

Critical Pedagogy and Assessment: Can we combine them in the L2 writing classroom?

Tiina MATIKAINEN

Introduction

Daily, writing teachers everywhere deal with the issue of assessing their students' writing. Whether we are teaching students in their first language or in a foreign language, we are required and expected to assess their writing abilities as language teachers. Recently, in the second language writing field, much critical discussion has centered around the important issue of assessment; mainly, what are the best, most productive and most fair ways of assessing our students (e.g. Hamp-Lyons 2001; Hamp-Lyons, 2003, Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1996; Pearson Casanave, 2004).

At the same time, the second language field has struggled with the question of the role of politics and ideology in our language classrooms. Researchers have tried to define and apply varying degrees of critical pedagogy, critical literacy, critical applied linguistics, and critical pragmatism to the teaching of languages (e.g. Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Santos, 2001; Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 2000).

However, as much research and discussion has taken place in regards to these challenging areas of second language learning/writing, not enough discussion has taken place in regards to how we can make the assessment of our writing students more compliant with the current thinking in regards to critical pedagogy. How can we as writing teachers help develop our students into autonomous, self-sufficient writers if, at the same time, we are assessing students based on the tradi-

tional approaches to writing, which are not necessarily the most fair ways of assessing our students? How can our student writers maintain and develop their own voices and identities in their writing if we are ranking and grading them constantly while at the same time making this ranking and grading the core of any writing program? I believe that by applying some of the critical pedagogy principles into second language assessment, we can improve the way we assess our students as well as look at assessment in a different light. Therefore, my goal in this paper is to try to connect some ideas about critical pedagogy with writing assessment to propose some more constructive ways to assess our writing students. I will try to do this by first discussing critical literacy in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) field as I understand it, and then moving on to discuss the currently most common ways to assess our language learners' writing as well as the problems I see with them. In the last part of this short paper, I will discuss some alternative ways for assessing writing that I feel can make a difference and move us ahead in the writing classrooms.

Critical Pedagogy in L2 Writing Classrooms

Much of the current research in SLA field tries to reconceptualize second language learning by looking at it from a critical perspective. Much of this research tries to reconceptualize and reevaluate the way we act and interact in language classrooms based on different theories and definitions of critical pedagogy that fall under critical theory. The discussion about critical pedagogy and critical literacy is way too vast and complex for this paper; however, I will briefly discuss the definitions and main ideas of these two as I see them relate to my ideas about connecting critical pedagogy and writing assessment. As with any issue, there are proponents and opponents of this issue; in this paper, I will only consider the proponents' points to using critical pedagogy in our classrooms.

As Santos (2001) points out, critical pedagogy builds on critical theory, which simply put focuses on inequality and social injustice.

The goal of critical theory is to give more power to the oppressed or the weak while taking some of the power away from the powerful.

In SLA, Pennycook was one of the first in trying to put this new emerging approach, critical pedagogy, into words in his book *Critical Applied Linguistics* (2001). When talking about critical pedagogy, Pennycook's starting point is the fact that everything we do in the classroom, whether it's an utterance, textbook illustration, homework assignment etc., has major implications. Everything in the classroom is political and ideological, and just like everyone else, students' and teachers' behavior and thinking are determined by ideologies that derive from the powerful; in other words, from differing power relations. The challenge, he thinks, is to take these macro-issues like social and political concerns and to tie them in with the micro-issues like classroom behavior. The major challenge for educators and for anyone interested in critical pedagogy is, "to find ways to meet the challenge of working across multiple levels" (pg. 120). In other words,

"The challenge is to find a way to theorize human agency within structures of power and to theorize ways in which we may think, act, and behave that on the one hand acknowledge our locations within social, cultural, economic, ideological, discursive frameworks but on the other hand allow us at least some possibility of freedom of action and change" (pg. 120).

The above challenge is evident in our language classrooms as well. Pennycook points out that once we acknowledge that everything we do in the classroom is determined by very particular ways of understanding the world as explained above, we can start to develop a form of critical pedagogy that allows our students to start to develop their own voices and that allows our students to resist the authority.

Similarly, Santos (2001) acknowledges that schools are sites for political struggle and that education is all about power relations. She continues,

“Because it is opposed to the standard curriculum and to mainstream classroom practices, critical pedagogy seeks to fashion alternative approaches to both, eschewing on principle any formal set or statement of methods and procedures in favor of experimentation and practices tailored to local settings, conditions, and concerns” (pg. 175).

Other researchers in the SLA field have taken a stab at developing their own definitions for critical pedagogy, and when talking about writing, for critical literacy. Among them, Hammond & Macken-Horarik (1999) define critical literacy as, “the ability to engage critically and analytically with ways in which knowledge, and ways of thinking about and valuing this knowledge, are constructed in and through written texts” (pg. 529). To Hammond & Macken-Horarik, the cornerstones of critical literacy include allowing students to resist and challenge the authority and status quo if they choose to do that as well as when talking about writing, being able to write critically, not according to some preformatted expectations.

However, applying all of the above to the writing classroom is more simply said than done. As writing teachers, we need to remember that we are responsible for improving our students’ writing ability. How we can do this while at the same time following the principles of critical pedagogy is a mystery to most writing teachers. Pearson Casanave (2004) also reminds us about this fact. According to her, when it comes to L2 writing, from a critically pedagogical point-of-view, writing teachers need to take into account the job they have: to help and to ensure that their students are developing the kinds of writing skills they need in the real environments they will be writing in.

It is clear that critical pedagogy can have a lot to give to language classrooms. It can potentially help us create classroom environments that may provide to be more meaningful and relevant to the students. However, a lot remains to be done to show us how to exactly do this in our classrooms. When it comes to writing and assessing writing, it’s

hard to try to imagine how we could follow the critical pedagogical principles. Before we consider this, let's look at how students' writing is being assessed today.

Assessment of L2 Writing

As Pearson Casanave (2004) points out, assessment is such an integral part of the education system everywhere that we often don't even think twice about it. As she states, "After all, the system often starts, continues, and ends with entrance, placement, progress, and exit assessments and examinations" (pg. 113). This is true for second language writing as well, whether we are talking about language students or college students studying in a foreign language. However, in most cases, the way we assess our students or the way we are expected to assess our students may not be the best way.

Hamp-Lyons & Kroll (1996) present a nice overview of the current issues involved with assessing foreign language writing. According to them, the four common models in writing assessment today are: 1) a snapshot approach involving a single-sample text, 2) a growth/multiple competencies approach involving portfolios, 3) assessing writing as academic literacy involving writing texts that draw on connection to already written texts, and, 4) assessing writing within wider academic competencies involving integrating all the four skills in the assessment. Hamp-Lyons & Kroll furthermore discuss the importance of choosing and making the tests appropriate for our students. The authors point out a central but undervalued dilemma in assessment, "In designing writing assessments at the most ideal level, we would want to select test parameters that call upon writers to apply their discourse, sociolinguistic, and metacognitive abilities as well as their linguistic and rehearsed genre competence in an entire package" (pg. 68). This is the first problem about our current tests as I see it; tests do not take individual differences of the students into consideration and do not allow a place for these differences. Hamp-Lyons & Kroll discuss the fact that individual differences between our students are huge and finally gaining

attention in the SLA field. Therefore, taken this into consideration, it seems foolish to use the traditional ways of assessment that do not allow these individual differences and creativity any place but that expect all students to fit into the same mold. In another article, Hamp-Lyons (2003) discusses this point further by saying,

“L2 learners are tremendously varied in language background and degree of cultural integration as well as socioeconomic status, personality, learning style, and all the other factors that apply equally to L1 learners. If a writing assessment is to be humanistically as well as psychometrically defensible, all of these factors should be accounted for” (pg. 169).

Hamp-Lyons (2003) further explains that rating and scoring student essays usually means that the students are supposed to fall into a very specific mold as they are writing their essays. For example, in one study she conducted, out of four students, only one student read the prompt for the writing assignment as the raters intended it to be read. Therefore, this one student was rewarded with a good grade while the other three suffered due to their inability to match the raters' expectations. The same can easily happen with the text itself.

Another problem with the current writing assessment is that we often evaluate our students' writing with a one-time-test that does not necessarily predict the students' true writing abilities. Hayes et al. (2000) conducted a large-scale study with university students, in which 15 judges evaluated 769 student essays from 241 students by either ranking or grading the essays. The judges were not given any training for grading and ranking the essays. The goal of this study, according to Hayes et al., was, “. . . to estimate the consistency of student writing performance on a series of holistically scored writing assignments” (pg. 4). The researchers decided to focus on holistic scores of essays since they are most often used in assessing student writing, and because they felt that not enough attention has been given to examine whether the

quality of students' writing samples stay the same throughout the different essays. Therefore, in this study, the researchers examined the test-retest reliability of the writing samples by having each essay ranked by three judges and then graded by another three judges. What Hayes et al. found was that this type of placement and exit testing, holistically scored essays, tell us very little about the students writing skills. They came to this conclusion as the results of this study showed that the test-retest reliabilities were very low: 0.11 for the graded essays and 0.21 for the ranked essays. As a conclusion, the authors caution educators against using this type of assessment.

Another problem comes in when judges enter the picture. All writing assessment needs to be judged by someone, and often this involves the judges grading and ranking a huge pile of writing. In many cases, the judges are trained and told the criteria for which to grade, whether these expectations come from the institution, current research, other colleagues or a textbook. In the previous study, no training was provided for the judges; however, often, when judges are required to assess student writing, the judges are trained on how to assess the writing. Rater training is an important factor to consider when talking about the effectiveness of essay examinations. Cushing Weigle (1994) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of rater training. According to Weigle, positive effects of rater training include clarifying the intended rating criteria, minimizing differences as a result of raters' backgrounds, making the raters focus on the appropriate criteria, and modifying expectations of good writing. On the other hand, negative effects of rater training, according to Weigle, include raters agreeing on superficial aspects of the texts rather than on any substantive criteria and denying that there may be more than one 'correct' reading of a text. In Weigle's study, four new raters were given rater training and because of this training, they understood the intended criteria better as they developed more modified expectations regarding the characteristics of the writers and the demands of the writing tasks. However, basically what the raters learned to do was to modify their

feedback and scores so that they would agree with the other, more experienced raters. To me, this highlights the negative effects of rater training mentioned above. Basically, we are expecting the raters to evaluate the students' writing based on some narrow, predefined criteria that might have little to do with student creativity, and certainly, little to do with teaching students to be critical writers.

Because of the problems discussed above for rating our students' writing are troublesome to many, people are starting to rethink the way we assess writing. Due to these problems, current research has started to consider some alternative ways for writing assessment, to which I will turn to now.

Alternative Ways for Writing Assessment

Santos (2001) points out the important fact that should ring true to most teachers in writing classrooms, "Critical theory and pedagogy, . . . , have clearly gained a presence in EAP and L2 writing, but equally clear, they have not had a significant effect on mainstream research or teaching practices" (pg. 187). To me, when it comes to L2 writing, this is the problem. I believe all the discussion appearing in different SLA publications about L2 writing and critical pedagogy is important; however, I don't think that it has been made very practical for the teachers to implement in their writing classrooms. The research does not usually go into the practical aspect of telling us how we can improve our classrooms in regards to this. I am well aware that this is not an easy task, and that there are many aspects of L2 writing to be considered as we start talking about improving classroom practices. However, in this paper, my goal was to connect some of the thoughts about critical pedagogy and assessment of L2 writing; therefore, I will next discuss some research as well as my ideas on how we can improve the relationship of these two.

I think one problem apparent in the discussion centering around critical pedagogy in L2 writing is that it has not concentrated on the larger picture: L2 writing instructors are not only L2 educators, they are

educators. Therefore, when we are talking about applying critical pedagogy to our teaching, we should remember that it is not a good enough excuse to say that we can't abandon assessment as it is because in universities and colleges, native-speaker students are being assessed this way. We need to prepare our students for the 'real world'. If we truly want to be educators moving towards critical pedagogy, we need to question the way education as a field assesses students; that's where our struggle should be at.

Granted, it may not be appropriate to term alternative ways of assessment as movement towards critical pedagogy; however, I choose to do that. To me, when I read the different definitions of critical pedagogy, one way to implement and to improve towards to being more critical would include rethinking and changing the way we assess writing. I understand that researchers discussing critical pedagogy in L2 writing (e.g. Benesch, 2001; Santos, 2001) are not concerned with assessment but with how to give the students the tools and opportunities to participate critically in their classes. In Benesch's (2001) case, she describes an EAP class where the students organized themselves to gain more control and voice in a class situation that was overwhelming for them. In addition, as Santos (2001) points out, when critical pedagogy is discussed in L2 writing, it mostly involves academic writing and how to prepare students for it. However, I don't see why it should stop there. We can extend the same courtesy to all language students, including their writing classes and the assessment of them, especially in the light of all the problems existing with the current way we assess students as discussed in the previous section of this paper.

Santos (2001) stresses that one of the main pedagogical recommendations of critical L2 writing is that these writing courses should challenge and deconstruct academic practices rather than encourage students to accept and follow them. This can start at the basic writing courses; we don't have to wait until the students attend academic writing courses. I think there is a danger that if we wait until the students progress to academic writing courses, more and more students

are going to experience the downfall of traditional assessment. By at least opening up a dialogue and considering how we can adopt alternative ways of assessing our students, we can hopefully prevent what Currie (2000) describes in her paper. She discusses some unfortunate cases in which the expectations and assessment of L2 writing students resulted in them deciding not to continue their education after experiencing a failure in the US academic setting. Currie stresses the fact that we should make sure our institutions go to acceptable lengths to ensure our students' success in all aspects of their education, including assessment. In addition, Currie talks about the dangers our L2 writers face when taking both regular college courses and English language courses. She explains how sometimes the writers' products are appreciated differently from a classroom to classroom.

Now, what alternative ways of assessment would be possible to use in our L2 writing classrooms? Hamp-Lyons (2003) suggests some alternative ways for assessing the writing of our L2 students. Portfolios, collections of students' work over time, are the most common and popular way to do this. According to Hamp-Lyons, the core of portfolio assessment is collection, selection and reflection, which she believe can be more beneficial for students than just getting a grade at the end of each paper. With portfolio assessment, the students make selections from their work through a process of reflection on what they have done and what it shows that they have learned. The students usually choose the pieces with the help of their peers and the teacher. However, this collection, selection and reflection are not enough for portfolios, as Hamp-Lyons points out. It is also important that the students and teacher are aware of the criteria used for giving scores or grades for the pieces. Personally, I have used portfolio assessment in my classes for years and find it very useful and fulfilling for the students. In an example course, the students write about 12 pieces during the semester, from which they choose seven to be included in an anthology that they make at the end of the semester. At the beginning of the course, the students are given a sheet with all the specific goals for the course (e.g.

using direct quotations in an essay, using varied sentence structures in writing, learning the different organizational patterns discussed in class etc.) The list is long and includes about 40 goals for the course. In addition, the students receive two different sheets with different categories and point values for all the goals mentioned in the sheet above. The students can collect points throughout the semester in two ways: just by completing the different tasks/goals outlined in the course as well as evaluating the quality of the tasks. In class, all self-, peer- and teacher-reviews are used for collecting points; however, the students themselves are responsible for giving themselves the points. At the end of the course, the students hand in seven pieces of their best writing that demonstrate all the different goals accomplished during the semester. The students also hand in their point sheets and a final essay that is a reflection of all the seven pieces they are handing in. In this reflection piece, the students evaluate themselves by discussing the strengths and weaknesses they discover about themselves and about their writing throughout the semester. They also comment on what they learned and how or why they think they learned it. They also comment on things that they did not understand or things that they don't feel they learned or acquired from the list of goals. Based on the students seven pieces, their self-assigned points and the self-reflection, they are given a final grade for the course. At the beginning of the semester, the students are also provided with a handout explaining how the final grade is assigned to them and how the points for all the above are calculated and added up. I have found this to be more useful for the students than just giving them my grades for each essay they write. I think the most satisfying thing about this type of assessment is the comments I get after the course. It seems that students are more likely to take with them the things they learned and acquired during the course. It seems that they are more likely to remember what they learned and to use this in their future work. They really feel that this way, writing becomes personal to them, and they see the relevance of what they have done in that class to their future studies. I really

believe that the use of portfolio assessment may be more beneficial and useful for our writing classes, especially if our goal is to identify students' writing profiles and skills that students possess as well as helping them to learn to maximize on their strengths for future writing.

In another article, Hamp-Lyons (2000) calls portfolio assessment the 'third generation writing assessment' and looks further into the 'fourth generation writing assessment'. The qualities of 'fourth generation' writing assessment are technological, humanistic, political and ethical. First, technological advantages would include repeated functions without boredom, adaptability, flexibility and non-judgmental decision about the writing product. Second, humanistic refers to the assessment being much more conscious of and responsive to the human needs, for example, looking at the attitudes of the test-takers. Third, politically renewed assessment means us being aware of the political forces for and against the methods we use for test development, delivery, and reporting. Lastly, ethical qualities include fairness, and as Hamp-Lyons puts it, "The language tester has no more inherent right to decide what is fair for other people than anyone else does" (pg. 124). In regards to the future, I would like to see some sort of electronic portfolio assessment that could include a variety of students' work. In addition to traditional essay writing, electronic portfolios could take advantage of some real-life writing; for example, e-mail writing and letter writing as well as structured chat-room writing that would involve some real issues in which students could show their strengths. I think it is safe to say that writing will become more electronic in the future, and therefore, developing some sort of electronic portfolios for writing classes could prove very useful for the students as well as the teachers.

Conclusion

As I discussed in this paper, I believe that many problems exist with the traditional way of assessing our writing students, especially since many classes I have been involved with and heard of use a process approach to writing, but then, assess the students with a one-shot

writing test. I think it is important that we move past this and try to develop some more fair and useful ways of assessing our students. Critical pedagogy that has gained an important place in the SLA field can be used to guide us theoretically into a better place for writing assessment. Even though portfolio assessment has gained some popularity amongst some educators, it is not used nearly enough, and more importantly, it is not often used in the best possible way. While we continue to develop better guidelines for using portfolios in L2 assessment, we can at the same time start thinking about how we can take advantage of the electronic media to possibly develop more flexible and better ways for using portfolios.

References

- Benesch, S. (2001). Critical Pragmatism: A Politics of L2 Composition. In T. Silva & P. K. Matsuda (eds.), *On Second Language Writing* (pp. 161–172). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Currie, P. (2001). On the Question of Power and Control. In T. Silva & P. K. Matsuda (eds.), *On Second Language Writing* (pp. 29–38). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Hammond, J. & Macken-Horarik, M. (1999). Critical Literacy: Challenges and Questions for ESL Classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(3), 528–544.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2003). Writing teachers as assessors of writing. In B. Kroll (ed.), *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing* (pp. 162–189). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2001). Fourth Generation Writing Assessment. In T. Silva & P. K. Matsuda (eds.), *On Second Language Writing* (pp. 117–128). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. & Kroll, B. (1996). Issues in ESL Writing Assessment: An Overview. *College ESL*, 6(1), 52–72.
- Hayes, J. R., Hatch, J. A., & Silk, C. M. (2000). Does Holistic Assessment Predict Writing Performance? Estimating the Consistency of Student Performance on Holistically Scored Writing Assignments. *written Communication*, 17(1), 3–26.
- Pearson Casanave, C. (2004). *Controversies in Second Language Writing*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Santos, T. (2001). The Place of Politics in Second Language Writing. In T. Silva & P. K. Matsuda (eds.), *On Second Language Writing* (pp. 173–190). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Weigle Cushing, S. (1994). Effects of training on raters of ESL compositions.
Language Testing, 11(2), 197-223.