Defining Writing Ability for Classroom Writing Assessment in High Schools

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Given that nowadays writing skill is included in main standardised tests worldwide as well as nationwide, as writing assessment is employed as a part of performance assessment in classroom testing at high school level in Korea, English teachers are first expected to establish the construct of writing ability explicitly prior to devising other test-related aspects such as test specifications, tasks and scoring/grading schemes for the sake of validity of the testing. The definition of writing ability can be formed depending on teachers' own experience as teachers and philosophy of writing, taken into consideration characteristics of learners and aims of pedagogy in a given context. It may also be formed according to pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing which each teacher adopts. This study, therefore, aims at exploring the definitions of writing ability according to three approaches to the teaching of writing (product-based, process-based and reader/genre-based) and examining whether English teachers at high school level in Korea have established their own but theoretical definitions of writing ability and what they look like, and making suggestions on ways to help them with this issue. For this study, six English teachers participated in the interview as respondents and their answers were discussed qualitatively. Even though this study has limitations of generalizing the findings from the small number of participants, it shows that there are ways to help them have their own concrete construct of writing ability before they establish and administer valid and consistent assessment scheme.

Key Words: writing assessment, writing ability, construct validity

1 Introduction

The importance of writing skills is growing in tandem with increasing international interactions/transactions and opportunities to study abroad. The current trend for standardised tests such as TOEFL to cover this skill in compulsory sections of tests, and the emphasis on writing skills in Korea, are evidence of the increasing attention paid to this skill. Certain studies (e.g. Lee, 2007) have found that many teachers of English in Korean high schools use writing assessment in their English courses as a way of evaluating performance, even in other courses than English writing courses.

In order to administer valid and appropriate writing assessments, it is desirable to start by considering how writing ability is defined in classroom assessment, since the construct that is to be tapped and measured in a test is

generally considered to be "a broad basis for development and use of language tests and language testing research" (Bachman, 1990: 81). Therefore, as Hill (1995) points out, it is common practice among language testing researchers trying to develop a test to start by defining the construct.

Even though the construct of writing ability should be specified before practical assessment procedure is designed, this basic principle is likely to be missed amongst teachers. They are likely to focus on devising other test-related features such as test-tasks, topics and scoring schemes. However, for the concern of validity of assessment, that is, construct validity, there is a need to make sure that they do establish it beforehand. As for the ways to set it up, the definition of writing ability can be formed depending on the teachers' own experience as teachers. It can be also defined according to their ideology on writing. Ideology means here teacher's philosophy on the nature of writing. Since communicative approach was adopted for language teaching and learning, the context of language use is treated as an important factor in defining, teaching and measuring language ability. As for writing skill, the context is in terms of five aspects: task, situation organiser, writer, setting and materials. Ideally, for communicative approach, all of these five aspects should be considered when defining writing ability, but it is not the case with most of studies on writing ability and the teaching of writing. The choice of context, therefore, is an issue. According to Mosenthal (1983), the choice depends on the teachers' ideology. According to the results of his study, it is teachers who are responsible for the way that learners acquire language and how writing competence should be defined. In fact, however, both of these cases of following either their experience or ideology on writing might sometimes reflect aspects which have little relation with the nature of writing ability, as shown in Yi (2007).

In the meantime, the construct of writing ability may also be formed according to pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing, which they adopt out of those generally accepted in the field of the teaching of writing, taking into consideration characteristics of learners and aims of pedagogy in a given context. Noticeably, as there are various pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing, there is more than one definition of writing ability that could be generally accepted amongst teachers and researchers of writing. No matter what approach they may adopt, to define writing ability, reflecting this/her teaching approaches can be more desirable than the aforementioned ones, in that as long as the approach they adopt is considered as a valid one amongst language teaching practitioners and researchers, the teachers are likely to be secure in terms of the validity of their definition on writing ability and furthermore they are likely to achieve consistency and validity in teaching and assessing writing. By principle, the order should be reverse: a teaching approach is opted or devised after the theoretical view of writing ability is first taken. I will, however, deal with the cases where teachers teach and assess English writing, following one of popular teaching approaches before making any critical judgement of it, and as a result they have never thought about or been informed of its theoretical and fundamental ideas of the approach, i.e., the construct, writing ability.

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As mentioned so far, we could think of three possible ways to define the construct. Obviously, however, the important and practical issue on which we need to attend is not only how to define writing ability, but also it *should* be defined in any way prior to developing test tasks (even though I contend that the last way is most appropriate). To do this should make the construct obvious to teachers themselves. Otherwise, the following procedural aspects might lose any connections with each other.

While there are many studies on the teaching and assessing of writing in Korea (e.g. Cho, 2007; Kim, 2007; Kim, 2007; Kim & Lim, 2007; Lee, 2007; Yang, 2007), unfortunately, it is hard to find research to examine whether English teachers have their own specific definitions of writing ability and try to help them decide on what constitutes writing ability in their own teaching and assessing of writing. Therefore, this study will explore definitions of writing ability that are implicitly implied in approaches to the teaching of writing, examine what writing ability is defined as amongst English teachers in Korea through interviews and make suggestions to help them define the construct of writing ability. This will thereafter lead them to make them design and administer a test which is valid for the given construct. The type of writing to be focused on in this study is supposed to be continuous writing. It lies in the fact that more emphasis is oriented for placing on continuous writing rather than guided or controlled writing at high school level in Korea. The definitions of writing and approaches to the teaching of writing, therefore, will be with regard to continuous writing.

2 Definitions of Writing Ability

When we discuss about the definition of writing ability according to the approaches to the teaching of writing, it is not plausible to find "the" writing ability which is accepted and agreed amongst all researchers and practitioners of English writing. Since writing ability is multifaceted in its own right, any approach and accordingly its definition of writing ability cannot be thorough and comprehensive in its own right. Each approach and definition has its own merits and demerits, depending on which facet it mainly focuses on among complex aspects of writing. As a result, it is valuable to investigate each approach and definition. I will, therefore, examine various definitions according to the approaches to the teaching of writing one after another.

Approaches themselves are classified differently according to researchers, as shown in Table 1. It seems, however, that they can be reduced into three main approaches: product/text-oriented, process/cognitive-oriented and reader/genre-oriented. Some (Hedge, 1998) argue that approaches to the teaching of writing can be grouped into two groups: the product approach vs. the process approach. It appears, however, appropriate to classify them into three approaches, as in Hyland (2002), on the grounds that since factors such as audience and social context have come to be considered important in writing, approaches involving these elements need to be included in the discussion.

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Various definitions of writing ability have been formulated according to the three main approaches to the teaching of writing. The next three sections will investigate the definitions of writing ability according to teaching approaches.

Table 1. Pedagogical Approaches to the Teaching of Writing

Author	Classification of approaches
Raimes (1983)	Controlled-to-free approach
	Free-writing approach
	Paragraph-pattern approach
	Grammar-syntax-organisation approach
	Communicative approach
	Process approach
Silva (1990)	Controlled composition approach
	Current-traditional rhetoric
	Process approach
	Academic-purposed writing approach
Johns (1990)	Process approach
	Interactive approach
	Social constructionist view
Tribble (1996)	Traditional text-based approach
	Process approach
	Genre approach
Nunan (1999)	Product-based approach
	Process-based approach
	Discourse-based approach
	Reader-based approach
Hyland (2002)	Text-oriented approach
	Writer-oriented approach
	Reader-oriented approach

2.1 Writing ability implied in product/text-oriented approach

The product/text-oriented approach sees texts as either "acontextually autonomous objects"(Hyland, 2002: 6) focusing on the surface structures of writing at sentence level, or discourse, emphasising cohesion and the processability of text by readers. The former corresponds to the traditional Product-based approach or Controlled composition approach, and the latter to the more recent Discourse-based approach (Nunan, 1999) and Current-traditional rhetoric (Silva, 1990).

The view of "Texts-as-autonomous objects" (Hyland, 2002: 6) refers to "the mechanistic view that human communication works by transferring ideas from one mind to another via language … because meanings can be encoded in texts and recovered by anyone with the right decoding skills" (Hyland, 2002: 6-7). As a result, this approach focuses on the formal features of texts, and the goal of writing instruction is to train students in propositional explicitness and accuracy.

The Product-based approach (Nunan, 1999), Controlled composition approach (Silva, 1990), Controlled-to-free approach (Raimes, 1983) and Traditional text-based approach (Tribble, 1996) correspond to this "Texts-as-autonomous objects"view, focusing on the learners' final product, with error-free performance at sentence level graded favourably and emphasis placed on language form, i.e.,

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grammar, syntax and mechanics. Although some researchers (e.g., Briere, 1966, cited in Silva, 1990) on this approach argue for 'Free composition' (Raimes 1983; Silva 1990), the main emphasis here is on the quality rather than the quantity and fluency of writing. This view is inherited from structuralism and the bottom-up theory of processing. Therefore, working on the basic notion that "the primary medium of language is oral: speech is language… speech ha[s] a priority in language teaching"(Richards & Rodgers, 1986: 49), writing is regarded as a secondary concern that functions as a reinforcement for oral habits. In psychological terms, the approach carries traits of behaviourism: learning is habit formation, in that learners are instructed to imitate, copy and transform models provided by textbooks and teachers (Nunan, 1999; Raimes, 1983; Silva, 1990; Tribble, 1996).

For teachers and researchers who subscribe to the view of "Texts-as-autonomous objects", writing ability is defined as the ability to respond to a given stimulus according to some authority's definition of the correct response (Nunan, 1999). Put another way, it is "the ability to adhere to style-guide prescriptions concerning grammar, arrangement and punctuation"(Nunan, 1999: 59), regardless of audience, purpose or context, working on the assumption that a text can mean the same thing to all people only if it is written explicitly following the given prescriptions (Hyland, 2002).

This view of "Texts-as-autonomous objects" i.e., the Product-based approach (Nunan, 1999), was subsequently criticised by discourse analysts, who see things very differently. In their view, it is discourse context, where the sentence is constructed, that determines how information is arranged in a sentence and which grammatical forms to use.

This notion of "Texts-as-discourse" (Hyland, 2002: 10) was introduced in the mid-1960s on the basis of awareness that "there was more to writing than building grammatical sentences"(Silva, 1990: 13). This view corresponds with the Discourse-based approach (Nunan, 1999), Paragraph-pattern approach (Raimes 1983) and Current-traditional rhetoric (Silva, 1990). Like the "Text-as-autonomous object" view, it is product-based, in that the emphasis is on the composed *product* rather than on the process of composition. However, whereas the "Text-as-autonomous object" view emphasises the production of isolated grammatical structures, this "Text-as-discourse" view focuses on the organic relationship between discourse and grammar beyond sentence level. The notion of "Text-as-discourse"also stresses that learners need to be given samples of discourse to enable them find out "how to use their knowledge of grammar in the construction of coherent texts" (Nunan, 1999: 290) and help them recognise the function of sentences and paragraphs in discourse. Accordingly, the aim of this approach is to teach that writing is not a collection of separate sentences, but involves connecting interrelated sentences to produce a coherent discourse. Thus, Raimes (1998) asserts that the central concern of this view is the logical organisation of writing. Learners are trained to seek "to discover how writers use patterns of language options to accomplish coherent, purposeful prose" (Hyland, 2002: 10). This approach is still dominant in today's writing textbooks and writing courses. According to the "Text-

as-discourse" view, writing ability is the ability to create coherent and cohesive discourses following prescribed patterns for developing and organising discourse.

To sum up, both of these frameworks view writing ability as the capacity to produce "acontextually" (Hyland, 2002: 6) correct forms of language, following prescribed patterns at either sentence or discourse level.

2.2 Writing ability implied in process/cognitive-oriented approach

In the 1960s the product/text-oriented approach was criticised on the grounds that it neither fostered the writer's thought or expression, nor adequately described the composition processes (Silva, 1990). As a result, a process/cognitive-oriented approach emerged, which centres on what the writer does during writing. Commonly known as the Process approach (Johns, 1990; Nunan, 1999; Raimes, 1983; Silva, 1990; Tribble, 1996), it can be roughly divided into three subcategories: Expressivist, Cognitivist and Social (Situated) strands (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2002; Johns, 1990).

The first view, Expressivism, reached in its zenith in the 1960s. Teachers who subscribe to this view encourage students to develop power over their own writing without being directive, assuming that writing is a creative act and that the process is important as a discovery of the true self (Berlin, 1988). As Grabe and Kaplan (1996) note, learners are encouraged to look for their own authentic voices and freely express them. Accordingly, the writing activities employed by those subscribing to this view are likely to be personal essays and journal writing, which are suitable for self-discovery (Johns, 1990). From this position, writing ability can be defined as the ability to express oneself freely.

The Cognitivist view, which is concerned with the writing process *per se*, subsequently emerged in the early 1970s, with the first language writers (Grabe & Kaplan 1996). After Emig's pioneering work (1971, 1983) on this view, many studies (e.g. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Hayes, 1996; Hayes & Flower, 1980) dealt with a cognitive model of the writing process. Among the most influential are Hayes and Flower (1980) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987).

Hayes and Flower (1980) developed a model of the writing process based on protocols, transcripts and videotapes of students talking aloud during writing. This three-part model consists of the composing processor, the task environment and the writer's long-term memory. There are three steps to the composing processor, through which written texts are operationally generated: planning, translating and reviewing. All three steps are individually managed by *a monitor*.

The problem with this model, however, is that "writers are not likely to be uniform with respect to their processing preferences and cognitive abilities; […] a protocol analysis approach [which was used by Hayes and Flower] may not be a valid primary methodology for the study of the writing process to the extent that Flower and Hayes claim […] [or at least from a more moderate perspective] it cannot be the primary source of evidence for a theory of the writing process" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996: 92-3).

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Pointing out the problems with Hayes and Flower's model, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) seek a model of the writing process that will help understand what writers actually do and why different writers write in different ways. Through their models they seek to explain what unskilled and skilled writers do while writing. They make a distinction between 'knowledge telling' and 'knowledge transforming': the former being a kind of writing that involves little planning and revision and can be done by any fluent speaker of a language, even children and adolescents who are not trained to write intensively. Knowledge transforming, on the other hand, requires a great deal of effort and skill, and cannot be achieved easily.

A comparison of these two models indicates that knowledge transforming can be said to be an extended version of knowledge telling, as it includes knowledge telling plus other elements. Therefore, the difference between the two models lies in the added part: namely, whether the model includes problem analysis, goal setting and problem translation. These meta-cognitive elements lead to problem-solving activities in two subsequent domains, the content problem space and the rhetorical problem space, both of which interact with each other in a two-way attempt to find solutions to the problems of either content or discourse.

Investigation from this Cognitivist view is ongoing, and now embraces more developed processes than traditional ones such as the think-aloud method. For example, Glendinning and Howard (2001) explore the actual process of writing (with L2 learners) using Lotus ScreenCam, inspired by Hairston (1982):

> We cannot teach students to write by looking only at what they have written. We must also understand how that product came into being, and why it assumed the form it did. We have to try to understand what goes on during the act of writing …if we want to affect its outcome. We have to do the hard thing, examine the intangible process, rather than the easy thing, evaluate the tangible product (Hairston, 1982: 84).

The Cognitivist views discussed so far are laudable in that they explore the "intangible"(Hairston, 1982: 84) writing process. However, they do have certain shortcomings. First, they were developed with first-language writers and therefore did not deal with the issue of L2 learners (recent studies, such as Glendinning and Howard, 2001, include studies on L2 learners). Another criticism is that they pay little attention to the social contexts that help specify the particular writing purpose. As a result, a third view within the process-oriented approach emerged in the 1980s: the Social (situated) view.

This view seeks to investigate the writing process on the basis of the assumption that writing is a situated act. Hyland (2002) explains it as follows:

> Research here seeks to move beyond the possible workings of writers'minds and into the physical and experiential contexts in which writing occurs. This view rejects the myth of the isolated creator and sets out to describe how 'context cues cognition'(Flower, 1989). Of

crucial importance is the emphasis placed on a notion of context as the 'situation of expressions' (Nystrand, 1987). […] The goal is to describe the influence of this context on the ways writers represent their purposes in the kind of writing that is produced (p. 30-1).

Since researchers advocating this orientation mean to observe what is *actually* occurring, without imposing an *a priori* framework according to which observations are illustrated, they usually use ethnographic research methods for their studies.

Of these three views – Expressivist, Cognitivist and Social (situated) –the Cognitivist perspective has occupied a dominant position. Johns (1990) believes that its influence on modern ESL classrooms cannot be exaggerated. Taking this approach, researchers and teachers aim to help learners to develop writing skills *per se* rather than produce correct writing, by making the writing process of skilled writers explicit through research (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) and replicable by unskilled writers.

Writing ability in this process/cognitive-oriented approach is, therefore, defined as the ability to initiate and evolve ideas and then use certain revising and editing practices to develop them to maturity in a given context.

2.3 Writing ability implied in reader/genre-oriented approach

In the reader/genre-oriented approach, the additional elements of audience and social context are included in the teaching of writing. According to this approach, writers who recognise the context and audience (the discourse community) for which and for whom the written product is generated are likely to appreciate the importance of rhetorical knowledge such as format, style and content in matching a text to a social purpose and shaping a successful text. This emphasis on the constraints of form and content is related to the notion of 'genre' (Tribble, 1996).

Swales' (1990) proposition in his book *Genre Analysis* is helpful in allowing a practical grasp of the term for writing instruction:

> *A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes*. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. *In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience* (p. 58) [present author's italics].

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Given Swales' definition of genre as a communicative event in accordance with purpose and structure, style, content and intended audience, examples of genres in written discourse include fiction novels, grant applications, progress reports, course syllabuses, survey articles and so on (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

Based on this notion of genre, the Genre-based approach to the teaching of writing (as in Gee, 1997; Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2002) developed out of concern about whether the process/cognitive-oriented approach that was becoming increasing prevalent in the writing curriculum fully addresses the needs of learners who are required to write effective texts that meets the readers' specific expectations of form, content and style (Tribble, 1996).

The Genre-based approach is "based on satisfying the demands of the discourse community" (Weir, 1993: 130), and is consequently "based on a selection of relevant genres […] which entail[s] a departure from an exclusive preoccupation with narrative/expressive writing and give[s] recognition to factual writing"(Gee, 1997: 25).

This approach has been criticised for being too prescriptive, taking a normative approach to the production of texts and focusing on the final product, like the product/text-based approach; even though, as Fulcher (1996) claims, "writing is process *and* product" (p. 46) [present author's italics]. Although the Genre-based approach has been criticised at times, it has held sway with writing teachers and researchers since it was first developed in Australia in the 1970s. Weir (1993) also notes a strong move towards the use of the Genre-based approach in courses on writing in English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

This Genre-based approach, which emphasises awareness of the reader, regards successful writers as those who are able to make reasonable assumptions about what the reader knows and expects, seek a balance between their writing purpose and the reader's expectations, and satisfy the reader's rhetorical demands.

Thus, according to this approach, writing ability is defined as the ability to perform writing tasks for a given purpose, satisfy a given discourse community with regard to the structure and content of the discourse, and communicate functionally.

I have discussed the definitions of writing ability depending on various approaches to the teaching of writing. As mentioned above, these definitions have their own points to draw attention to with regard to writing ability, and they could be conferred and incorporated into teachers' own framework depending on different contexts for teaching and assessing writing. As mentioned above, any kind of approach could be opted and the construct of writing ability could be defined accordingly, reflecting teachers' philosophy and educational policy. The issue is that the construct should be identified before assessment procedure. Then, there is a need to investigate whether and what kind of construct English teachers in Korea set up for their writing assessment. In next section, I will discuss about findings from interviews with some Korean English teachers on the definition of writing ability in their writing assessment.

3 The Study

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3.1 Subjects

Six English teachers at various high schools in Korea participated in this study as respondents to interviews. Four of them worked at general high schools, while the others at foreign language high schools in Korea. They worked as teachers for different years from 2 to 34 years (two 2 years, one 3 years, one 12 years, one 17 years and one 34 years). Among them, only one teacher who worked for 3 years as a teacher was female and the others were male. They were recruited through an internet advertisement which was made to English teachers at high schools in Korea.

3.2 Method

For interview, a semi-structured interview was devised. Its key questions regarding this study were about: 1) whether and how often they administer writing assessment in their classroom testing context; 2) for what and how they do it; 3) whether they set up the definition of writing ability prior to administering the assessment. If so, what the definition is to them; 4) whether they have been provided with any guidelines to the definition of writing ability; 5) whether they are sure of the reliability and validity of their assessment.

3.3 Procedure and data analysis method

The respondents had interviews with the researcher individually and all the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The findings from the interviews were reviewed qualitatively according to the asked questions rather than quantitative analysis, since the number of respondents was small.

3.4 Results and discussions

The results will be discussed according to the main questions of this study. Firstly, as for the question whether they administer writing assessment in their classroom testing context, all of them answered that they invited their students to writing assessment. The respondents for this study did it, which, it seems, may be one of the reasons why they responded to the interview. It was found that they did it relatively regularly, but as for the frequency of the administration, relatively a wide range of differences were found. There was one who did it once a week, whilst one who did it once a month. The other four of them, however, did it once two weeks.

Secondly, I asked them about for what and how they did it. Actually the courses each of them was in charge of at the time were not English writing courses, but others such as General English and English reading. Even so, they administered writing assessment in their courses. It was found that they did it in order to give their students to improve English writing ability, as shown below.

> Actually I do writing assessment in classroom. Otherwise, I think, they [the students] would not write in English at all. Probably… They feel

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bothersome to write something. [*laugh*].. Shouldn't I let them do as they want? So I mean to give them chances to write in English. Of course I include the scores on the assessment as one part of performance assessment. So they cannot but be attentive to the test.

I assign writing assessment because writing skill is included as one of language skills for English language learning. Admittedly, we have focused on mainly reading skill traditionally.. and nowadays we cover listening and speaking. But anyhow… the main skill to be dealt with in Korea, especially on the university entrance exam is reading skill. This has led us to exclude writing skill which should be included in the curriculum. This is why I do it. This is my intentional efforts. Honestly, there are many English teachers who do not think like this, especially amongst elderly teachers. I still find them focusing on reading skill only.

Performance assessment is usually done in various kinds of ways, such as dictation, quizzes on vocabulary, and listening tests. Writing assessment is found to be done as one of them.

Thirdly, I asked whether they set up the definition of writing ability prior to administering the assessment. For this question, the others except one respondent were not so convinced as when they answered for the previous questions. The two answers below show this phenomenon.

Well… I haven't thought about the definition of writing ability consciously. Um… I do just assign prompts and assess, looking at some aspects… for example, grammar, flow, that is, coherence, content and so on.

Um… when it comes to writing ability,….. in my case, it would be to write 'well' anyway [*laugh*]. It's just joking.. I haven't thought about it seriously. I think I may have had one implicitly, but I haven't tried to define it explicitly before administering writing assessment. I may have had it defined as the ability to write with accuracy, commitment, good content, creativity and good paragraphing.

On the other hand, the only one who was convinced of this issue appeared to have established his own stable and concrete framework of the concept of writing ability. He was the eldest of the respondents. He was, unfortunately, unlikely to share with the current opinions and research results on writing ability which is considered as multifaceted one.

Well… It should be the ability to write… every sentence accurately. It should be all about writing skill. Otherwise, we may lose consistency in rating. Just suppose, you know, when we try to assess other aspects, such as sort of abstract aspects, we would not be able to maintain

consistency in rating…. because it would be very hard to establish concrete criteria for such concepts. If so, students and their parents would neither accept nor trust our entire assessment system and even school. They are very sensitive to scores. You know, it is because their grades during school years at high schools are supposed to be taken into account when they apply for a university. Thus, our teachers should try to keep consistency and objectivity in assessment as much as possible.

Fourthly, as for whether they have been provided with any guidelines to writing ability, all of them answered negatively, as shown below.

Guidelines…? I haven't heard about it. Actually in most cases, and in education policy, it seems the policy makers usually don't attend to it. You know, it is because current university entrance examination doesn't include writing assessment in it. So teachers, students and other people related with education don't care about it. Honestly, even though there would be any guidelines to defining writing ability, if university entrance exam still wouldn't include writing section in it, it would not be effective. Teachers and students even don't have enough time to teach and learn English reading and grammar. Do you think, in this case, they look to skill not to be tested?

Well… I'm not sure whether the guideline is included in teacher's manual. Honestly, we rarely look into it. I have sometimes participated in teachers' in-service training…. Let's see… But I am afraid I can't remember whether it was dealt with there.

Finally, the respondents were asked as to whether they were sure of the reliability and validity of their assessment (Given that the technical terms of reliability and validity might be unfamiliar to them, I asked them, using relatively common terms and paraphrasing them). Except one person who assessed students' writing only in terms of grammatical accuracy at sentence level, the others answered negatively to this question. The former appeared to be fairly convinced of his own philosophical framework, as shown below.

Um… when I follow the assessing procedure which I employ, that is, to assess writing in terms of grammatical accuracy, I don't have to care about losing consistency in rating. ... When there are one to two grammatical errors in a script, I lower its score by one points. I mean, it would deserve, for example, 9 points out of 10 points. When three to four errors are spotted in it, you know, it should deserve 8 points. This is how I rate. You know, how could I lose consistency in rating? This is actually how teachers are able to maintain consistency in rating and make students and their parents happy with our assessment.

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In the meantime, the other respondents showed uncertainty in the reliability and validity of their rating regardless of the career history, as observed below.

> Right. That's what I am uncertain of. Whenever I assess students' writing, it is difficult for me to be certain of my rating, I mean, whether I assess fairly throughout all the scripts. Honestly, since I… I am sure it would be the case with other English teachers… since I haven't been trained or taught for what aspects and how to assess students' writing, I cannot but assess on my own way. You know, we aren't native speakers of English, so we feel limitations in rating and especially correcting students' writing. So in my case, I usually focus on length, commitment, grammatical accuracy, content and so on. But I'm not sure of whether I assess for what I really *have to* and whether my rating achieves consistency.

> Well… I do writing assessment because I think it should be covered in English courses at school. For rating, I usually focus on grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, organization and creativity and so on, but are they ok? [*laugh*]… I'm not sure of whether my rating is valid and consistent. I don't have something like a tool to diagnose and assess my assessment. … It would be helpful to be provided with any guidelines…

To sum up, the respondents answered that they relatively regularly administer writing assessment in the classroom, but they have rarely thought about the construct, writing ability prior to conducting the assessment. It may be because their courses were not entirely about English writing. They may be content with providing students with opportunities to write in English. Given that there are many cases where reading skill is taught as if it is only sole skill to be dealt with in public education sectors, we may be satisfied with concluding that such efforts are desirable and encouraging enough. Noticeably, however, when we try to make the system a further developed form, embody assessment system based on theoretical cornerstone, and maintain consistency throughout theoretical approach, specific design and administrative procedure of assessment, it should begin with identifying the construct, the writing ability.

4 Conclusions and Suggestions

Given that the construct of writing ability *should* be defined prior to designing writing assessment, this paper has reviewed various definitions of writing ability according to different approaches to the teaching of writing: product-based approaches, process-based approaches and reader/genre-based approaches. As reviewed here, there are various definitions of writing ability from widely accepted pedagogical approaches and there is no single, commonly accepted definition of writing ability among teachers and/or researchers of writing. This was followed by

examining the opinions of 6 English teachers in Korea about the construct. That is, they were interviewed as to whether they had their own definitions of writing ability. As a result, it was found that even though the respondents employed writing assessment system in their evaluation system, all of them had either vague or extremely biased ideas of writing ability. This could be a serious problem because it may lead them to have unsystematic, inconsistent and invalid assessment scheme.

Since the interview was conducted to the small number of respondents, we should not conclude that English teachers are likely to have not established their own construct of writing even when they conduct writing assessment in the classroom contexts. However, some suggestions for teachers who need to consider establishing their own definition of writing ability like these respondents can be made here. First, it is important that they make sure that they establish definitions which are compatible with at least one of those frameworks commonly recognised and agreed by researchers on writing. Otherwise their assessment systems might lose face validity amongst students and consequently construct validity amongst other stakeholders and testing experts. It is because students may be unwilling to commit themselves to such writing tests and thus it may create further possible problems with validity, as inferences about their writing ability based on their performance in such tests would not be valid.

When having difficulty in theoretically defining the construct by themselves, teachers could consider their approaches to the teaching of writing. They would choose any of the approaches discussed above, depending on various factors such as their students' levels of proficiency and their own philosophy of writing. Teachers who believe that writing should be dealt with in terms of grammatical correctness at sentence level are likely to favour the product-based approach and its definition of writing ability, while those who focus on the expression of ideas tend to follow the process-based approach and its definition of writing ability. Teachers whose students are just beginning to make sentences may choose the product-based approach and its definition of writing ability, whilst those with students at advanced level are likely to adopt reader/genre-based approach and its definition of writing ability, to encourage their students to be aware of the need to make their text appropriate to the audience. In this way, the definitions discussed above can at least play a role as a starting point when teachers try to establish their own definition in a given particular context (Needless to say, the reviewed definitions of writing ability here are not about all presented up to date. Nor are they comprehensive. They are just some representative examples).

In addition to considering their approaches to the teaching of writing, I believe that teachers may consider other factors. They could incorporate both the specific aims and objectives of the curriculum, general educational policy and the unique characteristics of learners in a given context. Each pedagogical context has its own aims and objectives, and within each context every group of learners has unique characteristics that differentiate it from other groups: in terms of biological aspects such as age and gender, affective aspects such as motivation, attitude to target language and anxiety, cognitive aspects such as learning style, and socio-cultural aspects such as the attitude of the community to which learners belong.

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Taking account of the learners' features and the teaching objectives should make it possible to establish definition which is suitable for them, and to generate a positive backwash effect. That is, it would be feasible and reasonable that English teachers try to establish their own definition of writing ability reflecting a given assessment context and the approach to the teaching of writing they adopt.

All of these considerations have to be made for the sake of validity in assessment. This aspect cannot be overemphasised, since validity – namely construct validity – has been the main concern in measurement since the publication of Messick's pioneering works on validity in 1988 and 1989. When devising writing assessments, therefore, teachers need to consider the definition of writing ability and use it as a pivotal point, in order to be sure of their inferences about students' writing ability and their decisions based on these inferences.

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