

“A New Language Tester is Born”

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This was the subject heading in the e-mail my advisor, Jim Purpura, sent out to the doctoral seminar group after I announced the arrival of my baby girl. While I clearly shared others' enthusiasm in my happy news, I was also more than a little apprehensive about how a baby was going to affect my lifestyle and career goals. Panic quickly set in as many questions raced through my mind: *How was I going to continue working full time? When would I be able to finish my doctorate? When will I find time to continue my research in writing assessment? What will happen to the person(s) I used to be?*

When I was admitted to the hospital with labor contractions, the doctors and nurses asked me to rate my pain on a scale of one to ten, ten being the highest. As a language tester who works with ratings on a regular basis, my first reaction was, “How can I give you a meaningful or reliable rating when I haven't been normed? What's a ten?” The nurse replied, “Imagine a ten as the most pain you could imagine feeling.” This vague descriptor was even less precise than some of the rubrics I've seen, so without adequate training in pain rating, I did what many raters do when they're unsure about how to use a scoring rubric and I hovered around the middle, always assigning a score between four and six to rate my pain proficiency.

Once I was back home, adjusting to life with a newborn, the doula I had hired to train me in motherhood was adamant that I persevere with nursing and resist using baby formula. Since I was one of many new moms who did not find nursing an easy task (but I now know what a ten is on the pain scale!), my doula constantly reminded me about the studies showing that breastfed babies are healthier/happier/better adjusted/(fill in the blank with something positive) than formula-fed babies. I again felt the researcher in me coming out, albeit with a little postpartum attitude, as I wanted to shout back, “Which studies? How rigorously were they conducted? Did they have a control group? How did they get that approved by the IRB? Were the differences statistically significant? Surely there were confounding variables!” I restrained myself, but felt great satisfaction when, a few weeks into bottle feeding, I read an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* that challenged many of the overstated claims that breastfeeding is far superior to baby formula.

As my newborn approached two months, and the sleep deprivation was really starting to get to me, I again morphed from mom to researcher as I plotted my baby's feeding habits on a chart, searching desperately for an emerging pattern that would display more regular and less frequent feedings. I thought such an investigation might predict how long I had to wait until my baby (i.e., *I*) could sleep through the night. Not surprisingly, the data were messy, leading to inconclusive findings. The chronic fatigue continues.

Having reflected on my reactions to these and other aspects of my new life, I've realized that, rather than force me to abandon my previous personae as instructor, doctoral candidate, and researcher, motherhood has instead given me the chance to apply my inquisitiveness in new areas. Indeed, a new (type of) tester was born.

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