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## *Being Under Control: The Power of Using Checklists When Writing*

### تحت السيطرة: قوة استخدام قوائم المراجعة عند الكتابة

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#### Abstract

Self-assessment techniques are fundamental tools in the educational system that can pave the way to instructors for “The involvement of students in identifying standards and / criteria to apply to their work and making judgments about the extent to which they met these criteria and standards” (Boud, 1990, p. 5). This article attempts to look at the rationales of using one of those techniques in particular writing checklists in the department of English at the University of 8 Mai 1945, Guelma (Algeria) throughout distributing a questionnaire to master one students regarding the area under investigation. The study findings revealed that motivation, arrangement, delegation, productiveness, and creativeness are the major reasons behind using writing checklists in the department of English at the University of 08 Mai 1945. Guelma.

#### ملخص

#### الكلمات المفتاحية:

تقنيات التقييم الذاتي هي أدوات أساسية في النظام التعليمي يمكن أن تمهد الطريق للمدرسين من أجل “مشاركة الطلاب في تحديد المعايير/ المقاييس لتطبيقها على عملهم وإصدار الأحكام بشأن مدى استيفائهم لهذه المقاييس والمعايير” (Boud, 1990). يبحث هذا المقال في الأسس المنطقية لاستخدام قوائم تدقيق الكتابة مع طلاب “ماستر واحد” في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة 8 ماي 1945، قالمة (الجزائر). تبين نتائج الدراسة التي كشف عنها الاستبيان أن: الدافعة، الترتيب، التفويض، الإنتاجية، والإبداع هي الأسباب الرئيسية وراء استخدام قوائم مراجعة الكتابة.

التقييم الذاتي  
التقنيات  
قوائم المراجعة  
للكتابة  
المعايير  
الإنتاجية  
الإبداعية.

## 1. introduction

Not only researchers are looking for an effective system to follow in order to accomplish a writing assignment or task in the right way, students writer in Higher Education (HE) are also considered to be a part of this research journey. Therefore, students' participation to develop and improve their writing skill and accordingly their autonomy is an essential aspect that should be stressed to track their own interests so that learning and mainly learning to write becomes more effective and meaningful. However, when writing any text many students are experiencing many writing problems and hardships and often they find themselves having no guidance, dropping some necessary steps or neglecting important writing traits and strategies. So, within this scope we will try to direct students toward the value of writing checklists and the reasons behind using them as a way of improving and developing students writing quality.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Writing Skill

Writing is highly valued in language teaching and learning and it is a real key to learners' academic and professional success. Numerous linguists have shed light on the area of foreign language writing (FL), a field that has a multilingual tone and commonly a problematic nature for most EFL learners; apparently, for a major factor besides other; that is transfer which is a "...bidirectional, and that it includes transfer of knowledge, skills and, very importantly, the use of the writer's total linguistic repertoire at product and process levels" (Manchon, 2009, p. 12).

This makes EFL students usually experience a number of writing hardships. Besides that many linguists stressed another aspect of writing which is: its multifaceted nature –writing skill- and it was best pictured by Westwood (2008) in which he affirmed that; writing is an arduous exercise that increasingly urges the engagement of the various cognitive, linguistic and psych-motor components (Westwood, 2008, p. 56) . Bell and Burnaby (1984) hold the same position as Westwood, in viewing that writing skill

demands mastering of the different elements at both "... the sentence level these include control of content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and letter formation. Beyond the sentence, the writer must be able to structure and integrate information into cohesive and coherent paragraphs and texts " (Nunan, 1989, p. 36) and consequently, students' written productions reflect their constraints, bounds and blocks regarding their writing skill.

### 2.2 EFL Writing Challenges

Writing is the most complex of the communication skills that requires the most time to master. It is one of the macro skills that needed to be taught because it is not naturalistic ability (Nunan, 1989) that we born with, but rather; it has to be learned. Accordingly, we need to learn how to write; otherwise, we will never evolve our writing competence to be proficient writers (Harmer, 2004, p. 3). The following collection spots light on EFL learners writing issues:

1. Poor planning or no planning participates in producing deficient and puzzling writings, which is the first and most important writing step is to put a good, clear and achievable plan. (Westwood, 2008)
2. "Lack of grammar knowledge can limit conversation; lack of vocabulary knowledge can stop conversation", that is to say if the students' repertoire is empty or not that good it is impossible for him/her to write. If rock is the first material for building, vocabulary or words are the rocks for writing because we can get a piece of writing because of words even if the grammar is incorrect. (Floese, 2004).
3. Deficiency in phonological awareness and ineffectual segmenting terms into component sounds and syllables. The problem is that the phonological issues lead to spelling errors and mistakes this may devaluate the writing production.
4. Students face linguistic hardships that is language used in speech is not as the same as writing (Hadfield, 1992)
5. Student writers fell frustrated when they are blocked and find no way to clear up the mind especially in time of exams and tests, where time plays another stress factor.

6. Weak or no organization for the writing task or activity plus the comprehension of the task itself can be considered as a hindering factor to students' writer.

It is inarguably that putting words down on paper is a writer's Achilles heel, particularly for second/ foreign language learners within the academic frame. Since, they encounter many problems and complications toward producing a correct English piece of writing. Being an important language skill, writing entails no less than knowledge of English grammar, knowledge of vocabulary, and the ability to formulate ideas in a proper English language free from the native language influence.

### 2.3 Self-assessment

We should not look back unless it is to derive useful lessons from past errors and for the purpose of profiting by dearly bought experience. -George Washington-

The concern of assessing, grading or evaluating students' written compositions is usually get done by teachers, and learners are totally absent from the scene of assessment for one reason or another; most importantly, as students themselves, were not competent to provide tips on English writing. Moreover, just receiving the scores for a piece of work or of examinations cannot really be of great benefit or help for students to make them get better marks in the forthcoming tests since they do not know actually where they missed up and how to fix this miss. So learners "...need to know what they have to do to move up a grade so they can build on their strengths while addressing areas of their relative weaknesses" (Pike, 2004). In this way, we are speaking here about the need for making learners aware of, engaged in and in charge for their own learning process to achieve that change.

So, the concept of inviting students to self-assessment their works or performances was neither popular nor usual practice to be done by them long time ago, however; during the few past years with the emergence of learner autonomy and self-directed learning, the notion of self-assessment was built to the point that in the absence of self-evaluation and self-assessment

there can be no real autonomy (Nunan, *Language teaching methodology: A textbook for teachers*, 1991)

(Gale, 1984) offered a description for self-assessment in which he affirmed that self-assess is a good technique to set goals for learning, it is the second half of helping students within their writing and the other half is called or known as self-remediation ... Self-assessment is a necessary part of learning, not an add-on that we do if we have the time or the "right" students". That is, self-assessment stands at the center of learning process". The author added that within the procedure of self-assessment learners are engaged in attaining the following issues:

1. With self-assessment students are the detectors of their good sides and weaker points.
2. Students via self-assessment can register knowledge they learned as well as knowledge they still questioned and acquired.
3. Self-assessment technique offers evaluative information.
4. Self-assessment enables students to take advantage of both responses: their classmates and their own so as to decide on what they have to work on more.
5. Self-assessment and self-remediation are the two sides of the same coin.

### 1.4 Writing Checklists: A Better Way to Write

Self-assessment lists, rubrics or occasions were set up to grant learners opportunities to contemplate on their learning advance. Among those opportunities; what we call self-monitoring checklists or self-assessment checklists. The latter were defined as those "tools students can use to make sure they have met all the requirements of an assignment that will be assessed" (Reeves, 2011). Writing checklists were described as detailed roadmap that guide and control students step by step to the way of fulfilling a given –writing-assignment successfully (Reeves, 2011).

According to Priestley (1982) he defined writing checklists as rating scale that are "used to help students assess their performance in a structured fashion. Given a checklist or scale and an orientation to its use, students can rate how well they performed

on a given task” (Priestley, 1982). Checklist is a working guide and a writing map for both instructors and students that serve the aim of directing the two about what writing criteria and writing rubrics should be considered and taken into account and to what degree they act on a given project; that is to say what is done and what is left.

A fundamental side of efficient writing instructions is teacher and peer feedback. Yet instructors and teachers have to identify the group of variables that have huge impact on how they assess and evaluate students’ written compositions. Those variables which were listed by (Graham, Harris, & Hebert, 2011a, 2011b) are:

1. Teacher’s scoring reliability.
2. Students’ skills with writing mechanics.
3. The paper’s representativeness of a student’s true writing ability.

Many authors stressed that students enhance their writing quality when they utilize explicit criteria (e.g., rubric traits) to self-evaluate their writing performance.

Elsewhere, Fiderer (1999) considered checklists as detailed sections within the stages of the writing process that are persistent steps- prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing- which provide assistance and guidance to student writers whenever they meet a writing difficulty (Fiderer, 1999). The effectiveness of using writing checklists was best pictured also by Tuttle (2010) in which he stated that: “checklists assist the students in assessing their own work. Because these checklists state specific skills, the students can verify for themselves that they have displayed that skill in their writing” (Tuttle, 2010)

### 3. The Study

#### 2.1 Method and aim of the study

The study was conducted through the quantitative descriptive method (Koul, 2009) by gathering and collecting information through administering a questionnaire to the selected audience. The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate the rationales of using writing checklist by the students when writing

in the department of English at the University of 8 Mai 1945-Guelma (Algeria).

#### 2.2 Setting and participants

The study was carried out in the department of English at the University of 8 Mai 1945-Guelma- Algeria. The targeted population in this study was three groups composed of 20, 21, and 22 a total of 63 LMD master one students; which represents the whole population, they aged between 21 to 31. At this level learners are presumed to attain certain level of English proficiency since the majority of them almost had more than eight years of English study.

#### 3.3 Research Instrument

In the second semester of the academic year 2016-2017, a questionnaire was structured for master one LMD students of English. It includes closed ended as well as open ended questions that aim at collecting quantitative data. It is divided into three sections. Each section is related to the aspect of the investigation.

The introductory section covers learners’ general information. Section two sheds light on information linked to students’ attitudes and awareness toward studying and practicing the writing skill. The purpose of this section is investigating students’ perceptions of themselves as student writers along side with the quality of their writing or whether their language competence is enough to create a good piece of writing. Additionally, It seeks to elicit the factors that shape a good writing (writers). Furthermore, it highlights what writing aspects students writers find most difficult for them, and what writing traits they should develop.

The last section in the questionnaire aims at mostly figuring out the possible and the different reasons/ causes behind using writing checklists when writing by the surveyed students at the University of 8 May 1945.Guelma.

#### 4. Results and Analysis

A total of sixty three (63) questionnaires were handed to master one LMD students of English. The questionnaire findings were gathered and analyzed like the following:

## **Section One**

With regards to the population under investigation, the female students (95.23%) outnumbered the male ones (4.76%). And more than (90%) of them have been learning English for more than eight years (08). Accordingly, we can assume that our respondents have acceptable, structural knowledge and familiar with the English language system.

## **Section Two**

In answering the question about learners' attitudes toward writing, the results demonstrated that, the overwhelming majority of the surveyed students (79.36%) like and enjoy writing tasks. And they provided the following justifications for their choice:

1. Students feel more comfortable in writing than in speaking.
2. Students think that writing is the appropriate approach to convey their ideas and the best way to express themselves.

Only (20.63%) of them affirmed that they do not like to write, and hence, we can consider them as unmotivated writers, and they gave the following explanations for their selection:

1. Students consider writing as a dull and boring activity, and they find writing a difficult task that requires time and practice.

Students when asked about whether they thought themselves as good writers, considerable proportion (69.84%) believed that they are not qualified enough to be classified as skilled writers; this signifies that learners are aware of their writing flaws. While (30.15%) of the participants claimed that they have the qualities of proficient writers.

Concerning students' poor writing marks, we noticed that their choices are integrative combining two to four options. Likewise, there is a frequent repetition of option (d) that refers to content and organization of ideas. Then option (c+b) that represent correct grammar and lexis respectively. From the previous mentioned results, we can deduce that learners view relevant content and organization of ideas besides correct grammar and vocabulary as the major writing

parts where they lack competence in.

Furthermore, regarding how learners could improve their writing skills, the participants suggested the following points that may participate in the improvement of their writing ability:

- To read a lot (books, journals, short stories, and online materials ...etc.).
- To find different texts and summarize them.
- To practise (writing) and get feedback from their teachers, pairs or even from others.
- To use online applications and writing blogs.
- To great online groups for the purpose of improving their ability to write in foreign or second language.
- To practice writing at least twice a week.
- To dedicate whole modules for how to write, how to review writing ...etc.

According to the students' suggestions, we can notice that they are conscious and mindful about the different activities that can assist them to overcome their writing problems. Hence, this means that learners are either careless students neglecting reading, practicing writing and all the previous mentioned points or they really try their best but still they face writing problems.

Regarding the last question, it has two parts which are whether students use writing checklists when they write and in what way checklists assist them in polishing their writing. The findings of the first part was (26.98%) of the participants used writing checklists and (73.01%) of the surveyed students admitted that they do not use checklists when they write, most of them start writing immediately as they receive the task or the assignment. Concerning the second part of the question students' answers fall into five categories (rationales) and they are as the following:

### **a.Rational One:**

The informants said that writing checklists motivated them to make decisions and encouraged them to take actions concerning their writing pieces. It acts as a motive of pushing them to write. Motivation is a key component that learners need to step up and get rid

over fair of / from writing.

#### **b.Rational Two:**

The students agreed on those checklists split up the whole writing activity (assignment) into smaller and specific tasks; which make students more comfortable and stimulate them to think clearly and decided from with point they are going to start to initiate to their writing process or activity to produce more. In other terms it plays the role of a good organizer that assist learners in their writing.

#### **c. Rational Three:**

The participants of the survey reported that by involving the use of writing checklists in their writing process, they could reach a considerable amount of completing ks/ parts of writing more rapidly and effectively and this encourage learners to be more productive writers, and pushes them toward putting more black ink on white papers

#### **d. Rational Four:**

By following a writing checklist, the students said we could stay on the track e.i;. It assists the learners to be more organized without missing any

writing step or writing trait. It made them focused and had a clear understanding about what exactly they are going to write. Writing checklists are efficient, helpful and time saving tools that guarantee learners not to skip, miss, or forget any writing detail so that the final writing outcome would be more proficient, convenient and at least acceptable piece of writing.

#### **e.Rational Five:**

Writing checklist provides great chance and a learning opportunity to figure out about the different factors of effective writing, mainly when learners check and revise their writing pieces. Writing Checklist that contains different writing traits such as: word choice, grammar, organization, fluency, voice and other traits can assist students become successful writers and assessors of their work.

### **Conclusion**

Setting goals for yourself or for the others is a crucial and remarkable point in accomplishing what you plan or what you want, and having a writing checklist

will support and pave the way for you to meet those planned goals. As indicated by the findings from the survey/questionnaire that: motivation, arrangement/ organization, productiveness, delegation, and creativeness are the main reasons/ rationales behind utilizing checklists when writing that were listed by the students in the department of English. Reaching proficiency in writing is the result of using self-assessment

strategies. Self-assessment appears when learners evaluate their work or their performance; and this process can advantage learner concerning the time (save time). With the use of self-assessment strategies-checklist- learners develop editing, writing, and their critical thinking skills. In addition, self-assessment is the way to another writing strategy which is self-remediation which can be seen as ultimate goal for self-assessment. Although, reaching those goals or fruits resides in the use of self-assessment mainly self-assessment checklist that is built on reflection.

### **Conflict of Interest**

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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**Appendix: Questionnaire for Students**

**Dear student,**

This questionnaire is part of a research work that aims at collecting some information about your writing ability; in terms of what can lead you as a learner to produce a proficient writing composition; calling the help of writing checklists in the English as foreign language (EFL) context.

You are kindly requested to respond to the following questions either by ticking the appropriate box (es), rating order, or give full answer (s) on the broken lines whenever necessary.

May I thank you for your cooperation and for the time devoted to answer the questionnaire.

**Thank you!**

**SECTION ONE: Background information**

**1. Participant’s sex:**

1	Female	
2	Male	

**2. Years of English learning: .....**

**SECTION TWO: Students’ attitudes and awareness toward learning the writing skill**

**3. Do you enjoy writing activities?**

1	Yes, I do	
2	No, I do not	

**4. Do you think of yourself as a good writer?**

1	Very good	
2	Good	
3	Acceptable	
4	Poor	

**5. What makes you get poor marks in writing?**

a	Content and organization of ideas	
b	Appropriate vocabulary	
c	Correct grammar	
d	Writing techniques (e.g. spelling and punctuation)	

**6. To be proficient writer, I would improve the writing skills by:**

1	.....	
2	.....	
3	.....	
4	.....	
5	.....	

**Section Three:**

**7. Do you use writing checklists when you write?**

1	Yes, I do	
2	No, I do not	

**If YES, in what way checklist helps you in polishing your writing compositions?**

1	.....	
2	.....	
3	.....	
4	.....	
5	.....	

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