

The Role of Voice in High-stakes L2 Writing Assessment

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Although a construct commonly addressed in writing textbooks and a key component in various writing rubrics, voice remains a concept that is only loosely defined in the literature and mystically assessed in practice. Few attempts have been made, in the field of language assessment in general and writing assessment in particular, to formally investigate whether an authorial voice in written texts can be reliably measured and how the strength of an authorial voice may affect the assessment of the overall quality of writing. As a response, this dissertation seeks to 1) develop and validate an analytic rating scale that measures voice intensity in written discourse, and 2) formally investigate the relationship between voice and overall writing quality in the context of a high-stakes L2 writing assessment. Specifically, 200 rated L2 writing samples will be used to validate the voice scale developed on the basis of Hyland's (2008a) interactional model of voice. Another set of 200 writing samples will be used to explore the extent to which the intensity of an authorial voice is associated with the overall quality of L2 writing. The potential effect of key factors—such as L2 writer's L1 background, level of education, and time spent on learning the target language—on the realization of voice in written texts and on the relationship between voice and writing quality will be explored so that results could be more meaningfully interpreted and better inform L2 writing instruction and assessment.