

REDEFINING CRITERIA AND STANDARDS FOR COMPOSITION CLASSES

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Abstract: Applying criteria in essay writing classes has been acknowledged as an important teaching and learning reference of evaluation; however, many students at lower level classes are experiencing difficulty in internalizing the conventional writing criteria and standards fully. As the result, many students produced insufficient pieces of composition and they continue depending on instructors to assess their work. In an attempt to address the situation, several criteria that students commonly encountered difficulties were redefined as supplementary writing criteria applied in planning and developing their essay compositions. Two projects writing of Argumentative essay in Writing 3 class were assigned, observed and evaluated throughout process writing approach, steps and activities. A survey of students' attitudes was conducted and administered after completion of the second writing project. The results of study show an increase in student's writing performance demonstrated after the course. Students' products of writing (N=20) were developed particularly on the organizational aspects. Students' perceptions about the learning system were reported to be high. Some positive feedback and constructive comments were given for better future writing instructions.

Keywords: *Redefining, Criteria, Standards, descriptors, Assessment*

Introduction

Current instructions of writing composition classes are still found to be lacking of a form of assessment although learning criteria has been used to promote and increase student writing performance, and it has been acknowledged to be an important teaching and learning reference. As the results, students' ability in planning and developing a well-organized composition is found to be below expectations. Many students fail to internalize criteria when put into practice. They depend on teacher evaluation, and the sense of responsibility for improving their own learning is weak.

Through self-evaluation and reflection on writing instructions, considering previous classroom research findings of my own, and through purposeful meaningful conversations with some pretty fair writing students who have had experienced using criteria in the previous writing courses, it can be concluded that the root problems of underachieved in writing performance are related to students' ability in comprehending some conventional writing criteria applied so far. For instance, the term used 'well-organized' in many organization criteria is not clearly defined. It needs to break down into clear structure of the organization itself. In other form of conventional criteria, the organization is broke down clearly into sections but the standards/rubric for the criteria is explained in general descriptors. In fact, inexperience readers or sophomores face difficulties to make distinctions and to internalize individual criteria to its standards precisely. This may happen because the descriptors used in the standards are written in condensed language. For example, it describes that criteria for a good introduction must be '*strong and engaging introduction*'. Again, the language may be clear for experience writers or advance level writing students but not for lower writing classes in the context of my institution. The same case of interpretation may happen in internalizing criteria for 'Good thesis or strong thesis' as defined in the standards. Such holistic defined criteria therefore, are considered ineffective for students at lower writing classes.

In an attempt to overcome the situation, this study designed by redefining conventional global criteria and standards with more detail and concise descriptive language. The solution is considered effective and a meaningful problem solving strategy for teaching at lower level writing classes. Students will produce good writing if they understand what are the criteria for good writing (Glencoe Literature, Reading with Purpose@2007). The following is an extract of organization criteria redefined as supplement to the applied convention essay criteria:

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR AN EFFECTIVE ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

Holistic Textual feature	Global Standards, Content	Analytic textual features	Specific Standards, Content	Descriptors of standards Introduction
ORGANIZATIONAL	An excellent persuasive essay contains outstanding content presented in a well-organized composition, in which the writer takes a stand on the issue, provides supporting evidence, appeals logically and emotionally, and carefully uses language to move the reader to agree.	Introduction Body/Development Conclusion	The issue of the writing subject is properly introduced. It may take the form of a general to specific information about the issue before the writer takes a stand on the issue, written in the form of an assertion. - -	*An introductory paragraph gives a general background containing interesting issue *The important of issue is explained *The issue contains a pro and con about the topic discussed *There are evidences used to support each side's opinions *The position of the writer is clearly stated in an assertion form *Assertion or thesis statement is usually put at the end of introductory paragraph

Methods

The primary purpose of this classroom research was to document changes in students' writing of argumentative performance over time after using both conventional and additional specific redefined criteria and standards of writing essay in the areas of introduction, body and conclusion. The study that was designed for two months (ten x meetings, 2 hours each), involved 45 students enrolled first time in the writing 3 course as a whole class sample. However, to be eligible for this study, students have to fulfill the learning criteria 1) participant must actively involved in the writing project 2) participate in individual conference and, 3) willing to give response to the questionnaires about their attitudes about the learning system. In the end, 20 students were successfully participated in all two projects writing activities.

The course started with a brief introduction to learning systems, to the learning criteria for an excellent essay. Conventional writing criteria was explained then distributed for all students as learning reference. Before the first writing project was executed, rationales and principles behind exposition text type and steps in planning were discussed. Course materials including writing conventional criteria were provided in the form of a learning module. Prior to make an outlining of writing, a model of student product writing was proofread and assessed together in the class using the conventional learning criteria.

After the students finalized their writing outlines, the first draft was developed followed by peer-assessment activity. During peer-assessment process, students would use the applied criteria as reference for evaluation. Comments from peers were discussed and taken as inputs for revising the second draft before proceed to individual conference with instructors. During individual conference, special attention was given to essay organization and the content of the main idea, how it was expressed in thesis statement/assertion, and how it was elaborated in major-minor points of supporting ideas developed in planning and development. During conferencing with individual students' some common practical problems were recorded, then some inputs and comments were highlighted in the class. Soon after revision on second draft was completed, students were assigned for a second writing project designed for another one month. At the beginning of second writing project, the redefined criteria were presented in power points and hard copies were provided for all students as additional learning reference and assessment criteria. Similar steps and procedure of writing process were followed as in the first project.

As a means of measuring performance, the final products of two projects were analyzed and evaluated by two instructors. The results then compared and converted into percentage grades and reported using basic statistical procedures using William Fox's formulas (1979)...

Findings

In general, scores reported show a relative consistency between the two markers. The scores were combined and then tabulated to determine the average increase on the writing projects. Basic descriptive statistics were used to calculate the means by 48.58–63.45, and the standard deviation of scores by 5.11–6.25. This finding suggests an average increase of 40 percent in final products after the redefined criteria was applied, in terms of the aspects of essay organization. The finding of this classroom research suggests the mean of introductory paragraph section improved the most by 35–60. This is realistic moved since the focus of redefining criteria was focused only on criteria and standards for introductory section of essay composition.

Students show positive attitudes about writing with criteria. When ask their experience learning with conventional criteria and standards (item #4), many students (75%) response with not clear enough, and they need more detail explanations with detail descriptors, otherwise confusing. When asked to compare the two types of writing criteria applied (Item#5), almost all (95%) agreed that both are useful, but the last one helps them shape in addressing the issues and the main ideas more properly. Some (50%) feel more confident in assessing both peers's and own work after additional criteria was used. Interestingly, when they are asked about the instructor's role (item#6) in the project writing, almost all students (95%) claimed and emphasized the importance still of having teachers assess their work through individual conference. Teacher's comment was reported to be clearer when confronting their writing problems with elaborating criteria. At the end of the project, many students (70%) expressed their feeling of satisfaction with their writing performance. Experiencing writing with criteria (Item #7) is reported to be useful learning guide (90%) in achieving the objective of the writing project. Using criteria helps them in assessing their work and their friends' work. Many students (80%) confessed that drawing an issue properly and stating a strong assertion, and supporting opinions with accurate evidence are among the difficulties in planning and developing an essay composition.

Discussion

Changes from second drafts to the final drafts essay composition are affected by the supplementary redefined criteria and standards. In general, participating students are on the way to developing better skills in writing introductory paragraph organization, in which issues and assertions were introduced in more proper way. The development of sub-main ideas is more unified and coherent although the length is relatively short. However, it cannot be denied that few students did not perform well and worked very slowly even after criteria had been redefined. When time for exchanging work or rewriting drafts was up, they were not ready. This can be explained that individual learning pace is different from one-another. Therefore, slower students must be treated differently.

Redesigning good learning criteria must be based on the instructional objectives that reflected from individual teacher's teaching experience with specific students' common writing problems. From my own instructional objectives I know what I expect to be changed in my students writing products. Therefore, the learning criteria redesigned were focused more on specific rather than holistic criteria and standards explained in more detail, easy and precise language, so that students can articulate and apply them when writing. Under this teaching and learning system, student's self-assessment ability can be increased. They can always, in their own time, refer to writing criteria when planning and developing and self-assessing the quality of their own work. In the long run, when students who have already attained schemata and strategies of effective writing criteria, they can be expected to perform well in writing essays. In line with this, Phye, (1997) underlined 'the more met cognitively sophisticated students are, the higher their school learning and achievement is likely to be'.

Promoting clear measurable criteria in this learning system is considered an effective to encourage student self-assessment learning strategy to determine their writing academic competence. This ability would require transferring more responsibility from teacher (external) to student (internal) systems where students are allowed to take an active part in evaluating their own learning. The process of learning with clear defined criteria provides students with opportunities for making decisions concerning what is good, what needs to be improved and what needs to be concentrated on the next writing. O'Neil (1994) described such the learning condition as the most common benefit that students become better attuned to the characteristics of quality work. Phye (1997) argued that students can use defined criteria during instruction to learn how close they are to success and understand how to improve.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Due to the limitation of time, this study were only focused only on organization criteria and standards of persuasive essay writing that many students usually encountered problems when planning and developing their argumentative essays. The particular attention was given to introduction paragraph of essay writing, which is considered to be one of very important that is much required for standardized tests. The application of learning system is adaptable other text types and language skills of English, therefore, developing English learning packages along with explicit learning criteria and elaborating standards for young students is very

effective. Therefore, related educational authority must conduct some special service trainings for English teachers to redefine existing learning criteria for enhancing and promoting independent learning of English as a foreign language in Indonesia. For younger students, developing learning criteria and standards or rubric in Bahasa or mix English and Bahasa is recommended.

Teaching writing through process writing approach provides many opportunities for applying learning criteria although it takes some extra time for teachers. Therefore, it is necessary to put writing into curriculum with larger room for practice. The more students get better understand the learning criteria along with assessment rubrics, the better they can assess work of their own without too much depending on their teachers. Under such ideal learning circumstances, the roles of teachers are switching from transferring of knowledge to learning facilitator, from the powerful main evaluator to mediator for students in achieving better learning results.

In conclusion, it may take time and energy to accomplish such programs and the learning systems, but the results for our young generation would be a blessing. Therefore, it is challenging for educators, classroom teachers in EFL context in Indonesia to develop learning criteria and to facilitate students in accomplishing their learning tasks independently.

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