

# MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT FOR WRITING AT ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES

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**Abstract:** The term ‘meaningful’ or ‘authentic’ assessments might be understood variously depending on the characteristics of the learners and the type of educational setting. General universities and Islamic universities are likely to employ the terms differently. It is no secret that an Islamic university seeks to integrate Islamic values into all aspects of its English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum including writing assessment. The fact that Muslims constitute a vast number of English learners in Indonesia has not yet been adequately supported by assessment procedures designed to guide the English instruction. The assessments in every teaching level is supposed to be meaningful. To design a meaningful assessment tasks for a writing course in Islamic universities, teachers should consider the growing number of Islamic terms and Islam-related expressions in the field of English language education. The terms and expressions could be integrated into imitative, intensive, responsive, and extensive writings. This paper focuses on meaningful assessment for writing course in Islamic university, an area on which researchers have not conducted adequate analyses.

**Keywords:** Meaningful Assessment, Authentic Assessment, Writing, Islamic Universities

## INTRODUCTION

The changing reality of English language nowadays should include a growing number of Islamic terms and Islam-related expressions in the field of English language education. The fact that Muslims constitute a vast number of English learners in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) and a Foreign Language (EFL) cannot be ignored. Besides, introducing Islamic terms and Islam-related expressions would contribute to a better and more informed understanding to Islam (Ali, 2007:32).

Including the Islamic terms and expressions into English instruction implies the need of

designing an appropriate assessment. Instruction, assessment, and evaluation are all interrelated. A careful assessment would provide information about what and how the Islamic terms and expressions should be taught. If the assessment process is faulty, the instructional information or conclusion will be faulty.

Assessment should be meaningful to ensure the instruction effectiveness. Johnson and Johnson (2002: 13) state that to make assessments meaningful, teacher should, among others, set the goals that are relevant to students’ immediate lives; conduct the assessment in authentic context; and make assessment procedures, criteria, and rubrics easy to understand by the

learners. Thus, meaningful assessment is similar to authentic assessment.

The term 'meaningful' or 'authentic' might be understood variously depending on the characteristics of the learners and the type of educational setting. General universities and Islamic universities are likely to employ the terms differently. It is no secret that an Islamic university seeks to integrate Islamic values into all aspects of its English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum including writing assessment. This paper focuses on meaningful assessment for writing course in Islamic university, an area on which researchers have not conducted adequate analyses.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **The Nature of Assessment**

Assessment is an inherent responsibility of an educator seeking to improve the effectiveness of his or her instruction. Johnson & Johnson state that to assess is to collect relevant information about the change in a student, group, school, etc. qualitatively or quantitatively. Assessment is a part of evaluation. While assessment can be conducted without evaluation, evaluation should be conducted based on the information provided by assessment (2002: 2).

Basically, the purpose assessment is to guide the instruction so that the teacher might know better as to what to address in the classroom. Unlike an evaluation, assessment does not arrive at a grade for students (Comer, 2011: 239). It is clear that

assessment is a part of evaluation process that deals with the information collection to improve the instruction.

Brown introduces the so-termed formal assessment and informal assessment. The first indicates an intended, time-constrained, systematic, and administrative nuances of assessment. A test is an obvious example of formal assessment. The second refers to an incidental, ongoing process, and less systematic parts of assessment. Oral impromptu feedback and marginal comments on students' papers are examples of informal assessment (Brown: 2004:5).

### **Diagnostic, formative and summative assessment**

While the purpose of conducting assessment is primarily to guide instruction, experts categorize the purpose into three, namely diagnostic, formative, and summative. Diagnostic assessment, which is conducted at the beginning of a program, is to gain information about the students' present performance, knowledge, skill, interest, or attitude. A good diagnosis will help teachers and students set realistic learning goals. Formative is an ongoing assessment conducted periodically and continually throughout the program. Its main purpose is to monitor progress and provide feedback for a better instructional program. Summative assessment is conducted at the end of a program to determine the final achievement of the students or to judge the success of the instructional program (Johnson & Johnson, 2002: 6-7).

Although diagnostic and summative assessment practices are believed to enlighten the outcomes of instruction, they are not as challenging as formative assessment. Comer maintains that formative assessment is much more holistic in terms of providing

instructional feedback. It deals with assessing for learning rather than assessing of learning like the summative assessment does. Thus, the outcomes of formative learning is always utilized to adjust the instructional activities to meet the students' needs (2011: 239-240). If the results of formative assessments are good, the results of summative assessments tend to be good.

Formative assessment might be relevant to various courses particularly to a writing instructional course. Within the course, a student's final achievement is commonly determined after several steps like drafting, writing, and revising. Beaglehole (2014: 13) argues that, *"Every time your students write they provide you with a piece of formative assessment and potentially your next teaching point."* The feedback which is given gradually and systematically in the writing course help students produce a better piece of writing.

### Meaningful assessment

Johnson and Johnson (2002: 5-12) propose seven questions to be answered in managing a meaningful assessment namely:

- (1) What student performances to be assessed? Is related to students' academic learning, reasoning quality, skills and competencies, attitude, or work habits?
- (2) What are the assessment procedures to be used? Will it be a standardized test, teacher-made tests, written composition, oral presentation, interview, observation, etc.?

- (3) What are the focus of the assessment? Will it be the process of learning, the process of instruction, the outcomes of learning, or the outcomes of instruction?
- (4) In what setting will the assessment take place? Will it be conducted in artificial situation like classroom or in an authentic or real-life setting?
- (5) Who are the stakeholders in the assessment? Will they be students and their parents, teachers, administrators, or policymakers?
- (6) What evaluation procedures should be used? Will it be a criteria-referenced evaluation or norm-referenced evaluation?
- (7) What is the purpose of the assessment? Is it diagnostic, formative, or summative?

With regard to the question number 5, meaningful assessments refer to the so-termed authentic assessment. This type of assessment requires students to demonstrate desired skills or procedures existing in real-life contexts. Further, O'Malley dan Pierce (1996:11-12) develop several types of the authentic assessments. Three of them that might be relevant to a writing instructional program are: (1) writing samples, (2) projects or exhibitions, and (3) portfolios. The table below depicts each type's description and advantages:

Assasment	Description	Advantage
<b>Writing Samples</b>	Students generat narrative, expository, persuasive, or reference paper	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Student produces written document</li> <li>2. Can be scored on content or language components</li> <li>3. Scored with rubric or rating scale</li> <li>4. Can determine writing processes</li> </ol>
<b>Projects/ Exhibitions</b>	Students complete project in content area,	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students make formal presentation, written report, or</li> </ol>

	working individually or in pairs	both 2. Can observe oral and written products and thinking skills Scored with rubric or rating scale
<b>Portfolios</b>	Focused collection of student work to show progress over time	1. Integrates information from a number of sources 2. Gives overall picture of student performance and learning 3. Strong student involvement and commitment 4. Calls for student self-assessment

**Figure 1. Types of Authentic Assessments**  
(Adopted from O'Malley dan Pierce, 1996:12)

Further, Nurgiyantoro maintains that authentic assessments require the students to demonstrate proficiency of doing something (2011:27). When observable product are not found and when comprehensive evidence regarding the students' performance are not available, the assessment is not authentic. Meaningful or authentic assessments are likely to be very relevant to a writing class as writing belongs to productive skill.

**Assessing writing**

When a student produces a written document, a teacher usually scores it on the basis of its content or language or both. A rubric or a rating scale are commonly used for the scoring activity. This simple illustration is not enough for a careful writing assessment. Brown argues that assessing writing is not an easy task. It requires a teacher to firstly set a very clear objectives or criterion before assessing. The

teacher should clarify wheter s/he wants to assess spelling, grammatical aspect, paragraph construction, logical development of a main idea, etc. (2004:218).

Beaglehole adds that it is the criteria that provides the direction for the writing assessment. She mentions relevant criteria pertaining to persuasive writing such as audience, text structure, ideas, literary or persuasive devices, vocabulary, cohesion, paragraphing, sentence, structure, spelling, and punctuation. Those criteria, at once, becomes the component of rubric or rating scale. In order to make assessments managable, a teacher could focus on one or two criteria at a time (2014: 13). When finished with one or two criteria, a teacher could continue assessing other criteria.

One important factor to be considered in setting up criteria, besides genre of the written language, is the type of writing performance. This factor refers to four types of writing performance, namely (1) imitative, (2) intensive (controlled), (3) responsive, and (4) extensive. The following table depicts each type and is adapted from Brown (2004: 220-221):

No.	Types of writing performance	Focus/Characteristics	Category
1	<i>Imitative</i> Focuses on	form or the mechanics of writing such as words and punctuation	Microskills are essential for the imitative and intensive types of writing tasks
2	<i>Intensive (controlled)</i>	Focuses on form, meaning, and context Appropriate, vocabulary, correct grammar.	
3	<i>Responsive</i>	Discourse level The construction of a logically connected sequence of the	Macroskills are appropriate

4	<i>Extensive</i>	paragraphs “the writer focuses on achieving a purpose, organizing and developing ideas logically, using details to support or illustrate ideas, demonstrating syntactic and lexical variety”	for the responsive and extensive types of writing task
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**Figure 2. Types of Authentic Assessments (Adapted from Brown, 2004: 220-221)**

When a teacher wishes to assess microskills level (such as appropriate words and word order patterns), s/he should condition the students to produce an imitative or intensive writing. When macroskills (such as conventions of certain written discourse) are the focus of the assessment, the teacher might require the students to produce a responsive or extensive writing.

### Islamic universities

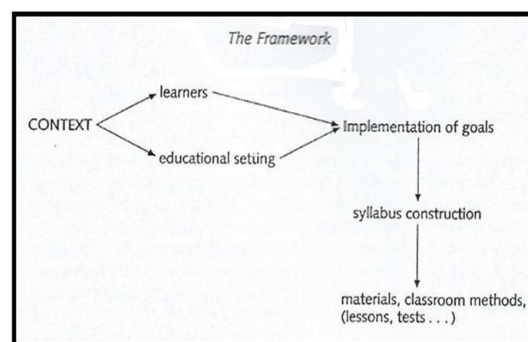
Indonesia recognizes two types of educational settings namely Islamic school and general school. The same is true within the context of university. Fitri states that Islamic Higher Education is under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) while General Higher Education is under the Ministry of National Education (2011: 1). Islamic Higher Education is a particular setting in Indonesia that seeks to integrate Islamic values into all disciplines including ELT (English language teaching).

An Islamic Higher Education is supposed to run an ELT program in tuned with the goals stated nationally by the MORA. One of the goals is to

create knowledgeable learners both in specific study area and Islamic subjects. A learner is encouraged to integrate Islamic values into his or her study area (retrieved 2015, 17 May, from **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**)

The educational goals or objectives existing in an Islamic university are greatly influenced by Islamic educational philosophy which is rooted in *tawhīd* spirit. All knowledge come from Allah in that instructional activities should lead human to the Presence of Allah as the Absolute Master of mankind. All disciplines of knowledge should be developed and disseminated in the spirit of *tawhīd* (Shah, et.al. 2012: 182-183).

Islamic universities can be taken as a broad context from which other instructional activities are derived from. McDonough & Shaw (2003: 5) illustrates how context (learners and educational setting) might influence the educational goals, syllabus construction, teaching method, and material development through the following framework: illustrate the determining factors of learning material development as follow:



**Figure 3. The Framework of Language Teaching (Source: McDonough & Shaw, 2003:5)**

Further, Tyler (1949:3) argues that “*educational objectives become the criteria by which materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional procedures are developed and test.*”

The term *Islamic universities* indicate particular language policies which are rooted in Islamic perspectives. The educational purposes, learning experiences, content, classroom methods and techniques, as well as assessment should represent the Islamic values.

### **Meaningful assessment task designs for Islamic universities**

This part deals with an effort to explore meaningful assessment task design for a writing instruction in English education programs within Islamic universities in Indonesia, particularly in UIN, IAIN, and STAIN. While the words, phrases, sentences, or texts are derived from related Islamic treasure, the designs are cited from Brown (2004) as it has been touched upon in the above theoretical review.

### **Listening cloze selection task for imitative writing**

*Test-takers hear:*

Write the missing word in each blank. Below the story is a list of words to choose from.

If you see someone older than you then respect him saying to yourself, “He has beaten me to Islam and righteous action.” If you see someone younger than you then respect him saying to yourself, “I have beaten him in sins.”

*Test-takers see:*

If you see someone\_\_\_ than you then respect him saying to\_\_\_, “He has \_\_\_ me to Islam and righteous action.” If you see someone younger you \_\_\_then respect him saying to yourself, “I have beaten him in\_\_\_\_\_.”

older                      yourself              beaten  
than                        sins

### **Grammatical transformation task for intensive writing**

*Nasrudin and His Key*

*On one occasion, A neighbor found Nasrudin down on his knees looking for something.*

*“What have you lost, Mullla?”*

*“My key,” said Nasrudin.*

*After a few minutes of searching, the other man said,*

*“Where did you drop it?”*

*“At home.”*

*“Then why, for heaven’s sake, are you looking here?”*

*“There is more light here.”*

(Source: Shah, 1971: 62)

Instruction:

1. Underline all nouns in the text!
2. Develop the nouns into noun phrases by adding pre-modifier and/or post modifier!
3. Underline all verbs in the text!
4. Rewrite the story from the Nasruddin’s perspective!

### **Essay for responsive and extensive writing**

The Muslim learners might be required to write a short essay pertaining to certain topics eliciting the use of Islamic terms or Islam-related expressions, such as repentance, fasting, knowledge, etc.. To make the assessments manageable, teacher could set up two to four criteria at a time. They are, for example, punctuation, grammar, ideas, Islamic terms or Islam-related expressions.

In scoring a responsive and extensive writing, a teacher could choose one of the three scoring

approaches proposed by Brown (2004: 241-245) namely: holistic, primary trait, and analytical approach. The holistic approach refers to a single score that represents the teacher's general overall assessment. The primary trait approach is conducted by rating one factor only such as the appropriate use of Islamic terms or Islam-related expressions.

Meanwhile, the analytical scoring deals with rating a student's writing on the basis of several subcategories like punctuation, grammar, ideas, etc. the teacher is, then, to give a separate rating for each subcategories.

To make the assessment of responsive and extensive writing meaningful and managable, below is an alternative rubric that can be used in the classroom:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Rubric for Assessing Responsive and Extensive Writing

<b>Punctuation</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The writing is free from misspellings</li> <li>▪ The sentences are punctuated correctly</li> <li>▪ The words are capitalized correctly</li> </ul>	
<i>Score ____/30</i>	

<b>Grammar</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Appropriate tenses are employed</li> <li>▪ Concord is employed correctly</li> <li>▪ Modals are used correctly</li> </ul>	
<i>Score ____/30</i>	

<b>Ideas</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The writing has a clear point of view</li> <li>▪ Every sentence is important to the scene</li> <li>▪ Appropriate use of vocabulary</li> </ul>	
<i>Score ____/30</i>	

<b>Islamic terms/Expressions</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Appropriate use of the Islamic terms/expression</li> </ul>	
<i>Score ____/10</i>	

### The Student's Engagement in the Writing Process

The student

- made a prewriting plan
- discussed the draft with a partner
- revised the draft
- submitted the final draft punctually

*Overall Score \_\_\_\_/100*

### CONCLUSION

The notion of meaningful assessments could be implemented in an Islamic university by integrating Islamic terms or Islam-related expressions into the task designs. In a writing course, for instance, such integration is added into the common assessment practice existing in ELT context. While a general university might include some aspects like grammar, punctuation, and logical development of ideas; an Islamic university might add the use of Islamic terms or Islam-related expression in the task design. Such addition, along with a careful selection of the criteria, would lead to a meaningful and managable assessments within Islamic universities.

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