Writing Assessment Literacy: A Study of Formative Assessment Practice Among Wattala International School English Teachers

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Abstract

Research into the technicalities of Writing Assessment Literacy (WAL) is an expanding domain, with many scholars stressing that its complex nature has not been fully developed in both pre- and in-service teachers due to oversights in teacher education and professional development. This study used survey data (N=20) and interviews (N=5) to investigate the practices of English language teachers related to formative assessment of writing in international schools in the Wattala Divisional Secretariat. The results complement existing findings that a majority of teachers mirror summative assessments in the practice of formative writing assessment, misrepresent their understanding of rubrics and feedback, and face limitations in the effective use of assessment results. The study concludes that specialized training in theory and practice related to WAL is needed to broaden the scope of classroom assessment methods used by international schoolteachers with focus on alternative assessment, transparent feedback practices, and purposeful collaboration between educators.

Keywords: writing assessment literacy; assessment for learning; formative assessment; teacher practices

Introduction

Studies in the field of educational assessment suggest a disassociation between the practice of teaching and assessing, stating that the neglect of such an essential correlation has led to "unacceptably low levels of assessment literacy among practicing teachers" and "inaccurate" student assessment leading to "ineffective feedback" (Stiggins, 2001, p.5). Additionally, Malone (2011) contends that "assessment… should integrate with teaching", with the notion that they "inform and improve" one another over time, which consequently raises the debate of adequate training for teachers (Malone, 2011).

Over the years, researchers have urged teacher education programs to better equip pre- and in-service teachers to develop knowledge and skills to plan, design, score and interpret language assessments to make logical judgements about their students (Popham, 2004; Taylor, 2010; White, 2009, as cited in Crusan et al., 2016). Studies also indicate that the disregard for writing skills in the classroom is a direct result of "inadequate training in the teaching and assessment of writing" since "the field of second language writing" has overlooked the preparation of English language writing teachers in favor of student learning of writing (Dempsey et al., 2009; Hirvela & Belcher, 2007, as cited in Crusan et al., 2016, p.44).

In the context of the Sri Lankan education system, a review of evaluation reports published for the English Language examinations of 2018 reveals a severely low facility of just 6% in the area of writing with 60% to 90% of students scoring only 50% or fewer marks for an individual writing question in both Paper I and Paper II (Department of Examination, 2018). The traditional roots of the local curriculum, which raise the question of enhancing teacher education programs, have been observed in the "academic, content-heavy, and lecture-based approach" established in Sri Lankan

National Colleges of Education (NCoEs) which provide professional development for teachers (Indrarathne & McCulloch, 2022).

The attempts to define Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) has undergone significant evolution, and recent literature proposes that it encompasses a need for different levels of knowledge, namely:

> (1) knowledge of theory, (2) technical skills, (3) principles and concepts, (4) language pedagogy, (5) sociocultural values, (6) local practices, (7) personal beliefs/attitudes, and (8) scores and decision making (Taylor, 2013, p.410).

The application of these levels to the different macro-skills within language teaching provides a multi-faceted understanding of the intricacies of writing assessment literacy (WAL).

Assessment of Learning (AFL), a subcategory of formative assessment comprises informal practice confined to the classroom while requiring less structure and does not entail a need for technical levels of data literacy to analyze data collected from standardized testing (Schildkamp et al. 2020). The effectiveness of AFL is, however, dependent on teacher abilities with knowledge and skill development needs in the most basic domains, i.e. cognitive-domain understanding, question formulation, and pedagogy, as well as the more complex domains, i.e. understanding assessment bias, design and implementation of assessments, and inferencing data gathered from assessments (Bennet, 2011).

Studies of teacher writing assessment literacy have both confirmed and rejected assertions about the shortcomings of pre- and in-service teacher education programs. In practice, teachers face challenges related to internalized judgements of assessment as summative in nature, reflecting on the purpose of assessment as informing practice, an absence of professional dialogue and teacher collaboration to "disseminate good assessment practices to colleagues", and the use of rubrics (Tayyebi et al., 2022; Crusan et al., 2016). The aim of this study was to utilize the methods of investigation and analysis of research related to various aspects of WAL to investigate the practices of international schoolteachers in classroom writing assessment.

Materials and Methods

This study employed mixed method research with the quantitative element being cross-sectional survey research through a self-administered online survey involving twenty teachers and the qualitative aspect emerging through semi-structured interviews with five of the teachers selected from the survey respondents. The choice of mixed method research was intended to use both interview data to supplement the cursory survey data, and to improve the validity of the study by accommodating the need for an interview to compensate for the "caution… warranted" in a self-administered questionnaire which can be caused by participants having "a more positive view about their assessment knowledge" (Crusan et al., 2016, p.53).

The participants were volunteers from a set of eight international schools in the Wattala Divisional Secretariat. While the respondents reported a range of experience levels, the majority were aged between 21 and 34 years and had fewer than three years of experience in teaching. In terms of the highest level of education, the greatest numbers of respondents fell into two categories: the secondary school level (7 out of 20) and Bachelor's degree (8 out of 20), with many being teachers of cohorts from grades six to nine.
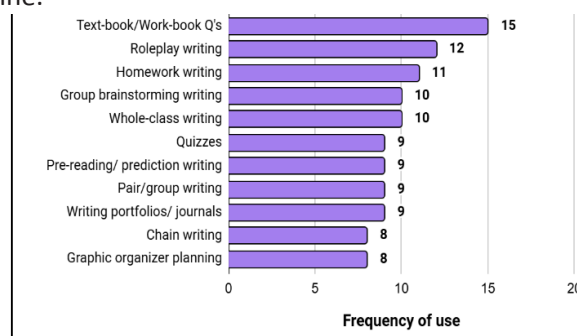

Figure 1. Types of Formative Assessment Used

The survey contained 12 multiple-select choice items related to classroom formative practice while the interviews, which were conducted in both face-to-face and video-call formats, contained 20 items. The survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify general trends in the sample, while the interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis from deductive in vivo coding to categorize stated practices. The data used is secondary data from a larger study conducted by the researcher to investigate attitudes, knowledge and practices of the sample of teachers.

Results and Discussion

The practices of teachers in formative assessment were elicited through both the questionnaire which uncovered information related to the types and purpose of assessment, elements of writing assessed, adequate preparation, feedback delivery, and use of rubrics and the interviews where supplemental information to the responses of the questionnaire were obtained, including the teachers' application of rubrics in assessing writing, how results of assessment were used, and whether assessment data influenced future teaching and assessment.

The results demonstrate that formal testing focus as a limiting factor in AFL is evident in the teachers' most preferred choice of formative assessments (Figure 1). The overshadowing power of assessment as a gateway to testing is evident in the predominance of exam-format questions, and textbook or work-book questions. This has also been observed in a study of formative assessment practices in government schoolteachers in Sri Lanka, where teachers spend "more than 90% of their instructional time testing students through questioning… based on lower-order thinking" while higher-order thinking necessary for "creativity and metacognition" is neglected (Sedere et al., 2014).

Teachers also appear to focus on writing genres and writing knowledge that are directly related to "high stakes" standardized tests where "test results have

a significant impact" on students, schools and their personnel (Sikka et al., 2007, p.240). This is supported by the highest priority being given to essays, letter writing, short answers, picture descriptions and articles, as well as knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and writing mechanics (Figure 2 & 3) which can, unfortunately, lead to teachers "implementing strategies and practices that go against their beliefs"
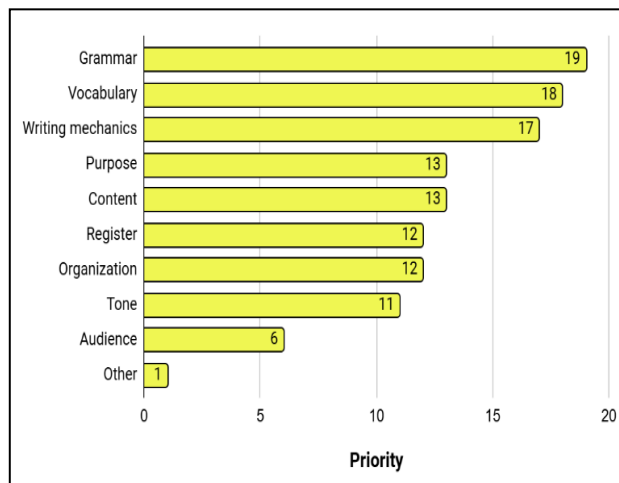

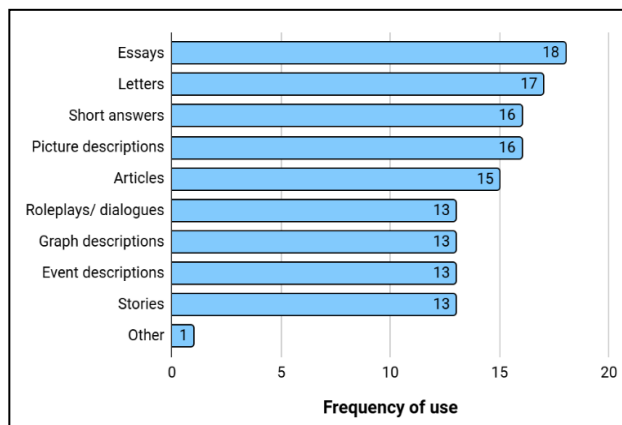**Figure 2.** Types of Writing Knowledge Tested

Figure 3. Genres of Writing Assessed

and decrease morale while allowing the "deprofessionalization of teachers" (Abrams et al., 2003, as cited in Sikka et al., 2007, p.240). In terms of language aspect or skill, all the teachers interviewed also agreed one or more elements were connected, although it leaned heavily towards grammar, punctuation, structures or vocabulary, with only one subject noting the use of listening to lead-in to

writing. The results reported on the type of support provided to students using the results of formative assessment (Table 1), also reinforce these findings.

In conjunction with the responses presented in Figure 1, the teachers interviewed highlighted issues in the use of alternative assessments in the classroom. While two out of the five teachers fully practiced peer-assessment and feedback in the classroom by having students present written work to classmates for suggestions ("*if you give it to a peer… they also learn*"), there was a low prevalence in the use of writing portfolios and journals in continuous, ipsative referenced assessment.

Table 1. Support from Formative Assessment

Standardized test preparation	18 (90%)
Objective achievement remediation	9 (45%)
Strength/ weakness exploration	15 (75%)

Table 2. Feedback Practices of Teachers

Time frame for feedback	Class time	19 (95%)
	Interval/ Free period	6 (30%)
	New period	9 (45%)
Method of giving feedback	Rubric scores	5 (25%)
	Written notes (task margin)	14 (70%)
	Verbal comment	15 (75%)
Form of engagement for feedback	Whole class	14 (70%)
	Individual (one-on-one)	12 (60%)
	Small groups (similar issues)	6 (30%)

Table 3. Areas for Learner Inclusion

Solving assessment related problems	17 (85%)	
Resolving lesson delivery issues	16 (80%)	
Assessment rubric planning	11 (55%)	

As illustrated in Table 2, respondents also reported a greater focus on feedback during class time as verbal or written comments to the whole class which gainsay the recommendations for feedback practices in informal assessment such as "teacher questioning and probing, small group… [and] individual interaction [with the teacher]" and learner collaboration but

are consistent with formal feedback practices like "comments on learners'… written work" (Rea-Dickins, 2001, p.434). While only 25% of respondents to the survey reported the use of rubric scores as feedback, 55% maintained that students were included in the planning of rubrics for writing assessments (**Table 3**). Such antithetical responses also emerged during interviews with all the participants facing issues in responding to rubric-related questions which were remedied by presenting them with sample rubrics, leading to responses like "*I don't use this*", and "*I read it from outside and make my own*".

Despite the disfavor from respondents towards separate time slots for personal feedback or the use of small groups with similar issues, interviewees offered contradictory ideas about the desire to give immediate feedback by "*correct[ing] them on the spot*", but also considering one-to-one support as important by having "*the child sit with*" them or having weaker students "*come early in the morning… [to] start from the beginning*".

A major lapse in the feedback mechanism was the teachers' view of high proficiency learners as not requiring guidance or suggestion for further improvement, but as a resource for supporting low proficiency learners. One teacher stated that he "*give[s]… more attention to the weak students*" and wishes to "*train someone else to go and teach*", while another disclosed that he lets student groups work together so "*the weak one will copy the best ones*". A final important detail the researcher hoped to elicit in questioning was the socio-emotional dimension of WAL (Schildkamp et al., 2020). None of the interviewees considered collaboration with colleagues as a viable option for overcoming challenged in designing assessments but provided options for pre-planning ("*if we plan stuff and come, it might work out*") to overcome time constraints and stated that students can improve "*with extra practice*".

Overall, the teachers in the sample demonstrated moderate levels of knowledge to conduct writing assessments, at least in the use of summative assessments in formative conditions while issues in practice, which have been substantiated by previous research and was evident in the current study, may have been precipitated by the "guidance available to teachers" being "limited to generic principles" (Ven der Kleij et al., 2018; Elwood, 2006, as cited in

Schildkamp et al., 2020, p.3). Additionally, a teacher who regularly cited school policies for practices expected to "*be within the framework*" based on predetermined levels of achievement demonstrated a greater breadth of WAL but inadvertently divulged an absence of standardized practices in international schools which is suggestive of a contributing factor to deficits in WAL development.

Conclusion

The results of this research reveal gaps in knowledge and skills, and a need to develop AFL practices among in-service English language teachers in international schools, so that writing assessments are exploited for their dynamic potential to inform teaching in a way that enhances the on-going learning process. Moreover, the competency to employ more transparent forms of evaluation (rubrics) and carry out alternative assessments such as School-Based Assessments (SBAs), peer-assessment and feedback, and portfolio assessments should also be given attention. The prioritization of formative assessment has been recognized and undertaken in Sri Lanka by the new National Educational Reforms (Presidential Task Force on Sri Lanka's Educational Affairs, 2020, as cited in Indrarathne & McCulloch, 2022). It is the ideal moment to support educational stakeholders to benefit by supporting teachers to evolve through professional development that fosters assessment literacy and cultivates collaboration among teachers by helping them recognize the professional community as a resource, while ensuring that international schools benefit from inclusive policy changes that standardize WAL development and practice in the public school system.

Acknowledgements

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