



Exploring Rater Perceptions in Argumentative Writing Assessment: A Qualitative Case Study of Experience, Nativeness, and Rhetorical Variability

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to explore how linguistic background and teaching experience influence evaluation criteria, rhetorical interpretation, and scoring decisions during assessment of argumentative writing. It also examines how raters perceive rhetorical variation in essays written by students from different cultural backgrounds.

Methodology: This study employed an exploratory qualitative case study design using Concurrent Think-Aloud Protocols (TAP). Participants consisted of four English as a Foreign Language instructors with different linguistic backgrounds and teaching experience. Data were collected through audio-recorded assessment sessions and analyzed using structural coding and pattern coding to identify recurring evaluation themes and scoring behaviors.

Main Findings: Findings revealed that native English-speaking raters emphasized coherence, audience awareness, and rhetorical organization, whereas non-native English-speaking raters focused primarily on grammatical accuracy and content. Rhetorical variation influenced evaluation decisions, producing differences in assigned scores across participants. Teaching experience and linguistic background contributed to variation in assessment criteria, rhetorical interpretation, and scoring practices during evaluation of argumentative writing.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study integrates linguistic nativeness, teaching experience, and rhetorical variation within one qualitative investigation using Think-Aloud Protocols. Unlike previous studies emphasizing score comparison, it explores cognitive processes underlying writing assessment decisions. Findings provide deeper understanding of how rater characteristics shape evaluation practices and support development of more inclusive and reliable writing assessment in multilingual educational contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment plays a fundamental role in education because it provides evidence of learning outcomes, evaluates instructional effectiveness, and supports the achievement of educational objectives [1], [2]. In language education, writing assessment is regarded as one of the most essential components since it measures students' ability to communicate ideas logically and effectively through written texts [3]. Unlike objective forms of assessment, evaluating writing requires human judgment, making the assessment process more complex and

susceptible to subjective interpretations. Raters often rely not only on established scoring rubrics but also on their professional experiences, educational backgrounds, and personal beliefs when evaluating students' writing. Consequently, ensuring fairness, consistency, and validity in writing assessment has become an important concern in second language writing research.

The subjectivity involved in writing assessment frequently leads to inconsistencies among raters when assigning scores to the same piece of writing [4], [5]. Variations in linguistic background, teaching experience, and familiarity with rhetorical conventions may influence how raters interpret students' arguments and evaluate the quality of written texts [6]. These differences become more evident in multilingual and multicultural learning environments where students employ rhetorical structures influenced by their first language and cultural traditions. In such situations, identical writing performances may receive substantially different scores depending on the individual perspectives of the raters. As a result, inconsistent assessment practices may reduce the reliability of writing evaluation and negatively affect students' academic achievement and motivation.

Numerous previous studies have investigated factors affecting rater behavior in writing assessment. Research conducted by Cumming, Weigle, Lumley, Kobayashi and Rinnert, Şahan and Razi, Han, and Wang and Engelhard demonstrated that rater experience, training, linguistic background, and personal beliefs contribute to differences in scoring decisions [7], [8]. Other studies concerning contrastive rhetoric have also shown that students from different cultural backgrounds organize ideas and construct arguments using distinct rhetorical patterns that may influence raters' evaluations. Although these studies provide valuable insights into rater variability and rhetorical differences, most of them primarily focus on quantitative comparisons or scoring consistency rather than exploring how raters actually make their judgments during the assessment process.

Despite the growing body of research on writing assessment, limited attention has been given to understanding how native and non-native English-speaking raters with different levels of experience interpret rhetorical variation while evaluating argumentative essays [9], [10]. Existing studies have generally emphasized statistical differences in scores without examining the cognitive processes underlying raters' decision making. Furthermore, only a few investigations have simultaneously considered the interaction between linguistic nativeness, teaching experience, and culturally influenced rhetorical structures in multilingual educational contexts [11]. This limitation creates a research gap because understanding how these factors influence assessment decisions is essential for improving fairness and consistency in writing evaluation.

Addressing this research gap is important because writing assessment has significant implications for students' academic success and the overall quality of language education. Fair and reliable assessment enables students to receive appropriate feedback that supports the development of their writing competence and critical thinking skills [12], [13]. At the same time, understanding the factors influencing rater judgment may help educational institutions design more effective rater training programs and establish assessment practices that accommodate rhetorical diversity. Increased awareness of cultural differences in writing can also reduce potential bias and promote more equitable evaluation for students from various linguistic backgrounds [14]. Therefore, investigating raters' perceptions contributes not only to assessment reliability but also to inclusive language education in increasingly multicultural classrooms.

The present study offers a new perspective by qualitatively exploring the assessment processes of native and non-native English-speaking raters with different levels of teaching experience through think-aloud protocols [15], [16]. Rather than merely comparing final scores, this study examines how raters interpret argumentative texts written by students from different cultural backgrounds and identifies the evaluation criteria underlying their judgments. The integration of rater experience, linguistic nativeness, and rhetorical variation within an exploratory qualitative case study provides a more comprehensive understanding of writing assessment than previous studies. By revealing the cognitive considerations that shape assessment decisions, this research contributes to the development of more inclusive, valid, and reliable writing assessment practices in English language education [17], [18]. Consequently, the findings are expected to enrich existing literature while providing practical recommendations for improving rater training and writing assessment in multilingual educational settings.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative case study design to investigate how raters with different linguistic backgrounds and teaching experiences evaluated argumentative writing [19], [20]. A qualitative approach was selected because it provides a comprehensive understanding of raters' perceptions and decision-making processes during writing assessment [21], [22]. The study emphasized describing participants' evaluation behaviors rather than measuring causal relationships among variables. Data were collected using the Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP), allowing participants to verbalize their thoughts while assessing students' argumentative essays. This design enabled an in-depth exploration of the influence of linguistic nativeness, teaching experience, and rhetorical variation on writing assessment.

2.2. Participants and Research Materials

The participants consisted of four English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors working at a private university in Northern Cyprus. Two participants were native English-speaking instructors, whereas the remaining two were non-native English-speaking instructors with different levels of teaching experience [23], [24]. Three argumentative essays written by students from Chinese, Turkish, and Kurdish cultural backgrounds were selected as the research materials [25]. These essays were intentionally chosen to represent different rhetorical characteristics that could influence raters' evaluation processes. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the participants involved in this study.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Participants

| Participant | Linguistic Background | Teaching Experience | Category |
|-------------|----------------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| John | Native English Speaker | 3 years | Novice |
| Stefan | Native English Speaker | 20 years | Experienced |
| Sare | Non-native English Speaker | 20 years | Experienced |
| Melda | Non-native English Speaker | 9 months | Novice |

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through concurrent Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP) sessions in which participants verbalized their evaluation processes while assessing each argumentative essay [26], [27]. All assessment sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' responses for analysis [28]. The qualitative data were analyzed using two stages of coding consisting of structural coding followed by pattern coding to identify recurring themes related to evaluation criteria, rhetorical interpretation, grammatical accuracy, organization, and audience awareness [29], [30]. The coding results were subsequently reviewed through discussions with another qualitative researcher to improve the credibility of the findings. Figure 1 illustrates the overall research procedure adopted in this study.

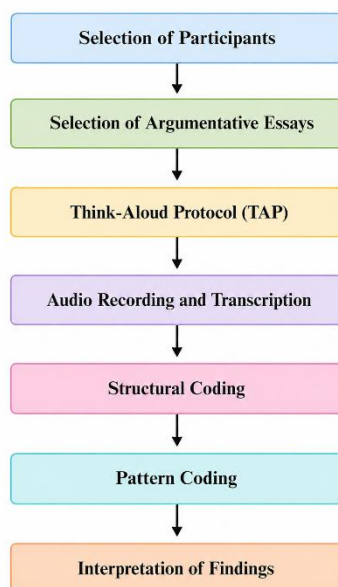


Figure 1. Research Procedure

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Evaluation Criteria Emphasized by the Raters

The analysis of the Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP) transcripts revealed that each rater emphasized different evaluation criteria when assessing the argumentative essays. Although all participants examined similar writing samples, differences emerged regarding the aspects considered most important during the assessment process. Native English-speaking raters generally focused on higher-order writing features, including coherence, audience

awareness, organization, and overall rhetorical effectiveness. In contrast, non-native English-speaking raters devoted greater attention to grammatical accuracy and content organization. These findings indicate that linguistic background and teaching experience influenced the evaluation criteria adopted during writing assessment.

Presents a summary of the assessment criteria identified from each participant during the evaluation process. The experienced native rater incorporated audience awareness as one of the principal evaluation criteria, whereas the novice native rater demonstrated greater flexibility toward grammatical errors when the intended meaning remained understandable. Both non-native raters consistently prioritized grammar and content while paying comparatively less attention to rhetorical elements. Differences were also observed between experienced and novice raters regarding the breadth of evaluation criteria applied throughout the assessment process. Overall, the findings demonstrate that writing assessment involved multiple dimensions extending beyond grammatical accuracy alone.

Table 1. Evaluation Criteria Emphasized by Each Rater

| Rater | Script A | Script B | Script C |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| John (Native–Novice) | Grammar, Content, Syntax | Grammar, Lexis, Syntax, Coherence, Cohesion | Grammar, Content |
| Stefan (Native–Experienced) | Coherence, Grammar, Audience | Organization, Coherence, Audience | Organization, Audience |
| Sare (Non-native–Experienced) | Grammar, Content | Grammar, Content | Grammar, Content |
| Melda (Non-native–Novice) | Grammar, Content, Formality | Grammar | Grammar, Content |

3.2. Raters' Perceptions of Rhetorical Variation

The findings demonstrated noticeable differences in how raters interpreted rhetorical variation across the three argumentative essays. Native English-speaking raters generally appreciated rhetorical diversity when the overall message remained coherent and logically organized. They evaluated rhetorical questions, audience engagement, and organizational flexibility as acceptable features that enriched the quality of students' writing. Conversely, non-native English-speaking raters preferred conventional academic structures and were more critical of rhetorical features that deviated from familiar writing conventions. These observations suggest that rhetorical expectations varied according to raters' linguistic backgrounds and professional experiences.

Further analysis showed that Script A received more favorable responses from native raters because they considered its rhetorical structure coherent and communicative despite minor grammatical errors. Meanwhile, Script B attracted criticism due to problems related to lexical choice, organization, and clarity, although the raters differed in identifying the most influential weaknesses. Script C generated diverse responses because several raters commented on the student's ideas and ideological expressions while continuing to evaluate the overall organization and language quality. Despite these differences, participants generally considered grammar, coherence, organization, and rhetorical effectiveness as important components during writing evaluation. The findings illustrate that rhetorical interpretation constituted an important element influencing raters' evaluation processes.

3.3. Differences in Scores Assigned by the Raters

The scores assigned by the four raters varied across the three argumentative essays, demonstrating differences in individual evaluation practices. Script A obtained the highest scores from both native English-speaking raters, whereas the novice non-native rater assigned a substantially lower score to the same essay. Score variation was also observed in Scripts B and C, although the differences among raters were relatively smaller. These findings indicate that raters interpreted the quality of argumentative writing differently despite evaluating identical texts. Such variations reflect differences in evaluation priorities among participants throughout the assessment process.

Table 2. Scores Assigned by the Four Raters

| Rater | Script A | Script B | Script C |
|--------|----------|----------|----------|
| John | 14.0 | 8.5 | 11.5 |
| Stefan | 14.0 | 7.0 | 9.0 |
| Sare | 12.0 | 9.0 | 10.0 |

| Rater | Script A | Script B | Script C |
|-------|----------|----------|----------|
| Melda | 7.0 | 8.5 | 12.0 |

The comparison of assigned scores indicates that native raters showed greater acceptance of rhetorical variation, particularly in Script A, while non-native raters tended to emphasize grammatical correctness during evaluation. Differences between experienced and novice raters were also evident, especially in the assessment of culturally influenced argumentative writing. Although several scores were relatively similar, substantial discrepancies remained in particular essays, suggesting that evaluation practices were influenced by individual perspectives and assessment priorities. The observed scoring patterns illustrate the complexity of writing assessment when multiple raters evaluate argumentative texts from diverse cultural backgrounds. Overall, the findings demonstrate that linguistic background and teaching experience contributed to variations in scoring behavior among the participants.

Findings indicate that raters with different linguistic backgrounds and teaching experience applied different criteria when evaluating argumentative writing. Native English-speaking raters emphasized coherence, audience awareness, rhetorical organization, and overall communication effectiveness, whereas non-native English-speaking raters focused primarily on grammatical accuracy and content quality. Differences demonstrate that writing assessment extends beyond scoring rubrics because professional experience and linguistic background shape evaluation practices. Variation in assigned scores also shows that identical essays may receive different judgments from different raters. Results confirm that writing assessment involves multiple dimensions requiring consideration of both linguistic accuracy and rhetorical effectiveness.

Results also reveal that rhetorical variation influenced evaluation decisions among participants. Native raters showed greater flexibility toward rhetorical diversity and accepted unconventional argumentative structures when overall meaning remained clear. In contrast, non-native raters preferred conventional academic writing patterns and emphasized grammatical correctness during assessment. Differences in scoring across three argumentative essays further demonstrate influence of rhetorical expectations on evaluation outcomes. Findings suggest that cultural background and teaching experience contribute substantially to variation in writing assessment practices within multilingual educational settings.

Present findings support previous studies reporting that rater characteristics influence writing assessment practices. Studies conducted by Cumming (1990), Weigle (2000), Lumley (2002), Şahan and Razi (2020), and Wang and Engelhard (2019) concluded that teaching experience, linguistic background, and professional knowledge contribute to differences in evaluation behavior. Research on contrastive rhetoric by Kaplan (1966) and Uysal (2008) also demonstrated that students from different cultural backgrounds organize ideas according to distinct rhetorical conventions, creating variation in writing performance. However, previous investigations mainly concentrated on scoring consistency and quantitative comparisons among raters rather than exploring cognitive processes during assessment. Present study extends existing evidence by providing qualitative descriptions of how raters interpret rhetorical variation while evaluating argumentative essays.

Novel contribution of present study lies in integration of linguistic nativeness, teaching experience, and rhetorical variation within one qualitative investigation of writing assessment. Unlike previous research emphasizing numerical score comparisons, present research explored reasoning processes underlying assessment decisions through Think-Aloud Protocols. Findings demonstrate that evaluation decisions are influenced not only by grammar and organization but also by rhetorical interpretation and audience awareness. Evidence generated through qualitative analysis provides broader understanding of writing assessment conducted in multilingual classrooms. Contribution strengthens current literature by explaining interaction among linguistic background, professional experience, and rhetorical diversity during writing evaluation.

Findings provide practical implications for language education and writing assessment. Educational institutions should strengthen rater training by incorporating grammar, rhetoric, audience awareness, and intercultural perspectives into assessment practices. Improved training may reduce differences among raters while increasing consistency and reliability of writing evaluation. Educators should also recognize that effective argumentative writing may appear in different rhetorical forms without reducing academic quality. More inclusive assessment practices are expected to support equitable evaluation for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting findings. Study involved only four raters from one university, limiting generalization to broader educational contexts. Analysis also focused on three argumentative essays representing limited cultural backgrounds, while Think-Aloud Protocol sessions may have influenced participants' natural evaluation behavior. Future research should involve larger participant groups, additional writing samples, and multiple educational settings to obtain more comprehensive evidence. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches may also provide deeper understanding of influence of linguistic background and teaching experience on writing assessment.

4. CONCLUSION

Findings confirm that linguistic background and teaching experience influence evaluation criteria, rhetorical interpretation, and scoring decisions during assessment of argumentative writing. Native English-speaking raters demonstrated greater flexibility in evaluating rhetorical variation, whereas non-native English-speaking raters emphasized grammatical accuracy and conventional academic writing patterns. Results also indicate that writing assessment involves interaction among linguistic competence, rhetorical awareness, professional experience, and cultural perspectives, making evaluation a multidimensional process. These findings achieve research objective by providing comprehensive understanding of how different rater characteristics shape writing assessment practices in multilingual educational contexts. Practical implications suggest that institutions should strengthen rater training by integrating rhetorical diversity, intercultural awareness, and consistent assessment standards to improve fairness and reliability of writing evaluation. Future research is recommended to involve larger participant groups, more diverse writing samples, various educational settings, and mixed-method approaches to produce broader evidence and support development of more inclusive writing assessment practices.

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USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The author declares that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research, including data collection, interpretation, and manuscript preparation, were carried out entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based technologies.

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