UNIT 20 IMPROVING AND ASSESSING WRITING ABILITY

Structure
20.1 Introduction
20.2 Objectives
20.3 Student Involvement in Assessment
20.4 Devising a Marking Code
20.5 Setting Writing Tasks for Assessment
20.6 Grading the Composition
20.7 Let Us Sum Up
20.8 Key Words
20.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
20.10 Suggested Readings

20.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already read in Units 16 and 17 that writing can refer to both the process of writing and the written products. You also know that as a teacher you have to take care of both these aspects. When you direct your learner's attention to writing as a process, your aim is to provide constructive feedback (as opposed to awarding marks or grades) - to provide maximum support for redrafting, rereading, rewriting parts of the texts and editing. On the other hand, when you are assessing writing as a product, you are more concerned with finding out how well the learners have mastered 'the many and varied skills of writing', viz.

- **language use**: the ability to write correct and appropriate sentences.
- **mechanical skills**: the ability to write a neat hand, use correct punctuation and spelling.
- **treatment of context**: the ability to think and develop thoughts.
- **stylistic skills**: the ability to manipulate sentences and paragraphs for focus and effect.
- **judgement skills**: the ability to write in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose with a particular audience in mind, together with an ability to select, organize and order relevant information.

On such occasions, you have to award marks or grades to your students' writing and tell them where they stand, what they have achieved and what still has to be taken care of.

In this unit we will look at approaches and methods to assess both these aspects of writing. But before we proceed further, we must bear in mind a few things.

a) "There is no simple transition from spoken to written language". Students have to move from casual (colloquial) speech to formal acceptable language, from spontaneous to planned language use, from known audience to unknown reader. In India, this transition becomes more difficult because of students translating some experiences literally from their mother tongue. Not only is a tolerance of errors essential, but also of Indianisms and certain adolescent slang expressions.

b) Students do not learn particular features of written language once and for all at a particular stage. Like all skills, the ability to write well develops slowly and gradually. Therefore, writing tasks should be repeated with varying degrees of complexity and difficulty at all stages.
c) Students show different ability on tasks of different kinds. Therefore only a relatively broad range of tasks demanding use of different varieties of language can provide reliable assessment.

d) As teachers, we need to use a combination of informal (continuous evaluation) and formal (unit test/term end) assessment to measure learner ability.

20.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- involve students in assessing their own writing;
- assess systematically students’ written work;
- writing tasks for assessment; and
- devise and use a marking scheme for marking written composition.

20.3 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN ASSESSMENT

Research studies by Brian Johnston (1987) suggest that when English teachers avoid grades or marks and involve students in assessing their own work, then the students are more motivated to improve their writing than are students who continuously receive grades or marks. He recommends that teachers should “encourage student involvement in arriving at assessments by: teaching students self assessment and peer group assessment skills, teaching students to specify the aspects of their work that they want responses to; and teaching students to negotiate assessments”.

Tricia Hedge (1988) advocates students’ involvement in the designing of a grading scheme on the grounds that this raises “student awareness of what makes a good piece of writing” and “prevents misunderstanding about the role of grading in writing classrooms”. Let us work at some of the ways of promoting student involvement and motivation in improving their writing skills.

Self Assessment : At the secondary level, when students develop greater understanding of the writing process, it is a good idea to give them time to read through and revise their own writing, to give advice about what they should look for in their own writing and show them examples of revised scripts. (They can see how some other students mark a script for revision). The ability to identify problems in their own writing is inculcated through this process and with your (i.e the teacher’s) help a good deal of effective revision can be done.

Pair Work Editing : Students can work in pairs, correcting and helping with each other’s work. They can talk about their ideas for their writing with each other and once the first draft is written, exchange it with the partner to mark the work and write comments. In case of doubt or clarification of some points, they can seek your help.

As pair work editing takes place immediately after the writing, it makes it useful and meaningful to the writer. Also students learn to recognise errors in their own writing by suggesting corrections in their partner’s work. Also it makes them think about clarity and acceptability in writing.

Negotiating Assessment : With your students (consent) prioritise the criteria for assessment. You can either write them on the blackboard or use photocopies of the following:
Marking Compositions

What do you think is most important in a composition? Put these things in order of importance (1-10).

- correct grammar
- length
- originality of ideas
- spelling
- punctuation
- neat handwriting
- a good range of vocabulary
- complex and well-structured sentences
- good organisation with introduction
- body and conclusion keeping to the title

What would you prefer?
- marks out of 10
- a letter grade

(Adapted from: Tricia Hedge (1988): Resource Book for Teachers: Writing.)

Have a class discussion to prioritise these criteria and having arrived at some kind of consensus, use the criteria for self or peer assessment. All these activities for involving students in the assessment of their own work will be most effective when the criteria for assessment are understood and accepted both by the students and teachers.
20.4 DEVISIGN A MARKING CODE

There is no doubt that students’ confidence in the exploration of ideas and manner of their presentation is best nurtured in a “helpful, non-threatening atmosphere, where experiments in language are not only acceptable but encouraged”. Nevertheless, there has to be some routine correction of technical errors and these surface features can be taken care of by devising a code of correction. Students should not get a copy marked with red ink with no inkling of what is amiss and therefore with no opportunity for self correction. Also a middling or poor grade at the end of composition without detailed comments for further improvement has a negative impact on students.

Many teachers use some symbols which tell the students where or what the error is so that they can correct them when they get their copies. Some common symbols which are used for the purpose are as follows:

- \( \text{Sp} = \) wrong spelling
- \( \text{T} = \) wrong tense
- \( \text{P} = \) wrong punctuation
- \( () = \) rearrange ideas, reword and rewrite this part
- \( \text{IR/NR} = \) irrelevant/not required
- \( \text{W,w} = \) wrong word

etc.

You can add more items depending on your requirement. Also just a ‘I’ in the margin may not help some students. You may perhaps write the correct tense in some cases.

Detailed comments at the end of the work, though time consuming, are specially beneficial to those motivated students who like to monitor their own development.

Check Your Progress

Notes:  
a) Write your answers in the space given below.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

5. Look at the following sample of student writing. Use a code of marking to correct the paragraph and write detailed comments at the end.

**Education for All (taken from an answer script of a Govt. Girls School student)**

India is a developing country. The 75% people of India are poor. In them most of the people illiterate and they had to suffer in calculating money, they are cheated by shopkeepers etc. It is the duty of the Govt. to literate the people. Many private social workers should also help the Govt. in this work. Nowadays, the Literacy mission has been started its aim is to literate more and more people of India. The advertisements are given in Delhi Doordarshan, Radio etc. In school there should be a rule that each student teach one person. An extragrading marks could also to them if needed. If the people of India could be fully literate, then the country would progress and could become a developed country.
20.5 SETTING WRITING TASKS FOR ASSESSMENT

We have mentioned at the beginning of this unit that we must set a number of writing tasks (and not just one composition) for purposes of assessment. Can you write two reasons why this is important?

a) .................................................................

b) .................................................................

If you have written that students need to be familiar with different methods of developing ideas (depending on the text type) and that different task types demand different language use, you are right. (While a personal letter can be written in informal language, a report has to be very precise and formal, while a picture composition demands a chronological development of a narrative, arguing for a cause implies the use of persuasive language with lots of evidence to support the line of thought/argument.) If we rely too heavily on one writing task, we may not assess a student properly because students perform differently on different tasks. Hence, the combination of marks on different tasks is a better guide to student competence and proficiency. J.B. Heaton and others suggest that we should not provide any internal choice to the students in a particular task (in the unit test or term tests). Not only does this provide a common basis for evaluation, but it also prevents the candidate from wasting time on choosing an item. On the other hand, when writing tasks are set for (internal) continuous evaluation purposes, a choice of topics will cater to the interests of each student. (Please note that we do just the opposite - any question paper from schools will show you that there is a lot of internal choice in paragraph or letter writing but the homework set is the same for everybody in a class. Well, we do have to unlearn to learn).

Let us look at some writing tasks which are usually set to evaluate the writing ability of students.

1. Write a paragraph of about 100 words on
   i) Lavish Living
   ii) Patriotism. ................................................ (10 marks)

2. Write a letter to the Editor of The Indian Express about the menace of loudspeakers at night. Sign yourself as Hem. ................................................ (8 marks)

In recent years, those Boards of Education (like West Bengal or CBSE) which have adopted the Communicative Approach to language teaching are introducing a different type of test to evaluate writing ability. Let us look at some examples:

1. Ashok Mathur of Class VIII A has just passed his annual examination. Two of his books are in fairly good condition and he wants to sell them at reduced rates. He puts up a notice on the school notice board giving all the necessary details. Write this notice in the space below, using not more than 30 words. Try to make the notice catch people's attention. You may use the space on the side of this page for rough work. ................................................ (5 marks)
2. You have met the following handicapped persons. You want to put up the information on your school notice board. Do it in two simple paragraphs in about 120 words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Handicap</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Award won so far</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1     | Parimal Roy   | Father: Biren Roy, Army Officer  
Mother: Uma Roy, Teacher | Unable to walk (both legs affected by polio) | Manager in a chemical factory | State Award for Employees 1988 |
| 2     | Bina Mandal   | Father: Teacher  
Mother: Teacher | Blind and slight deformity in leg | Music teacher in a music academy | State Award, Handicapped, 1989 |

3. Your friend Suman Mehta is a boarder of Eden School Hostel, Calcutta-96. Write in about 100 words a letter to Suman advising him to give up the habit of smoking which he has recently picked up from some of his senior friends. You may stress the bad effects of smoking using the following points.

i) affects the mouth, nose, and other respiratory organs  
ii) develops cancer risks: mainly lung cancer  
iii) causes growth of tumour and heart diseases  
iv) increases blood pressure  
v) causes pre-mature death.

(12 marks)

4. Use the following flow-chart to write a paragraph describing how hand-made paper is made ready for market.

Collect rags/torn clothes  
cut into small pieces  
wash and clean  
soak in bleach (3-4 days)  
beat into plup  
spread and lift in fine wire-net trays  
overturn on blanket pieces  
dry in sun or heating chamber  
ready for market  

dery again and pack  

What changes do you find in these tasks? A meaningful specific situation ensures that the students have something to say and a purpose for saying it. They also have an audience in mind when they write. The input or information which the students have to incorporate in their writing is much more. So they don’t waste much time chewing the pen trying to figure out what they should write. As the task is more controlled, the teacher can evaluate all the students on the same parameters.

(14 marks)
Check Your Progress

Note: 
  a) Write your answers in the space given below.
  b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

6. Use this advertisement to set a task on letter writing. Provide a specific situation and clear instructions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAY FOR</th>
<th>STAY FOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 DAYS</td>
<td>3 DAYS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here's an exciting gift coming your way from Himachal Tourism. Just pay for a two-day stay at any one of our 42 hotels and have the third day ABSOLUTELY FREE! Two children up to the age of 9 can also lodge with their parents FREE.

For reservation contact:
HIMACHAL TOURISM
Chanderlok Building,
36, Janpath,
New Delhi-110001
Tel.: (011) 3325320, 3324764
Fax: (011) 3731072

MANALI RESORTS
HOSPITALITY SERVICES
UG-40, Som Dutt Chambers-II
Bukkaji Cama Place
New Delhi-110066
Tel.: 672474, 616762
Fax: 011-619073

This offer valid up to 31st March 96 only

SKIING COURSES ALSOON

HIMACHAL TOURISM
NOBODY CAN GIVE YOU HIMACHAL BETTER THAN US

7. Read these writing tasks given below:
   a) A newspaper in Mahapur wants to publish an article about the increasing awareness of health and diet. The table below shows some of the changes in Mahapur between 1970 and 1990. Using this information together with your own ideas from the unit on 'Health and Medicine' write the article in the space provided below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health in Mahapur</th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Yoga + Health clubs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People using non-refined oil</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of magazines on health care</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV/Radio programmes on health</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death rate</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   (10 marks)

8. During his holiday, Rohit has visited Yoku and Belagudi. Below you can see pictures of these two places. Choose one picture of these two places. Choose one place and write a postcard from Rohit to his friend Gita Ramaswamy describing what he saw and what he liked about the place. Write the postcard in the space provided on the side. You may use the space at the side of this page for rough work.

   (10 marks)
Teaching Writing and Grammar

20.6 GRADING THE COMPOSITION

Composition may be marked according to one of the two methods: the impressionistic method or the analytic method.

The impressionistic or holistic scoring involves the awarding of a single score to a piece of writing on the basis of an overall impression. In open-ended tasks (where no hints are provided for the learner to fall back on like essays, paragraphs or letters) it is quite possible for a composition to appeal to certain examiner but not to another. On the other hand, the same composition can be marked by three or four examiners and then the marks can be combined or averaged. Such multiple-marking procedure reduces subjectivity. But few teachers have the opportunity to get three or four colleagues to help them with multiple marking and so impressionistic marking usually becomes the subjective impression of the teacher.

The analytic method, on the other hand, depends on a marking scheme where the total marks are spread over separate aspects of the task like grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, fluency, form, etc. An example is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total = 14


62
If this kind of a scheme is attached to the end of a composition, then the students are able to see how their particular grade has been obtained. Flexibility regarding divisions needs to be maintained in the analytical method. In lower classes, grammar and mechanics are usually given more importance; hence fluency can be omitted. In higher classes, originality of ideas and organisation of thought become more important than mechanics of writing. Again, it is not necessary to give equal weightage to these different aspects. The teacher can decide on the weightage to be given to different aspects. The students score is the sum of the weighted scores.

In the writing assessment scale prepared by the CBSE English Language Teaching Project Team the total marks of 10 are divided as follows: Content 4; Fluency 3; Accuracy 3. These marks are then shown as a scale where how the marks are to be awarded further specified as shown below.

**Writing Assessment Scale**

**Content/4**

0 The answer bears almost no relation to the task set.
1 The answer bears limited relevance to task set. There are many gaps in the treatment of the topic and/or pointless repetitions.
2 Much of the answer is in line with the task set, but there is some repetition, redundancy and/or omission.
3 The answer is largely relevant and adequate, with little repetition redundancy or omission.
4 The answer is fully relevant and adequate to the task set.

**Fluency/3**

0 Ideas are fragmentary, not organised in a coherent manner, and the theme is not clear.
1 Although the general theme is clear, ideas are not logically presented and the style may be inappropriate.
2 The general theme is clear. Main ideas are adequately presented in a fairly appropriate style, but supporting details are not always coherent.
3 The general theme, main ideas and supporting details are all well organised and presented in a style appropriate to the situation.

**Accuracy/3**

0 Inadequate vocabulary even for the basic part of the writing task, most grammatical patterns inaccurate, frequent punctuations spelling errors.
1 Frequent grammatical and/or vocabulary inaccuracies, poor use of punctuation and spelling.
2 Use of vocabulary is adequate, though perhaps sometimes limited. There are still some minor grammatical, punctuation and/or spelling errors.
3 Uses appropriate vocabulary with hardly any grammatical, punctuation or spelling errors.

**Layout**

Where layout is to be assessed, up to one mark may be deducted as follows:

-1 The work is inappropriately or inaccurately laid out.
-1/2 The layout is generally appropriate, but with a few minor errors.
-0 The layout is appropriate and accurate.

Both the impressionistic and the analytic methods have their own advantages and disadvantages as we can see from the table below. Depending on particular circumstances the teacher can decide whether to use the impressionistic or the analytic method.
Check Your Progress

Notes:  

a) Write your answers in the space given below.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

9. Read the following sample of student writing to the task set.

Q: You are correspondent of "The Hindustan Times". Write a brief report for your paper on 'The Children's Day' celebrations in Chhatrasal Stadium.

(10 marks)

Student Response

Delhi : 14 Nov. : HT Correspondent : Yesterday, the day of Children's the 14th Nov. was celebrated with great pomp and show at Chhatrasal Stadium at 2 p.m. It was celebrated by Govt. Girls Senior Secondary School of Rani. The Chief Guest was Madam Jai Khanna. The children looked like flowers in their dresses of different colours. The Fancy Dress competition was held. The prizes were distributed to the winners. A Dance Programme was organised by XI classes. The small children of II class showed the ribbon doll. After this events were distributed among the children. At 5 p.m. the occasion ended. The children went to their homes with their parents. The school staff came to see off the Chief Guest.

(Both question and answers taken from the question and answer script of a Govt. Girls School, Delhi.)

a) Make your own marking scheme for the analytic marking of the writing task.

b) Score the composition (by the analytic method) following your marking scheme.

10. Read the paragraph on Education for All:

a) Mark it using the impressionistic method.

b) What difference in attitude is there while correcting for feedback and marking for assessment?

20.7 LET US SUM UP

- As teachers you have to play several roles as guide, facilitator, and vigilant scorer.
- Not all writing work should be awarded grades or marks.
- Students feel motivated and involved if they understand the basis on which marks are awarded.
- Students should be involved in the assessment procedure in informal situations/daily classroom situations.
- A code of correction coupled with detailed comments can help motivated learners.
- A range of tasks demanding different registers, language use, methods of development should be used to assess students.
- No internal choice in items should be given while students are being assessed.
Specific situations, writing contexts and clear instructions should be given with each and every writing task.

Impressionistic and Analytic methods of marking have their own advantages and disadvantages.

Analytic marking, though time consuming, is more reliable.

**20.8 KEY WORDS**

**Analytical marking**: a method in which a marking scheme is used. The marks are divided in value points/aspects to be covered.

**Code of marking**: symbols (understood by students) used to correct written work.

**Holistic marking**: (also called impressionistic marking) a method of marking where a single score is awarded on basis of overall reading/assessment of the written work.

**Multiple marking**: the same script is marked by three or four examiners by the impressionistic method for greater reliability.

**Pair editing**: students work in pairs to correct/edit each other's work.

**Self assessment**: a student uses a set of assessment criteria to mark her own work.

**20.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Primary level — mechanics of writing (neat handwriting, punctuation).

   Secondary level — originality of ideas, coherence and cohesion, range of vocabulary and syntactic structures, range, fluency and accuracy.

2. Students play it safe and try to anticipate what the teacher wants; students who constantly get poor grades are demotivated and devalue these grades.

3. Inter-personal and group dynamics have to be taken into account and pairs and groups need to be changed frequently - students would rate their friends high and not so good friends low - weak students may not be able to identify their own/other's problems and errors.

   Teachers should move about in the class when the class is engaged in such activities and give her advice, suggestions wherever necessary; students should maintain a file where all writing tasks are kept - teachers can occasionally go through them.


5. Open-ended.

6. Open-ended.

7. Open-ended.

8. a) Table: to compare and contrast ideas and arrive at conclusions. Picture: description of a location/place of interest. And personal experiences and reactions.

   b) Last sentence - where planning, organisation of ideas and rough draft is being taken care of.

   c) More information included in task so the students only have to transcode information from a table and write it in a paragraph form.

9. a) Marking scheme showing weightage to relevance of ideas, fluency, accuracy and complexity of sentence structures.

   b) Open-ended.
10. a) Open-ended.

b) In both cases you ignore local errors, e.g. tense/article and concentrate on global errors which involve overall structure of a sentence or break down in communication. But, while correcting you use the correcting code to provide opportunities for self correction, self improvement. But marking is not for diagnosing but assessing the level of achievement.

20.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


CBSE: Interact in English Workbook, New Delhi.

CBSE, 1993 and Question Papers - Board of Sec. Education, West Bengal.