

**Group Work With English as Second Language (ESL) Students:
Integrating Academic and Behavior Considerations**

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Abstract

A group counseling intervention with beginning-level ESL students in middle school is presented. Findings from the pre- and post-group evaluations showed statistically significant improvement in students' reading and writing skills and appropriate classroom behaviors. Limitations of the research design are discussed and implications for school counselors serving ESL students in small groups are provided.

Group Work With English as Second Language (ESL) Students: Integrating Academic and Behavior Considerations

As the United States has been experiencing a dramatic demographic change due to immigration, American public schools have also been accepting an increasing number of “English as a Second Language” (ESL) students. Current demographic trends indicate that by 2026, one in every four students in U.S. public schools will be an English language learner (Garcia, 1999). Unfortunately, there is still no consensus on the terminology for ESL population. There exists a variety of ways to describe ESL students, e.g., ELL (English Language Learners), ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), ELD (English Language Development), ELS (English Language Service), Bilingual, etc. (Rance-Roney, 2009). In this article, ESL will be used to name students who need to learn English as a second language in K-12 schools.

Several authors have articulated the ways that school counselors could better connect with ESL students, immigrant youth and international students (Burnham, Mantero, & Hooper, 2009; Cárdenas, Taylor, & Adelman, 1993; Dipeolu, Kang, & Cooper, 2007; Galletta-Bruno, 1995; Goh, Wahl, McDonald, Brissett, & Yoon, 2007; Park-Taylor, Walsh, & Ventura, 2007; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Walter-Samli & Samli, 1979; Williams & Butler, 2003; Wong & Ishiyama, 1999). One important strategy to mention would be for school counselors to create school-family-community partnerships when working with ESL populations (Lee, 2001; Park-Taylor et al., 2007). Goh et al. (2007) emphasized school counselors’ role as a bridge that connects American culture with other cultures where ESL students may have come from. Hence, school counselors

may positively impact this student population by using cross-cultural simulations and activities (Goh et al., 2007).

More recently, a limited number of authors have acknowledged the significance of serving ESL students in school counseling programs (Burnham et al., 2009; Clemente & Collison, 2000; McCall-Perez, 2000). The rationale for school counselors to make concerted efforts to attend to the needs of ESL students include: (a) the dramatic change in the composition of student populations, (b) the reality that school personnel will serve students from cultures different than their own (Burnham et al., 2009); (c) the limited communication between school counselors and ESL teachers (Clemente & Collison, 2000; McCall-Perez, 2000), and (d) school counselors' potential positive influence on ESL students' development (Hagan, 2004; Roysircar, Gard, Hubbell, & Ortega, 2005).

School counselors inevitably will be exposed to ESL students in our nation's public schools. The school counselor's call to serve all students, including the increasing number of ESL students, makes group counseling a viable way to reach those in need of services (Villalba, 2003). Research has demonstrated that school counselors can have a positive impact on ESL students by intentionally interacting and connecting ESL students and teachers (Burnham et al., 2009; Hagan, 2004; Roysircar et al., 2005). For example, group counseling has been utilized by school counselors with ESL students and some authors have advocated for using group work with ESL students (Asner-Self & Feyissa, 2002; Villalba, 2003). To illustrate, a comprehensive drop-out prevention program that included a group counseling component increased the number of Spanish-speaking ESL students who remained in high school (Galletta-

Bruno, 1995). Another creative way to help students whose native language was not English was to use poetry in groups, which provided students an environment to talk about delicate issues and practice their English as well (Asner-Self & Feyissa, 2002).

Group counseling also has been shown to provide ESL students the following elements: (a) supportive context where their concerns can be normalized and their feelings of isolation can be decreased (Baca & Koss-Chioino, 1997); (b) comfortable environment to practice English skills (Asner-Self & Feyissa, 2002); (c) social support network in school (Villalba, 2003), (d) exposure to problem-solving techniques and useful resources available to them in the community or school (Dipeolu et al., 2007), and (e) opportunities to explore ethnic identity (Malott, Paone, Humphreys, & Martinez, 2010) . However, ESL students could also benefit from an exploration of what is considered appropriate classroom behaviors. Behavioral expectations in U.S. classrooms may be different than what students from other countries may anticipate (Asner-Self & Feyissa, 2002).

Although there is a growing body of evidence regarding group counseling with ESL students (Bink, 1994; Toffoli & Allan, 1992; Villalba, 2003), there remains an opportunity for future research (Burnham et al., 2009; Roysircar et al., 2005). The purpose of this article is to provide an example of a group counseling program for ESL students in a middle school that is focused on helping them improve their English proficiency levels and identify appropriate classroom behaviors. A group counseling program was used instead of a classroom guidance program because the ESL teacher conveyed that some of her students were in need of extra help learning English and appropriate classroom behaviors. Therefore, she believed that the school counselor

could support her by helping a few students gain additional practice in a small group setting while she continued teaching her other students more advanced skills.

Description of an ESL Group Counseling Program

The first goal of this program was to improve beginning-level ESL students' English proficiency. The second goal was to help the ESL students improve classroom behavior, which was demonstrated by the number of times they appropriately participated in their ESL classroom discussions. These goals were established with the help of the ESL teacher who expressed a concern for some of her students to receive extra help in learning English and appropriate classroom behaviors (Villalba, 2003).

Participants

Group leader. The school counselor who facilitated this group was completing her master-level internship at the time the group was conducted. She is originally from China and English also is her second language.

Group members and selection. Eleven students (nine female and two male) in a beginning-level ESL class were invited to participate in this group. Six of them were eighth graders, three were seventh graders and two were sixth graders. Seven students were new immigrants who just arrived in the U.S. within three months of their enrollment in school. The other four students had been living in the U.S. for almost one year. Two students were from Iraq, three from Mexico, four from Tanzania, and two from Vietnam.

All of the students came from one ESL class taught by a White female who had been an ESL teacher for over 30 years. This ESL class was designed for students in the beginning stages of learning English. The primary focus was on basic skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These students were selected based on the ESL

teacher's evaluations of their English proficiency level and classroom behaviors. Students whose English proficiency level was lower than three (on a five-point scale designed by the first author) were invited to participate and this resulted in 11 students being eligible for the group intervention. All the students agreed to participate in this small group and their parents were informed about this group intervention and the possibility of the findings being reported to improve future groups through communication from the ESL teacher. Once the school counselor received consent from the students' parents, they were divided into three groups. Students were mixed into the three different groups (two groups with four students each and the other group with three students) based on the native languages they spoke in order to eliminate the likelihood of them speaking to each other in their own native tongues during group sessions.

Evaluation Charts and Procedures

ESL student language acquisition skills rating chart. The school counselor provided the ESL teacher with a chart (Appendix A) to assess all of her students' basic language acquisition skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) using a five point scale (1 = poor, 2 = below average, 3 = average, 4 = above average, 5 = excellent). This chart consisted of five columns, with the first one inquiring students' identification number for confidentiality purposes and the other four including basic English skills. The students with the lowest scores were invited to participate and also re-evaluated after the group ended. Pre-group and post-group scores on this chart were used to determine if there were any gains on the scores for students' basic language acquisition skills.

ESL student classroom behavior observation chart. A classroom observation chart (Appendix B) was conducted to determine the number of times the ESL students, selected to participate in the group, appropriately participated in class discussions. Examples of appropriate classroom behavior included: answering questions solicited by the teacher; expressing opinions; giving feedback or commenting on other's responses; or asking questions. One 90-minute period each day during one week, both before the group started and after the group ended, the group leader went into the ESL classroom to document the group participants' classroom behavior in class.

Group Sessions

The school counselor used the following information as a guide in order to ensure the group counseling sessions for each group were as consistent as possible. Described are the objectives, activities, processing questions and homework used for the groups. The groups met once a week for five weeks and each session lasted approximately 30 minutes. Although this time frame is short, it adheres to minimal recommendations for groups that occur in school settings (Gladding, 2003).

Session 1: Introduction

Objective. To practice greetings in English and to discuss group expectations.

Materials. construction paper, poster board, and markers.

Activities. In the first session, the school counselor led the students through an activity that encouraged them to practice greetings in English and to introduce themselves. This session started with the school counselor greeting the students by introducing herself using the sentence stem: "Hello, my name is _____." Next, each student introduced themselves using the same sentence stem. Students were provided

construction paper to create a tent-shaped name plate, which could be used for future sessions. The school counselor then began giving more details about herself (e.g., where she came from, her age, hobbies and favorite food) in order to model how the students could share about themselves. Students then took turns talking about themselves while other participants were encouraged to ask questions if they had something they were interested in knowing about each other. Students were also asked to take notes of what others talked about in order to be prepared to review this information in session two.

The next activity was to discuss and create a poster with group expectations (e.g., group norms) that the students could agree to. There were five expectations that were explained to the participants in this group: (a) Come on time; (b) Take turns talking; (c) Listen when others are talking; (d) Speak English-only; and (e) Confidentiality. When explaining “confidentiality”, the school counselor used simple words to explain this concept. For instance, confidentiality was described as keeping secrets, not telling others outside of this room with the exception of their parents, and only talking about how you feel about the discussions but not about what other people have shared. The students signed the poster with these group norms to show their agreement for what was expected.

Processing questions. (a) What have you learned about the school counselor and other members in the group today? (b) What would you do if other students in your class asked you about what you discussed in group? (c) What are some things you could say to them?

Homework. Think about how you will introduce yourself, your parents, your siblings, and your best friends to others; practice it after group by introducing your family members to your ESL teacher or someone in your neighborhood.

Session 2: Communication Skills with Peers

Objective. To learn and practice communication skills for peer interactions.

Materials. scenarios created by the school counselor to be used for peer communication role plays and sentence stems used during session one.

Activity. First, the school counselor introduced and discussed with the students the basic elements of good communication which included appropriate eye contact, pleasant facial expressions (e.g., smile confidently but not laughing), proximity (e.g., personal space), and listening skills. Other communication considerations included the use of complimenting someone, identifying strengths in a person, and apologizing if mistakes are made. Second, the students role played some scenarios that the school counselor created while also using the sentence stems they practiced during session one. Some example scenarios included how to join a group of students to have lunch with at the same table; how to start a conversation with a student sitting beside you if you are new in that class; how to introduce one of your friends to someone else on a school bus. Third, the school counselor reflected what was observed during the interactions when the students were conducting their role plays. The school counselor provided positive feedback to encourage the students of what they did well. The school counselor also provided areas of improvement for them to consider.

Processing Questions. (a) What have you learned about how to communicate with peers? (b) Do you communicate differently with peers in your home country? (c)

What are the things you learned today that are different from what you have been taught in your home country?

Homework. Practice the communication skills you learned today with other students in the classroom and in your community.

Session 3: Communication Skills with Teachers

Objective. To learn and practice how to communicate with teachers.

Materials. Scenarios created by the school counselor to be used for role playing communicating with teachers.

Activity. First, the school counselor reviewed the communication skills the students used to interact with peers they learned in the last session as a warm-up activity. The students were also encouraged to share any examples of them practicing these skills as homework. Second, the school counselor introduced the importance of talking properly in classroom settings and how students could talk appropriately to their teachers. The basic elements of communication in classrooms were emphasized by the school counselor. For example, these included maintaining some eye contact, smiling not laughing, raising hands before talking, using sentence stems like “May I...?” or “Excuse me, could you please...?” Third, students practiced positive ways to communicate with teachers using the following scenarios: how do you ask questions to your teacher if you have something you do not understand; what do you say if you want to go to bathroom; what do you say if you want to get a drink of water; what do you say if you need to borrow a pencil or paper from your teacher? The students took turns sharing their ideas about how they could communicate with their teachers in those

situations. The school counselor encouraged students to give each other positive feedback as well as areas their peers could improve.

Processing questions. (a) What have you learned about how to communicate with teachers? (b) Do you communicate differently with teachers in your home country? (c) What are the things you learned today that are different from what you have been taught in your home country?

Homework. Practice the communication skills with your teachers, family and friends.

Session 4: Appropriate Classroom Behaviors

Objective. To provide students examples of appropriate classroom behaviors and to introduce typical classroom rules and expectations.

Materials. Video clip of inappropriate classroom behavior, DVD player or computer with internet access.

Activity. First, the school counselor led the students in a discussion of what they learned last session about communicating with teachers. Students were also given an opportunity to share if they had practiced these skills for homework. Next, the school counselor introduced classroom behaviors which included listening carefully, no laughing or chitchatting, raising hands when you have questions or want to answer questions, following instructions, asking for help when feeling sick, and so on and so forth. Then the school counselor showed a short video clip, which illustrated some inappropriate classroom behaviors. This clip used was found at: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ch29ZmgsN4&feature=related>). Following the viewing of the video clip, the school counselor facilitated a discussion of the students' reactions. The students

shared what behaviors they observed that were not appropriate in a classroom setting. Then the school counselor and the students reviewed appropriate behaviors in a classroom. Finally, the school counselor informed the students that their next week would be their final group meeting.

Processing questions. (a) What have you learned about appropriate behaviors in classrooms? (b) Did you behave differently in your home country's classrooms? (c) If so, what were the differences?

Homework. Try to use the appropriate classroom behaviors in class every day. If you see other students from this group behaving inappropriately, be sure to gently remind them of our discussion.

Session 5: Review and Closing

Objective. To review the communication skills and appropriate classroom behaviors; to bring closure to the group.

Materials. None.

Activity. Since this was the last session, the school counselor informed the students about the group ending at the beginning of this session. Therefore, the main activity in this session was to review what the students had learned and practiced in the previous sessions. The question, "What have you learned in this group?" was posed by the school counselor in order to generate a dialogue on the students' perceptions. Each student took turns sharing. The students' responses included the ideas and suggestions discussed during the previous sessions (e.g., group expectations, communication skills with peers and teachers, appropriate classroom behaviors). If some students needed help coming up with ideas that emerged during previous sessions, the school counselor

encouraged the other students to help. Moreover, the school counselor emphasized that the students talk in complete sentences to express themselves even if they made some grammatical mistakes. As a result, the school counselor and the students informally were able to acknowledge how much progress all of them had made. The students commented very positively on the group members' responses.

Processing questions. (a) What do you believe you will remember after this group ends? (b) If you had another three sessions, what would you like to learn about or discuss in the group?

Homework. Consider sharing with your teacher and family your thoughts about the group and what you have learned from this experience. Remember to share only about you but not about what other students have shared.

Findings

As shown in Table 1, the data distribution was tested for normality and was found not to be normally distributed. Therefore, a non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was used to evaluate whether there was any significant improvement in students' language acquisition skills and classroom behaviors. As shown in Table 2, students' post-group scores in reading, writing and classroom behaviors were significantly higher than their pre-group scores.

Discussions and Limitations

In the present study, the students' skills in reading and writing improved significantly following the intervention. One can assume that ESL students' ability to communicate in English is one of the first most important tasks they are faced with in

Table 1*Data Distribution Test of Pre-Group and Post-Group Data*

	Skewness	Kurtosis
Pre-listening	1.199	.020
Pre-speaking	.674	-.152
Pre-reading	2.127	3.492
Pre-writing	1.410	.427
Pre-behavioral	-.093	-1.186
Post-listening	-1.189	-.764
Post-speaking	.028	.412
Post-reading	.028	.412
Post-writing	.291	-.208
Post-behavioral	-.456	-.888

Table 2*Non-Parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test of English Language Acquisition Skills and Classroom Behaviors*

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Behavioral
Asymp. Sig.(2-tailed)	.052	.059	.011*	.034*	.010*

school. In this case, some students needed more help in addition to their ESL class, especially those who were at a lower level than the majority of their peers.

School counselors also can use groups to provide ESL students an opportunity to learn about appropriate classroom behaviors. There was a significant improvement in the number of times the students participated appropriately pre- and post- intervention in their classroom.

A key point for the success of this group was that the ESL teacher sought out and supported the efforts of the school counselor because she believed that ESL students could benefit from some additional help. In this study, the school counselor got support from the ESL teacher in the form of discussions about the group goals, member selection, evaluations, schedule, and access to students.

However, the study has several limitations that could affect its validity and reliability. The research used a non-random convenience sample selected from a middle school where the researcher did her internship. The small sample size, the sampling method and the lack of geographical diversity are some of the factors that could limit the generalizability of the results. The research design in this study didn't include a control group to compare the treatment group with. Therefore, there is a possibility that the differences found among the group participants can be explained by the pre-existing difference among the participants or simple some statistical errors. Besides, participants' maturation/history factor could be another source of validity threat in this study. Within the five weeks' duration of the group, the participants' out-of-group school experience might contribute to their improvement in both academic performance and classroom behaviors. Therefore, it was possible that it was the full-time school

attendance during the group participation, but not the group experience per se, that accounted for part or all of the changes that the results of this study had shown.

Although there were significant gains in their reading and writing proficiency levels, the data were collected through author-created evaluation tools. The subjective nature of the measurements used in this study could limit the reliability and validity. The ESL teacher was the only evaluator of the students' language proficiency skills. Hence, the evaluation provided by the ESL teacher can limit the validity of the findings due to the biases from the ESL teacher. In addition, the school counselor who led the group was also the observer and the evaluator of the students' classroom behaviors. The subjectivity and biases from the group leader might have impacted the validity of the evaluations of the students' behaviors. Therefore, the findings found in the study need to be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, in light of the dearth of research on group interventions for ESL students in schools this line of research should be continuously explored. Future studies are suggested using a more rigorous research design to address this issue: (a) A larger sample with random assignment would help to minimize the pre-treatment differences; (b) inclusion of a control group or controlling for some other variables that might influence the outcomes would be helpful to enhance the validity of the study; (c) sample recruited from a more diverse geographical area would make the results more generalizable. Furthermore, other topics such as self-concept, empowerment, identity development, and acculturation are areas to consider when working with this population.

Implications for Professional School Counselors

Professional school counselors can support ESL students and their practice of English skills within a group setting. Small groups were utilized with beginning level ESL students to improve their communication skills with peers and teachers, which could support students' academic attainment and their ability to build relationships in schools (Burnham et al., 2009). School counselors could also use groups to provide ESL students an opportunity to learn about appropriate classroom behaviors. Several recommendations are provided below for professional school counselors who are interested in conducting similar groups with ESL students.

First, school counselors who consider incorporating discussions of appropriate classroom behaviors need to be cautious about multicultural issues. School counselors need to be mindful that it is possible for some ESL students that "what is appropriate" in the U.S. is not consistent with their own cultural norms or what they have been taught at home. Second, reflective practice is recommended for school counselors who are working with an ESL population because self-awareness of counselors' own cultural identity and how that will impact one's practice with multicultural populations will positively influence counselors' effectiveness (Collins, Arthur, & Wong-Wylie, 2010). Third, consultation is another critical piece for school counselors to incorporate into their work with ESL students. One suggestion is for school counselors to seek assistance from colleagues, other professionals, community members, or families who could offer insight as to the similarities and differences between students' countries of origin and the U.S. (Goh et al., 2007). Finally, the last recommendation is for school counselors to support the efforts of teachers by offering small groups with this student population in

order to address specific academic needs that the students may have. The school counselor could not have successfully implemented the groups without the support from the ESL teacher in the present example (Clemente & Collison, 2000). The collaboration with ESL teachers is important in that it may strengthen opportunities for school counselors to serve a diverse body of students, especially students who are underserved or need special help. Essentially, all parties benefit including students, teachers and school counselors.

Conclusion

With the population of ESL students increasing at a high speed across the country, schools need to take the responsibility to provide quality education and service to this student population. In order to achieve this goal, school counselors can take leadership roles in serving this population by collaborating with teachers, principals, parents and communities to provide more care and support. Essentially, school counselors can use small groups as an effective way to help ESL students gain extra practice in learning English as well as a greater understanding of classroom behavior expectations in the U.S. School counselors have the awareness, knowledge, and skills to reach this under-served population and foster their success and achievement at school.

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Appendix A

ESL Students Language Acquisition Skills Rating Chart

Instructions: Please rate each of the students' proficiency level in all of the four language acquisition areas using a five point scale (1=poor, 2=below average, 3=average, 4=very good, 5=excellent)

Student ID	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
01				
02				
03				
04				
05				
06				

Appendix B

ESL Students Classroom Behavior Rating Chart

Instructions: Please log the number of times a student displays appropriate behaviors in class and the date of the observation.

Date	Student 01	Student 02	Student 03	Student 04	Student 05	Student 06
__/__/__						
__/__/__						
__/__/__						
__/__/__						
__/__/__						

Biographical Statements

Qi Shi is a doctoral student in the Counselor Education Program in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development. She got her Master's degree in school counseling after working as a high school teacher in Beijing, China for three years. She has published on the topic of school counselor's relationship with principals, Chinese school counselors' professional development, and group work with minority students. Her research interests include school counseling interventions that could better serve minority students and ESL students, the preparation of professional school counselors' multicultural counseling competitiveness and China's counselor education and counseling profession's development.

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