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ԱՎԱՐՏԱԿԱՆ ՀԵՏԱԶՈՏԱԿԱՆ ԱՇԽԱՏԱՆՔ

Թեմա՝ Assessing Writing Skills

Կատարող՝ Զարուհի Ղազարյան

Ղեկավար՝ Օհաննա Ավետիսյան

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INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons why teachers assess learners is to give them feedback. Feedback is a very important component in learning. When a teacher gives feedback to his or her learners, he or she will be able to identify their weaknesses and strengths in a certain subject or course. In this sense, feedback can enhance learning.

Many scholars stress the fact that feedback in the context of formative assessment has a strong impact on learning. Assessment is a classroom strategy that teachers use to check their learners' progress and decide if any remedial work or any adjustments to the students learning is needed. Based on the students' works and assignments, teachers can give students feedback which can help them learn from their mistakes.

In fact, students need positive feedback and reinforcement to keep them motivated and strengthening their desire to learn. However, the feedback should be positive in a way that builds their self-esteem. When feedback is negative, it can discourage student effort and achievement

The aim of the research is to find out types and methods how to assess writing skills.

The main objectives are:

1. to analyze principles of systematic assessment of writing
2. to analyze the types and methods of assessment writing
3. to study the techniques of assessing

The structure of the work

Our research paper consists of Introduction, two Chapters, Conclusion, References.

Introduction which embraces the aim, objectives, its practical value.

Chapter 1. "PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEMATIC ASSESSMENT OF WRITING" provides a short introduction to assessing writing skills and takes the reader into the realm of different approaches how to assess.

CHAPTER 2. "TECHNIQUES OF ASSESSING EFL WRITING" touches upon the techniques and types of assessing writing skills.

Conclusion summarize the main findings of the study.

References list the sources of literature used in the course of doing this research.

CHAPTER 1

PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEMATIC ASSESSMENT OF WRITING

Research studies reveal that when teachers involve students to diagnose problems in their own text and rectify them, they feel motivated to improve their own writing. Researchers like Brian Johnston (1987) recommends that, teachers should “encourage student involvement in arriving at assessments by teaching students self assessment, peer group assessment skills, to specify aspects of their work that they want responses to and teaching to negotiate assessments”. Tricia Hedge advocates students’ involvement in the designing of a grading scheme on the grounds that it raises students’ awareness of what makes a good piece of writing and “prevents misunderstanding about the role of grading in writing classrooms”.

Let us look at some aspects of this:

a) Self Assessment

When students develop a greater understanding of the writing process, it is a good strategy to give them time to read through their written work and diagnose the problems in what they have written. Constructive feedback should be given on what they have written and they should be asked to apply cognitive and affective strategies to develop the content and reader orientation of their writing. The ability to identify problems in their own text, will help them write effectively, with minimum errors.

b) Peer Comments

This is also another way of involving students in the assessment process. The writing could be commented upon by their peers, which could lead to further rewriting of the same task. Peer comments are usually suggestions not commands hence learners are at liberty to incorporate suggestions, which they feel are appropriate. This active interaction of learners with their peer texts will help them to expand their own ideas resulting in a greater vision of their own writing from

different perspectives, which perhaps they may not have thought about. In addition, peer suggestions may also have underlying cultural connotations which may or may not appeal to the learners.

This would also foster independent thinking because they would learn to choose and incorporate appropriate suggestions, which do not hurt the cultural sentiments of the readers. This is an extremely sensitive but an important issue because our classrooms are a microcosm of the larger pluricultural society, heterogeneous in character, having learners from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

b) **Pair Work (Feedback) Editing**

c) Students can work in pairs, correcting and helping each other. They can write the first draft and exchange them with their partners for comments. In case of doubts or certain clarifications, they can seek the help of the teacher. However, teachers need to monitor the feedback students give so that there is no negativity and leg pulling. As pair work editing takes place immediately after writing, it makes it more useful and meaningful. Students learn to recognize errors in their written text and it also makes them think about clarity and acceptability of their writing.

d) Negotiating Assessment - The teachers can prioritize the criteria for a feedback. They could also discuss it with the students so that assessment would be effective.

An issue that continues to remain at the forefront of developing writing skills in learners is teachers' response to student writing. Marking compositions is the most widely used method of evaluating student writing. Teachers and researchers alike acknowledge that pronouncing judgment on a piece of L2 writing is very important, yet very difficult.

Difficult because there is little agreement among teachers or researchers about how teachers should respond to student writing. Griffin (1982) noted that "the major question confronting any theory of responding to student writing is where we should focus our attention." Today also, much of the conflict over teacher response is whether teacher feedback should focus on 'form' (grammar, mechanics) or 'content' (organization, amount of detail, cohesion, coherence etc).

L2 research studies on teacher responses on student composition have focused both on form and content. In studies focusing on 'form' it was observed that providing the correct form did not have any significant effect on writing proficiency, while studies of Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) found that showing location of errors improved accuracy. Students who received feedback did make more improvement on the writing task than those who did not receive feedback. Zamel, (1985) examined the way the teachers provided feedback on 'content'. She found that ESL teachers' (Teachers teaching English as second language) comments on content were vague and contradictory. She

observed that students responded to comments on form and ignored those on content because these lacked clarity. Therefore, it is very important for teachers to comment on the context by giving concrete ideas and suggestions; maybe by rewriting part of students' writing.

Now let us turn our attention to the English teachers in India, and what they generally focus on while marking compositions. It is generally observed that teachers focus more on 'form' than on 'content'. The general way of responding is by underlining spelling errors, wrong grammatical constructions and inappropriate use of lexis. Hardly any teacher, or very few teachers write comments in the margins for students to understand and incorporate. If teachers do not clearly and precisely write comments, then how are the learners going to interpret the red line? How would they know that the word is wrongly used, or whether it is a wrong grammatical construction or whether the question mark means that the meaning is unclear (Mujumdar, 2005).

Therefore, it is very important to devise a feedback system, which can be easily understood by the students. But the primary question remains how should teachers respond to student writing? We have seen that writing is a cyclical process (Vanikar and Mujumdar 1995). Today, when communication of meaning is considered most important along with accuracy of form, it becomes extremely essential that teachers focus attention on both, the process as well as the product, that is, form as well as content. Researchers like Taylor (1981); Zamel (1987); Raimes (1985) have suggested that teachers should look at errors in the linguistic features only after the ideas or the content of the task has been fully developed. Keeping these trends in the frame of reference, it is important that teachers help learners, through their feedback, transform their "writer based structure" into a "reader based" one (Flower 1979).

In order to make this transformation at first, it is important to undertake writing as a class room activity (in almost all schools and colleges it is given as home work) in which learners go through the process of multiple-drafting (Huff 1983), and then teachers should provide "meaningful feedback" on what the students have written.

Students' confidence in exploration of ideas and the manner of presentation is best nurtured in a "helpful, non-threatening atmosphere, where experiments in language are not only acceptable but encouraged". Their writing work definitively needs to be marked but they should not get a copy marked with red ink with absolutely no inkling of what is amiss leaving no scope for self correction.

It is important therefore to devise a marking system which students are aware of. Also detail commenting, though time consuming, at the end on their writing is especially beneficial to motivate

students who like to monitor their own development. Both, commenting and devising a marking system is likely to have a lesser negative impact on their writing.

The following is a marking system, which teachers can follow and also give it to the students for their reference:

Agr agreement problem: circle the word and state whether it is subject verb, pronoun, antecedent etc.

art add an article or change the article used

cap use capital letter

no cap use small case

? unclear - either handwriting illegible or meaning unclear

^, del something missing, add the omitted word/phrase, something more needs to be added

pro Pronoun. Use subjective or objective form as necessary

sp spelling. Check dictionary if necessary

t verb-tense. Used wrong verb tense. Change to convey meaning

wc, wu word choice. Incorrect word used. Change to convey meaning **wo** word order. Rearrange the words to be meaningful.

This marking system is an example, which you can use. The teachers are at complete liberty to devise a new marking system, which your students can understand. Certain comments written in the margins could be something as given below:

1) Repetition

2) Show contrast

3) This would be better placed in the first paragraph

4) Use one paragraph to explain the definition/concept

- 5) You need a formal outline to organize your main points
- 6) Use a linker like and, but therefore, though, etc.
- 7) Extend paragraph 2
- 8) Add a concluding sentence
- 9) Rewrite the introductory paragraph keeping the topic in mind.
- 10) Correct the number problems
- 11) Improve organization of points.
- 12) Add specific details to support the point

Such comments can help learners rectify their own mistakes.

CHAPTER 2

TECHNIQUES OF ASSESSING EFL WRITING

The assessment of writing ability can be fulfilled using a wide variety of techniques. The continuum of available techniques rests basically on the objective of assessment and the type of performance required.

A. Indirect Assessment.

In general, indirect (or objective) assessment uses tasks which are not reflective of real target language use situations but are used to make implications on the ability lying behind performance in the test (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Indirect assessment is a traditional method of assessing writing which was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Attempting to measure the sub-skills involved in writing, this type of assessment usually employs multiple choice questions, error spotting or other selected response measures (Weigle, 2012).

Indirect assessment reflects the accepted ideas about composition of the time, where focus was placed on such features as grammar, usage and punctuation. Although it is recognized to be consistent and easy to administer and score, writing specialists have noticed important limitations of objective assessment: It seems to decontextualize knowledge and meaning making as it does not require real writing.

Narrowing the conception of competence, depriving students from revision opportunities as well as excluding rhetorical and contextual considerations in writing are the most noticed drawbacks of this form of writing assessment (Neff-Lippman, 2012). It should be stressed, however, that indirect assessment is highly reliable and practical although it is deficient in terms of validity and authenticity.

B. Direct Assessment.

Direct assessment, as its name suggests, requires that learners' writing ability is directly evaluated. In broad terms, a direct test refers to "a test that measures ability directly by requiring test takers to perform tasks designed to approximate an authentic target language use situation as closely as possible" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Indirect tests appraise the key abilities which are thought to be indicators of the target behaviour, but they do not model the behaviour itself, while direct tests seek to reproduce the real eventual behaviour in the test itself (Johnson, 2001). In assessing writing directly, the test tasks involve production of a sample of writing.

Through these tests, students show writing competence rather than spot the right answers without production. Reflecting changes in composition theory, this form of assessment supplanted the indirect

paradigm and has become widely used since the 1970s. In fact, it is still used in standardized examinations nowadays and is highlighted as a typical form of large-scale assessment.

Weigle (2002) asserts that direct tests are the most widespread and the best researched methods in all contexts of language learning. The form of direct writing assessment is well-defined. Essentially, such measuring devices are administered in a limited time frame (hence the term “timed impromptu writing test”), and the topic is not supplied to writers before the examination.

Hamp-Lyons (1991) specifies five additional key features:

- (1) Writers produce one piece of continuous (at least 100 words),
- (2) Writers receive a set of instructions (or prompt) but with flexibility given for dissimilar responses,
- (3) Produced samples are read by at least one but normally two or more qualified raters,
- (4) Judgment is tied to common standard (model essays or rating scales),
- (5) Judgment is expressed in numbers.

According to Weigle (2012), both the proper construction of tasks and the appropriate implementation of scoring are important in the use of direct tests, especially to ensure reliability and eliminate variation in the results of assessment. As for the construction of tasks, here are three factors that do influence performance: subject matter (personal Vs non-personal topics, general Vs specialized topics), discourse mode (genre, rhetorical task, cognitive demands) and stimulus material (textual, visual).

It is necessary that EFL writing instructors balance these factors in order to make their assessment more systematic and reflective of genuine competence. Regarding scoring procedures in direct assessment, three approaches are can be utilized: holistic scoring, analytical scoring and primary trait scoring, all of which use a rating scale (or a scoring rubric). Holistic scoring is developed in such a way that it assesses writing performance, and it complies with the validity and reliability principles. It starts from the belief that evaluating writing skill does not involve measuring an array of sub-skills, but rather measuring a whole piece of discourse (Williams, 2003).

In Holistic scoring, raters give a single score (or point) for the whole script based on trained rater’s impression (e.g. 1, 2, 3 or 4). For each point, general overall descriptions of performance are given (descriptors show clear criteria but are usually integrated in a patterned way). The use of such scales requires training raters so that consistent scoring can be achieved, and it is preferred when assessing a large number of tests (Weigle, 2002).

Analytical scoring divides writing ability into fundamental elements or criteria (e.g. such as content, word choice, mechanics, organization, grammar, etc) and assesses them independently. Focus is put

on traits which are held to be common to all writing. The criteria of assessment are separated and the descriptors for each are supplied independently. Discrete scores are attributed to separate aspects of performance, permitting learners to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses in precise areas (Brown, 2004). This scale is more appropriate in formative assessment. Primary trait scoring focuses on selected aspects of writing, usually a specific range of discourse (e.g. persuasion or explanation) (Weigle, 2002). The writer's performance on the very particular task at hand is assessed in terms of how much it achieves a given rhetorical goal. While impromptu timed tests have brought the assessment of writing much rigour, especially in large-scale testing situations, doubts are often raised regarding the faithfulness of this method to reflect learners' real competence. Weigle (2002) argues that direct testing judges a single piece of writing administered under non ordinary conditions. This seems to present only a partial picture of students' abilities. Further, Neff-Lippman (2012) sees that direct testing discards process and contextual issues and represents a restricted conception of competence. But because direct tests are still widely used, she suggests a number of qualities (e.g. clarity, engagement and audience specification, etc) to be incorporated in their construction for more efficiency.

C. Alternative Assessment.

In response to the limitations of direct assessment and in line with the changes occurring in composition theory and education at large in the late 1980 and 1990s, alternative methods of assessment have been developed. Writing specialists have become interested in informal classroom assessment methods which cater for learners in a more productive and authentic manner. The alternatives encompass a wide range of techniques, the chief ones being writing portfolios, protocol analyses, conferences and interviews, journals, peer-assessment, self-assessment and observations.

1. Portfolios.

A portfolio involves a whole record of accomplishments. It is generally defined as "a purposeful collection of work that provides information about someone's efforts, progress or achievement in a given area" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In writing assessment contexts, portfolios involve the student's entire writing products which capture his or her full performance, involving even drafts and works selected by learners' themselves (Peñaflorida, 2002).

The portfolio approach to writing assessment rests on the premise that writing performance is not uniform. Learners of writing might demonstrate high proficiency in some assignments but not in others. Then, it would be more reasonable to assess a collection of student papers over time and in a variety of genres than to restrict evaluation to one sample (Williams, 2003).

In spite of the apparent difficulty of making a consistent assessment of writing through portfolios, Neff-Lippman (2012) argues that their advantage lies in permitting instructors to function as coaches

and allowing students to exercise revision of their work in clear rhetorical settings. Further, portfolios involve students in task choice and more essentially give them opportunities to write in authentic contexts. This seems to be a significant step towards learner autonomy. The use of portfolios in assessing writing is subject to open variation in the modes of accumulating and appraising learner written products(Weigle, 2002).

2. Protocol analysis.

A protocol is “a sample containing observation(s) of a phenomenon which is being described, observed, or measured” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Embedded in the cognitively-oriented process approach to writing, the procedure of protocol analysis is counted among the innovative techniques that can be exploited to assess writing in the classroom. In essence, this form of evaluation is “a think aloud activity”. As explained by Peñaflorida (2002), the assessment starts by asking students to record their emerging thoughts all through the writing process. The transcripts are subject to analysis, which can reveal the internal mechanisms of generating ideas, revising and editing texts.

3. Journals.

A journal is a form of writing characterized by extensive freedom and self-reflection on the part of the learner. Brown (2004) defines a journal as “a log (or “account”) of one’s thoughts, feelings, reactions, assessments, ideas, or progress toward goals, usually written with little attention to structure, forum, or correctness” (p. 260). Journals are used to elicit regular extensive writing, giving students ultimate autonomy in topic choice and chance to experiment with their abilities in total privacy. According to Stix (2003), journal writing assignments are given to students to see who does or does not understand what is taught. Through writing, misconception comes into clear focus. Writing allows the student to make particular problems explicit. In the context of writing instruction, journals give students opportunities of practicing all aspects of writing, they trigger thinking, and they promote individualization and communication. The assessment of journal entries involves commenting on them in written notes or through conferencing. When assessed, journals go beyond mere scoring to providing constructive feedback to learners.

4. Conferences and Interviews.

Conversational in nature and rooted in the process approach to writing, conferences involve discussion of learner’s written work, portfolios or journals with teachers and peers in order to fine-tune ideas, talk about difficulties, highlight strengths and weaknesses or receive feedback (Thornbury, 2006; Richards & Schmidt, 2002). It is claimed that conferences are a formative assessment tool whose the chief function is to offer affirmative washback. An interview is a carefully constructed type of conference in which teachers interrogate students about a specific assignment

using focused probes. The use of both conferences and interviews in assessing writing informally calls for caution in order conform to the principles of assessment. Both are shown to be of low practicality, while the unreliability rests on a clear specification of objectives and procedures (Brown, 2004).

5. Observations.

Observations constitute an integral part of teaching. When used as a writing assessment tool, they permit teachers to scrutinize performance as it occurs in its authentic settings and evaluate competence accordingly. Gould and Roffey-Barentsen (2014) show that observations depend on detailed recording with sufficient clarity as to the observed facts on performance. Checklists, scaling rates or anecdotal records can be used in order to itemize the competences to be observed. According to Brown (2004), observation as an alternative assessment tool is conducted in a non-systematic way and covers both verbal and non-verbal behaviours of students in such a natural way that might not be noticed by learners. It is stressed, however, that it should be guided by clear objectives and conducted with relative systematicness.

6. Self-assessment and Peer Assessment

Self-assessment is the ability to judge one's own progress. Assessment specialists today assert that learners need to be trained in this mode of evaluation (Thornbury, 2006). Self-assessment enhances learners' reflection about their own work. The theoretical justification of this evaluation mode, according to Brown (2004), is derived from two established principles of second language acquisition: autonomy and intrinsic motivation. In the context of writing, Harris and McCann (2012) see that self-assessment is a direct and resourceful way to probe the problematic areas of language for students. It gives them an elevated degree of control over their own accomplishment and makes them motivated to challenge themselves towards more skillful writing. The benefit of self assessment, according to Hathaway (2014) is that students take possession of the evaluation process. This would add a personal dimension to learning and reduce sensitivity to feedback. Peer-assessment, which involves all activities in which learners evaluate each other's performance, is seen as a very important formative evaluation source that writing instructors can draw on. It rests on the principle of cooperative learning (Brown, 2004). Peer assessment concretizes the role of authentic audience in writing and encourages the growth of interpersonal intelligence based on clear expectations (Noel, 2017).

But for the use of self-assessment and peer assessment to be efficient and productive, it is necessary that the learners themselves are guided with clear objectives and criteria determined by the teacher. On the whole, the tendency in writing theory now is to use alternatives in the classroom as a way to triangulate measures of writing competence, a reaction to the long-established one-shot method of

essay testing. Alternative assessment has the merit of being more formative, authentic and process-oriented. These are indicators of an elevated extent of communicativeness and fairness (Lenski&Verbruggen, 2010).

Conclusion

Some recommendations are provided to mend the malfunctioning parts of the assessment apparatus and to eliminate the widely observed unproductive, static assessment routines in EFL writing classes.

The following pointers are provided:

- ❖ EFL writing teachers ought to be fully acquainted with the technical distinctions and the wide variety of assessment purposes.
- ❖ For EFL writing assessment to yield its desired outcomes, the principles of general assessment have to be observed.
- ❖ While institutional restrictions may not always permit teachers to use the assessment tasks they would favour, practicality issues should be cautiously treated in such a way that validity is ensured through assessing writing performance.
- ❖ Reliability issues should not seek consistency of measurement at the expense of preparing learners for a more authentic use of the target language.
- ❖ Writing assessors have to receive sufficient training in test construction methods and scoring procedures in both pre-service and in-service contexts in order to ensure fair and effective

assessment. This can be achieved via enhancing a collaborative exercise and designing appropriate benchmarking of texts to achieve consistency.

- ❖ In order for writing assessment to have a positive influence on teaching and to promote learner progress, alternative tools have to be integrated into EFL writing classes.

In the end, it should be stated that the enterprise of assessing EFL writing follows an intricate network of principles and approaches derived from the vast field of general assessment. These are tailored to fit the nature of the writing skill and the context of language teaching simultaneously. In fact, an appropriate practice of assessing EFL writing must be grounded in a thorough knowledge of assessment fundamentals. Not equipped with adequate assessment literacy, EFL writing instructors may fall in the trap of rendering this activity a mere psychometric, statistical process, which discards important aspects of language learning and which provides no direct feedback to teaching. Written language is in the first place a medium of communication, and if assessing writing does not help in preparing EFL writers for wider communications, the role of writing programmes in developing literacy would be negligible.

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