

**Writing Assessment under the Competency Based Approach**  
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**Abstract**

For over a half century writing has been a central topic in applied linguistics and remains an area of lively intellectual research and debate; interest in the writing skill and its improvement led to successive approaches to teaching writing. This is strongly linked to the different approaches to teaching English as a foreign language which were on their parts influenced by psychological trends such as behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism. As the role of writing increases in language learning, classroom assessment practices of writing also become increasingly important. Consequently, the question of how to assess or evaluate students' written productions motivated researchers and educators to research in this area in order to suggest, each time, approaches for assessing writing also related to language teaching theories and writing instruction. Before presenting the main approaches to assessing writing, we are going to define some confusing terms related to the topic.

**1. Definition of Assessment**

“Postsecondary writing instruction and writing assessment orbits are at the centre of a very large galaxy” (Kasner & O’Neil, 2010: 13). This shows the importance of the writing skill and how to assess it. “Assessment involves much more than measurement. That is, in addition to systematically collecting and analyzing information (i.e., measurement of it) it also involves understanding and acting on information about learners’ understanding and on performance in relation to educational goals (Greenstein, 2010: 6). In other words, assessment of learning involves making judgements about students’ summative assessment for purposes of selection and certification. On the contrary assessment for leaning is formative and diagnostic. It provides information about the achievements which allows teaching and learning activities to be changed in

response to learners' needs and recognizes the huge benefits that feedback can have on learning (Black & William 1998: 5).

From these selected definitions, we can say that assessment places the needs of students at the centre of teaching and that it is an important and integral part of the learning and teaching process. It involves attention to clear teaching and learning, aims, motivation, previous experience and present abilities, effective tasks and flexible teaching methods. In other words, assessment serves several purposes and provides information about the knowledge, skills and attitudes students have acquired. In fact, assessing helps to determine the level of competence the students have acquired and whether they can apply that knowledge; it can help in providing high-quality instruction for students. Hence, assessment is student focused as stated by Greenstein (*ibid*: 15) "Assessment is student focused, it is instructionally informative and outcome based".

## **2. Types of Assessment**

There are various types of assessment varying from product assessment to process or project assessment. Each one of them is based on a writing approach which in turn is fitting a teaching or a learning approach.

### **2.1 Product Assessment**

Traditionally, the student's final written product is the one which is assessed without taking into consideration the phases in the writing process. According to Isaacs (1984), any product that shows the following variables is a good one. A balanced assessment should look at all the five aspects of a student's writing: Fluency, Content, Conventions, Syntax and Vocabulary

The traditional method used in assessment, or the product assessment method, consists of assigning a set of writing topics, with students writing and handing a text without revising it during a regulated time period. Conventionally, teachers use direct correction and grade the text before returning it. Thus, product assessment is often equated with a grade, yet this type of assessment attends only to the students' cognitive domain. Teachers, raised and educated in the old tradition, do not easily let the belief that they must correct and grade each piece of writing. The traditional way according to Hedge (2000: 313) "attends to give the student the impression that it is the teacher who is responsible for improving the written text". This obsession with correction, often focused on mechanics, actually undermines the more fundamental aspect of composing -content and clarity. Intensively marked papers give too many details, overwhelming and demoralizing students in addition to overloading teachers.

## 2.2 Process Assessment

Writing assessment can take many forms. When only one product was considered, the writing process must not be neglected. In product assessment, the teacher evaluate students' finished compositions, while in process assessment he watches students as they engage in writing in order to determine strengths, abilities and needs. The teacher observes in order to learn about students' attitudes and interests in writing, the writing strategies they use and how they interact with their classmates during writing. While observing, the teacher may ask students questions. This type of informal assessment enables him/her to make instructional decisions and demonstrate to students that the teacher is supportive of the writing process.

Constructive, encouraging and frequent feedback as well as responses that emphasize content and process rather than just conventions, lead to improved competency and positive attitudes to writing. Praising what students do well improves their writing more than mere correction on what they do badly. Intensive correction does more damage than moderate correction. Focusing on students' attention or on one or two areas for concentration or improvement is more helpful than when students use the intensive correction.

## 2.3 Performance Assessment

Performance assessment is a form of testing that requires students to perform and demonstrate tasks rather write or select an answer. The disadvantage of this is that the teacher sometimes has to make subjective judgment about the students' work. This is why it is better to use rubrics prior to giving a grade in order to be objective to a certain extent. There are several ways to give performance assessments. One of them is the portfolio in which students collect their best work and save it waiting to sit with the teacher who will provide them with helpful feedback. The portfolio is a good way which illustrates improvement over time. Journals also fall in this category. The literature on performance is rife beginning as early as 1984 and continuing today (e.g., Barley, 1985; Shohamy, 1995; McNamara, 1996; Fulcher, 1996; Bindley, 1999; Skehan & Foster, 2001). Performance assessment can have positive washback effects (Brown, 2002: 17) by:

1. Providing diagnostic information in functional or task-based curriculums
2. Supplying achievement information in functional or task-based curriculums, documenting critical thought, creativity and self-reflection.
3. Aligning classroom assessment and instructional activities with authentic, real life activities
4. Showing students' strengths and weaknesses in detailed and real world terms.

Skehan (1996) proposes a framework of task-based instruction, which implies that the following three factors are important to the grading and sequencing of tasks: Accuracy? Complexity and Fluency. Based on those three components of Skehan's (*ibid.*) framework for implementing task-based instruction, Norris *et. al.*, (1998: 58-59) defined the components from a task performance perspective:

- a- Accuracy would involve the minimum level of precision in code usage, necessary for successful communication
- b- Complexity would involve the minimum range of grammatical/ structural code required for successful completion of a given communication task
- c- Fluency would involve the minimum on-line flow required by a given task for successful, acceptable communication.

## **2.4 Project Assessment**

As already mentioned in the first chapter, interest in project work and its integration into ELT instruction is growing around the world. This approach lends itself to focus on language at the discourse rather than the sentence level, authentic language use and learner- centeredness. Project work makes learning more meaningful. It also makes cooperative learning a concrete reality and opens up entirely new avenues for action, interaction and the construction of new knowledge. During the realization of a project learners show their capacities when demonstrating that they have mastered the objectives assigned. Assessing an assigned project includes the assessment of the process the students followed as brainstorming, collecting data, writing, editing and finally publishing it in addition to the final product. This kind of work shows students' various capabilities and prepares them to be autonomous, responsible of making research either in groups or individually and at the same time mastering the language structures and enriching their vocabulary.

## **2.5 Diagnostic Assessment**

Although, some authors delineate diagnostic assessment as a component of formative assessment, most consider it a distinct form of measurement (Kellough & Kellough, 1999). In practice, the purpose of diagnostic assessment is to ascertain, prior to instruction, each student's strengths, weaknesses, knowledge and skills. Establishing these permits the teacher to remediate what is to remediate and adjust the programme to meet the students' needs.

## **2.6 Formative Assessment**

Basically, there are two types of assessment, assessment for learning and assessment of learning. These two are further divided into significant purposes: formative, diagnostic and summative and evaluation. The word 'Formative' has been typically used to describe an improvement process, while the word 'summative has been used to describe a decision-making process (Brownson *et. al.*, 1996). Formative assessment is the assessment that takes place during a course or programme of study as an integral part of the learning process and as such it is up to the teacher to design and implement for improving teaching or learning. Similarly, formative assessment refers to frequent interactive assessments of student progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately. It is informal: that is to say, it is carried out by teachers while teaching and training. It is sometimes defined as assessment for learning. It

provides feedback to both teachers and learners about how the course is going and if the learners are doing what they need to do. Otherwise, the teaching and learning strategies chosen are in need of modification.

Kolb' (1984) experiential learning is one of the best known learning cycles. According to it, formative assessment can be seen as an example of concrete experience, just like many other strategy or experience that you may plan and design for your learners. The process of feedback and evaluation can be seen as observation and reflection and forming abstract concepts - the learner will have to consider the feedback that he or she receives and with the help of the teacher or trainer, decide what to do next. That final stage is one of testing in new situations, where the learner tries out what he or she has learnt. This kind of assessment can be done through various information-gathering activities, such as traditional tests, but also from observations, questioning, class discussion, projects, portfolios, homework, performance assessments, group work with peer feedback and students self-assessment.

Formative assessment is an assessment for learning. Therefore, it is found in all the steps of a lesson, an activity or a task. Cizek (2010: 8) summarized the characteristics of formative assessment in the following points:

1. Requires students to take responsibility for their own learning.
2. Communicates clear specific learning goals
3. Focuses on goals that represent valuable educational outcomes with applicability beyond the learning context
4. Identifies the students' current knowledge, skills and the necessary steps for reaching the desired goals
5. Required development of plans for attaining the desired goals
6. Encourages students to self-monitor progress toward the learning goals
7. Provides examples of learning goals including, when relevant, the specific grading criteria or rubrics that will be used to evaluate the students' work
8. Provides frequent assessment including peer and student self-assessment embedded within learning activities
9. Includes feedback that is non evaluative, specific, timely related to the learning goals, and provides opportunities for students to revise and improve work products and deepen understanding
10. Promotes meta-cognition and reflection by students of their work.

In addition to the characteristics noted by Cizek (*ibid.*), close examination of the research literature review helps identify the features of formative assessment that make it worth to improve learning. For example, we know from cognitive research that having students become self aware in monitoring their own learning also referred to as meta-cognition improves achievement. Similarly in the formative assessment literature, by teaching students to self assess themselves, they can internalize and use criteria as they carry out their work. This increases both the quality of students' projects and conceptual understanding (White and Frederikson, 2000).

Feedback is the most obvious feature of formative assessment and the one with the strongest research base. Motivation research on self-efficacy also teaches us valuable lessons about how day-to day uses of feedback and praise can shape students' confidence about their abilities. Another feature is that generally students lack motivation because they believe that intelligence is fixed. In

studies over the course of three decades (*ibid*:11) has found that students who believe that intelligence is an unchangeable characteristics they were born with, what she calls an ‘entity’ theory of self are flummoxed by difficult problems and tend to avoid challenges. In contrast, students who have been taught that ability can be increased by effort are more likely to seek academic challenges and to persist when faced with different problems. Feedback that focuses on a student’s level of effort, evidence of an alternative reasoning, strategies used and the specifics of work products fosters incremental beliefs about ability and results in more constructive behaviour in the face of learning obstacles (Cizek, 2010: 11).

We approve this because we, as teachers, do not just teach what is programmed, but we have to inquire about how students learn and what factors inhibit or enhance learning. We should also take into account the socio-cultural side in learning because according to the socio-cultural theory, children develop cognitive ability through social interaction that let them try out language and practice their reasoning. Instead of being born with a fixed intelligence, children become smart through what Rogoff (1990) calls an ‘apprenticeship’ in thinking. So, it is up to us to help students develop their skills not only being occupied by completing a certain programme because this process of providing support to help the learners attempt and master increasingly complex skills, such as writing effectively on their own is called scaffolding. Cizek (*op.cit.*) adds that “socio-cultural theory folds together an understanding of how children learn and at the same time develop identities as capable learners”.

Thus, we should note that formative assessment practises further cognitive goals and at the same time draws students into participation in learning for their own sake regardless of score. If we try to make a relation of all of this and the teaching of writing, we can say that the process approach to writing, if applied adequately, will lead students to develop their intellectual abilities, to be self confident and therefore to be motivated thanks to the teacher’s feedback. Besides, the genre approach will enable them to develop their writing abilities to be used in different real-life situations.

Formative assessment can be practised through a variety of other written exercises such as journals which are also useful for asking students to reflect on their beliefs, values and attitudes. When used informally, they may provide more honest remarks. Another way to use students’ written work is by evaluating drafts with qualitative assessments of their development, as it may be in the case of the Process-Based Approach during the various stages in writing a composition. Instead of assigning grades or scores based on mechanical and grammatical proficiency, the teacher can develop rubrics that provide written feedback about development, organization, coherence, cohesion, content and fluency. Teachers can also use portfolios usually used for both summative and formative assessment to assess students’ progress.

We should also note that, as stated above, in formative assessment, the teacher fosters students' self-assessment that encourages them to take responsibility and to be reflective on their learning. Involving their peers in assessment emphasizes cooperative and collaborative learning and makes the students aware of the importance of the reader. We have put much emphasis on this kind of assessment because it is going to be used in teaching writing during the experiment.

## **2.7 Summative Assessment**

We described previously formative assessment as assessment for learning. In contrast, summative assessment is considered as assessment of learning; it is the process that concerns final evaluation to ask if the project or programme met its goal. Typically, summative assessment concentrates on learner outcomes rather than only on the programme of instruction. The goal of summative assessment is to measure the level of success or proficiency that has been obtained at the end of an instructional unit by comparing it against some standard or benchmark. In simple terms summative assessment is the final test of how well a student has learnt a block of work. Summative assessment is generally a formal process used to see if the students have acquired the skills, knowledge, behaviour, or understanding of the course. It gives an overall picture of performance. According to Kellough & Kellough (1999: 418-419) summative purposes are summarized as follows:

1. To assist student learning
2. To identify students' strengths and weaknesses
3. To assess and improve the effectiveness of curriculum progress
4. To assess and improve teaching effectiveness
5. To provide data that assist in decision-making
6. To communicate with and involve parents

Summative assessment invariably leads to the award of qualifications: grades, diplomas and certificates. In other situations, qualification will lead to progress, to a higher level of education, or will lead employees to promotion at work. After having presented some types of assessment worth known in the field of education including writing, let us now see how writing can be assessed.

## **3. Forms of Writing Assessment**

Assessment forms were influenced by the change in teaching languages. As a result, there was a shift from traditional forms of assessment to recent ones such as the use of the portfolio, conferencing, peer and self-assessment.

### 3.1 Traditional Forms of Writing Assessment

Traditionally, teaching has been thought of as transmission of knowledge. The role of the teacher is to tell, to be in control of the pace and content of lessons and to be the purveyor of truth. Traditional approaches to the teaching of writing focus on the final product, in other words, the production of neat, grammatically correct pieces of writing focuses on one-shot correct writing for the purpose of language practice (Cheung, 1999). Writing was viewed primarily as a tool for the practice and reinforcement of specific grammatical and lexical patterns, accuracy being all important whereas content and self-expression given little if any priority. The emphasis was on grammatical correctness and adherence to given models or guidelines (White, 1988). However, imitating models inhibits writers; there is little or no opportunity for the students to add any thought or ideas by their own (Raimes, 1983). The inevitable consequence is that little attention is paid to the ideas and meaning of student writing, what is communicated to the reader, the purpose and audience (*ibid*: 75). This over emphasis on accuracy and form can lead to serious ‘writing blocks’ (Halsted, 1975: 82) and ‘sterile’ and unimaginative pieces of work (Mahon, 1992: 75).

Thus, the only form of assessment in the past relied on the teacher’s correction of the first /final draft. This Product Approach is often a poor way to approach writing assignment. Applying this Product Approach, students often used weak writing strategies as they wrote. According to Flower (1985: 87), this approach commonly includes the following weak strategies:

**Trial-Error Strategy:** Students who write using this strategy are trying to different combinations of words and phrases with the hope that one combination will result in an acceptable one. Using this trial and error method, students work slowly and produce products that contain minimal ideas and content.

**Perfect Draft Strategy:** Using this strategy, students write from start to finish in one laborious process. Using this weak strategy, students strive to perfect each sentence before moving to the next one. Students usually use this strategy with introductory sentences or paragraphs. As you can guess, this may lead to writer’s block during the beginning.

**Words looking for ideas:** Usually students may use certain words as they hope will trigger ideas as transition words (first, next...). However, using such words to trigger ideas is an unreliable procedure.

**Waiting for inspiration Strategy:** Some students may simply wait until the writing mood strikes them to begin writing. Although effective for some students, it may be a risky procedure. For many students, the deadline itself is the inspiration or the motivation to begin the writing process, however, it may also increase stress levels and actually lead to writer’s block (Boyle & Scanlon, 2009: 224). It is the reason why the product approach based just on accuracy and viewed as demotivating for students was rejected and replaced by the process approach, as shown in the previous chapter, therefore, recent methods and procedures have been used to assess writing.

## 4. Competency- Based Forms of Writing Assessment

The failure of traditional forms of assessment gave rise to recent ones such as portfolio assessment, protocol analysis, learning logs, journal entries and dialogue journals as explained below.

### 4.1 Portfolio Assessment

As seen previously, portfolios represent one form of assessment which is practically used in the CBA. It is defined by Applebee and Langer (1992: 30) as “a cumulative collection of work

students have done”. In the context of writing and assessment, a portfolio is ‘a collection of texts the writer has produced over a defined period of time (Hamp-Lyons, 1991: 262) and the collection may consist of “selected but not necessarily polished or finished pieces” (Privette, 1993: 60). According to Applebee and Langer (*ibid.*), some of the most popular forms are the following:

1. a traditional ‘ writing folder’ in which students keep their work
2. a bound note-book with separate sections kept for work, progress and final drafts
3. a loose-leaf notebook in which students keep their drafts and revisions
4. a combination folder and brown envelope where students’ writing- exercises, tests, compositions, drafts, and so on- are kept
5. a notebook divided into two sections: one for drafts and the other for final copies (traditionally called original and rewritten compositions back in the late 1950s and 1960s).

So, the writing portfolio contains the student’s total writing output to represent his overall performance, or it may contain only a selection of works which the student has chosen to be evaluated. In other words, the portfolio shows the student’s work from the beginning of the term or semester to the end, giving the opportunity to the teacher and the student a chance to assess how much the latter’s writing has progressed. But, in order to be effective tools of assessment, the use of portfolios should be made clear right at the beginning in order to meet the goals of literacy assessment, they must be developed as follows (Farr and Lowee, 1991: 5):

1. Teachers and students both add materials to the portfolio.
2. Students are viewed as the owners of the portfolios.
3. Conferencing between students and the teacher is an inherent activity in portfolio-assessment.
4. Conference notes and reflections of both the teacher and the student are kept in the portfolio.
5. Portfolios need to reflect a wide range of student work and not only that which the teacher or student decides is the best.
6. Samples of the student’s reading and writing activities are collected in the portfolios, including unfinished products.

According to Gallehr (1993: 29), no system of assessment is as perfect as portfolio assessment because students are required to write, but within this requirement, they can choose the topic, audience, responders in the class, revision strategies, and so on. They are also free to select from their work pieces they want to include in their portfolios. Many teachers find the portfolio the ideal assessment tool because it allows them to act as coaches providing feedback that students can use to revise their papers. Besides, it combines process and product together and ties assessment to instruction (Clark, 2008: 214). In addition, Weigle (2002: 139) finds that portfolios are of “great interest as they are seen to integrate classroom instruction with performance assessment, representing an overall model of organizing writing processes and products for ongoing reflection, dialogue and evaluation”. This shows that portfolios may be used as a holistic process for evaluating course work and promoting autonomy. They provide a sound basis on which to document student progress because they incorporate a range of assessment strategies over an extended period of time. However, the good use the portfolio requires careful planning (*ibid.*) as it

should be: **Integrative, Valid, Meaningful, Motivating, Process-oriented, Coherent, Flexible, Reflexive and Formative**

The use of the portfolio in teaching writing is a heavy workload for teachers especially in large classes as it requires not only a good and careful planning, but also a complete involvement in order to guide students and make them progress in writing. However, it remains one of the best assessment tools because it enables students to understand different writing processes and provides them with an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities in different genres.

#### **4.2 Protocol Analysis**

“Protocol analysis is one of the few methods in cognitive psychology that gathers data with sufficient temporal density to test models on-line and second by second behaviour” (Ransdell, 1995: 89). This form of assessment, although seen as a bit complicated is considered as a writing procedure which promotes the writing process; in other words, this form assesses the process not the product, it shows how the student is proceeding and the different strategies he is using in writing. Pressly and Afflerbach (1995: 2) notes that “spoken language is the data used in protocol analysis and the richness and variability of language are the greatest assets and liabilities of the verbal reporting methodology”. This is also referred to as ‘talk aloud’ or ‘think aloud’. When using this form, the students are asked to record every thought that comes to their mind during the writing process. The transcripts are, then analysed for the purpose of assessing student’s writing. “Assessment of students’ writing can be done using this strategy, for through protocol analysis, a teacher can tell how students write, the strategies they use to generate ideas, how often they revise and edit their work, and whether their written work has improved” (Penaflorida, 2002: 347).

The think aloud method can be used to investigate differences in problem-solving abilities between people, differences in difficulty between tasks, effects of instruction and other factors that have an effect on problem-solving (Van Someren 1994, *et. al.*, 9). This method has been used in educational research; for instance, Ericson and Simon (1984) based their work on verbal protocol analysis on the construct of short-term and long-term memory from information processing theory. They hypothesized that all human cognition is information processing and stated that a cognitive process can be seen as a sequence of internal states successfully transformed by a series of information processing (*ibid*: 11).

Flower and Hayes (1983) used it to observe the act of composing. They concluded that the writers’ behaviour combined with access to the concurrent reporting of their thought processes revealed that when composing they all proceeded through three cognitive processes: planning, translating and reviewing (see figure 2.4: 8). The function of planning is to take information

from the task environment and from long-term memory and to use it to set up goals and to establish a writing plan to guide the production of a text that is used to meet goals. The function of translating is to transform the meaning generated by the planning process into written language. The function of reviewing is to improve the quality of the text produced.

### **4.3 Learning Logs**

Harris and Hodges (1995: 137) define a learning log as “an ongoing record of learning kept by students to help them evaluate their progress, think about learning and plan further learning”. A learning log is an educational tool which is designed to enhance the learning experience for students. It facilitates exchanges between students and teachers. In a learning log, students write on the knowledge they have gained from studying in their writing classes, and from their own thinking. A teacher needs not grade, but can assess how much a student has gained or benefited from the writing class (Penaflorida, 349). A typical learning log takes the form of a notebook which belongs to the student and can be used in a variety of ways. For example, students may be allowed to take up five minutes at the end of the class to write about what they have learnt. This provides an opportunity for students to organize their thought and to generate questions which they might have about the day’s lesson. Learning logs can be used for responding to reading or writing. They help teachers see what their students are learning, particularly in the writing class and in language as a whole. In addition, they allow students to reflect on their learning and thus develop meta-cognitive awareness about their strengths and weaknesses.

### **4.4 Journal Entries**

A journal entry is a notebook or a dairy in which the student keeps his personal understanding of the course and may include comments and feelings. At the beginning or at the end of each period, students may write in their journals but are not obliged to share their writing with the teacher or their peers as it is suggested by Garth Sundem (2006: 32) “let them know that writing journals are for their eyes only”. Both learning logs and journal entries may be used for formative assessment. Like portfolios, journal entries may be used as a source for conferencing. Keeping a journal entry makes students practise writing and develop their writing skill gradually by expressing their thoughts. Writing journal entries is a good habit that will enhance students’ writing, help them achieve autonomy and improve their reflective thinking.

#### **4.5 Dialogue Journals**

A dialogue journal is a notebook kept by two people, usually a student and a teacher or a kind of written conversations. Each one writes entries as messages to the other. The journal is then exchanged after each entry (Penaflorida, 2002: 349). This kind of journal can help students develop skills and also gives the teacher an opportunity to interact with students as the latter can answer questions asked by students and in his turn ask them other questions that can clarify learners' thinking or stimulate ideas to know more about the students and their progress in the field. The value of a dialogue journal in assessing students' writing is that it makes them independent and eventually able to read and respond to the teacher's entries (Penyton & Staton, 1991). In addition, in terms of reflective awareness Carroll and Mchawata (2001) showed that ESL students' awareness of academic writing conventions as well as an understanding of others and their views was effectively facilitated through dialogue writing.

Journal entries are the ones used more in language teaching to assist the student during the process of writing. It is a kind of formative assessment the teacher can use to improve students' achievement. However, through dialogue journals, teachers are able to help their students with self-understanding, communication skills, negotiation of classroom relationship and problem solving (Staton, 1987). Dialogue journals are interactive and functional in nature in that they provide an authentic two ways written interaction. Other methods used in writing assessment are conferencing, peer assessment and self assessment.

#### **4.6 Conferencing**

During the process of writing, as mentioned above, teachers continuously assess students' writing using different ways (formative assessment). Teachers can give feedback on student writing through face-to-face conferencing (Kynland, 2003: 192). This kind of feedback, which is a one-tone conversation between the teacher and student, is an effective means of teacher response to student writing. "The interactive nature of conference gives teachers a chance to respond to the diverse cultural, educational and writing needs of their students, clarifying meaning and resolving activities, while saving the time spent in detailed marking of papers". Conferencing is a form of oral feedback which enables the teacher to find answers to some problems. However, it should be planned carefully so that it can have lasting effects on improving students writing in later assignments.

According to Kroll (1990: 259), one advantage of conferencing is that it "allows the teacher to uncover potential misunderstanding that the student might have about prior feedback on issues in writing that have been discussed in class". Hence, all kinds of feedback presented by the teacher are of such an importance to students' progress and are great triggers to students' intrinsic motivation, a necessary element leading to the intellectual development of any learner in any field. However, the

teacher should avoid degrading remarks; he should be very careful about the comments he makes to the students in order to make them develop their writing competencies.

#### **4.7 Peer Assessment**

In addition to the feedback received from the teacher, students can be assessed by their peers when they exchange their pieces of writing. Evaluating the work of peers is a social activity, especially when the peer assessment is non-anonymous. This kind of behaviour enhances collaboration and activates positively the interaction between students. “Collaborative peer review helps learners engage in a community of equals who respond to each other work and together create authentic social context for interaction and learning” (Mittan: 198). However, as students lack experience in writing, they may provide their peers with vague comments or they may focus on accuracy rather than on organization, coherence and clarity; thus, they should be trained in assessing their peers’ products. In order to be effective in doing that, Kroll (1990, *ibid*: 259.) suggests the following questions for peer response:

- What is the main purpose of this paper?
- What have you found particularly effective in the paper?
- Do you think the writer has followed through what the paper set out to do?
- Find at least three places in the essay where you can think of questions that have not been answered by the writer. Write those questions on the margin as areas for the writer to answer in the next draft.

These questions, of course, can be modified depending on the purpose of writing and the areas to be assessed; therefore, it is up to the teacher to provide students with helpful feedback and a clear understanding of what to look for in their peers’ work. This can be done through well-elaborated checklists to guide students during the assessment process. For peer assessment to be more effective, the learning environment should be supportive. Students should feel comfortable, trust one another in order to provide constructive feedback and at the same time develop their writing abilities.

#### **4.8 Self-Assessment**

Moreover, during the writing process students learn to assess themselves. This kind of assessment refers to the involvement of learners in making judgements about their own learning, particularly about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning (Boud & Falchikov, 1989). Self assessment is not a new technique, but a way of increasing the role of students as active participants in their own learning (Boud, 1995) and is mostly used for formative assessment in order to foster reflection on one’s own learning process and results (Sluijmans *et. al.*, 1998) the fact which develops in them a kind of autonomy and helps them to rely on themselves.

Strengths in using self and peer assessment (Sambell & MacDowel, 1998: 39) are that:

1. it can foster students' feeling of ownership for their own learning,
2. can motivate students and encourage their active involvement in learning,
3. makes assessment a shared activity rather than alone (i.e. more objective),
4. promotes a genuine interchange of ideas,
5. leads to more directed and effective learning,
6. encourages students to become more autonomous in learning;
7. signals to students that their experiences are valued and their judgments are respected,
8. develops transferable personal skills,
9. produces a community of learning in which students feel that they have influence and involvement,
10. reduces the teacher's workload ,
11. and makes students think more deeply, see how others tackle problems, pick up points and learn to criticise constructively.

From this list of strengths, we conclude that this kind of assessment as a tool for learning has considerable impact on students' learning and development into reflective and independent learners and what is most important is that it encourages critical thinking as it is supported by Sambell and Mac Dowel (*ibid.*) "encouraging students to assess each other's contribution to discussion and discourse is further exposing them to the skills of critical reflection and analysis". However, weaknesses of such an assessment lie in the occurrence of possible cheating, stress and time constraints. Thus, goal setting is essential because students can evaluate their progress more clearly when they have targets against which to measure their performance. Their motivation increases when they have relevant learning goals. They also need to be taught strategies related to self-assessment of their written products. The techniques which may be used include the use of rubrics and checklists to guide them in assessing themselves.

#### **4.9 Scoring Rubrics**

In order to evaluate students' texts, teachers can develop some guidelines to be able to grade them. These may be called scoring rubrics that are defined as descriptive scoring schemes that are developed by teachers or other evaluators to guide the analysis of the products or processes of students' efforts (Brookhart, 1999). A scoring rubric represents a set of guidelines that describe the characteristics of the different levels of performance used in scoring or judging a performance. One common use of scoring rubrics is to guide the evaluation of writing samples. Judgement concerning the quality of a given writing sample may vary depending upon the criteria established by the individual evaluator. By developing a pre-defined scheme for the evaluation process, the subjectivity involved in evaluating a paragraph or an essay becomes more objective. Rubrics can be used for grading a large variety of assignments and tasks: research papers, book critiques, discussion participation, laboratory reports, portfolios, group work, presentation and more. Stevens and Levi (2005: 21) stated the benefits of rubrics:

1. Rubrics provide timely feedback.
2. Rubrics prepare students to use detailed feedback.
3. Rubrics encourage critical thinking.
4. Rubrics facilitate contact with others.

5. Rubrics help us refine our teaching methods.
6. Rubrics level the playing field.

The construction of rubrics requires reflection of what to include in them, depending on the nature of the activity or the task and also stages to follow. In order to construct any rubric four basic stages are involved:

1. **Stage 1: Reflecting.** In this stage, we take the time to reflect on what we want from the students. Why we create this assignment, what happened the last time we gave it, and what our expectations are.
2. **Stage 2: Listing.** In this stage, we focus the particular details of the assignment and what specific learning objectives we hope to see in the completed assignment.
3. **Stage 3: Grouping and labelling.** In this stage, we organize the results of our reflections in stage 1 and 2 grouping similar expectations together in what will probably become the rubric dimensions.
4. **Stage 4: Application.** In this stage, we only apply the dimensions and description from stage 3 to the final form of the rubric using the grid shown in the appendix (*ibid*: 42)

Students may be involved in rubric construction in order to increase their awareness as assessors or other teacher and colleague can also be involved. In addition of using rubrics for formative assessment, they can also be used for grading, this will assure equity and fairness in assessing the students' work.

#### **4.10. Approaches to Scoring Compositions**

Generally, there are four approaches to scoring compositions. The error-count method, the primary trait scoring, the holistic or impressionistic method, and the analytic method, but the two most prominent approaches of assessing writing are holistic and analytical scoring. This is why, we are going to present the first ones briefly, but more stress will be put on the holistic and analytical scoring.

**4.10.1 The Error-count Scoring** as its name implies is a method in which a point or more is deducted for every mistake a student makes; for example, a mistake of grammar may cause the deduction of two points whereas a mistake in spelling may lead to only one point. This method is still applied by some colleagues to score students' compositions.

**4.10.2 The Primary Trait Scoring** consists of scoring just one feature in the written text such as grammar or content holistically. This approach is used, for example, when a researcher is interested in investigating one feature and scoring it (Weigle, 2002: 110).

**4.10.3 Holistic scoring** developed by writing experts is a kind of scoring which may be useful for large numbers of essays in that it does not take much time to grade them. According to this approach, the written work is read as a whole in order to decide of its grade, but the teacher or teachers have to grade the compositions based on chosen models in order to be objective. The essay is read quickly to determine whether it is stronger or weaker if compared to the models. (Adapted from Brown, 2001: 242-243)

The advantage of the holistic scoring (Moskal, 2000: 2) is that “it takes much less time than other scoring methods. Each reader of a holistically scored essay reads the essay through quickly, matching its quality to that one of the model essays”. However, readers may choose to focus on different aspects of the written products; consequently, the grades will vary from one reader to another. Holistic grading is ideal for large enrolment courses in which two or more teachers are responsible for the grading like in official exams.

#### **4.10.4 Analytical Scoring**

Analytical scoring is the traditional approach to grading writing. In the initial phase of developing a scoring rubric, the evaluator needs to determine what will be the evaluation criteria. “Depending on the purpose of the assessment, scripts might be rated on such features as content, organization, cohesion, register, vocabulary, grammar, or mechanics” (Weigle, 2002: 114). An analytic scoring, much like the checklist, allows for the separate evaluation of each of these factors. Each criterion is scored on a different descriptive scale (Brookhart, 1999). According to this approach, the written work is analyzed for several features, each one is given a certain score and the total score given is the sum of the scores of the various features. Among the most agreed upon features are: grammar, mechanics, content, fluency and relevance and they compose what is known as analytic scheme. The weight given to each feature should vary depending on the students’ level of proficiency in the foreign language. Many instructors choose to use analytic scoring because of its strengths, some of which are as follows (Moskal, 2000: 121):

- It helps instructors keep the full range of writing features in mind as they score.
- It allows students to see areas in their own essays that need work when accompanied by written comments and a breakdown of the final score. Its diagnostic nature provides students with a road map for improvement.

Some weaknesses of analytical scoring are:

- It is time consuming. Teachers who score analytically usually are required to make as many as 11 separate judgements about one piece of writing. Furthermore, not all students actually make their way through the analytic comments so painstakingly written on their papers, nor will be able to make profitable use of those comments on succeeding writing assignments.
- Negative feedback can be pedagogically destructive. Teachers who combine analytic scoring with confrontational or unclear comments-especially about issues of grammar- may actually inhibit student growth (*ibid.*)

#### **4.11 Checklists**

A checklist as its name suggests is another assessment tool in a form of a list used to assess learning or teaching. It determines what the student has learnt in a certain area according to fixed criteria. Checklists are very useful tools in writing courses as they are designed by teachers to guide students in assessing their learning. They are generally very simple scaffolding their meta-cognitive

development and enabling them to grow more confident and ultimately leading them to autonomy. Checklists may be used in self assessment making learners aware of their learning and the strategies they are using. This kind of reflection develops their meta-cognitive abilities and can increase their motivation to learn; therefore, they become more proficient language learners. In addition to this checklists can be used in peer assessment guiding students in order to provide beneficial feedback necessary for the improvement of learning.

#### 4.12 Measurement

Measurement is another term used in assessment and worth presenting because on the one hand it is used in assessment, and on the other it is going to be used in the present research. Measurement is the process of quantifying the characteristics of an object of interest according to explicit rules and procedures (Bachman, 2004: 8). It is one type of assessment that involves quantification, or the assignment of numbers (statistic description) as it is the case in research in languages where the researcher aims to compare, for instance, students performance in a pre-test and in a post test after a certain treatment in order to show if students improved in certain areas like ours in which we intend to find out if the students writing improved or not in terms of accuracy, fluency and complexity due to the implementation of the process genre approach. Thus in order to analyze quantitative data appropriately and meaningfully, we need to understand the specific assessment procedures or instruments we have to use to collect the data (*ibid.*). This form of assessment will be used to measure students' written products in the experiment in this research work; thus, details will be presented in that phase.

#### 4.13 Principles of Competency-Based Assessment

The basic principles of assessment are that what is to be assessed is to be valid, reliable, flexible and fair, as illustrated by Hagar *et.al.* (1994):

**Validity:** Assessments are valid when they assess what they claim to assess. This is achieved when:

- Assessors are fully aware of what is to be assessed (against some appropriate criterion or defined learning outcome).
- Evidence is collected from tasks that are clearly related to what is to be assessed.
- There is enough sampling of different evidence to demonstrate that the performance criterion has been met.

**Reliability:** Assessments are reliable when they are applied and interpreted consistently from one student to student and from one context to another.

**Flexibility:** Assessment is flexible when it is interpreted successfully and adapted to a range of training modes and the different needs of the learners.

**Fairness:** Assessment is fair when it does not disadvantage particular learners. For example, when all learners understand what is expected of them and what form of assessment will be used (adapted from Hagar *et al.*, *ibid.*).

Under a competency-based assessment system, assessors make judgements based on evidence gathered from a variety of sources, whether an individual meets a standard or a set of criteria. The idea of competency standards is essentially a development of criterion-referenced assessment which evolved in North America. The shift from norm-referenced assessment to criterion-referenced assessment has been fairly recent in higher education and seems to offer a higher degree of reliability.

### **Conclusion**

The forms used for assessing students' products were influenced by the change in teaching languages. As a result, there was a shift from traditional to recent ones; i.e., the forms of assessment which may be used in the CBA include non-traditional ones and more specifically all types of formative assessment such as dialogues journals, journal entries and conferencing. Self and peer assessment are usually used in writing during which students are guided through checklists provided by the teacher. Another assessment tool commonly used for assessing students' products is the 'portfolio' which informs both the teachers and students about their progress in writing. There is evidence that it has positive effects on students' learning because "when children have a sense of achievement they are more likely to have motivation for further learning" (Moon, 2000 & Cameron, 2001). In addition, we should stress the importance of formative assessment during the writing process because it enables students' to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. However, the teacher should be aware of the assessment principles as presented above.

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