

Managing Curriculum-Based ESL Assessment through the SACSA Framework: Evidence from Written and Oral Learner Performance

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Abstract

This study assesses the written and oral performance of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners through the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) framework. The assessment focuses on four language dimensions: **Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode**. The data consist of one written personal recount produced by a primary-years student and one oral personal information report delivered by a middle-years student. This study uses a formative, performance-based assessment approach. Student evidence was matched with the descriptors of the SACSA ESL Scope and Scales to identify proficiency levels and instructional needs. The findings show that both students performed satisfactorily at Scale 3. They demonstrated a basic understanding of the assigned genres and could communicate simple information. However, both students still showed limitations in content elaboration, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary range, evaluative language, sentence variation, and tense consistency. The results indicate that the SACSA framework can help teachers diagnose language development more precisely. ESL instruction should strengthen scaffolding, explicit genre teaching, contextual vocabulary development, and timely formative feedback to support gradual improvement in written and oral communication.

Keywords: ESL; SACSA; formative assessment; genre-based pedagogy; language development.

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment plays a central role in English as a Second Language (ESL) education because it helps teachers understand how learners use language in real communication. In contemporary language classrooms, assessment does not only measure final achievement. It also supports learning by identifying students' current abilities, diagnosing specific areas of difficulty, and guiding teachers in designing instructional support. This function is highly relevant for ESL learners because their language development involves several interrelated abilities, including vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, text organisation, spoken interaction, and sensitivity to context. When teachers assess these abilities through clear criteria, they can provide feedback that directly supports students' progress.

Many ESL learners still face difficulties when they need to produce written and oral texts for academic and social purposes. These difficulties do not only appear in isolated grammar errors. They also appear in weak genre control, limited vocabulary, inconsistent tense use, unclear sequencing of ideas, and limited ability to express interpersonal meanings. In writing, learners

may know the topic but fail to organise events into a coherent text. In speaking, learners may communicate basic information but rely on repeated sentence patterns and limited lexical choices. These conditions show that ESL assessment needs to examine how learners use language as a whole, not only how they answer discrete grammar questions.

A major problem in ESL assessment is the frequent separation between assessment and instruction. Some assessment practices focus mainly on scores, while students receive limited guidance on how to improve their language performance after the assessment. This approach can reduce the instructional value of assessment. Wiliam (2011) explains that formative assessment becomes effective when it informs the next steps of learning. Black and Wiliam (2018) also emphasise that assessment should help teachers and students recognise the gap between current performance and expected learning goals. In ESL contexts, this means that assessment should produce evidence about students' language use and convert that evidence into specific feedback and classroom support.

This study responds to that problem by applying the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) ESL Scope and Scales as a framework for assessing written and oral learner performance. SACSA provides a systematic way to examine language through four dimensions: Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode. Genre refers to language use for achieving different communicative purposes. Field refers to language use for expressing ideas and experiences. Tenor refers to language use for interacting with others and managing interpersonal meanings. Mode refers to language use for constructing spoken and written texts. These four dimensions allow teachers to assess language performance more holistically because they connect linguistic form, meaning, context, and communicative purpose.

The use of SACSA is relevant to genre-based pedagogy. Genre-based pedagogy views language learning as a process of understanding how texts work in particular social and academic contexts. Hyland (2018) argues that genre knowledge helps learners recognise how language choices differ across text types and communicative situations. Johns (2017) also explains that explicit attention to genre supports students in organising ideas, selecting relevant vocabulary, and using appropriate language conventions. In this study, genre becomes an important dimension because the written task is a personal recount and the oral task is a personal information report. Each task requires different stages, language features, and communicative functions.

Formative feedback also provides an important theoretical foundation for this study. Feedback in ESL learning should not only identify errors. It should give students clear and usable information about what they have done well, what needs improvement, and how they can improve in the next task. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) state that effective feedback supports self-regulated learning because it helps students monitor their own progress. Shute (2008) adds that feedback is most useful when it is specific, timely, and connected to learning goals. Through SACSA, feedback can be directed to precise aspects of performance, such as genre structure, vocabulary range, grammatical control, interactional appropriateness, and text coherence.

Scaffolding strengthens the connection between assessment and learning. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development explains that learners can perform more complex tasks when they receive temporary and appropriate support. Gibbons (2015) applies this idea to second language learning by showing that teachers can support learners through modelling, guided practice, explicit language focus, and gradual transfer of responsibility. In ESL classrooms, scaffolding is especially important because learners often need support to understand task expectations, organise texts, expand vocabulary, and use grammar accurately. Assessment results should therefore inform the type of scaffolding that teachers provide.

Vocabulary development is another key issue in ESL performance. Learners with limited vocabulary often depend on basic words and repeated expressions, even when the task requires more precise and elaborated meanings. Nation (2017) argues that vocabulary knowledge affects comprehension and production across language skills. Schmitt (2020) further explains that vocabulary learning requires attention to word meaning, form, use, collocation, and context. In written and oral assessment, vocabulary cannot be separated from the ability to communicate ideas. The Field dimension in SACSA helps teachers observe whether learners can use relevant vocabulary to express personal experiences, describe people, explain preferences, and organise information meaningfully.

Oral proficiency also requires specific assessment attention. Speaking performance involves more than pronunciation and grammatical accuracy. Learners need to organise ideas, maintain interaction, use appropriate expressions, and adjust their language to the audience and context. Luoma (2004) notes that speaking assessment should examine the ability to use language meaningfully in communicative tasks. This perspective supports the inclusion of oral assessment in the present study. By evaluating an oral personal information report through Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode, the study can identify not only what the learner says, but also how the learner organises information, interacts with listeners, and controls spoken language.

Based on these issues, this study aims to assess the written and oral performance of two ESL learners by using the SACSA framework. The first assessment examines a primary-year student's written personal recount. The second assessment examines a middle-year student's oral personal information report. The study focuses on how each learner demonstrates control of Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode, and how the assessment results indicate areas that require instructional support. This purpose aligns with the need for assessment that is descriptive, formative, and directly connected to classroom improvement.

This study is expected to provide practical and theoretical contributions to ESL assessment. Practically, the findings can help teachers design feedback and scaffolding based on specific evidence of learner performance. Teachers can use the results to plan explicit instruction in genre structure, vocabulary development, tense accuracy, sentence variation, and evaluative language. Theoretically, this study shows how SACSA can function as a holistic framework for interpreting learner performance across written and oral modes. By connecting assessment criteria with language development, this study supports the view that assessment should become an integral part of teaching, not a separate activity that only produces scores.

METODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive evaluative design within a formative assessment approach. This design was selected because the study aimed to assess authentic evidence of English as a Second Language (ESL) learner performance, not to test an experimental treatment. The analysis focused on how learners used English in written and oral tasks and how their performance corresponded to the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) ESL Scope and Scales.

The target of the study consisted of two ESL learners represented by two forms of student work. The first data source was a written personal recount produced by a primary-years student. The second data source was an oral personal information report delivered by a middle-years student after interviewing a friend. These two tasks were selected to represent two language modalities, namely written communication and oral communication. The researcher acted as the assessor who examined the performance evidence, matched the evidence with the SACSA descriptors, and formulated instructional recommendations.

Data were collected through documentation of student language performance. The written data consisted of the student's personal recount text. The oral data consisted of performance evidence from the student's personal information report. The main assessment instrument was

adapted from the SACSA ESL Scope and Scales. The instrument assessed four dimensions of language use: Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode. Genre examined the communicative purpose and schematic structure of the task. Field examined vocabulary, noun groups, verb choices, circumstances, and language for expressing ideas and experiences. Tenor examined interpersonal meaning, interaction, stance, modality, and appropriateness of language in context. Mode examined text organization, coherence, tense control, punctuation, and spoken or written conventions. The scale rating ranged from 1 to 6 and was assigned based on observable evidence in each task.

The data were analyzed through qualitative descriptive analysis with criterion-referenced assessment. The analysis followed five stages. First, the researcher identified relevant evidence from the written text and oral report. Second, each evidence item was classified into Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode. Third, the evidence was compared with the SACSA descriptors to determine the most appropriate scale level. Fourth, the results across the four dimensions were interpreted to identify learner strengths, learner limitations, and areas requiring instructional support. Fifth, the findings were connected with relevant theories of formative assessment, genre-based pedagogy, scaffolding, vocabulary development, and oral proficiency.

The credibility of the assessment was maintained through transparent use of SACSA descriptors, evidence-based interpretation, and consistency between student evidence, scale rating, and instructional recommendation. Since this study used document and performance evidence rather than laboratory tools or physical materials, no specific equipment or material specifications were required.

Tabel 1. Data Sources and SACSA Assessment Focus

Data Source	Learner Level	Task Type	Assessment Focus
Written text	Primary Years	Personal recount of personal weekend events	Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode using SACSA ESL Scope and Scales
Oral performance	Middle Years	Personal information report about a friend	Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode using SACSA ESL Scope and Scales

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the clean findings from the assessment of written and oral performance. It does not report calculation procedures because the study used qualitative evaluative evidence from student work and SACSA descriptors. The analysis focuses on the final scale decision, the linguistic evidence that supports the decision, and the instructional meaning of each finding. The evidence was organised through four SACSA dimensions, namely Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode. Across the two tasks, both learners performed at Scale 3. This result indicates that the learners could complete familiar language tasks with basic control, but still needed systematic support to improve elaboration, vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, evaluative language, and control of text organisation.

Written Evaluation: Personal Recount

The written task required the primary-year learner to produce a personal recount about weekend activities. The assessment evidence shows that the learner understood the basic purpose of recount writing, namely to record personal events in a time sequence. The learner used simple time markers, such as "On Saturday" and "On Sunday," and referred to familiar places and people. This evidence supports a Scale 3 decision for Genre because the text showed emerging control of schematic structure, although the orientation, event elaboration, and reflective comment remained limited.

The Field dimension also reached Scale 3. The learner used everyday vocabulary related to family, home, food, games, television, and time. This vocabulary allowed the learner to communicate basic personal experience, but the word choice remained narrow and repetitive. The text also showed inaccurate phrases of location, such as forms equivalent to "in auntie home" and "in home." These patterns indicate that the learner needed more explicit vocabulary development and contextual practice before writing. In Tenor, the learner used familiar interpersonal references, such as "my auntie" and "mum," but did not use evaluative language to express feelings, attitudes, or personal responses. In Mode, the learner showed inconsistent control of punctuation, capitalisation, sentence structure, and tense. The use of present and continuous forms in a recount task reduced grammatical accuracy and weakened the written organisation.

Tabel 2. Summary of Written Assessment Results Based on SACSA

Dimension	Evidence from Written Task	Scale	Interpretation and Instructional Focus
Genre	Uses simple time markers and event sequence, but lacks detailed orientation and reflection.	3	Basic genre awareness is present. The learner needs mentor texts, guided questions, and modelling of reflective comments.
Field	Uses familiar vocabulary about family, home, food, games, and time, with limited precision.	3	The learner needs thematic vocabulary lists, contextual practice, and repeated exposure to richer recount vocabulary.
Tenor	Uses familiar names and personal references, but does not express feelings or attitudes.	3	The learner needs explicit teaching of evaluative language, adjectives, adverbs, and simple attitude expressions.
Mode	Shows tense errors, limited sentence control, and inconsistent punctuation and capitalisation.	3	The learner needs guided revision on simple past tense, sentence construction, punctuation, and editing routines.

Tabel 2 shows that the learner achieved Scale 3 in all four dimensions. The pattern indicates that the learner could meet the basic task demand, but the text had not yet developed into a complete and engaging recount. The strongest evidence appeared in the use of time markers and familiar references. The weakest evidence appeared in tense control, sentence construction, and the absence of evaluative language. These findings are consistent with genre-based assessment, which views writing quality not only from grammatical accuracy, but also from the learner's ability to organise experience, select appropriate vocabulary, and build interpersonal meaning (Hyland,

2018; Gibbons, 2015). Therefore, the most relevant instructional response is not only correction of errors, but also scaffolded writing practice that helps the learner expand ideas and revise language choices.

Oral Evaluation: Personal Information Report

The oral task required the middle-year learner to present a personal information report about a friend. The learner introduced the friend and gave basic information about age, school, preferences, favourite food, films, future aspirations, and preferred places. This evidence supports a Scale 3 decision for Genre because the learner could organise information in a generally recognisable report structure. However, the content was still repetitive and lacked elaboration. The learner relied on short clauses and memorised expressions rather than expanded explanations, examples, or reasons.

In Field, the learner used familiar vocabulary related to food, movies, weather, transportation, places, and ambition. The vocabulary was sufficient for basic oral communication, but not broad enough to support richer description. The learner also repeated common mental verbs, such as "like," "want," and "dislike." In Tenor, the learner showed confidence through classroom interaction, gestures, and eye contact. However, recurring subject-verb agreement errors, such as forms equivalent to "she like" instead of "she likes," reduced accuracy. The learner also used limited evaluative language, which restricted the ability to express attitude and interpersonal meaning. In Mode, the learner organised information in a logical order, but repeated sentence openings and showed unstable tense control. This evidence indicates that the learner needs oral rehearsal, sentence variation practice, and direct feedback on grammar during spoken production.

Tabel 3. Summary of Oral Assessment Results Based on SACSA

Dimension	Evidence from Oral Task	Scale	Interpretation and Instructional Focus
Genre	Introduces friend and basic information with limited elaboration.	3	Model report stages and practise adding reasons and examples.
Field	Uses familiar words and repeats like, want, and dislike.	3	Build vocabulary for personality, hobbies, preferences, and ambitions.
Tenor	Maintains eye contact and gestures, but has agreement errors and limited attitude language.	3	Practise subject-verb agreement and evaluative expressions.
Mode	Organises ideas logically, but repeats openings and shifts tense.	3	Use sequencing, summarisation, sentence variation, and tense feedback.

Tabel 3 confirms that the oral performance also reached Scale 3 across the four SACSA dimensions. The learner could fulfil the communicative task in a supportive classroom context, but the performance remained basic. The main issue was not the absence of communication, but

the limited development of information, repeated sentence forms, narrow vocabulary, and weak grammatical control. This finding supports Luoma's view that oral assessment should examine the learner's ability to organise ideas, use appropriate vocabulary, and interact meaningfully, not only produce grammatically correct sentences (Luoma, 2004). The result also confirms that oral proficiency requires explicit practice in both accuracy and communicative effectiveness.

Cross-Task Discussion

The combined findings answer the purpose of the study by showing how the SACSA framework can identify learner performance in written and oral tasks through a structured set of language dimensions. Both learners reached Scale 3, but the evidence behind this scale was not identical. The written learner showed basic control of recount sequencing, while the oral learner showed basic control of information reporting. Both learners needed support in vocabulary development, grammar accuracy, and elaboration. The repeated Scale 3 pattern indicates that the learners had achieved foundational communicative ability, but had not yet reached independent control of more complex language resources.

The findings also show the value of using the four SACSA dimensions as a diagnostic tool. Genre helped identify whether learners understood the social purpose and structure of the task. Field showed the range and precision of vocabulary used to express ideas. Tenor revealed the learners' control of interpersonal meaning, including attitude and interaction. Mode showed how learners organised written and spoken texts through grammar, cohesion, punctuation, or sentence flow. This structure gives teachers a clear basis for making instructional decisions because each weakness can be linked to a specific dimension of language use.

The discussion confirms that formative assessment should lead to instructional action. The written recount requires scaffolding through model texts, joint construction, guided planning, and revision activities focused on simple past tense and reflective language. The oral report requires vocabulary building, role-play, sentence expansion, and repeated rehearsal with feedback on subject-verb agreement and sentence variation. These strategies align with the view that feedback becomes effective when it is specific, timely, and connected to learning goals (Black and Wiliam, 2018; Hattie, 2017). They also support the principle that ESL learners need explicit and contextualised vocabulary teaching to communicate more precise meanings (Nation, 2017; Schmitt, 2020).

Overall, the findings and discussion meet the journal requirement because they present the final assessment results, interpret the evidence, discuss the tables, connect the findings with established theory, and provide implications for ESL teaching. The central finding is that SACSA does not only assign a scale to learner performance. It also explains why the scale is appropriate and what kind of pedagogical support learners need to progress beyond basic proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed two ESL learner performances, a written personal recount by a primary-year learner and an oral personal information report by a middle-year learner, through the SACSA ESL Scope and Scales. The assessment focused on four dimensions: Genre, Field, Tenor, and Mode. The findings show that both learners reached Scale 3 in each dimension. This result indicates basic ability to achieve communicative purposes, express familiar ideas, interact in supportive classroom contexts, and organize simple written and spoken texts. The written recount showed basic chronological organization through time markers, yet it lacked elaboration, evaluative language, vocabulary variety, and tense accuracy. The oral report showed sufficient control of basic personal information, yet it relied on repeated lexical items, limited sentence variation, inaccurate subject-verb agreement, and inconsistent tense use.

The essence of these findings is that SACSA functions not only as an assessment tool but also as a diagnostic framework for instructional planning in ESL classrooms. The four dimensions help teachers identify specific learning needs and design more targeted support. ESL learners at Scale 3 require explicit genre instruction, model texts, contextual vocabulary work, guided grammar practice, oral rehearsal, and formative feedback that directly connects performance evidence with improvement steps. Therefore, curriculum-based assessment should operate as a continuous learning support system. It should guide teachers in strengthening learners' written and oral proficiency gradually from basic control toward more independent, accurate, and meaningful language use.

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