

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 focused first 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 assessment. 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 readers who consider ESL 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. Topics must be "culture-free."

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.