Issue 14 | December 2014

InForm

A journal for international foundation programme professionals

Assessment Literacy: Research and recommendations relevant to the IFP

Assessment literacy in international contexts: putting theory into practice

Authentic EAP assessment: Does joint marking of Subject assignments work?

And more ...

InForm Conference 2015

Technology enhanced learning on the IFP

We are pleased to announce the sixth annual InForm Conference will take place at the University of Reading.

The event will include presentations and workshops on themes related to international foundation and pathway programmes and provide an opportunity for interaction and sharing of practice with colleagues from the IFP community.

Saturday 11 July 2015

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Registration

Please check our website for details:
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or email: inform@reading.ac.uk.

Speaker proposals

Speaker proposals are invited from professionals involved in the delivery of International Foundation and Pathway programmes. As usual, the focus should be on issues associated with teaching and learning in this sector and address the conference theme. Sessions need to appeal to tutors and course managers across the curriculum.

The deadline for speaker proposals is 30 April 2015.

Call for papers

This is a call for papers for Issue 15 of *InForm*.

The submission of papers is now invited for the fourteenth edition of *InForm* from members of the academic community associated with international foundation programmes. Issue 15 will be published in June 2015.

We are interested in articles related to the variety of academic disciplines commonly found across international foundation programmes and remind contributors that *InForm* is not predominantly an English language teaching journal. *InForm* also includes a letters page with readers' responses to the articles included in previous editions. Letters should be no longer than 200 words.

Journal articles (of no more than 1200 words) should be sent by email to **inform@reading.ac.uk** by 12.00 pm on 1 May 2015.

For more information and a full writer's guide please visit:
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We regret that contributing authors to *InForm* will no longer receive payment for papers published.

If you wish to discuss an idea for an article, please email us on **inform@reading.ac.uk**

Inside *InForm* ...

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From the Editorial Board ...

This issue of *InForm* presents highlights of the fifth annual InForm conference, which was held in July at the University of Kent and explored the theme: Assessment as a tool for learning on the IFP.

This year's theme addressed a range of topics around the theme of assessment and international foundation students – a theme that generated a stimulating programme of presentations.

To open the conference, Dr Sara Hannam and Birgit den Outer dealt with the issue of assessment literacy in international contexts and the challenges of putting theory into practice. Our second keynote speaker, Anthony Manning from the University of Kent continued with the theme of assessment literacy by looking at the implications of EAP assessment literacy and how this can inform cross-curricular collaboration.

Continuing with the them of collaborations, Bella Reichard and Michael Stephenson from Newcastle University look at the joint marking of assignments by EAP and subject tutors. Next, Carla Morris and Sebastien Cadinot from the University of Kent discuss the issue of dealing with online assessment and feedback. Finally, Amanda Smith looks at reading-to-writing as an alternative to the discursive exam essay.

We would like to thank the speakers and delegates who made it such a success again this year. We are also grateful to the speakers for writing up their presentations for inclusion in *InForm* 14, and for sharing their ideas, research and initiatives with the IFP community.

Next year, the InForm conference will return to Reading once again. We look forward to this next opportunity for members of the IFP academic community to meet to discuss the challenges inherent in our programmes and to share practice with colleagues from across the sector.

We welcome your comments, letters and contributions. To submit an article or a letter for the next issue of *InForm* please email it to **inform@reading.ac.uk**.

Louis Rogers
Chair of the *InForm* Editorial Board

Assessment literacy: Research and recommendations relevant to the IFP

About the authors

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Assessment Literacy is an emerging area of academic research which takes into account the skills required by stakeholders of assessment in developing, using and interpreting assessments and their results. This paper aimed to highlight possible mechanisms for sustaining and enhancing the Assessment Literacy of IFP practitioners through the broader generalisation of findings which have emerged from a recent research project on the topic of EAP Assessment Literacy.

Introduction:

Assessment Literacy is a growing area of interest and associated academic enquiry. Individuals and institutions are starting to explore how the stakeholders of assessment can develop, use and interpret assessments and their results more accurately and appropriately. Such objectives are particularly relevant to programmes such as IFPs, given the high stakes nature of these courses and the impact of assessment outcomes which either provide or withhold access to higher levels of study.

Whilst the research project which underpinned the session was focused specifically on the context of EAP, the author contends that findings which have emerged have relevance to the wider IFP curriculum. This is due to the fact that key reference was made by research respondents who contributed to this project to the need for, and benefits of, collaboration in assessment across the curriculum. This is both in terms of cross-curricular interaction within any given Higher Education Institution and cross-institutional collaboration across the sector. This view of the importance of collaboration in the process of assessment also aligns with a recognition of the significance of teamwork and consensus in test and assessment development (Fulcher & Davidson 2007, p.61). It also resonates with an earlier contribution by the author to InForm (Manning, 2009) where the opportunities for cross-curricular collaboration through IFPs were described.

'The density of assessment-related literature may also alienate classroom practitioners as it is written from the theoretical perspective of research academics in the field rather for those predominantly engaged with the frontline of teaching.'

What is Assesment Literacy?

Stiggins (1991, 1995) is generally accredited with introducing the term Assessment Literacy, the different aspects of which are summarised below:

According to Stiggins, Assessment Literacy involves:

1 Approaching assessment with the full knowledge of what is being assessed;

2 Understanding the purpose of assessment;

3 Familiarity with the available means of assessing the achievement in focus;

4 The expertise to generate sound samples of performance;

5 An awareness of what can go wrong and how problems can be prevented before they arise.

Stiggins (1995) directly confronts the dangers which can arise when tests are poorly built and Inaccurately interpreted. From the perspective of Educators, Stiggins suggests that practitioners with limited assessment literacy do not understand how to produce high-quality achievement data and are unable to evaluate critically the data they use.

With regard to teacher training, Brindley (2001) also notes that there is a lack of prominence attributed to assessment in teacher education courses. The density of assessment-related literature may also alienate classroom practitioners as it is written from the theoretical perspective of research academics in the field rather for those predominantly engaged with the frontline of teaching.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the specific research project, on which the conference session was based, were to:

- investigate the assessment literacy of EAP teachers, based on the good practice highlighted in relevant research.
- collect data from relevant EAP practitioners which could be considered representative of the wider sector.
- analyse the data and make recommendations for the maintaining and enhancing of teacher assessment literacy.
- promote ongoing attention to the need for high-quality testing and assessment in EAP, the results of which can be used to draw trustworthy inferences.

These aims were deemed to be relevant to the IFP context due to the:

- key role of EAP provision in most IFPs
- impact of EAP on IFP progression
- relatively close interaction between EAP teachers and content tutors involved in providing IFPs.

Research Questions

The research questions which drove the research project were as follows:

- To what extent do EAP teacher views on EAP testing and assessment practices reflect language testing research and practices which comprise Assessment Literacy?
- How can EAP Assessment Literacy be sustained or enhanced?

Again, the relevance to IFPs emerged from:

- The high number of EAP practitioners engaged in IFP provision.
- The shared context of cross-curricular interaction relating to both the EAP and broader IFP fields.
- The varied training backgrounds and experiences of assessment pertaining to colleagues working in both the EAP and IFP sectors.

Supporting Literature

In terms of the literature which supported the investigation, the table below summarises some of the areas of enquiry which were explored.

'There is a lack of reference, amongst practising EAP teachers who assess, to research associated with assessment.'

Research design and analysis

The research design which was described, outlined the philosophy that the research adopted and aspects of the pragmatic paradigm which were followed. In particular, the rationale for the use of a mixed methods approach was provided, given that the use of both quantitative and qualitative research tools were deemed suitable to facilitate the investigation of a range of perspectives, relevant to education and EAP. Contemporary testing research such as that conducted by Fulcher and Davidson (2007, p.10) tends to argue that the wider context of theories on assessment need to be kept in view as theory and observation cannot be separated. This means that a focus on quantitative methods alone will not serve the full breadth of testing and assessment related research.

Details of the questionnaire tool and the interview protocol which the research employed were also provided. In total 187 respondents completed the questionnaire and 25 interviews were conducted. A large proportion of respondents indicated experience of having contributed to IFPs and other international pathway programmes.

With regard to analysis, the session also included reference to the various means of analysing the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire results and the qualitative data from both open questionnaire items and the interview responses. Procedures included a range of descriptive and inferential statistics, along with content analysis for the purpose of qualitative data analysis.

Findings

The findings which were drawn from the project, which the researcher believes are relevant to the IFP context are as follows:

- There appears to be a need for more structured training interventions for practitioners associated with EAP assessment, given variability in training – *The author postulates that the same is likely to be true for many other IFP tutors given the overlap with EAP and similar fluctuations in teachers' educational background and training, with regard to assessment.*
- There is a lack of reference, amongst practising EAP teachers who assess, to research associated with assessment – *Given that a large number of practitioners were active on international pathway programmes, this is likely also to have an impact on IFPs. Additionally, the focus on teaching rather than research inherent to IFP roles suggests that there is also limited time for research associated with assessment across other areas of the IFP curriculum.*
- There appears to be an interest in additional opportunities for collaboration amongst EAP practitioners both within and across institutions and with content teachers – *The IFP is key resource to enable this interaction*

Key proponents of Assessment Literacy				
Fulcher, 2012	Popham, 2001	Price et al., 2012	Taylor, 2009	Stiggins, 1991
Features of Assessment Literacy and examples of supporting research in Education, Applied Linguistics and EAP				
Bachman, 2004	Inbar-Lourie, 2008, 2013	Messick, 1989	Shohamy, 2001	
Guidance resources for the development and enhancement of EAP Assessment Literacy				
Blue et al., 2000	Fulcher, 2010	Davidson & Lynch, 2002	Davies, 1999	Popham, 2012
Training for teacher Assessment Literacy through general and EAP teacher education				
Bailey & Brown, 1996	Brown & Bailey, 2008	Coniam, 2006	Sharpling, 2002	Wallis, 1991
University-led EAP Assessment Literacy through in-house testing				
BALEAP,2012	O'Sullivan, 2011	Sharpling, 2010	Weir, 1993	

given the close interaction across the curriculum in many institutions.

- There is a need to extend practitioners' skills in interpretive assessment, including use of statistics– again opportunities for collaboration – *As a result of the broad curriculum common to many IFPs, the needs of EAP teachers in this regard is likely to be shared by other humanities and social science practitioners.*
- There are key concerns amongst practitioners with regard to the ethicality of assessment – *Based on the author's experience at Boards of Examiners for IFPs across the UK, this concern is shared by representatives of the wider IFP curriculum, beyond EAP.*

Recommendations and Actions for EAP and the IFP

The areas below outline a number of key recommendations which the author has put forward and how these may be related to the more specific context of Assessment Literacy on the IFP:

- The provision of a framework for in-service assessment training – *Models for both EAP and other subject teachers could help institutions to devise assessment training mechanisms to enhance Assessment Literacy.*
- The creation of an online annotated bibliography for EAP assessment literacy, this could assist practitioners in identifying useful resources for the enhancement of their assessments – *Such a resource would also be relevant to non EAP teachers on IFPs.*
- The promotion of collaborative research and learning opportunities in assessment *on programmes such as IFPs.*
- The development of interpretive EAP Assessment Literacy skills including user-friendly statistical analysis training – *There are clear opportunities to learn from colleagues with statistical skills and the IFP team may be able to assist with this both in terms of training EAP colleagues and others from non-quantitative backgrounds.*
- The raising of awareness about the key importance of ethicality as an aspect of EAP Assessment Literacy – *Working on IFPs brings together a wide group of stakeholders from different subject domains. This can be used as a resource. It may also help to promote the importance of Assessment Literacy at different levels within institutions.*

Conclusion

Whilst the principal aim of the research described has been to investigate EAP teacher assessment literacy, according to the author, the results also have key relevance to the broader IFP context and to colleagues beyond the EAP classroom. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations which have emerged will encourage the development of additional resources and activities to continue to enhance assessment practices undertaken on IFPs so that all stakeholders can benefit further from principled approaches which yield valid and reliable results.

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Assessment literacy in international contexts: putting theory into practice

In the keynote address, Birgit den Outer and Sara Hannam explored the conference theme of assessment by looking specifically at the concept of assessment literacy and its relevance to practitioners on International Foundation Diploma (IFD) programmes. To introduce the topic, they first considered the challenges of meaningful assessment on IFD programmes. These challenges arise from the varied characteristics of the IFD which include: the variety of types of provision (in-house or outsourced); the diversity of cultural and linguistic student backgrounds; the high stakes nature of the assessments; the need to balance content, skills and subject specialism; and the effect of culture shock. According to Bourdieu (in Topper, 2005), students entering a new domain such as this can have three typical responses: they can contest, assimilate into or withdraw from the new system.

'students entering a new domain such as this can have three typical responses: they can contest, assimilate into or withdraw from the new system.'

Next, the speakers introduced the relatively new notion of assessment literacy, grounding it in their work at the Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe) in Oxford Brookes, and asked the question 'why research on assessment?' To suggest an answer, examples were provided of the very wide variety of assessment types and questions that students may now encounter at university. Delegates were then asked to remember the type of assessments they did on their undergraduate studies. It became immediately clear that things have radically changed. Both groups now require 'a particular and new kind of understanding of education competence in the domain of assessment.' Arguably, the definition of being a competent teacher or student has also changed.

'Effective assessment plays a key role in learning and therefore assessment literacy is key to academic success.'

Effective assessment plays a key role in learning and therefore assessment literacy is key to academic success. But what is assessment literacy and how can it be developed in students and teachers? The answer provided by the speakers is that assessment literacy is a socially situated practice. It is something that is negotiated by both student and teacher. To be assessment literate requires extensive engagement and awareness from the student and the educator. An interesting example of how this can be encouraged was given through the 'Assessment Compact' from Oxford Brookes University, which has five tenets for effective assessment underlining the need for both this engagement and awareness:

1.1 Effective assessment is central to learning.

1.2 To be effective the relational nature of the assessment and feedback process needs to be emphasised, particularly in terms of the need for active dialogue between students and staff.

1.3 To be effective, assessment must be recognised as a joint responsibility between staff and students.

1.4 The ability to assess, the work of both self and others, is an essential skill for all graduates.

1.5 For the above tenets to be met in full, students and staff need to be 'assessment literate' and actively participate in disciplinary communities of assessment practice.

(www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsld/resources/assessment/assessment_compact_09.pdf).

The second half of the presentation looked at the usefulness of focusing on discourse (another form of social practice) in order to increase our understanding of assessment. How do educators and students experience and explain assessment in language? As an illustration, the presenters introduced their 'Dear Diary' data collection tool, a two-year project analysing student audio diary entries. The participating students kept these diaries as a reflection on issues around their assignments and their entries provided useful insight into their attitudes. Delegates looked at some diary extracts from international students and were asked to consider what the language might reveal about the students' perspectives on assessment, UK education, and anything else of note. This discourse analysis was then used to refer back to the three possible responses students may have: contesting, assimilating or withdrawing.

As a conclusion, delegates were presented with some ways in which IFD practitioners can develop their own assessment literacy and at the same time help develop that of their students. Teachers need to have insight into the ways students think about assessment; they should listen carefully to their students (listening for evidence) and also be aware that silent students still have views. IFD teachers must reflect on their own assessment practice, create opportunities for student reflection in class, and allow space for comparison with students' former assessment experience. We must all recognise how much we are asking of our IFD students.'

Topper, K. (2005) Language and power in communities of practice, in: **Barton and Tustig (eds)** *Beyond communities of practice: language, power, and social culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Authentic EAP assessment: Does joint marking of Subject assignments work?

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One aspect of 'authenticity' in EAP assessment is to what extent the assessment reflects the tasks students need to do in their target contexts (Alexander et al., 2008). On pathway programmes, one way to use a task similar to the target context for assessing writing is to mark assignments that students write for their subject modules from an EAP perspective. This paper describes the benefits and challenges of such 'joint marking' and makes suggestions for implementation in practice.

The context for this paper is an International Diploma in Business pathway programme (described by Herron, 2013). One subject assignment, 'Management and Organisation', is given a separate EAP mark in addition to the mark given for the subject; the same piece of work therefore gives rise to two summative marks for the separate modules. The following discussion is partly based on comments by students and staff involved in this assignment.

Benefits

Joint assessment can have significant benefits. First, as students are aware that their work will be assessed by their EAP tutors and their subject teachers, they may see this as a chance to produce an assignment which displays a high standard in both subject knowledge and general academic literacy. This, in turn, can foster a non-fragmentary view of language and content within students; one student commented that the joint assessment helped to 'identify our strengths and weaknesses in communicating our answers'. This comment indicates that the student has understood the importance of the 'how' of the answer; it also suggests that joint marking may help students to appreciate the credibility of EAP provision alongside their often more highly regarded subject modules.

'it may seem superficial to students to write an essay just for language assessment . . .'

In addition, as it may seem superficial to students to write an essay just for language assessment, the use of a real, context-specific, joint-marked assignment as EAP assessment may inject more authenticity and validity into the assessment procedure; much more so than context-free timed writing, at least. Moreover, as this assignment directly reflects what EAP classes in this context prepare students for, awarding it a writing score for the EAP module as well, ensures *fairness* of assessment for that module (Hedge, 2000).

Finally, joint marking indirectly benefits students by encouraging dialogue between subject and EAP teachers. One product of this close collaboration – and of the fact that EAP teachers actually read a number of subject assignments – is that joint marking can be seen as a form of teacher development, insofar as EAP teachers can gain a better understanding of the subject content and of their subject colleagues' expectations. Teachers from different disciplinary backgrounds can develop an eye for the specific conventions of the discipline for which they are preparing their students (Hyland, 2004). This can result in positive washback over time (Fulcher, 2010), as EAP practitioners are better able to tailor their provision more specifically to the actual assignment as a result of their involvement in marking it.

Challenges and possible solutions

Despite the clear benefits that joint assessment can have, there are also major challenges. In order to avoid penalising students in two modules for one area of performance, subject teachers need to mark only for content and not for language, and EAP teachers need to abstract language from content and only mark for language. However, these areas are often difficult to disentangle. It is not within the remit of this article to discuss in depth what EAP is, but this topic touches the boundaries between subject content and EAP. For example, it can be unclear in whose remit it falls to mark for, and comment on, 'structure', and what exactly is meant by this term in the different modules. Paragraph structure is probably EAP, but 'line of argument' can also be called 'structure', and whereas this is arguably a part of the subject module, it is taught in EAP classes. In some exceptional cases, a student may receive confusing feedback comments from the two teachers if the term 'structure' is used differently, for example 'Structure very good' (Subject tutor) and 'Difficult to read due to poor structure' (EAP tutor).

In order to provide optimal guidance and clarity for the teachers involved, as neat a division as possible is required for the two sets of marking criteria; perhaps implementing explicit restrictions pertaining to what should NOT be marked by the respective subject and EAP tutors. Another possibility would be to use a joint feedback sheet, so that both teachers see each other's comments and can adjust any wording that might seem contradictory to students. Alternatively, both teachers could annotate the same copy of the assignment, so that the EAP teacher can see what the subject teacher comments on.

'joint marking indirectly benefits students by encouraging dialogue between subject and EAP teachers.'

Some students are concerned that if a subject assignment is used to assess EAP skills, subject knowledge might affect the EAP mark. One student on this programme feared that the EAP mark was influenced by the subject *task* and that if the assignment had been easier from a subject perspective, the student may have had a better chance to create a coherent, well-written essay resulting in a higher EAP mark. This concern also raises questions about the authenticity of this assignment as a fair EAP assessment – especially if EAP is the part of the assignment that is transferrable to other assignments and even other subjects. Even though EAP teachers mark only for those transferrable skills in this assignment, the concern stands that if students genuinely struggle with the subject, coherence in their answer may be compromised.

To return to the initial question, 'Does joint marking work as authentic EAP assessment?', the verdict for this context is yes but there is room for improvement. The practice is continuously being developed here at INTO Newcastle University and we would be happy to exchange ideas and experience with other institutions who may have similar assessment practices.

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Herron, S. (2013) 'Getting the balance right: A case of cooperation on the Diploma in Business.' *InForm*, 12, 11–12.

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Perils and pitfalls of online marking

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As the phenomenon of online marking increases, so too does the debate concerning its usability and its performance as a mechanism for feedback. The discussion among markers appears somewhat polarised; opinions ranging from enthusiasm to dread, often settling on ambivalence at best. In our Inform presentation we wanted to look at the pros and cons of using Grade Mark. However, the main point of contention tends to be the mechanics of online feedback, which perhaps obscures more profound concerns, for instance, the integrity of the marking and the possible physical effects that reading on a screen may have. Therefore, rather than resorting to the traditional polarisation that such discussions tend to be characterised by, we attempted to look at the positive aspects of using Grade Mark versus the broader issues and concerns alluded to above. This is a short pilot study which brings together some views of online marking and in particular, Grade Mark.

Garry Maguire from Oxford Brookes University outlined the more commonly vocalised advantages and disadvantages of using Grade Mark which he presented at a BALEAP PIM in November 2012 as follows:

Pros:

- easy to access
- can check originality
- saves paper

Cons:

- clunky and difficult/fiddly to use
- Internet connections – slow; loss of comments
- Glitches & bugs

However, Maguire's presentation was generally positive and supportive of the online facility, suggesting that students favoured the type of feedback they received on Grade Mark. This perspective was supported by our findings when we looked at a range of module evaluations on the International Foundation Programme at the University of Kent. In module evaluations on over 15 modules we found that feedback from students tended to be positive in relation to online grading When asked whether 'Having online feedback on my Moodle-based assignments was preferable to written or printed feedback' students generally selected 'Definitely Agree' (average of 4.2 out of 5, 'Definitely Agree' being 5 out of 5). Significantly however, evaluations were higher in instances where aca-

demics provided ample online feedback in comparison with those where academics were less forthcoming.

Since 2006 on the University of Kent IFP, the use of Turnitin has become prevalent on all modules. However, it wasn't until 2012 that paperless submissions only and the use of Grade Mark came in. Since then, colleagues have variously complained that students do not look at the feedback, leading to the question of whether it is worth commenting extensively on a student's work. Yet this seems to contradict directly Maguire's findings and those related to the module evaluations indicated above.

Engaging students in online feedback

Nonetheless, colleagues within EAP consistently complain about the lack of acknowledgement from students regarding online feedback. Consequently, in 2013, Courtenay & Coleman (two EAP tutors from the University of Kent) followed up on Maguire's presentation and examined how to encourage student engagement in online feedback and to try to build on the seemingly positive elements perceived by Maguire. Among the strategies they proposed were to include reflective exercises on feedback within the assessment itself. Another was to hold one to one oral feedback sessions with the students. Yet, although the latter strategy always tends to prove successful, it can be time consuming, and is often a luxury teachers cannot afford. It also apparently defeats the object of annotating an assignment to any great extent, an obvious issue when the abundance and quality of the feedback must play a role in the level of student engagement.

'The automaticity can lead to generic feedback, thus potentially devaluing the quality and relevance of the comments made.'

Accessing and using feedback

There is little doubt that the facility to create 'Quickmark' comments quickly and easily and to highlight certain aspects of text is a strong point in the use of this marking method. It is generally faster than traditional hand-written marking and is clearer and easier for the student to read than idiosyncratic handwriting. Some research suggests that pedagogically, software such as Grade Mark is a definite enhancement to teaching and assessment (Chew & Price 2010). For example, the application of qualitative rubrics allows for a clear explanation of why a grade has been achieved. Fig.1 below shows a comment being associated with a section of the rubric or marking criteria, then cross-referenced when accessing the full marking criteria (see fig.2 overleaf). Furthermore, the use of the software facilitates standardisation across markers and modules.

Nonetheless, the glitches in the technology are a distinct drawback (Chew & Price 2010) and tend to discourage teachers from adapting to the software easily; this could lead to indolence on the part of some markers to annotate extensively.

Presumably, through heuristic development, the technology will improve, but there are other concerns that should, perhaps, be highlighted concerning the use of Grade Mark and possibly other software marking packages. The automaticity can lead to generic feedback, thus potentially devaluing the quality and relevance of the comments made. A degree of effort is also required on the part of the student to access the marker's suggestions by hovering over the Quickmark dialogue icon. Among less assiduous students, this is only more

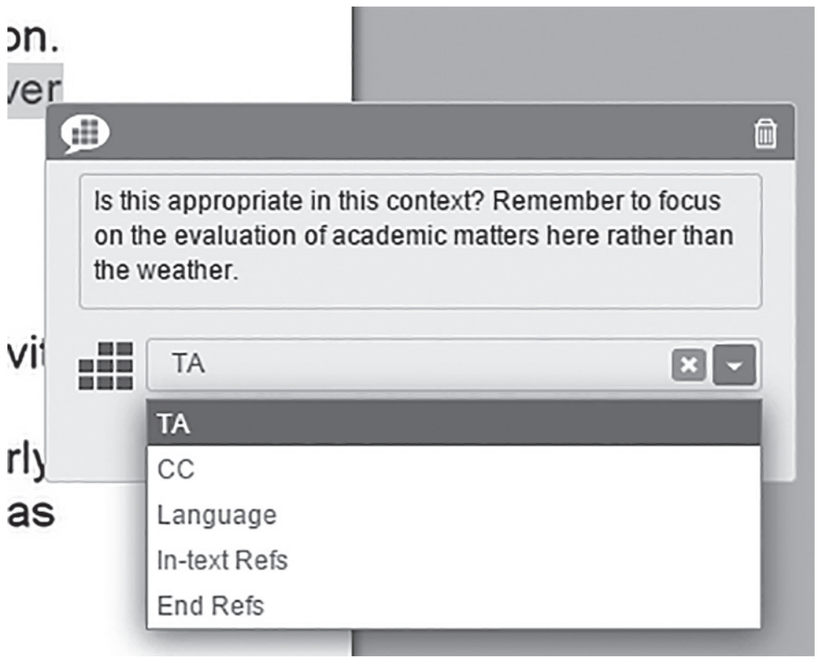

Fig. 1: Quickmark and Associated Criterion

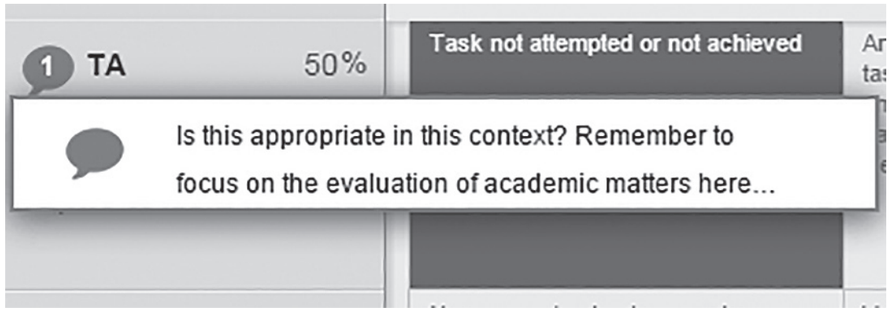

Fig. 2: Marking Criteria and Associated Criterion

likely to discourage them from reading feedback. In addition, annotations are easily editable, allowing the accidental deletion of comments.

Online marking challenge

'Growing research suggests that reading on a computer is more tiring and affects concentration and cognitive processes.'

However, a more concerning issue is the effect that the physical process of reading text vertically on a screen might have on the marker. We are used to reading pages from left to right and it is not by accident that E-readers mimic the flicking pages of a book rather than the scroll of a computer screen. Growing research suggests that reading on a computer is more tiring and affects concentration and cognitive processes (Noyes & Garland 2008). Research further implies that not only is reading vertically more physically and mentally taxing (Wastlund 2007), comprehension can also be compromised (Jabr 2013; Mangan, Walgermo & Bronnick 2013). This has concerning implications in relation to the accuracy and integrity of the marking process.

There are clear advantages to using Grade Mark: it is quick and easy to use, provided ones internet service is up to speed; it is convenient, and it avails the marker of a wide range of feedback tools. It also facilitates the standardisation of marking across modules. Nevertheless, a quick poll among colleagues indicates that many do not like using it. It could simply be down to mechanical difficulties which will likely be addressed through software upgrades. Yet for some, at least, reading on a screen in comparison with text on paper will always be less appealing, and there is evidence to suggest that the former can lead to comprehension errors. It could also be argued that students are not receiving the quality of feedback they deserve due to a paucity of comments and the over-use of 'generic' Quick marks. This could be because of technical difficulties or may be as a result of 'screen fatigue' affecting the marker. However, one aspect is certainly true: there is no going back. Therefore, an improvement in the quality of the software and the development of coping strategies among markers are essential in order to ease the passage of this innovation.

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Investigation of reading-to-write essays as an alternative to the discursive essay for pre-Masters students

About the author

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EAP Lecturer

Colleagues and I felt that the discursive essay which forms part of the summative assessment on our Graduate Diploma programme created negative washback, while the coursework (including a literature review) served our students' long-term needs more effectively. An investigation was conducted into students' perceptions of and performance on the existing exam format and an alternative: a reading-to-write exam. The alternative format was rated more favourably on five criteria: ease of exam, ease of preparation, interest of preparation, suitability as a post-graduate selection tool and usefulness and most students' performance was judged to be the same or better on this task type

Washback is defined by Alderson and Wall (1993) as 'the notion that testing influences teaching'; it can be positive or negative and planned or unintentional (Spratt, 2005).

The coursework on the Graduate Diploma at INTO Manchester includes an annotated bibliography, literature review, research proposal and 5000-word dissertation, on a topic of students' own choice. Colleagues and I agree that these assessments generate positive washback: they motivate both teachers and students to focus on skills (and sometimes subject knowledge) needed for their future Masters courses.

However, we have long felt that the summative writing exam (a discursive essay, on a general topic, without reference to other sources) does the opposite. The lack of authenticity arising from its mismatch with what is needed at university can lead to misconceptions about the academic writing process (Moore and Morton, 2005; Elander et al, 2006; Cumming, 2013; Wolfersberger, 2013) and encourage a disproportionate emphasis on form over content, which can hinder students' re-drafting of poor work (Weigle, 2002). As Cumming et al (2005, p5) state:

> … its rhetorically formulaic requirements may be prone to coaching or a reduction in the expectations for learning and teaching (ie: negative washback) in courses for students preparing for university admissions.

'The lack of authenticity arising from its mismatch with what is needed at university can lead to misconceptions about the academic writing process.'

There is a wealth of literature supporting the use of 'reading-to-write' tasks – essays which require integration of material from reading texts – as an alternative to the discursive essay. Many recent papers explicitly make the link between the authentic qualities of these assessments and the creation of positive washback (Cumming, 2013; Gebril and Plakans, 2013; Weigle, Yang and Montee, 2013). Gebril and Plakans (2013, p29) sum up the rationale for choosing reading-to-write essays thus; it:

> … hinges on their perceived authenticity (Feak and Dobson, 1996; Weigle, 2002, 2004) as well as the content they provide to writers, which may mitigate the demands writing-only tasks place on creativity and idea generation (Plakans, 2008; Read, 1990).

However, little attention has been paid to other stakeholders' perceptions of this type of test. For this reason, my research focussed on student perceptions of and performance on both essay types: discursive and reading-to-write.

Two Graduate Diploma classes participated in the study, with ages ranging from 21–41 and a fairly even gender distribution. Entry scores ranged from IELTS 5.5 to 7.5 and their nationalities were Chinese, Georgian, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Saudi, Taiwanese, Thai and Vietnamese. As normally happens at the end of term 1, the mock exams included a discursive essay. In addition to this, students were invited to complete a reading-to-write task during the same week.

The reading-to-write task was designed in order to simulate real-life post-graduate academic writing. Students were given highlighted sections within two unabridged texts upon which to base their writing. Texts were distributed the day before the test in the interests of authenticity, but also to aid optimal performance for poor readers (Cumming, 2013). This task was set the following day:

> Outline some of the arguments for and against PRP (performance-related pay) in education and explain which stance you find most convincing and why. Refer to the specified sections of the two texts you have read and make sure you follow standard academic citation procedures, including in-text referencing.

Like the task used by Gebril and Plakans (2013), the intention was to elicit features including quotation, paraphrase, synthesis and citation, with the addition of an evaluative element, as this is something students must do for their literature review assessment and in their writing at university. This topic was chosen because it relates to the management module all students complete as part of the course.

Wolfersberger (2013) conceptualizes reading-to-write as a separate construct from reading and writing, necessitating specifically designed reading-to-write criteria. However, for ease of comparison of the two essay types, and due to the lack of available reading-to-write criteria, both essay types in this study were marked using the same discursive essay marking criteria; this is acknowledged as a limitation. Markers dealt with source integration under coherence and citation / plagiarism under task fulfilment.

Once both tasks had been completed, students' performance on each was investigated via a comparison of the essay scripts. Students' perceptions of the two tasks were investigated under five categories (ease of exam; interest of preparation; ease of preparation; suitability as a post-graduate selection tool; usefulness) via questionnaires, focus groups and a teacher interview.

Despite students' familiarity with the task (the majority had extensive experience of IELTS, which includes a discursive essay) and the apparently increased cognitive load of dealing with two texts in the reading-to-write task, most students performed the same or better on the reading-to-write essay, with C-grade discursive essay candidates experiencing the largest and most frequent gains. The exception to this were those at the higher and lower ends (grades A and D for the discursive essay) who performed worse on the reading-to-write essay. It may be possible to hypothesise that, rather than being a burden, the texts actually constituted a support for many students at the mid-range of ability.

'In terms of students' perceptions, overall, they responded more positively to the reading-to-write exam than the discursive essay on all five research categories.'

In terms of students' perceptions, overall, they responded more positively to the reading-to-write exam than the discursive essay on all five research categories, with quantitative and qualitative data supporting this result. The most positive response emerged for the suitability of the reading-to-write test as an accurate measure of readiness to write at post-graduate level. 97% (60/62) questionnaire responses judged it to be an accurate or very accurate measure, compared to only 42% (26/62) for the discursive essay. This, linked with a similarly positive response garnered for the perceived usefulness of reading-to-write, might indicate an awareness among students of the possibility of matching their long-term aims (writing at post-graduate level) with their short-term aim (gaining entry to university) via an 'authentic' exam task. In addition, content supplied by reading-to-write (identified by 4/6 focus group participants as a factor facilitating optimal performance) might enhance test reliability, which may, in turn, enhance its suitability as a university selection test.

In conclusion, further research is needed, particularly into the specifics of task design and marking criteria, before reading-to-write tasks are likely to be implemented for large-scale testing. However, the results of this study suggest that our students might have greater intrinsic motivation, a greater awareness of what they really need for university and a greater willingness to engage in complex tasks than we sometimes give them credit for, if only the EAP testing culture could create conditions to allow (rather than inhibit) this.

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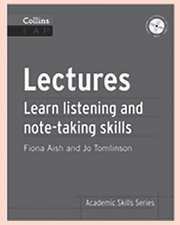
Book review

Lectures. Learn Listening and Note-taking Skills.

Aish, F., Tomlinson, J,
Harper Collins Publishers



This book from the Collins Academic Skills Series is for anyone preparing to attend University lectures delivered in English such as students on Pre-sessional and IFP courses. Developed as a self-study resource rather than a core coursebook, it aims to familiarize learners with some lecture genre conventions and to provide initial exposure to this spoken genre. The book focuses more on developing transferable listening skills than on language work.

The book consists of 10 chapters. Every two chapters are followed by an authentic lecture extract complete with a worksheet. Then there are appendices, a glossary, audio scripts, a list of useful online learner resources and an answer key. There is a course CD at the back of the book.

Each chapter starts with aims and a self-evaluation quiz, followed by 8-10 short activities focusing predominantly on developing macro-skills and top-down processing of lecture, although some practice in micro skills such as identifying features of connected speech is provided as well. The listening content is scripted and delivered in an intentionally clear and slow manner, which might not be challenging enough for higher level students. The chapters are concluded with a checklist of key points to be remembered, which could be more stimulating if presented gapped statements for learners to be completed.

Although the chapters could be used as stand-alone units over 3–4 hours, it might be preferable to go through them in a sequential manner as they follow the lecture cycle stages:

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the pre-listening stage and introduce lectures within a bigger context of academic studies, linking them to course reading and assessments. The chapters also offer a lot of practical advice on how to prepare for lectures, for example, on the amount of background reading required, helping to set realistic learner expectations about lectures.

Chapters 3–7 deal with the actual listening stage by providing training in macro-skills of understanding the overall lecture structure, identifying its main points. The chapters are progressively challenging, from requiring learners to take notes of factual information to asking them to identify and critically evaluate a lecturer's stance. There is a good balance between activities highlighting common genre discourse patterns and those raising learners' awareness of differences in individual lecturers' styles, accents and their stance.

The **two final chapters** focus the post-listening stage and highlight the importance of revising and re-organizing lecture notes (be they electronic or paper ones), using them to prepare for assessments. The chapters also provide useful tips on how to transfer lecture listening skills to other listening activities at university such as listening in tutorials and seminars.

There are a number of features that make Lectures easy to use for self-study. Firstly, it is well-structured and has a similar format to the other books in the Collins EAP series, so students familiar with those will easily follow this one. The language used in most of the book, with the exception of the Authentic Lectures section, is graded to be accessible to students at CERF B2 level and key terms are glossed with clear definitions from the Cobuild Advanced Dictionary. Most activities are also appropriate for individual work in terms of cognitive demands but some tasks in the Critical Thinking chapter could be quite challenging as they require learners to evaluate a lecture critically in terms of its bias, assumptions, reasoning, relevance and implications – concepts learners may not be familiar with.

One possible downside of this self-study format is that a lot of input is presented deductively rather than as guided discovery type activities so there is a lot of reading involved in using the book, which makes it less suitable for whole class use. However, there are other elements meant to encourage a learner to interact actively with the book content such as self-evaluation quizzes useful for activating learners' schemata and giving them a purpose to explore a chapter. Another engaging feature of the book is its subheadings which are phrased as questions that learners could / should be asking themselves while working through the book e.g. 'Why is my lecturer harder to understand than my English teacher?' or 'How does my course structure relate to my lecture?' . The book assumes no previous knowledge about lectures and covers these and other basic questions, which makes it quite a useful reference point for students in this respect.

The *Authentic Lectures* encourage learners to apply the listening skills developed in the preceding chapters. Unlike practice activities in the chapters, these lectures are unscripted and ungraded. The CD features talks by American, British and Canadian speakers, but exposure to a greater variety of accents would be welcomed. Subjects vary from Business to Meteorology, while the lecture extracts length ranges from 3 –6 minutes, which does not reflect the complexity of what students will likely encounter in lectures at university but provides useful initial exposure to the genre. The accompanying listening activities are carefully scaffolded and are quite authentic. For instance, note-taking tasks include completing linear notes, creating a mind-map, annotating lecture slides. There are 5 lectures in total so the content would not be sufficient to build a complete course around it but could be used as a supplementary material.

What sets this book apart from other books I have used is its emphasis on raising learners' awareness of academic expectations and guidelines.

I would definitely recommend this book as an introductory resource to those EAP students who have had limited exposure to the lecture genre in the English Speaking environment. At the same time, teachers are likely to 'dip' into chapters according to the listening subskill that is being covered. I have been using the book as a supplementary classroom resource and have found the chapters focusing on preparing for lectures and following up on them particularly useful, because these areas were not covered in the main listening course book I was using.

As a Personal Tutor I have also found chapter 10 useful for giving my tutees advice on how to make and follow a personal improvement plan and what online resources they could use to develop their listening skills further.

I would also recommend using the self-evaluation quizzes as 5-minute warm-up activities to help learners see how they personally can benefit from the session they are attending, which is particularly useful for motivating mixed-level classes that EAP tutors often teach. In addition, I have been using various questions in chapter headings as a springboard for a classroom discussion on listening strategies. This generally helped me to see how much practice was needed for a particular subskill.

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