



Evaluating Teachers' Assessment Practice on Students Writing Performance

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Abstract

Teachers' writing assessment practice in foreign language learning classroom is the issue that has not been investigated empirically and rigorously. Bearing this fact in mind, this study looks at how teachers gauge students' conceptual understanding and ability to perform task. To this end, four English teachers who had participated in writing instruction and assessment in their classroom were interviewed, and twenty students were also cross-examined to ensure the trustworthiness. The investigation reveals that the teachers' assessment practice does not satisfy the criteria. The students involved, moreover, specified that the teachers only showed them the score without giving a further explanation on their strengths and weaknesses, and they never indicated which part the students have gone wrong in their written work. Therefore, the results suggest the stakeholder to give the teachers professional development by training them with the fundamental knowledge base for carrying out valid assessment in any context.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the four language skills that English Foreign Language (EFL) students should learn. It basically develops students' ability to express their ideas, thought, feelings, and emotions, in written form, which further supports their success both at academic and professional lives. In other words, writing mastery will help students develop critical thinking skills which promote their ability to understand and communicate complicated ideas in preparation for good papers throughout their university career, and it also might save them from a lot of tasks and challenge dealing with writing activities later on in their workplace.

However, notwithstanding its prominence, writing has been always a great

struggle for EFL learners. It does not merely requires them to express their ideas on the paper, but it demands abundant knowledge and certain abilities to be skilled at. Richards and Renandya (2002) confirm that "the skills in writing are highly complex; L2 writers have to pay attention to the higher level skills of planning and organizing as well as the lower skills of spelling, punctuation, word choice, and so on" (p. 303).

These complexities have affected the dimension of writing assessment. The teachers should look at a number of various features as depicted in several writing rating scales. In the analytic scale proposed by Jacobs et al , for example, there are at least five categories that should be assigned including mechanics, language use, vocabulary, organization, and content. Referring to Brown (2001), scale for rating composing comprises "content, organization, discourse, syntax, vocabulary, and mechanics including spelling, punctuation, and citation of references, neatness and appearance" (p. 357). When it is associated to the genre type e.g. descriptive and expository writing, the aspects to consider are different and turn to be much more complicated. In descriptive text, the aspects cover the structure, sensory details, word choice, simile / metaphor / personification, sentence structure / sentence fluency, grammar and spelling. While in the expository writing, it is classified into support (specific details), language, organization, development, format, conventions, and spelling.

Accordingly the multifaceted nature of writing causes the teacher face innumerable challenges in assessing the students' written production. It requires enormous time to device and administer which in turn make teachers become furious and frustrated particularly when assessment take away their teaching time. It is in line with Lee (2007) who states that "Although responding to student writing is an important and meaningful area of teachers' work, it is often described in negative terms, referred to as frustrating, grueling and anxiety ridden, tedious and unrewarding" (p.13).

Assessment, in fact, plays a prominent role in teaching and learning process. It helps students identify their areas of strength and weakness and help teachers provide helpful feedback to their work. Added to that, assessments also aids teachers design and arrange for operative, directed instruction in the academic content standards. By measuring student learning against the principles, teachers can alter the teaching straightforwardly to what every student desires.

Related to the issue surrounding the assessment, there have been a great number of studies about writing assessment, but they mostly focus on assessing students writing ability. Studies carried out evaluation of teacher's assessment on writing are profoundly insufficient and has received little attention. To bridge the gap, this study is aimed at investigating how the teachers measure the students' mastery of their writing skills.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Assessment is simply defined as the classroom procedure to measure what students know and are able to do. Ioannou-Georgiou (2003) defines assessment as "a general term which includes all methods used to gather information about children's knowledge, ability, understanding, attitudes, and motivation" (p.4). Assessment, as part of the learning process, emphasizes on three major domains: cognitive, psychomotor and affective (Bloom, 1956, p. 7-8). The cognitive domain of an individual contains "the recall or recognition of knowledge and the development of intellectual abilities and skills" (Bloom, 1956, p. 7-8). Cognitive assessment is an effective approach that analyses understanding of concepts, critical thinking, and academic standards. The psychomotor domain relates to "the manipulative or motor-skill area" (Bloom, 1956, p. 7-8). Laboratory experiments are a good example of assessment of the psychomotor domain. Finally, the affective domain pertains to "changes in interest, attitudes, and values, and the development of appreciation and adequate adjustment" (Bloom, 1956, p. 7-8).

Bachman and Palmer (1996) discussed two main purposes for language assessment. The primary purpose is to make inferences about language ability, and the secondary purpose is to make decisions based on those interferences. It means that the assessment measures the learner's knowledge and skills in their learning area and to prove their knowledge and understanding to the standards of the awarding body. It also impacts decision-making upon grades, placement, advancement, instructional needs, curriculum, and etc.

There are various ways to categorize assessment methods, and one of which is performance assessment. Performance assessment is focused on direct observation of student performance. Students create projects or perform tasks based on predetermined standards, criteria and indicators, which are evaluated using a scoring rubric. In simple words, this assessment requires students to

demonstrate performance, not to answer or choose available answers.

Assessment of student performance is one of the foremost basic duties of classroom instructors as it significantly impacts the whole lot that instructors do (Mertler, 2009). Referring to Spolsky cited in Bayat and Rezaei (2015) "it is not true that if an educator is good in teaching a language, he or she is good in assessing the learners as well" (p. 140). In order to evaluate learners appropriately, it is necessary for teachers to have an adequate level of assessment literacy (Popham in Bayat and Rezaei, 2015, p. 140). The term of assessment literacy was firstly coined by Richard Stiggins. He affirms that the teachers with this knowledge "could discern between excellent and poor-quality assessments and apply that knowledge to make informed inferences about student achievement" (Stabler-Havener, 2018, p. 2). In relation to this, Stiggins (1995) therefore refers assessment literate to an educator who 'knows the difference between sound and unsound assessment. They are not intimidated by the sometimes mysterious and always daunting technical world of assessment' (p. 240).

Writing is the area in which performance assessment is implemented. In assessing the students' performance, the teacher commonly follows three forms of rating scales methods including primary trait scales, holistic scales, and analytic scales. In primary trait scales scoring, as Weigle (2002, p. 11) stated, "the rating scale is defined with respect to the specific writing assignment and essays are judged according to the degree of success with which the writer has carried out the assignment". In holistic scoring, the text is evaluated based on an overall impression or combination of all criteria, while in analytic, the students' work is rated based on several specified criteria.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This current study was carried out in English Education Department at a state University in West Java, and it included four EFL teachers teaching Essay Writing and twenty students taking the course.

In this study, the researcher applied a type of research defined as descriptive case study. According to Yin (2003), descriptive case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (p. 15). Following this definition, it is also often said to be mainly suitable for research seeking to answer "how" and "why" question. For the purpose of this

study, a descriptive case study design describes very basic information about how teachers evaluate the students' performance on their writing production.

The data of this study were elucidated from two sources: 1) the interview with two teachers as the primary source and 2) the synchronous focus group discussion with ten students to establish trustworthiness. The data gathered were subsequently analyzed using the qualitative perspective.

DISCUSSION

This section reviews the findings related to how the teachers evaluate the students' performance in writing. Each point is first labeled, and is then exemplified by teachers' experience, obtained from the discussion with the teachers themselves and also the students. Lastly, an attempt has been made to illuminate the assessment practice found on the data collected.

Fact 1: The teachers assess writing by assigning the students to compose text

To represent the level of students' learning achievement in writing, all teachers use scoring and grading on the students' essay. To do this, they require the students to make a composition after having accomplished each topic the students should learn and then they make the correction on the essay. One teacher remarked "It is important to do the evaluation to determine the extent the students meet the learning objective." Another teacher supported that "Writing assessment refers not only to evaluating a student's final paper and assigning it a grade, but also to measuring a student's knowledge of the elements of writing we have taught him." The teachers also conveyed that the assignment mostly follow the standard process approach. They never give the students test assessment during the instruction.

Fact 2: The teachers have less knowledge on writing assessment

In the interview, the four teachers admit that they use rubric to do grading and scoring. The rubric they always use is analytic rubric. They have never implemented other rubrics like primary trait scales or holistic scales. When they are confirmed the reasons, the teachers confess that they are not familiar with these rubrics.

The interesting fact is that the students from three teachers, through the focus group discussion conducted via WhatsApp group, declare that the teachers do not show the students strength and weaknesses. They also hardly ever find

feedback addressing whether they are correct or incorrect, and marking down for grammatical errors is noted once in a while. The only sure thing they find in the essay is only score, the general score.

It is indicating that the teachers might use the holistic rubric in which they react to the students' compositions as a whole and a single score is awarded to the writing. Unfortunately, the score is not accompanied by the general descriptor of ability. The result shows that the teacher does not have good language assessment literacy.

Fact 3: The teachers do not use rubric appropriately

As it has been mentioned, the teachers claim that they use rubric to determine the students score. Interestingly though, teachers do not seem to have a great deal of this usage. They tend to give score inaccurately, without really considering the rubric. This fact is attained from the teachers' explanation on how they apply rubric in their evaluation. When they were asked the question, they cannot demonstrate the practice evidently. A teacher only mentions that they give score from 10-100 based on the rubric. He does not explain where the score exactly come from. The same thing goes for another teacher. She clarified that she scored the students 60 to 100. She does not mention whose rubric she uses and how it works in her assessment practice.

This data is in line with a student's explanation stating that "When we ask the teachers why we can get this score, she simply mentions that this has been adjusted to the criteria." The rest of the students justified that they have similar experience.

Fact 4: The teachers do not know exactly what aspects to grade in the students' composition

In the interview, the teachers seem to be hesitant when mentioning aspects to assess. They mention about grammar and also vocabulary, but they appear to be indeterminate in elucidating that point. They even remarked that they only evaluate the generic structure of the students writing. In fact, if it is referred to the analytic rubric as they claim to use, the assessment covers at least five aspects including mechanics, language use, vocabulary, organization, and content. This finding shows that the teachers do not really consider the rubric in their assessment practice, and it proves the previous fact that the teachers do not use the rubric appropriately.

In relation to this, the students also affirm that the teacher have never told them specifically about the features they should pay attention to in writing assessment.

Fact 5: The teachers frequently employ peer review in their writing instructions

The data have revealed that the two teachers also integrate peer review in their writing instruction. When asked the reasons, one teacher said that it can help students improve their writing skills and learn how to collaborate effectively. Unexpectedly, another teacher acknowledged that peer reviewing in his classroom is to help him grading and providing feedback for the students which he believes as grueling and anxiety ridden. In his opinion, this kind of activity can reduce his frustration and confusion.

Responding to peer-review, some students show their attentiveness because they think that they learn greatly about their writing, they receive worthy feedback, and they can progress their papers affectedly. However, some others show the other way around. They reason that the peer reviewer does not provide helpful comments, they want only the teacher's thoughts, and they do not expect their friends to get their work before it is "completed".

The data analysis indicated that the teachers' assessment writing practice do not meet the expectations and standards. One of the causes might be because of their limited assessment literacy. From the interview, it is obtained that they have low level of knowledge and skills required to design, develop, maintain and evaluate that will guide and underpin the practice of their writing assessment. Although they know about the principles and concepts of the assessment, they do not have adequate ability to place the things into practice. As the results, they take only a type of scoring scale, for example, and they do not use it accurately.

It is therefore indicating that the assessment literacy plays important role in determining the good practice of assessment in the classroom as Borg, Darling-Hammond and Schulman in Hilden and Frojdendahl (2018) asserted that "The role of assessment literacy in the field of teachers' pedagogical knowledge is focal and in various ways acknowledged in prominent models of teacher cognition" (p. 1). Having language assessment literacy helps "to understand, analyze and apply information on student performance to improve instruction" (Falsgraf in Bayat and Rezaei, 2015, p. 141). Furthermore, as Siegel and Wissehr in Bayat and Rezaei (2015) pointed out "Knowledge about a variety of assessment types allows teachers to

select the most appropriate and effective instruments to meet their learning objectives" (p. 141).

According to Mertler in Davidheiser (2013) teachers' assessment literacy is viewed as a key link in the connection between assessment quality and student achievement (p. 14). Therefore, comprehending each assessment type has become a fundamental skill for teachers to foster as it may help them to interpret and communicate assessment results to students, and also provide effective information to determine the students' learning objectives. It should come as no surprise that assessment can propel instruction and encouragingly affect student learning and performance.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

As the findings of this study revealed, it is necessary to do more research to enhance the quality of writing instruction in Indonesian classroom context. Moreover, to embellish teachers' assessment literacy, the results suggest the stakeholder to give the teachers professional development by training them with the fundamental knowledge base for carrying out valid assessment in any context. It is expected that teachers use assessment as not a way to solely obtain the grades but also to improve teaching and learning because quality of educational process precisely represents the quality of the practical assessment.

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