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Developing a Self-Assessment Guide for Undergraduates' Report Writing

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Abstract

Writing for academic purposes can be challenging particularly when it has to be in another language. The objective of this project was to create a useful self-assessment tool to aid ESL undergraduates in writing descriptions of tables and graphs. To meet this objective, the major areas of difficulty faced by undergraduates in presenting their research results were qualitatively explored. For this purpose, an intact group of 49 second year undergraduates was selected from a Malaysian public university. They completed an online descriptive writing task.

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The written samples were analyzed to find the students' areas of difficulty in describing tables and graphs. More specifically, the samples were analyzed for the quality of their content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics and various problems were diagnosed. Additionally, two lecturers were interviewed with a focus on their students' typical problems and their expectations from the students in reporting their final year project results. Finally, in-house assessment of the developed Guide helped the researchers in its further refinement. The results of analysis of the written samples indicated that the students had difficulties in four areas which included describing the selected information, organizing the content, using the appropriate vocabulary correctly, and writing grammatically. Based on the related literature a number of ground rules were set. According to these rules and the students' identified areas of difficulty, a self-assessment guide was developed. The data from the interviews confirmed some of the results of the analysis of the students' written samples. The guide was refined based on the information provided by the lecturers in the interviews and the feedback from the in-house assessment. The guide can be introduced to students who may find it helpful in writing higher quality reports.

Keywords: Self-assessment, English for Academic Purposes, Writing reports.

Desarrollo de una guía de autoevaluación para la redacción de informes de estudiantes universitarios

Resumen

Escribir con fines académicos puede ser un reto, especialmente cuando tiene que estar en otro idioma. El objetivo de este proyecto fue crear una herramienta útil de autoevaluación para ayudar a los estudiantes de ESL a escribir descripciones de tablas y gráficos. Para cumplir con este objetivo, se exploraron cualitativamente las principales áreas de dificultad que enfrentan los estudiantes universitarios para presentar sus resultados de investigación. Para este propósito, se seleccionó un grupo intacto de 49 estudiantes de segundo año de una universidad pública de Malasia. Completaron una tarea de escritura descriptiva en línea. Las muestras escritas fueron analizadas para encontrar las áreas de dificultad de los estudiantes en la descripción de tablas y gráficos. Más específicamente, las muestras se analizaron según la calidad de su contenido, organización, vocabulario, gramática y mecánica, y se diagnosticaron varios problemas. Además, se entrevistó a dos profesores con

un enfoque en los problemas típicos de sus estudiantes y sus expectativas de parte de los estudiantes al informar los resultados del proyecto del año final. Finalmente, la evaluación interna de la Guía desarrollada ayudó a los investigadores en su perfeccionamiento. Los resultados del análisis de las muestras escritas indicaron que los estudiantes tenían dificultades en cuatro áreas, que incluían describir la información seleccionada, organizar el contenido, usar el vocabulario apropiado correctamente y escribir gramaticalmente. Sobre la base de la literatura relacionada se establecieron una serie de reglas básicas. De acuerdo con estas reglas y las áreas de dificultad identificadas por los estudiantes, se desarrolló una guía de autoevaluación. Los datos de las entrevistas confirmaron algunos de los resultados del análisis de las muestras escritas de los estudiantes. La guía se refinó en función de la información proporcionada por los profesores en las entrevistas y los comentarios de la evaluación interna. La guía se puede presentar a los estudiantes que puedan encontrarla útil para redactar informes de mayor calidad.

Palabras clave: Autoevaluación, inglés con fines académicos, redacción de informes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing for academic purposes in another language can be a demanding task. ESL writing is often taught by using textbooks, a practice which has long been criticized for often misleading us into believing that one size fits all (Kubota, 1998). One alternative or supplement, which has proved to be effective (Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2011), is having individual conferences with students. Teacher conferences, however, cannot happen frequently due to teachers' hectic schedules. To reduce the burden, some may resort to peer-assessment, which may be helpful. However, it may sound unrealistic to expect students to assess peers' writing fairly, effectively

and accurately. Therefore, a practical alternative to foster students' development is encouraging them to assess their own writing before submission. According to Oscarson (2013, p. 1), "if students develop a greater sensitivity to the strengths and weaknesses in their work, they stand a better chance of reaching the goals they are striving for". The focus of writing teachers has shifted from one-shot summative evaluation of students' written products to continuous and formative assessment of their writing process. Students these days are encouraged to write self-evaluation reports in which they continuously assess their development in their own writing. Students' active involvement in the assessment process shifts the focus from testing to learning and teaching (Charanjit Kaur et al., 2017). In addition, in recent years with an increasing focus on learner-centered language learning-teaching methods, such as problem-based learning (Webb and Moallem, 2016), more need is felt for self-assessment tools. However, the challenge is deciding on the criteria, based on which students could assess their own writing. This necessitates the development of self-assessment checklists which are useful tools that highlight certain aspects of writing to be considered by students when checking the quality of their drafts. Although self-assessment checklists are very powerful language learning-teaching tools, few are available to support undergraduates in reporting their research results. As it will be discussed later in the literature review section, the available checklists are mostly generic and have not been developed based on the specific features of a particular genre. There are genre-specific self-assessment checklists in the available literature. However, there is a

need for other writing genres including the descriptive genre. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to develop a self-assessment guide which supports students at different stages of writing descriptions for their research results.

2. OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. to develop a self-assessment guide for undergraduates' report writing based on the literature and the students' difficulties in writing result reports;
2. to refine the developed prototype by interviewing lecturers on their views toward their learners' difficulties as well as their expectations; and
3. to finalize the refined prototype through its in-house assessment.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the available self-assessment checklists in the area of ESL writing. Reviews of a number of studies on self-

assessment follow. Next, research findings on the rhetorical structure of the results section of a research report are also reviewed before deciding on a model that can be used in organizing the results. Finally, the ground rules based on which the Self-assessment Guide is developed are presented.

3.1. Self-assessment Checklists

Self-assessment checklists are tools that help students evaluate the quality of their written works before their submission. There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of self-assessment and self-assessment checklists. Reportedly, self-assessment causes learners to examine their written assignments more critically and results in their higher quality. Learners and teachers, both perceive self-assessment as positive and believe that it is a lifelong skill that can be transferred to other areas (Dragemark- Oscarson, 2009).According to Nielsen (2014), self-assessment enhances student writers' performance by promoting their reflection and meta-cognition throughout the writing process. Belachew et al. (2015) found that self-assessment improves students' writing skills and their performance in their subsequent written tasks.

Learners need checklists, which enable them to know how they can self-assess. Most of the available checklists are generic and fail to

account for the specific features of different genres. For example, Honsa (2013) presents one of the few checklists which was empirically tested for its effectiveness. The strength of this checklist is that it is accompanied by a guidance sheet. However, Honsa's (2013) checklist is not genre-specific. There are genre-specific self-assessment checklists in the available literature. To offer an example, Nimehchisalem et al. (2014) developed the Self-assessment Checklist for Undergraduate Students' Argumentative Writing, which helps students in writing argumentative essays. However, there is a need for other writing genres including the descriptive genre.

ESL writing teachers are encouraged to focus on the processes taking place in the student writer's mind (Flower and Hayes,1981; Zarei et al., 2017). Therefore the use of checklists should not be confined to the final stage of the writing process; rather, checklists could be designed in a way that they support students throughout the process of writing; that is, while drafting, revising, editing, and finalizing their work. Learners should be trained to revise their writing and be able to explain and justify the revisions they make. Nonetheless, most of the available checklists limit their focus on the written product, failing to capture all the writing stages, including idea generation, organization, revision, and editing. For example, the generic self-assessment checklist, which was developed for the law students at the University of Technology Sydney, does not support the learner throughout the writing process. It merely focuses on the quality of the final product and encourages student writers to assess the quality

of their drafting (putting ideas in logical order), style (using plain English), coherent and cohesion markers, grammatical definitions, and word choice, among a few other features of writing. In addition, its developers do not mention the theoretical framework based on which it was developed.

White and McGovern (1994) as well as Al-Hazmi and Scholfield (2007) also developed checklists based on the ESL Composition Profile by (Jacobs et al., 1981). These checklists covered different aspects of writing, including both meaning (organization and content) and form (grammar and mechanics). These checklists are very useful tools; however, they also fail to guide the learner throughout the writing process.

The significance of assessing writing in reference to different genres of writing has also been emphasized (Hyland, 2003; Jones, 1996). Checklists have been developed that are sensitive to the varying organizational structures of different genres of writing. Based on Faigley and Witte's (1981) taxonomy of revisions, Paulus (1999) developed a genre-specific self-assessment checklist. Its criteria included key argumentative writing skills like the development of ideas, word choice, effective reasoning, introduction, and conclusion. Nimehchisalem et al. (2014) developed an argumentative self-assessment checklist for Malaysian university students based on a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates a number of related models and theories.

There are also studies that explored the processes taking place in students' minds while writing (Flower and Hayes,1981; Hall, 2017). Based on the results of such studies self-assessment checklists have been recommended as tools that encourage learners to revise and explain their written works rather than merely evaluating them. Therefore, checklists should lead students to read their written works, list the ideas discussed, evaluate the unity, and finally explain how the written works could be revised and improved (Demirel and Enginarlar, 2007). By doing so, students will be actively involved in analyzing and evaluating their writing (Demirel and Enginarlar, 2007). One common drawback of most self-assessment checklists, however, is that they are merely restricted to the revision or the editing phase of writing. Students should be encouraged to assess their own works at all stages of writing, while generating ideas, organizing them, revising, and editing their written works. In other words, it would be a better idea to develop a self-assessment guide (rather than a checklist) that helps learners 'throughout' the writing process (rather than only after their written work is complete). There is a need for more genre-specific self-assessment checklists that are developed based on sound theory and that focus on the whole process of writing rather than only on the quality of the end product.

3.2. Ground Rules

With increasing emphasis on the important role of self-assessment and learner autonomy in language education, more and

more self-assessment checklists and guides will be developed in the years to come. It is important that certain ground rules are set based on the related literature before constructing such instruments. In addition to the rich literature available in the area of learning and teaching of ESL writing, some of the literature that we found useful to set the ground rules for developing the present prototype included Bachman and Palmer (1996), Nimehchisalem et al. (2014) among others. What follows is the list of ground rules set to develop the prototype.

3.2.1. ESL Writing Competence

The content of the current prototype was based on the Components of Language Competence (Bachman and Palmer, 1996), which views language as organizational knowledge (including grammatical and textual knowledge) and pragmatic knowledge (including functional and sociolinguistic knowledge). The taxonomy is well-established in the area of English language teaching and testing. Basing the prototype on a sound theory was expected to improve its construct validity.

3.2.2. ESL Writing as a Recursive Process

It was important to ensure that the prototype is also informed by well-established approaches in the area of learning-teaching of ESL writing. One of these is the process approach (Reid, 1993), which holds that the focus of student writer and teacher should be on the

process and not just the product of writing. The implication is that the focus of the learner/teacher should be on the whole writing process. The developed prototype covers the whole process of writing, before, while, and after the student writes. Additionally, the writing process is recursive (rather than linear), much like a pinball machine, as the writer makes unpredictable moves from pre-writing to writing or post-writing activities. A self-assessment guide should be sensitive to such principles.

3.2.3. Scaffolded Learning

Another approach that was followed in developing the prototype was the Genre Approach (Halliday, 1978), a well-established approach to learning-teaching of writing, particularly in academic contexts. This approach holds that in order for the students to learn the writing skills, they should actively use their linguistic knowledge to guide them toward a conscious understanding of target genres (Hyland, 2003). A sufficient number of examples should be provided for the students who are encouraged to: build the context, model the text, and deconstruct the text, to be able to construct the text independently and link it to other related texts.

3.2.4. Learning ESL Writing as a Lifelong Activity

In addition to support them before, while, and after writing a written piece, the self-assessment guide should also encourage student

writers to practice and develop these skills lifelong (Foley and Thompson, 2017).

3.2.5. Empirical Evidence

İt is important to explore the central phenomenon and learn more about the target users of a prototype. In order to ensure that the prototype was sensitive to the real problems faced by the target students in describing tables and graphs, it was developed by analyzing a batch of these learners' written samples.

3.2.6. Validation by Prospective Users

Validity matters in developing any instrument. The items of the prototype should address the construct that they are intended to address and experts in the area should validate their content. The current prototype was evaluated by two lecturers to ensure its validity.

3.2.7. Clarity

Since the prototype is going to be used as a self-access tool by the undergraduates, the clarity of its instructions and items is crucial. Therefore, if any technical terms have to be used, clear definitions, synonyms, and/or examples should be added to make them

comprehensible to the user (Colton and Colvert, 2007). The clarity of the prototype was addressed in the interviews with lecturers.

3.2.8. Imperative Wording

There is empirical evidence that as compared with statements and questions, imperative teacher comments result in more student writers' revisions in their drafts (Sugita, 2006). Therefore, the prototype items were worded as imperatives.

3.2.9. Appropriate Layout

Following Dörnyei (2003), the space economical font of 11-point Times New Roman was used and the response options were placed next to the questions and not below them.

3.2.10. Acticality

Finally, the developed guide should be accessible for its end users. For this reason, the online version of the prototype will also be launched. It should also be economical and concise since "long questionnaires can be counterproductive" (Dörnyei, 2003, pp. 18-19).

4. METODOLOGY

This study followed qualitative and data-based methods to develop and refine the prototype. The data-based method involved collecting written samples from a group of students and analyzing the samples to diagnose the special areas of difficulty in students' writing. According to Fulcher and Davidson (2007), it is possible to develop instruments in two different ways: intuitively or empirically. Instruments constructed intuitively are based on shared experience and theory. Following the related literature and theories as well as their own experience, developers outline a conceptual framework, according to which the items of the instrument are developed. On the other hand, instruments designed empirically follow databased approaches (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007), which commonly involve describing some written works collected directly from the population and then extracting the evaluative criteria that are going to be the focus of each of the domains (or sub-sections) of the instrument (Fulcher, 1996). In the current study, by combining the two methods a prototype was developed. Additionally, two lecturers were interviewed and in-house assessment was carried out by the research team to refine the prototype (Figure 1):

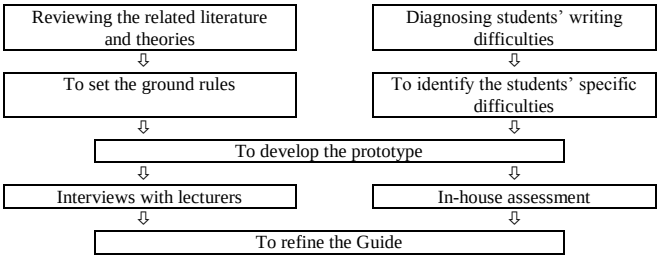

Figure 1. The Development Stages of the Guide

Figure 1 illustrates the stages of developing the prototype. The literature on the available self-assessment checklists and guides was reviewed to give the researchers some ideas on how to develop a useful checklist. In the meantime, a number of third-year students' written samples (n = 49) were analyzed to indicate the areas that needed to be emphasized by the checklist. In the next two stages, the prototype was refined by interviewing lecturers on its usefulness and through in-house assessment.

5. SAMPLE

An intact group of students (n = 49) was selected from the English Department of a public university in Malaysia. These students were selected since they were required to write their final year project the following semester. Two lecturers from the same department were invited for interviews. The first interviewee was an Associate Professor

with 30 years of lecturing experience.She had taught the course of Report Writing for 13years and was aware of the research setting and students' needs; she was also editor-in-chief of a scientific journal. The second interviewee was a senior lecturer with 10 years of lecturing experience and was about to complete her PhD. She was selected purposefully as she had 10 years of experience of teaching the course of Report Writing. Finally, in-house assessment was carried out by the members of the research team; that is, the present researchers.

6. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The written samples were collected from 49 undergraduates. The data were collected online using Google Forms. Before completing the task (Appendix A), the students filled up a consent form and answered a few demographic questions. The task involved describing the results in a table in more than 150 words and submitting their work within a week. They were told to spend no more than an hour on the task. A deductive thematic approach was followed to analyze the data (Gale et al., 2013). The data were compiled in an Excel document and shared among the researchers (n = 7) who read the samples one by one and commented on their content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. These features were adopted from Jacobset al.'s (1981) ESL Composition Profile, which was used by the researchers as an analytical framework. The researchers

individually read the samples and commented on their quality of content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics in the Excel file. These comments were then analyzed to elicit the major problems in the students' written works.

The interview data were collected from the two lecturers through email. The lecturers were sent a list of questions (Appendix B) with a cover letter, a consent form and the prototype. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively by the researchers, who also conducted the in-house assessment which was done by examining the prototype following a list of questions (Appendix C).

7. RESULTS

In this section, the results are reported in the order of the three objectives of the study, which were to develop, refine and finalize the Self-assessment Guide.

Development of a prototype

The first objective was developing a prototype. For this purpose, in addition to a review of the related literature, the students' written samples were collected and analyzed. The results of this analysis are presented in the next section.

Analysis of written samples

The comments were compiled, and analyzed for recurrent problems in the students' writings regarding their content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. As the results showed, different types of grammatical errors could be observed in all the 49 samples. The second most frequent area of difficulty was vocabulary. A majority of the samples (n = 37) had errors related to vocabulary. Problems related to content and organization were reported in almost half the samples, 24 and 22 respectively. Finally, the reults of the analysis indicated that the students had no problems related to mechanics, except for only one student. What follows is a detailed description of the particular areas of difficulty that the students had in reporting the tabulated information.

Content

While the competent students made attempts to select, analyze, synthesize, summarize, and/compare the information in their reports, a number of recurrent problems were observable in the written samples. The first problem was incomplete descriptions. Most descriptions failed to give a full picture of the table. Example 1 shows how students failed to fulfill the task in Appendix A:

Example 1:

This form is divided into age groups from teens to 70s+, each group have the percentage about six activities. Most teens play online games, peoples from 20s-50s groups use the internet for product research. Up to 60s groups get news from the internet. Teenagers do not have a job demand to search products. Getting news percentage is average between every age group. With the increase of age, people' interest for online games gradually reduced. Shopping age group focused on the 20s to 60s. Teens group less requirement of search people on the internet than other age groups.

The description is 95 words and is below the word limit (150 words). A complete description should be able to provide a full picture of the table in the readers' mind before they look at it. This description fails to fulfill the task. In contrast to the first problem, the second problem was that some students described everything, in a way that some reports included all the values indicated in the table (Example 2):

Example 2:

The table shows the information on the usage of the internetfor different age group which are; teen, 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s and 70 and above. The internet activities are divided by; Get news, Online games, Downloads, Product research, Buying a product

> and lastly, Searching for people. For the activity of Get news, there are 76% of teen, 73% from the 20s, 76% from 30s, 75% from the 40s, 71% from 50s, 74% from the 60s and 70% from 70 and above. …In addition, for the activity of Online games, 81% comes from teen, 54% comes from the 20s, 37% …

Example 2 describes the figures in the table one by one with no attempt to compare, synthesize, or analyze, all of which are left for the reader to do. The next problem was that some students had attempted to explain and discuss the results while the task only asked them to describe it. Example 3 shows an example of this type of problems:

> Example 3:
>
> Although 70 year olds using the internet for gaming are quite surprising, it is probably due to the orderly not wanting to clean up the mess after a game at the old folk's home.

The example shows that the student tried to explain the reason, but his/her justification (the underlined part) does not sound really convincing; not to mention that the task did not instruct the students to discuss the results. Although the review of the literature shows that it is a common practice to comment on (that it, discuss) the results right after reporting them, the focus of this study is only on describing the results. The third recurrent problem with the content of the students'

writing was that they sometimes lacked clarity. Example 4 gives an example of one of the students' vague content:

Example 4:

The number of users using the internet to search people increases going through the age groups, meanwhile the rate of activity for downloading decreases through the age groups.

Here the reader would wonder whether the writer means going through the age groups from lower to higher ages or vice versa. Another example for vague content is illustrated by Example 5:

Example 5:

… after the teenager, people are more interested in search other people.

In Example 5, it is not clear whether people will search for people or for teenagers. In teaching academic writing, one of the challenging tasks is to help them write clearly. In their English classes during school, students are often encouraged to write complex sentences using connectors. At university level, students should be guided to see the difference between essays and research reports. The problem that most students experience at this level is that they try to impress the reader by using complex sentences while neglecting a

more important aspect which is clarity. The final problem that was noticeable in some students' writing was that they sometimes included irrelevant content, as shown by Example 6:

Example 6:

> … This current situation explains the pattern shown in the table. However, don't judge the book by its cover. The pattern shown does not conclude the pattern of the Internet use around the world. For example, at the age of 52, my mother loves to play online games more than I do. In fact, she is the most frequent Internet user at home.

The underlined parts in Example 6 lack relevance. The student is not describing the results and therefore is not fulfilling the task. In the prototype, items were added to address these problems in order to make the students aware of the most recurrent problems exhibited by their peers. A good self-assessment guide would help students select, analyze, synthesize, summarize, and/or compare the information in the table.

Organization

Similar to the results of the analysis of the content of their written samples, four problems occurred frequently. The first problem

was abrupt opening and going straight into reporting the results without preparing the reader first (Example 7):

Example 7:

> According to the table, the variable shared by all ages is when they access the Get News. It seems that everyone updates on news most of the time as the average of 70% of every ages often access on Get News.

Readers will find it difficult to understand the report in Example 7 as it fails to begin by stating first what these results are all about before setting off to reporting the results. The second common problem that was noted by the researchers was a lack of coherence (Example 8):

Example 8:

> …for the first and second part on the table is quite right except for the remaining ones. I did more downloading than what mentioned. though I do spend a lot doing product research, I don't buy online that frequent. as for the last part, it's pretty much right since I don't really use the internet for that particular purpose.

The student exhibits a basic level of writing organization skills, failing to see that the reader will not understand what the first and

second parts of the table refer to and why the writer has started writing about him/herself. The reader will find it difficult to make sense of the description. The third problem was a lack of cohesion in some samples (Example 9):

Example 9:

> This form is divided into age groups from teens to 70s+, each group have the percentage about six activities. Most teens play online games, peoples from 20s-50s groups use the internet for product research. Up to 60s groups get news from the internet. Teenagers do not have a job demand to search products. Getting news percentage is average between every age group. With the increase of age, peoples' interestin online games gradually reduced. Shopping age group focused on the 20s to 60s.Teens group less requirement of search people on the internet than other age groups.

The cohesion of this text could be improved by effective use of connectors. The way the writer reported the results shows that the student expects readers to relate the sentences by themselves. Finally, as it was evident in some of the samples, the report ended rather abruptly (Example 10):

Example 10:

> … People from 20s are the highest for searching people because, at this age, they started to look for employment. Meanwhile, teens have the lowest number because they started to make friends at this age.

This report ends rather abruptly with no attempts to provide a closure. It indicates that the writer did not make any effort to wind up the report with some overall remarks about the table to signal that the report is coming to an end.

Vocabulary

Students also had problems with regard to the use of vocabulary effectively in addition to the common problem of using the correct words and word forms. One of the recurrent comments was students' over-repeated vocabulary items (Example 11):

Example 11:

> I can see that 81% of the teenagers use the internet to play online games. However, the percentage drops to 54% of people in their twenties and 37% of people in their thirties. The table drops to 29% …

The report in Example 11 would have sounded more mature if the student had tried other possible ways to describe the percentage

values, for example, by using about 8 in 10 for 81% or just over half instead of 54%. Apart from the use of repetitive vocabulary items, use of inappropriate registers could also be observed in some samples (Examples 12-13):

Example 12:

Teens prove again to be the odd one out as it scored a 5%.

Example 13:

Well, the 30s spend much more time on product search and buy them.

In these examples, the expression odd one out and well would be more appropriate for less formal contexts and it would be better to replace them with more formal or neutral words such as exceptional and obviously, respectively. The final recurrent problem that the students had with vocabulary was that they failed to use the exact words. For example, they would use falling up and down for fluctuating or download things for download files.

Grammar

Students made a variety of language errors. Some of the most common cases included subject-verb agreement (Internet activities

varies*), wrong use of plural forms (different age* would infer different interest*) and tenses (the age that was being focused* on are teens), missing prepositions (search people for search for people), inaccurate prepositions (interest on* online games), fragments, and inaccurate use of connectors. Another recurrent problem was that they often failed to shift their focus (Example 14):

Example 14:

All age groups also use the internet to search for people at a similar rate. All age groups use the internet to get news at a similar rate. All age groups also use the internet to search for people at a similar low rate.

Mature writers are capable of shifting the focus more often than the basic writers. The linguistic cue to recognize focus is the grammatical subject. Example 14 has 3 sentences and the subject, or the focus, in all three sentences remains the same (all age groups). The writer could have demonstrated his/her grammatical skills by shifting the focus in each sentence, as follows:

Example 14 revised:

All age groups also use the internet to search for people at a similar rate. The internet was used to get news at a similar rate

by all age groups. A similarly low rate was also recorded for all age groups for using the internet to search for people.

The syntax of the revised example looks more mature and its style less monotonous. In Example 14, as in a monotonous movie, the focus is on the same subject, all age groups. However, in the revised example, the focus keeps shifting from one subject to the other to add variety.

Mechanics

Almost all the students demonstrated highly competent skills with regard to the mechanics. Only in one of the samples, did the writer misuse a comma for a full-stop, which could be considered a mistake rather than an error since the student used commas and full-stops accurately for the rest of the sentences. Likewise, no inaccurate cases were reported for paragraphing and capitalizing.

Refinement of the prototype

In order to address the second objective, which was to refine the developed prototype, two lecturers were interviewed. The following section reports the results of these interviews.

Interviews

In addition to the information collected from analyzing the students' written samples, valuable information was also provided by two lecturers, who were interviewed on the clarity, comprehensiveness and relevance of the sections/items of the Guide. One of the lecturers mentioned that the term report was rather vague: For Malaysian university students, report writing usually means Final Year Project, and it is research writing.This was an important observation and it would indicate that the term had to be operationally defined.

The lecturers mentioned that a good report should be well-organized and should interpret the data. This would mean that the writer is expected not only to describe the information but also to say what it means:

> My students have problems in reporting their results. They only report the data in a literal sense. I normally tell them, ı can see the results for myself; what do the results mean? You need to interpret and not merely report numbers.

Additionally, they believed thatlanguage use also plays a significant role:A good report should be written in a clear and accurate language, following the correct writing convention (e.g. APA) accepted by the discipline. Such comments were very helpful and

clearly showed what had to be highlighted by the self-assessment guide.

When asked about their students' main areas of difficulty in reporting information in tables or graphs, they mentioned that their students' main difficulty areas included:

> Language: lack of clarity, wordiness, poor word choice, non-use of cohesion and coherence markers
> Organization: lack of logical progression such as from general to specific, and no linkage among the various sections
> Content: Ideas and claims not substantiated by citations

These results confirmed those of the analysis of the students' written samples. The researchers found them to be very helpful in revising the prototype. The lecturers were also requested to declare how they scaffolded their students' development in writing reports. One of the lecturers stated that she gave her students some guidelines to follow and sample texts to model as she believed, the sample text can help them to use the appropriate writing style and language structures needed. As they pointed out, they had not introduced any self-assessment checklists for their students.

Finalization of the Self-assessment Guide

To meet the final objective, an in-house assessment of the prototype was conducted whose results are presented in the next section.

In-house assessment

In addition to the interviews, the Guide was also shared with the members of the research team, two associate professors and three senior lecturers (with 15-28 years of experience), a postdoctoral fellow and an MA student in the Department of English in a public university in Malaysia. They individually went through the prototype and provided feedback on the clarity, comprehensiveness and relevance of its sections and items, based on a list of questions (Appendix C). The researchers ensured that the items of the prototype were clearly and appropriately worded for the students' level. The layout of the prototype was also assessed for its clarity.

Some useful comments were the results obtained fromthe in-houseassessment:

> While writing section contains too many items with a lengthy explanation. Perhaps, you may want to combine some related items together.

You may want to extend the scope of the prototype by combining discussion of results.
Suggest more useful sources!

As a result of the in-house assessment, modifications were made to the prototype, including:

Rewording some of the instructions
Rewording some of the items
Moving some of the items
Removing some parts of some lengthy items
Adding some items

The prototype was further refined based on these comments. The suggestion to add discussion of the results to the scope of the study was not followed as it would be beyond the scope of the present study. The result was the first version of the Self-assessment Guide for Tertiary Level Students' Results Report Writing (Appendix D).

The Self-assessment Guide for Tertiary Level Students' Results Report Writing

The final outcome of this study was the first version of the Self-assessment Guide for Tertiary Level Students' Results Report Writing. The Guide is divided into four main sections: Before Writing (with 5 items), While Writing (with 7 items), After Writing (with 15 items, and

Always (with 3 items). Next to each item, students are provided with three choices: they may check the item done, pending or not applicable. A notes column has also been added for the students to leave their own notes, should the want to, next to each item in the Guide.

The first section of the Guide, Before Writing, is a step in preparing materials or information before students organize their writing. This section also encourages the students to list ideas and plan before they start their research results in writing. Finally, they need to consider the appropriate vocabulary and tenses to be used in reporting their results. The next section, While Writing, is a step-by-step guide helping students to organize the descriptions of tables and graphs in their research results. The third section, After Writing, emphasizes on revision steps of their written products. This section encourages the students to analyze, evaluate, and improve their work. Its final section, Always, includes some tips on what the students should always do to improve the quality of their results report.

8. DISCUSSION

This paper presented the development and in-house assessment process of the Self-assessment Guide for Tertiary Level Students' Results Report Writing (Version 1). The novelty of the Guide is that its

focus is not only on the whole process of writing but also on writing skill development as a lifelong activity. It also emphasizes the recursive nature of writing. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this is the first genre-specific self-assessment guide developed based on empirical data and validated by experts to help ESL students in the process of describing data presented in tables and graphs.

In order to ensure that the developed Guide would address the specific areas of difficulty faced by the students in describing tables or graphs, a batch of their written samples were analyzed. The results of this analysis confirm those of the previous studies. For example, Nambiar (2007) reported low ESL writing skills among Malaysian tertiary level learners. In their study of Malaysian university students' difficult areas in ESL descriptive writing, Ashrafzadeh and Nimehchisalem called for "the urgent need for remedial courses to help these students improve their organization and vocabulary skills in ESL writing" (2015: 286). Similarly, Loan and Pramoolsook (2015) found Malaysian undergraduate students incapable of reporting and interpreting research results and often unable to organize their results and discussions effectively.

More specifically, our results showed that undergraduate students make highly frequent mistakes in sentence structure besides word choice and form. A possible explanation of these results could be the emphasis on content over form. Based on the principles of the dominant language teaching methods such as Communicative

Language Teaching (CLT), meaning is prioritized over form (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). In following this principle, some teachers may neglect the form and accuracy all together and focus solely on developing their learners' pragmatic skills and fluency. Language educators should note that failing to raise language learners' consciousness of accurate language use will result in their frequent language errors. Another issue that needs to be highlighted in this section is the validity of the Guide. Validity may be a priori and a posteriori (Weir, 2005). A priori validation has a judgmental nature. Instrument developers can guard against threats to a priori validity by establishing the instrument on sound theory and understanding of their current research context. A priory validity is tested before the instrument is in fact used. Ground rules 3.4.1 to 2.4.4 would help the researchers guard against the threats to a priory validity. A posteriori validation, on the other hand, is of an empirical nature. It is confirmed once the instrument has been developed. Rules 3.4.5 and 3.4.6 are expected to contribute to the a posteriori validity of the prototype. In this line, Fulcher (2003) argues that instruments established on intuition are questionable for their validity and quality, whereas those originating from the analysis of samples are empirically derived instruments (p. 104). The present Self-assessment Guide was developed by integrating both intuitional and empirical methods. This multi-method procedure will also contribute to the validity of the output of this study.

9. CONCLUSION

Learners can experience elevated stress and writing apprehension levels when they are required to write project reports, a compulsory course for most undergraduate programs in Malaysia. The results of this study provide very useful information for ESL writing teachers who need to know undergraduates' specific areas of difficulty in reporting results. Additionally, training these learners to use the Guide presented in this paper, among other helpful interventions may help them improve their academic writing skills in English autonomously.

This study is expected to help researchers and teachers interested in developing their own self-assessment guides or checklists for their current learning-teaching contexts. Most studies in the area address the argumentative or other genres while the descriptive genre is often taken for granted. Teachers usually assume students will acquire the skill to describe their results by themselves and by modelling the sample reports they are reading. However, most students do not analyze what they read; that is, they do not focus on the language or structure of the text they read. Rather, they primarily focus on the content of the texts they read. As a result, most of them fail to describe tables or graphs effectively. Students need to know what makes a mature description. Self-assessment guides or checklists can support them in doing so. Finally, teachers and researchers are increasingly realizing the significance of learner autonomy. One of the

powerful learning-teaching strategies that can support autonomous learning is self-assessment, which is sometimes misunderstood for self-rating. Writing teachers should develop a culture of self-assessment as an educational tool rather than a method to help students grade or rate their own work. Self-assessment as an educational tool supports learners in drafting, revising, and editing their written work. Admittedly, further studies are required to confirm the effectiveness of the Guide. The project is still on-going, and the Guide is in the process of being refined based on the results of the external assessment of a panel of experts and a field-test. The findings of forthcoming studies will help its developers further refine it and improve its usefulness and usability. It may be too bold to claim that self-assessment offers an effective solution for all ESL student writers' problems. However, training learners to assess their own writing, before having it peer-reviewed or before submitting it to teachers, will at least mean less work for peers and teachers. It will also scaffold the student writer's skill development.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: The Writing Task

You should spend no more than 60 minutes on this task. You have a week to submit.

The table below gives information on internet use in six categories by age group.

Describe the information in the table and make comparisons where appropriate.

Write at least 150 words.

Internet activities by age group

Activity (%)	Age group						
	Teens	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	70+
Get News	76	73	76	75	71	74	70
Online games	81	54	37	29	25	25	32
Downloads	52	46	27	15	13	8	6
Product research	0	79	80	83	79	74	70
Buying a product	43	68	69	68	67	65	41
Searching for people	5	31	23	23	24	29	27

Appendix B: Interview questions

1. Regarding the structure of the 'Results' section in a project report, what elements should the section include?
2. What are the common mistakes made by your undergraduate students in the 'Result' section of their FYP?
3. What do you think makes a good table or graph description?

a. What aspects matter to you most while reading the students' result section of their FYP?

b. What aspects are NOT very important to you while reading students' result section of their FYP?

4. Are there any guidelines or frameworks you commonly refer your students to while describing tables/graphs? Do you provide any models or self-assessment checklists for them?
5. What sorts of comments do you commonly give to your students? Could you list a few here?
6. How do you expect your students to organize the discussion section of their final year project reports/ theses?
7. What do you think your students perceive as a good discussion?
8. Are there any guidelines or frameworks you commonly refer to your students while discussing their results? Do you provide any models or self-assessment checklists for them?

Appendix C: In-house assessment questions

1. How appropriate is the language used in the prototype appropriate for undergraduate students' level?
2. How clear are the items listed in the prototype?
3. How clear is the layout of the prototype?
4. Which items would you recommend to be revised, reworded, removed, moved, and/or added?

Appendix D: Self-assessment Guide for Tertiary Level Students' Results Report Writing (Version 1)

An important academic skill expected from university level students is their ability to understand and describe tabulated or graphic data. This Self-assessment Guide (Version 2.0) has been developed for tertiary students to help them check the quality of their writing before submission to lecturers. The Self-assessment Guide has four sections, which support student-writers before, while, and after describing their research results in the form of tabulated or graphic information. Its final section includes some tips on what students should 'always' do to help them improve the quality of their results report.

Before Writing

Item	Done	Pending	Not applicable	Notes
1. Study the table or figure to				
i. find out its main purpose, and				
ii. see what is presented in the row and column headings of the table or the horizontal and vertical axes of the graph				
2. List/highlight the information you choose to describe.				
i. highlight the highest, lowest, and moderate trends or the less and more important features related to the topic in question; and				
ii. group the related categories.				
3. Plan how you want to organize your report: Descriptions have three main parts including an introduction, body, and conclusion, so you may:				
i. begin with an opening sentence summarizing what the table or graph shows;				
ii. specify the major trends or features;				
iii. compare the most and least significant features;				
iv. state a final point; and				
v. conclude your description				
4. Think about the vocabulary you will use in your description. Useful online sources: www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/describing-quantities/; and http://www.eslflow.com/describinggraphstables.html				
5. Consider the tenses that you would use in your writing.				
i. You may begin with a statement in the present tense that locates the table/figure;				
ii. You may continue with past tense statements that present the most important findings				
iii. You may also need to use a combination of tenses when describing a table or graph which contains trends in the past, present and future.				

While Writing

Item	Done	Pending	Not applicable	Notes
1. Write what the table or graph shows by paraphrasing the label or caption. You could start by stating: - The table indicates … - The pie chart is about ... - The figure illustrates … - The bar chart describes ... - The line graph shows ... - The chart compares the ... - The pie chart is divided into ... parts.				
2. Mention the features presented. Avoid direct reference to the stub and column headings of a table or the horizontal and vertical axes of a graph. Example:				

➢ The categories presented include …				
3. Avoid describing all the information presented by the table or graph.				
i. Make sure the information you report is accurate.				
ii. Report the summary of the important features or trends.				
iii. Select the most/least significant trends.				
iv. Categorize and compare different trends.				
v. Synthesize trends or categories to postulate hypotheses (if applicable).				
4. You may have to describe your important findings in there are three different ways depending on the table/graph:				
i. comparing among groups,				
ii. describing fluctuations over time, and/or				
iii. describing relationship between two or more variables				
5. Write two or more sentences about the overall trend. Example: ➢ There is an upward trend … ➢ The figure shows a decline … ➢ The number fluctuates …				
6. Describe two to three of the most significant trends, figures or features. Example:: ➢ ... has the largest/ second largest (number of) ... ➢ ... is as high as/ twice as high as ... ➢ ... is higher than ... ➢ The number ... rises/increases/ascends/grows by ... ➢ The number ... plateaus/remains stable ➢ It reaches a peak in …				
7. Describe the least significant trends, figures or features. Example: ➢ Only one third ... ➢ The figure ... plummets/decreases/falls/goes down ... ➢ The trend hits a dip in …				

After Writing

Item	Done	Pending	Not applicable	Notes
1. Organize your report:				
i. Make sure all the sentences are linked well and coherent.				
ii. You may use connectives (e.g., in addition, however).				
iii. Use transitions to signal the different parts of your report (e.g., 'to sum up' signals the conclusion).				
2. Avoid vague content. Example: The number of users using internet to search people increases going through the age groups meanwhile the rate of activity for downloading decreases through the age groups.				
3. Avoid irrelevant content. Example: This current situation explains the pattern shown in the table. However, don't judge the book by its cover. The pattern shown does not conclude the pattern of the Internet use around the world. For example, at the age of 52, my mother loves to play online games more than I do. In fact, she is the most frequent Internet user at home.)				

4. Avoid explanations since readers expect only reports of results not discussions Example: Although 70 year olds using the internet for gaming is quite surprising, it is probably due to the orderly not wanting to clean up the mess after a game at the old folk's home.				
5. Avoid repeating the same vocabulary or expressions. Example: use 'indicate' instead of over-using 'show'; or write 'half' or '10 out of 20' to avoid repeating '50%'. Note: Some technical terms do not have synonyms. Readers of academic reports expect you to use the key terms consistently. For example, paraphrasing 'anxiety' to 'apprehension' and using them interchangeably may confuse some readers. As another example, 'informant' is appropriate for participants in interviews while 'respondent' is often used for participants in a survey.				
6. Avoid informal words. For example, words like 'well' or 'actually' are appropriate for informal contexts. Similarly, avoid clichés (such as 'odd-one-out) or overused proverbs (like 'killing two birds with one stone')				
7. Use an objective tone:				
i. Use impersonal language (e.g., It can be argued that …; instead of I think that …).				
ii. Avoid emotive or judgemental words (e.g., I dislike this appalling trend).				
8. Use the exact term. For example, 'fluctuate' for 'going up and down' or 'downloading files' for 'downloading things'				
9. Revise repeated structures. One way would be changing the subject in different sentences. For example, instead of starting every sentence with 'The table…', change the subject, 'The majority of respondents…' use passive voice, 'The library was used by fewer …'.				
10. Avoid starting sentences with numbers. You can begin a sentence with an adverb (e.g., briefly, obviously, unexpectedly).				
11. Use formal structures.				
i. Avoid contractions (e.g., don't)				
ii. Avoid interrogatives (e.g., What does the table show?)				
iii. Use impersonal language				
12. Your language must be accurate. Avoid common grammatical mistakes, such as:				
i. Subject-verb disagreement: Internet activities varies (incorrect), Internet activities vary (correct)				
ii. Plural forms: different age (incorrect), different ages (correct)				
iii. Tenses: The table had shown (incorrect), The table shows (correct)				
iv. Prepositions: searching information (incorrect), searching for information (correct)				
v. Fragments: What is evident in the table… (incorrect), What is evident in the table is that … (correct)				

vi. Connectors: While female teenagers do not… (incorrect), However female teenagers do not… (correct) Useful online sources: https://www.oxford-royale.co.uk/articles/15-common-grammar-gripes-avoid.html; and http://my.ilstu.edu/~jhkahn/writing.html).				
13. Proofread for misspellings (e.g., 'form' for 'from').				
14. Avoid ampersand, unless you are citing others in brackets.				
15. Be consistent with capitalizing, italicizing, or bold-facing words.				

Always

Item	Done	Pending	Not applicable	Notes
1. Review and analyze related texts: While reading descriptions of tables, figures, etc., pay attention to how professional authors				
ii. select the information that is significant and the trends that can be compared;				
iii. present the information;				
iv. organize their description;				
v. use academic and technical vocabulary; and				
vi. use language accurately.				
2. You will find writing handbooks and online sources useful for improving your writing Useful sources: The first four units in the writing section of Jakeman, V. & McDowell, C. (2008). New insight into IELTS. Cambridge: CUP and http://www.ieltsbuddy.com/ielts-table.html				
3. Write. Write. Write. Practice makes perfect. There are very helpful online sources that help you practice writing for free Useful source: https://www.elanguages.ac.uk/los/eap/introduction_to_describing_graphs_and_tables.html				

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