

Needs assessments as tools for ESL teachers

In a border town like El Paso, where Spanish speaking people can do their shopping, get medical attention, and get just about any kind of service, without having to use a word of English, needs assessment tools for ESL instructors are useless and unrealistic. Students completing an assessment form are asked to decide if they are able to do things like making a doctor's appointment or shopping for food or clothing using the English language. How can they answer this if they have never experienced it?

Role playing is a good way of exposing students to situations where they have to use English to communicate, so they can see if they can truly do what the needs assessment tool is asking.

First, students were asked to fill the assessment form without any explanation, other than the reason for the assignment. After having to return incomplete forms a few times and having to tell the students to just answer as best as they could, we then started role playing the different situations.

Next the students filled out the same form again. The results showed quite a difference. Some students realized they had problems with items they had answered they could do and others realized they were able to do things they had answered they couldn't on the previous form.

This was very time consuming but I think that it turned out to be much more realistic, besides it was a learning experience, both for me and my students. I now think I can work with my students on their actual weaknesses and reinforce their true strengths,

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Needs Assessment Results (before role play)

Put a checkmark(√) In the box that best describes you (one √for each row)

Here's what I can do...	I can do this. No problem	I do OK most of the time, except when things are complicated	This is a little difficult for me, but I can do it with some help from others.	This is very difficult for me. I can only do it with a lot of help from others.	I can't do this. No way. It's much too difficult.
Clarify something I don't understand	5	2	3	5	3
Ask questions	1	5	4	5	3
Call for emergency help (police, ambulance, fire).	1	6	3	4	4
Communicate with my child's school	0	3	8	4	3
Find someone's telephone number in the telephone book.	7	3	3	4	1
Use services at a bank.	0	2	3	8	5
Shop for food and clothes.	4	4	5	4	1
Apply for a job	0	5	4	6	3
Make a doctor's appointment.	1	4	5	6	2
Talk to my doctor.	0	3	4	7	4
Figure out my phone bill or electricity bill.	3	5	3	5	2
Use a map to find places.	1	6	2	5	4
Give directions to help someone find a place.	0	2	3	5	8

Needs Assessment Results (after role play)

Put a checkmark(√) In the box that best describes you (one √for each row)

Here's what I can do...	I can do this. No problem	I do OK most of the time, except when things are complicated	This is a little difficult for me, but I can do it with some help from others.	This is very difficult for me. I can only do it with a lot of help from others.	I can't do this. No way. It's much too difficult.
Clarify something I don't understand	4	5	4	2	3
Ask questions	4	3	4	5	2
Call for emergency help (police, ambulance, fire).	2	6	4	3	3
Communicate with my child's school	3	2	7	4	2
Find someone's telephone number in the telephone book.	9	5	1	3	0
Use services at a bank.	1	5	5	4	3
Shop for food and clothes.	9	4	0	5	0
Apply for a job	3	6	1	7	1
Make a doctor's appointment.	5	4	3	5	1
Talk to my doctor.	3	5	1	5	4
Figure out my phone bill or electricity bill.	9	5	2	2	0
Use a map to find places.	8	6	0	3	1
Give directions to help someone find a place.	0	6	3	7	2