

**Individual Paper Session 12**  
**Testing**  
**Wednesday, July 5**  
**12:15-12:45pm**

**Writing Performance Assessment: The Role of Writer's/Rater's Content  
Familiarity/Unfamiliarity**

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As an L2 writing test is primarily designed to elicit a performance of the test-taker's writing ability, the scoring criteria should clearly articulate the definitions of the construct of L2 writing ability and raters should be trained to interpret these criteria in language-related terms (Ling Tsai 2003). Otherwise, writing test scores may reflect construct-irrelevant variability. According to Kenyon (1998), judgments of the relevance of test tasks to the intended score representation should be at the heart of any writing performance assessment. Since almost all the writing instruction in our curricula is in line with the principles of the weak sense of writing performance assessment (McNamara 1996), wherein the focus of assessment is mainly on the language per se, it is argued by many that topical knowledge, both on the part of the writers and on behalf of the raters may play a discriminatory role in the judgments about writing pieces. To lend more empirical support to the argument, the present study was conducted to tap into the role content familiarity/ unfamiliarity, on the part of both writers and raters exerts upon writing assessment.

107 students studying majoring in English Literature were given a TOEFL test of language proficiency, out of which 60 subjects were chosen to be homogeneous. The 60 subjects were randomly assigned to two groups. As a first step, the two groups were given a topic about "comments on a sonnet by Shakespeare" as a prompt to write an essay about. The comparison of the statistical means of the two groups did not indicate any significant difference which lent even more support to the homogeneity of the groups. The groups were then required to write an essay of about 150 words on the "link between personality and second language acquisition". One of the groups were presented with enough information in Persian about the topic at hand through 8 sessions while the other group were required to write on the topic drawing on their background and experiential knowledge. The writing samples were corrected once using Jacobs et al's (1981) analytic writing scale and once holistically by both topic-familiar and topic-unfamiliar raters. The results of the T-Test run for the purpose of the study proved a significant difference between the two groups of writers. The comparison of the means of the two groups of raters (topic familiar/unfamiliar), which corrected only the writing samples by the topic-familiar group to control for the interaction effect of familiarity on the writer's part and that on the rater's part, did not indicate any significant difference.

The study will, at the end, make a strong case for “Writing Across the Curriculum Movement”, “Theme-based Writing Instruction”, and any other model of writing instruction wherein a type of literacy is emphasized, and argues for bringing the writing instruction more in line with McNamara’s (1996) “The Strong Sense of Writing Performance Assessment”