

Iranian EFL students' perceptions of criteria for assessing students' written performance

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Abstract

In the history of language teaching and learning, writing in general and the assessment of writing in particular have always been the topic of controversy. Listening to the voice of students with regard to the process of writing and its assessment is of crucial importance. Doing so, the present study intended to explore Iranian EFL students' perceptions of criteria for assessing students' written performance. To this aim, a convenient sample of students ($N = 30$) from different classes and institutes in Darab, Iran, was recruited to participate in the study. All of the participants were interviewed to determine their perceptions of criteria for writing assessment. Results indicated that based on students' perceptions, grammar and spelling are the important factors in the assessment of a piece of writing, respectively. They also mentioned that the ability to write can be assessed through composition writing and their teachers should utilise their own perceptions rather than utilising a standard rubric.

Keywords: Assessing writing, criteria, perceptions, students.

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1. Introduction

Perceptions are a set of mental constructs that 'name, define and describe the structure and content of mental states thought to drive a person's actions' (Richardson, 1996, p. 102). Brown (2006) views perceptions as subjective beliefs and evaluations of someone's work which play an important role in the realm of language teaching since they shed light on teachers' and students' beliefs, opinions and actions. He further argues that differences in students' and teachers' perceptions may result in students' loss of interest and motivation in class. Also, potential mismatches between the perceptions of students and those of their teachers can have negative effects on learners' sense of satisfaction with their English class as well as on their final achievement (Williams & Burden, 1997), which highlights the importance of investigating teachers' and students' perceptions in education in general and language teaching and learning in particular. Moreover, the dynamic and flexible nature of perceptions (Brown, 2009) justifies the need for their continuous investigation.

Second language (L2) writing has been studied across different languages (Kaplan & Grabe, 2002) and has become a means for access to knowledge, power and resources (Crowley, 1998; Leki, 2003). Reilly (2005) believes that in the last two decades, since writing is accepted to be an important activity and the most demanding language skill, there has been a surge in the introduction of new approaches to help students to become better writers. Nevertheless, teachers see writing as a skill which is challenging and, consequently, not a desirable activity for language learners (Reilly, 2005). Considering the importance of L2 writing, it can reasonably be argued that writing assessment, too, assumes paramount importance in L2 learning contexts.

According to Palomba and Banta (1999, p. 4), 'assessment is the systematic collection, review and use of information about educational programmes undertaken for the purpose of improving learning and development.' Also, Dhindsa, Omar and Waldrip (2007) believed that the assessment is an essential component of teaching and defined it as 'a systematic process for gathering data about student achievement' (p. 1261). The importance of assessment has widely been acknowledged, especially by those who deal with teaching and learning. Brinke et al. (2007), for instance, believed that assessments are at the centre of the educational process because they directly impact on the students' learning processes. Moreover, it has been emphasised by Dahlgren (1984) that assessing learners' performances is an important task which cannot be ignored and has a strong effect on learners' approaches to learning and outcomes of their studies. As Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005) argued assessment has a significant effect on students' performance, which cannot be ignored.

Given the importance of writing assessment and considering the need for attempting to investigate students' perceptions of writing assessment criteria, it seems necessary to conduct an in-depth analysis and examination of these groups' perceptions of this issue.

2. Literature review

As stated by Leki (2001), the need for uncovering students' perceptions towards L2 English writing is undeniable; that is, it is necessary 'to hear their voices talking about the problems and successes they encountered in their writing classes and their interpretation of why things went as they did' (p. 17). In this regard, Rea-Dickins (1997) argued that because of the important information which students can provide on assessment, listening to their voice is necessary although "their views are among the most difficult to make sense of and to use" (p. 306).

In this regard, Ahmed Ismail (2011) investigated students' perceptions about an academic writing course (AWC) and writing in general. A total of 64 female students from an English for specific purposes programme participated in the study. The general design of the study was quantitative and qualitative in nature as a questionnaire and a focus-group interview were implemented for data collection. A combination of quantitative and qualitative procedures was employed to analyse the data collected via the questionnaire and the focus group interview, respectively. The results

demonstrated the students' positive views towards the AWC in particular and English as a second language (ESL) writing in general. The major findings demonstrated students' awareness of their needs and ESL writing requirements.

Koul, Fisher and Earnest (as cited in Mussawy, 2009) investigated the relationships among students' perceptions of their assessment task, classroom learning environment, academic self-efficacy and attitude to science in years 8, 9 and 10 of school. The study took 3 years and the authors used a six-scale instrument called perceptions of assessment task (PAT). Their sample constituted 470 students from grades 8 to 10 in 20 science classrooms in three Western Australian schools. As part of their study, they developed a five-scale instrument, *Students Perceptions of Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ)*.

In the second phase, the researchers administered SPAQ with attitude and self-efficacy scales to nearly 1,000 students from 41 science classes in grades 8–10. The collected data were analysed using one-way analysis of variance. Correlation results showed an association between the SPAQ and students' attitude to science classes. In addition, the authors found that among the five scales of SPAQ, the scales of Congruence with Planned Learning, Authenticity, Transparency and Diversity were positively associated. Hence, the instrument was able to differentiate between the perceptions of students in different classrooms based on the five scales on the questionnaire. In contrast, the scale of Student Consultation was negatively associated. That is, students did not have a say in their classroom tasks. Similarly, the analysis showed the association between students' PATs, and their academic self-efficacy in science classes was positively significant. However, the study showed that male students perceived themselves to be academically more efficient than their female counterparts.

Students' perceptions were also examined from another point of view; namely, their ideas about their peers' assessment (PA) of their writing performance. In this regard, Kaufman and Schunn (2010) investigated students' negative perceptions of an online PA system for undergraduate writing across the disciplines. Also, a) the nature of students' resistance to PA, b) factors influencing that resistance and c) how students' perceptions impacted their revision work were examined by the researchers. The study had two phases. First, the data were collected from 250 students in 10 courses across 6 universities using an online PA system called Scaffolding Writing and Reviewing in the Discipline (SWoRD) for their writing assignments. Results showed that students had the most positive perceptions of SWoRD in those courses where an instructor graded their work in addition to peers (as opposed to peer-only grading). Then, in the second phase, the data were gathered from 84 students using SWoRD and no instructor grading for assessment of writing in one university class. Findings from that the study indicated that students sometimes regarded PA as unfair and often believed that peers were unqualified to review and assess students' work. Furthermore, students' perceptions of the fairness of PA dropped significantly following students' experience in doing PA. However, students' perceptions appeared to be unrelated to the extent of their revision work.

In a study, Neumann (2014) investigated what students perceived to be the impact of their teachers' assessment criteria on their way of writing and learning in the L2 writing classroom. The students in this study apparently attempted to understand their teachers' expectations and then, tailored their writing to meet those expectations. Students may have avoided particular structures in order to satisfy the teachers' expectation for accuracy rather than focusing on their learning and taking risks to experiment with new language and expand their linguistic repertoire. Also, the results indicated that the students were aware of their teachers' primary focus on accuracy as an assessment criterion and could enumerate particular areas of weakness that their teachers had previously identified in their writing using the evaluation grid.

Khonbi (2012) surveyed Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of self-, peer- and teacher-assessment experiences. The researcher found that learners showed positive attitudes towards and beliefs about self-, peer- and teacher-assessment practices, with the PA group expressing significantly more positive than negative attitudes in this regard.

In an attempt to satisfy language students of their works, Galugahi (2010) investigated assessment in ELT classes through comparing and contrasting the marks given by three groups of assessors (self-, peer- and teacher-assessments) in productive skills (speaking and writing). The study was conducted with 50 upper-intermediate level students at Semnan University. An open-ended questionnaire was used at the beginning and a closed one was utilised at the end of the study to compare and contrast the learners' perceptions towards their involvement in assessment. The results indicated that when assessment criteria were firmly set and students were trained enough to do self- and peer-assessments, a strong correlation among self-, peer- and teacher-assessments could be estimated. Furthermore, it was found that self- and peer-assessments would also increase the students' reflective capacity about their own learning, which resulted in increased motivation.

Also, Khonbi and Sadeghi (2013) investigated male and female Iranian EFL students' perception of self-, peer- and teacher-assessment experiences. Sixty-three students at Urmia University and Tabriz Islamic Azad University, in the form of three intact classes, experienced self-, peer- and teacher-assessment activities for one academic semester during which they took a knowledge pre-test, four assessment series and a course achievement post-test. The findings revealed that the three experimental groups had positive attitudes towards their assessment experiences, while the peer-assessment group was the most positive in this regard, slight differences were found in the three groups' attitudes and beliefs.

As the literature review showed, although numerous studies have so far been done which explored students' perceptions from diverse perspectives, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, no study, especially in the context of Iran, has focused on this issue. Moreover, the importance of students' perceptions is undeniable, but sometimes their opinions do not match their teachers' ideas (Williams & Burden, 1997). So, the present study intended to explore Iranian EFL students' perceptions of criteria for assessing students' written performance by answering the following research question:

1. What perceptions do Iranian EFL students learning English at private language institutes hold towards criteria for assessing students' L2 writing?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were EFL learners in three institutes in Darab, Iran. The study was conducted in five different classes with 30 learners at the intermediate level who were selected using convenient sampling. Students' age ranged from 14 to 23 years old with an average age of 17. They were 18 female and 12 male students. Most of the students ($N = 23$) had been learning writing for more than 2 years. Students' English classes were the main source of training which prepared them for writing courses. As the proficiency level of the learners had already been estimated by the institutes, there was no need to administer a placement test. In fact, before entering any level in the institutes, all learners take a placement test and the criteria for promotion to another level are fixed in those institutes.

3.2. Instrument

The instruments for collecting data were interviews. There were eight interview questions which were drawn from available literature (see the Appendix) on writing assessment. The interviews were conducted in Persian for students because the target language could have acted as a barrier to clear and concise expression of ideas. Their answers were translated into English by the researcher. The researcher, then, gave some of those translations to the students and asked them whether they had accurately described their perceptions. This is called member check in qualitative research and contributes to the trustworthiness of the study (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2006). The

rationale behind the interviews was to uncover participants' perceptions. Each interview lasted about 15 minutes. The participants were interviewed one by one and their answers were audio recorded.

3.3. Data collection and analysis procedure

Learners were interviewed to determine their perceptions of criteria for writing assessment and their answers were audio recorded. As for data analysis, students' perceptions were analysed to find similar themes and also compare different factors which they mentioned.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Students' perceptions of criteria for L2 writing assessment

In order to answer the research question which was 'What perceptions do Iranian EFL students learning English at private language institutes hold towards criteria for assessing students' L2 writing?', the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 EFL students. As they were not proficient enough in English to be able to express their ideas, all of them were interviewed in Persian. Then, all interviews were recorded, transcribed and finally translated into English by the researcher. In the next phase, the transcriptions were qualitatively analysed to find out the answer to the second research question.

As the first interview question, students were asked 'How can we assess writing? Through what activities?' All of the students believed that the ability to write can be assessed through composition writing. One of the students said, 'I think writing can be assessed through composition writing. The teacher can ask the students to write about a topic and then assess their performance.' Moreover, two of the students believed that writing can be assessed by asking the students to write definitions of terms and concepts. One of them said, 'Besides composition writing, writing can be assessed through writing definitions, I think. Our teacher gives us some terms and concepts which we have to write about and define. Then, she corrects our responses with regard to grammar and lexicon'.

Regarding the second interview question which was 'In your opinion, what criteria should be considered while assessing writing?', the students just mentioned two criteria, grammar and spelling, as important factors in assessing a piece of writing. Most of the students ($N = 24$) mentioned grammar (language) as the most important criterion in assessing writings. One of the students said, 'I think grammar is very important in assessing a piece of writing. We have to write as accurately as possible, with regard to grammar, to get a good grade.' As another example, one other student stated, 'A piece of writing should be grammatically accurate. I think in assessing writings; we need to focus on grammar to see whether the sentences are correct in this regard or not.'

Besides grammar, 13 students believed that spelling is another important criterion in assessing writings. As an example, one of the students mentioned, 'Well, spelling is very important in a piece of writing. While assessing writings, we should check the spelling of words and if necessary, write a comment for the writer to correct it later.' In addition, another student said, 'In assessing a piece of writing, I think the spelling of words should be checked. The spelling should be correct and if there are words with incorrect spelling, the readers cannot understand the text easily. So, I believe that the spelling is an important factor.'

As the third question, the researcher asked, 'Do you believe that a multiple-draft approach in which students receive feedback and revise one or more times before a paper is graded should be used?' The majority of the students ($N = 21$) believed that their teachers should utilise a multiple-draft approach in their course while the rest of the students ($N = 9$) believed that this approach should not be used. As an example, one of the students stated, 'Yes, I think we should revise our writings and then, the teacher should grade them. We write the first draft and then the teacher writes comments, gives us feedback and asks us to revise the paper. I think the procedure should be like what I said.'

But, another student pointed, 'Well, I don't think so. We should not use this approach. The teacher should ask us to write and then after assessing the writings, she should grade them. We should not revise our writing'.

Answering the next interview question which was 'Do you think your teacher should utilise a well-known and standard rubric for writing assessment or assess the writings based on his/her own perception?', most of the students ($N = 22$) believed that in writing assessment, their teachers should utilise their own rubric and stick to their own perceptions rather than utilising a standard and available rubric, but the rest of the students ($N = 8$) believed that their teachers should assess their writings based on a standard rubric. One of the students said, 'While assessing the writings, I think, our teacher should not check a rubric and then grade us based on the rubric. I think based on his personal perceptions, he should assess our writings.' While another student stated, 'Yes, I think our teacher should utilise a standard rubric in assessing the writings. He should write comments for us and check every item and then grade the writings, I think.'

With regard to the next question which was 'What are your perceptions with regard to assessing language issues (grammatical problems) in a piece of writing?', most of the students ($N = 19$) said grammatical problems should be indicated and then revised by the students. Some of the students ($N = 7$) believed that grammatical problems should be detected and the correct form should be provided by the person who assesses the writings. A couple of students ($N = 4$) believed that the assessor should write comments and explain why the sentence is wrong grammatically and teach that part later in the class. As an example, one of the students who believed the grammatical problems should be revised by the student said, 'Grammar is very important in writing. I think grammatical problems should be revised by the student. The assessor can indicate where the sentences are grammatically incorrect and ask the students to correct the mistakes and revise the writing.' With regard to the belief that the correct form of mistakes should be provided, one student said, 'I think the person who assesses the writings should indicate the incorrect parts with regard to grammar and write the correct forms beside them. By doing so, the students will be exposed to the correct form and learn.' Moreover, another student believed, 'grammatical problems should be identified and indicated and later, the teacher should teach them in the class in order for the students to avoid making the same mistakes later in writings.'

Answering the next interview question, 'Some people believe that writing can be assessed indirectly through multiple-choice questions. Do you agree or disagree? Why?', while just three students believed that writing can be assessed through multiple-choice questions, the rest of them ($N = 27$) believed that writing cannot be assessed by using such questions. As an example, one of the students said, 'In multiple-choice questions, you can distinguish between the correct and the incorrect form and structure which can be a way to assess writings.' On the other hand, one of the students said, 'To assess writing, you should write. You cannot assess the writing ability by multiple-choice questions. You don't write in those questions; you only select the correct answer. This is not writing.' As another example, one of the students stated, 'I do disagree. In multiple-choice questions, you cannot assess whether the students can write or not. It is not a good way to use multiple-choice questions for assessing writing.'

As the next question, the researcher asked 'Some people believe that scoring writing is always inaccurate and subjective. Do you agree or disagree? Why?' More than half of the students ($N = 19$) said they agreed while the rest of them ($N = 11$) believed scoring writing is not inaccurate and subjective. While one of the students believed 'The assessor grades the writing following his/her own perceptions. The scores will vary based on assessors' taste, so the writing score cannot be accurate and subjectivity affects them', another one said, 'The scores are not inaccurate and subjective. I think teachers' personal feelings and perceptions do not affect the scores. They check everything in the writings and then based on the performance, they grade the writings.'

As the last interview question, the students were asked, 'In your opinion, is content more important than accuracy (grammar) when assessing writing?' More than half of the participants ($N = 23$) believed

accuracy (grammar) is more important than content, and the rest of them ($N = 7$) believed that both are of equal importance. One of the students who believed accuracy (grammar) is more important said, 'In assessing a piece of writing, I think grammar is more important than content. If the writer does not use grammar accurately, it causes misunderstanding of the text. Also, grammar is taught in the classrooms but content is not. So, students should use the grammar accurately'. One of the students who believed both content and accuracy (grammar) are equally important said, 'I think both are important. The content should be relevant to the topic and also the grammar should be used accurately. The assessor should check both when assessing writings.'

Based on the above-mentioned results, the research question which was 'What perceptions do Iranian EFL students learning English at private language institutes hold towards criteria for assessing students' L2 writing?' can be answered. As the students' responses to the interview questions revealed, all of the students ($N = 30$) believed that the ability to write can be assessed through composition writing, while some of them believed besides composition writing, writing definitions of words can also be considered writing. With regard to their perception of criteria for assessing writing, all of them mentioned just grammar and spelling as important factors. Also, most of the students ($N = 21$) believed that their teachers should utilise a multiple-draft approach in their course, while a few of them ($N = 9$) believed that this approach should not be used. Moreover, most of the students ($N = 22$) believed that their teachers should utilise their own perceptions rather than utilising a standard rubric but, the rest of them ($N = 8$) believed that their teachers should assess their writings based on a standard rubric. Also, most of the students ($N = 19$) believed grammatical problems should be indicated by the assessor and then revised by the student. In addition, most of the students ($N = 27$) believed that writing cannot be assessed through multiple-choice questions. More than half of the students ($N = 19$) said they do agree with the belief that scoring of writing is always inaccurate and subjective, while the rest of them ($N = 11$) believed scoring of writing is not inaccurate and subjective. Finally, more than half of the participants ($N = 23$) believed accuracy (grammar) is more important than content, while a few ($N = 7$) believed that both are of equal importance.

As the results showed, most of the students ($N = 24$) believed that grammar is the most important criterion in assessing writing and fewer than half of them stated spelling as the next important criterion in assessing a piece of writing. That is, they thought that grammar and spelling are the most important criteria which should be considered while assessing writing. This is in contrast with what Jacobs et al. (1981) recommended. They included content, organisation, vocabulary, language use and mechanics as crucial criteria which assessors should consider when assessing a piece of writing.

Most of the students ($N = 19$) said grammatical problems should be detected by the assessor and then revised by the writer. Some of the students ($N = 7$) believed that grammatical problems should be detected and the correct form should be provided by the person who assesses the writings. A couple of students ($N = 4$) maintained that the assessor should write comments and explain why the sentence is wrong grammatically and teach that part later in the class. In this regard, Lee (2003) found that most of the teachers mark errors comprehensively, while in the local English syllabus and error correction literature, selective marking is recommended. Teachers prefer to treat error feedback as a job with little long-term significance. Although teachers spend lots of time assessing students' writing, they are not convinced that their effort pays off in terms of the student improvement.

In line with this, Ferris (2002) suggested that the indirect feedback is generally more influential and appropriate as compared with the direct feedback. By using direct feedback, teachers may misinterpret students' meaning and put words into their mouths. However, Ferris (2002) explained that direct feedback could be appropriate in a number of situations like: when students are at the beginning stages, and when 'untreatable' errors occur, that is, when errors cannot be self-corrected. Another situation in which direct feedback is appropriate is when teachers want to direct students' attention to the error in order for the student to correct it.

While most of the students ($N = 27$) in this study believed that the writing cannot be assessed through multiple-choice questions, Struyven et al. (2005) concluded that learners hold strong views towards different assessment and evaluation formats and generally, students prefer exams in multiple-choice format rather than essay-type questions.

Also, most of the students believed that a multiple-draft approach should be used in classes while the rest of the students said they did not believe so. In this regard, Conrad and Goldstein (1999) found that students repeated the same errors, while they revised their subsequent writings in response to 36 out of 44 assessors' comments. Examined carefully, the findings of that study indicated that teachers' comments do not necessarily lead to learners' comprehensive revision of their writings.

5. Conclusion

Considering the dynamic and changing nature of perceptions (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2003; Brown, 2009), this study was an attempt to investigate Iranian institute EFL students' perceptions of criteria for assessing students' written performance. A convenient sample of students ($N = 30$) from different classes and institutes in Darab, Iran, was recruited to participate in the study and they were interviewed to determine their perceptions of criteria for writing assessment. Results indicated that based on students' perceptions, grammar and spelling are the important factors in the assessment of a piece of writing, respectively. They also mentioned that the ability to write can be assessed through composition writing and their teachers should utilise their own perceptions rather than utilising a standard rubric.

Some practical and pedagogical implications can be extrapolated from the findings of this study. The results indicated that they had a limited knowledge of writing assessment criteria, which may imply that they write their assignments based on these limited number of criteria they have in mind. In order to broaden their knowledge of such criteria, it is suggested that, prior to asking them to write something, their teachers teach them and raise their awareness of different aspects of writing which should be considered. The students can also be given ample opportunities to revise their writings provided that they receive enough feedback on their writing samples.

Obviously, no study is perfect and each suffers from different drawbacks. This study, like most other studies, suffers from some limitations. Although generalisability of the findings has not been a concern in this study, it can be argued one of the limitations of this study is that the findings of the study may not be generalisable to other people or contexts. The reason is obviously lack of random sampling procedures because from a practical point of view, it was not possible for the researcher to recruit the participants randomly, and therefore, he had to choose the students based on a convenient sampling procedure by selecting those who were available to him. This, of course, makes us approach the findings of this study more cautiously.

Also, another shortcoming of the current study is that because of the students' limited proficiency in English, the researcher had to interview them in Persian, their native language although their teachers were interviewed in English.

Considering these shortcomings, future research can take special measures to alleviate some of the above-mentioned problems by, for instance, randomly choosing the participants from a population of institute teachers and students. Other studies can also investigate teachers' and students' perceptions towards the issue in high schools or universities.

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Appendix: Students' Interview Questions

1. به نظر شما، چگونه می توانیم نوشتار را ارزیابی کنیم؟ از طریق چه فعالیت هایی؟
2. به عقیده شما، هنگام ارزیابی نوشتار چه معیارهایی را باید در نظر داشت؟
3. آیا بر این باور هستید که روش نوشتار و تصحیح که در آن زبان آموزان پس از نوشتار و دریافت بازخورد از طرف مدرسان نوشتار را تصحیح می کنند و برای ارزیابی دوباره به مدرس می دهند باید در کلاس استفاده شود؟
4. آیا فکر می کنید مدرسان برای ارزیابی نوشتار باید از سرفصل های موجود و استاندارد استفاده کنند یا برای این کار تنها به ادراک خود تکیه کنند؟
5. نظر شما درباره ارزیابی مسائل زبانی (مشکلات دستور زبان) در یک نوشتار چیست؟
6. برخی از مردم براین باورند که نوشتار به صورت غیر مستقیم از طریق سوالات چند گزینه ای قابل ارزیابی است. آیا موافقت یا مخالف؟ چرا؟
7. برخی از مردم براین باورند که ارزیابی نوشتار همیشه نادرست و براساس ادراک شخصی است. آیا موافقت یا مخالف؟ چرا؟
8. به عقیده شما، هنگام ارزیابی نوشتار، محتوا از درستی (از نظر واژگان و دستور زبان) اهمیت بیشتری دارد؟