

ASSESSING WRITING: TRANSPARENCY AND IMPROVEMENT WITH ANALYTIC RUBRICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explain current writing assessment practices in three universities of Uzbekistan and review literature to offer practical and effective assessment tool to assist writing teachers in assessing their students writing performance in higher education where English for specific purposes (ESP) is taught. The main focus of the paper would be to explore analytic rubric, their characteristics and role in assessing writing skill in higher education.

Keywords: Rubrics, analytic rubrics, writing, language assessment, ESP.

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

Guskey (2004) states that “grading is one of a teacher’s greatest challenges and most important professional responsibilities” (p. 31 cited in Bailey, 2012, p. 63). In other words, assessment, on the one hand, is challenging and it is teachers’ duty to excel at it. Despite the importance of this action, teachers receive little if any formal training in grading practices and the effectiveness of various grading methods (Brookhart, 2004; Stiggins, 1993 cited in Bailey, 2012, p. 63). That is to say, teachers tend to get little assessment training or some of them do not have any training.

This paper is attempting to find a solution to assessment issues when writing skill of students in higher education is suffering. In particular, in national system of Uzbekistan students in higher education are marked in three ways: joriy (current grade), oraliq (mid-term grade) and yakuniy (final grade). The problem is that students are more exposed to be measured or evaluated on the basis of numbers, points to a great extent and little is done with formative assessment (assessment for the purpose of learning). This leads to students working only for current grades, midterm and final examinations. As a result, students seem to be learning little from their errors. They may also not develop their knowledge, skills, and learning due to very little amount of time given for working on errors, comments from the teachers, self-corrections, etc., which result in passive learning and discouragement rather than encouragement.

The writing performance of students and assessing this skill in tertiary education has not been studied well. Recent research studies indicate that graduates of state universities lack the skill of writing good structured compositions and this is believed to cause issues in their future work places (Mukhammedov, 2017)

There are many factors for students’ poor writing performance. One of them could be lack of appropriate, well-designed writing course books. Most students are usually in search of materials to improve their writing skill. Some teachers use old materials without updates to the books that have been used the previous academic year. Another reason can be the syllabus which needs some updating in terms of new topics, activities, assessment system and course materials. Syllabus might lack necessary information about the system of assessing writing

skill of students. They are not ready or they need restructuring or they need to update their content to make it competitive with other developed nations' frameworks. Finally the most important one is assessment literacy of Uzbek language teachers and the knowledge of using necessary tools to assess students' written work and eventually improve.

An assessment is "a method or tool used...to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness, learning progress, skills acquisition, or educational needs of the students" (Gaston, 2019, slide 6).

An assessment could be:

- a quiz
- an exam
- a project
- a presentation
- an essay

<https://www.edglossary.org/assessment/>

Transparency

Transparency is the state of being easy to perceive or understand; or clear. Everything about an assessment should be written and available for the students to see at any time.

- Clear and exact assessment description (what exactly do you want the students to do?)
- Requirements (word count, typed/hand-written, formatting)
- Clear rubric (criteria, descriptors, and scale/levels)
- Students should know the purpose of the assessment
 - The intention behind the assessment should be clear
 - Where does the assessment fit into the course objectives? What skill or knowledge is being measured? (Gaston, 2019, slide 8)

If transparency does not exist in the assessment practices, the following possible instances can occur.

- ✓ Students aren't given clear instructions for an assessment
- ✓ Students don't understand the directions nor the purpose/intent of an assessment
- ✓ Creates confusion and stalls the process for students
- ✓ The final product may not actually measure what it intended to measure
- ✓ Students' progress is not being accurately measured in terms of the objectives of the course
- ✓ Students cannot reflect on their own learning and their progress
- ✓ Learning suffers (Gaston, 2019, slide 9)

Assessment descriptions

Assessment descriptions help make your expectations transparent to students.

Adopted from (Gaston, 2019, slide 10)

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- Students produce a product that allows you to accurately measure what you intended to measure
 - Students can better reflect and progress
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They give detailed information about the task.

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- There should be NO ROOM for misinterpretation
 - Students should know exactly what to do from reading the description
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Rubric

A rubric: a guide listing specific criteria for grading or scoring academic papers, projects, or tests (Gaston, 2019, slide 16). The study of Becker (2016) defines rubrics as a tool used to

score or measure students' performance. Rubrics are valued for their potential to clarify teachers' expectations, identify strengths and weaknesses and eventually direct learners to self-evaluation. He also states that rubrics can also serve as a formative assessment which enables students understand tasks and improve their writing performance when for example, they are involved in the development of rubrics and use them when peer-editing each other' work.

The majority of researchers (Becker, A., 2016, Ene & Kosobuscki, 2016, Li & Lindsey, 2015) indicate rubrics have many instructional benefits such as they help learners better understand their teachers' expectations, course objects (Becker, 2016), students improve their accuracy (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016), and facilitate self and peer-assessment in the writing classroom (Li & Lindsey, 2015). Other studies have also confirmed the instructional purpose of rubrics, for instance, in the study By Wang (2014) rubrics had a positive role on students' peer feedback practice. However, another study by Aldulkhayel (2017) indicates that the information in the rubrics was not clear to them. In other words, rubrics mostly represent as a positive instructional tool to promote learning, but it can cause negative impact on students when they are designed inattentively.

Another theme of the literature review indicates that rubrics have been used for administrative purposes, as well. For example, in the study by Wiseman (2012) rubrics namely holistic and analytic rubrics were used for diagnostic and placement tests. Analytic rubrics were preferred to be used to get more information about students. Faculty members can also come together to develop a scoring rubric for program assessment, which represents shared expectations of the English department. This collaboration will end up with evaluating students' work with the rubric (Hawaii, 2012). Goodrich noted that parents can also use rubrics to help their children with their home assignments (1997, p. 17).

Last theme of the literature review identified similar findings in most studies. Most research state that rubrics were not effective to help students understand the information given. According Ene and Kosobucki (2016) form-focused rubrics were not effective since learners were left unsatisfied. Approximate 55 % of students confirmed that rubrics about their writing helped them to see what they are good and students as a group don't have a strong agreement on the clarity of the rubrics (Aldukhayel, 2017). Another research done by Bacha (2002) indicates that there is a discrepancy between students' and teachers' understanding of assessment criteria of a good essay. However, the research by Anthony Becker state that including students in the assessment process resulted in improved writing performance. Further, he claims that the presence of rubrics had a great impact on students' improvement of writing skills. In other words, rubrics can be good when they are well prepared to meet students' needs, course objective and rather simplified to understand. If not, they can cause difficulties to understand.

Analytic rubric

Analytic Rubric for Business letter (ESP) adopted from (Assessment of English Learners at americanenglish.state.gov)

	Format	Spelling & Punctuation	Language	Vocabulary & Grammar
3	No errors in format	Spelling & punctuation are correct	Language is formal	Vocabulary & grammar are correct
2	Very few errors in format	Spelling & punctuation are mostly correct	Language is mostly formal	Vocabulary & grammar are mostly correct

1	Some errors in format	Spelling & punctuation are somewhat correct	Language is somewhat formal	Vocabulary & grammar are somewhat correct
0	Significant errors in format; no response	Significant errors in spelling & punctuation; No response.	Significant errors in formality of language; No response.	Significant errors in vocabulary & grammar; No response.

Analytic rubrics often look like tables. They should have three main components: criteria, levels/scale and descriptors.

Criteria: these are the areas or traits that are being measured. These are the areas or traits that are being measured. Example for a writing test: organization, content, grammar, and mechanics

Levels/scale: values on which to rate each criteria. Values on which to rate each criterion

Most rubrics have at least 3-5 different values

Numerical scales: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.

Percentages: 0%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, etc.

Ranges: 0-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, etc.

Alphabetical scales: A-F

Other: unacceptable, poor, acceptable, good, excellent

Descriptors: these are explanations for each level of the criteria

What does 4 (out of 5) on grammar mean? What does 70% on "organization" mean?

Descriptors help both teachers and students

Three state universities (*for some reasons their names are anonymous*) have been visited to obtain necessary information about the assessment practices related to writing skill of English and the following questions were asked to know how writing skill of students in their first and second year are evaluated.

1. Is there any assessment criteria being used related to writing?
2. Is there single combined assessment criteria used to assess writing?
3. Is there any assessment criteria created by university teachers themselves?
4. Is it included in the curriculum (ishchi dastur) or not? Is it mentioned in the syllabus (o'quv dastur) of the writing course?
5. Who created them and what is it based on?

Findings from interviews about assessment practices for writing skill in three universities

	University 1	University 2	University 3
Q1. Is there any assessment criteria being used to assess L2 writing?	It exists but not detailed, on a surface level. Full description is not provided for each criteria	No assessment criteria at all, teachers depend on their intuition, prior knowledge	No assessment criteria are practiced. Teachers use their prior knowledge from school or university they studied
Q2. Is there single combined assessment criteria used to assess writing?	Three English departments have their own assessment tools and practices	NO. There does not exist any	NO. L2 writing is not taught to students. So there is not found any assessment tool to assess
Q3. Is there any assessment criteria created by university teachers themselves?	Yes, it can be found in the working plan, but it is not explained or described in detail	Yes, there is. But it is not for L2 writing. It is general for all skills.	NO

Q4. Is it included in the curriculum (ishchi dastur) or not? Is it mentioned in the syllabus (o'quv dastur) of the writing course?	Yes it is included in the working plan But the syllabus does not have any information on assessment	There is only too general information about assessment.	There is only too general information about assessment.
Q5. Who created them and what is it based on?	Senior teachers, the head of the English department	No information provided	No information provided

After analyzing working program and syllabus of three universities, it can be concluded that they do not contain any information related to assessment criteria of the writing skill. There are names of activities, number of lessons, date and the teacher's signature. The topics to be covered are mostly grammar-focused or general topics. Any topic related to writing activity is not found in the syllabus. After discussing with the English department teachers and the head we came to conclusion that the topic of motivation letter to be included in the syllabus and the working plan as it is significant for students to be able to write when they wish to apply for a job.

Assessment criteria of writing performance of first and second year students from working plan lack detailed information of how students' writing will be evaluated. There is no sufficient, detailed description of categories which causes difficulties for both teachers and students. Teachers will have problems with reliability and validity issues and the same issues concern students. Students cannot expect their scores since they are provided with detailed assessment criteria which can clearly explain how they should approach any task.

In conclusion, assessment is there where there is teaching. Students and teachers interact closely in the academic setting on a regular basis. Teachers should work for students and students have the right to learn and get ready for the challenges in the job market. The role of assessment practices surely plays a significant role and they ought to be implemented in the very best way and teachers need to be assessment literate to provide fair, reliable and valid assessment towards their learners. Rubrics can assist teachers in making their work more productive and even helpful for students. Students can expect their marks and learn better when effective writing assessment tools such as rubrics are used.

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