Essay Writing, Student Self-Assessment, Teacher Grading: An Integrated Approach

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Abstract

On the basis of a practical classroom experiment, this paper presents a proposal for integrating students' self-assessment of their essays into the teachers' grading with a view to promoting a more balanced interaction between students and teachers in higher education. A cohort of international students enrolled on the English-taught master's degree in International Relations submitted their essays for the academic English class for intercultural communication at the University of Napoli Federico II. As an essential part of their assessment, they were asked questions about their essays during their oral examinations. The questions were meant to explore the students' writing process, their final output and their varying sense of personal satisfaction with their essays. The aims of the questions were twofold: to develop the students' (self)critical stance and awareness of academic writing conventions, and to replace the oral examination with a dialogic, anxiety-free interaction between tutor and student focused on essay writing. In light of the current debate on the academic writing agenda and assessment methods in higher education, I explore the contribution that the students' self-assessment of their essays can give to the teacher's allocation of final grades and, in a wider perspective, to the development of the students' academic identity as novice researchers proving their critical thinking and creative insights.

Keywords: Academic writing, Assessment, Essays, Self-reflective evaluation, Teacher and student positionality

1. Introduction: Some Issues With Grading Essays

It is common knowledge that because of their prominence in academic assessments essays are generally regarded by university students as a highly elusive genre, unsettling and anxiety-inducing (Huerta et al., 2017; Hyland, 2003), even despite the popularity of

ready-made recipes widely available online and in printed manuals. Although essays are meant to show the students' critical thinking skills, i.e. their ability to elaborate their views on a given topic independently of the sources consulted, very often they are misunderstood by students as a mere exercise in rhetoric, knowledge display, and a strategic show-off of quotations from the recommended reading list. As teachers we are eager to acknowledge the role of the student as an "active enquirer" posing the questions they will set out to answer in their essays; yet, we expect or even encourage our students to take into account their tutors' and examiners' "expectations, academic traditions and foibles" (Taylor, 2009, p. 1) by following essay guidelines that may prove too vague and open-ended to be of any real help.

As argued by Andrews (2003) on reporting some of his students' dysfunctional experiences with the assessment of their essays, it is important to work out a common set of guidelines that can be relied on by students whatever the lecturers' taste for a traditional or creative approach to writing:

> If you take a conspiracy view of affairs, you might say that the centrality of the essay in the academy is a subtly insidious form of gatekeeping in that the 'ground-rules' […] for success are not always spelt out. Despite the presence of handouts on 'what makes a good essay'—which vary from obsession with surface form, like attention to referencing systems, proof-reading, etc., to vague advice on 'structuring your ideas'— it is often not clear what tutors mean by an 'essay' and what students understand by it. (Andrews, 2003, pp. 119-120)

Academics and practitioners alert to the tacit nature of academic conventions and the elusive jargon used to clarify essay requirements have illustrated the "institutional practice of mystery" (Lillis, 1999, p. 127), embedded in the much implicit dialogic exchange between teachers and students and epitomized in the consolidated essay conventions (Turner, 1999), which "remain unexplicated and unquestioned by tutors, because for them it is academic 'common sense.'" (Jones et al., 1999, p. 125; also see McCormick, 2006, p. 208 on the appearance of "magic – or at least a romantic ideology of the individual writer's mind").

Rubrics can apparently solve the problem of this lack of clarity as they seem to offer an analytical way of grading students' writing based on shared criteria: for example, theoretical/conceptual understanding, critical analysis and evaluation, thesis and thematic structure and clarity, expression/writing skills (Bennett, 2016, p. 53). However, in practice, evaluation scales detailing the levels of achievement from poor to excellent do not provide a solution to the perceived vagueness of essay guidelines insofar as the labels used – whether "limited" or "outstanding" – still correspond to subjective perceptions of what constitutes "limited" or "outstanding" attainment. Their reassuring objectivity is to some extent misleading as their criteria to identify academic levels of attainment are not necessarily grounded in solid evidence and may be further weakened by the lecturers' inexperience in using evaluation rubrics, resulting in lower reliability and validity for assessment (Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010). Rubrics have also been proven to encourage students to adopt a conventional approach to assignments and to favour adherence to standardized output in place of innovative and creative thinking (Kohn, 2011; Wilson, 2005). However, the students' use of a

writing rubric has proved to have a positive effect on the quality of writing and self-efficacy (Covill, 2012), which reinforces the case for students' reflective self-evaluation.

2. Academic Writing in the Classroom: Teaching and Assessment

Many studies have analysed the writing process in depth to provide guidelines that can be used across different educational contexts and disciplines to enhance student writing, and leading to the development of targeted pedagogical approaches, from the cognitive process theory (Flower & Hayes, 1981) to genre-based pedagogy (Badger & White 2000), including several others, such as the multiliteracies approach design and the contrastive/intercultural rhetoric approach with a focus on culture-bound aspects of academic writing (see Tardy 2025 for an exhaustive overview of the most influential approaches and Walková 2024 for some practical examples and applications). These well-established approaches have provided valuable models and tools for writing instruction, such as the self-regulated strategy development model (Harris & Graham, 2009), consisting in a series of gradual cognitive steps (gathering ideas, organizing notes, elaborating and concluding), refined during the six-stage process, starting with background knowledge development and ending up with independent performance. The teacher's role is essential to ensure a smooth educational experience leading to students' success as writers since "SRSD [self-regulated strategy development] makes an important contribution to teachers' instructional repertoires" (Harris & Graham, 2009, p. 129).

However valuable this model may be in outlining a clear and well-defined writing procedure, it constrains students into a rigid pattern that may not necessarily suit their university study requirements and, possibly, their own priorities. While this model has been mainly applied to the school classroom, and, particularly, to learners who struggle with writing (Santangelo et al. 2007), it is yet to be systematically implemented in the university educational setting, which is more in favour of developing students' agency rather than training them to follow the teacher's instructional repertoire (see Cowan 2025 for the inspirational report of university students self-directing their learning).

In line with the principle of students setting their own learning agenda, the academic literacies approach has often been viewed as transformative pedagogy, which can enable students to challenge tradition and suit their own learning priorities (Lillis et al., 2015). As an alternative to teacher-led assessment, which relies on a step-by-step instructional procedure, the self-reflective evaluation of one's own work seems much more in tune with the higher education mission of empowering students by developing their (self)critical attitudes.

The wealth of approaches and terminological labels available in the literature on self-assessment (Nielsen, 2012) can impose the need for a clarifying definition, such as the one reported below:

> Self-evaluation comprises (a) self judgments of present performance through comparisons with one's goal and (b) self-reactions to those judgments by deeming performance noteworthy, unacceptable, and so forth (Schunk, 2003, p. 160).

Schunk's definition foregrounds the central role played by the self in the evaluation process

in contrast with the focus on the teacher's methodologies placed in other definitions: e.g., "self-assessment in writing signifies any teaching method that prompts writers to think about, evaluate and/or respond to their own writing." (Nielsen, 2012, p. 1). The student-centred self-evaluation method applied to essay writing can offer valuable insights into students' academic writing assumptions, personal experience and knowledge; it also allows them to take full responsibility for their academic work as they assess its strengths and weaknesses.

3. An Overview of the Course "Academic English for Intercultural Communication"

My classroom experiment stems from the academic English course for intercultural communication, within the English-taught Master's degree programme in International Relations at the University of Napoli Federico II. The two threads of my course – academic discourse and intercultural communication – are intertwined thanks to the selection of specialized materials, i.e., excerpts of monographs and research articles that explore key concepts within intercultural communication (Holliday et al., 2021). Topics such as culture, stereotypes, representation and deconstruction are examined in class through a series of inductive activities based on scholarly excerpts. Through an inductive task-based approach, students carry out activities individually or in pairs and work out the academic conventions used in the pieces of writing under examination, with particular attention to the author's stance, use of sources, quotations, and references. As published articles can be considered enhanced research-driven versions of essays, the analysis of their features can have a positive effect on students' writing and provide them with interesting ideas as well as rhetorical strategies and ready-to-use expressions.

In particular, this article reports on a cohort of international students attending classes in the first term of the academic year 2023-24. In one of my first lessons, I asked them to analyse the start of a research article by anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, dealing with culturespeak and its social repercussions:

> On a sunny morning a few years ago, at my summer house in Southern Sweden, with a national election season approaching, I found a leaflet in my mail box. In blue letters against a yellow background (the colors of the Swedish flag), an extremist group in a nearby town argued that the country had turned from a *folkhem*, a 'home of the people', into a 'multicultural inferno'. (Hannerz, 1999, p. 393)

While the students were invited to notice the unusual narrative start, with an autobiographical focus ("I found") and a detailed temporal and spatial setting ("at my summer house in Southern Sweden, with a national election season approaching"), they were also asked to discuss their educated opinions on the typical starts of research papers. Thus, this short excerpt was exploited to raise awareness of academic conventions, with particular regard to the tension between an objective style (e.g. "It is important…"; "This issue was thoroughly examined…") and the writer's personal stance (e.g. "My aim is …"; "I intend to…"). In parallel, the students' in-depth analysis of the article's key issues together with the paraphrasis exercises of complex sentences enabled them to adopt a critical attitude to Ulf Hannerz's research article as they were asked to assess his argumentation in terms of clarity, informativity and relevance. This request for assessment, deliberately provocative, was meant

to encourage the students' criticality of published research, which is often considered by students and junior scholars near to perfect or, more precisely, untouchable. Yet, one of the objectives of an academic English course (and, possibly, higher education in general) is precisely to demystify the perfection associated with published work and suggest that any piece of research, however good, can be criticized and perfected as it happens through the never-ending process involving the whole academic community across time. By encouraging students to engage critically with academic sources, I also try to reduce the power distance between myself as a university tutor and postgraduate students and also develop their confidence as junior members of academia.

Students' assessment for this course is based on several tests: a) a written test consisting of a cloze and two short academic English writing exercises, b) an interview on general topics and current affairs meant to test the students' proficiency in spoken English, c) an interview on the course topics, and d) an essay on a topic chosen by the student and related to one of the three areas examined in the course: language, culture, and education. The length of the essay varies depending on whether students have attended more than 60% of classes or not: students who attended regularly were asked to write an 850-word essay while students who didn't attend or attended occasionally had to write a 2,500-word essay. The final mark is given at the end of a written and oral examination taken at the university, in which students need to demonstrate their academic English proficiency and mastery of the syllabus content. The essay is not only a prerequisite for their final examination but also influences the final grade as it gives evidence of the students' skills in writing, with particular regard to argumentation, criticality, sourcing and referencing.

4. The Students' Reflective Evaluation of Their Essays

Reading students' essays is one of the most pleasant and engaging tasks in the course: thanks to the students' genuine interest in the topics they choose, I have the opportunity to explore different issues and discover approaches and perspectives unknown to me. Assessing essays, by contrast, does not feel quite as pleasant for reasons partly related to the inherent chore of grading interesting but formally inaccurate essays. Although the essays submitted are very engaging and offer plenty of stimulating insights into their writers' background cultures, languages and clashing lifestyles (influenced by their native cultures and the new routines in the host country), they often seem to fall short of academic standards. In particular, they may present weaknesses such as a lack of an argument, inadequate referencing, overreliance on sources and a colloquial style. These flaws seem to be in stark contrast with the intrinsic value of the students' writing and the great passion they put in their work. Hence, I find grading their essays problematic as I am aware of the great potential hidden in students' writing.

As argued by Clarke and Talbert (2023, p. 4) "The entire culture built around grades and grading is toxic", as it signals a profound disconnection between grades and the learning achieved by students besides encouraging them to work hard for the very wrong reasons: "When we have honest conversations with students, we find that they, too, dislike grades. They often admit that they'd rather not have grades at all, and that they like and want to learn.

But if it comes down to really learning a subject and growing as learners on the one hand, and earning a grade on the other, they know which direction the incentives point." (Clarke & Talbert 2023, p.3) Without going so far as "ungrading", I have always wished to reverse this direction and prompt students to learn for the sake of learning and all the other benefits that come with it: criticality, knowledge, assertiveness among many others.

Until December 2023, oral examinations focused on the topics covered in the course as well as on the essay each student had submitted. From January until December 2024, the oral examination only revolved around the students' essays and their reflective assessment of their own work according to the following prompts:

1. Why have you chosen this topic?

2. What is the leading argument of your essay?

3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your essay?

4. What kind of references have you used?

5. Have you used online tools/resources and which ones, if any?

6. How long did it take you to write your essay?

Each question and answer to the question lead to other questions, which explore the aspects of the essay that I found perplexing and that the students want to talk about. Originally, my questions during their oral examinations were aimed at helping them clarify the focus of their essays, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. However, as I noticed how the students relished the opportunity to discuss the making of their essays and how much their writing back scenes helped illuminate their essays for me but also for them, I gave them increasingly more time to explain the aspects of their essays that they considered most valuable and I considered worthy of greater attention.

At the end of each oral examination, which lasts up to 20 minutes, I feel I have a much better idea of the essays' strengths, weaknesses and the students' academic achievement; more importantly, I feel that the students have a much better grasp of the essential requirements for a good academic assignment and what they need to do to reconcile their personal histories with their new academic identities as postgraduate students at an Italian university. A synthesis of the insights provided by the students who took their academic English examinations in 2024 is provided below. (Note 1)

- *Why have you chosen this topic*: the answer to this question may appear obvious (i.e., "because I like it"), but the students' response was hardly ever obvious and was usually revealing of the deep-ingrained and emotional reasons behind any act of writing. The students shared their own stories to contextualise the subjects of their essays: for example, how an illiterate relative or their struggling with schoolwork pushed them to write about different school systems or innovative educational strategies; or how their volunteering in a local charity stirred their interest in human development. What their oral anecdotes reveal is that autobiographical aspects tend to be deleted in academic writing in line with a conventional

view of academia as the place for scientific research unaffected by academics' experiences, personalities and emotions. However, this view is increasingly being questioned by new models of literacies that put the writer in the center stage and more in control of their academic socialization (Jones et al., 1999).

- *What is the leading argument of your essay*: I only ask this question when the argument is not evident and the essay appears to be a first-person account or well-documented report of an interesting trend or issue. In these cases, students either summarise their essays or attempt to figure out the problematic aspect(s) which they could have developed more in writing. For example, many international students who decided to write about the customs and traditions in their countries acknowledged their overreliance on their background knowledge and the use of a narrative or descriptive approach in place of argumentation. If their essay was a historical outline of the literature, philosophy, and religious celebrations in Turkey, India or some other country, I encourage them to critically assess their background knowledge and sources, and relate them to Western views of the "exotic and mysterious East". They then realise that what is common knowledge for them needs to be thoroughly evaluated in light of insiders' and outsiders' references.

- *What are the strengths and weaknesses of your essay*: this is, in my view, the most demanding question that forces students to be critical of their own work and try out the teachers' role. Often students hesitate, repeat this question to themselves in bewilderment and start summarizing their essays to avoid the dreadful silence of oral examinations. I assumed their puzzled looks and inability to provide a satisfactory answer was due to a lack of criticality until a student bluntly responded: "But aren't you the one who should do that?" He made me realize how students' assessment schemata can not only affect their critical thinking but also their attitude to academic achievement: if assessing essays is the teacher's job, then the teacher's invitation for students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their essays can only feel like a meaningless exercise that will never be meant to integrate or modify the teacher's assessment of the student's essay. The students who adopted this self-dismissing attitude in favour of the all-powerful teacher storyline, however, end up weakening their analytical skills and also undermining their sense of agency in academia. By contrast, the students who were willing to play out the teacher's role gave themselves an opportunity to assess their own essays and have a higher grade. In general, the weaknesses identified are the ones I noticed too (from lack of argumentation to a colloquial style), while the strengths reflect their own personal views of what makes a good essay: for example, a long list of references or a high number of sections are not necessarily good in themselves and need to be evaluated in context.

- *What kind of references have you used*: this question is aimed at raising the students' awareness of the differences between scholarly and popular sources and helping them assess their relevance, authoritativeness and accuracy. One of the greatest difficulties in the digital age for university students endlessly navigating the flow of information through their smartphones or computers is to distinguish between popular web pages and academic resources available online through journals and digital libraries (Pennarola, 2024).

- *Have you used online tools/resources and which ones, if any*: this question takes into account the spread of generative Artificial Intelligence platforms such as ChatGBT and writing tools such as Just the word and Skell, which can provide valuable help with common academic collocations.(Note 2) The students acknowledged their frequent use of search engines such as Google Scholar, Scopus and ShareDiscovery (our university library resource), together with open-access monolingual dictionaries and translators such as Reverso. They were reticent over their use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), which can reflect the stigma generally associated with AI-assisted academic assignments, even though the University of Napoli Federico II – as most Italian universities – has not issued a ban on these resources. I did not insist on questioning them on this aspect for two reasons: 1. during the course little attention was paid to the use of AI in writing, 2. I assume that the personal and self-determined nature of the essays incentivizes the students' full commitment to their writing and minimizes the temptation to rely on technological help.

- *How long did it take you to write your essay*: timing one's work is a very personal issue as we all know from experience; the same task can be accomplished within different time frames depending on each person's ability and the situational context. However, surprisingly enough, all the students (apart from one) declared having written their essays in a short amount of time (from one very intense day to five days), while the time they declared for their background reading was much longer, from one week to one month.

5. Discussion and Follow-up

I consider the students' reflective evaluation of their essays a great opportunity for me to explore their writing process from the genesis ("why did you write it") to the actual development (time management, background reading, drafting, use of references and online resources, style). Even more importantly, in my view, the students' insights into their writing have made me aware of a tension between their interests, life trajectories and cultural backgrounds on one side and the academic world of university assignments and grades on the other. In parallel with my insights into the students' essay back scenes, the students declared becoming more knowledgeable about the academic agenda requirements: in particular, the need for scientific evidence based on a wealth of contrasting sources/accounts, which must be combined with a critical attitude to whatever is the object of enquiry, ranging from fields of study to personal experiences.

Because all the students, to a greater or lesser extent, engaged in the self-reflective evaluation of their essays, the grades they had received in the first two parts of the examination increased, after the interview, by a varying percentage, from 10% to 30%, depending on the students' different abilities to scrutinize their essays, highlight their strengths, identify their weaknesses and possible solutions, and argue their case. Thus, low marks (18-22) turned into middle grades (23-26), and middle grades were raised to good grades (27-28). The already good marks could only increase by a small percentage as was to be expected, since the high level of argumentation, coherence and background reading shown in the essays by the brightest students also shone through in their final examinations. (Note 3)

My overall assessment of this experiment is extremely positive in terms of examination

workload, grades allocation and sense of personal teacher achievement: the essay-centred interview was not only an opportunity for students to reflect on their writing strategies but also a way for me, the teacher, to gain insights into their (academic) writing assumptions and show genuine interest in and appreciation of their work.

However, when I examine this classroom experiment in the light of the vast literature on self-assessment, I am aware of some limitations: in particular, this account tells only my side of the story and lacks the students' feedback on their self-reflective essay assessment. Moreover, I did not take into account the summative aspects related to students' self-assessment (e.g. validity and reliability) and have not elaborated a systematic plan to integrate students' reflections into their final grades (see Brown & Harris, 2014; McMillan & Hearn 2008). In order to fully implement this integrated approach in other institutional contexts, it seems necessary to prepare and share guidelines with students on how to self-assess their essays and with teachers on how to integrate the students' self-assessment in their final grades. Not only would these guidelines contribute to make the whole procedure more transparent but they could also help clarify the actual integration of the self-assessment and grading criteria for teachers and students alike.

The next important step would be to elaborate a flexible tool that could turn this classroom experiment into a more equal assessment system shared by students and teachers, which could help students "assume ownership of their learning" (Bond et al., 2011, p. 32) as well as their self-evaluation. I trust that, by reversing roles in the examination and asking students to assume the teacher/assessor's positionality, teachers can help students develop their critical thinking but also, and more importantly in my view, promote their self-awareness and sense of belonging in higher education as early-stage members of academia.

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Notes

Note 1. At the course start in October 2023, the students were informed of my research project on essay writing and agreed to sign a consent form allowing me to use their anonymised data for research purposes.

Note 2. These open-access resources are available at the following links: www.just-the-word.com and https://skell.sketchengine.eu/.

Note 3. The Italian higher education grading system is based on a 30-point scale whose pass marks are between 18 (the lowest) and 30 cum laude (the highest).

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