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A Survey on EFL Teachers' Assessment Methods in Entry-Level Writing Courses in Technological Universities in Taiwan

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How writing teachers conduct their assessment is an important but under-researched topic in the field of language assessment. By partly adopting Cheng et al.'s (2004) survey, this mail survey study aims to fill this gap by examining how tertiary-level EFL writing teachers assess their students in basic English writing classes in Taiwan. The results indicate that the most frequently used method was *paragraph writing* (84%), followed by *editing a piece of writing such as a sentence or a paragraph* (64%), *essay writing* (40%), and *peer assessment* (36%). Teachers were also found to use an eclectic mix of methods when assessing their students, and large-scale projects such as student portfolios were used by about a quarter of the participants. The results of this study offer a glimpse into teachers' classroom assessment methods for entry-level EFL writing courses. It is hoped that more research efforts would be carried out to further our understanding of teachers' assessment methods.

Keywords: writing assessment, classroom assessment

1 Introduction

Assessment, defined as "the process of collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting information to aid in educational decision-making" (Airasian, 1994, p. 5), is an integral part of teaching and learning. Until recently, many published studies in the field of language assessment have focused on whether test scores from two major standardized tests, namely TOEFL and IELTS, can help decision makers make accurate judgments on test takers (McNamara, 2005). This emphasis is understandable, as test and admission results often have important implications for the applicants' lives (Hamp-Lyons, 2003). Theoretically speaking, this batch of studies typically draw on concepts and techniques from psychometrics (McNamara, 2005), with strong concern for issues like validity and reliability.

An important but under-researched topic in research on language assessment is classroom assessment (Cheng & Wang, 2007; Cheng, Rogers, & Hu, 2004). Classroom assessment is defined as "the process by which inferences are drawn about the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors possessed by each student in class" (Cheng et al., 2004, p. 361). It typically involves procedures which "mirror the language(s) and content of instructional practices" (TESOL, 1998, p. 7; also see McNamara, 2001). Implied in this statement is what McNamara (2005) calls a "locally focused definition of assessment" (p. 778) which stands in sharp contrast to the long tradition of large-scale institutional language testing. This shift of attention also echoes what McNamara (2005) calls the "social turn in language assessment" (p. 775) which sees knowledge as socially situated and context-embedded.

The central figure in classroom assessment is, of course, the teacher. In her introduction to a special issue of *Language Testing* on teacher assessment, Rea-Dickins (2004) urges the field to view teacher as the "agent in assessment process" (p. 252) who actively engages in daily observations of their students and makes sound pedagogical decisions. In the field of language education, some cross-context studies (Cheng & Wang, 2007; Cheng et al., 2004; Cumming, 2001) have been conducted to understand teachers' assessment practices in English-as-a-second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) classrooms at the tertiary level. The findings from these studies suggest that context plays an important role in guiding teachers' decisions on assessment. With the aim to continue this line of research, the current study narrows its investigation to how tertiary-level EFL writing teachers assess their students in basic English writing classes in Taiwan. In Taiwan, for most students, formal English writing instruction begins only after they enter university (Chen, 2013). Therefore, there is a need to investigate how students are taught and assessed in their first formal English writing courses to better understand whether these courses serve the purpose of preparing students for more advanced writing.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Teachers' assessment practices in classrooms

Investigation of teachers' assessment practices has a long history in the American mainstream classrooms. For example, Cizek, Fitzgerald, and Rachor (1995/1996) surveyed 143 midwestern elementary and secondary school teachers in the United States regarding their assessment practices. They concluded that teachers' assessment practices were highly variable and unpredictable, regardless of factors such as years of experience, gender, and school characteristics. Likewise, McMillan (2001) surveyed a total of 213 American secondary teachers on their classroom assessment and grading

practices. He found that teachers typically used what he called "the hodgepodge" approach in assessing their students.

In the tertiary level, in 2008, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) of the United States issued the White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities to articulate their position on effective writing assessment practices and the appropriate, fair and valid use of writing assessment (NCTE, 2008). In this white paper, it is argued that writing assessment must account for the wide array of contextual and social factors in writing instruction is situated. Moreover, instead of using a "single off-the-shelf or standardized test" to make important decisions about students, writing instructors should adopt multiple measures and perspectives to make these decisions.

In the context of ESL and EFL tertiary-level classrooms, comparative studies have been conducted to better understand university teachers' classroom assessment practices in recent years (Cheng & Wang, 2007; Cheng et al., 2004; Cumming, 2001; see later for more discussion). Extending the research on classroom-based assessment to university context is important, as fair assessment practices can better motivate students (Brookhart & Durkin, 2003). Also, many nations have experienced a recent surge in higher education enrollment in the past two decades. According to Hyland (2009), this "more culturally, socially and linguistically heterogeneous student population means that learners bring different identities, understandings and habits of meaning-making" (p. 4) to their learning contexts. One important consequence of this diverse student population is that teachers face more challenges when instructing and assessing their students. Understanding teachers' current assessment methods, therefore, carries the important value of unveiling what teachers already do to assess their students and what they can possibly do to improve their current practices.

Classroom-based teacher assessment has also gained recognition as an alternative, or at least as a complementary component (Linn, Baker & Dunbar, 1991), to the more conventional forms of standardized language testing (Leung, 2005). Previous research has raised doubts on whether standardized tests provide valid and reliable information about students' ability in a specific domain (García & Pearson, 1994; Gipps, 1994). In an era where school accountability and transparency of standards are emphasized, it is perhaps not surprising that interest in different facets of standardized tests remains strong (e.g., Barkaoui, 2014; Cho, Rijmen, & Novák, 2013). It is also not unexpected that formal and summative measures are still in many teachers' minds when they are asked about their assessment practices and needs (Rea-Dickins, 2004; Wu, 2014). However, Leung (2005) argues for the strength of classroom assessment. For him, the value of this form of assessment "lies in its integration with the normal processes of teaching and learning" (p. 885). The insights gained from the process of conducting

classroom assessment can provide rich feedback to students and teachers alike. Leung (2005) further argues that because these results are normally not used for public comparison and reporting purposes, issues regarding validity and reliability are less relevant. He describes classroom assessment as "*sui generis*" (p. 885) among all the testing and assessment approaches.

2.2 Writing assessment in language classrooms

Writing assessment is chosen as the focus of the current study for various reasons. From the teacher's perspective, writing assessment is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of every writing teacher (Weigle, 2007). Assessing writing and students' progress is demanding partly because writing itself is a complex process. Some teachers may also view writing assessment as villainous (Yancey, 1999) while others fear their lack of understanding of writing theories and statistics do them a disservice when they try to make judgment about students' writing (Hamp-Lyons, 2003; Weigle, 2007). In spite of these insecure feelings from the part of writing teachers, the development of English writing skills has significant implications if students want to further their academic studies and careers (Chen, 2013). Just as teaching and grading writing can be a daunting task for teachers, learning how to write is often a long and frustrating process for students (Paltridge et al., 2009). Therefore, writing is an essential component of a language curriculum that needs to be investigated thoroughly.

In their three-year project, Cheng and her associates (Cheng et al., 2004; Cheng & Wang, 2007) surveyed ESL and EFL writing teachers' classroom assessment methods. Because the second study (Cheng & Wang, 2007) mainly addressed the issue of grading, feedback, and reporting of student achievement, it is less relevant to the current study and will not be discussed here. The first study (Cheng et al., 2004), on the other hand, was a mail survey study which tackled the issue of how ESL/EFL teachers from Canada, Hong Kong, and Beijing assessed their students in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The results can be categorized into instructor-made assessment methods, student-conducted assessment methods, and standardized tests. For writing, it was found that "short essay" was a popular assessment method, as nearly 90% of teachers reported its use in all three settings. On the contrary, "long essay" was used by 53.5% of Hong Kong teachers, 69.5% of Beijing teachers, and 86.5% of Canadian teachers. For the category of student-conducted assessment methods, it was found that Canadian teachers made uses of methods like student journal, peer assessment, portfolio, and self assessment more frequently. In terms of standardized test, it was found that three-fourths of Beijing teachers used it while the numbers were much lower for Canadian (27%) and Hong Kong (14%) teachers.

In contrast to Cheng et al.'s (2004) study which focused on all four language skills, Cumming (2001) narrowed his investigation to ESL/EFL instructors' practices for writing assessment. He found that depending on whether the course had a specific- or general- orientation, the instructors were found to assess students' achievement differently. In specific-purpose writing courses, emphasis was often placed on the form of written texts, with a restricted range of criteria and expectations for student achievements. On the contrary, the instructors from general-purpose courses focused more on the development of individual students, and they were also found to use a wider range of assessment methods to evaluate their students' progress.

One cautionary note on this study is that these distinctions were identified "more or less coincidentally" (Cumming, 2001, p. 223), as Cumming did not set out to investigate the assessment practices used in writing courses with different orientations. Before his interview with each teacher, Cumming (2001) sent out three open-ended questions to the interviewee: (1) How is the curriculum for ESL or EFL writing organized in your institution?; (2) Could you describe a typical syllabus for an ESL or EFL writing course at your institution? Please select one course that you usually teach; and (3) How are students typically assessed in their ESL or EFL writing? (p. 210). Like Cheng et al.'s 2004 study which did not target a certain level of writing course, Cumming's (2001) study also addressed a wide range of writing courses in different teaching contexts. However, comparing the assessment methods of an advanced-level writing course to those of a beginner class tells us little about what goes on in a specific level or type of writing course. Take the short vs. long essay requirement in Cheng et al.'s (2004) study for example (Table 2). It is possible that as students progress to writing courses of higher levels, they will be, quite naturally and logically, required to write longer essays. Although these cross-context and cross-level studies have provided us with an overview of the range of assessment methods in writing courses, the information gained from these studies are often incomparable to those with more specific teaching context and student level.

To better focus on a certain student population and minimize the possible variables, the author decided to focus on the entry-level English writing course which most English majors in Taiwan are required to take. Because these entry-level courses typically provide the first formal training of English writing to EFL university students, their implementation, with assessment methods as one of the core constituents, bears important implications for students' long-term development in learning to become a better English writer. Researching on how writing assessment is conducted in these fundamental courses can also provide information on instructional sequencing and curriculum planning for the entire program (NCTE, 2008). To further triangulate the participants' self reports, curriculum documents (such as syllabus) and teaching materials (such as handouts and teacher-made

tests) related to writing assessment were collected from the participants as well as from related websites such as the school's course registration system or the teacher's personal website (Cheng & Wang, 2007).

The research question explored in this study is: What assessment methods do tertiary-level EFL instructors of entry-level English writing courses report using in four-year English departments in technological universities in Taiwan? The decision to focus on technological universities, rather than the other track of comprehensive universities, is mainly based on the researcher's familiarity with this particular university context.

3 Research Methodology

A survey, named Survey on Entry-level English Writing Teachers' Classroom Assessment Practices (see the Appendix), was developed by the researcher in the summer of 2014. The major part of the survey modified the items from Cheng et al.'s (2004) survey and asked respondents to check the assessment methods they used to assess students in their entry-level EFL writing class. An important modification was made in the process of making the survey: Instead of just putting a check mark beside a method that was used to assess students (Cheng et al., 2004), the respondent was asked to further describe the details of the method that had been checked. This will allow the researcher to know more fully about a specific assessment method and avoid the potential misunderstanding of the pre-determined categories between the researcher and respondent (Braine, 1995; Zhu, 2004). The researcher did not set a limit on the number of assessment methods a respondent could check. The design of the survey also echoes to Ruth and Murphy's (1988) to call to address the need "to identify the existing bits and pieces" of information about writing assessment and "to synthesize this information into a coherent structure" (p. 4).

To find potential respondents, I first updated the list of technological universities which housed four-year English departments in Taiwan from one of my previous studies which focused on the planning of writing curriculum in these schools (Chen, 2013). Then I searched each department's homepage and school's course registration system (if I was granted free access) to look for instructors' names for entry-level English writing courses. The search was limited to the 2013 and 2014 school years. I set this limit mainly because I wanted to know the most current trends of writing assessment methods used by teachers. I was able to find 90 potential respondents from 45 institutions around the country. I made a list of the 90 teachers and assigned each teacher a number. The survey was sent to them via snail mail in September, 2014. The decision not to use electronic survey was based on the fact that the electronic form may often be neglected by people who receive the request for help (Martins, 2010). By late December of 2014, 25 copies were returned (with a return rate of 28%) from 19 schools. Among these 25 teachers, 9

provided samples of their syllabi or test papers (request made in Part 3 of the survey). Because I wrote the corresponding number of each teacher on the returned envelope, I was able to send emails to teachers if I had further questions about their replies. Therefore, the data pool for this study consists of the returned surveys, supplementary materials provided by teachers (including syllabi, handouts, and exam papers), and my email correspondences with some of the teachers.

The responses from the valid returned copies were tallied, and qualitative descriptions provided by the teachers were read carefully and organized into categories. If a written comment appeared to be unclear, the researcher emailed the teacher for further clarification. The findings will be shown in the next section.

4 Findings

Table 1 summarizes the number of times each assessment method was checked by the 25 respondents as well as the percentage in terms of the total respondent population (N=25). It can be seen from the table that the most frequently used method was *paragraph writing* (84%), followed by *editing a piece of writing such as a sentence or a paragraph* (64%) and *essay writing* (40%).

Table 1. Writing Methods Used by EFL Writing Teachers in Entry-Level Courses

Assessment method	Number of times/Percentage
Teacher-made tests containing	
true-false items	5/20%
matching items	5/20%
multiple-choice items	7/28%
editing a piece of writing such as a sentence or a paragraph	16/64%
short-answer questions	7/28%
Paragraph writing	21/84%
Essay writing	10/40%
Term project	6/24%
Student journal	7/28%
Peer assessment	9/36%
Self assessment	5/20%
Student portfolio	6/24%
Standardized writing tests	1/4%
Other methods	3/12%

Some teachers supplied brief descriptions of how they used each method. Table 2 summarizes these descriptions (only those items with descriptions are listed).

Table 2. Descriptions of Assessment Methods Provided by the Participants

Teacher-made tests containing **true-false items:** *grammar, phrases, vocabulary* (Teacher #1) *identifying sentence fragments or types of sentences* (Teacher #30) *textbook content about writing knowledge* (Teacher #63) *students' perceptions on writing (e.g., "Freewriting helps learners practice vocabulary and grammar,"* Teacher #83*)* **matching items:** *grammar and vocabulary* (Teacher #23) *identifying sentence fragments or types of sentences* (Teacher #30) *grammar points* (Teacher #57) *textbook content about writing skills* (Teacher #63) **multiple-choice items:** *rules of writing, grammar, vocabulary* (Teacher #1) *grammar and vocabulary* (Teacher #23) *grammar points* (Teacher #57) *content about writing/grammar* (Teacher #63) *choose the best topic sentence or concluding sentence* (Teacher # 79) *prepositions and phrases* (Teacher #83) **short-answer questions:** *sentence structure and grammar* (Teacher #23) *writing controlling ideas* (Teacher #79) *writing an outline* (Teacher #83) *paragraph organization* (Teacher #84)
Term project: *about Taiwan's culture to describe people, places, events, rituals* (Teacher #27)
Student journal: *topics they choose together in the beginning of semester* (Teacher #55) *students can write whatever they like* (Teacher #57) *students' experience and learning* (Teacher #63) *daily life experience* (Teacher #86)
Student portfolio: *paragraphs written during the semester* (Teacher #23) *reading and reflection, paraphrasing* (Teacher #30) *all the writing students compose during the semester* (Teacher #83) *corrected assignments* (Teacher #84) *diary, exercises, assignment* (Teacher #87)
Standardized writing tests: *BULATS* (Teacher #11)
Other methods: *sentence marking* (Teacher #25) *writing assignments of events shown on YouTube, 600-word tourism and travel articles* (Teacher #27) *sentence writing* (Teacher #51)

5 Discussion

The findings of this study, albeit limited by sample size, provide valuable self-reported data on how tertiary-level EFL writing teachers assess their students in entry-level writing classes in Taiwan. These results can provide ample information for curriculum planning and program design. An important implication is that teachers should make note of what has been covered in these basic-level courses when they design the more-advanced ones by at least reading the syllabi for previous courses or doing a quick student report when they meet students in the first week. A more rigorous approach is for the department to set a list of teaching goals for each level of writing courses for instructors to follow when they design their courses.

As shown in Table 1, the most frequently used method was paragraph writing (84%), followed by editing a piece of writing such as a sentence or a paragraph (64%), essay writing (40%), and peer assessment (36%). Except these top three methods and the last two methods on the list (standardized writing tests and others), all the other methods were used by 20% to 28% of the survey respondents, suggesting that most teachers probably adopted an eclectic mix of methods when assessing their students. While some teachers (N=10) may venture into essay writing, most teachers (84%) emphasized on paragraph writing in entry-level courses. Some teachers (see Table 2) also seemed to set time aside for sentence writing.

A scrutiny of Tables 1 and 2 also reveals that the basic building blocks of writing, including grammar and vocabulary, were often included in teacher-made tests, and they were often tested by common testing techniques including true or false items, matching items, and multiple-choice items (Hughes, 2003). These closed questions were found to be used by two teachers to test writing concepts illustrated in the textbook (e.g., "The final sentence of a paragraph is called the topic sentence," Supplementary material, Teacher#63). Sentence-writing or editing was also included as part of assessment method by quite a few teachers (16 out of 25). This emphasis on the basics is probably necessary, as teachers may feel the need to teach the building blocks of English writing in entry-level writing courses.

The findings also suggest that teachers often used alternative methods (e.g, peer assessment and self assessment) to assess their students. Writing research abounds with discussions on their implementation in writing classrooms (e.g., Azarnoosh, 2013; Carson & Nelson, 1996; Min, 2006). In this study, 36% of teachers reported using peer assessment in their classrooms while 20% reported using self assessment. For future research, it would be intriguing to find out how these teachers implemented peer and/or self assessment (e.g., were students trained to do peer or self assessment and what rubrics were provided for peer or self assessment?) and whether they view their implementation as successful.

Another alternative assessment method, diary writing or student journal, was used by 28% of the teachers, indicating that some teachers were interested in knowing about students' learning experience and in cultivating students' reflective skills. Teacher # 55 (see Table 2) wrote on her survey that she asked students to write "topics they choose together in the beginning of the semester" in their journals. I contacted this teacher (via email) and asked further how these topics were chosen. She explained that because some students were clueless about what to write in their journals, she thought that she could first establish a "topic bank" in the beginning of the semester. Then all the students, chose 5 to 10 topics from the topic bank, and they would write their journals around these topics. The three other teachers who provided further descriptions on their implementation of student journal (Teachers #57, #63, and #86; see Table 2 did not set a limit on the topics as long as these topics were related to students' learning and life in general. To be able to further students' analytical and reflective skills, teachers may consider moving beyond daily issues and personal narratives and focusing students' portfolios on highly-discussed topics such as cyberbullying and taking a gap year.

It was found that large-scale projects, such as term projects and student portfolios, were also assigned by 24% of the teachers to gain a more holistic view of students' learning progress. In terms of what students were asked to do, it seems that most teachers who provided further descriptions (Table 2) simply asked students to collect their writings which were written during the course of the semester. On the other hand, one teacher (Teacher #30) asked students to do extra reading and reflect on these readings. These uses of portfolio as a form of writing assessment appear to fit Weigle's (2002) definition of portfolio as "a collection of written texts written for different purposes over a period of time" (p. 198; also see Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). A scrutiny by future studies to look into teachers and students' perceptions of portfolio assessment would yield more insights into this form of alternative assessment.

In this study, it was found that the percentage of reporting using standardized writing tests as an assessment method was rather low; in fact, only 1 in 25 teachers (4%) reported that he used the writing section of BULATS (Business Language Testing Service) as part of his assessment of students. As revealed by one of the documents from this teacher's department, BULATS and TOEIC, the two major tests of business English, were placed much emphasis by this department; students would even be given monetary rewards if they excelled on these exams. This probably explains, at least partly, why the writing component of BULATS was included in this teacher's assessment scheme. Nonetheless, results of this study reveal that the inclusion of a standardized writing test does not seem to be a mainstream practice in entry-level EFL writing courses in Taiwan. Most teachers would

probably delay such inclusion to more advanced-level writing or exam-preparation courses.

Unfortunately, the results of the current study cannot be compared to the two existing studies (Cheng et al., 2004; Cumming, 2001) on ESL/EFL writing assessment. As mentioned earlier, these two studies were designed as cross-context studies which examined all the different writing courses available in the research contexts. Although they offered a glimpse into what writing teachers generally did to assess their students, they told us little about what really happened in a specific context. This study, although much smaller in scale, provides a more focused and context-sensitive description on the assessment methods used for a specific student population.

6 Conclusion

The current study aims at investigating the range of methods which entry-level EFL writing teachers used to assess their students in technological universities in Taiwan. The results offer a glimpse into teachers' classroom assessment methods for a specific student population. To further this line of research, other research methods, such as focus group interviews (e.g., Lee & Falvey, 2014) and teacher narratives (Barkhuizen, 2014), can be used to look into the reasons behind teachers' assessment decisions. Although gaining access of classrooms has become increasingly difficult, data gained from classroom observation will help to triangulate teachers' sell reports. Comparative studies can also been conducted to compare, for example, how students in other EFL countries are assessed in their basic and other writing courses. These efforts will help depict what it means to be a competent EFL writer as well as how teachers can promote such competence. At a more fundamental level, researchers can also look into the sequencing of the entire four-year writing program at the tertiary-level to see if its design fits with the educational goals set by the department and school. Lee and her associates' (Lee & Coniam, 2013; Lee & Falvey, 2014) call to move away from assessment of learning (AOL) to assessment for learning (AFL) also offers many opportunities for researchers to advance the classroom-based research on writing assessment. Ultimately, it is hoped that this line of research will provide writing teachers with ample knowledge and insights when they need to assess their students.

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Appendix

Survey on entry-level English writing teachers' classroom assessment practices

Part 1: Background (Please circle the item that applies to your situation)

Gender		Male	Female				
1.	Age	≦ 30	31 ~ 35	36 ~ 40	41 ~ 45	46 ~ 50	≧ 51
2.	Education	Bachelor	MA student	Master	PhD student	PhD	
3.	Years of teaching EFL writing in college	≦ 4	5 ~ 8	9 ~ 12	13 ~ 16	17 ~ 20	≧ 21
4.	Position held	Part-time	Full-time				

Part 2: Classroom assessment practices (partly based on Cheng et al., 2004)

Instruction: Please put a check mark (✓) in the space to the *left* for EACH method you use to evaluate your students in your ENTRY-LEVEL ENGLISH WRITING class. If your assessment methods are not included in 1-9, please describe what these other methods are in the space provided at the end of the list.

Methods I use to assess writing in my Entry-level English writing course (✓) (Course title: _____)	Assessment methods
	1. Teacher-made tests containing
	a. true-false items: What are these items about: _____
	b. matching items What are these items about: _____
	c. multiple-choice items What are these items about: _____
	d. editing a piece of writing such as a sentence or a paragraph
	e. short-answer questions What are these questions about: _____
	2. Paragraph writing
	3. Essay writing
	4. Term project (please describe the expected content): _____
	5. Student journal What do students write about: _____
	6. Peer assessment
	7. Self assessment
	8. Student portfolio What should students include in the portfolio: _____
	9. Standardized writing tests Name of the test: _____
	10. Other methods (please specify):

Part 3: If you can, would you please show me a copy of your test, syllabus, and/or handout? Please enclose it in the returned envelope, or tell me where I can find it (e.g., an URL).

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