

Website Review

Criterion™ Online Writing Assessment and ScoreItNow®

Reviewed by Tomonori Nagano

New York University

tn305@nyu.edu

In this article, I will review the online essay editing services offered by ETS Technologies, a branch company of Educational Testing Service in the U.S. I will suggest that such increasingly available online assessment resources, especially those that focus on students' productive language skills, lead to beneficial effects on classroom instruction in Japan and other EFL countries. Followed by details of each essay rating service, several suggestions and cautions are presented for those who plan to adopt *ScoreItNow®* into their teaching practice.

As interest in communicative competence in EFL continues to grow, more attention has been paid to students' productive skills (i.e. speaking and writing) in teaching practice. There has been a great deal of discussion of the need for more emphasis on productive skills instruction in Japan, where reading and grammar instruction is dominant, but Japanese administrators and teachers of English are still perplexed as to how to incorporate these skills in their instruction.

It is often argued that the language assessment influences teaching and learning. Generally speaking, multiple-choice tests are associated with negative washback, encouraging teachers to teach for the tests and emphasizing the discrete language skills like grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, the performance test (e.g., essay composition and interview) is favored for its beneficial washback, that is, allowing teachers to engage in more communicative approaches in their classrooms.

While many teachers and administrators in Japan agree on the beneficial washback of the performance assessment, the number of performance tests being practiced in Japan is amazingly low. For instance, *the National Center Test for University Entrance Examination*, one of the high-stakes tests in Japan, still consists of all multiple-choice tasks with little emphasis on speaking and writing. (Brown, 1995; Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Grove, 1996) The reason for this paradox is simple. It is just not possible to assess all 442,263 test-takers using performance assessment. We are certainly short on time and resources to assess every single test-taker through interviews, or to conduct norming sessions to train a large enough number of essay raters. The same is true in each school district, school, and classroom. Although we are all aware of the value of performance assessment, we are busy enough catching up with day-to-day business and school chores.

Criterion Online Writing Assessment and *ScoreItNow* could be a breakthrough in this discouraging situation. Both of these online services are powered by *e-rater*, an automated essay assessment system, and offered by ETS Technologies. The *e-rater*, a computer program that has been used by ETS since 1988, can instantly score students' essays, and the results show a remarkably high consistency with trained professional human raters. According to the ETS, *e-rater* has attained over .98 correlations with professional GMAT essay raters and .92 correlations with TOEFL raters.

Criterion Online Writing Assessment was developed to provide a comprehensive writing learning system for educational institutions or commercial companies. There are five different categories divided by grade level: Middle School (8th grade), High School (12th grade), College Level, Graduate Level (GMAT), and International Student (TOEFL). *Criterion* holistically evaluates essays based on its own algorithm and assesses syntax, content, and organization of ideas, and reports a six-scale score. Scores are given on the screen instantly upon submission of essays and saved for future reference. Teachers can manage students' learning through the system; for example, limiting essay topics, analyzing statistic records of students' progress, checking each individual essay and so on. The demo version is available on the ETS Technology website at <http://www.etstechnologies.com/criterion>.

While *Criterion* is available only for large institutions, *ScoreItNow!* can be used by individual students, especially those who are preparing for the TOEFL exam. Its assessment rubric is aligned with that of the TOEFL, and their topics are selected from those on the TOEFL exam. In addition, *ScoreItNow!* reports a remarkably high consistency with the scores given by the trained TOEFL essay raters (92%). Individual learners can purchase one unit (2 essays) of service for US\$10 through their website. The URL to the *ScoreItNow!* is <http://www.scoreitnow.org>.

Trying out ScoreItNow!

To begin with, it is noteworthy that *ScoreItNow!* is surprisingly easy to use. All instructions and navigation procedures on the website are written in simple English and are quite intuitive. I thought even low-proficient English learners have no difficulty using this service. The payment process is not complicated either. I instantly received my ID and password on the computer screen without any problem. The account was activated as soon as I received an e-mail confirmation message, and I was able to start my first essay within 15 minutes of registration, including the payment process.

Although *ScoreItNow!* is very much aligned with the TOEFL exam, a few differences exist and are mentioned in the instructions. Besides the essay being scored by *e-rater* instead of human raters, users can choose their own essay topic and can take the test without a time limit. One difference that I noticed was that *ScoreItNow!* evaluates the essays using a six-scale score (1-6) whereas TOEFL test-takers might receive 11-scale scores including the decimal points such as 3.5 or 4.5.

Essay topics are categorized into about 10 different themes such as "change in the new century" and "something to change in school life." Topics can be chosen from either thematic categories or an alphabetical listing. The instructions (which looked similar to the writing tutorial on the TOEFL exam) are quite straightforward and are followed by a small text box in which a user types an essay. Because the *ScoreItNow!* assessment is not timed, there is no clock on the screen (although users can see the amount of time they took for each essay in the score report).

The only one disappointment to me was the format of the score report. According to the

ScoreItNow! website, individualized advice for improving writing skills should be given in the score report. In my score report, however, there was only a link to a webpage which showed a list of suggestions that were presumably written to apply to all users in the same score range. The essay review checklist was available, but it was written too broadly to apply to individual reviews.

Overall, however, *ScoreItNow!* was fairly good, and I was satisfied with it, especially considering its modest price. According to its website, a test taker's record is stored and can be retrieved online for six months. This way it is possible for users to have their own online writing portfolio, through which they can check their progress in writing skills.

In conclusion, both *ScoreItNow!* and *Criterion* will possibly help teachers incorporate performance assessment in their classrooms without much hassle. These online services are recommended not only for teachers who have GMAT or TOEFL courses, but also for those who are seeking direction toward incorporating communicative language teaching in their classrooms.

Bibliography

- Brown, J. D. (1995). English Language Entrance Examinations in Japan: Mythes and facts. *The Language Teacher*, 19(10), 21-24.
- Brown, J. D., & Yamashita, S. O. (1995). English Language Entrance Examinations at Japanese Universities: What do we know about them? *JALT Journal*, 17, 7-30.
- Grove, R. (1996). Some Questions about Recent Articles on English Tests. *The Language Teacher*, 20(12).