



## Exploring Writing Assessment Literacy and Classroom Practices of Thai University Instructors

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This study aims to explore Thai university writing instructors' knowledge of writing assessment and their perceptions of different assessment practices. Having a good understanding of assessment principles is important because it helps teachers choose and develop appropriate assessment tools to measure students' abilities. Two major research questions are how much Thai university instructors know about writing assessment and whether they received any formal training in writing assessment before they started teaching. Fifty-two participants from ten large universities in Thailand participated in an online survey, and 21 of them participated in in-depth interviews. Findings from the survey show that the majority of participants reported having received some formal training in writing assessment, but 30% reported no formal training. More than half of them expressed frustration when having to develop assessment tasks to assess their students' achievements. Moreover, answers given in the online survey did not correspond with neither actual classroom practices nor background knowledge of assessment. It is hoped that the results of this study will motivate Thai university instructors to reflect on their assessment practices because, ultimately, the aim of this research is to provide suggestions that may help TESOL programs better prepare their graduate students for future teaching responsibilities.

**Keywords:** writing assessment, assessment literacy, professional development, teacher beliefs

### Introduction

When we discuss "writing assessment," many language teachers feel uncomfortable or avoid the discussion because they feel that they are not "experts" in assessment. This perception coincides with the study of Crusan, Plakans, and Gebril (2016). Their study explored the writing assessment literacy of 702 writing instructors to find out whether or not they had sufficient knowledge in writing assessment. In their study, they found that approximately 26% of their participants had limited training in writing assessment. In fact, many of them confessed a lack of confidence in their current assessment practices. While their participants came from 41 countries, including Thailand, the researcher of this study is particularly interested in exploring the awareness of Thai university instructors regarding writing assessment practices. The results of this study could be vitally important for improving the writing performance of Thai students because a good understanding of appropriate assessment practices – known as assessment literacy – is critical for every writing instructor when developing assessment tasks to assess their students' writing abilities.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the levels of writing assessment literacy of Thai university writing instructors and to identify the common writing and assessment techniques used in the classroom. In the context of higher education in Thailand, there have not been any studies conducted to

explore writing assessment literacy of Thai writing instructors. The ultimate goal is to raise awareness and draw attention to the harmful effect of writing assessment illiteracy. The major research questions are:

1. How much do Thai university instructors know about writing assessment?
2. Have Thai university instructors received any formal training in writing assessment before they started teaching writing?
3. What are the common practices of Thai university instructors in assessing students' writing abilities?

## **Literature Review**

According to Yamtim and Wongwanich (2014), the quality of instruction depends on five major components: teachers, students, teaching materials, contexts, and assessments. They noted that knowledge of assessments is essential because it allows teachers to make informed decisions about their instructional curriculum, i.e., assessments 1) provide teachers with information that can be used to improve their teaching by helping them choose suitable teaching methods for students, 2) enable teachers to monitor the students' learning progress throughout the semester and help students improve their knowledge before the end of the semester, 3) allow the students to receive constructive feedback and be responsible for their own learning process, and 4) help students to prepare for standardized or national tests. As assessments can benefit both teachers and students in a number of ways, the researcher believes that assessment literacy is vital for all teachers to develop the quality of their instruction and improve the learning experience for students, "which is the major goal of instruction" (Yamtim & Wongwanich, 2014, p. 2999).

### **What is Assessment Literacy?**

Based on my literature review, there is still no consensus among educators on the definition of assessment literacy. In an attempt to obtain a standard definition of assessment literacy, the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), the American Federal Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association defined the standards for teacher literacy in educational assessment as follows: teachers should be skilled in 1) choosing and designing appropriate assessment tools based on instruction, 2) developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions, 3) administering, scoring and interpreting the results of both externally-produced and teacher-produced assessment methods, 4) developing valid and reliable grading procedures, 5) using assessment results to make instructional decisions, 6) communicating assessment results to different groups of stakeholders, and 7) recognizing unethical, biased, illegal, and inappropriate assessment tools.

However, Stiggins (1999) and White (2009) argued for a revision of these seven standards of assessment literacy by adding that teachers should: 1) have clear objectives of their assessments, 2) understand the contexts of learning to effectively measure students' achievements, and 3) employ appropriate methods to maximize the quality of assessments. Similarly, Boyles (2005), Brookhart (2011), Inbra-Lourie (2008), Popham (2004; 2009), and Sadler (1998) further elaborated that teachers should also have a deep understanding of different types of assessments to appropriately utilize assessment results to improve their teaching, to make decisions about students, and ultimately enhance student learning.

In sum, based on these perspectives, teachers should:

1. have a good understanding of the content and context of learning and teaching;
2. demonstrate clear course and assessment objectives;
3. be able to communicate achievement expectations to students and stakeholders;

4. have knowledge of both standardized and classroom assessment and know essential characteristics of different assessment methods and standard criteria appropriate for different settings;
5. have skills in constructing appropriate tests and selecting or creating tasks that allow the students to apply the knowledge that they have learned;
6. have expertise in scoring and making fair judgments across tasks and individuals;
7. have expertise in framing appropriate feedback statements for students; and
8. know how to interpret and use the results of an assessment to improve classroom instruction and help students gain more knowledge.

### **Assessment Literacy and its Relevance to Writing Instructors**

In the field of L2 writing, Weigle (2007) has specifically identified the basic elements of writing assessment knowledge based on the notions of test reliability, test validity, and test practicality. According to Weigle (2007), writing teachers should be able to:

1. set clear and measurable course objectives;
2. construct writing prompts that match the objectives of the instruction. In order to achieve this, the teachers need to be familiar with both formal and informal assessment methods;
3. provide useful feedback to students. Students should be able to identify strengths and weaknesses in their writing based on teacher comments;
4. select practical and reliable methods of scoring. Writing instructors should be familiar with different types of scoring techniques and know how to construct a systematic process of assigning scores;
5. select appropriate methods of assessment to assess writing abilities. The teachers should know different types of alternative assessments and how to evaluate writing skills holistically and discretely; and
6. interpret and use writing assessment outcomes to improve instruction.

Throughout her study, Weigle (2007) stressed the importance of these practical aspects of assessment literacy. Thus, she encouraged every instructor to incorporate these basic elements of assessment literacy into their classrooms. If writing instructors do not have adequate writing assessment literacy, they could make poor decisions about their students' scores, and their teaching might not be as effective as it should be.

### **Teacher Training in Thailand**

As many researchers have argued, language assessment is inseparable from language teaching because most language teachers spend more than half of their professional career assessing their students (Crusan, Plakans & Gebril, 2016; Green, 2013; Weigle, 2007). However, many teacher training programs tend to give this area little attention because assessment is often the topic for only a few sessions, and many TESOL programs in different countries do not require their students to take an assessment course (Green, 2013; Weigle, 2007).

In examining assessment education of language teachers in Thailand and exploring whether the situation in Thailand is similar to that in other countries, the curricula of 25 accredited universities that are available online have been investigated. It has been found that 17 universities offer either TESOL programs or English teaching-related programs at the certificate, master's, or PhD levels. Of the 17 universities, only six universities require their students to take a language assessment course, three universities offer it as an elective, and eight programs do not offer any course related to assessment. Instead, the Faculties of Education at nine universities offer a degree in educational measurement, and these programs have at least one course in assessment and evaluation. From this survey, the researcher

has found that in most higher education institutions in Thailand, the responsibility to train teachers in assessment lies in education programs. For many graduate and doctoral programs in the subjects of applied linguistics, TESOL, or English for Communication, language assessment courses are taught only as electives.

## Methods

### Participants

In total, 52 Thai university instructors completed the online survey. Twenty instructors held Ph.D. degrees, 31 instructors held M.A. degrees, and one instructor had a B.A. degree in fields related to English, linguistics, or language teaching. Even though all of them felt that their terminal degree qualified them as university instructors, it was found that a few of them did not have a degree related to language learning and teaching in particular. Regarding the number of years of teaching, nine instructors had more than 20 years of teaching experience, seven instructors had between 16 and 20 years, ten instructors had between 10 and 15 years, and the rest had less than 10 years of teaching experience. Thirty-three of them received their degree from a university in Thailand, and 19 of them from an English-speaking country. All of them had taught at least one writing undergraduate course, and nearly half of them had taught a writing course at the graduate level. Moreover, of the 52 survey participants, 21 of them agreed to participate in a follow-up interview. Fifteen of the interviewees graduated from a university in Thailand, while the remaining six graduated from either England or the United States. All of them held at least one degree related to English teaching or linguistics from one of eight large institutions in Thailand.

### Instruments

The researcher used both an online survey and semi-structured interviews in this study. The online survey was adapted from the published study by Crusan, Plakans, and Gebril (2016), but some of the items in their survey were adjusted to fit the context of Thai universities and to cover all six aspects of assessment literacy proposed by Weigle (2007). The online survey was divided into three main parts. The first part gathered the demographic characteristics of the participants. The second part gathered data regarding both assessment literacy in general and writing assessment literacy in particular. This part consisted of 10 multiple-choice items. The third part consisted of 20 five-point Likert scale items, obtaining instructors' beliefs about good practices of writing assessment. The survey required approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

Apart from the online survey, in-depth interviews were also conducted in order to validate the results gained from the online survey and to explore the perspectives of university instructors about the importance of writing assessment literacy in more detail. For the interviews, all questions were designed to parallel the notions of assessment literacy proposed by Weigle (2007), which could be grouped into six major areas. Specifically, the participants were asked the following questions:

1. How do they set their course objectives and how do they know that they are measurable objectives?
2. What are their current classroom practices when selecting and assigning written assignments?
3. What are their current practices for giving feedback? Do they think that their feedback practices are effective?
4. How do they ensure that their scoring process is reliable? What do they think about their scoring practice? How do they design and use their rubric? How do they make sure that their students understand what they are expected to do in each assignment?
5. What are their general beliefs about alternative writing assessment such as portfolios, self-

reflection, and peer review?

6. Do they feel adequately prepared to assess their students' writing performance? In their opinions, what should be an important capability that writing teachers should master before starting teaching? Have they ever conducted any classroom research based on writing assessment outcomes?

## Procedure

Snowball sampling and the researcher's professional networks were used to recruit participants from more than ten large universities in Thailand. The researcher initially contacted the directors of the English programs at different universities to identify potential participants. These initial informants later helped identify the participants who met the eligibility criteria and could potentially contribute valuable information to this study. In order to be eligible, they had to have experience in teaching at least one English course that included writing components as part of the evaluation. The participants were first required to fill out the survey. At the end of the survey, they were asked whether they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Only those who had previously completed the online survey were interviewed. All interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order, and each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes.

## Results and Discussion

### Results from the Online Survey

The survey questions can be divided into three main aspects. The first aspect examined the participants' knowledge of language assessment in general and writing assessment in particular. The second one explored assessment practices in the participants' writing classrooms. The third one investigated their beliefs about different types of writing assessment. The tables below show raw frequencies and percentages of each question asked.

#### Instructors' knowledge of writing assessment

All three questions shown in the table focused on the participants' knowledge of assessment. All items in this section were close-ended (See Table 1).

TABLE 1

#### *Instructors' Knowledge of Writing Assessment*

Questions	N	%
Have you ever received formal training in assessment in general? Check all that apply.		
Yes, as part of a study course.	32	62
Yes, as part of pre-service or in-service training.	11	21
Yes, at a professional conference.	6	12
No, I have never received any formal training.	16	31
Have you ever received formal training in assessment of writing? Check all that apply.		
Yes, as part of a study course.	28	54
Yes, as part of pre-service or in-service training.	10	19
Yes, at a professional conference.	11	21
No, I have never received any formal training.	17	33
Which statement best describes your feelings about assessing writing?		
I accept it as a necessary part of being a teacher.	24	46
I find it interesting and challenging.	19	37
I feel frustrated and/or resentful at least sometimes.	7	14
I would rather do almost anything else.	1	2

The majority of the participants reported having received some formal training in general assessment and writing assessment in particular, while approximately 30 percent reported never receiving any formal training. For those who received formal training in assessment, most of them learned about assessment through their graduate coursework, while around 20 percent learned about assessment either from training provided by their program or from conferences and workshops. Forty-six percent of the participants believed that assessing students' writing was a necessary part of being a teacher. Thirty-seven percent felt that assessing students' work could be an interesting and challenging task, while 14 percent felt frustrated or even resentful when evaluating students' writing.

### **Assessment practices of the instructors**

Along with items asking the participants about their knowledge of assessment, the survey also asked them about their current assessment practices in the classroom. All seven questions in this section were close-ended (See Table 2).

Fifty-six percent of the participants reported using a multiple-draft approach for their assignments. When asked about techniques used when dealing with language issues in student writing, 29% used correction codes, while 23% simply circled language errors and asked the students to correct those errors by themselves. Seventeen percent indicated that they provided their students with the correct forms of those errors. Another 17% chose to write comments to identify students' errors. Four percent chose to ignore the errors that did not cause miscommunication.

When asked about their rubric use, 52% reported that they gave their students a rubric or a list of criteria for every assignment, while 44% responded that they only did for some assignments. Only 21% reported that they created all of the rubrics they used. Fifty percent of the respondents reported that they used some strategies to ensure that their students understood their writing criteria or rubrics, while 10% were not sure whether their students understood the descriptions in the rubrics. Only 10% gave training to their students to ensure their students' comprehension of the rubrics. Around 80% informally explained the rubrics to their students; however, they would not call it training. Interestingly, 10% of the participants never provided any training or instruction on how the assignments would be evaluated.

From the question that asked participants about their opinions of using rubrics for grading writing assignments, 39% agreed that rubrics are important in helping students understand how their writing assignments are evaluated. However, 29% felt that their students did not really pay attention to the rubrics, and 25% even felt that their students did not actually know how to use rubrics to guide their own writing. Finally, it is interesting to note that a handful of the instructors (4%) felt that rubrics were relatively useless.

### **Instructors' beliefs about writing assessment**

In this section, data were collected from the 20 Likert-scale items. Table 3 indicates the instructors' level of agreement with different statements: SA = strongly agree; A = agree; NS = not sure; D = disagree; and SD = strongly disagree. The items in this section targeted four major aspects:

1. Beliefs about scoring practices (Questions 2, 3, 13, 17)
2. Beliefs about assessment methods and practices (Questions 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 14)
3. Beliefs about general issues in writing classrooms (Questions 4, 10, 11, 20)
4. Belief about themselves as writing instructors (Questions 9, 15, 16, 18, 19)

The majority of participants agreed that scoring was a time-consuming process. However, the participants had mixed feelings about their scoring practices. Only about half of the participants believed that their scoring was always accurate. When asked whether they thought that their scoring was subjective, the majority of the participants agreed, while 12% disagreed. When asked whether content should receive

more weight than accuracy of the language, about half of the participants agreed, whereas 14% disagreed.

TABLE 2  
*Assessment Practices of the Instructors*

Questions	N	%
Do you utilize a multiple-draft approach?		
Yes.	29	56
Sometimes.	23	44
Never.	0	0
What is your approach to assessing students' language issues? Check all that apply.		
Circle language errors and ask students to correct them.	12	23
Write in correct forms for student language errors.	9	17
Mark errors with some coding scheme to help identify errors.	15	29
Put a check in the margin by a sentence containing error(s).	0	0
Ignore errors unless they cause major confusion.	2	4
Write comments focusing on patterns.	9	17
Do you provide students with a rubric or a list of criteria when assigning an assignment?		
Yes, I provide criteria/rubrics for every assignment.	27	52
Yes, but not for every assignment.	23	44
I seldom provide rubrics/criteria.	2	4
I never provide criteria/rubrics.	0	0
Do you create your own rubrics for your writing assignments?		
I create all the rubrics I use.	11	21
I create some of the rubrics I use.	37	71
I create none of the rubrics I use.	4	8
I don't use rubrics.	0	0
Do you use any strategies to ensure student comprehension of your assignment criteria/rubrics?		
Yes, regularly.	26	50
Yes, occasionally.	19	37
Not sure.	5	10
No.	1	2
Not applicable as I do not provide rubrics/criteria for my students.	1	2
Do you provide any training to students regarding the information on the rubric?		
Yes, I have a specific approach.	5	10
I provide an informal introduction to the rubric in use, but I wouldn't call it training.	41	79
I do not provide any training or introduction.	5	10
I do not use rubrics in my classes.	1	2
Which statement BEST describes the effects of using rubrics for grading writing assignments?		
I feel that rubrics are an important tool for accountability and help students understand why they received their grade.	20	39
While I think rubrics have the potential to help students, I am not sure they pay adequate attention to them.	15	29
Even if they do pay attention to the rubric, students are not always able to utilize the information to improve their writing.	13	25
I do not think rubrics help that much.	2	4
I do not use rubrics.	0	0

The second aspect asked the participants about their beliefs about assessment methods in general and their current practices. It is interesting to see that there were relatively equal proportions of respondents who agreed and disagreed with the statement that writing could be assessed through multiple-choice items. Most of them agreed that self-assessment could be a good technique for assessing writing, while 27% were not sure. However, a considerable number of participants (35%) reported uncertainty about the effectiveness of self-assessment, and 23% believed that self-assessment could not provide an accurate picture of students' writing proficiency. With regard to the use of portfolios in writing classroom, about half of the instructors agreed that a portfolio was a good tool for assessing writing, while 33% were not sure. Moreover, the responses demonstrated that, in general, the participants believed that essay exams were the best technique to assess students' writing skills, and that writing was best assessed together with other language skills such as reading and listening.

TABLE 3  
*Instructors' Beliefs about Writing Assessment*

Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	NS (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
1. Writing can be assessed through multiple-choice questions.	2 (4)	19 (37)	7 (14)	18 (35)	6 (12)
2. My scoring of writing is always inaccurate.	4 (8)	11 (21)	13 (25)	22 (42)	2 (4)
3. Scoring of writing is subjective.	14 (27)	25 (48)	7 (14)	6 (12)	0 (0)
4. Grammar is important in writing assessment.	19 (37)	29 (56)	3 (6)	1 (2)	0 (0)
5. Essay exams are best when it comes to assessing writing skills.	11 (21)	20 (39)	10 (19)	9 (17)	2 (4)
6. Writing is best assessed when integrated with other skills like reading and listening.	7 (14)	25 (48)	12 (23)	7 (14)	1 (2)
7. Self-assessment can be a good technique for assessing writing.	10 (19)	25 (48)	14 (27)	2 (4)	1 (2)
8. In general, writing (essay) exams provide a good estimate of writing ability.	12 (23)	31 (60)	5 (10)	3 (6)	0 (0)
9. I hate assessing student writing.	5 (10)	10 (20)	15 (29)	19 (37)	3 (6)
10. Writing assessment provides good feedback for writing instruction.	15 (29)	28 (54)	8 (15)	1 (2)	0 (0)
11. The highest point deduction should be from grammar mistakes.	2 (4)	5 (10)	7 (13.5)	26 (50)	12 (23)
12. A portfolio is a good tool for assessing writing.	5 (10)	25 (48)	17 (33)	5 (10)	0 (0)
13. When scoring writing, I believe that content should receive more weight than accuracy (grammar).	9 (17)	26 (50)	10 (19)	7 (14)	0 (0)
14. Self-assessment provides an accurate picture of student writing ability.	4 (8)	17 (33)	18 (35)	12 (23)	1 (2)
15. Assessment plays an important role in writing classes.	17 (33)	33 (64)	2 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)
16. Assessment is an important capability that writing teachers should master.	23 (44)	26 (50)	2 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)
17. Writing assessment is time consuming.	29 (56)	18 (35)	3 (6)	2 (4)	0 (0)
18. I love to assess student writing.	4 (8)	16 (31)	14 (27)	11 (21)	7 (14)
19. I consider myself to be a good writing instructor.	3 (6)	18 (35)	26 (50)	5 (10)	0 (0)
20. My students usually do poorly on writing exams.	4 (8)	12 (23)	17 (33)	17 (33)	2 (4)

The third aspect involved general issues found in writing instruction. Almost every participant agreed that grammar was an important part in assessing students' writing. They, however, did not think that grammar mistakes should be the highest point of deduction in the rubric. When asked whether writing assessment could provide good feedback for writing instruction, the majority of them (83%) agreed, while only 2% disagreed. However, a considerable number of the instructors (30%) felt that their students usually did poorly on writing exams.

The final issue in this section focused on how the instructors perceived themselves as writing instructors. The majority of them (96%) agreed that assessment was an important part of teaching writing, and it was an important skill that all writing instructors should have. When asked whether they loved or hated the process of assessing writing, the results showed three different opinions. About one third of the participants (30%) showed positive feelings about this process, around 30% showed negative feelings, and the rest expressed uncertain feelings, i.e., they were not sure whether they liked or hated this process. Approximately 40% of the participants thought that they were good writing instructors, while half of the participants were not sure.

In summary, the findings reported here suggest that most respondents had completed some formal assessment training before they started teaching; however, a considerable number of them still expressed the need for more training in some areas of assessment to reach their desired level of assessment literacy, e.g., the development of more reliable scoring rubrics and rating techniques, and the use of alternative assessments. In terms of their beliefs about writing assessment and being writing instructors, most instructors believed that knowledge in assessment is a necessary part of their teaching; however, to some extent, they considered their responsibility in writing assessment a source of stress and frustration.

## Effects of teaching experience and educational background

Apart from the findings from the online survey about the participants' knowledge, practices, and beliefs, the researcher also explored whether teaching experience and the educational background of the participants could have some potential effects on the patterns of their responses. Therefore, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to determine whether there was a difference between the two levels of education background (Master's and Ph.D.), and a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to explore significant differences among the four levels of teaching experience (0-5, 6-10, 11-20, and 21++ years). These two methods were chosen because they allow analyses to be run on non-normally distributed data. The statistical analyses of both tests showed that the investigated variables had no significant effects. This means that both educational background and the duration of teaching experience do not have any influence on the participants' responses. However, these results might not be accurate due to the small number of participants in each sub-group.

## Results from the Interviews

In addition to the data from the online survey, semi-structured interviews were also conducted to examine the perspectives and actual assessment practices of the participants. Findings from the interviews are also discussed in reference to the six primary areas.

### Setting measurable course objectives

For any instructor, the ability to set clear and measurable objectives is one of the most fundamental skills (De Jong & Harper; 2005; Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Weigle, 2007) because objectives are like mileposts on the roadmap of student learning. However, the interviewees' commentary below shows that they oftentimes felt that the course objectives specified in their syllabus were difficult to interpret and impossible to measure because they usually contained statements that were vague or difficult to measure objectively. Therefore, they frequently faced a dilemma when making decisions about whether or not their students had achieved the objectives at the end of instruction.

Before the semester started, my department gave me the course syllabus. When I looked through the course objectives, there was a statement that said something like *The students will learn how to write for academic purposes and for everyday life correctly and suitably*. I think it's too vague and there is no way I can easily check whether students have mastered those writing skills. Writing for both academic purposes and for everyday life? It actually covers every kind of writing. Don't you think?

Well, in the course syllabus for my academic writing class, it says that *Students will be able to demonstrate rhetorical awareness of diverse audiences, situations, and contexts*. When I first read it, I thought to myself, *How can I measure that ability from a few assignments?* I don't even know how to come up with writing tasks that can effectively elicit that skill. Anyway, can anyone show me what a successful paper should look like? [Laughing]

According to Weigle (2007), one problem with vague objectives is that they do not provide clear guidance for choosing appropriate assessment tools that align with the course objectives. If the instructors do not know how to set clear and measurable objectives, they are not, indeed, able to develop good writing tasks and rubrics to measure those aims.

Moreover, when asked whether they had any opportunities to set their own course objectives, more than half of the interviewees reported that they usually had little freedom to do so because the course objectives were usually set by their department. Surprisingly, some of them even confessed that they actually do not know how to set measurable objectives.

## **Current assessment practices in writing classrooms**

As mentioned, the benefits of specifying clear course objectives are numerous. One benefit is to help instructors choose appropriate methods of assessment (Weigle, 2007). However, a number of the interviewees mentioned that their course objectives were generally too broad and could be interpreted in different ways. Even though they were mostly familiar with using content objectives to identify what students had to learn and do in each lesson, they often felt frustrated when they had to develop an assessment tool to measure the achievement of the specified course objectives.

When asked about common practices for writing assessment, the majority of the interviewees reported that formal assessments such as midterm and final exams were usually predetermined by their department. However, they felt that these kinds of assessment did not allow them to see their students' best writing abilities because the students were required to write under time constraints. Therefore, they chose to have different writing tasks during the semester as complementary sources of information to help them evaluate their students' writing performance.

A number of the interviewees mentioned that their writing evaluations were usually based on several writing assignments in a variety of writing genres, usually integrated with course readings, rather than one long assignment or writing project at the end of the course. The assignments were both reading-based and relatively reader-based, with specific considerations for specific audience types such as their professors.

When asked about in-class timed assessments, most of them mentioned that they were almost non-existent. They rarely assigned impromptu writing such as writing quizzes in their class because they believed that in-class writing tasks did not allow the students to demonstrate actual writing skills, and these tasks did not accurately reflect real-world tasks. Moreover, they felt that in-class writing assignments were usually difficult for their students. These views could be the reasons why a number of the interviewees decided to incorporate informal writing assessment such as blog-writing assignments in their courses.

I use blogs to improve my students' writing proficiency, especially for developing skills in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Blogs can serve as a place where students can reflect on each other's writing assignments. Each student is required to read at least 10 blog posts throughout the semester and give comments. I also provide feedback to some of the students' work. Blogs can also be useful as a forum for discussion outside the classroom if it happens that some lessons are not adequately covered in class. They can ask me directly or ask each other. I told my students that the primary purpose of writing a blog is communication, so correct grammar is not so important here.

## **Feedback practices and challenges**

For many instructors, one of the most challenging aspects of being a writing instructor is giving meaningful and useful feedback to students' writing because it can help students to write more effectively (Boyles, 2005; Brookhart, 2011; Inbra-Lourie, 2008; Sadler, 1998). The responses from almost every interviewee revealed that they usually gave corrective feedback to their students by circling or underlining the errors and using correction codes to indicate the locations and types of mistakes. This sort of feedback practice tended to focus only on mechanical (e.g., spelling, punctuation and capitalization) and grammatical mistakes (e.g., tenses, subject-verb agreement, and countable-uncountable nouns). However, they always felt that this type of feedback was not truly effective because simply circling, underlining, or crossing over errors and substituting them with the correct forms had a very small impact on the improvement of their students' writing, since their students usually made similar mistakes in subsequent assignments.

Even though many of them reported that global aspects such as content, organization and technical language use were more important than local aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, it is interesting to

discover that a number of the interviewees who taught ESP courses admitted that their comments regarding global errors were almost nonexistent due to their lack of knowledge in specialized fields.

I normally have students from different fields such as engineering, education, fine arts, and architecture, but I don't really know about the writing conventions or content in those fields. So when I read my students' writing, for example, research proposals, oftentimes I don't understand what they actually want to say, especially when their writing contains several serious errors. I would say that it's really hard for me to give effective comments. My feedback is simply the same thing as editing — only a few red marks on the papers.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that a considerable number of the interviewees believed that class size was a major factor in determining the effectiveness of their feedback. Many of them found it difficult to provide detailed feedback when there were more than 20 students in class. Therefore, large class sizes are a big challenge for them when providing feedback to individual students.

I usually limit my class size to 20 students for my ESP course because, in a semester, my students have to submit multiple drafts for all 5 assignments. But recently, my average class size has increased to 25 due to the high demand of writing courses and a shortage of writing instructors, and the situation is even worse when we have to teach general English courses. We usually have 40 or 50 students in one general English class, and we have to assign two or three assignments.

In the past, I only had about 20 students in my College Writing class, and I taught only one section. But now I am the only instructor teaching that course. Last year, I had almost one hundred students in my class, and I had to spend so much time giving comments to each individual paper every other week.

### **Scoring practices and challenges**

The only approach that all interviewees used to establish reliability and accuracy of their scoring practice was using a rubric. They noted that rubrics could help them not only to measure their students' progress, but also to achieve high consistency among different instructors teaching the same course.

Many of them mentioned that they used a rubric not only as a grading tool, but also as a teaching tool. They believed that a rubric could identify pertinent aspects of good writing because the descriptions in the rubric could communicate expectations of the assignments to the students. When completing their assignments, the students would not be left uncertain about what their instructor wanted, but instead they could consider how to fulfill specific criteria for an assignment.

When it comes to the use of rubrics, it is worthwhile to mention one common challenge faced by the interviewees. A number of the interviewees confessed that even though they always used rubrics, their judgments were always subjective and varied. Therefore, they expressed great interest in learning more about how to deal with unreliable scoring.

You know, grading involves human judgment and is therefore never entirely objective even though I try my best to stick to the rubric.

It is quite common to come across students' work that is overall of very high quality, but the preset criteria do not capture overall quality. So oftentimes I add extra points to account for a wow factor.

Oftentimes, I have difficulty in deciding between two levels of performance. The quality of writing seems to fall somewhere between the levels. For one composition, I chose the lower level, but for others, I chose the higher one, resulting in inconsistency.

Even though the results of the online survey showed that the majority of the respondents (84%) created their own rubrics, findings from the in-depth interviews showed the opposite. Almost every interviewee shied away from creating their own rubrics because the process was time-consuming. They tended to use the ones available online and adjusted them to best fit their students' performance and objectives of the assignments to save time.

### **The instructors' beliefs about alternative assessments**

As noted by Inbra-Lourie (2008) and Weigle (2007), knowledge in different assessment methods is useful in ensuring that instructors choose the most suitable assessment method for a given context. Even though almost every interviewee in this study expressed some interest in the implementation of alternative assessments such as self-assessment, peer evaluation, and portfolios, only a few of them actually knew about the concepts and issues related to each type of alternative assessment. In fact, only a few of them had experience using them in the past or were currently using them in their classes.

When the interviewees were first asked about self-assessment, many of them stated that they considered this type of assessment is relatively new for them. Even though many of them believed that self-assessment could be an effective way to monitor student progress while reducing their workload dealing with assessment progress reports, they admitted that they were totally inexperienced with this method. They said that they lacked good training of how to use it and how to give training to their students before implementation.

I have never used self-assessment before, and I think for Thai students, it might be a good exercise because it requires high-level thinking skills. However, I think it takes time and tremendous effort to train students on how to personally reflect on their own work in a constructive manner, and I don't know how to do it.

I have used self-assessment only once, but I don't think it was effective. Most of my students lacked confidence in evaluating their own work. Because of their limited language proficiency, they don't know how to identify and correct their own problems. I remember that I gave them a self-assessment checklist which contained open-ended questions. But many students only selected 'Yes' or 'No' in the checklist and left the plan for improving their essay empty. They told me that it was very frustrating for them to check their own work.

Similar to the use of self-assessment, the challenges of implementing peer assessment are also great. Many of the interviewees believed that this assessment type is not feasible in the Thai education system because Thai students are generally taught to rely on teacher comments as the only source of information for their writing skill development. Therefore, using peer assessment might not be effective.

I think Thai students are not ready for peer-assessment due to the fact that in cultures like ours, learners always think that they are not proficient enough to give their peers feedback. We all know that assessing writing is generally based on traditional paper-and-pencil correction by the teacher. So in general, I think peer assessment would not contribute much to my students' writing improvement.

I used peer assessment a few times. The good thing is that my students were able to receive fast feedback from their classmates, even if it wasn't always very helpful, but I think it's still better if they can get more useful feedback from me. But they need to wait a long time. [Laughing]. One issue is that students are not experts yet, so they don't dare to discuss or argue with the writer or ask for clarification.

Regarding the use of writing portfolios, it is interesting to note that almost every interviewee reported

unfamiliarity with the use of this method. Most of them did not know how to assess the achievement of students by using portfolios, and actually they were concerned that portfolios would require more work than regular writing assignments.

I'm not sure if I can develop scoring criteria that can accurately reflect the course content and then use those criteria to mark students' portfolios equitably. It's hard for me to transform portfolios into a single score or grade.

In sum, many interviewees admitted that the lack of training and knowledge in different assessment methods was one of the challenges in implementing these alternative assessments. Even though they realized that some of these methods could reduce their workload in monitoring student development and lessen student dependence on teacher comments and corrections, many of them wished that they had been trained and guided on how to embed these alternative assessments into their teaching, so that they could use them when planning their courses.

### **The uses of assessment outcomes for classroom research and instructional improvement**

According to Weigle (2007), assessment-literate instructors should possess a variety of skills and knowledge related to assessment and evaluation, including knowing how to use and interpret the outcomes of assessments to improve their future instruction. Unfortunately, more than half of the interviewees reported that as they were not required to take an assessment course as part of their training in graduate school, they did not have solid background knowledge and extensive training to conduct research related to assessments and evaluations. Even though the results from the online survey indicated that around 30% of the participants admitted a lack of knowledge in writing assessments, the results from the in-depth interviews suggested different findings.

Most of them reported that they had relatively little knowledge and professional development in the areas of assessment. Their professional development in assessment usually occurred after they started teaching, e.g., through attending conferences and workshops and using commercial writing textbooks that suggested techniques for writing assessment. Even so, they rated their confidence level in assessment knowledge and practices as low and considered themselves as *inexperienced* classroom teachers in this field. Consider the following responses to interview questions related to assessment and evaluation practices.

In graduate school, I might have learned some basic – very basic – concepts of language assessment, but I already forgot everything I learned. It has been more than ten years, you know.

What is language testing exactly? [Laughing]. I don't even know. I remember that language assessment is taught as an elective course, and I chose not to take it. I think knowing different techniques to teach language is more important for me. .... Even though I attended a few conferences on statistics for assessments, I forget what I've learned. It has been a long time, and I've never had a chance to use it in my class.

Even though I took a course in language testing, I only learned about general concepts – test principles and fundamental test processes, but when it comes to statistical analyses, I don't remember a thing. I'm not sure how to apply concepts for standardized tests such as test reliability into my own tests. Even though I feel that some knowledge about assessment might be important, I don't have a chance to attend conferences that can strengthen my knowledge of writing assessment due to several factors such as my workload and departmental policies.

Moreover, when asked whether or not they had a chance to use the outcomes from classroom assessments to conduct further research, the responses were also surprising. For the formative assessments, the majority of interviewees used the results of writing assignments during the semester to support and motivate students to become better writers. The interviewees tried their best to provide constructive feedback to ensure that their students could be more active when it came to revising their own writing. However, these practices were mostly done during the instructional process. When it came to summative assessments such as formal exams and student course evaluations at the end of the semester, almost all of them admitted that they never formally reviewed or examined the results of these assessments to see whether the students' writing progress genuinely and appropriately moved toward identified learning objectives because they were mostly preoccupied with preparing final grades or other administrative work.

After I finish each course, I only want to know how I can make it more interesting and fun next semester. [Laughing]

I am a new teacher. Do I need to do research, too? I think our roles are simply to teach students how to write, provide useful feedback, and encourage them to become better writers. I've never done any research related to classroom assessments before. But if someone could give me some guidance, and if I were to have enough time, I might choose to do some research.

In conclusion, the responses from many interviewees suggested that they do not consider knowledge of assessments to be important in their teaching. Even more concerning, they do not consider it necessary to acquire such knowledge before starting teaching. Moreover, it was found that almost all of the interviewees never carried out any assessment-related research. The outcomes from classroom assessments were used primarily to help students assess their current position in relation to course goals. Evaluation of assessment outcomes linking current practices to writing performance, and subsequent discussion of how the writing curriculum should be adjusted, were non-existent, and the results of summative assessments in particular were mostly neglected. According to Weigle (2007), any form of assessment that instructors administer in the classroom, ranging from writing assignments to formal exams, can serve as meaningful sources of information to guide the development and improvement of student learning as well as teaching, because these pieces of information can be used to examine the writing progress of students and then adjust any instruction as necessary.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conclusion, this study has found a lack of substantial knowledge in writing assessment and limited assessment pedagogical practices in many participants of the study, so there is a need for formal training and guidance in many aspects of writing assessment such as scoring, grading, giving useful feedback, and using alternative assessments. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will benefit both individuals and institutions. On the individual level, the participants will have an opportunity to reflect on their educational preparation regarding assessment practices. On the institutional level, the results can be used as evidence for teacher training programs to better prepare their current and future teachers. Ultimately, the researcher hopes that institutions from other countries will be able to use this study as a case study when exploring the writing assessment literacy of their own instructors. Based on the outcomes of the current study, the recommendations are as follows:

### **For Writing Teachers**

Even though Stiggins (1999) argued that the demands of assessment literacy can vary from context to

context and from country to country, they are not mutually exclusive. In other words, the instructors should at least possess all of the skills proposed by Weigle (2007) and other scholars (Crusan, Plakans, & Gebril, 2016; Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Stiggins, 1999) because they are considered the core competencies that underpin good quality assessment practices. Therefore, instructors, especially new instructors, should be more active in learning about the basic principles of writing assessment. They can find online materials or other specialized documents to gain more knowledge, discuss their practices with other instructors who have more experience in teaching and assessing student performance, or attend assessment workshops. Moreover, for instructors or department administrators who are responsible for designing curriculum and setting course objectives, having a deep conceptual understanding of assessment should be seen as a necessity because their decisions can affect both writing instruction as well as whether or not the course objectives can be achieved.

Last but not least, not only should teachers be required to be assessment literate, but students need to be assessment literate as well. Part of students' assessment literacy is being able to understand feedback given by the teachers and exploiting the information collected from different assessment tasks to monitor their own learning progression.

### **For TESOL Programs in Thailand**

Considering the current curriculums of TESOL programs at a number of large institutions in Thailand, many of them offer only one language assessment course and it is often not compulsory. A considerable number of the interviewees in this study admitted that they took the class only because they had to take it, but they no longer remembered much because the course content tended to be theory-based and had too much focus on the development of large-scale tests rather than providing guidance that was practical for classroom assessment and research. This could contribute to the fact that they were not able to expand their understanding through practice and research.

Unlike standardized assessments, classroom context can vary substantially from one class to the next. Therefore, the researcher believes that TESOL programs should offer some courses related to classroom assessment and research. Students of such programs should be able to apply the concepts of validity and reliability in large-scale assessments into their own classroom contexts. Even though some interviewees mentioned that they still remembered some concepts of validity and reliability in large-scale assessments, they did not know how to apply such concepts into their own classrooms. Similarly, these programs should train students to develop skills that will support them in conducting classroom research, so that they know how to ensure that their tests are valid, reliable, and practical.

### **For TESOL Programs Worldwide**

According to Crusan, Plakans, and Gebril (2016) and Taylor (2009), there has been concern worldwide to increase teachers' assessment literacy because inadequate assessment literacy leads to non-standard and unethical testing practices. Therefore, every TESOL program as well as any programs involved in language teaching should ensure that their students have an adequate level of assessment literacy. They should at least be capable of choosing and designing an assessment tool that can make fair and trustworthy assessment decisions to support both student learning and teacher professional development.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the Journal of Asia TEFL for their constructive comments which truly help improve earlier versions of this manuscript. The author also wants to thank Assoc. Prof. Bee Chamcharatsri for his help with data collection and the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Mahidol University for funding this study.

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