



ASSESSMENT OF WRITING

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The aim of this paper is to illustrate the necessity of having clearly defined criteria for the assessment of writing. Students should be provided with the criteria prior to commencing the writing process. Our students' previous experience in writing showed a prevalent lack of awareness in the evaluation of their writing and exposed a crucial need to develop assessment criteria with both the aim of traditional assessment and student self-evaluation/self-improvement. Designing and applying appropriate assessment criteria play an essential part in the teaching and learning of writing as a process.

Key words: assessment of writing, student self-evaluation, self-improvement, learner independence

INTRODUCTION

Writing forms an unavoidable component in the process of foreign language learning. Teaching and acquiring the skill of writing is an essential part of *English Language Practice 1 (Jezične vježbe 1)*, a compulsory subject in the undergraduate degree programme offered by the Department of English at the University of Split. This subject is team-taught in close collaboration by the authors of this paper: a Croatian teacher of English and a native teacher of English. Our previous article described the process of teaching and learning writing (Bakašun and Blažević, 2002). This article now focuses on assessment of writing since evaluation is a crucial part of the entire process.

Assessment as a way of measuring the degree to which students have mastered a subject is a basic necessity not only in learning English but indeed of all education. When one considers any kind of study, assessment is an integral part of education. Primarily, one can consider assessment to be an accepted presumption in terms of the actual grade/mark required, in this case, by the University as an educational and social institution. This process ca-

tegorises students into good-better-best and sets a cut-off standard above or at which students must achieve in order to continue and eventually complete their degree thereby obtaining a rite of passage into certain domains of society.

Despite accepting the above, we believe that assessment plays a greater role than merely determining the good-better-best students. When one considers the peculiarly difficult task of writing in a foreign language, it is crucial for us as teachers and for the students themselves that, through a process of assessment which is clearly defined and stated in advance, visible progress in writing can be achieved. This process should enable the detection and recognition of problem areas for both students and teachers alike. The result of this should be that students are eventually able to overcome and improve their weaknesses.

DIAGNOSING PROBLEM AREAS IN ASSESSMENT

It was our aim that our students should become better at writing through a system of

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assessment that encouraged self-analysis, self-criticism and reflection, and, moreover, served to give feedback which was of crucial importance both to us and our students. The need for such a process of assessment was supported by our students' output in their first writing assignment. The purpose of this introductory task, which was not formally assessed, was to acquaint ourselves with our new students on many levels, e.g. their knowledge of writing conventions, personal attitudes to writing and just how they wrote in general.

Hence, our first-year students were asked to write an account of their previous experiences in writing commenting on the teacher input given, the quantity of writing done, how the writing was assessed, how many different types of writing they had been exposed to and/or had done and the techniques they used to produce a piece of writing. Students brainstormed in class a set of related input questions to aid their writing. What the students wrote confirmed the need to rationalise the whole process of assessment. Samples of comments symptomatic of problem areas follow. The comments are categorised according to a few of the input questions discussed by the students.

1 How much writing did you do at school?

- We would usually get a topic about which we had to write something, give our opinion and our teacher wasn't giving us tasks very often.
- The problem is that in our schools teachers don't pay too much attention to writing and therefore pupils don't get enough practice so naturally they find it very difficult to write something. Nevertheless, I can't say that we had any practice at all.
- We didn't practice composition writing at all and then at the end of semester our teacher would give us a dictation to check our spelling and that was it.
- At school we did mostly grammar exercises, creative writing was very rare.

Obviously, teaching writing is a complex and difficult task which requires a large amount of teacher-time and individual student attention. The reality of large classes and a heavy teacher workload makes this task quite impractical. Composition writing is perhaps not crucial for everyone, but given that our students are future teachers or translators, the teaching and learning of writing is essential.

2 What teacher input did you receive prior to the writing task?

- All my experiences with writing are the same! We would get three topics on the blackboard and had to choose one and write about it in two school hours.
- We didn't do any practice for compositions which would be marked. Our teacher would just give us a topic and we had to write about it.

It is evident from these comments that students' experiences in writing were very limited. There was little or no teacher input and students had no idea about or experience in writing as a process (Bakašun and Blažević, 2002).

3 On what criteria did your teacher assess your writing?

- What annoyed me the most was that I never really knew according to which criteria it had been assessed. I mean, was my grade based on style, creativity, grammar mistakes, or on something completely different? Even when I thought I wrote a pretty good composition, my grade would say differently. We didn't get any explanation from the teacher.
- In my class the first grade we got for our first composition was the grade we got for every composition afterwards no matter if we tried harder or not.
- My goal was to get a good mark. That's why I wrote in a way I thought my teacher would like and give me a good grade.

What I'm trying to say is that I never wrote from my own point of view but I tried to satisfy my teacher's expectations.

Obviously, students were confused about the assessment criteria used and did not understand the rationale behind the criteria applied. Their teachers appeared to be using the system of impression marking which is criticised by Cushing Weigle (2002:112) as not being reliable enough as it gives an overall grade based on criteria that are never really defined. Such a marking system allows too much teacher subjectivity making it almost impossible for students to detect insufficiencies in their writing.

4 How much feedback did you get?

- We would just get our marks without comments. We never discussed this in class.
- When we wrote something we either never got our work back, or we would get it back so late that we forgot what we wrote.

If the feedback provided is insufficient or non-existent, it excludes any hope of self-analysis or opportunities for self-improvement and the overall overcoming of difficulties in writing. Also, when one considers that many of our students are future teachers themselves, the need for a clear assessment process and well defined criteria becomes even more pressing.

To avoid such a situation, we insisted that students' work be handed in on time so that it could be assessed and marked at relatively the same time, under the same conditions, to assure ultimate fairness to all students and to achieve consistent and reliable assessment results. Students' work was always returned at the next class. To achieve our goal of student self-diagnosis and awareness of weaknesses, students were furthermore asked to rewrite their work so that they could improve upon the diagnosed weaknesses. This rewrite was also collected next class and returned immediately

in the following. It is our belief that prompt return of work forms an essential part of effective feedback to students. Although time-consuming, we found that this process achieved the desirable results in students' improvement.

CONSTRUCTING THE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

We applied specific criteria in order to assess student work. Despite measurement being the primary function of a test, we strongly agree with Bachman and Palmer (1996) that a test must serve pedagogical purposes. This is especially true in the area of writing which poses the most difficulty for our students. Therefore we avoided the more common holistic scoring procedure 'which focuses more on defining strengths' (Cushing Weigle, 2002:112), because our desire was to also diagnose weak areas that need improvement. Moving away from impression marking was also an attempt to move away from subjectivity which does not aid students in improving their work. This is the reason we turned to analytic scoring where compositions are rated on several aspects of writing rather than on a single score or rating scale. We developed our criteria for assessing writing on the basis of the analytic scales created by Jacobs *et al.* (1981).

Similarly to Jacobs *et al.* (1981), we assess five aspects of writing: content, organisation, accuracy, vocabulary and mechanics. Jacobs *et al.* use a system of points to assess each category weighting each category differentially. In our case each category is weighted equally. Namely, each category is given an individual mark (from 1 to 5) to simplify the whole procedure as a point system might have confused our students, the majority of whom had never seen such a marking system. Grading from 1 to 5 had meaning and significance for our students as they were familiar with these marks from their previous schooling experience.





CRITERIA USED IN ASSESSMENT OF WRITING

1. CONTENT / TASK ACHIEVEMENT / COMMUNICATIVE QUALITY

EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD (5-4): The writing displays an ability to communicate without causing the reader any trouble. Knowledgeable – substantive – thorough development of thesis/genre – relevant to assigned topic.

AVERAGE (3): The writing displays an ability to communicate with a few difficulties for the reader. Some knowledge of subject – adequate range – limited development of thesis/genre – mostly relevant to topic, but lacks detail.

POOR (2): The writing displays an ability to communicate, although there is often strain for the reader. Limited knowledge of subject – little substance – inadequate development of thesis/genre.

VERY POOR (1): The writing displays a limited ability to communicate, which puts strain on the reader throughout. Does not show knowledge of subject – non-substantive – not relevant to assigned topic/genre.

2. ORGANIZATION / COHESION

EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD (5-4): The writing displays a logical organizational structure which enables the message to be followed easily. Fluent expression – ideas clearly stated and supported – thorough development of introduction, body, and conclusion – thorough development of supporting details – effective use of deictic, referring and connective words – cohesive.

AVERAGE (3): The writing is organized well enough for the message to be followed throughout. Main ideas stand out, but organization unclear – limited development of introduction, body, and conclusion – limited development of supporting details – limited use of cohesive items – defective cohesion.

POOR (2): The writing is too poorly organised for the message to be followed. Ideas confused or disconnected – lacks logical sequencing and development of introduction, body and conclusion – inadequate development of supporting details – lacks cohesion.

VERY POOR (1): The writing lacks a clear organizational structure and the message is difficult to follow – no organization.

3. SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION / ACCURACY

EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD (5-4): Effective use of simple, compound, and complex sentences – effective use of connectors – almost no errors of S-V agreement, verb tense, number, word order, word function, articles, pronouns, prepositions.

AVERAGE (3): Effective simple sentences – minor problems in compound and complex sentences – minor problems in the use of connectors – occasional errors of S-V agreement, verb tense, number, word order, word function, articles, pronouns, prepositions – *but meaning not obscured*.

POOR (2): Problems in simple, compound, and complex sentences – errors of negation, agreement, tense, number, word order, word function, articles, pronouns, prepositions – *meaning often confused or obscured*.

VERY POOR (1): Inadequate, major problems in sentence construction – dominated by errors.

4. VOCABULARY / RANGE / REGISTER

EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD (5-4): Sophisticated range – effective word/idiom choice and usage – word form mastery – appropriate register.

AVERAGE (3): Adequate range – occasional errors of word/idiom form, choice or usage – *but meaning not obscured*.

POOR (2): Limited range – frequent errors of word/idiom form, choice or usage – mother tongue interference – *meaning confused or obscured*.

VERY POOR (1): Little knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms, word form – gross mother tongue interference.

5. MECHANICS + LAYOUT

EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD (5-4): Demonstrates mastery of conventions, few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization – includes clearly defined paragraphs and headings – appropriately sized margins.

AVERAGE (3): Occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, unclear paragraphing – *but meaning not obscured*

POOR (2): Frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing – poor handwriting – *meaning confused or obscured*

VERY POOR (1): No mastery of conventions – dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing – handwriting poor or illegible

Figure 1: Criteria used in assessment of writing



Although using analytic scales is much more time-consuming because there are more decisions for the rater, such a scale serves our aim to provide diagnostic information and to teach students how to self-improve. Students often show an uneven profile across the five different aspects of writing mentioned above. For example, a student's composition may be strong in sentence structure but show little content. So analytic scoring provides a diagnostic picture of students' strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, the extra time spent in assessing in this way reaps rewards in terms of feedback to students. Another salient advantage of these criteria is that they contribute to test reliability, that is, if the same criteria are applied across the board to the same task, then reliable results are achieved. Yet another advantage of analytic criteria is that these same criteria can be applied to every written assignment throughout the whole academic year thus facilitating raters' objectivity and students' monitoring of their own progress in writing.

The analytic criteria presented in figure 1 were discussed at length with the students who were given a copy of these criteria at the very beginning of the academic year. The criteria were referred to prior, during and after completion of the task making them a vital pedagogical rather than merely a measurement tool.

CHOOSING A WRITING TASK

An example of a writing task assigned to students is presented in figure 2 (Broadhead, 2000:27).

In choosing an appropriate task we must take four basic requirements into consideration (Cushing Weigle, 2002:90). The first is clarity. Thus, the given example presents an easily un-

derstood and well explained task. The second is validity. This task gives enough prompts which enable a range of responses to be elicited, thereby demonstrating a range of student abilities and at the same time providing an opportunity for all students to attempt the task. The third aspect of reliability has already been mentioned previously in our consistent application of the same criteria across the board. When considering the fourth aspect, which is that the task should be interesting, we believe that this is related to the concept of authenticity. Tasks and assessment should contain an aspect of authenticity, in other words, they should be relevant to the whole teaching process (Bachman and Palmer, 1996:23). Our given task, a letter of complaint about a poorly organised holiday, demonstrates a topic related to real life, that is, something students may write about beyond the classroom. Unlike the students' experiences mentioned in their comments, where they were forced to write an impromptu composition on an unrelated topic, this task was taken from a Unit on travel from their coursebook and, therefore, was related to the task. Also dissimilar to their previous experiences, time was not limited as the task was done at home and there was a great amount of teacher input given in class time both on the given topic and the whole process of writing (Bakašun and Blažević, 2002).

APPLYING THE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

What follows is an example of a student's response to the task: the first and the second version of the given task (figure 2) illustrating how the application of the analytic assessment criteria contributed to our diagnosis and the student's self improvement.



You are at the end of the first week of a four-week trip organised by a company called Voyager. You have lots of complaints about the holiday but your requests to get things put right have got nowhere. The staff at the hotel say there is nothing they can do and that you will have to write to the head office. You decide to write a letter of complaint saying what you will do if the situation does not improve in the next three weeks. You are determined to have a good holiday and will take matters into your own hands if necessary.

Read the advertisement for the holiday with your own comments added. Then write a letter of complaint.

<p>VOYAGER <u>A holiday of a lifetime travelling to exotic locations</u></p> <p>Exploration in small groups to experience local history and culture! Fully equipped coaches, comfort guaranteed. Evening lecture programme by experts!</p> <p>Five-star luxury hotel with air-conditioned rooms, en-suite facilities, phone and TV. Dining excellence to make evenings an unforgettable experience.</p> <p>Swimming pool and sports facilities equal to none! All inclusive — no extras!</p>	<p>⇒ <i>The groups are huge, must be divided up!</i> <i>Old, uncomfortable coaches, ours broke down! I refuse to go in them again!</i></p> <p>⇒ <i>No air-conditioning in my room. I'm going to move.</i> <i>Restaurant service – awful – not enough waiters.</i></p> <p>⇒ <i>Pool has no water. I'm going to ask for a refund.</i> <i>At the end of the first week I got a bill for breakfast – I'm not paying it!</i></p>
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Figure 2: A sample writing task — A letter of complaint



The student's first version:

*The 'Voyager Company'
PO BOX 2052
London W1A 1HH*

Dear Sir or Madam!

I am writing to Your head office for the hotel staff tells me there is nothing they can do about my numerous complaints.

I am at the end of the first week of a four week trip that I have paid in advance and that was organised by your company named 'Voyager'. I am slowly losing my patience for nothing written and promised in your appealing brochure seems to be truthful.

- *First, I was promised a five-star luxurious hotel with conditioned rooms, phone and TV. And what do I get?*

Small room without a bathroom or windows – talking about the 'luxuries' such as phone or TV is absurd.

- *Then swimming pool and sports facilities were mentioned.*

There is a swimming pool all right, but it could have been a fenced garden as well, for it is full of sand and dirt, and there is no water in it!

Also, there are no sport instructors or sport courts besides two devastated tennis courts.

- *Exploration in small groups to experience local history and culture is not possible for the groups are huge and should be divided, and the old uncomfortable coaches should be replaced immediately by fully equipped and comfortable ones, as it was promised.*

Unfortunately, my group had to experience the danger of driving in the coaches you are offering; ours broke down and I refuse to go in them again!

- *The experts that give evening lecture programme are nothing but amateurs who read or learned by heart a few brochures and are playing smart about it.*
- *Your so-called 'dining excellence' consists of two clumsy waiters that are neither qualified nor sufficient to handle the given task.*

Also, the dining room is inadequate to hold that number of guests.

- *But the biggest con of all is the underlined remark in your brochure that says 'no extras'.*

I find it quite funny for at the end of the first week I received a bill for that tasteless breakfast which I wouldn't consider paying for even if it was included in the price!

- *Dissappointed and deceived as I am, I request solving the room problem immediately, withdrawing the breakfast bill and taking care of my other complaints in three days' time.*



I also dare to say that a little lecture about politeness and good manners to the members of your staff wouldn't do any harm, on the contrary – it would give you less dissatisfied guests in this already unsatisfying situation.

- *If things do not improve, I am afraid I will have to ask you to refund my money.*

If there are any further problems, I will contact my lawyer for I will not let you ruin my 'holiday of a lifetime' – as you call it, and get away with it.

Yours faithfully,

XY

Raters' comments for the first version (based upon the assessment criteria) given to the student

The criteria, marks and comments were fully discussed in a feedback session with students. What follows is a shortened version of that process.

1 CONTENT / TASK ACHIEVEMENT / COMMUNICATIVE QUALITY – mark: 2

There is not much strain for the reader, but there is inadequate development of content: reads more like a shopping list of problems than a fully developed letter. You should tackle one idea at a time developing it fully and applying your own ideas, as well, not just the input from the text.

2 ORGANISATION / COHESION – mark: 2

Poorly developed, constructed and set out paragraphs (inappropriate use of bullet points). You should use the theory of paragraphing (introductory, supporting, explanatory and concluding sentence to fully develop one idea per paragraph). Introduction needs improvement; it lacks purpose and proper development of the reason for writing. Conclusion is also very sparse. Inadequate development of supporting details: the task requires an adequate explanation of the action you are going to take, you should include some expectation of a response. Insufficient use of linking words. Avoid using *but* at the beginning of a sentence.

3 SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION / ACCURACY – mark: 3

Effective, but mainly simple sentences (e.g. *Then swimming pool and sports facilities were mentioned*). Sentence openings are too repetitive (e.g. *I* is overused at the beginning of sentences). Not enough complexity and variation (e.g. *Also* repeated).

4 VOCABULARY / RANGE / REGISTER – mark: 3

Many phrases are 'lifted' from the given text of the task and some were not even properly copied (e.g. *... with conditioned rooms ...*). You should use your own words as much as possible. Some evidence of effective and appropriate word choice (e.g. *Unfortunately, ... , I dare say ...*). Some vocabulary too informal for a formal letter of complaint (e.g. *I would not let you ruin my holiday and get away with it ...*). Overuse of the familiar *you* for a formal letter (e.g. *...it would give you less dissatisfied ...*). Try to use more formal expressions.

5 MECHANICS + LAYOUT – mark: 3

Occasional errors of spelling (e.g. *devided, equiped, dissappointed*), capitalization (e.g. *Your*) and punctuation (e.g. *Dear Sir or Madam!*). Layout needs attention as paragraphs are not properly defined because of inappropriate use of bullet points.

OVERALL MARK: – 3

The student's second version:

*The 'Voyager Company'
PO BOX 2052
London W1A 1HH*

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am writing with regard to the four-week trip organised by your company. I would like to take issue with the inadequate organisation of the entire trip and accommodation, which seemed to be completely the opposite of what was promised.

Firstly, when we arrived at the hotel after an exhausting journey, we were surprised to see the unfriendly staff together with very indifferent service of the hotel. We were forced to stand in a queue for almost an hour. Finally, we went to our rooms, but we unfortunately concluded that they were very small without a bathroom and lacked the 'luxuries' such as air conditioning, phone and TV. Furthermore, the entire atmosphere and interior were irritating and inappropriate.

Secondly, although we were supposed to experience local history and culture, our tourist guide was unqualified for the job, the groups were huge and should have been divided. A few interesting sights were so distant, that we had to get there by coaches which were so uncomfortable and dangerous. They should be replaced immediately by fully equipped and comfortable ones, as it was promised.

So far, we were extremely disappointed with the entire hotel service, but the unpleasant fact that the swimming pool was full of dirt and sand and that the hotel did not offer any kind of entertainment, was irritating the most. Therefore, there is an unquestionable need for an efficient reorganisation of the hotel. Your so-called 'dining excellence' was also disappointing. The waiters were clumsy and were neither qualified nor sufficient to handle the given tasks. Employing a larger number of staff with more experience and good manners, would give you less dissatisfied guests in this already unsatisfying situation.

Finally, disappointed and deceived as I am, I request solving the problems immediately. You did not organise the holiday carefully enough and we did not get our money's worth, not to mention the bill for breakfast which I am not going to pay.

Consequently, if things do not improve, I am afraid I will be forced to ask you to refund my money and seek legal action.

I look forward to your prompt reply.

Yours faithfully,

XY



Raters' comments for the second version (based upon the assessment criteria) given to the student

1 CONTENT / TASK ACHIEVEMENT / COMMUNICATIVE QUALITY – mark: 4/5

Substantial development of the topic and ideas. Content relevant to the task.

2 ORGANISATION / COHESION – mark: 4

Logically organised: most paragraphs contain one idea which has been developed by using appropriate paragraph sentences. Great improvement in development of introduction (e.g. reason for writing introduced immediately) and conclusion (e.g. *I look forward to your prompt reply*). Appropriate inclusion and variation of connective words (e.g. *Firstly, Secondly, So far, Finally, Consequently*).

3 SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION / ACCURACY – mark: 4

Now, there is a definite range of sentences which do not contain many errors, there is adequate variety in sentence beginnings, e.g. *Employing* (gerund), *Therefore* (connective word), *The waiters* (subject), *I* only occurs occasionally. However, some ambiguous sentences need to be clarified (e.g. *... I am afraid I will be forced to ask you to refund my money and seek legal action.* – who will seek legal action?!).

4 VOCABULARY / RANGE / REGISTER – mark: 4

There is more evidence of the appropriate formal style required for this kind of task (e.g. *Therefore, there is an unquestionable need for an efficient reorganisation of the hotel ...* or phrases like *as it was promised*). A marked decrease of the use of the familiar you.

5 MECHANICS + LAYOUT – mark: 4/5

There is a huge improvement in construction and layout of paragraphs (e.g. bullet points omitted). Most spelling/punctuation/capitalization errors corrected (e.g. *Dear Sir / Madam,*).

OVERALL MARK: 4 (A marked improvement, well done!)

The above illustrates how the application of analytic scoring has contributed to a real improvement in student writing. Problem areas were identified and discussed with the students. The combination of the feedback, assessment criteria and raters' comments provided the basis for student self-analysis, thereby promoting self-improvement and learner independence. Such an analytic assessment procedure is a time-consuming task but we found that, as the year went on and the students became better acquainted with both the assessment criteria and the process of writing, less teacher-time was needed for evaluation and the students gradually took on the responsibility for their own learning and improvement.

CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the assessment of writing for three purposes. The first is testing for proficiency or traditional testing which categorises students for various educational and social establishment reasons. The second purpose is diagnosis or assessment which, through the development of appropriate criteria, diagnoses students' areas of weaknesses in writing. These criteria then form the basis for the third purpose of assessment which is achievement. Namely, students are forced to self-analyse their progress and actually improve their writing skills. In our opinion, the second and third are more important. If students are aware of and apply the criteria to their work, the criteria become an opportunity or indeed a learning tool for their development as independent learners. Thus, assessment becomes an essential part of the whole writing process as described in our article *Portfolio and the Process of Writing* (Bakašun and Blažević, 2002).

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OCJENJIVANJE PISANIH RADOVA

Sažetak

Cilj je članka ukazati na potrebu da se pisani radovi studenata ocjenjuju na temelju jasno razrađenih kriterija. Studenti se moraju upoznati s kriterijima ocjenjivanja prije nego što započnu s procesom pisanja. Prethodno iskustvo naših studenata u pisanju pokazalo je da nisu svjesni kako su se njihovi radovi vrednovali. Ta činjenica je pokazala da je vrlo važno razraditi kriterije ocjenjivanja kojima je cilj ne samo tradicionalno ocjenjivanje nego i kritička prosudba vlastitog rada, čime se potiče samostalno napredovanje studenata. Stoga primjena analitičkih kriterija ocjenjivanja ima bitnu ulogu u cjelokupnom podučavanju i učenju pisanja kao procesa.

Ključne riječi: ocjenjivanje pisanja, kritička prosudba vlastitog rada, samostalno napredovanje, samostalnost studenta

