of proficiency in English and the necessary background knowledge about Canada.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students enrolled in ESL C</td>
<td>Revised expectation: create a poster integrating graphics and text to promote environmental awareness</td>
<td>Students at this stage can demonstrate their learning through tasks with a reduced language requirement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students enrolled in ESL B</td>
<td>Revised expectation: complete a graphic organizer, choosing from a bank of words and phrases supplied by the teacher, to demonstrate an awareness of some key environmental issues</td>
<td>Students at this stage need considerable support to demonstrate their learning in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students enrolled in ESL A</td>
<td>Alternative expectation from the ESL A curriculum: demonstrate knowledge of basic facts about Canada (e.g., identify the regions, provinces, territories, and capital cities of Canada; provide information about common Canadian customs and holidays)</td>
<td>The grade level expectation is not attainable for newcomers to Canada who are just beginning to learn basic vocabulary and sentence patterns in English.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assessment of Academic Knowledge and Skills

Language is the most important tool for learning, and for demonstrating learning. Most assessment tasks, including performance-based assessment tasks such as writing explanations for mathematical solutions as well traditional tasks such as writing answers to test questions, measure reading and writing skills in English as much as, or even more than, academic knowledge and skills.

Students who are learning the language of instruction are often not able to express what they have learned in the second language. They may have difficulty understanding what they are being asked to do, and they usually need more time than their English-speaking peers because they often think and work in two languages. When they write in English, their teachers sometimes focus as much, or more, on their incomplete knowledge of English as on the information they are trying to communicate. Therefore, alternative assessment strategies are required in order to compensate for these problems and allow students to demonstrate learning in ways that do not depend totally on their proficiency in English.
Try some of these strategies to help your ESL/ELD students show what they know. In the case of students at higher levels of English proficiency, these adaptations will enable them to meet many of the program expectations without modification.

**Reduced Language Requirement**
You can give second language learners the best chance of demonstrating their learning if you remove or lower the language barrier. For example:

- Encourage students to produce assignments and write tests in their first language if they are not yet able to do the task in English. A bilingual teacher or trained tutor can help you to assess the student’s performance.
- Give an oral test; you could do this in two languages if you involve bilingual peers or members of staff.
- Invite beginning learners of English to show what they know, using concrete or visual representations: for example, “Point to…” “Give me…” “Show me…” “Draw…” “Find the page/the picture/the opposite/the word that says…” Students could also match captions to visual representations of information.
- Instead of having students write complete sentences, paragraphs, or essays, provide support for students’ written responses. Create a cloze passage for students to complete with words or phrases selected from a list. Charts and other visual organizers help students to display knowledge or demonstrate their thinking without having to produce large amounts of language.
- Focus on content rather than language when you want to assess what a student knows. Learn to “read through the errors.”
- Assess performance on tasks that involve several different aptitudes or talents, such as demonstrations, oral and written reports, graphic displays, videotapes and audiotapes, concrete models, or bilingual submissions.

**Practice and Feedback**
Practice provides risk-free opportunities for students to practise new knowledge or skills, and receive constructive feedback. Practice should not “count” for marks. If you use written tests, provide practice tests that students work on in groups. The use of students’ first languages to clarify problems should be encouraged. The next day, students take an individual test that is the same or almost the same as the practice test. For example, in mathematics, the problems may be the same, with only the number values changed.

**Performance-Based Assessment**
Performance-based assessment supports higher achievement for all students, especially ESL/ELD learners, by providing practice and feedback before final evaluation. Use this process to implement performance-based assessment in your classroom:
Show the learners a variety of models of acceptable to outstanding performance: sample stories, lab reports, research projects, essays, and other written products; samples of practical work and artistic creations; videotapes of oral presentations and dramatic or musical performances; demonstrations of practical skills and of physical performance in sports and fitness activities, etc.

Invite students to rank the models and figure out what the criteria are. For example, encourage students to identify what makes the difference between an adequate and an excellent performance.

Distribute the rubric you plan to use and discuss what will make the difference between various levels of achievement on a specific aspect of performance.

Provide constructive feedback on process as well as product. Base the assessment on your observation, as well as students’ notes or logs.

Invite students to assess their work, and submit their best performance for summative assessment. For example, if they do three projects in a year, they might choose one to submit for assessment of their performance as “self-directed learners.”

Portfolio Assessment
A portfolio is a file or a box containing evidence of a student’s progress. Portfolios involve teachers and students in collecting and assessing examples of performance and growth over time.

Portfolios may include samples of work, as well as response journal or learning log entries, records of conferences, teacher’s observation comments or checklists, self- and peer assessment forms and checklists, as well as more traditional test and quiz papers.

Portfolios give a more complete view of the learner’s performance and capabilities.

Portfolios may include material in the first language: this acknowledges the student’s proficiency and encourages continued development in that language.

Over the course of a year or semester, samples in the portfolio usually show significant growth in English, in ways that may be less discernible through traditional tests and exams.

Portfolios provide opportunities for parents to be involved in the selection and assessment of their children’s work.

Portfolios provide opportunities for students to assess and select their own work for inclusion in the portfolio. For example, if they write in their journals every week, invite them to choose one or two pieces each term to “polish” for evaluation and for inclusion in the portfolio.

Guiding Questions
Give some clear guidance to the students in the phrasing of the questions on tests and exams, and in instructions for assignments. How much should they write? How many examples should they give? Phrase questions as simply as possible, avoiding the use of passive verbs. Avoid or paraphrase and explain words such as identify, describe, discuss. Students who are learning English as a second language may know the word discuss in general usage but may not know what is required in a History or English examination, and a dictionary explanation may not help in this context. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of this…</th>
<th>Try this…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify the major causes of World War I.</td>
<td>What were the four major causes of World War I?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain how triangles can be classified.</td>
<td>What are the 2 ways of classifying triangles?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the levels of government and their functions.</td>
<td>What are the three levels of government in Canada? What do they do?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thinking Time
Second language learners often need to process ideas in two languages, especially when the task is complex or involves higher-level thinking. This means that everything takes much longer than it would for students who are thinking in one language only. When you use written tests and examinations, give more time, or ask the students to answer fewer questions within the time allotted. Avoid multiple-choice and true/false questions that involve a lot of reading, or “trick questions” that depend on comprehension of fine differences in vocabulary. Instead, use a variety of matching tasks, such as matching captions to visual representations of information, filling in a partly completed organizer, or completing cloze passages with lists of words to choose from. Scaffold students’ longer written responses through sentence completion tasks, or by providing a framework or model answer.

Open Discussion
Discuss openly the alternative assessment strategies and modified expectations you may be using with ESL/ELD learners. Otherwise, some English-speaking students or their parents may perceive your use of alternative assessment tasks and criteria as unfair, especially at the secondary level, where students are sometimes very competitive. Open the discussion by asking English-speaking students to discuss what special consideration they would need if they had to write a project or a lab report in French. Then encourage the students who are learning English as a second language to describe their experiences. Most young people have a keen sense of justice; if they can hear first-hand from their peers about the difficulties they have in trying express what they know in a language that they are still learning, the English-speaking students may respond generously to the needs of their classmates.

Explain the use of the ESL/ELD box on the report card to indicate program adaptation. It is important to explain this to parents as well, and to emphasize that second language learners need less and less adaptation as they become more proficient in English.

Dictionaries
Encourage older students to use dictionaries in tests and examinations. Dictionaries are no substitute for knowledge, but they are essential tools of literacy and scholarship. Perhaps all students, second language learners and native speakers of English, should have access to dictionaries. The school could keep a special set for tests and examinations. Beginning learners of English who are already literate in their first language need bilingual dictionaries to help them translate even basic words in questions and instructions. Beyond the beginning stage, students should be taught how to use monolingual English dictionaries designed for ESL/ELD learners, such as the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English or the Collins Cobuild Dictionary.
Observation

Use observation to assess the learners’ behaviour and involvement in classroom activities. You can assess each student’s performance in being prepared for class, keeping materials organized, keeping a vocabulary notebook, helping with group presentations by providing concrete or visual material, helping to take care of the classroom, and so on. Keep in mind that students can demonstrate involvement and participation in languages other than English.

You will have more opportunities to observe students when they are working in groups or at activity centres. For older students, a checklist might be useful (see next page). You can fill in the form several times during the term or semester for each student in the class. Leave blank all that do not apply.

Explain the form to the students at the beginning of the year or course, and show the individual student the form each time you fill it in. Keep the form on file until the end of the assessment period. You can use the form in parent/teacher interviews, and/or send copies home. The form can be translated into the languages of the school so that it is meaningful to parents.

Weighting

Students who do not have the productive command of English to demonstrate their learning early in the year or semester are nevertheless absorbing language at an amazing rate, and they may be learning more than you think. In a few months they may surprise you with the amount of content they have learned. Because their performance will not be consistent throughout the course— in most cases performance will improve significantly as the students develop greater proficiency in English— special consideration should be given to more recent
evidence of achievement. This will give a better indication of how the students are performing now. You could base your final evaluation on the last few weeks of work, to give a more accurate evaluation of the student’s present level of performance.

You may also need to adjust your weighting of the various components of a task or of the achievement chart on which you base your evaluation.

**Achievement Charts and Rubrics**
The Achievement Chart for the Ontario Curriculum was designed for English-speaking students, and is based on the assumption that all students have had the same opportunities to acquire the specified skills or knowledge. However, this assumption cannot be made in the case of ESL/ELD students, especially recent newcomers, and the descriptions of levels of performance in the achievement chart may be quite inappropriate for these students. It may be necessary to weight the categories differently and/or devise alternative rubrics for second language learners. For example:

The descriptions of levels of performance in the **Communication** category on the Achievement Chart are based on expectations for English-speaking students and are unattainable for most second language learners. They cannot reasonably be expected to perform at the level of their English-speaking peers. In assessing the Communication aspect of any performance task, it would be more appropriate and more equitable to devise a rubric using criteria based on performance descriptors for the appropriate level of development in ESL or ELD.

The **Thinking/Inquiry** category may also require adaptation. The Ontario education system develops skills in self-directed learning, independent research, and projects. Many expectations in the Ontario Curriculum assume that the learners have had opportunities throughout their school careers to develop the required sub-skills such as finding, evaluating, selecting and collating information without copying verbatim. However, most ESL/ELD students who have received some of their education in other countries have much less experience than their peers with this kind of learning. It would not be equitable to use the same criteria for assessment for students who have not had the same opportunity to acquire the necessary skills. Instead, it may be necessary to “reach back” to the expectations of earlier grade levels in this area of the curriculum, using assessment criteria that are realistic in terms of the students’ present level of development and will support their continued development.

The **Knowledge/Understanding** category also poses some problems. The expectations in any given subject area may assume prior knowledge that many ESL/ELD students may not have. For example, the elementary Language expectations are designed for students who have had more opportunity to learn the language than their ESL/ELD peers have. Also, content-based subjects such as Social Studies may assume prior knowledge that recent arrivals have not had an opportunity to learn. It may be necessary to have a different starting point for assessment and instruction with these students, “reaching back” to earlier grade levels if necessary, in order to develop the background knowledge that they need in order to be successful in the specific curriculum area.
Literacy Assessment
Most procedures that are commonly used to assess students’ language development have been developed for native speakers of the language, and are therefore inappropriate for students who have not had the same access and exposure to English as their peers. Some adaptation is required in the tasks and procedures used to assess the reading and writing skills of learners of English.

Reading
Many literacy assessment procedures in use in classrooms today use oral reading, running records, and miscue analysis to assess fluency, reading strategies, and reading comprehension. Other procedures rely on students’ written answers to assess reading comprehension. These are very useful tools for assessing the reading performance of proficient English speakers. However, they are not always appropriate for students who are still learning English. For example:

- Reading aloud for assessment is not appropriate for second language learners, especially in the early stages. They cannot be expected to be fluent readers in a language they are still learning. Students are often so anxious about performance (pronouncing the words correctly) that comprehension is lost.
- Miscue analysis or running records carried out in the second language may not provide reliable information about reading comprehension and reading strategies. For example, pronunciation errors or missed word endings may say more about the student’s incomplete knowledge of the English sound system or English grammar than about reading comprehension or reading strategies. In fact, reading aloud may actually hinder comprehension for second language learners, who are often concentrating on pronunciation rather than comprehension when they read aloud.
- Assessment tools based on “concepts about print” are actually “concepts about English print”. Many students arrive in our schools with concepts about print in their own language: for example, Chinese print is conceptual rather than phonetic, and may be printed vertically rather than from right to left; Farsi script runs from right to left, has no upper case letters, and indicates few vowel sounds.
- Standards developed for English speaking children may not be appropriate for second language learners until they are in the later stages of development and catching up to their peers in English language proficiency. In the meantime, standards will vary by a number of factors, including: length of time in Canada/length of time in an English school environment (for children born in Canada whose home language is other than English); previous educational experience; prior instruction in English.
- Reading passages followed by multiple-choice questions, true-false questions, or questions requiring written answers should be used with caution. Newcomers may be unfamiliar with the format of multiple choice and true-false questions. Also, such questions often rely on subtle nuances of language, or interpretation of “trick” questions, which are unfair to language learners. Questions that require extended written answers depend on the student’s skills in writing at least as much reading skills. Since most second language learners can perform at a higher level in receptive language, their reading comprehension level may be significantly higher than their level of proficiency in writing. Therefore questions requiring extended written answers should be avoided when the focus of the assessment is reading.
How to Adapt Reading Assessment for ESL/ELD Learners

- **Selection of material:** Choose reading material that you could reasonably expect a student to be able to read at his or her present stage of development in English. For example:

  - Use picture books normally used at the primary level with older ESL/ELD students, as long as the illustrations and situations depicted are not too obviously designed for young children.
  - Use material that has been specifically designed for second language learners at various stages of development. For example, several publishers produce graded ESL readers with controlled vocabulary and sentence structure.
  - Beginning learners of English cannot be expected to do more than recognize basic words and respond to very short reading passages.
  - Informal reading inventories such as the *Burns-Roe Informal Reading Inventory* can be used with students at higher levels of development in ESL or ELD (Stages 3 and 4 for elementary students; ESL or ELD C and up for secondary students).
  - Make sure that the assessment materials you choose are reflective of linguistic and cultural diversity, and deal with topics and situations that are likely to be familiar to newcomers.

- **Silent reading:** Give the passage to the student to read silently. Then ask oral questions about the text. Students should retain the text for reference and may check back to locate details, find specific words, etc. Your questions should be based on main idea, detail, sequence, cause and effect, vocabulary, and inference. Note that passages and questions dealing with inference, sequence, or cause and effect are not appropriate until students have completed Stage 1 (elementary) or ESL A (secondary).

- **Interpreting or reporting on performance:** If you are using graded material such as an informal reading inventory, levelled books, or the materials provided in the Developmental Reading Assessment, be very cautious about interpreting and sharing information about grade level scores. A Grade 4 ESL learner who reads at the pre-primer level on graded material in English may read at or above grade level in his own language. Similarly, a 17-year-old who reads at Grade 5 level in English may have a reading level equivalent to Grade 12 in her first language. Rather than using grade level scores normed on English speaking students, it would be more useful and more equitable to use assessment criteria that compare learners of English with each other. Use the descriptors from the elementary ESL/ELD resource document (forthcoming from the Ministry) or the secondary curriculum expectations for the specific level of ESL or ELD in which the student is enrolled.

- **Reading in the first language:** You can collect information about reading in the first language by having a conversation about reading, asking about the student's experiences and preferences. You may find that a child who is a beginning reader in English can already read signs and simple stories in Chinese, or has learned to read the Qu’ran in Arabic. You may find that a secondary school student whose reading comprehension level in English is at the early elementary level has read Tolstoy or Dostoevsky in Russian, or likes to read about astronomy in Spanish, or enjoys the poetry of
Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali. With beginning level learners of English, conduct interviews and conferences with the assistance of a bilingual volunteer or peer.

Writing
When you assess an ESL or ELD student’s proficiency in writing, do not use criteria developed for students who are native speakers of English, and do not use exemplars gathered from those students. If you do, you may find out how far the ESL or ELD students lag behind their English-speaking age peers, but as ESL/ELD learners they could not be expected to perform like native speakers. Instead, it is more useful and more equitable to use assessment criteria that compare learners of English with each other. Use the descriptors from the elementary ESL/ELD resource document (forthcoming from the Ministry) or the secondary curriculum expectations for the specific level of ESL or ELD in which the student is enrolled.

Remember that many students have language skills that are more highly developed in a language other than English. For this reason it is important to gather information about each student’s first language development. For example, if you keep a portfolio to track each student’s growth in reading and writing, collect writing samples in each student’s home language as well as in English. You may not be able to read them, but you can learn a lot from observing how the student tackles writing in the first language.

The following comparison of a student’s writing in her first and the second language demonstrates how informative it can be to compare first and second language development. This student from Iran had been in an English-speaking Grade 6 classroom for several months when the sample was collected. She was unable, or unwilling, to do more than write out the alphabet. Her handwriting appears undeveloped for her age, and she mixes upper and lower case letters. On the basis of this sample, the only assessment to be made about this student’s proficiency in English is that she cannot write to communicate in English.
This sample of the same student's writing in Farsi was collected at the same time as the English sample. The Farsi sample gives a much clearer picture of the student's literacy development. It is obvious even to teachers who do not read Farsi that her handwriting is well developed, and that she is able to write continuous prose, and to edit her own work (see the insertion in the last line). According to the Farsi-speaking educator who assessed the sample, the student’s literacy skills in Farsi are well developed and above the expected age or grade level. You can learn a lot simply from looking at a first language sample, but if you can get it assessed by a trained volunteer or a trained student from the senior grades you will learn a lot more.

When you assign a writing task for assessment, make sure that the content is relevant to learners of English. For example, newcomers cannot be expected to write about topics such as winter, specific regions or places such as the Algonquin Forest, or sports and leisure activities such as canoeing, hockey, or skiing. It is also important to assign the task in a form that is familiar to the student. For example, if the piece is to be in the form of an exposition, use modelled and guided writing, provide writing scaffolds and show the students models of performance at various levels— even if English-speaking students may be expected to be familiar with various forms of writing at a specific grade level, no such assumption can be made for the second language learners. In fact many students educated in other countries have learned completely different conventions about how writing should be organized, and
how the writer should relate to the reader. You may find the *First Steps* material very helpful. The *Metro Literacy Videos* also provide examples of teachers providing direct instruction on writing at several grade levels and in different content areas.

**Resources**

*Building Literacy in the Classroom.* Toronto: Metropolitan Toronto School Board, 1997. A series of videos demonstrating exemplary literacy practices, including guided reading and guided writing. Available in most schools in the TDSB, or contact your local Instructional Leader for English and Literacy.


*Collins Cobuild Dictionary.* London: Harper Collins, 1995. For intermediate-advanced learners of English. 75,000 entries. Includes information such as verb forms, count/non-count nouns, simple definitions, and many examples. CD ROM version available. Beginner dictionary also available. [http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/catalog.html](http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/catalog.html)

Education Department of Western Australia. *First Steps.* Addison Wesley, Melbourne, 1994. Series of teachers’ resource books providing practical advice and strategies for assessing and teaching reading, writing, oral language, and spelling. The suggested approaches and strategies are very suitable for ESL and ELD learners, although the developmental continua are not appropriate for students in the early stages of second language acquisition. The *First Steps* approach to writing is recommended for LEAP programs. In the TDSB, contact your local Instructional Leader for English and Literacy for information on how to receive *First Steps* training.

