Coherence in the assessment of writing skills

Robin Walker and Carmen Pérez Riu

Unhappy with the contradiction of teaching writing skills through a process-genre approach and testing them by means of a timed essay, the authors devised the Extended Writing Project (EWP) as an alternative evaluation mechanism. This requires students to write an extended text in consecutive sections that are drafted and revised with external help. At the marking stage, the final version is compared with the drafts to gain an insight into the development of both content and language from the planning stage to the final version. The EWP allowed the incorporation of process into the assessment of writing skills, and encouraged increased learner autonomy. Despite flaws, the EWP was well received by students as is reflected in a voluntary questionnaire.

Introduction

A great deal of the literature on the teaching of EFL/ESL composition skills relates to the teaching/learning process itself, and to how this may be optimized. Deliberations as to the relative merits of process, genre, or process-genre approaches have received attention over the last decade (Badger and White 2000; Flowerdew 2000; Tribble 1996; Villamil and De Guerrero 1998), as has the value of teacher- and/or peer-initiated feedback (Frankenberg-García 1999; Hyland 2000; Muncie 2000; Rollinson 2005). In contrast, there is relatively little on options for the assessment of composition skills, with the timed essay still the dominant mechanism.

The impact of writing under a time restriction on the standard of the work produced was examined some time ago by Caudery, who pointed out that although:

the trend in language teaching is towards emphasis on the extended composing process, there has been no concomitant trend in the assessment of writing skills in examinations.

(Caudery 1990: 123)

Interestingly, he concluded that there was nothing to support the hypothesis that students would write better without a time restriction. For ourselves, however, the question is not about whether time restrictions affect performance or not, but about the incoherence between a process-oriented approach to teaching and a product-based approach to assessment. The latter denies both the possibility of drafting and the chance to seek external...
assistance, key elements in the process approach. Without external assistance, for example, this paper would have been impossible.

Porto also perceives this drawback when she argues that ‘since timed writing \textit{per se} contradicts current research on writing pedagogy, it is therefore inappropriate, even (\ldots) for evaluation purposes’ (Porto 2001: 39). To resolve the dilemma she explored ‘cooperative writing response groups’ and self-evaluation. Her approach satisfactorily addressed ‘the constraints of audience, purpose, time pressure, and feedback that operate and are consistent with a view of writing as a recursive, interactive, communicative and social activity’ (Porto ibid.: 45), but generated dissatisfaction in some of her learners, who still had to pass a product-oriented, timed essay exam at the end of their course.

The conflict between a process approach to teaching and a product-based, timed essay for assessment is best described, perhaps, by Cushing:

\ldots for many teachers, particularly in academic settings, the social aspects of writing are increasingly being recognised, and an evaluation of writing may also include consideration of the degree to which students have incorporated instructor and/or peer feedback in their writing. In evaluating a final written product, thus, it is no longer strictly the ability of the writer to use his or her own linguistic and cognitive resources to generate appropriate texts independently that is the issue, but rather the ability of the writer to make use of all available resources—including social interactions—to create a text that appropriately meets the needs of the audience and fulfils a communicative goal.

(Cushing 2002: 178)

In our own work at the Escuela Universitaria de Turismo de Asturias, Spain, we fully identify with this position. However, since experience in our local context indicated that there would be significant resistance to assessment based on group work and self-evaluation, an alternative to Porto was required. This paper describes our attempt to find that alternative. In particular, it evaluates the use of a piece of extended writing as a vehicle for the simultaneous teaching and assessment of process writing skills.

### Teaching situation

Our students follow a 3-year diploma course in tourism, with English being an obligatory subject each year. English 1 and English 2 provide 100 hours’ contact in total, and English 3 brings a further 75. Course assessment is through one of two options. In Option A, attendance in class is not obligatory, and assessment is through a single exam at the end of the academic year. This option is in direct response to our university exam regulations. For Option B, attendance is obligatory, and the course is graded using marks obtained in various ways throughout the year. In both options students are assessed for competence in the four language skills. Language levels among Year 3 students range from lower to upper-intermediate, and the average group size is around 20.

Surveys have revealed that students reach the Escuela de Turismo after some 12 years’ essentially teacher-centred language learning. Accuracy and
form have dominated over skills acquisition and communicative efficiency, and writing has been used to practise form rather than as a means of communication. Given this background, in English 2 we introduce students to the concepts of pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing as natural, recursive steps in the creation of any written text. In line with genre-based approaches to the teaching of writing (White and Arndt 1991; Tribble op.cit.), students are also required to take both the reader and the purpose of the text into account. This proves new to the vast majority, despite which both concepts are usually well received.

However, after two years of acquiring the sub-skills of a process-genre approach, the assessment in writing in English 3 has been, until now, through a timed essay. In short, we have been teaching one thing and testing another.

The extended writing project

In an effort to resolve the teaching-testing incoherence, in English 3 we substituted the timed essay with the Extended Writing Project (EWP), although only in the case of students following Option B assessment, given the need for regular contact with tutors that the Project entails.

From the outset, we saw the EWP as having 3 main aims:

- to resolve the incoherence between a process approach to the teaching, and assessment through a timed essay;
- to create a mechanism which would allow us to assess the process as well as the product of the learner’s writing; and
- to facilitate our students’ independence by improving their awareness both of their writing techniques, and of the standard of their language.

A less explicit aim was to reduce the frustration felt by students and teachers because of the marked drop in the standard of exam timed-essays compared to coursework essays. Through the EWP, students would now get the chance to draft, revise, and correct a text worth 20% of their course mark (the remaining 80% being shared equally between the other three skills and coursework). This we hoped would motivate them to raise the overall quality of their writing.

For the EWP, students had to write an article of 1,000–1,200 words on a topic of their own choosing, though clearly relevant to the broad contents of their diploma. The article was to be written in four sections, each of which would be read and assessed by us, their course tutors. We chose to do this in order to push students to reflect on the problems they had had in one section, and thus hopefully avoid repeating them in the next. Help in identifying those problems, linguistic, organizational, or otherwise, would come through our marking, through tutorials, or through peer feedback, and would constitute the teaching side of the EWP. A student’s ability to use this information effectively in the later sections, and thus demonstrate improved composition skills, would be part of the assessment mechanism built into the project.
In essence there were six stages to the EWP:

**Stage 1**
Students proposed a topic, which was accepted or not by their course tutor on the basis of its relevance to the aims and contents of the tourism diploma.

**Stage 2**
Students prepared a preliminary outline for their article. Apart from the effect of pushing them to plan the content, this phase was important because it:

- provided further information on the acceptability of the topic chosen;
- allowed us to assess the student’s ability to organize content;
- allowed us to give guidance on research or the coherence of the text; and
- allowed us to foresee other potential problems.

**Stage 3**
On completion, the first draft of the first section of the article (approximately 200–250 words) was handed in for correction based on criteria students were accustomed to from English 2: content, meaning, and organization, on the one hand, and language correctness, on the other. While revising this first draft, we left clear indications as to the place and nature of language errors. On returning the drafts we instructed students to record their errors, the error type (using the codes they were already familiar with), and the correct version, on a simple error sheet—see Appendix 1.

The main purpose of this was to raise their awareness as to individual language problems, and thus hopefully avoid their re-occurrence. In this respect, error had now become a teaching tool, as opposed to an indicator of failure.

**Stage 4**
Students were invited to re-draft the first section of their article, correcting language errors and using any feedback from their tutor to improve coherence, cohesion, relevance of ideas, and so on. Once this was done they could go on to draft the second section of their article, which we corrected in much the same way as the first. For both of these sections, we encouraged students to make more than one draft if they felt this to be beneficial.

**Stage 5**
For the final two sections of the article, we deliberately offered less explicit feedback with respect to language errors we had commented on previously. In this way, we hoped to push students towards increased responsibility, and ultimately independence, in the revision of drafts for linguistic correctness.

In contrast, comments on aspects such as coherence and development were still given in full, although even here students were reminded that they themselves were responsible for the coherence of the text as a whole. Clearly,
this was something that we could not be adequately aware of until the article was finished; marking isolated sections of a larger text at different moments in time made it impossible for us to obtain a sufficiently wide view of coherence.

**Stage 6**

On completion of all four sections, each student had to hand in the final version of the whole article, together with the bibliography. The drafts and any comments and suggestions made in tutorials were also handed in. We insisted on this since they would give us invaluable insights into the process behind the writing of the texts.

Despite these quite demanding conditions, we obtained a set of very satisfactory articles, both in terms of the range of current tourism topics covered, and in terms of the standard of the texts produced, particularly when compared to the work students had been producing at the beginning of the course.

**Grading the articles**

For grading purposes, we prepared a mark sheet based on 10 criteria—see Appendix 2. Of these, criteria 3–7 were concerned directly with the finished text, whilst criteria 8, 9, and 10 were conceived of as relative to the process of writing. The extent to which each of the criteria was fulfilled was graded on a four-point scale from ‘Very much’ to ‘Not at all’. The criteria themselves were weighted. Readability, coherence, and development (3, 4, and 5 in the Appendix 2) were allotted 3 marks each, whilst the presentation of the article, the range and correctness of the language, and the ‘source’ of this language (criteria 6, 7, and 8) were awarded 2 marks each. Least importance was given to the originality of the topic, the quality of the research, and the use of tutorial advice and the error-sheet (criteria 1, 2, 9, and 10).

Marking involved reading a text and simultaneously assessing it on the basis of the 10 criteria. On average this took 15–20 minutes, as compared to 8–9 minutes for a timed essay written in exam conditions. Where appropriate, the finished text was compared with the drafts and the error-sheet in order to assess the writer’s effectiveness in using feedback on the drafts during the process leading to the final version. The end result of was a mark up to 20 maximum that reflected both product and process.

**Evaluating the EWP**

We opted to evaluate the EWP at two levels. Clearly, it was vital to know how the students felt about it, whilst as course tutors we needed to assess the degree to which we had achieved our initial aims.

**The student questionnaire**

Once the finished articles had been given in, students were asked to complete a simple questionnaire in Spanish. Five questions required responses on a Likert-type scale, with space after each for any additional comments. The last question invited students to offer any further suggestions.
Results of Qs 1–3 of the student survey

Q1 How would you assess the EWP overall in terms of learning to write in English?
The response to this question was overwhelmingly positive, as is evident in Table 1. In addition, various students offered comments. Four of these referred to a change in the students’ perception of their ability to write in English, a key aspect of the third of our initial aims. The change was best described by the student who said ‘It helped me a lot, not only grammatically, but also psychologically, since I could see that I can write an article on my own’.

Other comments referred to the ability to deal with errors, also essential with respect to the third aim: ‘You’re continually seeing mistakes, and thanks to the error sheet you notice them’.

Q2 How do you value the EWP as a way of assessing your writing skills in English? Do you know of any alternative?
As with Q1, the response was clearly favourable, although this time the comments were more diverse. One student pointed out that after 5 drafts it seemed illogical to give a mark for writing skills, whilst a second felt the system was good, but complained that ‘we should have seen the evaluation criteria’. Two comments indicated the EWP to be preferable to a timed essay, and the fifth suggested that ‘the teacher can evaluate your progress’, presumably as an alternative method of assessment.

Q3 How do you value the support you received from your tutor during the writing of your project?
As tutors we were seen to be supportive of our students, with two of the four comments indicating full satisfaction. One comment suggested that our support was ‘in some cases a little ambiguous’, whilst another was openly critical.
Questions 4 and 5 (see Table 2) sought to determine, on the one hand, if students were conscious of having learnt anything during the EWP, and on the other, if students felt themselves to be better equipped to face similar tasks on their own in the future. The first of these questions relates to the difference we hoped to establish through the EWP with conventional assessment, since from the outset we understood this way of working as involving teaching as well as assessment. Question 5, of course, was an attempt to measure student awareness of increased autonomy with respect to writing.

**Q4** Are you conscious of having improved your level of written English thanks to what you learnt during the EWP?
Everybody admitted to having learnt something, the majority clearly being aware of learning having taken place. Compared to a time-restricted essay, this would seem a very desirable situation.

Of the comments, four made reference to specific areas of language learning. Interestingly, there was no agreement among the four about which areas they had improved, which seems to reflect the room students and tutors found in the EWP to individualize their learning/teaching.

**Q5** Thanks to your experience with the EWP, do you feel yourself to be more able to tackle work of this nature on your own in the future?
The majority of students felt the EWP had left them much better equipped for the future (10 students), or somewhat better equipped (17 students). Of the first group, one student commented that she ‘will have difficulties, but will not be afraid’, whilst of the second, another stated that ‘undoubtedly I’ll tackle it with greater confidence and less fear’.

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<tr>
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<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
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<td>A lot</td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>Not much</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
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<td>2</td>
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**Table 2**
Results of Qs 4–5 of the student survey
Q6 What other comments and suggestions would you like to make as to the usefulness and workings of the EWP?
Seventeen students made contributions to the survey through this question. Of these, one student felt that although it had been a positive experience, ‘it shouldn’t be such an important part of the year mark’, undoubtedly a reference to the 20% weight this work carries. Another student was more openly critical, complaining that the ‘structure should adjust more to the preferences of the students, and be more flexible’. However, a number of students reiterated their satisfaction with the new system, with one directly challenging the previous criticism and expressing ‘satisfaction on having had all the tourism themes available—in short, on having been able to choose the topic’. This, of course, is a significant difference compared to the timed essay.

Finally, numerous students suggested that the EWP should have started earlier, and not coincided at any time with preparation for other exams in June.

Tutor reflections on the EWP

The outcome of the project was more than satisfactory if we consider the first of our aims. Through the EWP we had eliminated the inconsistency between our teaching of process writing skills and their assessment by means of a timed essay. The most evident consequence of this was that given more time to reflect on the topic, the ideas presented by the students were more sophisticated, and were much better expressed than in timed essays.

In relation to our second aim—the development of a mechanism able to assess both process and product—we also feel satisfied. Thanks to the drafts, error sheets, and tutorials, we had been provided with a large amount of data on the process itself: we had information on how the ideas had been put together, on how each of the sections had been developed, and on how successfully individual students had used tutorial and peer feedback. Moreover, by means of the error sheets, we could measure their ability to detect and solve their own language problems.

Our third aim, that of improving learner independence, had also yielded positive results, since to a large extent each student had been responsible for her own progress. The most tangible evidence for this claim has already been reviewed in the analysis of the student questionnaire above. However, in tutorials, we were also aware of their increased autonomy: students sought help less often, and clearly controlled higher level text skills (tone and style, or taking the reader into account) much better.

Our fourth aim, the reduction of the frustration generated by timed essay assessment, had obviously been fulfilled for both students and teachers. Not only had the overall quality of the texts risen considerably, but the close interaction with our students encouraged an atmosphere of collaboration in the assessment process. This gave students a feeling of achievement, which in turn increased their confidence with respect to future writing tasks, as is also reflected in the survey.

One unexpected result was that the need to structure, organize, and draft a fairly long text, led students to a greater awareness of each of the aspects of writing than we had ever achieved previously. This awareness created
conditions for meaningful learning, the product of the need to solve
problems specific to each text. That is to say, the EWP provided ideal
circumstances for individualized learning, with students solving their own
difficulties, with or without peer or teacher help.

Despite this success, we were aware of a number of problems, either during
the writing, or at the marking stage. The EWP requires both more time than
we had estimated, and also better timing. In addition, the EWP demands
a close, consistent interaction between student and teacher, and this is best
done when students do not feel the pressure of exams. The outcome here
was to bring the EWP forward to the start of the second semester.

Another important problem that arose while carrying out the EWP was the
inadequate use of the error sheet: several students did not record language
problems adequately; others did not record them at all; a few students relied
heavily on their tutors to provide the correct forms. The explanation for this
appears to be that students found it extremely difficult to identify errors that
were not pointed out to them, or were unable to see what was wrong in
a sentence they had written themselves.

As a result of the above, we will insist on a more systematic use of the error
sheet in the future. In addition, we will make students aware of their
recurrent errors through the use of a specific symbol. Finally, we will
continue to give feedback on new errors in sections 3 and 4 of any text, whilst
being firm in our refusal to find solutions to repeated ones.

A final problem we identified concerns a certain inconsistency in the
marking scheme. We had agreed that issues such as readability, coherence,
and development were more important than others such as grammar, and
we had designed the evaluation criteria to reflect that. However, once the
final texts had been handed in, we became aware that there was a significant
difference between the work done by students who had depended heavily on
tutorial help, and that of those who had taken their work forward through
personal effort. This difference should have been brought out by the criteria
related to the evaluation of the writing process (8, 9, and 10 in the sheet).
However, these criteria had been given relatively low weightings. Obviously,
this will need to be corrected. Moreover, the use of tutorial feedback will
need to be measured more formally, through criteria that reflect both the
initial quality of each draft, and the amount of tutorial help needed to
produce the final text.

**Conclusions**

Assessment through an impromptu timed essay is incoherent with
a process approach to teaching. In contrast, the EWP is a system where the
evaluation of process complements that of product, where learning and
assessment concur, and where learner independence is openly fostered. We
see this as positive both for our students and for ourselves. Moreover, the
EWP supposes an important change in the roles of teachers and students
alike, with learning and collaboration taking over from teaching and
subordination.

Three evident flaws in the way we ran the EWP are the timing, the
inadequate use of the error sheets, and the distribution of the marks.
However, these can be easily remedied by starting the EWP earlier, by
training students more directly in the use of the error sheets, and by adjusting the balance in the marking scheme in order to better accommodate the process.

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References


The authors

Robin Walker has worked in ELT since 1981 and has developed special interests in ESP and pronunciation. A member of the IATEFL ESP and Pronunciation SIGs, he is co-author of Tourism 1 (Provision) and Tourism 2 (Encounters) in OUP’s Oxford English for Careers series. After 20 years at the Escuela Universitaria de Turismo de Asturias, he is now a freelance teacher, teacher educator, and materials writer.
Email: walkerrobin@wanadoo.es
Carmen Pérez Ríu has a PhD in English Philology. She has wide experience in teaching ESP in tertiary education, including English for Tourism, for Chemistry, and for Business. She is a tutor at the Spanish National Distance University (UNED) and has carried out research into different aspects of ELT.
Email: perezcarmen@uniovi.es

Appendix 1: Error sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Error</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Correct form</th>
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Coherence in assessing writing
Appendix 2: Mark sheet

English III — Extended writing project assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Quite</th>
<th>Just</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Is the topic chosen original?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Are there signs of effective research having been done?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Is the article immediately readable throughout?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Is the article coherent, with a clear structure?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Are the contents relevant and fully developed?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Is the article well presented, with visuals aiding reading?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Does the language used display an appropriate range of grammar and vocabulary?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Is the language clearly the student’s own at all times?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Is there evidence of tutorial advice being used effectively?</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Has the error chart been used efficiently and effectively, with evidence of the student eliminating errors?</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals

Final mark =

Additional comments

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