

Japanese High School English Teachers' Perspectives on Classroom Writing Assessment Criteria

Yoko Suganuma Oi

Waseda University

yokosuganuma@suou.waseda.jp

Abstract

The present study aimed to clarify the role of assessment criteria for writing in the classroom. A total of 61 Japanese high school English teachers participated in the study and responded to a questionnaire to rank order various criteria often employed for assessing student writing in various test. After that, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven of the survey respondents, who provided detailed comments about (1) how they actually assessed students' English writing in class and (2) how they conceptualized the relationship between the assessment criteria and instructional content. Results showed that the teachers perceived task fulfillment and coherence as the most important writing assessment criteria as opposed to other components such as language use. However, some teachers were facing the difficulty in balancing between instructional content and assessment criteria.

Keywords

Writing assessment, high school English teachers

Introduction

The present study examines the needs of Japanese English teachers. Needs analysis (NA) aims to systematically collect and analyze all information necessary for exploring how language learning can be maximized (Brown, 2009). The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science and Technology (MEXT) adopts commercial English language tests (MEXT, 2014). However, the purpose of such commercial English language tests is basically different from classroom assessment. Therefore, this is the time to examine carefully how writing assessment rubrics for classroom assessment should be designed. It is because classroom assessment for writing has not been well discussed and established yet. In fact, teachers and schools

individually devise and apply assessment rubrics for classroom assessment, because the needs of high school teachers in terms of classroom assessment has not been surveyed yet (2017, Oi). Thus, it is an urgent task to explore writing assessment criteria for classroom assessment which reflect teachers' perspectives.

1 Literature Review

One of the important effects of assessment rubric use is to promote learning. It is assumed that the explicitness of criteria and standards in a rubric are fundamental in providing the student with high-quality feedback, because such a rubric can promote student learning (Arter & McTighe, 2001). In holistic assessment, the rater makes an overall judgment about the quality of performance. In contrast, in analytic assessment, the rater assigns a score to each of the aspects being assessed in the task, so the results can help teachers and students identify students' strengths and learning needs (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). Analytic assessment serves classroom writing assessment to be more formative and help students to develop writing skills, because it gives teachers and students more detailed diagnostic information (Weigle, 2002).

2 Method

A convergent design of mixed-methods was conducted to investigate what Japanese English teachers most importantly assess students' writing. A needs analysis of high school teachers contributed to the development of an analytical writing assessment rubric. Two methods were conducted to collect NA information questionnaires (quantitative analysis) and semi-structured interviews (qualitative analysis). The quantitative analysis focused on what teachers recognized as the most important criteria for writing assessment. The qualitative analysis

examined how the teachers actually assessed students' English writing in class and the relationship between class teaching and assessment. The following research questions are proposed: (1) what aspects of writing performance do Japanese high school English teachers perceive as important? ; (2) what are their rationales for their judgement?

2.1 Participants

A total of 61 Japanese senior high school English teachers (40 public high school teachers and 21 private high school teachers) participated in the present study.

3 Results

3.1 Quantitative findings

The criterion of “task fulfillment” (No.1) was supported by participants in the first place. It means that teachers put emphasis on the extent to which students could complete a task. On the other hand, “adherence to length requirement” (No. 2) is ranked in the middle, so it was not so highly evaluated by teachers as “task fulfillment” even though they are both in the same category of task design. From the second highest to the fourth highest items were all related to topic development and ease of understanding.

Table 1: Ranking Order of Assessment Criteria (N=61)

Ranking	Writing assessment items	Mean rank
1	1. Task fulfillment	2.0
2	3. Use of examples and reasons for support	3.5
3	7. Coherence	3.6
4	8. Organization	4.1
5	9. Naturalness of language	4.8
6	2. Adherence to length requirement	6.3
7	10. Appropriate use of discourse markers	6.9
8	6. Originality of content	7.1
9	4. Lexical adequacy and variety	7.6
10	5. Spelling accuracy	7.8
11	11. Punctuation	9.0

The participants' open-ended responses on the rationales for their rank-ordering were analyzed by counting the frequency of words that appeared in them. First of all, “coherence” most frequently appeared and was commented on by 21 participants. It was found that teachers emphasized the importance of coherence in writing and the consistency of the writer's logic,

which were mentioned 23 times. They mostly evaluated the coherence more highly than grammatical errors and spelling mistakes. In the second place, a component of “to understand a task” was mentioned 19 times by 18 participants. It means that teachers commonly perceived great importance to students' understanding of the task. Therefore, task fulfillment is also a mandatory condition of writing assessment in classroom.

3.2 Qualitative findings

Three key themes were identified in the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews in which seven interviewees participated. It was in accordance with the results of quantitative analysis in terms of importance of task fulfillment. However, the qualitative results of coherence and language use did not coincide with quantitative results.

4 Discussion and conclusion

“Task fulfillment” was extensively supported by teachers, suggesting that task fulfillment is considered fundamental in writing assessment by high school teachers. Teachers encourage their students to understand the purpose of a task and complete it. Teachers also stated that one of the most important things for writing was “content” which comprises “coherence”, “organization”, and “reading ease”. Therefore, classroom criteria should be composed of “task fulfillment”, “content”, and “language use”. However, some teachers were facing an ambivalent situation between what they taught in class and what they wanted to assess. Some teachers actually spent longer on teaching grammar and vocabulary use. Accordingly, it is necessary to reconsider the relationship between instructional content and assessment criteria for formative assessment in class.

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