

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL WRITING ASSESSMENT: RESEARCH ISSUES

Speakers: *Alan C. Purves*, State University of
New York at Albany
Thomas Gorman, National Foundation
for Educational Research, Great Britain
Rainer Lehmann, Institute for
Educational Research, Federal Republic
of Germany

Introducer/

Recorder: *Wayne Fenner*, University of Minnesota

This session was the first of several sessions on research on international writing assessment. Alan Purves began with an overview of the background of the fourteen-nation Written Composition Study. Begun in 1980, this project is the most recent undertaken by the International Association for Educational Achievement (IEA). Previous studies have examined the teaching and testing of science, math, reading, foreign language, and civic education. Unlike earlier subjects, the domain of written composition is a cloudy one: it is both an act of communication and an act of cognitive processing. Researchers, then, had first to define this domain, both empirically and theoretically. After this phase of domain specification, researchers designed a series of specific writing tasks and writing purposes to be included in the study. Third, a five-point scoring scheme was devised that would be valid and reliable across languages and cultures. Finally, raters were chosen and trained.

Thomas Gorman discussed the results from a recent writing assessment program in England in order to clarify what can be learned from international studies and cannot be learned from separate, national writing assessment projects. The problem of domain specification seems to be culturally relative. The purpose of writing varies in its relation to general educational aims, and specific tasks may or may not reflect the kind of writing that is generally required of students in specific schools in particular cultures. There is, however, remarkable unanimity of assessment criteria and standards of

performance across languages and cultures. Content, for example, as well as form, style, and tone appear to be rating factors utilized internationally. As a result of the IEA Study, we have learned more about the relative difficulty of various writing tasks, and we have gathered a great deal of information about background variable relative to writing performance. These variables include students' interest and involvement in life at school, plans for future education, amount of daily and weekly homework, and involvement of parents in the educational process.

Rainer Lehmann discussed the methodology of comparative writing assessment, specifically the application of multitrait-multimethod analysis to the problem of validating the analytical scoring scheme used by all countries in the IEA Study. Although his discussion was limited to results from the Hamburg data, Lehmann provided information from a non-English language context that appeared to confirm the IEA student's methods and findings.