



## **WORKSHOP I**

### ***Assessing Continuous Writing: What makes a good marking scheme? What are its implications for teaching and learning?***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The workshop is intended to enable participants to gain a working knowledge of the major assessment principles involved when designing a marking scheme as well as to discuss the various methods of assessing continuous writing, competence criteria and establishing mark boundaries or bands. The workshop will engage participants in a short mock marking session followed by the task of designing a 'good' marking scheme. Participants will be encouraged to share their views about the extent to which marking schemes can have either a positive or negative backwash effect on teaching and learning.

#### **WORKSHOP SUMMARY**

The first part of the workshop was a discussion on designing a marking scheme. The facilitator started with the definitions of key terminologies such as continuous writing and a marking scheme. Then, it was followed by some discussion on the assessment principles that need to be observed.

Continuous writing is defined as “an attempt to express ideas in discursive prose” (Ballard, 1923). Continuous writing can be categorized into four different types, namely, guided, directed writing, essay or free composition.

A marking scheme is defined as “a comprehensive document indicating the explicit criteria against which candidates' answers will be judged” (Murphy, 1979). The context here refers to the learning, teaching and testing continuous writing in an ESL setting at Form 4/5 upper secondary schools.

In assessing continuous writing, there are several assessment principles that need to be followed.

- Fairness ,
- Reliability, i.e. to what extent does it measure a trait/skill/construct consistently?
- Intra-marker reliability coefficient which deals the degree of consistency within one and the same marker; a correlation of the marks awarded on successive occasions by one and the same marker for the same answer.
- Inter-marker reliability coefficient which concerns the degree of consistency between markers; it compares the marks given by different markers for the same answer scripts on a particular occasion.
- Marker bias; a marker's "relative generosity or severity in awarding marks for an answer script" (Wood & Quinn, 1975).
- Validity; to what extent does a test/marking scheme measure what it claims to measure?
- Positive effect on classroom practice (merit marking vs. demerit marking)
- Productive feedback which serves as encouragement
- Weighting – extra points or emphasis given to a particular area/criterion.

The second part deals with the methods of marking, competence criteria and mark boundaries. There are five methods of marking. They are analytic, holistic, achievement of aim, multiple and individual scoring. The details of each method are listed below.

- **Analytic scoring:** answer is broken down into specific points and the student's score is based upon the number of points contained in his

answer; part of an answer is more important than the answer as a whole; also called 'point-score' method.

- **Holistic scoring:** the marker reads through the answer and forms a general impression of the answer as a whole, then using some standard, assigns a mark to the answer; quality of an answer as a whole is more important than its parts; also called 'global' or 'impression' method.
- **Achievement of aim:** How far has the writer achieved the purpose which he has implicitly put before himself? (Cast, 1939)
- **Multiple scoring:** At least 2 or more examiners are engaged to mark the same script independently, and an average mark is then obtained.
- **Individual scoring:** Choice of examiner's own method of marking.

Below is an example of a competence criterion:

**Grade C:** The *meaning* is clear. There will be patches of accurate *language*, particularly when simple vocabulary and structures are used. *Vocabulary* is usually adequate to convey intended meaning, although it may be insufficiently developed to achieve precision. Idiom may be uncertain at times. *Punctuation* will be used, but may not enhance/clarify meaning. Some sentence separation errors may occur occasionally. Simple words will be spelt accurately, but more complex vocabulary may show *spelling* weaknesses. *Paragraphs* will be used but lack unity.....

Examples of mark boundaries are as follows:

- Grades A, B, C, D, or E
- Grades A (21-25), B (16-20), C (11-15), D (6-10), E (0-5)
- Percentages – 100%, 75%, 50%
- Qualitative grades – Excellent, Fair/Average, Poor

The third part was the practical session. In this session, the course participants were given a marking scheme, a sample question and a sample student answer script. Course participants were required to mark the student answer script and give a brief rationale for the grade and mark given.

After the practical session, the facilitator proceeded with the discussion on the implications on language learning and teaching. Firstly, it is important that students have a purpose and an audience for their writing, and this should be reflected in whatever scheme of assessment is used for written work (Lucantoni, 2002).

Secondly, combination of analytic and holistic marking approaches, where written work is assessed against certain criteria, within which there are descriptors, would allow for feedback to students, indicating their strengths and weaknesses. Thirdly, the more productive feedback a student receives, the more likely he/she would want to write more. A suggested method for recording productive feedback is as follows:

Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p>Wide range of appropriate vocabulary</p> <p>Excellent conclusion</p> <p>Logical progression of ideas</p>	<p>Check subject/verb agreements</p> <p>Paragraphing weak</p> <p>3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph is confusing</p>
<p>Suzana – Overall this is a good effort. You've answered the question. You need to think more about how to break up your ideas into paragraphs, and check for errors with subject and verb. I enjoyed reading your report. Well done.</p> <p>(Lucantoni, 2002)</p>	



Lastly, a poorly designed marking scheme will negate the positive backwash effect of a well-constructed test.

The facilitator summed up the discussion by asking the participants whether assessing continuous writing is dogmatic or provocative. He further continued that workshop ideas were not meant to sound dogmatic but more an attempt to share ideas and experiences and to promote some debate about issues surrounding language teaching, assessment of continuous writing and marking procedures. Change, or doing something differently in the classroom, is always difficult. Unless we're prepared to try, we won't know whether something will work. Very often, trying something new brings pleasant surprises. Even if we make the decision not to change, at least we would have tried something new, and we would have reflected on our own teaching and our students' situations for learning. Peter Lucantoni (2002) stated that "There is no right or wrong way to teach, only more or less effective ways to teach." Does the same apply to testing?