

Collaboration in ESL/EFL Writing Assessment Classroom: Portfolio Assessment with Holistic Scoring Rubrics

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Abstract-Of any ideal classroom teaching-learning context- collaboration is the key. At present, collaboration is to be sought at any level, teacher-teacher, teacher-student and student-student .With a shift in view from product to process writing in the collaborative writing assessment class, learner-centred approach towards assessment is more prevalent now. Hence, alternative assessment like portfolio assessment has emerged and implemented in classroom situation to a great extent as a potential answer to the shortcomings of both the indirect writing test and the more direct timed essay assessment. This paper has explored the effect of using portfolio assessment with holistic rubric to measure L2 learners' language performance. It has also briefly focused on another relevant issue in second language writing classroom i.e. providing feedback on student's errors. Finally, it aims to furnish ESL educators with some handy tips and guidelines drawn on reviewing of literature to determine students' improvement, proficiency, and growth.

Key Words: *Writing Assessment, Portfolio Assessment, L2 (second language) Learners, ESL Classroom, Scoring.*

1. Introduction

The plethora of books, journals, articles, research papers attempts to discuss writing task assessment and presents lots of suggestions as to how an ESL educator can assess examination scripts. Though they offer improved insights into this complex arena of assessing paper in different academic settings, it still remains a challenging task. One reason can be its nature which is very time-consuming. Besides, reading EFL students' scripts may require patience. On the other hand, for students' it has always been a scaring experience as it means lots of reading, writing, tension of good grades or scores or to some, it can be a matter of pass or fail of a program. Again, many learners may possess good understanding of the content, yet fail to display the knowledge in the summative test. Moreover, many also believe that teachers' scoring cannot be objective all the time. Whatever may be the challenges, one cannot forget that assessment is intrinsic to effective teaching. In recent years, as one-off test fails to represent students' real performance ability, assessment researchers recommend alternative assessment like portfolios [1, *Classroom-based Assessment. Practical English Language Teaching*] with portfolios educators can assemble a variety of writing samples in a range of different contexts which can consequently portray a rich

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picture of learners' ability. With an aim to evaluate learners' achievement, raters become researchers [2,] they observe and record, collect and monitor the documents to uncover day to day progress. The progress figures, eventually, can indicate students' growth as a writer and the acquisition of skill. In addition to, learners' active participation in the assessment method can enhance collaboration and motivation; can nurture inner process of learning and critical reflection which should also be a goal of L2 writing class. Classroom assessment is an ongoing process, a continuous way of lending feedback where an educator can harness different tools and methodologies ranging from self-assessment to portfolio, analytical to holistic. To plan outlines, develop thoughts, and analyze concepts and to build overall framework for writing in the second language one literary needs to embark on a great deal of thinking, effort, and practice. Therefore, ESL instructors can develop eclectic approach (a mix of different methods with teacher's own conception) which can foster learners' gradual improvement. This paper examines the three main issues of ESL classroom assessment on learners' writing:

1. Conventional Methods of measuring second language performance in ESL/FL writing assessment field with a focus on relevant issues like validity and reliability.
2. A comprehensive discussion of portfolio assessment ranging from collecting samples & topics to fixing scoring rubrics with its relation to self-assessment and reflection. An explanation of portfolio-holistic scoring rubric will also be included in order to provide some handy tips and guidelines for practitioners.
3. A brief discussion on when and how to provide feedback on student's errors in writing assessment classroom.

2. Literature Review

Before highlighting conventional methods and approaches of ESL writing assessment, it is worth mentioning here the two most important qualities of testing, validity and reliability. Validity and reliability are crucial to effective assessment practice.

According to Hughes validity of a test is "if it measures accurately what it is intended to measure" [3, *Testing for Language Teachers*]. A valid assessment supplies information on the ability we want to assess and nothing else.

Reliability is another basic feature of a good test. In testing it is identical with consistency of test scores. Again, Hughes claims on reliability "the more similar the scores would have been, the more reliable the test is said to be". A reliable assessment yields to stable learners' score regardless of different occasions and different raters.

Analytic Rating Band

The L2 writing assessment literature basically identifies two types of scoring scales for assessing students' writing proficiency: analytical marking and holistic marking [5]

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According to Hughes-“Methods of scoring which require a separate score for each of a number of aspects of a task are said to be analytic” [6 *Testing for Language Teachers*,] . [7] Again, in an analytical scale “raters mark selected aspects of a piece of writing and assign point values to quantifiable criteria. Hence, from the definition of analytic method it can be understood that this scale views language as sum total of different discrete parts.

Analytical methods of scoring produce quite a number of benefits. Firstly, analytical scoring offers an explicit number band; it is thought to be particularly useful with new and inexperienced teachers with little or no training at all. Secondly, detailed analytical scale can present a vivid picture of student’s nature of mistakes, errors. Therefore, this method helps provide elaborate feedback pointing out learners’ strengths and weaknesses. It also facilitates raters training. Thirdly, this type of marking guards against the collapsing of categories within overall writing ability. Finally, Hughes affirms the very fact that the scorer has to give a number of scores will tend to make the scoring more reliable [9, *Testing for Language Teachers*,].

Analytical scale has some drawbacks as well. The main disadvantage of the analytic method of scoring is that it takes longer time than its holistic counterparts. Secondly, as teachers look at specific areas in a given essay, the most common being content, organization, grammar, mechanics and vocabulary [Jacobs et al, 1981 in 10], marks are often lower than that may be achieved by using holistic scale. Thirdly, because of its discrete-point nature of language, it may fail to assess the overall effect of the piece of writing and consequently may lose validity.

Holistic Rating Band

Holistic scoring (often referred to as ‘impressionistic’ scoring) involves the assignment of a single score to a piece of writing on the basis of an overall impression of it. Holistic scale of marking is most widely used and very popular in measuring the 12 learners’ performance. There are several advantages of Holistic marking. Firstly, trained instructors can assess papers within very short time. Secondly, it ensures greater reliability as it considers language as a whole. Again Hughes states “If well conceived and well organised, holistic scoring in which each student’s work is scored by four different trained scorers can result in high scorer reliability [11] . Thirdly, since overall writing ability is assessed, students are not disadvantaged by one less ability such as poor grammar bringing down a score [12].

As there are advantages, there are also some disadvantages associated with it. Firstly, Haswell (2006 in Susser 2010) cited research showing that “holistic scores explain very little and add almost zero information for placement decisions” [13]. This denotes users of holistic scale cannot provide a vivid profile of student’s strength and weakness. Again Perelman (2005) argued that “longer essays consistently score higher” and that the test disregards factual accuracy and basically encourages the wrong kind of writing” [14]. Even ETS (Educational Testing Service) researchers (Frase, et, al., 1999) have noted the strong relationship between essay length and holistic scores [15]. Finally, Hout

(1990) stated that “ perhaps the most important criticism of holistic scoring is the possibility that a personal stake in reading might be reduced to a set of negotiated principles, and then a true rating of writing quality could be sacrificed for a reliable one” [16].

3. Background History of Portfolio Assessment

Having addressed existing methods, the second issue of the study is to consider portfolio assessment to be practised in the ESL classroom as a way out to insufficient year-end test such as summative test, graded test.

In mid -1970 languages used to be viewed as mastery of isolated elements or knowledge of different component parts [17]. She went on that language proficiency entailed controlling of separate constituents of linguistic system such as the sound system, grammar, and vocabulary. [18] Therefore, the quality of student writing was typically assessed through the use of indirect (and usually multiple -choice) test of usage and mechanics [Hout in Conrad 2001]. The test methods applied by the practitioners during this period were termed as discrete-point tests because they tested one linguistic item at a time. This sort of tests had high reliability and the desired validity as the test designers could include multiple elements and computer scored objective system. But then language test developers and linguists paused to ask question, with this linguistic competence could learners develop communicative competence? To find way out to this traditional indirect test, more direct timed-essay exams were deemed to be practical reflections of the construct of writing. (Construct assessment denotes making its point clear at the very outset/ before it really assesses the ability of students.) However, unlike indirect test strategies timed-essay and product based test approach could not fulfill the criteria of validity and reliability of a test. Husada (2007) pointed out several reasons as particularly problematic in the field of EFL language classroom such as prompt development and time-constraints as ESL test-takers writing requires conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas [19]. [20] Another claim against the validity of timed essays was that in eliciting only a single writing sample, they did not sufficiently measure the abilities that students must demonstrate in order to succeed in the various writing tasks found throughout the different academic disciplines (Horowitz, 1991 in Conrad 2001).

As solution experts and test-designers incline towards process-based, student-centred communicative approach. Goodman and Heymsfeld (1989) illustrate that this approach includes process writing, process reading, communicative competence, and language as a whole which is distinguished from prior practices by their focus on language function and meaning and the processes of learning [21] .Thus it is understandable that curriculum, test designed for product assessment will fall short for process learning. As a result, a non-test procedure like portfolio assessment has begun to be harnessed as a plausible option in the ESL classroom. [22] It is (also) increasingly cited as a viable alternative to standardized testing (Wolf, 1989 in Sharifi & Hassaskhah 2011).

4. Portfolio Assessment and Reflection

In order to define and describe portfolios as assessment tools, the following

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quotations from previous literature can be consulted:

The use of writing portfolios as assessment instruments has been hailed to a certain extent as a potential answer to the shortcomings of both the indirect writing test and the more direct timed-essay assessment. Portfolios share the common goal of the “alternative, authentic, or performance” assessments, which is essential to provide evidence regarding the complex processes in which students engage themselves in actual, real-life performances [23].

[24] In practice, writing portfolios combine several forms of documentation and evaluation. A writing portfolio can include product, process and reflection. Inclusion of product and process allows others to evaluate the acquisition of skill or strategy; reflection reveals the writer's attitude and point of view. As an assessment tool, the writing portfolio compares favourably standardized indirect measures of writing with regard to validity. Given the complexity and variety of real writing tasks, a collection of final drafts written on different topics at different times is more valid than a single sample of writing as well. To the extent that the creation of a portfolio mirrors the writing process followed in other college courses, it is a valid and relevant assessment of a student's academic writing ability (Hamp-Lyons, 1991, p.263 in Albertni, 1994).

In the light of features mentioned above it can be stressed that portfolios have direct relation with process writing. It can show learners ongoing progress graph and achievement. It boosts up classroom learning by increasing learners autonomy in selecting and evaluating the classroom task. Feedback from teachers', advice from peers can contribute positively to emerge as skilled writers. Genesee and Upshur 1996 in Sharifi & Hassaskhah 2011) clearly state that reviewing portfolios can increase the students' involvement in and ownership of their own learning [25]. Furthermore, Belanoff (1994) confirm that the result of the evaluation becomes a positive force to encourage growth, maturity, and independence, rather than a means of pointing out deficiencies [26].

Since this paper advocates exercise of portfolio assessment principles in ESL classroom, its benefits are of particular interest. In this regard, I would like to consult and cite Hamp-Lyons (1996b in Conrad 2001) as her ESL situation perfectly co-relates with that of Bangladeshi ESL contexts [27]. Here a short discussion of Bangladesh context is worth mentioning. In our country, English is learnt as a mandatory course in all levels of education. However, observation of classrooms at tertiary level reinforces that because of Bangladesh being a monolingual country, the practice and learning of English of Bangladeshi Learners are limited only to classroom situation. Besides, Primary, Secondary and, Higher Secondary levels' age-old traditional system of summative tests only encourage memorisation of grammar rules, a few paragraphs and essays. Majority of the students actually fail to show their proficiency in English because of lack of practice in real life situation, being too frightened of final tests. Year round class tests, in-course tests or portfolios can help erase their fears and anxieties about the very word “Test”. And this practice will also

prevent fossilization of English Knowledge. cite Hamp-Lyons (1996b from her experience of University of Michigan shows portfolios are remarkably beneficial for ESL learners as they can have increased time for revision to correct fossilized errors (solidified mistakes usually become part of regular habits) [28] . She continued "portfolios with their greater number of texts and multiple drafts provide a more comprehensive and consequently fairer assessment of a non-native writer's ability". Finally, Elbow & Belanoff (1986 cited in Conrad 20010) indicate portfolio as a tool to better diagnose the intricacies perceived at the various stages of process writing [29].

[30] Despite some advantages of portfolios, a few drawbacks are to be observed in issues like validity and reliability. Portfolios only exhibit a high degree of face validity which is the least important aspect of validity. Disadvantages with reliability is if the end result of an assessment are found to be unreliable, they are ultimately pointless as they cannot be said to be indicative of future assessments or performances in the skill being tested (Hout,1990 in CARLA 20) .

[31] Portfolio assessment heightens instructor-learner collaboration. To follow facilitators in classroom context, students need to develop their critical reflection. Swain (2002, p.12) sums up the generally accepted benefits of reflection: "Reflection enables us to evaluate experience, learn from mistakes, repeat successes, revise, and plan" (in Sharifi & Hassaskhah 2011)

Gallagher (2001) also maintains that reflection is a major component of portfolios as it helps students to learn from experience and practise, thereby helping them to bridge the theory-practice gap. He says through the reflective process students are not only able to identify gaps in knowledge and/or skills and competence, but also to reconfirm and document strengths, skills and knowledge. [32]

Therefore, students who can reflect on what they are learning and also what they have learnt can be better learners.

5. Self-Assessment and Peer-Evaluation

Classroom observation by instructors upholds that assessing one's own learning and providing assessment on class-mates writing scripts may subsequently contribute to learner's evolution as a critical writer. In this regard, Farr & Tone (1994) noted that self-assessment and peer-assessment have direct relations with portfolio assessment. With ESL learners, self-assessment can be introduced in the beginning of a course, thus imparting strong motivational factor to assess their own language learning objectives leading to self-direction [33]. Besides, portfolio assessment is the only methodology that responds directly to the goal of training students to assess their own success. Portfolios integrate gathering and reviewing facts, revealing gradual progress, recording students' preferences, conferencing with teacher and peers. The key to self-assessment is that it makes them independent learners by engaging them in their own learning strategies. (Crooks 2001) maintains that "self-assessment provides students with the opportunity to understand the grading system. Thus, they can assist removing weaknesses associated with raters biased scoring [34]. Furthermore, students

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involved in self-evaluation can build up their own understanding, share meaning with fellow-mates, can also draw support from both teacher and peers in order to establish cooperative and collaborative language learning environment. Peer-assessment is another assessment tool which imparts lots of benefits with portfolio assessment. According to Gibbs (1992) "Research studies examining this mode of assessment have revealed that it can work towards developing students' higher order reasoning and higher level cognitive thought, helping to nurture student-centred learning among undergraduate learners, encouraging active and flexible learning and facilitating a deep approach to learning rather than a surface approach [35].

6. Portfolio and Holistic Scoring Rubric:

Some Guidelines

With purpose of designing a portfolio rubric, we may consider keeping in mind that setting guidelines for assessing single sample produced by a one-off test is rather easier than sketching a rubric for multiple tasks on several genres from various writing situations. Based on Conrad (2001) study in the context of intensive English as Second Language Programme for international students at a large midwestern university, an attempt is made here to describe portfolio scoring rubric. For this, three portfolio writing samples gathered at the end of each term which are 1. an introductory letter addressed to the portfolio readers (i.e. to instructors as writing sample), 2. a multiple essay draft and 3. an unassisted writing and students had the liberty to choose topic for sample no2 & 3 (i.e. multiple essay drafts and independent writing) [36] . Here only multiple essay draft sample deserves a separate but brief description. Along with the final draft for this study students' submitted all prior edited copies with teacher's comments. This altogether numbered approximately three to four.

When time for portfolio checking came after each term, educators generally called meeting where they pulled ideas and shared views on the quality of a set of anchor portfolio writings chosen by the portfolio programme supervisor. This sort of conference was commonly known as standardisation sessions, in it the instructors could collaborate to fix criteria for assessing portfolios. As the very name signified the primary focus of standardisation sessions was to build consensus on the parameters that were to be used to distinguish portfolios of differing quality based on the descriptors found on the portfolio scoring rubric. In order to establish standards, the sessions would regard both old and new portfolio items. In this manner principles could be set unanimously with majority's approval. Once standards were fixed, each submitted portfolio was read and rated by two raters and if there is any discord popped up between them, a third reader was included in the assessment. Instructors, who taught advance composition class, were not allowed to assess their direct students' portfolios. Different benchmarks were set to assess all three types of samples-portfolio letter, multi-draft essay, and unassisted writing. Both portfolio letter and unassisted writing were assessed using holistic scoring rubric as this scale described a comprehensive depiction of overall quality. However, a modified holistic scale was applied for assessing multi-draft essay. Unlike basic holistic scale this modification involved different traits such as content, audience

awareness, organisation, and language usage. Hamp-Lyons (1991) showed that this way, to a certain extent, it resembled a multiple –trait instrument. Nevertheless, the system for marking the multiple draft essays was principally holistic as reader assigned score on the basis of general impression without following any fixed formula [37]. A three layered scale acceptable, marginal, or unacceptable was introduced to assess writing samples. In fact, the final score was recorded according to this three-level scale and by means of a specified formula (Table A). According to this method of determining the overall portfolio grade, if any of the samples obtained score unacceptable, the final portfolio grade was unacceptable. However, to secure marginal at best one had to score marginal on the multi-draft essay or on both the portfolio letter and unassisted writing were to score as marginal. Among three samples if two samples scored acceptable, the final grade was acceptable providing that between two acceptable items one had to be multi-draft essay. And if all three samples scored acceptable, undoubtedly the overall score of portfolio would be acceptable. To ensure reliability of the assessment primarily two raters scored portfolios. In cases of disagreement, one additional rating might significantly increase reliability. This way, an impartial feedback could be provided by someone who had not been in the team of raters or class instructors. In extreme and rare case like where all three scorers failed to come to a consensus, a fourth party might be called upon to assess the portfolio or some kind of compromise was reached.

Table A: Formula for determining overall portfolio scores [38]

Individual writing sample scores	Overall portfolio score
One unacceptable score	Unacceptable portfolio
A marginal multi-draft essay	Marginal portfolio at best
Two marginal scores	Marginal portfolio at best
One marginal letter or unassisted writing & two acceptable scores	Acceptable portfolio

7. ESL Learners, Error Correction in Classroom

Husada (2012) believes that “Learning to write is a step-by-step process, by which errors occur in all stages of learning” [39]. However, what approach should be considered for correcting errors is a matter of controversy. As instructors of both first and second language unanimously believed that correction which interrupts students’ natural performance, may usually have discouraging effect. One study from the University of Minnesota (Semke, 1984 in Albertni 1994) can be cited here- accuracy, fluency, and general language proficiency in the German students’ writing was sustained not by error correction but by practice [40]. In L2 classroom learners remained rather shy and unconfident about second language use in any form i.e. writing or speaking specially in first few classes. When asked to be performed they usually gather some courage to perform. For this Husada (2012) remarked that “school papers ‘bleeding with red pencil’ adversely affected their motivation to write [41]. Conversely, as facilitator, mentor and course guide we cannot overlook our duty of correcting learner’s mistakes. Additionally, “less correction may result in

fossilization". Therefore, it totally depends on the particular instructor and in the learning situation s/he works. With mature learners, negotiating for high time and context for correction can be one solution. "Also, selective correction of only those errors related to the main objective of an assignment will reduce students frustration and increase learning" [42]. At this time of meaning based approach towards writing, teacher may, first of all focus on overall meaning, intelligibility than grammatical errors. In this manner, learners can initially concentrate on idea development and organisation and can come back for style fixing and mechanics at the final stage of writing. Peter Elbow (1993 in Albertri 1994) "reports that the creation of "evaluation-free zones "at the beginning of each semester improves both students' writing and his own attitude towards it [43]. He continues "liking" students' writing better and, as a consequence, being more able to criticize it constructively".

8. Conclusion

Yancy (1992) indicates that instructors who use portfolio as an assessment tool report that they have had a salutary effect on their teaching [44]. As stated in the literature, portfolio encourages students to enhance their reflective skills (Grant & Dornan, 2001) and help them become aware of their strengths and weaknesses (Priest & Roberts, 1998). They help students to take responsibility for their own professional development and promote critical thinking (Wenzel et al., 1998). In addition, they support students to develop independent learning and increase their feelings of self-esteem and confidence [Harris et al., 2001 in 45]. Portfolios, in the teaching learning process may entail learners' suggestions into decision making, thus help emerge them as independent and autonomous learners who can take greater control in their learning. Teachers' feedback at every stage on their portfolios can enhance their self-confidence and critical reflection which can assist performing in real life situations communicatively. In collaborative ESL writing classroom, portfolio assessment can be a suitable alternative as it is generally assumed that portfolios and collaboration walk hand in hand. Gonzalez, Yawkey and Minaya-Rowe (2005 in Fregeau, A.L. Leier, D.R.2008) suggests that "incorporate portfolio assessments that will be a source of data for a continuous evaluation of progress" [46]. Classroom assessment is a part of a learning process, and a medium of offering continuous feedback. By supplying gradual feedback on learners' portfolios, classroom assessment and portfolios actually complement each other. In this regard Brindley (2003) asserts "classroom assessment is a means of informing and improving learning-if we teach what we assess and we assess what we teach, and then both learners and teachers know what has been achieved and where to go next[47]". Therefore as instructor we have to make our assessment goal clear to our students. And whatever scales teacher do use in any classroom context, it should not be anything fixed. Nunn, R.Thurman, J. (2010) state that the criteria are a developmental tool and periodical modifications should be seen as a normal part of the process [48]. Moreover, Susser (2010) emphasises that students should not be made aware of the problems with this type of scoring, only familiarity with the rubrics used and study of model essays that will ensure high score and consequently prepared them for the test [49].

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