

WRITING ASSESSMENT AND MINORITIES

Facilitator: Paul A. Ramsey, *Educational Testing Service*

Paul Ramsey opened the session with some general remarks about writing assessment bias. In general, many teachers believe that an essay test is less culturally biased than a multiple-choice test. We know that SAT results have revealed differences of 100 points between the mean scores of black students and of white students. What we do not know is the meaning of these differences. The fact that we know so little about cultural bias in test construction suggests that it has been ignored in terms of research; the real racism is that we have persisted in our ignorance.

While we trust essay tests, we need to be concerned about how they are scored. Most essay tests are read holistically, to get a general impression. Some critics of holistic scoring say it merely assesses "scribal fluency," and if that is so, dialect features will influence the general impression left with the reader. An interesting area for research is whether primary trait analysis of holistically-scored essay tests would change the scores of minority students.

The group also discussed other issues concerning writing assessment and minorities. Participants wanted to know whether the expository/persuasive modes discriminate against minority students. Many minority students are products of inadequate secondary schools and, thus, may lack information we assume they have. It was suggested that students be allowed to choose among topics in different modes. In addition, testing should be linked to the goals of instruction: if students write expository prose in their courses, then it is fair to test them in this mode.

Various questions were also raised about linguistic minorities. There was no agreement as to whether the exit criteria should be the same for ESL students as it is for native speakers of English.

The group also discussed the problem of responding to Black English features in essays. Several people noted that dialect papers must be read and discussed in the training session, so that there is agreement among the readers about assessment of papers displaying these features.

Competence and tolerance became the key words. As teachers, we are responsible for teaching competence in the language accepted by the larger culture. Many believe that the dialect features that do not interfere with communication are acceptable, those that interfere are not. It is the moral responsibility of teachers to offer instruction in communicative competence, but it is also the moral responsibility of teachers not to make value judgments about students who do not want that instruction. An additional responsibility of teachers is to broaden the definition of what is acceptable language in the general culture and to stretch the limits of tolerance of language diversity. We must help make our students—minority and non-minority—sensitive to language variation and make them agents of change.

It was also expressed that dialect variation was not the key problem in teaching or assessing the writing of minority students. Minority students have the same problems as other students: lack of clarity, lack of organization. We must address these problems.

Finally, Ramsey reminded us that we do not determine what is or is not acceptable language. Furthermore, we must remember that while tests can be used to assess the best methods of instruction, they can also be used to exclude or segregate minority students.

Jane Paznik-Bondarin, *Recorder*
Borough of Manhattan Community College