

Towards the Student-Centred Paradigm to Teaching and Assessing Writing: A Shift of Focus

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Abstract

The objective of education is learning. The domain of higher education is anchored by two theoretically opposed approaches; namely, the teacher-centred and the learner-centred approaches to teaching. In many discussions about teaching and learning in EFL contexts, mention is always directed towards these two teaching paradigms. Debate always rises about one main point that is usually given little importance on the part of language teachers, if not partially over-looked. This crucial point concerns the assessment of students' learning in the four language skills and in the writing skill in particular. Given the great importance it has in the learning process, assessment is claimed to be a central part of language teaching. Therefore, it is an obligation on the part of teachers and stakeholders to give it due attention and to consider its key role in boosting EFL students' learning in order to get better academic results. As a component of teaching, assessment is considered in different ways in each teaching paradigm, reflecting thus the principles and assumptions each paradigm is based on. In the present paper, we argue that teachers should move forward and

ملخص

الهدف من عملية التعليم هو التعلم ويرتكز نظام التعليم العالي على منهجين متعارضين نظريا: وهما المنهج الذي يركز على المعلم، والمنهج الذي يركز على المتعلم في العملية التعليمية. وفي العديد من النقاشات التي تدور حول تعليم وتعلم اللغات الأجنبية بصفة عامة واللغة الانجليزية بصفة خاصة يكون النقاش متمحورا حول هذه المناهج التعليمية. ودائما يكون هناك حوار حول نقطة رئيسية عادة ما تعطى لها أهمية قليلة إن لم تكن منعدمة من طرف أستاذ اللغة. وتتعلق هذه النقطة بتقييم تعلم الطلاب في المهارات اللغوية الأربعة. وفي مهارة الكتابة على وجه الخصوص. ونظرا لأهميته الكبيرة فإن التقييم في عملية التعلم يعد جزءا أساسيا من تعليم اللغة. ولذلك هناك شعور بضرورة أن يعطى الاهتمام اللازم من طرف المعلم والنظر في دوره الرئيس في تعزيز العملية التعليمية لطلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلفة أجنبية لأجل الحصول على نتائج أكاديمية أفضل. . رآخذ التقييم باعتباره عنصرا من عناصر عملية التعليم طرقا مختلفة في كل منهج. مما يعكس المبادئ والافتراضات التي يستند عليها كل منهج. وسنحاول في هذه الورقة البحثية أن نبين بأنه يجب على المعلمين أن يعتمدوا على المزيد من التعليم و التقييم الذي يركز على المتعلم. كون الأهداف الرئيسية للتقييم هي تحديد المعارف التي تعلمها الطلاب للكشف عن نقاط القوة والضعف (تحصيل الطلبة). وللحصول على معلومات قيمة حول نوعية البرامج التعليمية. إن التحول نحو التعليم الذي يركز على المتعلم سيغير جوهر التعليم إلى الطالب وعملية التعلم.

use more learner-centred teaching and assessment since, in higher education, the main purposes of assessment are to determine what students have learned to reveal their strengths and weaknesses (students' achievement) and to get valuable information about instructional programs' quality. The shift towards learner-centred teaching will change the core of teaching to the student and the learning process. All the activities and tasks to be assessed in the courses emerge from the course objectives. Besides this, student-centred approach to learning necessitates the use of authentic assessment. Teachers' involvement in the assessment process is more likely to ensure that the evaluation process reflects course goals and objectives.

Keywords : Learner, learning, learner-centred approach, assessment, academic achievement.

كما أن الأنشطة و المهام التي ينبغي تقييمها في الحصة تأتي من أهداف الدرس أو الحصة التعليمية. بالإضافة إلى هذا، فإن المنهج الذي يتمحور حول الطالب في عملية التعلم يتطلب استخدام التقييم الأصيل. ومشاركة المعلم في عملية التقييم تضمن بأن تعكس عملية التقييم الأهداف الحقيقية للدروس و البرنامج. الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم، المنهج المتمحور حول المتعلم، التقييم، التحصيل الأكاديمي.

Introduction

In The few past years, teaching used to be centred around the teacher in the first place. S/he used to be the centre in the teaching process because he used to be conceived as the first and the most responsible person to take decisions about the content to be taught, the way it should be organized into concrete lessons to be used in teaching and the way it should be taught. In this sense, the status of students used to be seen as a secondary one; they were conceived as being passive participants in the learning process. Recently, this has led to rising calls that over-emphasis on teachers and what they often do should be reconsidered. This was a result of a general discontent on the part of many concerned agents in the teaching/learning process that learners are being ignored. As passive learners, students were claimed to have learnt things which they could not apply. Complaint about this fact and about their inability to learn on their own as critical thinkers and active participants has led to major paradigm shifts in the teaching of language during the last few decades. This reform in the educational context was a result of the great importance the teacher has been given at the expense of the learner and the learning process. Hence, there was a shift of focus and emphasis from the teacher to the learner and the learning process. These two are referred today as the teacher-centred approach to teaching and the learner-centred approach to teaching.

- **The Learner-Centred Approach to Teaching**

Recent international educational reforms in many countries all around the world resulted in paradigm shifts not only in teaching but also in assessment. There was a shift from organisational input-orientation of curriculum design, which were based upon mere descriptions of course content, to outcome-based teaching orientation. Such kinds of reform do not concern higher education only; secondary education is also concerned with these changes in teaching and assessment. The Algerian situation is no exception.

... There has been a paradigm shift ... from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. (...) Beyond this rhetoric, possibly the most noticeable changes that can be seen ... are a greater emphasis on the development of skills, and in particular, general transferable 'life' skills (and the notion of lifelong learning), and the writing of course units and modules in terms of intended student-learning outcomes (Rust, 2002: 146).

The rethinking and the reconsideration of education was a necessary, if not an obligatory, need. Today, course content is to be seen in terms of learning outcomes that have to be achieved at the end of the term. In addition to that, as active participants in the learning process, students are becoming aware of their learning responsibilities: what skills, knowledge and competences they are expected to develop. This shift has shown a move from 'instruction' or 'teaching' to 'producing' learning within universities (**Barr et al., 1995**).

The learner-centred or student-centred approach to teaching/learning is a learning approach. It has been seen as a possible pedagogical approach in education and it can be summarised in the following statement by **Brandes et al. (1986)**:

With student-centred learning, students are responsible for planning the curriculum or at least they participate in the choosing. ...The individual is 100 percent responsible for his own behaviour, participation and learning (**Brandes: 1986, 12**).

As the term learner-centred suggests, this approach is an approach to teaching/learning that has the learner at its centre (**Boyer, 1990**). Now, it is a concept in the field of educational pedagogy which has received, and still receives, attention in education. The naming is a new one, but the idea of investigating the teaching conduct and how learning work is not a new one; the idea has spanned since a long time ago. The origins of this approach can be easily traced in the theory of constructivism, which in turn has its origins in the Piagetian theory. Constructivism is based upon the principle that learning is constructed and knowledge is reconstructed on the part of learners for learning to become effective **Papert (1986)** states that in constructivism,

[W]e take a view of learning as a reconstruction rather than as transmission of knowledge (and) ... extend the idea of manipulative materials to the idea that learning is most effective when part of an activity the learner experiences as constructing a meaningful product.

Constructivism discourages traditional approaches to teaching/learning. It came to introduce and extend the notion of flexibility in learning and to encourage outcome-based assessments of learning. Moreover, the learner-centeredness teaching philosophy is claimed to have a strong link with **active experiential learning**, humanistic psychology and task-based

language teaching (**Nunan and Lamb, 2001**). This is clearly expressed in the following statement:

A learner-centered curriculum will contain similar elements to those contained in traditional curriculum development, that is, planning (including needs analysis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and materials development) and evaluation. (**Nunan, 1988, cited in Nunan, 1999: 12**).

Learner-centred teaching is based upon the assumption that learners are active participants. This approach to teaching as an unlimited potential for individual development. Moreover, this teaching/learning approach is not confined to the use of one single method of teaching. It emphasizes a variety of methods whereby the role of the teacher shifts from **information giver** to **learning facilitator: a guide**. The main focus of learner-centered approaches is on the WHAT and HOW students are learning. Not only this, but the way knowledge gained from learning is used is also of central importance in this approach:

Being student-centered implies a focus on student needs. It is an orientation that gives rise to the idea of education as a product, with the student as the customer and the role of the faculty as one of serving and satisfying the customer. Faculty resist the student-as-customer metaphor for some good reasons. When the product is education, the customer cannot always be right, there is no money-back guarantee, and tuition dollars do not “buy” the desired grades (Weimer, 2008: p. xvi).

Learning is said to be the central focus of learner-centered teaching approaches. Focus is greatly focused on what students are learning, how they are learning, the conditions surrounding their learning, whether students retaining what is taught, and how learning can position the student for future learning.

The learner-centered approach to teaching is seen as a way that allows teachers to improve and promote students' learning. **Weimer (2008)** defines learner-centred approaches by characterising them with five key differences that can be traced in teaching philosophies and practices. These involve the goal of student activity, the role of the teacher, assessment and so on. **Blumberg (2009)** shares the same opinion as that of **Weimer (2002)**. **Blumberg (2009, p. 18)** also identifies five teaching

practices that have to be changed for learner-centred teaching/learning to take place. Blumberg's (2009) five student-centred teaching practices are stated below.

The Function of Content

The purpose of teaching is to boost and/or improve students' learning. Hence, the content of course should be used to provide learners with a sound and strong knowledge base. A central point in teaching content is not only the retention or the rote memorisation of information, but rather, it is also to develop students' ability to apply knowledge gained from courses and to develop the skill of autonomous (independent) learning. Students need to be made aware of the reasons (the why) of learning a given course content and for what purpose so that they will be actively engaged in the process of learning.

- **The Role of the Instructor**

The teacher's role in the student-centred teaching pedagogy changes from being an information provider to a learning facilitator. Her/his role moves from being an authority to being a negotiator in the learning process. One of her/his main roles is to create a meaningful learning environment for students, and the choice of the methods to be adopted in her/his teaching should be appropriate and should reflect the teaching content and the goals of instruction.

- **The Responsibility for Learning**

Students are the first and main agents who are responsible for their learning, not the teacher. As it has been stated earlier in this paper, the main role of the teacher is to help students learn better by guiding, facilitating learning and creating good environments for learning, but it is up to the student to assume responsibility for her/his learning. The teacher's responsibility is to help students gain the necessary knowledge and develop the necessary skills and competences that students need for academic success and for future life as well. Assuming responsibility for their learning will make of students self-directed learners who are aware of their learning and their abilities to learn.

- **The Purpose and Processes of Assessment**

Assessment is used to provide a constructive feedback on students' performances in different subjects. It is not only meant to assign grades in the first place to make decisions about students who will pass and students who will not. The constructive feedback is used in order to help students in learning and to boost their learning by taking decisions with regard to teaching and learning together. Feedback is considered as an essential part in the learning and assessment processes.

- **The Balance of Power**

The teacher is no longer an authoritative power who decides about everything alone as a single working agent. The balance of power shifts

to involve students as well. The teacher should be flexible and adheres to what has been agreed to with students (*ibid.*).

- **The Shift Toward Authentic Assessment**

Debate about assessment lies at the heart of current teaching practices of writing and the desired learning outcomes teachers aspire to have. In recent years, there has been growing dissatisfaction with traditional methods of assessment. Nowadays, attempts on the part of curriculum designers and language teachers is to move beyond paper-and-pencil tests and rote memorization of knowledge toward more open-ended forms of assessment such as assignments, projects, and practical activities.

Traditional assessment places emphasis on the tasks and tests as a demonstration of the students' learning abilities. Authentic assessment, on the other hand, calls for a need for more holistic approaches to evaluate students' learning. It moves beyond rote memorization of learning material, but rather, it allows students to construct responses. In authentic assessment, the tasks are meaningful and engaging to students. The tasks are performed in a rich context, allowing students, thus, to apply knowledge and skills in new situations. In the subject of Written Expression, for instance, the teacher may assess the students' argumentative writing knowledge and skills authentically by having them to write an argumentative essay about the educational reforms in Algeria since 2004. This task will be accompanied by a rubric identifying a set of assessment criteria related to the course goals and instructional objectives. The rubric contains the criteria that will guide students to understand what is expected of them and to meet these expectations.

It is claimed that EFL students fail to engage with the material of learning. They often memorize material for which they have no understanding, and most of the time they do not remember what has been learned previously. As an integral part of instruction, teachers can use authentic assessment to determine whether the teaching goals and objectives are met or not. The main role of teachers should also be to use activities and assessments that, "put knowledge and use of our subject area curriculum in context: Make students use it as they will/would have to in a real situation later in life" (Blaze, 2008, p. 55).

Assessment can be any method which is used to understand the current knowledge, skills and abilities students possess. It can range from a simple observation of students' performance to more standardized tests (Shelly et al., 2008, p. 404). Various forms of assessment have occurred including authentic assessment, performance assessment and portfolios. They are all forms of what has come to be known as "alternative assessment", and they reflect authentic ways to evaluate students' performance. According to Shelly *et al.* (2008, p. 404), the term "alternative

assessment" is used to refer to non-traditional methods to determine the students' mastery of the appropriate content and skills. These assessment tools are used to, "determine how well and in what ways they meet curriculum standards and related benchmarks."

Authentic assessment goes beyond what students know to what students can do. To use Janesick (2001, p. 6) words, "authentic assessment offered teachers a valuable tool. This tool was used to evaluate learning in the settings that were closely related to the real world." Authentic assessment allows for more active learning on the part of the learner. It can take different forms including: essays and writing samples, performances, oral presentations, interviews, recordings, portfolios and so on (*ibid.*, 6-7).

- **Authentic Assessment of the Writing Skill**

The concept of constructivism has come to be a central part in the discussion of teaching and assessment. It reflects the belief that "learners actively and dynamically construct the information they are learning about the world." To use Clark's (2007, p. 186) words, "The learner is not an "empty cup", to be filled with knowledge and information." Students will learn better in interactive and integrative learning environment. The more a student actively listens, speaks, reads, writes, and thinks, the easier the learning and retention of knowledge will be." (*ibid.*). The assessment of students' learning must validate and reflect instructional standards and objectives since it reflects back on the meaningful instruction and learning process" (*ibid.*).

Incorporating authentic assessment in EFL classrooms requires time, effort and experience on the part of teachers. It is common for EFL Written Expression teachers, for instance, to feel uncomfortable when grading and assessing their EFL students' writing. Teachers and researchers have become more concerned with matters related to assessment and EFL students' achievement. Concern has been mainly about standards of assessment. In other words, concerns about accountability and rating students against standardized criteria have dominated recent debate and practice in higher education. To use Keefe and Jenkins (2000: p. 136) words,

as instruction is the medium for curriculum delivery, assessment is the clarifying link between curriculum and instruction. Assessment [...] must encourage student learning as well as illuminate the degree to which curriculum standards and instructional objectives have been achieved. The chief purpose of contemporary alternative assessment is to support instruction and to certify student competence. Most alternative assessments show clearly what students know and are able to do.

Two categories appear under authentic assessment; namely, performance assessment and portfolio. "Performance assessments are skill tests that students complete in the context of instruction. They measure a student's ability to perform such tasks as essays, speeches, playing a musical instrument, driving a car, or conducting a science experiment." (*ibid.*, p.147). Performance assessment reflects a demonstration of students' competence through performance. Portfolio assessment involves the collection of students' work samples over a period of time. Teachers should bear serious attention to one main thing that concerns assessment: "authentic assessments are designed to represent real-life activities, that are based on clear performance standards, that they attempt to help students rate and improve their own efforts, and that they often require a public performance or product" (*ibid.*).

Characteristics of authentic assessment presuppose that the methods of assessment should be aligned with the purposes of instruction. The written task performance should be described to students at the very beginning of instruction to let learners know what is expected of them. Again, Keefe and Jenkins (2000, p.147-148) state that,

The evaluation of a performance outcome requires valid and reliable rating criteria. Criteria are established as scoring rubrics and applied to students' work [...]. Assessment should be continuous to tie together evidence of instructional effectiveness and instructional planning. Gathering salient information on an ongoing basis enables teachers to make adjustments in the instructional process.

In the same line of thought, Tanner (2001) maintains that authentic assessment is criterion-referenced. The students' performance is judged against certain learning standards and those standards are necessary to maintain authenticity.

Performance assessment requires students to write frequently to learn to write skilfully. The best way to assess students' writing is by getting them to write to demonstrate knowledge of language use, grammar, and syntax and their overall communicative skills and ability. Students' performance in the writing skill takes the form of essay writing. The assessment may reflect the students' ability to develop ideas and the ability to relate information in a coherent manner as a coherent whole (Keefe and Jenkins, 2000, p.149).

- **Making Marking Criteria Accessible for Students**

Students need to understand what is expected of them in the assessed tasks. Assessment tasks should be accompanied by "clear

assessment criteria” that are effectively communicated to students and scorers (Hakel, 2013). Teachers are also required to develop an assessment plan before teaching a specific learning program. They should let students know from the outset what are the goals of the learning program, what they are expected to demonstrate the mastery of those goals. Moreover, the criteria of assessment should be made clear, detailed and justifiable (Keefe and Jenkins, 2000, p. 137). Assessment should be informative as well as formative. It should reveal what sorts of learning have been achieved and what learning is still to be attained.

- **Ensuring the Quality of Assessment Practices**

Assessment is claimed to be authentic unless it is (a) valid, and (b) supporting learning. As a component of assessment, validity determines whether a test measures what it purports to measure or not. Does a Written Expression test, for instance, measure the particular language abilities and the mastery of language it claims to assess? A valid authentic assessment of the skill of writing calls for real writing tasks (*ibid.*, p. 136).

Keefe and Jenkins (*ibid.*, p.137) point out that proponents of authentic assessment suggest two solutions for problems of identifying which type of assessment is authentic or not. To make assessments more authentic, we should either make our assessment tasks more like the regular classroom tasks, or we should make them like the real challenges that students must cope with outside school.

The first of these approaches can work if the classroom tasks are authentic representations of the goals that we value and that adults seek to achieve. In fact, however, classroom tasks rarely rise to this level. The second approach holds more promise if we can agree on what we really value that our schools should attempt to do, or, again alternatively, if schools can offer enough variety in the educational experience to make various options truly feasible.

In line with what Keefe and Jenkins(2000) suggest, it is also claimed that in authentic writing tasks, the task should also be authentic (Ekbatani, 2010; Ryan *et al.*, 2011). Authenticity in this sense refers to “the degree to which the test tasks represent the tasks that we expect the students to perform in real-life situations”(Ekbatani, 2010, p.61). Weigle (2002, p.98) also points out that what constitutes authentic writing tasks differ from one group of students to another. In an academic setting, the authentic task may take the form of an essay writing; in another context, EFL students may be asked to write a letter asking for accommodation or any other kind of practical activity.

Keefe and Jenkins (2000, p.137) argue further that for assessments to be valid, enough evidence must be gathered. No one single performance of students on a given task can be a sufficient evidence of valid and authentic achievement. Accordingly, they (ibid.) claim that assessments such as portfolio, graduation exhibition, teacher longitudinal anecdotal records are needed. The important thing to consider, though, is that the tasks must be valid measures of the targeted skill.

An important characteristic of authentic assessments is that they must enhance students' learning. Good assessments are the ones which promote students' understanding and proficiency. Unlike traditional standardized and classroom assessments which tend to favour rote learning over real understanding, authentic assessments address real-life goals and instructional objectives. Put differently, authentic assessment attempts to "achieve a close integration of instruction and assessment" (ibid., p. 138). Keefe and Jenkins (2000, p. 140) state that, "effective assessment must be authentic; integrated with instruction; performance-oriented; based on collaborative learning goals and appropriate standards; must measure student growth and success; and promote student self-assessment."

Taking the student into account in setting the teaching goals will give the system credibility and potential for authenticity: "Such assessment starts with students and the goals that are relevant to students. It leans toward authenticity in that it measures the knowledge and skills that are valued in real life" (Keefe and Jenkins, 2000: 140). All in all, authentic assessment can enhance learning and improve instruction.

- **The Important Functions of Authentic Assessment in Boosting EFL Learning**

Authentic assessment represents a movement to rethink and reconsider the tasks used to assess EFL students learning. It has been fuelled by dissatisfaction with the quality of current assessment practices. Nowadays, assessment plays a central role in boosting the EFL students' learning and improving their academic achievement. One important role of authentic assessment is that it measures how well course goals and instructional objectives have been met and mastered by allowing students to demonstrate what they know:

To be authentic, tests must provoke or stimulate problem solving, critical thinking, and writing. In addition, they must (1) allow students to demonstrate their strengths through the employment of multiple measures, including the student's self-assessment; (2) apply reasonable real-world standards in the assignation of grades; and (3) allow for different approaches to learning. [...] Reliability for "authentic tests" needs to be

established through a pretesting of the test items and through the creation of scoring rubrics so that outcomes of the testing can be used to inform future instruction (Pickering *et al.*, 2011, p. 188).

As EFL teachers, a central question that we should always ask is: how effectively our teaching is promoting students' learning? Assessment should be explicitly connected to what has been taught inside the classroom, what the student has learned, and how information is gained from that to guide future instruction. Teachers can use assessment also to stimulate their own reflection to plan their teaching. As an important part of education and given the great importance it plays in the teaching/learning process, assessment should focus on what students do inside the classroom.

As an integral part of education, it is also crucial that teachers become aware and competent in assessment. Given the importance it has in teaching/learning, teachers should always stay abreast of the assessment issues in teaching. This paper is an introduction to assessment in the area of written compositions, and it is geared toward teachers and researchers alike. Teachers must be able to evaluate assessment tools; they should be able to determine which instruments are appropriate for a specific aim. Not only this, but the evaluation process continues even after the appropriate instruments for assessment have been identified. Competent use of assessment tools help teachers to make inferences and understand how to interpret the students' results in an appropriate manner.

Another main aim of assessment is to improve the students' learning. Its aim is not only to get results at the end of the semester. Besides, end-of-term decisions should be based on multiple sources of evidence about the students' learning. Evidence can be taken from projects students have completed, papers they have written, tests and quizzes administered at the end of the cycle, and anything that represents the students' state of knowledge following appropriate opportunities to achieve mastery of the intended learning outcomes. In addition to this, Berry (2009, p. 6-7) argues that it is not advisable for teachers and decision makers in education to base end-of-term decisions about learning on a single source of evidence. Moreover, she (*ibid.*) maintains that information about learning should be gathered mainly for "formative purposes". Different methods of assessment should be used to assess students' performance. Summative assessment strategies can be used to serve as the basis for judging end-of-term status. It is useful in summarizing the students' quality of learning by the end of the term to decide whether they pass or not. The objective of summative assessment is to "prove

learning". Teachers can also use formative assessment methods to diagnose learning difficulties and monitor the students' progress. The objective of formative assessment is to "promote greater learning", the objective is to "improve learning".

Assessment can be used for more than one function. Functions of assessment can be categorized in different ways. There are two main functions of assessment; namely, (a) to make judgments about the performance of individuals or the effectiveness of the system, and (b) to improve learning. These basic functions of assessment can also be other categories as shown in the following table (Berry, 2009, p.13).

Table 01: Functions of Assessment

Function of Assessment	Description
Selection and Placement	Test or examination is used to determine who will be selected to university, or is used to place students into school bands.
Accountability	Assessments are used to determine if students have achieved learning outcomes appropriate for their grade level, and are used to judge the effectiveness of teachers, schools, etc., in helping learners achieve the intended learning outcomes.
Diagnosis	Assessment is used to identify underlying sources of learning difficulties.
Support of Learning	Assessment (especially at the classroom level) are used to monitor the progress of learning; to provide learners with feedback on their learning, to help them improve; to assist teachers in identifying changes to be made in their teaching; to enhance student motivation and confidence by demonstrating progress.

• Needs Analysis and Course Design

Developing teaching materials is based on the assumption that, "a sound educational program should be based on an analysis of learners' needs." Needs analysis is used to refer to the procedures of information gathering about the learners' needs. It emerged in the 1960's as part of the approach to curriculum development and it has been since then considered as a necessary phase in the course of planning educational programs. Suggesting new teaching materials and planning new courses is accepted if based on a real response to a genuine need.

Needs analysis has been first introduced in the field of ESP (beginning 1960) in response to the ongoing need for more specialized

language programs. Under such persistent demands, needs analysis began to gain shape and to be employed in language teaching, especially in ESL/EFL teaching contexts.

- **The Purpose of Needs Analysis**

There are different purposes for conducting needs analysis. The following are examples of purposes for needs analysis in language teaching:

- To find out what language skills a learner needs in order to perform a particular role.
- To help determine if an existing course adequately addresses the needs of potential students.
- To determine which students from a group are most in need of training in particular language skills.
- To identify a change of direction that people in a reference group feel is important.
- To identify a gap between what students are able to do and what they need to be able to do.
- To collect information about a particular problem learners are experiencing.

The first important step to decide upon in conducting a needs analysis is the identification of purposes (Richards, 2001, p.51-52). Even though ESL/EFL learners of a given language do not usually recognize what kind of knowledge they need or they do not have any immediate perception of needs, decisions about what is to be taught in the curriculum and what is to be emphasized in the course is usually decided by the course designer and the teacher based on their past experience and deep knowledge, to figure out what knowledge of English they expect their students to acquire/master and what skills to gain. The introduction of a new content to teach is often based on what curriculum planners/course designers consider to be useful and more effective for students. Richards (2001, p.53) comments on that by stating that,

Learners are not consulted as to whether they perceive a need for such knowledge. Their needs have been decided for them by those concerned with their long-term welfare. Needs analysis thus includes the study of perceived and present needs as well as potential and unrecognized needs.

Needs analysis is considered as a part of the planning taking place as part of the development of a course. It lies upon the assumption that, "time and resources are available to plan, collect, and analyze relevant information for a planned program of instruction." Richards (*ibid.*54) refers to this approach as an '*a priori*' approach to needs analysis because, to

use his (*ibid.*) words, it “requires long-term planning and assumes adequate time and resources to devote to needs analysis.”

Moreover, in a needs analysis, the course goals/objectives, content, and the teaching and assessment methods are shaped by the information collected. The bulk of information may be also collected after the course is finished; the gathered information can be then analyzed to gain “a more comprehensive view of the learners’ needs as a basis for evaluating and revising the program.” (*ibid.*).

- **Aligning Assessment to Teaching in Course Design**

Assessment is an everyday activity. It must be consistent with the content and the objectives of the course. Most important of all is the fact that methods of assessment should reflect course goals and objectives:

Basically, what to assess should reflect the teaching content, and the assessment tasks that are set should reflect the skills that students will need in their studies. With reference to the set criteria and through various means, teachers can observe, collect, record and analyze students’ performances, and then diagnose and estimate their learning condition and capability. Teachers give students effective feedback and then adjust teaching, as a means of focusing on continuous improvement in both teaching and learning. Teachers use the information obtained from their assessments to help them understand the learning progress of students. With the insights gained, teachers can modify teaching and learning activities to suit students’ needs (Berry, 2009, p. 14-15).

Based on Fuller’s (2010, p.42) principles of course design, in our EFL courses there should be an alignment between the following critical course components: (1)teaching objectives, (2) materials of teaching, and (3) assessment. The three course components must all be logically related to one another. The first important component to consider before planning courses is the ‘*learning outcomes*’. These latter are at the heart of course design choices and material selection. The most important thing to consider also in a course design is the issue of how well the elements of a course are aligned. The course objectives have to be fully aligned with the course activities and the assessment used to measure learning.

While it seems a rather obvious requirement, course design which has traditionally focused on the content of the course, and not on the learning arising from students’ engagement with the content, has often

resulted in students receiving mixed messages as to what is expected of them. Teachers' remarks to their students that they would like the students to become critical thinkers, for example, are undermined by teaching activities and assessment methods that basically require that students memorize and reproduce knowledge. (Calkins *et al.*, 2009, p.81)

The issue of alignment raises also another important point which is the quality of the learning that is being sought from the students. The learning outcomes lie at the heart of course design and each course should be aligned around certain meaningful outcomes. Moreover, before we should decide on the content to include and cover in our course, as teachers, we should endow our course with a strong internal structure conducive to the students' learning. Alignment among the three main course components ensures an internally consistent structure. Alignment occurs when:

- **Objectives** articulate the knowledge and the skills the teacher wants students to acquire by the end of the course.
- **Assessment** allows the instructor to check the degree to which the students are meeting the objectives of learning.
- **Instructional strategies** are chosen to foster student learning towards meeting the instructional objectives.

When these components are not aligned, there often appears some complaint on the part of the students that the test does not have anything to do with what has been covered in class, or the teacher might feel that even though students are earning a passing grade, they do not really master yet the material at the desired level.

- **Course Alignment**

Before designing any course, the teacher should answer the following central teaching questions:

- What learning outcomes do you want your students to achieve (intellectual, social, practical, and personal) as a result of taking your course?
- How will your course help your students achieve these learning outcomes?
- How will you know if the students in your course have achieved these learning outcomes?
- How will you know if and how your teaching has contributed to your students' learning outcomes?

The most important thing to consider in a course design is the issue of how well the elements of a course design are aligned. The teacher's course objectives with regard to her students' learning need to be fully aligned with the teaching activities used to strengthen mastery of

knowledge and skills and the assessment is used to measure that learning. The issue of alignment raises also another important point which is “the quality of the learning that is being sought from the students”. The learning outcomes are also at the heart of course design and each course should be aligned around certain meaningful outcomes (*ibid.*).

- **Course Objectives**

The term ‘*objective*’ is different from that of *aims/goals* and *learning outcomes*. To use Calkins *et al.* (*ibid.*:81-82) words, “course aims refer to what the teacher is generally trying to achieve in his or her course. Learning objectives are more specific and refer to what the students are expected to learn. Learning outcomes are more behavioural, describing what students are actually able to do in observable terms having successfully completed the course.”

- **Course goals/aims** are best thought of as general statements of educational content.
- **Learning objectives** are more *specific* and *concrete* statements of what students are expected to learn.
- **Learning outcomes** are specific outcomes with specific observable/measurable statements of the learning students achieve.

- **Course Content**

Setting objectives for a given course involves taking into account the **course content**. Sometimes the content suggests specific objectives; other times objectives may indicate appropriate content. It is a necessary step to specify the content for teaching in a course design, but as teachers, we should avoid thinking about content in terms of a list of topics that needs coverage. A great deal of focus should also be put on the *tasks* the students should be involved in, the tasks they should be able to perform. This forms an essential part of their education also.

Conclusion

The present paper is a call for EFL teachers to move beyond asking students to perform acontextualized activities and narrowly focused exercises designed to teach the writing skill. Teachers should move beyond the teaching of grammar, spelling and mechanics to more real-life, contextualized and communicative writing tasks. We also hold the claim that it is possible to create authentic contexts that help students in learning and acquiring new techniques, strategies and knowledge to help them achieve real-life goals.

In addition to the teaching practices, assessment of EFL students’ learning and mastery of new skills and knowledge should be based on certain pre-determined criteria that help both the students in understanding what is expected of them, and help the teachers to focus on these criteria while grading and assessing students’ performance. The teaching methods, content and assessment have all to be aligned together around certain instructional objectives. Teachers should direct their

teaching toward achieving the instructional goals/objectives. Accordingly, matters of learning goals and instructional objectives should receive primary importance before indulging oneself in any kind of course design, and even test design, for EFL students. Besides that, planning a new ESL/EFL course involves the identification of students' language learning needs since this represents a crucial step in any kind of educational planning or development.

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