
TITLE

Assessing writing at lower levels: Research findings, task development locally and internationally, and the opportunities presented by the extended CEFR descriptors

This is a summary of a report by Konrad, E., Holzknacht, F., Schwarz, V., Spöttl, C. as part of the ARAGs Research Online Series. For a copy of the full report, see www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/publications/

WHAT WE LOOKED AT:

We investigated how writing tests for beginner language learners are currently designed by international test providers as well as language teachers. We were also interested in how the newly published descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) might impact assessment practices. Many testing boards across the world use the CEFR to map their assessments onto language proficiency levels. In particular, we wanted to know the following:

1. What is the current state of research regarding the development of tasks assessing low-level writing?
2. What types of writing tasks are currently used in international, national, and local contexts to assess low-level writing?
3. What strategies do test developers employ to deal with the limitations of the CEFR in the context of low-level writing assessment?
4. What potential do the expected changes to the CEFR offer to adapt assessment practices of low-level writing?

HOW WE DID IT:

Our research consisted of several parts. First, we conducted a review of the scientific literature on the development of lower level writing tests. We then collected and compared 45 sample tasks from 21 writing exams by 10 international test providers designed to assess writing at beginner levels. We also conducted an online survey to collect information from language teachers and test developers about their practices when it comes to lower level writing assessment. Finally, we looked in detail at the newly published descriptors of the CEFR. We were interested in whether the new descriptors might impact current practices of assessing writing at beginner levels.

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WHAT WE FOUND:

The survey of the research literature conducted for this study revealed that little guidance is currently offered for the development of low-level writing tasks, despite the practical need for assessing writing at this level. Results from the task analysis and the online survey showed that test developers face a number of challenges when assessing low-level writing. In particular, it was found that a clear differentiation between tasks at the lower CEFR levels A1 and A2 is often missing and that there are large differences in what is required of test takers within the same level. We also found that existing task types and rating scales may be considered inadequate for assessing A level writing.

When analyzing our findings in light of the extended CEFR descriptors, we found that the new descriptors could provide more guidance for differentiating between the levels and for developing additional, authentic task types for assessing writing at low levels.