

## **Testing the writing skills in high school level: The case of Leonik Tomeo High school, Durrës**

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### **Abstract**

The main focus of this article will be the issue of testing writing skills in English language at the high school level. The method we have used to collect the data is the qualitative one. More specifically, the data has been collected by examining English language final tests provided by the teachers. The examination of the tests is related only to exercises designed to test writing (not speaking or grammar) and it will be divided in three main categories as follows:

- a) criteria used by the teachers to assess writing skills in English
- b) number of points given to exercises designed for testing writing versus the rest of the test
- c) types of texts chosen for this purpose.

Part of the analysis will be the students’ level of English as well. We will also focus on the types of texts that result problematic for them. Furthermore, teachers will be asked about possible ways they can use to help students improve their writing skills. The findings of this study and the review of literature will provide useful suggestions related to testing writing skills in English.

**Keywords:** *writing skills, English final test, assessment criteria*

### **Introduction**

Assessing the writing skills is part of the learning process for each subject, as it is for English language. It is important to note here that being good at writing involves a number of factors. However, contrary to what some people believe, having a sound knowledge of grammar, spelling and punctuation rules is not enough to guarantee success. Clear thinking and effective organization are equally important when it comes to expressing the message in writing. In the context of second language teaching it is often the language itself which presents a barrier in this aspect since it makes English teachers’ assessment tend mostly toward mechanical

aspects of writing, bypassing in this way the major goal which is to achieve successful communication by means of the written text.

In the context of testing the writing skills it seems that the main point of debate has to do with the ways in which this ability can be tested. Some scholars seem to be in favour of written assignments or essays as an evaluation tool (Heaton, (1988); Hamp Lyon (1990). Others, including Dunlop (1969), support the use of objective tests of writing. There is also a group third who believe that the combined use of the two previously mentioned ways would be an ideal solution to this problem (Ackerman and Smith, 1988). However, it is impossible to develop a good and valid test without having a clear idea of what will be assessed and how will the assessment be conducted. Following we will analyse various form of assessments used.

Indirect assessment is a form of assessment that seeks to minimize potential variations in test results through the use of objective test formats such as those with multiple choices or fill-ins. This kind of assessment was widely used in the past but these last decades its use has decreased considerably, mainly due to the spread of Communicative language teaching method which focuses primarily on the communicative purpose of writing. According to Hyland (2003) indirect measurements indicate recognition of various writing sub skills such as grammar and sentence wording, (considered to be active components of the writing skills). But according to DeMauro (1992) cited in Hyland (2003), whereas some researchers claim that indirect methods are reliable ways to measure the ability of writing, they are mainly focused on accuracy rather than on communication. This leads writing assessment in class today towards texts produced by students. Researchers Spandel and Stiggins (1980) stated that because indirect methods measure the prerequisite of writing – the understanding of key elements and conventions of standard English usage - they represent necessary but not sufficient components of ability of speech.

Direct assessment of writing, on the other hand, measures the ability of students to communicate in writing, based on the production of a text with a specific theme. Weir (1993) would consider the successful realisation of this task as a reflection of the writing communication skills of students in real life. Direct assessment of writing harmonizes all the elements of writing. The same idea is expressed by Coombe and Hubley (2004) who state that the student must find appropriate ways to organize ideas, deliver content and use vocabulary, grammar and syntax conventions accordingly. But even in this case comes out the problem of the evaluation of written

text. Two are the forms used in direct assessment: holistic assessment and the analytical one.

Holistic assessment of writing means providing a single score based on the overall impression of the written text. In general, when holistic assessment is used, the text is read by the assessor and he judges keeping in mind a given a scale or rubric with specific criteria for each category. From the standpoint of usage, this form is very practical because it takes less time than analytical assessment (where the text is read several times, focusing each time on a specific aspect). Another feature is pointed out by Elbow (1999) cited in Bacha (2001) according to which holistic assessment focuses on what the individual is good at, not in his weak points. White (1984) argues that holistic assessment is more valuable than analytical one as it reflects more closely the real individual response of a reader of a text, compared with analytical assessment. Among the main shortcomings of the holistic assessment of writing, especially in the sphere of foreign language, is that the result does not provide detailed information about the writing ability of the individual. This is because a single result does not allow the assessor to distinguish between different aspects of writing as the use of grammar, organization etc. Another drawback is related to the difficulty of interpreting the results. According to Lumley and McNamara (1995), although assessors are expected to assess a range of features with the holistic assessment (for example: the style, content, organization, grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.), it is not an easy job to do. So, some assessors may (consciously or unconsciously) assess 1 or 2 of these criteria, as more important than others, and give more weight in their assessment (Lumley and McNamara 1995).

Analytical assessment, on the other hand, separates different aspects of writing (for example: organization, spelling, vocabulary, etc.) and assesses them separately. Analytical assessment schemes provide more detailed information about the performance of the person taking the test, in different aspects of writing and therefore are preferred more than holistic assessment schemes. One of the strengths of this evaluation has to do with the fact that results on specific aspects make the overall assessment more reliable. Also, in the context of teaching, analytical assessment provides both teachers and students a very significant feedback compared to holistic assessment. Among its shortcomings can be mentioned that the focus on different aspects can divert attention from the overall effect of the written text. Another weak point has to do with the fact that the estimates for specific aspects of writing cannot be used separated from each-other, which means that if an assessor awards maximum points in one of the categories, it

directly affects the overall assessment. In this regard, Hughes (1989, p. 94) notes that while the whole is often greater than the sum of the constituent parts, a compound result can be very reliable, but not valid.

One of the most commonly used scales in the writing assessment for English as a Second Language (ESL) is that of Jacobs et al. (1981). According to this scale, the writing is assessed in five areas: content, organization, vocabulary, language usage and mechanical terms. Each aspect has been assigned different point: content (30 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), the use of language (25 points) and mechanical aspect (5 points).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has also paid attention to the aspect of writing. Among other issues covered, it is given a special attention to the interactive nature of writing that is found in (CEFR, p. 61), "In written production (writing) activities the language user as writer produces a written text which is received by a readership of one or more readers." and is illustrated by the activities of writing (for example, completing forms and questionnaires, writing articles for magazines, writing reports, taking down messages from dictation, creative and imaginative writing etc.) which have as their main purpose communication. As in the case of the speaking skill, CEFR provides a set of illustrative scales for Overall written production as well as creative writing.

## **Methodology**

### **Subjects**

The subjects of this study were English final exams administered to students of the third year in "Leonik Tomeo" high school, Durres. Concerning this part of the study, with the permission of the school headmaster we met personally the English teachers and asked several copies of written tests administered during the academic year 2013-2014 to 12th grades. We decided not to examine the preparatory tests for the State Matura since it was expected that the format would be very similar to the latter. Most teachers welcomed positively this request and provided the tests. They were told in advance that anonymity of test makers would be preserved and the tests would be used only for study purposes. Also, it should be clarified that in accordance to the research questions presented at the initial part of the study, not all the test was analysed, only questions or exercises that measured written communication. A total of 12 English tests were analyzed.

## **Instruments**

The instrument used for this study was the English test content analysis. We did not analyse the tests in their entirety, but only that part that had to do with the communicative writing skill. This was done with the purpose of distinguishing it from reading exercises or grammar exercise where students sometimes had to write (as is the case of sentence transformation) etc. This aspect was analysed in terms of points assigned to this activities towards the points accorded to the other skills in the test. Furthermore, we analysed the criteria used by the teachers is their assessment as well as types of texts used to test students writing skills.

## **Data Analysis**

What we noticed at the outset of this analysis was the fact that out of the 12 tests that were in total, 5 of them were designed by the teachers, 3 were adapted taking as the starting point the test booklet that accompanied the English method used by them (Wishes) and the other 4 were taken directly from the test booklet. In the case of the 3 tests, adjustments were of different natures;

- a) some of the exercises of the test were taken from the booklet and some developed by the teachers themselves
- b) some of the exercises were removed from the booklet format so the test was reduced in terms of the number of exercises
- c) another adaptation was changing the number of points for exercises.

The first step of this analysis was identifying the tests that had exercises which measured of written communication skills. After reviewing all the tests it was noticed that of the 12 tests, 3 of them had no exercises for the writing skill; consequently they were not included in our analysis. We focused on only 9 English tests. Initially we analyzed the percentage that exercises which measured the writing skills had towards the rest of the test. As we know, CEFR, as a leading document in the field of assessment presents a scheme where the four skills are given equal weight. The same can be said about internationally recognised English exams like IELTS, TOEFL, PTE General and Academic etc, where skills assessment is balanced. Now, turning to the tests that we analysed, what catches the eye almost immediately is that usually there is no balance. More specifically, the results showed that 2 of the 9 tests, or (22.2%) had no information about the points in the exercises of written communication, which means that points of the exercises were missing in throughout the test or they were not

specified in the exercises of written communication or the test lacked the evaluation scheme. The latter became an obstacle in calculating the percentage of these exercises. In the remaining 7 tests, these exercises accounted for 10% - 30% of the test. More specifically, we found that in 44.4% of tests (4 tests), written communication exercises accounted for 11-20% of the test, while in 33.3% of tests analyzed (3 tests), they take 21-30% of the test. Another aspect of the analysis had to do with the criteria English teachers used to assess exercises of written communication skill. Out of the 9 tests reviewed, only 3 of them had specified criteria concerning the way the written part was assessed. In the other 6 tests was not given any information on the assessment of this type of exercise. It is not clear on what aspects the students are supposed to concentrate while producing the written text, or how much importance should they give to specific aspects of writing. While in every standardised test are clearly specified the criteria of assessing writing in 6 of the tests were not found such criteria. That is a serious drawback. In these 3 tests (with the given criteria) was noticed that in general, each one had 5 or 6 specific criteria, similar to those used by the English tests in the State Matura. More specifically, the criteria were as follows: content, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, organization, spelling, arguments on the topic and paragraphs. The first four criteria were present in each of the three tests. Also in these 3 tests were found changes in the number of points assigned to different criteria. One of the 3 tests had only the criteria but not the points for each one of them, whereas in the other 2 tests, points ranged from 1-3 and none of them had the same number of points for the given criteria.

Types of texts were also part of the content analysis. As we mentioned, only 9 tests were analysed as the others had no written communication exercises. In these tests it was observed that generally the prevailing text type resulted the letters (formal or informal), which accounted for 33.3%, followed by essays on different topics and e-mails. Also, it was noticed the use of stories that are more focused on the expression of students' opinion rather than on the structure of the text. This is clearly understood by the exercise requests of the type: "*Write a story about the loss of an important person*" where is not given any specification on the type of structure to be used. Other types of texts used were proposals, letters of application and instructions to find a location. In one case it was not specified type of text that should be used by the student. An example is "*It was the worst day of my life*" where was given only the topic and nothing else.

Another element analysed were the teachers' opinions on the difficulties of various types of texts for third year students. Based on their answers,

formal letters, essays, compositions, reports, reviews and proposals present an "average" level of difficulty whereas for informal letters, e-mails and summaries the difficulty is "low". Based on students' answers, compositions, essays, articles, reports, proposals and reviews the level of difficulty varies from "low" to "average", whereas the difficulty for formal and informal letters, e-mails, and summaries is in "low" levels. Viewing this aspect from both perspectives we noticed that for informal letters, e-mails and summaries students and teachers answers comply with each other concerning the "low" level of difficulty.

### **Limitations of the study**

Among the main limitations of the study we can mention that a larger sample of English tests would yield a more specific result, which would be nearer to the reality of the classroom. This would result in a clearer perspective of testing written communication skills at the high school level. Another limitation that was evident during the analysis is the limited number of studies in the Albanian context concerning this problem, which makes it difficult to compare results.

### **Conclusions**

The study shows that despite the expectation that written communication skill is given the same importance as the other linguistic skills in a foreign language, the data show that in tests it is given less importance, which is reflected in the points accorded to this type of exercise. This finding is supported by the result of the tests' content analysis as well as from the teacher's answers. Also, we noticed that the way of designing exercises of written communication in English tests in certain cases left much to be desired. It was not uncommon that important elements were not specified such as: the type of text, the exercise points, evaluation criteria etc.

To sum up, we can say that in most of the English tests that we analysed, the written communication skill was not given the importance it should have. This means that in some of the English tests this skill was not tested at all and in others, exercises that tested this skill were given very few points compared to the rest of the test. Concerning the second question, the criteria used to assess the written component was not always specified in the exercises. This makes it difficult to understand on what basis will be assessed the written component. The most typical test items resulted letters (formal or informal), which accounted for 33.3%, followed by essays on different topics and e-mails.

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