ASSESSING THE WRITING OF ESL STUDENTS

Speakers:  
Sybil Carlson, Educational Testing Service, New Jersey  
Daniel Ipson, Hartnell College  
Rosemary Ibarra, Hartnell College

Introducer/Recorder:  
Bruce Bennett, Ohlone College

Sybil Carlson reported the results of a recent study, funded by GRE and TOEFL, to look at the variables involved in the writing assessment of ESL students. Her talk was based on some of the measurement issues in assessing the writing of ESL students; defining competent writing, selecting appropriate instruments to measure it, scoring and interpreting the results of the assessments. Carlson stressed that the purpose of the assessment or its "context" will define what is considered competent writing. For example, the definition of competent writing may differ on placement, TOEFL, and exit exams.

Carlson noted that scoring and interpreting the writing of ESL students raises interesting questions about the cultural differences between ESL and native student groups. A paper written by an ESL student, for example, might not adhere to the same rhetorical standards used by the readers who evaluate the paper. The reader who considers English, papers during a training session may find their own notions of good writing enlarged as a result of confronting these cultural differences. Carlson illustrated some of these differences: an essay topic that requires a student to interpret a "pie" graph may be difficult for students who are accustomed only to reading linear graphs.

students from other countries may have no concept of our discourse modes. For example, an Arabic student, asked to write a persuasive essay, may write a circular essay that he feels is persuasive.

Hispanic or other third world students may be overly sensitive to an essay about the family. In short, Carlson concluded that evaluating the writing of an ESL student population may enlarge our idea of what competent writing is since standards for competent writing in the students' own countries may differ from our own.

Daniel Ipson and Rosemary Ibarra discussed a recent effort at Hartnell College to evaluate the placement test that the college had been using to place students in three levels of ESL classes. Students who had taken the college's placement test were given the Secondary Level English Placement Test, primarily a listening test. The students' scores on the two tests tended to be more correlated in the lower-level ESL course than in either the intermediate or upper-level courses. This check on the reliability of the placement test the college had been using was prompted by the college's concern to increase student retention through better placement of students in its courses. Rosemary Ibarra reported on the writing program that she has developed to improve the retention of Hartnell students. One of the innovative features of the program is the use of computers to encourage students to do multiple drafts in their writing. Ibarra's preliminary findings indicate that students enrolled in the writing center earned higher grades in their English courses. She also found a correlation between the number of essays students finished in the writing center and their English course grades.

WRITING ASSESSMENT AND MINORITY STUDENTS

Speakers:  
Rosentene Purnell, California State University, Northridge  
Paul Ramsey, Educational Testing Service, New Jersey

Introducer/Recorder:  
Sonja Armour, University of California, Berkeley

Rosentene Purnell opened the session by considering the widespread implications of writing assessment for different minority groups. Although an entire school population is affected by any writing assessment, the misuse of tests impacts most significantly on minority students. Test misuse usually stems from insufficient knowledge about the purpose of tests and from a failure to observe recommended policies in administering tests. The SAT was cited as a test which is frequently misused. Although the SAT is an aptitude test which supposedly predicts student success in the first year of college, schools misuse it as an admissions or placement test or a test of writing skills. Often minority students are denied admission to professions based on test scores alone. However, Purnell noted that the Bakke case challenged the fairness of considering criteria other than test scores for admission to medical school. According to Purnell, many minority students would not have been admitted to college if their counselors had relied on test scores alone as predictors of success.

The predictive validity of many tests is more relevant to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than for many minority students and for students from rural and lower economic areas. In addition, the cultural bias of test makers who determine the content and shape of the tests tends to influence favorably the performance of students of high socioeconomic status. Since most tests measure learned, not innate ability, misunderstandings, especially regarding minority student performance, arise when terms like "intelligence," "aptitude," and "achievement" are applied to tests.

Societal improvements will contribute to the advancement of minorities by allowing them access to decision-making positions including school faculties. Purnell believes that writing assessment gains its most convincing rational when it is most closely tied to instruction. Assessment procedures can be improved by relating testing and teaching in the classroom. A good test will evaluate teachers and students. Purnell pointed out that a test should involve and aid critical thinking. In school, students should be trained to adapt what they know to new situations. Many minorities lack this training, which results in fear of tests, a lack of confidence, deficient perception regarding the relevance of tests, and insufficient motivation to commit themselves to the task of test taking. Purnell warned against giving students false illusions about their ability to perform on tests and against lowering standards for minorities. She maintained that tests should diagnose deficiencies and educational institutions should provide remedies.

The second aspect of testing related to teaching involves continuous testing. A clearer picture of the (Continued on page 20)