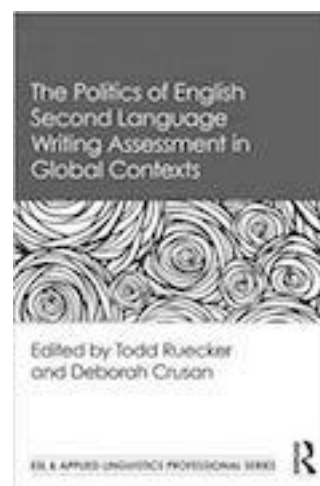


The Politics of English Second Language Writing Assessment in Global Contexts

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Pp. x + 244 pages	978-1-138-09447-5 (paperback)	\$38.36 USD



Large-scale, life-changing English as a foreign language (EFL) tests, often featuring a written component, have become firmly entrenched in today's increasingly globalised world. As such, some influential authors have written about learners, teachers, and test-takers becoming progressively ensnared within powerful systems and cultures of assessment that are depersonalised, demoralising, and often dehumanising (McNamara & Roever, 2006; Shohamy, 2001; Spolsky, 1997). *The Politics of English Second Language Writing Assessment in Global Contexts* provides critical perspectives on the controversial intersection between politics and second language (L2) writing assessment.

The Politics of English Second Language Writing Assessment in Global Contexts is a contemporary, internationally-eclectic anthology of 19 studies centred on the perspective that formal, mass assessments of L2 writing are always political. However, as stressed by the editors, Ruecker and Crusan, the political aspect of writing testing has received less scholarly attention due to what they identify as genuine practitioner fear of getting political. The book's central thesis is that powerful state institutions, national and international testing organisations, big money capitalism, and

“distant” administrators have subverted the formative and educational bases of L2 writing assessment and language learning via washback. This view resonates in contemporary learning landscapes that are characterised by language learners’ destinies hinging on performance in high-stakes tests and teachers feeling increasingly pressured to teach to the test.

The book is written for the purposes of illuminating the political determinants and ethical fallout of national and international L2 writing assessment. As such, it can be perceived as a response to increasing calls for improved understandings of the consequential validity of high-stakes mass language tests. It is evident that a further goal of this title is to internationalise the issues raised, which have previously mostly received coverage in Anglo contexts, particularly the United States. This aim appears extremely pertinent, as several of the state policies explored in this work are underscored by a country’s motivation to enhance its global economic competitiveness. Nevertheless, the book’s agenda is more than mere awareness-raising of the problem. The title’s Afterword by Casanave features a rallying cry for bottom-up change in depersonalised high-stakes testing, and the idea that frontline practitioners need to be both better equipped and given the freedom to make assessment decisions locally with student learning at the forefront.

This book appeals to a diverse global audience within both L2 writing teaching and testing fields. Researchers with an interest in the ethical and political dimensions of large-scale language testing and in assessing writing are likely the main target audience. However, the readership of this book is not limited to scholars of language testing. The often intimate portrayals of local assessment regimes, provided in the personal vignettes, make this work fascinating, if at times, grim reading for practitioners working in the ELT or language testing industries.

The anthology is organised into three thematic sections, each containing empirical studies, policy analysis and informal vignettes. Part I, *Local and National Policy Contexts*, serves to contextualise the work, featuring six entries exploring how domestic language policies have impacted L2 teaching and writing assessment in a heterogeneous array of countries. In Chapter 2, Ene and Hryniak reveal a number of similarities regarding the impact of macro language policies on L2 writing assessment in China, Mexico, and Poland, while in Chapter 4, de Oliveira, Aranha, and Zolin-Vesz explore the official documentation for language teaching and assessment in Brazil, devising an innovative framework for foreign language writing assessment. Ngo’s narrative study (Chapter 5) provides the personal perspectives of two teachers in Vietnam on a twelve-year government initiative to improve the quality of English teaching and learning. Marefat and Heydari conclude Part I by investigating the differences between three national English proficiency tests in Iran with TOEFL and IELTS to illuminate the challenges faced by test-takers (Chapter 7). A highlight of Part I is the two vignettes, particularly Banat’s anecdotal insights into two contrasting university assessment cultures in the UAE (Chapter 6). This contribution effectively articulates the ethical and pedagogical ramifications of the imposition of financially-driven, distance institutional assessment systems on teachers and learners.

In Part II, *High-Stakes Assessment*, the controversial ramifications of high-pressure, high-importance L2 writing assessment on syllabi, teachers, and students are explored in six entries. The focus is primarily on national English examinations, particularly at the secondary school exit stage, as exemplified in Abdel Latif and Haridy’s analysis of curriculum reform in the written component of Egypt’s General Secondary Education Certificate (GSEC) in English and its impact on teachers (Chapter 8), Swatek and Kasztalska’s critical discussion of Poland’s Matura high school exit exam (Chapter 10), and Kremmel, Eberharter, and Maurer’s report on the classroom washback effects of

Austria's 2004 introduction of an English Matura linked to the CEFR (Chapter 12). Similarly, Bekar's holistic look at the development of Macedonia's English state Matura (Chapter 11) reveals the complexities of high-stakes test development as well as the far-reaching and nebulous washback effects. The highlight of this section is West and Thiruchelvam's thematic exploration of the ethical consequences of Korean university students failing the Computer-Based English Test (Chapter 13). The severe implications of this, elucidated through interviews with the students themselves and their teachers, serve to vividly illustrate the central argument of the book.

Finally, in Part III, *Seeking Solutions: Assessing Better Locally and Internationally*, six case studies provide insights into how the pernicious trends explored earlier in the work have been successfully tackled by teachers and test-developers internationally. Huang and You explore how two writing instructors have reinterpreted assessment mandates in China to cultivate students' agency and creativity (Chapter 14). In Chapter 16, Chen and Saulter explore the difficulties faced and offer practical insights in modifying the content, format, and administration of L2 writing assessments for individuals with various disabilities. Chapter 17, by Gilliland, Bravo, and Galleguillos, provides an account of how local contextual knowledge was employed at a Chilean university to develop an e-portfolio system for student teachers to evince national standards in English and other areas. Siczek and Dolgova's entry gives an account of the creation and piloting of a localised placement test to better serve their institution's local needs and signal its values towards writing assessment (Chapter 18). The two vignettes contained in Part III provide personal perspectives into what practitioners can do to instill equity and inclusiveness into L2 writing assessment, as well as challenge the deficit mindset perspective.

A clear strength of this title is the truly international coverage it accords to the problematic political dimensions of L2 writing assessment. The reader gets a sense of how corporate financial interests and national policies driven by the need for international economic competitiveness intersect with L2 written assessment to generate ethical and pedagogical problems that are similar across many countries. A further strength of the book is the combination of both rigorous empirical studies with the personal vignettes within the overarching theme. As suggested by Casanave in her Afterword, some of the vignettes serve almost as exposés on the depersonalised, messy, and ill-thought through bureaucratic assessment systems which are imposed on teachers and learners. The result is an innovative book which combines both scholarly and practitioner perspectives on the political dimensions of second language writing assessment, which have rarely been addressed in this level of depth and breadth.

In terms of suggestions to enhance this anthology, despite emphasis from Ruecker and Crusan in Chapter 1 that "tests affect the lives of and define the people who take them" (p. 2), it is unfortunate that the voices of test-takers themselves are largely absent. It cannot be assumed that teachers and researchers always know best concerning test-takers' needs in formal language assessment. Indeed, hard-working ELT practitioners may be unaware of the wider consequential impacts of test-taking on their students, such as those explored in Chapter 13.

Overall, *The Politics of English Second Language Writing Assessment in Global Contexts* addresses the consequential validity of mass L2 writing assessment, primarily from the perspectives of ELT practitioners. The text draws the reader's attention to the often-unpleasant and unsatisfactory assessment systems and cultures that burden both teachers and students globally. The book also provides current evidence of ways forward. The work is likely to inspire further research into how writing assessment can better serve formative purposes to become more student-centered, and

ultimately, more humane. As such, the text is an essential companion to any EFL teacher or researcher with an interest in writing assessment or language testing more generally.

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