



# The Assessment of L2 Written English across the MENA Region

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A Synthesis of Practice

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*Edited by*  
Lee McCallum · Christine Coombe

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*...To our parents...*

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**Test Design and Administration:  
Connections to Curriculum and Teacher  
Understandings of Assessment**



# Introduction

Lee McCallum and Christine Coombe

Research into second language writing has developed in depth and scope over the past few decades and researchers have shown a growing interest in new approaches to the teaching and assessing of writing. In the past two decades, there has been a healthy surge of research studies that have tackled issues relating to the process of L2 writing and writing assessment as well as important related elements such as the use of rubrics, written corrective feedback and rater reliability in general (e.g., Knoch, 2009a, b; Knoch, Rouhshad, & Storch, 2014; Rakedzon & Baram-Tsabari, 2017; Wang, Engelhard, Raczynski, Song, & Wolfe, 2017) and in the MENA context in particular (e.g., Aryadoust & Fox, 2016; Assalahi, 2013; Coombe, 2010; Coombe, Jendli, & Davidson, 2008; Ezza, 2017;

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Ghalib & Al-Hattami, 2015; Hamouda, 2011; Hidri, 2019; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016; Obaid, 2017; Reynolds, 2018).

At the heart of such a surge in the MENA context lies the ever-increasing need to communicate in English. The status, demand and use of English across the region have continued to grow and takes on an increasingly important role in professional contexts. In light of this increase, there has been a subsequent need to ensure that citizens in the MENA region have a recognisable and often professionally accredited level of English language proficiency. In line with this need, there has also been an increasing need for citizens to have a level of written English proficiency that allows them to communicate in writing at local, regional and international levels. This need for written proficiency in English is also being considered through a more critical lens as the ability to write well in English impacts on the academic and professional success of MENA region citizens. The assessment of written English proficiency therefore has a considerable role to play in determining current and future levels of success in education and the opportunities it brings to citizens both regionally and internationally.

The assessment of written English proficiency across the MENA region on the surface may appear homogenous as the countries that make up the region by and large share a common first language in Arabic and have historically similar backgrounds. However, there remain several nuanced differences between the countries in the region in terms of populations, wealth and resource distribution, and cultural beliefs, all of which impact the practices we see being taken in the teaching and assessing of English writing. Indeed, the primary motivation for this book was to uncover the why and how of these practices. It is our belief that this book uncovers and critiques a number of observations about how writing is currently assessed and most importantly provides a platform where the assessment of writing across the region can be established theoretically and empirically. In providing such a platform, it is hoped that the book will add weight to the understandings of writing assessment already presented in other book-length works (e.g., Ahmed & Abouabdelkader, 2018; Ahmed, Troudi, & Riley, 2020; Hidri, 2019). We also believe this contribution is a timely one given the interest in writing at the present time in the region.

Arguably, at the time of bringing this synthesis together, interest in Language Assessment Literacy (e.g., see Davidson & Coombe, 2019) and the complete assessment cycle (e.g., see Coombe, 2010) has never been greater with our synthesis also joining initiatives in assessment that characterise the region. Examples of these initiatives include teaching and testing organisations and committees (e.g., TESOL Arabia, 2020) and scholarly journals which provide a platform for the discussion of assessment throughout the MENA region (e.g., *Arab Journal of Applied Linguistics (AJAL)*, 2020) as well as collaborations with international testing committees (e.g., the hosting of the Language Testing Research Colloquium (LTRC) via the International Language Testing Association (ILTA) in Tunisia, planned for 2021).

The fifteen chapters in this volume have investigated several important issues in the assessment of second language writing skills and have discussed the implications of their findings for teaching and assessment. The studies attempt to shed light on long-held lingering questions in the field and offer suggestions for future research. Chapter authors based in seven MENA countries have situated their research on writing assessment in varied contexts while drawing on theories of language, assessment literacy and psychometrics as well as other interpretive traditions and paradigms. It is the intention of this book to highlight areas in which research into writing in a second language in MENA contexts can and does inform classroom practice. Chapter authors have focused on the complexity of the writing assessment process and the interplay between the various issues that must be addressed by teachers and students who engage in writing and writing assessment activities in second language classrooms.

Part 1, *Test Design and Administration: Connections to Curriculum and Teacher Understandings of Assessment*, brings together issues of test design and administration with a focus on how teachers understand the assessment process, and how it relates to their wider ELT curriculum and notions of writing proficiency. In Chapter 2, Rauf and McCallum look at the importance of language assessment literacy and carry out an analysis of how teacher-designed assessment tasks match the goals of the course learning outcomes in three Saudi universities. They find that teachers' task design needs to be sharpened to better meet course outcomes. In

Chapter 3, El Rahal and Dimashkie describe how they redesigned a local placement test in a UAE university and how they sought to better police their department's testing policy/procedures by creating test banks of appropriate essay prompts and improving the rubric scoring process. In the last chapter of Part I, Babaii takes a broad view of these traditional assessment issues by reminding us of the need to consider and implement an understanding of World Englishes into the assessment process. In this chapter, Babaii sets out the key considerations and challenges that those involved in writing assessment in the MENA need to be constantly aware of.

Part II, *Grading and Feedback Connections: Exploring Grading Criteria, Practices and the Provision of Feedback*, explores grading criteria, grading practices and the provision of feedback across different tasks and writing instructional techniques. In a move towards considering the construct of writing proficiency and how teachers understand and describe it, Shahmirzadi's chapter revisits the key constructs of Complexity, Accuracy and Fluency (CAF) in judging learners' writing proficiency in an Iranian university. She notes the need for this linguistic description to also take into account contextual and task factors via the use of Cognitive Diagnostic Assessment (CDA). She advocates that this combination of CAF considerations of language and the use of CDA can help us understand how learner performance is judged and acted upon. In Chapter 6, Bustamante and Yilmaz, compare and contrast the grading practices of EAP teachers in Turkey and Kurdistan. They find that writing/learning context and teacher experience have a notable influence on grading practices. In another study of grading practices, Ben Hedia looks at how Tunisian EFL instructors at a university held similar and different beliefs about grading writing that did not always match their actual evidenced grading practices. The last two chapters of Part II consider how rubrics are best designed for different assessment stakeholders. In covering rubric design, Mohammadi and Kamali's chapter reports on the issue of tailoring different scoring rubrics to different tasks. They report on the design and implementation of a rubric that assessed resume writing on a language course in Iran. Among their key findings was the need to consider making the rubric comprehensive in terms of construct coverage but also accessible to learners. Sanavi's chapter provides an

overview of the theoretical considerations of rubric types and how this theory relates to using and implementing rubrics in the MENA region.

Part III, *Teaching and Assessment Connections: Exploring Learner Performance and the Impact of Instruction*, looks at the connections made between teaching and assessment and aspects of learner performance. In her chapter, Qin explores how argumentative writing is assessed in a UAE university. Crucially, Qin's chapter describes how the learners' cultural environment and beliefs about argumentation shape their practices and concludes by noting how critical thinking can be incorporated into argumentative writing and how it may be assessed.

Rezaei and Sotoudehnama focus on learners' completion of integrated writing tasks and summarise how learners display different patterns of source use. In addition to their qualitative examination of these patterns of source use, they also note that the increased practice of referring to sources appears to have a positive relationship with writing quality grades. In her chapter, Al-Khalili makes a connection between methods of teaching writing and how writing proficiency scores increase. In a Lebanese university course, Al-Khalili carries out a mixed-methods study that looks at how using the process writing approach helps learners improve their essay writing skills. The learners themselves report how their confidence and writing skills developed through the processes taught to them. Heydari and Marefat describe the provision of feedback and the differences between computer and teacher feedback. Computer feedback is provided by Cambridge's *Write & Improve* software and is compared to teacher feedback in terms of focus and learner uptake. In the last chapter of Part III, Athimni, Yakoubi and Bouzaiene carry out a scoping review of feedback provision across the MENA region with a focus on how it relates to assessment practices and claims about writing improvement and development. Their systematic review covered 37 studies across the region with a number of research gaps and initiatives presented to guide future research.

As the final part of the book, Part IV, *Using Research Methods to Capture the Nature of Writing Proficiency and its Assessment*, looks at how different research methods can illuminate different aspects of the construct of writing proficiency. In Chapter 15, Curry and Clark use corpus linguistics methods to evaluate spelling errors as a key writing

proficiency criterion across the CEFR levels in the Cambridge Learner Corpus. In the last chapter of the book, McCallum and Rauf carry out a meta-analysis of 27 studies from Saudi universities to show how technology improves writing proficiency scores. Across the 27 studies, they detail a number of flaws in the reporting of these primary studies, suggest how intervention studies like these should be reported and conducted in the future and ultimately report that the use of technology has a large positive effect on writing proficiency scores.

Bringing these chapters together, there are a number of observations that readers may be drawn to; and which we would like to comment on. Taken together as a synthesis, this book helps highlight how the state of writing assessment is influenced by the blending of internationally recognised assessments, assessment tools and approaches to test design, feedback and grading with local adaptations and applications. Readers are encouraged to actively engage with the authentic materials provided in chapter appendices so as to appreciate how these have been influenced by established international practice and locally adapted to meet contextual needs. With this in mind, the synthesis makes a case for future research to uncover the underlying rationale for the use of such assessment materials and adaptations; and ultimately pushes the MENA assessment community to continue to explore the decision-making processes and contextual constraints that underpin much of these decisions, choices and practices.

It is also worth pointing out an interrelated observation from these practices. The chapters in the synthesis overwhelmingly follow two broad patterns. First, the majority of chapters focus explicitly on the role teachers and students have in the assessment process. That is to say, chapters shed light on how teachers assess and to a lesser extent how students approach or are expected to approach these assessments. In this manner, it is perhaps an unexpected observation that much of this focus on the practices of assessment does not make an overly explicit reference to the role of technology. In this regard, chapter contributions point to a 'back-to-basics' approach to understanding assessment, whereby focus, at least on the face of it, appears to remain on the fundamentals of the whole assessment cycle. With the exception of later chapters that do make

explicit reference to technology (e.g., Chapters 13 and 16), the contributions still point to researchers and their contexts being grounded in looking at the basics of task and test design, rubric design and uncovering grading criteria, practices and aspects of learner performance. This focus may be an unexpected one given the number of technology-informed teaching and assessment initiatives that are known to exist across the region (e.g., See Weber & Hamlaoui, 2018 for an overview).

A second related observation focuses on the research methodologies and methods used by chapter authors. This synthesis helps bring to light the continuing use of interpretivist research paradigms with many studies using qualitative research methods on small numbers of teachers and students. This again points to the local nature of their enquiry but also leads us to question why some studies did not also supplement these detailed understandings with quantitative test data and/or larger-scale empirical enquiry in their contexts. This indicates a possible area of future research for not only our chapter authors to undertake but also readers and assessment stakeholders in these contexts.

A further observation this synthesis brings to light is understanding how the construct of writing proficiency has been defined and unpacked in individual studies. A striking feature of this unpacking is that assessment seems to closely adhere to principles and beliefs that writing is assessed under a 'Standard English' model where adherence to accurate native speaker English is a theme throughout. This adherence is seen in the task analysis work of Rauf and McCallum's chapter where accuracy plays a key role in university learning outcomes, in the grading practice chapters by Bustamante and Yilmaz, and Ben Hedia, as well as in chapters that explicitly focus on spelling errors (in the work of Curry and Clark), and overall linguistic accuracy (in the work of Shahmirzadi). We believe that the clear influence of a native speaker model needs further critical discussion, not only in the institutions where these studies took place, but at a much more macro level. This discussion should take place across the region to challenge and fundamentally put forward viable alternatives and discussions to be had as Babaii's chapter here and others have recommended elsewhere (e.g., Brown, 2014; Canagarajah, 2006; Davies, 2013; McCallum, 2019).