Impact of the Alignment between Learning Outcomes and Assessment on English as a Foreign Language Students' Writing Skills Development (Ishik University Language Preparatory School Case)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of alignment between carefully selected learning outcomes and assessment on the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' writing skills. An experimental research study was carried out with 36 undergraduate EFL students at the private university in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The premise of the study was to compare the development levels of two sample groups. The control group received instruction in the traditional way, while the experimental group, in addition to the regular program, was taught with the implementation of the suggested learning approach focused on outcomes and assessment alignment. Study findings revealed that the alignment approach has a significant impact on the improvement of writing skills. The current study is believed to be useful for educators to apply learning outcomes and assessment alignment model for teaching writing, and also can be the basis for further research in the field.

Key words: learning outcomes, assessment, alignment, writing skills

Introduction

The major target of Iraqi higher education nowadays is to prepare qualified and compatible professionals for the job market. Departments and programs face increasing demands from higher education stakeholders that require teachers of every discipline to find new ways of teaching and measuring students' progress. Employment, acceptance to university, and development of education system and procedures, very much depends on the results of admission examinations. However, this data is very often unable to represent the real picture of the candidates' competencies and capabilities (Hutchings, 2016). One of the reasons for this misfortune lies in the lack of alignment between the received education and the assessment that represents the acquired knowledge and skills and the outcomes requirements of career fields, university specialization, etc. (Marshall, 2017).

Among all language skills, for university students writing is one of the most in-demand skills. The success of completion of almost all the programs depends on the development of this crucial skill, since students are required

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to submit reports, projects, course work, theses, dissertations, etc. The inability of some students to express their ideas and knowledge in written form negatively influences their motivation, performance, and productivity. That is why, in order to meet the desired learning outcomes, mastery of undergraduate students' writing skills is vitally important.

Alignment, in the educational context, refers to the interconnection between the components of an education system. It analyses to what extent standards, curricula, intended student learning outcomes, teaching methodology, course content, and assessment are able to work together to support and ensure the achievement of the desired goals (Arum, Roksa, & Cook, 2016). For this to happen, Biggs & Tang (2011) recommend to start the teaching and learning process with identification of the target learning outcomes, to continue with the development of the learning activities and the material to cover, and finally to apply the assessment practices. They believe that these three steps enable educators to make learning more transparent and meaningful, select the right material, tasks, and activities in order to obtain the desired outcomes, and measure to what extent the learners have reached the goals. The alignment between the components helps to avoid the failure in acquisition of essential knowledge and skills that the learners and teachers aimed to attain (Bay, 2016).

Intended Learning Outcomes

To provide the alignment between the intended learning outcomes and the assessment it is essential to determine what students are expected or desired to know and able to do at the end of a lesson term, semester, year, course, etc., what kind of tasks, activities, material can be used to obtain this knowledge and skills, and what assessment tools are the most appropriate and applicable to ensure that the students are able to demonstrate the specified learning outcomes (Biggs, 2003). Thus, learning outcomes serve the role of a starting point and a basis for effective course design.

According to Nygaard, Holtham, & Courtney (2009), the definition of the learning outcomes of an educational program has multiple benefits:

1. they demonstrate what competencies a learner is expected to acquire during the program;
2. they help teachers to develop their teaching methodology to improve and facilitate the achievement of the learning goals;
3. learning outcomes give information about the way in which knowledge and skills need to be measured;
4. they inform about the specifications and priorities of educational organizations;
5. they provide employers with the information about what capabilities and competencies they can expect from a graduate;
6. they inform a learner about the competences s/he needs to master in order to be employed.

Effectively developed learning outcomes should include, first, observable and measurable action verbs (for example, choose, identify, apply, differentiate, etc.), second, these verbs should specify actions expected to be

performed by students rather than teachers. These three key characteristics provide learners with a clear picture of attributes and capabilities they should be able to demonstrate for successful completion of the course, as well as, what and how they will be taught and how their performance will be assessed.

Besides all the benefits of the outcomes based learning and teaching, there are some nuances that have to be taken into consideration. The misuse or overuse of the learning outcomes may cause the development of a too narrow framework for an educational program, putting constraints on what could be learned parallel with the intended outcomes (Hussey & Smith, 2008). This becomes especially risky in higher education since the most useful and powerful kinds of learning outcomes are usually those that go beyond what was initially expected and planned (Carless, 2015). Putting too much focus on attainment of particular learning outcomes can also result in producing "students who are the clones of each other" (Boud, 2016, p. 29), which can make learning too mechanistic.

Assessment of Intended Learning Outcomes

Assessment has always been an important component of the educational process. Understanding what students know and how they grow as learners helps educators continually improve how and what they teach. Assessment data provides the information about students' specific knowledge, practical skills, attitudes, and measures how well the expectations have been met. From the learners' perspective, assessment plays the role of a driver that influences the amount of time they spend on studying, attitude toward learning, and the way they acquire new material (Entwistle, 2009). Feedback (positive or negative) on students' work or performance enables learners to understand their strengths and weaknesses and to navigate them for the further development.

By aligning assessment with the intended learning outcomes test designers increase the validity of an assessment tool, since any type of assessment can be considered as accurate only if it is able to measure what has been intended or prescribed (Suskie, 2009; Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to make sure that the selected assessment instrument is able to measure the intended learning outcomes of a course. Testing multiple learning outcomes may not be possible by a single assessment instrument, since it may not be valid for every type of outcomes. That is why multiple assessment measures must be implemented into the course.

Even though assessment is often viewed as a final point in the chain of the learning process, the successful course assessment design begins at the initial stage of the course development and continues throughout the whole course. It supports the selection of measurable learning outcomes and systematic collection, analysis, review, and use of information about students' learning (Banta & Palomba, 2014).

The assessment aligned with the learning outcomes attracts students' attention and effort, gives students a clearer picture of how their attainments will be measured and ensures the accountability of the results (Kuh, et al., 2015).

Writing Course Learning Outcomes Assessment

Writing is a skill that students very often find challenging not only when they learn a foreign language, but also in their native language because it requires composition and expression of ideas through writing (Haiyan & Rilong, 2016). The people who are required to communicate with each other via mails, e-mails, or text messages, are urged to master their writing skills. When the turn comes to a university EFL students, learning how to write in good cohesion and coherence becomes a must, because writing is one of the most required skills for successful completion of a program and further study (Badrasawi, Zubairi, & Idrus, 2016).

The most common requirement for a university EFL writing course is to train students to write paragraphs and/or essays, however, to reflect the needs of professional communication, the list should be extended by adding mails/e-mails, reports, theses, etc. Generally, the long-term outcome of a writing course is students' ability to create a variety of accurate, coherent, cohesive, and appropriate in terms of style, format, etc. written products. To achieve this goal, depending on the level of English language proficiency, students may need to start from writing sentences, so on the initial stages of the course, the learning outcome is students' ability to write accurate sentences. Later, they will learn how to collect and organize the ideas, put the sentences into paragraphs, and write topic/supporting/concluding sentences, etc. before they learn how to write a paragraph. Thus, to achieve a final outcome students must accomplish short-term outcomes. In other words, teaching writing should be a balanced complex procedure that embodies process and product-oriented approaches. Providing students with the sufficient practice in planning, drafting and revising through collaborative work and implementation of formative assessment on the one hand, and adequate practice of factual writing required in schools by the means of imitation, copy and transformation of models provided by the teacher or the textbook, on the other hand.

Furthermore, the attainment of this or another learning outcome must be supported by the appropriate instruction (material, learning activities, teaching / learning methods, etc.) on the intended level, depth, and breadth.

To ensure that the students move in the right direction, it is crucial to implement assessment on every stage of the development of the writing skill. For instance, while teaching how to write a topic sentence for a paragraph, teacher should measure students' attainment before they proceed to the next step. For this purpose, the assessment tool/s should be carefully selected to measure the exact learning outcome, for example, students may be asked to choose the right topic sentence for a paragraph or/and write their own sentence. To assess this type of performance, teacher should provide the criteria according to which the evaluation will be done (Leeuw, 2016). The same evaluation criteria should be used when students reach the paragraph writing stage, so students will have a better understanding of what and how they are expected to perform a clearer picture of how their attainments will be measured and ensures the accountability of the results (Kuh, et al., 2015).
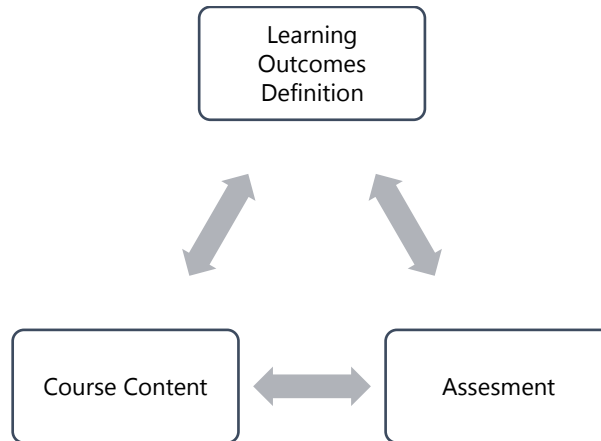
Figure: Learning outcomes, assessment and course content alignment model (made up by the researcher)

According to the figure above, all three components (learning outcomes, course content and assessment) must be interconnected with each other. Defining the learning outcomes, educators must simultaneously consider the assessment instruments to measure the goals, and the content that will provide the attainment of the intended learning outcomes. This approach aims to help teachers to develop lesson plans, syllabus, and curriculum aligned with all the constituting components. For this purpose teachers are recommended to follow the following procedure:

1. carry out a careful needs analysis to find out the objectives of the whole program;
2. define the program learning outcomes;
3. determine the final assessment instrument or the components of assessment to measure the attainment of the course objectives;
4. split the long-term objectives into short-term sub-objectives to ensure the construction of the basis for the achievement of the program goals;
5. plan the assessment instruments that will show the accomplishment of each stage toward the final goal;
6. design the material (course content) to support the development of the desired outcomes;
7. state the measurable and observable learning outcomes of each lesson;
8. define the appropriate assessment tool for each outcome;
9. design each lesson to help students to reach the learning outcomes of each lesson, including teacher explanations, guided practice implementing teacher/student feedback, independent practice applying peer- or self- assessment, for example, with the help of check lists and/or rubrics;
10. assess the attainment of the lesson learning outcomes,
11. give sustainable feedback.

The alignment approach aims to provide the balance and tight links between the desired learning outcomes and assessment on each step of an educational program, where the assessment (formative and summative) go

hand in hand with the all the components of an educational program in order to ensure the attainment of the learning goals.

Research Methods

The goal of this study was to explore the effect of the alignment between the components (learning outcomes and assessment) of the EFL writing course on the development of freshman students' writing performance. A quantitative research study was carried out at Ishik University, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Hypothesis

Based on the literature review, the following hypothesis is suggested:

The implication of the alignment between the learning outcomes and assessment approach has a positive impact on the development of EFL students' writing skills.

Participants

An experiment was conducted among English language learners in undergraduate programs and the total number of the participants was 36 (18 in the experimental group and 18 in the control group). The age of the participants varied from 18 to 21. All participants were of the same level of language Proficiency (A2, according to CEFR) determined by the proficiency test. The participation in the experiment was on a voluntary basis, so every student was explained that s/he could quit at any stage of the experiment. According to the oral interview, none of the students had had any experience of participating in this kind of experiment before.

Instruments

The instruments used in the current study include three writing sections (Part 2 and 3) of B1 level Cambridge Preliminary English Tests (PET) and the Writing Assessment Scales (bands descriptor) as pre-, while-, and post-tests. The tests were conducted to measure the participants' writing skill level throughout the experiment. Each test contained two parts. In the first part students were required to write a response to the given situation in approximately 35-40 words, while in the second part the students had to choose one of the two tasks, and write about 100 words. For the assessment of the tests Writing Assessment Scales (bands descriptor) was used.

Procedure

An experimental study was conducted during 8 weeks in the spring semester of the 2016-2017 academic year. The students of the same level of English language proficiency were randomly divided into the experimental and the control groups. On the initial stage of the experiment, the PET writing section was given to both groups (pre-test). The two groups had the same learning environment, such as the size of the class, textbooks of English and the amount of class hours to provide the validity and reliability of the results. The control group was taught in the traditional way, while the experimental group, in addition to the common program, was taught according to the

described approach. For this purpose, lesson plans were designed based on the recommended model, students were systematically informed about the intended learning outcomes, and assessed with the help of the tests designed to measure the attainment of the goals. To observe the changes/improvement, on the fourth week of the experiment a while-test was implemented. Finally, at the end of the eighth week both groups were given another exam – a post-test. The writing papers of all participants were assessed out of 10 points by two writing teachers using the given rubrics.

Results and Discussion

The table below demonstrates the results of pre-, while- and post- writing proficiency tests which were given to the students of the control (CG) and the experimental (EG) groups.

Table: Test results of the experiment

Groups		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control Group	Pre-test	18	2	6	4.278	1.127
	While-test	18	4	7	5.278	0.895
	Post-test	18	5	7	6.111	0.696
Experimental Group	Pre-test	18	2	6	4.167	1.098
	While-test	18	4	7	5.722	0.958
	Post-test	18	5	9	7.056	0.938

The starting skill proficiency level in both groups was very close to each other: (CG) (M=4.278) (EG) (M=4.167), with the same minimum (2) and maximum (6) score, and the standard deviation 1.127 and 1.098, which shows that at the beginning of the experiment the consistency of the groups was homogenous.

According to the while-test results, which was given to the groups on the fourth week of the experiment, in both groups a certain increase was observed, however, the EG demonstrated a rise from 4.167 to 5.722 points, which is 33.3 % higher than the rise in the CG.

On the eighth and the last week of the experiment, the post-test was carried out in order to assess the students' progress. The total increase of the writing skill proficiency that the EG had made from the beginning of the experiment yielded to 2.889, and 1.833 points in the CG, indicating that the EG had made significantly more progress due to the instruction based on the alignment of the desired learning outcomes and assessment received throughout the experiment. The revealed data demonstrate that aligning the assessment with the learning outcomes helps students to improve their writing skills and achieve better results on tests.

Limitations

Although this research was carefully prepared and organized, it had some limitations. First, the number of the participants involved in the experiment might not represent the majority of the students in the same condition. Second, the time (8 weeks) spent on the research may not be enough to have a clearer picture of the impact of the suggested approach. Finally, the experiment took place in one university, which might not be enough to make generalizations for all universities of the country. It is expected that the shortcomings of this study may be addressed through additional larger-scale investigations.

Conclusions and Implications

This research aimed to investigate the effect of emphasizing the alignment between learning outcomes and assessment approach on the development of writing skills of EFL undergraduate students, and reached the following conclusions and recommendations:

- Clearly stated, measurable, observable, and student-centred learning outcomes:

    - help learners to understand what knowledge and skills they are expected to attain during the program;

    - inform students about what knowledge and skills they must master to be employed;

    - give teachers the direction for the improvement of the instruction in order to meet the desired goals;

    - identify the concentration and priorities of educational institutions;

    - give employers a clearer picture of what they can expect from a graduate.

- Assessment, as a powerful driver for learners to study, should be used continuously throughout the whole program to ensure the attainment of the desired learning outcomes and to navigate students in the right direction.

- To appreciate the results of emphasizing the alignment of assessment and learning outcomes, validity of the assessment tool used should be provided.

- The alignment approach captures learners' attention and effort, informing them about the assessment procedures;

- The alignment model should be implemented in the process of the course development (curriculum, syllabus, and lesson plans), to maximize the validity of the assessment results.

- The assessment aligned with the intended learning outcomes has a positive influence on the development of undergraduate students' writing skills.

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