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 primarily 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 an ESL 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
MINORITY STUDENTS (continued)

student emerges from multiple evaluations, and
students have the advantage of various exposures. Students should be involved in the selection and
evaluation of tests as well because children from the
most favored socioeconomic backgrounds accept tests
more readily than do minority children since tests are
a part of their culture. Purnell advised that minority
students must come to see tests as a well-established
feature of all schooling and as gate keepers to upward
mobility. She advocated that minority learn to "play
the game and play it well."

In conclusion, Purnell maintained that tests be used
to advance rather than retard learning and that the
worth of a student should not be based solely on a
single test performance. She provoked further reflec-
tion on the ultimate test by her reminder that some
students pass tests but flunk life and other students
flunk tests but succeed in life.

Paul Ramsey began with the suggestion that problems
in assessing minority students' writing differ little from
assessing minority performance in other subject areas
or from assessing the writing of the majority of
students. Ramsey pointed out that most English
teachers object to arcane features of multiple-choice
writing tests. He then cautioned participants to:

1. "Know your test and teach to the concepts it is
assessing." In order for writing instruction and
test goals to match, teachers should be the
assessors.

2. "Make sure your students know the test they
have to take." They need to know the general
subject areas and the test format. The latter is
particularly important for minority students who
need specific instruction on the language and
techniques assessed by the test.

It is important that tests be valid, that they assess
the student's writing skills and not the student's test
taking dexterity. Ramsey cited a personal preference
for the essay test for two reasons. First, the essay
test is valid because it reveals whether a student can
"generate, organize, and develop rhetorically effective
prose in standard written English." Second, an essay
test serves as a "prod to the less industrious of the
profession to give their students writing assignments
rather than fill in the blanks." However, essay testing
has its problems.

The first problem cited was the limitation of a "one-
shot" writing test (which is still preferable to none at
all). The second problem is the difficulty of setting
criteria or standards for readers who score essays.
English teachers favor essays, but they must consider
whether one type of score — holistic, analytic, primary
trait — seems to favor or disfavor minority students
more than another type. Ramsey noted the absence of
studies in this area.

Ideally, readers will be well-trained, will have wel-
chosen samples of acceptable writing at their disposal,
will have a clearly-delineated scoring guide, and will
have made conscious decisions beforehand about the
surface feature errors which will pass or fail a paper.
Additionally, readers should reflect the racial charac-
teristics and linguistic backgrounds of the test-taking
population.

Ramsey concluded that further research is needed:
"If white students did as poorly as minority students
on standardized tests, we would either know why, or
we would change the test or we would stop testing."

Several participants asked questions about training
readers to score essay papers written by minority

THE IMPACT OF A FIFTH GRADE
WRITING TEST

Speakers:  
John S. Mayher, New York
University  
Nancy Lester, The Write
Company, New York

Introductor/Recorder:  
Thelma Worthen, Alamo School
District, California

John Mayher began the session with a discussion of
the background of New York's statewide writing test.
Although New York State had been involved in the
evaluation of writing since 1979, its program had been
focused primarily on the secondary level. From the
beginning, however, the need to develop an assess-
ment instrument for the lower level was apparent.
When teachers of young children began to realize
that developing the statewide testing program, they
were assessed at the lower levels. The result was the
collection and evaluation of 10,000 papers
from elementary level students, and then the develop-
ment of The Writing Test for New York State Eleme-
nary Schools, which is now given to all fifth grade
students in the state of New York. (The test items in five
categories (personal expression, personal narrative,
process writing, description, and response to a "story
starter") were tried out in February, 1982 in a repre-
sentative sample from New York elementary schools.

In October, 1982, the State Department of Educa-
tion began to train a group of fifty evaluators in holistic
reading methods. They in turn trained fifth grade
teachers throughout the state. Subsequently, papers
from all fifth grade students in New York's public
schools were evaluated in their own schools, the
administering and evaluating conforming to standards
that had been established statewide. Each student
wrote two papers, each of which was evaluated
independently by two readers, and each student's
score was the sum of scores from the two papers.

Mayher noted that the purpose of this first testing
was to establish a baseline or statewide reference for
future testing. However, one of the most important
 uses of the test scores is the need to identify students in need of special instruction. Thus, students
(who must ultimately pass the Regents Competency
Test to graduate from the schools of New York State)
and their teachers now have a means of developing
early awareness of any special needs. As the program
develops, a growing body of information and criteria
are evolving to support the statewide effort to bring a
large majority of students in the public schools to a
level of achievement that qualifies them for graduation.

Nancy Lester described that test in detail. It is
divided into two parts, each to be given on separate,
preferably consecutive days. It consists of two
writing tasks, one for each day, drawn from the
established five categories mentioned previously.
Teachers read the directions aloud to the students,
who are given up to two hours to complete the test.
There are several kinds of prompts included in the
directions. The first presents the topic to be written on,
the second provides questions to help the student
generate information to be used in writing the paper,

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