

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Investigating the practices of assessment methods in Amharic language writing skill context: The case of selected higher education in Ethiopia

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This study aims to investigate Ethiopian higher education Amharic language writing skills instructors' practices of Assessment Methods in writing skill context. It was also intended to look for their viewpoints about the practicality of implementing Assessment Methods in Amharic writing courses. In order to achieve the goals of this study, document analysis such as course outlines and assessment papers, 10 Ethiopian Amharic language writing skill instructors, and teaching at higher education were cross-examined. Since the study employs a mixed-method design, the researcher profited from both document analysis and interviews. The document analysis and interview data were analyzed thematically, discussed thoroughly and then interpreted. The results indicated that the majority of Ethiopian Higher Education Amharic Language writing skill courses instructors is implemented as 95% traditional assessment and 5% alternative assessment methods. Application of the assessment methods and activities was encouraged based on the curriculum. They rarely apply Alternative assessments in their writing courses. Further investigations revealed that the instructors were not fascinated by the implementations of alternative assessment in their writing courses.

**Key words:** Assessment methods, Amharic language curriculum, Amharic language writing skill context, writing skill courses, Amharic writing instructors, higher education.

## INTRODUCTION

Amharic (ሐላርኛ) is an Afro-Asiatic Language of the Semitic group, and is related to Ge'ez (ግዕዝ) or Ethiopic. The language is widely spoken in Ethiopia, and also widely spoken Semitic language next to Arabic. As the Language is the major spoken in the country, it serves as the official working language. In public universities, it is a medium of instruction for Ethiopian languages, literature and Folklore majoring students of different disciplines like, Amharic language writing skills.

There are two forms of paradigm shifts in the writing assessment context. One is traditional assessment form and the other, alternative assessment form. For traditional form of writing assessment, indirect and direct assessments are included (Massa, 1997; Fulture and Davidson, 2007).

Indirect assessment language instructors allow the assessment of the abilities that underlie the skills, and often use items where the student selects a response,

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rather than constructing their own. The usual assessments in indirect assessment method such as multiple-choice, true or false, or fill-in the blank, assess the students' ability to recognize the correct answer rather than produce it (Hamayan, 1995; Massa, 1997; Brown, 2004; Nef-Lipman, 2012; Forutan, 2014).

Direct assessment method of writing skill allows teachers to see students using writing practice in context, through tasks that require performance of writing. According to Nef-Lipman (2012) views in measuring writing ability, direct assessment is often used. Examples of direct assessment might include presentations, translations, writing summaries, and essays.

According to Oscarson (2009), Nef-Lipman (2012) and Lopes (2015), instruction methods changed in order to incorporate new principles, assessment methods needed to be adjusted accordingly. Traditional assessment methods are inadequate as a measurement for the depth and scope of education that a student receives. In writing assessment, theory alternative assessment method is suitable for measuring the student's performance.

According to Hamayan (1995), alternative assessments are procedures and techniques in the context of instruction, and can be easily incorporated into the daily activities of classroom. In this case, alternative assessments are not remotely similar to the former, traditional state assessments, but used to measure teacher success, evaluation, and retention. Instructors now find themselves in the position of designing alternative assessments that measure writing. This is so that, students are better prepared for common core assessments (Oscarson, 2009; Wubshet and Menuta, 2015). This task is further complicated for Amharic language instructors who are instructed to uphold the entire curriculum based assessment standards.

In the curriculum of Amharic Language Writing Courses in Higher Education, they restructure their curriculum and assessments to meet current demands, and state traditional and alternative assessment measures (Continuous assessment). A paradigm shift has occurred with assessment expectations for Amharic language students at Higher Education level (Tamjid and Birjandi, 2012; Wubshet and Menuta, 2015).

In the writing skill courses, practitioners are faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of all students as well as the demands of state performance evaluations. In an effort to address this quest, educators must research best practices in the areas of language assessment, and must create a perceived value to students. According to Nef-Lipman (2012), writing requires appropriate assessment choices based on the curriculum and instruction. The assessment methods also should emphasize on the writing ability.

Amharic language instructors became an integral component of assessment methods as they prepared students to meet the Writing assessment. Forutan (2014), Wubshet and Menuta (2015) and Lopes (2015)

completed a study comparing the assessments practiced by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in their classrooms and assessment methods to what will be required with the curriculum state standards. They found that almost all EFL teachers practiced traditional assessment methods in their English classrooms. Conversely, assessments for the common core will employ questions that require fixed response such as multiple choice, matching, and true or false. Test-takers will need to simply choose a possible response to the given questions.

Using traditional, summative assessment in the language writing assessment is no longer sufficient. Fulture and Davidson (2007) and Popham (2003) explained that traditional assessment, which typically required students to recall and process contextual data, had to be modified to include assessments with closed answer tasks. Tamjid and Birjandi (2012) supposed that teachers needed to move away from traditional, one-answer assessments toward performance-based assessments in which the students' personal accountability was raised. All these research groups posited that best practices included designing some form of alternative assessment in the Language Writing context.

According to Aksu (2008), alternative assessment techniques have major advantages over traditional assessment techniques. Nevertheless, some language education research studies reveal that teachers do not prefer to use these techniques much. Some studies report that Language teachers use alternative techniques rarely because they don't have sufficient knowledge about these techniques. The reason for teachers' being more apt to traditional assessment methods might be related to their lack of confidence in preparing, applying, and grading processes of alternative assessment techniques (Forutan, 2014).

Assessment and evaluation are important parts of writing process. Whether a curriculum creates the desired effect or not on students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes determined by means of assessment and evaluation. In the implementation of Amharic writing, the curriculum and syllabus state standards, Amharic language instructors will need to assess their students in a more communicative way, and detach from traditional assessment methods. Students must also adapt to alternative ways of being assessed. Instead of being grammar-centered, teachers will need to design effective assessments with a communicative focus while continuing to cover essential grammatical concepts and typical vocabulary. Possible assessment types that would facilitate this change include dynamic assessment (Popham, 2003; Beaten et al., 2008; Oscarson, 2009), task-based assessment, and formative assessment using peer- and self-evaluations (Fulture and Davidson, 2007; Tamjid and Birjandi, 2012; Forutan, 2014).

To decide what methods to use in writing assessment,

**Table 1.** Higher education writing syllabus assessment recommendations.

Writing courses	Traditional assessment (%)	Alternative assessment (%)
Basic writing skill (ELAm 1023)	60	40
Advanced writing skill (ELAm 1024)	55	45
Technical writing (ELAm 1031)	65	35
Writing for media (ELAm 1032)	70	30

it is important to clarify what kind of writing case or level trying to assess. While there are numerous methods to assess language writing, what you want to measure will determine how you assess students (Brown, 2004; Hyland, 2009). For example, the assessment about the ability to use certain Essay quality in a paragraph, or the comprehension of written text in an Amharic language, or progress toward the course goals?

In the Ethiopian Higher Education, the Modular curriculum encourages the application of both traditional and alternative assessment techniques. Both assessment methods are assessed by calculating the average result of assessment methods.

Table 1 describes the assessment methods that encourages modular curriculum of Amharic Language in Higher Education in Ethiopia. The assessment trends recommended to apply in writing courses is 55 to 70 in traditional assessment, and 30 to 45 in alternative assessment.

As Brown (2004) and Ramazanpour et al. (2016) describe, language includes four skills and one of the most important skills that is needed to assess is writing. Writing is a process through which a writer tries to communicate ideas, and thoughts with the audience or reader. Nevertheless, the researcher observe from his long years of teaching in higher Education that Writing skill teachers usually implement the traditional assessment techniques. Amharic instructors prefer the traditional assessment methods because of its simplicity and time saved. So, there is need to investigate Amharic instructors implementation of assessment methods in writing courses. Based on the assumptions of Ethiopian Higher Education Curriculum, this study stated the following questions:

- (1) Which assessment methods and activities do Amharic instructors employ in writing courses?
- (2) Do Amharic instructors practiced the assessment methods of writing assessment based on the curriculum?

The main objective of this study was to investigate Amharic teachers which assessment methods employ in their writing courses in Higher Education in Ethiopia. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

- (1) Identify the dominant implemented assessment methods and activities used in writing context.

- (2) Investigate the reason(s) teachers claim for using or not using all of assessment methods.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative study with a survey design, since a survey is conducted on the sample in order to have an overall judgment about the whole participants. Some research questions were answered by using qualitative research techniques.

The study aims to investigate the extent to which Amharic language instructors implement assessment method in their writing courses. The participants of this study were 10 Ethiopian Higher Education Amharic Language Instructors. The participants were selected who teach writing courses.

Based on this, their educational qualification consists of 6 instructors who teach Amharic (TeAm), basic writing skill, technical writing and advanced writing skill, 2 instructors were from Applied Linguistics teaching Amharic (ALTA), technical writing, basic writing skill and Advanced writing skill, and 2 instructors were from Media and communication who teach technical writing and writing for media in different programs and academic years. All participant instructors were post graduate degree holders.

The study benefited from a kind of purposive sampling, since the researcher aimed to collect data from instructors who had academic status to provide relevant and required information. Based on this, the researcher employed a qualitative research design that comprised of document analysis and key informant interview. Document analysis is also valuable in an empirical study of this kind because it provides a practicing assessment method in context. The document analysis in this study which is the assessment methods of higher education Amharic language instructors, was collected, analyzed and evaluated.

This type of investigation can provide significant data that can be beneficial to identify the assessment methods that is used by the instructors. During the data collection, a semi-structured interview was employed. It consists of 5 questions, which invited the participants to express their practices toward assessment methods in the writing courses, the barriers to the application of these assessment methods, and its implications.

The data for this study was collected during the 2016 (2008 E.C) academic year. The required qualitative data was elicited through the document analysis and interview, which the researcher observed was course outlines, and assessment activities based on the principles of writing curriculums and syllabuses, and were asked to participate in face-to-face in-depth interviews.

In order to interview the participants, the researcher asked them to arrange certain time in advance. The participants were informed of the purpose of the research, and their consent was obtained. During the interview, the participants were asked the questions that were already prepared based on the objectives of the study. Since the interviews were semi-structured, and the questions were open-ended, the participants were free to elaborate on the issues as they thought necessary.

Data analysis involves more than providing an explanation of the

**Table 2.** Document analysis result.

Assessment methods based on the incorporated in the writing curriculum and syllabus		Writing skill courses				AP (%)
		BW (%)	AW (%)	TW (%)	WM (%)	
Traditional assessment methods (through homework, class work, quizzes, mid and final exams, oral presentation and discussion)	Multiple choice	20	20	10	15	95
	Matching	15	10	15	12	
	True or false	20	25	15	8	
	Fill in the gap	8	10	15	0	
	Essays	25	20	25	25	
	Oral tests	0	10	10	10	
Alternative assessment (project work, homework, class work)	short answer	12	5	10	10	5
	Self	0	0	0	0	
	Peer	0	0	0	0	
	Portfolio	0	0	0	10	
	Journal writing	0	0	0	10	

Keys: BW=basic writing, AW=advanced writing, TW=technical writing, WM=writing for media and AP= Average practice.

data that is collected from documents and interview. Qualitative data needs to be organized, so that related information can be selected and separated from information that is not directly connected to the study. In order to produce the most effective results, the researcher should have the necessary skills in order to be able to condense, reorganize and collate related information from the data collected in the study.

The field notes of each interview session were semi-structured, and the measures were taken to ensure that all the data were collected during the interview. In addition, all key informant interviews were semi-structured information. After that, the transcripts were reread several times, and selected the important information only. Data was organized into different categories based on writing assessment types listed in the writing curriculum, and syllabuses in order to shade light on the findings of the study.

The collected data in this study was generated from analysis of the assessment methods of writing curriculum and syllabus documents, and key informant interview are presented. The procedures for conducting key informant interview and text analysis are presented. First the researcher prepared two sets of checklists. One set of the checklist contained the criteria to determine assessment methods were incorporated in the instructors course outlines and test or assignment papers, and the other set determines the percentage distribution of the instructors' in the whole semester assessment methods against practiced activities.

The ultimate goal of the document analysis was to show which assessment methods was incorporated in the writing courses, and to find out the assessment methods frequently used in the writing courses in Higher Education.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data were collected from documents and assessment papers, and interview of instructors understudy conducted different assessment activities but the study focused only on assessment methods. The following (Table 2) document analysis shows the composition of each of the assessment methods that were incorporated in the writing courses.

As seen in Table 2, traditional assessment methods such as multiple choice, matching, true and false, fill in

the gap and short answer were more (95%) practiced in all of the writing courses, except in the course “Writing for Media”, in which the assessment methods used in writing courses was 100% of traditional assessment questions, the only 20% of Alternative assessment types that were designed to apply in all writing courses was used in one course.

Similarly, majority of the assessment practiced fragmented bits of information (not contextualized information) as the recommendations of their assessment methods in the curriculum and syllabus. These were traditional assessment questions in which students were expected to respond by remembering information they learned, and choosing response items from context. Therefore, Table 2 clearly depict that memorization or rote learning of isolated bits of information were required, and encouraged in the assessment methods of the courses.

In Table 2, alternative assessment methods only incorporated (practiced) 5% from the recommendation to apply in writing curriculum (37.5%). Based on the writing curriculum on self and peer, portfolio assessment methods are encouraged to employ, but not practiced in all courses. As a result, it is not possible to say alternative assessment encourages the improvement of writing in progress.

The second data that gathered information on the practiced assessment methods by writing instructors in writing courses, shows participant instructors' response on assessment methods was almost similar. Among the participants, some practiced traditional assessment is based on its easy preparation and suitability for correction. These instructors mentioned choosing objective type questions as their assessment method.

In addition to this, the participant instructors mentioned their practices of assessment methods that are influenced by the type of writing skill activities they assess.

Some informants agreed with the preference of short answer and multiple choice items when assessing Basic writing skill and Writing for media courses. Nonetheless, they cannot use these if they want to assess the students' advanced writing skills. Similarly, other informant instructors mentioned that they usually prefer giving essay writing as an assignment to their students.

The other issue the instructors raised as a factor that influenced on their practice of assessment type is time. All participants mentioned that they prefer objective item assessment methods because they are not time consuming to give correction. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that instructors decide their assessment types based on its convenience for management and correction. They prefer traditional assessment methods since they are easy to administer, easy to correct, and not time consuming. Generally, the objective type of assessments reveals many traces of traditional assessment.

Most of the Amharic Language writing courses instructors given the other reasons for their reliance on the traditional assessment is that it is best for average and particularly weaker students, and it is always the same format with national examination. So, students prefer the traditional assessment methods over other types of assessments. As wubshet and Menuta (2015) opine traditional assessments have many disadvantages for both instructors and learners. One of which is that it does not help for their cognitive development, that is, critical thinking.

In the writing courses, assessment methods and activities that are used by Amharic instructors include, multiple choices, matching, true-false, essays, short answers and fill in the blank. On the other hand, the alternative assessments portfolio and journal are confirmed in one course only. Instructors that used traditional assessment depend on examination wash back, and their students are aware before the national examination. This is because the Ethiopian national examinations do have same format. In Ethiopian Higher Education, writing courses assessment methods depend on traditional assessment.

The main reasons for the practices of traditional assessment method in writing courses were behind the assessment goals (that is, easy to administer and correct, and not time consuming). These practices were also reasons that made Amharic instructors reluctant to try out alternative assessment activities in their writing courses. Therefore, Amharic instructors are not interested in alternative assessment methods, and activities because the approach is different from that practiced before and during by learners.

## DISCUSSION

Since the modularization curriculum was designed to apply individual learning, cooperative learning, learner-

centered, and the higher education Amharic writing courses instructors did not involve their students in the assessment practices.

Most instructors sometime made their students work with their classmates. On the other hand, Amharic writing courses instructors do not use alternative assessment method as it leads learners to involve in learning context, except in one course that is, writing for media and some different cases.

Writing curriculum and syllabuses were designed, and encouraged continuous assessment. They were to develop learners' internal motivation, and to involve in the learning process. This means assessment is practiced for the improvement of students in learning progress. However, in the Ethiopian Higher Education, writing assessment practices is quite different. Since the assessment methods employed in the writing courses are practiced to grading students, not to involve in the learning process, and to assess their learning progress.

Although assessments should encourage the improvement of writing skill in progress, the type of assessment that employed Amharic writing instructors were not for students learning improvement in progress, it was for grading students only. They were not frequent in different assessment methods and activities, and they were in the position of traditional method. The only evidence of alternative assessment was the portfolio, and writing journal in which students were asked to document their activities prepared during the whole semester.

The method of assessment mainly used by the Amharic writing instructors were customary ones, these include multiple choice, matching, essays, and true or false. They were reluctant to include alternative assessment in their practices due to different reasons, like, time consuming and easy to administer and correction. Amharic instructors assumed students are not interested to assess alternative assessment, as its format is completely different from the national examination, and their experiences.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research paper draw recommendations as follows:

- (1) Training on the practical implementation of assessment methods and activities should be given to Amharic Writing instructors. This will help to change their attitude towards various assessment methods implementation.
- (2) Alternative assessment method is new for most Amharic writing skill instructors, it should get support in form of supervision, and should be given chances to reflect their confusion regarding assessment.
- (3) Higher education assessment professionals and/or departments should include all assessment methods, and activities as the assessment packages of their instructors,

and following-up its implementation.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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