Exploring Appropriate Evaluation Tasks for a Mixed Ability English as a Foreign Language Writing Class in Taiwan

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Abstract -*Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) college students usually do not have sufficient language skills to generate satisfactory performance on their essay compositions. It is also hard for teachers to assess their progress on writing performance. This study attempted to investigate appropriate assessment criteria employed in a mixed ability EFL writing classroom. The participants were English major students from a private technological university, Taiwan. Based on students' performance at each learning stage and negotiated evaluation tasks agreed by students and the teacher, the assessment items would be revised to correspond to students' language skill levels. In addition, the students were asked to provide their opinions after conducting writing activities. The findings indicated that many students had their writing skills improved when they followed the guidelines and the use of reasonable assessment criteria. This implies a need for the teacher and student writers to collaboratively develop structured writing activities relating to assessing writing work.*

Key words: assessment criteria; EFL writing; mixed ability classroom; negotiated evaluation tasks.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation, most basically, is a way of measuring evidence of a learners' progress. It is one of the important elements of overall educational methodologies. Many educators and teacher/researchers have studied the effects of the evaluation techniques employed in English classrooms and many questions have been raised. For example, are the same evaluation criteria suitable for all English learners in different contexts? These contexts may include their educational backgrounds, their learning experiences, and their English proficiency. Are traditional tests ideal solutions for learners when evaluating their progress? If so, who else might be suitable for receiving traditional tests? The exam-oriented method has been used in English teaching for a long time in Taiwan. Although many scholars have criticized its negative influence in language learning, before an effective way to improve the satisfactory outcomes can be devised, traditional tests, such as multiple-choice questions, true-false statements, and cloze-tests, are still viable evaluation tools for measuring learners' performance.

Admittedly, traditional tests can examine learners' actual progress to some extent. However, they are not effective measures in all areas of evaluating English skills, such as writing proficiency. How educators can construct an objective and effective evaluation criteria to examine learners' writing progress is an important and difficult task. In particular, in Taiwan, the declining birthrate and an "oversupply" of colleges have contributed to a gradual decline in the general academic performance demonstrated by many college students. The corresponding urgent need for universities to pursue very vigorous student recruitment approaches often results in classrooms consisting of students with very mixed language abilities and quite varied educational backgrounds and learning experiences. Thus, the evaluation criteria are obligated to include various aspects that help students meet the subject courses' requirements. Most importantly, through appropriate evaluation tasks, both higher and lower achieving learners can receive realistic academic evaluation that corresponds more accurately to their individual competency levels. Precisely, how to construct objective and appropriate evaluation criteria has become an important task for the teachers involved in such classrooms. The teacher/researcher introduced a classroom atmosphere

in which evaluation could flow in two directions – teacher to students, as well as students to teacher.

For the purpose of helping students improve their writing skills and monitor their progress at each stage, in this study, the teacher/researcher attempted to design doable evaluation tasks which could be used effectively in mixed ability EFL writing classes. The teacher/researcher seemed almost to assume the role of a chef who served her customers a varied choice of dishes. If the appropriate dishes were prepared by the chef, all customers would feel as if they had been fed satisfactorily. After tasting the dishes provided, the customers sometimes were asked to give a feedback so that the chef could offer better service in the future. In this study, the teacher/researcher worked with a same group of students, all of whom were enrolled in the writing classes for four consecutive semesters. She not only designed evaluation tasks that involved many different writing activities, she also asked students to provide feedback after they had conducted specific writing tasks. In this, she was able to monitor and evaluate each individual student's writing progress and make adjustments to both the appropriate corresponding writing activities and the evaluation criteria that were employed.

English writing is one of the skills for EFL/ESL learners to work on and is also among the most difficult ones for them to achieve or excel at. With appropriate evaluation tasks, the researcher hoped that the EFL writers in this study would come to improve their writing proficiency and would learn how to apply their writing skills to realistic ends. The underlying importance of any kind of evaluation in teaching seems to be utilizing a technique that is consistent and accurate. It was hoped that, in this, the basic learning and second/foreign language acquisition process could be made more effective.

The criteria to evaluate the results of writing have been discussed for decades. The complex nature of evaluating writing makes it a difficult subject to quantify. Reid and Kroll [1] pointed out that designers of writing assignments should carefully consider the purpose and the evaluation criteria for each writing assignment. In their study, they discussed a range of issues in the design and assessment of classroom writing tasks assigned in courses across the U.S. college/university curriculum. The researchers used a specific framework to discuss the preparation and evaluate the design of writing tasks. They then analyzed successful and unsuccessful writing across the curriculum assignments, particularly from the perspective of ESL writers, and offered suggestions that would enable teachers to design and better assess effective writing tasks.

One instrument employed by writing teachers involves rubrics which have highlighted both the advantages and shortcomings of various writing task strategies [2,3]. Despite some limitations, such rubrics have been extensively advocated and used in K-12 [4] and higher education [5]. The rubrics, in this regard, that are utilized, may incorporate criteria for evaluating critical thinking skills, as well as the writing skills evidenced in particular samples of writing. However, Broad [6] pointed out that such rubrics alone, when applied as the staple of in-class writing assessment or other such universally applied instruments, are "dangerously unsatisfactory for purposes of contemporary rhetoric" (p. x). Rubrics, applied on a grand scale, may not reflect individual teachers' lessons and values inherent in those lessons, nor transfer reliably to other classrooms. In addition to employing the rubrics as the criteria to assess writing, many researchers attempted to investigate even more reliable criteria assessment.

Martin and Penrod [7] discussed how the application of assessment theory to pedagogy had resulted in evidence-based benefits for students in an Evaluating Writing course. They found that the students who had taken Evaluating Writing, indeed, became more competent and conversant in both the process model approach to writing and to the crafting of writing in general. In addition, in order to investigate how to achieve an overall reliable score based on the judgments of specific criteria such as topic relevance and grammatical accuracy, Gamaroff [8] conducted a workshop on inter-rater reliability at a conference where a group of 24 experienced educators of teachers of English were asked to assess two grade 7 English essay protocols. The results revealed substantial variability in the attention that raters paid to different criteria, varying from penalizing students for spelling and/or grammatical errors to glossing over these criteria and considering mainly content. Similarly, Ghanbari, Barati and Moinzadeh [9] launched a wide-scale survey in an Iranian EFL writing assessment context. The results of a questionnaire and subsequent interviews with Iranian EFL composition raters revealed that a rating scale in its most common sense simply does not exist. In fact, raters relied on their own internalized criteria as

developed through their long years of practice. Therefore, these researchers suggested that a revision in the assessment procedure and professional development of composition teachers through rater training courses would improve the current inconsistencies that have been recognized. They also encouraged the development of a local rating instrument in this context.

In this, how can teachers or assessors design their assessment criteria so that they are able to better give their students fair and objective evaluation? And, how can students work to improve their writing and obtain higher overall evaluations?

Elbow [10,11,12] has consistently stressed the importance of feedback that is timely and related both to the ongoing teaching and to the nature of the assigned composition. Conversely, feedback practice revealed situations where teachers are overwhelmed by the amount of homework assignments to which they must give feedback, while students either do not care to read the feedback, do not understand it, or, when they do, more often than not, are frustrated by its perceived negativity [13-15. That being said, Wingate [15] indicated that students who responded positively to feedback did improve. But for low-achievers and less motivated learners, teachers should refrain from giving too many negative comments all at once. In addition, Chai [16] inquired if students were encouraged to generate a writing plan before they began essay writing, would their plans correspondingly raise their writing scores? This study investigated the nature of writing plan quality and its relationship to the ensuing writing scores. The researcher indicated that features of writing plan quality could provide valuable instructional information to promote student writing. Some studies indicated that, instead of being passively assessed by their teachers, student writers should become active participants on writing assessment. For example, DeGroff [17] and Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William [18] stated that students should not only be given the assessment criteria and thereby gain a clearer understanding of the expectations; they should also have an opportunity to participate in determining the underlying assessment criterion.

Based on the goals aimed at in this study, the teacher/researcher proposed three research questions that were designed to explore appropriate assessment criteria and various writing activities employed in the mixed ability EFL writing classroom.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to evaluate the tasks chosen to meet mixed EFL writers' real needs; to compare students' performance on different assignments; to determine how did students perform on different writing assignments and determine the students' learning outcomes through conducting designated evaluation tasks.

METHODS
Research site and participants

This research project was conducted at a technological university located in central Taiwan. Twenty two English major students participated in this study. Because of their different educational backgrounds in their vocational high schools, such as English, Food and Beverage, Tourism, Information, and International Business, their English performance was quite varied. Some students could easily complete their written assignment by themselves; however, others needed more time or helpers to work with them. In this, it was truly a mixed ability writing class. Since these students entered the college, they had all been in the same classroom setting and had taken the same required courses. And, while the study was conducted, they were all taking the required course series, "English Writing." The course of English Writing was offered for four consecutive semesters in the English Department. English major students started taking this course when they were sophomores. It was a two-credit-hour course per semester. Students regularly gathered at a language lab equipped with Internet access to conduct their writing tasks weekly. In addition, the students were asked to conduct after-school group projects. In this, various locations, such as the school library, departmental discussion room, and their homes, were used for gathering information and for having discussions.

Feedback on specific writing activities

All feedback sheets were conducted in the format of open-ended questions. In the process of conducting the writing tasks, students were asked to give their opinions about specific writing activities which lasted several weeks, such as the group projects, "breaking news" reflection and reaction, and peer review activities. In addition, end-of-the-semester feedback was given to reflect students' overall performance during the semester. In this, the teacher/researcher hoped to learn the difficulties students had faced and

better understand their individual perspectives on specific activities. The teacher/researcher thus intended to review certain work items and alter them so as to make them become more appropriate to reach the expected goals. Additionally, the assessment criteria were adjusted based on the difficulties individual students encountered as they were related to the complexity of the work items.

Time frame

This study targeted a group of students who took entire English Writing courses offered for four consecutive semesters by the English department. Therefore, it took two years to complete the data collection.

Assessment criteria

The grading criteria with various writing tasks would be designed by the teacher and then negotiated by both parties, students and the teacher, in the classroom on the very first week of the semester.

Table 1 illustrates the assessment criteria for each work item in the writing class for each semester. The full points for the course were 100 and were divided into several items. Based on the individual student's familiarity and competency with writing tasks, many writing activities were conducted both in and out of the classroom and either by individuals or in groups in order to meet mixed-ability writers' real needs. For example, other than attending the regular class, every student was required to conduct the on-line self access learning weekly so as to improve their basic grammatical knowledge on sentence structure. In addition to composing individual writing papers, students were grouped to work collaboratively on specific project. Thus, group members formed with mixed ability students could help one another to successfully accomplish designated writing tasks.

The procedures used in establishing assessment criteria and course design

Before the semester began, the teacher/researcher designed the overarching plan of the course. In addition to establishing the writing tasks, she also assigned the grade percentages for each, during the first class meeting for each semester, the teacher would explain the overall goals of the writing class by posting the assessment criteria and writing tasks on the blackboard. Students could then negotiate about the assessment criteria and work items and request adjustments, as they deemed appropriate or necessary. The teaching materials employed in the class included a textbook and e-materials. The writing skill levels required of the students advanced as the overall course progressed. For example, concerning the activity of story summarization, which was conducted for three semesters, at the very beginning, the teacher/researcher downloaded English stories from the Internet and made five wh-questions based on the stories. Students merely were to answer those questions using their own words. Later on, they needed to write an entire summary on their own without wh-questions prompts. Although there were only two contact hours weekly in the language lab, the students needed to spend many extra hours on their writing assignments after class.

RESULTS

The criteria for assessing individual work items

As a reference point for teachers to assess their students' overall academic performance: the grading criteria suggested by the university where the study took place customarily include three parts: their completion of day-to-day classroom writing assignments, a mid-term exam, and a final exam.

Table 1 Grading criteria of English Writing for four semesters

English Writing I	English Writing II	English Writing III	English Writing IV
1. attendance 10%	1. attendance 10%	1. attendance 10%	1. attendance 10%
2. participation 30%	2. participation 30%	2. participation 30%	2. participation 30%
3. online self-access learning 10%	3. on-line self access learning 10%	3. campus event reports 30%	3. campus event report 10%
4. mid + final exams 30%	4. mid + final 30%	4 mid + final exams 30%	4. mid and final exams 50%
5. group projects 20%	5. campus event reports 20%		

Daily performance in this case was assigned to comprise 40% of the final grade, and the mid-term and final exams 30% respectively. Teachers are given the option to revise each category if it might thus better meet the requirements they set for specific course work. In this study, the assessment criteria were determined using two main factors: the course objectives and students' individual skill levels. However, the criteria could also be adjusted to better correspond with certain situations as requested by the school and department policy; for instance, the on/off campus activities participation and the various campus event reports. The assessment criteria in this study contained more than those stressed three principle areas. In addition to the mid-term and final exams, the day-to-day performance was extended to include various work items. In contrast to other basic courses, in which fixed answers can be used for assessment (such as multiple choices or spelling of words), the assessment of English writing is far more demanding than this. Therefore, class participation and particular writing tasks were also included in assessment. In the first semester, many participants indicated that they were nervous and worried about working on writing papers because they feared that their grammar knowledge was relatively inadequate. Some students argued that oral skills were more important than writing skills in any case. They tended to ignore or minimize their participation in the writing activities. A small portion of students thought that they were sufficiently competent EFL writers because they had learned English for years and already held part-time jobs at private children's English schools. To them, the fact that they'd obtained such jobs was certainly ample evidence of their practical abilities. In addition, certain of the students tended to pay more attention to performing well on the mid-term and final exams, yet seemed curiously lax with regard to day-to-day performance in the class – to the point that some would skip the classes occasionally, even regularly. In some cases, some students expressed concern about the outcomes of the course because they felt that they lacked the overall necessary language skills. This resulted in their lacking the confidence that they would truly benefit from the course despite their best efforts to do so. In such cases, the teacher/researcher revised original assessment criteria on mid-term and final exams from 50 percent to 30 percent and increased points that could be earned in daily classroom performance. As such, the less competent student writers could earn points if they could demonstrate truly serious efforts to participate in the writing activities. For them, the outcomes of their writing efforts (and their short comings) could be balanced by attitudes of sincerity in their efforts to at least participate and improve. In general, however, the teacher/researcher believed that the more the students participated in all of the activities, the better English users they would become. Yet in the case of the less competent EFL writers, diligent work might make up to some degree for their insufficient writing proficiency. The assessment criteria were thus kept flexible and individualized where possible.

The basic items of assessment criteria for various writing classes always concerned attendance, participation, and mid and final exams. Yet additional items could be added to a specific semester based on specific requirements, such as improving the fluency of writing skills and/or special project performances. In this regard, the relationships between the percentage arrangement and each participant's individual course design were closely linked with one another. Assignments could be constructed in such a way that they could vary, or be adjusted to meet each individual student's level of writing proficiency. Assessment in this course, in other words, attempted to incorporate a certain element of what could be called "flexible democratization" for each student.

Course design, connecting authentic writing tasks

Most participants progressed gradually from beginning to intermediate EFL writers. Although most of them still made the same grammar errors, they generally grew more aware of how to describe their thinking using written words. The contents in their writing texts became more organized and readable. While students were moving on to intermediate level, the difficulties of writing assignments grew progressively more demanding. The arrangement of the writing activities covered 18 weeks. Table 2 illustrates how the work schedule for English Writing IV proceeded during a semester.

The table shows that each activity would take several weeks to complete, depending on its complexity and difficulties. Each activity was conducted in either an individual or a group setting, as necessary. At the first class meeting, the teacher/researcher projected the work schedule on a screen and explained the overall basics of how the students would be asked to conduct each activity.

Table 2 The work schedule for English Writing IV

Week	Work items	Style	Memo
1st	Warm up; what we are going to do this semester	class	
2nd~16th	Campus event reports	individual	
2nd~4th	Story chains	group	
5th~6th	Story chains editing	group	Aided by the computer program
7th~8th	Story chains sharing	Class	
9th	Mid-term exam		Tourist attractions
10th	F2f conference	individual	What and how(creative writing)
11th~14th	Peer tutoring	individual	For sophomores
11th~14th	Bilingual environment settings	Group	Specific place selection with pictures & signs
15th~18th	Story creation (creative writing)	individual	

After that, the work schedule was uploaded on an e-platform so that the students could refer to it when necessary. All of the students followed this structure and completed the assignments that were outlined on the work schedule.

Feedback reflected by the students involved

Students were asked to provide feedback on specific work items. Thus, both the students and the teacher would better realize how effective each work item appeared to be. There were eleven total feedbacks collected in four semesters. The feedback on specific writing activities concerned story summarization, interdisciplinary collaboration reflection, peer editing, and writing works commentaries. Interestingly, in the feedback, many students complained that their workload was too heavy. Thus, when one semester progressed to the next, some writing tasks were reduced. For example, the teacher/researcher supposed that students were familiar with employing *facebook* to have a chat with their friends. Thus, at the very beginning of the course, students were asked to conduct synchronous online discussions in the classroom. However, many students were not really expressive in the *facebook* format, and found themselves unable to give their opinions in a "proper" way and consequently felt very frustrated. Therefore, such online discussions were cancelled from the students' proposed work schedule requirements.

At the end of the semester, students would reflect what they had learned and their perspectives on the writing activities that the teacher/researcher had assigned. Many students were grateful to have perceived true progress in their writing skills. It is worth mentioning that, by the fourth semester, many students had become truly mature writers. They not only could understand why the workload of the writing class needed to be heavier than in other classes they had enrolled in previously, they were also able to compose genuinely superlative essays and understand the value of being able to do so. When their works were showcased before their classmates, they felt genuinely proud of themselves. Results such as these are not the in least insignificant.

Performance achievement

Many students experienced obvious improvement during four semesters of writing training and became genuinely fond of writing. They indicated that it was initially hard for them to compose writing paper assigned by the teacher. However, they would spend a great deal of time to think about the assigned task before starting to write their drafts. Eventually, they were able to create a two to three page story by themselves by the final semester. The teacher/researcher encouraged those students to keep conducting their creative writing works throughout their lifetimes. Some students even grew competent enough to be able to help their senior classmates revise their own writing papers. Conversely, some students seemed remain at a standstill. Instead of composing writing paper on their own, they would rely on an online translation program to translate their Chinese writing into English versions. Or, some of them would plagiarize existing published texts. For example, students were asked to write publicity advertisements that would promote their departmental programs. These texts were to explain that program's benefits and advantages for prospective new student enrollees. Unfortunately, one student copied directly from the English descriptions of the program that had

already been posted on the departmental website and presented it as her own work. Naturally, the work that she submitted was rejected.

In a nutshell however, students who actually had sincerely conducted the assignments designated in the course had nearly universally satisfactory performances.

The myth of so-called ideal assessment criteria

In order to assure students abilities to learn and improve their writing skills in the mixed ability class, the assessment criteria used in this study were integrated into several work items. Based on the performance each individual student demonstrated, the teacher/researcher adjusted the percentage arrangement of the assessment criteria points and work items so that lower achieving students could still attain realistic goals and experience genuine achievement. The teacher/researcher could envision a metaphor in which first responder rescuers need to precisely adjust the location of their rescue air cushion in order to catch a person jumping from a high building. Mistakes in this could be disastrous, but deft response could be lifesaving. The students who did not meet the criteria in this study adequately included several who had skipped classes or who failed to complete homework assignments, or in some cases both. Fortunately, there were only three students failed in four semesters. In the metaphor, the lives saved by this approach vastly outnumbered the disasters.

Implication and Suggestions

Many activities designated in the coursework were authentic writing tasks for students to accomplish, such as telling a picture story or building bilingual environments. Hence, in future settings, in order to achieve effective assessment criteria, students can be asked to face more challenges involving actual real life situations and corresponding writing tasks that concern them. In this, it may become easier for students to compose essays about the events occurring in their daily lives. Writing teachers may design more authentic, true-to-life situations for students to encounter in their writing classes. Simple examples of this could be: "The day I earned my driver's license", "My favorite food" or, "My earliest memory of life," and so on. The possibilities are rich in potential, infinitely varied, and would undoubtedly tap into the almost universal urge on the part of most people, (young and old alike) simply to "Tell a story." Almost

all humans are instinctive tellers of stories. It is one fundamental job of educators to encourage their students to want to relate those of their own experience.

As mentioned previously, some writing activities in this course were cancelled because they proved to be inappropriate to students' needs or skills. Therefore, while arranging the assessment criteria, one suggestion that this teacher/researcher puts forth here is that it may well be that both the teacher and students collaboratively develop structured writing activities relating to the assessment criteria. This could well lead to their more synergistic mutual establishment and consequent overall relevance. Certainly further research in this regard would be worth pursuing.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the assessment criteria and writing tasks design were like a coin with two sides. Their relationship was very close. With appropriate tasks design and reasonable assessment criteria arrangement, students can gain better outcomes. In addition to setting mid-term and final exams, the focus of the writing was mainly on day-to-day activities. This was given more weight than the two exams because the teacher/researcher believed that there was no short cut to improve writing skills other than having more actual writing practice. After this four-semester long-term training, many students had improved their writing performance significantly. In particular, for those lower achieving students, their academic performance was assessed by various work items instead of using only a few main criteria; thus, like other higher level students, they were still able to earn points if they were serious and worked hard in the class at their individual proficiency levels. In fact, as mentioned, there were only three students who failed in four semesters. In each case this was attributable to poor participation and unsatisfactory classroom attendance.

Although the teacher may present a well prepared course design with assessment criteria devised through careful consideration, students still may not be satisfied with it. Different classes usually will have different writing ability combinations among their participants. The one which is appropriate for class A may not fit for class B, and so on. Therefore, before beginning the work schedule, the teacher and students would be well advised to check, discuss, and mend the

course design and assessment criteria together. Having an organized work schedule makes it easier for the teacher to trace students' writing progress at different stages. Most importantly, mending and developing the assessment criteria helps teachers to improve their teaching quality. In this study, the teacher/researcher became more adept at developing course design and enhancing the skills needed for successful assessment criteria. She was more aware of the students' needs and interests in writing and their progress; in addition, she became more skillful at providing writing instructions. That was why, in the last semester, as she found that participants became more mature EFL writers she extended the writing tasks from the classroom into daily life topics and genuine/authentic writing practice such as Taiwanese cuisine and tourist attractions. Overall, this evolution in approach, hopefully, can help students to comprehend the deeper rewards of simply enjoying the writing process in and of itself.

Students who participated in this project produced many meaningful writing texts in four semesters. However, the heavy workload was one unpopular factor prohibiting them from fully enjoying the class, and it might serve to influence their unwillingness to take any subsequent courses that are structured along these lines. Likewise, the teacher also needed to take extra work on her shoulders while designating great many extra assignments for the students to conduct. In the end, making the overall workload more appropriate and realistic can be seen as a worthwhile goal for both the teacher and students to work toward together.

Finally, the negotiation of assessment criteria to meet individual student's abilities and expectations has shown itself to be a wholly valid concept to employ within the mixed-ability classroom, and certainly presents a fertile area for continuing implementation and further pedagogical research.

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