

Evaluation of Writing Assignments

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Abstract

Teaching English as a foreign language is now one of the most important subjects in Croatian secondary schools since English is one of the three obligatory subjects at 'matura' - standardized tests which the seniors need to pass to graduate. Writing is one of the three parts of the EL exam, the other two being listening and reading. When learning a language, students start from listening skill, move on to speaking and reading and finally to most difficult skill to master: writing. Teaching and learning writing faces a lot of challenges since it requires a lot of time to practice and even more to evaluate and monitor progress. Teacher's responsibilities are to regularly provide opportunities to write, encourage students to learn from their mistakes and promote their success. In order to do so, students should be given clear instructions on evaluation/assessment and concise feedback. Since grading written assignments takes up a lot of time, the author proposes rubrics which can be used to assess various types of writing taught at secondary level (description of place/event/person, letters of complaint, job application, invitation, discursive/opinion/for-and-against essay etc.). Author suggests four fixed rubrics and subdivisions: Task completion, Cohesion / coherence, Grammar and Vocabulary. All rubrics and subdivisions are described in the paper. A survey was also conducted on a sample of 140 students and has given an insight into students' opinion on importance of assessment and feedback and its influence on their progress.

Keywords: English language, evaluation, assessment, writing assignments, rubrics, writing skills

Introduction

Undoubtedly, evaluating writing assignments is one of the most challenging tasks a teacher can face. Evaluation takes a significant amount of time and energy, so teachers are looking for a way to make grading simpler and quicker yet still important and valuable to students. Quite often, as Crump and Carbone (1998) noticed, evaluating and providing feedback often becomes a daunting task of "correcting" or "explaining" rather than offering useful feedback that improves students' writing skills since teachers tend to focus on mistakes rather than praise.

To avoid fatigue influencing our grading after tenth essay, we should use clear grading criteria which will make our job much easier. This paper aims to offer some tangible strategies and criteria for improving the complicated and intensive attempt of evaluating students' writing.

Teachers' Challenges

Every teacher is faced with many challenges and obstacles which need to be considered when grading an essay. Among the most important are:

Students' attitude towards feedback and rubrics,

putting focus on important,

efficiency and consistency, and

investing time earlier in process.

Students Attitude Towards Feedback And Rubrics

Before considering methods of evaluating and responding, it can be helpful to consider the student-writer perspective. Being conscious of how students perceive and react to our commentary as teachers can positively influence the way we respond to their writing. No student is satisfied upon receiving an essay full of corrections and comments.

A 1990 study by Spandel and Stiggins revealed that students often misread the tone and meaning of comments, even though they seem to be clear and direct. Nancy Sommers (1982) from Harvard University found that most comments were not text-specific and could be clearer - surely a result of time and space restrictions. Some of the comments were also frustrating for students who are incapable or insufficiently prepared to understand the meaning themselves. With that in mind, the primary goal in providing feedback on our students' writing is to promote overall improvement as well as clearly explain the grade we have assigned.

Putting Focus On Important And Being Clear

Our students, especially the young ones, struggle to see their own work objectively, so it is helpful for them to receive feedback that helps them understand what they have done well and which aspects and parts of their essay need improvement. It is also very important to respond as a reader and grader to the writing itself, not to the person. Also, the aim is to help students improve their writing in general, and although it is probably easier to focus only on general issues, it is also important to help our students with important issues like critical thought, target audience and content.

Students need specific details which will help them understand our evaluation and advice for future writing. For example, instead of saying: 'poor paragraph construction', we could explain that 'paragraph should include opinion and explanation' or 'mention reasons and explain each of them'. Another very important issue to focus on is not to forget to point out what a student has done well.

Finally, we must not forget that unlike taking a test, writing and receiving feedback is a deeply personal experience for many. When providing feedback, we should respect our students' personality and create a positive setting that will inspire students to advance, rather than discourage them from trying.

Efficiency and Consistency

Best interest of both the teacher and the writer should be improving writing skills using clear and concise comments (Hendergen, 2004). Too many comments on too many aspects can confuse and overwhelm a student and consume a lot of our time and energy. Upon reading an essay, teachers should choose what they believe to be the most important areas on which a student should concentrate. Teachers should try focusing on "higher-order" issues first, eg. format and development. To help a teacher accomplish this, author suggests reading through the whole paper first without marking it at all to help get a good idea of what the primary issues are, if any.

On one hand, if teacher's comments are concentrated only on those issues, a student might think nothing else needs improvement. On the other hand, if there are very few comments students might become discouraged and feel the grade was given subjectively, and that there is no way to improve.

When discussing efficiency, focusing on content might help teachers limit the amount of time they spend on marking and commenting. Sometimes it might be a good idea not to edit the paper word-for-word and a good balance should be found since correcting errors does matter, but if a teacher fixes every error in an essay, students will feel dissatisfied with their work and lose the opportunity to identify the problems and make the corrections themselves. Consequently, teachers will feel as if they have wasted a lot of time on corrections in vain. Instead, a teacher might create a list of comments applicable to a selection of essays so that you can discuss the essay or revision more in depth with the entire class. If you find that a problem is common to many papers in the class, you do not have to take the time to explain it on every single paper. Instead, explain the problem and teach the skills to your class as a whole. Another idea might be marking errors with a question mark '?' or an "x" in the margin so the students try to figure out what needs to be revised. Finally, a teacher might carefully edit just one paragraph, and then students grade each other's paper and write comments before the teacher gives final opinion and ticks the 'proper/correct' comments and crosses out the 'wrong ones'. In the long run, this way of correction will most likely attract the attention of students since they do like correcting others and sharing their ideas. You will also profit since they will learn during the procedure as well.

Investing time earlier in the process

A common problem in classrooms is not having enough time to practice. However, if you do manage to get one or two extra lessons which you can spend on practicing writing, the effort will be worthwhile. In class, clearly explain the criteria you will use when evaluating papers. Writing out your criteria ensures consistency and provides a useful point of discussion and assigning students a few essays to grade will help them recognize and later avoid some common mistakes. Also, copy a few good examples of essays and explain why the paper is successful.

Discuss the assignment: go over it literally sentence by sentence, eg. in a for-and-against essay: last paragraph should contain short summary of the topic, writer's opinion and explanation of the opinion. If your students mark each of the requested parts in colour, they will remember it later.

Also, write the essay paragraph by paragraph – give your students a few topics and ask them to write only first paragraph. Then move on to paragraph two etc. You can also use peer review for this practice.

Creating rubrics based on the type of assignment

Not all types of assignments require the same type of feedback and the same grading process. However, teachers often use rubrics to assist learning, while at the same time they must make assessing their students' work objective, efficient, objective, and rapid. A teacher knows what the main idea of each type of writing is so one can always create and adapt the criteria accordingly.

Rubrics permit teachers to evaluate students' performance and focus their attention to the key concepts and standards that the students must achieve. Author suggests using not more than five rubrics for each type of writing since it could prove to be too complex and overwhelming to students.

Luckily, teachers have the flexibility to reuse the same rubrics for different class assignments since all types of writing pieces includes some sort of grading vocabulary, grammar or task completion. If a teacher explains the use of rubrics beforehand, students are provided with a clear understanding of what is expected of them and they have tangible guidelines about what makes a good paragraph, or a conclusion, etc. Various studies have proven that rubrics improve students' final essays and therefore increase the students' level of learning. Being familiar with rubrics and comments pool, students can clearly understand what feedback they can expect and what each comment reflects on. Rubrics allow students to understand the used criteria and what is considered 'good' in a certain type of an essay. By using rubrics, teachers allow students practice higher-level thinking processes. Parents also highly value the use of rubrics because they permit teachers to rationalize why a certain grade was awarded to his/her child since they are easy to understand at a quick glance.

Model rubrics (descriptors and comments for for-and-against essay)

National exams (matura) for seniors of secondary level schools in Croatia require students to write a 250-word 'for and against' essay at a B2 CEF level. According to ZEROJ-a (2005), a student is expected to be able to:

write clear texts on various topics

can evaluate different ideas or solutions to a problem.

express news and views effectively in writing, and relate to those of others

write letters conveying degrees of emotion and highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences and commenting on the correspondent's news and views

write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from various sources

write clear, detailed descriptions of real or imaginary events and experiences marking the relationship between ideas in clear connected text, and following established conventions of the genre concerned.

write an essay or report that develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail.

write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a specific point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

synthesise information and arguments from various sources.

At matura, essay is graded in four categories, with 0-5 points per category:

Task completion

Coherence and cohesion

Vocabulary and

Grammar

Catalogue for English language matura contains rubrics table with feedback comments for 'For and against' essay. Four categories have subdivisions and notes on what is considered important and will be graded in a specific category. Author has found this table very useful and so have the students who have been continuously expressing their satisfaction ever since the rubrics have been introduced seven years ago.

Table 1. Rubrics at Matura, by NCVVO

POINTS	TASK COMPLETION	COHERENCE AND COHESION	VOCABULARY	GRAMMAR
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All parts of the prompt fairly equally developed. Main ideas consistently well supported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear flow of ideas. Effective use of paragraphing and cohesive devices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wide range for the task. Minor errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wide range for the task. Minor errors.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All parts of the prompt developed but unequally. Main ideas generally well supported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally clear flow of ideas. Good use of paragraphing and cohesive devices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very good range for the task. Errors do not impede easy understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good range for the task. Errors do not impede easy understanding.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One part of the prompt not developed. Main ideas sufficiently supported. / Not all main ideas relevant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flow of ideas sometimes unclear. Sufficient use of paragraphing or cohesive devices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good range for the task. Errors sometimes impede easy understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally uses simple structures. Errors sometimes impede easy understanding.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two parts of the prompt not developed. / The essay is largely irrelevant. Main ideas insufficiently supported. Errors cause difficulty in understanding in places. Inappropriate layout. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flow of ideas often unclear. Limited use of paragraphing or cohesive devices. Errors cause difficulty in understanding in places. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sufficient range for the task. Errors sometimes cause difficulty in understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relies on simple structures. Errors sometimes cause difficulty in understanding.
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insufficient prompt development. / The essay is irrelevant. No clear main idea. Errors frequently cause difficulty in understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flow of ideas generally difficult to follow. Inadequate use of paragraphing or cohesive devices. Errors frequently cause difficulty in understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inadequate range for the task. Errors frequently cause difficulty in understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Range is severely restricted. Errors frequently cause difficulty in understanding.
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally unintelligible. / Less than 50 words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Errors generally prevent understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Errors generally prevent understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Errors generally prevent understanding.

With years, author has adapted the table rubrics slightly and uses the table shown below in class. The table lists all the important criteria and items which are considered when grading an essay. The table is simplified so students do not need to look for specific information through all the descriptors for each mark within a graded category and can concentrate on what is graded. All students have copies of the table in their notebooks so they can consult the table freely whenever they need to.

Table 2. Adapted Rubrics For 'For And Against' Essay

Task completion:	1a. Development appropriate content of paragraphs: introduction, body /for and against/, conclusion; all parts equally developed 1b. Arguments support of ideas (for and against arguments in separate paragraphs, with sufficient support and explanations)
Coherence and cohesion	2a. Coherence flow of ideas, ease of reading, linking words

	2.b. Cohesion paragraph structure, use of cohesive devices
Vocabulary	3a. Range A1-C2 level of used vocabulary
	3b. Accuracy spelling, syntax, choice of words is appropriate for the task
Grammar	4a. Range variety and level of tenses and structures used
	4b. Accuracy choice of structures is appropriate for the task

Author has also adapted the same rubrics for other types of written assignments: descriptions, letters and stories, which are explained in continuation of this paper.

Adapted Rubrics

As already mentioned, students found the rubrics very useful and user-friendly and liked the suggestion of creating the same type table for grading other types of writing, eg.:

- descriptions (persons, places or events),
- letters (personal, business, recommendations, complaints) or
- narrative essays (stories).

All category terms remain the same, however, descriptions vary for different types of writings under task completion and coherence and cohesion.

Table 3. Rubrics For Grading A Description (Person, Place, Event)

Task completion:	1a. Development has a student completed a task (introduction, two middle paragraphs, conclusion)
	1b. Specific details for each type of a description: person: physical description, psychological characteristics; opinion and attitude towards a person place: outline of the city and general information, sights and recommendation (what to do and what to see) event: general information (time, venue), attitude and recommendation.
Coherence and cohesion	2a. Coherence flow of ideas, ease of reading, linking words
	2.b. Cohesion paragraph structure, use of cohesive devices
Vocabulary	3a. Range A1-C2 level of used vocabulary
	3b. Accuracy spelling, syntax, choice of words is appropriate for the task
Grammar	4a. Range variety and level of tenses and structures used
	4b. Accuracy choice of structures is appropriate for the task

Table 4. Rubrics For Grading Letters (Personal, Business etc.)

Task completion:	1a. Development has a student completed a task (content of paragraphs: greeting, introduction, body and formal ending, all parts equally developed)
	1b. Specific details for each type of a letter: personal: reason for writing a letter, ask three questions, retell an interesting event, give excuse for ending the letter

	business: reason for writing a letter (recommendation, complaint, asking for information), suggest solution, give explanation or provide information.
Coherence and cohesion	2a. Coherence flow of ideas, ease of reading, linking words 2.b. Cohesion paragraph structure, use of cohesive devices
Vocabulary	3a. Range A1-C2 level of used vocabulary 3b. Accuracy
Grammar	spelling, syntax, choice of words is appropriate for the task 4a. Range variety and level of tenses and structures used 4b. Accuracy choice of structures is appropriate for the task

Table 5. Rubrics For Grading Stories (Narrative Essays)

Task completion:	1a. Development has a student completed a task (content of paragraphs: setting, climax, conclusion; all parts equally developed) 1b. Arguments support of ideas (character, setting, conflict, plot and theme)
Coherence and cohesion	2a. Coherence flow of ideas, ease of reading, linking words 2.b. Cohesion paragraph structure, use of cohesive devices
Vocabulary	3a. Range A1-C2 level of used vocabulary 3b. Accuracy
Grammar	spelling, syntax, choice of words is appropriate for the task 4a. Range variety and level of tenses and structures used 4b. Accuracy choice of structures is appropriate for the task

Survey

To understand better whether the students appreciate getting feedback on their writings, the author created a structured questionnaire for the purposes of the research and a survey was conducted among the students of Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija. The subjects were 140 third and fourth-year students who were learning English for at least 10 years. Therefore, they had already had significant previous knowledge of English at an average higher B1 level. The survey was composed as a questionnaire with 10 questions in which the students had to grade their answer on a scale from 1 to 5, depending on how much it applied to them. The author herself compiled the questions, which represented a combination of AMTB survey (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993) and authors own questions.

Results and Analysis

A total of 140 students of PRHG completed an online survey, created with the assistance of the website Monkey Survey, consisting of 10 questions. The questions were in English language and the students had to choose between three answers: yes / no / not sure. The goal of the questions was to establish their attitude towards feedback, the use of rubrics in class, their opinion about each of the categories used and their level of overall satisfaction with feedback.

Table 6. Lists of Questions Used in Survey

Questions
Do you find feedback useful?
Do you like your mistakes to be corrected?
Do you like your mistakes to be marked and left for you to correct them?

- Do you like rubrics?
- Does it help when you know the grading criteria in advance?
- Do you think you could grade yourself accurately in 'task completion' rubric when given the feedback and not the grade?
- How satisfied are you with the feedback you receive for your writing tasks?
- Is the feedback too general?
- Feedback comments are too long.
- Do you understand comments given in feedback?

Overall, students' answers showed that they do appreciate feedback, are satisfied with the comments they receive and find feedback very useful and they like knowing the criteria in advance (95%). Majority believes they could even grade themselves accurately in 'task completion' category (63%) and that it helps them improve (69%). On average, they do not find feedback too general (49%) nor too long (66%).

Table 7. Survey Results

Questions	Yes %	No %	Not sure
Do you find feedback useful?	82	11	7
Do you like your mistakes to be corrected?	52	18	30
Do you like your mistakes to be marked and left for you to correct them?	51	36	13
Do you like rubrics?	88	11	1
Does it help when you know the grading criteria in advance?	95	5	0
Do you think you could grade yourself accurately in 'task completion' rubric when given the feedback and not the grade?	63	22	15
How satisfied are you with the feedback you receive for your writing tasks?	75	17	8
Is the feedback too general?	28	49	23
Feedback comments are too long.	22	66	12
Do you think feedback helps you improve?	69	19	12

Conclusion

Unquestionably, evaluating and providing useful feedback on student writing will always be a complex procedure. Grading papers is much more than just reducing the quality of a paper to a 'number', especially if we want to help our students become better thinkers and writers. However, if a teacher thinks the process through and finds a useful method which will help him grade papers more objectively, clearly and quickly, the whole process can become less complicated and time-consuming.

Author suggests rubrics with clear explanations and instructions together with familiarizing students with the criteria for assessing their work. Use of rubrics proved successful in class, which is corroborated by the student survey. The strategies used in class developed a positive attitude towards feedback and stimulated the students' participation in class, which in turn raised their self-confidence and motivation for writing.

The research may serve as the basis for future studies of the relation between feedback and actual final achievement in class and impact on the final grade the students achieve in class. Rubrics and feedback have momentary influence on students, so it should be researched how it influences their writing skills in long-term. Finally, the paper shows that teachers themselves need to find a method which suits their own and their students' needs best to achieve the best possible results.

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