Integrating Assessment for Learning in the ESL/EFL Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Assessment for learning (AfL) is a concept that falls into a new category in ESL/EFL writing. At AfL, learning is an end in itself, and assessment acts as a means to an end. However, the emphasis on the assessment of the AfL concept raises several suggestions, in implementing AfL, teachers are required to be able to integrate teaching, learning and assessment at once rather than just focusing exclusively on how to assess students' writing themselves. This article aims to discuss the key concepts AfL refers to writing and provide easy-to-implement suggestions to assist teachers in ESL/EFL writing and practicing AfL in the classroom.

I. Introduction

English language teaching has experienced a major paradigm shift in assessment and evaluation in the last decade with a greater focus on outcomes-based and standards-referenced assessment (Davison & Cummins, 2006). Such a shift has resulted in an increasing attention to teachers, learners, and the classroom, and in particular the relationship between teaching, learning, and assessment. These interrelationships are embodied in the notion of 'assessment for learning' (AfL), which came into use in the late 1980s and early 1990s, originating from the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) in the UK. AfL emphasizes the important role that assessment plays in strengthening, developing and extending learning.

Taking AfL as its starting point, this article attempts to clarify important issues in AfL by referring to writing in second and foreign language contexts and to provide more practical suggestions to help writing teachers implement AfL in their own classrooms. The key premise is that AfL implementation begins with an awareness of the relationship between teaching and learning and in particular how assessment can be used to provide information about the teaching and learning process.

Starting from this case, the purpose of this paper is about how writing teachers can integrate teaching, learning, and assessment to get optimal benefits for students, not about how teachers should assess writing itself. The examples cited come from the context of secondary schools in Hong Kong where there is an assumption that English is increasingly being considered more of a foreign language than a second language.

II. Review of Literature

The term AfL, which is often used interchangeably with formative assessment, contrasts with learning assessment (AoL), which primarily involves summative assessment. The AfL-AoL distinction, therefore, corresponds to the old division between formative and summative goals of assessment. Summative assessment is conducted for administrative and reporting purposes (Genesee & Upshur, 1996), whereas formative

assessment is useful in learning activities i.e. in student learning 'through providing information about performance' (Yorke, 2003) AfL is increasingly being seen as more needed concept of education than formal testing and in recent years, received growing serious attention in curriculum policy statements in the UK, Australia, and Hong Kong (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2003; Gardner, 2006; Leung, 2004).

In England, where the idea of AfL originated, an influential analysis of the research literature conducted by Black and William (1998) revealed that AfL can generate substantial gains in student learning. The Assessment Reform Group (ARG), closely associated with the AfL initiative, has played a critical role in bringing about positive changes in assessment practice, policy and research in the UK.

Through a collaborative project involving secondary school teachers – the King's-Medway-Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP), funded by the UK (and later USA) Nuffield Foundation – AfL research has begun to have a tremendous direct impact on assessment practice at the classroom level (see Black & William, 2003). In Australia, the AfL is the cornerstone of curriculum reform. The national curriculum framework has put the improvement of learning and teaching as the primary function of assessment. In a recent curriculum renewal document Every Chance to Learn (Australian Capital Territory, 2005), for example, 'assessment for essential learning' is laid down as an important priority in curriculum renewal: 'Assessment is a continuous process of gathering evidence to determine what each student knows, understands, values and can do. It is used at the beginning, during and end of learning sequences to determine where each student is ''at'' initially, their progress, and final judgements about the extent to which they have achieved the Essential Learning Achievements' (p. 29).

In the principles published by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA, 2005), similarly, assessment is considered an integral part of teaching and learning. Recent research applied to AfL in Oueensland schools has shown useful results from AfL practice in Australian secondary education (Sebba, 2006; Sebba & Maxwell, 2005). In Hong Kong, AfL has been identified as one of the most important new paradigms in the English education reform agenda (Curriculum Development Council, 2004, 2007; Curriculum Development Institute, 2004).

New inventions such as oral assessment in school-based assessment in Middle Schools 4 and 5 (Grades 10 and 11) are an innovation in an effort to promote AfL in English (Davison, 2007). In other areas of the English curriculum, a number of breakthroughs have been proposed for the success of AfL, such as portfolios, feedback sheets or checklists, and conferences (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, 2006).

Research on AfL is increasingly being applied to English language teaching in Hong Kong – such as Carless (2002, 2005) on AfL in primary schools and Davison (2004, 2007) on classroom-based assessment in secondary schools. In the United States, underlining the prominence and objectivity of judgment in a culture that takes into account aspects of accountability, the AfL shows a lower profile (Wiliam, 2006).

However, areas of assessment practice usually make a contribution to student learning, such as a broad focus on process writing and realistic genres (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Horowitz, 1986). Not only subjecting students' terminal written products to assessment, the writing process also involves teachers in helping students develop strategies, through some drafting, to improve their final products during writing.

When teachers respond to intermediate drafts, they assess students' writing to promote their learning, which is about AfL in principle. In addition, because peers and learners themselves are involved in assessment (as in peer and self-assessment), the focus on student learning is also in sync with the spirit of AfL (eg, Liu & Hensen, 2002; Stiggins, 2001).

If AfL is so grounded in teaching second and foreign language writing – through the writing process, peer-to-peer feedback, student-teacher conferences, portfolios, and more – why do we need to support AfL in the writing class? There are at least three reasons why AfL should be prioritized, especially when it comes to ESL/EFL writing.

First, the above-mentioned AfL strategies such as peer feedback and conferences are not widely used outside of North American educational contexts where the pedagogical process is pervasive. In Hong Kong, for example, writing is treated primarily as a product of an ethos in which the culture of examination predominates over the culture of learning (Hamp-Lyons, 2006), despite the ideals espoused to advocate for AfL.

Second, written AfL is not just about implementing strategies such as process pedagogy, delivering effective feedback, or irregular or unsystematic conferences in the classroom. On the other hand, AfL in the writing class aims to integrate a whole set of interrelated concepts, including pedagogy, assessment process, student learning, teacher-student interaction, motivation, and so on, which are rarely discussed thoroughly in ESL/EFL writing classes.

A third reason why AfL in writing requires special attention is that writing assessments still have a tendency to draw the attention of teachers and students to its function of summative tests more than its formative potential in improving teaching and learning to write (or other knowledge or skills). This is especially true at the level of activity in schools, where teachers may have little choice but to go with the flow in a culture of standards assessment and accountability (Casanave, 2004).

Thus, assessment is seen primarily as a platform for maintaining foundations, teaching as a coaching process, and learning as a matter of achieving better grades and standards (Huot, 2002). For teachers, assessment often means testing and grading, which are referred to as 'bad things' for teachers to do (Belanof, 1991, p. 61). For students, assessment tends to be equated with getting grades. This orientation can easily lose confidence and reduce enthusiasm for learning or motivation. Moving on from this, there needs to be an emphasis on AfL, to recast the essential essence of assessment and take advantage of its strengths to improve teaching and learning in ESL/EFL writing classrooms.

III. Research Method

AfL develops students' abilities to self-assess so that they can become independent and reflective in learning. It is therefore important to let students engage in assessment that contains different focuses, such as self- or peer evaluation of overall quality of writing, and self- or peer editing. The teacher needs to provide guidance and training and vary the demands of self- and peer assessment according to students' abilities, such as by giving students checklists (see Appendix 1 for an example of a self-evaluation checklist on story writing) that reflect the learning goals established for specific writing tasks. Student assessment should focus on not only weaknesses but also strengths in their writing. Self-evaluation of writing can take different forms, such as self-editing, self-assessment (based on the assessment criteria articu- lated), and self-inquiry where students not only reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in writing, but also formulate their own goals and take initiatives to improve their own writing. Examples of students' self-inquiry are the adoption of error logs that chart the development of written accuracy over time, and keeping of reflective diaries in which students analyze their own writing needs in communication with the teacher.

It is crucial that teachers provide quality feedback so that students learn about their strengths and weaknesses in writing, and more importantly, how to set goals for further development. This is one of the most challenging tasks for teachers, especially because feedback research has cast serious doubt on the effectiveness of teacher feedback (Ferris, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). According to Williams (2005), effective feedback is focused, stimulates thinking, consists of comments only (rather than marks), refers explicitly to success criteria, and provides concrete guidance on how to improve (rather than giving complete solutions). Such advice sheds important light on how prevalent feedback practices – particularly in L2 writing classrooms – can be improved.

For instance, instead of giving vague comments like 'under-developed ideas,' feedback will be more effective if concrete suggestions are made to help students revise their writing – such as, 'Give one or two examples to illustrate why smoking is harmful.' Instead of writing correct answers for students' grammatical errors, feedback may be more effective when students are asked to correct their own errors – if these are errors amenable to self-correction (Ferris, 2003). Since it is important to give students opportunities to act upon teacher feedback, single-draft classrooms where students do not have to respond to feedback are not conducive to learning. Feedback can also be delivered through teacher-student conferences, during which students are helped to think of ways to close the gaps in their writing.
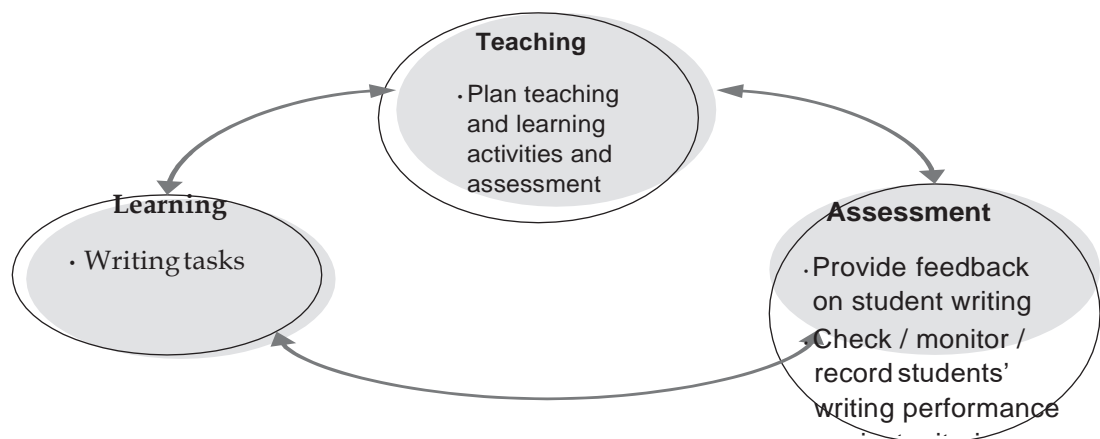
Figure 1. Interrelationships between teaching, learning and assessment

When putting AfL principles into practice, educators should integrate teaching, learning, and assessment in the classroom. As such, the practice of AfL does not begin or end with a focus on assessment. Rather, teachers should start by thinking about planning for the teaching, learning, and assessment of writing (see Figure 1). Assessments are continuous because teachers should continually use information from assessment to fine-tune their teaching, improve learning, and facilitate planning for the next instructional cycle. Thus, through Afl, teaching, learning, and assessment form a symbiotic relationship, with assessment being integral to teaching and learning.

However straightforward this teaching-learning-assessment procedure appears to be, when put into practice, AfL may not be easy. Below I highlight a few issues that are pertinent to the successful implementation of AfL in writing. The teaching-learning-assessment procedure illustrated above may seem a bit daunting if teachers

and learners are to go through the steps for all writing tasks, especially in ESL/EFL contexts dominated by a product-oriented approach to writing. In reality, not all writing tasks need to be formal and assessed. It is important to give students a variety of writing tasks, some of which can consist of single drafts, some informal, and some non-assessed (e.g., journal writing).

AfL has a lot to do with enhancing learners' motivation and developing their autonomy. Students can play an active role in the writing classroom by doing some of the following:

- Using self- and peer evaluation
- Writing journals in pairs or groups
- Compiling their own portfolios
- Keeping error logs
- Writing reflective journals or progress logs on how they can improve their future compositions
- Suggesting areas of error feedback for the teacher
- Participating in the development of feedback forms or checklists

IV. Results and Discussion

Appendix 1: Story writing self-evaluation checklist
Go through the checklist below, putting a tick next to the item you have included in the story.

Beginning
Check to make sure you have included the following background information about the story:
- The time of the story – i.e., when it happened
- The place of the story – i.e., where it happened
- The characters of the story – i.e., who were there
- Other facts important to the story – i.e., what happened to the characters

Story development
Check to make sure you have developed the story by including the following:
- A problem or problems that happened to the main character(s)
- A solution or some solutions to the problem(s)
- Well-sequenced events that describe the problem(s) and the solution(s)

Ending
Check to make sure you have ended the story by including the following:
- An evaluation of the solution(s) – e.g., how the characters responded to the solution(s)

Language
Check to make sure you have used the following correctly:
- Dialogues (e.g., use of contractions)
- Simple past tense
- Spelling
- Punctuation

Appendix 2: Assessment criteria for story genre

	😝😊😝	😊😊	😝
I can give clear information about the setting of the story. I can provide interesting details about the main characters. I can use suitable vocabulary to describe the setting and characters. I can create a problem that arouses interest.			
I can develop ideas in the story. I can describe the events in a logical sequence. I can provide an interesting ending.			
I can write simple dialogues. I can use the simple past tense to narrate past events. I can write in neat paragraphs.			

V. Conclusion

This issue is particularly relevant to language learners. To ensure that assessment truly serves the purpose of enhancing learning rather than simply evaluating writing, teachers have to work out a consistent error feedback policy. This policy should be selective, tie in directly with the content and activities of grammar instruction, encourage self- and peer editing, and use error codes or other forms of commentary consistently and sparingly.

Research has shown that when students get a grade and teachers' comments, they tend to ignore the comments (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In some educational contexts, students' writing may serve primarily summative purposes, so dispensing with scores or grades may not be easy or even feasible. To develop students' confidence and promote their motivation, teachers can consider withholding scores temporarily, for example, by giving them scores or marks only after revisions have been submitted.

AfL cannot be achieved by individual teachers working in isolation. Instead, it is important that teachers work collaboratively to review their writing instruction practices and plan a comprehensive program that takes into account the interrelationships between teaching, learning, and assessment. They can then develop strategies to teach writing and formulate a clear feedback policy in the light of their writing program.

To implement AfL, teachers need to define and communicate goals and expectations clearly to students, provide them with opportunities to engage in learning rather than reduce them to passive testees, and prompt them to take responsibility for learning and to exercise control in the assessment. What's more, teachers need to secure the support of school leaders, inform parents about these matters, and develop a concrete action plan, try it out, monitor it, and evaluate the process of change. AfL should be considered a key professional skill for teachers, who need support through continuing professional development. There are significant implications for teacher education in helping teachers come to grips with AfL in writing.

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