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ASSESSMENT OF WRITING AND SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract: Current paper discusses the vital role of assessment in speaking and writing skills. Literature was reviewed regarding assessment of writing and speaking. The author highlights that teachers should be trained prior to developing and assessing students' language abilities. In this way, reliability, validity and practicality measures are ensured. Students' career future is vital and therefore, it is advisable to consider appropriate frameworks in the evaluation of learners. Some activities to enhance writing abilities of students were suggested.

Key words: language assessment, writing, speaking

Introduction

Writing is no doubt, the most challenging skill of all learners, and even teachers find it hard to assess fairly (reliability). Initially, it is necessary to identify course objectives because they will prompt test developers to design an appropriate writing task. There are different purposes for writing. One of them can be when

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learners aim to enter a university (entrance test) or take an examination (proficiency test). Therefore, learners start preparing by taking up some private lessons (tutoring). Another reason might be when in universities, Academic Writing Course is taught, and it is considered obligatory for students to take it since they should produce a written assignment by the end of the semester or during the academic year (achievement test). In this case, writing becomes essential to learners as it might affect their final evaluation or future career.

Assessing Writing

As it comes to assessing writing, it is another difficulty for teachers because it requires to be assessment literate. Hughes (2003) emphasizes that a valid writing test should test only writing ability and not other skills, such as reading or creative ability. A test that contains a variety of writing tasks does not give a more representative picture of a student's writing ability than one that contains only one writing task. One of the most challenging in creating a writing test, yet, to develop scoring criteria. At universities, analytic scoring procedure is frequently used in tests; that is, a score is given for different aspects of a piece of writing, such as grammar, content and layout. A holistic scoring framework is also another most wide-spread which is the easiest to use for less high stakes tests as they take less time of examiners. Bacha (2002) found that teachers have to consider developing reliable and valid tests in order to eliminate the grade divergence between teachers and students' perceived grades. For this, it is necessary to raise learners' knowledge of what they can do, and what they cannot. In this way, students will become self-aware of their abilities, and they start working on their weaknesses and further lead to improvement.

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It is vital for teachers to identify and understand the purpose of assessing students' writing. Teachers can give diagnostic, proficiency or achievement tests depending on their purpose. For example, results of a diagnostic test will enable course instructors to decide on certain topics to cover during the course coming. Therefore, it is crucial to know who we are teaching, why we are teaching (university goal), and what we are delivering (needs analysis). In business settings, one of the purposes of business correspondence is to enter into business communication among different parties, such as shareholders, businesses, entrepreneurs and others.

Productive skills: writing and speaking

Students have been struggling to learn writing and speaking competence since they are productive skills. Both require sufficient efforts, determination and hard work. Both are productive skills and their evaluation needs careful attention. In comparison to listening and reading skills, where answers can be checked automatically with instant results. Speaking and writing abilities require raters to be trained appropriately and be equipped with resources, such as time and mental wellbeing.

To achieve expected results, language learners must showcase that they have mastered a language and are capable enough to respond well to meet the assessment criteria set as the base for grading by teachers or graders. For example, students who take IELTS proficiency test, are aware of the grading framework publicly announced by the IELTS administration. The same is true with other TOEFL or SAT. At the university level, many teachers provide their assessments in their syllabus, and students prepare their assignments to these requirements. Providing language learners with grading systems is the key to success for examinees, and it is of paramount importance for test takers and raters. The criteria differ from one skill to

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another. In the speaking and writing tests, students are asked to follow and adhere to certain criteria (see Table 1 and 2):

Table 1. Assessment criteria for speaking evaluation

CRITERIA	Description
Language accuracy	Correct use of grammar, pronunciation, intonation
Task response	Answers all questions
Lexical resource	Uses a variety of vocabulary, collocations, idioms
Cohesion and coherence	Logical and grammatical link of ideas, words

Table 1. Assessment criteria for writing evaluation

CRITERIA	Description
Language accuracy	Correct use of grammar, spelling
Task achievement	Responds to task requirements
Lexical resource	Uses a variety of vocabulary, collocations, synonyms
Cohesion and coherence	Logical and grammatical link of ideas, words, linking words

Language accuracy – examinees should demonstrate how well they use grammar, a variety of grammar structures appropriately

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Students should demonstrate how well they have learnt and can apply grammar, a variety of grammar forms in their oral and written speech. It is crucial for test takers to vary their grammar use in their speech to show how accurately and appropriately they employ them.

Task response – questions need to be answered, ideas are relevant to topic questions, prompts are considered

Many raters claim that language learners have good knowledge of English, but they do not carefully read or understand question and the prompt and this leads to lack of relevance of their ideas to main idea of the question. This is true with both speaking and writing skills. In speaking test, they may forget the question main topic, or miss key ideas, or do not understand the question, while in the writing test, question could be difficult due to unfamiliar words and complicated structure of the sentence. Anyway, task response is paramount to achieve good result.

Lexical resource – topic-related vocabulary is used appropriately, collocations are applied, a variety of word forms are utilized

By lexical resource, it is meant that test takers should use topic-related vocabulary and a variety of word combinations. Main reasons for test failure can be when students use some words repeatedly which shows they lack a bank of new vocabulary. Even if students know many words, but they do not use them correctly or unable to combine with other words. They have simply learnt words without practicing them. Similar issues is true with writing skill. The most common problem students

Cohesion and coherence – ideas are connected grammatically and logically

This criterion can be the most difficult part because if students' grammar is poor, this can affect their coherence and cohesion. Being able to connect ideas

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requires students to master grammar structures. Another problem is with ordering ideas appropriately. Applying linking expressions are main factors for logical connections of ideas and paragraphs. In essay writing, the layout consists of instruction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. In the introduction, question should be paraphrased first, background information is second, and thesis statement is final sentence. In the body paragraph, sentences consist of topic sentence, supporting sentences including details, explanation and examples, and concluding sentence. This is the logical connection of ideas in these paragraphs.

Transparent and practical methods of assessing productive skills

Rubric assessment is useful and transparent and practical for teachers (Budiharso, et al. 2024). It offers many benefits for students and teachers (Becker, 2016). It serves to enhance students writing and speaking skills. Consistent evaluation is provided thoroughly and accurately. It is a fair and relevant system that students can rely on if they are provided with explanation earlier.

Alimov (2018) recommended five step-by-step approach which can improve students' English language writing competence. He created five steps of shaping students' writing speech 1) preparation mode: gathering materials, setting goals, and tasks 2) exercising making sentences about a topic with the help of cluster 3) expressing your ideas in clear and logical way 4) encouraging critical thinking 5) revising, reviewing and rewriting based on the comments and feedback.

In conclusion, it is crucial that raters are assessment literate, and in this way, students can be assessed reliably, and validly. Educational settings should prioritize students' needs, future over teachers' aspirations.

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