STUDENT-GENERATED RUBRIC ASSESSMENT: A MEANINGFUL LITERACY PRACTICE

Bee Chamcharatsri, PhD
University of New Mexico, New Mexico, USA
bee@unm.edu

Abstract

The function of assessment is considered as a gatekeeper (Shohamy, 2001b; Spolsky, 1997). This is especially true for second language (L2) writers because writing is a challenging task. In this pedagogical paper, the author argues that teachers should consider applying democratic assessment in their classes. Democratic assessment is aimed at “shared power, collaboration and representation” (Shohamy, 2001a, p. 137). The author argues that it is not only the power has been shared, but meaningful to students as they have involvement in seeing how grading will be done. Many studies have promoted the benefits of rubrics; however, less has been discussed the benefits of constructing rubrics with students. The aim of this paper is to discuss benefits of applying democratic assessment in class and provide a pedagogical implication on how to create rubrics with students.

Keywords: second language writing, democratic, authentic, composition, empowerment

In academic writing classrooms, composition teachers use different types of writing assessments to determine level of writing proficiency of our students. For writing teachers, responding to and grading student writing can feel like a never ending journey. Furthermore, teachers also have to be prepared to answer questions from students who received lower grades than they have expected. Teachers attempt to use an alternative assessment that will help them save more time and energy; writing teachers turn to performance-based assessment because it promotes student engagement to work on a real world application (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Performance-based assessment focuses on the engagement of students through authentic tasks such as presentations, written tasks, video-recording tasks (Darling-Hammond, 1994, p. 5) in which the student learning outcomes would meet or exceed the classroom into the real-world settings (Ghosh, Bowles, Ranmuthugala, & Brooks, 2016). Furthermore, it promotes and allows
students to take ownership in their learning processes. Ghose et al. (2016) argue that rubrics can be one of the appropriate assessment tools because the expectations are stated to students prior to being assessed. Students and teachers can collaboratively create grading criteria, which can be seen as a democratic assessment because it is aimed at “shared power, collaboration and representation” (Shohamy, 2001b, p. 137). In this pedagogical paper, the author argues that student generated rubrics can be a powerful tool in engaging students to look at and demystify assessment process as a learning opportunity. Shohamy (2001b) asserted that teachers need to change the way they look at assessment; “assessment of students’ achievement ought to be seen as an art, rather than a science, in that it is interpretive, idiosyncratic, interpersonal and relative” (p. 137).

Composition scholarship has all agreed that writing instructors should incorporate multiple assessment approaches in our classrooms. One of writing assessment instruments is a rubric. Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) define rubrics as one of the assessment devices “used to evaluate open-ended oral and written responses of learners…composed of a set of criteria or competencies” (p. 129). Another definition is by Ghose et al. (2016) who stated that “rubrics are assessment tools that comprise of individual and essential dimensions of performance know as criteria alone with standards for levels of performance against those criteria” (p. 320). A lot of studies have promoted the benefits of rubrics (Crusan, 2010b; Spandel, 2006) and some discussed the disadvantages of using rubrics in grading student writing works (Kohn, 2006b; Wilson, 2006); however, less has been discussed the benefits of constructing rubrics with students (Crusan, 2010b; Huffman, 1998). The aim of this paper is to discuss benefits of applying democratic assessment in class. The author will share his pedagogical implications on how to create rubrics with students in academic writing classrooms.

The Bias of Assessment

Bachman and Palmer (2010) define assessment as “the process of collecting information about something that we’re interested in, according to procedures that are systematic and substantively grounded (p. 20). Assessment can also be used to provide information for further evaluation to “make decisions to improve or facilitate [students’] learning or to use as a placement” of students to be in certain grade levels in language classes (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 21).

Scholars argue that assessment has been used as a gatekeeping tool in granting or denying access to students (Crusan, 2010a; Shohamy, 2001a, 2001b; Spolsky, 1997; Wilson, 2006). One problem of assessment is that people use assessment without critical examination of the consequences. Shohamy (2001a, 2001b) points out that no one in public would object the power of assessment because of its objective and scientific discourse. The
role of assessment tools then has become “instrumental in reaffirming societal power and in maintaining social order, which…not only are they unchallenged, unmonitored and uncontrolled, but in fact enjoy enormous trust and support on the part of the public and of institutions” (Shohamy, 2001a, p. 375). In other word, assessment should be questioned and examined prior to implementing or accepting of results.

In writing classrooms, teachers have also used variety of instruments in evaluating and assessing writing proficiency of our students. Assessing student writing is a time consuming and a never-ending endeavor. However, these teachers have no choice in avoiding such task because students would be asking the teachers constantly of feedback and grades on their written assignments. The anxieties of writing teachers can be understood because they may have adopted the writing assessment tools without clear explanation of what each criterion means; others may feel unsure of how to explain each point to students because they may not fully understand the tool themselves (Crusan, 2010b; Crusan, Plakans, & Gebril, 2016).

Pennycook (1994) states that “no knowledge, no language, and no pedagogy is ever neutral or apolitical. To teach critically, therefore, is to acknowledge the political nature to all education; it is not to take up some ‘political’ stance that stands in contradistinction to a ‘neutral’ position” (p. 301). People may not realize the subjectivity in their pedagogical and/or assessment practices they use in classes. If this is the position educators are taking in education, then assessment is no exception. Teachers have to understand that assessment tools are not neutral. In other word, the assessment tools also hold power of granting access to information or serving as selection tools in the society (Shohamy, 2001b; Spolsky, 1997). Huot (2002) points out, “it is no secret that most standardized assessments as well as local judgments about academic achievement or aptitude are biased” (p. 8).

**Writing Assessment**

Writing assessment is one of important activities in writing classrooms. That said, some writing teachers may not adequate trainings and backgrounds in writing assessment (Crusan, 2010b; Crusan et al., 2016; Hamp-Lyons, 2003; Huot, 2002). Huot (2002) has asked writing teachers to align the writing assessment with the writing instructions in classrooms:

We need to articulate a much more conscious, theoretical and practical link between the way we think about assessment and the way we think about the teaching, research and theorizing of writing, recognizing that assessment is a vital component in the act of writing, in the teaching of writing. (p. 11)

Crusan (2010b) points out, “without the ability to assess writing, to notice good writing, to understand what we are saying and what we are meaning to say, we, as teachers and as writers, sacrifice a valuable avenue of
communication” (p. 9). To further complicate the matter, writing scholars have been questioning what “good writing” looks like (Belanoff, 1991; Leki, 1995). Especially for second language (L2) writers, they come to our composition classrooms with different cultural and linguistic background, learning styles and strategies, personalities when compared to students who speak English as their first language (Hamp-Lyons, 2002). These L2 writers would have different perceptions of ‘good writing’ in our classes. Leki (1995) reminds us that good writing is context dependent and situated within appropriate academic discourse. Since our L2 writers bring in rich background, “[teachers] need to encourage them to take advantage whenever possible in their writing of their own unique, diverse experiences” (Leki, 1995, p. 44). The same argument is made by Hamp-Lyons (2003) that writing instructors have to value the individuality that students bring into our composition classrooms. In other word, students need to be taught how to compose within the appropriate genres and discourses of certain assignments.

After the instructors teach L2 students how to write their papers, writing teachers can also educate students how to evaluate their own writing. In fact, compositionists and writing assessment researchers ask writing instructors to teach students to evaluate their own writing (Crusan, 2010b; Crusan et al., 2016; Hamp-Lyons, 2003; Huot, 2002; Weigle, 2007). Crusan (2010b) argues that the use of rubrics in assessing student’s written assignments “can be powerful tools when they are created specifically for each assignment” regardless of languages used in written assignments (p. 44, emphasis original). Not only students learn what is important in this assignment; they will also be more invested in working on the assignments. Furthermore, the practice is not only empowering and meaningful to students as they have a chance to see how grading will be done. Prior to discussion on rubric creation, the democratic writing assessment is discussed.

Toward a Democratic Writing Assessment

Writing teachers start to incorporate critical pedagogy in their teaching philosophy (Hanauer, 2009; Shohamy, 2001a). Instead of feeding knowledge to students, teachers are facilitators in their learning processes through problem posing practice. Students will gain knowledge through discussions with their colleagues and in turn self-reflect on their personal beliefs. However, when it comes to assessing student writing, some writing teachers are at loss in incorporating critical pedagogy in assessment. Shohamy (2001a, 2001b) proposes that educators use the critical language testing (CLT) to promote democratic assessment in large scale and local assessment tools. CLT asks assessment designers and stakeholders to critically reexamine the hidden agenda of the tests. As Shohamy (2001) states,

CLT examines the intentions of tests…whether they are meant to assess
and negotiate knowledge or define and dictate it...CLT engages in a wider sphere of social dialogue and debate and confronts the roles that tests play and have been assigned to play in society by competing ideologies and the discourse that is thereby constructed. It draws testers towards areas of social processes and the power struggles embedded in democracies. (p. 337)

With CLT, the design of assessment instruments will be a mutual effort among involved parties through different assessment methods rubrics, self-assessment, and portfolios (Shohamy, 2001a). Fetterman (1996) attempts to promote “empowerment evaluation [which] is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination [and] it is designed to help people help themselves and improve their programs using a form of self-evaluation and reflection” (pp. 4-5). Further he explains that the empowerment evaluation invites everyone to participate in the creation of evaluative tools in an open arena. This means that everyone has a chance to participate and voice their concerns and contributions to make an inclusive evaluation tools. That being said, people need to be taught by evaluators because it helps “desensitize and demystify” (Fetterman, 1996, p. 9) evaluation processes. Writing teachers may wonder whether the democratic approach in writing assessment can be implemented in their classes. In composition, Huot (2002) makes the similar call for writing teachers that “If we are to teach students to write successfully, then we have to teach them to assess their own writing” (p. 11). Shohamy (2001), Fetterman (1996), and Huot (2002) argue that writing teachers have to teach our students reflect on their writing process and reveal the assessment process by asking them participate in the creation of assessment tools to use in assessing their written papers.

Especially with second language (L2) writers, writing in English is a challenging task. These L2 writers bring with them rich resources and backgrounds that can be useful in composition classes. However, a few L2 writers are afraid of writing classes because of their negative experiences in feedback they received based on their grammatical errors and mistakes. Writing teachers can help change such attitudes in L2 writers; the section on assessment in the CCCC Statement on Second language Writing and Writers (2014) states the following:

Writing instructors should look for evidence of a text’s rhetorically effective features, rather than focus only on one or two of these features that stand out as problematic. To reduce the risk of evaluating students on the basis of their cultural knowledge rather than their writing proficiency, students should be given several writing prompts to choose from when appropriate.... When possible, instructors should provide students with a rubric which articulates assessment criteria. (para. 8)

As the statement has suggested, writing teachers should focus on the additive model in second language acquisition (SLA) instead of deficit model
in language learning. In order to facilitate the learning process, assessment criteria should be provided to L2 writers in advance to ensure that students compose their written assignments to meet the goal of the composition courses. However, others may have argued that by providing rubrics to students, teachers are doing a disservice as this may compromise student learning process (Kohn, 2006a, p. xiv). That being said, L2 writers should be taught how to assess their own writing because “writers need to become critical assessors of their own writing; as they shuffle back and forth through the various phases of writing, they are assessing what they have written” (Crusan, 2010b, p. 9).

Rubrics

Among different assessment tools used in writing classrooms, rubrics seem to be one of the most popular tools because rubrics provide students guidelines and focus to complete assignments and help reduce students’ anxieties (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). However, rubrics can be perceived as “a tool to promote standardization” (Kohn, 2006b, p. 12). This may be the case if and when the rubric is created by writing program administrators and is delivered to writing instructors and teaching assistants in the program (Broad, 2003).

As discussed above, writing assessment researchers have a favorable approach in promoting fair and democratic tools for evaluating our student writing by asking students to participate in the process of rubric creation. Weigle (2007) has provided some examples of how to concretize the development of classroom assessment tools. Not only assessment tools need to have validity and reliability, the tools also need to be practical; “that is, it can be developed, administered, and scored within the constraints of available resources, particularly time…writing teachers in particular know how time-consuming it is to grade papers” (Weigle, 2007, p. 196).

In an attempt to humanize composition classrooms, the author invites both L1 and L2 students in composition classrooms to create rubrics to be used in grading their written assignments. Some writing instructors may ask questions regarding the validity or the reliability of the rubrics created by students. Weigle (2002) has warned teachers that “rubrics developed for large-scale [assessment] are not necessarily the most appropriate for classroom use and should not be adopted wholesale, without a serious consideration of the goals of the class and the specifics of the assessment context” (p. 184). That being said, writing instructors have forgotten that different assignments require different rubrics and that one rubric cannot be used in assessing every piece of writing (Crusan, 2010b).

Furthermore, publications promote and encourage students to participate in the rubric creation; the practicality and implementation are limiting. In art education, Huffman (1998) has asked her art students to create
their own rubrics to use in grading their own art work; she reports that her students take ownership and change their attitude in their learning. In a reading classroom, Skillings and Ferrell (2000) collaboratively conduct a study based on the student-generated rubrics in the school settings; they argue that “involving students in this process of self-evaluation empowers them in the development of critical think skills” (p. 455). Not only the students are empowered, they also develop metacognition, which can be transferred to the new learning environments. Crusan (2010b) posits that students will not question their grades if the teachers use student generated rubrics. Another argument is that assessment should not be a mystery to our students; students should have active participation in creating writing assessment tools (Spandel, 2006). If writing teachers value student voices in our pedagogy, they should also provide spaces for our students to participate in creating (writing) assessment instruments (Wilson, 2006).

Some writing instructors may feel ambivalent in giving power to students, especially in assessing their own writing. Others may have questions of how they can invite students to see the importance of using rubrics they have created in assessing their own writing. If teachers truly embrace and value student voices in their classes, they also have to demystify the gatekeeping tool the teachers use in their classrooms.

Especially with L2 writers, they would feel appreciative of knowing what to be assessed in their written assignments. The democratic writing assessment approach is helpful to L2 writers because they can see what teachers really value in writing (Broad, 2003; Spandel, 2006). By using student-generated rubrics, L2 students will see the authenticity of the writing assignments. This helps build confidence in their language learning, especially in writing proficiency, their clarity in what is to be expected in the writing assignments, and the ownership they gain in their work (Huffman, 1998).

In this L2 writing classrooms, the focus of this writing course was on research writing, which was usually taken after students passed the first-year composition course. The class meets for 16 weeks. For this particular class, the students are self-identified as students who use English as a second/foreign language. Some students are bilingual students.

The following steps are taken to help facilitate the rubric creation in the author’s composition classrooms.

- **Genre analysis**
  Instead of analyzing written samples in textbooks, students analyze authentic written texts from published journals because textbook samples do not represent the authenticity of genres students are expected to write beyond our classrooms. Textbooks also promote composition traditions or “replication of standardization [and] the absence of cultural creativity” (Hurlbert, 2012, p. 165).

  After the analysis, the students and the instructors would discuss
what is expected in that genre of writing. The whole class also explores cultural differences in the context of academic writing. By doing comparative rhetorical analysis, L2 students will gain metacognitive awareness of the genre and what they need to include in their writing.

After the discussion on genre analysis, students are group together to brainstorm criteria in response to the sample written texts. They have to come up approximately five criteria from each group. The instructor will record each criterion and what it entails on the board or on the projector screen in which everyone in class can see. When every group has shared their criteria, students will participate in the whole class discussion.

- Collaborative discussion

  Group discussion provides a space for students to voice their opinions and concerns in generating rubrics. Students will also learn what is important in assessing a piece of writing from other students’ perspectives. For L2 writers, the group discussion is a space where they can practice not only making arguments in their speech, they also have an opportunity to think beyond the grammatical issues in their writing (Canagarajah, 2006; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Reid, 2008).

- Rubric generation

  After each group has shared their criteria, the whole class will look at the whole list of criteria on the board. Everyone will have a chance to make objections to any criterion they feel it should not be included. When students make an objection, they have to provide their reasons of excluding the criterion. After the objection has been provided, the other students will be asked if there is any rebuttal. Once the discussion is over, the whole class will be asked to vote whether they would like to have the discussed criterion removed.

  The discussion helps clarify ambiguous terms for other students. It also provides writing instructors and students a space to make meaning of each criterion. Since assessment terms are not discussed in class, many students sometimes feel left out or are not fully understood since “language [of the assessment instruments] is not self meaningful and self explanatory” (Hanauer, 2009, p. 57). The discussion of assessment terms helps students gain learning autonomy and make writing assignments more meaningful.

- Implementation of rubric

  After the rubric has been created, students will be given a copy of the rubric they created. Students will be asked to bring their drafts of the paper to class. They will be asked to switch their papers to their peers. After that, students will use the rubric they have created to provide feedback to their peer's draft. This process is crucial because students will have an opportunity to critically examine their
understandings of the rubric and reflect on their written drafts. If students have questions understanding or applying rubrics to their peers’ drafts, they have a chance to ask questions and revise. Every suggestion will be taken up to a whole class discussion. After the revision of the rubric, the writing instructor will use the student-generated rubric to evaluate students’ final papers. Andrade (2005) points out that students need to be trained on how to use and understand rubrics; without training, students can be lost even the rubrics are created by them.

The reactions from L2 students were positive. Students found that this particular activity helped them understand how important an assessment tool is. The students also felt that they were empowered because they had an opportunity to voice their opinions of what is important in written assignments.

Conclusion
Rubrics can be used a reflective tool for students to revise their papers. The rubrics provide concrete revision plans for students to pay attention to in order to receive higher grades. Students not only learn how to revise their papers, they also learn to set higher expectations in their learning experiences. As the author has demonstrated throughout this paper, writing teachers can promote and value student voices in the most crucial aspect in their classes: assessment. Among many assessment tools writing teachers use, rubrics can be an appropriate evaluation tool in writing classrooms if students have input in creating them. Instead of treating assessment as a gatekeeper, teachers can open the gate for students to see the complexity of grading their written papers. When the assessment process is demystified, students will develop the metacognitive skills in navigating academia. The students may never look at the rubrics the same way as they walk out of our classrooms.

Author’s Biography
Pisarn Bee Chamcharatsri is assistant professor, Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies and Department of English, University of New Mexico. His research interests include second language writing, emotional expression, World Englishes, and assessment.

Resources


