



# Preservice Teachers' Performance of Writing Assessment: A Theoretical Pilot Study

Hyeyoun Kim<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Writing assessment has been regarded as one of the most important tasks that writing teachers should implement. However, many teachers reported that they were not adequately trained on scoring students' compositions or giving feedback to them during their teacher training courses. Considering that writing assessment requires much time, effort, and professional training, preservice teachers need to prepare relevant writing assessment literacy. Nevertheless, there is not sufficient concern for investigating preservice teachers' actual performance of writing assessment except for a few studies. As part of the research project to investigate and improve preservice teachers' writing assessment literacy, the current paper addresses the relevant theoretical backgrounds and attempts to design a series of studies to confirm the status of preservice teachers' writing assessment skills. The current pilot study thus suggests some principles to design research on preservice teachers' actual performance of scoring students' written texts and their awareness on conducting the assessment. These interim findings will act as a basis for the larger research project which aims to develop a preservice teacher training program.*

**Keywords:** *Writing assessment, Teacher education, Preservice teachers, Scoring;*

## 1. Introduction

Writing assessment has been one of the most important and difficult jobs that school teachers should implement (White, 1994). However, many in-service teachers reported that they have been dispatched to the school without experiencing adequate training courses on writing and writing assessment (Mertler, 2004; Popham, 2009). Thus, we can attribute why writing assessment in the school education field has been inactive and ineffective not only to the fundamental difficulties in assessing writing but also to lack of pertinent and professional training. Some research studies have introduced the concept of *teacher assessment literacy* to solve this practical issue by emphasizing the necessity of additional training courses for pre- and/or in-service teachers (Mertler, 2004; Volante & Fazio, 2007; Wang, Wang, & Huang, 2008). Thus, the current paper, as a theoretical pilot study for an empirical research project, focuses on examining the theoretical grounds and the rationales to develop some telling and necessary research designs that will act as a basis for fostering preservice teachers' writing assessment literacy.

## 2. Preservice teachers' assessment literacy

Teacher assessment literacy refers to basic understanding on educational evaluation and skills to apply those knowledges on various measurement of students' performance (Stiggins, 1991). Stiggins (1995) also suggested some criteria for proper teacher assessment literacy: good teachers should start from the obvious purpose, focus on targets, and judge whether they examine students' achievement without prejudice and distortion by choosing appropriate methods. Recently, Xu and Brown (2016) analysed pertinent research trends to make a comprehensive survey of teacher assessment literacy and to establish its new framework. According to them, teacher assessment literacy is meaningful because it acts as a bridge between educational evaluation and teacher education, two representative main areas of educational research. To establish a new framework for teacher assessment literacy, we need to explore teachers' perspectives on evaluation and various contexts in which they evaluate students, and to consider evaluators' identity and how they compromise between various demands (Xu & Brown, 2016).

However, as Volante and Fazio (2007) pointed out, fostering teacher assessment literacy should begin from developing the curriculum for preservice teachers because it cannot be achieved in a short time and it sometimes requires to be managed by combining various sub-courses, such as writing education and educational evaluation. Some researchers have investigated assessment literacy for preservice teachers. Mertler (2004) used the classroom assessment literacy inventory to compare pre- and in-service teachers and revealed that they were differentiated in the selection of appropriate tools,

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<sup>1</sup> Dongguk University-Seoul, South Korea



scoring/interpretation of the results, and judgement and awareness on unethical and irrational writing. Volante and Fazio (2007) reported the survey result that preservice teachers tended to assess based mostly on students' output and did not adequately consider the purpose of formative assessment. Wang et al. (2008) attempted more concrete research to develop a program for improvement of preservice teachers' assessment literacy. They asserted the importance of pedagogical content knowledge to emphasize the necessity of domain-specific instructional skills. From their perspective, therefore, teacher assessment literacy in general would be probably too abstract or ineffective rather than domain-specific assessment literacy, e.g. writing assessment literacy. To discuss and prepare practical and viable strategies to enhance preservice teachers' skills of assessment, domain-specific research studies that are based on the empirical grounds and include concrete conditions should be more conducted.

### 3. Scoring of students' written texts

To produce more informative results from a single research project, it requires to focus on a specific issue among writing assessment. In this respect, we can discuss how to score students' essays since it is one of the main issues in the domain of writing assessment research. However, many researchers have disagreed with each other on the effectiveness of two representative ways of scoring: *holistic* and *analytic scoring*. The paradigm of holistic scoring was initially insisted by some writing researchers such as Myers (1980) and White (1984). According to White (1984), holistic scoring means that teachers give marks on the whole text as a unit without dividing sub-elements or separable factors. He also suggested that holistic scoring needs to be more investigated because most of in-service teachers have chosen it as a main assessment tool. Huot (1990) emphasized the importance of holistic scoring in that it is an economic, flexible, and highly applicable way among direct assessment of writing. However, other researchers criticized that holistic scoring can be problematic due to its lack of reliability (Charney, 1984; Hayes, Hatch, & Silk, 2000). To be specific, Charney (1984) demonstrated that holistic scores were easily influenced by superficial features such as handwriting, length of texts, selection of words, and spelling errors. Hayes et al. (2000) reported that holistic scoring showed much lower consistency than analytic scoring. Researchers who advocated analytic scoring have recently tended to more emphasize the need for analytic scoring not just because holistic scoring have some weaknesses but also because analytic scoring is more appropriate to the fundamental purpose of direct assessment (Bacha, 2001; Hamp-Lyons, 1991). Analytic scoring means that teachers give marks in terms of sub-categories regarding writing quality (Weigle, 2002). According to Hamp-Lyons (1991), analytic scoring may be more pragmatic because the criteria of judging a good essay can differ in terms of the rhetorical contexts and the analytic rubric enables teachers to give more detailed feedback according to its sub-categories. Under this controversial circumstance, some researchers argued to use both scoring systems altogether or choose one of them according to the purpose or genre (White, 1994). However, other researchers insisted that we need to prepare appropriate rationales to choose because there are some situations in which we should select one of them considering evaluative aims and practical conditions.

As mentioned above, the issues between holistic and analytic scoring have been intensively addressed by writing researchers. However, there has been seldom researcher who investigated how much pre- and/or in-service teachers have difficulties in scoring students' writing. Particularly, there is lack of understanding on what preservice teachers need to develop and feel about the processes comparing to in-service teachers. Moreover, it is not easy to address scoring in general because teachers may experience very different circumstances and procedures when they give holistic and analytic scores. Therefore, it is needed to compare preservice teachers' actual performance of holistic and analytic scoring to understand the status and necessity of preservice teachers' training on writing assessment.

### 4. Preliminary conclusion

The current paper is a preliminary study to set up an empirical research project. Thus, to finish here, I propose some principles for the research design as follows. First, we need some empirical research results on the present status of preservice teachers' performance and their awareness of scoring activities. It will become a basis for preparing domain-specific teacher training courses. To this end, some in-service teachers' data also need to be collected as comparative criteria for judging preservice teachers' performance. Second, participants self-report or interviews need to be collected along with the performance data. Materials on how they feel about the experiences of scoring as well as the performance output of scoring will form a multidimensional basis for finding a better strategy to enhance preservice teachers' writing assessment literacy. Mixed-methods research designs can be



proposed to deal with these data and research purposes. Third, comparison between holistic and analytic scoring might be another interesting point for understanding preservice teachers' difficulties in learning how to score students' essays. Last but not least, a series of follow-up research designs can be made to develop a preservice teacher training program for writing assessment. Understanding the status of preservice teachers will just act as a starting point for finding a solution. Furthermore, holistic vs. analytic scoring is just a part of issues in writing assessment; writing assessment encompasses much larger issues including validity and reliability, writing feedback, emotional problems, and so on. Therefore, multistage research designs will be needed to ultimately provide any solution for preparing preservice teachers' writing assessment literacy at an adequate level.

As Weigle (2002) mentioned, teachers should not forget the fundamental reasons and purposes of writing assessment apart from judging students' output in an objective and reasonable way. Thus, these attempts to improve preservice teachers' skills of scoring students' essays should relate to the bigger picture of writing assessment.

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