



# Teacher assessment of grammatical ability in second language academic writing: A case study

Heike Neumann\*

Faculty of Education, McGill University, 3700 McTavish Street, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

## Abstract

In the language assessment literature, grammatical ability is widely accepted as a key component of second language (L2) ability in general and L2 writing ability in particular. Indicators of grammatical ability have been investigated in L2 writing research, but the indicators L2 writing teachers attend to when determining grammatical ability levels of their students have not been studied. Furthermore, there is no research on what students know about their teachers' assessment criteria and how that knowledge might affect their writing and learning process. This mixed methods triangulation study examines these questions in university L2 academic writing classes through a quantitative text-based analysis of academic essay exams, student questionnaires, and teacher and student interviews. The combined results of all data sources indicate that the teachers in this study focus primarily on accuracy when assessing grammatical ability. This leads to risk avoidance behaviour by students and may have a negative impact on their learning as students adapt their writing to meet above all their teachers' expectations for grammatical accuracy.

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## Introduction

Cumming (2004) has called for a “broadening” of the investigative scope of writing assessment because “we need to know more about the practices and principles of assessment in *ordinary contexts of teaching and learning* [italics added]” (p. 6), a call supported by McNamara (2001) and Rea-Dickins (2009), yet we still know very little about the classroom assessment of grammar in academic second language (L2) writing classrooms. This is despite the fact that grammatical knowledge is indispensable in accomplishing a task in an L2 (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Weigle, 2002) and an essential component of writing ability models (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hayes, 1996; Hayes & Flower, 1980; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987; Weigle, 2002). Much of the L2 writing assessment research is focused on high-stakes testing situations because of the tests' consequences for test takers and the tests' importance for all stakeholders involved. On the other hand, classroom L2 writing research that is related to grammar often centres on pedagogical rather than assessment questions, such as how L2 writing teachers can provide effective feedback so that learning can take place (see Ferris, 2002, 2003, 2007 for an excellent overview of this line of research) or how

\* Current address: Department of Education, Concordia University, 1455 De Maisonneuve Boulevard West, LB 579, Montreal, Quebec H3G 1M8, Canada. Tel.: +1 514 848 2424x2443; fax: +1 514 848 4520.

E-mail addresses: [hneumann@education.concordia.ca](mailto:hneumann@education.concordia.ca), [heike.neumann@concordia.ca](mailto:heike.neumann@concordia.ca).

collaborative writing contributes to language and writing development (e.g., Storch, 2002, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009, 2012). Little research, however, has been conducted on how L2 writing teachers assess grammar in writing classrooms. The current study examines this issue in the context of university L2 academic writing classes.

### *Assessing grammar in L2 academic writing*

Students' writing ability is usually assessed by means of a performance test. Although portfolio assessment has seen a surge in popularity since the 1990s as an alternative to impromptu essay exams and Byrnes and her colleagues have expanded the definition of what writing assessment tasks might look like (Byrnes, 2002; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010), a timed essay written in class, where students are presented with a topic and have a limited time frame to write their texts, is still the most commonly used assessment tool (Barkaoui, 2010a; Crusan, 2010; Cumming, 2013; Hamp-Lyons, 2011; He & Shi, 2012; Weigle, 2002). Even writing assessment portfolios usually include at least one piece of timed writing (Crusan, 2010; White, 1984). The continued use of the essay exam is due at least in part to two advantages of the timed essay: (a) One knows for certain who the writer is and that students submit their own writing (Weigle, 2012; White, 1995), and (b) one obtains more accurate information about students' language ability (Weigle, 2012).

Student performance on an essay task has to be evaluated by qualified judges or teachers themselves (Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998), usually through the use of some kind of rating scale (Crusan, 2010; Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Turner & Upshur, 2002; Weigle, 2002, 2012). While it may be true that rating scales or rubrics are not used in all contexts, it is also certain that they *should* always be used to ensure good writing assessment. Rating scales appropriate for the assessment task improve reliability through clear articulation of assessment criteria for the benefit of both teachers and students (Crusan, 2010; Weigle, 2002, 2012; White, 1984).

Rating scales generally belong to one of two categories: holistic scales, where one overall score is assigned for a piece of writing, or analytic scales, where subscores on different criteria make up the overall score. When L1 or L2 writing is rated by means of a holistic rating scale, grammatical accuracy is often correlated to the overall performance assessment (Barkaoui, 2010b; Huang & Foote, 2010; Sweedler-Brown, 1993). When an analytical rating scale is used, grammar is often a separate criterion, but there is little research on what construct teachers base their assessment of grammar for classroom L2 writing assessments. In order to examine the teachers' construct, it is necessary to look to the testing literature for construct definitions as a point of reference.

Attempts to define this construct in the assessment literature within the context of L2 writing assessment emerge from models of writing ability based on cognitive science research for L1 writing (Hayes, 1996; Hayes & Flower, 1980; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987) or the writing and testing literature for L2 writing (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Weigle, 2002). In both L1 and L2 writing models, knowledge pertaining to content, form, and process as well as theoretical language knowledge are essential to produce texts. An important component of this language knowledge, in particular in the language testing literature, is grammatical knowledge because it is seen as indispensable in accomplishing a task in a L2 (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Weigle, 2002).

There are various models of grammatical or language ability (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980; Purpura, 2004; Weigle, 2002), and while the format of these models differs, grammatical ability in all these models comprises the learner's ability to use and apply theoretical grammatical knowledge accurately and meaningfully in language use situations.<sup>1</sup> The grammar knowledge to be applied relates to graphology, lexicon, and a range of morphosyntactic forms and structures. The question is, however, whether teachers' construct of grammatical ability resembles the theoretical construct definitions such models put forward.

### *Indicators of grammatical ability in L2 writing research*

The goal of the current study is to examine the construct of grammatical ability that is assessed in L2 academic writing courses. In order to examine this construct, an analysis of L2 texts is crucial because the texts, along with the rater who assigns the grade and the rating scale used by the rater, influence the score or grade for this performance (McNamara, 1996; Upshur & Turner, 1999).

<sup>1</sup> Although there are alternative ways of defining and analyzing grammar, such as the systemic-functional linguistic framework (Halliday, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), I draw here specifically on definitions of grammar in the language assessment literature, within which the current study is situated.

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