A REAPPRAISAL OF THE EVALUATION OF WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a reasseSsment of the methods employed in the marking and evaluation of writing exercises. It is a study of methods that have so far been used by teachers and proposes a reorientation of perspectives and approach. By citing examples from a student's writing exercise, I suggest two approaches towards the evaluation of writing. One approach centres on the analysis of the grammatical structures employed by the student while the other approach is based on the acknowledgment of students' correct application of the rules of grammar. Practical suggestions are given on how these approaches can be applied in the classroom. Practical problems encountered in the classroom are briefly referred to and attempts are made to answer some questions on making pedagogic notions functional in the classroom. The paper is an attempt to look at the both the teacher's task of evaluation as well as the students' process of learning. It is hoped in the final conclusion, some salient and useful pointers may be offered to teachers and therefore, to the benefit of students.

The Importance of Error Identification

While it cannot be argued that the marking and evaluation of writing exercises is both time-consuming, and laborious, the task of sieving out the students mistakes and misuse of the language cannot be overlooked. However, if the marking and evaluation of writing exercises were to be confined to the level of identification of errors - a mere pointing out of errors and a signal for students to proceed to corrections or re-writing either having been shown how to go about it by the teacher or to carry on as best as he/she can, this approach will sadly seem myopic and impoverished.

While our hard-working and equally hard-pressed teachers should be exonerated from the charge of being unmotivated or even archaic in their time-tried approach towards the evaluation of writing, perhaps it is time to reassess our ways, shake off some of the old conceptions if need be and even take a step back to the early principles and re-emerge with refurbished ideas.

It has generally been accepted that the student's errors provide evidence of the existence of a system of language that is different from his or her mother tongue and the target language (Selinker, 1985; Corder, 1985). Furthermore, these errors reveal that the student is attempting to learn the grammar and structures of the language. His or her learning stage can be likened to the plotting of a continuum, where presumably he or she begins near the starting point of the continuum and as he or she progresses in his or her mastery of the target language, he or she moves farther down the

continuum. As he or she progresses down the continuum, assuming he or she improves with time and practice, it would seem that he or she is experimenting and devising some kind of system that grows to be closer to that of the target language as he or she fulfils the learning objectives.

The errors he or she makes along the way are not to be viewed upon as a negative sign of the student's inadequacy in the target language but rather as a positive sign of what he or she has grasped of the target language in the limited time he or she is exposed to it. It can, therefore, be seen why error identification is undeniably of great importance to the teacher.

In the evaluation of writing exercises, two useful approaches go hand in hand: the analytical and the acknowledgment.

The Analytical Approach

Given the large number of students in the class and the amount of paper work and deadlines that teachers face today, it may seem difficult for overtaxed teachers to look upon students' writing exercises as a valuable cache of information that speaks volume of' the students' performance and competence. Teachers who are eager to get on with the marking task at hand, may overlook the fact that errors reveal what students have acquired. According to Strevens (1969):

> If a regular pattern of errors could be observed in the performance of all learners ... his errors could be taken as evidence not of failure but of success and achievement in learning.

It seems then that as teachers, given our work pressure and other constraints, we need to re-orientate our way of looking at the task of essay marking as not merely to seek out errors and correct them, but equally importantly, to understand these errors not just for ourselves but also for our students.

The first and second parts of the marking process, that is, identifying the errors and correcting them will come naturally to most of us but the third part, that of understanding the errors will prove to be the most interesting and admittedly, the most time-consuming activity for the concerned teacher. To illustrate the analysis of errors, let us look at the following sentence that has been constructed by a student.

Sentence

Malaysia, likes other countries, can't escapes from the problems.

Analysis

'like other countries' is considered a prepositional phrase.

In *A University Grammar of English* (page 138), Quirk and Greenbaum state that "among the prepositions less commonly used in postmodifications we should mention 'like' in the sense 'resembling'... But it is common and fully acceptable in the sense 'such as'..." In the above sentence, we see that the student has applied the word 'likes' to the correct function of a preposition but because of its function, the student does not realise that the word does not undergo inflectional change.

The student was probably confused with the use of the word 'likes' as a verb as in for example: She likes coffee where as a verb, 'likes' has an 'a' added for agreement with the singular pronoun 'she'. The student has added 's' to 'like' for agreement with 'Malaysia'. In the analysis of the above sentence, it can be seen that the student has

a. applied correctly the use of the word 'like' as a preposition
b. has tried to apply the basics of subject-verb agreement.

In other words, the student has some notion of the rules of usage but has overgeneralised the rules. However, the errors are positive indicators of the student's learning process.

Mention has to be made of incidences in evaluation where the teacher has to be sensitized to particular cases where the student's correct applications of the rules and orthographic system of the language may be obscured by errors in the writing.

A case in point is illustrated by the following example drawn from the same student's writing exercise.

Sentence

The latest statistic showed, approximately there are 6,000,000 people in Malaysia who involve in the drug abuse and most of them die teenagers and unemployees.

Analysis

At first glance, it is obvious that the word 'statistic' should be 'statistics'. The absence of an 'a' in the word is probably due to negative transfer. It usually happens that when English words are borrowed and used in Bahasa Melayu, the morpheme 'a' that occurs at the end of English lexical items are omitted in the Bahasa Melayu borrowed item. Hence, we have words like 'matematik', 'fizik' and 'ekonomik'. However, what is surprising in the use of the word 'statistic' is that the student has correctly spelt the word with a 'c' and not 'k' as is the case with 'statistik'. So, while the student has left out the 's' from the word, he has managed to spell the word partially correctly.

Another example of correct usage that may be obscured by the errors in the above sentence is: the use of the word 'involve' which shows that the student has attempted to arrive at some form of agreement between the verb and the noun 'people'. However, he does not realise that the passive form is required. It is also possible that the student has not used 'who involved' because in his opinion, the problem still persists and therefore, the past tense is not suitable. Though this may strictly be conjecture on the part of the teacher, it cannot be denied that the marking of writing exercises does require some depth of understanding on the part of the teacher and some allowable, plausible explanations for the discrepancies made by students. It is hoped that this approach may offer flexibility to an otherwise rigid form of evaluation and will help remove the 'sting' from students at the receiving end.

The Acknowledgment Approach

As mentioned earlier both the analytical approach and the acknowledgment approach should be applied concurrently when we are marking students' work. But for the purpose of discussing each one in detail and in drawing examples to illustrate, I have elected to deal with them separately.

What do I mean by the Acknowledgment Approach? It is important to remember that our task at marking is not only to point out errors, as mentioned earlier, and to correct them. But an equally important dimension lies in the acknowledgment of the correct usages and constructions that students have experimented with and successfully applied.

Learning is a cognitive process and it means that getting constructions and grammar correct is not a hit-and-run affair or a flash in the pan for students. The correct usages actually indicate that students have thought hard on the rules of grammar and have exercised care in applying these rules to the formation of sentences that express their ideas and reasoning. It is therefore, befitting for teachers to acknowledge the worthy efforts of students by openly remarking them to the students either verbally or as written asides in the margin of the essay. This will be a positive signal to students and is moreover, psychologically motivating and encouraging for the learners.

To illustrate the use of this approach together with the analytical approach, let us look at the following sentence again.

> *Sentence*
>
> The latest statistic showed, approximately there are 6,000,000 people in Malaysia who involve in the drug abuse and most of them die teenagers and unemployees.
>
> *Acknowledgement*
>
> The use of the adjective 'latest' and adverb 'approximately' is appropriate. In addition, the student has applied correctly the rules pertaining to subject-verb agreement in 'there are 6,000,000 people'. Another plus point for the student is that he has used the relative pronoun 'who' correctly and in the suitable position. It may also be observed that a further example of correct subject-verb agreement in 'most of them die' aptly shows that the student has mastered the rules pertaining to this particular area.

Application in the Classroom

Given the size of the classroom population and the time constraint, the approaches mentioned above will remain mere showcases of pedagogic ideals, even if we strive to carry out the analysis and acknowledgement with every student in the class during the language period. A more practical way may be to apply both approaches while marking the writing exercises and then to select the pieces of work at random or with specific intentions for class analysis. The teacher could analyse and acknowledge the selected pieces of work with the class, pointing out the errors, explaining them, correcting them and acknowledging the good points. Later, when students are set to do other pieces of work or if time permits, the teacher could then go through the analysis and acknowledgement with some students, especially the weaker ones, in person.

Once the students have become accustomed to the teacher's use of the approaches in marking essays, there will come a time when it may no longer be necessary for the teacher to write the analysis - the asides of acknowledgement in detail. By now the teacher will probably have evolved some system of abbreviation or markers that are easily and accurately interpreted by the students. As this concept of

marking is not based on the assumption of what is right and wrong but rather on identification, understanding and acknowledgement, perhaps it would be a worthwhile idea to carry out the marking with a neutral coloured pen as opposed to a red one that instinctively tells the student that his work is flawed.

The idea of analysing student texts and acknowledging usages may be regarded as pedagogic wise talk or even sales talk by teachers who are already admirably holding up as best as they can the superb juggling act they perform in the classroom. It is fine to proffer ideas in the form of approaches, theories and case studies. But how does one reconcile notions and classroom situations? Is there any absolutely foolproof formula?

Just as ideas, theories and so forth may be propounded and offered to teachers, practical suggestions in proliferation have likewise assailed them. Clearly no aspersions are meant to be cast on commendable and laudable inroads made by fellow teachers and educationists in the field of language teaching and learning. But the parallelism drawn points ultimately to the user of these notions and practical suggestions. The teacher is in the end the one who will have the flexibility and challenge of trying out, modifying and reassessing such new or refurbished ideas and suggestions.

Conclusion

The approaches discussed above are aimed at helping teachers to develop an added dimension in the perspective of the evaluation of students' writing exercises. It is hoped that teachers will be imbued with the desire to make the writing class a more realistic activity and for the students a forward moving process.

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