6 Alternative Assessment of Second-Language Writing: A Developmental Model

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Introduction

The nationwide advent of open admissions in colleges has sparked new directions in composition research for skilled and unskilled speakers of English (see Bruner; Heath; Mayher; Perl; and Vygotsky, for the work of some of the most prominent theorists and practitioners who have succeeded in uncovering the multitudes of factors that influence the development of writing). Innovative research has extended to the writing development of nonnative English speakers as a result of the growing population of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in institutions of higher education, especially in large, urban centers such as New York City, Boston, and Los Angeles (see Cazden; Dulay, Burt, and Krashen; Edelsky; and Nelson, *At the Point of Need*, for some of the most pioneering work by second-language researchers).

Second-language writing assessment is undergoing rapid change as well. Standardized evaluation procedures that rely on rote recall or decontextualized multiple-choice items designed to measure recognition of lexical items have expanded to encompass assessment of rhetorical components of writing, including topic at hand, clear

sequencing of ideas, appropriate paragraphing, and consistent point of view (Cohen; Conners). One of two widely used assessment tools is the "six-point scale" designed to evaluate the writer's control over language and organization. Essays that contain evidence of a pattern of development and a command of syntax are awarded the maximum six points. A score of five is allotted to essays written in clear language contained in grammatically correct sentences. Essays that show evidence of basic logical structure with only occasional digression in sentences containing correct grammatical inflection are given a score of four on the six-point scale. A score of three is assigned to essays that show no overall pattern of organization, written in language that reveals recurring grammatical problems. Two points are assigned to essays in which the response to the test prompt is not developed and in which conversational language is used, with errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling. And essays that are incoherent and unorganized and contain sentences with lapses in punctuation, spelling, and grammar receive one point for effort (City University of New York, *CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test*).

The second widely used assessment tool designed to diverge from evaluation of rote recall is the more detailed "composition profile," which dissects the essay into five categories: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Such guides, created to assess impromptu essays written on teacher-chosen themes, are used by more than 70 percent of colleges (see Sandra Murphy et al. in White, "An Apologia"). The six-point scale and the composition profile provide a breakthrough in the assessment of first- and second-language writing by establishing guidelines that look beyond factual recall. An advantage of these assessment tools is their effectiveness in broad screening decisions.

Such evaluation scales, however, are not without their limitations. One drawback is that they obscure variability among learners. Essays written by two different learners, each with his or her own distinct abilities and needs, may receive the same grade due to the arbitrary nature and broad range of the criteria, which are open to interpretation by individual readers from paper to paper (Nelson, "Reading Classrooms as a Text"). A score of three on a six-point scale may be assigned to essays on the basis of any one of a number of lexical, syntactic, or rhetorical criteria. Peter Elbow has concluded that such scores do little more than provide "agreement about a faint, smudged, and distorted picture of the student's writing ability" (see White, "An Apologia" 30). A second drawback is that product evalua-

tion, which is based on the categories outlined in the scales mentioned above, ignores the cognitive and linguistic development made by learners as they devise strategies to complete the writing task.

Fortunately, the foci of writing assessment are beginning to expand. I will present a developmental model that redefines writing assessment by targeting the strengths students develop as they struggle to reach their potential as academic writers. In the approach I use, tasks are designed to provide opportunities for learning, not solely for displaying knowledge. Teacher feedback is designed to encourage, not punish. The purpose of this essay is to present an alternative model-in-progress for developmental writing assessment.

I will describe an assignment given to low-intermediate ESL students enrolled in a public college in the Bronx, New York, and present a detailed assessment of the strategies devised by a second-language learner as she struggles to make meaning of a poem and respond to it in writing. Classroom instruction will be linked to outcomes of the developmental assessment.

Meaningful Assessment Tasks

The developmental writing assessment model described here is grounded in two underlying premises drawn from the work of Vygotsky (*Mind in Society*) and Bruner (*Acts of Meaning*). First, writing ability develops in response to the productive use of language, not "fill in the blank" recognition tasks. Short-answer questions related to reading passages result in truncated responses that obscure strategies used by the learner. The number of right answers is quantified, and the final score is presumed to be an indicator of achievement. In contrast, developmental writing assessment tasks, such as the one described here, elicit interpretation of ideas and analysis of information, intrinsic to academic composing, reasoning, and learning (Langer). According to the model, it is the strategies devised to carry out a task—not the quantifiable components in the evaluation scales listed above—that indicate academic achievement. The second underlying premise argues that cognitive and linguistic development are linked to the self-confidence needed to formulate interpretations, make statements, and derive conclusions. Developmental assessment tasks are designed to be carried out in an environment in which student writers gain the needed confidence, along with a feeling of safety from ridicule due to academic "deficits."

A Significant Classroom Event

At the center of the lesson focused on here is a poem written by Julia de Burgos, the renowned Puerto Rican poet, who recounts her rise from her denigrated role in society. The poem, like subsequent materials used during the semester, is selected on the basis of the opportunity it provides for students to interpret and express their ideas in writing. I distribute a copy of the poet's most famous work, "A Julia de Burgos" ["To Julia de Burgos"], and ask for a volunteer to read the poem in the original Spanish, using clear pronunciation. Reading the poem in Spanish serves a number of purposes. One is to bring the knowledge base, background, skills, and strengths of the learners into the higher education classroom, a setting in which some Caribbean-born, Spanish-speaking incoming freshmen feel alienated. Next, readers are more likely to comprehend the nuances of poetry written in their native language than in translation. The Spanish language provides a familiar link to the genre and to references contained in the poem, both of which are new to some of the students. Alternative assessment tasks are grounded in such links. I encourage non-Spanish speakers to listen to the "music" of the poem read in the original, a concept appreciated by all learners who function in two languages.

A student eagerly walks to the front of the room and reads the poem in Spanish. When he is finished reading, the class applauds vigorously. I ask for a volunteer to read the English translation; once again I remind the class of the importance of clear pronunciation and clear writing in order to communicate ideas in English. Reading and hearing the work read a second time reinforces comprehension. Hearing the poem in the original Spanish, followed by the English translation, turns the ESL classroom into a place in which the native language is merged in the target language setting. This is a unique experience for the majority of the students, who live, work, and socialize in communities in which Spanish, their native language, is spoken exclusively.

A second student, Elena,[1] volunteers to read the English translation. Somewhat reluctant to stand in front of the room, she stands up next to her chair and reads, dramatically, the English translation. The integrity of de Burgos's decision to discard her outer, social self in order to preserve her inner, private self is reflected in Elena's voice. When she completes her recitation, the class applauds.

I ask the students to reflect on their impressions of the poem in writing. The task serves dual purposes. First, it requires the learners to

explore and formulate their ideas. Second, reading and then respond-
ing to the poem introduces the concept of expressing the thought pro-
cess in writing. The assignment is the first of its kind for many stu-
dents whose voices have been harnessed into the limited spaces of
worksheets that contain no space for original thought.

A Developmental Assessment of a Written Response

Sandra writes the following in response to the poem:

> This poem was not common to my senses because I have
> never read one like this before. Also, when I started reading it I
> thought somebody was reciting a poem to this lady.
> I must not be using the right words, but I think this is a
> poem which have a lot of religion involved. She talked to her
> negative part: or ego, then expressed her essence or conscience
> feeling and finally made a contrast of the two different parts.
> In Conclusion this poem was an instruction that shows us
> the good & bad parts of our insides.

The appearance of Sandra's paper is deceiving (see the original,
Figure 1). Becker warns against the dangers of graphocentrism—our
preconceived notions of what the paper should look like, adhered to
while holding on to our paradigms of modes of analysis or our pre-
conceived notions of what it should read like—when evaluating our
students' work. Using simplistic words and inconsistent penmanship,
the learner's response to the assignment reflects an initial state of con-
fusion, resulting from her lack of exposure to the genre, to interpreting
literature, and to expressing her opinion. When asked about her prior
experience, Sandra does not recall ever having written an essay or
having read an entire book, from the time she arrived in the U.S. and
entered junior high school, followed by enrollment in high school in
the Bronx. She remembers filling in handouts designed to test recogni-
tion of grammatical structures and learning how to format business
letters in her language arts classes.

Sandra's response represents a contrast from her earlier work in
the ESL class. What appears to be a breakdown in the control of lan-
guage is actually an indication of the student risking courageously a
break with the five-paragraph essay form from which she has not been
able to deviate up to this point—an important advancement. Walsh
observes that "teachers who do not know these meanings usually find
the response of the pupil baffling, annoying and exasperating" (81).

Figure 1. Sandra's response to the poem "To Julia de Burgos."

The opening sentence—"This poem was not common to my senses because I have never read one like this before"—reveals the learner's lack of familiarity with the genre and with the process of interpreting literature. Sandra's struggle for clarity and control over her initial state of confusion continues into the next sentence: "Also, when I started reading it I thought somebody was reciting a poem to this lady." Such states of confusion provide optimal moments for inexperienced writers to develop language skills and achieve intellectual growth (Mayher). Cognitive development occurs as the writer moves from unfamiliar patterns of interpretive thought to new patterns that help her make sense of the task (Erickson). Both teacher and student

need to recognize Sandra's successful attempts to devise a strategy to transform her sense of chaos into order. In the sentence that follows— "I must not be using the right words, but I think this is a poem which have a lot of religion involved"—the student anchors herself to a recognizable reference, i.e., religion, which appears at the end of the poem, while she continues to grope for meaning. The next sentence— "She talked to her negative part: or ego, then expressed her essence or conscience feeling and finally made a contrast of the two different parts"—is written with a greater sense of self-confidence. Sandra recognizes the conflict between two aspects of the self that appear in the poem: the unconscious, spontaneous inner self and the negative, and calculated, outer self.

A breakthrough occurs in the final sentence as the learner places herself in a position of equal footing with the "expert" poet and is able to synthesize the thoughts of the poet with her own. She writes: "In Conclusion this poem was an instruction that shows us the good & bad parts of our insides." This is a clear manifestation of Sandra's triumph over her sense of confusion and an indication of her ability to recognize and generalize the message contained in the poem. Sandra's final sentence indicates her control of the writing task.

Teacher Feedback

A grammatical or rhetorical assessment of Sandra's response paper which does not acknowledge the successful, albeit awkward, demonstration of beginning fluency in academic language and thought is an abortive assessment. Rather than elicit answers to informational questions about the poem, my role as teacher is to create a setting in which students feel confident to formulate their own views and state them in writing. Additionally, it is my role to acknowledge and reinforce indications of development that appear in the student's work. This is accomplished by writing comments in the margin and by reading the student's paper aloud to the class, while collectively pointing out its strengths. Mayher points to the advantages of reading students' papers aloud to the class, including the motivating effect on the writer and the other students.

I distribute a copy of Sandra's paper to each student. The class takes some time to read it. In order to place the focus on development rather than error hunting, I note the consistent movement from personal to abstract thought, an ability prized in higher education. I also point to the student's achievement as she pursues the tasks of inter-

preting and analyzing the poem, she having no prior experience at either. My goal is to dissect and, thus, demystify the task at hand, while at the same time discovering the strengths and needs of the learners in order to integrate both into the classroom curriculum (Nelson, *At the Point of Need*). I wish to convey the message that this and other such tasks are, indeed, within the reach of all, including those students, who, like Sandra, may never have encountered a literature-based writing task before. Sandra's facial expression reveals a sense of pride at having her work singled out and taken seriously, perhaps for the first time.

A Follow-up Assignment

Reflecting on literature provides an optimal moment for the students to pose and resolve relevant questions (see Henry Giroux's comments in Freire and Macedo 78–79; Rigg and Kasemek). A follow-up task asks the students to identify themes contained in the poem and to design corresponding questions to be used as essay prompts. The two follow-up tasks, along with the tasks of reading and responding in writing, form a continuum of poem-related activities and thus have no determined beginning or end that can be evaluated. The goal of the follow-up tasks is to encourage the students to discover universal issues found in the autobiographical poem that may apply to their lives as well.

I ask the class to break up into small groups. Some students lack confidence in their ability to abstract knowledge or contribute their insights to a small group. Both skills have been circumvented in their prior educational experience by informational questions requiring rote-recall transfer of facts onto worksheets. More important than intervening, my role at this point is to maintain a nonthreatening setting which the students can work in and eventually feel safe enough to contribute to. Some students listen silently as they carefully observe others model strategies used to respond to the academic task. Each group of students chooses one or two larger issues from their list. I write the suggestions on the board. The final list of student-generated themes elicited from the poem contains the following:

- hypocrisy/honesty
- materialism/spiritualism
- dependency/independence
- repression/liberation
- male/female roles

From the list on the chalkboard, the students vote for two sets of concerns that they find most pertinent. They choose "materialism/spiritualism" and "male/female roles." We then formulate the following questions to address in essay form:

1. Some people think that it is better to be rich in material things instead of rich in the love and concern for friends and family. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

2. Relationships, in which the male dominates and the female is passive, result in harmony since the roles of the man and the woman are clearly defined. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

After that, we pause for a moment to reflect on the significance of the work completed thus far. The ability to recognize universal themes and formulate questions that lend themselves to examining the human condition must not go unnoticed. Nor do I pass up the opportunity to demystify the wide variety of tasks accomplished by Sandra, which cannot be quantified but need to be acknowledged. I begin by pointing to the risk that Sandra took by moving from her concern with the formulaic five-paragraph essay to a concern with reflecting on her impressions of the poem in writing. She reorganized her initial insights while at the same time moving from personal to abstract thought. She ends by connecting the issues found in the literature to issues found in her personal life—and accomplishes all of this in English.

For their exam, the students choose one of the questions to write about in essay form. Creating their own examination provides an opportunity for them to contribute meaningfully to the curriculum. Additionally, student-created exams are intended to reverse the intimidating and sometimes punitive association with assessment. Finally, the assignment provides an initial opportunity for some students to identify and solve existential problems in writing.

The class is encouraged from the success of Sandra's essay and from the modeling by participants in the smaller groups. Sandra's paper, including imperfections, was read with seriousness and respect. It received positive feedback from the students and from me, which is important to other inexperienced students who are unsure of their ability to complete analytic reading/writing tasks. The students use the remaining hour to write an essay on one of the two questions. I wish them luck.

Alternative Assessment and Traditional Grading

Once the students have completed their essays, I assess those and all subsequent written work throughout the semester in the manner described on Sandra's response paper, above. I look for indications of movement from each student's starting point toward his or her potential, the area which Vygotsky terms

> the zone of proximal development, [or] the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (*Mind in Society* 86)

Rather than artificially quantify development or reduce the multiple revisions of an essay to a single grade, I note indications of growth on the essay exam. Instead of pointing to specific grammatical errors, I place parentheses around segments of writing and label them "unclear." By doing so, the students are left to explore and discover their options as writers, independently, and to rewrite the segment clearly.

I compare each student's writing progress to prior final drafts of a limited number of essays written throughout the semester. My comments are instructional and related to the development apparent in the work submitted. Thus, I reinforce the concept of writing development as evolving. The students are given credit for completion of the assignment once the final draft is handed in. With no numerical or letter grade at risk, communication of ideas becomes the goal of the students, who are left to find their own ways of reaching clarity. Some students choose to work in collaboration with others in groups, some work in pairs, while others work alone on draft after draft and approach me or another student only when they reach an impasse.

The class is given a midterm and a final exam in the form of an essay question based on an article or the literature read. The midterm essay is assigned a "pass" or "no pass" grade by an outside teacher who reads the essay impressionistically for evidence of control of the language and a logical response to the question. A second grade of "pass" or "no pass" is assigned by me. The graded midterm is returned to the student and is treated like any other first draft of a work-in-progress to be revised, with the exception of the added outside input. The grades are intended to be instructional and to be used as a benchmark for informing the student of the progress made up to the midpoint of the semester. Equally, the grades inform me of stu-

dents' needs to be addressed in the curriculum. A revised draft of the midterm exam is handed in to me for credit, consistent with all prior assignments. The final exam is given during the last class, with no opportunity for revision. The final essay culminates the development made throughout the semester. The letter grade for the course is determined by the student's ability to answer the essay question thoroughly, using clearly written English.

Implications for Classroom Instruction

There is a need to redefine the objectives of writing assessment, moving it from a punitive, gatekeeping tool that measures deficits, to a facilitative tool that informs novice academic writers of the characteristics of clear expression of thought, informs teachers of students' potential, and informs the classroom curriculum. The definition of writing development needs to be extended from the indication of increasing proficiency in editing mechanical errors to the increasing ability to successfully complete a wide variety of tasks. An alternative assessment model transcends quantified evaluation. The ultimate goal of the developmental writing assessment model presented here is to prepare students to meet the rigors of academic language and thought. It is accomplished by designing tasks that foster written solutions to abstract problems.

The movement from personal to abstract levels of thought promoted in this assignment is seen in Sandra's response. She begins: "This poem was not common to my senses because I have never read one like this before. Also, when I started reading it I thought somebody was reciting a poem to this lady." A transformation occurs as the learner broadens, reorganizes, and finally assimilates her insights with those of the poet. Sandra ends her paper thus: "In Conclusion, this poem was an instruction that shows us the good & bad parts of our insides." She progresses from her own starting point, as an inexperienced writer, and uses writing to reflect on her impressions. The assignment requires students to devise strategies with which to understand the ideas in the poem, formulate their own opinions, and express their ideas in writing.

Writing assessment models that evaluate surface errors in response to teacher-chosen topics may provide useful information about mastery of lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical features of second-language writing. Such assessment procedures, however, conceal thought processes and patterns of development that may provide the

teacher with a rich database for assessing educational progress, strengths, and needs. The ability of Sandra and her classmates to control the initial writing task signals the next phase of instruction—in this case, the complex follow-up tasks of identifying universal themes and integrating them into a writing test prompt.

Subsequent classroom research in the form of longitudinal observation of language interaction is needed. Such observation will permit teacher-researchers to document and assess how students develop from the abilities with which they enter the classroom to reaching their potential. The model presented in this essay is a more reliable indicator of the development of academic language and thought, while at the same time serving a facilitative function, not a gatekeeping one.

Note

1. All names included in this essay are pseudonyms.

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Interlude

In my freshman comp classes, I encourage a lot of ex-
pressive and nongraded writing. I also have my students
write about literature in alternative—often "creative"
—as well as analytical forms. In the hopes that it
will encourage them to experiment with their writing, I
don't put formal grades on anything they turn in.
Instead, I comment in writing on their drafts, and I
meet individually with every student at least once. My
grades are based on a modified contract approach. When
we're doing a sustained piece of writing (a unit
essay), I run a process-centered workshop. If they show
up to class prepared, participate in groups, and write
with reasonable effort and skill, they can get no less
than a 2.0–2.5 (in a 4.0 system) for the course. Just
so they don't get too worried, I give them all a ball-
park grade at the end of each unit. Most students who
meet the minimum requirements of the contract have lit-
tle trouble getting at least a 3.0. I reserve the right
to give 3.5's and 4.0's on quality of effort, attitude,
and initiative. Those who get the highest grades must
show some genuine interest, potential, and skill.

   —Mike Steinberg
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