

Suggestions for Evaluating ESL Writing Holistically

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Introduction

Assessing second language writing can be a daunting task for ESL teachers. However, by becoming familiar with some common writing assessment techniques, ESL teachers can be better positioned to manage and evaluate their student's progress. Although several forms of writing assessment are readily available, many teachers choose holistic evaluation because of its effectiveness in establishing overall writing ability. *Holistic evaluation* involves reading a paper quickly in order to gain a broad impression of a writer's skill. In contrast, *analytic scoring* involves an itemized analysis and is commonly used to identify weaknesses in a student's writing. Holistic evaluation is often used for informing placement decisions and measuring student achievement. What follows are some basic suggestions for ESL professionals when assessing writing holistically.

Familiarize Yourself with a Holistic Scoring Rubric

A holistic scoring rubric guides teachers by explaining what features to scrutinize as they read. These descriptions are useful because they give evaluators a sense of what aspects of a student's writing should be critiqued. For example, a rubric may suggest evaluating a text according to the extent to which it develops a main idea, supports that idea, uses appropriate vocabulary and punctuation, and makes clear transitions.

Rubrics can be found over the internet, and sometimes in the teacher's edition of a composition textbook. Rubrics define the qualities of texts at each point of a scoring range. Scores are often assigned on the basis of four, six, or ten point systems. Many rubrics also differ in what features of the writing they emphasize, and are sometimes designed with a specific prompt in mind. However, generic rubrics are often a good place for the ESL teacher to start because they can be applied to a variety of different writers and tasks.

Read for an Overall Impression

A common misbehavior of novice evaluators is to unnecessarily edit student writing as they evaluate (Cumming, 1990). This slows down the reading process. Holistic evaluation is concerned with viewing the paper in its entirety rather than its individual parts; evaluators use their time most effectively by reading in a continuous, smooth fashion.

Keep the Writing Prompt in Mind as You Read

The nature of the task will dictate the style of discourse. If, for example, the task requires students to argue a position, such as whether mass transportation is beneficial to society, you would expect an essay to contain several main points with details and examples supporting those points. If, on the other hand, the task requires students to explain a moment that changed their life, you might expect less academic essay structures. Be aware that a descriptive task, such as a student describing his or her country, may elicit a different performance than a student explaining the role of pets in America, which is more an expository writing task (e.g., Way, Joiner, & Seaman).

Know Your Students' Backgrounds

Writing clearly and adeptly is a learned skill that can be challenging for both native and nonnative English speakers. ESL educators are aware that their students often have only vaguely developed language skills and sometimes little or no writing

skills. When teachers read student texts, they should be aware that students may be transferring rhetorical patterns from their first language to English. Such structures may be puzzling to the teacher accustomed to Western rhetorical patterns but familiar to the ESL student, who may be writing with previous notions of evaluative criteria in mind. This might be the case with a student from Japan where teachers have been shown to value content, word choice, and grammar rather than cohesion and coherence, which have been shown to be values of American teachers (Connor-Linton, 1995). A general understanding of these differences allows ESL educators to better understand their students.

Conclusion

By being aware of the aforementioned issues, ESL teachers can more effectively assess their students' writing. Holistic evaluation is a useful tool that informs teachers and allows them to more capably meet their students' needs. This enhances the educational process and leads to both knowledgeable teachers and ESL writers.

References

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