Writing as a Dynamic Endeavour

CARLO GRANADOS
Universidad Central and Universidad Javeriana
cgranadosb@ucentral.edu.co

IMELDA ZORRO
Universidad Libre,
Escuela Superior de Administración Pública (ESAP),
and Universidad Javeriana
idazorro@hotmail.com, imeldazorro@yahoo.es

This paper attempts to facilitate assessing undergraduate students' progress and teachers' work in academic writing. A progress chart has been used to provide feedback to the learners and for them to self-evaluate their work. Drafting, revising and editing are conducted for both the teacher and the student to keep track of the learners' difficulties. A portfolio showing on-going feedback as well as treatment, suggestions and tips for improving writing hope to overcome learner's difficulties.

Key words: Writing, Assessment, Drafting, Editing, Progress chart

Este artículo tiene por objeto facilitar la evaluación del progreso de los estudiantes de licenciatura así como la labor del docente en escritura académica. Se desarrolló un cuadro de evaluación del progreso el cual se utilizó para brindar retroalimentación a los discentes con el fin de que ellos autoevaluaran su trabajo. Tanto el estudiante como el docente condujeron el proceso de elaboración de borradores, revisiones y ediciones con el fin de llevar un registro de las dificultades de los aprendices. Se sugieren estrategias que contribuyan a mejorar el desempeño de los discentes como actividades de portafolio y ejercicios prácticos para mejorar la habilidad de escritura.

Palabras claves: Escritura, Evaluación, Borradores, Edición, Cuadro de Progreso

Introduction

This study attempts to show a way to facilitate teachers' work when assessing written compositions as well as to provide a guideline that contributes to giving more thorough feedback to students about the skill of writing. As we know, the process of correcting written compositions is tedious and time consuming; therefore, the need for a tool that makes this process easier is obvious.

Most of the time teachers do not have clear criteria when grading students' compositions. In addition, even if there are criteria, students do not know what they mean. This article presents a model for correcting written samples, which is based on a chart (see Appendix 1). The model presented offers students the opportunity to be aware of their progress as well as the aspects on which assessment and grading are based.

We have used this model with university students and, with the help of a feedback form given to them, we were able to identify its strengths and weaknesses and to reflect on what could be modified so that it became a more useful tool for both students and teachers. The results of this reflection will be explained later.

Writing as a dynamic process

Writing is one of the most complex skills, and sometimes, it is difficult to assess because it is an ability in which all the knowledge a person has about the language has to be shown. This means that as an integrated skill, writing demonstrates understanding of grammar, adequate selection of vocabulary, aspects related to coherence and cohesion, and in addition, the use of an appropriate register.

For Heaton (1991), writing requires not only the mastery of grammatical devices but also of conceptual and judgmental skills. This means that a good writer should not only manage the language in terms of grammar and vocabulary but also she or he should be able to determine the appropriate register for a given audience and to link her/his ideas in a coherent and cohesive way within a written text.

White & Arndt (1991) stated that writing is a thinking process in its own right. It demands conscious intellectual effort, which usually has to be sustained over a considerable period of time. These authors argue that writing is a form of problem solving which involves diverse processes. For instance, generating ideas, discovering a 'voice' with which to write, planning, goal setting, monitoring and evaluating what is going to be written as well as what has been written and searching for language with which to express exact meanings.

In general teachers are more interested in the product of writing rather than in the process, which is usually neglected because it is time consuming and also because

teachers do not involve students in the process of writing. It is also necessary to recognise that, historically, the assessment of writing has placed emphasis on the product rather than on the process.

It is recognised that initially the product approach was most used when working with writing. First, based on the audio-lingual and behaviourist theories, the controlled composition techniques considered writing only to reinforce oral habits. Then, with the current-traditional rhetoric approach, based on Kaplan's theory of contrastive rhetoric, writing was used as an imitation of patterns where the students fill in a pre-existing form with provided or self-created content (Gap fill).

But, nowadays writing has been given importance as an independent skill where the process is of the centre. Activities such as drafting, revising, and editing, among others are now required for good training in the ability of writing. As White and Arndt (1991) stated, "Writing is an activity that requires time and revision as well as a purpose and an audience to make the activity real-life like. But apart from this, writing is a skill that demands a constant feedback that permits students to learn from their errors so that they can improve their writing style."

In written communication, unlike in speech, there is no additional help in transmitting the writers' message by the means normally used in conversation (gesture, facial expressions, stress, intonation and occasional repetition) that give feedback to the writers about what they are saying. In writing, information has to be transmitted without any aid from sources other than the language itself. Hence, feedback should be provided constantly in order to systematically train students in this skill and to improve their writing by intensive practice of drafting, revising, and editing.

As Norrish (1983) suggested: it is probably more true with writing even than with speech that, if a student makes a large number of errors, he has not been adequately taught to do what he is attempting. One way to reduce the number of errors students commit and to make them more responsible for this process is by carrying out more activities that oblige them to take charge of their process. We all know how tiresome and stressing is trying to give feedback to students; however, there are some key things you may do for quickening this process:

• To encourage group and pair work helps avoiding the waste of time because students can identify mistakes in their own texts as well as in the others'; then, the teacher's work will reduce a little.

• Some of the students get discouraged when writing because, instead of receiving extensive feedback of their performance, they receive their works covered in red ink and with no explanation of their mistakes. This fact emphasises the need for a

systematic way of giving feedback in which students see their mistakes and get a general picture of their progress.

Therefore, we need a tool that contributes to the interaction between teacher and student while working on the process of writing. It needs to help both the teacher and the student to see the student's progress and also to reduce the teacher's correction time. A suitable technique can be the one presented by Hagen & Peterson in their book 'Better Writing through Editing' (1999). This model consists of a progress chart. However, this chart only addresses the format aspect of the texts but it does not take into account the content. We adapted this chart by including criteria on aspects of cohesion and coherence when editing with respect to **content**.

Progress chart: an interactive tool

This chart will help the students see their progress because it records the total mistakes in each written assignment. Additionally, they will see which areas are improving and which areas need study. It is also useful for the teacher when grading tasks because, based on the record of mistakes shown in the chart, she or he can give a fairer mark.

The **communicative event** grid records if the student has understood the activity the teacher has assigned in the writing sample or not. For example, if they are writing a letter, this can be considered as the communicative event or if they are writing a story, that story is the event. It means the **operation** or the task the student has to carry out when doing the activity.

The aspect of **relevance** does focus on the entire text but on specific paragraphs which are not related to the topic because all we teachers know that sometimes learners write paragraphs which are not connected to the main points of the discourse.

Register refers to the relation between the initiators and receptors of the communication i.e., formality vs. informality. The register is determined by the context the teacher provides for the task. For instance, writing an article for a newspaper talking about the economic situation in Colombia demands a formal style; therefore, learners should know they cannot use contracted forms, that formal connectors have to be used and the word choice should be appropriate (avoiding idioms and colloquisms).

Comments in the section of **context editing** will clarify students' doubts about more global aspects related to their writings. Students will be able by identify shortcomings within the text macrostructure through analysis of the mistakes recorded in these grids.

Pedagogical implications

After using the chart with our different groups of students and by asking them about the method of giving feedback, we feel certain that this method is very complete. Apart from giving the students a clear understanding of the mistakes they are committing, it also fosters their autonomy and makes them more independent in their process of learning language. Moreover, as it highlights the areas in which the students are failing, it serves as a diagnostic tool that, in the future, will be useful for both teachers and students, to devise solutions to these failures.

After the use of this chart, students consider that it is a very complete tool which was useful to help them recognise their problems when writing and to work on their improvement. However, they suggested including some types of mistakes that were not specified, such as missing word and superfluous word, which were included in numbers 18 and 19 of the chart.

Another aspect is the reduction of correction time. As we said before, there comes a time when you are so experienced that you can do your job mechanically and much faster. That reduces the hours spent reading students' compositions. This means that now you do not need to waste a lot of time checking using the form, which gives you the chance of using that time to analyse the content more deeply. Cooperative work shared by students and teachers is an enriching activity that can be encouraged in the process of editing and revising written texts. Students can correct each other and complete the chart for their or their peers' papers. This would also decrease the amount of time you devote to checking written samples.

Nevertheless, there are also some shortcomings to this approach. One of these refers to individual differences. If a student is responsible, autonomous and mature enough as to lead his/her own learning process, the approach could have excellent results but if the student has not developed his/her autonomy, you will need to exert pressure so that s/he takes charge of his/her learning. This would mean that you have to train your students to be independent from the outset of working with them. This not only applies to the writing component of the course, but also in the other aspects such as, looking for opportunities to speak English and studying by themselves. In summary, to teach them become responsible for their own learning.

The second disadvantage we have found is that if you are not completely trained in the use of the chart, it will be time consuming to correct students samples. Therefore, there is a need for you as a teacher as well as for your students to start working with the chart during classes. A result of this will be that when the time to use it frequently arrives, you will be able to correct quickly because you will have already assigned a number to a specific mistake.

A disadvantage that students mentioned is that not enough space is given for evaluator comments when carrying out peer correction. There is insufficient space for to provide a conclusion about the performance and advice on techniques and strategies for improvement. Moreover, the grid of **comment** seemed insufficient to both students and teachers to offer any specific explanation about the kinds of mistakes they were committing. This shortcoming could be avoided by holding tutorials in which the teacher provides oral feedback that permits the clarification of misunderstanding of intended meanings and explanation of the teacher's written feedback that students might not understand on their own, as proposed by Kroll (2001).

Suggestions for the teachers

• The progress chart should be used as a process rather than as a product tool, in such a way, grading is something you might not have to worry about.

• You will find that when checking the students' mistakes using the **progress chart** with a number will facilitate your job, since you can do it systematically. Students can use this chart as a basis to study more their weaknesses and get better on next assignments.

• Along the semester and after recording at least five assignments, you will find out that you have acquired enough experience, plus students working in pairs and in groups will help you save time. These writing activities can be done every two weeks.

• Writings used in mid-term exams with the specific purpose of being graded could be revised against both charts so that students could see their improvement there, too.

• For the learners, using these charts with a different purpose than to obtain a grade would make them more conscious on their works; plagiarism could also be avoided.

• Grading could be considered according to the teachers' criteria. Let us say you can do that after enough practice has been done. Remember that these charts work on a process approach basis. What we are doing is assessment not testing. Thus, we will support the point made by Norrish (1983): "Ideally language learners should be assessed not only according to what they have not learnt but also by giving them the opportunity to show what they can do with the language they are learning."

Hagen & Peterson (1999) state "It is important that each time students do a writing piece, they chart their errors. Both the teacher and the student can see the areas where the student needs to focus his/her efforts. Students should do beginning, mid-term, and final assessments. As the term progresses and students complete more writing assignments, they should see the number

of errors decrease. In many cases, a certain type of error will actually disappear as students master that area."

It is equally important that students rewrite each assignment. We have found that if students fail to do this, they simply repeat the same errors over and over and see little or no improvement. In our class students are not allowed to turn in a new assignment until the previous assignment has been "charted" and rewritten. This ensures that rewritings are done.

It is advisable to do this writing most of the time in class to avoid someone else doing the students' writings for them. We, as teachers, should offer our learners key tips to make them skilful, especially in editing.

• Provide students with topics. Let them also give you opinions about them. Let the topics tend to be personal in nature, relating to the student's own experience or ideas. Hagen & Peterson (1999) state: "At the intermediate level, students first need to master writing about their own experiences and ideas before attempting to the use of the vocabulary of less familiar topics".

• They also advise that the writing topics lend students to various rhetorical modes (narration, description, reasons, comparison/contrast, and advantages / disadvantages). Instruct your students to do so. These topics can be developed as a single paragraph or as an essay. Encourage your learners to edit their writing carefully for sentence structure, word choice, grammar, spelling and punctuation.

• Consider your students taking the following steps in the process of writing:

1. Choose a topic
2. Brainstorm (gather ideas)
3. Plan (work on topic or thesis sentences, outlines, or lists).
4. Write a first draft.
5. Get feedback (from a peer or the teacher), make any additions, or deletions to help organisation, clarity, and support. (Students often need to add more examples and explanations to clarify ideas.)
6. Write a second draft. Edit carefully.
7. Turn in the writing assignment. (Teacher will add numbers or symbols for editing errors.)
8. Fill in the writing of errors on the Progress Chart and do a final rewrite.
9. Review the teacher's comments and save the writing for future reference.
10. If teachers choose to, they can give a grade for the editing process. Hagen & Peterson have found it is best to assign an editing grade based on the first draft that the

student has edited, not on the second draft that was done after you have corrected it once. The assessment can be tailored to fit your students' needs. For example, at the beginning, you may want to experiment with students editing their papers in pairs or groups until they become more comfortable with this process. The following chart with a 100-120-word paragraph suggests two scales.

An easier scale	A more difficult scale
0 -10 points = very good	0 -7 points =very good
11-15 points = good	8 –12 points = good
16-20 points = OK (minimum accepted)	13-15 points = OK (minimum accepted)
21+ points = not acceptable	16+ = not acceptable

Chart 1. *Scales suggested by Hagen & Peterson (1999).*

Hagen & Peterson suggest that these scales can be used depending on the kind of assessment a program requires, you may want to assign percentages, letter grades, or decimal points. Assigning points to the first draft the student turns in has been an effective process since learners pay little attention to grammar.

However, when they understand that their errors accumulate points, and these points affect their grade, a reduction in the number of errors appeared. When an error is made twice, a parenthesis is used around the number or symbol, but does not count in the total. Teachers should feel free to adapt this system according to the student's needs.

Activities for treatment

• When learners present weaknesses on grammar which are common to the whole class, use a transparency and show the errors, correct them with the class (keep anonymous). As a game activity, make groups distribute sentences with errors. Those students who correct the sentences get points. If you would like to include a competitive element, you can give points just to the first student who hands in the corrected sentence.

• **Tic-tac-toe, version 1.** Make several tic-tac-toe grids on a piece of paper. In each square, write a short sentence with either an error or a fill-in-the- blank. Photocopy the grids for the class. Students play in pairs. With one player being player X; the other, player O. Player X chooses a square. If s/he can correct or complete the sentence,

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s/he writes X on the square and then it is player O's turn to choose a square. If player X does not correct or complete the sentence, player O tries that same sentence, and puts an O in that square if correct. The first player with all of the squares in a row (up down, across or diagonally) wins. You can confirm correct or incorrect answers, or the correct answers can be written on the back of the page.

- **Tic-tac-toe, version 2.** Select 30 sentences from students' papers that need correction and put them on a handout. Draw an empty tic-tac-toe grid on the board. Students work in groups of three or four, and each group is assigned a letter: A, B, C, D, etc. Call out a sentence number, randomly. The first group to correct the sentence puts their letter (A, for example) in the grid. When all sentences are corrected, the team with the most squares wins. For large classes, use two or three grids at the same time.

- In the initial stages, another useful activity is to use scrambled sentences. Students are divided in groups and they are given pieces of cardboard, contained in an envelope, in which the parts of the sentences are written so that they organize them correctly. The group who finishes first gets a point.

- Another useful activity for initial stages is the following: The teacher distributes a piece of paper on which the first student will write a complete sentence. Then, she or he passes the paper to the second student who will write another complete sentence continuing the text based on what the first student wrote. Then, she or he folds the paper so that the following student can only see the sentence s/he has just written. This is repeated until all the students have written a sentence. Afterwards, the teacher reads the story and all of them try to correct the inevitable mistakes.

- Another activity you can do is to create picture stories. Ask students to work in pairs, give each pair a comic strip with the speech bubbles blanked out. The pair who receives the comic strip completes the first bubble and then passes it to another pair who should complete the second bubble and so on until they complete the whole strip. After that, together as a class you correct the mistakes. (Taken from Klippel, 1983)

Conclusions

One of the skills that causes the most problems to students is writing. They are asked to write extended texts but when they have carried out the activity, they are not provided with in depth feedback but with a written sample in which the words are circled and everything is covered in red ink, consequently, students get frustrated when working on their written papers.

Moreover, a great number of teachers prefer not to ask for written samples from their students because of the time it takes to correct and mark compositions.

Here, they are presented with a tool, a chart, that will help them reduce that time and at the same time, it will help them uncover problematic areas in language that can later be worked on. In addition, the teaching and learning process can become more personalised since the teacher is able to see the progress each student is making and the areas in which s/he needs more work.

Another concern of language teachers is the one of making students more autonomous when learning a language. This is one way to address this as students are only informed of the kind of mistake that they are committing; this pressures them to consult books, or other sources to correct their errors. Moreover, the process of checking by themselves makes them more aware of the way they have to write and also of the importance of drafting when carrying out writing tasks.

As a conclusion, there are more advantages than disadvantages to this approach. As this is not a fixed procedure, the teacher can adapt the approach according to the needs of his/her students. They will get satisfaction from when knowing what the mistakes were and what they have to do through in depth feedback and the progress they are making can be more easily assessed. After following up the different samples you should notice that students' writing improves and some mistakes in specific areas disappear.

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The authors

Carlo Granados M.A. from Universidad Distrital is currently a full-time English teacher at the Languages Department at Universidad Central and also works in the Language Department in the Service Courses at Universidad Javeriana.

Imelda Zorro M.A. from Universidad Distrital is currently a part-time English teacher at Universidad Libre and also works in the ESP courses at Escuela Superior de Administración Pública (ESAP) and in the Language Department in the Service Courses at Universidad Javeriana.

Appendix 1: Progress chart

Name: …………………………… Assignment Title…………………………

Form editing	Abbr.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Unclear meaning/translation	(Uncl)										
2 Fragment	(Frag)										
3 Run-on sentence	(Run-on)										
4 Comma splice	(Cs)										
5 Verb tense/Verb Form	(V)										
6 Singular/Plural	(S/Pl)										
7 Subject-Verb Agreement	(SV)										
8 Noun-Pronoun Agreement	(N-Pn)										
9 Word choice	(WC)										
10 Word form	(WF)										
11 Word order	(WO)										
12 Preposition	(Prep)										
13 Article	(Art)										
14 Punctuation	(Punc)										
15 Capitalization	(Cap)										
16 Spelling	(Sp)										
17 Illegible handwriting	(HW)										
18 Missing word	(?)										
19 Delete word	(Ο)										
Content/Cohesion/Coherence Editing											
18 Connectors	(Conn)										
19 Fluency (No. Of Words)	(NW)										

Total number of errors													
Grade													
Context Editing													
20 Communicative event (Understood/Not understood)													
Comment:													
21 Relevance to the topic (Relevant/Irrelevant)													
Comment:													
22 Register (Relation between speakers/Formality vs. Informality)													
Comment:													