The Influence of Curriculum and Student–teacher Relationships on Academic Writing

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Abstract
This paper analyses a method of instructing first-year students in academic writing, based on the belief that students gain a sense of self-efficacy through positive reinforcement of their attempts to write; that writing improves when writing concepts are introduced gradually; and that students perform better when they repeatedly see evidence of good writing. The study seeks to examine the following hypotheses: (1) step by step instruction of academic writing is effective; (2) the psychological aspect of students should be fully considered; and (3) the combination of three types of assessment – self-, peer and teacher assessment – works well, particularly if the process is gradual. Three types of assessment rubric were issued in the same format during one academic term. The results suggest that the combination and procedure worked well. As a result of these investigations, several suggestions for future research could be made.

Keywords: Academic writing, Assessment design, Rubrics

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Introduction

The introduction of college first-years to academic writing does not always go easily. Nowadays, students find academic writing more difficult than communicating via mobile tools or social media networks. University teachers note a decline in students' comfort with proficiency in academic writing.

I have tried out several methods of instruction but runs into problems almost every year. Still, I have found that the teacher's individual correction of essays is helpful. However, it is also true that this leaves teachers more burdened and students likely to be daunted. This may indicate that students cannot learn everything they need by such corrections. The problem, in my experience, is that their contribution is less rewarding than they expect. Before my students submitted a piece of work, I used to ask them to check the self-assessment rubric which was already available in their textbook. This seemed not very successful; in my view, the timing and the format could have been improved. In response to this, I tried to reform what I was doing and to apply it in different ways combined with several types of assessment. This paper reports my latest attempt

Assessment in the Literature

As regards assessment, various methods have been introduced and conducted in the past few decades. He study by Ono and Matsushita (2016) raises issues of assessment in universities and concludes as follows:

> It is very important in the active learning to foster students as assessment subjects and to design assessment itself as learning, or 'assessment as learning'. [translated by the author]

I agree with this view, since it helps to make learners self-regulated (Zimmerman 2002).

Reinholz (2016) stresses the value of peer assessment in support of self-assessment and proposes a new model of peer assessment for learning. His model, which has six components, focuses on the connection between peer assessment and self-assessment. Peer assessment has two functions, that of evaluating students' outcomes and another, which he focuses on: its support for student learning.

Ndoye (2017) explores students' perceptions of the mechanisms and processes through which peer assessment and self-assessment can contribute to their learning. He shows the effects of the mechanism, particularly the successful interaction of the mechanism with visualized depictions. In his findings, he emphasises students' sense of responsibility for their own learning. In the minds of his students, feedback is one of the main mechanisms helping them to benefit from both self-assessment and peer assessment.

A two-year university study by Wanner and Palmer (2018) states that self- and peer assessment require careful design and implementation for them to be effective in formative assessment processes.

Kearney, Perkins and Kennedy-Clark (2016) examines the validity of self- and peer marking using an AASL (authentic assessment for sustainable learning) model in

which lecturer assessment, self-assessment and peer assessment are combined to produce summative grades for the students. The result reveals that students from an early stage can judge their own work as well as that of their peers with reasonable accuracy.

Hypotheses and Research Method

This study seeks to examine the following hypotheses:
(1) Step by step instruction of academic writing is effective.
(2) The psychological aspect of students should be fully considered.
(3) A combination of three types of assessment – self-, peer and teacher assessment – works   well, particularly when the process is gradual.

The rubrics were chosen and applied to fit the various assessment tools. The same format was used in all the types of assessment. The format and the procedures of the rubrics were carefully designed.

First, all the descriptions in the rubrics were expressed in a positive tone. As can be seen in the table below, even the lowest level (Level 1) has avoided negative phrasing; rather, it asks to what extent students completed their task.

Second, each column describes a concrete achievement. Students were able to find their next assignment just by reading the right column.

Table 1: Descriptions of the rubrics

Perspectives	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Citation and quotations	The introduction of citations or quotations was attempted.	Between L1 and L3	Citations or quotations were set out according to the rules	Between L3 and L5	Citations and quotations were set out according to the rules and seemed natural and even effective in their context.
Outline and heading of chapters	The headings seemed to be related to the contents of the essay.	Between L1 and L3	The headings suggested the contents of the essay.	Between L3 and L5	The outline was clearly and logically organized and easy to understand.

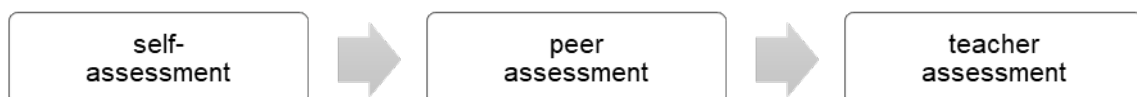Third, each assessment was conducted in the order shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: the order of the assessment in this study

Fourth, the instructions for writing were given step by step. As the step proceeded, the rubric was 'piled up'; for example, title, keywords, outline and references were taught in the first step and then the first three chapters were added (see Figure 2).
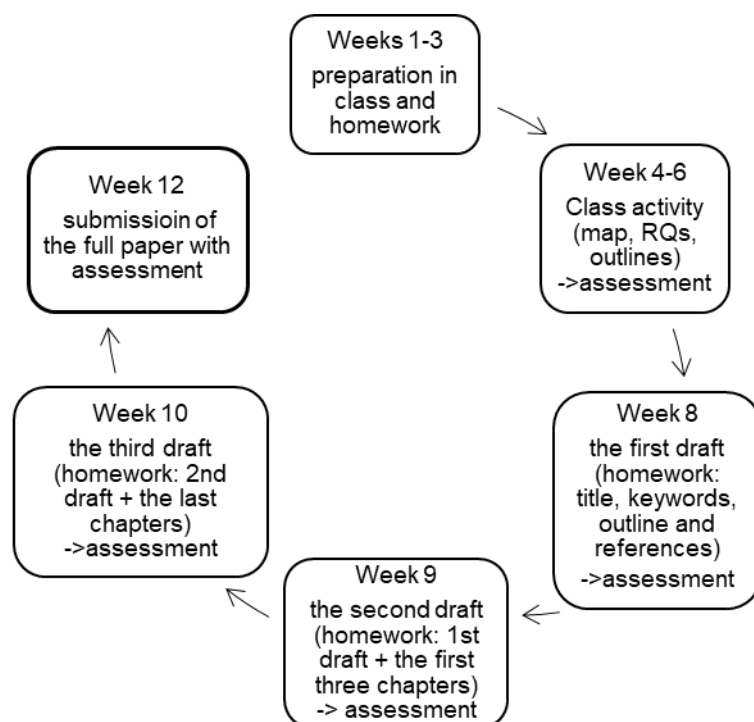
Figure 2: The process of writing essays in the class of 2019

26 first-year students aged 18-19 participated in the study. They were all females. Each assessment in the rubrics was written by hand in the spaces for comments allowed in the format, before being returned to the writer. Here are some examples:
   [Self-assessment]
     "Future research is written in detail." "Titles of each chapter seem clear."
     "The references should be checked again." "Citations should be corrected."
   [Peer assessment]
     "Your opinion can be seen clearly."   "The whole structure is good."
     "Conclusion could be expanded a bit." "I want to hear your voice a bit more."
   [Teacher assessment]
     "The style and form of the essay are good." "Your perspective is great."
     "Some colloquial words can be corrected." "You should always be aware of paragraphs."

Results

To indicate the results of this experiment, I show some of the results of the questionnaire survey conducted after all the students had submitted all their essays. Four out of the ten questions and answers are shown below:
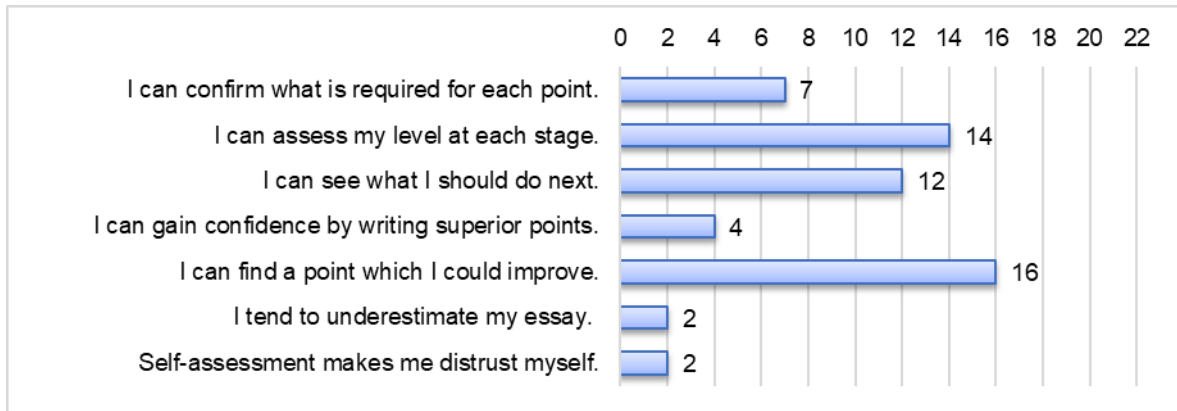
Figure 3: Responses of the students to the question about self-assessment
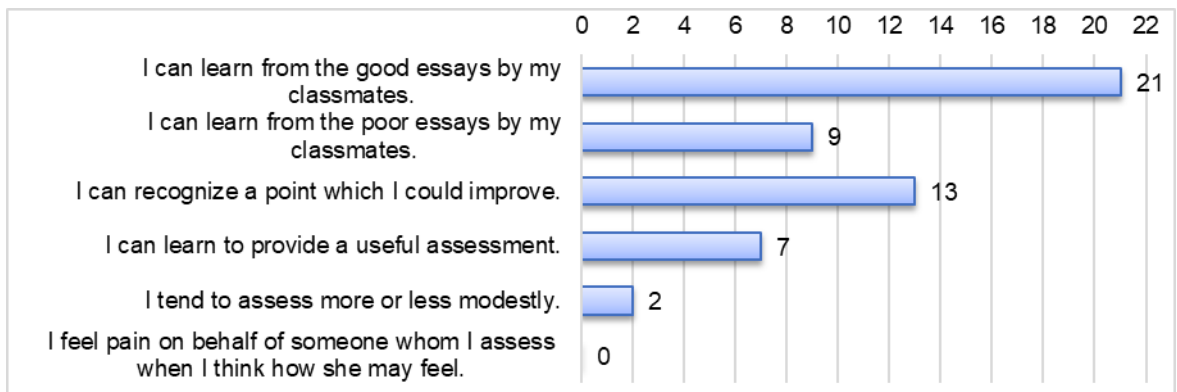(multiple answers were allowed)

Figure 4: Responses of students to the statements about peer assessment as evaluators
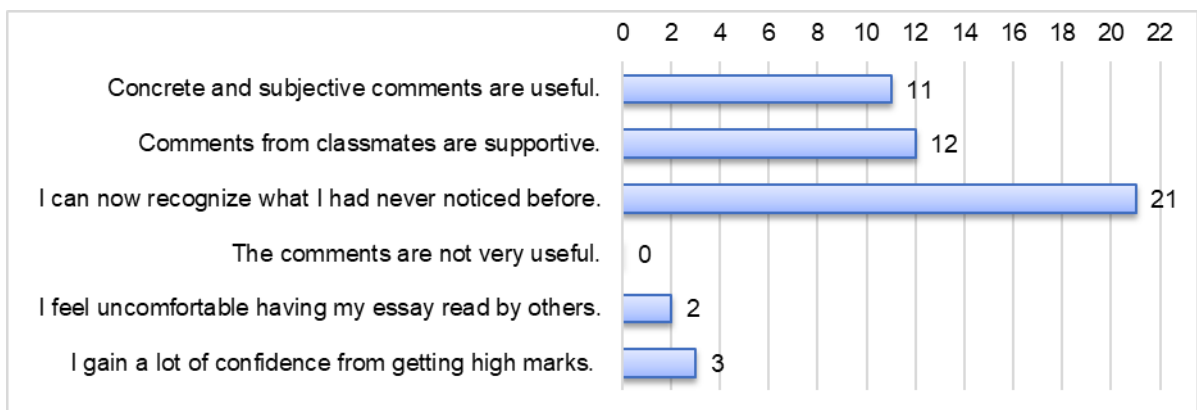(multiple answers were allowed)

Figure 5: Responses of students to the statements about peer assessment as
evaluatees)
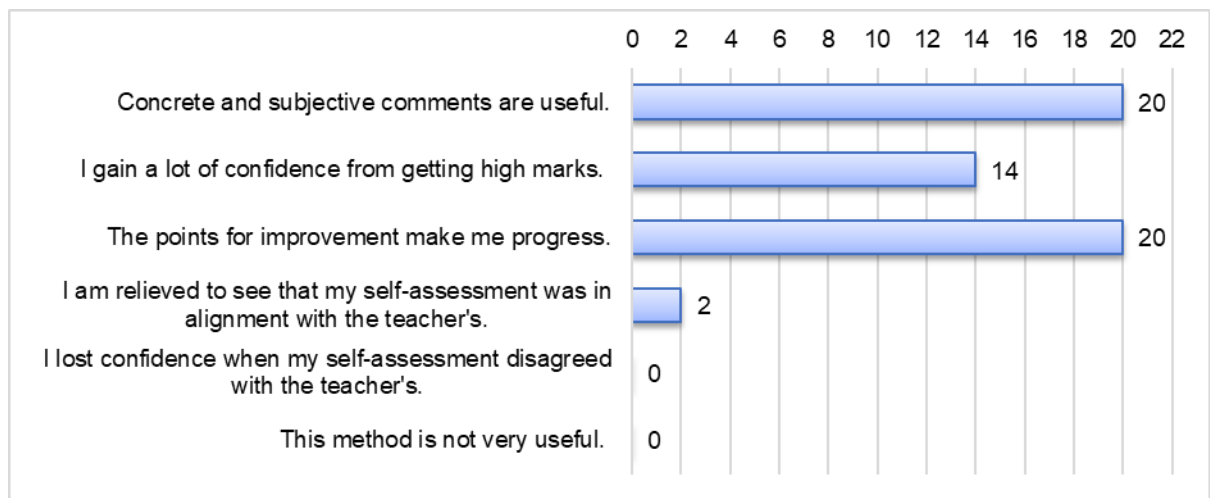(multiple answers were allowed)

Figure 6: Responses of students to the question about Teacher-assessment
(multiple answers were allowed)

According to Figure 3, 16 out of 21 students responded that they were able to find a point for improvement, and 12 students answered that they could now see what they should do next. This was exactly what I wanted students to feel from using the rubrics. As can be seen in Table 1 above, if the student is marked at Level 2, she can infer that she should improve her references

As regards peer assessment, I divided the responses into two types, those from the evaluator's standpoint and those from the evaluatee's standpoint. All the students asserted that they could learn from their classmates' good essays. But it was more important that they should recognize the points in which they could improve their own work: "Reading the other person's essay was stimulating. It encouraged me to revise my own essay." "It encouraged me to write better essays." There are, however, negative reactions to peer assessment: "I was reluctant to comment on my classmates' essays." "Peer assessment should be optional. It is certainly useful, but I don't like to upset a classmate if I'm not close to her." These comments should be respected and treated carefully. Only one third of the students indicated that they could learn to provide a useful assessment.

As evaluatees all of them responded that they were now able to recognize what they had never noticed before. This and the next two responses may indicate that students to some extent developed their evaluation skills. However, as mentioned above, two thirds of them did not admit that they could learn to evaluate, and therefore this finding should be left as a point for further research. Minority opinions should not be neglected, either. Two students felt uncomfortable to have their essay read by the others.

Finally, teacher assessment was on the whole favourably received. Teacher assessment this time came after the students' self-assessment and peer assessment. The results may suggest that the order of assessment was appropriate. I tried carefully not to repeat what had been said in either of the former assessments. As a result, the teacher's comments were brief and students may have found them too selective.

Discussion

In this study, I have investigated how in the teaching and examining of academic writing different kinds of assessment can be combined. Here I would like to review my findings along with my research hypotheses.

In response to the first hypothesis, the instructions in academic writing itself that I gave were not very different from my instructions every year. Nevertheless, giving them step by step and combining them with self and peer assessment seemed successful. Students had a chance to catch up if they missed something.

The second hypothesis, about students' psychology during the process of writing, was addressed by carefully designing the rubrics and the order in which the three types of assessment was taken. The rubric, which used only positive descriptions, allowed students to proceed with their writing without stress. The order of the assessments, first asking students to assess their own work; next, asking them to submit it for peer assessment, and finally to teacher assessment, seemed to be a key to success, since this was able to make students aware of strengths and weaknesses first by themselves. Such awareness tends to train them as autonomous learners. In my opinion, this is a very important point. In fact, the students completed their essays approximately 10 days sooner than usual.

The third hypothesis, concerning effective assessment tools that would encourage students to write good academic papers, can receive two kinds of response: one taking the subject to be the assessment of essays and the other considering this particular method of assessment. As noted above, the combination of self-, peer and teacher assessment worked effectively and so did the rubrics. In this study, I made sure that the rubrics were all in the same format. This helped students to compare scores between different assessments and may have made it easier for them to memorize the matrix of grading.

This kind of procedure does take longer and some students may have found it troublesome. A few students were reluctant to engage in peer assessment. This reluctance suggests that one of ok the most important points here was the student-teacher relationship or the trust between them.

Conclusion

This study was designed to determine the effect of combining three types of assessment with rubrics for instruction in academic writing in a first-year class. Some results support the hypotheses raised above, but this study does have some limitations.

First, the method of peer assessment should be improved. In this study, the students exchanged their papers directly, but it would be better to do this anonymously, using ICTs, such as LMS (Honda 2017). We cannot neglect the voice of minorities. From another perspective, it is also worth following the process in which two peers collaboratively mark another student's anonymous work (Kearney, Perkins and Kennedy-Clark 2016).

Second, it should be examined whether students should learn how to assess their and other's task. In fact, Kearney, Perkins and Kennedy-Clark (2016) claims that students without prior experience in peer- or self-evaluation are able to accurately judge their own work and make reasonably accurate judgements of the work of their peers.

Ndoye (2017) also reports his participants' indication that peer/self-assessment allowed them to take responsibility by helping them to develop their evaluative skills. As regards my students, only one third answered that they could learn to provide a useful assessment. The age of the participants, however, may have influenced their answers. While Ndoye's participants were students on a graduate course, mine were first-year college students. Further investigation would perhaps clarify this issue, which may be related to the psychology of the evaluatee.

Finally, the study could not analyse the gaps, if any, between the three types of assessment. Further studies regarding the modulation of rubrics are thus required.

Continued efforts are needed to make the method more appropriate and it should take both students' learning and their psychological condition into account. Establishing a relationship of mutual trust between teachers and students is still the key to success.

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