

## VALIDITY ISSUES IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

**Speakers:** Sybil Carlson, Educational Testing Service, New Jersey  
Barbara Gonzales, CUNY Office of Academic Affairs  
**Introducer/Recorder:** Carolyn Leitman, Cuyahoga Community College, Ohio

Sybil Carlson described an ongoing research project investigating the validity of the Analytical Reasoning section of the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). The project, which investigates the extent to which the assessment of reasoning skills is confounded by the assessment of writing skills and the extent to which they can be differentiated, is motivated by the need to demonstrate "construct validity." Carlson said that many tests do not have construct validity: there is no evidence that many tests measure what they were intended to measure.

Writing samples were selected for observation because the thinking or reasoning skills of post-secondary students are largely evaluated by how well they can express themselves in written form. The data, consisting of writing samples generated by beginning graduate-level students, are being examined to identify reasoning skills that are relatively independent of other skills. Carlson described some of the relationships among scores assigned to samples according to the various scoring schemes that were developed. Essays were evaluated for holistic writing scores, holistic reasoning scores, two different reasoning scheme scores, Writer's Workbench scores, and subscores on the GRE General Test of Reasoning.

Carlson indicated that this project enabled researchers to observe consistent patterns of relationships among different assessment instruments, and also to find out what the different schemes developed to assess reasoning skills actually can and cannot do. This research may eventually lead to the development of useful measures for evaluating reasoning skills, measures that can also provide students with valuable feedback on improving their

writing/reasoning skills.

Barbara Gonzales discussed the assessment of the writing skills of ESL students at CUNY. Gonzales began her presentation with a general overview of the ESL population and programs at CUNY. In 1984, 14,000 students enrolled in CUNY's various ESL programs. All students (native speakers and ESL students) must pass three basic skills tests in order to enter the junior year of college. The writing section of the test consists of an essay in which the student must agree or disagree with a given statement. Students must compose and revise their responses within fifty minutes, the equivalent of a single class period.

Gonzales explained the rationale for asking foreign students to submit a writing sample. She pointed out that elements of good writing, such as clarity, organization, correct use of idiomatic English, proper word choice, etc., would not be revealed by testing students with a multiple-choice test. Moreover, the test serves the overall goal of the ESL programs--to achieve communicative competence in writing--as well as that of writing teachers, who define competent writing as the coherent expression of thoughts. However, CUNY policy requires that the writing tests of ESL students be read by at least one reader familiar with the writing of nonnative speakers of English. This guarantees appropriate and correct recognition of errors pertinent to these writers.

Gonzales also discussed the relationship between the testing and the teaching of ESL students at CUNY. The CUNY Task Force on Writing recently developed a curriculum model for ESL in order to prepare foreign students for college-level work. Writing proficiency, as defined by CUNY's test, was designated as the ultimate goal of the ESL program. Instruction proceeds through four levels, and the importance of reading academic material is emphasized beginning in the very first course. At all seventeen participating CUNY colleges, ESL teachers stress the importance teaching functional communicative competence in writing, and they are collaborating with Basic Writing teachers to develop standards for writing proficiency for all students. ■