
HOLISTIC AND PERFORMATIVE ASSESSMENT OF ESL WRITING

Ulla Connor, Purdue University
Elaine Fischer-Kohn, San Francisco
State University

This session focused on two types of assessment of ESL writing: (1) large-scale holistic scoring for pre- and posttesting for program assessment purposes and (2) "performative assessment" for assessing specific writing skills as a diagnostic tool for classroom instruction. First, we described a new tool for assessing specific writing skills: performative assessment, developed by Faigley et al. at the University of Texas at Austin. We explained what a performative assessment instrument is (a set of rubrics, or evaluation guidelines, describing specific levels of proficiency for several general skills required by the writing task); how it differs from other criterion-based assessment tools such as primary-trait scoring; and how it is developed. We discussed the practical applications of performative assessment, both in diagnostic testing and as a tool for classroom instruction.

Next, we explained how holistic scoring, used effectively in native-speaker composition testing, is currently being adopted by schools and testing companies for non-native speaker (ESL/EFL) composition testing. Holistic scoring enables evaluators to identify high- and low-level writing efficiently and reliably. However, holistic scoring fails to differentiate between different qualities of middle-range ESL writing.

Our research was conducted on immigrant university freshmen in a year-long ESL program.

Feature analysis scales were used with holistic scoring results, in order to diagnose specific strengths and weaknesses of middle-range writing. The scales not only helped to identify important features that contribute to successful communication, but also threw light on the actual criteria which holistic raters apply when scoring. We ended by outlining the implications of the use of holistic scoring of ESL writing for programs at the secondary, pre-university and college or university levels.