

## **Fairness and Test Use: The Case of the SAT and Writing Placement for ESL Students**

**Kristen di Gennaro**

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

In the United States, many students planning to attend college are required to take the SAT test<sup>1</sup> as part of the college admissions process. Currently called the *SAT Reasoning Test*, this exam includes sections measuring reading, writing, and math skills considered necessary for college-level study. In 2004, the SAT test included a direct essay-writing component for the first time. Once accepted to college, most students then take placement exams to determine which writing courses they should take in their first year. The results of the SAT and placement exams involve high-stakes decisions about test-takers, such as their acceptance to a university and/or exemption from coursework; hence, the consequences of inaccurate results may lead to unnecessary hardship for test-takers. Instructors, too, may indirectly suffer if they must accommodate very disparate levels of students in their classes as well as respond to students' dissatisfaction with their course assignments. Thus, whenever assessments "serve as both door-openers and gate keepers" (Bachman & Purpura, in press), test users must be particularly vigilant in ensuring that test scores are interpreted accurately, and that tests are used as intended. This commentary focuses on test use and how it influences the fairness of decisions made on the basis of test scores. More precisely, I argue that adopting tests for purposes other than those for which they were created is not only irresponsible, but potentially unjust.

Tests are "very powerful instruments which can determine the future of individuals and programs," yet the "actual uses of tests may be different from the purposes they were intended for" (Shohamy, 2000, p. 15). As a standardized norm-referenced test, the primary purpose of the SAT is to allow test users (usually university admissions officers) to make comparisons across test-takers from a variety of secondary schools in order to determine which students are most likely to succeed at their university. The SAT is not linked with a specific school curriculum, since it must be relevant for test-takers from a vast range of programs and schools across the entire country. In contrast, the primary purpose of a placement test is to determine where in a specific program students should begin their coursework. Thus, unlike nationally standardized tests such as the SAT, placement tests are closely linked with the curriculum of the specific program for which they were created. In cases where a program serves a diverse population, including students for whom English is a second language (ESL), there is an even greater need for placement tests to reflect the nature of the local situation, something the SAT was not designed to do.

To assist language testers in selecting and designing tests appropriate for their purposes, such as placement tests, Bachman and Palmer (1996) identify six qualities that, together, provide "a kind of metric by which we can evaluate not only the tests we develop and use, but also all aspects of test development and use" (p. 17). Since it is unlikely that any one test can maximize all six qualities in Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model, test users must determine the relative

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<sup>1</sup> The SAT exam, formerly called the Scholastic Aptitude Test and Scholastic Assessment Test, is a type of standardized test frequently used by colleges and universities in the U.S. to aid in the selection of incoming students

importance of each element for their particular testing situation. Of these six components, namely, reliability, validity, impact, practicality, authenticity, and interactiveness, one that holds a great deal of importance in large-scale testing contexts (such as placement testing) is practicality. Of course, all six components are relevant for test fairness, but practicality is a particular concern if it is given a disproportionate amount of weight compared to the other five components.

Practicality refers to the resources (economic, human, and temporal) required to design, administer, score, and report results for a given test (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). In the case of a direct writing test, for example, time is needed initially to create the testing instrument and scoring rubric, but time is also needed to administer, proctor, and score the tests. Human raters are required to judge the quality of the tests, and money is needed to compensate those who administer and rate the tests. Test-takers, as well, are affected by a test's practicality, as they must find the time to take the test and, in some cases, may incur some of the test administration costs. In short, performance tests (such as direct essay-writing tests) require a great deal of resources and, for this reason, are often considered costly and time-consuming. It is not surprising, therefore, that some test users may search for ways to avoid less practical performance tests if they believe other tests can serve the same purpose. It is in this context that some university administrators may turn to the new SAT writing component as an alternative to local placement testing, believing that SAT scores can serve the dual purpose of providing information for both admissions and placement decisions. The rationale is that by extending the use of SAT scores to placement decisions, test users can reduce time and costs as they eliminate the need to create, administer, and score additional placement tests. In addition, some university administrators may hold the misguided assumption that asking students to take a test for writing placement is not "student-friendly" (di Gennaro, 2005). Such an assumption, however, presupposes that students will not suffer hardship once classes have begun and they find themselves either in courses they do not need to take or in courses beyond their current ability. The former situation may cost students additional time and money for unnecessary courses, and the latter potentially leads to failing grades, lowered self-esteem, and additional costs for resources needed to make up for the course misplacement. In other words, when SAT scores are used in lieu of a placement test, the university may save time and money, but other costs are then passed onto students who bear the consequences of inaccurate placement decisions.

Perhaps if there were evidence that the distinctions between placement levels for an individual program corresponded well with SAT scores, if the content of the SAT were similar to that of the college writing program, if decisions were low-stakes, and if the college population only included native speakers of English, one could make an argument for applying SAT scores in this way. In sum, test users must also keep in mind the other five components in Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model, noted above, when making decisions about using scores from one test in place of administering a different test, and not sacrifice fair test practices to efficiency or cost (Shohamy, 2000). Test users must ask themselves, "is ease of administration and cost effectiveness to the university enough to justify probable financial and academic hardships to students?" (Crusan, 2002, p. 26). In short, testers must guard against placing practicality above all other testing concerns, since gains in time or money may lead to losses in fairness to test-takers.

Finally, ESL students may suffer particular hardships if local placement exams are abandoned. Many colleges offer special courses for ESL students, often taught by TESOL-trained faculty familiar with ESL students' strengths and weaknesses and equipped with

techniques to address ESL students' needs. In cases where such courses exist, local placement exams can help identify students who may place into these courses. SAT scores, in contrast, do not include the type of information test users need (such as background information and linguistic features in their writing) to identify students who may benefit from ESL versions of college writing courses. Furthermore, an increasing number of ESL students enter U.S. colleges having finished their secondary education in the U.S. (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). Such students often do not self-identify as ESL students, despite their need for additional ESL support with regards to their writing. Such a situation makes it particularly urgent for colleges to use local placement exams that can more accurately reflect the needs of incoming students.

This brief commentary calls attention to the need for testers, especially those who work with ESL students, to oversee how tests are used when they are adopted for a variety of purposes. Extending SAT scores beyond the purpose of admissions decisions to placement within a specific program is just one example of how tests may be inadvertently misused. Test users should know that such test misuse, while potentially more efficient, may jeopardize fairness to test-takers. Specifically, test users must be wary of favoring practicality over other test features, since such imbalance is at best naïve, and at worst unethical.

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Kristen di Gennaro is a doctoral student in the Applied Linguistics program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include second language writing assessment in higher education and professional development strategies for part-time faculty. She is the director of ESL in the English Department at Pace University.