WRITING ASSESSMENT AND ESL STUDENTS

Facilitators: Aida Ruiz and Diana Diaz,
Hostos Community College

Not least among the problems facing designers of writing tests is the difficulty in developing a test that "works" for all students, regardless of whether they are native or non-native speakers of English. This issue, as well as others, was addressed by Aida Ruiz and Diana Diaz in their session on Writing Assessment and ESL Students. After briefly describing the ESL program at Hostos Community College (a bilingual college in which approximately 80% of the students must go through a four-semester ESL sequence), defining the relationship of the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT) to the program, and outlining some of the things test-makers should be sensitive to when creating tests and test situations, Professors Ruiz and Diaz opened the discussion to the conference participants.

The first issue discussed was the need for questions that are content-free and culture-free. While it is often difficult to predict what kinds of responses a question will elicit from native speakers of English who do not necessarily share a common cultural background, it is even more difficult to predict to what extent a question will confuse or exclude students whose knowledge of American or Western culture is even more limited. It is important, therefore, that test-makers look for cultural bias in their questions.

In addition, idiomatic English poses real difficulties for ESL students. Foreign students who have not had much experience with the English language may not be able to answer questions that are constructed around idioms. As a result, teachers and test-makers should try to use non-idiomatic language in their questions and should learn to recognize errors in their students' essays that arise from a poor grasp or a misuse of idiomatic language.

The participants also discussed the effect of the test-taking situation on the performance of ESL students. Teachers might consider allowing ESL students extra time and the use of bilingual dictionaries when they are being tested. Moreover, assessment instruments which focus on the composing processes of ESL students need to be developed, and these kinds of tests, too, might require adjustments in the time element.

And the group agreed that there is a need for tests that vary the mode of discourse. Conference participants suggested that ESL students be encouraged to write in modes that they have not had much exposure to, and, conversely, that they be given the chance to write in modes which may be more compatible with the linguistic patterns of their native language.

Finally, the group seemed to agree that English proficiency must be defined at each individual campus according to its own needs and objectives and those of its students. They went on to call for more research in the areas of topic development, audience specifications, and the composing process, and concluded with a show of hands in favor of using writing samples to measure proficiency rather than objective tests.

Robbin Juris, Recorder
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THE POLITICS OF TESTING

Facilitator: William Lutz, Camden College of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University

William Lutz asserted in his opening comments that "testing dries up politics—there are no non-political aspects of a testing program." He made it clear that if we perceive ourselves as a group committed to the implementation of adequate assessment programs in response to the needs of our students, then we may as well don armor because, in his view, we are in for a war.

Good testing programs require a sizeable financial investment for test design, piloting, implementation, and administration. In addition, if the tests are used to identify students in need of remediation, then it is the responsibility of the institution to fund courses for these students. Unfortunately, many institutions are not willing to sponsor the needed curricula, and students are either placed in courses that do not meet their needs or denied a college education. Thus, it seems that in many instances, the controversy surrounding competency testing is an extension of the argument over open admissions policy.

Lutz also pointed out that since testing is here to stay, we must learn all that we can about it and must have input into the testing programs at our institutions. He recommended that we talk about competency testing with the business community, that we seek the support of local politicians, and that we forge a strong articulation with teachers in secondary schools. And, above all, we must remain responsive to the needs of our students. We must understand how tests can be used either to help our students or to hold them back.

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