Combined Assessment Model for EAP Writing Workshop: Portfolio Decision-Making, Criterion-Referenced Grading, and Contract Negotiation

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An assessment model that combines portfolio decision-making with criterion-referenced grading is described as applied in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) pre-university ESL writing program. In this model, portfolio decision-making is combined with criterion-referenced assessment. The portfolio concept is valuable in that learners are encouraged to "own" and to make decisions about their work. At the same time, criterion-referenced assessment allows teachers to set meaningful, consistent standards while encouraging learner self- and peer assessment. Learner involvement may be further encouraged through the use of contract grading and collaborative revision of grading criteria. For academically oriented adult ESL learners, in particular, this assessment scheme encourages learner control while keeping performance-based standards at desirable levels.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how a combined approach using portfolio and criterion-referenced grading has been used in an academically oriented writing program for ESL adults. The EAP2 (English for Academic Purposes, level 2) writing workshop (WW) is for university-oriented adult ESL students at the final level of their intensive English program. Classes meet four times a week (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday) in two-hour blocks, with alternate days in a regular classroom and in a computer classroom. Wednesdays are used for writing conferences, tutorials, and weekly teachers' meetings, which include standardization and grading sessions. Class size is limited to 15 students per section, with two sections offered.

Students from widely varied first-language backgrounds enter the course with an expected TOEFL range of 490-517. New students are placed into EAP2 according to their entry institutional TOEFL and on diagnostic writing results. Continuing students are placed into EAP2 on the basis of teacher recommendations and course grades at the previous (EAP1) level, which also includes a writing workshop class. In addition to the EAP2 writing workshop class, students participate in an eight-hour-a-week, content-based core in which they learn and practice academic English skills through earth

science materials. Overall programmatic goals emphasized in the EAP classes are that learners will (a) organize themselves as students, (b) gain fluency and accuracy in language use for academic purposes, and (c) utilize critical, logical thought as a language tool.

A combined assessment model was used that employed elements from holistic portfolio assessment, criterion-referenced assessment, and norm-based assessment. This combination evolved as a means to meet the assessment needs of students, teachers, and the wider university audience. The portfolio approach was considered valuable in that learners are encouraged to "own" and make decisions about their work. At the same time, criterion-referenced assessment allowed teachers to set meaningful, consistent grading standards while encouraging learner self- and peer assessment. Norm-referenced measurement was also included as a means to assess learners' exit proficiency and university readiness. Contract grading and learner-teacher negotiation are being considered as other methods to further increase learner involvement in assessment decision-making.

In the sections that follow, aspects of assessment that were considered when developing the EAP2 WW assessment scheme are presented. Some of the main advantages and disadvantages of portfolio assessment are discussed first, followed by a description of our model, which combines elements of both holistic portfolio assessment and criterion-referenced assessment. Finally, considerations regarding the use of contract grading and criteria negotiation are presented as possible directions for the future.

Portfolio Assessment: Advantages and Disadvantages

Recent trends in performance assessment include a deemphasis on norm-based testing and corresponding interest in holistic and criterion-referenced assessment (Brown, 1996; Connor-Linton, 1995; Hamp-Lyons, 1991, 1995; Black, Daiker, Sommers, & Stygall, 1994). The best assessment models often contain elements of each and typically include multiple samples. Assessment samples can take many forms, including projects, multimedia displays, newsletters, portfolios, self-assessment schedules (Boud, 1992), on-site criterion-referenced checklists, integrated tests, or problem-solving activities. They still share common properties as condensed from Farr (1992) and Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991) from their discussions of "authentic" assessment.

Authentic assessment, they say, should integrate language skills and focus on language use. Ideally, assessment will be highly individualized, designed to match each student's interests and needs. Assessment activities should be integrated in instruction and should make learners aware of their language-related strengths. Through assessment activities, learners should be encouraged to express unique and emerging reactions to ideas encountered, while engaging in critical thinking. Learner self-assessment

should be developed and encouraged, leading to more effective, creative language use.

The shift away from norm-based assessment is due in part to a longstanding concern that students feel ownership of their work and learn to engage in self-assessment so as to identify personal strengths and weaknesses. Assessment thus nurtures student awareness of learning while helping the teacher to plan more individualized instruction. The student is recognized as an active collaborator in the language learning process and is thus expected to critique self and peers, to think critically, to take language risks, and to express his or her responses and decisions. Assessment schemes can be powerful tools for encouraging these desired behaviors on the part of the learner. Schemes by which learners are encouraged to own and make decisions about their work are particularly suitable for adult learners of ESL. Adults prefer setting their own pace, using learning styles flexibly, and imposing their own structure on instructional activities (Penland, 1979). Assessment that increases students' awareness of their own learning while encouraging responsibility and decision-making is an important aspect of what Brown (1994) refers to as an informed approach to second-language learning.

Portfolio assessment has been embraced as a means to encourage learner decision-making, class negotiation, and attention to language learning processes. There are problems with portfolio assessment, however. Some of the advantages and disadvantages of portfolio assessment are described below.

Portfolio assessment allows for the evaluation of multiple samples (across time and across genres). In a discussion of ESL college writing, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (1993) explain that "evaluation by portfolio is becoming increasingly accepted as an enriched evaluation and thus a better evaluation" (p. 176). Teachers use portfolio assessment as a means to make better informed judgments both when planning instruction and when assessing learner progress. Multiple samples are collected, with a consideration of both progress over time and the degrees of competence displayed when considering sample variety (assessing language and skill use, critical thinking, library research skills, etc.). A close working relationship and individualized attention on a daily basis are essential to true developmental assessment by portfolio.

One of the problems with portfolio assessment, however, is the workload, which is extremely demanding because the assessment schedule requires constant attention and feedback by both teachers and learners. Another problem arises with grading consistency. Because of the complexities of our jobs and the harried demands of our classrooms, it is sometimes difficult to include multiple expert judgments, to document thoroughly our assessment criteria, or to record the assessment procedures used. The National Center

for the Study of Writing and Literacy conducted a Classroom Writing Portfolio Study (1994) in which they surveyed 150 teachers and writing program administrators nationwide. Feedback from teachers who used portfolio assessment revealed three primary characteristics: (a) intense personal commitment by teachers; (b) assessment practices that lacked analytic and technical substance; and (c) evaluations tending toward narrative and descriptive reporting (p. 3).

Hamp-Lyons and Condon (1993) asked portfolio assessors to discuss portfolio grading processes and issues while participating regularly in standardization sessions. Assessors also kept logs and responded to reader response questionnaires in which they noted criteria used to make their judgments and the processes by which they applied those criteria. Examination of teacher judgments during the portfolio assessment process led Hamp-Lyons and Condon to discover that assessment decisions are more difficult with portfolio assessment than with holistic assessment. Portfolio assessors must consider evidence and judge portfolio contents one against the other as well as making judgments about the portfolio as a whole. Assessors repeatedly commented on the need for established criteria and standards, leading Hamp-Lyons and Condon to conclude that "training readers, establishing reliability and validity, standing up to public scrutiny—all would be impossible without these explicit, external criteria" (p. 187).

In addition to problems with criteria and consistency, assessment schemes that rely heavily on portfolio assessment may not accurately measure learner proficiency. Students who engage more often in conferencing, who more effectively draw on the teacher as expert critic and editor, or who seek tutorial instruction when developing their written products are more likely to have portfolios that reflect effort (by both teacher and student) more than proficiency.

Despite the problems with portfolio assessment, however, the portfolio concept is valuable in that the learner is encouraged to own and to make decisions about his or her work. Portfolio assessment also attunes learners to the writing process, reinforcing the importance of audience. If portfolios are shared with and/or assessed by real audiences (class members or the wider community), learner motivation is typically enhanced. The challenge, then, is to combine the best elements of portfolio assessment (learner ownership, self-reflection, and attention to process) with assessment methods that are consistent, teacher-friendly, and still provide needed information as to both progress and proficiency.

Portfolio Decision-Making Combined with Criterion-Referenced Grading

Overview

In our assessment model, students are asked to construct their end-of-term portfolios by including multiple drafts to show both product variety and skill progress over time. Some samples are student-selected and some are teacher-imposed. The portfolio is assessed holistically at the end of the term, with the teacher providing a summary of the learner's strengths and weaknesses, as well as areas showing the greatest improvement. These holistic assessments are used when deciding recommendation to either full-time university study, part-time university coursework (with continued part- or full-time EAP coursework), or full-time EAP coursework.

Besides holistic assessment, each draft included in the portfolio is assessed on the basis of established criteria so as to measure degree of competence displayed. Comparisons are again made of progress over time. Teacher-imposed samples allow for norm-based assessment, while student self-selected samples allow insight into the learner's opinion of his or her own work. Because teachers have standardized and used the criterion-referenced grade sheets throughout the term, final draft scoring can typically be accomplished rather quickly. Specific objectives for the EAP2 WW course are provided in Appendix A, but a brief synopsis follows of class activities that lead to samples assessed in the portfolio. Although the specifics may change from term to term, the general schedule of writing-to-learn activities has remained the same across the last six terms (12 months).

Writing to Learn: Activity Progression

Throughout the term, students are guided with instruction and practice through a variety of writing-to-learn activities. Library research skills and word processing orientation weeks 1 and 2 of the term are followed by critical reading of journal articles and writing of journal article summaries and critiques. Journal articles are selected by both teachers and students and revolve around the core class theme of ecology. Short-answer essay writing is introduced at the end of week 2, when students are asked to plan questions and then to write responses based on core class materials. Practice in short-answer timed and untimed essay writing (classification, problem-solution, compare or contrast, etc.) continues throughout the rest of the term. Article summaries continue in weeks 3 and 4, leading to short synthesis papers in which the students identify issues and relevant support from articles previously summarized. Synthesis papers lead to short argumentative papers involving identification of issues, persuasive support, and counterargument. The final and largest paper (approximately 7-8 pages) is based on an ecology-based, student-selected research topic. A topic-related oral article summary

in the core class is followed by a written article summary in the WW class. A supported outline for the research paper is revised with the writing teacher, then used for an informative speech in the core class. After core teacher and class feedback, the detailed outline is revised again and used to develop the first draft of a research paper. The second draft of the research paper is added to the portfolio display at end of term.

With each draft, students are asked to assess themselves using criterion-referenced grade sheets designed for that assignment (see Appendix B for grade sheet samples). To help students follow the steps entailed in their process writing assignments, timelines for major assignments are often provided in a checklist format (see Appendix C for a sample timeline of the research paper assignment).

Portfolio Construction

Early in the term students are told about the need to construct a portfolio for a program-wide open house at which they will exhibit work from the whole term. More specific directions are provided later in the term. For the exhibit portfolio they are asked to include final drafts of both an argumentative paper and their research paper. To complete their exhibit portfolio students are also asked to select other final drafts of writing-to-learn papers that they feel represent their best work across the term. The exhibit portfolios are displayed at an open house attended by the ESL students, teachers, and guests from the university and wider community. Students host the exhibit and discuss their work with guests and other students.

After the exhibit, EAP2 WW students add to their individual writing portfolios by including prewriting, outlines, first drafts, peer reviews, teacher reviews, and criterion-referenced grade sheets for all drafts. This final writing portfolio is submitted to their WW teacher for criterion-referenced scoring and inclusion in the overall course grade. When the course was first instituted, portfolio contents were assessed for 60% of the final grade, with writing-to-learn activities and active participation assessed for the remaining 40%. The teachers later separated portfolio contents according to (a) summary and synthesis paper writing at 20-30% of the final grade, (b) research paper outlines and drafts at 25%, and (c) argumentative essays and essay exams at 30-40%. Class activities including reading-writing and editing logs, in-class exercises, and active participation ranged from 15-20% of the final grade.

This system has many benefits. Through use of criterion-referenced grade sheets, students and teachers became familiar with criteria and performance levels expected. Standardization sessions and regular teacher meetings allowed novice teachers to become oriented quickly to the objectives of the course and to the performance standards expected. Students were required to assess themselves using the same criteria teachers used for assessment.

Progress charts listing criteria-based scores helped both teachers and students to be more aware of developmental strengths and weaknesses and areas needing further improvement. The criterion-referenced grade sheets also saved teachers' time in repeated explanations of how the assignment would be graded. Learners' criterion-referenced self-evaluations were also useful as quality control checks when a teacher was grading alone. Comparison of learners' self-evaluation with teachers' evaluations encouraged teachers to reassess those categories where students gave themselves full marks but the teacher's score was much lower. Providing criterion-referenced grade sheets helped to establish standards, to point out the purposes of various assignments, and to clarify the grading system to both teachers and students.

Course evaluations by students indicated that they felt that this evaluation system was fair and that they knew what was expected of them as learners. Teacher and course evaluations by EAP2 WW students were regularly quite high. Program evaluations by students indicated that they valued the WW course and recognized its emphasis on preparing them for university writing. Observation and informal interviews with students during conferencing sessions and at end-of-term exhibits indicated that students were satisfied with the assessment scheme, felt pride in their portfolio products, and enjoyed explaining to incoming students what work was expected in the course while showing samples of their own work. Students went well beyond teachers' requirements in displaying their work attractively. They requested extra classroom hours for writing, worked during the noon hour, and spent time and money in order to include graphics and attractive cover sheets as they prepared their portfolios for the exhibit. The combination of portfolio and criterion-referenced grading seemed to provide a good balance between teacher and learner goals, assisted in instructional effectiveness, and encouraged students to take pride in and responsibility for their own learning.

The Next Step? Contract Grading and Learner-Teacher Negotiation?

We are considering some techniques to refine our assessment scheme so as to increase learner involvement in assessment. One technique under consideration is the use of contract grading. The other is encouraging the class to negotiate with the teacher the criterion-referenced grade sheets. We are only in the initial stages of attempting to determine possible repercussions on grade standardization and consistency and other problems that could arise. Thus, although the ideas presented below have been successfully used in other courses in our program, we are as yet undecided as to whether we would like to test them in the field in the EAP2WW course.

Contract Grading

In the article "Good Teaching: A Matter of Living the Mystery," Palmer (1990) suggested that each student be allowed to determine, within limits, the proportion of the overall grade for various types of class work. He argued that "By allowing students to lead with their strengths rather than weaknesses, some of the anti-educational effects of competition are mitigated" (p. 16). In our writing program we are now considering using contract grading to enhance student control and involvement in the assessment scheme.

If we decide to modify our current model in order to employ contract grading, teachers will first be asked to establish minimum and maximum percentage points possible in each assessment category (e.g., active participation, research paper, writing-to-learn papers). This would help to assure that instructional objectives are appropriately reflected in the assessment scheme and that work expected in the course is fairly consistent for all learners. For example, a "major" product such as the final draft of the research paper may be allowed (as decided by the teachers) a range from 10% of the final course grade up to 40% of the final course grade. Writing-to-learn assignments may be allowed 10% to 35% of the course grade, and so on. All learners would be expected to complete work for each category in the assessment scheme, although number of drafts and weighting may vary.

From a learner's point of view, establishment of grade categories and minimum and maximum percentages possible in each category would give an idea of the relative worth of each activity in the class overall while helping the learner decide on the need for additional work. A learner who receives a high score on a first draft may thus make the decision not to submit a second draft. Similarly, learners who are unhappy with first and second draft scores may wish to negotiate submission of a third draft. Teachers would also need to establish the number of drafts to be allowed and impose time limits for submission. This would keep grading headaches to a minimum and require that students revise while content and language use problems are still freshly in mind.

The next step would be to establish contract deadlines. It works well to require that contracts be submitted on a date when most class work has been completed and the majority of scores received, but when there is still at least one outstanding project due. Students must then assess the grades they have so far as they allocate percentage points. They also must project their remaining grades and make decisions and commitments about still-to-do projects. Given established minimum or maximum ranges, each student can assesses his or her own strengths, draw on knowledge about grades already earned, and decide the exact amounts to be allocated to each assessment category.

The desired percentages for each category would then be submitted by the learner to the teacher, discussed in a conference, and drawn up into an

individual contract. Following agreement, the contract would be signed by both instructor and student, with a copy for each.

My experience with contract grading in projects and teacher training courses indicates that learners are more likely to feel control over their own grade, are more likely to reflect on progress and weaknesses, are more aware of due dates and work schedules, and are more likely to discuss language learning progress meaningfully with the teacher. Learning styles and learners' priorities are typically reflected in contract choices made and students are more likely to be treated as (and respond as) responsible adults in charge of their own learning.

Negotiation of Criterion-Referenced Grade Sheets

Another technique we are considering as a means to encourage student participation in the assessment scheme is to ask that they negotiate the revision of the criterion-referenced grade sheets. Following self-assessment and completion of the first draft, but before teacher scoring, the class and teacher would negotiate and work together to revise the criterion-referenced grade sheets. As a group they must reach consensus as to categories to omit or add, as well as changes regarding point allocations, in each scoring category. Students thus engage in critique of the grade sheets, revising them to better reflect their self-perceived learning priorities and efforts. Student are encouraged to participate more fully in assessment decision-making. This could further reinforce a collaborative framework, with teachers learning from and responding to student needs and wishes.

Conclusion

We are all concerned with creating assessment schemes that encourage instructional effectiveness while enhancing learner ownership and decision-making. An assessment scheme that combines portfolio decision-making with criterion-referenced grading allows teachers to set meaningful, consistent standards while encouraging learners' self-assessment. Learner involvement may be further encouraged through the use of contract grading and collaborative revision of grading criteria. For adult ESL learners in particular these methods encourage learner control while keeping performance-based standards at desirable levels. I hope the ideas described in this article will help ESL teachers as they consider the roles of portfolio assessment, criterion-based grading, and contract negotiation in their intensive English classrooms.

The Author

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Appendix A
EAP2 Writing Workshop Instructional Objectives

Key to Target Skills: L=Listening, R=Reading, S=Speaking, W=Writing, G=Grammar (syntax)

Key to Target Functions: Ac=Academic, CT=Critical Thinking, CL=Computer Literacy, CU=Community/University Use, In=Interpersonal, SS=Study Skills

	Target Skills/Functions	
Summarize and/or evaluate author's thesis, major premise and support in written texts.	W/R/S	CT/SS/Ac
Analyze multipart essay questions and highlight specific text or lecture information that best fits an essay question.	R	SS/CT/Ac
Write about diagrams and charts.	R/W	CT/SS

Take notes and write essays from those notes.	R/L/W	SS/Ac
Synthesize information from a variety of sources and then present this information in a logical, linear format using transitions/cohesion devices.	R/W/L/G	CT/Ac
Select an issue or topic related to class content suitable for a "problem analysis," "problem solution," or pro/con research paper.RCT/SS/Ac		
Use library on line catalogs and library search techniques.	R/W	SS/Ac/CL
Construct mini research paper with supporting statistics, facts, and expert quotations in proper MLA or APA format.	R/W/G	CT/Ac
Use an academic tone in writing.	W	In/Ac
Effectively use simple sentence structures.	S/W/G	In/Ac
Effectively use complex grammatical structures, such as subordinate and coordinate clauses.	S/W/G	Ac
Effectively use editing strategies for errors in writing at the word, sentence, and discourse level.	W/G	CT/Ac
Read, understand, and follow directions provided in handouts.	R/L	SS/In/Ac
Follow class procedures, schedule, and come to class prepared with minimum reminders from the instructor.	R/L	SS/In/Ac

Appendix B.1
Summary/Response Criterion-Referenced Grade Sheet

Final Draft:

Student Name _____ Asgnmt _____

Instructor's Name _____ Date _____

Summary

Indication/Comprehension of author's thesis and credentials	_____	(10)
Main points of article/story identified and summarized clearly	_____	(10)
Appropriate examples/details given	_____	(10)

Response

Student's own personal opinion stated clearly	_____	(10)
Reasons for student's personal opinion stated clearly	_____	(10)
Appropriate examples/details/support given for student's reasons and opinion	_____	(10)

Entire Paper:

Organized and logical	_____	(10)
Use of paraphrasing (own words)/quotations	_____	(10)
Language Use/Mechanics	_____	(20)
Total	_____	(100)

Comments:

Appendix B2
Comparison Essay Criterion-Referenced Grade Sheet

Writer's Name _____ Asgnmt: _____

Instructor's Name: _____ Date: _____

Draft 2

Controversy or issue introduced/stated clearly at the beginning of the essay	_____	(5)
Student's thesis of comparison appropriate and stated clearly	_____	(10)
Article titles, authors, and authors' credentials noted	_____	(5)
Each author's thesis and main points stated and summarized clearly	_____	(20)
Effective use of detail from each article (statistics, quotations, etc.)	_____	(10)
Similarities and differences outlined clearly and logically	_____	(10)
Effective organization and use of transitions	_____	(10)
Use of paraphrasing and quotations	_____	(10)
Language Use	_____	(10)
Mechanics	_____	(5)
Citations provided and properly formatted	_____	(5)
Total	_____	(100)

Comments:

Appendix B.3
Documented Problem-Solution Paper Criterion-Referenced Grade Sheet

Student's Name _____ Asgnmt _____

PROBLEM: Show that a problem exists and needs attention. This may involve identifying the causes for and the effects of the problem. Be specific. Include details, examples, and facts. _____ (20)

SOLUTION: Propose solution(s) for the problem. This is your chance to convince your audience that you know what will solve or reduce the problem. Justify your solution(s) with reasons and evidence. Remember to give details, facts, and examples. _____ (20)

KEY ELEMENTS: Use at least one or two of the following where appropriate: _____ (20)

- Evaluate alternative solutions
- Show that your solution meets certain criteria: feasibility, cost, effectiveness, compromise, legality.
- Answer possible objections
- Suggest implementation or call for action

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS: _____ (20)

- Organization and transitions clear
- Audience needs addressed - definitions, adequate explanation of new concepts
- Correct tone and word use
- Correct simple and complex grammar
- Correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization

APA and DOCUMENTATION: _____ (20)

- Correct formatting and effective use of quotations
- When paraphrasing, only key words unchanged
- Citations and References correct and complete

Total _____

Appendix C
EAP2WW Research Paper Timeline

Due:		*Done:*
Friday, July 14 (8 pm)	Summary of Research Paper Article	_____
Thursday, July 20 (3:40 pm)	Summary Revision	_____
Monday, July 24 (1 pm)	Proposal and Preliminary Outline	_____
Thursday, July 27 (3:40 pm)	Summary of Second Research Article	_____
(end of class)	Detailed Outline with Citations	_____
Friday, July 28	Conference Worksheet	_____
Time _____	Conference with instructor	_____
Tuesday, August 1 (8 pm)	Draft 1 of Research Paper	_____
Thursday, August 3 (4:40 pm)	Peer Response of Research Paper	_____
Time: _____	Conference Worksheet 2	_____
	Conference with instructor	_____
Monday, August 7 (noon)	Exhibit Portfolio due	_____
(3:40-4:40 pm)	Final Essay Exam	_____
Tuesday, August 8 (3:40 pm)	Final Writing Portfolio due	_____