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A Classroom-Based Assessment of EFL Academic Essay Writing Class: *Who Gets the Benefits?*

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Abstract

Classroom-based assessment (CBA) has been implemented globally at many levels of educational system such as in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, USA, Singapore, as well as in Africa. In Indonesia, CBA might effectively be implemented in all stages of education since this way of assessment offers improvement in the teaching and learning process. This essay explores the design and implementation of CBA, which focuses on academic EFL essay writing for teacher trainees in Indonesia. Based on my reflection on taking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Academic Essay Writing class, I found that applying a classroom-based assessment could give two benefits. The first is for the improvement of the teaching and learning process in order to reach the study objectives. The second is to facilitate the study program for creating qualified and competent English language teachers in the area of producing competent academic essay writings.

Keywords: *Classroom-Based Assessment, EFL, Academic Essay Writing, Teacher Trainees, and Indonesia*

Introduction

One of the important skills, which is essential to be mastered by teacher trainees in English language education programs in Indonesia, is writing. Weigle (2002) claims 'The ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus assuming an increasing role in both second- and foreign-language education'

(p. 1). Thus academic essay writing is also important for the teacher trainees in order to complete their final project to obtain their undergraduate degree. In Indonesian undergraduate programs, the ability to write an academic essay is still considered low priority. There are some factors related to learners' needs and abilities, time, attitudes, resources, facilities, supports and teacher abilities which might be improved in reaching positive outcomes on the development of academic essay writing skills. Therefore, to know about related issues and problems and how to solve them to improve the teacher trainees's academic essay writing, an appropriate evaluation is needed.

One of the best ways to undertake evaluation is, it will be argued, by implementing classroom-based assessment(CBA) which consists of some important aspects of evaluation – ‘purpose of evaluating, collecting information, interpreting information, and decision making’ (Genesee &Upshur, 1996, p. 6). In the CBA, the focus is on learning how to compose an appropriate academic essay aimed at reducing some problems faced by learners in achieving learning objectives of the EFL academic essay writing class.

This article discusses current concepts and research findings related toCBA. It starts with a brief discussion of the nature of CBA. After that, the components included in CBA are described. At the end, a procedure for implementing CBA is offered. This paper is closed by drawing some conclusions.

Discussion

Classroom-Based Assessment

As previously noted, the aspects of classroom-based assessment based on Genesee &Upshur (1996, p. 6) are ‘purpose of evaluating, collecting information, interpreting information and decision making’. These four aspects are essential components for the implementation of Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA); thus, this essay is organised around these key areas. As its name suggests, classroom-based assessment is held in specific classroom, with a specific teacher or lecturer who is teaching a certain subject for a group of learners. In my context, the classroom is EFL academic essay writing class for teacher trainees.

According to Bachman (2004b) ‘assessment is the process of collecting information about something that we are interested in, according to procedures that are systematic and substantively grounded’ (p. 6-7). Bachman and Palmer (2010, pp. 20-21) confirm the outcome of

assessment is such a score or a verbal description. They continue ‘in language assessment, what we are interested in is making an interpretation about some aspect of the test takers’ language ability which has systematicity and substantive grounding’. While ‘evaluation involves making value judgment and decision on the basis of information, and gathering information to inform such decision in the primary purpose of which language assessments are used.’ They also make clear that assessments are usually implemented for evaluation in educational programs to identify ‘students’ areas of strength and weakness to help them make decision to improve or facilitate their learning, to select and place individuals into instructional programs, or to decides which students pass a course’.

Throughout my learning process, I observed that many learners, including myself, found difficulties in writing an academic essay with its formal style, evidence, critical analysis, and final editing or proofreading. These steps are considered important to be mastered by the learners in order to be able to produce competent academic essay writing whether for an undergraduate final thesis, continuing study, writing some essays for journals or conferences, or undertaking some research. Considering these challenges, McGrath (2002) draws attention to material evaluation and design, which are oriented towards practical outcomes as the solution of problems (p. 2).

Therefore, by doing CBA, learners’ achievement in EFL academic essay writing can be measured, effective evaluation can be planned and some appropriate changes for better classes could be acquired. Genesee &Upshur (1996, p. 7) suggest the following as approaches to evaluation: practical, classroom based and teacher driven, helpful in making instructional decisions, adaptable to different instructional styles and objectives, and responsive to the needs of different audiences, to enhance learners’ learning.

Classroom-Based Assessment Components

This essay is elaborated based on the context of classroom-based evaluation by Genesee &Upshur (1996, p. 37), which is described in figure 1. The figure shows there are three components of instruction which are always included in the subject; namely, instructional purposes, plans, and practices. The input factors in my context are the learner needs regarding the ability to produce an EFL academic essay as one subject in their study. The learners’ needs and abilities, time, attitudes, resources, facilities, supports and teacher abilities are very

important to construct instructional purposes, instructional plans and instructional practice to reach certain outcomes.

The comparisons between various components of instruction and the larger instructional context (input, factors, purposes, plans, practices and outcomes) in classroom-based assessment are made. Subsequently, the decisions to reduce mismatches from the components to achieve the desired outcome or match are taken (Genesee & Upshur 1996). If there is no mismatch anymore, then the instruction can be carried out without making any changes. If learners' needs and abilities, time, attitudes, resources, facilities, supports and teacher abilities are proven by CBA to be able to match the instructional purposes to learn academic essay writing, instructional plans on how to learn, and instructional practice on how to produce academic essay writing, then, the outcomes could be measured by giving the learners an open-ended test on how to write an academic essay.

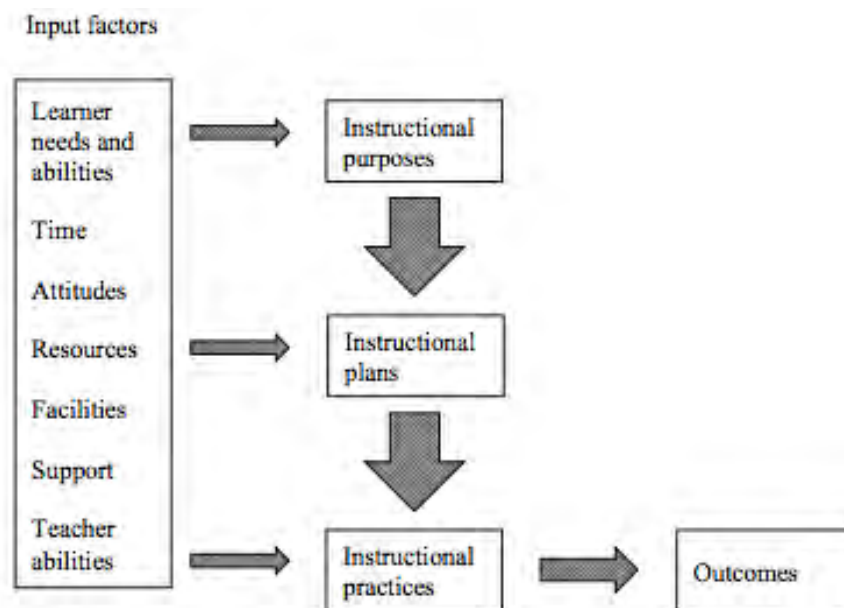


Figure 1: *The context of classroom-based evaluation by Genesee & Upshur (1996, p. 37)*

The instructional objectives in an academic essay writing class relate to language objectives, which ‘refer to language skills that learners are expected to acquire in the classroom’ (Genesee & Upshur, 1996, p. 16). This language objective is very important in learning academic essay writing, where the learners should be able to develop some language skills, which support them in writing a good academic essay. Bachman and Palmer (2010, p. 44) specify ‘language knowledge includes two broad categories: organisational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.

Another objective relates to strategic objectives in which the learners are encouraged to gain some strategies for learning and critical thinking. Learning strategies are ‘conscious processes and techniques that facilitate the comprehension, acquisition, and retention of new skills and concepts’ (Chamot and O’Malley 1987, p. 239). Bachman and Palmer (2010, pp. 48-49) agree strategic competence is as a set of metacognitive strategies – language use and cognitive activity which is involved in planning, monitoring, and evaluating individuals’ problem solving.

The instructional plans consist of some information on what, when, and how a certain topic should be taught. This is as the syllabus, which should be specific, and it should show the blueprint of how the subjects are taught. Genesee & Upshur (1996, p. 24) state that the aspects of instructional plans are content (objectives), organisation, materials and equipment, and activities and roles. The instructional plans will follow the instructional objectives in detail. This means that every objective could become one unit in instructional plans completed with their steps to achieve every objective.

Genesee & Upshur (1996, p. 29) explain that ‘instructional practices include the actual strategies, materials, activities, and tasks used by teachers and learners in the classroom’. For effective incorporation of instructional practices, the flexibility related to the practice should be gained since not all planning could be implemented perfectly in classroom practice. Therefore, in undertaking instructional practice, all changes could happen depending on the situation, condition and atmosphere in the teaching and learning process. However, the focus or objectives should be kept in order to reach the intended outcomes at the end of the course.

By having some information about instructional objectives, plans and classroom practices, the evaluation for the CBA is ready to be prepared, especially in an academic essay writing class. This CBA could give useful input for the lecturer to improve the effectiveness of learning academic essay writing for teacher trainees to produce qualified academic essays.

The Implementation of Classroom-Based Assessment

The CBA which might be implemented in Academic Essay Writing class to identify potential problems, so that the lectures could help learners achieve the learning objectives is shown below which is adapted from Genesee & Upshur (1996, p. 42). Some questions for evaluating an academic essay writing class for teacher trainees in Indonesia are as follows:

1. Does this course respond to the needs and desires of learners?

This questionnaire is given at the first meeting, before the lecturer explains about the course objectives so that the learners could genuinely construct their needs and desires to learn Academic Essay Writing. There will be approximately 15 to 20 minutes taken by the learners to write their questionnaire. The questionnaire is also with name, so that the lecturer can specifically pay attention to the progress of every individual at the end of his or her subject learning. The learners are asked to fill in the responds to options on a Likert scale by choosing SA (Strongly Agree) / A (Agree) / D (Disagree) / SD (Strongly Disagree). They can also put some notes where relevant, and answer the open questions.

Using questionnaire is part of evaluating without testing. In the designed questionnaire, there are also some open questions, which could be categorised as indirect interview. The learners will have the opportunity to express their opinions and ideas through the questions. In the classroom, the learners consist of teacher trainees from the higher year; therefore, they have already known many aspects and knowledge in EFL teaching and learning and should be able to make effective use of the questionnaire. This questionnaire is given at the beginning of instructional process; therefore, the result will significantly help the lecturer to evaluate as well as give positive input to instructional objectives, plans, and practices.

Through the questionnaire, the lecturer will gain a better understanding of the needs, abilities and lack of learners. For the open questions, the lecturer will obtain some information related to learning strategy, which learners prefer to be applied in the classroom. This is in line with Genesee & Upshur (1996, p. 128) who state that ‘before instruction, questionnaires or interview can be used with learners to collect information about input factors that might influence instructional planning’.

Most of the questions used in the questionnaire follow a non-linear arrangement whereby the learners can skip some questions or fill in the questions not in order. In most questions, the multiple choice format is used in order to help learners gain information and elicit self-assessment about academic essay writing. This questionnaire format will minimise the use of time and improve efficiency and effectiveness in the information collecting process. As Genesee & Upshur (1996, p. 132) note, ‘multiple-choice questions are generally easier and faster to answer than open-ended questions’. This kind of questionnaire will be easier to analyse and draw conclusions from.

2. Does the plan for this course seem like a good means for attaining the course objectives?

This question is addressed to compare general course objectives with interim objectives to see whether lessons (or parts) should be added or removed; compare materials and activities with interim objectives to see whether all are taught; check whether materials and activities reflect the best current thinking on EFL language teaching in order to see if anything needs to be altered; check whether instructional requirements can be satisfied by available resources; and check whether materials and activities seem appropriate for the intended learners.

The knowledge of course materials and documentation of the lecturer. In this part, there will be a form for the lecturer to complete in order to reflect whether the plan for the course is appropriate as means for reaching the instructional purposes, then a meaningful decision can be made.

3. Is the course working according to the plan? Are the planned activities actually occurring? Are the learners performing as expected?

Observation, in this CBA, an observation form for lectures is provided in order to help the lecturer reflect on the on-going teaching and learning process for an academic essay writing class. Related to this observation, some changes could be made to the lecture if it is found there are many mismatches between the plan and the stage that learners reach.

4. Were the interim objectives met? Check performance and use of language

Assignments, in this open-ended response assignment, the learners are asked to compose an academic essay in a different subject based on some questions and readings which the lecturer provided. The readings aim to help the learners gain some background knowledge on the topic and questions they are going to elaborate in their essays. Furthermore, they have to find their own resources of readings to support their essay. The result of this assignment will be used to improve the strategy to help learners perform better and use language more appropriately.

5. Were the general course objectives satisfied? Check learners' use of language. Knowledge of course materials and documentation of the lecturer and final test

In this final test, the lecturer asks the learners to write their own academic essay writing based on the topic they like, related to EFL teaching and learning. They are also asked to find some sources, books, and other articles to support them in writing up their final test. Consultation with the lecturer and friends is very important so that the learners can make sure

that they have chosen the right topic, as well as consulting their writing outlines. This final test will show the outcomes of the teaching and learning process as well as giving some input for the improvement in the next course. Weir (1993, p. 134) asserts ‘as regards selection to topic(s) it is necessary to ensure that students are able to write something on the topic they are presented with’.

The test is a kind of open-ended test where ‘the response alternatives are not limited by the examiner or test item, and learners are free to give a wide variety of possible responses’ (Genesee & Upshur, 1996, p. 171). However, open-ended tests are considered complex to score. Therefore, in this test, their format of scoring based on ESL composition profile is held. Then, the examiners would be more than the single lecturer, but also some other lecturers from the same subjects in different groups of learners. For this essay open-ended question design was chosen because this class is about academic essay writing and based on Genesee & Upshur’s (1996, p. 180) explanation, ‘open-ended tests are suitable for testing speaking and writing skills because they require language production’.

In designing open-ended questions, this essay aimed to take considerable care when devising the test. The consideration consists of three aspects; namely, appropriateness, understandability, and feasibility (Genesee & Upshur, 1996, p. 182). The criteria in the table hopefully could show the appropriateness, understandability and feasibility of the final test designed.

Conclusion and Suggestions

By implementing classroom-based assessment which consists of some important aspects of evaluation – ‘purpose of evaluating, collecting information, interpreting information, and decision making’ (Genesee & Upshur, 1996, p. 6), this essay designs the questionnaire to be applied to check whether the learners’ needs, ability and desires are in accordance with the instructional objectives, plans and practices. At the end of the course, an evaluation based on open-ended test is also designed to collect information about learning outcomes and find some improvements for the further course.

In this CBA, the questionnaire and open-ended test are chosen because the subject learning is academic essay writing for teacher trainers. Therefore, for writing skill, open-ended test is very important to be applied. Finally, the scoring processes, which use analytic and

holistic scoring systems, are implemented based on adaptation from ESL composition profile by H. L. Jacobs et al. (1981). This scoring system will help to reduce the subjective process in marking the final test.

Finally, it is hoped that this essay could contribute to the development of EFL test and assessment in Indonesia, especially for the development of Classroom-based Assessment, which is very contextual to be implemented in every class. This CBA hopefully can give positive input for the development of academic essay writing for teacher trainees in Indonesia.

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