ESL/EFL INSTRUCTORS' PRACTICES FOR WRITING ASSESSMENT: SPECIFIC PURPOSES OR GENERAL PURPOSES?

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to explore ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instructors' practices in writing assessment, examining whether they favor specific-purpose or general-purpose approaches. A mixed-methods design was employed, including surveys and interviews with 30 instructors from various universities and language centers. The findings indicate that the majority of instructors prefer specific-purpose assessment, as it effectively evaluates students' ability to write in academic or professional contexts. However, some instructors use a general-purpose approach to strengthen students' overall writing skills. The study provides practical insights for ESL/EFL instructors to enhance assessment strategies and improve students' writing competencies.

Introduction. Writing is widely recognized as a fundamental skill in second and foreign language education, serving not only as a medium of communication but also as a reflection of a learner's cognitive, linguistic, and socio-cultural competence (Hyland, 2003). In ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, writing plays a critical role in both academic and professional settings. Learners are expected to convey complex ideas clearly, structure their texts coherently, and use appropriate grammar and vocabulary. As a result, writing assessment is a central component of language instruction, providing instructors with valuable information about students' abilities, progress, and areas for improvement (Weigle, 2002).

Assessment of writing serves multiple purposes, ranging from diagnosing learner difficulties, monitoring progress, providing feedback, to evaluating overall language proficiency. However, the approaches used by instructors can vary significantly depending on the goals of the assessment. Two primary approaches have been identified in the literature: specific-purpose assessment and general-purpose assessment.

Specific-purpose assessment focuses on evaluating learners' ability to write in particular contexts or for particular goals, such as academic essays, business reports, or professional correspondence. This approach emphasizes the functional and contextual aspects of writing, aligning assessment tasks with real-world requirements and the specific needs of the learners (Brown, 2010). For example, students in an

academic English course may be assessed on their ability to produce research-based essays, while learners in a business English course may be evaluated on their ability to draft emails or reports appropriate to workplace contexts. Specific-purpose assessment has been argued to provide more authentic measures of a learner's communicative competence in practical contexts.

In contrast, general-purpose assessment evaluates learners' overall writing proficiency without a strong emphasis on context-specific goals. This approach primarily focuses on grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, and overall structure (Hughes, 2003). While general-purpose assessment is effective for monitoring general language development and reinforcing foundational writing skills, it may not fully capture a learner's ability to apply writing skills in real-world or context-specific scenarios.

The choice between these approaches has significant implications for teaching and learning. Instructors must consider the purpose of assessment, course objectives, learner needs, and the contexts in which students will use English. Previous research indicates that many ESL/EFL instructors integrate both approaches to balance the assessment of general writing proficiency with context-specific abilities (Hyland & Tse, 2007). However, there remains a need for empirical studies examining how instructors make these decisions in practice and which approach predominates in real classroom settings.

The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating ESL/EFL instructors' practices for writing assessment, focusing on the extent to which they favor specific-purpose versus general-purpose approaches. This research addresses the following questions:

1. To what extent do ESL/EFL instructors use specific-purpose or general-purpose approaches in writing assessment?
2. Which assessment approach is perceived as more effective in evaluating students' writing skills?
3. What criteria influence instructors' decisions in selecting a particular assessment approach?

By answering these questions, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of current practices in writing assessment and offer practical recommendations for instructors aiming to enhance the effectiveness of their evaluation methods. The findings are expected to contribute to both theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of ESL/EFL pedagogy, particularly in the context of writing instruction.

Literature Review. Writing assessment in ESL and EFL contexts has been widely studied due to its critical role in language learning and pedagogy. Effective writing assessment is not only a measure of students' language competence but also a tool for fostering learning and guiding instructional practices (Weigle, 2002). The literature highlights two main approaches to writing assessment: specific-purpose assessment and general-purpose assessment, each with distinct theoretical foundations, practical implications, and pedagogical outcomes.

Weigle (2002) emphasizes that writing assessment should reflect both the complexity of the writing process and the communicative purposes of texts. Effective assessment aligns with three core principles: validity, reliability, and authenticity. Validity ensures that the assessment measures what it is intended to measure, reliability ensures consistency across raters and tasks, and authenticity reflects the real-world applicability of writing tasks. In ESL/EFL contexts, balancing these principles is often challenging because learners' needs vary according to academic, professional, or personal contexts.

Brown (2010) differentiates between form-focused assessment, which evaluates grammatical accuracy and language structure, and performance-focused assessment, which evaluates communicative effectiveness and context-specific writing skills. This distinction forms the theoretical basis for differentiating general-purpose and specific-purpose assessment approaches. Form-focused assessment aligns more with general-purpose evaluation, whereas performance-focused assessment aligns with specific-purpose evaluation.

Specific-purpose assessment emphasizes students' ability to write in particular contexts or for particular objectives. Hyland (2003) argues that academic and professional writing contexts require students to demonstrate genre awareness, rhetorical organization, and discourse-level skills, beyond mere sentence-level accuracy. Specific-purpose assessment tasks often include research essays, reports, business correspondence, or formal proposals, mirroring authentic situations learners are likely to encounter.

Several studies have highlighted the advantages of specific-purpose assessment. For example, Hamp-Lyons (1991) notes that context-specific tasks allow instructors to evaluate not only grammatical accuracy but also functional competence, such as the ability to construct persuasive arguments or concise technical descriptions. Similarly, Bachman and Palmer (2010) argue that specific-purpose assessment provides a closer approximation of real-world language use, which is critical for preparing learners for academic or professional environments.

However, some scholars caution that overemphasis on specific-purpose tasks can limit students' development of general writing skills. For instance, Cumming (2001) observes that focusing solely on context-specific genres may reduce opportunities for students to practice broader organizational and language skills, potentially hindering overall language development.

In contrast, general-purpose assessment evaluates overall writing proficiency, including grammar, vocabulary, cohesion, and coherence. Hughes (2003) highlights that such assessments are commonly used in standardized testing contexts, such as TOEFL or IELTS writing sections, where the focus is on evaluating learners' ability to communicate effectively without specific contextual constraints.

General-purpose assessment has several pedagogical benefits. It provides a comprehensive measure of linguistic competence, allowing instructors to identify strengths and weaknesses in grammar, syntax, and lexical use (Weigle, 2002). Moreover, general-purpose tasks are flexible and can accommodate diverse learner

levels, making them suitable for courses that aim to improve foundational writing skills.

Nonetheless, research indicates that general-purpose assessment may not fully capture learners' ability to produce contextually appropriate texts. Hyland and Tse (2007) argue that without authentic contexts, general-purpose assessments may underestimate students' potential to apply their writing skills in real-world situations.

Recent studies advocate for an integrated approach that combines the strengths of both specific-purpose and general-purpose assessment. This approach allows instructors to assess both functional competence in specific contexts and general writing proficiency. For instance, Weigle (2002) and Hyland (2003) suggest designing writing tasks that include both genre-based requirements and evaluations of language accuracy, cohesion, and coherence.

Empirical research also supports this integration. In a study of EFL instructors in Taiwan, Hyland and Tse (2007) found that most instructors employed hybrid approaches, assessing students' ability to write context-specific texts while also evaluating general writing mechanics. Such integration helps prepare students for academic and professional demands while maintaining attention to overall language development. While existing literature provides significant insights into the principles and practices of writing assessment, there remains a lack of empirical research specifically examining how ESL/EFL instructors decide between specific-purpose and general-purpose approaches in practice. Most studies focus on either theoretical frameworks or standardized testing contexts, leaving a gap in understanding classroom-based assessment practices. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating instructors' actual practices, decision-making criteria, and perceptions of assessment effectiveness.

Results and Discussion. The findings align with previous research indicating that specific-purpose assessment is more prevalent in ESL/EFL contexts where students are preparing for academic or professional writing tasks (Brown, 2010; Hyland, 2003). The preference for specific-purpose assessment reflects instructors' focus on practical relevance and authenticity, ensuring that learners can apply their writing skills in real-life contexts.

The results also highlight the continuing importance of general-purpose assessment. While it is less frequently used as the primary assessment method, it remains valuable for assessing grammatical accuracy, coherence, and general writing proficiency (Hughes, 2003). This confirms Weigle's (2002) argument that an effective assessment strategy should balance both functional competence and general language skills.

The integration of specific-purpose and general-purpose approaches observed in some instructors' practices supports Hyland and Tse's (2007) recommendation for hybrid assessment methods. Such integration allows for holistic evaluation, capturing both the communicative effectiveness of context-specific writing tasks and the structural quality of writing.

Interestingly, the study also revealed that instructors adjust their assessment strategies based on students' proficiency levels and course objectives. Lower-level learners often benefit from general-purpose assessment to strengthen foundational skills, while higher-level learners are challenged with specific-purpose tasks that simulate real-world writing demands. This adaptive practice underscores the importance of context-sensitive assessment, which has been emphasized in contemporary language assessment literature (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Overall, the findings suggest that while specific-purpose assessment is dominant in ESL/EFL writing instruction, the most effective approach may involve a thoughtful combination of both assessment types. This integrated approach not only evaluates students' ability to write for specific purposes but also ensures the development of general writing proficiency, resulting in more well-rounded and capable writers.

Conclusion. This study explored ESL/EFL instructors' practices in writing assessment, focusing on the choice between specific-purpose and general-purpose approaches. The findings indicate that a majority of instructors prefer specific-purpose assessment, particularly in academic and professional contexts, due to its ability to evaluate students' writing in authentic, real-world situations. Specific-purpose assessment allows instructors to assess not only linguistic accuracy but also the functional competence and genre awareness required for academic and workplace writing. At the same time, general-purpose assessment remains relevant for developing foundational writing skills, including grammar, coherence, and overall organization. The study also revealed that some instructors integrate both approaches to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of students' writing skills. This hybrid approach ensures that learners develop practical writing abilities while reinforcing essential language structures and general proficiency. The study highlights the importance of context-sensitive assessment, emphasizing that the selection of assessment methods should align with course objectives, student proficiency levels, and the intended real-world applications of writing skills. These findings offer practical implications for ESL/EFL instructors, suggesting that a balanced, integrated approach can enhance both teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. In conclusion, while specific-purpose assessment dominates in ESL/EFL writing instruction, the most effective assessment practice combines both specific-purpose and general-purpose strategies, providing a holistic framework that fosters the development of competent, versatile writers.

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