

## Chapter 9

# Ipsative Assessment of Essay Writing to Foster Reflection and Self-Awareness of Progress

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Ipsative assessment to improve argumentative essay writing aimed at studying how an alternative type of assessment, which persuaded learners to reflect on the feedback received and involved them as active assessment participants, influenced the writing skill of 24 students from two Colombian universities. The queries addressed throughout the chapter were analyzing the way students structured their essays by means of the Ipsative feedback and the influence of the assessment approach on students at the self-management levels. Findings revealed that through Ipsative assessment students enhanced their argumentative essay writing as they grasped the structural and reflective nature of this skill. Furthermore, the comparison of various drafts allowed learners to reflect on their improvements at the same time they raised self-awareness of progress and the whole process took students to the realization that they were developing generic skills useful for academic discourse. This chapter was also concerned with the effects of Ipsative assessment on self-directedness and lifelong learning.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Assessment in general has played a pivotal role in learning processes and assessment of writing in particular, as it has been a center of debate since the early 70's when academic writing shifted its focus from product to process approach (Ferris, 2003). This shift has had pedagogical implications for both teachers and students who have to enlist in a task that seems demanding for both. Sommers argued that teachers, on one hand, are required to provide substantial feedback which is time-consuming, and students, on the other hand, are called to the interpreted teacher's comments, which are commonly misunderstood (as

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cited in Ferris, 2003, p. 3). Based on this context, it is evident that formative assessment has been the centerpiece in the improvement of written work because its feedback component has been considered crucial to writing development (Klimova, 2011). Even though formative assessment can take various forms that can ease the difficulties mentioned above, it still fails at getting students more personally involved in the assessment of the written task; therefore, an alternative assessment approach that focuses on self-comparison of written work was implemented in this study.

Academic writing at Colombian Universities Universidad de La Sabana and Universidad Santo Tomás, is a major component of the English language programs, and professors devote considerable time and effort to its assessment throughout an academic term. Particularly in intermediate English levels (B1) in both contexts, essay writing implies that the students are able to organize their ideas within an argumentative structure; in fact, the development of this task focuses on analyzing students' accuracy when writing an argumentative essay. At the time, both summative and formative feedback showed low performance with reference to students' cognitive development and use of the rhetorical structure. From this preliminary diagnostic emerged the idea that students may need to apprehend about the developmental nature of writing by shifting the focus on the product to a scaffold process of reflection, goal setting and last-long learning. In addition, it was also realized that in order to guide the students properly through this ongoing process a different approach to teach the argumentative rhetorical structure was also needed. Finally, yet importantly, the main outcome of the diagnostic inspired the intention of including the students as active participants in the assessment of their work, and, foster accountability, self-direction and the learning of generic skills (the last term is used in this chapter as a life long learning skill that can be applied across a variety of subject areas).

A central argument of this study - as opposed to the transmissible view of assessment- is that by persuading learners to reflect on the feedback received from the teacher and to set specific paths for improvement, students become accountable for the effectiveness of those and, at the same time, they raise awareness of progress and come to be active participants in the assessment process. This approach, known as Ipsative assessment, has the potential to change the focus on grades to long- term progress encouraging self-management and autonomy in students, as part of the assessment process considers how far the learners have progressed from one draft to the subsequent one, rather than only focusing on how well they have satisfied the criteria- reference assessment (rubric). Throughout the implementation of Ipsative assessment, feedback provided by the teacher not only focuses on students' progress along the different tasks, but also provides strategies to overcome performances (ipsative feedback). Furthermore, this type of feedback presents self-referential goals to the students, which can be used as scaffolds that in the learning process are used to measure the improvement of their own work. After the implementation of this assessment approach, findings showed that, by means of Ipsative assessment, students enhanced their academic writing as they grasped the structural and reflective nature of this skill and they developed generic skills useful for academic discourse.

This chapter provides a new assessment approach to student writing and illustrates the findings about the influence of Ipsative Assessment approach on essay writing among a 24 undergraduate students group with a B1+ language level according to the common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR): one group from a teacher-training program and the other from an English proficiency program in an online and face-to-face environment correspondingly. The study focused specifically on how Ipsative assessment leads to improvement in undergraduate students argumentative essay writing and how it influenced at the process and students' self- management level.

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