ASSESSMENT AND ESL
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH
SECOND EDITION

PORTAGE & MAIN PRESS
CONTENTS

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION (2007) vii
PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION (1995) xi

INTRODUCTION 1

Chapter 1. Kiss Me Teacher: WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW 9

Chapter 2. What Shape Will We Use? Red! TESTING VS. ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF ASSESSMENT 21

Chapter 3. Determining the Navel Assigned to the Factor: PLACEMENT 43

Chapter 4. We’re Working Hardly: EMERGING LITERACY 79

Chapter 5. Diving for Pearls in their Shelves: HOW AND WHERE TO FIND INFORMATION 115

Chapter 6. The Santa Maria, the Pimpas, the Ninny Sailing with Baflaf’s Dog: RECORDING YOUR OBSERVATIONS THROUGH CHECKLISTS, RUBRICS, ANECDOTES, AND CONFERENCES 157

Chapter 7. Finding the Perimeter of a Pollyollygon: EXITING 181

Chapter 8. The Final Nail in the Coffee: GRADES 197

Chapter 9. Lunching Several Measures: PRESENTING THE INFORMATION TO STAKEHOLDERS 217

Chapter 10. Converting Fahrenheit into Cellulose: STANDARDS 245

Chapter 11. Fight to the Spinach! MAKING THE CHANGE 255

APPENDIX A 265
APPENDIX B 273
GLOSSARY OF TERMS 281
BIBLIOGRAPHY 285
INDEX 299
It was January, the start of an endless, miserable slog through winter. The excitement and anticipation of Christmas was over, and it was a long way until spring. The first week back was study-for-finals week. The material that the state curriculum framework had deemed important had to be reviewed. The second week was devoted to exams. Other middle schools across the city administered the exams in the mornings and students went home for the afternoons. But this was a K-8 building; the principal informed the middle-school team that they were considered an elementary school, and kids had to stay at school. The students were resentful. Most of the afternoons were wasted.

Two weeks later, all seventh and eighth graders across the state took the mandated standardized test by which students, schools, districts and, ultimately, the state, were judged. Tension ran at an all-time high. Everything rode on those scores. Schools were required to have a 95% attendance rate. Teachers at this school were not allowed to test on Mondays or Fridays. They could only test in the mornings. All teachers were given yogurt and string cheese to make sure students received proper nutrition and would not fade out during the exams.

On that first Tuesday, part one of a three-day segment began. Students were given the entire morning to read a selection of prose, answer some questions, and formulate a rough draft of an essay response. Most finished in forty-five minutes, some even less. Now what? No teaching was supposed to happen during testing days.

On Wednesday, schools were closed due to heavy snow. On Thursday, the principal had a hurried meeting with the middle-school teachers. They could not decide whether to continue with the test or wait until the following Tuesday. Barb said they should just get it over with.
Ten lashes with a soggy score sheet for being politically incorrect. “Get it over with” was not the right attitude to have with these tests. With so much riding on their outcome, they were serious business. The stakes were too high.

So, the middle-level team had to fill up the following Thursday, Friday and Monday with other “stuff,” struggling to go on in this disjointed way, to attempt to continue with the curriculum until they could begin testing again the following Tuesday. It did not work: school essentially stopped; no learning happened. Days were filled by playing games, corralling students, and keeping them from running rampant. No matter how many times students were told to relax and just do their best, the strain got to them, manifesting itself in abominable antics.

Five weeks of learning lost—wasted—at the most productive time of year. No amount of yogurt and string cheese was going to make up for lost time in the classroom. And the future of the school and the students was hinging on their scores on this test.

The worst part was that they did not have a prayer. This was a poor, inner-city school made up mostly of African American and Hispanic kids. The highest score on the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test the year before had been a 67.

This meant the school would be punished. By engineering mergers with two other inner-city schools, the principal had managed to sidestep the baseline scores needed to establish where the school was to begin tracking progress and put off documenting adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two more years. But sooner or later it would be time to pay the piper, because it was doubtful that, without serious fudging and padding of scores, they would ever meet AYP.

It was not that teachers did not do their darndest to make school interesting and filled with enriching experiences. It was not because students did not try their hearts out. It was not because of the classic, parents-do-not-care excuse trotted out by people living in the suburbs who have never set foot in an inner-city school.

It was because the school was poor. Students did not have easy access to museums and zoos, trips to other states and abroad, the wealth of books in the home that most of us take for granted. It was because classroom books had been amassed from libraries that had closed, many of them too musty to open. It was because the only computer in the classroom belonged to the teacher, and students were forbidden to use it (unless the doors were locked, the window covered, and the vice-principal known to be out of the building). It was because students missed school when they moved from place to place because they were evicted or because they had returned to their home countries for the holidays. It was because many of the parents did not speak English and did not know how to help their children. Or, because they worked long hours and were too tired when they got home.

These are what Mary Myers (2003) calls “rigged outcomes” for English language learners (ELLs). The tests are an “expensive charade, racist in effect,” which end up marginalizing students. This is not the “soft bigotry of low expectations” George W. Bush trumpeted during his 2000 and 2004 Presidential campaigns. It is the hard racism of punishing the victim, of narrowing the curriculum, and of driving creative teachers out of the very classrooms in which they are needed most.

At the same time, across the state, fifth graders were taking the science portion of the state test. When you read some of their answers to the questions, you can immediately
see what was wrong with the test. In those answers, you can see logic (“If the earth didn’t have water, everyone would dehijrate.”), creativity (“The force working on the box is worker C. One way to reduce the force is to tell worker C to take a lunch break or something.”), thoughtfulness (“The earth and sun give us light, heat and peace on earth.”), common sense (“If people lived on the sun they would get blind and very hot! The sun would burn us up really bad.”), humor (“The earth have life and making more.”), and clear voices (“If the earth didn’t have clothes I don’t know what I’d do!”). But none of that mattered. If the student wrote “similarity” when he clearly meant “difference,” the answer was wrong. Complete sentences did not matter, while three correct words could receive a score of three points.

Knowing how the students labored over these exams makes it even harder to bear. Thinking about them all writing neatly, reaching out to an unknown reader (“Wow!” wrote one, “Trees sure are valuable resources!” and “Try to stay focused on what I’ll be telling you,” admonished another), revealing little glimpses of their personalities is, in its own way, heartbreaking. Danielle, for instance, did well. She scored 3s on all her answers. She was one of an average of 1 in 100 kids across the state of Michigan who scored all 3s—a whopping .001%. Antonio scored a couple of 2s and two 0s. Melissa got three 0s and a 1. What do those scores mean? Does it mean Danielle had a good teacher and Melissa had a bad one? Does it mean the teachers ignored the curriculum for the year? Does it mean the teachers should lose their jobs?

The scores scrutinized by the government on tests such as these do not take into account any of the reasons students might not have achieved the right answers. They are simply scores, hard and fast. Schools can stand or fall based on them. And, in some states, individual scores matter such that some students cannot graduate based on the score they achieved on the state test.

When we first wrote Assessment and ESL, alternative assessment was riding a wave of enthusiasm and positive potential. We were optimistic that we could use information gained on-site to make important decisions about the lives and futures of our students.

Since then, alternative assessment has been all but thrust into the back of the broom closet by a steamroller of mandated standardized testing and the agendas of politicos who have little or no experience with learners and what actually goes on in the classroom. And, although the purposes of testing have not changed, their reach, their uses, and their power have.

In spite of the challenges educators face since the first edition of this book, we still insist on more accurate, fair and reasonable ways of determining what students know and can do, as well as more effective methods both for placement of students into programs that suit their individual learning needs and for timely exit from those programs, back into the mainstream classroom.

This is why we have revised our book. It is, admittedly, angrier, more defiant, and filled with more stories of frustration and heavyheartedness. But it is also filled with great stories of success, of students who began with baby steps, progressed in leaps and bounds toward proficiency, and eventually, learned to fly on their own.

This book is about the adrenaline rush of seeing a kid finally get it. It is about being able to say, “I know what his test scores say, but let me show you what he really can do.” It is about
having all the realities of competency right there before you, not as a couple of numbers or lines on a graph, but in page after page of brilliant, funny, and glorious detail.

We have many people to thank for their help with this second edition of Assessment and ESL. We thank all the teachers who willingly and generously shared their expertise, their students’ work, and their stories: Susie Beverstein, Jackie Deeb, Ellen Fetu, Judy Fritz, Suzanne Gut, Il Han, Marlene Hess, Cheri Mornard, Mark Rowland, Cathy Tegen, Keith Wakeman, and Sara Vander Woude. We thank all the students who have passed through our lives, who made us laugh, who enriched us, and who made the struggle to write this book and fight for the betterment of their lives worth the effort. We thank our editors at Portage & Main Press, Catherine Gerbasi, Annalee Greenberg, and Leslie Malkin for their endurance and careful attention to detail.

And, as always, we thank our loving families for their patience, their tolerance, and their continued support throughout these long years of struggle. When we began this book, our children were very small and they played under our kitchen tables while we hunched over student work, asking “What are we looking at? What does this show?” again and again, trying to make sense of what we were seeing. Now, they have grown up and gone off to college—and we are still asking those same questions.

Lastly, we want to remember those, whom we loved deeply, who died during the years between this edition and the last: Gene Eckes, Austin Lamberts, Vangie Lamberts, and Ken Law.

About Our Chapter Titles
Each chapter title in this new edition of Assessment & ESL incorporates one of the many charming miscues we have encountered during our careers, while also conveying the theme of the chapter. Although many of these are self-explanatory, such as “we’re working hardly,” others take some thought to understand the meaning that the writer or speaker intended to convey. Still others need explanation. For instance, Mary was stumped when two students repeatedly came over to her desk and said “kiss me, teacher,” all the while giggling shyly, only to return to their desks when she did not know how to respond. After much puzzlement and embarrassment, Mary finally realized they were saying “excuse me, teacher.”

We have no clue what “determining the navel assigned to the factor” means, which is the miscue we attached to chapter 3. But it seemed to be a natural for that chapter, since placement of ESL students can be challenging and confusing and the issues vary from student to student. Converting Fahrenheit to Cellulose” speaks to the government’s attempts to reduce and quantify, by means of numbers, something as all-encompassing, complex, ephemeral, and personal as learning.

Although this is a modest book, we feel that attention to this issue is vital to the task of educating all children. The consequences of not watching and listening, collecting, and documenting, or of simply allowing someone else (who does not know you or your students) make sweeping judgments on the basis of one test, are extensive and potentially disastrous.

There is no margin for error.
“Mom, can I have a snack?” asked Barb’s seven-year-old one night

“You can have an apple.”

“I can’t eat apples.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t have any front teeth, remember?”

“Ummmm.” Long pause. “What have you been doing with all the apples I’ve been putting in your lunch?”

“Giving them to my friends.”

Barb was stunned, not to mention outraged, over the thought of all those apples she had been buying and dutifully packing during the last three months that had been slipping, unbeknownst to her, into the hands and tummies of Kate’s friends.

We have come to the conclusion that education and assessment are much like packing school lunches for your children. You put in everything that you think your child needs, all the necessary food groups, making it attractive and palatable. Then you send it off, hoping it will get eaten. The lunch box comes back empty, but you can’t assume that the child has actually eaten what you packed. He may have traded those cookies for a candy bar, taken one bite of the apple and thrown it away, or chucked the entire contents of the box in the trash. There are three main ways for you to check to see if your child has actually eaten the lunch: ask him (monitoring closely for truth); see if he’s ravenous when he comes home, if he’s growing (or getting seriously skinny); or simply volunteer for lunch duty and watch
him eat. The first one is only partially revealing of what happens: he may tell you, he may not. The second method is far removed from the actual fact: by the time you see your child losing weight, the lack of lunches has gone on for quite some time. The third—if not entirely feasible or practical—is of course the most effective. You can intervene when necessary, negotiate, and change the menu if it’s not meeting the child’s tastes and needs (or number of teeth).

The comparison to assessment is easy. Standardized testing, like weighing and measuring a child against the bathroom door every New Year’s Eve, is a natural and logical part of quantifying growth. Parents want to know whether their child is growing, learning and achieving at a rate that is considered normal for his age. But it often occurs after the fact. It’s the day-to-day watching of your child growing, of listening to what he says, of monitoring his eating habits, who he plays with and how much television he watches that tells you who your child is and what he’s all about. This kind of assessment is ongoing. It is the observation of development as it happens, rather than the final product. Parents and teachers are masters of this art—it’s what they do. Ask any good teacher and she can go on and on about what any one particular student can or can’t do.

This fine art, this mastery of the craft of child-watching, has been invalidated in recent years and relegated to a less-than-important status, to be supplanted by impersonal, easy-to-read-and-quantify standardized tests.

The assessment of non-English-speaking students is not clear-cut. The regular standards and criteria that are used to assess English-speaking children cannot be used as reliable yardsticks. When a student does not speak the language of the test, it is difficult to gauge whether he knows the material and just doesn’t have the English to display the knowledge, or whether he truly doesn’t know the material.

There are many variables that come into play with students who do not speak English as their native language. Many of the things we take for granted with our regular students—an understanding of American culture, a basic background in government, science, math and reading—cannot be assumed with newcomers. We cannot even take it for granted that they understand that print has meaning. Giving a fair grade to a student who can barely read, who has just arrived from a foreign country, is a tangled issue that needs serious thought to resolve.

There are also many wild cards: students who arrive in senior high school with no previous schooling and have to learn such simple things as sitting in a desk; students who do not adhere to the time-line we impose on them, who learn at much slower rates than we consider normal because they have so much to learn in knowledge and concepts, on top of the materials presented in class; students who come to us with moderate to severe disabilities, whose problems are beyond our abilities to understand, diagnose and help correct. How can we assess them, and measure the knowledge they have and the gains they are making?

Those who do not understand these issues (unfortunately, many of our policymakers fall into this category) try to impose time limits to ESL schooling, advocate buying software instead of paying teachers, worse still, relegate students to remedial status, and, worst of all, advocate eliminating services altogether. And, those who do not understand try to use the
same yardsticks on our ESL students without allowing them the time, the attention, and the input they need to achieve on a comparable level with mainstream students.

This is a modest book. We do not pretend to have all the answers to alternative assessment. In the past several years there has been a great deal of interest in and a burgeoning amount of research on this topic. But little attention has been paid to how this can relate to non-English speakers. As with our previous book, *The More-Than-Just-Surviving Handbook*, we have tried to make sense of the literature and the theories and apply them in a clear and usable way for the teacher in the trenches.

We have filled the book with examples drawn from our own experiences and the experiences of others.

We have many people to thank for their help in writing this book. To the teachers who so willingly and generously shared their expertise, their stories, and their students’ work: Cathy Tegen, Bong Hee Lis, Dan Jones, Judy Lewis, Mary Miller, Corri Gossen, Heidi Meissner, Mary Delie, Debby Moon, Caitlin Cogburn, Dolores Duncan, John Patterson, Teresa Greer, Mary Marcus, Cherie Mornard, Andrea Davis, Ellen Kallio, Jackie Deeb, Miss Huong. We thank them for their input and their critiques. We’d especially like to thank all the students who have passed through our lives, made us laugh, enriched us, and made the struggle to write this book and fight for the betterment of their lives worth the effort. We’d like to thank our editor Annalee Greenberg for her patience and her careful attention to detail.

And, as always, we thank our loving families for their patience, their tolerance, and their continued support throughout these long years of struggle.

**About our title:** This book has been through many incarnations and had many titles (*Barb and Mary Have an Adventure; Mary and Barb Screw Up Again; But Officer, We Were Lost!; Why Isn’t Chest Plural?). Finally, the dilemma answered itself. The theme of this book is being able to look through the errors to the meaning intended, and so it was natural that we choose a title that incorporates one of the many delightful miscues we have encountered during our careers. Taken from one student’s story retelling of the *Wizard of Oz*, it seems to sum up the idea that learning is a continuum, and that assessment must follow the same path. The titles of chapters are the same; each one conveys the theme of the chapter and takes some thought to understand the meaning that the writer or speaker intended to convey. Some are self-explanatory, such as “Flying without an Earplan.” Some need an explanation. Mary was stumped when two students repeatedly came to her desk and said, “Kiss me, teacher,” all the while giggling shyly, to return to their desks when she didn’t know how to respond. After much puzzlement and embarrassment, she finally realized they were saying, “Excuse me, teacher.” Then she could respond appropriately. We have no clue to the meaning of one title, “Determining the Navel Assigned to the Factor.” But it seemed to be a natural for that chapter, since so many people argue for standardized testing and use the results without any idea as to what has been measured and what the results really mean.
Editor's Note

One of the dilemmas facing today’s editor is that of retaining writing clarity while ensuring gender balance. This relates specifically to the use of the personal pronouns he/she, him/her, himself/herself, and so on. Using both forms in all cases makes for particularly awkward reading. In this book, we have chosen to use masculine pronouns when referring to generic students and feminine pronouns when referring to generic teachers. We assure the reader that no affront is intended.
INTRODUCTION

For the first four months Hiro was in the United States, he ordered nothing but hotdogs at the school cafeteria. He did not know any other words for food, and could not read the menu. He just pointed and said, “Hotdog.” Three years later, he told his teacher, “I don’t eat hotdogs anymore.”

Jenny arrived at the middle school speaking no English. At eleven, she had been in sixth grade in her home country, but here, her parents insisted on enrolling her in the seventh grade. Their rationale: the education system in their own country was so far advanced from the American system that when they returned to their country, Jenny would be held back a year. Although very shy, Jenny proved to be an exceptional language learner and, within three months, was speaking colloquial English without an accent. By year’s end, she was competing with her peers.

Jenny got to play the role of the heroine when the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade ESL students put on the play Cinderella. It was a success and, performing for the entire school, the students received a standing ovation. Jenny and her family never returned to their home country. Now a successful dentist, whenever Jenny sees Barb she says, “Remember when we did Cinderella? Wasn’t that fun?”

These incidents in the lives of Hiro and Jenny were steps in their ongoing learning continuum toward competence in English and in school. One of the great joys of working with second-language learners is watching that magical unfolding as each one grows and gains competency in a new language. The challenge is to capture that growth and record it. Because growth is dynamic and ongoing, assessment should be, too.
Teacher’s manuals now include, as a matter of course, discussions of ESL students and accommodations to be made for them to the curriculum. While many of the ideas, teaching methods, and solutions are the same, non-English-proficient students pose a special challenge for the teacher who wants to grade fairly and give credit for work done, progress gained, and concepts mastered. Trying to grade or chart the progress of a student who speaks little or no English, cannot communicate what he knows, does minimal work in class, and hands in no homework continues to be a perplexing dilemma.

This book has been written for those of you who are working with English-language learners—elementary and secondary, mainstream and ESL—to help you recognize the progress ESL students make, which may not always be apparent at first glance, and to identify ways of documenting that growth. As Gullickson (2003), writes, “Sound evaluations presume the need for substantial assessment skills on the part of the evaluator to deal effectively with a wide range of issues that arise.”

In this book, we have undertaken to

• distill the latest research on effective assessment, literacy development, and second-language acquisition
• apply this research to the unique issues of learning to speak, read, and write in English as a new and additional language
• suggest activities to foster proficiency and competency in both oral and written language

THE FOUR THEMES

In our first book, The More-Than-Just Surviving Handbook, we discussed the process of learning another language effectively around four basic themes:

1. Real language
2. Integrated and whole language
3. A facilitating environment
4. Learning is a continuum, in which errors have a place and role

We can also discuss assessment within the framework of these four themes.

Real Language

This refers to language that has purpose, that is meaningful, authentic, and relevant. The reasons students have for using language must be more than simply to please the teacher and get a good grade. Students have many reasons for using real language: to order food, to ask a parent for an allowance, to convince the teacher to give them an extra day for completing an assignment, to tell a joke to a friend, and so on.

In the same vein, the language in which a student is being assessed must also have meaning and purpose. The context must be the type of situation he encounters in everyday life, rather than contrived language used to illustrate a phonic principle or language someone
has decided is “easy.” Research shows that students often perform more poorly on tasks that are dull, uninteresting, meaningless, purposeless, boring, or frustrating than they do on tasks that have a purpose (Smith, 1998). When the student cannot see a purpose for what he is doing or, if the cost of trying is too high compared to his expected rate of success, he may not give the task the time, attention, or effort it requires. Forester and Reinhard (1989) write:

_Evaluation of children’s reading and writing should take place while they are actually reading and writing and not in situations that are supposed to simulate reading and writing. This makes it possible for the teacher to learn about how children use the many resources that are available to them from their classmates and from print material._

Real assessment, then,

- is realistic. Tasks being assessed closely follow the ways in which our ability is tested in the real world
- requires judgment and innovation on the part of the student
- measures the progress of students engaged in authentic tasks
- involves tasks that have meaning for the student
- is dynamic and flexible. It can vary in time, context and demands
- uses multiple means of measuring knowledge and skills

**Integrated and Whole Language**

For many years it was thought that language and literacy skills equaled the sum of their parts, that teaching the parts would lead to adequate understanding of the whole, and that testing the parts would give us insight into a student’s grasp of the whole. We now know this is not true. Davies et al. (1992) write that “language is not a set of unrelated bits. It forms a whole...the bits must be integrated and tested in combination with one another.” Assessment tools do not fragment language. They do not measure just spelling, or grammar, or word lists, or comma splices; they measure language use as a whole. Shuy (1973) writes:

_*Tests of grammar and phonology are not accurate predictors of effective participation...functional language competence is far more crucial. That is, a child’s ability to seek clarification or get a turn seems much more critical than his ability to use past-tense markers._*

In _The Primary Language Record: Handbook for Teachers_, Barrs et al. (1989) state that “reading cannot be examined in total isolation from talking, listening and writing, so it is important to consider each child in the context of her/his language and learning experiences.” As well, language is assessed within the context of the surrounding environment, not divorced from it.
According to Gumperz (1964):

*Context is thought of as the physical setting, the people within the setting, what the people are doing and saying, and where and when they are doing it. Language is embedded in the flow of daily life.*

Assessment, then, does not isolate one skill from another. Reading is not separate from writing, listening, and speaking. What a student says about what he writes is important. His comments about what he has read reveal much about what he has understood. The drawings that illustrate what he wrote, and the actions he pantomimes to explain a situation are all clues to competence.

Integrated assessment, then, means

- the context of the situation is as significant as the task itself
- tasks consist of more than just rote memorization
- individual tasks are not isolated from other people or from other skills

**A Facilitating Environment**

The learning environment must be conducive to learning. A facilitating environment means several things. First, it means a positive orientation on the part of the teacher and classmates that allows a learner to behave naturally and feel truly capable of expressing himself openly without fear of ridicule or punishment. Second, the environment and, consequently, assessment, should focus on positive achievement rather than on negative failure. Too much testing can be punitive, focusing on errors and a student's failure to measure up to a standard. According to Murphy (1992), emphasis should be on “meaningful and positive descriptions of what pupils know, understand, and can do.” Facilitative assessment, then,

- is constructive, not destructive
- recognizes the student’s achievements, not his failures
- treats the student as a person worthy of respect, not a number
- gives the student a chance to experience success in a wide variety of contexts at many different levels
- provides a continuous record of tasks and stages of achievement that the student demonstrates
- takes into consideration students' learning styles, language proficiencies, cultural and educational backgrounds, and grade levels of students

Observe Song Jo’s writing.
Song Jo meant to say:


Although it is easy to be taken aback by the errors and to look at his language deficits, it is important to focus on what he can do. So, what does Song Jo know?

- He knows word boundaries.
- He knows cursive writing.
- He knows the correct orthography of several English words: *I’m, today, old.*
- He has a strong grasp of English phonic principles. For example, *yt, tu, u, du* and *cakes* reveal that he understands the concept of sound/letter correspondences and can make reasonably accurate guesses.
- He is familiar with English punctuation. He uses a question mark.

**Learning Is a Continuum**

Forester and Reinhard (1989) speak of learning as a journey: it is not enough to note that students are giving correct answers on exercise sheets, reading well orally, copying words correctly, or spelling words from a list correctly. The question is, can they readily transfer that knowledge to new and different situations? Or, do they simply know it at the imitation or product level? Observing students’ small steps forward will tell you far more about who has truly internalized knowledge and where individual students are along the learning continuum.

Every student travels along the learning continuum at his own pace. Although Nok and Veapasert are both ten and arrived in their new country at the same time, that does not mean we should expect them to be at the same level of proficiency. We cannot be concerned that it takes one longer to get there than it takes the other. We cannot judge developing English students according to a preset timeline, considering them failures or disabled because they do not achieve competence as quickly as we would like. For example, when Isabella says, “Tengo toys” (*tengo* is Spanish for “I have”), she is demonstrating progress. She is making the transition from monolingual Spanish to English, a piece at a time.

This also means that errors are not necessarily indication of a problem. Errors do not denote failure to learn. According to Goodman (1988):

*Errors, miscues, or misconceptions usually indicate ways in which a child is organizing the world at that moment...Errors also indicate interpretations which may in no way be wrong, but simply show that the child has used inferences about reading or listening which were unexpected...the [observer] who understands the role of unexpected responses will use children’s errors or miscues to chart their growth and development and to understand the personal and cultural history of the child. Often errors signal the onset of leaps in knowledge, as, for instance, the explosion of invented spelling with children just on the verge of putting reading together. Teachers who are familiar with the bumps and quirks of language and*
literacy learning encourage approximations and invented spellings with the faith and certainty that, over time and with continued exposure to the desired and ideal forms, children will learn them.

Teachers of ESL students also encourage approximations, sentences that contain both languages and creative grammar, because they know that these features indicate the student is moving forward toward proficiency.

Understanding that learning is a continuum means

- all students are given the time they need, independent of what the policymakers think is a reasonable amount of time for mastering English or what other students are doing
- there is a place for errors
- errors can be considered indicators of progress rather than failure to learn
- errors are roadmaps for teachers, telling us where the student is now and where we need to go next

EQUITABLE ASSESSMENT

It is upon this conceptual framework that we will build our case for alternative assessment and demonstrate how to do it. Today’s students will be assessed through testing. That is a given. What we want to ensure is that the assessments they undergo are equitable. The movement toward raising standards for all students, English language learners (ELLs) included, does not necessarily mean it will happen, particularly if the tests used are not accurate indicators of what the learners know or can do. Meisels et al. (1995) write:

Tests that do not accommodate crucial differences between groups of children are inherently inequitable. They do not give all children a fair chance to succeed because they assume that all children come to the testing situation with roughly the same experiences, experiences that are crucial to success.

The needs of English language learners vary along a wide continuum. “To establish standards as though all students have had access and opportunity to learn from a common curriculum is to deny the reality that exists in most schools,” writes Brown (2001). He continues that it is not possible for a single standard “to represent an appropriate expectation of academic quality...and still be fair for all the individuals in that school.” Neither is this possible for a test.

The most fundamental premise underlying equitable assessment is that a student does not come to the classroom “alinguial,” without language. He usually comes with the ability to speak and with varying levels of competence in one or more languages. Therefore, we must observe him and assess his abilities where he is on the learning continuum and use our observations to make decisions about what to do with him next.

To assess a student accurately and equitably and to make fair decisions about him, we need to gather as much information about him as possible, including what he has accomplished and where he is on the learning continuum. But it is not enough to gather
data for its own sake. It does no good to have piles of notes, or bursting portfolios that sit on the shelf. The data needs to be catalogued for accessibility and presented in useable ways. This information must then be used to help the student progress.

The ultimate purpose of any assessment or evaluation is to improve learning. If it does not further a teacher’s understanding of where a student is and what he needs to do to improve or develop, if it does not inform students about themselves and their mastery and capacity, then assessment, in any form, whether it be testing, portfolio development, anecdote collection, or narrative writing, is a wasted endeavor.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In Chapter 1, Kiss Me Teacher: WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW, we discuss why we assess, what kinds of information educators need to find out about their non- or limited-English-speaking students to make appropriate decisions about placement, curriculum, and educational objectives, and what effective assessment is and does.

Chapter 2, What Shape Will We Use? Red! TESTING VS. ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF ASSESSMENT, explores what good data is and the problems traditional standardized testing poses for ESL students. We propose that alternative assessment can lead the way toward fairer and more accurate assessment in order to showcase a student’s actual abilities as well as proficiency and development in language and academic content.

Chapter 3, Determining the Navel Assigned to the Factor: PLACEMENT, examines how to identify students whose primary language is not English, the steps to take in assessing proficiency and literacy levels, and factors to consider for placing students appropriately. We provide three placement scenarios to illustrate some of these factors or issues.

Chapter 4, We’re Working Hardly: EMERGING LITERACY, explores the importance of both context and the concept of emergence with regards to language and literacy acquisition. We discuss the levels of emerging proficiency and literacy as well as the theoretical framework or standard against which to evaluate student proficiency or achievement. We provide a basis for understanding emerging proficiency and literacy by exploring the research and providing examples of growing competency and mastery in both oral and written expression.

In Chapter 5, Diving for Pearls in their Shelves: HOW AND WHERE TO FIND INFORMATION, we address how to find important information about students through observing them working, sampling their work, talking with them, and using traditional measures. From this, we can determine the strategies they are using as well as their understanding, attitudes, interest, and degree of control over language forms. We also explore opportunities for collecting information about students and how to analyze and interpret the information.

Chapter 6, The Santa Maria, the Pimpas, the Ninny Sailing with Baflaf’s Dog: RECORDING YOUR OBSERVATIONS THROUGH CHECKLISTS, RUBRICS, ANECDOTES, AND CONFERENCES examines these four ways of collecting and documenting important information about student progress.
Chapter 7, Finding the Perimeter of a Pollyollygon: EXITING, is about deciding when a student is ready to function in a mainstream class on a level with his peers. We explore how to determine when a student no longer needs second-language support, as well as exiting criteria.

Chapter 8, The Final Nail in the Coffee: GRADES, presents the problems and issues involved in grading ESL students, the decisions you must make to grade fairly, and setting standards that can include ESL students.

Chapter 9, Lunching Several Measures: PRESENTING THE INFORMATION TO STAKEHOLDERS, is about systematizing the information you have gathered about your students, presenting the data in forms that are usable to the stakeholders, and how to hold conferences with the stakeholders.

Chapter 10, Converting Fahrenheit to Cellulose: STANDARDS, tackles the sticky issue of standards, what they are meant to do, and what they mean for ESL students.

Chapter 11, Fight to the Spinach! MAKING THE CHANGE, offers suggestions for changing methods of grading and assessment and for collaborating with partners in the educational system to make these changes reality.

Why We Have Written this Book

We have written this book so that you, the reader, equipped with tools and knowledge, can confidently document the development and progress of second-language learners, help to further their growth, and comfortably welcome all learners. We have filled these pages with many of our own experiences as well as struggles and mistakes we made over the years. We include numerous case examples and anecdotes*, which make the theory real and illustrate the sometimes uneven, often arduous path toward mastery of the English language. This book itself has been a struggle, and while we learned a great deal, we also discovered that as teachers we—like all other teachers—already knew the basics of assessment: observing students closely for signs of growth and mastery, and finding joy in that growth.

And so, in the overwhelming avalanche of publications and opinions about assessment, testing, and standards, we can add personal stories. We can add glimpses into the lives of students. We can make real the statistics and the theories. And we can put a human face on the endless debate—about the effectiveness of various forms of assessment—taking place across a great chasm of disagreement.

* Please note that names and minor details from some of these case examples and anecdotes have been changed.
Daniel, Martha, and Elsie were brought to the middle school of the small, Midwestern college town with no warning and no school records. Barb was summoned from the “Boogie Room”—the tiny windowless classroom to which she had been assigned, found along an unlit corridor on the second-floor landing. Standing in the hallway outside the office with the principal and the counselor, she had to make an on-the-spot decision about where to place the three newcomers. According to their father, Daniel and Martha had a solid learning foundation, and he thought they would do well in seventh and eighth grade respectively. Elsie ought to be in sixth grade, he said. Everyone took his word for it. No one had any idea how to find out at what grade level they were or how much English they knew. Besides, the older two looked mature enough. So that decision “felt” right. But then Barb looked at Elsie. She was very tiny. She looked nine, not eleven. She hid behind her father, peering at Barb with large, frightened eyes. Instinct told Barb that Elsie would do better at the elementary school. But Daniel and Martha were going to be at the middle school. Maybe it would be better to keep her with her brother and sister. She might feel safer there. Stifling her apprehensions, Barb agreed to place Elsie in the sixth grade with the other eleven-year-olds. That, it turns out, was a decision that was to go very wrong.

What’s in this Chapter

- Why we need to assess
- Questions we need to ask about our students
- What we are looking for when we assess
- What effective assessment is and does
HOW WE GOT HERE

Barb’s Early Years

The seed for this book began long ago with Elsie. Barb’s instincts were right. Sixth grade was too much for Elsie: she was too immature and her academic background was too spotty. As a tiny eleven year old, all she did was smile shyly and whisper. Two years later, she was still smiling shyly and whispering, but she had grown into a very large girl whose helplessness and unwillingness to try drove everybody crazy. She never seemed to pull it together and floundered for all the years she was at the middle school, only to return to who-knows-what in her own country. Barb has been haunted by the sense that if she had to do it over again she would have done it differently—and that the outcome for Elsie might have been different, too.

If she had known more about Elsie’s background, her reading ability, and her grasp of basic academic skills, Barb would have asserted her apprehensions, articulated her rationale, and, perhaps, just as important, justified her decisions, then taken stronger measures when Elsie did not begin to make progress.

But Barb was woefully ignorant about what resources were out there, what she needed to do to help Elsie, and how to go about making well-informed decisions. She needed information and did not know how to get it.

In those days, Barb was one of three ESL teachers in the entire town. She was assigned to seven elementary and two middle schools. All students were mainstreamed, and Barb met them whenever and wherever they fit into her busy schedule. If the state had a policy concerning non-English-speaking students, nobody knew what it was. Often, decisions about kids like Elsie were made standing in the hallway while the parent disappeared out the door. No initial placement tests were given. There was no curriculum, no guidelines to follow. Once the student was placed, it was difficult, if not impossible, for Barb to schedule time with the classroom teacher to find out what and how the child was doing.

During Barb’s third year in the district, she was given a self-contained classroom of second-language learners, thirty or so children from grades one through five, who arrived at her classroom soon after the tardy bell, to stay until lunch. Among them, they spoke eleven different languages. There were thirty different levels of English proficiency and thirty different sets of needs. Barb was
instructed to “teach them English” so that sooner or later they could return to the regular classroom fulltime.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the work of one new immigrant, Jung. Based on the work sample, Barb had to ask: How much does he know? Can he function in the regular classroom? Am I willing to set him adrift in a classroom when the options are pretty much all or nothing—either my class or alone in the mainstream?

Looking at the work sample, Barb could tell that Jung was literate in his own language. She could tell from his attempts at writing that he had some experience with English. When she questioned another individual, whose primary language was Korean, about what Jung had written, Bong Hee told her that Jung had listened carefully to the English words and phrases Barb had dictated, and he had written them first in Korean (which necessitated his understanding of her words). Then he had transcribed the words and phrases, as best he could, into English.

The first word Jung wrote is after. The second item is the phrase time to clean up. After some consultation with Bong Hee, Barb discovered that Jung knew quite a bit of English, but she was not ready to let him struggle alone in the mainstream classroom until he had gained more English. Jung, however, was one of those students who made great strides very quickly and was soon sailing along in the mainstream classroom with little or no additional help.

But Barb was privately overcome with questions about her second-language learners: What would she teach the students? There was nothing to help her establish what her priorities were and no one to help her decide where to start. Barb looked at John and Laban, who could read and write in Chinese but knew no English; at first-grader William who was on the verge of reading in English; at Chatphet, who would be going on to the middle school next year; at Vaji, who did not seem to be doing much in either Farsi or English. Barb sensed these children did not only need to learn to speak English, they needed to learn how to read and write in English. Time was passing. A year spent simply learning how to speak correctly was a year lost on learning the content of the curriculum.

Once Barb decided what to teach, how could she be sure it was relevant and aligned to what the students were doing in the mainstream curriculum? She rarely knew what was going on in the student’s regular classroom. With her mornings filled and her afternoons occupied with kindergarten and students needing extra help in reading, content areas, or language skills, she had little time to talk to classroom teachers. Communication was catch-as-catch-can in hallways and the teachers’ lounge. Conversation was often limited to “How is he doing?” “Oh, fine.”

How could she be sure the students were learning? Barb watched. She listened to the children as they worked, studied the writing they did, and observed their behavior throughout the morning. She talked to her aides and compared notes on what they had seen. Documenting that progress was another issue altogether, however, and the idea of portfolios in the classroom had not yet been developed. She attempted to put together a report card but was not happy with it because it did not reveal much.

How was she to decide when to send the students back to the mainstream classroom fulltime? There was no established procedure or criteria for exiting students in her class, and so it was a struggle to mainstream them. William, for instance, was a problem. He
talked constantly while Barb was trying to lead a lesson, got up and ran around during rug time, picked fights with other students, and would not stay on task during group work. He had entered school in the United States in kindergarten, had been in the self-contained classroom since his arrival nearly a year and a half before that, could speak English fluently, and was ready to read. It was clear to Barb that he could be successfully mainstreamed. However, when she approached the classroom teacher with the idea, Mrs. Smith curtly stated that they would have to meet with the principal. At the meeting, Barb presented her case. But because she really did not know much about assessment and could not document in any concrete way what William was capable of doing, she was unable to convince them. Mrs. Smith accused Barb of trying to get rid of William because he was a behavior problem (which he was); Barb secretly harbored the notion that Mrs. Smith did not want him back for precisely the same reason. So, over Barb’s objections, and what she intuitively knew was the right decision, William stayed in ESL.

Was the self-contained program the right program for the children? The logistics were overwhelming for Barb, with so many students at so many different levels. The children, isolated from their peers for half the day, made few English-speaking friends. And all but a few teachers seemed to relinquish responsibility for them, leaving the entire burden of teaching to Barb. Worst of all was the one-size-fits-all mentality that assumed that since the children all had the same “problem”—not knowing English—one teacher could, in the course of a morning, adequately teach five grade levels of children.

Mary’s Early Years

Mary had a different experience. Her first ESL assignment was at the Language Assessment Center (LAC) in southern California. The center provided intensive ESL instruction for newly located Indo-Chinese refugees. Every day, they attended a four-hour class split into two two-hour shifts shared between two teachers. The students were grouped according to capabilities, and the classes were open entry—students could come in at any time during the semester, and teachers could move them from level to level when they were ready. The students stayed in the program for approximately six to nine months and then moved into other programs or job training.

The curriculum at the LAC focused on survival skills the students would need to succeed in their new environment. Teachers had six major themes they were supposed to cover, but the materials they used and how they used them were left to them. They had access to the resources the center provided, or they could create their own. Texts were available, but the director discouraged teachers from using them too frequently. They were encouraged to keep the English meaningful and tangent to the students’ experiences. Teachers met every day to coordinate during the students’ twenty-minute break. This gave them time to share materials, ideas, observations, and so on. Once a month, the break was extended and a few teachers were asked to present a successful technique or observation to the entire group of about twenty teachers. They were kept abreast of ESL theory by presentations from experts in the field, by publishing companies who wanted feedback from them on new materials, and by interested professors at the nearby universities. They were encouraged to attend ESL workshops and to share what they learned with the rest of the group.