



Writing assessment literacy: Surveying second language teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices



Deborah Crusan^{a,*}, Lia Plakans^b, Atta Gebril^c

^a Wright State University, 3640 Colonel Glenn Highway, Dayton, OH, 45435 United States

^b The University of Iowa, N274 Lindquist Center, Teaching and Learning, Iowa City, IA 52242 United States

^c The American University in Cairo, Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Alsaud Hall, Room 2046, Cairo, Egypt

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 January 2014

Received in revised form 17 March 2016

Accepted 19 March 2016

Available online 9 April 2016

Keywords:

Writing assessment

Assessment literacy

Teacher knowledge

Teacher beliefs

ABSTRACT

Assessing student writing constitutes the major portion of second language writing teachers' workloads; however, studies assessing and quantifying teachers' writing assessment literacy (knowledge, beliefs, practices) are comparatively rare. In the present study, *second language writing instructors* from tertiary institutions (N = 702) were surveyed. Data were collected with a 54-item survey instrument administered through SurveyMonkey®. Items were formulated to ascertain writing teachers' backgrounds and perspectives on assessment using multiple choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended response items. Analysis focuses on four research questions: (1) How have second language writing teachers obtained assessment knowledge? (2) What do second language writing teachers believe about writing assessment? (3) What are the assessment practices of second language writing teachers? (4) What is the impact of linguistic background and teaching experience on writing assessment knowledge, beliefs, and practices? Teachers reported training in writing assessment through graduate courses, workshops, conference presentations; however, nearly 26% of teachers in this survey had little or no training. The results also showed relative effects of linguistic background and teaching experience on teachers' writing assessment knowledge, beliefs, and practices.

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Assessment remains a ubiquitous element of any writing classroom and is vitally important to the academic growth of students (White, 2009). An understanding of good assessment practices – often referred to as assessment literacy – is critical for teachers. Assessment literacy has been defined as an understanding of the principles of sound assessment (Popham, 2004; Stiggins, 2002), which is central to achieving and maintaining the overall quality of teaching and learning. In fact, Popham (2009) claimed that a lack of assessment knowledge can “cripple the quality of education” (p. 4). For second language writing teachers to become assessment literate, they need guidance in those aspects of assessment involving scoring, grading, and making judgments about students (Popham, 2004; Taylor, 2010; Volante & Fazio, 2007; Weigle, 2007; White, 2009). Teachers need to know how to create fair assessments that provide information about their students' writing ability. They need to know how to develop scoring rubrics and assessment criteria. Bad assessment practices can have a potent effect on students. The consequences of uninformed assessment can be losses for students in time, money, motivation, and confidence.

Despite the importance of ensuring that teachers are assessment literate, scholars point to a dearth of teachers who possess adequate knowledge about assessment (Brown & Bailey, 2008; Malone, 2013; Popham, 2009; Scarino, 2013; Stiggins, 1999, 2002; Taylor, 2013; Weigle, 2007; White, 2009). Others assert that many teachers do not feel adequately prepared

* Corresponding author at: 479 Millett Hall, 3640 Colonel Glenn Highway, Wright State University, Dayton, OH 45435, United States.
E-mail addresses: deborah.crusan@wright.edu (D. Crusan), lia-plakans@uiowa.edu (L. Plakans), agebril@aucegypt.edu (A. Gebril).

to assess their students' performance (Mertler, 2009; Stiggins, 1999). Mertler (2009) surveyed and interviewed teachers, asking them if they felt amply trained in assessment—teachers confessed to feeling ill-equipped to assess their students' work. Other work (Zhu, 2004) has also shown that teachers' limited assessment literacy causes them to feel uncomfortable and unprepared.

Scholars and researchers have consistently argued for the inclusion of assessment in teacher training (Crusan, 2010; Malone, 2013; Weigle, 2007); however, it is not clear to what extent, if any, this suggestion has been implemented. Lee (2010) made the case for teacher training and its benefits. She interviewed four second language writing teachers who described a course in their MA studies that focused on the teaching of writing; they credited the course with helping them reflect on their practices and recognized the value of some process-oriented practices such as peer review, genre analysis, and conferencing. Prior to the class, they had equated the teaching of writing with grammar and vocabulary. Once they had completed the course, however, the teachers believed that their identities had changed; for the first time, they felt empowered to refer to themselves as writing teachers. As a result of the course, Lee (2010) claimed, “. . . the teachers became intrigued about the ineffectiveness of traditional practices, questioned the status quo, and attempted alternative approaches to writing instruction and assessment” (p. 153). Clearly, strong professional development can lead to teachers seeing themselves as writing teachers and as assessors of writing.

Dempsey, PytlikZillig, and Bruning (2009) contend that language teachers often neglect the teaching of writing in their classrooms as a result of inadequate training in the teaching and assessment of writing. In a mixed-methods study, they examined Internet-based assessment activities and their effect on teachers' writing assessment knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Teachers interacted with students online, reading and analytically assessing their writing. Results of the study indicate that practice and expert feedback served to improve teachers' knowledge about writing assessment as well as their assessment practices and their confidence in their ability to assess student writing.

In this paper, we refer to a specialized area of assessment literacy—that of writing assessment literacy, and if we push further, we focus specifically on *second language writing assessment literacy*. To explore this topic, we first review current thinking and recent research on the topic of second language assessment literacy in general, then with attention to issues of context, experience, and linguistic background. Based on this overview, we followed related work using large scale survey data collection to design and disseminate an exploratory survey to gain a general sense of second language writing teachers' self-reported assessment literacy. We review the results of the survey with implications and direction for future research on this nascent issue.

1. The assessment literate teacher

In 2007, Hirvela and Belcher declared that the field of second language writing has overlooked the preparation of second language writing teachers, focusing instead on students learning to write. In light of this evidence, it would not be presumptuous to assume that there has been even less teacher preparation in writing assessment. Weigle (2007) made that very point; she acknowledged a lack of training in writing assessment, pointing to the importance of teacher training in writing assessment while lamenting that many graduate TESOL programs do not require an assessment course where this topic could be given attention. However, evidence suggests that assessment courses may not remedy this oversight for writing. In a 2008 follow-up to their 1996 survey of language testing instructors regarding the courses they teach, Brown and Bailey reported that while teaching of the *separate skills* is relatively common, the teaching of *writing assessment* in language testing courses is much less widespread.

1.1. What should second language teachers know about assessment?

In an effort to call attention to the components that make up assessment literacy, scholars (Brown & Bailey, 2008; Malone, 2011; Popham, 2009; Stiggins, 1999; Weigle, 2007; White, 2009) have attempted to elucidate what teachers need to understand about assessment in general and writing assessment in particular.

Regarding what teachers need to know about assessment, Brown and Bailey (2008) summarize seven standards for teacher development in assessment. These standards, developed by the American Federation of Teachers, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and the National Education Association (1990) include skills in

- choosing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions;
- developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions;
- administering, scoring, and interpreting the results of both externally produced and teacher produced assessment methods;
- using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and improving schools;
- developing valid pupil grading procedures which use pupil assessment;
- communicating assessment results to students, parents, other lay audiences, and other educators; and
- recognizing unethical, illegal, and otherwise inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information (p. 350).

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