

# Teaching strategies – 5

## Using learner assessment for writing tasks

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This strategy sheet on alternative assessment has resulted from a research project to develop teacher understanding of assessment within the AMEP. It provides perspectives on the subject from the point of view of several AMEP teachers, who give examples of how and where informal assessment practices can be integrated with the teaching program.

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### Context

Learner assessment is frequently mentioned in discussions about assessment but it is rarely used in classrooms. This reluctance to adopt learner assessment may arise from ongoing and genuine concerns about its validity in the high status, summative assessment of achievement.

Some reflection on the matter, however, will disclose that successful learners routinely monitor and assess their own language learning and progress (self-assessment). They also observe the language interactions of peers to pick up new ideas, identify mistakes to avoid, or to compare their own abilities with those of fellow learners (peer assessment). In reality, successful learners are already assessing their own efforts both in class and in the 'real world'. This informal monitoring can be made explicit and formalised in the classroom as a bona fide learning tool for all learners.

In the classroom, **self-assessment** is any language assessment that requires learners to judge their own language abilities or performance in casual conversations, while **peer assessment** requires learners to judge the skills of other learners.

Although AMEP teachers most commonly use formal assessment to assess learner achievement of CSWE competencies, the curriculum does allow for the incorporation of more informal methods to supplement other teacher assessments.

Self and peer assessments have a range of potential advantages. For example, they can:

- be integrated into teaching and learning processes
- provide personalised assessments for each learner
- involve learners in assessing learning
- foster learner reflection on how learners learn
- encourage greater learner autonomy
- increase learner motivation.

The classroom examples in this information sheet will help teachers to realise the potential advantages of self and peer assessment, and to adopt this valuable tool in ways that suit their learners as well as their teaching styles and settings.

### Strategies

#### The writing classroom – teaching communication

In contrast to the other three macro skills, there is a tendency among learners, and some teachers, to focus more on form and surface features when developing writing skills. For example, 'getting the gist' of meaning is a skill valued by learners and teachers in listening, speaking and even reading. There can be glaring errors in perception, word order, pronunciation, stress, or understanding, but learners and teachers can still acknowledge successes in understanding and fluency in these three modes while recognising the presence of inaccuracies.

On the other hand, when it comes to writing it is common for success at 'getting the gist across' and fluency to be overlooked. Learner confidence as writers can be continuously undermined by a focus on mistakes in capital letters, full stops, spelling, word order or subject-verb agreement.

It is true that good writers use accurate form to facilitate communication. It is also true that the conventions of spelling, word order, subject-verb agreement and punctuation are essential learning, particularly for learners wishing to move into further training and academic settings. Nevertheless, it is important to recall that the major purpose of learning to write in language classrooms (compared to an English for Academic Purposes class) is about learning to communicate in the written form with fluency and confidence.

In this era few in the population regularly write more than the briefest of paragraphs, and the conventions of spelling and punctuation are in a period of flux

due to the influence of email and mobile phone text messaging. Nonetheless, learning to write in the language classroom still needs to use a foundation of form and surface features to bring fluency and confidence into the foreground.

Classroom investigations by AMEP teachers in writing classrooms support previous research evidence that self-assessment can provide learners with an ongoing learning tool as well as offering stimulus for authentic language interactions as they use and discuss its use with other learners and the teacher.

From the teacher’s perspective, introducing a model overview and using it to analyse sample reports as a prelude to learner practice in self-assessment provides a solid and structured basis for teaching and learning.

The four examples that follow show how AMEP teachers took up the challenge of introducing alternative assessment strategies in writing classrooms.

### Example 1: Introducing self-assessment through writing simple formatted text

In this example, learning focused on the CSWE Level 1 B L04 *Can complete a simple formatted text*. Figure 1 shows the form that was used in class as the model that was practised in working towards the formal assessment of the target competency.

PERSONAL INFORMATION	
<b>Instructions</b> – Answer all questions	
Family name _____	
First name _____ Initials _____	
Date of birth ____ / ____ / ____ Marital status	
	dd mm yy
Address _____	
Number ____ Street _____	
Suburb _____ State _____ Postcode _____	
Country of birth _____	
Nationality _____	
Date of arrival in Australia ____ / ____ / ____	
	dd mm yy
Occupation _____	

Figure 1: Personal information form

This form was used as an in-class exercise to collect information about the starting points of each learner. Learners retained the completed work sample as a record of their skills at the commencement of the course.

The completed forms were also used as the basis for individual discussions with learners, which highlighted valuable insights about individual and

group learning needs that were incorporated later into the teaching and learning program. For example, the need to consolidate oral language related to the CSWE Level 1 B L03 *Can provide basic personal information using spoken language*, and the need for in-class and home tasks such as matching pictures (concept) cards with word cards, spelling exercises on learner names, addresses, nationalities, marital status, and writing in upper, lower and mixed cases as required.

To ease the introduction of the self-assessment procedure for learners, the teaching and assessment sequence was divided into four manageable chunks. Assessment questionnaires were devised for each stage. Learners were introduced to an assessment questionnaire that provided the criteria for assessments by both learners and teacher. The questionnaire included concrete and specific ‘checkpoints’ for each item on the form where learners needed to fill in information. The sample questionnaires follow in Figures 2–4.

After progressively becoming familiar with three sections, learners used a single questionnaire that incorporated all three sections.

SELF-ASSESSMENT SHEET			
Name _____			
Date _____			
Check your answers [Tick (✓) one]	A*	PA*	NA*
Family name	Written		
	Spelled correctly		
Other names	Written		
	Spelled correctly		
* A = Achieved PA = Partially achieved NA = Not achieved			

Figure 2: Self-assessment questionnaire – Part 1

SELF-ASSESSMENT SHEET			
Name _____			
Date _____			
Check your answers [Tick (✓) one]	A*	PA*	NA*
Country of birth	Written		
	Spelled correctly		
Nationally	Written		
	Spelled correctly		
Date of arrival in Australia	Written		
	Spelled correctly		
Occupation	Written		
	Spelled correctly		

Figure 3: Self-assessment questionnaire – Part 2

SELF-ASSESSMENT SHEET				
Name _____				
Date _____				
Check your answers [Tick (✓) one]		A*	PA*	NA*
Address number	Written			
	Spelled correctly			
Street name	Written			
	Spelled correctly			
Suburb	Written			
	Spelled correctly			
State	Written			
	Spelled correctly			
Postcode	Written			
	Spelled correctly			

Figure 4: Self-assessment questionnaire – Part 3

### Example 2: Introducing self-assessment through report writing

The learning focus of this example is CSWE Level 2 H L02 *Can write a short information report.*

A cooperative learning environment promotes learning in any classroom but when it comes to introducing self-assessment, and especially peer assessment, cooperation among learners is a critical element for success.

One way that teachers of writing can encourage co-operation is to give multiple opportunities for learners to work on a shared task in pairs and small groups. The classroom investigations revealed that the model report and structured outlines used by many AMEP teachers can be made into effective learning tools. These tools provide an authentic stimulus for pair and small group work, and prompt learners to discuss problems they are having and to share language-learning insights.

The additional advantage of preparing a ‘checklist for report writing’ based on the teacher’s model report outline is that it can also be used as a guide for learner self-assessment.

Self-assessment can be introduced into the writing classroom in many ways, but one way that has been found effective is:

- 1 Introduce a model report overview
- 2 Use the model overview to analyse (assess) sample reports
- 3 Introduce the *Writing a report* worksheet and demonstrate its use in writing a report with the whole group
- 4 Learners use model and ‘group report’ to write reports

- 5 Introduce a *Report writing assessment checklist* and ask learners to use it to assess their written reports
- 6 Compare learner and teacher assessments using the checklist
- 7 Practise writing and assessing other reports.

### 1 Introduce a model overview

Figure 5 shows a sample structural overview that could be used as a teaching and learning tool. It is a tool familiar to AMEP teachers from the genre approach to writing.

<p><b>Model report – overview</b></p> <p><b>PURPOSE</b></p> <p>To present information.</p> <p><b>STRUCTURE</b></p> <p>Title</p> <p>Introduction: context</p> <p>Information paragraph/s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• begin with topic sentence</li> <li>• sentences giving more details</li> </ul> <p>Conclusion (optional)</p> <p><b>LANGUAGE FEATURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• simple present tense</li> <li>• to be/to have</li> <li>• two clause sentences with conjunctions</li> </ul>
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Figure 5: Model for report writing

Introduction of such a model in the classroom can stimulate vibrant discussion of its vocabulary and concepts. Encouraging learners to make notes in their first language on their copy of the overview can clarify and consolidate vocabulary and concepts, as well as provide a summary and guide for further writing (and self-assessment).

### 2 Use the model overview to analyse (assess) sample reports

Analysis of sample reports using the model overview, first in pairs and then as a whole class, provides a rich and authentic context for language use and discussion.

Figure 6 is based on the model overview and provides a sample of the type of checklist that students can use to analyse and assess sample reports at this early stage.

Report writing assessment checklist – Part 1		
Look at your report. Place a tick (✓) in the column if your report contains the items listed.		
The report:	Yes	No
• has a title		
• has an opening sentence		
• has paragraphs		
• has given a number of pieces of information		
• has a conclusion		

**Figure 6: Report writing assessment checklist**

Figure 7 is an example of a sample report that can be assessed by learners using the model overview. Sample reports can be obtained from textbooks, newspapers, magazines or created by teachers themselves. The important thing in selecting sample reports is that the report should be at the appropriate level for learners and should clearly demonstrate features of the model overview.

**Weddings in Australia**

Weddings in Australia are traditionally held in churches, and they can be big family occasions or small, private events. The bride, groom and their families decide on the size of the celebrations.

Big weddings mean an endless list of arrangements. For example, choosing the wedding ring, booking the church and reception centre, selecting the bride's special white dress, deciding on the colour of bridesmaids' dresses, choosing flowers for bouquets, finding suits for the men and hiring wedding cars. Then there is the guest list. Big weddings can have 40, 60, 100, 200 or more guests. The only limit to the size of a big wedding is the amount of money the families can afford to spend, because in Australia the families of the bride and groom, not the guests, pay for the party.

Small weddings have 2, 4, 8 or more guests, but there are almost as many different arrangements. For example, the bride needs a dress, but it doesn't have to be white. The groom needs some nice clothes or a suit. The ceremony can be in a church or it can take place in a public registry office. The bride and groom must have two witnesses, but they don't need to invite any family or friends. Small weddings usually have a lunch or dinner party after the ceremony, and the bride and groom decide on how many guests will attend and who will be invited.

For a bride and groom, no other day is as important as their wedding day – well, perhaps not until the day their first baby is born!

**Figure 7: Sample report**

### 3 Introduce the *Writing a report worksheet* and demonstrate its use in writing a report with the whole group

Topics such as 'Australia', 'My family', 'Journey to Australia', 'Computers', 'Unemployment' or 'Going to school' are familiar to learners. The concepts, vocabulary and language features that have already been learned in previous studies around these topics are a rich foundation for report writing.

Figure 8 is a sample of a worksheet that teachers can use to demonstrate writing a sample report to a whole class group. Individual learners can then use it as a guide to writing their own reports.

Writing a report worksheet
Title
Introduction (opening sentence)
Information paragraph/description <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>begin with topic sentence</li> <li>sentence giving more details</li> </ul>
Conclusion (optional)

**Figure 8: Sample worksheet**

### 4 Learners use model and 'group report' to write reports and the *Report writing assessment checklist* to assess their efforts.

An explicit model, analysis of sample reports and demonstration of how to write reports combine to provide a firm foundation for writing development. But the most effective way for learners to improve accuracy and confidence as writers of reports is to provide them with ongoing opportunities to write reports and for self-assessment of their efforts.

At this stage lessons and home exercises focus on learners using the sample worksheet to write reports on familiar and researched topics.

### 5 Introduce a *Report writing assessment checklist* and ask learners to use it to assess their written reports

The *Report writing assessment checklist* (Figure 9) shows how the earlier and simpler checklist based on the model overview has been expanded to include language features and some aspects of form. Learners use checklists of this type for deeper assessment of their reports.

Report writing assessment checklist		
Look at your report. Place a tick (✓) in the column if your report contains the items listed.		
The report:	Yes	No
• has a title		
• has an opening sentence		
• has paragraphs		
• has given a number of pieces of information		
• has a conclusion		
The report:	Yes	No
• uses present tense		
• has agreement between subject and verb		
• has general categories of people or things		
• has two clause sentences with conjunctions		
• has capital letters at the beginning of sentences		
• is in clear handwriting		

Figure 9: Report writing assessment checklist

## 6 Compare learner and teacher assessments using the checklist

It is common for learners to want to know how well their assessments compare to those of their teacher.

The process of comparing and discussing learner self-assessment and teacher assessment of the same sample of work can be an important learning opportunity for learners and an eye-opening experience for teachers. It is common, for example, for there to be a high degree of agreement between the teacher and learner assessments. It is also common for the discussions with individual learners to reveal issues that can be included in teaching programs to enrich the learning for a number of learners in the group.

## 7 Practise writing and assessing other reports

As noted earlier, learners require multiple opportunities to practise writing reports in order to improve their report writing skills. Use of the *Writing a report worksheet* (Figure 8) and the *Report writing assessment checklist* (Figure 9) will assist learners to develop skills and confidence not only in writing reports but also in assessing their reports.

## Examples 3 and 4: Using portfolios for self-assessment with CSWE Level 3

Because students at higher levels in the CSWE may be highly conscious of a future where writing competencies will be assessed formally, teachers may be wary of introducing any form of self-assessment. However, the process of getting to that point of excellence needs to be paramount in the teacher's mind.

In emphasising this, two of the research projects reported in this sheet indicate that learner assessment provides at least one answer to the problems that many students face when learning to write. In both action research projects, the teachers reported on teacher/student responses and reflections on a writing course where assessment consisted of the teacher's final judgment, not of one piece of written work but several different pieces collated in a portfolio.

The writing sample in both cases included not only samples of in-class and home tasks, but also filled-out student/teacher checklists and student reflections on the entire process. The teacher was thus able to evaluate the target competency, as well as growth in the ability to write and to deal with problem areas by means of self-editing.

Despite the fact that the projects deal with report writing, which is now not included as a Learning Outcome at Level 3, the descriptions of the projects will reveal how self-assessment could be used in other learning outcome areas such as K L02 and M L02.

### *Preparing for self-assessment*

Self-assessment preparation played a vital role in both experiments. Going beyond merely introducing the practice of portfolio keeping, the discussion was widened to cover student views and experiences of writing assessment, thus allowing contextualisation of combining self/teacher assessment with the compilation of the individual portfolio.

### **Project 1**

Preparation was based upon information obtained from a written questionnaire about assessment.

### **Project 2**

Students were first introduced to the meaning of the terms, used in the curriculum statement to describe the performance range and criteria associated with report writing assessment.

Both methods appeared to succeed in giving adequate focus to the activity and in increasing student interest and involvement.

### *Organising the portfolios*

Since continuity of practice is an important part of training in self-assessment, success depended to a large extent on the keeping of adequate records in the portfolio in line with the normal understanding

of the portfolio as 'a collection of texts produced over a defined period of time' (Hamp-Lyons, 1991). Furthermore in both situations, initial support in relation to portfolio organisation helped to lessen fears about this marked change in assessment. What this meant in actual practice was to give practical help; besides issuing students with suitable folders, advice was given as to the contents, such as the type and number of writing samples. Some differences appeared in relation to detail.

**Project 1:** Students were asked within the guidelines to choose samples that best showed their progress as writers.

**Project 2:** Students were required to include their second and third reports and paragraph samples, together with their checklists and journal reflections. The latter were read by the teacher but not marked.

### *Integrating self-assessment into the course*

Self-assessment in both cases was seen as an integral part of the report-writing courses. However, differences in the way that this was done reflected the nature of the student body in each case.

**Project 1:** With a very diverse student population both in terms of nationality and background, the focus in the first group was on writing reports from video viewing and community/college observations.

**Project 2:** In the other course, with a class made up almost wholly of students with a tertiary background the approach could be more academic. Class interaction preceded writing reports about sun protection and aspects of Australian society.

### *The self-assessment process*

The process whereby students assessed their work in each situation was made part of the normal teacher evaluation of the written work. Both groups adopted similar activity cycles, although there was some variation in relation to the measuring instrument. Key activities were:

- Teaching of essential features of the report genre, for example, over organisation, paragraphing, and tense.
- Completion/submission of written tasks by students either in class or at home.
- Teacher evaluation of these using a marking code and checking the features taught.
- Student editing/self-evaluation and resubmission.
- Teacher review and feedback to students on both edited text and self-evaluation.
- Teacher/student conferencing about progress exhibited in the portfolio, particularly at the course end.
- Discussion, both general and individual, about the value of the self-evaluation procedure.

The major difference between the two projects was that only in the second case was the checklist developed from both teacher and student input through discussion. In this way, what could be termed a user-friendly system emerged, as shown in the following box.

#### **Checklist for self-evaluation of written work**

After editing your work read it over once more. Then with care give yourself a grade of 1, 2 or 3 for each of the following points. The numbers indicate that you are giving yourself in order 'a fair grade', 'a good grade' or a 'very good grade'.

- A structured report with a beginning, middle and end
- Clearly connected paragraphs
- Ideas connected by suitable link words within sentences and paragraphs
- Generalisations, eg people, advantages, industry
- Appropriate vocabulary
- Correct grammar, eg word order, passives

### *Reflecting on the process*

Student feedback through journal writing and discussion revealed a favourable opinion that its use brought developmental as well as attitudinal change. Students approached tasks more seriously, they attended more frequently and paid more attention to the requirements of each exercise. A noticeable increase in motivation in turn led to a growth in confidence and a corresponding decrease in the quite common feelings of stress when having to put pen to paper in another language. It was concluded that this positive view of the experiments owed a great deal to the fact that the self-evaluation process had been practised throughout the entire course and associated with the use of the portfolio, with the latter appearing to give the experiments greater validity and status.

## Principles

Despite concerns about the potential for too great a focus on form, the writing classroom has definite advantages over other language learning classrooms when it comes to introducing self or peer assessment. First, learner's completed writing tasks accurately record their authentic response without intrusive and intimidating recording equipment. Second, the writing sample is immediately available for analysis.

The writing classroom has the additional advantage of being able to use strong models of the written forms of English that have emerged from research and classroom practice with the 'genre' approach.

The models and structures of the genre approach have been a major influence on teaching, learning and assessment in CSWE courses. When introducing self or peer assessment, these familiar teaching and learning models can also provide the criteria on which learners assess their writing and the writing of other students. Importantly, the link between assessment and learning is made explicit to learners when they recognise the models used in learning exercises reoccurring within assessments.

Self and peer assessment of writing are best introduced through structured activities based on the use of explicit criteria that learners can identify, practise and then assess. Learners, whether assessing their own efforts or those of peers, can be directed to observe, analyse and give feedback about:

- the presence or absence of language features
- the strategies used to achieve certain purposes
- their experience of communication problems.

Although concerns remain about the validity of self and peer assessments in high status contexts, these types of assessments can provide a valuable source of additional information for teacher assessments of learner achievement. More importantly, including these techniques in learning programs makes key learning strategies of successful learners explicit and available to all learners.

## Conclusion

Judgments about the language and non-language benefits of informal assessment practices to both teachers and students have been highlighted throughout this information sheet. When properly explained, introduced and managed, alternative assessment methods can bring considerable benefits. These have been described in terms not only of achieving learning outcomes, but also of improving teacher-student relationships, class atmosphere and inter-student collaboration, as well as improvements in student confidence, self-esteem and study habits.

## Useful resources

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