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## Principles and Practices of Sociocultural Assessment: Foundations for Effective Strategies for Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

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*Increasing numbers of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners throughout the United States have created an urgent need for strategies that teachers can use to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms. Research has shown that effectively meeting the needs of second language learners requires appropriate goals for learning, standards-based curriculum, sociocultural pedagogy, and assessment that is coherent with these practices. This article provides assessment principles and practices that are coherent with the sociocultural perspective and emphasizes four assessment accommodations that are appropriate for ESL learners in mainstream classrooms.*

During the past decade, two major concerns have dominated educational reform in the United States: (a) increasing diversity of students, and (b) declining performance of American students on international comparisons. The first concern reflects the changing demographics of the population of the United States and anticipates its impact on schooling, particularly the dramatic increase in the number of English as a Second Language (ESL) students entering all levels of American schools. Kindler (2002) reported that 3.7 million prekindergarten through 12-grade students (8% of enrollment) are language minority students.

The second concern, poor student performance, began to receive national attention in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. It continued with the development of the *National Educational Goals* and the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (Lam, 1993; Stansfield, 1994). In response to this concern, educational reforms have focused on raising standards to a “world class level” (Stansfield, 1994) and on implementing high-stakes assessments targeted at school accountability. As Short noted, “assessment dominates the educational reform dialogue” (1993, p. 630). In fact, national policies have emphasized testing as the primary method for states and districts “to reshape teaching and to effect learning in the schools”

(Stansfield, 1994, p. 43). This emphasis on high-stakes, assessment-driven accountability has continued with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

However, the interaction of these two concerns poses a significant problem. The focus on assessment as a strategy for encouraging educational reform can place ESL students at special risk. Bernhardt, Destino, Kamil, and Rodriguez–Munoz (1995) argued that these students “are in double jeopardy when confronted with assessment of any type” because they are “forced into demonstrating knowledge in a language over which they have only partial ... control” (p. 6). The interaction between content and language requires teachers to determine whether a student’s difficulties are due to lack of content knowledge or lack of language proficiency (Rosenthal, 1996; Short, 1993). Teachers of ESL students should use assessment strategies that enable these students to demonstrate what they know, identify students’ needs, and support effective teaching and learning.

### The focus on assessment as a strategy for encouraging educational reform can place ESL students at special risk.

The assessment principles, practices, and accommodations described in this article are derived from foundational views of knowing, learning, teaching, and performing in the sociocultural perspective (Bakhtin, 1981; Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985, 1991). These views can be summarized as follows:

1. Knowledge is cultural understanding and competent participation.
2. Learning is social.
3. Teaching is assisting.
4. Performance is situative.

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These four views are briefly described in the following paragraphs.

### **Knowledge Is Cultural Understanding and Competent Participation**

Knowing is understanding the language, symbols, and tools, patterns of reasoning, shared meanings, and customary practices needed for competent participation and problem solving in a particular social group, community, or culture.

### **Learning is Social**

Learning occurs through internalization and automatization of social activities. Individuals actively construct personal understandings and abilities by way of cooperative interaction and negotiation of shared meanings in social contexts. Language and other social tools mediate learning, and structured experiences can produce expected patterns of development. Generalized, formal understandings develop by making connections among multiple situated experiences. These situated experiences serve as paradigms for participation in similar contexts.

### **Teaching is Assisting**

Teaching consists of structuring goal-directed learning activities and assisting performance of learners during meaningful and productive social interactions. Teachers, as more capable others, provide assistance within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the range between unassisted and assisted successful performance. Effective learning activities provide opportunities for guided reinvention of knowledge that is valued by society in situations that are motivating for learners. Teachers assist students in making connections among situated experiences, and they guide the generalization of formal knowledge from these connections. Teachers also judge the quality of students' performances and explanations of thinking by comparing them to suitable standards, and teachers provide feedback that assists students' learning.

### **Performance is Situative**

Automatization occurs in learners when performance of a particular task in a familiar situation becomes automatic, subconscious, and integrated and thus no longer requires self-regulation or assistance from others. De-automatization occurs when performance of a new task or

performance in an unfamiliar situation is beyond the learner's present development and the learner returns to requiring self-regulating activities or assistance from others for success.

This perspective emphasizes the interrelatedness of the individual and the sociocultural environment. Descriptions of educational processes include metaphors such as apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation. For purposes of analyzing educational processes, the appropriate unit is the activity or event, because these preserve the dynamic contributions from the three inseparable players in every sociocultural activity: individuals, their social partners, and the histories, meanings, practices, and materials of communities. Although it may be helpful to temporarily bring one of these three planes (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community) into the forefront for focused study, the influences of the other two planes remain and must be accounted for as part of the sociocultural context of the activity (Rogoff, 1995).

Drawing on this sociocultural perspective, researchers at the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE; Dalton, 1998; Tharp, 1997) synthesized a model for sociocultural pedagogy and argued that sociocultural pedagogy is essential for teaching second language learners. These teaching practices work with all students because they provide strategies for becoming both effective (able to help each individual student learn what is essential) and equitable (able to ensure that all students experience learning success).

Similarly, the sociocultural perspective points to assessment principles and practices that can be both effective and equitable. This article is intended to help mainstream classroom teachers respond to the dilemmas of assessment-driven educational reforms by providing these principles and practices of sociocultural assessment. We believe this sociocultural view of assessment is essential for teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms and responding to the needs of language minority students. We begin with a framework for defining sociocultural assessment that includes detailed explanations of the meanings and implications of three important concepts of sociocultural assessment. Second, we describe four sociocultural assessment practices. Third, we elaborate on four specific assessment accommodations that are helpful with language minority students.

### **Framework for Defining Sociocultural Assessment**

Assessment involves gathering information about student learning, most often for the purpose of making quantitative and qualitative judgments about what students have learned. That is, assessment most often moves the intrapersonal plane into the foreground to

gather and analyze evidence, with the interpersonal and community planes becoming the social context for the assessment activity. Using a sociocultural perspective provides the opportunity to integrate valued behaviors, cognitions, and contextualized social performances into assessment activities. Assessment from this perspective recognizes the importance of the sociocultural activity as the vehicle for integrating these desired outcomes, and it anticipates the variability in performances that can occur across particular situations.

In trying to assess learning, we must infer what students know from what they do and communicate, and we have only three sources of evidence on which to base these inferences: observing what students do, listening to what they say, and examining what they produce. Unless assessment practices are consistent with what we believe about knowing and learning, the inferences we make from student performances and the feedback we provide will not match the goals and outcomes we value most. Particularly as we enlarge learning goals to reflect both content and ESL standards, and as we expand pedagogy to be more inclusive, we can run into issues of coherence between learning goals and assessment practices. All too often we see examples where the learning of students who have actively engaged in interesting and authentic group activities is assessed with traditional tests of narrowly defined fact knowledge that provide evidence of only a small part of the learning that has occurred.

By definition, any process for inferring what students have learned rests on foundational definitions of what it means to know and to learn. For the most part, however, educational practices tend to be theoretically incoherent mixtures that reflect the popular culture of schooling and are strangely disconnected from the foundational theories on which they should be based. In assessment, the conversation too often focuses on the formats of alternative assessment tasks without attending to the essential concepts of assessment that drive teachers' choices of assessment methods and task formats.

In the context of current educational reforms, as we expand learning goals for cognitive, academic, social, affective, and linguistic development in social contexts, we should begin to use new concepts, methods, and formats for assessment that are consistent with these changes in curriculum and pedagogy. Although these changes clearly include greater use of alternative assessment formats and more authentic tasks, this perspective does not require elimination of familiar, narrowly focused assessment formats. For example, as long as high-stakes, multiple-choice tests remain a part of our culture, they can fit within sociocultural views of understanding, competent participation, and situative performance. More important than changes in format, this perspective encourages changes that result in every assessment format being used to support and encourage the

learning, cultural understanding, and competent participation of all students.

We need to find ways for schools to evolve rapidly to ensure that educational practices remain current and coherent with new paradigms for learning and appropriate research-based principals for teaching and assessing. To accomplish this evolution quickly enough to provide the best possible educational experiences for all students requires that teachers reexamine the variety of cultural practices currently used in assessment and to use only those methods that are inclusive and assist the learning of all students.

**Unless assessment practices are consistent with what we believe about knowing and learning, the inferences we make from student performances and the feedback we provide will not match the goals and outcomes we value most.**

We think these needed changes in assessment practices can best be encouraged by three broad concepts of sociocultural assessment that can be summarized by the following:

- Sociocultural assessment is useful for stakeholders.
- Sociocultural assessment is meaningful for its purposes.
- Sociocultural assessment is equitable for all students.

Table 1 defines these three concepts in terms of six principles. The definitions of these principles are supplemented by 12 checklist items which offer questions that teachers can ask themselves to prompt consideration of important issues about assessment methods. Often the pairs of principles defining these assessment concepts must be balanced to achieve their intent.

### Useful

Usefulness is judged by weighing the educative value of an assessment against practical considerations. Educative assessment focuses on the value of particular assessments for improving rather than merely auditing student performances (Wiggins, 1998). This type of assessment focuses on the quality of students' understanding, thinking, and skilled performances in meaningful

**Table 1.** *Sociocultural Assessment*

Concepts	Principles	Checklist Items
<b>Useful</b> For stakeholders	<b>Educative:</b> Assessment is educative when it supports learning, improves student performance, and supports effective instructional decisions.	<b>Feedback:</b> Does the assessment provide timely, actionable feedback to my students about the quality of their work and next steps for learning? Are scores and reports useful for stakeholders?  <b>Decisions:</b> Does the assessment help me make instructional decisions that are beneficial for students?
	<b>Practical:</b> Assessment is practical when it is feasible and efficient within available resources.	<b>Feasibility:</b> Is the assessment feasible for me, given my students, workload, and resources? <b>Efficiency:</b> Does the assessment efficiently provide the information needed by me, my students, and other stakeholders?
<b>Meaningful</b> For purposes	<b>Relevant:</b> Assessment is relevant when it emphasizes understanding important content and performing authentic tasks.	<b>Content:</b> Is the assessment content important? Does it reflect professional standards for the discipline? <b>Tasks:</b> Are the assessment tasks authentic? Are they coherent with my beliefs about learning and knowing? Do they elicit my students' best work?
	<b>Accurate:</b> Assessment is accurate when it produces valid results based on reliable evidence and expert judgments of quality.	<b>Validity:</b> Do the assessment results match my specified purpose for the assessment? Does the format of the assessment follow its function? <b>Reliability:</b> Are the assessment results consistent across tasks, time, and judgments?
<b>Equitable</b> For all students	<b>Open:</b> Assessment is open when it is a participative process and discloses its purposes, expectations, criteria, and consequences.	<b>Participation:</b> Is the assessment process open to participation by interested stakeholders, including my students? <b>Disclosure:</b> Do my students understand the assessment: its purpose, what is expected, how it will be judged, and its consequences?
	<b>Appropriate:</b> Assessment is appropriate when it fairly accommodates students' sociocultural, linguistic, and developmental needs.	<b>Fairness:</b> Is the assessment un-biased in terms of my students' languages and cultures? Does it contribute to equal outcomes for my students? <b>Impact:</b> Are the personal and social consequences of the assessment equitable for my students?

sociocultural activities. It emphasizes and supports the social nature of learning, provides opportunities for students to revise their work, and generates feedback that helps students see how to improve their learning.

The convergence of recent research on mind and brain, processes of thinking and learning, and development of competence has resulted in recommendations that useful assessment should (a) mirror good instruction; (b) occur as a continuous, unobtrusive part of instruction; and (c) provide information about the levels of understanding and competence that students demonstrate (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). The levels of understanding and competence that constitute the expectations for student performance can be outlined in frameworks that identify patterns of development and learning trajectories. The usefulness of these assessment frameworks is improved by integrating cognitive processes with social contexts so that feedback can be related to next steps in the learning trajectory. These frameworks can anticipate assessing the limits of stu-

dents' ZPDs by alternately providing and withholding assistance during performances. They can also anticipate assessing students' automaticity, self-regulation, and metacognition through appropriate choices of assessment activities. Thus, the selection of format for a particular assessment task becomes a methodological choice that depends on the nature of the information desired. Frequent use of only one type of assessment task, such as multiple-choice questions, overemphasizes one type of information about student learning.

To support wise use of limited educational resources within most communities, assessments must also be practical. No matter how educative a particular assessment design, it must be feasible within the circumstances and efficient with its resources. However, if an assessment strategy is highly educative, it is worth finding ways to make it practical by considering how processes, performances, or products might be altered to increase feasibility without significantly decreasing the educational value of the assessment. Too often, the bal-

ance between educational value and practicality is tipped too far in favor of lowest cost. One of the purposes of the concept of usefulness is as a reminder that practicality must serve the primary purpose for assessment—improving student learning.

### Meaningful

Meaningfulness is judged by balancing the relevance and accuracy of assessment information for particular educational purposes. Relevance is determined by the importance of an assessment's content and the authenticity of its tasks. Decisions about what to assess and expected types of knowledge and performances should reflect professional standards for the particular discipline. Wiggins described authentic tasks as those "that teach students how adults are actually challenged in the field" (1998, p. xi). Socially negotiated standards for the various school subjects established by states and professional organizations can be used to specify the most important concepts, skills, and processes for students to learn and demonstrate. Teachers are also concerned with students' progress in performance areas that cut across discipline boundaries (e.g., literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking) and in dispositions and attitudes that enable successful participation as adult members of communities beyond the classroom. These widely conceived goals for learning should be reflected in assessments to provide relevant information about student growth and development in cognitive, academic, social, affective, and linguistic domains.

One of the greatest challenges in implementing more relevant assessment involves the need to change many stakeholders' mental models of knowing and effective learning. This is particularly applicable to the importance of language and culture in creating and expressing understanding and competent participation in social practices. The key to relevant assessment is to understand that "the kind and quality of cognitive activities in an assessment is a function of the content and process demands of the task involved" (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 143). Language and culture are important yet often overlooked elements of those content and process demands.

The other requirement for meaningful assessment is that results must be accurate, which requires both validity and reliability. Validity is determined in relation to the adequacy of particular evidence for a particular social purpose, is always a matter of degree, and refers specifically to the appropriateness of the conclusions, uses, and social and personal consequences that follow from an assessment (Linn & Gronlund, 2000). When making judgments based on assessments, teachers improve validity by (a) ensuring that the content is important and the evidence is sound, by considering both confirming and disconfirming evidence, by trying out alternative interpretations, and by

assuring that the judgment is reasonable for the particular consequences. Understanding the situative nature of performances can be useful in interpreting a student's varied performances across what appear to be similar tasks.

Reliability refers to the dependability of the evidence across time, tasks, and judgments. Several similar tasks that assess the same big ideas can be used on a single assessment or collected across time. Reliable evidence also requires consistent assessment conditions for all test takers. For example, this requirement can be satisfied by allowing all students to have plenty of time and all of the materials and tools they might need. Although restricting time and tools to some minimum provides consistent conditions, this discriminates against some students and is often used as a rationale for an exclusive focus on individual performances.

Reliability of assessment data can be jeopardized by the health, mood, motivation, test-taking skills, or general abilities of students. Reliability can also be compromised by the quality of the directions, ambiguities of language, distracting conditions in the environment, interruptions during test administration, biases of the observer, errors on the scoring sheet, or even bad luck. Teachers can reduce the impact of these factors by attending to these conditions and making appropriate accommodations for all students. For complex authentic assessments, reliability can be improved by using rubrics and checklists that provide detailed guides for scoring students' performances.

Accuracy and relevance are both essential to establish the credibility of an assessment with various stakeholders for the particular purposes that society values, including the accountability of schools and teachers for student learning. In this regard, the public has shown a willingness to accept low levels of relevance accompanied by high levels of accuracy when there is not an economical alternative. For example, severe imbalances exist between these principles in the case of multiple-choice standardized tests of computational skills in mathematics. These tests have been widely criticized as incapable of assessing understanding of important mathematical concepts and higher-order thinking and problem solving as well as overemphasizing tasks that have little relevance to the world outside of school mathematics. However, alternatives with greater relevance to the important content and processes of authentic mathematics have not been implemented because of the high costs of producing accurate judgments of more complex student performances. But these economic arguments against the use of more worthwhile tasks on large-scale assessments should not inhibit teachers from using more relevant assessment tasks in their classrooms.

These concerns for relevance and accuracy also distinguish between sociocultural and behavioral views of assessment. Traditional behaviorist assessment focuses on individual performances on familiar tasks removed

from cultural, social, and community contexts and does not allow for interaction, in-process feedback, or other assistance. When performances are considered against social and community planes, a sociocultural view of assessment calls for situated individual and group performances; opportunities for social interaction, feedback, and assistance; and a variety of culturally relevant assessment designs and authentic task formats.

### Equitable

Equitable assessment is clearly fair, but in a different way than most people expect when thinking about fairness. Fairness in education is not like fairness in competitive sports, where everybody plays by rules that favor some over others. Education ought to be providing every student the same probability of success by responding differently to individual needs. Equity involves inclusion and assistance according to individual needs. Equitable teaching means each student is supported by a more capable other within his or her own ZPD. Similarly, equitable assessment provides each student with appropriate opportunities to demonstrate what he or she knows and can do. For example, students with limited English writing skills can be assessed on their understanding of important concepts orally, using gestures or drawings. This allows them to show learning and to receive comprehensible feedback to improve the quality of their learning. Assessments that are equitable promote equal opportunities for all students to grow and develop, and they encourage improvements in teaching to support each student's learning.

Openness in assessment avoids many of the intellectual costs of secrecy in testing (Schwartz, 1991) by making assessment a more social process that invites students and parents to understand how students will be assessed. Through disclosure of assessment procedures, teachers involve and empower students to engage and succeed in assessment. However, for assessment to be genuinely open, teachers should invite students and others to fully participate in the assessment process. Students can be involved in the social process of identifying goals and developing criteria for judging products, thus clarifying exactly what the requirements are and committing to the learning and assessing process. In addition, when students participate in authentic real-world tasks, experts from the community can be invited into the classroom to make decisions about the quality of student work and provide feedback to improve performance.

Although assessment is often interested in the learning of individual students, disclosures about details of the process allow students and others to participate in the social negotiation of the many details of the assessment process. Openness invites participation to make sure one's culture is fairly represented and portrayed in

the details of the assessment tasks. Secrecy prevents others from learning what they need to know to fully participate in this sociocultural process.

Appropriate assessment ensures that content and tasks are meaningful for individual students and that feedback and judgments are helpful to them. Appropriateness is improved by social negotiation and input from students, parents, and other teachers who are familiar with the particular needs of students, their cultures, and their languages. Assessment that is clearly based in shared learning goals and provides feedback that guides improvement in students' performances is also likely to be appropriate.

Fairness requires that assessment tasks, language, and processes are respectful toward gender, culture, and linguistic differences present in the classroom. Materials and contexts need to be meaningful to students of all backgrounds. If it appears that only one group of students is showing learning growth, teachers should examine their assessment and teaching strategies for inequities that might account for unequal outcomes by group.

Assessments always have cognitive, academic, social, affective, and linguistic consequences for students. These consequences constitute the impact of the assessment. For example, teachers may use assessment information to adjust the difficulty of the curriculum, make various accommodations, or fundamentally redesign the assessment. They may find that the structure or nature of a commonly used assessment has caused students to become disinterested in certain valued learning or to react in other unexpected ways. When assessments are equitable, negative consequences are minimized and positive ones are emphasized.

Often, teachers must consider fairness and impact together to balance potentially conflicting goals and to meet the needs of all students. For example, increasing the authenticity of a task may simultaneously increase its cognitive and linguistic load. Consequently, accommodations may be needed to ensure ESL students have access to the task.

In summary, assessment that is useful, meaningful, and equitable is consistent with what Stiggins (2002) called assessment for learning, as opposed to assessment of learning that focuses primarily on providing achievement scores for public reporting. "The effect of assessment *for learning*, as it plays out in the classroom, is that students keep learning and remain confident that they can continue to learn at productive levels" (Stiggins, 2002, p. 762).

### Sociocultural Assessment Practices

These assessment principles provide a foundation for describing a collection of sociocultural assessment practices that are faithful to the fundamental concepts of the

sociocultural perspective and to the CREDE Standards for Effective Pedagogy (Dalton, 1998). These sociocultural assessment practices are summarized in the left column of Table 2.

**Focus on Quality**

When tasks become complex and authentic, the focus must shift from counting correct answers to making expert judgments of the quality of students’ understanding, thinking, and performances. Our view of sociocultural assessment asks teachers to become experts at judging the quality of student performances on authentic tasks. This also asks teachers to compare the quality of students’ work and thinking to that of competent adults and content-domain experts. Attention to completion of authentic work is not enough (Smith, 2000). This perspective also includes helping students to set learning goals and to analyze the differences between their current thinking and work and exemplars of high quality thinking and work. These goals should reflect in some detail the teacher’s standards of quality for the cultural understandings and competent performances that he or she expects students to achieve by the end of a particular learning experience, both short term and long term.

**Attend to Language, Culture, and Content**

Language, literacy, and culture are fundamental to social participation. Language and literacy are also the means for both developing and providing evidence of cultural understanding and competence. Our

view of sociocultural assessment asks teachers to attend to language and literacy use in comprehension and expression of cultural understandings and socially shared meanings. This includes assessing the integration of language use, understanding of culture and content, and competent participation in particular content areas. It also includes attending separately to evidence of language learning and content learning and making independent judgments of progress in each of these areas. Equity requires that appropriate accommodations be made when language development or cultural understanding interferes with expressions of content understanding or displays of competent participation.

**Sample Many Situations With Appropriate Methods**

Assisted and unassisted performances are typical of adult life. Our view of sociocultural assessment asks teachers to gather samples of evidence from assisted, unassisted, individual, and group performances in familiar and unfamiliar contexts on several occasions for each important content topic and authentic task. Teachers need to identify students’ ZPD for a variety of subjects, in meaningful contexts, using appropriate assessment formats and tasks. The selection of assessment methods, tasks, and formats should be matched with the type of information about learning that is needed. Teachers should also ask their students to compare their current understandings and performances to their learning goals for each of these situations, contexts, content topics, and authentic tasks.

**Table 2.** *Sociocultural Assessment Practices and ESL Accommodations*

Sociocultural Assessment Practices	ESL Accommodation Strategies
<p><b>Focus on quality:</b> Assess the quality of students’ performances on complex authentic tasks. Anticipate the types and quality of understanding and performances desired at the end of the learning experiences.</p>	<p><b>Ask worthy questions:</b> Ask only those questions for which students are accountable because they involve important learning purposes in meaningful ways.</p>
<p><b>Attend to language, culture, and content:</b> Assess language and literacy use in comprehension and expression of cultural understandings and socially shared meanings. Make accommodations when language development or culture interferes with displays of content understanding and competence.</p>	<p><b>Structure to support performance:</b> Pay attention to how the structure of the assessment inhibits or supports student performance. Consider simple to complex, concrete to abstract, familiar to unfamiliar, and situated to general structures.</p>
<p><b>Sample many situations with appropriate methods:</b> Use appropriate methods to gather samples of evidence from assisted, unassisted, individual, and group performances in familiar and unfamiliar contexts on several occasions for each important content topic and authentic performance.</p>	<p><b>Use variety:</b> Use both formal and informal assessments, include a variety of task formats, and provide multiple opportunities for students to reveal what they know and can do.</p>
<p><b>Provide encouraging feedback:</b> Making revisions and improvements are part of the learning process. Attend to the needs of each student in providing helpful feedback and encouragement for improving quality and monitoring progress toward high expectations. Provide feedback that is specific enough to assist revisions and improve the quality of each student’s thinking and work. Help students learn when and how to seek the assistance they need in various individual and group situations.</p>	<p><b>Modify for clarity:</b> Make the language and context of the assessment as simple and clear as possible.</p>



## Provide Encouraging Feedback

Making revisions and improvements are part of the learning process and of adult life. Our view of sociocultural assessment asks teachers to attend to the needs of each student while providing helpful feedback and encouragement for improving quality and while monitoring progress toward high expectations. This means providing feedback that is specific enough to assist revisions and improve the quality of each student's thinking and work. It also suggests helping each student learn when and how to seek the assistance he or she needs in various individual and group situations. How teachers prepare students to be successful on assessments and how they debrief students' performances are more important than the choice of a particular assessment task format. The key is that students truly believe they can achieve their highest expectations and clearly see their personal path to those goals.

## Accommodations for ESL Students

The influence of the sociocultural perspective can also be recognized in the four accommodation strategies for use with second language learners that are summarized in the right column of Table 2. These assessment strategies capture the essence of the literature on effective assessment accommodations for ESL students.

## Ask Worthy Questions

Because students' levels of language development may make it difficult for teachers to identify whether they understand and have learned content, teachers can simplify this problem by asking the questions that are central to learning content, language, and general cognitive skills. This strategy focuses on what is most important to improve the quality of student performances. The effort to assess becomes worthwhile because the essential student learning being assessed is central to the particular content area. What is to be learned becomes more important than how that learning is assessed.

## Structure to Support Performances

This includes simple adjustments in structuring assessment items or performance requirements from simple to complex, concrete to abstract, familiar to unfamiliar, and situated to general. It can also include considerations for how questions might be posed or answered using pictures, whole body movement, diagrams, and other nonverbal strategies. Whatever we do in alter-

ing the structure, we want to support students so they can accurately reveal what they have learned and can do.

## Use Variety

When teachers focus sharply and clearly on what students need to know, they should be able to collect evidence of student progress from multiple sources, including formal and informal assessments and traditional tests. They can evaluate students' participation and involvement in learning activities as well as the performances that show that students know and understand what has been taught.

## Modify for Clarity

Teachers of ESL students need to examine instructions, questions, guidelines, and all assessment materials that will be used by students to make certain that the language is clear, cogent, coherent, and easily understood by those who are being assessed. Every student who knows and understands should be enabled and supported in the assessment process so as to be successful in demonstrating that understanding. Clear communication is an essential component of student success.

## Conclusion

Returning to the dilemma of "world class" standards for all students in the context of increased student diversity and emerging English proficiency, we should ask the following: What can teachers do? Obviously, such a complex problem has no simple solutions. [Stiggins \(2002\)](#) argued that without more meaningful and helpful feedback, high-stakes assessments will likely result in the discouragement and disenfranchisement of a large segment of the student population. More effective and equitable classroom pedagogy and assessment must prepare every student to successfully meet high expectations. The same consensus of research that supports the use of sociocultural pedagogy in multicultural and multilingual classrooms also points toward a coherent framework for sociocultural assessment.

Classroom teachers remain the primary source for encouraging feedback about the quality of students' learning and their next steps toward competent participation. Although more complex than "tell and test" approaches, the sociocultural perspective, with corresponding views of pedagogy and assessment, provides a foundation on which workable solutions to this immense educational challenge can be based.

We ask all teachers, as they shift their teaching toward more effective and equitable practices, to make each of their assessments more useful, meaningful, and equitable. These three concepts, with the accompanying principles, practices, and accommodations, can guide teachers as they interrogate their personal assessment practices and design better ways to assist all learners.

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