

Improving Process Writing with the Use Authentic Assessment

Muhammad Noor bin Abdul Aziz¹, Nurahimah Mohd Yusoff²

¹ Sekolah Kebangsaan Pauh Jaya, Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

² Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses on how process writing is improved with the use of authentic assessment in an English Language classroom. Eleven primary school children from Year 4 in a rural school in Sabah are the participants of the study. Data were collected by observing them during the English Language lessons and at the end of the series of observations, an interview session was conducted. The results of the study revealed that using authentic assessment to assess young learners' writing skills is beneficial and effective in helping them to write better in the English Language classroom. The presentation will therefore provide suggestions for the use of more authentic assessment in the classroom, particularly in English Language teaching and learning.

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Corresponding Author:

Muhammad Noor bin Abdul Aziz,
Sekolah Kebangsaan Pauh Jaya, Permatang Pauh,
Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
Email: muhammadnoorabdulaziz@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

“Once upon a time, the animals decided that they must do something heroic to meet the problems of a ‘new world’ so they organized a school. They had adopted an activity curriculum consisting of running, climbing, swimming and flying. To make it easier to administer the curriculum, all the animals took all the subjects. The duck was excellent in swimming, in fact, better than his instructor. But he made only passing grades in flying and was very poor in running. Since he was slow in running, he had to stay after school and also drop swimming in order to practice running. This was kept up until his webbed feet were badly worn and he was only average in swimming. But average was acceptable in school so nobody worried about that, except the duck. The rabbit started at the top of the class in running but had a nervous breakdown because of so much makeup work in swimming. The squirrel was excellent in climbing until he developed frustration in the flying class where his teacher made him start from the ground up instead of the treetop down. He also developed a ‘Charlie Horse’ from over-exertion and then got a C in climbing and D in running. The eagle was a problematic child and was disciplined severely. In the climbing class, he beat all the others to the top of the tree but insisted on using his own way to get there. At the end of the year, an abnormal eel that could swim exceedingly well and also run, climb and fly a little had the highest average and was valedictorian. The prairie dogs stayed out of school and fought the tax levy because the administration would not add digging and burrowing to the curriculum. They apprenticed their children to a badger and later joined the groundhogs and gophers to start a successful private school” [1].

The fable above has a priceless moral value. That is – No one standard assessment is suitable for all learners in a curriculum. It is high time for the use authentic assessment in the classroom for a better learning environment. As language teachers, we always tell ourselves that it is difficult to get our students to write. Adding on to this serious matter, we must cater our children to be prepared to sit for national examinations which include writing tests. Of all the four language skills, writing is the most challenging one to acquire and be taught [2]. Indeed, writing is a productive skill that demands effort and attentiveness, even for those who

are professional writers. Writing is a process. Miller claims that young children teach themselves to write by directed trial and error [3]. They also motivate themselves personally. This motivation formulates their own forms of writing. Butler, Liss & Sterner highlights that these experiences interact with the characteristics of individual children to determine the level of literacy skills a child ultimately achieves [4]. Failing to give children literacy experiences until they are school age can limit their reading and writing levels.

Hatcher & Goddard mentioned that a good piece of writing must have 3c's in it and they are [5]:

- i) Clear
- ii) Concise
- iii) Correct

They stated that if writing has the three mentioned characteristics, it will improve gradually and the writers will enjoy more (or dislike it less) and the readers will understand better. In relation to process writing, Gardner and Johnson have described the stages of the writing process [6]:

- i) **Prewriting.** Students generate ideas for writing: brainstorming; reading literature; creating life maps, webs, and story charts; developing word banks; deciding on form, audience, voice, and purpose as well as through teacher motivation.
- ii) **Rough Draft.** Students get their ideas on paper. They write without concern for conventions. Written work does not have to be neat; it is a 'sloppy copy.'
- iii) **Reread.** Students proof their own work by reading aloud and reading to see if it makes sense
- iv) **Share with a Peer Reviser.** Students share and make suggestions for improvement: asking who, what, when, where, why, and how questions about parts of the story the peer does not understand; looking for better words; and talking about how to make the work better.
- v) **Revise.** Improve what the narrative says and how it says it: write additions, imagery, and details. Take out unnecessary work. Use peer suggestions to improve. Clarify.
- vi) **Editing.** Work together on editing for mechanics and spelling. Make sure the work is 'goof proof.'
- vii) **Final Draft.** Students produce their final copy to discuss with the teacher and write a final draft.
- viii) **Publishing.** Students publishes their written pieces: sending their work to publishers; reading their finished story aloud or making books.

Authentic assessment is one of the most important professional tools that early childhood educators use in the classroom. Authentic assessment must go beyond tracking progress. It is considered a crucial part of a good teacher's curriculum planning and instructional strategy. Puppin states that in authentic assessment procedures are clearer; the mismatch between testing and teaching is significantly reduced; the assessment instruments correspond well with the lesson and how it is being taught; the testing changes allow the teachers to record students' progress systematically through formative and summative assessment [7].

2. THE STUDY

This study focused on improving pupils' process writing with the use of authentic assessment. It was carried out in a school in Sabah. It was an interpretive design Creswell as qualitative approach was used in gathering the data for this study [8]. A writing process checklist adapted from McKenzie & Tompkins was used in observing the students' gradual improvement in the writing tasks given namely pair writing, dialogue scripting, picture description and journal entries [9]. We prepared a set of interview questions which was adapted from Fahed Al-Serhani and Losardo & Notari-Syverson [10],[11]. The interview questions consisted of process writing and what should be done to improve the assessment and how they felt about the 'new' assessment that was taking place in their classroom.

3. FINDINGS

When participants were asked about the problems that they faced during writing classes, they answered that they had difficulties in the technical aspects of writing, brainstorming of ideas to start writing, difficulty in understanding the questions and also translation issues. The themes mentioned above are elaborated with relevant verbatim from the participants as evidences.

3.1. Technical aspects

'I am not aware of punctuation when I write. When I see my work and after Sir point it out, then only I realize my mistakes' (Participant 1)

'Paragraphing is my main problem. I need to write many sentences and I do not know how to break them into paragraphs. Sir told me so many times that I should write 4 sentences in a paragraph, but I still make that mistake in my exercises.' (Participant 4)

3.2. Brainstorming of ideas

The participants also felt that they did not have ideas to write essays if the teacher did not explain the points in detail. Their responses were:

'I do not know what to write when Sir gives exercises. I always follow what my friends write. I cannot think.' (Participant 9)

'I do not have the idea to start writing. I do not know what to write because I do not understand some word clues given in the question.' (Participant 2)

3.3. Difficulty in understanding the questions

They also revealed that one of the main problems in writing occurred when they did not understand the questions given by the teacher. They said that:

'I do not understand the question. If the question is long, it makes it more difficult for me to understand. I understand only if Sir translates it to me in Bahasa Malaysia.' (Participant 5)

'I do not the question because I have not seen the picture like that before. Like the one on writing about a train. I have never seen a train, so I cannot imagine and think on what to write.' (Participant 6)

3.4. Translation issues

We were also told by the participants that English was difficult because they could not find the exact word that they want to write. This resulted in them opting for translation. Here is a response when asked about their problems in writing:

'I do have difficulty writing in English because I have to think in English unlike Malay which I just have to write the sentences. For example, if I want to write something about a boy, I need to think in Malay like 'Lelakiitusangattampan' and I will try to think of the English word for the word 'taman'. I have problem thinking and writing in English.' (Participant 4)

3.5. Teacher's feedback

When participants were asked about teacher's feedback to their writing and their responses to the teacher's feedback, there were a myriad of answers:

'Sir says "Good" every time my friends and I write on the board correctly. I like to follow what he says with my friends. When my friends do it correctly, I will say "Good" to them.' (Participant 3)

'Sir writes comments like, "Neat, Good try" when I do spelling activity and short sentence construction. I am happy.' (Participant 9)

Participants also stated that when the teacher pointed out their mistakes, it helped them to see their writing much clearer.

'Sir always points out the errors that I make in the exercise. Sir also asks me to refer to the dictionary for correct spelling of the words.' (Participant 1)

'Sir circles my spelling errors in the exercises and will ask me to do the correction. I can see it clearly. Not like Mathematics, the teacher just put an 'X' on the book. I do not know my mistakes.' (Participant 6)

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Process writing

Out of the 11 participants, only 3 of them said that the three periods allocated for writing activities weekly was not enough for them. These are their responses:

'No, the time given in class is not enough for me to do my writing. I think writing in English needs more time. I want Sir to use Thursday lesson to teach writing also because I am very poor in constructing long paragraphs for Question 3.' (Participant 4)

Gardner and Johnson provided eight stages in a writing process and it is evident in our observation on the participants that they followed the stages in the writing process and thus, their writing skill became better throughout time [6]. They improved on their mechanics of writing as their draft work did help them to

make their writing products better for each time. This is important because we had students with different abilities all mixing and mingling in one classroom. A portfolio each for all the eleven participants helped us to focus on each of them, even though we may not have the time in each lesson. We could see the children improving through the compilation of their work. Their writing got better as they became more engaged in using the portfolio and other resources like dictionary and revision books to help them write.

Apart from that, the participants' motivation in writing in English increased with comments and guidance from the teacher. Guided writing process in the classroom is believed to consequently develop increased motivation among students to achieve their own goals [12]. From the analysis, we could see that the participants improved on punctuation after much drilling was carried out in the classroom which now, has resulted in them being able to compose short paragraphs of writing. We love to quote an example from the interview analysis which proves that the children's motivation is increased with the comments by the teacher:

'Sir says "Good" every time my friends and I write on the board correctly. I like to follow what he says with my friends. When my friends do it correctly, I will say "Good" to them.' (Participant 3)

The students were already mirroring what the teacher did in the classroom-complementing the other students. This is something that has to be paid attention. If the children are not acknowledged and if their work is not given due recognition, then, their spirit to work is going to die out. It lies within the teacher to make or to break their motivation towards learning because in this case, English Language is not their second language. From our observation, we can say that English language is their third or fourth language after their mother tongue (Dusun Banggi, Kagayan, Bajau Ubian, Suluk or Rungus) and Bahasa Malaysia.

4.2. Problems faced in the process writing

Among the problems that are identified in the writing process which makes writing a difficult task are:

1) Lack of skills in brainstorming of ideas

This is closely related to instructions in the classroom. The teacher must pay close attention to this. After all, instruction is vital in the success of a lesson. If the teacher is not clear with what has to be done in a task, then, how do the students, in this case, young learners are going to compete the task? Furthermore, working with young learners requires the teacher to simplify the instructions in the classroom. This takes time and effort from the teacher but the reward is fruitful.

2) Difficulty in understanding the question

'I do not understand the question. If the question is long, it makes it more difficult for me to understand. I understand only if Sir translates it to me in Bahasa Malaysia.' (Participant 5)

The worry in the child's tone is evident. Why trouble ourselves and the children with complicated instructions? It could have been simple and meaningful. Based on our reflection, we realized that we made a few mistakes by giving long rubrics like, "You are to complete the table below and then compose a paragraph with at least three reasons of your choice." We could have made it into two simple sentences like this, "Complete the table below. In a paragraph, write three reasons for the choice you have made."

3) Limited vocabulary acquisition

From the findings, it is evident that the children were having problem to construct sentences because they could not think of the word in English. This is a common problem among Malaysians students as depicted by Mohd. Saat Abbas et.al [13]. From my observation, the students did not complete the task given or only write in Bahasa Malaysia because they were frustrated. As a matter of fact, we realized that this happened because they did not want to use the dictionary provided for them. We made sure all of them have a dictionary each and yet, they were still depending on me to provide them with the translation of the words. I feel that if this were to continue, the children will have attitude problem and thus, leads to them being lazy. Chitravelu, Sithamparam and Teh mentioned that dictionary skill is an important matter in the classroom [14]. Teachers must help their students to master the skill in order for the students to be independent learners.

4) Time allocation for process writing

The data proved that more time is needed for process writing. This is mainly because three periods per week for writing is not enough to improve the students' writing skills. We had no choice than to do that because we were instructed to finish the syllabus as well as to keep up with the students' achievement in the English Language as a whole. We realized that this is a burden for us and also for the students. The students did not have enough time and this frustrated them when they were having fun in the writing class.

'No, the time given in class is not enough for me to do my writing. I think writing in English needs more time. I want Sir to use Thursday lesson to teach writing also because I am very poor in constructing long paragraphs for Question 3.' (Participant 4)

5. CONCLUSION

Teachers might use projects such as reports, journals, speeches, videos and interviews with the students to assess children's writing processes. For example, an authentic assessment on the expedition of Gulliver can be used to grade students on journal writing or assigning them to draw a map showing the route which Gulliver travelled.

The teacher may introduce self or peer-assessment as another option to assess the children. A simple-tick observation checklist or simplified questionnaires may be designed and utilized to help them self-assess or co-assess their writing. Diptoadi et al. [15] suggest observation checklists, criteria sheet and holistic and analytical rating scales can be used in assessing the children. With the use of authentic assessments, students and teachers have great and golden opportunity to appreciate their work in the process of language acquisition.

The ultimate goal of authentic assessment is to boost the learning process and help students to gain knowledge while completing assignments that are beneficial to their "real-world" experiences. With authentic assessments, students can see what they capabilities without the pressure to excel on a traditional test with straight As.

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