

Assessment Criteria in EFL Writing Skills

Imad maoloud waragh

كلية الآداب - جامعة الزنتان

Abstract:

in Higher education sector, assessment criteria are important in measuring students' learning and support teaching. The assessment of students EFL writing could help in identifying students' learning needs, progress and also teaching. This research examines university tutors and students understanding of assessment criteria used in EFL writing skills. The analysis shows important finding that most of the tutors did not inform students about assessment criteria or discuss them which affected the students' ability to gain higher grades and produce better work. This might be due to lack of knowledge about the importance of providing and involving students in the criteria. The finding prompts a re-thinking about the use of assessment criteria and could make significant contribution to improve and provide great insights into the education especially in the Libyan context and in an EFL context.

معايير التقييم لمهارة الكتابة

نبداه مختصرة

في قطاع التعليم العالي تعد معايير التقييم مهمة في قياس مدى تعلم الطلبة ودعم عملية التدريس. عملية التقييم مادة الكتابة يمكن أن تساعد في التعرف على احتياجات وتقديم التعليم لدى الطلبة، هذا البحث يهدف لإيضاح مدى فهم واستيعاب طلبة الجامعة والمدرسين لأسس معايير التقييم المستخدمة في مادة الكتابة، ويظهر تحليل النتائج المهمة التي مفادها أن معظم المعلمين لم يبلغوا الطلاب بمعايير التقييم أو مناقشتها ما أثر سلباً على قدرة الطلبة في اكتساب درجات أعلى والحصول على نتائج عمل أفضل. ويرجع ذلك إلى النقص في المعرفة بأهمية تزويد وإشراك الطلبة في عملية معايير التقييم. وتحت هذه الدراسة على إعادة التفكير في استخدام معايير التقييم، ويمكن أن تسهم إسهاماً كبيراً في تحسين التعليم بشكل خاص في ليبيا وكذلك في بلدان أخرى.

Key words: the concept of assessment, definition of assessment, assessment criteria, the integration of criteria within the process of assessment, assessment in EFL writing.

THE CONCEPT OF ASSESSMENT

Assessment is seen as integral part of all fields of learning and teaching. It is argued that educational development cannot progress without effectively employing processes of assessment. “Assessment is of central importance in education, and yet there is a lack of consensus in the definitions of terminology relating to it” (Taras, 2005:466). For example, Sadler (2010) defined an assessor as the teacher; but in practice, it may be a tutor, teaching assistant or other appropriately qualified person. However, further agents can be added to this definition such as classmates, the self and parents, because assessment is not only restricted to qualified people.

DEFINITION OF ASSESSMENT

This section presents several definitions of assessment as well as the process of assessment in the field of learning and teaching. In the field of education there is no complete agreement among researchers as to what is meant by assessment. The definitions which are given possibly related to varied perceptions of the functions and purposes of assessment. It could be noted that “the origins of the term “assessment” comes from the Latin “assidere”, to ‘sit beside’, and is also reflected in the French term “assayer” (Watkins et al.,2007:144).

There is a general consensus about what assessment can mean and therefore some researchers have tried to establish a definition of exactly what it might be. For example, assessment is the gathering of information on students’ language learning attainments to inform instructional decisions (Gardner, 2006). The above definition focuses only on collecting information about students' achievements to make decisions, whereas Ngar-Fun Liua and Carless (2006:280) provided another view of the term assessment where it is “often interpreted as referring to marking, grading, measuring or ranking which are considered the products of assessment”. On the other hand, researchers have established different definitions of assessment as the process of taking a series of actions, which involve the assessor, goals, criteria and standards to make a judgment. Taras (2005) stated that the process of assessment involves the steps required to effectuate a judgment. These steps are included in every method of

assessment, and Scriven (1967) has said that assessment is a single process. The judgment is a step in the process; therefore, the judgment cannot be made without employing these items. Parr et al. (2007) indicated that it is important to understand the process of assessment and involve its functions deeply to teaching. In the current study, the researcher supports Taras' view of assessment when she refers to assessment as the collecting of evidence and information about people's work in order to make judgements based on goals, criteria and standards.

It is clear from the above definitions that there are different interpretations of the meaning of assessment. Now, it is important to discuss the definition of assessment criteria.

DEFINITION OF ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Assessment criteria are an essential element of the assessment process. Some researchers provide general definitions of assessment criteria as highlighted by Foxman et al (1989) where criteria are seen as a description of the knowledge and skills possessed by the teacher to ensure that all students achieve learning. Others have established specific definitions of assessment criteria as characteristics or properties and required principles before a test took place, which are then used to judge individuals against those criteria (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Sadler, 2007). In this study, the researcher refers to criteria as a set of requirements according to which the quality of work may be judged. It may be noted that assessment criteria have been viewed in different ways in the field of learning and teaching.

THE INTEGRATION OF CRITERIA WITHIN THE PROCESS OF ASSESSMENT

This section provides greater insight into how criteria and standards are integrated within the assessment process. An effective assessment process needs criteria, which are considered an essential element because “criteria are attributes or rules that are useful as levers for making judgments”(Sadler, 2005:79). Assessment criteria concern the aspects of an assignment or examination which will be assessed (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Assessment criteria and standards have a significant role in supporting students' learning. Therefore, understanding the meaning of assessment criteria can enhance students' understanding of their own performance (Woolf, 2004).

Bloxham and Boyd (2007) also stated that assessment criteria identify what aspects of an assignment or examination are assessed and, therefore, what students need to pay attention to. This is reflected in the process of learning and teaching, as Orsmond et al., (2000) confirmed that developing criteria may enhance the quality of assessment practice and have an impact on student learning. Bloxham (2013:65) stated that “there has been an effort to make standards transparent through explicit information such as assessment criteria, rubric (marking schema) and learning outcomes”. “Students can also participate in these processes if teachers communicate to them the lesson goals and the criteria by which they can judge their progress towards the goals” (Harlen, 2007a:19). “Active engagement in discussion and the application of criteria can help students to acquire deeper insight into the meaning of criteria in particular and assessment more generally” (Woolf, 2004:488). It seems that it is essential that criteria and standards are used in conjunction to support students’ learning. The process of assessment cannot be effective unless criteria are provided for each piece of written work in order to support students to achieve the required standards and learning goals.

ASSESSMENT IN EFL WRITING

This section provides an overview of the assessment of EFL writing skills. According to Strickland (2000:66), “assessment gets to the heart of teaching and lets us decide how and when to offer support to writers”. Hand-writing is still used in the EFL context, which offers an opportunity for tutors and students to use a range of assessment methods inside and outside the classroom. Handwriting is used commonly within the larger area of learning a language and assessment (Brown, 2004).

Assessment is the only method that tutors use to identify their students' weaknesses or strengths in writing. Tutors use assessment to identify spelling, grammar and punctuation problems in writing (Graham et al., 2011). In the EFL context tutors still focus on accountability and grades when they assess their students' written work. This may affect students' level or performance in writing or their ability. Brown (2004) stated that learning how to become a good writer puts the student in an almost constant stage of assessment.

It can be argued that assessment can improve students' writing performance because “assessment helps teachers to know where learners are, to locate their strengths and identify gaps in order to make teaching decisions about next steps, Libyan bulletin for studies – thirteenth issue

including what to build on or what to revisit” (Parr et al., 2007:70). Thus, Calfee and Miller (2007) stressed that it is important to practice and assess writing tasks with clear purpose. Finally, assessment in EFL writing classes is more likely to help students to become better writers in English.

RESEARCH DESIGN

PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The participants were Libyan 12 tutors and 207 fourth-year university students from six English language departments in different sites at Zawia University in Libya. A mixed approach was used to elicit data from respondents about the use of assessment criteria in EFL writing. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were designed to provide valid and truthful findings from the quantitative and qualitative analyses employed in the study.

RESULTS FROM TUTORS

According to the analysis of data for Q1, 9 out of 12 tutors (75%) never designed different assessment criteria for each written task, whereas one (8.33%) selected hardly ever and 2 (16.66%) sometimes did. This shows that a large number of the tutors did not design assessment criteria for each written work (see table 1). While in qualitative data, three out of the 12 tutors provided criteria for mid and final exams and some assignments. They agreed that providing criteria helped students to get a full picture about every point in their work in order to gain higher grades. They also reported that criteria could help students to understand the requirements of good work.

The analysis of data for Q2 reveals that nine out of 12 tutors (75%) never explained assessment criteria to their students and two participants also (16.7%) hardly ever did, whereas one tutor (8.33%) sometimes did provide explanations before written work was undertaken. This means that most of the respondents did not explain assessment criteria. Meanwhile interview data shows that nine out of the 12 tutors did not provide and explain criteria to students because of their deficiency about the importance of giving it to students. They also reported that they did not ask their students to discuss criteria because they perceived them as part of the tutors’ responsibility. The above analysis shows that assessment criteria were not provided by a majority of EFL writing tutors. This indicates that these tutors lacked training or knowledge about the use of assessment criteria.

Table1: Assessment criteria

Question		Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Always
(1) Do you design different assessment criteria for each written task?	Tutors number	9	1	2	0
	Percentage %	75.0	8.33	16.66	0
(2) Do you explain assessment criteria to your students?	Tutors number	9	2	1	0
	Percentage %	75.0	16.66	8.3	0

DISTRIBUTION OF ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

This is a multiple choice question where the participants had the choice to select all the criteria that they used. The analysis reveals that out of the 12 tutors, 11 participants’ assessed grammar, representing (20.8%) of criteria selected. All 12 tutors assessed vocabulary and spelling in students’ written work, each representing (22.6%) of the total. Furthermore, eight tutors assessed sentence structure, accounting to (15.1%) of all criteria selections. In interview, tutors reported that assessment criteria were based on the characteristics of the written work and also the distribution of grades. Finally, the results show that ten tutors assessed content or ideas representing (18.9%) of the total criteria selected. From this, all tutors focus on vocabulary and word spelling more than other aspects of assessment criteria.

Table2: Aspects of Assessment Criteria.

Assessment Criteria	Responses		Percentage of tutors
	N	Percentage of criteria	
Grammar	11	20.8	91.7
Vocabulary	12	22.6	100.0
Sentence structure	8	15.1	66.7
Word spelling	12	22.6	100.0
Content or ideas	10	18.9	83.3
Total	53	100.0	

RESULTS FROM STUDENTS

Students’ responses concerning Q3 show that (89.8%) either strongly disagreed or disagreed while (10.1%) either agreed or strongly agreed, therefore,

nearly (90%) of the students stated that their tutors did not provide them with assessment criteria. From the analysis of qualitative data, two out of the six students valued the use of assessment criteria in their writing assessment. They received assessment criteria, which allowed them to obtain higher grades and to pay more attention to specific aspects of the writing task.

Similarly, the data for Q4 reveal that (93.4%) either strongly disagreed or disagreed while (5.8%) either agreed or strongly agreed, which means that a majority of students disagreed that their tutor provided them with criteria before every writing assessment. Furthermore, the data for Q5 indicate that (81.1%) strongly disagreed or disagreed while (18.2%) agreed or strongly agreed. The interview analysis showed that all of them agreed that there was deficiency of discussing assessment criteria due to lack of motivation. For all three statements, the majority of the students either strongly disagreed or disagreed.

Table3: Assessment Criteria

Questions	Part 8: Assessment criteria	number of Students	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Q3	My tutor provides me with assessment criteria	number of students	86	100	18	3
		percentage %	41.5	48.3	8.7	1.4
Q4	My tutor provides me with assessment criteria before every written assessment	number of students	121	74	12	0
		percentage %	58	35.4	5.8	0
Q5	I discuss assessment criteria with my fellow students in classroom	number of students	93	75	22	17
		percentage%	44.9	36.2	10.6	8.2

The most important findings were that almost 90% of the students stated that their tutors did not provide them with assessment criteria. The tutors' results showed that nine out of the 12 tutors never designed and explained different assessment criteria for each written task.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings concerning assessment criteria. Assessment criteria are considered one of a series of steps or actions of the assessment process in this study. Assessment criteria refer to the aspects of tasks that are assessed, and they provide the basis for tutors to make judgments about the work students produce.

According to Bloxham and Boyd (2007), assessment criteria are aspects of a task, which the assessor takes into consideration when making judgments. The analysis of data indicates that EFL writing criteria include elements such as grammar, vocabulary, content, sentences structure and spelling.

In the present study, it was found that only three out of 12 tutors provided assessment criteria to students, but not for all classroom-writing activities. The analysis shows that the students interviewed, who received criteria, value knowledge of assessment criteria because they support their understanding and to gain better grades, achieve better work and learning goals. Orsmond et al (2000) stated that the assessment criteria have a major influence on students' learning. On the other hand, the data show that nine out of the 12 tutors did not give students assessment criteria and 90% of students said that they did not receive information about assessment criteria, which makes their work difficult. This is due to these tutors' lack of knowledge about the importance of explaining assessment criteria to students. These tutors believed that giving criteria was not necessary because the students need to focus on all elements of writing in every piece of work in order to obtain high grades. Consequently, the specific requirements of each assessment are unknown to students and they are in the dark about what they are required to do to pass the assessment. In other words, students have to guess the agenda involved, which leads them to become unfocused in their work. This implies that providing students with assessment criteria is important in order to make them understand and focus on aspects of their work. Sadler (2009) argued that students' deserve to be given an opportunity to understand the basis upon which grades are assigned. This is consistent with Feng's (2007) findings that all participants believed that it is necessary to always receive explained assessment criteria because it helps students to understand how to do the work.

A further finding indicates that these learners were not asked to discuss criteria before their work was assessed. This is mainly related to the lack of training for tutors on how important it is to involve the students in assessment criteria. Tutors who participated in this study believed that designing criteria is entirely their responsibility. The Libyan educational environment at university level also influences the discussion of criteria because it appears that students work individually in that they do not exchange their thoughts and experiences with peers about assessment criteria. Thus, Libyan tutors need to create an environment in the classroom in which

students could share, discuss and exchange their beliefs about assessment criteria. Rust (2002) indicated that giving students a clear assessment criterion alone is unlikely to result in better work and more engagement with what is being taught. The literature supports that one strategy is to involve students in developing and generating assessment criteria, which is better to make judgements of their work (Ngar-Fun Liua and Carless, 2006). It seems that the process of assessment is less effective unless criteria are provided before each piece of written work, which will help students to achieve their learning goals and higher grades through greater understanding of expectations. Libyan tutors need to understand the value of assessment criteria and also need to be aware that discussions of assessment criteria among students or with their tutors are useful for students' learning.

Another important finding was that most tutors did not explain the assessment criteria they used which affected the students' ability to gain higher grades and produce better work. Finally, the insights obtained from blending qualitative and quantitative methods have provided a fuller understanding of the use of assessment methods in the Libyan context concerning EFL writing at university level. Significantly, the results revealed that most of the tutors did not inform students about assessment criteria or discuss them in EFL writing classes. This might be due to lack of knowledge about the importance of providing and involving students in criteria.

CONCLUSION

To conclude it could be said that there is considerable room, and desire, for improvements in the area of assessment. The key finding concerning the process of assessment was the relationship between assessment criteria, feedback and grades. For instance, without knowing the criteria, which would be used, the students did not know what was being assessed.

An important recommendation of this study, and a contribution to new learning, is that, within the Libyan context, tutors could be required to provide students with information about assessment criteria which will be used to assess their work, in order to help them to achieve their learning goals, get high grades and meet the standards required. This would allow students to concentrate on those particular aspects of writing that will be assessed and it gives them clarity about the task they have to complete. Moreover, it would make feedback more useful because it could be more specific and focused. Providing assessment criteria could also reduce students' Libyan bulletin for studies – thirteenth issue

feelings of stress or anxiety. The findings suggest that Libyan tutors could change their thinking about the importance of providing assessment criteria to students before each written task.

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