
UNIT 20 EVALUATION OF WRITTEN WORK

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20.0 OBJECTIVES

Writing can be evaluated in a number of ways, depending upon the purposes and goals of the writing and the teacher. In this unit we shall explore some different ways of evaluating writing, and their advantages and limitations. After you have finished this unit, you should be able to:

1. Select a method of writing evaluation which is suited to your purpose.
2. Distinguish between evaluation strategies which look at the writing process with opportunities for improvement and self evaluation; and those that look at the evaluation of an end product.
3. Appreciate the importance of a uniform evaluation policy in a school.

20.1 INTRODUCTION

Evaluation as it has been traditionally viewed brings to mind words like “marks” and “exams”. It implies the process by which the teacher corrects a child’s work, and gives feedback. Recent works on the development of writing skills in children emphasise the need to give children a feedback on their strengths and weaknesses, and to allow them opportunities for “improvement”. Evaluation, is therefore seen as a process by which a teacher helps the child “improve”. Tricia Hedge, in her book on writing says, “marking is maximally effective in enabling students to improve only if it provides constructive feedback which can be channelled into the processes of redrafting and editing.” Teachers need to look at two aspects of the child’s writing. The first are the skills involved in the process of composing, that is having a sense of purpose, a sense of audience and a sense of direction. The second group comprises skills connected with “crafting”, that is the way a writer puts together the pieces of a text and chooses correct and appropriate language. Teachers can build up criteria which look into both these aspects. One possible way is to take four criteria: accuracy, appropriacy, range and complexity and analyse the degrees of skills at three levels ‘good’, ‘average’ and ‘needs improvement’. Within each of these, teachers need to spell out details of the expected writing skills. The child’s writing is then assessed against this criteria, and suitable feedback given.

Before we proceed any further it is important to clarify that when we are looking at various aspects of writing evaluation, we are considering only sustained pieces of

writing, such as paragraphs, narratives, poems etc. Writing at the sentence level is a useful exercise for reinforcing different grammatical structures, or for diagnosing weaknesses. However, it does not provide an opportunity to look at the child's grasp of the range and complexity of skills required to produce a piece of writing.

Evaluation, as it exists, in most primary schools in our country, today, looks at the end product, whether it is a paragraph, an essay or a poem or story. The child is given some pre-determined topic, on which to write within a specified time period. The writing is then checked for spellings, grammatical structures, as well as for organisation of ideas, style, expression, vocabulary and so on. We often expect a young child, who is groping and exploring the world of written words, to produce a perfect piece of writing, without giving the child a chance to revise, edit or proofread. This is quite unrealistic, since even adults cannot produce a piece of writing in one go. Throughout the units on writing we have emphasised the need to allow children to go through the different stages in the writing process. This gives a greater opportunity to the child to identify errors and correct them. It also allows the teacher to assess the developmental level of the child. Within this approach errors are a part of the process of learning and development. They are like little clues which tell us the stage at which a particular child has arrived, and help teachers to decide and plan teaching/ learning strategies which enable the child to progress to the next stage. Since errors are a natural part of learning they are not something to be afraid of, instead they indicate areas which need extra support. The most important aspect of this approach is that it emphasises positive feedback, by not only focusing on the child's weaknesses but also on his strengths. It also provides ample opportunities for support and self correction. The child is guided towards self evaluation through the processes of drafting, revising, proofreading and editing before a final piece of writing is produced. This encourages critical thinking and self correction on the part of the child, and also helps the child to internalise corrections, since the child is actively involved in this process. One question that may be asked is how feasible such an approach is within the context of a large class of fifty or sixty children. While admittedly, this is a daunting task, all these ideas have actually been tried out and been found to work effectively within a large class context. However, it is important to remember that these ideas are just suggestions of some methods that can be used for process based evaluation. As teachers we need to take these into the reality of our situation, and see what works and what doesn't. We need to share our experiences with other teachers and perhaps, work out evaluation procedures that suit our situations and realities. As just mentioned a little while ago, these evaluation techniques have been tried out in classes with approximately 45 children each. However there is nothing sacrosanct about them. Perhaps, the most important need of today is for teachers to become actively involved in creating methods that work in the classroom. This means that we need to constantly evaluate and reflect our teaching and assessment methods. In our constant search for suitable and workable methods, it is vital that we share and talk about not just our successes, and about things that worked but as much about things that didn't work. We need to look positively at both successes and failures as an integral part of any growth process. Sometimes unsuccessful experiences reveal a lot. They tell us, for example that our methods were, perhaps, unsuitable or the level was too high or too low for the children in the class, or that we need to give more attention to the grouping of children and the class dynamics, because there are many children who do not get along, and this was creating blocks. In other words, we are able to look for reasons that some methods work and some don't. We are able to document these, and through these processes, we teachers become creators of our own programmes which are rooted in the realities of our classroom situation.

To help children improve and progress in their writing skills it is important to allow children to do a lot of writing of different kinds. They need to go through the various stages of writing with each piece of writing. However, since it is impossible for the

teacher to look at each individual piece of writing, feedback on some writing tasks is given on a whole class basis and others may be evaluated through peer conferences. Not every piece of writing goes to the teacher. For individual assessment each child is asked to select a required number (two or three pieces) of his/her writings at the end of a term, to give to the teacher for evaluation. The advantage of this approach is that it strengthens the child's abilities for self evaluation, since the child has to critically examine his/her own writings and decide which three or four pieces she thinks are good enough to go to the teacher to be evaluated. It also makes individual feedback from the teacher possible. The teacher can stagger the evaluation so that all the children do not hand in their writing together, but work according to a predetermined schedule.

20.2 DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF EVALUATION

Evaluation is a necessary educational process that helps students recognise their strengths and weaknesses, thereby improving future writings. Some of the ways a teacher can help create a positive attitude about writing are as follows:

1. Communicate the idea that each student has good and relevant ideas to share.
2. Provide students with many writing activities to give them the security that familiarity brings.
3. Instill confidence by finding positive things to say about each writing and by showing appreciation of it through displays, reading and sharing.

The actual evaluation of writing can be done by using several methods, some of which we will look at later on.

While evaluating a child's writing a teacher needs to look at the following:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| a) Accuracy i. e. | the grammatical and lexical structures spellings/ punctuation/ handwriting. |
| b) Appropriacy i. e. (or fluency) | the suitability of the language and format to the function of the writing as well as to the writer's purpose, and whether the layout is appropriate. |
| c) The range i.e. suitable | the amount of language available, and whether the child is able to express her/himself clearly through the choice of vocabulary. |
| d) Complexity i. e. | the extent to which a child is able to produce a coherent piece of writing with a logical order in the flow of events. |

As mentioned earlier, students need a positive feedback on the way their writing is improving. This may be given through comments at the end or through a grade. If the only feedback the students receive is negative, in the sense of corrections, with no encouragement or appreciation for trying, the children may not want to write. A number of teachers have begun to feel that correction after the writing is over, is not very useful, instead children should be encouraged to revise and edit as much as possible during the writing. This helps the children to internalise the corrections as much as possible.

Check Your Progress 1

Based on the above factors design a criteria sheet on a three point scale which can be used for evaluating the writing skills of a group of children at the Elementary school level.

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20.3 THE TEACHER AS EVALUATOR

It is a good idea for the teacher to be the sole evaluator at the beginning of the year to set the standards and to let students know what is expected of them. Later, students should be allowed to take part in the evaluation process. It is important to note that evaluating writing is easier for the teacher if specific writing directions are given to the students when the writing task is given. Then the teacher knows exactly what to look for in the final draft. We discussed how this can be done through pre-writing activities (see unit 16). The following ideas may be useful in eliminating the negative aspects of teacher evaluation:

- The students can keep their writing in a folder and select the best from three or four writings to be turned in to the teacher for evaluation, thus reducing the teacher's load.
- The teacher should not correct the errors but should write specific comments that will help the students towards revising and correcting themselves. Errors may be indicated in the margin, leaving the finding and correcting of the specific error to the student. If a paper has many errors, only a few should be indicated on a single writing. Encouraging and positive remarks must also be included.
- The teacher can concentrate on one or two aspects of a paper and grade only those chosen areas such as content or organisation.
- One grade may be given for content and one for mechanics so that the students will receive credit for good ideas in spite of mechanical errors.
- The grade may be a single rating for the entire piece (**holistic rating**, we will look at this a little later on), or a set of ratings for the different features being considered.
- The teacher may use writing conferences in which the teacher and the child read the writing together. During the conference the teacher should concentrate on only one or two areas of improvement and offer positive reinforcement for things done well. Generally conferences should last for only a few minutes.
- Once the class is familiar with the writing process, introduce the writing process. Give very clear directions to the children about what to look for, and how to evaluate in a positive way. Peer evaluation allows children to read other children's writings, and be exposed to different styles and approaches. They also develop the skills of critically reviewing each other's writings.

20.4 SOME POSSIBLE MARKING STRATEGIES

The process of improving through correction, comments and revision can only work if there is a consistent methodology and scheme for marking throughout the school.

Designing a marking policy involves making decisions about how to note correctness or suggestions for improvement, so that the child's ideas are respected and the writing is not mutilated with red marks. One effective way of arriving at such decisions is for a group of teachers to mark some scripts together and discuss the options available.

Some possibilities:

- a) Replacing part of the students' work with the correct form.
- b) Indicating an error by underlining and allowing the students to self correct.
- c) Indicating an error and identifying the error with a symbol, eg. 'sp' for a spelling mistake. If the teachers are going to use a marking code then it is important that the children are familiar with it. It could be displayed on the wall.
- d) Indicating that there is a certain kind of error in a line, by writing in the margin, but leaving the students to locate the errors themselves.
- e) Exercises in proofreading, and other self correction procedures which would equip children to correct some of their own, or other children's work.

Once a school has arrived at a marking policy it is important that it is shared with the students and parents. They need to know that evaluation is not just confined to pieces of writing corrected by the teacher, but includes all of the following:

- 1) Some whole class feedback, where the teacher responds to the class as a whole, and based on this the children correct or revise their work.
- 2) Peer correction, based on a set of criteria which are displayed on the board. It is important that these are within the grasp of the children and at a level where they have meaning for the children.
- 3) Feedback through discussions of either individual or group work through conferencing with the purpose of enabling children to redraft or revise their writings through self correction.
- 4) Variations in the teacher's correction. The teacher may be correcting the writing with a particular focus in mind. The teacher would decide each time what would be the most important thing she would be looking at, it could be the use of the correct tense or using a form of writing suited to the purpose. This would be corrected in particular, and other aspects of the writing would be secondary for that particular time.
- 5) Indicators for self correction through revising, such as, the underlining of an error, which has to be corrected, or a note in the margin which suggests a better way to express something.

There are two aspects of correction that need to be looked into. These are:

- a) **Grading**
- b) **Conferencing**
- a) **Grading** : The school needs to work out a suitable grading scheme. They would need to consider the following :
 - correct grammar
 - length
 - originality of ideas
 - spelling
 - punctuation
 - neat handwriting
 - a good range of vocabulary
 - complex and well-structured sentences
 - good organisation
 - keeping to the main idea

point or five point scale. While this method does not evaluate individual language needs, it is a good method for assessing the overall language demands of the class as a whole.

A set of holistic scoring criteria arranged on a five point scale is given below. The writing descriptions are generic and therefore applicable to any kind of writing. Teachers can however modify it to suit a specific type of writing or adapt it to the needs of their students.

A HOLISTIC EVALUATION GUIDE

SCORE	WRITING DESCRIPTION
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WRITING IS CONSISTENT AND COHERENT• INCLUDES A CLEAR SENSE OF ORDER• ELABORATES ON A MAIN IDEA• USES ORIGINAL AND SPECIFIC DETAILS• PROVIDES A CLEAR CONCLUSION• USES VOCABULARY APPROPRIATELY AND EFFECTIVELY
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WRITING IS CONSISTENT WITH STIMULUS• USES ELABORATION THOUGH SOME GAPS APPEAR• INCLUDES SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OR DETAILS• USES VARIED VOCABULARY• WRITES BARE ESSENTIALS WITH LITTLE OR NO DETAILS
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WRITING RAMBLES AND GOES OFF TOPIC FREQUENTLY• WRITING CONTAINS GAPS THAT CONFUSE READERS• USES ADEQUATE BUT SOMETIMES INCORRECT VOCABULARY• RESTATES WRITING PROMPT
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WRITING IS CONFUSING OR LACKS COHERENCE• LISTS OBJECTS IN PICTURE• USES VOCABULARY POORLY• USES ILLEGIBLE HANDWRITING
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• DOES NOT RESPOND TO REQUIRED WRITING TASK• DOES NOT COMPLETE ASSIGNMENT

(Source: *World of language. Grade 4. TEST TEACHER MANUAL.* Silver Burdett and Ginn Inc.1990)

On the basis of the above evaluation, the teacher could write a summary indicating the strengths of the writing , as well as, the areas requiring improvement.

Analytic evaluation : This method involves the isolation of specific traits or aspects of writing, such as, organisation, word choice, usage, and mechanics. The teacher then evaluates the writing sample several times – once for each trait on a scale ranging from low to high. the analytic method helps the teacher to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. However, since it is very time consuming, teachers would perhaps need to modify it to suit the requirements and constraints of a large class.

stood by teachers, children as well as parents. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly we emphasised that teachers need to be actively involved in changing and modifying methodologies to suit their classroom needs. They need to constantly reflect and review their classroom experiences and use these to develop their own workable methods of process based evaluation.

20.7 SUGGESTED READING

World of Language, *Test Teacher Manual*, Silver Burdett and Ginn Inc. 1990.

Hedge, Tricia. *Writing*. Oxford University Press. 1991.

Raimes, Ann. *Techniques in Teaching Writing*. Oxford University Press 1983.

Rosen, Harold. 'Towards a Language Policy Across the Curriculum' in *Language the Learner and the School*. London: Penguin, 1969.

Shaughnessy, Mina.P. *Errors and Expectations : a Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

20.8 ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

An example of a criteria sheet on a three point scale is given below:

CRITERIA SHEET

CRITERIA	GOOD	AVERAGE	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
ACCURACY	writes grammatically correct sentences, correct spellings and punctuation, legible handwriting	there are some grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors but don't destroy communication. Handwriting is fairly legible.	many errors, which interfere with the meaning.
APPROPRIACY	use of language entirely suitable to purpose, layout suitable.	use of language is broadly suitable though there are some inconsistencies. Layout generally appropriate.	language is unsuitable, layout unsuitable
RANGE	expresses clearly using selective vocabulary and figurative speech with logical flow of ideas	vocabulary adequate but some words are misused, writing contains some gaps.	limited vocabulary, lacks coherence.
COMPLEXITY	uses specific and original examples, shows ability to use complex sentences	very few details, writing is often very sketchy and off the topic	no detail goes off the main idea.

Check Your Progress 2

An example of a marking code which is suitable for an Elementary school classroom is given below:

WF

WF _____ wrong word (I go to school yesterday)

ww

ww _____ wrong word (He are go to school)

T _____ wrong tense (She is played today)

^ _____ something is missing

Sp _____ wrong spelling

WO

WO wrong word order (He school came to)

P _____ wrong punctuation

/ _____ new paragraph needed

D _____ delete

? _____ I don't understand what you are trying to say

0 Needs clearer expression

(), _____ This part needs to be reworded.

Check Your Progress 3

A criteria sheet for assessing a paragraph with special focus on the main idea is given below:

SCORE

CRITERIA

- | | |
|---|--|
| 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● there is a clear topic sentence ● each of the other sentences expands on or clarifies the main idea. ● uses specific and clear details relevant to the topic. ● the student addresses the main idea with understanding by showing a logical progression and using suitable connectors. ● there is a definite and logical conclusion which may include a summing up of the main points. |
| 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● there is a clear topic sentence ● each of the other sentences expands on the main idea, however there are some irrelevant details ● uses details to expand on or support the main idea. ● there is a logical progression, however there are some gaps. ● there is a conclusion. |
| 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● there is a topic sentence, but it does not clearly address the topic. ● some sentences wander off into inappropriate subjects. ● there is a minimal amount of description or detail. ● there are a number of gaps, the transitions between actions or ideas are not clearly expressed, therefore the writing does not progress logically. ● there is no conclusion. |
| 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the student rephrases or directly repeats the verbal stimulus. ● the sentences are confusing, they address the topic in a disorganised and disconnected way. ● details are irrelevant ● there is no logical progression. ● there is no conclusion. |
| 0 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the student's handwriting is so poor that it is impossible to determine if the topic was addressed. ● the writing is completely off the topic. ● the paper is blank or has some meaningless scribbles. |