2.5-5%). He then discussed where on the scale these discrepancies were occurring. Agreement was greatest at the high end of the scale and least likely in the low-middle range of scores.

Takala then discussed where the rating of "off topic" appeared. In early discussions with colleagues, it was anticipated that this rating would pair up with ratings at the high end of the scale (an essay would be so creative as to elicit either "very good" or "off topic"). In fact, just the opposite was true: "off topic." appeared at the low end of the scale with "poor." Surprisingly, it also occurred in the middle range. Takala noted that perhaps some raters were unsure of how to score such essays and so chose a middle ground. In general, similarities between raters outweighed differences, lending credibility to further comparisons.

Elaine Degenhart, another coordinator of the IEA Study of Written Communication, looked at relationships between writing instruction and student performance, using data from the teacher questionnaires, and questionnaires on the background and curriculum of the schools involved in the IEA study. The purpose of her work was to identify some patterns in instructional approaches and to determine how well the variable that show these approaches discriminate between low, middle, and high achieving classes. The four main approaches that emerged were product, process, reading-literature, and a less well defined skills-oriented approach with emphasis on product. Based on mean scores on the writing tasks, classes were divided into achievement levels: 25% high, 50% middle, 25% low. The top two instructional approaches for each country were then examined in terms of how well they discriminate for the three levels of classes. Degenhart reported on findings from four of the countries: Chile, Finland, New Zealand, and the U.S.

The top two teaching strategies found for Chile were (1) a strongly student-centered approach with a process orientation and (2) a stronger product orientation. Here it appeared that low-achieving students had more process-centered teaching, whereas the product-centered approach distinguished well for the middle group. In Finland, the top two teaching strategies were (1) a reading-literature approach and (2) a process approach. The process approach did not distinguish between the top and bottom groups; the reading-literature approach was positive for low-achieving students. In New Zealand, the top two were (1) a teacher centered reading/literature approach and (2) a less clearly defined approach leaning toward process. Both discriminated between all three levels. In the United States, the top two approaches were (1) a structured reading/literature approach and (2) a strong student-centered product orientation. The product orientation was high for the low-level students.

Questions centered around possible interpretations of these findings. Degenhart was careful not to draw premature conclusions or make quick generalizations. From the discussion it became clear that a greater understanding of the background situation in each country would help with the interpretation of why classes were receiving a particular type of writing instruction.

**EFFECTS OF ESSAY TOPIC VARIATION ON STUDENT WRITING**

**Speaker:** Gorden Brossett, Florida State University  
Jim Hoetker, Florida State University  
**Introducer/Recordor:** Laura Brady, George Mason University, VA

Gorden Brossett and Jim Hoetker presented the results of a study designed to analyze the ways in which systematic variations in essay topics affected the writing of college students under controlled conditions. To explore the question of whether a change in topic makes a difference in the quality of student response, Brossett and Hoetker chose extremes of topic and student population. The population consisted of remedial students and honors students writing in response to a regular course assignment. The year-long study (May 1987-April 1988) was based on 557 essays collected from four Florida sites: the University of Florida, Miami-Dade Community College, Valencia Community College, and Tallahassee Community College.

The general essay topic for this project, "The most harmful educational experience," was written according to procedures developed by Brossett and Hoetker in their previous research on content-fair essay examination topics for large scale writing assessments (CCC, October 1986). Brossett and Hoetker then varied this topic in two ways: (1) they controlled the degree of rhetorical specification and (2) they changed the wording to invite subjective and objective responses. These variations yielded four versions of the topic:

- Minimal rhetorical specification requesting an impersonal discussion
- Minimal rhetorical specification requesting a report of personal experience
- Full rhetorical specification requesting an impersonal account
- Full rhetorical specification requesting a report of personal experience

The essays written in response to these topic variations were scored holistically on a 7-point scale by experienced graders; the scale included operational descriptions for four levels of quality (1,3,5,7) and left the other three variables
Although the original plan had been to gather samples from extreme student populations (high- and low-ability), differences between institutions in the average quality of student writing were noticeable: many “low-ability” students wrote as well as or better than students ranked as “high-ability.” As a result, the sample fell into a bell-curve distribution. The research concluded that there is no evidence from either the holistic-scale scores or the analytic-scale scores that even gross variations in phrasing affect either the quality of student responses or the nature of student-topic interaction. Other conclusions: the appearance of first-person voice is significantly higher in essays written in response to topics calling for accounts of personal experience, but it is unaffected by the degree of rhetorical specification.

In a discussion following the presentation of the research, Brosset and Hoekstra mentioned plans for future work that include a study to evaluate the effect of content variation in essay topics when wording and rhetorical specification are held constant. They also plan to develop their analytic score further, based on additional essays written at greater leisure and revised, and representing average and high-ability students as well as low-ability students. With revision and development to make the scale reliable and “transportable,” the analytic scale might, according to Brosset and Hoekstra, have the potential to become an alternative to the single-digit holistic score.

WHAT SHOULD BE A TOPIC?

Speakers: Sandra Murphy, San Francisco State University, Leo Ruth, University of California, Berkeley

Introducer/Recorder: Robert L. Brown, Jr., University of Minnesota

Taking a cue from the Bay Area Writing Project’s collective spirit, Sandra Murphy and Leo Ruth rejected the usual panel format by opening the session to audience discussion of issues influencing subject-selection for holistic scoring. They directed the session with six questions (treated at greater length in their recent ABLEX book Designing Writing Tasks for the Assessment of Writing). Their questions examined the dual problem facing assessment designers: naming a subject and providing the writers with instructions about what to do with it. In part, the session provided a forum for a critique of both the entire agenda of holistic scoring and of the specifics of assessment design. But it also allowed Murphy and Ruth format in which to report some of the findings from their work.

The six questions treat variously the syntactic-semantic structure of the items, the discourse structures suggested, the power relationships established between test(er) and writer, and the cultural knowledge presupposed. The six questions and comments from the presenters and audience are as follows:

1. How much information should be provided about the subject?
Murphy and Ruth’s findings suggest that a simple referring phrase (NP) elicited less rich responses than a full proposition. When a predicate was provided, writer responses were more “reasonable and responsible.”

2. How does specification of a subject constrain response?
Discussion demonstrated the range of possible constraints: discourse type, qualification, quantification, text structure, style, and--always--ideology, explicit and implied.

3. How does knowledge of the subject affect performance?
The session members soon raised the meta-question of whether any topic could not require “specialized knowledge,” and therefore whether holistic essay testing could be free from political bias. Generally, Murphy and Ruth and the session members agreed that knowing a lot about the topic was a great advantage, and the “knowledge” extended well beyond simple propositional knowledge to familiarity with cultural discourses.

4. Should students be given options in selecting topics?
Generally, options invite confusion. Items may not be equally difficult. Students may not be wise in selecting, picking complex topics and writing complex, bad essays. Confusion over the selection process may penalize.

5. How do rhetorical specifications affect performance?
Students did not seem to be helped by suggestions of rhetorical type. Typically, they ignored them or found that the problem of executing the rhetorical command interfered with their writing in general.