

College Teacher- Raters' Criteria for Assessing Written Tasks and Criteria for Assessment used in Standardized Tests

Dr.R. Kalpana¹

Professor (CAS), Dept. of English, PSG College of Technology, Coimbatore

Dr. MaruthiVadapalli²

Assessment Consultant, UAE

Abstract

This study primarily aims at finding out the criteria used by a group of college teachers to assess their students' writing. It also analyses the similarities and differences between the criteria used by them and the criteria used for assessing candidates writing in standardized tests like TOEFL, IELTS, and PTE. The study adopts data from a questionnaire to arrive at results. The results revealed that the professors' assessment it is not altogether holistic. Most of the criteria used by these professors seem to match with those spelt out in standardized tests. Directions for future research have also been presented.

Keywords

Writing, assessment, coherence, cohesion, grammar, vocabulary

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Introduction

Standardized Language proficiency tests such as TOEFL (Test of English as a foreign language), IELTS (International English Language testing system) and PTE (Pearson Test of English), which are globally accepted in different universities for study and immigration purposes, use a well-researched assessment rubric that underlie the criteria used for assessing candidates' writing abilities. These test takers are basically shaped in universities and colleges, where they are also assessed for their LSRW skills. Candidates who take standardized tests, (where in writing scores contribute to 25% of their overall assessment), sometimes fail to attempt to obtain the desired scores /bands in their first attempts. This occurs despite receiving close to 10 plus years of education in schools and colleges, where they are formally trained in writing skills. These students are assessed through different tests and tasks both as part of summative and formative evaluation. Identifying the criteria used by these teachers, we presume, would help us understand their method of assessment. Further, it would also enable to identify if there are any similarities between these criteria and those used in standardized tests. This study aims to find out the criteria used by a cohort of 48 college teachers to assess students' essays. It further aims to find out the similarities between the criteria used by them and the criteria used in such standardized tests.

Review of Literature

Writing could be a difficult skill to be learnt or taught because it demands the mastery of many sub skills and features of writing such as coherence, cohesion, organization, right choice of vocabulary, control of grammatical structures etc. Swales and Feak list the following as some of the chief features that define academic writing: "organization, style, flow, and presentation are some of the chief factors that define academic writing (2012). Cohesion is defined as 'the internal hanging together of the text' (Taboada, 2004). The job of a paragraph is "to develop one important point in support of the thesis statement and to show how that point furthers the argument of the paper" (Griswold & Wright, 2004). Thesis statement gives "meaning and purpose to the paper" and it is also the "central element that locks the other components of the essay together (Hanna, 2019) The problem of generating ideas about their topics is also a problem to many ESL students (Al Murshidi, 2014). The beginning to judging essays against criteria such as coherence, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary etc. can be traced to the shift from assessment practices moving away from being norm-referenced to becoming criterion-referenced. (Hyland, 2003) categorizes assessment into three main categories: (a) holistic, (b) analytic, and (c) trait-based. While the holistic approach offers a general impression of a piece of writing (Weigle, 2007), the analytic approach is based on separate scales of overall writing features. (Swales & Feak, 2004) (Zaeri, Aghagolzadeh, & Ameri, 2017) The scoring guide and public band descriptors of these language proficiency tests IELTS, TOEFL and PTE point to some of these aspects of paragraph and essay writing. These aspects were considered while designing the questionnaire described in Section 3.1.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What criteria do college teachers apply while they rate written inputs of students?
2. Are there any similarities between the criteria these teacher-raters use and those used in standardized tests?

Research Design

A group of 48 volunteer teachers was chosen from different colleges in Tamilnadu and Telangana.

Though some of these professors worked in both Arts and Engineering colleges, we included only those teachers who teach subjects like English, Communication skills, Communicative English and General English. Some professors in Arts colleges in Tamilnadu and Telangana, India usually teach literature. Heavy literary essays which are replete with different figures of speech and loaded with layers of text and patterns might require a different set of standards when compared to expository essays, narratives, reports and argumentative essays written by students of General English. Therefore, we chose teachers who teach General English for this study. The following Table 1 presents the participant profile.

Table 1:
Participant Profile

Male	13
Female	35
No of teachers who had formal ELT qualifications	3
No of years of experience	7-12
No of teachers with Phd Qualifications	16
No of writing examiners of standardized tests	Nil

Based on criteria spelt out in these 4 standardized tests, we designed a questionnaire and administered it to this cohort of 48 engineering and arts college teachers. These questions were designed based largely on the features listed in assessment criteria, with the following as major guidelines:

- Fulfilment of task requirements/ rejection of topic or partial fulfilment of a topic/Relevance/irrelevance of topic
- Originality of ideas VS memorized responses
- Pervasive and systematic Grammatical Errors
- Aspects of cohesion and coherence (logical organization, use of cohesive devices and organizational features such as paragraphing)
- Impedance of errors in grammar, structure and usage with meanings
- Choice of words and diction

Not all teacher-raters who participated in the study had formal qualifications in ELT. Therefore, sufficient allowance was made in the questionnaire to explain certain technical terms in ELT, where needed (eg Q20). Owing to limitations of Covid lockdown, the questionnaire was sent through google forms to these teacher-raters. Likert scale type of questionnaire was used to capture their responses within a scale of 1-5, starting from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Table 2 presents the questionnaire and the number of responses. The number in each row refers to the number of respondents.

Table 2

		Strongly Disagree 1	Somewhat Disagree 2	Neither agree not disagree (Neutral) 3	Somewhat Agree 4	Strongly agree 5
1	While assessing students' writing , I look for Organizationof ideas in an essay /paragraph	3	0	4	11	30
2	I look for a clear topic sentence in each paragraph	1	0	5	14	28
3	Erratic grammatical structures & disorderly syntax disturb me while grading and I tend to mark them down	2	4	7	21	14
4	I mark my students down if the sentence structures are repetitive	4	6	0	22	16
5	I look for a variety of cohesive devices in my students' paragraphs and essays	2	2	6	27	11
6	Easy, clear paragraphing in essays is important for me	0	3	3	24	18
7	I also look for links between paragraphs in essays* (2 respondents not answered)	2	2	6	20	16
8	Adequate and relevant vocabulary is important for paragraph/essays Punctuation and spellings are aspects of writing I am	2	2	2	19	23
9	concerned about while assessing my students' written word	1	1	4	27	15

10	Topic sentences in a paragraph are important for me and I tend to mark my students high if I spot them clearly	0	2	4	21	21
11	Relevance of points to the topic/key issues in the question is important	1	3	4	9	31
12	I mark them up if I see development of topic with relevant main ideas, sufficient related examples	0	0	2	15	31
13	I tend to overlook punctuation when I assess	7	6	3	10	22
14	I look for a variety of sentence structures in my students writings	2	6	8	17	15
15	Poor spelling is not an issue & I don't penalise my students for it	19	11	6	6	5
16	If all the sentences/examples/supporting ideas are not in alignment with the thesis statement made, I don't give high grades	3	5	3	11	26
17	If the words are not specific to the topic given and are used in a generalized/ambiguous manner, I mark them down	8	9	2	8	21
18	Even if the main idea in a particular paragraph is not clear, I generally ignore it and not penalize my students	12	12	8	10	6

19	In an essay, I expect a good range of sentence structures (1 respondent not answered)	3	2	5	21	16
20	I look for higher level discourse markers like "summing it all up" "considering all the factors discussed above." etc in student's essays and mark them up if I find samples of them (1 respondent not answered)	1	6	7	25	8
21	Most times, I don't even look for all these individual features and give marks based on a general impression I get when/after I read the essays/paragraphs (2 respondents not answered)	23	18	1	2	2
22	If basic words are used repeatedly & in a vague manner, I don't tend to give them very high marks	-	5	8	24	11
23	I don't expect a combination of complex sentence structures and don't penalize them if they are not present	33	12	2	1	-
24	If the ideas are not relevant and appear memorized, I penalize my students	2	6	1	16	23

25	If I find repeated errors in tense and concord and if they change the meaning ,I penalize my students	6	3	1	17	21
26	While rating, looking for specific features is a bit cumbersome, so I rate based on the overall impression I get	22	19	2	3	2

Discussion

Organization

(paragraphing, cohesive devices - variety and appropriacy, discourse markers, use of topic sentences). The relevant questions designed to test organization in Part A are 1,2,5,6,7,10,18&20. 41 respondents (Q1) have expressed that organization is important, with 3 disagreeing and 4, taking a neutral position. Topic sentences (Q2 & Q10), according to 42 respondents are important to rate their students for high marks. 38 respondents felt variety in cohesive devices is a significant element of writing, while a minority of 4 respondents overlooked the need for cohesive devices. 42 respondents felt easy & clear paragraphing to be important

Grammar & Syntax

(Variety in sentence structures, grammatical errors) Questions 3,14,19,23,25 check how the teacher-raters respond to various aspects of grammar. A majority of them have expressed that they mark their candidates higher if they see a good range of sentence structures and strong syntax. These teacher-raters also seem to be particular about the errors in their students' write ups, as understood from their responses to question 25.

Vocabulary

(Relevance, precision, sufficiency) Generating adequate and relevant lexical items is an important aspect of academic writing. Questions 8,17&22 were designed to test the use of appropriate and relevant vocabulary. From the responses, it is clear that the use of basic/imprecise /vague vocabulary does not seem impress them.

Addressing the Requirements of Task

(Expanding the topic, presenting main and supporting ideas, relevance of ideas): Responses to questions 11,12,16,24 indicate that a majority of these teacher-raters consider the expansion of topic with adequate examples to be the key for task accomplishment. These teachers tend to mark their students high if they find samples of these in the written responses. Further, they seem to be confident of spotting memorized responses, as can be seen from their response to Q24.

Punctuation and Spelling

Responses to questions 9,13 and 15 seem to indicate that while a majority of teachers are tolerant of wrong use of punctuation, they consider good spellings to be a desirable feature of writing.

Impressionistic Vs Analytic assessment

Questions 21 and 26 were designed to cross check if the respondents have been marking students based on the initial impressions they get. Their responses to the questions seem to indicate otherwise. Except for 5-7 respondents, a majority of respondents seem to look for specific features in an essay while marking.

Conclusion

Though a majority of teacher-raters were not raters for proficiency tests, their responses seem to indicate that they have a mental rubric to assess the written work of their students. Despite not possessing a formal/advanced ELT qualification, these teacher-raters seem to have a notional awareness of the criteria for evaluating student essays. They also appear apply it while marking written responses. From the responses to the questionnaire, it appears that most of the criteria used in standardized tests are considered by them while marking. This study, however, is not without its set of limitations. The sample size of the study is restricted just to 48 teacher-raters. The convenience sampling used here does not permit us to generalize these findings. Further, questionnaire is the only tool that has been used for data collection in this study. To triangulate data, it is necessary to

capture wider responses using different tools. Future studies can focus on studying if teacher-raters give preference to one set of criteria over the other while rating. The tendency, if any, to overlook/consider some aspects of writing to be more important than the other can also be studied. The weightage given by these teachers to the contraindicative features of standardized could be another area of study.

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