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Teachers' Assessment Literacy and Its Correlation with IELTS Students' Achievement in Writing Skill

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Abstract—The role of teachers in their students' success is an undeniable factor which has already been dealt with in diverse literature. The challenge is their knowledge pertaining to the scale of their prevailing awareness related to one of the leading issues in the testing domain that is assessment literacy. The aim of the study was to investigate the effectiveness of teachers' assessment - literacy effectiveness in IELTS writing practice, Task 2, by administrating an in-service training course for a group of teachers instructing IELTS candidates and measuring the effect of their literacy on the writing skill developments of their students. The result shows that those teachers who received the literacy of the IELTS writing assessment procedure have earned consciousness of the genre principles and are more successful in their profession as they are capable of producing more literate learners, who achieve higher scores than their fellow candidates. The findings of the present paper reveals that assessment literates tend to communicate their knowledge through a more effective approach to their students than their colleagues, emphasizing the fact that teachers who try to secure their profession in an optimal manner should equip themselves with the needs of the assessment. Assessment literacy, then, acts as a dual instrument both for the well-being of the teachers in the first step and for the objectively literate students meeting their test demands in the second step.

Index Terms—achievement, assessment literacy, genre, IELTS, teacher literacy

I. INTRODUCTION

The challenging nature of a subjective skill like writing in such formal exams as IELTS and TOEFL for their candidates is by no means insignificant, partly because of writing's complicated structure which relates directly to its composing and scoring procedure. It has been noticed that some IELTS candidates while successful in other skills of the exam lack or better say suffer in the writing module. The analysis of the candidates' writings has revealed that inappropriacies observed in terms of genre requirements are the prevalent detectable drawback besides other minor defects, which are randomly responsible for the candidate's low score in the IELTS writing module, task 2. There could be, apparently, different factors contributing to this ill-functioning among the candidates; however, the role of the teacher in triggering and constituting genre awareness and sensitivity is of a dominant significance as most of the students in the research context obviously demonstrated no sign of genre related knowledge. Surprisingly, some of the teachers inquired were mostly unaware of the academic need for basic genre understanding and accordingly the necessity of imparting that knowledge to their students. Thus, the present paper consists of two different parts:

1- Theoretical discussions and analysis of the basis for assessment,

2- An Experimental part building upon the theoretical facts trying to find a factual answer to the following question:

Is there any significant relationship between a better assessment-literate teacher and the achievements of their students in the IELTS writing skill?

II. ASSESSMENT LITERACY REVIEW

The concept of literacy is in itself a challenging word and as such cannot be defined in a sentence, for the notion has been utilised by different researchers and scholars in a miscellaneous way depending on the immediate context of use (Popham 2009). In addition, the most prevalent domain discussed is teacher's assessment literacy focusing mainly on the "measurement basics related directly to what goes on in classrooms" (Popham 2009). Having focused on talking about the classroom, assessment literacy is a significantly related issue concerning the learners as well. To think that assessment literacy is exclusively directed towards teacher's abilities on measuring learner's knowledge could lead to

ignoring the very vivid reality that learners' status in the process of learning is underestimated or inadvertently forgotten. If it is approved that the final goal of any teaching procedure should entail the desired change in the test behavior of the learner, wash back effect (Davies, 1995; Heaton, 1995), it could, then, be sensible to direct part of the emphasis of assessment literacy on learners.

Another definition of assessment literacy goes beyond the classroom constraint and includes wide range of abilities. According to Johnston and Costello (2005) "we often think of literacy as a set of all – purpose skills and strategies to be learned, it is more complex, more local, more personal, and more social than that" (p.257) The realm of such notion of assessment literacy goes beyond finite understanding of symbols representing knowledge rather spans to individual's wellbeing in society. The type of assessment leading to culminate such literacy should seek to foster the objectives of education not in its abstract entity but in a very tangible reality. (Greene 1985; Carr & Claxton 2002).

Referring back to the classroom script, there generally exist two forms of classroom assessment named as formative and summative assessment where the purpose of each is different from the other but not necessarily in contrast. As Bachman & Palmer (1996: 98) indicate both teachers and learners need to receive feedback on the progress made in the educational activities but with different aims for each group. In Formative evaluation, students are provided with the kind of information to "guide their own subsequent learning," and teachers are benefited by altering their teaching methods, resources and materials in accordance with their students' needs, interests, and abilities. Considering Summative evaluation, it is in general reported in the form of grades, on the basis of test scores and indicator of the learner's achievements.

Needless to say that the role of teachers in both formative and summative assessment is crucial. A literate teacher could knowingly benefit from the results of a test in providing true path to his learners through the interpretation of a measurement. Johnston & Costello (2005) believe that any achievement in formative and summative assessment to a large extent depend on the teacher since 'instrument' to implement formative assessment is the teacher's mind and gaining any improvement in summative assessment requires improvement in formative assessment. Again, the teacher is the core element in all achievements regardless of the nature of the assessment, formative or summative.

Newfields (2006) sites three main reasons why teachers should be assessment-literate. The first reason refers to its universality in academic settings which requires more time and asset. The second notices to teacher's ability to understand basic interpretations of statistical and educational terms in order to empower them analytically read and evaluate related articles and publications released in the concerned topics, what is referred to as statistical literacy. The final reason referred to is the necessity of teachers' research sharing and communicating their classroom feedbacks with their colleagues so as to enhance learning possibilities. To do so, they have to be competent enough to mediate their views in a clear and technically feasible approach to provide an academically interpretive analysis of their work in a convincing method.

To sum up, what is common in all of the definitions related to language assessment literacy is to make stakeholders familiar with the task of measurement and its corresponding result for the people affected by this assessment (Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Taylor, 2009) "Familiarity with test process awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice" (Fulcher 2012, cited in O'Loughlin, 2013)

III. GENRE LITERACY: A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSMENT

The analysis of the IELTS Task 2 writing module enquiries reveals the fact that in general there are fixed categories of the questions for the candidates to deal with in about 40 minutes in at least 250 word length. The existing genre in all of them is an essay in the written medium with the information source provided by the candidate based on his own previous knowledge or experience and supported by some examples or facts.

The rhetorical function in each type is, however, different and should be emphasized while teaching the candidates in their preparatory writing courses. The prevalent rhetoric referred to here is an argumentative type of nature with its different tokens of enquiry in the IELTS writing module task 2, these argumentative forms are mainly introduced in a direct question types as "Do you agree or Disagree?", "To what extent do you agree or disagree?" or "Discuss both the advantages and disadvantages", each of which has functional objective that is the presentation of enquiry in the form of contrasting ideas or comparing them in a subjective manner.

The sample examples for each of these exam topics receiving a 'very good' assessment evaluation display mostly a fixed form of responses which stem from the reliability of the rating system intrinsic in scoring the IELTS writing papers. Based on Swales (1995), the pattern of the genre and its argumentative rhetoric sense could be repeated in the similar enquiries, that can be used as a model for the IELTS candidates to get familiarized with in order to conform their task performance with the model so that they would enhance their writing validity and its assertiveness.

Most of the sample writings with a 'very good' raw band score consist of four to five paragraphs each of which displays a discernible function in fulfilling the rhetoric implementation in the given topic. The first paragraph in all of them serves as the introduction of the essay which has been referred to as move 1 in the Figure (1). The ultimate purpose of this move is to generalise the topic and claim centrality (Swales 1995) which are crucial in the following paragraphs. These functions are mediated via steps 1 and 2. Step 1 in move 1 has the role of topic generalization through which the writer agrees with the topic and broadens it to the related issues under the enquiry. Step 2 in move 1 acts as a narrowing element which presents the arguments for the first time and signals to the reader that conflicting

issues are going to be negotiated by providing presuppositions. The general function of the first paragraph, therefore, is to establish a territory for the whole writing.

A. *Writing Task 2 Sample 228*

You should spend about 40 minutes on this task.

Write about the following topic:

It is generally believed that some people are born with certain talents, for instance for sport or music, and others are not. However, it is sometimes claimed that any child can be taught to become a good sports person or musician. Discuss both these views and give your own opinion.

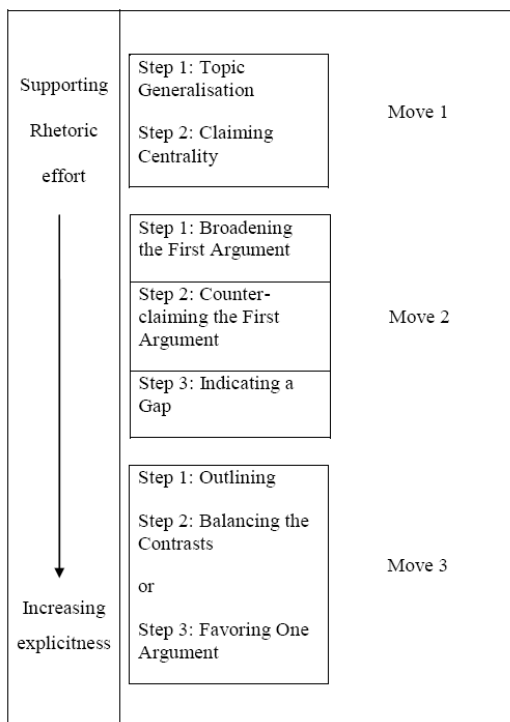
Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience. Write at least 250 words.

The relative importance of natural talent and training is a frequent topic of discussion when people try to explain different levels of ability in, for example, sport, art or music. Obviously, education systems are based on the belief that all children can effectively be taught to acquire different skills, including those associated with sport, art or music. So from our own School experience, we can find plenty of evidence to support the view that a child can acquire these skills with continued teaching and guided practice. However, some people believe that innate talent is what differentiates a person who has been trained to play a sport or an instrument, from those who become good players. In other words, there is more to the skill than a learned technique, and this extra talent cannot be taught, no matter how good the teacher or how frequently a child practices. I personally think that some people do have talents that are probably inherited via their genes. Such talents can give individuals a facility for certain skills that allow them to excel, while more hardworking students never manage to reach a comparable level. But, as with all questions of nature versus nurture, they are not mutually exclusive. Good musicians or artists and exceptional sports stars have probably succeeded because of both good training and natural talent. Without the natural talent continuous training would be neither attractive nor productive and without the training the child would not learn how to exploit and develop their talent. In conclusion, I agree that any child can be taught particular skills but to be really good in areas such as music, art or sport then some natural talent is required.

B. *Sample Writing Adopted from Cambridge Handbook (7)*

Move 2 includes 2 or 3 steps contributing to the development of the rhetoric sense by providing contrasting ideas. Step 1 in move 2 mostly acts as a broadening agent for the first argument by representing the views in an impersonal tone preventing the use of deictic expression 'I' or 'we' to make it sound more assertive for the reader to pursue the second argument in the next step. The argumentative sense is developed through examples or facts and the paragraph ends without any personal comments. Step 2 in move 2 represents a counter-claim for the first argument made in step 1 in move 2, commencing the paragraph by adversative element binders such as 'however', 'but', 'yet', 'nevertheless', ... to show its contrastive content and to accentuate on the argumentation developing between the two paragraphs. Step 3 in move 2 is not an obligatory step like the first two, step 1 and step 2, but could be added if the writer wants to 'indicate a gap'. The gap is there because the writer tries to indicate insufficiency in the argumentations made before and through this step illuminates the contrasting sense of the rhetoric by adding more challenging subjects, sometimes utilizing 'I' as a deictic expression. Step 3 displays limitations discussed before by using negative sentences and intensifying on the drawbacks in the argumentations above by providing a new prospect. In brief, step 3 in move 2 acts as a 'weakening claim' against steps 1 and 2.

Move 3, the final move, serves as the conclusion to the essay and mostly has three steps from which step 1 is an obligatory but the occurrence of steps 2 and 3 depends on the existence of step 3 in move 2. Step 1 acts as a brief outlining of the argumentations elaborated before by employing expressions such as, 'To sum up', 'To conclude', 'Overall', 'In my opinion' Step 2 in move 3 balances the arguments, showing that the writer has accepted both contrasting views with some modifications or instead the writer utilizes step 3 which portrays his favour in either direction, or rejection of both argumentations by proposing a new approach. Step 3 in move 3 cannot be used, in case, step 3 in move 2 has already been utilised (Figure 1).



The move and step patterns could be formulated in another form as well. It happens when argumentation(s) and its counter-claim(s) are presented in the same paragraph in move 2, step 1 and step 2 in a single paragraph, which juxtaposes claims and counter claims. (Figure 2)

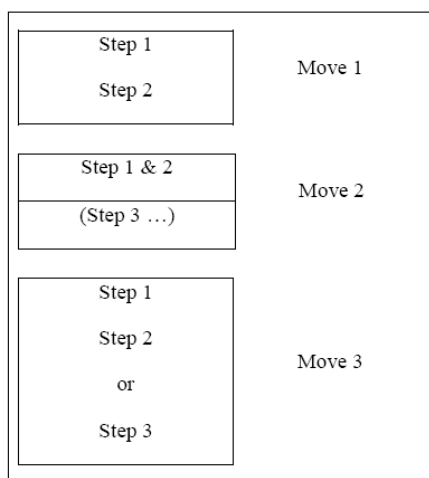


Figure 2: Parallel pattern for Figure 1

C. *Experimental Operationalisation of Literacy*

Eight EFL teachers engaged in teaching English for the senior students in one of the English schools in Tabriz were asked to participate in an in-service training course principally aimed at promoting teachers in their profession. These teachers were chosen from a shortlist of 20 candidates willing to teach in IELTS preparatory courses for students who wish to master their language skills for the IELTS exam. The preliminary task in selecting them was their lack of previous knowledge of IELTS administration, which was achieved through a questionnaire prepared beforehand, and these 8 teachers were the only ones who subjectively mentioned they had not received any training courses in IELTS teaching and were detected as the assessment-illiterate. The group included 5 males and 3 females, MA in TEFL, and were treated in a single class by two experienced IELTS tutors for about 60 hours for three skills, reading, listening and speaking modules. The writing module course was treated in a fifteen-hour course for all the trainees, but four of the teachers from the group, chosen randomly, 2 females and 2 males, received an extra five-hour course focusing on the rhetorical functions of the task 2 writing module, especially on argumentative type of enquiry. This five-hour training was implemented after all the candidates finished the period and they received the approval of the tutors.

D. Complementary Writing Course

The course content was mainly analytical based on literating the teachers about the rhetorical differences concerning the IELTS task 2 writing module through the schematic presentation of the rhetoric patterns. Since most of the topics in tasks 2 are of argumentative nature, it received more attention and was broadly elaborated on. The teachers were asked to read on the issue of genre analysis and rhetoric functions if they found the subjects challenging for them.

IV. EXPERIMENT IMPLEMENTATION

After 2 months of the training course, in order to find out the possible effects of the complementary writing course and to measure teachers' assessment literacy six of the trained teachers, three best ones from each group, were asked to teach for the new IELTS candidates in different groups. Thus within two terms, each term including 15 sessions, 64 IELTS candidates in the same level were taught through a random choice of teachers for the classes.

In the final exam the writing topic for the task 2 was of an argumentative sense. 56 writing papers were collected, 8 candidates were absent for the exams. 32 papers were produced by group one students, whose teachers had received the extra rhetoric sensitive course. The other 34 papers were produced by group two students who belonged to the other three teachers who had intentionally been denied the literacy of the IELTS writing assessment procedure.

V. RESULTS

The analysis of the papers for the rhetoric-literate teachers showed that 20 out of 32 followed the first model of argumentation procedure (62.5%) with a very distinct care for move separation and consideration for the steps, and 7 ($\approx 22\%$) followed the second pattern of the rhetoric representation and 5 (15.5%) candidates' writings were not compatible with any either model and lacked reliability in content.

On the other hand, the writing performance of the students trained by the teachers who didn't receive the supplementary writing course, group two, was different. 12 out of 34 followed the first model of the genre presentation with some negligible problems ($\approx 35\%$) and 5 ($\approx 15\%$) favored the second model of argumentation realisation and 17 (50%) had different approaches for developing their writing enquiries.

Overall, 88.5% of the student performances related to assessment-literate teachers were reliable and accountable based on the realized patterns of preferred rating system, whereas this percentage for the second group was only 50 with some rhetoric presentation problems.

The marking procedure, on the other hand, based on rating the papers from zero to 9 by the raters shows that the difference between these two groups is not due to chance; on the contrary, it is significant and meaningful.

Mean	6.25
SD	1.14
N	32

Mean	5.42
SD	1.08
N	34

VI. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The reality that a teacher's awareness of the assessment requirements could lead to better understanding of the classroom activities is beneficial for the both parties. The washback effect in teaching writing skill to IELTS candidates proves that assessment literacy should seriously be considered in pedagogical circles. Therefore, it seems that assessment literacy is a crucial element required by teachers for their own long-lasting interests, and for the educational welfare of their learners. Regarding predictable prospect, teachers are expected to be in a situation where test-elicited facts have a significant instructional and evaluative function. In such situations, individuals who organize the tests tend to direct the whole activity. Until pre-service instructor educators give fruitful assessment literacy for forthcoming teachers on a standard basis the moderators of professional development programs will need to offer assessment-literacy programs.

Black & Wiliam (1998a, 1998b) lends powerful empirical support attesting to the learning dividends of instructionally oriented classroom assessment. When classroom assessments are conceived as assessments for learning, rather than assessments of learning, students will learn better what their teacher wants them to learn. It is apparent that the effective teachers have to be informed about the rudiments of classroom evaluation in future. Consequently assessment literacy is considered as a must for today's proficient instructor and educator. Therefore, assessment literacy ought to be a fundamental content area for present and upcoming organization improvement activities.

The result of the present enquiry shows that assessment literates tend to communicate their knowledge through a more effective approach to their students than their colleagues, emphasizing the fact that teachers who try to secure their profession in an optimal manner should equip themselves with the needs of the assessment. Assessment literacy, then, acts as a dual instrument both for the well-being of the teachers in the first step and for the objectively literate students meeting their test demands in the second step. The role of in-service training courses for the prospective teachers,

therefore, ought to seek the real demands of the teachers in order to make them potent to realize standardized test requirements through assessing them with subtle features of test demands.

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