Issues Surrounding English as a Second Language Students and Exams

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Abstract

The number of English as a second language (ESL) students in the United States is increasing, which poses a number of issues for universities. The current paper outlines three potential dilemmas present when assessing ESL students’ learning through exams: using culturally bound language, reading level, and the use of portable electronic bilingual dictionaries. Both instructor and student perspectives on these issues will be discussed. Specifically, this is a call to research to examine whether and how these factors impact ESL student performance on exams in their non-ESL courses (the courses not specifically designed to improve their English proficiency). It is clear that there is a great need for research in this area, and research findings would greatly aid in the decision making process regarding these dilemmas.
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During the 2009-2010 school year, there was a 3% increase in total numbers of international college students in the United States, and the number of international students on college campuses around the US continues to increase (U.S. Department of State, 2010). The top three countries sending students to the United States are China, India, and South Korea (U.S. Department of State, 2010), none of which are predominantly English speaking countries. Thus, many of the international students coming to the US are learning English as their second language, commonly referred to as ESL students. Additionally, the K-12 school system in the United States has also seen increases in ESL students, approximately a 95% increase from 1992 to 2002 (Lee, 2006). Lee (2006) reports that this increase in ethnic and linguistic diversity in schools has created challenges for teachers.

The issues concerning ESL students in college courses are wide ranging and cut across multiple domains. Many of these issues could benefit from research, especially if it is conducted to help determine what the best course of action may be. The focus of the current paper will be on the issues surrounding methods of evaluating student learning, specifically one of the most common evaluation methods: exams. This is of particular relevance for ESL students in their non ESL classes; that is, in their topical classes in which the aim is not specifically to learn English (e.g. a Psychology course, History course, or Mathematics course, for example).

Exams, Ethics, and the ESL Student

Virtually every course a college student takes involves taking several exams. Exams usually assess knowledge that the student should have learned during the course, via multiple choice, true false, fill in the blank, and short answer questions. Typically, students are not allowed to look at their notes, their textbook, or outside materials while taking the exam. Also,
anecdotal evidence suggests that exams often represent the largest portion of the grade in a class, and thus it is important to consider what issues surround them.

Unfortunately, issues surrounding exams have been virtually ignored in the ESL literature. Most of the literature on ESL students and assessment focuses on the ESL program themselves—that is, the classes in which the students specifically learn English (see Deckert, 2004; MacPherson, Kouritzin, & Kim, 2005; Ortega, 2005). For those articles that do focus on assessment not specific to ESL programs or classes, they focus on the issues surrounding ESL students’ written reports for their non-ESL courses (i.e. “papers”; Silva, 1997; Daniloff-Merrill, 2007). However, examinations pose a number of issues for ESL students and their instructors. Just a few of these issues include the wording of exam items—specifically using culturally bound language, the reading level of the exam, and whether or not the student should be allowed to use a translator or bilingual dictionary.

**Using Culturally Bound Language**

First, can instructors really conclude that the grade a student gets on their exam is an accurate reflection of how much content that student has learned? While this is a question that instructors should consider for all of their classes and students, this is especially important for when considering ESL students. For example, ESL students may have extra difficulty in taking the exam if the exam questions are especially culturally bound or contain slang words or colloquial speech. As an example of this, a colleague of the author was teaching a Psychology 101 course, and once asked an exam question that was phrased “Genie is throwing a Tupperware party, how can she persuade her guests to buy more Tupperware?” While Tupperware may not be something commonly used by students today, arguably the vast majority of students native to the US would know what Tupperware is and be familiar with the concept of a Tupperware party.
However, several of the instructor’s ESL students approached her during the exam to ask what "Tupperware" was, and she then proceeded to explain to the class what Tupperware was, even though understanding persuasion techniques was the main point of the question. As this example demonstrates, sometimes exam items may also be unintentionally assessing something other than the course content, and may instead be assessing students’ knowledge of the culture in which they are living and studying. While the students in this instructor's class were comfortable enough to ask her about an exam item they did not understand, other students may not do so. The students who do not ask questions about exam items such as these will likely answer the item incorrectly; not necessarily because they did not know the course content the item was supposed to be assessing (i.e. persuasion techniques), but rather because they were not familiar with that part of the culture and could not adequately understand the question.

From an ESL student perspective, questions that contain culturally bound language may be especially challenging. At the very least, they may be more challenging for an ESL student than they would be for a native speaker. In cases for which culturally bound language is used, students are being evaluated partially on their knowledge of the culture, rather than the class material they were supposed to have learned. Thus, having exam items that are especially culturally bound may markedly impair the ability of the ESL student to answer the item correctly—even when they may have learned the material successfully. Furthermore, the ESL student may be spending precious extra time deciphering unfamiliar words in the question, instead of the answer to the question. To the ESL student, using this type of language may seem unfair and unnecessarily challenging, as well as cause emotional upset at earning a lower grade than they feel they deserve.
From the perspective of an instructor, exam questions that are especially bound in culture or contain slang words or colloquial speech are also a dilemma to which multiple perspectives can be taken. One perspective is that some instructors may feel that using culturally bound speech may unfairly penalize their ESL students on exams for simply not being familiar with the culture in which they are studying. However, even knowing that they are using culturally bound or colloquial speech in their exams may be a challenge to instructors. As long as the instructor is a native member of the culture in which the class is being taught, they are likely so immersed in their own culture that they may not realize that they are using culturally bound language, slang words, or colloquial speech, such as asking about a “Tupperware party”. Thus, this problem is one that may potentially be occurring quite often and may be difficult to stop from happening.

The instructor may be completely unaware of when they use culturally bound language, as things like Tupperware parties may seem like common sense. In the Tupperware example in particular, it did not occur to the instructor to think about the cultural implications of the exam question. She simply needed to present a situation in which to test the students' knowledge of the particular concept she was assessing. Now, after this eye opening experience, this instructor tries to carefully construct her exam questions and, if possible, to avoid culturally specific questions or language.

Another perspective on this matter is whether an instructor should have to modify their exams or exam questions simply because they have ESL students. One could argue that ESL students be familiar enough with the culture and country in which they are studying that they recognize most of its cultural intricacies and nuances (Young, 1998). Thus, instructors should not have to modify their teaching style or exam questions to accommodate ESL students and their potential lack of knowledge of the culture in which they are studying (Young, 1998).
Indeed, they may contend that retaining culturally specific language in their classrooms and exams will help the ESL students learn the culture and English more quickly.

Most academics seem to take the former perspective, believing that culturally fair tests are important. For example, there are several popular standardized exams—such as intelligence tests and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)—that are intended to be culturally fair (Wood, Wood, & Boyd, 2009). These culturally fair tests are specially designed to minimize the cultural bias present in the test, so that individuals (such as ESL students) are not unfairly penalized if their cultural background is not of the dominant or mainstream culture (Wood et al., 2009). Indeed, research suggests that culturally fair tests to seem to be a more accurate assessment of minority student and ESL student abilities (see Skiba, Knesting, & Bush, 2002; Shaunessy, Karnes, & Cobb, 2004). If national standardized exams are making this effort, this suggests that other tests should also strive to be culturally fair as well. Just because a student does not know or understand the speech being used to explain a situation does not mean that they do not understand the concept in question. Thus, instructors have to determine whether students should be potentially penalized for their relative lack of knowledge of the culture when they potentially understand the material being tested, just not the language that is being used to assess it, or whether exam items should be carefully worded so as to avoid a cultural bias. As Young (1998) questions, are ESL students responsible for adopting the practices of their host culture, or are instructors responsible for adapting their course content for their ESL students?

The difficult issue of intentionally or unintentionally using culturally bound language in exam questions is one that could benefit from research, for which, currently, there is a dearth. Broadly, it is important to assess how often this phenomena actually occurs and whether it significantly impairs exam scores. Specifically, qualitative research (e.g. focus groups) that
assessed students’ perception of how often this problem occurs, whether they believe it negatively affects their grades, and whether they believe their exam score are an accurate estimate of how much course content they have learned would be incredibly beneficial. Also, quantitative research could help to determine to what degree using culturally bound speech impairs ESL student’s ability to correctly answer exam items. Specifically, existing exams could be compared to exams specifically constructed to reduce cultural bias, and ESL student’s scores could be compared to see if there are significant improvements in scores when taking an exam with reduced cultural bias. Moreover, research could focus on the instructors themselves to determine to what degree instructors believe they use culturally bound language in their exams, sample existing exams to determine how often culturally bound language is actually used, and assess how often or how many instructors take extra care to reduce cultural bias in exams.

**Reading Level**

A related concept to using colloquial speech or slang words is the reading level of the exam. Reading level is akin to readability, or the comprehension difficulty of the written material (Flesch, 1948). While the problem of readability of exam questions may not be completely unique to ESL students, it is likely more common among ESL students than native speakers of English. Regarding ESL students, they usually have to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), before entrance to any university. The TOEFL measures English proficiency and is an indication of the student’s English reading level. Some academics have suggested that a student’s TOEFL score may not always be the best or most accurate assessment of a student’s ability to read English (Tasker, 2001). In fact, it is estimated that it only takes between six months and a year to learn to *speak* proficiently in a second language if an immersion approach is taken, but it takes approximately 10 years to learn to *read and write* in a
second language proficiently (D. Pascoe-Chavez, personal communication, November 5, 2010). While, native students have been learning English their entire lives, ESL students have not. Thus, it makes sense that the reading level of ESL students would be typically lower on average than that of students who are native speakers of English.

Is it fair to assess ESL student learning using exams? Is a test that is written at a college reading level going to be an accurate assessment of how much course content the ESL student has learned if the student cannot completely understand the questions because they are worded in a difficult or challenging way? Clearly, from the perspective of an ESL student, the reading level of exam items is problematic. If the reading level of the exam is above the reading level of the student, then it can impair their ability to perform well on the exam, and potentially impairs their ability to perform well in the class as a whole since exams do tend to make up such a large portion of the grade in a given course. For example, if an exam is written at a college reading level, but the ESL student is only reading their second language at an 8th grade level, the student will encounter unnecessary and irrelevant difficulties when taking the exam that are unrelated to knowledge of the course content. Thus, exams may not accurately assess how much the student has learned.

Reading level of exams poses a dilemma for instructors as well. Presumably, college level exams are typically written at a college reading level, and multiple perspectives could be taken on whether an instructor should retain this high reading level or lower the reading level of their exams to accommodate their ESL students. First, instructors may want to retain a high reading level because reducing readability might make the exam too easy, or may over simplify the material. Arguably, using the language of the subject, otherwise known as jargon, is not likely to be detrimental to ESL students, because native speakers of English are also learning a
variety of new words pertaining to the course. Also, instructors may desire a high reading level because they may believe that college students should be reading at a college level, and if they are not, they should quickly learn to do so. On the other hand, there are also reasons why instructors may want to lower the reading level of their exam. Even though reducing the reading level of the exam may pose a challenge for the instructor, and may make it difficult for the instructor to make a sufficiently difficult exam for a college level course, the main goal of exams is presumably to assess how much and how well students have learned the course material, not necessarily how well the students read English. Writing the exam at a high reading level may impede ESL students’ ability to understand the exam items, even if they successfully learned the course material. Thus, the exam may not be an accurate measure of the student's knowledge of the course content.

Research examining the impact of exam readability on ESL student performance is in order. First, it is imperative to determine if most college exams are indeed written at a college level, or if they are written at a lower level. While there is likely variability between instructors and subjects, it would be helpful to know the average reading level of exams to determine if this could be a barrier to success for ESL students. Specifically, research should examine whether readability impacts ESL student performance on exams, and to what extent exams written at the college level accurately assess their learning. Research should also investigate the average reading level of ESL college students, and the potential effect that lowering the reading level of exams may have on ESL students’ grades.

**Bilingual Dictionaries**

Lastly, a new but equally important issue regarding ESL students and exams is regarding the use of portable electronic bilingual dictionaries. Generally, a bilingual dictionary is a special
dictionary that translates one language into another. For example, in the case of a Chinese ESL student studying in the United States, they may want to use an English-to-Chinese bilingual dictionary, which would translate English words into their Chinese equivalent or meaning. Bilingual dictionaries can be found in printed format and on the internet, but they can also be purchased as portable handheld electronic devices. These portable bilingual dictionaries pose a dilemma for college classes, in that students may want to use them while taking an exam.

One issue is whether these devices provide an unfair advantage to ESL students or whether they simply bring the ESL student up to par with the native English speakers. Bilingual dictionaries could be considered unfair because an ESL student using a bilingual dictionary would be able to look up the meanings of English words that are present on the exam, some of which may be the concept being assessed. Native speakers typically are not allowed to look up any words in a dictionary during an exam.

Clearly, there are two perspectives regarding this issue. First, it would appear that most academics agree that there are certain circumstances for which some students should be treated differently. For example, students with disabilities are often allowed special accommodations, such as having extra time to take the exam and being able to take the exam outside of class (in a testing center, for example). One could argue that being an ESL student is also a special circumstance for which special accommodations should be made. An ESL student, almost by definition, is a student who is atypical because they are not a native speaker of English. Being an ESL student adds an additional challenge or barrier to success in the student’s courses. Thus, one could argue that ESL students should be allowed special accommodations while taking exams, such as a bilingual dictionary.
Conversely, being an ESL student is not considered a disability, so one could also argue that they should be treated just like every other student in the class. Some instructors may feel, just as with the culturally bound language, that students studying in English speaking universities should know the language well enough that they do not need to use a dictionary to help them translate. ESL students typically have to meet a minimum standard on the TOEFL exam before admittance to the university, which is an indication that they should be proficient enough in the English language to succeed at the university. One could also argue that giving ESL students special accommodations, such as a bilingual dictionary, when they do not have a recognized medical or learning disability is unfair to the ESL student because it may be preventing them from having to learn English quickly and proficiently, and allows them to rely on a device that they may not always be able to access in real life situations. Also, as stated previously, allowing ESL students to use a bilingual dictionary may provide them with an unfair advantage over other students who are not allowed to use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words. Knowing the meaning of the words on the test may help the ESL student mark the correct answer, when a native speaker may not know the meaning of a word but is not allowed to look up the meaning. This is especially important when the word being looked up in the bilingual dictionary is the concept being tested.

From a student's perspective, using a bilingual dictionary on an exam could be an essential tool for academic success, depending on the student's level of English reading proficiency. Considering that there is great variability in English proficiency among ESL students, in that some students are proficient at spoken English while at the same time are not proficient in reading and writing, and other students are proficient at reading and writing English while not proficient at spoken English (Lucas, 2001), a bilingual dictionary could potentially
markedly improve an ESL student's performance on an exam if they are lacking skills in reading English. Simply knowing the translation of some unfamiliar words on the exam could help the student understand the exam item fully, and thus would make the exam item an appropriate assessment of the student's knowledge of the concept being tested. Additionally, many words being tested on the exam may not even be contained in a bilingual dictionary if they are a part of the jargon of the subject being tested. Clearly, that would be a case in which a bilingual dictionary would only help the ESL student better understand the exam item, and not give hints as to what the correct answer might be.

From the perspective of the instructor, they have to decide whether bilingual dictionaries are an unfair advantage or a device that will help raise ESL students up to the level of native speakers for exams. Some instructors believe that ESL students should be required to complete the same assessment methods as other students, but that bilingual dictionaries are an acceptable aid for helping them do so (Dooley, 2004). Other instructors believe that ESL students should be required to complete the same assessments as other students without the aid of a bilingual dictionary. This issue of using bilingual dictionaries in the classroom is an ongoing issue for colleges and universities, and only some institutions have written policies regarding them. However, for the institutions that do have written policies on appropriate accommodations for ESL students, portable bilingual dictionaries are often listed as an appropriate accommodation (Thurlow, Liu, Erickson, Spicuzzi, & El Sawaf, 1996). However, currently the decision regarding allowing students to use bilingual dictionaries is left up to instructors to decide most of the time (Dooley, 2004).

Currently, there are no research studies that indicate how helpful the use of bilingual dictionaries are during exams or how often students are allowed to use them. Research can
determine this, as well as many other important aspects of bilingual dictionary use—what words students look up (ones that are being tested, or other, supporting words in the exam item), whether they improve student scores, and whether they are helpful in improving students’ English proficiency. Research showing the usefulness of these devices would aid in the decision of whether students should be allowed to use them during exams. Research should also aim to determine whether being and an ESL student sufficiently impairs a student's ability to perform well on exams to where special accommodations, such as using a bilingual dictionary during exams, should be made.

**Conclusion**

While many publications discuss ethical and practical dilemmas regarding ESL programs, there are few that discuss issues involved in assessing ESL students’ learning. More specifically, there is a shortage of research in regard to the ESL students’ performance on college exams and the factors that impact this. As discussed previously, there are a variety of dilemmas present when ESL students take exams, a few of which include the use of culturally bound language in exam items, the reading level of the exam, and the use of bilingual dictionaries during exams. Each of these issues can be viewed from various perspectives and how they should be dealt with is unclear at the present time.
References


