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ESL Assessment

What We Learn When We Open Pandora's Box

Demographic changes have rendered the traditional categories of English as a Second Language (ESL) and native speakers inadequate. ESL assessment at the university level needs to develop more complex models for assessing whether students whose first language is not English belong in ESL or regular writing programs. Assessors need to take into account students' dominant language and their academic literacy in their first language. The university then needs to develop new programs and curricula that reflect the changing needs of these diverse groups.

Specially designed assessment is the heart of any viable university English as a Second Language (ESL) program. A writing assessment developed for native speakers will usually place the majority of non-native students in the bottom levels of remedial English classes designed for native speakers. The test may be culturally biased and most certainly will not give any accommodation for the types of grammatical errors that even advanced ESL students make. As a result of their placement, some students would take the remedial courses. Others, if given the chance to "challenge" more advanced courses, may take them, relying on their perseverance and the instructors' sympathy to get through. Another group will place themselves into ESL classes, but few will be able to gauge accurately the level at which they belong. The bravest, though not necessarily the best, will go into advanced classes. The more timid may place themselves lower. All of them will feel great pressure to minimize the time spent in lower-level classes. Thus, many students will be denied the time and the type of instruction essential to developing language skills. Faculty teaching classes of native speakers will find them filled with ESL students whose presence in numbers can make it difficult for instructors to maintain their previous standards. ESL faculty will find students of all levels within a single class. Developing a curriculum that is both culturally and cognitively appropriate will be difficult.

The Issue of Identification

In 1979 the California State University system (CSU), concerned about the weak writing skills of its upper-division students, instituted a Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR). Once

that requirement went into effect, it quickly became apparent on most campuses in the system that something had to be done for ESL students who were failing the junior-level writing exam at much higher rates than native speakers. The CSU Sacramento campus responded by establishing the English Diagnostic Test (EDT) to give "early warning" to students who would be likely to have problems with the junior-level writing exam and who were therefore advised to take ESL classes to prepare themselves. The EDT gave them that warning and placed them into the appropriate classes.

The EDT was designed to serve the kind of ESL students who were common in California at the time: international students in the United States on special student visas. These foreign students were studying in undergraduate and graduate programs to prepare for careers in their home countries. They had already studied English, perhaps for ten or twelve years, before coming to the United States. They were typically admitted to U.S. colleges after demonstrating English proficiency by an acceptable score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), an internationally recognized test administered by the Educational Testing Service in the students' home countries to assess their proficiency in English.

Even before the EDT was in place, however, a subtle, unannounced change had begun to take place in the ESL population, a change that was particularly pronounced in California. In the late 1970s, ESL students who were immigrants and refugees began to appear on California college campuses in substantial numbers. Unlike international students, these permanent residents might not have studied English in their home countries nor would they have taken the TOEFL to demonstrate their English language proficiency for admission purposes. Some of these students came to the four-year institutions after completing lower-division requirements in community colleges; others had spent years in the U.S. public school system. Whatever the origins and backgrounds of these ESL students, it was clear that many of them needed ESL instruction when they got to the university.

One might consider the case of "Albert,"[1] who is representative of this new breed of ESL student. Albert, who is Chinese-American, enrolled at California State University, Sacramento, in fall 1991 at the age of 19. When he took the CSU system-wide English Placement Test, a test designed for native speakers but required of all entering freshmen, he scored in the bottom quartile, officially placing him "at risk" in the university. Later, he took the English Diagnostic Test. His scores on all three sections of the test — a dictation, a reading passage, and a 30-minute essay — were unambiguous; he looked like a classic ESL student and was placed in an intermediate level ESL class. That was when Albert came to our attention. He came to complain that he was not an ESL student. In fact, he had lived all his life in Sacramento and had been regularly admitted to the university with a 3.4 GPA (on a 4.0 scale) from a local high school. He had satisfied all his high school graduation competencies, including writing, and indeed had taken an Advanced Placement English class in high school. He did not read or write Cantonese, although he spoke it at home and at work in his parents' Chinese restaurant. Respecting his

wishes and recognizing that he would feel out of place among recently arrived ESL students, we allowed him to take a developmental writing course for native speakers. There he struggled all semester. He wrote the following passage in response to *The Dark Wind* by Tony Hillerman:

> Most of my relative are becoming lost through our linkage in kinship. I would Consider that unsatisfied because our family tree would be broken, and not knowing where we are from. So much of the attitude toward our kinship is most like have less importance, and value. In the Navajo culture, it is more easily identified and keep up to date on the family tree. Because in our cultural way of thinking, separating from the relatives would be a better way of living. that is one of the reason that the linkage in the family that is lost. It is a big difference of how important in attitude between my cultural attitude and the Navahos.

The consequences of having large numbers of students like Albert who do not fit into the traditional categories of ESL or native speaker are profound, both for ESL testing and ESL teaching. Clearly, universities need to develop more complex models for assessing where ESL students belong, and at the same time need to develop new programs and curricula that reflect the changing needs of these diverse groups.

New Categories for ESL Assessment

What are the qualities that differentiate ESL writing from the writing of native speakers? Often it differs in quite obvious ways. Not only do ESL students typically make more grammatical errors than native speakers, but they often make different kinds of errors. For example, they often have problems with verb tenses or articles, both areas of grammar that, for the most part, "come naturally" to people who have been listening to and speaking English since birth. They may make errors in word order or in the construction of relative clauses; they may use both "although" and "but" to join two clauses when a native speaker would intuitively know to use one or the other. They may choose a word that is inappropriate in a particular context or misuse an idiom. They are often confused by prepositions, not knowing whether someone "succeeds in" or "succeeds for." They may have trouble with word forms, calling someone "an envy person" when a native speaker would automatically say "an envious person."

Although errors at the sentence level are the most obvious markers of "ESL-ness" in writing, ESL writing differs from the writing of native speakers on the rhetorical level as well. ESL students often operate on different assumptions about the roles of readers and writers, based on their experience in their own language and culture. They may approach a topic indirectly, resisting the use of thesis statements or topic sentences. They may write in a more flowery style or more abstractly than American readers prefer. They may rely on aphorisms and proverbs to make their points rather than on argument and evidence.

In addition, within the general category of students whose first language is not English, there are wide variations based on their language

background, their education in their first language, the length of time they have lived in the United States, their educational experience here, and a host of other individual, social, and cultural factors. ESL students fall at different places on a continuum in their acquisition of English language and literacy. Some are classic ESL students who are still in the process of acquiring both oral and written English. Their writing reflects both the errors that come from their reliance on their first language and the errors that are typical of learners at a particular stage of English acquisition. Other ESL students are much more like developmental native speakers: though they may make ESL errors of the kind discussed above, they do have oral fluency; most of their writing problems can be attributed to their unfamiliarity with the conventions of written English and their lack of experience in writing. Finally, others are indistinguishable from proficient native speakers.

Because ESL students are so varied, universities must look afresh at the categories of ESL and native speaker. Rather than categorizing students by their immigration status or where they received their schooling, it is more helpful to think of them in terms of language dominance. All students whose first language is not English are bilingual by definition, but some are dominant in their first language while others are dominant in English (I am indebted to Maria Montano-Harmon for the useful term "language dominance"). Within these groups, some students have been educated in their first language and can read and write it. Others have received little if any schooling in their first language and are not literate; in others words, they lack academic skills in reading and writing that language. (See figure 1.)

Figure 1: ESL Placement

	Literate First Language	**Nonliterate First Language**
First-language Dominant	Group I	Group II
Second-language Dominant	Group III	Group IV

A classic example of a Group I ESL student is "Olga." She is dominant in her first language, Russian; it is her language of choice and she uses it most of the time. She and her family are recently arrived refugees from Uzbekistan, formerly part of the USSR, where they were victims of

persecution for their Baptist faith. However, having graduated from high school in Tashkent, she knew how to read and write Russian before she came to the United States. She initially knew very little English and placed into a high beginning-level ESL class when she enrolled at CSU Sacramento. Since then she has made rapid progress through the ESL sequence of courses, and her writing is fluent and expressive although still strongly "accented." She wrote the following in an essay about *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan:

> I know thousands of examples about Russian women who extiguished bombs on the roofs of houses, saved somebody else's children, went fighting in the World War II. They are heros without any doubts, and we give them all the glory they deserve. But not all the people are so strong in their character, some of them did things we wouldn't expect from a human. I once speak to a woman whose sister, in the time of blockade of Leningrad, bought frozen piece of human meat, boiled it and sip that soup with her children. This woman didn't loose her maternal feeling, in fact, she did al of that because of the children, but still something must have been broken in her soul before she would do that, don't you think so?

In addition to the spelling and punctuation errors that a native speaker of English might make, Olga has problems with the usage of articles, the number of nouns, verb tenses, and pronouns. Phrases like "strong in their character," while not grammatically incorrect, are not idiomatic. Olga is the kind of student for whom ESL classes have traditionally been designed, and her rapid progress is testimony to their effectiveness.

Group II students are dominant in their first language, speaking it at home and often at work and among their friends, but are not literate in that language. "Pao" belongs in that category. He is a Hmong refugee who attended school in Laos for only two years. For twelve years he has lived in California, attending elementary, junior high, and high school here. In addition, he successfully completed freshman composition for native speakers at a community college before transferring to a four-year university. Nevertheless, Hmong remains the language he uses most of the time and his writing reflects that dominance. In response to an essay topic about whether college should be available only to good students, he wrote:

> I ask myself this question: "What is a student and a good student?" A student is someone who is willing to go to a college or universities without force. To me, a good student is a 4.0 average kid who excell in every subject. I think not all students are 4.0 student so why not give everybody a chance at university education. Sometime the student may barely passed a course that's pertain to his major but when he is in the career field he or she may be better than the 4.0 student. Let's face the fact. All students wants a good education and a career after college. I don't think there should be system that will depriving students of their rights to attend a college and getting a degree.

Although he has met the composition requirement for graduation at a community college, Pao may not be able to pass the junior-level

graduation writing exam at CSU Sacramento. Pao needs help in generating and organizing ideas, but he must also learn how to edit his writing for specific grammatical forms. He makes errors in forming verbs and has problems with idioms. Classes for native speakers generally do not provide that kind of instruction, as indeed, in Pao's case, fourteen years of them have not.

Group III students are dominant in English but have also maintained or acquired both speaking ability in their home language and literacy in that language as well. Born in Korea, "Michelle" has lived in the United States for thirteen years and received all her education here, but she reports that she still uses Korean half the time. On the English Placement Test, designed for native speakers, she missed placement into freshman composition by one point and was held for a one semester basic writing course for native speakers. The ESL-ness of her writing is less clear as she writes about whether the elderly should be cared for at home:

> I have three reasons why elderly should be cared for by their family. The first reason is that they need personal attention by their loved ones. My grandmother, who likes living with us, says that she enjoys spending most of her time with us. When elderly are left alone, they may get sick emotionally because they long to be with their loved ones. The second reason is that they don't have to worry financially. These days living expenses are very high. My grandmother's friend, who is living in an apartment, sometimes can't pay her bills. She depends on her children to pay for her which can be a burden on them. The third reason why I think the elderly should be cared for by their family is that when the elder gets sick, they have their family in same place to take care of their sickness. My grandmother is very old. She gets sick very often. My parents, who care for her very much, feels very safe having her in our home.

Most of Michelle's errors have to do with the usage of articles, which often pose problems for students who have mastered the rest of English syntax; otherwise, her writing is fluent and quite idiomatic. Students like Michelle usually prefer to be in classes for native speakers because they have been part of the American education system for their entire lives, and they identify strongly with American culture. However, they sometimes have problems in those classes because they make the residual errors in their writing and because it simply may take them longer to write than their native-speaking peers.

Finally, we have Group IV students who are dominant in their second language, English, and who are not literate in their first language. Many of these students function well in reading and writing academic English, but others, like Albert, have severe problems. One Spanish-speaking student, bright and articulate in his class for native speakers, puzzled his teacher because his writing was so poor. Finally, the teacher asked the student if he would write his essay in Spanish in the hope that it would shed light on the problem. The student responded that he couldn't write in Spanish at all; his halting efforts in English represented his total literacy in any language.

"Alejandro" is an example of this group of students. He has lived in the United States for eighteen years, only attending school in his native Mexico for two years. He went to American elementary, middle, and high

schools and fulfilled his freshman writing requirement in community college in a class for native speakers before transferring to CSU Sacramento. He does not read or write Spanish; nevertheless, it remains the language that he uses most. Although his writing has some serious weaknesses, his errors do not significantly stem from his Spanish-language background. In an essay about whether women should work outside the home, he wrote:

> A woman just by doing house work and taking care of the children is a full and overtime job. If the couple is living economically well why would a women want to work? She needs to take care of the house and her children. When the husband cames home he could help her do some work around the house. On the other hand, if the women worked they would have to hired someone to clean, cook and take care of the children. Which can became very expensive as well.

Despite the fact that Alejandro speaks his first language more than he does English, he probably feels strongly that he does not belong in ESL classes since almost all of his education has been in this country. Students like Alejandro feel out of place in a class that, in part, is introducing relative newcomers to life in the United States. In one case, a student complained bitterly when her ESL teacher defined "ketchup," offended by the implication that she didn't know the basics of modern American life. Furthermore, Alejandro's problems, typical of developmental writers who are native speakers of English, probably stem in large part from his lack of exposure to written English. His writing is not marked by the semantic and syntactic problems of typical ESL writing. If read aloud, his writing has the sound of a native English speaker. Even the glaring error in the first sentence, "a woman . . . is a full and overtime job," is typical of oral language where we often change thoughts in mid-stream. The verb errors probably occur because he does not clearly distinguish the different vowel sounds in "become" and "became," nor does he pronounce the "-ed" endings, so he is unsure how these verbs are spelled. But he knows verbs, using participles skillfully and even using the subjunctive in the clause "if the women worked" correctly.

The question is whether these students are best served in basic writing classes for native speakers or in ESL classes. With the exception of Olga, all of these students have lived in the United States many years and have had most of their education here. However, Pao, because his writing is less fluent and idiomatic than most basic writers, seems much closer to Olga and more in need of ESL instruction, while Michelle and Alejandro would probably identify more closely with students in a basic writing class for native speakers and would probably be successful there.

The Implications of Multiple Categories for ESL Assessment

Today most major urban universities have large numbers of students whose first language is not English. Among them are students representing all four categories of language dominance and first language literacy.

Instruments to assess the writing competence of native speakers may unfairly penalize these students by either the linguistic or the cultural content of the test. In the California State University system, entering students who have not satisfied their freshman writing requirement elsewhere must take the English Placement Test (EPT). The EPT consists of a holistically scored, 45-minute essay and two machine-scored parts, "Reading Skills" and "Composing Skills." The machine-scored portions of the test have been carefully designed to measure the skills that students need in freshman English courses for native speakers. While those skills may be necessary for ESL students as well, the EPT necessarily fails to test for typical ESL problems, those problems which distinguish the written expression of non-native from native speakers. The characteristic problems in syntax, grammar, idiom, and rhetoric that occur with regularity in ESL writing, but only rarely in the writing of native English speakers, are not measured and their gravity, therefore, is not assessed. Most crucially, tests designed for native speakers will not identify ESL students and distinguish them from non-ESL students, and within the category of ESL, they will not distinguish between the first-language dominant and the English-dominant ESL student. Olga, Pao, Michelle, and Alejandro will all simply be classified as remedial and lumped together with remedial writers whose first language is English.

Perhaps one reason why ESL students are tested together with native speakers is that designing a machine-scored test that validly measures the writing competency of the wide range of ESL students is a difficult, perhaps impossible task. When the California Community College system set out to find a valid placement test for its ESL students, it found that not a single test currently in use was valid for the community college ESL population. Many ESL programs now rely partially or exclusively on integrative tests of language proficiency such as dictations, so-called "cloze" passages in which students fill in deleted words, interviews, or holistically scored essays. The direct assessment of writing through holistically scored essays is most common. However, it is also not without problems. Using such essay assessment requires topics that are accessible to ESL students. Scoring them requires readers who are culturally and linguistically sensitive and carefully trained to assess the gravity of "ESL errors." They must judge whether it is more serious if a student misuses an idiom or drops inflected endings or consistently uses the simple present tense where a variety of past tenses are required. They must make a distinction between fluent writing containing nonsystematic errors and writing where errors interfere with readability. Clearly, ESL assessment requires serious attention.

Once a university has undertaken to serve the special needs of its ESL students, it must begin by setting up a separate assessment process. It needs to test *all* students who report that they speak a language other than English. That is the only way to determine which students will be most likely to benefit from special ESL instruction and which, like Michelle (Group III) and Alejandro (Group IV), will probably be successful in writing classes for native speakers. It is tempting to say that students who have lived most of their lives in the United States should be exempted from ESL testing even though they speak a language other than English.

Students like Albert (Group IV), in contrast, are evidence that some students who have lived in the United States for many years and had most or all of their education here may still be in desperate need of the type of instruction offered in ESL classes. On the other hand, more and more university students whose first language is not English are, like Michelle, nevertheless dominant in English. Although English is their second language, they should not be held inappropriately in ESL classes. However, even teachers in classes for native speakers need to be sensitive to English-dominant bilingual students like Michelle and help them in dealing with the remaining ESL features in their writing. Thus, it is as important for an ESL test to identify these students and direct them into classes for native speakers as it is for the test to identify students who are still in the process of acquiring English and who can benefit from the special curriculum of an ESL program.

At CSU Sacramento we have developed a program of ESL testing that not only has proven beneficial to our ESL students but has helped us to understand the complex issues involved in ESL identification. As ESL students arrive on campus, they take the EDT (the English Diagnostic Test), composed of a holistically scored writing sample, a dictation, and a cloze test. When the subscores of the EDT are gathered, students who are clearly Group I or Group II are readily placed in appropriate ESL classes. Placement for students in Groups III and IV may require more careful attention; such placement typically includes a consideration of biographical information gathered when the EDT is administered. Students assess how well they read and write their first language as well as indicate how many years they have lived in the United States, how many years they went to school in a non-English speaking country, and how many years and where they have studied English

As one would expect, time in the United States or other English-speaking countries is useful information, but we have found that an equally telling factor is the level of literacy that the student has attained in his or her first language. Students who have had most of their education in another language are more likely to prosper in ESL classes, while students who have had little education in their own language often respond better to the kind of instruction offered in basic writing classes designed for native speakers.

Implications for the Curriculum

Assessment makes us confront the diverse nature of the ESL student population. Once universities recognize that they are serving not only the traditional ESL students of Group I, but also serving those without literacy skills in their first language (Group II) and those who are dominant in English (Groups III and IV), they then need to set up programs designed to help all these students develop the academic language skills essential to their survival and success in the university.

All college writing teachers, both those who work in writing classes for native speakers and those who teach ESL classes, need to be trained to work with students whose first language is not English—to understand

the relativity of languages and cultures, the ways in which language acquisition takes place, and the teaching methodologies that facilitate language acquisition rather than simply develop writing skills. It is important to increase students' confidence in their writing, develop their fluency and accuracy, improve their reading skills, and expand their vocabularies. Students need to be brought into the academic community and made aware of the different kinds of discourse that take place there. The curriculum should offer opportunities for them to interact with other students and develop oral language skills, as well as skills in reading and writing.

Students who are dominant in their first language and fairly recently arrived in this country need a curriculum that is very different from a curriculum designed for those who have lived and been educated in this country for most of their lives and who are dominant in English. ESL students dominant in their first language need readings that deal with their experiences and introduce them to American life. Such reading materials cannot be highly idiomatic nor should they rely on extensive knowledge of American culture. Writing assignments likewise need to let these students draw on their international experiences while relating to their interests, which are often very different from those of students who have spent their entire lives in American schools. ESL students need and are responsive to explicit instruction in the systems of English grammar. Finally, when their writing is evaluated, they need some accommodation for the occasional ESL feature that occurs in their writing because they have not fully mastered spoken English.

On the other hand, teachers can operate with a different set of assumptions about students who have had most or all of their education in the United States. These students are culturally literate though not in the culture of the academy. Their written language may be heavily influenced by oral language, but the latter is fluent and often idiomatic. They know what ketchup is. These students respond to different kinds of writing assignments that tap into their very different experiences. Errors occur for different reasons in their writing: over-reliance on spoken language; lack of knowledge of the conventions of spelling and punctuation; misguided attempts to achieve a higher degree of formality in writing, as indicated in Alejandro's writing. These errors need to be treated in different ways. At the same time, perhaps because they are fluent in English, they are often resistant to direct grammar instruction and must be taught in different ways. Despite these differences, teachers need to be very aware that many of their students do come from language communities that do not use standard English. They cannot assume that these students can rely on their ears to hear how something "should sound." Teachers also need to recognize that some errors—an occasional dropped ending or missing article—are attributable to the second language background of these writers and should not be unduly penalized.

Even though many of these students have been raised in cultures separate from the mainstream American culture, for them their culture *is* American culture. Albert is not writing about Chinese culture when he contrasts his customs with the Navajo culture. Because there is so much diversity within the groups, teachers in both types of classes need to be

especially sensitive to that diversity and should not make assumptions that any students have had generic experiences or are products of a generic culture. A popular assignment in ESL classes is to ask students to contrast their culture with American culture, but many students feel they have nothing to contrast. Similarly, in basic writing classes, students are often asked to write about their experiences in American high schools, but not everyone necessarily went to an American high school. Students also need to be sensitized to their own diversity so that when teachers give explanations to newcomers, the old hands do not become impatient. Teachers of both first-language dominant and English-dominant students also need to be aware that many of their students are not literate in their first languages, and that they cannot necessarily rely on knowledge of or transfer literacy skills from that first language to English.

Implications for the University

Too often campuses view ESL as remediation rather than language acquisition and marginalize it on the campus. On the other hand, student advocates may view ESL instruction as an unjustified obstacle placed in the way primarily of students of color. They call for an end to testing and segregation of students into ESL classes. However, in California and elsewhere, too many students come from second language backgrounds and their needs are too urgent to be ignored. In 1990, after statewide hearings on issues related to Asian and Pacific Islanders in the CSU system, a panel issued a report, *Enriching California's Future: Asian Pacific Americans in the CSU,* recommending that "the CSU Board of Trustees should make development of academic English proficiency among students who need ESL assistance one of its highest priorities, with particular attention to the urgent and special needs of Asian, Latino, and other linguistically diverse students."

What is needed is a whole-campus response to ESL. ESL instruction must be viewed as language learning and given the same dignity and—perhaps more importantly—credit as foreign language classes. ESL students must be tested appropriately and not simply lumped with native speakers in the interest of efficiency or the name of equity. Support must be forthcoming so that sufficient numbers and kinds of classes (skills classes, integrated reading/writing/grammar classes, content-based or sheltered courses, etc.) at various levels are available early in students' programs. This enables students to acquire not only the language skills they need to graduate but also the ones they need to benefit from their content-area classes.

Language learning is far too complex and time-consuming a project for a sequence of ESL classes to develop single-handedly academic language skills. Developing these skills needs to be the job of the whole university. Faculty should be tolerant of "writing with an accent" but should demand writing that expresses ideas clearly and accurately. Students should also be given opportunities to interact with each other in groups and whole-class situations since that interaction will provide opportunities for language development.

Conclusion

ESL assessment at the university level begins a process that leads to recognition of the presence of ESL students, their numbers, and diversity. It can be a Pandora's box of troubles, obligating the university to devote resources, develop programs, and make commitments to these students who are much more easily ignored. ESL assessment can also be a source of hope, since these students, given adequate language skills, are a rich resource themselves with much to offer both to the university and to our society. We cannot afford to ignore them.

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Endnote

1. None of the names in this article are the students' actual names.

Suggested Readings

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