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A Three-tiered Evaluation Framework for Effective Writing Instructions in English for Academic Purposes Course

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Abstract

Academic writing is becoming a matter of concern for the developing countries where English serves as a second or foreign language because of the significant role it plays in the academic as well as professional life of an individual. Excellence in academic writing and communication is among the top ranked expectations from graduates of all disciplines, Pakistani Higher education Commission has listed Technical and Academic communication as second significant competence (2017). Therefore, there is a dire need of a writing instruction framework that could inculcate communicative competence among Pakistani graduates. A framework that will suppress all challenges and ensure success. The consciously chosen methodology meant to determine the effectiveness of 3-Tiered Evaluation Framework in enhancing students' engagement in writing classes; ensuring their academic success. The study established that the 3-tiered evaluation framework assisted teachers and language learners alike in dealing with language related problems including; large class size, writing in second/foreign language, absence of corrective feedback, students' passivity and high dependence on easily available notes. The 3-TEF ensured active involvement of students in writing tasks facilitated through collaboration and systematic critical reflection, which ultimately improved students' writing engagement and achievements. Besides, interpersonal skills, negotiation, critical thinking, autonomous learning, team work, collaboration, and confidence development, surfaced as by-products of the 3-TEF.

Keywords: tiered evaluation, framework, feedback, self-reflection, soft skills

Introduction

Academic writing has expanded across curriculum in various disciplines at higher education (Ariana, 2010; Badenhort et.al., 2014; Murphy, 2012; Sommers and Saltz, 2004), especially for second/foreign language learners to cater to their needs in relation to specific academic and disciplinary activities; converging linguistic skills and discourse knowledge simultaneously (Osman, Ismail, and Darus, 2014; Strevens, 1988). Carroll (2002) opined that academic writing at higher education accommodates critical thinking ability among students, obliging them to 'read complex texts, understand key disciplinary concepts ... synthesize, analyze, and respond critically to new information, usually within a limited time frame' (3–4). However, academic writing has been regarded as "a problem" in need of fixing' (Badenhort et al., 2014, 1). Inadequate instructional input, writing in a second language or foreign language, large class sizes, excess teaching load, and absence of corrective feedback in writing classes have been identified as the roots for making writing 'a problem' at higher education (Boud and Lee, 2005; Haggis, 2006; Murphy, 2012; Owler, 2010).

English language teaching at higher education requires constant struggle to align language learners' needs and modern teaching strategies with the growing demands of corporate world to enable language learners to be technologically proficient, productive, motivated, self-directed, dynamic, change managers; bearing the skills and competence needed in interdisciplinary situations (Fernandes, Flores, and Lima, 2012; Mc Cabe and O' Conor, 2014; Yang, 2015). Consequently, teaching methodology in general, and writing instructions in particular, have been through dramatic changes over the century; 'Unfortunately, some conditions have not improved' across the globe (Murphy, 2012, p 271). Pakistani context exclusively has failed to keep pace with the innovative instructional strategies owing to the disregard second language writing and its instruction receive as a one-dimensional skill needed to improve grammatical structures, to reproduce a perfect written draft, and to clear the exam (Dar, Zaki, and Kazmi, 2014; Rehmat, 2013; Warsi, 2004; Zaki, Rashidi, and Kazmi, 2013).

Even though a number of instructional strategies have been devised 'to improve current practices in [writing and] assessment feedback' (Tee and Ahmed, 2014, p 580), but since the strategies put emphasis on one or two factors, criticized Fraser et al. (1987), therefore learning gets a peripheral influence of the strategies (Tee and Ahmed, 2014). This directed towards an exigency for an instructional strategy that should bring about active learning, students' engagement and collaborative learning in classroom, and also promote self-regulatory learning skills among ESL students to ensure success in developing EAP writing skills. Considering the gap in instructional methods, the study was established accordingly, i.e. to experiment a holistic teaching-learning writing instruction framework, The Three-Tiered Evaluation Framework (Zaki, 2010) as a reform in writing pedagogy in improving students' writing skills and writing achievement focusing on the process and product of writing. The study was set to answer the following questions:

- i. What is the impact of employing three-tiered evaluation framework in a Pakistani undergraduate EAP writing class on students writing achievement?
- ii. What is the impact of the 3-tiered evaluation framework, used for EAP writing, on students learning engagement and their soft skills?

The 3 -Tiered Evaluation Framework

The 3-tiered evaluation framework is a carefully constructed complex method with several layers of teaching and learning. The framework has taken its theoretical underpinnings from communicative language teaching, formative assessment, process-genre approach, self, peer, and criterion-based assessment, and EAP writing to corroborate the significance of active and systematic teaching- learning strategy in developing academic writing skills. Having its roots in communicative language teaching, the framework provides second language learners an opportunity for 'proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978) by lowering 'affective filter' (Krashen) (Lin and Chein, 2009). Since the framework fosters collaborative learning and process writing, the 3-tiered evaluation framework provides efficient means to communicate feedback, Tee and Ahmed professed, 'a good feedback system is not a single discrete activity but encompassed by a bundle of elements and practices' (2014, p 581).

The 3- Tiered Evaluation framework provides evaluation in three steps; the first step makes students assess their writings against identified criteria. 1st tier makes learners reflect on their written drafts by developing understanding of the writing standards. The second step is based on their peers' performance. 2nd tier stimulates self-assessment in a way that it demands conscious 'self- questioning, post reflections, learner's ownership and management of learning processes, sense of personal ownership, responsibility, and accountability' (Toppng 2003). Besides this, the 2nd tiered encourages meaningful negotiation among the learners about the writing and its process, consequently complementing collaborative learning

The final step of evaluation involves a comparison of students' written drafts with the standard written draft teacher provided them with. The 3rd tier facilitate learners to observe the standard ways of writing; propagating unconscious learning and conscious self- reflection simultaneously among the learners. Each tier in the framework endorses collaborative learning; where learners gain self-confidence, fluency, autonomy, and self-expression through social interactions. The 3- tiered evaluation framework

is a teaching – learning method which ensures ‘structured and conscious teaching learning’ in achieving results (Zaki, 2010, p. 150).

The framework offers; criterion based, peer performance based, and standard based evaluation that successfully engages students to actively evaluate their writings and be reflective as a result. The framework has taken its theoretical underpinnings from psycholinguistics, communicative language teaching, formative assessment, process-genre approach, self, peer, and criterion based assessment, and EAP writing to corroborate the significance of active and systematic teaching- learning strategy in developing academic writing skills ; fulfilling Brown’s (2004-5) definition of writing instructions at HE that is meant to “fit for purpose”; considering learners, assessees, suitable time to assess, assessment as a part of learning – learner centered assessment (p, 81).

Figure 1: The 3-Tiered Evaluation Framework

Methodology

The epistemological stance for this study was Objectivist and Constructivist which are closely allied with Positivism and Interpretivism (Grey, 2015). The stance led to the deductive approach which further guided the selection of a Triangular Convergence Model (Creswell, 2006) for data collection and analysis under Mixed-Method. The pretest-posttest intact group Quasi-experimental method was conducted in regular teaching classes, and collected data through Structured feedback forms, reflection forms, and the final written drafts of students’ four genres of essays. The triangulation convergence framework was used to obtain diverse yet corresponding data “to best understand the research problem” (Creswell, 2014, p, 62). The study was conducted on the conveniently accessible sample of (N=62) students of one department of a public-sector engineering university who were enrolled in the freshman functional English course, with a certain aptitude for language that is checked by the university through entrance exam. The ethical research protocols for the university and the participants including; anonymity and confidentiality, informed consent, and analysis and reporting of the collected data were keenly observed (Babbie, 2010). The data gathered through qualitative means were coded, and thematically analyzed (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). However, the correlation and t-test were run to test the significance of pre-and posttest (Nayak & Hazra, 2011).

Findings

This longitudinal study was stretched over six weeks with pre-and posttest in which students following process genre approach composed multiple drafts (in pursuance of a perfect written draft) of four different genres of Essays including; Descriptive, Narrative, Persuasive, and Compare and Contrast. Careful analysis and interpretation of the collected data using SPSS for statistical analysis of the pre-

and post-test scores, and interpretation of the information obtained from the questionnaires (pre-and post-experiment) provided answers to the questions raised in this study.

Impact of 3-tiered evaluation framework in writing achievement

The findings of the study confirmed that the 3-tiered evaluation framework has a positive and strong linear relationship with students’ writing achievement. The correlation values of the 3 Tiers during the course of experiment revealed that the values of self, peer, and standard evaluation in Round 1 show a positive but weak linear relationship between peer and self, and standard evaluation, whereas the subsequent rounds display a strong positive linear correlation between standard and self, than peer evaluation. Peer evaluations’ findings show positive yet weak relationship on the basis of inconsistent peers evaluating each other’s drafts. However, the total scores of the taught genres indicate positive and strong linear relationship.

Table 1: Matrix Correlation of All Rounds of 3-Tiered Evaluation and scores of all 4 genres of essays

All Four Rounds of the 3-Tiered Evaluation Framework	Category	Pearson Correlation	Sig.(2-tailed)	Scores of 4 Genres of Essay	Category	Pearson Correlation	Sig.(2-tailed)
	Round 1	Total Self	1			Pretest Writing Achievement	1
	Total Peer	.145	.261	Total Scores of Descriptive Essay	.698**	.000	
	Total Standard	.287*	.024	Total score of Narrative Essay	.627**	.000	
Round 2	Total Self	.593**	.000	Total score of Persuasive Essays	.527**	.000	
	Total Peer	-0.020	.876	Total score of Compare and Contrast Essays	.314*	.013	
	Total Standard	.410**	.001	Posttest Writing achievement	.634**	.000	
Round 3	Total Self	.632**	.000				
	Total Peer	.399**	.001				
	Total Standard	.296*	.019				
Round 4	Total Self	.292*	.021				
	Total Peer	.25	.845				
	Total Standard	.180	.217				

The hypotheses that directed the course of study stated; (1) there is a difference between the perceptions of students about the previous writing experience and the current writing experience, (2) there is a difference between the writing achievement of students in the pre-and posttest. The outlined findings in the table 2 display a substantial difference in the perceptions of the participants; there is a 0.2% chance of finding a difference in perception < 0.726 and a 0.02% chance of finding a difference > 0.726. Also, the writing achievement of students in the pretest and posttest have been changed by a mean value of 5.76. There is a 0.0% chance of finding a difference in perception < -5.76 and a 0.00% chance of finding a difference > -5.76.

Table 2: Paired Sample Statistics of Perceptions and Writing Achievement

		Paired differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std Deviation	Std error mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre experiment Perceptions and post experiment perceptions (Average Scores)	.726	1.901	.241	.243	1.208	3.007	61	.004
Pair 1	Pretest Writing Achievement and Posttest Writing Achievement (Average Scores)	-5.76613	4.80298	.60998	-6.98586	-4.54640	-9.453	61	.000

The data collected using pre-and post-experiment questionnaire accrued participants’ perceptions about the writing instructions they have received in their academic years, along with their insights on the effectiveness of the 3-tiered evaluation framework in EAP writing achievement. Perceptions of the participants led to uncovering one of the crucial benefits of the 3-tiered evaluation framework, i.e. enabling language learners to be autonomous and self-directed learners; breaking away from the over dependence on the course instructor and ready-made assignments available on the internet websites ultimately gaining confidence in their own writing skills.

Table 3: Pre-and Post-Experiment Perceptions of Participants on Writing Instructions

Pre-Experiment Responses	Post Experiment Responses
They had their essay writing classes that strictly followed product approach	The participants felt that the strategy was helpful in developing in other areas of writing, i.e. letter, reports, applications, etc.
Writing pedagogy, they received focused on error correction to a great extent	The participants believe that the 3-tiered evaluation framework propagates active learning in such a way that it makes the entire writing process into a systematic writing activity
The participants received writing instructions that involved teacher’s scaffolding	The participants believed that the peer evaluation done under the 3-tiered evaluation framework introduces students to various ways of expression in writing
The participant has developed writing skills by following proper process of writing in previous education	They viewed peer evaluation done during the execution of the 3-tiered evaluation framework as an opportunity to self-criticism
Theses participants have been following process approach that was limited to pre- writing alone.	The participants characterized 3-tiered evaluation framework promoting collaborative writing which helped them to develop their writing skills by inducing systematic writing strategy and enabling participants to have confidence in their writings
The participants did not have classes specifically designed for essay writing	They prefer process writing approach because:
They were highly dependent on their teacher, peer, internet, books, and articles to get written material for their essay.	The outcome is bound to be better

Impact of the 3-tiered evaluation framework on soft skills

The application of the 3-tiered evaluation framework converges the idea of developing academic as well as soft skills among students (earning professional degrees), by empowering them to concur with the demands of economic world. Since the core purpose of the study rested on writing achievement of the participants, the pivotal soft skills developed by means of the 3-tiered evaluation framework instructional framework, were investigated through the questionnaire. The instructional framework by means of participants' active involvement encouraged them to share their evaluation with each other within the class time. Therefore, the principal soft skills surfaced after the thematic analysis include; negotiation, time management, and decision making skills.

Table 4: Significance of the 3TEM in enhancing soft skills

<p>The participants' perception revealed the following outcomes of the 3 TEM on the non-academic skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Made us (participants) more thoughtful and practical ▪ Fostered team work and collaboration ▪ Developed critical thinking skills ▪ Broadened our perspectives ▪ Gave us confidence about our writing products by enabling us to consciously and carefully follow a process of writing ▪ Promoted creativity ▪ Helped to socialize, to ask for help and to share and discuss openly

Discussion

Four main themes have structured the discussion of findings in this study: 3-tiered evaluation framework as a mean of active participation, 3-tiered evaluation framework as a systematic learning tool, 3-tiered evaluation framework as assessment tool, and 3-tiered evaluation framework as social control.

3-tiered evaluation framework as a mean of active participation

The steps that are involved in 3-Tiereds Evaluation Framework include; brainstorming, multiple drafting, feedback practices, revision, and final editing. Which enables learners to apply the information first (composition of 1st draft), later to improve on their written drafts once feedback is received or self-evaluation is done (information process) finally, composing a final written product (information application). Besides this, sensing current flaw in local education system, i.e. traditional teaching where lecture surpasses the students' input in the teaching-learning process, the 3-tiered evaluation framework encourages active engagement of students in the teaching-learning process for conscious learning and ultimate success. Researchers posited the view that teachers need to avoid communicating ALL to students rather they should formulate 'strategies that engage students in ways that are both hands-on and minds-on' (Thompson 2011, p 5). Mandernach (2006) opined the view that "To encourage active engagement, teachers must design authentic tasks that reflect the complexity of the environment." (p. 4).

The statistical analysis indicated a noteworthy influence the active engagement has on students' writing achievement. These findings are in the line of the study conducted by a number of researchers regarding the significance of peer and self-evaluation and process- genre approach while teaching writing. These researches have unanimously posed the idea that students acquire and improve writing skills when are consciously made to go through a process in which they assess a variety of written drafts and improve their own written drafts (Andrade and Valtcheta, 2009; Farrah, 2012; Moussaoui, 2012; Rahmat, 2013; Tahir, 2012; Wiley and Gardner, 2010). Participants' views about the impact of students' active involvement in the writing achievement also validate the findings of the study:

In the beginning I feel so boring but then when I am going to improve my writing skills then I feel happy in taking classes (P11).

I was somewhat innovative, yet rigorous and even though, it might have seemed fruitless at that moment but am sure that it will prove its worth (P 2).

The 3-tiered evaluation framework augmented learning beyond memorization and reproducing the learned information. The framework rather engaged second language learners into teaching-learning process; enabling them to talk, write, experience, and apply what they have learned (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). Studies have posited the view that academic writing cannot be taught to passive learners rather teachers should devise such teaching-learning strategies that would enable ESL writers to be autonomous and independent in their written drafts to ensure quality learning (Mandernach, 2005; Wiggings and McTighe, 2005; Thompson, 2011).

3-tiered evaluation framework as a systematic learning tool

The 3- tiered evaluation framework trailed writing as a course of discovery; intended to elevate cognizance of SLLs about the recursive disposition of writing countenancing collaboration and intervention by teacher and students through the procedure which allowed peers to exchange meaning (Susser, 1994; Reid, 1995). The 3- tiered evaluation framework is a teaching-learning method which ensures “structured and conscious teaching learning” in achieving results (Zaki, 2010, p. 150). Additionally, the method conformed to the edifice of basic teaching-learning process presented in the educational psychology. The teaching learning process consists of three stages: information intake, processing, and application.

The 3-tiered evaluation framework assisted students in both second and third stages of basic teaching learning process moving back and forth simultaneously. The findings of the study are in the line of the results of the study conducted by McGraw and Kaufhold (2016). The study concluded that SLLs writings improve when they are exposed to ‘meaning-based instruction in which form focused activities and corrective feedback are provided’ (Tataway n.d. p, 6), an opinion that is unanimously agreed by the researchers in SL writing pedagogy (Fernsten and Reda, 2011; Liu & Carless, 2006; Wass and Golding, 2014; McCabe and O’ Conor, 2014; Tee and Ahmed, 2014).

3-tiered evaluation framework as assessment tool

‘One of the most common ways instructors can help students make the journey from error to mastery on any given task is by providing feedback on their performance’ (Ekholm, Zumbrunn, and Conklin, 2014, p 197). Fulfilling the notion posited by Ekholm, Zumbrunn, and Conklin, The Three-Tiered Evaluation Framework is an instructional framework for EAP writing which relies on Process-Genre approach and tiered evaluation which fosters formative assessment in large classes; enabling students to edit, also to cultivate such tactics which would help in ideas generation, to compose multiple written drafts, to handle feedback, and improving draft at all stages (Raimes, 1983).The framework provides evaluation in three steps; where students are required to assess their writings against identified criteria (1). Then, based on their peers’ performance they are provided with the opportunity to reflect upon their understanding of the concept being taught to them (2). Final phase of evaluation involves an unconscious comparison of students’ written drafts with the standard written draft teacher provided them with (3).

The data analysis and discussion has given away the notion that formative assessment could be quite beneficial in terms of enhancing learning experiences and developing an in depth understanding of the assessment criterion which further enabled the participants to out- perform in the post-experiment test. Another significant point that the findings highlighted that participants when trained in formative assessment, performed better in the summative assessment, i.e. final exam. In this sense, the study answers the reservation that is usually associated with formative assessment that formative assessment is quite time taking; which is not available to the students during their term papers (Atkinson, 2003; Leki, 1992).

The findings emerging through statistical and thematic analysis concluded that self-evaluation, being an integral part of the 3-tiered evaluation framework, fortified among the participants introspective and autonomous learning skills, which improved their writing skills as a consequence. The findings acquiesce to the researches done in the area of formative assessment, process-genre approach, and self and peer evaluation (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Rouhi and Azizian, 2013; Riese, Samara, and Lillejord, 2012; Sultana, 2009; Lin and Chien, 2009; Puegprom and Chiramanee, 2011).

However, a contrastive finding surfaced from the statistical and thematic analysis of the 2 and 3 - Tiered of evaluation, i.e. Peer and standard based evaluations. Because of the reason that the peers were different in each cycle. Peer evaluation, for these participants, served as a mean to self-criticism (Andrade and Valtcheta 2009), an indirect way of analyzing mistakes (Moussaoui, 2012; Tahir, 2012), conscious realization of weaknesses, and education about various ways of expressions (Farrah, 2012; Rahmat, 2013; Wiley and Gardner, 2010).

Standard based evaluation antithetically had 13 missing values which served as the prime cause of discrepancy between statistics, however participants' insights about the impact of 3rd- tier in the evaluation process revealed altered perspectives. The inclusion of standard essay in the writing process clarified the social and functional aspects of writing; making students realize the significance of suitable vocabulary, structure, grammar, and discourse to come up with the text (Badger and White, 2000; Nordin and Mohammad, 2006; Arndt, 1987).

3-tiered evaluation framework as social control

Learning through collaboration has been promoted to a great extent in SL contexts because of its promising outcomes; therefore, collaborative writing has been preeminently advocated in literature (e.g., Storch, 2005; Kessler, 2010; Kessler and Bikowski, 2012). Collaborative writing has been accredited for improving students' knowledge and understanding, developing nous for audience with an increase in the ownership and motivation of writing, highlighting the lexical and discourse patterns, along with a prompt feedback (Leki, 1993; Donato, 1994; Kowl and Swain, 1994; Swain and Lapkin, 1998; Storch, 2005). Storch (2005) maintained that collaboration for writing results in improved writing equally in L1 and L2 contexts.

Learning through collaboration provides students with an opportunity to intermingle and cooperate with each other at maximum to reach a shared end with the help of all four basic language skills, i.e. reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Harmer, 1991). Delucchi (2006) recounted that collaborative learning is desired by students for being a source of communication of diverse notions and beliefs. As a result, students with varied language proficiency bring about better results. The results indicated that the 3-tiered evaluation framework propagated a collaborative environment in writing classrooms where students' affective filter was low (Krashen 1988) and the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) was taken well care of, as a result student out-performed the writing task (Kessler and Bikowski, 2010).

The constructive aspect of collaborative writing in terms of broadening understanding, developing team work, sense of ownership, socialization, and an understanding of writing for the audience (Leki, 1993; Donato, 1994; Kowl and Swain, 1994; Swain and Lapkin, 1998; Storch, 2005). The results have affirmed that the 3-tiered evaluation framework has been successful in carving the above-mentioned skills in the ESL students. All in all, the 3- tier evaluation framework satisfied the six fundamental components of an effective and efficient feedback, proposed by Tee and Ahmed (2014):

The six elements are timing, quality, quantity, social pressure, reflection, and communication. These elements are neither mutually exclusive nor independent. An effective system enables these elements to function intertwiningly to maximize the potential of feedback for learning. (p 581)

Conclusion

The 3-tiered evaluation framework was experimented to explore the effectiveness of the framework to provide for the learning gap that has been a part of Pakistani education system by virtue of the inadequate number of teachers, class size and teaching load, writing curriculum, and the writing practices that have been a part of Pakistani education system at the intermediate level. The findings of the study have shown positive impacts of the 3-tiered evaluation framework on students writing achievement by raising their consciousness to the processes that are involved in academic writing and by making them active learners who have been passively dealt by their instructors. The framework successfully propagated active involvement and engagement in the writing classrooms assisting participants to observe, rationalize, and criticize multiple drafts; consequently, qualifying them to identify and correct their mistakes to improve their writing outputs. Hence the framework is expedient for the teachers and students as the 3-tiered evaluation framework provides practical solution to teachers and students alike, for problems like; large class size, absence of individual feedback, teaching work load, and developing a sense of ownership, autonomy, motivation, and understanding of the genre, discipline, and the writing practices. Therefore, teachers at the higher education level, sensing the need of learners should devise classroom strategies in a systematic way where teaching learning process is facilitated through active involvement of the learners into the process. While students need to display positivity towards modern teaching-learning styles and start taking responsibility of their own learning. This study could further be stretched over to other genres and types of writing. Besides this, in the study, the peers of the participants were not consistent; therefore, the experiment could be carried out to see the results with the consistent peers to explore the new prospects of the 3-tiered evaluation framework.

Note: Since the study was a part of practitioner research, there was no funding body involved in the course of study. Also, the study was a part of academic practice; the framework coincided with the curricular needs of the students, therefore the study did not have any conflict of interest.

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