

WRITING ASSESSMENT AND ESL STUDENTS

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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 60% 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-fair 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 needs 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.

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Journal of Basic Writing, CUNY