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Teacher Beliefs on Teaching and Evaluating Writing

Nuray OKUMUŞ CEYLAN[1]

ABSTRACT

In foreign language education, reliable and consistent measurement of writing abilities has quite often been challenging. As Hamp-Lyons (2002) explains assessment is not value-free and it cannot be separated from who the writer is and from the undeniable effects of "washback" (p. 182) on teaching and learning. Therefore, scoring procedures will always be subject to human judgment; therefore, making fair and accurate assessment of student writing is difficult to actually reach (Pearson, 2004). This study aims to define attitudes of the teachers in Bülent Ecevit University Prep School in teaching and evaluating writing. The results of the frequency analysis of the questionnaire based on teachers' writing practices and their views on their students' abilities suggest that textual coherence is more important than grammar and vocabulary in writing, writing instruction, and writing assessment. However, in their own practice, the teachers mostly focus on grammar while they are helping students to write. Besides, they are mostly concerned with grammar in their evaluation of students' paragraphs and essays.

Keywords: Writing Assessment, Writing Instruction.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose and Significance

In foreign language education, reliable and consistent measurement of writing abilities has quite often been challenging. As Hamp-Lyons (2002) explains assessment is not value-free and it cannot be separated from who the writer is and from the undeniable effects of "washback" (p. 182) on teaching and learning. Therefore, scoring procedures will always be subject to human judgment; therefore, making fair and accurate assessment of student writing difficult to actually reach (Pearson, 2004). There has been some research demonstrating the discrepancies between writing teachers in terms of their judgments of good writing. Brown (1991) investigated the degree to which differences exist in the writing assessment of English Freshman course instructors. He provided the raters with a rating scale involving the broad categories cohesion, content, organization, mechanics, syntax, and vocabulary and asked them to identify the best and worst features of the sample student essays referring to these categories. The results revealed that the features assigned to essays as best and worst varied. Cohesion is the connection of words and expressions using devices which can be categorized into five groups: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion Halliday and Hasan (1976). According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), reference is a device which allows the reader or hearer to trace participants, entities, events, etc. in a text. The starting point of this study was the differences in the assessment of students' writing that came up during the meetings after the assessment process in Bülent Ecevit University Prep School. The difference between the grades of two teachers sometimes rose up to three or four points. This can be considered as indicators of the variety of teachers' views on how to teach and how to assess writing.

Method

This study aims to define attitudes of the teachers in Bülent Ecevit University Prep School in teaching and evaluating writing via a questionnaire by eliciting information about the following:

1. What are teachers' evaluation of students' writing abilities in different aspects of writing?

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2.   What are teachers' beliefs about the teaching of paragraphs and essays?

The 40 teachers were asked to respond to a 5-point Likert scale (very good, good, satisfactory, poor, and very poor) to evaluate their students' abilities in different aspects of student paragraphs and essays.

Results

The results suggest that teachers are less satisfied with students' ability to "write grammatically correct English", and by contrast they are more satisfied with students' ability to handle the discourse-related aspects of writing, such as "developing the main topic", and "linking the sub-topics with the main topic of essay". The findings seem to indicate that "grammar" is the teachers' major concern in their assessment of students' writing, and this is consistent with their primary concern in the writing classroom is with students' ability to write grammatical English.

These findings suggest that the teachers claim that they often teach different aspects of writing. they claim that they teach discourse-related aspects of writing such as "developing the main topic", and "linking the sub-topics with the main topic of essay". By comparison, areas related to the discourse level, such as fostering logical linkage between propositions and anticipating reader expectations in writing are the given the least attention. The teachers state that they often teach their students how to write grammatically correct English. These findings corroborate existing views in the literature that teachers are focusing more on low-level features than discourse features in their teaching of writing.

Discussion and Conclusions

This survey has revealed thoughts on the teaching of writing in Bülent Ecevit University. The major findings are:

• There is a gap between teachers' beliefs about writing and their own practice. Although teachers think that textual coherence is essential to writing instruction, their focus in teaching and evaluating students' writing is primarily on grammar.

• Teachers are not giving students sufficient help to attend to the discourse features of writing.

The implications of the results suggest a need of teacher education in teaching of writing. Teachers should provide their students with help to teach discourse features of writing. This may help to fill the gap between the teachers' beliefs about the teaching of writing and their own practices in teaching it.

Yazma Öğretme ve Değerlendirmede Öğretmen Tutumları

Nuray OKUMUŞ CEYLAN[1]

ÖZET

Yabancı dil eğitiminde yazma becerisini güvenilir ve tutarlı bir biçimde değerlendirmek oldukça zordur. Hamp-Lyons'un (2002) dediği gibi, değerlendirme yazarın kişisel değerlerinden ayrı tutulamayacağı gibi öğretme ve öğrenme üzerindeki kaçınılmaz olumsuz etkileri de yadsınamaz. Dolayısıyla, not verme süreci her zaman kişisel yargılara maruz kalacaktır; bu da öğrencinin yazdıklarının adil ve doğru değerlendirilmesini zorlaştırmaktadır (Pearson, 2004). Bu çalışmanın amacı Bülent Ecevit Üniversitesi Hazırlık Okulu öğretmenlerinin yazma becerisinin öğretilmesi ve değerlendirilmesiyle ilgili tutumlarını belirlemektedir. Çalışmanın sonucu öğretmenlerin metin bütünlüğünü dilbilgisi, yazıda kelime, yazma eğitimi ve yazmanın değerlendirilmesinden daha fazla önemsediklerini göstermiştir. Bununla birlikte, öğretmenler ders uygulamalarında çoğunlukla öğrencilere yazma süreçlerinde yardım ederlerken dilbilgisine odaklanmaktadırlar. Dahası, değerlendirme süreçlerinde dilbilgisine önem vermektedirler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yazma Değerlendirmesi, Yazma Öğretimi,

1. Introduction

Among the four language skills, writing is considered as the most challenging and difficult skill for most of the foreign language learners (Reid, 2002). The fact that it is a productive skill to be developed over a long time with continuous practice might partly stand for its difficulty. Moreover, the development of students' L2 writing can be influenced by multiple factors such as L1 writing ability, L2 proficiency, and writing experiences in both languages (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Kubota, 1998).

The research on the evaluation of EFL learners' writing skill suggests that there are discrepancies between writing teachers in terms of their judgments of good writing. As Noyes (1963) suggests, "Over and over it has been shown that there can be wide variance between the grades given to the same essay by two different readers, or even by the same reader at different times" Furthermore, the scoring discrepancies "tend to increase as the essay question permits greater freedom of response" (Coffman, 1971, p. 277). Brown (1991) investigated the degree to which differences exist in the writing assessment of English Freshman course instructors. He provided the raters with a rating scale involving the broad categories cohesion, content, organization, mechanics, syntax, and vocabulary and asked them to identify the best and worst features of the sample student essays referring to these categories. The results revealed that the features assigned to essays as best and worst varied.

Leki (2001) criticizes the fact that writing courses in EAP contexts are often based on the false assumption that there is a standard of features of good writing and that writing can be taught and assessed in a non-discipline-specific writing course. Although the reliability of writing evaluation would never be equal to "a controlled system of machine scoring" as Conlan (1980; p.27) indicates, English prep schools at universities with a certain number of classes of different levels from A1 to B1 (based on Common European Framework of Languages) have to obtain standardization in the evaluation of learners' writing performance. Since a language institution cannot afford a lack of consensus among its raters because they are accountable for fair assessment of students' writing exam as Williams (1998) argues.

Cumming (2001) asserts that defining the construct of L2 writing specifically is a prerequisite to the formulation of a standard understanding of good writing. Therefore, it would be a valuable endeavor if the individual components of the criteria for good writing were analyzed in terms of how they are interpreted by different ELT teachers. Coherence is an essential component of writing assessment (Lukmani, 1999). It is a writing component that covers a number of aspects of writing (Nunan, 1999). There is evidence that ELT teachers tend to rely on their personal judgments of coherence regardless of

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the given criteria (Wong, 1998). Lee (1998) in his study with Hong Kong secondary school writing teachers found that although teachers think that writing instruction should focus on textual coherence, their primary concern in teaching and evaluating writing is grammar. He states that faulty grammar of students in their writing may be shaping their instruction and evaluation. He also found that the teachers do not provide students with sufficient assistance in discourse features of writing.

1.1. Coherence and Cohesion in Written English

According to Lee (2002), coherence is the relationships of various ideas in a text that are linked together to create a meaningful discourse. Lee identifies five features of a coherent text as follows:

1.   The text has a macrostructure that provides a sense appropriate to its communicative purposes and functions. The macrostructure is an outline of the main categories or functions of the text, e.g. when the writer's purpose is to tell a story, it is common to arrange the events in a chronological order.

2.   The text has an information structure that guides the reader in understanding how information is organized and how the topic of the text is developed. This involves the giving of old information before the new information.

3.   The text shows connectivity of the underlying content evidenced by relations between propositions. A text is coherent if the propositions it contains are justified or exemplified with detail.

4.   The text has cohesive devices to establish a relationship between sentences and paragraphs. This feature is associated with the surface structure of coherence which links sentences and points being made.

5.   The text contains appropriate metadiscourse features. Metadiscourse markers in texts help readers organize interpret and evaluate information. Some examples of these markers are sequencers (first, second, finally), and certainty markers (certainly, no doubt), etc.

2.   The Study

Cohesion is the connection of words and expressions using devices which can be categorized into five groups: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion Halliday and Hasan (1976). According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), reference is a device which allows the reader or hearer to trace participants, entities, events, etc. in a text. The starting point of this study was the differences in the assessment of students' writing that came up during the meetings after the assessment process in Bülent Ecevit University Prep School. The difference between the grades of two teachers sometimes rose up to three or four points. This can be considered as indicators of the variety of teachers' views on how to teach and how to assess writing. This study aims to define attitudes of the teachers in Bülent Ecevit University Prep School in teaching and evaluating writing via a questionnaire by eliciting information about the following:

1.   What are teachers' evaluation of students' writing abilities in different aspects of writing?

2.   What are teachers' beliefs about the teaching of paragraphs and essays?

3.   Results

The teachers were asked to respond to a 5-point Likert scale (very good, good, satisfactory, poor, and very poor) to evaluate their students' abilities in different aspects of paragraphs and essays.

3.1. Teachers' evaluation of students' writing abilities in different aspects of writing

The data was analyzed using SPSS frequency tests. The findings displayed in Table 1 Teachers' evaluation of students' writing abilities in different aspects of writing suggest that the means range from 3.00 to 3.50 (5 being very poor), that is, the majority of teachers tend to find students' writing ability satisfactory or poor.

Table 1
The results of the frequency test of teachers' views of students' writing abilities: overall means

I think my students' ability in …….. is	$\overline{X}$ (%)	s
developing the main topic of an essay	3.09	0,97
using connectives in writing	3.32	0.83
linking the sub-topics with the main	3.23	0.86
paragraphing an essay	3.09	0.92
developing a paragraph systematically	3.32	0.89
developing the overall structure of an essay	3.00	0.75
establishing the context for an essay	3.23	0.68
maintaining the focus of an essay	3.14	0.71
writing grammatically correct English	3.50	0.74
developing ideas logically in writing	3.45	0.85
using appropriate vocabulary	3.18	1.05

The results suggest that teachers are less satisfied with students' ability to "write grammatically correct English", and by contrast they are more satisfied with students' ability to handle the discourse-related aspects of writing, such as "developing the main topic", and "linking the sub-topics with the main topic of essay". The findings seem to indicate that "grammar" is the teachers' major concern in their assessment of students' writing, and this is consistent with their primary concern in the writing classroom is with students' ability to write grammatical English.

Table 2
Teachers' writing practices: overall means

I teach students how to	$\overline{X}$ (%)	s
use connectives in writing	1.64	0.65
link sub-topics with the main topic	1.59	0.79
develop the main topic of an essay	1.59	0.95
develop topic sentences	1.45	0.73
develop the conclusion of an essay	1.68	0.99
write grammatically correct English	1.68	0.78
structure an essay into paragraphs	1.77	1.23
use appropriate vocabulary in writing	1.73	0.76
develop the overall structure of the text	1.86	0.99
establish a context for writing	1.82	0.95
develop the introduction of an essay	1.55	0.73
foster logical linkage between propositions	2.45	1.01
anticipate reader expectations in writing	2.68	0.99

These findings suggest that the teachers claim that they often teach different aspects of writing. They claim that they teach discourse-related aspects of writing such as "developing the main topic", and "linking the sub-topics with the main topic of essay". By comparison, areas related to the discourse level, such as fostering logical linkage between propositions and anticipating reader expectations in writing are the given the least attention. The teachers state that they often teach their students how to write grammatically correct English. These findings corroborate existing views in the literature that teachers are focusing more on low-level features than discourse features in their teaching of writing.

3.2. Teachers' Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing

Teachers were asked to respond to "yes/ no" questions (25-30).

•   About 75% of the teachers think that the focus of writing instruction should not be on helping students produce grammatically accurate English.

•   All the teachers, 100%, think that helping students understand how a text hangs together as a unified whole is essential to writing instruction.

Although all teachers think that textual coherence is essential to writing instruction, the teachers' own practices tend to move towards the teaching of grammar. Seeing students' faulty grammar in writing, teachers may tend to focus on the teaching of grammar in the writing classroom. Teachers' insufficient competence in strategies to teach writing in discourse level may be another reason for the focus on grammar.

About 100% of the teachers think that teaching students how to divide an essay into the introduction, body, and the conclusion is the most useful way to help them structure an essay. About 80% of the teachers think that the teaching of connectives is the most effective way to help students create coherence in writing. About 92% of the teachers think that the most effective way to help students develop their writing ability is to engage them in frequent writing practice.

About 90% of the teachers think that students need very explicit and specific guidance in order to improve their writing. Rather than leaving students to struggle on their own by asking them to write more, teachers think that students need explicit guidance and help in order to write better. This is consistent with views in the literature that students need "more specific definitions and sequential, task-dependent exercises" (Johns, 1986: p.248) in order to learn to write effectively, and that teachers need "more extensive treatment of textual concerns" (Silva, 1993: p.671) in their teaching of writing.

About 90% of the teachers think that the main goal of writing instruction is to help students express and organize ideas logically and coherently, and only 10% of the teachers think that the main goal of writing instruction is to help students acquire a range of vocabulary and sentence structures.

About 81% of the teachers think that their major emphasis is on helping students see how the whole text hangs together. About 9% of the teachers think that their major emphasis is on helping students acquire a range of grammatical patterns and structures. About 5% of the teachers think that their major emphasis is on helping students realize linkage between sentences.

About 45% of the teachers think that students' most immediate need in the writing classroom is to learn how to develop coherence in writing. About 25% of the teachers think that students' most immediate need in the writing classroom is a variety of language structures. About 10% of the teachers think that students' most immediate need in the writing classroom is to learn a variety of text types. About 5% of the teachers think that students' most immediate need in the writing classroom is to learn a range of vocabulary. About 5% of the teachers think that students' most immediate need in the writing classroom is to learn how to write grammatically accurate English.

About 80% of the teachers think that the most important criterion in evaluating student essay is the overall coherence. About 10% of the teachers think that the most important criterion in evaluating student essay is the accuracy of language structures. About 10% of the teachers think that the most important criterion in evaluating student essay is the originality of content.

These results consistently show that textual coherence is more important than grammar and vocabulary in writing, writing instruction, and writing assessment. However, in their own practice, they mostly focus on grammar while they are helping students to write. Besides, they are mostly concerned with grammar in their evaluation of students' writing.

4.   Conclusion

This survey has revealed thoughts on the teaching writing in Bülent Ecevit University Prep School. The major findings are:

• There is a gap between teachers' beliefs about writing and their own practice. Although teachers think that textual coherence is essential to writing instruction, their focus in teaching and evaluating students' writing is primarily on grammar.

• Teachers are not giving students sufficient help to attend to the discourse features of writing.

The implications of the results suggest a need of teacher education in teaching of writing. Teachers should provide their students with help to teach discourse features of writing. This may help to fill the gap between the teachers' beliefs about the teaching of writing and their own practices in teaching it.

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