

Assessing writing – a challenge

Four year research project involving Norway and New Zealand...

The ability to write is a key competency in a knowledge society – in social, public and working life, as well as in education. Writing is an important prerequisite for active participation in a modern democracy, but simultaneously an important source of current educational inequality. There is also a positive correlation between poor writing competency and marginalisation in the labour market. It is thus important that every child is given the opportunity to develop his/her writing competency in order to participate fully in society.

There is, however, a lack of knowledge as to how this key competency develops and can be assessed. Teachers disagree on what counts as good writing and also on what are reasonable expectations at different age levels. This is crucial in a situation where Norwegian educational authorities in agreement with OECD recommendations (DeSeCo 2000) have decided to implement writing as a key competency integrated into all school subjects, and also to develop a new set of writing tests to assess the pupils' skills in this field. There is an urgent need for shared norms of expectation (standards) concerning pupils' writing across the curriculum.

To meet this challenge, a group of writing and assessment researchers from five different Norwegian colleges and universities have joined forces in a large research project. The title of the project is *Developing National Standards for the Assessment of Writing. A Tool for Teaching and Learning*. Eight scholars from Norway, four from New Zealand, and two PhD-students are participating. The project started in January 2012 and will run

for four years. It is funded by the Research Council of Norway.

Aims

This research project aims at defining which levels of writing competency should reasonably be expected at different grades, and to investigate what effect a set of shared national norms of expectation may have on the quality of teacher assessment and pupils' writing. The overarching goal is to improve the basis for teaching, learning and assessment of writing.

Pilot study

The research group has already carried out a pilot study and empirically defined a set of tentative national criterion-referenced indicators of competency for grade levels five and eight. These indicators will be further developed in the ongoing study and put into use as a basis for writing education and assessment.

The pilot study revealed differences in how explicit teachers were when assessing students' texts. They used fairly detailed norms when assessing for instance spelling, while their norms seemed only partially shared and were to a small degree expressed explicitly

when assessing other aspects of writing (eg narrative organisation, communication, multimodality). In other words, the norms that the teachers sought support in were rather unstable and very often also not made explicit.

Research questions

The objectives of the project will be met by answering three empirical research questions:

- Which specified norms of assessment can sustainably serve as explicit standards for writing at grade levels five and eight?
- Which specific effects does the educational integration of shared explicit standards have on the quality of teacher assessment?
- Which specific effects does the educational integration of shared explicit standards have on the quality of pupils' writing?

How to find answers to our questions?

To find answers to our questions we will cooperate closely with teachers. They hold the knowledge and experience we need, and it is important that the new specified norms do not



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contradict the teachers' own insights and knowledge about children's writing development. Consequently we will gather our data by observing, listening to and eliciting teachers' assessment of texts.

The project is designed as an intervention study, where 24 schools representing different learning ecologies will participate. At these schools, teaching and assessment practices will be planned and carried out in concert between principals, teachers, and members of the research group. The study is divided into two stages.

Stage one

Stage one addresses the first research question and deals with developing and refining the tentative standards from our pilot study. The specified standards will be defined according to different 'acts of writing' and to the use of relevant semiotic resources for carrying out those acts. On the basis of pupils' texts from different school subjects, teachers and researchers will discuss and decide on which level of writing proficiency it is reasonable for average pupils to reach at 5th and 8th grades, granted they get good levels of teaching. This part of the project will have a qualitative approach.

Stage two

Stage two addresses the second and third research questions and investigates local integration of the newly defined standards in a subset of schools. To measure learning outcomes and effects on teachers' assessment, a large set of texts from classroom work will be analysed – together with examining the way the teachers assess these texts. Comparisons between selected intervention school classes and a paired sample of non-intervention school classes will be carried out. At this stage a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches will be employed.

Planned substudies will be:

- To investigate how standards/norms of expectations are integrated by the teachers;



National Centre for Writing Education and Research

This research project is closely connected to the National Centre for Writing Education and Research, in Trondheim. The centre is responsible for developing national sample tests in writing, and also training a panel of 80 teachers who will assess the texts from these tests. The first set of writing tests will be implemented in the autumn of 2012, testing a representative sample of students in grades five and eight. This will give a picture of Norwegian fifth graders and eight graders' competency in writing. When the results have been published, all teachers can use these tests in their classes and compare their students' achievement to the national representative results. The main purpose of this writing test is to be a supporting tool for the teachers in their work, not just to map their competency.

Arne Johannes Aasen, Centre Leader
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- To study different aspects of students' writing competency – including multimodal competency, encoding, grammar, punctuation;
- To carry out longitudinal case studies of students and create individual competency profiles.

Relevance to society

Assessment is a politically debated issue in Norway. Over the last decade a national system of objectives-oriented curricula, with cross-curricular key competencies like writing, has been connected to a system of national tests. In this situation it is important that policy-makers, school leaders and teachers are given access to empirically valid information about current educational reality and its challenges. The present project will contribute with essential knowledge

to support future tests, and even more important; give teachers a useful tool for better teaching of writing in schools.

Research group

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