

Questions and Observations Based on Survey Submissions

Observations

There does not appear to be any emphasis on professional development for ESL instructors.

- Few respondents indicated that scheduled onsite or paid professional development was available.
- There does not appear to be a coordinated effort for professional development.
- Four teachers in the Montana ABLE system have specific SLA/ESL training, which are ESL Certified, CELTA certificate, M.A. in Linguistics and an Ms.Ed –TESOL. No directors have SLA/Linguistics training. This indicates that there is a general lack of understanding at the administrative and instructional levels of what SLA and ESL instruction is. This is lack of understanding is exemplified by the perceptual dissonance seen in Item H, Professional Development Content. The most glaring omission was that NO respondents stated Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as an item of interest. What we do is based on SLA theory and its attendant skill sets. For example, one cannot teach “real-life” listening and speaking skills without a technical knowledge of comparative L1/L2 phonology, phoneme discrimination skills, L1/L2 phonemic articulation points and the reduced speech patterns of standard spoken American English.
- The surveys validated that the overwhelming majority of teachers/directors are not speaking the common language of the field. In addition to the above example, refer to the item “Please list the currently accepted standards....” It appears that the knowledge of such standards is lacking in the majority of respondents.

Questions:

How can the perception of professional development be expanded for directors and coordinators so they will understand the importance of talking to instructors about their professional development needs and accommodate them accordingly?

Answer: (1) Directors and coordinators must be made to realize that ESL students, although the minority of ABE students in Montana, are an equally important category of student and are taught differently. They are outside the familiar confines of what constitutes instruction in the L1 ABE classroom as well as the confines of (most) directors' personal mindsets. To put it succinctly in Directorese, numbers are numbers and gains are gains. So it is incumbent upon directors and coordinators to initiate the PD needs dialogue with their instructor(s) rather than assuming that the standard ABE pap is applicable to those “other students and their instructors”.

(2) Since no directors or coordinators stated having a (formal) background in the SLA/Linguistics fields, they should **encourage** their ESL instructors to submit professional development plans and provide the time/monetary support necessary for the work to be undertaken – **and stay out of the way**. One cannot supervise something one knows nothing about.

I say this for a reason, because we have to aware of the “authority as knowledge” tendency, which can either be an offensive or a defensive mechanism. I was asked by a former administrator if I had a professional development plan for the quarter and why I hadn’t submitted it. I hesitated before telling her that I was working on selected junctures of syntax, phonology, morphology and meaning in certain native languages spoken in my class. The objective was to contrast those junctures with English for the purpose of student awareness and note. And, yes, I do have two heads, but I was never asked that question again. (Terry Kelley 10.09)

In addition, I would say that through a “critical friend”- a person from outside of the system who provides guidance and feedback. The critical friend, would assist teachers and program administrators in a change process. Assisting in interpretation and reflexion, providing voice from outside of the class, school or program. (Katya Marandino Irish)

Which brings up another point: We are talking about ‘system change’ and about ‘iinstructor change’. As we all know, the ‘system’ has to buy into any desired change (possibly at gun point) before the concept can be introduced and carried to fruition. (Naturally, the change agent that you mention would be one from the field of SLA/ESL. . So, it’s double our fun. (Terry Kelley 10.09)

How does Montana address sequencing in supporting informed instructional practice?

This is the conundrum you are faced with. There is no difference between your position on conferences, i.e., attend/return/forget (which is certainly not always the case) and the sequencing/sustainability continuum of what you/we want to accomplish via this CAELA project. Sustainability, or on-going PD and the implementation thereof, is a matter of professionalism. The key would be to invite professionalism by making it clear that YOU and your directors both expect and support it. As in any singular endeavor, incentives are always appreciated. What could they be? One hand clapping (the instructor) won’t do it.

How do we balance training and substantive job-embedded professional development?

Don’t forget that “action research” was the second PD choice of the respondents. There is a stated connection at least.

The interest in action research opens all kinds PD activities that would be substantive, collaborative, (even the ABE/ESL divide) cooperative, uber-team building and potentially soften the isolation aspect that Katya mentions. (Terry Kelley 10.09)

All of the stakeholders involved, including the teachers receiving professional development, need to have a shared vision for the scope and expected outcomes of the professional development provided, understand how specific activities relate to each other, and work together to reach shared goals.

(Katya Marandino Irish)

Agreed, but we CANNOT let anyone blithely, i.e., erroneously, equate student outcomes as a reflection our PD outcomes. I can see it coming; instant gratification (or false justification) is so appealing to the uninitiated. (Terry Kelley 10.09)

How can MT ensure that its ABE ESL instructors communicate in the language of the field to express what they know as well as to recognize and explore areas of SLA which are unfamiliar to them.

How can we be assured the educators will have the knowledge to read and critically review research to make informed decisions regarding their professional practice?

How can our ESL professional development link with ABE language arts and math instructors to help them work more effectively and efficiently with ESL students?

This is important, since a good number of respondents stated they were interested in ESL/GED transition PD training.

*ABLE language arts and math instructors must understand that there are particular concepts that they must also understand in order to be effective with adult English language learners: how second and additional languages are learned; the role of the native language learning, and cultural issues that teachers must adress.***(Katya Marandino Irish)**

Totally agree, so I guess it is triple our fun. (Terry Kelley 10.09)

How can we be assured that a Montana professional development plan will change practice?

Professional development should not exist in isolation, but as part of a system for ensuring that the teacher workforce is qualified to teach adult English language learners.(Katya Arpon Marandino)

I agree with you. What are the logistical/ delivery possibilities we can use break down the inherent geographical isolation that we work in? What are the resources for doing so? How do we define 'qualified'? And how do we provide for beginning, intermediate and advanced levels of PD?

Our needs, and those of my counterpart, Jacquie Teasdale, are very different from the majority of ABE ESL instructors and tutors. And, the ESL types are not the only ones in ABE that need (basic) ESL competency as you have said. I have some ideas that we can bat around when the time comes to do so. (Terry Kelley 10.09)

Just a side comment: I was great to see via the survey that so many of our ESL instructors/tutors have studied other languages to greater or lesser degrees and have had very positive living abroad experiences. (Terry Kelley 10.09)

Byrdeen's summary comments (the director perspective)

Wow! I read the observations/responses with much interest . . . and reflection. Since I am a project director that by position supervises a variety of programs and staff, I'm one of those that does not have the ESOL licensure nor background in the field of instructing in this arena. Therefore, I'm relying heavily on Katya and Terry to continue my "education" in this area though Bozeman has a history of intense ESOL programming; however, I believe that project directors can--and indeed do in most cases--understand what it takes to be successful in an educational environment. When hiring for our program, the goal is to hire those with expertise in the field and at the minimum are certified teachers (knowing that ESOL specialization is what makes the most effective instructional delivery).

I rely on staff in various programs to provide the level of professionalism and expertise to fulfill the "job," knowing that ongoing professional development is probably the main ingredient for growth in individuals that provide educational services. Research-based activity is a must but with the expectation of accountability.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading your communication . . . and learned . . . that this process of integrating and supporting ESOL professional development will be a challenging task. I concur that attending a session (or two!) at a 1- or 2-day conference does not meet the need . . . the intensive development of a sequenced event for professional development is ideal.

I'm truly excited to be a part of this journey and thank you for letting "tag along."