EXPLORING THE LECTURERS AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IN ACADEMIC WRITING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

This study explores the lecturers and students attitudes towards alternative assessing in academic writing instruction. Informed by the Teacher Knowledge theory, this study is based on assumption that lecturers and students' knowledge of alternative assessment may play a significant role on the success of the administration of the assessment of student learning. The findings of the study are based on the analysis of qualitative data collected through lecturer interviews and student focus group discussions. A thematic approach was employed in the analysis of data. The study concludes that the lecturers and students' attitude which is skewed towards the positive direction may be an indication that there could be hope for success in attempts to integrate alternative assessment in academic writing instruction. The study strongly emphasises the need for lecturer education on assessment practices that respond to the current students' academic literacy needs

Background of the Study

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[5] **Biography of Author**

Hafeni Pamwenase Shikalepo Hamakali, a Fulbright alumnus, is a senior lecturer of Academic Literacies at the University of Namibia. He is also the Editor in Chief of the Journal of the University of Namibia Language Centre (JULACE). Hafeni holds a Bachelor of Education (English and Geography), a Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages (MA TESOL), and a PhD in Language and Literacy. His academic interests include language assessment; academic literacies pedagogies; and material development.

As a point of departure, it is important for my study to provide an overview of my background as the researcher in this study. My experience in language education started with teaching of English as Second Language at high school level, and then at university level where I focused more on Academic Literacy. Recently, I have taught the English for Academic Purposes at University. Therefore, my research background has been mainly on teaching and learning of academic literacy, and as such I have developed research interest in the assessment practices of academic language. I must acknowledge here that, my knowledge, skills and experiences on language assessment will have a significant influence on my study as well as on my philosophy of language education. In this regard, I wish to refer to Dikli's (2003) definition of language assessment that it is any method used to find out the current language knowledge and skills that a student possesses in line with their learning objectives or practices.

Concerning my subject and focus of the study: alternative assessment, I wish to embrace the definition of alternative assessment as the collection of evidence of change or progress from multiple sources over time and the analysis of data to help inform lecturers, students, programs, and eventually, policy makers who need to compare findings across curriculum (Balliro, 1993). In addition, it is also the process of evaluating student's performance, lecturer's teaching methods, and learning materials in order to reconsider the way of teaching and to make the necessary adjustments in it for a better as well as an empowering educational experience to students in particular (Fiktorius, 2013).

I carried out my study in Namibia, at the University of Namibia, in the Language Centre. Majority of the students enrolled at the University of Namibia have passed out of secondary schools in Namibia. The language syllabi for Namibian secondary school, analogous to the University of Namibia's assessment policy, promotes alternative assessment as it emphasises that information gathered about learners' progress and achievements should be used to give feedback to the learners about their strong and weak points (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2014). However, in practice, assessments in Namibian schools remain largely traditional since most of the teaching is geared towards national examinations, the final product, with little focus on the learning process; assessment relies largely on traditional assessment, such as tests, essays and friendly letters (Hamakali & Lumbu, 2016). This mismatch seems to have led Hamakali and

Lumbu (2016) to question the relevance of assessing the friendly letter, when the world has already shifted to using electronic e-mails, as well as social media. This is to suggest that, the students that enter the University of Namibia and attend courses at the Language Centre may be more exposed to assessment practices that are predominantly traditional and have limited link to real world practices.

In Namibian tertiary institutions, it seems more avenues for alternative assessment are provided. The University of Namibia's (2013) assessment policy permits the usage of alternative assessment in the university programs, as it is stated in the policy that "[i]t does not constrain the development of alternative or additional forms of effective assessment, provided such assessment are consistent with the principles stated in the policy" (p. 3). I have also noted that, the continuous assessment contributes the largest proportion to the exit mark. The University of Namibia and the International University of Management, for example, have a ratio of 60% for continuous assessment and 40% of the examination. In this paper, I will argue that the choice of assessment methods and how it is received by the students depend on the lecturers and students' attitude, respectively. This paper presents a study that explored the lecturers and students attitudes towards alternative assessing in academic writing instruction.

Teacher Knowledge Theory

This paper is informed by the Teacher Knowledge theory, which refers to the particular knowledge that teachers have that relates to knowing how to teach (Bresler, 1995; Xu, & Liu, 2015). This study is also pinned to the "post-method condition" proposed by Kumaravadivelu (1994; 2001) which brought about the concepts of teacher "plausibility" and "autonomy" in to the domains of teaching and learning. The former refers to the teacher or lecturer's subjective perception of their teaching which could be developed by their previous experiences as students, teachers, or lecturers, as well as through their professional training. Teacher autonomy refers to the teacher or lecturer's independent teaching setting in which they may be required to develop reflective approaches to their own instructional settings so that their approach addresses the specific language needs of the students. These concepts concur with the Teacher Knowledge theory and the objective of my study, that lecturers may possess various assessment experiences, they may also not be presented with the same assessment settings, and they may have to administer their assessments in various but appropriate ways based on the circumstances that

they may find themselves. This could be the same case for students. Ultimately, it is believed in this study that, based on this theory, the beliefs and experiences that students have may influence the way they receive and respond to a given assessment.

Methods

This study is informed by the constructivist view of education. The study embraces the interpretivist approach to research which tends to be more qualitative. Hence, this study employs a qualitative research design, where data was collected from 3 lecturers and 10 students in the English for Academic Purposes course, through lecturer interview (see interview guide in Appendix 1) and student focus group discussion (see discussion guide in Appendix 2), respectively. I used an audio recorder to record the interviews and the student focus group discussion in order to capture the discussions.

I employed a qualitative data analysis method by using a thematic analysis method to analyse the data by organising the data under different themes. I transcribed and used the coding techniques to identify and place different sets of data under different themes. Since my methodology was qualitative, the data did not involve any quantification. The focus was on the specific features that emerged from each set of data. In this study, I maintain anonymity by not citing the participants' names in the findings of the study. I also treated the information provided by the participants with high confidentiality. Under no circumstance would the information be traced back to the participants' names and used for any other purpose other than the analysis of the current study.

Findings

I wish to reiterate my view in this study that lecturers and students' attitude have a significant effect on the process of administering alternative assessment effectively. This study found that there seems to be varied attitude towards alternative assessment from both the lecturers and students. Some of the lecturers and students' responses showed positive attitudes towards alternative assessment, while some of the other responses showed negative attitude towards alternative assessment.

Lecturers' attitude towards alternative assessment in academic writing instruction

The findings of this study show that, the lecturers' attitude may influence the process of designing and using alternative assessment in academic writing. Their attitude may also be influenced by various circumstances in which lecturers operate. It turned out in this study's analysis of data that lecturers value the role played by alternative assessment in academic writing instruction. For example, the lecturer participants indicated that:

"...informal assessment methods are very important. Sometimes even just by discussing with students in class and you tell them to ask questions and depending on the type of question they are asking 'Sir, what really is a topic sentence'.

"My take is that the more you assess students in whatever way, the more it becomes realistic. But if we look at only the formal assessment tasks that are set on a semester period, then to me that does not give a true reflection…., even the results that we will get will show a true reflection which the students are also able to give in a real situation which is not a classroom based situation."

"*Because, when they have written several times, then you are able to see whether they have understood or they have picked up the skill or not.*"

They also reported how informal assessments are equally important as formal assessments since they allow students to ask for clarification in a relaxing environment. The lecturers' positive attitude was also evident where the lecturer participants supported the assessment of students in pairs or groups. This finding is in keeping with Ortega's view (2009) who writes about the need to create learning/assessment environments that can lower the students' affective filter so that they can perform their assessment tasks with minimal anxiety. Furthermore, the finding relates to Krashen (2009) as he writes in his Affective Filter hypothesis that, group or pair work lowers the affective filter since students tend to feel relaxed and less threatened when assessed in groups or pairs.

The findings of this study also point to the lecturers' positive attitude towards alternative assessment, through their support for current thinking on assessment; that assessment does not

only focus on the final product but also focuses on the process that students go through while completing their assessments. The lecturer participants indicated that:

"I believe in drafting. Writing is a process. As far as the final product should be rewarded marks, we should also reward the process where students go through."

"I believe that my students construct the knowledge within the classroom. So that enables me to sort of assess my students as knowledge is constructed continuously."

They seem to believe that writing is a process, and as a result, a process approach would be instrumental in academic writing assessment. At this juncture, it is important for this study to clarify that, according to Brown & Abeywickrama (2010), the process approach places more emphasis on the way the students process the learning content, and in light of this the performance and behaviour of the students towards the learning contents becomes the center of assessment. This is in contrast to the product approach that concentrates on the outcome or final product of the performance or behaviour, and it tends to be the focus of traditional assessments. This seems to suggest that there is lecturer support for the alternative approach. The lecturer participants indicated that:

"I believe that my students construct the knowledge within the classroom. So that enables me to sort of assess my students as knowledge is constructed continuously."

"So my philosophy is that, we construct knowledge, it's a social activity and therefore it enables me to assess my students as knowledge is constructed continuously in class."

This is also in keeping with Canagarajah (1999) who writes that, the constructivist view of knowledge sees students as constructors of new knowledge, and this knowledge is negotiated in the classroom through learning activities and experiences. Based on this view, I concur with lecturers who support inclusion of assessing the learning in their instruction on the basis that the process of negotiating knowledge and experience also need to be assessed, and hence it may be improved.

Another sign of positive attitude was also observed that, despite the challenges of having many students in a given classroom, some of the lecturer participants did not seem to be discouraged to integrate alternative assessment in their instruction. This is to suggest that, the lecturers still feel that it is important to assess the process, and not only the product. I attribute this to the fact that, my data indicated that some lecturer participants used checklist to allow students to assess their own written work, an assessment that assessed the writing process. One of the lecturers specifically indicated that:

Now that my students are many, I don't ask for first two drafts, I just ask for the first one and then the final one. Because I have about 200 students. What do I do? I designed a checklist as you can see [showing me the checklist] it will be on top of each of those (draft essay)."

Research has also shown that most students prefer learning processes that enable them to be active, and thus it advises faculties teaching large classes to try to include constructive instruction in their course whenever possible (Carpenter, 2006). It could be argued that the lecturer's support for the usage of alternative assessment approach could be dependent on their exposure to the alternative approach of language assessment. This in keeping with the Teacher Knowledge theory, that each teacher/lecturers has a particular knowledge that relates to knowing how to teach (Bresler. 1995). This is to suggest that, the lecturers' knowledge and skills of alternative assessment can be an influencing factor in the usage of alternative assessment.

This study also found that there lecturer participants also showed perseverance towards the use of alternative assessment, despite instances of limitations stipulated by institutional prescription of how to assess. It should be noted, though, that the institution under study allows for the use of alternative assessment. In light of this, the University of Namibia (2013) Assessment Policy "does not constrain the development of alternative or additional forms of effective assessment, provided such assessments are consistent with the principles stated in the policy" (p. 3). However, lecturer participants indicated that sometimes circumstances found in specific departments may lead them to rather opt for traditional assessment. For instance, they explained that in cases where a course is taught by many lecturers, such as the English for Academic

Purposes, one may be forced to meet the institutional requirements which my stipulate specific number of tests. For example, they indicated that:

"English for Academic Purposes ought to be student need driven. Now, if you are so many, you would rather meet institutional requirements as they call it. That you need to have this test and so on.

"I think there are templates of assessments already at the Language Centre. Since we need to have uniformity, we all follow the same template."

"But if we look at only the formal assessment tasks that are set on a semester period, then to me that does not give a true reflection."

This is to confirm that, although there is lecturers' willingness to use alternative assessment, the institutional influence of whether its policies support or discourage the usage of such assessment could undermine or facilitate the success of integrating alternative assessment in academic writing instruction.

Students' attitude towards the integration of alternative assessment in academic writing

It is my belief that students' attitude in this study may have an effect on the integration of alternative assessment in academic writing instruction. That is to say, if students develop a negative attitude towards assessment, then the integration of assessment in academic writing is rather unlikely to yield fruitful results.

This study found that, students seemed to have a positive attitude towards alternative assessment. First, student participants acknowledged their willingness to be assessed. I could deduce their willingness from their indication that:

"I personally enjoy being assessed. Because I am very critical, and you know I get the chance to see my mistakes; I feel I can grow from there. I see that no, this and this I am wrong and I need to improve on that. And I can go back and say let me just read through this more."

"Actually, one should be assessed because if you are taught something, then you must prepare to be assessed, then you can know that now you know what you were taught."

Students also indicated that they feel they can grow and work on their weakness through assessment. This is to suggest that students may enjoy being subjected to alternative assessment because of its formative nature. I wish to argue that, the students' positive attitude, especially towards formative assessment (alternative assessment), is a good indication for the purpose of this study. This is because literature also shows that, formative assessment aims at assessing students' learning and responding to them (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005). In this regard, this can be achieved through alternative assessment where students can receive feedback about their strengths and weakness with regard to the learning task or objectives.

Another indication of students' positive attitude towards alternative assessment was also evident when students indicated that they enjoy assessments tasks that require creativity. In particular, one of the student participants indicated that:

"I enjoy something that I have to be creative. When I write a test, there is nothing creative about it. It's just right or wrong. So then I would not prefer that. If I have to make a presentation or construct an essay, I am sort of asked to voice my opinion. The fact and visual effects that I am choosing, that's also like part of it's my choosing.

"And I like it when I am able to be creative about something and express myself. And where I am not given room to do that, those are the assessments that I don't like."

The students' responses above help to suggest that students may welcome alternative assessment, and they may be willing to participate in these assessment tasks. This finding is in keeping with

current thinking that informs alternative assessment and advocates for creativity in language assessment. This is also in line with Canagarajah (1999; 2006; Muchiri et al., 2014) who opposes pedagogy that insists on uniform variety of language or discourse as it only promotes monolingual ideologies and linguistic hierarchies. Alternatively, he reveres the constructivist view of knowledge in that he wants lecturers to start seeing students as constructors of new knowledge. In light of the above, I wish to argue that, students' preference for assessments that feature creativity could contribute to the success of integrating alternative assessment in academic writing.

It was interesting to note that students seemed to have criticised the use of traditional assessment in academic writing instruction. It appears from my analysis of data (see Section 4.9.2) that, they would rather prefer alternative assessment. One of them stated that:

"When I write a test, there is nothing creative about it. It's just right or wrong."

This finding, though interesting, has not really come as a surprise to me, since literature on language assessment has also criticised traditional assessment. To illustrate, some critics (Reeves, 2000; Tsagari, 2004) argued that, traditional assessment may not be functional in all assessment situations of academic writing. For instance, standardised testing has been criticised as being adversative to process learning (Sharifi, & Hassaskhah, 2011). According to Sharifi and Hassaskhah (2011), traditional assessment has also been criticised with reference to the incompatibility of process learning and product assessment, and the discrepancy between the information needed and the information derived through traditional assessment. Similarly, the findings of this study showed that, students felt that when they are asked to write a test, they found limited or no creativity in the assessment. Hence, they indicated that they would not prefer such type of assessment. This can further help confirm that, students would welcome assessment tasks that feature more creativity, which is also advocated in alternative assessment.

In contrast to the points I have discussed above, it is important to note that there were some students who voiced their preference of spoken activities over writing activities. They indicated that:

"I actually prefer, enjoy being assessed presentation-wise. I don't like having to write and things like that."

"...some things are actually fun like presentations, but it also depends if you are an outspoken person. If you are very into academics, then you will enjoy like writing a test rather than speaking or oral."

This is to suggest that, there was some negative attitude detected over a type of alternative assessment. It is important for this study to discuss this finding because; written activities are a significant and essential element of academic writing instruction. Particularly, according to Denscombe and Robins (1980), the academic essay has been significant in the Social Sciences where the grasp of the subjects is predominantly applied and demonstrated through a medium of written words.

Nevertheless, it is my view that, although students might have shown signs of negative attitude towards written activities, it should not completely puzzle the agenda of this study since literature may still provide some useful explanations. First, Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) indicated that, it may be difficult to provide a concrete distinction between alternative and traditional assessment; some forms of assessment may even fall in between the two while others combine the two. Canagarajah (1999) also explained that the manner in which academic essays are used as assessment tools defines them whether they fall or not in the category of alternative assessment tools. For example, academic essays can be alternative assessment when they are used diagnostically. Based on these explanations, it could be possible that lecturers could also be faced with the difficulty raised by Brown and Abeywickrama (2010), and as such they may have administered written activities following the principles of traditional assessment. As a result, student may develop negative attitudes towards these assessments.

I must clarify here that, students' preference of spoken or oral activities should not be fully considered as negative attitude towards alternative assessment. Language skills are interdependent. Therefore, although this study is focused on academic writing activities, it is through oral activities, such as presentation, that students can discuss and negotiate meaning of

the content they have written. This is in keeping with Takahashi and Sato (2003) who explained that, one of the reasons why students tend to prefer alternative assessment methods is because they can be engaged in both interactive speaking and writing activities. In addition, allowing students to orally present their written content can also maximise the opportunity to benefit from their multiple intelligences that they may possess.

Another concern on the side of students was that students felt that sometimes their assessments are not aligned to what was taught as well as what they are expected to do later on in real life situations. The student participants indicated that:

"Any method the lecturer uses, it's fine with me, as long as what was taught is what was assessed."

"I only like to be assessed when I am taught. If you didn't teach me, don't assess me."

"...if you are not assessed, for example you are taught something and you are not assessed, it would be pointless because you might not get what you were taught. Let's say for example, just in general like in real life you won't be able to use what you were taught. So if you are assessed, it makes it easier for you to know what you don't know."

This concern has also received attention in the literature in relation to authentic assessment. It is documented in the literature on alternative assessment that alternative assessment techniques feature more authenticity (Finch, 2002). The significance of authenticity in alternative assessment can be traced to Finch's (2012) work where he synonymously uses the term 'authentic assessment' to refer to alternative assessment. He believes that authentic/alternative assessment presents high validity because they use assessment tasks which closely parallel real-life writing situations which students may encounter outside the classroom (Dikli, 2003). It is, therefore, for this reason that this study promotes alternative assessments which features authenticity and thus incite students' positive attitude towards alternative assessment.

In light of the above-stated point, alternative assessment can address the students' issue with the element of real-life practices, because it employs criterion-referenced orientation. As pointed out

by Bachman and Palmer (2011), this orientation elicits information about the actual students' language abilities in given real life situations. Based on this orientation, the focus of assessment is directed to whether the students have mastered the learning content or language skills taught in a given language lesson or program. In return, this is the kind of assessment that students would like to have; assessment that parallels the content taught as well as the real-life practices.

Conclusion

This study explored the lecturers and students attitudes towards alternative assessing in academic writing instruction. This study found that, lecturers and students' attitude towards alternative assessment have a significant effect on the process of administering alternative assessment effectively. In light of this, it could thus be concluded that the lecturers and students' attitude which is skewed towards the positive direction may be an indication that there could be hope for success in attempts to integrate alternative assessment in academic writing instruction. It was particularly interesting to find that students showed willingness to partake in assessments that manifest features of alternative assessment, and somehow criticised the use of traditional assessment in academic writing instruction. At this juncture, it could be presumed that lecturers and students' attitude towards alternative assessment can be molded to the benefit of the integration of alternative assessment in academic writing instruction. In light of this, Xu and Liu (2015) warn that, teacher knowledge (and of course that of the students) is not something objective and independent of the teacher. It is a collection of the teacher's whole personal, social, academic and professional experience. Students' knowledge of a given assessment is also a collection of the students' whole personal, social and academic experiences, and these experiences may influence the attitude that students may have towards alternative assessment. I wish to conclude that the signs of positive attitude towards alternative assessment on the part of the lecturers and students serve as a great support for the agenda of my study, which is meant to illuminate the importance of alternative assessment in academic writing instruction. As premised by the Teacher Knowledge theory (Blesler, 1995), this study acknowledges that teacher empowerment (through training on assessment) has a crucial role to play in the way they assess their students. All in all, this study strongly emphasises the need for lecturer education on assessment practices that respond to the current students' academic literacy needs

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Appendix 1

Lecturer Interview Guide

1. Have you attended any language assessment training?
2. In your view, do you think assessment is of great importance in academic writing instructions?
3. Has the training included any assessment of academic writing?
4. What is your philosophy/approach of assessment?
5. Apart from the prescribed assessments: the essay, test, and presentation, what are the other methods of assessment do you use particularly on academic writing?
6. What are the factors that influence your choice of assessment methods?
7. How do students' characteristics influence your choice of the type of assessment tools?
8. How often do you assess your students?
9. What is your take in authenticity assessment?
10. What are the available platforms for information sharing on writing assessment?
11. Where do you get your assessment tool? Are they readily available at the centre or you produce your own?

    Any other contributions?

Appendix 2

Student Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. How do you understand the term or concept "assessment"?
2. Is there a relationship between assessment and teaching? Is it one thing or two different things?
3. Do you like being assessed? And why?
4. In English for Academic Purposes, you are taught academic listening, speaking, reading and writing. So I am focused on academic writing. Do you feel like you are assessed enough when it comes to academic writing. Or how often are you assessed?
5. How often does the lecturer assess your writing skills?
6. Apart from the essay that specifically assesses your academic writing, are there other assessments that are given to you in the course?

7. When the lecturer gives you a writing task, how do they convey the criteria that you should try to meet? How do they ensure that you are clear on what to do?

8. When lecturers assess, they use a document called a rubric. It consists of the assessment criteria and marks allocations. In your views, how helpful could it be to complete your assessments if it was provided to you in advance?

9. Do you think that what you are required to perform will be required in the real world?

10. Any other contributions?