

# The Primary Trait Scoring Method for Classroom-Based Assessment of Students' Direct Writing

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**ABSTRACT**— *The function of the classroom-based assessment in Malaysian secondary schools is to give some insights into the progress of students' learning and achievement while still in school, whereas the national-based examinations is to give final grades that determine the students' future studies in higher institutions of learning. There should be a balance between classroom assessment and standardised assessment so that students achieve both learning goals. It is also essential for classroom-based assessments to develop diagnostic information to be adjusted to students' specific needs. ESL teachers should use specific scoring methods to assess their students' writing for the classroom-based assessment. In this research an ESL teacher conducted three lessons to teach her students to write guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing. Then she assessed the students' writing by using the primary trait scoring method. Her written feedback was analysed. She was observed while giving feedback lessons to her students. The result shows that she was able to make use of her assessment as a basis to teach during her feedback lessons. It was also found that she provided corrective feedback to her students' writing.*

**Keywords** - Primary Trait Scoring Method, Formative Assessment, Summative Assessment, Classroom-Based Assessment

## INTRODUCTION

Guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing are the three types of direct writing that require students to write differently. These three different types of writing test students' ability to understand and use correct grammar, to apply language skills for interpersonal purposes, to apply language skills for informational purposes, and to apply language skills for aesthetic purposes (Malaysian Examinations Syndicate, 2004). Students need to do well in the three types of direct writing as these three writing tasks require skills that can be applied to real life needs. As stated by Takala (1988), written language has always played a dominant role in formal education. Typically, the acquisition of literacy (expressed through written means) is considered to be one of the most important tasks of the school, not only as a vehicle of learning, but as a means of achieving other goals as well. Students through their school life are assessed on their writing ability, both at school level and also in national standardised examinations. Various assessment systems are used depending on the writing task and the type of examinations.

*LITERATURE REVIEW*

Educational systems offer instruction in several types of writing tasks. Students were taught different kinds of writing in order to help them become competent and flexible writers. That was why the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) decided to sample student writing across tasks to cover the domain well. According to Takala (1988:12), getting several writing samples from each student was considered necessary in order to be able to study the structure of writing ability. She also said that writing was one of the most visible products of education, and incorrect usage and spelling had been taken to be signs of a personal scholastic failure, and an alleged widespread deterioration of writing ability an indication of inadequacies in whole school system.

Heck and Crislip (2001) stated that besides the proposed equity advantage of writing performance task over multiple-choice tests in measuring student learning across groups of students, the writing performance task was also reviewed as having greater utility for monitoring school progress because of their proposed closer correspondence to the curriculum that was actually taught. They both believed that performance assessments rely on samples of students' work or judgments on their performance in completing a task that were used to evaluate their thinking skills and thus confirmed that over the past few years, the use of performance-based assessments in large-scale testing had dramatically increased as an alternative to the multiple-choice format for assessing student learning and monitoring school progress.

Apart from that written language had always played a dominant role in formal education (Takala, 1988:4). Typically, the acquisition of literacy was considered to be one of the most important tasks of the school, not only as a vehicle of learning, but as a means of achieving other goals as well (Takala, 1988:25). In an earlier study, Harpin (1976:22) stated that writing was crucial in language learning because one could read without needing to write, but writing, in any real sense, was impossible without the ability to read what had been written. He believed that writing skills could lead to the mastery of other skills in language learning by stating that "the practice of writing extends the mastery of speech" (Harpin, 1976:53). To show that writing was an important skill in language learning, he quoted Lev Vygotsky from the latter's book "Thought and Language" where Vygotsky wrote that "written speech was a separate linguistic function, differing from oral speech in both structure and mode of functioning. Its minimal development requires a high level of abstraction" (Harpin, 1976:52).

The term assessment refers to the general process of monitoring or keeping track of the learners' progress. It is the more inclusive term, the broader concept, and it is part of the whole educational process of teaching and learning (Hedge, 2000:376). There are two types of assessment that schools should have in their educational curriculum: summative assessment and formative assessment. Summative assessment is used at the end of the month, or the term, or the semester, or the year to measure what has been achieved both by the groups and the individuals. Formative assessment is used to check on the students' progress, to see how far they have mastered what they should have learned, and then use this information to modify their future teaching plans. Formative assessment can also be used as the basis for feedback to the students (Hughes, 2003:5).

This paper is interested in the formative assessment that forms part of ESL teaching and learning in ESL classrooms. The purpose is pedagogically motivated. Classroom teachers make use of the information gained from the formative assessment about learners' progress as a basis for further classroom work (Hedge, 2000:376). The backwash effect of assessment can

also be checked. Hughes (2003:53-54) has given eight suggestions for teachers to achieve beneficial backwash. Among these eight suggestions is that teachers should use direct testing that implies the testing of performance skills using authentic texts and tasks. The three types of direct writing chosen in this paper are able to test students' performance skills. Weigle (2002:40) strongly believed that writing tests should be a subset in testing language performance as she felt that a person's language ability cannot be observed directly but we can make use of his or her responses to the test items as data to make inferences about the ability that underlies the test performance. These inferences can be used as data to make a variety of decisions at individual, classroom, and programme level.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An ESL teacher (named as Teacher C in this research), who had five years of experience in teaching English, was observed three times, while teaching a class of Form Four ESL students in a sub-urban secondary school in the state of Pahang, Malaysia. She taught her students to write guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing. Then she was required to assess or correct the students' written work using the primary trait scoring method. The students' written work after being assessed by the teacher were analysed as document analysis in this research. The teacher was also observed for three times in three separate lessons to investigate how she gave feedback on her students' performance in guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing after assessing their written work. Naturalistic observations were involved, whereby normal classroom behaviour occurred. A discussion was held with the ESL teacher before she was observed. She was informed about what was expected from her during the observations. During the observation stage the activities happening in the classroom and the impressions and reflections about the observations were recorded for data analysis.

#### Research Questions

1. How did the ESL teacher make use of the primary trait scoring method to assess her students' guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing?
2. What kind of feedback did the ESL teacher give to her students after assessing their written work with the primary trait scoring method?

#### Instrumentation

Three primary trait scoring methods were devised for the assessment of guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing (see Table 1, 2 and 3).

**Table 1: Primary Trait Scoring Method to Assess Guided Writing**  
(Rating for a clear process of cooking *nasi lemak*)

Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
25 – 30	20 – 24	10 – 19	5 – 9	0 – 4
The process is very clearly stated. The instructions are easy to follow. The information given is clearly stated. The sequence connectors are correctly used.	The process is fairly clearly stated. The instructions are quite easy to follow. The information given is fairly clearly stated. The sequence connectors are adequately used.	The process is not so clear but there is some evidence of the process being stated. Most of the information is stated but the sequence connectors are not clearly used.	The process is not clear and the information given is not properly organized that it hampers meaning.	The process is not at all. There is a sign of confusion about the process.

**Table 2: Primary Trait Scoring Method to Assess Summary Writing**  
(Rating for summary of ideas about how dyslexic pupils are handicapped and the solutions to the problems)

Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
25 – 30	20 – 24	10 – 19	5 – 9	0 – 4
The main ideas about how dyslexic pupils are handicapped, and the solutions to the problems are clearly stated with the use of own words.	The main ideas about how dyslexic pupils are handicapped, and the solutions to the problems are clearly stated with some use of own words but with very little lifting.	The main ideas about how dyslexic pupils are handicapped, and the solutions to the problems are fairly clearly stated with some lifting.	The main ideas about how dyslexic pupils are handicapped, and the solutions to the problems are not so clearly stated. A lot of lifting.	The main ideas about how dyslexic pupils are handicapped, and the solutions to the problems are not clear, or total lifting or writing does not make sense at all.

**Table 3: Primary Trait Scoring Method to Assess Continuous Writing**  
(Rating for the description only)

Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
30 – 40	20 – 29	10 – 19	5 – 9	0 – 4
Description is very clear and the ideas are accurately linked to the topic.  Readers are able to imagine the object or incident described by the writer very clearly without any difficulty.	Description is fairly clear and the ideas are relatively linked to the topic.  Readers are able to imagine the object or incident described.	Description is unclear but there is some evidence of ideas that linked to the topic.  Readers are able to imagine some of the descriptions.	Description is poor and not accurately linked to the topic.  Readers find it difficult to imagine the object and the incident described.	Description is very poor and ideas are not at all linked to the topic.  Readers cannot at all imagine the object or incident described.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data obtained from this research were the students' written work after being assessed by the ESL teacher, and the classroom observations on the ESL teacher's feedback lessons. These data were analysed descriptively. The analysis of the students' written work focused on how the teachers gave written feedback to their students' written work. As suggested by Best and Kahn (1993:203), three steps were taken to analyse the qualitative data in this research. The three steps were: organising the data, description of the data, and interpretation of the data. The description of the data covered the various pertinent aspects of the observations that included the setting; the individual being observed, the purpose of any activities examined, the viewpoints of participants, and the effects of any activity on the participants. The interpretation of the data obtained from the observations was done by attaching significance to particular results and putting patterns into an analytic framework (Patton, 1990:375 as quoted by Best and Kahn, 1993:204).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An important reason for classroom assessments is to provide feedback and incentive to students. "The purpose of giving feedback to students is to alter and improve students' learning while instruction is taking place. In order to provide such feedback, teachers must constantly assess student learning and behaviour", said Airasian (2001:6). Considering the importance of giving oral and written feedback to students, this research included classroom observations, whereby Teacher C was observed while giving feedback after assessing her students' guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing. Prior to the classroom observations the written feedback given by the teacher to the students' written work were analysed.

## The Students' Written Work

It was found that Teacher C wrote comments in her students' exercise books after assessing them. Then she returned the exercise books during the feedback lessons and asked her students to read the written comments. She gave some explanation about the comments during the feedback lessons. Hedge (2000:385) studied two examples of written feedback given by two teachers. The first example provided limited information that distinguished the scores between a pass and a fail. The second example provided a detailed description of the students' overall performance in writing, which not only included the scores that distinguished between a pass and a fail, it also had comments about the overall performance. Hedge found the second example to be the kind of written feedback that was useful to students. "The teacher's written comments not only indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the student's writing but they may also assist students in monitoring their own progress and identifying specific language areas to develop further", said Hedge (2000:385) about the second example of written feedback.

Teacher C admitted that she was confused because she had never used the primary trait scoring method before. She felt that it was an incomplete marking since she had to leave out other language aspects and just focussed on one aspect only. Even though Teacher C was confused when she used the primary trait scoring method the written comments that she gave were very constructive. She focussed on the description aspect of writing. For example in one of her students' essays she wrote:

*Your description about the person you adore so much is very convincing. But you did not organise your ideas well. Your writing can be considered as an excellent piece if you had organised it well. However you can improve. Learn how to plan your work before you start writing.*

Despite the opinion she gave about the scoring method Teacher C was able to make use of the primary trait scoring method to assess her students' work and give constructive written comments that enabled her students to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

## The Classroom Observations

Teacher C who assessed guided writing using the primary trait scoring method in her first observed feedback lesson (see Table 4), found that her students could not write good informal letters. She also found that her students were weak in sequence connectors. She showed to her students an informal letter that she herself had written and taught her students to write another informal letter during the feedback lessons. She gave a more detailed guideline for her students to write the informal letters, and asked them to insert the sequence connectors. This kind of corrective feedback is known as the recast, whereby the teacher reformulates all or part of the students' ill-formed written product without the error. Satoko Yamamoto (2003:3) conducted a research on the role of corrective feedback in communicative language classrooms. In the literature review Satoko Yamamoto quoted Lyster and Ranta (1997) as saying that the recast never led to student-generated repair but the learner merely repeated what the teacher had said. However the recast given by Teacher C in her feedback lesson in this research had generated repair among her students. This is because after Teacher C reproduced a corrected version of informal letter on the blackboard, she had asked her students to write another informal letter. The students did this task as a group-work. Then they presented to the class.

Teacher C had given more than two types of corrective feedback in her second feedback lesson (see Table 5). First she pasted two samples of summary writing: the first one was the original summary writing that was written by one of her students, and the second one was the corrected version of that summary writing. She highlighted the errors in the first summary writing and pointed out the corrected version in the second summary writing. This is the recast type of corrective feedback. The second type of corrective feedback was when she returned her students' summary writings. She asked her students to come to the front and write down the errors that she had highlighted in their writings. Then she gave the corrected versions. This is known as the elicitation and meta-linguistic feedback. In this kind of feedback the teacher provided the correct form explicitly by indicating that what the student had written was incorrect. Then the teacher gave the grammatical meta-language that referred to the nature of the error (Satoko Yamamoto, 2003:3).

Teacher C gave three types of corrective feedback in her second feedback lesson: recast, elicitation and meta-linguistic feedback (see Table 5). First, she gave the recast feedback when she pasted two samples of summary writing: the first one was the original summary writing that was written by one of her students, and the second one was the corrected version of that summary writing. She highlighted the errors in the first summary writing and pointed out the corrected version in the second summary writing. The elicitation and meta-linguistic feedbacks were given when she returned her students' summary writings. She asked her students to go to the blackboard and write down the errors that she had highlighted in their writings. Then she gave the corrected versions. In the elicitation and meta-linguistic feedback, the teacher provided the correct form explicitly by indicating that what the student had written was incorrect. Then the teacher gave the grammatical meta-language that referred to the nature of the error (Satoko Yamamoto, 2003:3).

In her third feedback lesson (see Table 6), Teacher C gave the meta-linguistic and the recast type of corrective feedback. She highlighted her students' errors in writing and explained the symbols she had used to highlight the errors. She provided the meta-language that referred to the correct versions of the errors. Towards the end of her lesson, she picked some sentences written by her students that involved subject-verb agreement. She wrote down the corrected versions of these sentences. Teacher C explained to her students that she used the primary trait scoring method to assess their continuous writing. A few good students who were not satisfied with their marks asked her why she did not use the scoring method for the SPM Examination that was normally used by the English teachers in the schools. Teacher C, who was earlier briefed on the classroom assessment, explained that she used the primary trait scoring method to help her students improve in writing the content of continuous writing. She also explained that being good in grammar alone could not help them to score in continuous writing if the content was not focused on the topic given. The students' attitude in this feedback lesson indicated that they were exam-oriented. It was difficult for the ESL teachers to divert their students' attention from the standardised examinations. However, Teacher C made an effort to do so. It is hoped that more ESL teachers are willing to help their students to realise the importance of having specific scoring methods for classroom assessments.

## **CONCLUSION**

It was likely that the ability to give effective feedback may be due to training. Teacher C who was given the specific scoring method gave feedback very much based on the system used in the method. Thus, the ability to give meaningful feedback could be guided by descriptors in

the scoring systems. More important was the training that teachers can undergo to enable them to be more sensitive to writing and thus, be able to write pertinent remarks as feedback. Training in giving meaningful feedback was often neglected. It should be focused on in teacher training.

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**APPENDICES**

**Table 4**  
**Teacher C's Feedback Lesson**  
**(Assessing Guided Writing using the Primary Trait Scoring Method)**

Time	Observation Details	Observer's Remark
1.25 p.m.	Teacher C started her lesson by distributing envelopes to her students. She told them that the envelopes contained surprises for them. She asked them to open the envelopes and asked them "What did you get for your directed writing?" A few students announced the scores they got for their directed writing exercises.	The teacher was able to capture the students' attention with this interesting set induction.
1.30 p.m.	She pasted the primary trait scoring method on the board and explained to the students how she assessed their writing by using that scoring method.	
1.35 p.m.	She told them to use the sequence connectors correctly and gave some examples of sentences with correct use of sequence connectors. She pasted a manila card on board. On the manila card was written some sentences with correct use of sequence connectors. She explained to her students how to write the process of making <i>nasi lemak</i> by using the sequence connectors.	After assessment the teacher found that her students were not good yet with using sequence connectors and writing informal letters.
1.40 p.m.	She pasted another manila card on which was written an informal letter. She explained to her students how to write the salutation, content and closure of the letter.	The teacher focused on this because she found that the students did not write the correct format of an informal letter.
1.43 p.m.	She asked her students to get into three groups. The first group was told to write an informal letter; the second group was told to write a process of making <i>nasi lemak</i> ; and the third group was told to write the process of making anchovies gravy.	Different groups of students were engaged in different types of exercises.
2.00 p.m.	She asked representatives of the three groups to present their work in front of the class. She asked her students to get back to their original seats and to take out their exercise books. She asked them to write an informal letter to a friend by referring to the points given by the three groups during the presentation.	The students learn from the presentation presented by three different groups.
2.05 pm	End of lesson	

**Table 5**  
**Teacher C's Feedback Lesson**  
**(Assessing Summary Writing using the Primary Trait Scoring Method)**

Time	Observation Details	Observer's Remark
12.25 pm	Teacher C started her lesson by asking her students to stand up and do some light body exercises to prevent her students from getting sleepy.	
12.30 pm	She asked her students to sit down and pay attention to her. She pasted two manila cards on the blackboard. On one card is written a summary written by one of her students (she did not mention the name of the student). The errors in that summary were highlighted. On the other card was written a corrected version of the summary. She explained the errors made in the summary and then showed the corrected version.	Teacher C reproduced the student's summary writing into its correct version. This type of corrective feedback is known as recast.
12.50 pm	She returned her students' summary writing. She asked them to pay attention to the errors that she highlighted in their writing. A few students asked her about the errors highlighted in their writings. She explained to the whole class. She asked her students to come to the front and write down their errors. Then she asked the other students to volunteer to correct the errors.	The students took active part. They were able to learn from their own errors and their friends' errors.
1.05 p.m.	End of lesson	

**Table 6**  
**Teacher C's Feedback Lesson**  
**(Assessing Continuous Writing using the Primary Trait Scoring Method)**

Time	Observation Details	Observer's Remark
12.45 p.m.	The teacher started her lesson by returning the students' essays that she had already assessed using the primary trait scoring method. She asked the students whether they were satisfied with the marks that they got. Many students admitted that they were not satisfied.	The good students seemed to be the ones who were not satisfied.
12.50 p.m.	She explained how she assessed the students' essays. She wrote down on the blackboard the symbols she used to identify the students' grammatical errors. She told the students that they did not get good marks because the content of their writing was not focused on description. She pointed out that a few of the students' writing were good in grammar but the content was not focused on description as required by the scoring rubrics. She explained that she could not give good marks to those writings.	This is an elicitation type of corrective feedback, whereby the teacher provided the correct form explicitly by indicating that what the students wrote was incorrect.
12.54 p.m.	She pasted the primary trait scoring method on the blackboard and explained the rubrics of the scoring method that required the students to focus their writing on a clear description.	A few students asked the reason why the teacher did not use the scoring method for SPM Examination.
12.58 p.m.	She pasted on the blackboard a manila card on which was written symbols that she used to assess her students' essays, for example, "G" for errors in grammar. After explaining the symbols, she opened the class to discussion and asked if the students had anything to ask her. A few students asked about the symbols that they got in their essays. The teacher answered the questions to the whole class. At times she went to the students and answered their questions individually.	A few students copied the symbols into their exercise books. When asked why they copied the symbols, they said that the symbols would guide them to identify their weaknesses.
1.11 p.m.	She told the students that they were very weak with subject-verb agreement in their essays. She pasted on the blackboard a manila card on which was written some sentences with the correct use of subject-verb agreement. She tested her students' understanding by asking them to volunteer to give sentences with correct use of subject-verb agreement.	After assessment the teacher identified the students' weakness in subject-verb agreement and focused her lesson on teaching this aspect so that the students could improve themselves.
1.20 p.m.	She adjourned the class early because there was an announcement for all the students to assemble at the hall.	