

“Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach”

Book review

Amy C. Tarmey

Authors: Barbara Law and Mary Eckes

Publisher: Portage & Main Press

Publication date: 2007

304pp, i-xiii

ISBN: 978-1-55379-093-8

Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach is specifically written for ESL, not EFL teachers, as evident in the title, to help ESL teachers navigate the complex, diverse, and multifaceted ESL teaching environments present in the United States. The book interlaces the personal experiences of both authors with research and theory to promote alternative assessment methods in ESL programs in the United States. The personal anecdotes, abundant student samples and thorough description of the issues facing ESL teachers, from placing students into ESL programs to exiting them, make *Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach* a valuable addition to the topic of alternative assessment.

Consistent with the intent and purpose of a resource book, Law and Eckes presented their content in a teacher-friendly format. Each chapter, besides the introduction, is organized in the same manner. The beginning of the chapter starts with a personal anecdote or real life scenario that has been encountered or documented by one of the authors. The stories and scenarios exemplify in a real-life context the topic or theme each chapter discusses. This feature of *Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach* is very beneficial in helping educators relate the various issues, ideas, theories, and philosophies concerning assessment in ESL, to real world students, teachers, and ESL programs. For example, in the beginning of Chapter Two, “What shape will we use? Red! Testing vs. Alternative Forms of Assessment,” the authors described two English language learners, one a young girl in an inner-city school, the other an older man, a mi-

grant worker taking an ESL adult education class. The authors briefly described the learners’ experiences in their learning environments and how despite progress in the classroom, both learners score below average on standardized tests. The authors used these glimpses into the lives of students and teachers to illustrate the topic of the chapter and connect the themes or problems addressed in the book to real life situations teachers or students encounter, “putting a human face on the endless debate about the effectiveness of various forms of assessment” (Law & Eckes, 2007, p. 8).

Following the personal anecdotes, each chapter contains a text box entitled, “What’s in this chapter,” which contains bulleted points outlining the main ideas and themes that will be discussed in the chapter. This feature is very convenient as it easily directs readers’ attention to the main points of the chapter while also providing them with a simple way to preview or skim the chapter’s contents. The main part of the chapter addresses the theme of the chapter and then offers guidelines, steps, or suggestions for each topic at hand. In addressing the chapter theme, the authors referred to and cited research from the field pertaining to alternative assessment. They often revisited the personal narrative or anecdote introduced in the beginning of the chapter and discussed how the problem or scenario might be remedied.

In the introduction, Law and Eckes laid the foundation of the book by presenting their intentions in writing the book, their convictions about the purpose of assessment, and



the four themes they believed are involved in the process of learning another language effectively. These four themes set the stage for the authors' arguments in favor of alternative assessment by first describing the themes and then directly relating those themes to alternative assessment. For example, in the first of the four themes, "real language," Law and Eckes discussed using meaningful, authentic and relevant language in the ESL classroom and then related the concept to assessment, coining the term "real assessment" (p. 3). "Real assessment," they contended, involves engaging in dynamic, flexible, realistic assessment that measures progress through authentic tasks (Law & Eckes, 2007, p. 3). The authors continued to discuss the other three themes in the introduction, "integrated and whole language", a "facilitating environment", and "learning as a continuum", and then demonstrated how those ideas translate into the arena of alternative assessment (Law & Eckes, 2007, p. 4). Lastly, in the introduction, Law and Eckes presented their view of the purpose and role of assessment, "the ultimate purpose of any assessment is to improve learning... if it does not further a teacher's understanding of where a student is and what he needs to do to improve or develop, then assessment, in any form... is a wasted endeavor" (p. 7). The four themes discussed in the introduction, as well as the presentation of the authors' beliefs of what assessment is and whom it should serve, builds the conceptual framework for Law and Eckes (2007) to promote alternative assessment methods above standardized testing throughout the rest of the book. While the tenets of communicative and progressive education that the authors outlined in the introduction are not original or innovative ideas, it is useful that the authors discussed the themes in terms of language learning and then provided bulleted points to show how the themes translate into assessment.

After providing the reader with a brief overview of the conceptual framework of their work, Law and Eckes dove into the bigger picture of assessment in Chapter One, "Kiss me Teacher- What Teachers Need to Know." In this chapter, they discussed why ESL teachers need to assess, what teachers

need to look for when they assess, and what effective assessment is and how it operates. Law and Eckes began by identifying the people and parties who have an interest in assessment, referring to such people as the "stakeholders" (p. 14). The stakeholders, as Law and Eckes explained, are the various parties that are invested in assessment, each with varying needs, interests and goals. Stakeholders include the federal government, administrators, mainstream teachers, ESL teachers, teacher aides, parents, and students. Law and Eckes described and explained each party's interest and investment in assessment, beginning with the highest level, the federal government. The authors asserted that the government's investment lies in accountability; making sure government money is being spent properly and schools are producing the kinds of learners society needs and wants (p. 14). From there, the stakeholders' interest and investment trickle down through school administrators, charged with upholding state and federal mandates, to teachers, striving to achieve curriculum and state standards, to parents, who are intricately and inherently invested in their child's learning, future and well-being (p. 14). Law and Eckes covered the broad spectrum of people and agencies invested and involved in assessment to illustrate the importance of equitable, accurate assessment measures, as well as exemplify the far-reaching injustices that can result in the misvaluation of ESL students. The authors asserted that with so much at stake in terms of our ESL students' educational life and future prospects, "we must strive to gather as much information as possible about our students through assessment" (p. 14).

With the groundwork for why we need to assess and who is invested in assessment laid, Law and Eckes next sought to identify the major differences and distinctions between standardized and traditional testing and alternative assessment. Chapter Two, "What Shape Will We Use? Red! Testing vs. Alternative Forms of Assessment," begins with the story of an adult immigrant worker enrolled in an ESL literacy class. The authors painted a picture of an older student in his sixties performing very poorly in class and on school proficiency tests. However, when the teacher in his

class decided to abandon the class textbook, and implement projects based on agriculture, this student began to show a remarkable knowledge of English concerning his work on prune farms and harvesting prunes. In turn, through the project, the student was able to reveal to the teacher just how much he actually knew, none of which any of his previous assignments or tests had been able to do (Law & Eckes, 2007, p. 21).

This anecdote offers a fitting introduction to Chapter Two, in which Law and Eckes weighed and reviewed standardized tests and the importance they carry in today's modern society. In the pages following, Law and Eckes outlined a collection of arguments against standardized tests, asserting that standardized tests cannot inform the teacher whether or not a student knows the material, especially in norm-referenced situations, and that standardized tests possess inherent problems with economic, cultural, and linguistic bias (p. 23- 24). Other problems with standardized tests that Law and Eckes (2007) pointed out were that they do not provide teachers with meaningful data, do not provide for "teachable moments", do not measure "creativity, initiative, curiosity, independence, imagination, effort, judgment or ethics", and are being used to replace rather than inform important decisions concerning students (p. 28). These accusations are substantial and momentous, criticizing the near unilateral adoption of standardized tests in American education. Because of such adoption and widespread use, Law and Eckes condemned standardized tests for gravely diverting money away from resources proven to contribute to learning, allocating more and more funds towards testing instead of "books, paraprofessionals, special services and training" (p. 28). They continued to caution against the detrimental effects caused by the importance placed on standardized tests. Such negative effects can be seen throughout the U.S educational system today, with teachers teaching to tests, course curricula narrowing, lower-performing ESL students being placed in special education programs in order to make test scores look better, and creativity, richness and experimentation being diminished, devalued and abandoned in education (p. 29).

In the conclusion of Chapter Two, Law and Eckes (2007) dispelled the myth that standardized tests are so heavily relied on because they provide concrete, scientific, and objective data, stating that their popularity is due to society's reluctance to change. The authors asserted that the guise of hard, scientific data must be replaced with alternative assessment media or tools that are designed to reveal a broader range of information, "not just a snapshot but a dynamic picture of students' development – both academic and linguistic" (p. 36). They found it absurd that standardized tests are used to make such important decisions when "not a single form of research says, use only one form of assessment to gain information about students" (p. 35). It is in this light that Law and Eckes made their argument for alternative assessment methods that aim to find out how students learn, that can demonstrate students' growth and progress over time, and that can provide insight into individual students' needs (p. 36). While the authors' assertions and arguments for the widespread use of forms of alternative assessment are persuasive and well-informed, I believe the major hurdle in implementing such practices on a large scale, is exactly what the authors' specified earlier in the chapter, and that is society's reluctance to change.

After making their initial case for alternative assessment, Law and Eckes turned next to the issue of placement in Chapter Three, entitled, "Determining the Navel Assignment to the Factor: Placement." Within this chapter Law and Eckes identified the steps involved in making informed placement decisions, describing each step, who it applies to, why it is necessary, and what to use it for. They also introduced and defined vocabulary and terminology used in ESL assessment. Terms such as "Limited Proficiency" and "English Proficient," are explained, but more importantly, they are demonstrated with oral or written examples of students classified under each label. This feature of the book helps provide a clearer picture of definitions that can sometimes be dubious or left to broad interpretation, especially for the novice teacher. However, it is important to remember that such classifications can vary greatly among school districts and states, and while the authors pro-

vided their criteria for classification of English language learners, they may not flawlessly coincide with every school's classification criteria.

Also in Chapter Three, Law and Eckes discussed "the issue of grade levels" (p. 61). They strongly advocated for placing ESL students with students their own age and provided several arguments for keeping new ESL students with peers their own age. Some of the reasons mentioned include: students emotional and social needs can be met with their age mates, self-image and motivation can be severely affected by being placed with younger children, and lack of fluency in English does not indicate a lack of intelligence or maturity. Although placement is one small aspect in the larger complex web of ESL instruction and assessment, Law and Eckes insisted that a "clear, unified and consensual (placement) plan is the best hope for meeting the challenge" of providing meaningful and purposeful assessment (p. 78).

Chapter Four, "We're Working Hardly: Emerging Literacy," moves from the process of placing an ESL student at a certain level to focusing on emerging literacy, proficiency and evaluating a student's progress. This chapter stresses the importance of continually assessing your students' proficiency after the initial placement process to better develop an understanding of where students lie within the language acquisition process. The authors deemed such knowledge crucial and important in providing educators with a framework to measure their students' progress and learning (p. 80).

However, Law and Eckes did not provide suggestions on how to assess proficiency levels or where to look for such supporting information and evidence until Chapter Five, "Diving for Pearls in their Shelves: How and Where to Find Information." In this chapter, Law and Eckes presented methods of collecting usable and valuable information organized under three headings: the first, "observing the student working", the second, "talking with the student", and the third, "sampling student work" (p. 117). The authors recommended collecting information from all three categories, stating that through the process of observation, teachers can observe the daily

"how's, when's, where's and whys," of the school life (p. 118). In such a context, teachers are not only observing the process of learning but they are in a position to actively respond as needed: reacting, intervening, and participating in students' learning (Law & Eckes, 2007, p. 118). Such actions, Law and Eckes insisted, are part of the natural, inherent, and essential roles of the teacher.

Once information is collected, the teacher must know how to utilize it as an assessment tool. In Chapter Six, "The Santa Maria, the Pimpas, the Ninny Sailing with Baflaf's Dog: Recording Your Observations Through Checklists, Rubrics, Anecdotes, and Conferences," the authors described in detail each of the four assessment methods listed in the title. For each method, Law and Eckes offered a list of advantages and disadvantages as well as suggestions for the method's use and design. For example, they pointed out that the advantages of checklists are that they provide a "quick and easy way to observe, focus on, and record specific skills and behaviors" or that they can act as a tool to "show you and your students which areas need work- before it is too late" (p. 159). Disadvantages the authors cited for checklists include: "they do not provide a rich context for understanding behaviors," and "it is easy to become trapped by what is included on the checklist and to believe that everything must be mastered in order for the student to be deemed proficient or to move on to another level" (p. 159). After presenting both the advantages and disadvantages of checklists, the authors ultimately recommended the inclusion of checklists into teachers' alternative assessment repertoires, stating that with proper use they can be very beneficial, yielding a large amount of information. In the conclusion of Chapter Six, the authors urged teachers to steer away from using traditional check mark or letter grade systems, claiming they are not informative methods of assessment nor do they showcase what students know.

With the comprehensive information the authors provided in *Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach* concerning the context of alternative assessment and the issues ESL teachers face, I had anticipated more chapters after Chapter Six dedicated to other alterna-

tive assessment tools and methods. However, Chapter Seven turns to the issue of when and why to mainstream ESL students. This chapter, entitled “Finding the Perimeter of a Polyollgon: Exiting,” presents guidelines for exiting ESL students from ESL programs to mainstreamed classrooms and offers a description of the multiple indicators the decision to exit a student should be based upon (p. 184). Indicators such as oral proficiency, written proficiency, and reading proficiency are discussed. However, the authors cautioned against one commonly used indicator of student performance, standardized tests, as they do not offer a well-rounded view of students’ skills and capabilities (p. 196). Lastly, when placing an ESL student into a mainstream classroom, Law and Eckes contended that the decision to move a student should never be the decision of one teacher, rather it should be the decision of a team of teachers with knowledge, familiarity, and insight into the student’s skills and ability levels.

From the decisions of how, when, and why to mainstream ESL students, Law and Eckes moved onto the issue of grading in the next chapter, “The Final Nail in the Coffee: Grades.” In keeping with their views on language education, Law and Eckes approached grading in a communicative and comprehensive manner. They appealed to teachers to “grade both the process and the product in student work,” to “carefully define and communicate to students what you will grade in their work” and “involve students in the grading process” (p. 204-5). Likewise, Law and Eckes petitioned teachers to acknowledge that external factors, such as the emotional, intellectual, cultural, ethnic, and moral makeup of a student, can consciously or subconsciously affect the grade we give them (p. 213).

The authors moved in a logical sequence from grading to presenting grades and the results of student assessments to stakeholders in Chapter Nine, entitled “Lunching Several Measures: Presenting the Information to the Stakeholders.” In this chapter, they discussed how to design a system that creates a clear picture of how students are doing, and then report such information to the various stakeholders aforementioned in the book. They began by outlining the crucial and key com-

ponents to consider: “What information is useful to stakeholders?” “How will the information be gathered?” “How will the information be used?” “How will the information be judged?” (p. 218). The authors introduced the idea of keeping folders for each student to present to stakeholders, but more importantly, they stressed the importance of deciding what will be kept in the folder, and which pieces of evidence will be used to pass, retain, assign grades, reclassify a student, show progress, or demonstrate learning or mastery (p. 221). From my personal experience, keeping folders of students’ work is an extremely valuable practice and habit for teachers to maintain. By possessing concrete evidence of students’ learning, work, revisions and graded assignments, teachers possess the necessary proof to support the grades given for each student and answer questions from students, administrators, and parents alike.

From folders that exemplify students’ work and progress, a cornerstone of alternative assessment is also discussed in Chapter Nine, portfolios. The authors hailed portfolios as a “useful and revealing way of showing growth, mastery, and a true picture of where a student is functioning” (p. 226). They promoted portfolio use by highlighting its role as an all encompassing product of process, growth, and individuality, while also emphasizing its use as a tool for examining effort, improvement, and achievement (p. 227). Although the authors supported the use of portfolios, they also addressed the disadvantages of using portfolios, citing the time, thought and maintenance required for their development (p. 227). Ultimately though, Law and Eckes stressed that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages and urged teachers to capitalize on portfolios as a multidimensional platform that allows for collaborative reflection, emphasizes what students can do, and works to give students a sense of ownership (p. 228).

In the last chapters, Chapters Ten and Eleven of *Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach* Law and Eckes moved away from discussing alternative assessment tools and presentation of the findings, to other components of ESL environments in the United States. In Chapter Ten, “Converting Fahrenheit to cellulose: Standards: What They Are

And Why We Have Them,” Law and Eckes addressed, discussed, and dissected the purpose of standards and why standards-based education is so prevalent in the United States today. They demonstrated the inherent inequity in standards-based education for ESL students by presenting the scenario of a high school-aged ESL student arriving at public school in the United States with no English, little to no prior schooling, and without literacy in her first language, yet being required to meet the same standards for graduation as other students. While standards-based education is not a component of alternative assessment, the authors connected broader school or statewide policies, such as standards-based education, to implications in assessment and the repercussions those policies can have in ESL students’ lives. In this sense, Law and Eckes covered every component of ESL education and their significance to assessment.

Finally, in the last chapter of the book, Law and Eckes urged teachers to heed the plethora of advice dispensed throughout the book and make the change from reliance on standardized testing to cultivating an equitable program based on alternative assessment. In Chapter Eleven, “Fight to The Spinach! Making the Change,” the authors discussed how to take steps towards creating change within your classroom and ultimately bringing the change into the broader context of your school and school district (p. 255). Law and Eckes offered many suggestions towards taking such action, imploring teachers to become “agents of change”, to collaborate with administrators and parents, to challenge themselves, and not be deterred by the mountain of obstacles that teachers face, but instead focus on introducing change in small realistic units (p. 259). Law and Eckes asserted that:

assessment is a human issue: accurate and fair decisions about students and their learning can only be based on human contact, by those who know the students, their situations, the local context and the environment in which they all function. We know our students best. We know who they are and what they need. We need to take control again of deciding how and what we are going to teach. (p. 263)

In three hundred and four pages of *Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach*, Law and Eckes presented a wealth of information, capturing the enormity and complexity of assessment, while presenting assessment concerns in the larger context of education and society. Readers who will most likely benefit from the thoroughness with which the authors approached, explored, and discussed the variety of issues inherent to education and assessment in the United States are novice teachers or teachers without any prior understanding of alternative assessment. While Law and Eckes’s step-by-step approach and pages of student work and examples may prove beneficial for the inexperienced teachers who are trying to maneuver their way through their first years of teaching, or are reaching out in their first attempts to implement an alternative assessment program, the opposite may be true for a more experienced teacher. Experienced ESL teachers, who already subscribe to the benefits and ideals promoted by alternative assessment, may find Law and Eckes’s thoroughness redundant, and plentiful examples superfluous. For such teachers, I would not recommend *Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach* as a new or innovative read on the topic of alternative assessment. Rather, for the experienced ESL teachers in the United States, the book might more aptly serve as a resource, with which to measure, enhance, or compare the components of their alternative assessment program against the attributes the authors proposed. The book may also be of value to experienced ESL teachers as a source of support, to aid whatever convictions and claims teachers may need to make in favor of alternative assessment to stakeholders outside of their classrooms.

Another area in which I think *Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach* slightly lacks, is in the diminutive amount of alternative assessment tools the authors provided. The book offers a plethora of information on how to implement, justify, and maintain an alternative assessment program, but fails to provide an in-depth look at a variety of alternative assessment tools, a feature that could be useful to both novice and experienced teachers. In this regard, I would recommend supplementing this book with an alternative assessment

activities book, such as *New Ways in Classroom Assessment* (Brown, 1998). When combined with a collection of alternative classroom assessment ideas from ESL and EFL teachers from around the world and a variety of integrative and practical alternative assessment methods, *Assessment and ESL: An Alternative Approach* becomes a more complete resource on alternative assessment within the ESL context.

Above all, Law and Eckes were able to impart to the reader that assessment is a cru-

cial job of teachers, and when entrusted with such an important task, educators must strive to learn about and pursue methods that best serve their students and their needs. Law and Eckes implored teachers to look outside the confines of traditional and standardized testing and to adapt their teaching to meet the needs of our changing society in order to ultimately ensure the success and productivity of our students' future lives.

References

Brown, J. D. (Ed.). (1998). *New ways in classroom assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers

of English to Speakers of Other Languages.