



## Enhancing the Writing Process: Integrating Applied Linguistics Learning Assessment in the Classroom

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### Abstract

This study in Applied Linguistics to the writing process addresses the challenge of assessing and improving basic writing skills among 120 incoming students at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. Faced with instructor reports of significant writing deficiencies and a lack of calibrated, objective evaluation methods, the study focused on developing and implementing new assessment tools within a basic writing course. Specifically, an objective test and a calibrated rubric were designed, informed by principles of applied linguistics, to establish clear performance expectations and guide pedagogical interventions. While the assessment revealed that over 70% of students demonstrated proficiency in three key learning objectives, as measured by achieving a passing score on the test and a "Good" rating on the rubric-assessed text, the substantial instructional time required to achieve these outcomes highlighted a mismatch between student needs and the existing curriculum. This finding, informed by the applied linguistic analysis of student performance, led to a significant curricular change: the original course was restructured into two distinct subjects to provide more targeted instruction and support for developing writers.

**Keywords:** Applied Linguistics, basic writing, learning assessment, rubric, objective test

## Introduction

In a faculty meeting report from April 2016, the faculty of the School of Communication noted perceived "deficiencies" in writing skills among the student body, and the consequent failure of students to align language skills with the style of mass media. There was no evidence that the six objectives of the current master syllabus, revised in April 2016, were being met. From the analysis of the report and the syllabus, the following questions were derived: 1. Which objectives have priority, in relation to the distribution of instructional time, for achieving their fulfillment? 2. What are the specific basic writing skills that hinder student progress? 3. Do these skills correspond to the specialized style of mass media?

To design an intervention plan aligned with these questions, the theoretical and methodological frameworks of Applied Linguistics for Mass Communication and Applied Linguistics for First Language Writing Instruction were employed, specifically the curriculum revision model for language courses proposed by Omaggio (1993) and adapted by Cassany, Luna, and Sanz (2007). Consequently, content and assessments were aligned with the principles of code duality (oral and written), textuality, cognition, metacognition, extrapolation, and relevance. Regarding teaching methodology, a combination of grammar-based, function-based, and process-based approaches was proposed, culminating in a content-based approach for the course's conclusion (García & Fumero, 2010; Franco, 2005). While the syllabus objectives initially emphasized orthosyntactic elements, these authors have found that students first learn by observing content—the ideas within a sentence or paragraph—and then attend to formal details such as syntax and orthography. The skills best mastered are those related to formal elements—commas and accent marks, for instance—that have significant repercussions for content and its decoding by the reader (Cassany, Luna & Sanz, 2007). Therefore, these elements were isolated into sentence items or text fragments analyzable into parts with specific functions conducive to effective communication. Student performance in this learning process should be measurable across six dimensions that, in turn, coincide with the discursive needs (skills) of mass media: conciseness, precision, clarity, orthosyntactic correctness, structure, and cohesion (Stovall, 2014).

The combined assessment approach, using both an objective test and a writing rubric, presented an opportunity to address the need for students to learn discrete, mechanical aspects of writing within basic university writing courses, and to monitor their progress.

## Methods

This teaching model was implemented in six sections of 20 students enrolled in COPU4136, Basic Writing for Media. To establish a baseline, an objective pre- and post-test was administered during the first and last weeks of the course. Three writing activities were integrated: 1) students produced a text combining descriptive, narrative, and informative strategies; 2) they edited the text after receiving instructor feedback; and 3) they produced a new text. In the first phase of the project (2016-2017), the objective test contained an equal number of items for each of the six skills. Analysis of results from three cohorts established the reliability for differentiating between easy and difficult items. Precision items were found to be easy, while those assessing conciseness and cohesion proved difficult. Consequently, the time allocated to these skills, both within the semester and on the post-test, was redistributed, with additional weeks and exercises dedicated to conciseness and cohesion (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). Thus, a passing expectation was established: at least 70% of the 120 students should achieve a score of 67-70% or higher on the post-test. For the writing activity, a rubric was designed to quantify and evaluate errors across four levels: Excellent, Good, In Progress, and Beginning.

Four professors participated in the project, along with a coordinator who served as an arbitrator to ensure that each instructor implemented the same teaching and assessment design. The final rubric scoring criteria were established after three calibration meetings during which each professor shared one text evaluated as Beginning and another as Excellent to reach consensus on assigning levels within the assessment (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry & Kinzie, 2014). Consequently, they concluded that more than 70% of the student body should achieve a rating of Good in each skill/criterion as the passing expectation.

## Results

The results of the objective pre- and post-tests, administered to different student cohorts in each phase (N=120 total across all phases), are presented below:

**Table 1.** Objective Pre- and Post-Test Results (N=120, different students in each phase)

Phase	Date	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Improvement	Passing Expectation
First Phase	May 2017	59%	70%	11%	67%
Second Phase	June 2019	54%	88%	34%	67%
Third Phase	March 2021	49%	84%	35%	70%
Fourth Phase	June 2023	47%	86%	39%	70%

The following table presents the number of sections (out of six) in which at least the specified percentage of students achieved a rating of "Good" or higher on the third writing activity during the fourth phase (N=120):

**Table 2.** Third Writing Activity (N=120, Results from the Fourth Phase)

Skill/Criterion	≥70%	of	≥80%	of	≥90%	of	100%	of
	Students Achieved "Good" Higher		Students Achieved "Good" Higher		Students Achieved "Good" Higher		Students Achieved "Good" Higher	
Clarity	6/6 (100%)		6/6 (100%)		6/6 (100%)		3/6 (50%)	
Conciseness	6/6 (100%)		1/6 (17%)		1/6 (17%)		0/6 (0%)	
Precision	6/6 (100%)		6/6 (100%)		6/6 (100%)		2/6 (33%)	
Orthosyntactic Correctness	4/6 (67%)		4/6 (67%)		1/6 (17%)		0/6 (0%)	
Structure	6/6 (100%)		6/6 (100%)		6/6 (100%)		5/6 (83%)	
Cohesion	6/6 (100%)		6/6 (100%)		3/6 (50%)		0/6 (0%)	

## Discussion

For the post-test, the passing expectation was met for more than 70% of enrolled students, thus fulfilling the assessment goals. In all sections, more than 70% of students achieved a "Good" rating or higher on each rubric criterion, with the exception of Orthosyntactic Correctness, which did not reach this threshold in two sections.

Backing faculty perceptions with an assessment project employing two types of measurement—objective and textual production—enabled the identification of easier (structure, clarity, and precision) and more challenging skills (conciseness, correctness, and cohesion), and the establishment of transformative actions involving time redistribution and increased exercises for the areas requiring improvement, as recommended by Milian and Camps (2006). Evidence of fulfillment of three of the six objectives outlined in the course syllabus, offered over semesters, was obtained.

## Conclusions

Using these results and discussion to design transformative actions in the curriculum, it became necessary to reconceptualize the remaining three objectives of the course within a second part of the course that, in 45 instructional hours (three credits, one semester), could address them with the time and intensity of practice that students, according to the assessment, demonstrated needing. Consequently, the course COPU 4136, Basic Writing for Media, was transformed into COPU 4137, Fundamentals of Writing for Media; and the course ESIN 4137, Writing and Editing for Communication, was created to address the other three objectives. The combination of

theoretical-methodological frameworks, in a project tested in four stages, proved to be effective (Hunt, 1970), as did the processes of objective test design and rubric calibration (Gatica-Lara & Uribarren-Berrueta, 2013)

### Human Studies

Appropriate approvals were obtained from the Institutional Committee for the Protection of Human Beings in Research (CIPSHI, by its acronym in Spanish) at the Rio Piedras Campus of the University of Puerto Rico (2018-12). Ethical guidelines were followed. Being an institutional research and following the guidelines from the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), the names of the institutions and courses are made explicit to guarantee transparency and accountability.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author reported no conflict of interest.

**Data Availability:** All data are included in the content of the paper.

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