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Classroom Assessment for Academic Writing

by Ling He

Over the past two decades, the field of classroom assessment has shifted from assessment of learning *at the end of* instruction to assessment for learning *during* instruction. Assessment for learning (or as learning) goes beyond a measurement of students' classroom achievement of a targeted curriculum only; instead, it integrates formative assessment that values multiple sources of information in daily classes and uses that assessment for instruction in support of learning and motivation. In this article, I explore the role of classroom assessment in teaching English academic writing with the aid of technology.

Classroom assessment is unlike large-scale standardized English proficiency tests (e.g., Test of English as a Foreign Language and International English Language Testing System), which are administered and scored in a consistent or "standard" manner in controlled testing situations.

Classroom assessment

- takes place in changing, complex classroom situations.
- is intertwined with classroom activities in a multifaceted teaching process in alignment with curriculum, classroom management, and learning goals.
- involves student participation and teachers' constant modifications to daily teaching objectives to meet students' needs.
- plays an essential role in judging whether student work is approaching learning goals and course objectives.

Thus, classroom assessment is an integrated part of instruction; it is a process rather than a single event or action.

The understanding of classroom assessment purposes centers on effective student-teacher communications; it is the purposes that decide what to assess and how to assess. When discussing classroom activities, articulating the purposes and expectations for assessment is the most important step. The following classroom assessment practices have two major purposes:

- To gather information for teaching
- To provide information for learning

Classroom Assessment *Before* Instruction

Determine Prior Knowledge

Cognitive learning theory explains that new knowledge is built upon prior knowledge, so an initial step of classroom assessment is to gather information. In the first class of a semester, have students complete a timed diagnostic writing on a given topic without using outside sources. This writing will not be graded, so students can write without pressure or anxiety, which helps demonstrate their existing knowledge and skills. The evidence gathered from the diagnostic writing will provide you with rich information for modification of your teaching plans and student placements, if necessary.

When it comes to teaching a specific writing project, a quick response question, posted on an LMS, will give you a sense of the students' prior knowledge related to the target genre. I suggest having students answer the task-related questions briefly or in keywords. In addition to familiarizing you with students' background knowledge, this task opens a channel for students to read each other's posts and chat about the topic. Their interaction can reveal more information about what they already know.

In a similar way, you can use polling (a binary choice of Yes/No or a multiple-choice question) on an LMS to learn students' opinions. Responses and feedback to both the quick response and polling questions can be posted in different modes anonymously to reduce students' concerns about the correctness of their choices.

Utilize the Data

I suggest making an immediate comment on each post on an LMS, highlighting the meaningful points. Be sure to modify your teaching plans for appropriate learning objectives and instructional strategies, taking students' responses into consideration. Gathering this information will allow you to connect meaningfully to new knowledge and skills for each writing project, ensuring students grow that new knowledge and those new skills from where they are.

Classroom Assessment *During* Instruction

During instruction, classroom assessment provides meaningful, constant, explicit feedback on students' writing throughout the writing process, from the outline to multiple drafts. In this process, writing drafts are assessed for constructive suggestions for improvement, not for grading. It's important to use multiple modes of assessment for feedback, such as the following:

- **Written in-text comments:** These are inserted into the students' essay, asking eliciting questions as well as providing specific suggestions.
- **Question/answer:** This is teacher-student interaction in multiple modes, synchronously or asynchronously online or face-to-face in physical classrooms.
- **Individual conferencing:** In one-on-one meetings, the instructor meets every student taking the course at least once a semester, and more often with those who need individual attention.

- **Technology-assisted feedback:** The instructor uses technology, such as [Panopto](#) videos, [VoiceThread](#), [Zoom](#), and [Blackboard](#) recordings, to provide feedback on identified issues in writing drafts.
- **Self-assessment:** After teaching a concept and a skill, the instructor can provide students with some time for a self-assessment (e.g., answering Yes/No questions, taking a multiple-choice poll, or going through self-evaluation questions on a survey).
- **Peer assessment:** In the writing process, students comment on one another's drafts to learn from each other through interactions and knowledge sharing. These peer-directed activities can be guided by a checklist of questions regarding the target tasks (see Appendix A for an example checklist). Observe the student engagement in the activities, join with the students, and answer their questions.

The teacher-student interactions make teaching writing a meaningful communication and enhance learning outcomes and student motivation. Teachers' feedback both provides information to students for revisions and improves the quality of revisions in new drafts.

Classroom Assessment After Instruction

Integrating Summative Assessment and Using Rubrics

An effective assessment during instruction must show effective learning outcomes after instruction. Integrate summative assessment into the grading process to evaluate students' learning of a genre through a final draft at the end of a writing project. Create an analytical rubric in line with the target learning outcomes; the rubric should show descriptive criteria of writing components associated with each genre (see Appendix B for a sample rubric). The explicit diagnostic information in the analytical rubric allows students to understand their writing strengths and weaknesses. A transparent assessment criterion makes grading informative and meaningful and supports teaching and learning.

Use an in-class writing task at the end of the semester to assess the students' application of the writing knowledge and skills they have gained in the course. Use a holistic rubric to grade students' overall writing improvement. (See the [TOEFL iBT® Test writing rubrics](#) for great examples.) The writing topics should be course related and familiar to students. Different from creating multiple writing drafts in the writing process, in-class writing is impromptu and timed; the topics are given in class. Assessing writing in different situations (e.g., in multiple drafts throughout the writing process or timed writing during class time) fundamentally provides information to support teaching for student learning.

Portfolios

For beginning-level writing courses, consider using portfolios to assess students' efforts, progress, and achievements in target areas of the curriculum over a semester. At the end of the semester, have students combine all the drafts and final drafts of writing projects and assignments to showcase their best learning and skills; use these for summative assessment.

Classroom Assessment “for,” “as,” and “of” Learning

Classroom assessment is situated in changing, complex teaching and learning situations. It must be explicit, informative, and timely; it requires multiple modes of feedback *before, during,* and *after* instruction. Teachers must consciously observe changing classroom situations to gather evidence for accurate decision-making. These decisions cannot be isolated; instead, they must be in line with the curriculum, teaching plans, and student proficiency levels.

Your values, experience, and knowledge influence what and how you assess. When you think about your own classroom assessment, you’ll need to reflect on your decisions, your responsibility and flexibility, and the effectiveness of your communication with students. Meanwhile, students are valuable informers; their achievements and their learning reflect the validity of classroom assessment in alignment with curriculum, instruction, and student placement.

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Appendix A: Academic Writing Peer Assessment Checklist

	Peer Comments
Overall Opinions	
1. What do you think of this body paragraph?	
Essay Format	
2. Is the essay format correct? Is it the same as the paper formatting in Course Materials on our course site?	
Body Organization	
3. Can you identify a topic sentence in each body paragraph?	
4. What is a controlling idea in a topic sentence? Is the controlling idea in the topic sentence too general or too specific? Why?	
5. How does the writer support their opinion? What type of evidence do they use?	
6. Are there any logical links within sentences?	
Sentence Structure and Grammar	
7. Are there sentence structure errors? Can you correct those mistakes?	
8. Do you see any grammar mistakes? Can you correct those mistakes?	
Mechanics	
9. Please check mechanics.	

Appendix B: Analytical Scoring Rubric for Academic Reading Summary

Component Criteria	Little or No Control	Inconsistent Control	Nearly Consistent Control	Consistent Control
Introductory Sentence	1	2	3	4
	Lack of the text's title, author's full name and main thesis; incorrect in title or name formatting	Lack of the text's title, author's full name, or main thesis; incorrect in title or name formatting	Correctness in the text's title, the author's full name, and main thesis, yet incorrect in title or name formatting	Correctness in the text's title, the author's full name, and main thesis, and title or name formatting
Composing	1	2	3	4
	Few main points of the text; many personal opinions, interpretations, or comments; and no logical flow of ideas	Some main points of the text, some digressions and personal opinions or comments, and lack of logical flow of ideas	Most main points of the text, few personal opinions or comments, and a logical flow of ideas	All main points of the text in author's own words, no personal opinions or comments, and a logical flow of ideas
Referencing	1	2	3	4
	No referencing of each new main point of the text to the author; no appropriate citation for direct quotes	Some referencing of each new main point of the text to the author; no appropriate citation for direct quotes	Correctness in referencing of each new main point of the text to the author; no appropriate citation for direct quotes	Correctness in referencing of each new main point of the text to the author, and citation for direct quotes
Reporting	1	2	3	4
	Limited vocabulary and frequently copies word-for-word the main points from the text	Somewhat sufficient vocabulary and copies word-for-word some main points from the text	Sufficient vocabulary and paraphrasing of most of the main points from the text	Sufficient vocabulary and good paraphrasing of the main points
Grammar	1	2	3	4
	Frequent comma splices, run-ons, choppiness, and long-winded sentences; inappropriate verb tenses	Some comma splices, run-ons, choppiness, and long-winded sentences; inappropriate verb tenses	Few comma splices, run-ons, choppiness, and long-winded sentences; appropriate verb tenses	No comma splices, run-ons, choppiness, or long-winded sentences; appropriate verb tenses
Mechanics	1	2	3	4
	Incorrect paper formatting, punctuation, capitalization, or citations; frequent spelling mistakes; appropriate length	Mostly correct paper formatting, punctuation, capitalization, and citations; some spelling mistakes; appropriate length	Correct paper formatting, punctuation, capitalization, and citations; few spelling mistakes; appropriate length	Correct paper formatting, punctuation, capitalization, and citation; no spelling mistakes; appropriate length