MARKING FOR PROCESS, SELF-REFLECTION AND AUTONOMY:
DESIGNING ITEM SPECIFICATIONS FOR BUSINESS WRITING

Martin Andrew
School of English & Applied Linguistics
Unitec New Zealand

Abstract

This paper describes curricular, pedagogical and assessment-related factors that affect the design and implementation of a grid of ten item specifications for an advanced writing course. The study is located within a second year Business Writing programme of a Bachelor of Arts in English as an Additional Language (EAL). The marking criteria described were created to fulfil a number of purposes simultaneously. These item specifications serve as item descriptors, a focussed curriculum aid or pro forma and an evaluative assessment and feedback tool. As such, they may promote tutor ease without reducing feedback quantity. The item specifications incorporate such skills as self-editing and reflection, collaborative editing, and ability to work independently on improvement of recurrent language errors or features of discourse belonging to a particular genre. The design and implementation stages of this study hypothesise that learners of Business Writing within an EAL Programme benefit from acquiring a range of self-analytic, self-reflective and self-corrective skills to enable them autonomously to draft and reformulate well structured, accurate and professional-looking business texts. Drawing on a range of literature, this paper describes the process of designing and implementing item specifications that prescribe and assess these skills. Next, it introduces main findings from the evaluative implementation stage, and offers rationale for ten criteria chosen for the item specifications.

Introduction

This paper describes the design of a curriculum, teaching and assessment aid for writing tutors of advanced learners that incorporates process writing, self-reflection and the need for increased autonomy. It focuses on a project to create a draft set of ten item specifications for a Business Writing paper, Business Writing in International Contexts (BWIC). As course developer and tutor, I was aware of a range of considerations in drafting these item specifications that aid the learners, in terms of prescribing the generic texts and describing students’ work, and the tutor in terms of reducing time spent in explaining tasks and in offering holistic feedback. As action researcher, I investigate issues impacting on the design stage from the literature, discuss the process of designing the item specifications and demonstrate the enhanced awareness of the students and the teaching benefits of such documents to curriculum designers and writing tutors. I also consider their increased insight into their own written interlanguage via the emphases on noticing and applying (at the micro level) and intertexts via drafting and editing (at the macro level).

Teachers of writing for specific purposes in an English as an Additional Language (EAL) context obviously need to fulfil a number of functions. They have to describe the characteristics of model generic texts and prescribe the linguistic and discursive symptoms of good writing for learners. Further, they need to accommodate student expectations to offer corrective and holistic feedback as part of the text-evolution and learning processes. These teaching functions operate within an institutional culture that defines target competencies at particular years in the educational
framework. In the case of degree courses, course content must comply with New Zealand Qualifications Authority-approved course descriptors. Any item specifications need to conform to both institution-level and national-level controls. BWIC operates at Level 6 of the NZQA framework. This corresponds to the second year of a Bachelor course.

**Background**

Between 2003 and 2005, the School of English and Applied Linguistics (SEAL) at Unitec New Zealand implemented a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in EAL. It attracts migrants and international students aiming to enhance their communicative and linguistic capital for a range of academic and vocational, instrumental and integrative reasons. BWIC was intended to be popular among those taking the B.A. and a Bachelor of Business (BBus.) conjointly as these learners are likely to be working in international business cultures in their futures. The paper’s input includes materials building awareness of the cultural dimensions of written communications for business; for instance, the discourse structure of a business letter written in China exhibits structural and tonal differences to a New Zealand business letter. The action research project described in this paper takes place in the context of the development and initial delivery of BWIC, a paper taught over 14 weeks by two tutors with a total of 56 contact hours and the expectation of 56 hours of self access and collaborative learning beyond the classroom.

I developed the course outcomes inscribed in the institution’s course outline used to gain national (NZQA) approval. These learning outcomes emphasise critical evaluation of texts, use of appropriate genre, demonstration of self-correction, proof-reading and editing skills, critical evaluation of peer work and accurate production of texts using target language. Portfolio and examination modes of assessment are specified with equal 50-50 weighting. The portfolio assessment structure developed appears in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Portfolio Assessment Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portfolios (50% of final mark)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content:</strong> For each item of writing included in the portfolio, students are required to submit:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. first draft of the task</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. rewrite of the task following peer review and evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. final copy incorporating self reflection and tutors' suggestions.</td>
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**Week 8: Portfolio Part 1 (25%)**

(i) written evaluation of a business report  
(ii) covering memorandum  
(iii) real-life business letter.

**Week 13: Portfolio Part 2 (25%)**

(i) political, legal or cultural business letter  
(ii) Powerpoint slides from mini-research  
(iii) three Blackboard discussion board contributions: cross-cultural commentaries, reviews, critiques or evaluations.

Based around these factors, I developed an action research project aimed at creating and implementing (and later evaluating and recreating) a draft grid of ten marking criteria and grade descriptors. The research question is: “What items need to be specified in a working document designed to describe and assess the quality of business texts and the learning process in BWIC?” I
adopt Brown & Hudson’s (2002) use of ‘item specifications’, bearing in mind the wider range of functions in the present context.

The aim was to create item specifications that function both as a pro forma, effectively a descriptive and prescriptive curriculum, and as marking criteria, allowing the tutor to offer descriptive and diagnostic feedback to the learners according to the ten targeted item specifications. Having ten specifications of course adds mathematical ease. The draft item specifications not only allow learners to understand the stylistic, generic, discursive and linguistic features of business writing, but also reduce marking time for tutors while still offering holistic feedback. Further, the marking criteria incorporate the process of writing. Marks are allocated for text improvements due to both individual and collaborative editing. A further marking criterion labelled targeted language allows each individual to target one specific weakness in their written construction or expression and to apply their learning in the process of producing the second and third drafts of their texts. The discussion section describes the rationale for selecting these ten items in more detail. Short descriptions of the selected item specifications appear in Figure 2 and the full grid appears as Appendix A.

In two portfolio instalments, students hand in six texts. They present their three drafts, the second evidencing self-editing and the third reflecting applied collaborative input. For each item, students write a reflective memorandum describing her or his perceived progress in the ten specified items during the production and reproduction of each prescribed task. The two tutors either mark collaboratively, or standardise their marking based on three co-marked tasks and grade individually, meeting again for a final check of contentious tasks. This calibration process standardises marking consistency and offsets subjectivity. For each of the six tasks, each item is individually graded using the item specifications. By indicating a particular grade for each item, the tutor simultaneously describes the learner’s work and offers holistic feedback. Tutors can, of course, also write individual comments to students and operationalise follow-up face-to-face conferences.

**Figure 2: Short Descriptions of Item Specifications for BWIC**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Short Description of Specification</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Rigour, research depth and selection of content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout</td>
<td>Professionalism of layout and application of format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Type</td>
<td>Evidence of understanding and applying linguistic features appropriate for the particular text type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>Evidence of understanding and applying appropriate structural and discursive features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexis</td>
<td>Accurate use of appropriate business vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>Effective use of well-selected grammatical items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax</td>
<td>Accurate use of a range of appropriate sentence structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted language</td>
<td>Evidence of successful understanding and application of a specified aspect of language (a weakness as identified in collaboration with tutor and peers) using self access materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative editing</td>
<td>Evidence of collaborative editing and response to a peer’s proof-reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-critical enquiry</td>
<td>Reflective evidence of individual editing, proof-reading and targeted language learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Study: Designing Item Specifications for Business Writing in International Contexts

**Methodology**

The design stage is the first part of this action research project. Action or classroom research, “the application of fact-finding to practical problem-solving in a social situation” (Burns, 2000, p. 443), provides the over-arching methodology. The activities involved in action research “have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are implemented, and then systematically submitted to observation, reflection and change” (Kemmis & Grundy, 1981, cited in Burns, 2000, p. 443). This cyclical process is reflected in the design and implementation stages of this project, and applied during evaluation and improvement stages. Importantly for a project involving assessment, action research allows tutor-researchers to test intuitive experience-based motivations against empirical variables. Figure 3 itemises the stages of the study, the data collection methods and the methodologies employed.

**Figure 3: Data collection and methodology over the four stages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Data Collection Methods</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1 Design| • Analyse marking criteria from five comparable writing papers  
• Investigate vital issues in designing appropriate item specifications  
• Needs analysis via focus group discussion with the tutors of the target learners | • Action research using open coding and emergent themes  
• Literature review and application of insights  
• Location of emergent themes from transcript |
| 2 Implementation| • Elicit Initial memoranda from learners following piloting  
• Hold collaborative interview with co-tutor | • Open coding and emergent themes  
• Transcription and discourse analysis |
| 3 Evaluation| • Solicit evaluative questionnaires from participants  
• Hold second collaborative interview with co-tutor  
• Triangulate with insights from designer-tutor’s reflective journal | • Open coding and emergent themes  
• Transcription and discourse analysis |
| 4 Improvement| • Rewrite, reformat and re-pilot revised item specifications | • Applied action research |
**Sources of the Design Stage**

Models of *pro formas* provided by the Higher Education Academy’s Student Enhanced Learning through Effective Feedback (SENLEF) research project in the United Kingdom (2005, online) are grids incorporating self-reflective and peer collaborative elements. These provide insights into layout, structure and pedagogical application. North (1996/7) has also developed writing descriptors for language testing, and Hyslop (1995) devised holistic analytic criteria for college business writing.

The design of the item specifications originated from three sources. Firstly, ongoing literature review established a range of issues needing consideration when designing item specifications. Secondly, open coded analysis of existing similar documents for current Level 5 writing courses demonstrated a need for Level 6 to focus on the assessment of applied skills, most notably self-corrective and peer collaborative editing skills, more targeted application of generic, syntactic and discursive patterns and more emphasis on lexicogrammatical forms (Andrew, 2004, pp. 124-6). Third, a needs analysis performed prior to the designing of the criteria developed a portrait of the likely Level 6 BWIC learner based on results of previous semester’s courses, interviews with tutors of ongoing students, and data about newly enrolling students including Bachelor of Business majors and single semester Study Abroad students. In short, the predicted class included learners with variable written competence. All students had achieved IELTS 5 (or equivalent) in Writing (a slim majority had achieved 6) and all shared common instrumental motivation. This is a vital fact in maximising learner success in a writing programme (Myles, 2002, p. 11). This empirical data, in addition to the range of issues raised in the literature review, informed the processes of designing and implementing the item specifications.

Commentary and feedback on the selection and wording of the ten key criteria were elicited from seven EAL tutors comprising the SEAL B.A. development team and minor changes were made. Next, draft descriptions of performance within each criterion were written, using the ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ scale to incorporate insights advanced by Brown and Hudson (2002, Chapter 3) in producing ‘specification-driven’ items. The process follows Cushing-Weigle (2002) who argues that scale descriptors should be written intuitively “by defining in advance the ability being measured”. The next stage sets “levels of attainment, from none to complete mastery” (p. 125).

In addition to Brown and Hudson (2002), Liu and Hansen (2002) and Cushing-Weigle (2002), two other studies provide insights into developing item specifications grids: Gunn (1995) and Bailey (1998). First, Gunn’s (1995) study of devising, implementing and evaluating a set of assessment procedures for adult immigrant learners of English within the Australian Migrant Education Programme (AMEP) concludes that items specifications need above all to be clear. Gunn emphasises that criterion-based assessments can track/record learners’ language development systematically (p. 263). They can also have a focussing effect on the curriculum, yielding interpretable measurements of ‘teachable’ performance standards, countering marker subjectivity and reducing confusion (p. 263). Second, Bailey (1998) describes the devising of weighted analytic scoring criteria for an Upper Intermediate writing course. The team composed a one-page grid with the aim of using the grid to ensure marker standardisation and to “promote positive washback” and allowed the students to see areas of progress throughout the term (p. 191). The BWIC grid is intended to contain and reflect these advantages, as well as being a curricular *pro forma* for learners.
Further Literature Review for the Design Stage

Below, in identifying three issues impacting on assessing business writing, I discuss a range of literature informing the study, and identify controversies which need consideration when designing and implementing marking criteria. Identifying assessment issues, I summarise the controversial dichotomies informing scale construction, consider the place of focus on form and error correction and argue for the incorporation of criteria for the assessment of reflective learning.

Assessment Issues: Reconciling Three Dualities

Literature on assessing writing (Brown & Hudson, 2002; Cho, 2003; Cumming, 1990, 1998; Cushing-Weigle, 2002; Fulcher, 1997; Hamp-Lyons, 2001; Hyland, 2002; Kroll, 1998; Pollitt & Murray, 1993/6) offers insights into types of norm and criterion-referenced scales used in marking, largely focussing attention on three dichotomies: the intuitive versus empirical duality informing scale construction, the relative appropriateness of analytic scales and user-constructed scales and, of course, the stress between assessing product and process.

As for the first of these, the draft marking criteria for BWIC were intuitively constructed but founded on empirically-based needs analyses. Further, they are subject to further empirical scrutiny by the target users in the evaluation stage for future ongoing revision. As for the second, Cushing-Weigle (2002) comments on the appropriateness of analytic scales for L2 writers as “different aspects of writing ability develop at different rates” (p.121). The BWIC scales are, hence, analytical and criterion-based. Cushing-Weigle (p.122), further, differentiates between ‘constructor oriented scales’ (task-specific, as in any SENLEF or NZQA scale), ‘assessor-constructed scales’ (created for ease of marking) and ‘user-oriented scales’ that help the users to interpret their scores. In developing the BWIC grid, it was necessary to integrate analytic user-constructed and assessor-constructed scales in order to create a document that could function both as pro forma and assessment and feedback tool. As for the third duality, product versus process, BWIC’s measurement of learning across the item specifications requires definite focus on processes (drafting, editing, proof-reading, evaluating, reformulating, responding, reflecting) to foreground writing problems as well as language problems (Gabrieletos, 2002) and to for students to demonstrate and assess evidence in improvement. These are assessed via the criteria targeted language, collaborative editing and self-critical enquiry.

Assessment Issues: Incorporating Focus on Form

In producing scale descriptors for BWIC and considering the institutional context and the end users of the grid, issues around the viability and necessity of peer and tutor interventions in micro- and macro-level feedback and error correction were considered.

First, we considered the debates around the relative weighting of criteria focussing on grammatical/lexicomorphological accuracy in the product and applying error correction strategies in the process (James, 1998; Ferris, 1999, 2002, 2003; Grey, 2004, et al.). Myles (2002) sums up the problem articulated by many researchers (Truscott, 1996; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Lee, 1997; Hyland, 1998; Loewen, 1998, et al.) involved in the debate around the usefulness of corrective form-focussed feedback on writing: “if students have not developed learning strategies to monitor their writing errors, and if they do not receive enough
conceptual feedback at the discourse level, then the positive effects of the instruction may backfire” (p. 11). Our brief was to assess text types and to focus on discourse-level issues. However, needs analyses suggested that the target learners required lexicomorphological input as well as a focus on the error at word, sentence and discourse levels. To bridge the gap, we decided on three tutor interventions: tutors would lead class sessions focussing on text reformulation and editing weekly in order to focus attention on the editing process as well as particular cases of focus on form and to train the learners as peer collaborators. Tutors would also hold one-on-one conferences with each learner in class time based on one item (three drafts) in the learner’s portfolio to offer specific feedback that can be applied to remaining texts in the portfolio. Third, there are optional conferences when the portfolios are returned. The level of success of these interventions is the subject of ongoing research.

For the reasons outlined above, we refocused our consideration on the value of form-focussed peer correcting (Swain, 2000; Riddiford, 2004) and more holistically-focussed peer editing (Falchinov, 2001; Liu & Hansen, 2002). Both are incorporated in our item specifications subsumed under collaborative editing.

Focus on form, however, is an unavoidable consideration (Myers, 1997). The studies of Cohen (1989), Swain (2000), Qi and Lapkin (2001), Lapkin and Swain (2002) and others into collaborative dialogue and reformulation inform assessment of the drafting and editing processes, and strategies for integrating peer editing into curricula have been detailed by Liu and Hansen (2002). Importantly, the cross-curricular imperative of business writing foregrounds focus on form: “Sloppy or poorly-worded correspondence is usually detrimental to business relations, even if the ideas are clear” (South, 1998, online). The BWIC criteria acknowledge the need for accuracy with its conventional descriptors for grammar, lexis and discourse.

Assessment Issues: Reflective Learning

Thirdly, the need to focus learners on the process of text construction over a series of drafts demanded the application of reflective practice methodology (Birch, 1997; Birch & Kemp, 1998; Hillocks, 1995; Scott, 2005). Students write reflective memoranda describing their process learning during the production of each of the 6 texts, over three drafts, to help tutors assess individuals’ self-reflective skills in the criterion self-critical analysis.

Processive and subject-specific writing such as that required in BWIC incorporates a form of reflection (Hillocks, 1994). ‘Reflection’, applied to student learning, refers to “the ability to be self aware, to analyse experiences, to evaluate their meaning and to plan further action based on analysis and reflection” (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2002, p. 1). Birch and Kemp (2000) maintain that academic literacy is developed when knowledge is applied beyond the classroom (as in peer- and self-editing and -reflecting) allowing learners to “operationalise … components of communicative competence even when they are not yet fully developed” (p. 10). Promoting the skill of self-correction in EFL learners appears possible in translation contexts (Kouraogogo, 2002). As the following discussion makes clear, applied reflective thought is considered in the criteria self-critical enquiry and collaborative editing.

Discussion

In the light of the literature discussed above, I would like to offer rationales for the selection of these 10 item specifications. Next, I will discuss initial findings from the implementation
stage regarding the usefulness of the item specifications and the clarity of their design. The third part of this discussion discusses the benefits of designing (and applying) item specifications from the perspectives of learners and tutors.

**Rationale for the Item Descriptors**

Firstly, I wanted to ensure that students were reading, processing and applying a sufficient range of primary sources (such as authentic and model texts) and secondary materials (a wide selection of business writing textbooks and websites) with emphasis on global contexts. Learners encounter these in the classroom, in recommended texts and on BWIC’s intranet Blackboard site. This comprehensible input translates into the first item specification, **content**, which is obviously an overarching criteria impacting on many others. Because of the business focus, it is important to measure the learner’s ability to employ professionally word-processed formats, obey conventions of lineation and spacing, use white space effectively and produce a professional document. These skills focusing on the typographical professionalism of the printed text are measured as **layout**. **Text type** is BWIC’s item specification for the learner’s ability to apply the linguistic and conventional features of a particular genre effectively. The assessed genres are reports, memoranda, business letters, Powerpoint slides and critiques.

A genre-based item specification allows students to bring their knowledge of the purpose, structure, and grammatical characteristics of genres to the assessment (Paltridge, 2001). This, achieved pedagogically via text reformulation and deconstruction of model texts, enhances discourse level awareness of textual organisation (Alonso & McCabe, 2003), which in turn impacts on the composition process (Raimes, 1991, 1998). It effectively participates in a process that Cumming (1995) calls ‘cognitive modelling’. The use of genre accommodates two issues raised by Fulcher (1998): the facts that rhetorical structure and genre are culturally-conditioned and/or institutionalised, and that the texts are recognisable and classifiable from their communicative purpose. Further, the use of genre adds to learners’ cultural capital in terms of its being a means of reaching a target discourse community, and is in itself motivating (Paltridge, 2001, p. 104). And it allows students to demonstrate their potential for future development (Paltridge, 2001, p. 114), a point that becomes especially important in the context of assessing the processes involved in drafting and redrafting text.

The next three criteria, **discourse**, **syntax** and **lexis** clearly correspond to accuracy and appropriacy at the levels of text and paragraph, sentence and word. **Discourse**, in this context and at this level, measures the learner’s ability to construct a business text and signpost its thought processes in a logical, objective and reader-centred manner. It necessarily overlaps with text type and students need to be clear that text type focuses on generic features while discourse looks at logical and structural elements. Learners also need to be aware that discourse conventions belonging to a genre within their culture may not correspond with those of New Zealand contexts. At level 6, syntactic variety and accuracy is a major issue for learners and this is consolidated in other papers which learners may be taking as co-requisites. Clear, simple, accurate sentences minimising relative clauses are expected of BWIC students. Lexically, BWIC learners are taught to avoid jargon, archaisms, indirectness, euphemisms, verbosity and overuse of abstractions and nominalisations. We ask them to focus specifically on lexical form, connotation and
tone and to ensure succinct verbs are selected. This process of revisiting target lexis aids language acquisition and encourages meaning negotiation (Flower, 1994).

The item grammar is deliberately wide-ranging, although issues of word form (e.g. a noun used where a verb is needed) are more appropriately covered by lexis. Issues of tense and word ending are construed as grammatical. This criterion embodies accuracy, a vital component of professional writing in a course designed to prepare learners for future professional and workplace contexts. Students with a high expectation for corrective feedback capitalise on the item targeted language. This flexible criterion is designed for students to use self-access materials to target a diagnosed or particular linguistic need. A student consistently making incorrect lexical choices in dependent prepositions, for instance, locates self-help materials and applies them when self-editing. This can also be used for recurrent grammatical errors, inappropriate use of discourse markers or lack of syntactic variety. It can also be used to focus attention on learning specific to business genres, such as the accurate use of bullet points. This is useful for ensuring that more grammatically and lexically advanced students are given a challenge while those needing form-focussed input target their own learning needs autonomously. There is also need to transfer responsibility for rectifying error to learners as peers and self-analytical individuals. For this reason, and because integrating new grammatical learning follows the pattern of noticing, comparing and remediation to promote language acquisition (Ellis, 1997; James, 1998; Cross, 2002), targeted language is a viable item for assessment. Assessing it depends on its manifestations in the three drafts, and the students’ reflections on their learning in the accompanying reflective memorandum.

This memorandum, itself unassessed, provides learner self-reports on collaborative editing and self-critical enquiry, the final of the 10 item specifications. The first of these is fundamental to the outcomes of BWIC’s institutional course descriptors. An increasingly substantial amount of literature indicates the necessity of skills developed during peer editing for future professional contexts and for lifelong autonomous learning. Berg’s (1999) experimental research, for instance, supports the inclusion of item specifications for collaborative editing. She suggests that appropriate and targeted peer editing training not only effects meaning-related revision but also, at a more global level, better quality of writing. Liu and Hansen (2002) advance this approach in a book-length study accommodating issues of learner styles and group/pair dynamics. There is also support for our item specification for self-critical enquiry. Cram (1995), for example, asserts: “training in self-assessment helps learners to become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and to accept greater responsibility for assessment decisions” (p. 300).

These skills require considerable in-class practice in order to focus learners on the non-grammatical (as well as the grammatical) aspects of their peers’ intertexts. It also requires tutor responses. Hyland’s (1998) ethnographic study into the lasting value added by teacher feedback in the text revision process informs the need for collaborative editing to include tutor suggestions. This implies that teachers can help learners generate both their own sources of feedback and strategies for self-revision. Empowering learners to comment on others’ use of generic conventions, discourse structure, syntactic and lexical choices and achievement of tone represents a substantial learning investment. It offers a major contribution to the autonomous evaluation and construction of business texts. This is also true for self-editing, which, together to reflect on the learning achieved through the processes of drafting and collaboration, makes up self-critical enquiry.
Teacher and Learner Response to the Draft Item Specifications

During the implementation stage, the item specifications were used to introduce and assess a formative task. On receiving their assessed task back together with annotated item specifications, 16 learners (mixed nationalities and ages; even division of genders, and of international students and permanent residents) wrote a non-assessed practice memorandum. The memorandum task aimed to elicit learners' understanding of the specifications and gauge opinions of the fairness of the item specifications as an assessment tool and their ability to offer diagnostic and holistic feedback. In addition, the co-tutor was interviewed in order to discuss implementation issues and learner (and tutor) problems with using the grid. I supply a brief advance summary of the findings here.

The most recurrent comment (ten responses) indicates the usefulness of the diagnostic role of the grid in terms of providing curriculum-specific feedback and pinpointing aspects of text production requiring self-study. This directly supports Bailey (1998). One student generalises: "Without the grid's clear feedback, it would get difficult to develop my business writing", while another, clearly concerned mainly with accuracy, offers: "I can find out what are my weaknesses, things that I need to improve, what I have done good, how to improve more, how to correct my errors and mistakes". The diagnostic use of the grade specifications is noted: "It tells me what is the level of my writings". Seven learners indicate that the grid provides a useful foundation for the basis of developing confidence in producing business texts of various genre, as with the learner who comments that she can now write "letters like the model letters". Other typical comments indicate the ease with which the grid directs performance according to specifications: "It is very good for us to be able to see what we are expected to do for different grades".

Two other emergent themes are relevant: the grid’s clarity (Gunn, 1995); and its potential to promote positive washback (Bailey, 1998) and autonomy. The clarity of the grid as a diagnostic tool is the subject of seven comments. A representative sentiment is that "you can easily see what you are good at and what you need to improve" by studying the grid. The grid’s role in focussing the students on self-editing and self-reflection emerges in five comments: "One thing I want to emphasise is I am not over rely on tutors now ... I am noticing all my weaknesses, especially on self-critical enquiry". Several students appreciate learning via process: "I need to pay attention to the stages of writing step-by-step and not concentrate on just finish the writing", and one notes the value of reflection: "Reflection helps me to see where I have gone wrong and what I need to work on next time and also in my future job". Similarly, the use of targeted language is well reviewed: "I can recognise my comma splices and worked on it".

Less well reviewed is collaborative editing, largely due to the fact that the class contained some learners, and hence collaborators, whose level of language awareness was below the class norm: "If no responses from group members, how can I learn from each other?", "my teacher is the best collaborator for me". Falchikov (2001) indicates in her study of peer tutoring that the educational benefits of peer tutoring depend on the degree to which tutees are ‘real’ peers. The tutor’s insight is valuable here:

Collaborative editing is essential for students on this course (and at this level) to start learning and putting into practice peer editing and proofreading skills in relation to future study and work needs. The majority of students are from a teacher-centred, non-
communicative learning environment and need as much exposure as possible to development of autonomous learning skills, especially if they plan to continue their studies and/or work in NZ.

The tutor evaluates the item specifications positively overall, and specifically for their use of layout and text-type, their evaluation of content, grammar, lexis and syntax, and for their detail and ability to promote positive washback: “A detailed marking criterion enables teachers to check a wider range of descriptors than would otherwise be referred to in individual error correction, especially for portfolios and exams”. She indicates some confusion among learners about discourse, particularly its border with text-type, makes suggestions for clarifying the wording of performance descriptions, notices general improvements in learner’s self-critical and reflective skills and comments positively on the learning potential of targeted language. The major obstacle, even at an advanced level, is student’s difficulty in seeing past grammar, both their own and that of others, and into other components of business text production. In terms of implementation for the tutors, their value in promoting standardisation and time-saving are noted, although tutors need to get adjusted to them.

Benefits of Item Specification Grids for Teaching and Learning

The item specification grid itemised in Figure 4 offers potential benefits to both teaching and learning. In particular, it acts as a curriculum aid in defining ten key facets of the business writing product and/or process. It incorporates a clear focus on aspects of the process of writing while maintaining awareness that in business texts and in a computer-moderated text production environment layout within culturally-specific genres is significant. This is enhanced by its emphasis on peer editing, self-critical analysis and reflection, highlighting the importance of these skills for autonomy and future study and professional work. The grid is helpful in defining the focus for learners engaged in collaborative editing and self-critical analysis, although the development of these skills needs a range of tutor interventions. Its provision of the item targeted language recognises that learners have different grammatical, structural and formal needs and gives each learner a chance to notice, compare and integrate their targeted learning into their final draft and reintegrate it into their subsequent portfolio item. As such it serves as a catalyst in the process of learning.

Its benefits to instruction, assessment and giving holistic feedback are also evident, although this is the subject of ongoing further evaluative study and the wording of the descriptors is far from perfect. However, such item specifications can function as a fair and extensive set of marking criteria and grade descriptors, provided markers engage in a calibration process. Done well, they can aid in the process of co-marker standardisation and reduce post-event moderation issues. They also have the capacity to provide diagnostic, descriptive and curriculum-specific feedback to learners. They may serve as the basis for face-to-face learner conferencing and the diagnosis of future targeted language. They can also reduce marking and processing time by providing sufficient holistic feedback.

In terms of being user-constructed pro formas, the specifications focus learners on appropriate aspects of learning for entry into a business-focussed discourse community. For instance, they direct learners to recognise the lexical, syntactic and discursive features of selected business text types and apply them to their own texts; to critically and
holistically evaluate one's own and others' work and to compare their own and others' texts to authentic texts of the same genre and recognize opportunities for making them more effective. These skills are valid foci for measurement of achievement as well as being important prescribed learning outcomes.

**Conclusions**

Devising analytic, criterion-based item specifications that are assessor-constructed yet user-oriented for advanced specific-purpose writing courses represents an investment for the course designer/tutor. The process requires design team corroboration, a window during the first weeks of instruction for piloting, and tutor standardisation meetings.

Any item specification document serves to prescribe and itemise categories in which learners are expected to make progress in line with institutional and national course documentation. In addition to serving as a curricular aid, it is also invaluable as an assessment tool. Although its major considerable advantage lies in valuing tutor time, it may also provide sufficient holistic feedback for students to acquire target language. A question for further study, of course, is whether such feedback is to any extent a substitute for or a reasonable complement to individualised written and/or oral feedback. I would also like to measure the amount and type of washback that the use of such item specifications can achieve.

The emphasis on process written into the item specifications appears to lead to an appropriate shift in responsibility for corrective and editorial feedback from the tutor to the peer and the individual. This effectively builds autonomy, fosters learner independence and builds skills for use in future discourse communities of practice. My study so far indicates that substantial tutor intervention and conferencing is needed to activate collaborative editing skills and to a lesser extent reflective self-critical skills. This intervention takes the form of in-class reformulation and text evaluation tasks in addition to a short face-to-face conference focussing on one item in a writing portfolio. This is effective in the week prior to the deadline. Conferencing diagnoses patterns in grammatical and syntactic error and also offers insights into text patterning and evidence of applied learning of business format, typographical layout, generic text type and logical structure at the discourse level.

What emerges from the evaluation stage and is also supported by considerable research is that learners of business writing within a programme such as the B.A. (EAL) benefit from acquiring a range of self-analytic, self-reflective and self-corrective skills to enable them autonomously to draft and reformulate well structured, accurate and professional-looking business texts. Whether the item specifications participate in a process by which specific aspects of language acquisition occurs is a further subject for future empirical study. Clearly, a great deal of empirically-based research can be done to corroborate these claims. The evaluation and recreation stages of the project aim to rarefy the specifications so that they to incorporate a better idea of the texts that the target students are composing.

The ten item specifications selected and described here, particularly targeted language, self-critical enquiry, the discourse level descriptors (discourse, text-type, layout) and the conventional item specifications (content, grammar, lexis, syntax) suit the context of BWIC and aid its students and tutors although clearer wording may help differentiation. In the eyes of many learners only, collaborative editing is problematic and needs tutor intervention at the
pedagogical level and conferencing at the drafting stage. The item specifications for BWIC incorporate and reflect recent research, but also suggest a range of studies and improvements for the future.

References


## Appendix A: Business Writing in International Contexts: Draft Item Specifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short Description of Criterion</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
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<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
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<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Rigour, research depth and selection of content</td>
<td>• Content is precise, accurate, well-selected, well-researched, original, appropriately referenced</td>
<td>• Content is mostly precise, accurate, well-selected, well-researched, original, and for the most part appropriately referenced</td>
<td>• Content is sufficiently precise, accurate, satisfactorily-selected and -researched, original, and appropriately referenced, although there may be some gaps</td>
<td>• Content lacks precision, accuracy, appears unsatisfactorily-selected and -researched, possibly not entirely original, and inappropriately or partially referenced, with some gaps</td>
<td>• Content is imprecise, inaccurate, poorly-selected and under-researched, appears unoriginal, inappropriately referenced or unreferenced</td>
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<tr>
<td>Layout</td>
<td>Professionalism of Layout and Application of format</td>
<td>• Item is accurately word-processed, effectively laid out with excellent use of typographical features and spacing</td>
<td>• Word-processing of item is mostly accurate and largely effective, with good use of typographical features and mostly effective spacing</td>
<td>• Accuracy of word-processing is satisfactory and fairly effective, with adequate use of typographical features and satisfactory spacing</td>
<td>• Item is occasionally imprecise in its word-processing with evidence of hurried or sloppy formatting layout</td>
<td>• Item is imprecisely or sloppily word-processed, ineffectively laid out with inadequate use of typographical features and poor spacing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Text Type</td>
<td>Evidence of understanding and applying linguistic features appropriate for the particular text type</td>
<td>• Structural, stylistic and linguistic features of the item’s text type are fully evident and effectively applied</td>
<td>• Structural, stylistic and linguistic features of the item’s text type are mostly evident and effectively applied</td>
<td>• Structural, stylistic and linguistic features of the item’s text type are satisfactorily evident and applied</td>
<td>• Structural, stylistic and linguistic features of the item’s text type are partially evident and applied with some degree of effectiveness,</td>
<td>• Structural, stylistic and linguistic features of the item’s text type are not evident and have not been effectively applied,</td>
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<td>Discourse</td>
<td>Evidence of understanding and applying appropriate structural and discursive features</td>
<td>• Item is marked by a high level of evident understanding of appropriate discourse features</td>
<td>• Item is marked by a good level of evident understanding of appropriate discourse features</td>
<td>• Cohesion and coherence are clear, and discourse markers mostly well-chosen and used, although application may be improved</td>
<td>• Item is marked by an unsatisfactory level of evident understanding of discourse features</td>
<td>• Item is marked by a poor level of evident understanding of discourse features</td>
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| **Lexis**                      | Accurate use of appropriate business vocabulary | • Vocabulary characteristic of the text type and subject is precise, well-chosen and accurate  
• Word forms are accurate  
• Excellent range of lexis | • Vocabulary characteristic of the text type and subject is, on the whole, precise, mostly well-chosen and accurate, although minor errors may occur  
• Word forms are mostly accurate  
• Good range of lexis | • Vocabulary characteristic of the text type and subject is satisfactorily precise, chosen with some care and presented with some attention to accuracy  
• Minor lexical errors, such as in word form and collocation may occur and some remedial work may be needed  
• Attempt to use a satisfactory range of lexis | • Vocabulary used is partially uncharacteristic of the text type and subject and/ or may be partly imprecise, appear too general rather than business-like and/ or inaccurate  
• Word forms contain frequent inaccuracies  
• Inadequate range of lexis | • Vocabulary used is uncharacteristic of the text type and subject and/ or may be imprecise, overly general and/ or inaccurate  
• Word forms contain frequent inaccuracies  
• Inadequate range of lexis |
| **Syntax**                     | Accurate use of a range of appropriate sentence structures | • An excellent range of complex, compound and simple sentences is effectively and accurately used | • An good range of complex, compound and simple sentences is used with a good degree of effectiveness and accuracy  
• Minor remedial self-study is helpful | • A fair range of complex, compound and simple sentences is used with a satisfactory degree of effectiveness and accuracy  
• Minor remedial self-study is helpful | • A limited range of complex, compound and simple sentences are used with a less than satisfactory degree of effectiveness and accuracy  
• Remedial work in sentence structure and form is recommended | • A poor range of complex, compound and simple sentences are used with a less than satisfactory degree of effectiveness and accuracy  
• Remedial work in sentence structure and form is required |
| **Grammar**                    | Effective use of well-selected grammatical items | • Appropriate grammatical structures are clearly evident and accurately applied  
• An excellent range of appropriate grammatical structures is competently used | • Appropriate grammatical structures are evident for the most part and applied with a high degree of accuracy  
• An good range of appropriate grammatical structures is competently used  
• Minor remedial self-study is helpful | • Appropriate grammatical structures are evident to a satisfactory extent and applied with a satisfactory degree of accuracy  
• An fair range of appropriate grammatical structures is used, with satisfactory competence  
• Minor remedial self-study is helpful | • Appropriate grammatical structures are not satisfactorily evident and/ or are applied with an unsatisfactory degree of accuracy and work may be careless  
• An inadequate range of grammatical structures is used  
• Accuracy may be faulty  
• Grammatical competence may be questionable  
• Remedial self-study is recommended | • Little or no evidence of appropriate grammatical structures  
• Some grammatical structures are inaccurately applied  
• An extremely limited range of appropriate grammatical structures is used  
• Remedial work in grammatical form is required |
<table>
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| Targeted language              | Evidence of successful understanding and application of a specified aspect of language using self-access materials | • Specified aspect of language appears fully understood and is applied with some accuracy and appropriacy in the writing  
• Evidence of own learning  
• Minor lapses in language target may be evident | • Specified aspect of language appears improved and is applied with a satisfactory degree of accuracy although appropriacy may be occasionally doubtful  
• Some evidence of own learning, but also evidence of the need for further self-study on specified language item  
• Lapses in language target may be noticeable | • Specified aspect of language appears mostly understood and is applied with a satisfactory degree of accuracy although appropriacy may be partially applied with an unsatisfactory degree of accuracy  
• Appropriacy is doubtful  
• Limited evidence of self-access and own learning  
• Evidence of considerable need for remedial self-study on specified language item | • Aspect of language may not be sufficiently specific  
• Appears understood only partially and applied with an unsatisfactory degree of accuracy  
• Appropriacy is doubtful  
• Lacks accuracy and appropriacy  
• Disputable evidence of self-access and own learning  
• Remedial work urgently required | • Aspect of learning is not specified  
• Specified aspect of language appears misunderstood and is misapplied  
• Lapses accuracy and appropriacy  
• Disputable evidence of self-access and own learning  
• Remedial work urgently required |
| Collaborative editing          | Evidence of collaborative peer editing and proof-reading                 | • Final item contains convincing evidence of collaborative peer editing and proof-reading  
• First draft, rewrite and final copy are included, and original | • Final item contains evidence of collaborative peer editing and proof-reading  
• First draft, rewrite and final copy are included, and original, but some aspects may be incompletely realised | • Final item contains satisfactory evidence of collaborative peer editing and proof-reading  
• First draft, rewrite and final copy are mostly complete, and are satisfactorily original, although evidence of collaborators’ help might be noticeable | • Final item does not contain fully convincing evidence of any one or more of the following: collaborative peer editing, proof-reading  
• Any of: first draft, rewrite or final copy may be incomplete  
• Work may appear unoriginal | • Final item does not contain convincing evidence of completely collaborative peer editing and/ or proof-reading  
• First draft, rewrite and final copy are not all included,  
• Work unoriginal or generic |
| Self-critical enquiry          | Evidence of individual editing, proof-reading and targeted learning      | • Final item demonstrates full attempt to apply editing and proof-reading skills  
• Clear evidence of individual work and learning | • Final item demonstrates a good attempt to apply editing and proof-reading skills  
• Evidence of good individual work and learning | • Final item demonstrates a satisfactory attempt to apply editing and proof-reading skills  
• Evidence of satisfactory individual work and learning  
• Work may appear unoriginal and may not reflect the individual’s work sufficiently | • Final item evidences no attempt to apply editing and proof-reading skills  
• No evidence of individual work and learning is  
• Work is unoriginal and does not reflect the individual’s work |