PROFICIENCY TESTING: ISSUES AND MODELS

Speakers:	*George Gadda*, University of California, Los Angeles
	Mary Fowles, Educational Testing Service, New Jersey
Introducer/ Recorder:	*Adele Hansen*, University of Minnesota

George Gadda opened the discussion with a statement concerning general issues in developing a proficiency testing program. Proficiency testing, like achievement testing, measures success in a particular domain. There are several motivations for proficiency testing: to certify individual achievement exclusive of grades, to validate a program's effectiveness, or to screen before certification of passing to the next level of instruction. The choice of purpose governs the rest of the assessment program. Proficiency tests may be used to exempt students from further work; to prove value added in a course program; to permit passage, graduation or certification; or to identify those who need further instruction.

Gadda noted that test-makers should define the domain of the test by describing the kind of written ability being assessed and that we should make a public statement concerning the criteria used for judgment. Tests used for advancement should be a well-defined part of the curriculum, with samples and grading criteria clearly described. Ideally, scorers should be those people who are testing and using the results. In addition, we need to determine what will happen to those who don't pass. Gadda noted that proficiency tests should not be a "roadblock." He concluded by stating that we should strive for high reliability and validity in our testing because proficiency tests need to withstand legal challenges.

Mary Fowles remarked that we need an increased understanding of what is to be tested and that the "community" must share the same standards. She referred to a project in Rhode Island, where a state administrator

decided to work on literacy beginning in the third grade. ETS was asked to construct a test that encouraged good writing. They worked with local administrators and teachers from every school district in the state to formulate a writing test which was administered to all 3rd graders. The test featured a pre-writing section and then an essay test. It also included an editing phase, where students were given specific questions about content.

Fowles described how scorers were trained: Every district in the state was represented in training sessions, and benchmark papers were identified and then used to train local raters. After the results were tabulated, the teachers returned to the classroom and showed examples of good papers to the students and discussed the scoring criteria. Next, the state decided to develop a portfolio of such "assignments" to validate the scores on the "test" and to enhance teaching.

In the discussion that followed, questions were raised concerning the "read and respond" type of test. Gadda agreed that such a test does assess reading as well as writing, but that there is a connection and such tests are useful to determine the students basic ability to do university level work. He added that such tests seem most fair, because all students begin with the same information and the students can then better understand the testing situation. He cautioned that such tests should always be pre-tested to discover if the reading is "accessible and interesting" and if the assignment elicits more than one response, because this can affect raters' evaluations.