

# ESL Teachers' Perceptions and Factors Influencing Their Use of Classroom-Based Reading Assessment

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative study that examined English as a second language (ESL) teachers' perceptions of classroom-based reading assessments. ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments, their understanding about the function and effectiveness of this assessment method, and the factors influencing this assessment process are presented. Six middle school and 7 elementary school ESL teachers participated in this study. Data consisted of interviews with ESL teachers, classroom observations, and assessment materials teachers used in the classrooms. Constant comparative method was used for data analysis. Findings of this study include that ESL teachers highly value classroom-based reading assessments, considered them accurate and valuable and thought these assessments could provide great help to the daily teaching of reading. Teachers viewed state-mandated standardized testing negatively and of little value for English language learners. Student characteristics, statewide mandated tests, and district policies were three major forces influencing and controlling the kind of reading assessment used by teachers. The teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and uses of assessment have implications for teacher education programs and policymakers.

I think, with the Stanford 10 test, I get hardly none [feedback on student capability] . . . when I have a child here for 2 months taking the same test as the children who were born here and lived here all their lives and have a lot of support at home. . . . That kind of test doesn't give me anything because I can look at the test and know at least my students are not going to do well on it because [of] the vocabulary alone. They don't, their vocabulary is not that big in English. . . . It is not an accurate way [to assess] what my students are actually capable of . . . (RA, Middle School ESL Teacher)

The above statement, by one of the teachers in this study, demonstrates the frustration many English as a second language (ESL) teachers feel toward state-mandated standardized tests. Many educators fear that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002) and state-mandated standardized tests constrict the curriculum and force teachers to “teach to the test,” thereby reducing the quality of instruction rather than enhancing it (McNeil, 2000). Researchers are also concerned about the overrepresentation of English language learners (ELLs) in special education programs and other minority students who do poorly on standardized tests and the consequent reinforcement and extension of social and educational inequalities (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Duran, 1989; Valenzuela, 1999, 2004).

The implementation of NCLB (2002) has led to large-scale use of standardized tests such as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System in schools. These standardized tests are designed to measure a representative sample of knowledge defined by state and local standards and curricula. To some extent, and for some students, these tests provide evidence of school learning. But for ELLs in U.S. public schools, standardized test results are also likely to reflect limited proficiency in English and a lack of opportunity to learn the subject matter of the tests (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Kohn, 2000; McKeon, 1994; Stiggins, 2002). Researchers have long believed that the use of alternative forms of literacy assessment will help teachers choose instructional strategies aligned with good practice (Airasian, 1991; Resnick & Resnick, 1992; Short, 1993).

Resnick and Resnick (1992) assert that, unlike statewide mandated standardized testing which mainly contributes to public accountability, classroom-based assessments have more power to evaluate instruction and identify students’ personal needs.

Airasian (1991) states that classroom-based assessments “occupy more of a teacher’s time and arguably have a greater impact on instruction and pupil learning than do the formal measurement procedures” (p. 15). Classroom-based assessments, which aim to generate information for teachers to make instructional decisions within the classroom setting, traditionally include teachers’ informal observations, casual questioning, and paper and pencil tests (Wixson, Valencia, & Lipson, 1994; Genesee & Hamayan, 1991). In the last 20 years, researchers have taken efforts to formalize this procedure, enrich its methods, and extend its functions (Darling-Hammond & Goodwin, 1993; García & Pearson, 1994; Resnick & Resnick, 1992; Short, 1993; Stiggins, 1999; Wiggins, 1992).

Classroom-based assessments are seen as helpful because they give a more immediate measure of progress and achievement of students, guide and improve instruction, and diagnose student knowledge of a topic (Hurley & Tinajero, 2001; Short, 1993), provide day-to-day help with teaching and

learning, which is the core and base for attaining excellence in education and school improvement (Stiggins, 1999), as well as help teachers find the weaknesses and strengths of their instruction and encourage them to continuously search for better ways to teach (Shepard, 1995). More specifically, in relation to reading comprehension, classroom-based assessments have a greater ability to measure complex reading tasks in a contextualized setting and can provide ample information about the use of reading strategies and skills by students (García & Pearson, 1994).

Hamayan (1995) states that ELLs can benefit from classroom-based assessments because it “allows for the integration of various dimensions of learning as relating to the development of language proficiency” (p. 214). Central to her claim is the fact that these assessments will provide better opportunities to measure complex constructs such as language proficiency and reading in a contextualized setting. The assessments provide a well-integrated picture about students’ strengths and weaknesses that can guide instruction and encourage greater educational equity for all students. Since ELLs are in a progressive period of language acquisition, it is very important for teachers to obtain information on the progress of students’ learning so that they can notice students’ needs in a timely manner and keep their instruction aligned with students’ development. Classroom-based assessments allow teachers to monitor students’ development day by day (Darling-Hammond & Goodwin, 1993; Resnick & Resnick, 1992; Wiggins, 1992). Since classroom-based assessments are individually oriented, they run less risk of suffering from the cultural bias to which state-mandated standardized tests are prone (Chamberlain & Medinos-Landurand, 1991).

Even though classroom-based assessment has gained considerable attention in the past few decades, there has been little research in understanding ESL teachers’ perceptions and use of classroom-based reading assessments. Understanding teachers’ perceptions and beliefs is important because teachers, heavily involved in various teaching and learning processes, are practitioners of educational principles and theories. Teachers have a primary role in determining what is needed or what would work best with their students.

The findings of research on teachers’ perceptions and beliefs indicate that teachers’ perceptions and beliefs not only have considerable influence on their instructional practices and classroom behavior but also are related to their students’ achievement (Grossman, Reynolds, Ringstaff, & Sykes, 1985; Hollon, Anderson, & Roth, 1991; Johnson, 1992; Morine-Dershimer, 1983; Prawat & Anderson, 1988; Wilson & Wineburg, 1988). Johnson’s 1992 study, for example, indicated that ESL teachers’ classroom practices and behaviors are congruent with their perceptions and beliefs.

Prawat and Anderson (1988) earlier reported that teachers’ beliefs and perceptions influenced their students’ problem-solving ability. Thus, knowing the perceptions and beliefs of teachers enables one to make predictions about

teaching and assessment practices in classrooms. Other researchers of teachers' perceptions have shifted their focus to articulate teachers' voice in discussions of teaching, learning, and educational policies (Commeysra, Osborn, & Bruce, 1994; Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004; Jegede & Taplin, 2000; Skelton, 2003; Zimmerman & Deckert-Pelton, 2003). Among these, only a few studies focus on understanding classroom teachers' perceptions and use of classroom-based assessments. Allen and Flippo (2002) examined the attitudes, concerns, and understanding of preservice teachers of the use of alternative assessments in literacy education courses. Johnson, Guice, Baker, Malone, and Michelson (1995) explored how language art teachers conducted classroom-based assessments and what conceptions the teachers had of literacy development and of their own professional effectiveness in teaching children to read and write.

This paper focuses on how ESL teachers perceive and utilize classroom-based reading assessments. The study focuses on how ESL teachers daily wrestle with issues of appropriateness, breadth, and personal and district constraints as they seek to use assessment as a guide for choosing classroom activities for children whose primary language is not English, but whose achievements are measured using English-language assessments.

The research questions underpinning this study are:

1. What are ESL teachers' perceptions regarding the function, use, and effectiveness of classroom-based reading assessments?
2. What are and how do external factors influence ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments?
3. What are and how do internal factors influence ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Convenience sampling was used to select the participants of this study. The teachers were chosen from districts located in close proximity to each other to facilitate the use of multiple observations and interviews. Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the in-depth analysis involved in the treatment of data, the number of participants was limited to seven elementary and six middle school teachers from nine schools in four school districts in Houston, Texas. All teachers were certified with an ESL endorsement, were currently teaching language arts or reading and had done so for at least 1 year prior to the time the research was conducted. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms (consisting of two initials) are used when referring to the teachers in this study. Table 1 provides demographic data on the teachers involved in this study.

Table 1

*Demographics of Teachers in the Study*

Teacher	School	Gender	Ethnicity	Experience (years)	Grade level and school type	Subject taught
AB	EA	F	White	Over 30	Fifth grade (Elementary school)	Language Arts
KS	EA	F	African American	4	Second grade (Elementary school)	Language Arts
CI	EA	F	Asian/ Pacific American	12	First grade (Elementary school)	Language Arts
MC	EA	F	Asian/ Pacific American	14	Fourth grade (Elementary school)	Language Arts
RA	MB	F	White	2	Beginning level ESL (Middle school)	Reading
AT	MC	F	White	2	Intermediate level ESL (Middle school)	Reading
RL	ED	F	White	6	Fourth grade (Elementary school)	Language Arts
CM	ED	F	White	3	Fourth grade (Elementary school)	Language Arts
BG	ME	M	White	7	Intermediate & advance level ESL (Middle school)	Reading
AN	MF	F	African American	Over 30	All level ESL (Middle school)	Reading
JI	EG	F	Hispanic American	3	Fourth grade (Elementary school)	Language Arts
PF	MH	F	White	2	Beginning level ESL (Middle school)	Language Arts
MH	MI	F	White	7	All level ESL (Middle school)	Language Arts

*Note.* Teacher and school names are pseudonyms.

Across the nine schools in this study, the student population can be characterized as majority minority. The teacher population in three of the four districts was majority White. The ethnic distribution of students and the teachers in this study closely parallel that of the districts; in only one classroom in the study were White students the majority population in a classroom. As is often the case in schools, some of the teachers interviewed were the only ESL teacher in the school (e.g., teachers AN, BG, RA, and MH).

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected by observations, interviews, and document analysis. The researcher collected data by completing two or three observations at different times in each teacher's classroom. The lessons observed were reading lessons or language art lessons focusing on reading. During observations, the researcher was an observer and did not take part in any classroom activity. Field notes on the teacher's use of reading assessments were taken during each observation. After all the observations with a teacher were completed, the researcher shared the observation notes and interpretations with the teacher to check if the researcher's interpretation about the classroom activities were accurate.

One purpose of the interview was to clarify the researcher's initial interpretation of the information collected during the observation(s). Most of the interviews lasted 40–50 minutes; a few took a little longer. The interviews were semi-structured and took place in each teacher's classroom at a time convenient for the teacher. Since the purpose of the interview was to clarify the researcher's understanding of what occurred in a specific classroom, the individual interviews were guided by an individualized set of questions about classroom-based reading assessment based on the class observations. The questions were developed before the interview and necessary modifications and additions to the questions were made as the interview was being conducted (see Appendix for Basic Interview Questions). Each interview was audiotape-recorded and transcribed. After each interview, the transcript and interview summary were sent to the teacher to check for agreement with the researcher's interpretations (member check).

The documents collected included materials related to the schools' or districts' policies and procedures on assessment, including state directives on standardized testing. Also collected were samples of materials teachers used in their classroom for the purpose of reading assessment such as worksheets, books, and paper and pencil tests.

The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data. In this method, the researcher constantly compares the point of view of the participants to find similarities and differences until a pattern or theory can be formulated (Merriam, 1998). The first step of data analysis was open coding, in which meaningful segments of the text were labeled by discrete terms and

formed into data bits. The labels were named based on the research questions and problem statement, the theoretical framework in reading assessment, and the participants' reflection or the researcher's reflection on the study. With the initial coding, the researcher explored information such as the specific assessment techniques an ESL teacher used, the particular feelings and attitudes ESL teachers have toward classroom-based reading assessment, and the basic elements involved in the assessment process. The initial coding resulted in approximately 50 codes.

In the second step of data analysis, the codes dealing with the same themes were grouped into larger categories. Overarching categories were formed, including the classroom-based reading assessments in practice, ESL teachers' perceptions of classroom-based reading assessments, and the internal and the external influential factors.

Finally, these categories were integrated again. During this phase of analysis, patterns within these overarching categories emerged, specifically with regard to the interaction of the various forces in the classroom-based reading assessment process.

## **Findings**

The findings of this study show that ESL teachers generally used three kinds of classroom-based reading assessments. The first was teacher-constructed tests, which includes short quizzes. The second was observation, which involved listening to students' verbal responses and oral reading, general observations, and one-on-one conferences with students. The last type was the use of written notes or essays to assess students' reading skills. In addition to these methods, one ESL teacher, MH, created a series of book reports for teaching and assessing reading in her classroom. Teachers asserted that these assessments provided immediate and useful information about student performance.

Teachers in the study also reported the use of formal paper and pencil tests (e.g., included with district provided curriculum materials), state-mandated standardized tests, and computer-based reading tests in their classrooms. However, these were not seen as valuable components of curriculum planning and in general, the teachers did not see these "official" tests as effective means of providing guidance for daily instruction.

**Question 1: What are ESL teachers' perceptions regarding the function, use, and effectiveness of classroom-based reading assessments?**

According to the ESL teachers in this study, classroom-based reading assessments were basically used to evaluate an individual ELL's reading level (below grade level, on grade level, or above grade level), progress in reading,

and problems he or she had with reading. These assessments assisted teachers to make decisions about student placement, what kind of help to provide to students, and what kind of books to select for students. For instance, AT stated, "I use the outcomes [of classroom-based reading assessments] to decide if they have learned the material they need to learn, enough even to be moved from my class to a higher-level ESL classes. I use them for that." CI stressed that the classroom-based reading assessments she used such as oral testing and reading aloud could inform her about a student's comprehension knowledge and phonic knowledge. JI stated that some classroom-based reading assessments like written notes or comprehension worksheet could tell her "whether or not the students are merely decoding the words in the stories [i.e., are they just saying the words] or decoding with comprehension."

Teachers also commented that classroom-based reading assessments help them make decisions about instruction. Aggregating information about each individual student's reading ability led to an understanding of general performance of the whole class. Based on the general performance of the whole class, teachers evaluated the effectiveness of their teaching and lesson plans and then made decisions about what to add, what to repeat, and what to teach in future classes. For instance, CI stated, "Well, let's say, I test this group, and I look at the scores, and they all did poorly—that means I need to go back and re-teach. The group is not ready to move on to the next lesson." MC considered classroom-based reading assessments as tools that could help her manage the pace of instruction.

In addition to serving as a tool to assess the results of teaching, classroom-based reading assessments were sometimes used as an instructional instrument, helping ESL teachers convey expectations to students and facilitating the learning of reading skills. The teachers commented that using assessment types of documents as instructional materials could be more effective in teaching than generic instructional materials because the use of an assessment instrument allowed students to see how what they were supposed to be learning would be used. This was not seen as "teaching to or teaching the test," but providing students with the context of assessment.

The data analysis indicated that ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments shared particular characteristics such as: assessing without threat, assessing with support, and grading with support. While assessing ELLs, ESL teachers were very careful with the assessment environment and tried their best to provide students with a comfortable and pressure-free environment. Those ESL teachers who were bilingual took advantage of their bilingualism to support students in the assessment process. PF noted, "Most of my students speak Spanish, and I can speak Spanish too. That is helping me a lot. We can translate from one language to another." And in AT's classroom, the teacher allowed students to answer questions in Spanish.



T: OK, for that artist, and then? What did he make?

S3: *Una escultura* [A sculpture].

T: Correct, make sculptures, and what is the character doing? She is just watching and nothing else?

(T = teacher, S# = particular student)

The use of both Spanish and English in the questioning provided a way for AT to know that, even if the students could not express their learning in English, they were understanding the text they were reading. By using their students' first language in classroom assessments, the ESL teachers provided students with more opportunities to demonstrate their reading comprehension. Classroom-based assessments also helped the ESL teachers to be aware of each student's strengths and weaknesses, which the teachers used to guide future instruction.

When talking about grading, most ESL teachers agreed that their grading focused on what their ELLs could do rather than what they could not do. They also stated that grading should serve to encourage students, not frustrate them. "Many of them just have to start having a better self-worth. They just don't think they can speak English, and they can't, unless I convince them that they can," AB, an elementary school ESL teacher said. In addition, ESL teachers mentioned that, in grading, they would consider both the students' past learning and their current performances on the assessment, giving credit to any progress students have made.

The ESL teachers in this study highly value classroom-based reading assessment and considered it an important component of their teaching of reading. They believe that classroom-based reading assessments are valuable because the assessments are clearly tied to instruction, provide teachers with information about individual students' general performance on reading, and show teachers the specific reading skills or strategies a student may be having problems with and what kind of help the students need. For example, CM said, "The teacher assessments are valuable because my assessments drive my instruction."

The ESL teachers also considered classroom-based reading assessments accurate and of high quality because it was a continuous process and conducted by classroom teachers, who are currently teaching the ELLs and know them best. For instance, MC commented, "Since it's really made by the teacher herself and she knows the level or the reading capacity of the students, I think it is very effective in diagnosing what the students really need."

Another teacher, AB, stated, "Any kind of assessment will be more valuable when you know the person you are talking to."

The ESL teachers in this study favored classroom-based reading assessment because of its high efficiency. According to these ESL teachers, most classroom-based reading assessments, especially the ones that are

implemented by the teachers, such as general observation (e.g., observing students as they complete worksheets and participate in small-group conversations), verbal response (e.g., question-and-answer interaction between teacher and student), and reading aloud from textual material are fast, short, and information-rich. Thus, this allows the ESL teachers to know students' current learning level quickly. The efficiency of detailed, immediate feedback obtained through the informal assessments the teachers used was seen as one of the primary benefits of their self-created assessment methods.

The researcher noted that the ESL teachers did not express concern over the issue of the possible lack of reliability and validity of an individual assessment. They viewed any one classroom-based assessment as part of a holistic activity, not to be the basis for making a final decision on student capabilities. Furthermore, most of the teachers in the study were not concerned about the possibility of teacher subjectivity in creating classroom-based reading assessments as an issue.

Some teachers stated that most of the classroom-based reading assessments they used were objective and they did not worry much about subjectivity in their assessing process. For instance, MH stated, "I do not see the subjectivity in my assessment. Sometimes my judgment may be a little subjective, but it is always temporary. The long time work I am with my students helps me provide an accurate assessment of them."

Other teachers did admit that the classroom-based reading assessments they used involved subjectivity, but they did not consider that it would impair the quality of these assessments. For instance, MC believed that the so-called subjectivity in classroom-based reading assessments should not be considered in a negative way, and in fact, it could be an advantage of this kind of assessment:

I would not want to consider it really subjective. I just would want to qualify it as more sensitive to the needs of the learners and since I go with the thinking the teacher who is in contact with the students would know better what materials should be selected for the kids. It is an advantage for the kids.

Only a few teachers expressed concern about subjectivity as a problem in classroom-based reading assessments. However, they felt that subjectivity is always an issue with any type of assessment and testing. The ESL teachers viewed their classroom materials as less subjective in that they were designed for specific students in specific learning situations rather than for "generic" students across all situations in the state.

Even though formal tests were not the focus of this study, they are an integral part of instruction in schools and were mentioned by teachers during the course of our discussions and interviews. ESL teachers expressed concern about some tests (e.g., TAKS exam, the TAKS benchmark tests, and Cognitive

Academic Language Proficiency test) assigned by districts or school administrators and considered these tests as useless and a waste of time. In fact, the ESL teachers had concerns about assessing their ELLs with any formal paper and pencil test. According to several of the teachers, many ELLs do not have much experience with tests and are easily threatened by them. Furthermore, many ELLs feel nervous and disappointed during testing, or they just ignore these tests and do not realize that they need to try to do their best on them. For most ESL teachers, formal paper and pencil testing was not considered an appropriate and effective way to assess and encourage ELLs' learning of English. For instance, AB strongly supported this view in the following statement:

The assessments are often misleading. I rely more on my interaction with them than I do on the reading test to know how well they are learning. Most of the ELLs at the beginning level are afraid of the paper and pencil tests. If I can get them to interact with me and talk with me, what I learn is much better than paper and pencil tests. I do not have a lot of confidence with the validity of those tests.

PF also commented, "I do give them tests, but I do not average them into test grades because I just don't feel like that is appropriate with this group [beginning level ELLs]. Some of them just really are afraid of tests." Another teacher, MH, argued that she did not want to use the tests or quizzes provided by the district or state because they were ineffective in her classroom.

Although the ESL teachers in the study did not feel formal paper and pencil tests were appropriate or helpful measurements of their students' learning, such tests were used in their classrooms because almost all districts or schools participating in this study require teachers to use them. The ESL teachers have to follow the requirements of the districts or schools, even though they do not always agree with them.

In general, classroom-based reading assessments help ESL teachers because of the immediacy of the information received, the discrete information on each student, and the information gained provides a continuous update on student performance. The ESL teachers highly valued this kind of assessment and considered them an important part of their teaching of reading.

**Question 2: What are and how do external factors influence ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments?**

The analysis of teachers' interview data and classroom observations indicated that classroom-based reading assessments are limited and influenced by multiple factors outside the classroom as well. Some of the external factors were so powerful, as shown by teachers' perceptions in this study, that they overrode ESL teachers' control of the process of classroom-based reading assessments. This study indicated that four major external forces influenced

the ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments: district and school administrators, statewide mandated standardized testing, parents, and lack of opportunity to work as a team in developing an instructional program for students.

### *Districts and school administrators*

When talking about whether district or school policies influenced their use of classroom-based reading assessments, the ESL teachers used words like "Yeah, a great deal," "A very big influence," or "The influence is great," to express their feelings about the impact of districts and school administrators.

However, the extent of influences among these districts or schools varied greatly. Some districts or schools just provided general guidelines for teachers to follow. Others, however, had very detailed regulations about the ways or even the specific steps that teachers should follow when conducting classroom-based assessments, leaving little room for teacher autonomy to make their own choices. For instance, at the EA school where KS and CI taught, the school authorities require all teachers, grades 1-3, (including ESL teachers) to join a "reading mastery" program in which each step of teaching and assessment of reading is specified. All the teachers in the school are expected to follow the program. KS said, "They [school administrators] make sure we have enough tests to give [i.e., at each checkpoint in the program teachers are provided with the designated tests to measure student progress]. As I said, the school is in a reading mastery program, so we are doing things they ask." CI reinforced the measure of school administrator control, stating: "The way I assess is what they tell me to do." She further implied that she was powerless to affect any change, "I have a coordinator. She comes and she assesses me every week. She comes in and she sits down and she observes me. So, if I am not doing what I am supposed to do, she will take points off [my evaluation]."

Finally, some of the ESL teachers also felt uncomfortable about the way that their school administrators pushed them to work on preparing students for the statewide mandated standardized tests. For instance, RL complained that her school principal "...shoves the TAKS test down our throats [e.g., daily use of required test preparation materials, specific amounts of time allocated to test preparation]...and her salary is based on how well we perform. So, you know, we are constantly being threatened."

### *Statewide mandated standardized testing*

Most of the data in this study was collected in Spring 2004, the semester when the TAKS was administered; this provided an opportunity to view how statewide mandated standardized testing influenced the lives of ESL and other teachers and students in these schools. During the 2 months prior to the administration of the test, the teachers had to teach and assess only the specific objectives which would be covered on the upcoming test. Also, the

ESL teachers had to constantly shift directions of their teaching and assessing to adapt to the changes in TAKS. Sometimes the changes in TAKS objectives seem to invalidate teachers' past classroom objective and instructional/assessment strategies. AT describes her perception:

A lot of times, what happens is when you teach students and you think that is OK they got a pretty good handle of this knowledge, it is working pretty well, and then, the test [TAKS or district assessment] changes to another direction. Then, suddenly, you are thinking, "Wait a minute, I didn't teach them this, we are in trouble" . . .

The TAKS exam not only changed teachers' daily teaching and assessment practices, but it also put great pressure on the teachers. While talking about the statewide mandated standardized test, RL said, "All those books over there on the counter are TAKS stuff and it's, you live, eat, breathe in fear of this test." AT also complained, "We have so many tests; it will blow your mind. We have test, test, test. . ." For CI, a first-grade ESL teacher, her students did not need to take TAKS until they went to the third grade, but she also could not escape the influence of TAKS. During the interview, she kept talking about how her current work could help students pass the TAKS when they went to the third grade. She directly mentioned "TAKS" twice and "the third grade" 11 times in the 40-minute interview. For example, she said, "Yes, it is, now, you know, why we do so much reading in first grade because they have to pass TAKS, the state test in third grade. When they get to the third grade they need to know that." In addition, CI also added that teachers were not the only ones who felt the pressure of TAKS. School administrators had to endure the same pressure too, as their performance ratings and continued employment depend on how well students and various subgroups of students (by ethnicity, race, SES, etc.) do on the TAKS exam.

Under the pressure of the statewide mandated standardized testing, the ESL teachers in this study believed that they had a responsibility to help students pass the TAKS exam. They focused their teaching and assessing on preparing students for the test. As CI described, "We do teach the kids the skills that are covered on the test. . . what we teach in reading has to reflect what is covered on the test too." However, AB stated, "I am not a big fan of standardized tests. I think they are an unnecessary evil," and "I can't teach a Spanish-speaking person all these little intricacies. . . the little variation, the language. . . ."

When talking about their attitudes towards and perceptions of classroom-based reading assessments, the ESL teachers commented on the effect of statewide mandated standardized testing (usually referring to the TAKS). According to these teachers, the statewide mandated standardized test was unrealistic and too hard for ELLs and failed to provide accurate and valuable evaluation of ELLs' reading progress and competency. For instance, RA commented:

I don't really see those being of value to me at all. Because like I said, I can look at those books and look at the stories they contain, look at the questions they are asking, and I know most of my students are not going to be able to do very well on those tests. I don't feel standardized tests will help me at all.

The ESL teachers criticized the statewide mandated standardized test as being disconnected from the ESL curriculum and not helpful in guiding ESL teaching. RA also thought that statewide mandated standardized testing did not provide any benefit to her teaching. Underlying all of the teachers' conversations about the TAKS test was the lack of immediacy in knowing how well their students scored on the test because the test results are returned to the schools several months after the tests are administered.

### *Teamwork*

All of the ESL teachers appreciated the value of teamwork and believed that communication with other teachers could help them with both teaching and assessment. ESL teachers' teamwork took various forms; it could be highly structured, where teachers worked together on each step of the assessment they used in the classrooms. For some teachers, teamwork was just an exchange of experience, techniques, and methods. A few teachers had regular and frequent discussion with other teachers. Others (e.g., AT, RA, and MC) rarely had a chance to communicate with other colleagues. AT explained her situation:

There are only three ESL teachers in this school, but there is only one beginning, one intermediate teacher, and only one advanced teacher. Then one or two transitional teachers, but we are on different levels, the levels are so different and what the kids can do in each different level is so different . . . we modify to different levels since our kids are in different levels so we don't spend a lot of time collaborating between us on assessment methods.

RA was the only ESL teacher at her school as was BG. Opportunities for sharing were limited when only one ESL teacher was at a school.

In short, the process of classroom-based reading assessment involves multiple external factors. Districts and schools, statewide mandated standardized testing, parents, and teamwork are the four major forces. Districts and schools provide ESL teachers with the guidelines; statewide mandated standardized testing influences the content of the curriculum, the schedule, and the methods of teaching and assessment; and parental involvement and teamwork of teachers increase the performance of both teachers and students in teaching and learning.

### Question 3: What are and how do internal factors influence ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments?

The findings of the current study indicate three types of internal factors influence ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments: students, materials, and time. The influences from students were reflected in three aspects: a wide range of reading ability, increasing ESL population, and students' ability, or lack of ability, to attend to the lesson presented. Although in most of the schools, ELLs were divided into different groups or classes according to their reading levels, the range of reading ability still varied widely within each group or class. The wide ranges of reading ability complicated ESL teachers' assessment work as what would work for one student was inappropriate for another student with different abilities.

The increasing ESL population in schools and classrooms also affected ESL teachers' assessment work. For many schools, there were just one or two ESL teachers teaching ELLs at differing learning levels. Teachers sometimes had to prepare six different lessons in 2 days. Despite this heavy workload and restrictions of time limiting teachers' ability to focus on the development of more alternative assessments, all of the teachers still thought the assessments they were using were superior to those provided by the district or required by the state.

When talking about assessment materials, while eight of the ESL teachers in this study agreed that they had plenty of materials to use for assessment of reading and were satisfied with the quality of these materials and supplies, all of the teachers identified a lack of "appropriate" materials that focused on assessing ELLs at their specific levels of expertise.

Student attention span was another factor ESL teachers worried about while conducting assessments. Teachers felt that it was hard to get an accurate measure of a student's reading ability if that student did not try his or her best in the standardized assessments or failed to focus on completing the test. The ESL teachers felt that effort and attention were factors that had an adverse impact on ELL student performance. The teachers also identified that ELLs often have difficulty completing assessments because of stress and unfamiliarity with the language and content being assessed.

The third internal factor that influenced teachers' assessment was time because teachers' schedules were always tight. Most classroom-based assessments of reading did not take much extra teaching time to administer because they were directly correlated with, and a part of, daily teaching. Other assessments, especially ones assigned by schools or districts such as the TAKS, were viewed as requiring a lot of time, which teachers saw as taking away from beneficial instructional time.



The internal factors refer to the subject, the process, and the material of an assessment. The three major internal factors explored in the process of classroom-based reading assessments are students, assessment materials, and time. Students' attention and the quality of assessment materials affect the accuracy of the assessments; time and the range of students' reading ability increase the difficulty teachers have in assessing student progress toward language acquisition.

## Discussion

Four conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, classroom-based reading assessments play a central role in ESL teachers' decisions about teaching and assessment of reading and are the foundation teachers use to make decisions about individual students and instructional practices best suited to individual ELLs. The ESL teachers' perceptions parallel the major arguments of many researchers and educators that classroom-based reading assessment benefits instruction and pupil learning (Airasian, 1991; Shepard, 1995; Short, 1993). This study showed that ESL teachers believe that classroom-based reading assessments allow them to address ELLs' academic needs and abilities and take these needs into consideration in the assessment procedure. The findings reinforce beliefs in the advantages of classroom-based assessments on ESL education advocated by many researchers and educators, including Darling-Hammond and Goodwin (1993), Hamayan (1995), Resnick and Resnick (1992), and Wiggins (1992).

The ESL teachers in this study highly value classroom-based reading assessments and consider them an accurate and efficient way to measure ELLs' reading ability. All of the ESL teachers in this study preferred classroom-based reading assessments over statewide mandated standardized testing. These findings provide a response to the critiques about the efficiency, accuracy, and validity of classroom-based assessments from researchers and educators such as Worthen (1993) and Norris, Brown, Hudson, and Yoshioka (1998). These authors argue that alternative assessment (classroom-based assessment) does not have a bright future because it fails to provide an integrated structure that shows how to design, pilot, analyze, and revise the procedures of assessment so that the reliability and validity of the procedures of the assessment can be studied, demonstrated, and improved in public. However, these claims are rejected by the ESL teachers in this study. According to the teachers in this study, while classroom-based reading assessments may not provide the statistical levels of reliability and validity sought by psychometricians, classroom-based reading assessments are valuable because they are clearly tied to instruction, provide teachers with information about individual students' general performance of reading, and show teachers the specific reading skills or strategies students have problems with and the kind



of help the students need. The ESL teachers also believe that classroom-based reading assessments are accurate and of high quality because they involve an ongoing process tied to instructional activities. In addition, many classroom-based reading assessments are mainly designed, assigned, administered, and interpreted by ESL teachers who are currently teaching the ELLs and know them best, which further increases the quality of assessments.

The findings of this study also show that the ESL teachers do not consider subjectivity a serious issue in classroom-based reading assessments. When talking about the issue of subjectivity and objectivity related to classroom-based reading assessments, most of the ESL teachers did not believe that subjectivity was a problem in their classroom-based reading assessments. Some did admit the existence of subjectivity, but did not consider it as detrimental to the quality of the assessments, and they also argued that sometimes the subjectivity could be an advantage to the fair assessment of students.

Second, ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments is largely under the control of districts or school authorities and there are disagreements on using different methods of assessment of ELLs between teachers and the districts or schools. This study exposes the problem of teachers' lack of power in decision-making process with regard to educational policy in the current educational system, a situation that has been addressed by researchers such as Good and Brophy (2000). In the current educational system, teachers are often left out in the process of decision-making related to teaching, learning, and school affairs. They have to follow policies and rules that are made by districts, administrators, and principals. The powerlessness of teachers on the decision-making of educational policy, in fact, has marginalized teachers' role in education. However, teachers are the ones who work at the front line of education, having the first-hand knowledge about what works and what is needed for teaching and learning, and they are also the final conductors of educational policies. Ignoring the input of teachers in the process of decision-making is not only a great waste of resources, but also could ultimately hurt the effective application of any educational policy in practice. In addition, Good and Brophy also point out that if schoolteachers are powerless in most school and district life, there is no way to set up a real democratic educational system. Therefore, teachers should be empowered more in our modern educational system.

Third, statewide mandated standardized testing has, in many instances, overshadowed and distorted ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessment in practice (e.g., focusing on test objectives rather than meeting needs of the students, allocating instructional time to review test items not in their regular curriculum as reported by CI, KS and RL above). This finding is consistent with other empirical studies including Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001), Urdan and Paris (1994), Johnson, Guice, Baker, Malone, and Michelson

(1995), and Haladyna, Nolen, and Haas, (1991). For instance, Johnson et al.'s study (1995) found that pressure from accountability assessment forced teachers to change the ways of their teaching and assessment in the classroom. Hoffman et al. (2001) found that teachers started to prepare students for the TAKS exam more than a month before testing, but they almost always plan their curriculum for the year to emphasize those areas that will be tested on the TAKS exam. Urdan and Paris's study (1994) of 153 teachers from across the United States revealed that most teachers have negative beliefs about the merits and validity of statewide mandated standardized tests—especially teachers of non-White students view standardized tests more negatively and perceive more negative consequences for students.

Finally, as captured by this qualitative study, ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessments is a multifaceted process which works through the negotiation of multiple forces on teachers, including teacher's perceptions, external factors such as district, school, and parental expectations, and the identified internal factors. Figure 1, based on the findings of this study, provides a graphic display of the relationship of the various influences on ESL teachers' perception and practice of classroom-based reading assessment.

In Figure 1, the ESL teachers have the greatest influence on classroom-based reading assessments, having direct control of this assessment process, but their assessment practices are largely influenced and limited by multiple internal and external factors. For instance, the large number of students and wide range of reading ability of these students complicate teachers' assessment work. Students' attention also has direct impact on the result of this assessment; limitations on time circumscribe teachers' ability to give further development to the assessments; and the quality of assessment materials has influence on the quality of the assessments. Statewide mandated standardized testing and administrators of schools and districts are two major external factors influencing this assessment process. The former changes every aspect of ESL teachers' teaching and assessment: the content, the schedule, and the methods. The latter guide and partly control the way ESL teachers conduct classroom-based reading assessments. At the same time, statewide mandated standardized testing also puts pressure on the administrators of schools and districts who transfer these pressures to teachers. In addition, teamwork increases teachers' assessment skills. Parents' involvement indirectly influences assessment and increases students' scores on classroom-based reading assessments.

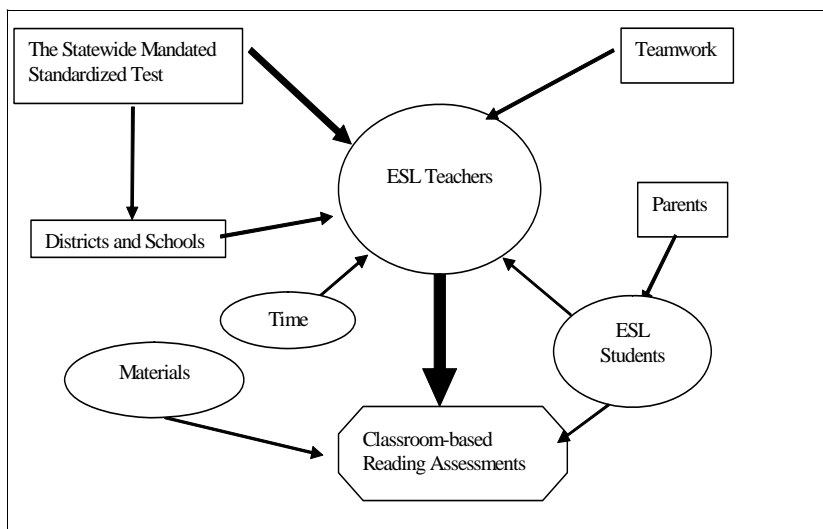


Figure 1. The interactions between ESL teachers and factors influential in the classroom-based reading assessment process.

Note. The thickness of the line indicates relative weight of influencing factor.

## Implications

The current study affirms the importance of studying teachers' perceptions and views. According to this study, teachers are the direct practitioners of classroom-based reading assessments, and their assessment practices are based on their perceptions and understanding of different educational issues. Issues of reliability and validity of teacher-made tests concern the teachers less than the utility of an assessment procedure to provide guidance for instruction and support for student learning.

Our findings show a general picture of ESL teachers' use of classroom-based reading assessment in practice including the process, the functions, the problems, and the influential factors, "providing a foundation for possible recommendations regarding continuation or change" (Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 126). The findings of this study confirm prior research (e.g., Hurley & Tinajero, 2001; Short, 1993) that classroom-based assessments guide instruction and identify individual student's learning strengths and weaknesses. The findings also reveal that ESL teachers have little faith in the usefulness and validity of standardized tests for evaluating ELLs' reading proficiency.

Despite the lack of satisfaction with standardized tests, the teachers in our study reported that they and other teachers often take time away from regular classroom instruction to prepare students to take the tests. The study

has implications for district and school administrators' work. Districts and school administrators should pay as much attention to classroom-based assessment as to standardized testing, addressing its importance in school life and provide teachers with more support regarding the use of classroom-based reading assessments. For instance, districts can provide workshops about assessment skills and strategies or provide teachers with more assessments materials and supplies.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Classroom-based reading assessments involve teachers, students, and district and school administrators. To have a comprehensive and profound understanding of classroom-based assessment, the voices of all the involved parties should be heard and addressed. The present study only focused on ESL teachers' perceptions and use of classroom-based assessment. Students, parents, and administrators were not involved in this study. Further research is needed to investigate the contributions and perceptions of these other forces.

This study has shown that classroom-based reading assessments play a valuable role in ESL teaching and learning, and most of them are designed, assigned, administered, and interpreted by ESL teachers. Further research is needed to investigate the preparedness of current preservice ESL teachers to develop and use classroom-based assessments for ELLs.

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## Appendix

### Basic Interview Questions

1. What types of informal assessment methods do you use to assess students' reading competence in your classroom? Would you explain to me how you use them? Which of these do you use most often? Is the one you use most often your favorite? If yes, why? If not favorite, why do you use it most often?
2. How often do you use these different methods?
3. What kinds of difficulties or problems do you encounter when assessing reading in your classroom?
  - a. Do you have enough material or information to conduct the assessment?
  - b. Do your students' reading abilities have a large range? How does this range in ability affect your assessments?
  - c. Do you want to get expertise help?
  - d. Do the classroom-based assessment tasks take too much of your time or create more burdens on your daily work?
4. What kinds of information do these assessments give you? What kinds of information do they leave out? What is the quality of information you believe these assessments give you?
5. How valuable do you believe these assessments to be? What function do you see these assessments serving?
6. How do students' personal background information influence your interpretation of the outcomes of assessment? How do you collect this information?
7. How do you use the outcomes of assessment? What kinds of influence do they have on your instruction for reading?
8. How does your school administrator or district requirements influence your assessment design in classroom?
9. What kinds of influence do statewide mandated tests have on your classroom-based reading assessment?
10. Do you discuss assessment methods with other ESL teachers or mainstream teachers? How do these discussions affect your own assessment design? Could you please give me some examples?