Ways to Assess Writing Skill in Academic Context

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Abstract: assessment is one of core components in language teaching and learning process since students undoubtedly experience some forms of assessment throughout their learning process and as teachers, they are responsible for assessing their students while teaching. This article will define a concept of assessment, introduce nature of writing process, types of writing, focus on five aspects of writing assessment and put emphasis on regular feedback through using forms of formative assessment such as portfolio, rubrics and self and peer assessment that leads to a short conclusion.

Keywords: assessment, Language Assessment, Writing process, aspects.

Assessment plays an essential role in teaching and learning process. So What is Assessment? In the context of teaching English as a second or other language, assessment is the process of gathering information about learners' language ability (Bailey, 2003). The kinds of things assessment can tell us include: what learners have learnt, how well learners have learnt something and what tasks learners are able to perform using English. Assessment can take a number of forms such as classroom participation, essays, quizzes and examinations that usually occur throughout a course. Assessment is beneficial to both learners and teachers since this increases learner motivation, encourages reinforcement and retention of information, identifies learners' strengths and weaknesses, summarises and concludes modules or units in a curriculum, and promotes learner autonomy and others. The terms assessment, evaluation and testing have quite different meanings. Assessment is a general term referring to procedures that can be used to measure students' progress in a course. Tests are one form of assessment but many forms of assessment are not tests, such as observations, interviews, or questionnaires. Evaluation refers to procedures used to determine the overall effectiveness of a language course, and may involve many different procedures such as interviews with teachers and students as well as classroom observation. Students' performance on texts may also be used as one component of evaluation.

All forms of assessment, whether tests or otherwise, should be based on the five principles of practicality, reliability, validity, authenticity and wash back (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). We naturally want to ensure that the assessment we use in our classrooms is useful for our learners and ourselves. In relation to language assessment, how do teachers assess writing skill? To answer this question, it is necessary to give the first response to a question" What is writing process?

Writing has often been viewed simply as "talk written down" (Nunan, 1999, p. 274). This is however a misleading description as writing and speech are different in a number of important ways:

a) Writing is used to communicate over time and across space;

b) Writing is permanent;

c) Writing has to recreate context for readers;

d) Writing generally reflects action;

e) Writing is usually done by a single person with no immediate contact with the audience;

f) Writing can be edited and redrafted multiple times.

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Writing has its own unique linguistic features such as greater use of nouns to convey meaning and a greater number of content words (Nunan, 1999). Writing well is difficult, even for native speakers, and therefore it should no surprise that "the assessment of writing is no simple task" (Brown, 2004, p. 218). Depending on purposes, there are four types of writing:

1) Imitative (writing is concerned with the mechanics of writing. It refers to the ability to produce in writing letters, words and basic sentences).

2) Intensive (controlled) writing refers to learners' ability to demonstrate knowledge of correct grammar, vocabulary and sentence formation through writing.

3) Responsive writing refers to learners' ability to write short, connected stretches of text such as summarises, brief responses to readings and brief descriptions.

4) Extensive writing is the ability to write long stretches of connected text such as essays, projects and articles with appropriate organisation, development of ideas, use of supporting details and variation in vocabulary and grammar.

The difference between these two types of writing, as Brown and Abeywickrama, (2010) point out, is in the length and complexity of written text rather than their type. For this reason, we will deal with the assessment of responsive and extensive writing together. As knowing writing types is important, focusing on several aspects is needed in writing assessment. To be specific, balanced writing assessment should cover five aspects; fluency, content, convention, syntax and vocabulary. To be specific, fluency means being able to translate one's thoughts into written words. A simple curriculum-based measure of fluency is total number of words written during a short writing assignment. When fluency is the focus, misspellings, poor word choice, and faulty punctuation are not considered. Attention is only directed to the student's facility in translating thoughts into words. The second factor -content includes the essay organization, cohesion and accuracy. Regarding a composition's organization teacher can ask general questions such as: Is there a good beginning sentence? Is there a clear ending? Is there a logical sequence of subtopics or events? and cohesion questions such as :Does the writer stick to the topic? Is it clear what words like it, that, and they refer to? Does the writer use key words that cue the reader to the direction of the discourse (First…, Then… , Therefore… , On the other hand…)? Third factor is convention that covers correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar and legible handwriting. Even if the message is communicated, readers tend to be negatively predisposed to compositions that are not presentable in their form or appearance. The next factor is syntax how to produce sentences. Beginning writers often produce sentences that follow a repeated subject-verb (S-V) or subject-verb-object (S-V-O) pattern. A more advanced writer will vary the sentence pattern and combine short S-V and S-V-O sentences into longer, more complex sentences. The last factor-vocabulary refers to the words used in a student's essay. A simpler classroom-based method of looking at vocabulary is to simply make notes of words used repetitiously (over-used words) as well as new words the student uses.

Besides the consideration of the mentioned five aspects of writing assessment, being skilled, learners need not just to know how to perform some action but also know when to perform it and adapt it to varied circumstances as well to acquire different kinds of knowledge and skills Resnick & Klopfer, 1989, p. 4). Ken Hyland (2003) assumes that language teachers also need to address different knowledge

a) **Content knowledge**: How can topics for writing activities be chosen? Can students be involved in selecting topics to write about? And do students have the necessary background knowledge to write about topics they may choose or be asked to write about?

b) **System knowledge:** How will grammar be used to support their writing needs? What areas of grammar will be most useful to them?

c) **Process knowledge:** How will students get ideas and information to use in writing? Will they make use of the internet, group discussion, library research, etc.?

d) **Genre and text knowledge:** What kinds of texts will students learn to write? Do they need to improve their skill in composing particular kinds of texts, such as essays, business letters or reports? How will students become aware of the principle of organization underlying different types of writing, such as recounts, descriptions or business letters?

e) **Context knowledge:** How will students develop awareness of the influences on the writing context for the type of writing they engage in, as well as awareness of cultural factors that affect expectations about the nature of appropriate written texts? In addition to this, forms of formative assessment play a major role in writing assessment. They are portfolio, rubrics, self and peer assessments aligned with a conceptual model like POWER.

Portfolio assessment

Many writing teachers make use of portfolios for the assessment of student writing. A portfolio is a collection of students' writing, assembled over time. It usually contains examples of the students' best work and provides a collection of writing samples, rather than a single piece of work. It may also include a written reflection by the student on his or her progress in writing, as well as a self-assessment of his or her strengths and weaknesses in writing and this is used as the basis for a final grade.

Using a Rubric

Using a rubric to assess students' writing is a great way to see exactly what students are grasping and what they're struggling with. Teachers can find premade rubrics or create their own on I Rubric. This is my favorite site for creating and adapting rubrics, and it's free! What makes rubrics efficient is that teachers can circle and add notes to each category. Then, they quickly calculate the score. Rubrics help teachers pinpoint exactly what the student needs help with or where the student needs more of a challenge.

Student writing self-assessment

Having students assess their own writing process is also important for two reasons. First, self-assessment allows students an opportunity to observe and reflect on their own approach, drawing attention to important steps that may be overlooked. Second, self-assessment following a conceptual model like POWER is a means of internalizing an explicit strategy, allowing opportunities for the student to mentally rehearse the strategy steps. Both self-observation and teacher observation of the writing process can follow the POWER strategy. Similar self-assessments or observation checklists could be constructed for other conceptual models of the writing process. POWER –Plan- Organise - Write-Edit-Rewrite.

In addition to these ways, teachers could use the margin putting X Marks the Spot for seeing a grammar mistake or a spelling error. Simply putting a small x next to it lets students figure out their marked mistakes with an x and enter their corrections in the margin. This will help students assess their own work and learn from own mistakes. Writing an End Comment is also helpful because students can take teachers' recommendations to assess their writing and set goals to continue their progress for further writing. Addressing Common Errors Together is an efficient way for writing assessment. To clarify, if teachers notice that many of their students make the same mistakes, it is necessary to have a class discussion; students will all receive the same comments through this simple whole-group conference.

In conclusion, on-going assessment of writing is integral to effective teaching of writing. To make continuous and appropriate assessment teachers need to consider the nature of writing process, distinguish writing types that require specific tasks, pay attention to five key aspects that should be included in writing assessment. Moreover, the teacher's regular feedback through use of forms of formative assessments are vital to encourage students' critical ideas and improve writing skills, and learn from own mistakes.

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