BARBARA LAW • MARY ECKES

ASSESSMENT AND ESL

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

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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."

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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.

Figure I.1 Song Jo's writing

Song Jo meant to say:

> **What do you do today? How old are you? I'm 9. I'm 9 years old. I had cookies. Peanut-butter cookies. Salted.**

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 *cukes* 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 "alingual," 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.

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*Please note that names and minor details from some of these case examples and anecdotes have been changed.