However, it seems that secondary school English grades (based in part on the evolving provincial exam and in part on the teacher’s assessment of work throughout the year), are more valid measures of writing ability than current one-shot placement tests.

FIRST- AND SECOND-LANGUAGE WRITING OF FRENCH IMMERSION STUDENTS

Marie-Josée Vignola and Marjorie Bingham Welche, University of Ottawa

Our presentation provided a review of the research literature on L1 and L2 writing of French immersion students, and reported the results of a pilot project with such students in first-year university studies. Over the past two decades, various forms of "immersion" have become a prominent approach to teaching second languages, particularly French, in Canadian schools. In immersion programs, children whose home background is English (L1) are taught some or all of the regular school curriculum through the medium of French (L2). Popular starting points for these programs are kindergarten, the middle elementary grades and grades 6–7. Many students continue their high school studies in bilingual programs. Research has consistently shown that students completing immersion programs as a group catch up to, or sometimes surpass, English program students in English language arts and subject matter courses, and that they achieve high, if not native-like, levels of functional French skills.

Most research to evaluate the impact of immersion education on students’ writing skills has focused on French (L2) writing skills, including the influence of L1 on L2 writing. Some research has also been done on L1 writing skills in early immersion students. Several studies have demonstrated that students after 3 to 4 years in early French immersion not only catch up in L1 skills but may surpass English language control groups in certain areas (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, sensitivity to grammatical structures) despite the fact that the immersion students have had more limited training in their L1 than students enrolled in the regular English program.

To our knowledge, all research to date on immersion students’ writing skills has compared immersion students with English instruction or French L1 control groups in order to evaluate their L1 and L2 language skills. We have found no previous research which compares the L1 and L2 writing skills of the same subjects. As ever-increasing numbers of former immersion students university age, the question of the effects of vision education on high-level first language writing skills is frequently posed.

HOLISTIC AND PERFORMATIVE ASSESSMENT OF ESL WRITING

Ulia 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.

RESPONDING TO THE CONTENT OF STUDENT WRITING: A CONSIDERATION OF AESTHETICS, ETHICS, VALUES, AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASSESSMENT

Claudia Mitchell, University of Prince Edward Island
Anne E. Cheverie, Mount Saint Vincent University

Helping children to express their thoughts through writing brings into question not only the assessment of process and product, but also content and intention, particularly in terms of assessing values, ethics, and moral responsibility. Such considerations become increasingly significant in classrooms where writing is shared amongst peer audiences. Issues of sexism and racism, and sensitive subjects such as neglect, abuse, divorce, and suicide arise in successful writing programs where children feel free to write.

Using scenarios collected from teachers in Australia and Canada, we focused on assessing the content and intent of writing that teachers confront in their classrooms. We drew on research in ethics and aesthetics, moral development, censorship, gender studies, values in education, counselling, and student law in order to examine the content of student writing within the context of writing process curricula. We argued that the process has taken precedence over content.

RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

Jane Ledwell-Brown and Carolyn Pittenger, McGill University

When teachers read students' writing, in draft stages or as finished products, our reactions carry great weight. Our response (or lack of response) can shape a student's image of himself or herself as a writer, sometimes even as a person. Our comments, suggestions, and corrections affect the student's ability to use writing for personal growth, for communication with others, and for career success.

We often measure student writing against an imaginary, absolute standard of "good writing," far removed from meaningful contexts. Instead of asking ourselves whether the student is achieving a purpose he or she has set or whether the student is reaching an audience, we play copy editor with the text. On the other hand, we give some texts no more than a cursory response: "O.K.," "Well done," "Needs work." Any of these reactions—a river of red ink or a global comment (often accompanied by a grade)—stills the voice behind the prose and ignores the self being expressed. Since studies have repeatedly shown that literate, well-educated adults have great difficulty agreeing upon what good writing is, what messages are we sending when we glibly label student writing for good or not good?

In order to understand our students' experiences with writing assessment, the feedback they have received, and their responses to that feedback, we collected information from students in management programs at McGill University. Our inquiry focused on the feedback they have received from teachers, peers, and supervisors in both academic and nonacademic settings. We presented the results of our study and discussed the implications of this information for the composition classroom.