

“RESEARCH-BASED TRANSFORMATION OF TEACHER EDUCATION: TRADITION AS A BASIS FOR INNOVATION” International Conference on Teacher Education

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF ASSESSING EFL WRITING

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***Annotation.** As great significance of writing in both academic and professional setting, the skill assessment has already become one of the main research topics. In most cases, the evaluation of writing skills can be overlooked due to instructors lacking theoretical understanding or insufficient training. This issue is evident in assessing writing in English as a foreign language (EFL). Therefore, the importance of assessment literacy during the evaluation process is being emphasized by scholars. This paper aims to explore the basics of EFL writing assessment and to provide essential and relevant source for instructors to improve their writing skills and understanding. Moreover, the purpose of this paper is to assist in equipping teachers with essential knowledge about assessment in the field.*

***Key words:** methods of writing, indirect, direct, formal, informal assessment.*

Introduction.

Assessment, as described by Brown (2003), is an ongoing process that considers various aspects beyond just test scores. Teachers should evaluate students based on participation, motivation, presentations, performance, papers, portfolios, attendance, and homework, in addition to mid-semester and final semester scores.

Assessing writing is a challenging task for language teachers across various educational levels and settings, as highlighted in literature and everyday teaching practices (Hyland, 2003; Kroll, 1990; Tribble, 1996; Raimes, 1983; Rivers, 1981). Evaluating a student's written work is particularly frustrating due to its complexity, unlike other subjects where standards of correctness are clearer (Brown, 2001; Neff-Lippman, 2012). Weigle (2002) identifies two main reasons for this complexity: the diverse purposes, styles, and genres of writing, and the inherent bias in judging writing samples. Inconsistency in standards of assessment, as noted by Williams (2003), exacerbates the challenge by leading to uneven evaluations. Moreover, determining what aspect of writing to measure—such as content, general writing ability, or task-specific performance—adds to teachers' confusion.

Scholars have identified two main approaches to assessment: formal and informal. While **formal** assessment, often equated with testing, is designed to evaluate specific skills and knowledge through structured exercises, informal assessment occurs naturally in classroom settings. **Informal** assessment involves teachers intuitively evaluating students' performance, attitudes, and engagement without the constraints of formal testing. This type of assessment includes

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spontaneous feedback and observations of both linguistic and non-linguistic factors such as attitude, cooperation, and creativity.

Writing assessment techniques.

The evaluation of writing skills can be accomplished through various methods, which depend on the assessment's goals and the type of writing being evaluated.

Indirect assessment, also known as objective assessment, doesn't directly reflect real-world language use situations but instead implies a person's abilities based on test performance (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). This method, popular in the 1950s and 1960s, aims to measure writing sub-skills using tasks like multiple choice questions or error spotting (Weigle, 2012). It emphasizes grammar, usage, and punctuation, reflecting composition ideas of the time. While reliable and practical, it lacks validity and authenticity.

Direct assessment evaluates learners' writing ability by directly measuring their performance in tasks designed to simulate authentic language use situations. Weigle (2002) claims that direct tests are the most common and extensively studied assessment methods across all language learning contexts. Factors influencing task performance include subject matter (personal vs. non-personal, general vs. specialized), discourse mode (genre, rhetorical task, cognitive demands), and stimulus material (textual, visual). In direct assessment, three scoring approaches are commonly used: holistic scoring, analytical scoring, and primary trait scoring, each employing a rating scale or scoring rubric.

Alternative assessment. During 1980s and 1990s writing experts have turned their attention to informal classroom assessment approaches that better support learners in a more dynamic and genuine way. These alternatives encompass a variety of techniques, including writing portfolios, protocol analyses, conferences and interviews, journals, peer-assessment, self-assessment, and observations.

Portfolios. A portfolio represents a comprehensive collection of achievements, typically defined as "a purposeful collection of work that provides information about someone's efforts, progress, or achievement in a given area." In the context of writing assessment, portfolios encompass a student's entire body of writing, including drafts and selections made by the students themselves.

Protocol analysis. A protocol refers to a sample containing observations of a phenomenon under study. Embedded within the cognitively-oriented process approach to writing, protocol analysis is considered one of the innovative techniques for assessing writing in the classroom.

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Journals, on the other hand, offer students extensive freedom and the opportunity for self-reflection. They serve as a means to elicit regular extensive writing, granting students autonomy in choosing topics and experimenting with their writing abilities in a private setting.

Conferences and interviews. Conferences, characterized by their conversational nature and rooted in the process approach to writing, involve discussions among teachers, peers, and learners about written work, portfolios, or journals. These discussions aim to refine ideas, address difficulties, identify strengths and weaknesses, and provide feedback. Interviews, a more structured form of conference, involve teachers questioning students about specific assignments using targeted probes.

Observations, integral to teaching, serve as another tool for writing assessment, allowing teachers to evaluate performance in authentic settings. Detailed recording of observed facts, supported by checklists, scaling rates, or anecdotal records, helps itemize competencies being assessed.

Conclusion.

This paper provided a comprehensive understanding of the essentials of EFL writing assessment, with the hope of improving current practices. It emphasizes the importance of promoting effective writing assessment literacy among EFL instructors and expanding their teaching methods with innovative approaches. To address existing issues in EFL writing assessment, recommendations are provided to refine assessment techniques and move away from unproductive, static practices commonly seen in writing classes.

Assessing EFL writing involves a complex set of principles and methods drawn from general assessment practices, tailored to suit the specific nature of writing skills and language teaching contexts. Effective assessment in EFL writing requires a deep understanding of assessment basics. Without adequate assessment literacy, EFL writing instructors may mistakenly view assessment as merely a statistical process, overlooking crucial aspects of language learning and failing to provide meaningful feedback for teaching. As written language primarily serves communication purposes, the assessment of writing should contribute to preparing EFL writers for real-world communication scenarios, ensuring the relevance of writing programs in fostering literacy skills.

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