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## Assessment System in Writing Essays by Graduate Students

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### Abstract

This study considers how an assessment system combining teacher's, peer- and self-assessment contribute to developing graduate students' essay writing skills. The assessment procedure consisted of such steps as: peer-evaluation of essay's paragraphs and draft essays; self-evaluation and editing; teacher's assessment. The students also worked with self-editing logs to create a checklist of errors that had been noted in feedback from the teacher or peers. The findings suggest that the iteration process of the assessment system improved my graduate students' essay writing skills, which was seen when comparing the essays written before intervention with essays produced during intervention period.

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### 1. Introduction

My research interest in the problems involved with teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing at tertiary educational institutions worldwide is explained by the fact that English is becoming a lingua franca of academic research, which leads to results becoming internationally recognized mainly through publications in English. Moreover, developed writing skills are the key elements of professional qualifications of a university teacher (Hyland, 2011).

Since the outset of globalization processes many research studies have examined how to improve second language writing instructions (Hyland and Hyland, 2006; Hyland, 2011; O'Brien, 2004; Edwards, 2013). Developed writing skills are in great demand among university researchers and scientific institutions of various kinds because

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writing helps students not only consolidate subject specialism knowledge, but also becomes the way to talk about this knowledge (Hyland, 2011).

However, the process of developing writing skills, particularly those for composing essays, leaves much to be desired both by teachers and students, not to mention university administration, who understands that almost all university rating lists include qualitative and quantitative indices of publications written in English. This problem can be explained not only by teachers' insufficient knowledge of essay writing discourse forms, who mainly focus on teaching writing as a means rather than writing as an end (Ur, 1996), but also by inefficient system of written assignments feedback (Wei, 2010).

That is why my focus in this paper is on an action research project investigating the possibilities of an assessment system in teaching graduate students how to write essays.

### *1.1. Literature review*

Many recent EAP research publications emphasize that assessment plays an important role in developing not only language skills but also self-study and self-development skills (Coombe, 2010; Fahim and Jalili, 2013; Qu and Yang, 2010; Reynolds, 2010; Wei, 2010).

While many EFL educators interpret this concept in different ways, assessment is a process that "...integrates multiple sources of evidence, whether test-based or not, to support an interpretation, decision, or action" (Moss et al., as cited in Burns & Richard, 2009, p.78). related to student progress and performance.

According to Linn and Gronlund (2000), assessment is functionally categorized into four types:

- placement assessment to determine students performance at the beginning of a new course;
- formative assessment to monitor students' progress while on a course,
- diagnostic assessment to determine problems persistently occurring in the process of learning in order to efficiently solve them;
- summative assessment to define if the goals set at the beginning of the course have been achieved (p.41-42).

Although all kinds of assessment are important at different stages of a language course, in the process of teaching writing for academic purposes researchers emphasize the importance of the formative one for a number of reasons.

For example, Wei (2010) favors formative assessment as a range of formal and informal procedures aimed at developing both writing skills and students' potential as learners. In Wei's (2010) opinion, formative assessment may have different forms, such as teacher, peer, self-assessment or a combination of them, and uses various techniques like classroom observation, portfolios, questionnaires, interviews, etc. (p.838). She presents some characteristics that are key to understanding formative assessment:

It not only assesses cognitive process but is concerned about learner feelings, behaviors, interests and attitudes... It is process-focused and for developmental purpose, not for comparison or selection... It pays more attention to the change in individual learners and respects learner differences and gives full play to learner potential (Wei, 2010, p. 838).

In my view, Wei is right in saying that formative assessment is focusing on learners, which agrees with what Fahim and Jalili (2013) say about non-test assessment options, namely, portfolio assessment. Fahim and Jalili's (2013) ideas about standardized testing failing to provide opportunities for the students "to revise, edit, ask for help, and ... be able to evaluate what they have learned about learning" (p.496) seem to be extremely useful because, more often than not, in every day practice of teaching writing some teachers tend to give grades for students written assignments without paying attention to how much effort each student made to do the task, and what lessons they can learn from the grades received. As an alternative to traditional course grades or percentile grades, Fahim & Jalili (2013) use portfolio assessment, which, in their view, helps learners "become more active in and responsible for their learning and develop the sense of ownership" (p.496). And this corresponds to Obdalova's (2014) article saying that students learn better when they learn consciously (p.64).

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