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BOOK REVIEW



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Assessing Change in English Second Language Writing Performance, Khaled Barkaoui and Ali Hadidi, Routledge (2021), 218 pages, ISBN 978-0-367-55190-2.

Neomy Storch ^a, Seyed Yasin Yazdi-Amirkhiz ^{b, *}

^a *The University of Melbourne, Australia*

^b *Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Iran*


Interfacing the domains of second language (L2) writing and assessment, *Assessing Change in English Second Language Writing Performance* authored by Khaled Barkaoui and Ali Hadidi purports to advance our understanding of the nature and outcome of instruction on L2 learners' writing development over an extended period of time. In this succinct volume, the authors present a writing assessment model and then describe a study that set out to validate the proposed model. As L2 writing teachers and researchers, we are constantly faced with the choice of how best to assess learners' writing development. As such we were keen to review a book which provides a model that identifies and evaluates a number of different measures of writing dimensions.

The book contains nine chapters, grouped according to the typical structure of a thesis: introduction, literature review, method, results, discussion and implications. Chapter 1 (*Introduction*) presents the rationale for the book by highlighting the overall inadequacy of research concerning the effects of L2 instruction on L2 writing development and argues cogently for a broader framework that could more accurately capture all aspects of writing performance. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a review of the relevant literature. Chapter 2 (*A framework for analyzing L2 learners' texts*) provides a comprehensive and critical review of frameworks and measures that have been used in research to date to assess L2 written texts. The authors then present a theory-informed (based on a communicative competence model) and empirically grounded assessment framework. The framework extends on the work by Connor-Mbaye (2002) such that it includes not only the four key competences associated with communicative competence (grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic) but also content and source use. The framework is very detailed, outlining constructs associated with these competences, measures that can be used to provide a concrete representation of the identified constructs, and indices that can be used to assess the measures. For example, grammatical competence includes the well-known constructs of fluency, linguistic accuracy, lexical and syntactic complexity. These constructs can be defined

* Corresponding author: Department of Foreign Languages, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Iran

Email address: syyazdia@sina.tums.ac.ir

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by a range of measures (e.g., text length, error incidence, lexical variation, structural variety) and assessed using one or more specific indices (e.g., number of words, error severity, type-token ratios, syntactic similarity). Discourse competence is another construct dealt with in the book. It includes cohesion and coherence, discourse organization as well as argument quality, the latter being perhaps not widely used in research on L2 writing assessment. Measures associated with this construct are both local and global and are assessed via a count of certain features (e.g., connectives) or via the use of a rating scale (e.g., text organization). Another distinguishing feature of this chapter is that it contains an evaluation of these measures and indices, noting not only which measures are contentious but also which indices have been shown to be empirically strong predictors of L2 writing test scores. The authors also provide a useful discussion of the strengths and drawbacks of some of the computer programs that can be used to analyze written texts and suggest that computer analysis be combined with human rating and human coding.

Chapter 3 (*Research on L2 writing development*) reviews the extant longitudinal studies that have investigated L2 learners' writing development and the effects of instruction on this development. As the authors correctly point out, this body of research is not only relatively small but also most of the studies have tended to be cross-sectional, comparing L2 learners' essay scores and/or writing features (predominantly related to language use) at a single point in time. They also note that previous longitudinal studies have examined only the changes in test scores or the effect of instruction on L2 writing test scores. The authors thus call for longitudinal studies which could shed light on the nature, process, and duration of key aspects of L2 writing development over time.

The next four chapters (Chapters 4 – 8) focus on the validation of the proposed framework. Chapter 4 (*Method*) describes the data set used in this study and explains in detail the methods and various steps and procedures adopted in the study to analyze the essays. It should be noted that the data set was not collected by the authors but comes from a longitudinal study by Ling et al., (2014), who compared English language learners writing before and after a nine-month period of language instruction. The fairly large data set comprised texts written by 85 Chinese EFL learners at different levels of English proficiency who completed two writing tasks: a TOEFL-iBT independent essay and an integrated essay (however, not all the students completed both tasks). The essays were analyzed using a combination of computer analysis (e.g., Syntactic Complexity Analyzer, Criterion), manual coding (e.g., for text organization), and human rating (e.g., examining source use in the integrated essays). Some features of the essays were analyzed by only using computer programs such as *L2 Syntactic Complexity Analyser* (e.g., syntactic complexity), *Cob-Matrix* (e.g., syntactic complexity, cohesion and coherence) or *Criterion* (e.g., linguistics accuracy, text organization). Other features were analyzed by using both computer analysis and human rating (e.g., linguistic accuracy, text organization) or by a combination of computer analysis, manual coding, and human rating (e.g., examining source use for the integrated essays). What stands out in this chapter is not only the rich array of indices and tools used to analyze the essays but also the rigorous approach taken to ensure the reliability of the analysis.

Chapters 5 to 8 provide a very detailed account of the study's findings. They report on the changes that were found in the linguistic and discourse features of the learners' writing on the exact same writing tasks (i.e., TOEFL-iBT independent and integrated writing tasks) after a nine-month period of English language instruction. Each chapter reports on specific changes as indicated in the chapter titles: Chapter 5 (*Changes in grammatical aspects*), Chapter 6 (*Changes in discourse aspects*), Chapter 7 (*Changes in sociolinguistic and strategic aspects*) and finally Chapter 8 (*Changes in content and source use*). Overall, a comparison of the scores before and after the period of instruction revealed that the learners' essays improved over time on most of these aspects of writing. Improvement was most noticeable on the independent essays than the integrated essays. Furthermore, and unlike what has generally been reported in previous studies (e.g., Knoch,

Rouhshad, & Storch, 2014), Barkaoui and Hadidi found that learners with a higher proficiency on the initial test improved the most.

Although overall the book is written in a lucid and reader-friendly language, the presentation of the findings in these four chapters is quite technical and could be overwhelming and difficult to follow for readers who are not very statistically minded. Hence, the clear summary of the main findings presented in Chapter 9 (*Discussion and implications*) is very welcome. This final chapter also discusses briefly the implications of the study's findings for writing pedagogy, assessment and research. However, as the data set came from another study, the authors were not able to provide detailed information on the nature of instruction the students experienced during the 9-month period, and this means that the findings may not be able to advance our understanding of how instruction impacts on writing development and ultimately on how we can improve L2 writing instruction.

Nonetheless, we feel that despite some of the limitations, as acknowledged by the authors themselves, (e.g., data set coming from another study, the small sample size and consequently concerns regarding the generalizability of the findings), this research-based monograph makes an important contribution to the field of L2 writing assessment. It is the first book to present a comprehensive and validated assessment framework which includes a wide range of measures and indices that can be used to gauge L2 writing development. The other important contribution is the critical evaluation it offers of the different measures and approaches that can be used to analyse writing. The authors also include useful appendices which contain examples of rating scales and instructions for rating various aspects of writing. As such the book would be useful for teachers and researchers with an interest in L2 writing assessment.

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