

Introduction

Why This Book?

Assessment in the Second Language Writing Classroom is a teacher-friendly and prospective teacher–friendly book, uncomplicated by the language of statistics. The book was written for those who teach and assess second language writing in several different contexts: the IEP, the developmental writing classroom, and the sheltered composition classroom. Teachers who experience a mixed population or teach cross-cultural composition will also find the book a valuable resource.

Assessment is one of the most important of the many tasks for which teachers are responsible. Learning to do good, honest, and criteria-based assessment is crucial for all teachers, especially writing teachers. Although several books thoroughly cover the theoretical aspects of writing assessment (Huot, 2002; Weigle, 2002; White, 1998, 2007), none concentrate as heavily on the practical classroom aspects of writing assessment as this book does. Further, no book has as yet included an in-depth examination of the machine scoring of writing and its effects on second language writers.

This book also reflects my interest in the assessment of second language (L2) writing, which began very early in my teaching career at a small community college in western Pennsylvania. It was then that I faced the stark realization of the consequences of assessment when, as a brand new (and powerless) adjunct, my students questioned me about why

they had been placed in the developmental English class I was teaching. I promised these students that I would find out why they had been placed in my class rather than in the for-credit class they thought they should be taking. When I was told that their placement was based on their scores on a multiple choice grammar test rather than actual writing, I attempted to dispute what I perceived an injustice with the powers that be. I quickly realized that I did not know enough about the placement and assessment system to function as an effective advocate for my students. From that point on, I became a self-appointed crusader for fairness in assessment in general and writing assessment in particular. I was inspired to write this book because I was moved by the plight of my students who were/are marginalized by assessment procedures and wanted to share my understanding of this increasingly complicated and politicized field.

One thing I have learned is that it is very important to understand why we do what we do (Johnson, 1999). When we profoundly reflect on our practices, we often realize why we do what we do and how to change if change is warranted. We can and should improve our practices. Embedded in every chapter of this book is the notion of teacher reflection and improvement of pedagogy.

I also wanted to write this book because I believe that many teachers are unprepared to systematically establish and use criteria to assess writing. Teachers are responsible for assessment as well as ethics in assessment and are certainly stakeholders in assessment (Hamp-Lyons, 2000). However, many seem unprepared to accept this responsibility, which is certainly troubling (Crusan, 2006). In my experience, many new teachers of writing are naïve about assessment, and I include myself. I remember how unprepared I was the first time I taught writing. My first assignment established no criteria by which I would fairly assess what my students had written. Worse yet, I was not sure where I might find help. I quickly realized that while I had my degree and understood different pedagogical approaches, I had little expertise in the teaching of writing and still less in writing assessment. My teacher preparation courses had failed me, especially the

testing and measurements course in which the professor had spent nearly the entire semester teaching us to write multiple choice questions. I remembered my feelings of helplessness and a little shame, and when I was given the responsibility of preparing teachers for the classroom, I vowed that they would not be as naïve, helpless, or ashamed as I had been.

I believe that teachers need a strong historical and theoretical background in writing assessment and a familiarity with the seminal publications in the field. They need to know the politics involved in assessment, to be familiar with the purposes for writing assessment—admission, placement, in class, and exit. They should be comfortable with the tools of writing assessment (rubrics, scoring guides, criteria)—among them holistic, analytic, primary trait, and multiple trait—and be able to create their own rubrics and to clearly articulate criteria for assignments. Finally, teachers should be well-informed test consumers: they need to know the assumptions inherent in standardized testing; they need to understand the proper use of such tests; and they need to be able to intelligently articulate their objections to the misuse of these tests. I am hopeful that readers will benefit from the treatment of those issues within these pages.

What's in This Book?

Throughout the book, I provide not only practical information about how to do assessment, but I also challenge the ways teachers think about writing assessment and, possibly, assessment in general. To be critical of assessment—to understand the appropriate uses of standardized tests, and the political, economic, and sociological ramifications of tests—helps teachers protect their students from the onslaught of perhaps well-intentioned, but possibly detrimental, tests. This book offers no quick-fix solutions because assessing writing is far from easy, but when it is done well, it can produce better teachers and better writers.

Assessment in the Second Language Writing Classroom has seven chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter discusses the

history and theory relevant to writing assessment in general and L2 writing assessment specifically. This chapter serves as a foundation for the rest of the book, helping readers understand the reasons why we assess writing the way we do. Although I freely admit a basic bias about assessment—I come to assessment from a teaching perspective—I recognize the need for a strong foundation upon which to base our practices.

Chapter 2 discusses the ABCs of assessment, delving into such issues as standards, objectives, reliability, validity, wash-back or impact, rubrics, and writing assignments for different purposes of assessing writing; it also provides examples of various assignments, rubrics, and criteria from a variety of teachers and contexts. Chapter 3 provides instructions for creating assignments, feedback tools, and rubrics necessary for good writing assessment. The fourth chapter discusses a variety of biases inherent in writing assessment, asking readers to consider their own prejudices and recognizing ways to combat them. Chapter 5 discusses the major standardized tests that are used to assess second language writing and the political and ethical issues at play. Chapter 6 looks specifically at the use of technology to provide feedback and to formatively and summatively assess student writing. It further explores the synchronous and asynchronous tools that students use for writing and that teachers find valuable in providing feedback to their students. Further, the chapter questions our fascination with the essay and discusses other ways to prepare our students for their futures.

Particularly relevant to the future is the topic of machine scoring of essays; Chapter 7 provides one philosophical and ethical perspective regarding the use of such programs. The Epilogue considers the future of writing assessment and suggests where we go next in writing assessment and the issues that need to be considered.

It is my fervent hope that through this book, readers will understand that “all assessment practices are political” (Hamp-Lyons, 2001, p. 117). It is vitally important that teachers recognize that when they undertake assessment, they are undertaking an important political process.