



Methods of Scoring Writing Tests

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There are basically two ways for scoring tests, one is called impressionistic or holistic scoring and the other is called analytic scoring.

Impressionistic or holistic scoring

The notion of impressionistic marking does not allow isolating the discrete features of the components of test items in order to assess the quality of a candidate's performance. It is based on giving a single score based on the markers overall impression of the test as a whole (Weigle, 2002). The marker awards a mark according to the students overall performance, without picking out any special features or using a counting system for errors. Thus this marking requires a very quick skimming of the answer rather than detailed reading to give a chance to two or more markers to assess it. Impressionistic scoring is appropriate for language skills that are very hard to define such as testing writing and speaking.

The positive features of holistic scoring

White (1984) states that this method of scoring has high validity as it concentrates on communication while not overlooking the components of test items. Another advantage is reported by Hughes (1989) which indicates that holistic scoring is very practical as TOEFL examiners are given only one and a half minutes to assess each TOEFL composition. This kind of marking is suitable for quick placement tests where there is little time for complicated marking systems.

The limitations of holistic scoring

This type of scoring comes under criticism for a number of reasons; Chetaravelu, Sithamparam and Choon (1995) state that many

Credit Score



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In this Issue

Title	Page
A slant of stream of consciousness: A Journey by Brain	3
Re-appropriating Magical Realism in Arabic Narratives	4
KKU: Empowering Women	5
Poetry and Cash	6
Objectives of Learning English in Saudi Arabia	7
Alligator: An LEP Word-List Item Examined	8
 Poetry Corner	10
 SEMANTIC MICROSCOPE	14
 VARIA TRANSLATION	15



"It is possible to use one method as a check on the other and the other for confirmation, first by assigning candidates to a level holistically and then rating them in an analytic way."

teachers find this kind of marking confusing in evaluating many things simultaneously. Besides, marking accurate holistic-based assessments requires a lot of experience. Therefore, less experienced markers would not be expected to make assessment based on impression alone and they should

be trained by using previous years' scripts. Weigle (2002) draws attention to other drawbacks to holistic scoring as he notes that its reliability is low because of inter-rater variability. The same examiner may rate the same test differently at different times. This is often caused by many factors such as fatigue, the mood of the examiner at different periods during marking, and the examiner's experience in teaching. Besides, a number of examiners in holistic marking are consistently biased in terms of either leniency or severity in their marking. Therefore, to achieve a high score reliability, it is suggested that each student's work should be scored by different trained scorers. Another limitation is the difficulty in using holistic marking to provide useful diagnostic information; the students will not get any feedback to improve their performance or check their progress for specific weakness or problems.

Analytic scoring

This kind of marking attempts to evaluate separately the various components of the test items, and the total score is arrived at by adding the individual estimates (Chetravelu et al., 1995). In other words, the marker prepares a list of features such as content, organization, cohesion, vocabulary, grammar or mechanics to assess the test and then allots a specific

number of points to each of these areas in which the learner performs correctly.

The positive features of analytic scoring

Madsen (1983) notes that analytic marking is highly objective and highly reliable as it yields similar results when applied again; at the same time it reduces inter-rater variability effectively, and it facilitates agreement among examiners, as there are clear criteria for all markers for grading. Weigle (2002) adds that analytic scoring can be used to perform a diagnostic role to show students strengths and weaknesses as it evaluates particular aspects of language separately.

The limitations of analytic scoring

Hughes (2003) presents a number of disadvantages of analytic scoring. He states that this type does not evaluate the ability to communicate in the target language as it concentrates on the components that divert the examiner's attention from looking at the whole. Another disadvantage of analytic scoring is that it has low validity as sometimes areas are tested because they are testable and not for their importance. Finally, it is difficult to know how to weight each error or even each area being analyzed.

In general, there is no overall advantage of one approach over the other as both have their strengths and weaknesses. The choice is not clear-cut. It depends on the circumstances of scoring. It is possible to use one method as a check on the other and the other for confirmation, first by assigning candidates to a level holistically and then rating them in an analytic way. Thus by utilizing analytic marking procedures to confirm holistic grading is fair. Combining these two methods of marking seems more acceptable as it can produce a somewhat more valid, reliable and practical test.

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