

Assessing ESP Writing Skills. Case Study Proposal: Assessment for Learning

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Abstract

This paper deals with the assessment of the students’ ESP writing skills and, more specifically, with the influence that the Assessment for Learning strategies have on the development of their writing skills. The first part of the paper is dedicated to the analysis of the similarities and differences between several theoretical concepts, such as assessment, evaluation, examination, feedback, and test. Test items and scoring methods (i.e., holistic scoring, primary trait scoring and analytic scoring) are also discussed in this theoretical part. The second part of the paper presents a case study proposal based on the hypothesis according to which the employment of Assessment for Learning strategies contributes in a consistent manner to the enhancement of the learners’ ESP writing skills.

Key words: Assessment for Learning, writing skills, English for Special Purposes, case study proposal, reports

J.E.L. classification: Z12

1. Introduction

Teachers have been in a constant quest for the most adequate training and assessing means that would meet their learners’ needs and develop their various language skills (Nadrag, 2000, p. 412), especially in the past two decades, marked by the increasing necessity to incorporate digital skills as well, in order to attain professional success (Popescu, 2020, p. 457). The task is even more difficult in the academic environment, when ESP teachers often work with heterogeneous classes (Istratie-Macarov, 2019, p. 306) and tackle various perceptual positions (Zamfir, 2020; Zamfir, 2022, p. 473).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Overview of several key concepts connected to the idea of assessment

When it comes to assessing activities and strategies, there are several key terms that should be clarified i.e., assessment, evaluation, exam/ examination, feedback and test. Although often employed synonymously, there are several significant differences that should be paid attention to. For instance, *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries* (online) provide the following definitions of the terms mentioned above:

Assessment is “an opinion or a judgement about somebody/something that has been thought about very carefully”, while evaluation is “the act of forming an opinion of the amount, value or quality of something after thinking about it carefully”. Therefore, according to this dictionary, the difference between assessment and evaluation lies in the fact that the latter implies the idea of the process that leads to the opinion or judgement of someone or something; moreover, the latter also includes the fact that the respective opinion or judgement is focused on amount, value or quality. In its turn, the word examine is defined by the above-mentioned dictionary as follows: “to give somebody a test to see how much they know about a subject or what they can do”; therefore,

according to the dictionary, this term is more specific and it clearly refers to the quantification of someone’s knowledge regarding a certain subject.

Peha (2011) considers that evaluation and assessment are interconnected because, in the scholar’s opinion, evaluation involves decisions underlain by the data provided by the assessment process. Thus, evaluation can be employed as an instrument in order to check whether a certain approach or teaching program is carried out as initially planned.

Exam or examination is defined by the same online source (i.e., *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries* online) as “a formal written, spoken or practical test, especially at school or college, to see how much you know about a subject, or what you can do”, while the term test is “an examination of somebody’s knowledge or ability, consisting of questions for them to answer or activities for them to perform”. These two definitions suggest that examination and test can usually be used interchangeably, as the term examination means testing someone’s knowledge of a certain subject, while the term test means examining somebody’s knowledge. However, the term test is more specific, as its definition also makes reference to the examination of someone’s ability (not only knowledge) and it includes several details regarding the contents of a test, such as questions and activities. As far as feedback is concerned, it is defined in the aforementioned source as “advice, criticism or information about how good or useful something or somebody’s work is”.

In Ur’s perspective (2009, p. 33), a test is mainly focused on pinpointing the testee’s level of knowledge about something or ability to perform a certain activity, defining thus the testee’s knowledge level, and triggering the feedback. According to the same scholar, feedback – a type of information provided “to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task”, consisting of two key elements i.e., assessment and correction – should be employed in performance enhancement. The former implies merely informing the learner of his/ her performance level, such as communicating the percentage grade that s/he acquired on an exam, giving the response “No” to a wrong answer, or the label “Fair” on a written assignment. It is noteworthy that information about the learner’s performance (i.e., strengths, weaknesses, and explanations regarding his/ her mistakes) should be included in the correction process (Ur, 2009, p. 242).

Harmer (2007, p. 137) also tackles the terms assessment, and feedback, and explains that the former involves “tests, exams, comments, grades and marks, reports and even self-assessment” and that teachers should employ the means with a higher impact on the learners’ achievement. Moreover, he also professes that these means contribute to the identification of the gaps that teachers should correct or fill.

As far as Brown (2003, p. 3) is concerned, in his perspective, the term test designates “a method of measuring a person’s ability, knowledge, or performance in a given domain”. He further explains the terms that make up his definition. Thus, a method (which, in this case, should be explicit and structured) is “an instrument – a set of techniques, procedures or items” involving the test-taker’s performance; measurement – whose presence is mandatory in a test – is mainly aimed at furnishing a result to the test-taker.

In order to test individual abilities, a tester should know his/ her testees, as the test should match their abilities. Moreover, when assessing someone’s knowledge, various aspects should be taken into consideration, depending on the type of the respective knowledge; for instance, the assessment of a certain piece of knowledge about language may involve the definition of a vocabulary item, mentioning or explaining a grammatical rule, etc. In its turn, the term performance is synonymous with competence, with the ability to use the respective language in certain communication contexts. Finally, the word domain makes reference to the fields of study. Thus, Brown (2003, p. 3) concludes that a properly designed test should furnish a rigorous measurement of the testee’s competence and level of achievement in a certain area. He also adds that science and art hide behind the apparent simplicity of his definition, as the design of a good test is a complex process. Brown (2003, p. 4) further makes the distinction between assessment and tests, underlining that the former “is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain”, while the latter “are a subset of assessment”, “formal procedures, usually administered within strict time limitations, to sample the performance of a test-taker in a specified domain”.

In Bachman’s perspective (1995, p. 49), measurement is directly connected to tests, as they both imply the quantification of observations. This scholar also distinguishes between tests and evaluation, since the former generates a particular type of behavior, while the latter involves decision making.

2.2. Writing tasks

When designing tests, teachers always have to bear in their minds the fact that appropriate test items provide the success of the respective test. According to Ur (2009, p. 37), the choice of these items is influenced by various issues, such as the type of knowledge tested, the way it is administered and marked.

Furthermore, Nadrag (2019) also recalls of the three levels that should be taken into consideration when designing writing tasks, i.e. word choice, correct sentence construction and appropriate paragraph or text design.

Harmer (2007, p. 381) classifies test items into two main categories, i.e., direct (which requires testees to employ the communicative skill that is tested) and indirect (which attempts to assess a testee’s knowledge and ability by reaching the elements that underlie their receptive and productive skills). The scholar also differentiates between discrete-point testing (focused on testing only one element at a time) and integrative testing (focused on testing the learners’ ability to employ an array of language at any time). Since their main purpose is to provide an accurate picture of a learner’s ability, proficiency tests consist of both direct and indirect and discrete-point and integrative testing. The assessment of writing skills may involve, for instance, tasks such as writing stories or various types of letters or e-mails (i.e., letters of application, letters of complaint, letters asking for or giving information, invitation letters, etc. based on information given by the test item), leaflets, instructions for a certain task, newspaper articles, etc. (Harmer 2007, p. 385).

Tests should be designed carefully, considering, according to Harmer (2007, p. 386), the following steps: assessment of the situation (test objectives, level, context, time, place, etc.); deciding the pieces of knowledge/ skills to be tested; balancing the test elements (i.e., direct and indirect items, the time dedicated to each section); weighing the test scores, in accordance with each test task; making the test work (i.e., trying it out before administering it).

Morris and Smith (1999, p. 22) define the writing skill as the ability to coherently articulate and convey ideas, opinions, emotions, and attitudes via written symbols. Thus, the mastery of this productive skill – which is generally deemed by teachers as the most challenging language skill to grasp, teach and assess compared to the other three language skills i.e., reading, listening and speaking – involves a high level of accuracy (Hyland, 2003). Other scholars, such as Swales and Feak (1994), explain that tools such as controlled lessons, authentic tasks and experiences are essential for the development of writing abilities.

2.3. Main scoring methods

As far as scoring methods are concerned, when it comes to responsive and extensive writing, Brown (2003, p. 234), Hyland (2003) and Weigle (2002) identify and analyze three scoring types, i.e., holistic scoring, primary trait scoring and analytic scoring. When tackling holistic scoring, these scholars emphasize its rapidity, inter-rater reliability, emphasis on the testee’s strengths, easiness of interpretation, focus on the general impression of the students’ written text, and general applicability. However, it lacks diagnostic information and its scale is not equally suited to all writing genres, being thus applicable to the assessments conducted for admission or for placement into courses.

As regards primary trait scoring, it aims the assessor’s attention to the main function of the written piece, depending on the genre. Thus, Weigle (2002, p. 110) explains that this type of scoring focuses on the students’ ability to “write within a narrowly define range of discourse”. Such instances are represented by the description of the essential characteristics of the graph (for tasks requiring graph descriptions) or by the accuracy of the stages of the procedures and their final results (for reports).

Last, but not least, analytic scoring is the most adequate for classroom use in Brown's opinion, as it involves six main writing elements and it can be adapted to various curriculum objectives, genres, levels and learner needs. Despite the disadvantage of spending more time on detailed scoring, analytic scoring provides learners with more consistent feedback, which enhances their improvement (see Brown, 2003). In his turn, Weigle (2002, p. 110) highlights the main elements taken into consideration in analytical scoring, i.e., "content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics". Salmani Nodoushan (2014, p. 132) stresses that scoring writing is a sensitive and controversial issue and the above-mentioned criterion-referenced procedures are widely used nowadays.

2.4. Assessment for learning

The specialists in the field pinpoint the idea that the assessment should furnish practical information about the learners' achievement level and also about the benefits, strengths and weaknesses of the teaching methods and techniques. For instance, Hyland (2003) draws the attention to the key role played by a well-defined scoring system in the assessment process, with clearly delineated scoring and performance criteria that would allow students with low scores to understand what they should do in order to improve their performance. Salmani Nodoushan (2014, pp. 130-131) reiterates the above-mentioned ideas, underlining that the students' performance should be assessed based on crucial attributes, not on easily measurable ones.

Fatimah Fatimah and Fazri Nur Yusuf (2018, pp. 430-431) also highlight the significant part played by guidance, progress assessment and feedback in enhancing the students' performance. In their perspective, the assessment process should represent a tool employed in order to help learners evolve and strengthen their skills. This type of assessment presented by the above-mentioned scholars is known as Assessment for Learning or Formative Assessment, where teachers gather various pieces of information of their learners' ongoing progress, needs and understanding. The assessment for learning is highly marked by feedback and it focuses on notifying students about their progress, which grants them the opportunity to take the appropriate measures and action so as to enhance their performance and skills during the learning process. Questions, surveys, feedback, peer assessment, self-evaluation are some of the main strategies employed in assessment for learning, which can positively influence the learners' performance and assist the weaker ones to carry out their learning activities successfully and to obtain achievement scores. Moreover, it increases their motivation, which often reflects in the improvement of their academic achievement (see Băcă, 2020, p. 224).

This type of assessment furnishes valuable pieces of information about the students' progress and assists teachers in adjusting their teaching and learning activities, targeting instruction, and distributing resources. Dler Abdullah (2017, p. 30) also explains that the assessment as learning plays a major part in the development of metacognition for learners because it places them in the limelight, as critical interconnectors between the learning and the assessment processes, via self-reflection and critical analysis. Moreover, it allows teachers to focus on specific functional language items, which are sine qua non for the success on a job market (Popescu, 2021, p. 408).

3. Research methodology

The hypothesis underlying this case study (mainly grounded on the theoretical aspects presented in the previous parts of this paper) is as follows: by employing Assessment for Learning strategies, such as constant feedback, questioning, peer assessment, self-evaluation, teachers can enhance the students' writing skills and obtain valuable information about their learning needs.

The research methods to be applied in this case study will be the observation and the survey.

The subjects of this study will be a group of first year BA students from Economic Sciences. At the beginning of the study, the students will sit for an initial test, in order to establish their English proficiency level. They will also be required to fill in a self-assessment questionnaire. The teacher will constantly provide students with feedback and the materials used during the case study will be adapted in accordance with the students' initial test results.

The teaching stage will stretch over a four-week period and it will be focused on teaching students how to write business reports and interpret graphs. When writing short reports and interpret graphs, students will be taught to pay additional attention to the report-writing tips and to the task analysis; they will also be taught to match the instructions with the teacher's marking guide. The teaching materials will be mainly based on: "Check Your English Vocabulary for Business and Administration" by Rawdon Wyatt (London: A&C Black, 2007), "*Market Leader. Advanced Business English*" ("Unit 3. Partnerships"), by Iwonna Dubicka and Margaret O'Keeffe (Edinburgh Gate: Pearson Education Limited, 2007) and "Career Paths: Business English" by John Taylor and Jeff Zetter (Newbury: Express Publishing, 2011). Constant feedback will be furnished to the students during this stage. Moreover, questioning, self-assessment and peer assessment will also be used. At the end of the teaching stage, the students will sit for another test, aimed at the assessment of their writing skills. They will also be required to assess themselves.

It is noteworthy that, according to Brown (2003), drawing up a text in an effective manner requires the ability to coherently develop ideas, which in its turn can be taught based on strategies such as freewriting, outlining, drafting and revising, but also on raising the learners' awareness of the task, attention to the writing genre and to the expectations of the respective genre. The text genre may trigger one or more of the following task types: compare/ contrast, problem/ solution, pros/ cons and cause/ effect (see Brown, 2003).

In order to assess the students' writing abilities for drawing up reports, the following criteria will be taken into consideration, as explained by Brown (2003, p. 23): "Conform to a conventional format (for this case field); Convey the purpose, goal or main idea; Organize details logically and sequentially; State conclusions or findings; Use appropriate vocabulary and jargon for the specific case". As far as the assessment of the students' writing abilities for the interpretation of statistical, graphic and tabular data is concerned, Brown (2003, p. 23) suggests that the following elements should be taken into consideration: the provision of efficient and accurate general description of the data; understandable and coherent language use when organizing the details; rigorous conveyance of details; data elements adequately articulated in various relationships; comprehensive and comprehensible transmission of diverse and specialized information; interpretations beyond the given data, if necessary.

For the purpose of this case study, the teacher will compare the results of the two tests and the two self-assessments (i.e, the initial and the final one), in order to analyze the students' progress. Moreover, the teacher will conduct a survey focused on the students' attitudes towards the assessment methods applied during this research.

4. Findings

It is expected that the students' scores at the test given after the teaching stage will be higher, compared to those from the initial test. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the data provided by the self-assessments and by the employment of the observation method will reveal that students get more involved in the achievement of the writing tasks when provided constant feedback and when the teacher explains and employs adequate assessment methods, adapted to the specificities of report writing and graph interpretation. It is also expected that the survey will highlight the students' positive attitudes towards these assessment methods and procedures.

Therefore, results furnished by this case study are expected to validate the hypothesis according to which adequate ESP writing assessment strategies and constant feedback, typical of the Assessment for Learning, enhance the students' writing skills and furnish valuable information about their progress and learning needs.

5. Conclusions

Regardless of the type of scoring they employ when assessing the students' ESP writing skills, teachers should have in view the final purpose of this activity, i.e., providing students with those abilities necessary in order to successfully perform real world writing tasks, in their future professional environment. Assessment should represent a tool employed by teachers not in order to

get some scores necessary for the student’s academic record, but to obtain a clearer picture of the student’s progress and learning needs. Assessment should highlight both the strengths and the weaknesses of the teaching and learning process and reveal new paths towards improvement and (self)development.

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