

Exploring the challenges of efl writing assessment – A case study at vietnam national university of agriculture

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Abstract: *The critical role of testing and assessment in developing teaching, learning and designing curriculum is undeniable. However, the challenges of EFL teachers when assessing writing have yet to be paid adequate attention, leaving a gap for research. This qualitative research intended to find out the difficulties that EFL writing teachers at the Faculty of Tourism and Foreign Languages, Vietnam National University of Agriculture (FTFL, VNUA) had confronted. Through interviews, six participants shared their background knowledge, challenges in assessing writing, and their training needs for testing and assessment.*

Keywords: *EFL writing assessment, FTFL, VNUA*

1. Introduction

Along with the substantial changes in learning and teaching methods and curriculum, assessment or language assessment has made considerable adaptations. Also, language assessment literacy of teachers has been paid greater attention by scholars and researchers over the past two decades because it plays a vital role in understanding and encouraging learners. Many researchers argue that language assessment is an essential competence of teachers, yet most of the teachers in studies still need to receive more training and they still confront a lot of challenges in assessing their students. Writing assessment is not an exception. In this study, the researcher restates some primary considerations in language assessment in general and writing assessment in particular, through which she explores teachers' understandings of assessment knowledge and the difficulties they have to face in assessing writing.

2. Literature review

2.1. Assessment and language assessment literacy (LAL)

The term "assessment literacy" (AL) was first mentioned by Stiggins in 1991 and referred to skills and knowledge that stakeholders need to deal with the new world of assessment. Although this remains a disagreement of AL definitions, some have been widely recognized and cited in research. Davies (2008) introduced a framework of AL with skills, knowledge and principles. These three components are explained in Giraldo (2018) and developed into a core list of assessments for stakeholders with 66 descriptors. In

2012, Fulcher shared the same term of AL regarding practical knowledge, theoretical and procedural knowledge and social-historical understanding.

2.2. Writing assessment literacy

As mentioned above, different stakeholders play essential roles in language assessment. In the classroom context, teachers' AL is proved to be critical because of its effect on the teaching and learning process and the learners' results. However, EFL teachers may not receive adequate training to enhance their theoretical and practical skills to assess their students accurately and effectively (Gonzalez, 2017). The challenges may be more significant when assessing writing performance, requiring a fair and objective assessment from the teachers. Classroom assessment of writing is highly complicated and context is a determining factor in valid and reliable procedures (Pearson, 2004).

Regarding writing assessment, Weigle (2007) proposed that teachers sharpen assessment skills of developing, administering and scoring writing tasks. She added that teachers need to perceive good assessment and use it accurately in the classroom, understand both formative and summative assessment, and acquire literacy using assessment results. Similarly, Crusan (2010) listed skills that teachers need to possess, such as comprehending the difference between formative and summative assessment, the importance of scoring criteria and the uses of writing assessment.

2.3. Previous studies

Fulcher (2012) examined how different modes of training impact teachers' needs, assessment issues

and their assessment of writing and concluded that “language teachers are very much aware of a variety of assessment needs that are not currently catered for in existing materials designed to improve assessment literacy” (p.125). In a recent study in 2019, Lam also found out that teachers possess basic knowledge of assessment though they have positive ideas about it. They also raised the opinions of the needs to integrate knowledge into their curriculum and believed that writing assessment play a critical role in their assessment literacy.

Gonzalez (2017) summarizes that many research focus on EFL teachers’ training needs by surveying their perceptions and knowledge of assessment in general, leaving a gap in understanding teachers’ difficulties. This is what the study intends to address; by exploring teachers’ challenges in assessing writing, it is hoped to give a more critical role in teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

3. Research method

This study aims to clarify teachers’ challenges in assessing writing and uses a qualitative approach to answer the following research question:

What challenges do teachers face when assessing writing in the EFL classroom?

This study is conducted at the Faculty of Tourism and Foreign Languages, Vietnam National University of Agriculture. Six writing teachers out of twenty teachers at the faculty participated in the study. Throughout this study, the participants expressed their difficulties in assessing writing. Teachers took part in a semi-structured interview which lasted about 30 minutes each to clarify their specific challenges. The questions were adapted from the study of Gonzalez in 2017 about the challenge of EFL writing assessment in Mexican higher education. Data analysis followed an inductive approach (Creswell, 2014) by working with emerging themes and categorizations in the transcriptions of interview data.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Background knowledge of writing assessment

Only one teacher could list five language testing and assessment principles, including validity, reliability, authenticity, practicality and washback among six participants. Meanwhile, the other five teachers considered validity and reliability the most essential in testing and assessment. Nevertheless, they were not able to clarify their understanding of these qualities. T1 – the most experienced teacher is the only participant who can give correct explanations of

different principles.

All teachers perceived writing as an important skill to develop in a language student. The most common reasons mentioned in the interview were to make and communicate with new foreign friends through social channels, to work in a flat world in the international context of globalization and integration, to work in multinational corporations or simply to pass the exam and reach the required level of the training program. T1 and T4 expected writing would be allocated more time than other subjects in the curriculum due to its importance to students’ learning and future work.

4.2. Experiences in assessing writing

All participants agreed that writing is integral to students’ regular assessment and evaluation. It functions not only as a subject but also as a skill that students need to achieve in order to prepare for higher level. Six teachers have more than six years of experience in assessing writing. The two compulsory evaluations teachers must conduct every semester are midterm and final tests. The midterm test is often organized in the middle of the course, and the final test is conducted two weeks after the course finishes. T1, T4 and T5 tried to conduct other kinds of in-class assessment so that students could develop their ideas quickly and organize their writing. However, they all felt that it really took time and effort and they hardly completed it in class. Here are some comments from these three teachers:

T1: “Moreover, I conduct assessment for nearly every lesson by asking Ss to write short paragraphs like introduction or answering guided questions to develop ideas for the body of writing task. However, it really takes time.”

T4: “Sometimes I ask them to write short passages to develop ideas and choose some to check. However, I always don’t have enough time to check in class.”

T5: “Each lesson I try to pick up some answers to check and assess in front of class but I rarely finish on time.”

In addition to the difference in conducting assessment forms, the teachers showed a variety of ways to score students’ midterm and final writing tests. T1, T5 and T6 usually use analytic scoring by reading carefully and underlining the mistakes in each sentence or the idea in each paragraph. T1 often focused on grammar, vocabulary and ideas, especially with challenging tasks and topics. T5 and T6 also tried to give detailed comments on each sentence, each paragraph. However, this way of scoring took time and

effort. Moreover, they sometimes found it challenging to keep an objective view in scoring, especially with students having positive attitudes.

Meanwhile, T2, T3 and T4 rarely assessed in detail and gave comments on each student's writing. Instead, they gave a holistic scoring to minimize the time of checking and assessing. They complained that scoring about 50 students takes a lot of time and effort so they could not do in two weeks. They had to spend time assessing other subjects. Similar to T1, T5 and T6, they also found challenges to be objective in scoring. They commented that:

T2: *"I rarely assess in detail, mainly ask students to analyze, use peer feedback and I give an overall comment. In midterm and final test, I just read through the task and then give an overall score. Sometimes I gave scores based on the student's attitudes and competency they had shown in class."*

T3: *"I often read for main ideas, layout and organization. Ss have to check gram and vocab themselves. Moreover, most of the students are very lazy so if I check and edit mistakes, they do not care and often make these mistakes again. I sometimes plus 0.5 for hardworking students."*

T4: *"I don't have enough time to check carefully, just give comment on common mistakes depending on the task type."*

4.3. Participants' use of rubrics

All six participants were familiar with rubrics because they had to design them in the course specification. English-majored students at FTFL, VNUA are assessed according to the Common European Framework of Reference so the teachers had to follow the required criteria. They were aware of the importance of these rubrics, though not all of them used these standardized rubrics in scoring. T2 stated that she could not follow every criterion in the rubric because she had to finish scoring in two weeks after the final exam. She often taught 2-3 classes, equivalent to 60-75 students so giving comments according to the rubric was nearly impossible.

4.4. Needs of training session

Six writing teachers in this study have at least six years of experience in teaching writing. They have attended several courses on testing and assessment. When answering questions about the need to organize a training session on testing and focus on writing, most felt unnecessary. The main reason they mentioned here was that they do not really believe in the quality of the training courses. Actually, all of the courses they had joined only provided background knowledge

that they could read and understand from textbooks or references. They urgently need qualified trainers from prestigious organizations worldwide who can help them apply knowledge and solve problems in authentic learning and teaching context.

Only T1 – the most experienced teacher, showed her excitement in training courses. However, she also emphasized that the leaders should pay more attention to the quality of the courses so that the teachers can receive real benefits to enhance teaching and learning quality through testing and assessment.

5. Conclusion

In this qualitative study, I interviewed six writing teachers at FTFL, VNUA to explore their background knowledge of testing and their challenges in assessing writing. Most of them showed their functional knowledge in language testing and assessment, though they can use different forms and apply principles in classroom practices. The toughest challenges they have to confront in assessing writing are a shortage of time and need more motivation in analytical scoring due to their students' laziness. Moreover, keeping an objective attitude in scoring writing is also a significant challenge. These findings are similar to the results of previous studies presented earlier, in which the teachers showed a lack of background knowledge of language testing and assessment in theories and practices. In terms of training needs, all teachers experienced several training courses and stated that these courses **had not met the** demand for upgrading their assessment literacy. They expected more courses from professionals to help them deal with real problems in the teaching and learning context at FTFL, VNUA.

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