

## EVALUATING AND GRADING THE ABILITY OF FUTURE ECONOMISTS TO WRITE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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*Communication in the economic field is based, to a large extent, on written documents, the only ones that are considered official in most countries of the world. Since the business market has become global, people activating in the economic field need demonstrate their proficiency in using foreign languages, in both oral and written form. For this reasons, their academic education should focus upon the development of students' abilities to express and reproduce correctly professional forms of discourse. The purpose of this paper is to present different techniques of grading students' pieces of writing, taking into account the types of writing assignments that are generally evaluated and graded in the case of economic sciences students.*

*Key words: analytic scoring, holistic scoring, communication, professional discourse.*

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### **Introduction**

Communication in the economic field is based, to a large extent, on written documents, the only ones that are considered official in most countries of the world. Among these, one can mention reports, memos, instructions, proposals, internal informative notes, letters, minutes, protocols, etc. The capacity to produce diverse written documents is an important competitive advantage for employees, who often build their careers around materials that demonstrate their capacity to express themselves in writing. The persons occupying important positions within the structure of a company are also required to draft a large variety of official or internal papers.

A second important factor to be taken into consideration nowadays is the fact that the business market has become global and the activity of many companies is carried out in a multinational context. Thus, persons involved in economic activities need demonstrate not only the ability to communicate efficiently using their mother tongue, but also the capacity to express themselves in a foreign language and act according to the standards that characterize the global business culture and the idiosyncratic features of the persons they need to interact with.

Starting from these assumptions, it is important to help economic sciences students: (a) understand the characteristics and the structural patterns of both technical writing and of documents they will probably need to produce and decode in their future activity and (b) gain the abilities that might enable them to express and reproduce correctly the professional discourse, from and into a foreign language.

Besides presenting the economic sciences students with the input they need in order to become efficient in using a foreign language in contexts that are similar to those of their future careers, the activity of foreign language teachers also encompasses the evaluation and the grading of students' activity.

The purpose of this paper is to present different techniques of grading students' pieces of writing, taking into account the types of writing assignments that are generally evaluated and graded in the case of economic science students. The material is structured in three parts. The first section presents characteristics of written documents used by people involved in economic activities. The second part discusses aspects related to testing and grading writing in general. The third section is larger and presents some techniques that can be used in grading student's writing, relating them, as mentioned before, to the context of producing pieces of writing generally associated with activities in the economic domain.

## **1. Elements characterizing written documents used by people activating in the economic field and skills the writers of such documents need**

The technical and the economic writing refer not only to documents produced by experts but also to documents that managers and employees edit in order to communicate inside or outside the organization. The main aims of the technical and the economic documentation are to inform and to convince. Among the elements characterizing it, one can mention:

- specific audience (consumers, employees, manager, etc.);
- simple, objective language, aimed at informing or convincing people;
- strict organization of discourse, so that the written message can be easily read and decoded;
- reference to visual elements (graphs, tables, images, drawings, etc.);
- reliance on definitions, analogies, comparisons or descriptions, in order to make the message clear.

As mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, teaching writing to economic sciences students is generally based on input referring to documents such as: letters, e-mails, faxes, memos, projects, reports, protocols, minutes, etc. When such examples of written materials are presented, reference is made to form, content and useful expressions. The production of such documents is generally based on free writing techniques, and for this reason, when grading and evaluating students' pieces of writing, the technique to be adopted by the teacher should focus on learners' abilities to produce correct and coherent pieces of writing, use an appropriate register and demonstrate the control of other skills, such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, paragraphing, drawing the reader's attention and keeping it alive. The forms of the so-called "objective testing" (multiple-choice items, error-recognition exercises or sentence and paragraph completion) are rarely used in this situation.

In evaluating and grading pieces of writing produced by economic sciences students, evaluators generally consider elements related to form (What type of writing is this intended to be? Does it conform to writing conventions usually expected for this type?); content (Is the writer's purpose clearly stated? Is the writer aware of his/her audience? Does the writer demonstrate a sense of direction in writing? Does the beginning grab the reader's attention, making him/her want to read on?); organization (Is the text organized clearly, in a logical manner? Are paragraphs developing only one idea? Are the linkers properly used? Are the central ideas clearly emphasized and placed at the beginning of the material?); accuracy and layout (Are mechanics and grammatical structures used correctly? Is vocabulary selected from an appropriate register? Is the paper neatly and clearly presented?)<sup>320</sup>.

## **2. Grading. Why and how?**

For many teachers and researchers<sup>321</sup> the problem of grading students' tests is a difficult problem. Especially in the case of free writing and other forms of "subjective" testing, every score may be surrounded by some degree of uncertainty. On the one hand, the reliability of a mark can be questioned if one thinks that some students might not be on their best disposition or health state when taking the writing test. Factors such as time pressure, inappropriate class atmosphere, noise, etc. can also have a negative influence on certain students. On the other hand markers can be considered unreliable if we consider their own inconsistency or their failure to agree with colleagues on the merits of a particular piece of writing. Despite the arguments mentioned above, grades continue to be indicators of students' achievements and capacity to master the functions of language and the construction of discourse and should consequently be present in the process of foreign language learning and teaching.

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320 See Ron White and Valery Ardnt, *Process Writing*, 1991, p.121.

321 Harrison:1983; Heaton: 1988, 1990; Huges: 1988; Reid: 1993.

Speaking of the way marks are given, J.B. Heaton put forward the view that markers award their grades on: (1) what the student has actually written; (2) what they believe the student meant by what he/she has written; (3) handwriting and the general appearance of a piece of writing; and (4) previous knowledge of a student<sup>322</sup>. It follows from these statements that an evaluator relies not only on what can be objectively evaluated, but also on subjective elements when grading pieces of writing produced by students in general and economic science students in particular. The idea is that “objective scoring” can be used only in the case of multiple-choice items, fill-in-the-blanks or sentence completion exercises, but these are not considered actual writing, being only preparatory stages in the process of acquiring the real writing skills.

In my view, evaluating and grading written work according to the degree of intelligibility and the demands related to form and content, specific to different forms of professional discourse, is probably the most appropriate approach. Of course, if a paper demonstrates a substantive development of its topic but is replete with problems connected to spelling, grammar or punctuation, it cannot be graded exclusively in terms of its content. However, if errors cause only minor trouble and confusion in a particular clause or sentence, without hindering the reader’s comprehension of the text, they can be given less importance than factors such as development of ideas, paragraph structure and organization, the coherence and the cohesion of the text, the focusing upon the particular audience.

However, it is very important to explain the students, before administering the test, what is going to be evaluated (for instance, if memos, business letters and reports have been presented during the course activities, the evaluation will focus upon the way the requirements related to the structure, organization or content of such pieces of writing have been met, rather than simply concentrate on counting language or grammar errors.

### 3. Types of scoring written assignments

In general, there are three basic types of grading that can be used when evaluating the written work in general and of economic sciences students in particular: the analytic, the holistic and the mechanical (or error-count method).

As indicated in the previous section, when considering the situation of economic sciences students, the *error-count method* (by which the number of language, grammar or punctuation errors made by a student is counted and then this number, or a certain percentage, is deducted from the possible maximum total) cannot be considered valid, since it ignores the content and the purpose of writing as a communicative process. Besides, it does not take into consideration the fact that some errors are more serious than others.

*Analytic scoring*, as grading method, is very often used in order to mark students pieces of writing. It relies on a marking scheme designed by an examiner or a group of examiners and evaluates separately various components of a piece of writing. When grading writing tests, the teacher is less likely to ignore the different aspects of a written assignment when he or she can visualize the elements to be examined. Moreover, the fact that the scorer gives a separate mark for each aspect of writing, and then make a sum of them, might make the scoring more reliable.

In the book entitled *Teaching ESL Writing*, Joy Reid quotes H. Jacobs (1981) and presents a widely used evaluation and grading scale for EFL/ESL writing<sup>323</sup>, which will be partly reproduced here. Such a scale can be useful to students, as it presents the skills they need to develop and master. A separate mark (or qualification) is given for content, organization of material, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. For instance, in terms of content, a paper that is considered “excellent” or “very good” needs to demonstrate a substantive development of thesis and relevance to the assigned topic. “Good to average” papers demonstrate knowledge of

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322 Heaton, *Writing English Language Tests*, 1988, p.144.

323 Joy M. Reid, *Teaching ESL Writing*, 1993:236-237.

subject, adequate range, limited development of thesis, relevance to the topic but absence of details. “Fair to poor” papers demonstrate limited knowledge of the subject, little substance and inadequate development of the topic. “Very poor” papers show no understanding of the subject and lack of pertinence.

In terms of organization, an “excellent to very good” written work demonstrates fluency, clearly stated ideas, logical sequence of ideas, cohesion. A “good to average” written paper is loosely organized, but the main ideas are clearly stated. “Fair to poor” papers lack fluency, present ideas that are confused or disconnected, lacking logical sequencing and development. “Very poor” papers are difficult to read and evaluate, do not communicate effectively and lack organization.

In terms of vocabulary, “excellent to very good” papers use a sophisticated range of words, in an adequate form, and the register is appropriate. “Good to average” papers use an adequate range of vocabulary, but present occasional errors of word/idiom usage. Nevertheless, the meaning is not obscured. “Fair to poor” papers demonstrate a limited range of vocabulary, present frequent errors of word/idiom form, frequent errors of word/idiom form, choice and usage, which create confusion with regards to meaning. “Very poor” papers demonstrate little knowledge of vocabulary, idioms and word forms.

In terms of language use, “excellent to very good” papers demonstrate effective, complex constructions, few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order, articles, pronouns and prepositions. “Good to average” papers use effective but simple constructions but present several errors of agreement, tense, number, word order, articles, prepositions, though meaning is seldom obscured. “Fair to poor” papers demonstrate major problems in simple or complex constructions and present frequent errors of agreement, tense, number, etc., which obscure meaning. “Very poor” papers demonstrate no mastery of sentence construction rules and do not communicate effectively.

With regards to mechanics, “excellent to very good” papers demonstrate few errors of spelling, punctuation or paragraphing. “Good to average” papers present occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, but the meaning is not obscured. “Fair to poor” papers present frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, poor handwriting, which contribute to the obscurity of meaning. “Very poor” papers are dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, and the handwriting is illegible.

Another way of scoring a paper analytically is to give a percentage of the overall grade for each component. For instance<sup>324</sup>:

Introduction – 10%

Topic sentence – 20%

Sentence structure – 20%

Use of connectives – 10%

Grammar – 20%

Vocabulary – 10%

Conclusion – 10%

The teacher can also begin with a number of points (10, for example) and subtract points for the deficiencies related to the appropriate use of register, language conventions, accuracy and vocabulary range.

When the analytic method is employed, it is essential to maintain flexibility, and give weighting to the elements that are being evaluated in relation with the students’ level of language proficiency.

Though very often employed by teachers and evaluators, the analytic method presents the disadvantage of taking more time than other methods of grading writing. A second drawback of this method is the fact that it concentrates on different aspects of language use and thus the

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324 Adapted from Joy Reid, *op.cit.*, p.235.

evaluator should never forget that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. For this reason, the so-called “impressionistic”, or “holistic” scoring is employed.

Holistic scoring is associated with the assignment of a single score to a piece of writing, on the basis of the overall impression it creates. Cooper and O’Dell believe that, in the case of holistic scoring, the rater can “(1) match it (*the piece of writing*) with another piece or pieces in a graded series, (2) score for the prominence of certain features important to that kind of writing or, (3) assign it a letter grade or number”<sup>325</sup>. This kind of scoring has the advantage of being very rapid, thus allowing a certain composition to be scored more than once. Though the mark given by one examiner is very subjective, and the rater can also be influenced by factors such as tiredness, carelessness, prejudice, etc., it is believed that a result based on several judgments might be more reliable than one based on single judgment. However, it is very important for this type of scoring to be well conceived and appropriate to both the level of the learners and the purpose of the test.

In order to help the students, the evaluator can give them a “holistic scoring guide”, which offers them a perspective on what is expected from a good piece of writing. The following grading system has been adapted from the Test of Written English Scoring Guide:

10 – The paper is well organized and developed; uses appropriate details in order to demonstrate the thesis; uses the appropriate style and register; demonstrates a sense of audience, purpose and direction in writing; uses correct language, punctuation and grammar.

8-9 – The paper demonstrates competence in writing at both the rhetorical and the semantic level; is generally well organized and developed; uses appropriate details in order to demonstrate the thesis; uses the appropriate style and register; displays facility in the use of language; demonstrates some syntactic variety and range of vocabulary.

7 – Demonstrates minimal competence in writing on both rhetorical and syntactical levels; is adequately organized and developed; does not address all parts of the task, though the topic is adequately addressed; uses some details to support the thesis; may contain vocabulary, grammar or punctuation errors that occasionally obscure meaning.

6 – Demonstrates some competence in writing, but the organization and the development of the thesis are inadequate; details used to support the thesis are insufficient; the choice of vocabulary is inappropriate: there are several errors in terms of sentence structure and usage.

5 – Suggests incompetence in writing; is disorganized and the thesis is not developed; little or no details used to support the thesis; serious problems with focus.

4 – Demonstrates incompetence in writing; the paper may be incoherent, underdeveloped and contains persistent and severe writing errors.

Presenting the students with the “holistic scoring grading guide” can help them understand that the evaluation of their papers is not simply a subjective, personal process, but rather a logically executed measurement, based on well established criteria.

## Conclusions

When learning a foreign language and trying to master the concepts of professional communication, students need feedback on how well they are doing and what needs further improvement. This feedback is often obtained by means of a test and a grade, which are important stages of the learning process.

Although marks sometimes fail to reflect the real abilities of students with regards to writing documents they might be expected to use in their future career as economists, they are usually important indicators of performance. In general, three grading methods can be employed: the analytic, the holistic and the error-count method. This paper has demonstrated that all of them

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325 Cooper and O’Dell, 1977, p.3, apud Reid, op.cit., 1993, p.238.

have both advantages and disadvantages, and they should be chosen in relation to the purpose of the writing test.

When evaluating the written assignments of economic sciences students the accent falls on their communicative abilities and capacity to reproduce the forms of documents that are common in real-life situations. Thus, the general quality of the written work prevails over any other factors, such as grammar or mechanics, when assigning a grade. The error-count method is not appropriate for their level of proficiency in a foreign language. Evaluators can choose either the analytic or the holistic method and the choice between these two methods is made in terms of the purpose in testing and the number of evaluators that are available.

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