

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

Hector A. Aponte-Alequin, PhD
University of Puerto Rico

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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 like a specific choice test or a proficiency scale based on observed performance, 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 later adapted by Cassany, Luna, and Sanz (2007), as well as by Fumero (2021), was utilized. 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; Fumero, 2021). 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; Fumero, 2021). 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.

Literature Review

The challenge of assessing and improving students' writing skills in online and hybrid learning environments has been extensively discussed in the literature. Retention in online courses is a significant issue, often linked to factors such as inadequate engagement, unclear expectations, and insufficient instructor feedback (Bawa, 2020). Similarly, emergency remote teaching, as opposed to well-planned online learning, often exacerbates these challenges by lacking pedagogical coherence and strategic assessment design (Hodges et al., 2020). The transition to digital assessment methods, particularly in foundational writing courses, requires calibrated evaluation tools that ensure reliability and fairness. In this context, the development of an objective test and a calibrated rubric in the basic writing course aligns with best practices aimed at increasing assessment transparency and instructional effectiveness. Such tools not only provide measurable performance indicators but also help in refining pedagogical strategies to better address student needs.

The effectiveness of online assessment methods depends on their ability to provide valid and meaningful measures of student learning. Traditional assessment approaches often fail to translate seamlessly into digital contexts due to differences in student engagement and instructor-student interaction (Kumar & Rani, 2021). Faculty perceptions of assessment quality indicate that well-structured tasks aligned with learning outcomes are crucial for ensuring effective evaluation in higher education (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2023). Additionally, best practices in online assessment emphasize the need for diverse and adaptable evaluation strategies to address various learning styles and proficiencies (Meyer & Murrell, 2021). This approach demonstrates how targeted assessment interventions can inform curricular changes, ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes and instructional efficiency.

Methods

The teaching model which combines an objective test and a writing rubric 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 (Bawa, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; 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 a consensus on assigning levels within the assessment (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2023; 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%

These results, across four phases, indicate a consistent trend of improvement in student performance. In the first phase (May 2017), students demonstrated an 11% increase from a pre-test score of 59% to a post-test score of 70%, just surpassing the passing expectation of 67%. However, in subsequent phases, initial performance declined while post-test scores showed substantial improvement. The second phase (June 2019) saw a lower pre-test average of 54%, yet students achieved an 88% post-test score, marking a 34% improvement and significantly exceeding the 67% passing expectation. This trend continued in the third phase (March 2021), where the pre-test average dropped to 49%, but post-test performance reached 84%, with a 35% increase meeting the adjusted 70% passing expectation.

By the fourth phase (June 2023), the pre-test average had declined further to 47%, marking the lowest starting point among all phases. However,

the post-test score soared to 86%, reflecting the highest recorded improvement of 39%, surpassing the 70% passing expectation. These results suggest that while students began with lower initial performance in later phases, instructional and assessment strategies contributed to notable learning gains. The steady increase in post-test performance despite declining pre-test scores highlights the effectiveness of pedagogical adjustments and curriculum refinements implemented throughout the study. The data indicate that targeted interventions and structured assessment approaches have played a crucial role in enhancing student writing proficiency over time.

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%
	Students Achieved "Good" Higher	or	Students Achieved "Good" Higher	or	Students Achieved "Good" Higher	or	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%)

The assessment of student writing performance based on key skills and criteria reveals varied levels of achievement across different proficiency thresholds. Clarity, precision, and structure emerged as the strongest areas, with all students (100%) achieving at least a "Good" rating across all levels. Clarity and precision maintained full achievement even at the 90% threshold, while structure exhibited a slight decline, with 83% of students reaching the highest level. Conciseness, in contrast, demonstrated a stark drop-off beyond the initial 70% threshold, where only 17% of students maintained a "Good" rating at 80% and 90% achievement levels, and none reached full mastery.

Orthosyntactic correctness and cohesion presented more mixed results. While 67% of students met the 70% and 80% achievement thresholds for orthosyntactic correctness, this number declined sharply at the 90% threshold, with only 17% achieving the standard, and none reaching full mastery. Cohesion exhibited strong performance, with 100% of students achieving "Good" or higher at the 70% and 80% levels, but this dropped significantly at the 90% threshold (50%), with no students attaining full mastery. These results indicate that while students generally excelled in clarity, precision, and structure, targeted instructional interventions may be necessary to improve

conciseness, orthosyntactic correctness, and cohesion at higher proficiency levels in terms of full mastery exceeding the expectation of 70% level.

Discussion

However, for the post-test and third writing activity, the passing expectation, consisting of achieving a level of 70% in the post-test and 5 or more (Good) in the writing activity, following Hodges et al., 2020; Jankowski et al., 2018; Kumar & Rani, 2021; and Meyer & Murrell, 2021; was met by 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.

The observed improvements in student performance across the four phases align with best practices in online assessment and pedagogical intervention, as highlighted in previous studies. The consistent increase in post-test scores, despite declining pre-test averages, suggests that structured assessment strategies and curriculum refinements effectively supported student learning. These findings reinforce Kumar and Rani's (2021) argument that well-designed digital assessment tools can facilitate meaningful learning outcomes by addressing engagement and instructor-student interaction challenges. Additionally, the notable gains in post-test performance parallel the structured approach to assessment and learning intervention advocated by Meyer and Murrell (2021), emphasizing the importance of diverse and adaptable evaluation strategies in digital and hybrid learning environments. The success of these strategies, evidenced by the improved outcomes in the final phase, further validates the necessity of recalibrated testing and targeted instructional design in foundational writing courses.

The analysis of writing proficiency criteria also reflects key trends in assessment literature, particularly regarding faculty perceptions of effective evaluation (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2023). The strong performance in clarity, precision, and structure suggests that students responded well to explicit assessment criteria, supporting the notion that clear learning outcomes contribute to enhanced student performance. However, the discrepancies in conciseness, orthosyntactic correctness, and cohesion indicate areas where further refinements are necessary. Bawa's (2020) research on retention challenges in online learning underscores the need for ongoing instructor feedback and engagement strategies, which could be instrumental in addressing these weaker areas. Additionally, the findings corroborate Hodges et al.'s (2020) argument that pedagogical coherence in assessment is crucial to student success, reinforcing the importance of structured rubrics and calibrated evaluation methods in online and hybrid instructional settings.

Backing faculty perceptions with an assessment project employing two types of measurements —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.

This restructuring aligns with best practices in online and hybrid learning, emphasizing the importance of structured assessment and pedagogically coherent course design (Hodges et al., 2020; Kumar & Rani, 2021). The assessment-driven approach underscores the necessity of clearly defined learning outcomes and well-calibrated evaluation methods to ensure instructional effectiveness (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2023). 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). Moreover, the steady increase in post-test performance across phases validates the effectiveness of targeted pedagogical interventions, reinforcing the role of continuous assessment in shaping curricular improvements. These findings demonstrate that data-informed curricular modifications, supported by applied linguistics insights, can lead to enhanced student writing proficiency and more effective instructional strategies in foundational writing courses.

Declaration for Human Participants: 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 institution and courses are made explicit to guarantee transparency and accountability.

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

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