

Tipping the Scales: Practice and Research in Assessing L2 Writing

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Abstract

This paper reviews the scoring of performance in tests of L2 writing. It describes the testing techniques that emerged during the twentieth century as a response to a persistent problem for those seeking to measure writing ability: the failure of teachers to judge writing consistently. It will consider the social factors that contributed to the rise of the rating scale as the preferred solution to this problem as well as to emergent threats to their position of dominance.

Rating scale or scoring rubric development projects have long been a mainstay of the L2 research literature, and they are well-established as practical tools in major testing programmes globally. This dominance seems unlikely to continue. Automated scoring systems, which offer test developers some obvious advantages over human raters, have already replaced them in some large-scale language testing programmes. At the same time, socially oriented views of writing that have gained influence in composition and applied linguistics raise questions about how rating scales frame the ability to write and whether they should continue to be used on writing programmes.

The paper will describe and evaluate alternatives to rating scales and suggest some new avenues for research and practice in L2 writing assessment.

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