

**The Bilingual Cat**  
**A Listening and Writing Placement Test**

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# The Bilingual Cat

## A Listening and Writing Placement Test

### Introduction

*The Bilingual Cat* is a one-hour ESL test designed to place students first according to their English writing fluency and second according to their listening comprehension skills. The test can be administered by a single tester to as many as 60 students at a time.\*

The tester tells the story twice, asks questions about it, then has the students write the story from picture cues. Scoring of the comprehension questions takes place while students are writing, and scoring of the writing sample, integration of all scores and placement take another minute or two per student.

The rationale behind the test is that a writing sample is crucial for placement but that *fluency* is initially more useful for accurate placement than are the kinds of composition skills tested by typical expository composition tests. Because *The Bilingual Cat* requires only narrative skills, students with virtually any English writing ability try it. Proficiency levels show through the amount written in the time allowed, the sophistication and correctness of structures and vocabulary, and overall naturalness, rather than specific composing skills.

The accompanying Student Information Sheet serves several purposes: (1) to fill time until latecomers arrive since they must hear the telling of the story to take the test at all; (2) to find out how long a student has been in the U.S. and whether he has studied English before; (3) to provide a convenient, uniform piece of paper for the comprehension questions (to be written on the back of the sheet) and assure that students' names accompany their answers; and (4) to identify real beginners who may not be able to complete such a form in English. The teacher can speak to such students individually and may choose to excuse them from the test.

### Procedure

#### 1. Student Information Sheet (10 minutes)

Give out information sheets as students enter. Speak individually to students who have difficulty filling it out in order to identify real beginners. The last question, which is open-ended, does not have to be answered by everyone, but it sometimes identifies advanced students. Tell students, "Don't worry if you don't finish everything."

#### 2. Telling the Story (five minutes)

Say something like this at a normal pace:

*"I'm going to tell you a story about a cat. Don't write anything yet. Just listen. I'll tell the story twice. OK? Listen:"*

Tell the story twice with minor variations (see samples on page 3). Just be sure the things asked about in the comprehension questions are present both times. DON'T READ. Use appropriate gestures, sounds, etc. as if you were telling a funny story anywhere. Watch for reactions to the punch line. People get it or they don't.

\* Since 1992 this test has been used with advanced ESL students at York College for hierarchical placement -- i.e. when a double-sized group of students needed to be divided into a "higher" and "lower" section -- and, with the same students, to make predictions based on *fluency* about students' ability to pass a WAT-type exam at the end of a term. It has also been used to relevel five classes of beginner to low intermediate students in the Day Intensive Program at LaGuardia Community College. In the summer of 1994 the five teachers reported possible misplacement of only five of the 85 students tested with *The Bilingual Cat*.

### 3. Comprehension Questions (20 minutes)

Give these instructions:

"OK, now turn over your information sheet, and write your name again. Then write **Example** twice and the numbers one through ten."

Write the same thing on the board to be sure everyone understands.

Continue (using the questions on page 4):

"I'm going to say ten sentences about the story. Write **T** for "true" and **F** for "false." Let's do one example. Listen to the sentence and write **T** or **F**.

**Example:** It was a bright and sunny day.

It was a bright and sunny day.

What did you write? **T?** Good. Here is the other example:

**Example:** A mother dog wanted to take a walk.

A mother dog wanted to take a walk.

What did you write? **F?** Yes, 'a mother dog' is false. It was a mother cat. OK, now write **T** or **F** for #1, but don't say anything."

Read each question twice only.

Continue:

"Now number one through ten again right next to the true and false answers. This time write a short answer to each question. Let's do the first one together:

#1. How many children did the mother cat have?

How many children did the mother cat have?

What did you write? Three? OK. Now answer question 2."

Again, read each question only twice. Collect the papers and check them while students are doing the writing sample.

### 4. Writing Sample (15 minutes)

Give out the picture sheets. Make sure students put their complete names on them immediately. **TELL THE STORY ONE MORE TIME AS THEY LOOK AT THE PICTURES.** Tell them to read the first sentence of the story carefully and *continue it in the past tense*. Tell them they have fifteen minutes and can use a pencil or pen but no dictionary. They can ask you for spellings.

## Scoring

Use a score of one to ten for each part of the test. On the short-answer part, don't count spelling or grammar so long as the answer shows the writer understood the question and was able to give some logical answer.

Read *all* the writing samples and put them into several piles from the strongest to the weakest. Then take a pile and try to match the features you see with a number or numbers on the scale on page 5. Numbers should be assigned based on the basis of *fluency*, which usually shows most readily through English-sounding syntax. The scale downplays writing conventions like spelling and comprehension in favor of overall naturalness.

## Placement

When you have all three scores, copy them into the small box at the top of the Information Sheet, and write each student's placement. (The writing score is the most important; the two listening scores are useful in borderline cases.)

## Two Versions of the Story

### Version 1

It was a bright and sunny day, and a mother cat wanted to take a walk with her three little kittens. She wanted to go the park with the three kittens because she was very proud of them, and she wanted everyone to see them. She told the kittens she wanted to go to the park to enjoy the beautiful day, and the little kittens said, "Oh, yes! We want to go there, too!" So they went to the park. The mother cat was leading, and the three little kittens were following, and they looked very nice, all in a row. The mother cat was very proud, and the kittens were having a good time smelling the flowers and looking at all the people in the park.

Suddenly a big dog came out from behind a garbage can. He looked very mean. He was growling like this -- **grrrrrrrr** -- and his teeth were showing. The little kittens were very scared. One of them started to run away. The mother cat said, "Stop! Don't run away! I can take care of everything. Just keep following me."

The kittens were still afraid, and their little hearts were pounding, and their bodies were shaking, but they followed their mother. The mother cat walked right up to the dog -- who was still growling -- and when they were nose to nose, she said, "**Woof! Woof!**" The dog was so surprised that he turned around and ran away! Then the mother cat turned to her kittens and said, "You see, my children, I have always told you it's a good idea to learn a second language."

### Version 2

One beautiful day, when the sky was bright and sunny, a mother cat wanted to take a walk in the park. She asked her three little kittens if they wanted to go to the park, and they said, "Oh, yes! Let's go to the park." So they followed their mother into the park. For a while, everything was fine. The little kittens were smelling the flowers and looking at all the people in the park, and they looked very nice walking in a line behind their mother. The mother cat was very proud of them, and she was happy that everyone could see them.

All of a sudden, a big dog appeared. He was behind a garbage can, and then he came out. The little kittens got very frightened because the dog looked so mean: his teeth were showing, and he was growling like this: **grrrrrrrr**. One of the little kittens started to run away, but the mother cat said, "Wait! Don't worry about the dog. Just follow me. I can handle everything."

The little kittens obeyed their mother, and they kept on walking, but their little hearts were beating very fast, and their bodies were trembling with fear. The mother cat walked toward the dog -- closer and closer until they were nose to nose -- and then she said, "**Woof! Woof!**" The dog was very surprised! He turned around and ran away. The mother cat said to her children, "You see? I have always said it's important to know another language."

## Questions and Answers

Example: It was a bright and sunny day.

T

Example: A mother dog wanted to take a walk.

F

- |   |      |
|---|------|
| 1. The mother cat wanted to walk at the beach.          | 1 F  |
| 2. The kittens wanted to go for a walk, too.            | 2 T  |
| 3. The mother cat was very proud of her little kittens. | 3 T  |
| 4. The mother cat walked behind the kittens.            | 4 F  |
| 5. Suddenly they saw a big dog in a garbage can.        | 5 F  |
| 6. The mother cat was afraid of the dog.                | 6 F  |
| 7. One of the kittens tried to run away.                | 7 T  |
| 8. The mother cat hit the dog in the nose.              | 8 F  |
| 9. The dog said, "Woof! Woof!"                          | 9 F  |
| 10. The dog ran away.                                   | 10 T |

1. How many kittens did the mother cat have?
2. Where did they go to take a walk?
3. What did they meet in the park?
4. How did the little kittens feel about the dog?
5. What did one of them try to do?
6. What did the mother cat say to that kitten?
7. What did she say to the dog?
8. What did the dog do?
9. Why did he do that?
10. Finally, what did the mother cat say to her kittens?

- |       |   |
|-------|---|
| 1. F  | 1. Three  |
| 2. T  | 2. (To) the park  |
| 3. T  | 3. A (big) dog  |
| 4. F  | 4. Scared/afraid  |
| 5. F  | 5. Run away   |
| 6. F  | 6. Stop!/Wait!/Don't run away!/Don't worry about the dog./I can take care of everything. etc. |
| 7. T  | 7. Woof! Woof!  |
| 8. F  | 8. (He) ran away.   |
| 9. F  | 9. He was surprised.  |
| 10. T | 10. I have always said it's a good idea to learn a second language, etc.                      |

## Scale\*

- 0 = The student wrote **nothing**.
- 1 = The student wrote a few words or phrases but **nothing comprehensible**. (See Sample A.) A score of 1/2 might have a few comprehensible phrases, either alone or in a longer sample (Samples B & C).
- 2 = There are one or two **barely comprehensible sentences or some phrases** which do match the pictures but do not cohere as sentences (Samples D & E). A score of 2/3 might have the beginning of sentence structure although the sample is still hard to read (Samples F and G).
- 3 = The sample is longer and fairly comprehensible, but **the syntax is not English** (Sample H) -- or -- there are **only two or three short sentences** even though the syntax is quite English (Sample I). A score of 3/4 might tell the whole story fairly well, but because of omissions or L<sub>1</sub> interference, the syntax is still not recognizably English (Samples J & K). Or the story might reuse only the same simple pattern.
- 4 = There's a **clear sense of English syntax but little control** of technical matters such as verb forms and tenses, singular and plural, sentence structure, etc. --or-- the story is told fairly completely but in quite unidiomatic English (or English **strongly marked by first-language influence**).
- 5 = The story is fairly complete, and there **signs of past tenses, etc.** -- or -- the whole sample is quite good except for a total absence of past tense -- or -- the story goes along well for a while, including some past tense, but then there are **sudden lapses** in coherency, grammar or sentence structure. Or it's good but too short.
- 6 = There is **some command of verb forms and tenses and overall comprehensibility**. The story is fairly complete, but there are still constant non-English structures and/or idioms.
- 7 = The story **reads easily in spite of quite a few errors**. Either it *sounds* good (and may reflect high oral fluency), but spelling, inflections, punctuation and other features of written English suggest the writer has not had a lot of English writing experience -- or -- the writing shows a good deal of school practice, but there are still many non-English sounding structures and idioms.
- 8 = There are **still some major errors, but** sentence structure and idiom are **quite natural-sounding**. The story is complete and reads easily -- or -- there are few major grammar errors, but the sentence structure is very simple, or there are many idiom errors.
- 9 = There are **very few major errors**. The story is either very fluent but not too complex structurally, or the writer has tried some complex structure and made mistakes in doing so -- or -- there are occasional errors that identify the writer as a non-native speaker of English.
- 10 = The story is **native English-sounding**. Errors are the type made by native speakers: spelling or other mechanics, non-standard inflections, negatives, etc., colloquialisms or slang. *This writer should be spoken to individually to see if placement among native English speakers would be better than an ESL placement.*

\* In a program like LaGuardia's Day Intensive Program, with 15 or 16 proficiency levels, the scores 1-3 (or 3/4) represent beginner levels 1 and 2A (2B in some terms); the scores 4, 5 and 6 represent intermediate students, who are usually placed in levels 3A to 4A. Scores above 6 represent high intermediate and advanced students, who should probably be retested with a more challenging test like *The Thief*.

**Sample A** **Score: 1**  
*"a few words or phrases but nothing comprehensible..."*  
Mother cat seat, her little kittens. go to garden and budyfoul flowers. Big drog

**Sample B** **Score: 1/2**  
*"a few comprehensible phrases...alone..."*  
Three dogs very happy. It went to park and ran anyway

**Sample C** **Score: 1/2**  
*a few comprehensible phrases...in a longer passage..."*  
To, day beaurifur cami up to go park, and a mother cat. the chiendel, floy the feliz!!! the dog muy grarr!!!  
the bebi cat is juroa(?) tack the frensend the mather and dog is the dog thes go goo the mather cat and the chiolden this feeliz-

**Sample D** **Score: 2**  
*"one or two barely comprehensible sentences"*  
She mather side. Another came lasigo! Oke. The litils cats. in the park. The dogs are met. She is mather cate smele. She is side No! Wete. The litils cats Oke mather came to we home.

**Sample E** **Score: 2**  
*"one or two phrases which do match the pictures but do not cohere as sentences..."*  
1.  
2.. When they come to park, the little cat  
3..the mother cat look a dog and sinks  
4..one little kittens look the dog and walk

**Sample F** **Score: 2/3**  
*"the beginning of sentence structure..."*  
three little kittens playing.  
garbage can behind dog.  
The dog was running behind.  
Win a victory over the enemy.  
mother cat triumphant

**Sample G** **Score: 2/3**  
*"the beginning of sentence structure..."*  
Go to work in the park the kittens very happy and work and fio(crossouts) a big dog while the garbage and hi greee the kittens scared one kittens rond a way his mother tell hime come beck dont wory the mother go to the dog nose a nose and he say Woof Woof the dog rond a way and the mother cat say (crossout) tel you no probleme.

**Sample H** **Score: 3**  
*"The sample is longer..but the syntax is not English..."*  
The little cats very happy. The smale flowers, people, cars, see the walk. Suddenly, the big Dog one little kitte very afraid Runaway. Mother is said "wait wait Don't worry about it's follow me?  
Mother is see the Big dog said.  
"Woof Woof" dog is very surprise Runaway

**Sample I** **Score: 3**  
*"...only two or three sentences even though the syntax is English..."*  
They looked around flower. Suddenly big dog appeared. Mother cat said second language. The dog ran away.

**Sample J** **Score: 3/4**  
*"...the whole story ...but because of omissions or L<sub>1</sub> influence, the syntax is not recognizably English."*  
What a beautiful day. cat's mother bright it's three "children" go to the part. small cats take look flower very doog. cat's mother take look big god. Cat' mother to listen Call. Worry! three small to jump and tear.  
Cat's mother call with big dog. small cats running away. then three cats come back cat's mother near.

**Sample K** **Score: 3/4**  
*"...the whole story... but because of omissions or L<sub>1</sub> influence, the syntax is not recognizably English."*  
Stay in the park, the mother cat "says" don't round this way afrain a dog with the garbage can, the three little kittens no licenend her mother and round this way and put togeheter nouse to nouse the dog woff, woff the mather cat "says" maybe speak diferent language.

**Sample L** **Score: 4**  
*"...a clear sense of English syntax...but strongly marked by first-language influence."*  
The little kitten s sniff flowers, look at trees, birds, glassland and more people and children to play ball. walking see an big dog in the garbage can, His dog have tooth very big and to grunt in the cats and the little kiltens to be afraid and the nother said at the cat "No afraid! and the nother walk the dog and say Woof! Woof!



# Student Information Sheet

<b>Scores</b> ____ / ____ / ____
<b>Placement</b> _____

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(first name) (last name) (country)

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(number) (street) (apt.) (language)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(borough/town) (state) (zip code)

When did you come to the United States? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you study English in your country? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, how many years of English did you study? \_\_\_\_\_

What was your job or profession when you were in your country? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a job now? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, what kind of a job? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you want to learn English/improve your English? \_\_\_\_\_

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# Student Information Sheet

<b>Scores</b> ____ / ____ / ____
<b>Placement</b> _____

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(number) (street) (apt.) (language)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(borough/town) (state) (zip code)

When did you come to the United States? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you study English in your country? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, how many years of English did you study? \_\_\_\_\_

What was your job or profession when you were in your country? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a job now? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, what kind of a job? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you want to learn English/improve your English? \_\_\_\_\_

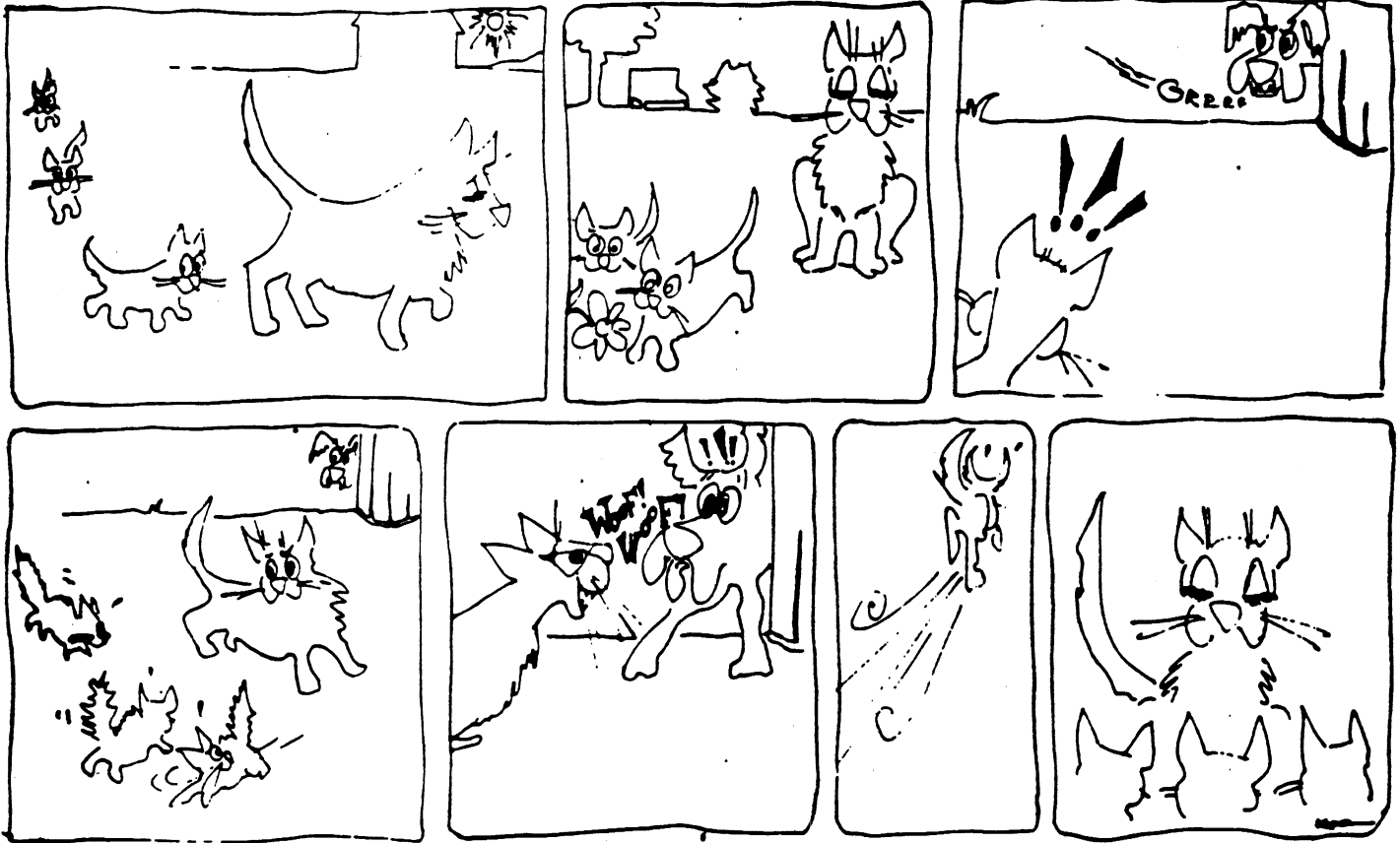
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# The Bilingual Cat

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**Instructions:** Look at the pictures and finish the story below. Use the other side of the page if you need it.

*It was a bright and sunny day, and a mother cat wanted to take a walk with her three little kittens.*

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