

## **EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Writing Quality and Holistic Evaluations**

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(Received on 3 / 11 / 1417 A.H.; accepted for publication 3 / 1 / 1418 A.H.)

**Abstract.** This paper reports on the results of a study conducted on EFL teachers' perceptions of writing quality categories that represent the levels of accuracy and communicative efficiency (mechanics, cohesion and coherence). It also reports on the correlation between the teachers' perceptions of these categories and their actual holistic evaluation. The results indicate that:

1) There is a discrepancy between the teachers' perceptions of the mechanics and their actual evaluation; i.e., they think of these categories as insignificant but in their actual evaluation these categories figure out very strongly.

2) These teachers do not pay attention to coherence in their actual holistic evaluation nor do they think of coherence as significant. This finding is indicative of teachers' inadequate knowledge of coherence categories and of their confusion over cohesion and coherence.

3) Some cohesion categories are perceived as significant, namely sentence structure. Other elements, for example, transitional links are not seen as such. By and large, these teachers do not seem to be quite clear on the distinctive nature of coherence and cohesion. It is recommended, therefore, that workshops on cohesion and coherence be conducted for EFL teachers. Further, EFL writing instructors should focus on the communicative or meaning - level issues at the early stages of college writing and then on the accuracy of language forms.

### **Introduction**

Recent research on EFL writing evaluation has provided us with some insights on the nature of writing and teachers' practices. One interesting aspect of EFL writing evaluation that received attention has been teachers' comments on students' written products. Such studies have shown that some teachers' comments concentrate on errors

of mechanics while others' comments were on all things in a text at the same time. Thus, the students did not know what to take in as needing change [1]. However, one dimension of EFL teachers' evaluation of writing has been neglected, and that is the teachers' perceptions of writing categories. That is, there is a need to know what these teachers think of as significant or insignificant, as a writing category, before they approach the task of evaluation and what they actually do when they evaluate students' written products.

The problem with studies on teachers' comments on students' written work is that teachers are conditioned to play the role of evaluators of students' essays that have to be corrected. That is, teachers subconsciously involve themselves in "hunting" for the most observable errors in the text, namely the surface mechanical errors. Thus, they forget that they are readers, in the first place, who interact with the text to make sense out of it without worrying much about the surface errors. Hence studies on teachers' perceptions are important to negate the effect of this possible variable of conditioning involved in teachers' evaluations of writing.

The view that writing instructors are readers rather than "teachers who read to correct errors only" is supported by the functional approach to writing. This approach considers writing as a communicative act involving the writer's purpose, the topic, the addressee(s) and the effect on the targeted readers. The rhetorical purpose of writing determines the writer's choice of rhetorical patterns, lexical and syntactic choices. Hence, this study and the research design examines EFL writing teachers' holistic evaluations as readers to students' products.

Researchers need to focus on the teachers' roles as readers of written texts, rather than as evaluators. The crux of our research should be the teachers' knowledge of writing quality gained through previous academic training as well as through teaching experiences. Teachers' response to their students' written work may be biased in that it may or may not reveal what the teachers necessarily know or think of as significant parameters of writing.

## Research Design

### 1. Data

The researcher suggested a set of categories that cut across all levels of writing proficiency: The accuracy level and the communicative efficiency level. The *accuracy level* refers to the correctness of language forms such as spelling, grammaticality of phrases and sentences, punctuation and indentation. The elements or categories of this level are referred to as the mechanics elements. The *communicative efficiency* level refers to the meaning - level elements which are embedded within the cohesion and coherence of texts. Cohesion is realized by the explicit or overt connectivity in intra - and inter - sentential meanings while coherence refers to the implicit or covert logical

sequence of ideas in a text. Hence, under the communicative efficiency level (i.e. cohesion<sup>1</sup> and coherence<sup>2</sup>) the following categories are usually subsumed: Transitional links, the provision of a topic sentence, logical sequence of ideas, relevance of ideas to topic sentence and to other ideas, the provision of necessary details to the reader and the effect on the targeted reader. The categories that represent both levels are: Sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, indentation, topic sentence, transitional links, logical sequence of ideas, relevance of sentences to main idea, the provision of details to the reader, the writer's effect on the reader and wording and phrasing.

### **Classification**

Following is a classification of the researchers' suggested categories in terms of three levels of discourse [This classification was not given to the subjects. The categories were all scrambled when presented to them (see Appendix 2)]:

#### **a. Mechanics**

Sentence structure  
Spelling  
Punctuation  
Indentation

#### **b. Cohesion**

Topic sentence  
Transitional links  
Phrasing and wording

#### **c. Coherence**

Logical sequence of ideas  
Relevance of sentences to main idea  
Details for the reader  
Writer's effect on the reader

**Bases of the classification:** It is obvious that in the choice of these categories no specific model is adopted from Text Linguistics or Discourse Theory. However, we have drawn on various sources such as Halliday's and Hasan's concept of cohesion and

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1. Cohesion is identified as the explicit connectivity holding between parts of the text by language specific markers.

2. Coherence is identified as the implicit meaning relationship among parts of a text which are made explicit by the reader or the listener through a process of interpretation.

on the current linguists' views of coherence and the current literature on EFL / ESL writing [2-6]. Thus, the suggested categories are the ones that cover all levels of discourse.

The closest to the suggested model could be Hirsh's work [2] on the valid assessment of writing quality. He concludes with three measures of evaluating writing holistically. These are the "intrinsic evaluation", the "extrinsic evaluation" and the "correctness" measure. By "correctness" he means correctness of language form; i. e., the mechanics of writing in the suggested model. The "intrinsic" evaluation means the presentation of ideas in the text; this could be part of the cohesion categories proposed. The "extrinsic" evaluation means the quality of intention according to Hirsch [2]. This could be equivalent to the level of coherence (see footnotes for an identification of cohesion and coherence).

In addition, two texts produced by EFL writers at the intermediate college level were selected (see Appendix 1). One is exemplary of an almost error-free text (henceforth Text A<sup>3</sup>) at the accuracy level but idiosyncratic in style; that is, it does not invite for interaction with the reader. The other (henceforth Text B<sup>4</sup>) is full of errors at the accuracy level but communicatively efficient; i.e., the writer sacrificed the correctness in language form for the purpose of conveying his experience to the reader.

The reader of the two texts will automatically recognize that Text A is almost error-free in the mechanics of writing, but it is not as communicatively efficient as the other text (Text B). Text A does not invite the reader for interaction as Text B does. Text B on the other hand is full of errors in the mechanics but it is more communicatively efficient in the sense that the writer manages to convey his experience to the reader despite the grammatical deficiencies.

The choice of these two texts with the aforementioned features will test the sample of EFL writing instructors' actual evaluation on the basis of the scale provided below each text.

It is our contention that the surface structure errors such as faulty sentence structure, misspellings, punctuation mistakes tend to have their toll on the teachers' evaluation to the extent where the communicative efficiency of the text may not be recovered nor appreciated.

The subjects' holistic evaluation of the two texts will reveal whether their evaluation is guided most by grammaticality and correctness in language forms or by

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<sup>3</sup> Borrowed from Shirely Ostler's article: "English in Parallels: A Study in Arabic Prose" presented at TESOL in San Francisco in 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from the book, *Exploring Speaking-Writing Relationships: Connections and contrasts*, edited by B.M. Kroll and Roberta Vann (1981) and published by NCTE, Illinois.

efficiency in communication regardless of the form.

## 2. The sample

Twenty-two EFL teachers from the English Departments at Bethlehem University and Birzeit University in the West Bank were selected. They all teach courses in writing for students at the lower intermediate college level. They were given a questionnaire comprising the two texts (Texts A and B) and the suggested categories (see Appendix 1). They were given two tasks to perform. First, to read the two texts and then evaluate them holistically in terms of poor, average, good, very good, , excellent. Second, to read the researcher's suggested categories and then arrange them in a list from top to bottom according to significance (Appendix 2). As was mentioned earlier, the suggested categories were scrambled and they were not classified into coherence, cohesion, and mechanics. Of the 22 teachers, only 19 filled out the questionnaire and returned it to the researcher.

Investigating the results on the holistic evaluation of the two texts, the researcher found that the teachers' ratings fell into three categories: Good , average and poor. As to the ranking of the suggested categories, the ones from 1 - 4 on top of the list were considered as the most significant categories, the ones from 5 - 8 as significant and those from 9 - 11 as least significant.

## Findings and Discussion

### 1. The raters' holistic evaluation of Texts A and B

The majority of raters ranked Text A as above average while Text B was rated poor. Table 1 shows the general consensus on considering Text A as good or above average. The reader should be reminded that Text A is almost error free at the correctness level but inefficient at the communicative level, while Text B is full of grammatical, punctuation and spelling errors, but it is communicatively efficient.

**Table 1. The raters' holistic evaluation of Texts A and B**

Total no. of raters	Text	Good	Average	Poor
19	A	16	3	0
	B	0	7	12

It may be the case that in their actual evaluation, teachers are influenced by the correctness of language forms more so than by the other features of the text, namely cohesion and coherence. It is the researcher's contention that the current emphasis on developing a certain level of language proficiency is responsible for leading these teachers to give this measure, the mechanics of writing, the primacy over other measures.

## 2. The teachers' perception of suggested evaluation categories

a. **Perceptions of the mechanics :** As was mentioned earlier, the researcher classified the ranking of the categories as follows:

From 1 -4	Most significant
From 5 - 8	Significant
From 9 - 11	Least significant

Table 2 shows the ranking of the mechanics categories. The only category perceived as *highly significant* is the *sentence structure*. The rest, *punctuation*, *spelling*, *indentation*, etc., were perceived as *least significant*.

**Table 2. Perceptions of the mechanics categories**

Total No. of teachers	Categories	(1-4) *MS	(5-8) *S	(9-11) *LS
19	Spelling	1	6	12
19	Punctuation	1	9	9
19	Indentation	1	2	16
19	Sentence structure	15	4	0

\*MS = Most significant; \*S = Significant; \*LS = Least significant

The table also shows the discrepancy between the teachers' perceptions and their actual holistic evaluation. For instance, the *spelling*, *punctuation* and *indentation* categories were judged as *least significant* but these same teachers rated the text (Text B) that is full of errors in this area as *poor* and the one which has almost no problems in these mechanics categories as *good* or *above average*. Thus, their actual holistic rating must be influenced by the correctness level. Since it is also the case that the *sentence structure* was ranked as most significant, then one can conclude that this is a by-product of the teaching practices that have been emphasizing the language structure as the ultimate objective in language teaching.

b. **The perception of the cohesion categories:** The *topic sentence* was also perceived as *significant* and *most significant* while the *phrasing and wording* and the *transitional links* were perceived as *significant* only.

**Table 3. Perceptions of the cohesion categories**

Total No. of teachers	Categories	(1-4) *MS	(5-8) *S	(9-11) *LS
19	Topic sentence	9	7	3
19	Transitional links	2	11	6
19	Phrasing-wording	5	10	4

\*MS = Most significant; \*S = Significant; \*LS = Least significant

What is surprising here is that the *transitional links* category was not perceived as *most significant* while the *topic sentence* was rated as *most significant*. One would expect to find the *transitional links* category as *highly significant* since meaning can be dependent on the links between sentences and paragraphs.

**c. Perceptions of the coherence categories:** The two categories, *relevance to the main point* and *logical sequence*, were perceived as *highly significant* but *the writer's effect on the reader* and *the provision of necessary specific details* to the reader were perceived as *least significant*.

**Table 4. Perceptions of the coherence categories**

Total no. of teachers	Categories	(1-4) *MS	(5-8) *S	(9-11) *LS
19	Logical sequence	14	5	0
19	Relevance	14	4	1
19	Writer's effect	4	3	12
19	Details	5	6	8

\*MS = Most significant; \*S = Significant; \*LS = Least significant

It seems that these teachers do not regard extra-textual features as part of the written text elements. Hence, the *writer's effect* was perceived by 12 out of 19 as *least significant*. The same applies to the *details category* relatively speaking. It seems to us that the *logical sequence category* is perceived from the viewpoint of cohesion not coherence because the informants perceived the *writer's effect* and *details* as *least significant*. How can *logical sequence* be achieved without *the writer's inclusion of details*? So, may be these teachers are not familiar with the components of coherence and cohesion.

### Conclusion

The results of this study give evidence to previous research findings stating that teachers' comments on students' essays are centered around the correctness level rather than the meaning level issues [1]. They also indicate that the teachers are confused over the distinction between cohesion and coherence. Consequently, it is recommended that workshops on cohesion and coherence be conducted for these teachers. Furthermore, it is recommended that emphasis be placed during early stages of college EFL writing instruction on the communicative efficiency level. The accuracy level will be emphasized at a later stage.

### References

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## Appendix 1

### A questionnaire on EFL teachers' evaluation of written texts

*Read the following texts and then answer the questions that follow:*

#### Text A

We face two serious problems on my country. The first problem is that we import many things from other countries and we cannot depend on ourselves in producing the things we need. We import different kinds of food, electric materials, cars and clothes.

The second problem is that we depend on one source of income and that is the oil. Our national economy depends on it. We have a lot of revenues each year from oil export that come to us from selling this material. It is not good for our country to depend only on one source and it has to vary its resources. We can't insure that the oil will be enough for ever.

We can solve the first problem by building many factories and we have to develop our soil to be useful to agriculture. We have to form educated people to serve and to develop their country. We can solve the second problem by seeking from other resources that we have in my country not to depend on one source like oil. Finally, we will become a developed country and we can insure our future and our life.

#### Text B

They behaved like real human being and took that man with them. While they were going back to the rest of their group, they found some of their enemies who carried guns with them. One of these two men who carried the injured man who was their enemy with them went away, the other pulled him back home. The enemy when they saw that the two men carried their friend with them went when he reached his home he found that all the houses were burnt by the enemy. So he said to himself, "I save their friend and they set fire on our houses". Then he carried a very big stick and hit the injured man to death. He killed the man whom he carried and pulled in that long distance and bad weather. He killed him when his people killed.

1. *How would you evaluate Text A? Circle one item:*

poor          average          good    v. good          excellent

2. *How would you evaluate Text B?*

poor          average          good    v. good          excellent

**Appendix 2**

*Guided by the suggested categories for written texts evaluation below, make a list of these categories.*

Begin the list with the ones you consider most significant and then on to the least significant down the list: Spelling; sentence structure; logical sequence of ideas; use of transitional links; punctuation; indentation; phrasing and wording; relevance of sentences to one main point; provision of the topic sentence; the writer's effect on the reader; and enough details for the reader.

The list

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.

## نظرة مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لمعايير تقييم الكتابة والتقييم الفعلي لها

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(قدم للنشر في ٣/١١/١٤١٧هـ، وقبل للنشر في ٣/١/١٤١٨هـ)

ملخص البحث . تقدم هذه الورقة نتائج دراسة عن نظرة مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية لمعايير تقييم الكتابة وعلاقة ذلك بتقييمهم الفعلي للكتابة . وقد وجد الباحث أن هناك تناقضاً بين ما يعتقد المدرسون أنه معايير مهمة وغير مهمة من الناحية النظرية وبين تقييمهم الفعلي للنصوص المكتوبة . كما وجد أن أولئك المدرسين يجدون صعوبة في التفريق بين التماسك cohesion بين الجمل والتسلسل المنطقي للأفكار في النص coherence . لذا يقترح القيام بورش عمل عن الفرق بين التماسك وانسجام النص ، كما يوصي بالتركيز على الأخطاء المتعلقة بجوانب المعنى والتواصل في المراحل الأولى للتعليم الجامعي ، وبعد ذلك يتم التركيز على الأخطاء الخاصة بالنحو والصرف وتراكيب الجملة الصحيحة .