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ASSESSMENT CRITERIA AS A WAY OF OVERCOMING THE DIFFICULTIES IN COMPLETING SELF-ASSIGNMENTS: A CASE STUDY AT ENU

Abstract

Assessment in academic writing is a crucial element in evaluating master's students' comprehension, analytical skills, and ability to communicate ideas effectively, ultimately enhancing their critical thinking and professional abilities. This article focuses on the difficulties master's students encountered when practicing academic writing and doing self-assignments (such as their thesis or other degree-mandated papers), as well as the strategies they used to overcome those difficulties. The purpose of the study was to investigate appropriate assessment criteria for self-assignments to address the challenges in completing self-assignments. Data were gathered using a survey. The results show that master's students have had various difficulties in completing their self-assignments. This study raises a few issues to address these students' particular demands in terms of their academic writing backgrounds and to guarantee their academic success. The authors suggest that the implementation of assessment criteria will facilitate master's students in completing their self-assignments and succeeding in their degrees. Some approaches are emphasized for the important aspects of the study to help master's students improve their research abilities as they work in their specific field of study.

Keywords: master's students, academic writing, self-assignments, assessment criteria, research skills.

Basic provisions. Assessment in academic writing is an essential part of the educational process that benefits both master's students and teachers. It is designed to assess comprehension of the topic, analytical skills, and ability to convey ideas clearly and coherently. In academic writing, assessment seeks to improve students' critical thinking and professional abilities. Moreover, assessment determines a student's profound understanding of the topic, as well as his capacity to analyze, synthesize, and think critically. It gives students useful information about the strengths and flaws of their work, which aids in future learning and development. Students can benefit a lot from assessment while completing their self-assignments if it is conducted based on criteria, which provide objectivity and transparency of assessment. Predefined assessment criteria assist students in understanding what is expected from them to complete their assignments. They can understand the particular requirements and standards that their job must follow, which helps them plan and manage their efforts more effectively. In addition, Students can use the rubric to self-test and improve their work before submitting it. This promotes critical thinking and self-esteem.

Introduction. A recognized hub for academics, research, society, and culture, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (ENU) was established in 1996 and is a significant player in the Eurasian academic community. One of ENU's priorities is that the training system of a modern university student is unthinkable today without recourse to the student's academic training. The concept of academic writing in the modern system of university training is no longer associated exclusively with teaching a foreign language since it is integrated into the system of general language training (Russian/Kazakh) and becomes the basis for the formation of a student's research competence (Bekturova, 2023; Zharkynbekova & Isenova, 2021; Abdirov, 2018).

Following this concept, the Foreign Languages Department where the authors of this study work, created the course "Essentials of Academic Writing" (EAW), which was introduced into the curriculum for master students ten years ago. To address the concerns

of Academic writing, which is a key skill in scientific activity, allowing researchers, in our case master's students, to present the results of their degree-mandated work, as well as exchange ideas and discoveries in their subject area. They are not aware that writing for academic audiences and situations demands criticism, experience, and adaptability. There are general guidelines for clarity, coherence, and correctness that people must adhere to when creating any kind of writing, be it an essay, report, review, or research paper. But they also need to understand the unique customs and requirements of many fields, such as the social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, and humanities (Coombe et al., 2020; Vakili & Ebadi, 2019; Andrade, 2008).

Within the content of the course "EWA" are assignments to improve academic writing in general, but the assignments appear to be affected by the nature of the self-assignments. Writing their self-assessments well has been one of the main assessment criteria in the teaching procedure of the authors, who are teachers of EWA sections. Designing the assessment criteria of self-assignments has been a challenging task, and is what this paper explores.

The "Essentials of Academic Writing" (EAW) course is taught in the non-linguistic master's degree programs at Eurasian National University (ENU) using at Eurasian National University (ENU) using the "Foreign Language (professional)" discipline as a foundation. The courses "English for Academic Study" by McCormack & Slaght, (2012) and "Extended Academic Writing From Paragraph to Essay" by Zemach & Rumisek (2016) as well as instructors' own experiences gained from their internships through Bolashak, Erasmus Mundus, and the course "English for Academic Writing and Publication" taught by Professor Robin Bantel at ENU serve as the foundation for the Academic Writing tutorial for master's students.

The course gives master's students training and practice in developing their research and academic writing skills. It also helps them build their foreign language communication abilities in scientific contexts and domains,

taking into consideration the unique ways that postgraduates think scientifically and professionally. The usual curriculum "Foreign language for non-linguistic majors of post higher education of master's degree programs" (Levels A1- C2) serves as the foundation for the module curriculum's construction.

The course "Essentials of Academic Writing" helps master's students succeed by fostering confidence and the development of critical academic reading, writing, and communication abilities. Master's students who take this course learn how to write in a style that is appropriate for academic texts and effective for meaning-making. The course emphasizes writing techniques that are typical of academic English papers in addition to grammar and vocabulary usage. The course covers a wide range of essential abilities, such as taking notes, effectively conducting class and small group discussions, critically analysing and reacting to readings, creating research topics, making claims, and using academic language and syntax.

The course is designed for ENU master students in the fields of mathematics, economics, engineering, philology, information technologies, construction, and natural sciences who are enrolled for a year.

The course is taken for one semester (fall or spring), with a calculated 2.5 credits, depending on the program's focus. Postgraduate students' independent study and hands-on instruction are combined in this English-taught course. Master's students are expected to meet the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages requirements for English language proficiency at level B2+ or above (CEFRL, 2003).

The goal of the academic discipline is to develop postgraduates in non-linguistic specialties' intercultural and communicative competence at the standard (C1) level of postgraduates in non-linguistic specialties during the foreign language education process (Sagimbayeva et al., 2018).

The course's learning objectives encompass a range of competencies that will be honed during the project writing and presentation phases. Among them are the following:

- brainstorming, planning, and arranging work;

- developing ideas and establishing a specific focus;

- locating information sources from books, journals, and the internet;

- choosing information that is appropriate for the task at hand;

- incorporating concepts and information into your text by summarizing, synthesizing, and paraphrasing without plagiarizing;

- assessing sources and choosing the most relevant and appropriate developing your critical thinking skills;

- discussing your work with your group mates;

- giving a presentation about your work;

- knowing the features of writing an introduction, conclusion, and abstract.

Topics covered in the course include:

- choosing a research topic (developing a focus, ways to narrow the topic);

- working with sources (sourcing information for your project, using evidence, writing a bibliography);

- writing different sections of research work (how to write a dissertation, writing abstracts, introductions, and conclusions);

- developing practical skills (summarizing, paraphrasing, and academic styles);

- teaching and presenting the material (conference preparation, presentation skills).

The study reported in this paper aims to add value to the field's knowledge of improving assessment criteria by teaching the course "Essentials of Academic Writing" for master's students at ENU in Kazakhstan. This should allow us to investigate which criteria characterize quality at each level of this part of the course. Additionally, it will supply data that will enable us to adjust or validate the rater training materials and rating scale descriptors. The research will additionally help to develop a better understanding of teaching the course "Essentials of Academic Writing" for master's students and its assessment for self-assignments and provide us with an opportunity to improve the quality of this course teaching. One unique feature of the current study is that it has brought instructors of the course together to investigate the assessment of self-assignments; this should enhance the research impact as the findings can be meaningfully translated to changes in the rating course materials (Tavakoli et al., 2023). The study's guiding research question is the following: What difficulties do master's students have in completing self-assignments, and to what extent can aspects of assessment criteria of self-assignments for master's students at ENU in Kazakhstan facilitate learning?

It is known that Academic writing is a unique genre of written communication in a scientific and educational environment, allowing researchers to share knowledge and raise scientific discussions. Therefore, the course of Academic Writing has been considered by the authors of this paper for ten years. The researchers attempted to upgrade the course materials each academic year.

Some studies have been under our review. In their book "Essential Actions for Academic Writing", Caplan and Johns (2022) identified some important aspects that will probably direct educators to develop students' comprehension of rhetorical choices, linguistic adaptability, and their writing agency more deliberately. It is believed that Academic writing is a difficult process, especially for English as a second language students because their language skills for critical thinking, genre knowledge, and social knowledge are inadequate (Bayjakanova & Martbek, 2023; Manjet, 2015). In this regard, there are difficulties in assessment, in our case, the assessment of self-assignments.

The problem of assessment has been discussed in many studies that investigated different aspects of assessment (Mendoza et al., 2022; Murchan & Siddiq, 2021). Our attention should focus on the study by Tavakoli et al., (2023). They investigated which fluency traits, in this Test of English for Educational Purposes (TEEP) speaking exam section, are characteristic of fluency at each proficiency level. They have made suggestions for improvements that should improve the TEEP's rater training materials and fluency rating descriptions.

Another research is Virtual Special Issues in Language Testing by Chapelle (2020).

The author selected articles from the journal "Language Testing" and noted that the writers of this Virtual Special Issue looked into how exams are used in larger social frameworks for opportunity acquisition as well as in teaching and learning. The articles' researches discuss their studies on the social roles that tests play in both larger social frameworks for opportunity acquisition and in teaching and learning.

In Saykova (2023) since the students' ultimate assignment was to produce an essay, the study also included an initial assessment exam and a performance analysis of the students. It is necessary to state that the majority of students were merely adequately proficient in terms of the predetermined standards. The research indicates that the course appeared to be both skill-worthy and enlightening, as the students demonstrated notable advancements in the challenging domain of scientific writing. In addition, all things considered, the statistical data from the current course leads one to believe that the initiative has been a success.

Winke & Lim (2017) focused on Testwiseness and test management skills where they investigated the effects of listening test preparation. It was noted that testwiseness can help someone receive artificially inflated test scores. Since the current study is focused on the essentials of Academic Writing, the researchers would like to focus on Assessment criteria and research skills because they have something in common. The researchers believe that self-assignments can help to develop research skills.

According to Khonbi and Sadeghi (2013), self-assessment of some assignments results in greater comprehension reduces stress, and gives them a chance to evaluate and enhance their testing abilities. Additionally, Khonbi and Sadeghi (2013) expressed a want for self-assessment to familiarise themselves with various question types. Falk et al., (2023) enumerated their three primary result metrics in their studies: Accuracy of Self-Assessments, Effort and Motivation, and social interaction styles. In this current study, the researchers have been interested in the first two variables. They promote the benefits of using appropriate assessment criteria for the completion of the various self-assignments.

Materials and Methods. The study focuses on assessment of self-assignments in the course "EAW" in the 2023/2024 academic year. Sixty-four master students from non-linguistic specialties participated in the survey. They all had the same syllabus in this course, studying it in their first year at ENU in Astana. A key emphasis of EAW is writing techniques that are taught as a subject and they are also common in academic English articles and writing their thesis.

The course syllabus covered topics such as writing the abstract, introduction, conclusion, research methods, aims, objectives, research statement, and bibliography of their research area, summarising and paraphrasing some sections, and presenting the research in oral form. The researchers created the criteria for these tasks (Table 1.)

The main data collection instrument for this research was a survey that the researchers created. The survey included Likert-scale questions with six options (1 to 6), and those Likert-scale questions are in Table 2. The researchers also had three open-ended questions which were: 1) What challenges do you face in this course, and how do you overcome them? 2) Do you have recommendations on how to fulfil your self-study tasks? 3) Are there any specific changes or improvements you would suggest in your self-assessment tasks to enhance motivation for studying this course? We provided this survey to master's students to examine whether their research skills are particularly useful in their writing self-assignments. The survey results will enable the researchers to explore whether the content of the course is appropriate for the student's skill levels.

Results. The effects of the self-assignments of EAW were examined using an analysis of the survey data. As can be seen from Table 2, most respondents were satisfied with the content of self-assignment tasks in this course and rate well the tasks of self-assignments in this course. The study's findings show that master's students discovered that they need more time to do their self-assignment tasks. 80 percent of them spend just the time between 20 - 50 minutes. They also indicate that the content of

self-assignments is needed to have more details and examples.

Common responses from the first open-ended question, which was "What challenges do you face in this course, and how do you overcome them?" included responses such as the following:

Example 1: Difficult tasks

Example 2: Lack of practice

These demonstrate that master students need extra time to master the content of the course. To get advice on how to approach their tasks, students must make an effort to speak with their lecturers in their subject area. Asking instructors for help and direction can be found to be essential when thinking about writing assignments.

Common responses from the second open-ended question, which was "Do you have recommendations on how to fulfil your self-study tasks?", included responses such as the following:

Example 1: More examples

Example 2: More details

Example 3: The self-assignment tasks should be directly related to real-world situations or academic contexts

These demonstrate that using an English language dictionary, searching the internet for websites that may aid in their writing process, and asking their teachers for advice on academic writing standards can all assist students improve their writing and research skills.

Common responses from their open-ended question, which was "Are there any specific changes or improvements you would suggest in your self-assignment tasks to enhance the motivation of studying this course?" included responses such as the following:

Example 1: to add some group tasks

Example 2: to make tasks more relevant

These demonstrate that master's students are very satisfied with the course and even suggest some extra tasks such as group work. The results also showed that the most effective strategies were to be persistent, strive to express oneself in various ways, and take additional time to complete their self-assignments. In addition, master's students in this study supplemented what they learned from the lecturers and seniors with their practices.

Overall, this study discovered that master's students had a harder time adjusting to the demands of studying Academic English language for their master's degrees. Based only on the course's statistical data, it can be assumed that the program has been successful.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the survey

#	Question	# of responses	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation
1	Do you find the course "Essentials of Academic Writing" helpful for your research skills?	65	2.00	5.00	4.00	0.74
2	How familiar are you with the concept of Academic English?	65	1.00	5.00	3.11	1.08
3	What types of activities do you engage in to improve your Academic English?	64	1.00	7.00	3.53	1.66
4	What motivates you to have Academic English? (e.g., academic goals, personal interest, research skills, identifying the research statement, presenting the project (in oral form, etc)	64	1.00	6.00	2.78	1.32
5	How well do you believe doing self-assignments is helping you achieve your Academic English language learning goals?	63	1.00	5.00	3.65	0.91
6	How much time do you have to do your self-assignment tasks?	63	1.00	5.00	2.65	1.14

7	Do you find self-assignment tasks helped you to achieve your academic goals? RATE them on a scale of 1 to 5	63	1.00	5.00	3.56	0.92
8	How comfortable did you feel doing your self-assignment tasks?	63	1.00	5.00	3.92	0.86
9	How would you rate the tasks of self-assignments in this course?	63	2.00	5.00	4.05	0.67
10	How satisfied are you with the content of your self-assignment tasks in this course?	62	1.00	5.00	4.08	0.89
11	How confident do you feel about achieving your Academic English language learning goals?	63	1.00	5.00	3.67	0.84
12	To what extent do you feel that all given instructions in Academic English are tailored to your individual learning needs and preferences?	63	2.00	5.00	3.52	0.96

Discussion. The students' conception of academic writing practices from their previous academic education is not the same as the equivalent conception and socialization in the master's community of practice currently in progress. Their writing, which is influenced by prior learning styles, makes it difficult for them to understand the new and distinct academic standards in graduate degrees rapidly. According to research, it takes time to adjust to a new educational system, and a foreign culture, and negotiate these differences when learning a foreign or second language (Andrade, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008; Wong, 2004).

The study's findings show that master's students discovered some challenges with this course such as finding the tasks difficult and not having tools for the research. The results of this research also clearly suggest that even though the master's students met the university's language requirements (TOEFL, IELTS, or an equivalent test), they still had difficulties with academic literacy in key domains like academic writing. Their English language credentials, therefore, do not accurately reflect their level of English language competency as assigned by standardized tests. (Albert, 2023)

As a result, this study offers some suggestions to assist master's students from Kazakhstan in overcoming obstacles in their academic writing practices.

Firstly, the creation of a Learning Support Centre is the first move in the direction of the university's internationalization objective and the good of the students. The research site of the university's academic fraternity is the ideal forum for intellectual discourse to support the crucial path of academic socialization for inexperienced domestic or international graduate students to become accepted members of the master's program. Therefore, the institution should be assisted by the one-stop academic center in enhancing the academic writing experience of its students. Some foreign competent specialists can be invited to conduct academic research with master's students at this Learning Support Center.

Secondly, to help master's students develop effective learning so they can become skilled researchers in the master's program, the university should improve teaching and learning by using transdisciplinary collaboration, which is currently underutilized in Kazakhstan, between lecturers who specialize in content and language. It is recommended that lecturers from both fields work across disciplinary boundaries and gain familiarity with a broad range of subjects. It is possible to establish integrative language and content teaching courses that concentrate on particular discourses within the discipline to provide master students the best possible exposure to the standards of academic writing by integrating the knowledge of both area lecturers (Manjet, 2015).

Thirdly, the authors created the assessment criteria for master's self-assignments. There are

several benefits of these criteria. It is obvious that effective assessment improves master's student learning, and it influences students' better understanding of the important goals of the course. In addition, the assessment criteria constitute how we, as teachers, assess master's student learning. The created criteria are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Assessment criteria of self-assignments at ENU

Unit 1	Identify three stages in producing your research project, think about the topic, and find out what you have found interesting about this topic.	Task Achievement	Three stages	Topic	Why is this topic interesting?		
		30	30	10	40		
Unit 2	Choose a general topic for your academic paper and narrow it down by asking questions. Steps. 1. Write a general topic 2. Ask 4-5 questions 3. Narrow your topic and formulate your topic.	Task Achievement	General topic	Questions	Narrow your topic and formulate your topic.		
		30	10	40	20		
Unit 3	What research methods are you going to use in your dissertation? List your research methods and explain why you are using them.	Task Achievement	Research methods in my dissertation	Why are you using them?	Academic vocabulary use		
		30	10	40	20		
Unit 4	1. Aims of your research 2. Objectives of your research 3. Research question 4. Research statement	Task Achievement	Aims of your research	Objectives of your research	Research question	Research Statement	
		30	10	20	20	20	
Unit 5	Write a bibliography using: (4 for each) Book Journal Article Newspaper article Articles With Two to Six Authors On line source	Task Achievement	Book	Journal Article	Newspaper article	Articles With Two to Six Authors	On line source
		30	10	20	10	20	10
Unit 6	Analyze the abstract of the scientific paper in your field. Write an abstract of your research	Task Achievement	Analysis of the abstract (Features)	Own abstract (showing features)			
		30	30	40			
Unit 7	Use evidence in the scientific paper in your research field (3 examples of each piece of evidence should be provided)	Task achievement	Direct quotation	Paraphrase	Summarize	Use of reporting verbs	
		30	10	20	30	10	
Unit 8	Demonstrate the ways of avoiding plagiarism: 1. Summarise one paragraph 2. Paraphrase one paragraph 3. Use direct quotation	Task achievement + Source	Use of summarizing	Use of paraphrasing	Use of direct quotation	Use of reported verbs and vocabulary	
		30	20	20	20	10	

Unit	Task					
Unit 9	Use paraphrasing and summarizing for your research 2 paragraphs for paraphrasing, 1 paragraph for summary	Task achievement	Source (Presence of the original text)	Quality of paraphrasing	Quality of summarizing	Use of academic vocabulary
		30	10	25	25	10
Unit 10	Use Parallelism with coordinators (5 sentences), with conjunctions (5 sentences), parallel structure (5 sentences)	Task achievement	Use of co-ordinators	Use of conjunctions	Use of parallel structure	Academic vocabulary
		30	20	20	20	10
Unit 11	Write and analyze the introduction of your research	Task achievement	Organization of paragraphs	Analysis of introduction (features)		Use of academic vocabulary
		30	20	30		20
Unit 12	Demonstrate using graphs and charts in your research.	Task achievement	Use of graphs	Use of chart	Quality of description	Use of academic vocabulary
		30	15	15	30	10
Unit 13	Write and analyze the conclusion of your research	Task achievement	Organization of paragraphs	Analysis of conclusion (features)		Use of academic vocabulary
		30	20	30		20
Unit 14	Outline and organize your presentation on your research (Presentation)	Task achievement	Outline and Introduction	Body	Conclusion	Use of academic vocabulary
		30	20	15	15	20
Unit 15	Present your project (in oral form)	Task achievement	Outline and Introduction	Body	Conclusion	Use of academic vocabulary
		30	20	15	15	20

Conclusion. This study has shown how Kazakhstani master's students at ENU addressed challenges related to academic writing practices in the "EAW" course and offered solutions. The findings only provide a limited picture of the academic endeavour, especially when it comes to the students' experiences writing for academic reasons concerning a larger context of their educational and linguistic background from both the past and present. However, the findings have helped us understand things from their perspective, particularly how students handle challenges in their academic writing habits and take the necessary steps to overcome them. The findings create new opportunities for a more thorough understanding of academic writing that recognizes the linguistic diversity of master's students in target English-language discourse groups.

The study also supports the notion that master's students' research abilities may be developed and that teachers and researchers can enhance the quality of the "EAW" course instruction by using the assessment results from self-assignments. Additionally, ENU should take into account the suggestions made in this study to guarantee that master's students have a great learning experience, both inside their classroom and outside. This is because the university has a sufficiently high level of international authority and is actively working to modernize its educational program to meet international standards and rank among the top universities in the world for postsecondary education. Enhancing students' educational experience could help Kazakhstan's higher education institutions build a more favourable reputation. We noted one way this could be

done would be by opening a Learning Support Center students could go to outside of class, which would be like a "Writing Center" at other universities. Thus, putting the recommendations into practice will help the research university's international higher education environment grow and will contribute to the realization of one of the main goals of the internationalization agenda, which is to make the nation a center of excellence for higher education.

The study has also shown the importance of a system for assessing master students' knowledge in the teaching "EAW" by introducing a criteria-based assessment system created by the authors of this study, who are also teachers of the EAW sections. Attention is focused on the importance of the assessment criteria as fundamental in the educational process system. We emphasize that the assessment method is not only a way to diagnose the academic performance of master's

students, but also an effective tool to improve the quality of teaching the course "EAW". In this regard, the activity of an English teacher in the application of popular, scientifically based assessment systems is the key to achieving the ultimate goal of the course "EAW"– to enhance the intercultural and communicative ability of postgraduates in non-linguistic fields at the standard (C1) level while they are pursuing foreign language education.

In addition, all given approaches to conducting classes in Academic English allow educators to develop the research skills of master's students as they work within their particular scientific area. It is also emphasized that the assessment criteria are not only a method of diagnosing student academic performance, but also an effective means of improving the quality of teaching the course "Essentials of Academic Writing".

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