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**Collaborative Writing Assessment as a Supplemental Tool to
Enhance Novice and Experienced EFL Raters' Critical Thinking:
A Contrastive Case Study**

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate Studies Office in Partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking (CT) is not a new idea. According to Wright (2002), there were the ancient Greeks who first wrote about CT. Conceiving its prominence, studies carried out investigating two major groups involved in education, namely students and teachers, have started since some decades ago and are still continuing to be important areas to be invested on. Some revealed conflicting results in terms of the relationship between CT and other factors such as cognitive development (Ennis, 1993), writing and speaking (Ghahramani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini, 2005), teachers' CT (Birjandi & Bagher Kazemi, 2010) and assessment and evaluation (Ghafar Samar & Ahmadi, 2012) among many others. As teachers play an important role in determining the success of an educational system, and concerning the positive effects of interaction in teaching and testing, the present study examines whether the frequency of CT components among novice and experienced Iranian EFL teachers is different while assessing a text individually and collaboratively. A mixed-method approach was followed to acquire the data for the study containing recorded think-aloud protocols and the raters' written comments on three passages written by the IELTS examinees. In the first phase, novice and experienced raters were compared regarding the total frequency of CT components used

while assessing individually and collaboratively. Then, their criteria for scoring a passage, without using a rubric, were attempted to be discovered. To this end, the collected data from 16 novice and 16 experienced raters were coded investigating the total number of statements which could be classified as one of the five components of critical thinking (Stapleton, 2001). The findings revealed that collaboration in writing assessment improves the raters' CT irrespective of their experience level. The raters' criteria for rating a text were also formed based on the qualitative analysis of the presented information.

Key words: *critical thinking, novice raters, experienced raters, individual assessment, collaborative assessment.*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------------|-----|
| Abstract | III |
| Acknowledgements | V |
| Table of Contents | VI |
| List of Tables..... | IX |
| List of Figures..... | X |
| List of Appendices..... | XI |

Chapter One: Introduction

| | |
|---|----|
| 1.1. Preliminaries | 2 |
| 1.2. Statement of the Problem | 6 |
| 1.3 Purpose of the Study..... | 8 |
| 1.4. Significance of the Study..... | 9 |
| 1.5. Research Questions | 11 |
| 1.6. Research Hypotheses | 12 |
| 1.7. Limitations and Delimitations..... | 13 |
| 1.8. Definition of Key Terms | 14 |
| 1.8.1. Critical Thinking | 14 |
| 1.8.2. Critical Thinking Abilities..... | 15 |
| 1.8.3. Collaborative Assessment..... | 15 |
| 1.8.4. Rating..... | 16 |
| 1.8.5. Novice Teachers..... | 16 |
| 1.8.6. Experienced Teachers..... | 16 |

Chapter Two: Review of the Related Literature

| | |
|---|----|
| 2.1. Introduction | 18 |
| 2.2. Theoretical Background on Assessment..... | 18 |
| 2.2.1 Writing Assessment..... | 22 |
| 2.2.2. Previous Studies on Writing Assessment..... | 24 |
| 2.3. Raters and the Concept of Experience..... | 30 |
| 2.3.1 Previous Studies on the Raters and the Concept of Experience..... | 32 |
| 2.4. Theoretical Background on Critical Thinking..... | 35 |
| 2.5. Stages of Critical Thinking..... | 41 |
| 2.6. Critical Thinking Assessment..... | 43 |
| 2.7. Previous Research on the Concept of Assessment..... | 46 |
| 2.8. The Role of Collaboration on Critical Thinking Enhancement..... | 51 |

Chapter Three: Methodology

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| 3.1. Introduction..... | 55 |
| 3.2. Participants..... | 55 |
| 3.3. Instrumentation..... | 56 |
| 3.4. Design..... | 59 |
| 3.5. Data Collection Procedure..... | 60 |
| 3.6. Data Analysis..... | 64 |

Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| 4.1. Introduction..... | 67 |
| 4.2. Research Questions..... | 68 |
| 4.2.1. Quantitative Question 1..... | 68 |
| 4.2.1.1. Null Hypothesis..... | 68 |
| 4.2.1.2. Coding the Data..... | 69 |
| 4.2.1.3. Descriptive Statistics..... | 70 |
| 4.2.1.4. Results..... | 72 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 4.2.2. Quantitative Question 2..... | 74 |
| 4.2.2.1. Null Hypothesis..... | 74 |
| 4.2.2.2. Coding the Data..... | 75 |
| 4.2.2.3. Descriptive Statistics..... | 78 |
| 4.2.2.4. Results..... | 80 |
| 4.2.3. Quantitative Question 3..... | 81 |
| 4.2.3.1. Null Hypothesis..... | 81 |
| 4.2.3.2. Verification for the First Part of the Null Hypothesis..... | 82 |
| 4.2.3.3. Descriptive Statistics..... | 82 |
| 4.2.3.4. Results..... | 83 |
| 4.2.3.5. Rejection of the Second Part of the Null Hypothesis..... | 84 |
| 4.2.3.6. Descriptive Statistics..... | 85 |
| 4.2.3.7. Results..... | 86 |
| 4.2.4. Qualitative Question..... | 87 |
| 4.2.4.1. Novice Raters' Criteria..... | 89 |
| 4.2.4.2. Experienced Raters' Criteria..... | 93 |

Chapter Five: Conclusion, Implications, and Suggestions for further Research

| | |
|--|------------|
| 5.1. Introduction | 100 |
| 5.2. Summary and Conclusion..... | 101 |
| 5.3. Implications of the study | 103 |
| 5.3.1. Implications for EFL Teachers | 104 |
| 5.4. Suggestion for Further Research | 106 |
| References | 108 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|-----------------|----|
| Table 4.1..... | 71 |
| Table 4.2..... | 73 |
| Table 4.3..... | 74 |
| Table 4.4..... | 79 |
| Table 4.5..... | 80 |
| Table 4.6..... | 81 |
| Table 4.7..... | 83 |
| Table 4.8..... | 84 |
| Table 4.9..... | 85 |
| Table 4.10..... | 87 |
| Table 4.11..... | 87 |

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1.....21

Figure 2.1.....45

LIST OF APPENDICES

| | |
|-------------------------|-----|
| Appendix A | 119 |
| Appendix B | 125 |

Chapter I

Introduction

1.1. Preliminaries

The mainstream language teaching and learning started with such methods as Classical Method, which was the study of classical Latin “in which the traditional works of Virgil, Ovid and Cicero were studied and an analysis of the grammar and rhetoric became the model for foreign language study (Richards & Rodgers, 1999, p. 3). Or Grammar Translation Method, proposed by Seidenstucker, Plotz, Ollendorf and Medinger, and such others as Prussian Method with their related schools of thought in which translation and grammar study were the main teaching and learning activities. To move with the time and observe the needs of learners, different schools of thought, approaches, and methods appeared one after another. In this lengthy period of time, there were such theorists as Pavlov and Skinner with their behaviorism, Chomsky and Ausubel with their rationalism and cognitive psychology, Piaget and Vygotsky’s constructivism (Brown, 2004), and many others such as Ellis, Nasaji and Schmidt with their specialized standpoints about learners, language teaching, and learning.

Regarding the teaching style of the primary methods, Quian (2007) states that teachers’ role as transmitters of knowledge has been taken for granted, and has proclaimed them as absolute authorities in the classrooms. Here, students

are not supposed to challenge such authorities and foster opinions and thoughts. However, the movement continued and finally reached a place where communicative and collaborative language learning, learners and their needs went to the center of attention. During this long way, measurement and evaluation have also been the concern of educators and educational system.

According to Heaton (1988), like for teaching, there have been different approaches for language testing as well, such as the essay translation, structuralism, integrative, and communicative approaches. Traditionally, assessment could be described as a mere quantitative device used just for summative purposes. These purposes, according to Farhady, Ja'farpur, and Birjandi (1994) are conducted to gain insights into individual's knowledge and abilities to make various kinds of decisions, ranging from screening and selecting applicants, to a program of study, to determine whether additional instructional time should be allocated to a given topic or not. Here, assessment could be described as a motivated activity. But "as the goals of education have become more and more complex, and the number of students have enormously increased, evaluation has, accordingly, become much more difficult" (Farhady, et al., 1994, p. 1). To be in the same line with language teaching, while its atmosphere changed and students and their needs started to gain more and more attention, a shift also started from quantitative methods of language testing to

more qualitative ones, or as Brown (2005) mentioned, a shift from summative forms of assessment to more formative ones. Heaton (1988, p. 1) also approved that the qualitative forms of assessment are “superior to” and of “considerable benefit” for language learners. In this newly accepted convention, when people are to be assessed, great effort should be put into minimizing any intervening factors which cause deviating the true picture, and making sure that the assessment procedure is the same for everyone.

In line with the changes and movements, then students went to take more and more responsibility for their learning, monitoring their promotion, and assessing their work. They also, based on the findings of different studies (Parti, 2002; Roskams, 1999; Warren & Cheng, 2005), started to be counted as an outstanding source of feedback for their friends in cooperative environments and play a greater role in their learning, but teachers still had an undeniable role in educational system and classrooms. They were considered as one of the key factors in determining the success of educational system, and specifically, language teaching and testing. Therefore, it is not surprising if a huge number of language research studies (Birjandi & Bagherkazemi, 2010; Buckhalt, 1990; Dinkelman, 1999; Ghafar Samar & Ahmadi, 2012) have been addressing the important characteristics of successful language teachers. Then, newer

contributors of a better teaching and learning such as critical thinking and reflectivity for both teachers and learners were introduced.

Concerning the interactive and collaborative process of teaching and testing, a considerable number of studies (Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini, 2005; Reinersten & Wells, 1993; Stapleton, 2011; Stout, 1993; Twardy, 2005) were carried out to improve teachers and learners' critical thinking abilities in EFL contexts. Nowadays, nearly all successful teachers try to be involved in an ongoing reflection process, and approximately everyone agrees that critical thinking has begun to play an outstanding role in education and has turned to one of its main goals. However, a problem still exists. According to Ghafar Samar and Ahmadi (2012), "Because the priorities in today's classrooms include learners' critical thinking abilities, little attention has been paid to this skill from the side of teachers as practitioners and mentors of these abilities in such classes" (p. 3). So, it seems necessary to carry out some studies investigating teachers' critical thinking and ways to improve it to bridge the mentioned gap. Therefore, it is the goal of the present study to investigate the effect of collaboration on CT among teachers by comparing the total number of CT components used by those raters in individual and collaborative assessment. And also to investigate the effect of teachers' experience on their CT skills by comparing the number of those components used by novice and experienced

raters, and finally to find the criteria used by those teachers while assessing a passage without using a rubric.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Derived mostly from the works of Vygotsky (1978), two major learning theories—psycholinguistic theory and sociocultural theory— support collaboration in learning and claim that learning is a social activity. Among these approaches include the notions of “interaction hypothesis” and “ZDP” which highlight the importance of collaboration as well as social interaction in learning. These movements brought about some new roles for teachers. They needed to investigate the best methods and techniques to incorporate into their classrooms the goal of which was improving autonomy, reflectivity, and critical thinking practices among learners.

The efforts to improve classroom testing, also accompanied by such other issues as collaboration, shaped our current understanding of effective assessment, and still “the development of communicative performance-based assessment continuous to challenge both assessment experts and language teachers” (Brown, 2004, p. 11). Regarding this notion, different studies (Parti, 2002; Reinersten & Wells, 1993; Roskams, 1999; Stout, 1993; Twardy, 2005;

Warren & Cheng, 2005) have been conducted with some new findings advocating the role of collaborative learning, peer feedback, self and peer assessment as well as other factors in improving learners' critical thinking and reflectivity. Learners develop their reflective skills by incorporating such factors which equip them with some necessary means of learning, but what about the teachers and their roles?

Teachers' CT abilities would certainly be of great importance because they are playing an important role in preparing reflective students to take part in society, but how can they (teachers) improve their CT skills? According to Ghafar Samar and Ahmadi (2012, p.4), "nearly all of the studies on collaborative works have been done on learners ... [and] there is little empirical evidence on its effectiveness for teachers' [reflectivity]." Thus, there is a gap – having no idea about teachers' collaboration and its effect on their critical thinking skills– and a need of conducting research to fill this gap is felt. Regarding assessing writing by teachers and the notion of subjectivity and its potential bias or negative effects on the final result, collaborative assessment may decrease those negative effects and provide a criterion on which more reliable results could be agreed upon for the learners. The question then will be: Is it possible that teachers do their best in shaping learners' feeling, thinking, and actions without some degrees of reflectivity from the side of themselves?

Considering these facts, empirical studies should be conducted to find out new techniques to improve teachers' critical thinking abilities, and consequently, testing those techniques in different EFL educational settings in order to help teachers develop better approaches. To my best knowledge, there are just a few studies (Ghafar Samar & Ahmadi, 2012; McConnel, 2002) investigating such newly introduced techniques as collaborative assessment and its effect on teachers' critical thinking in the EFL contexts, especially in the educational system of Iran. And by reviewing the literature, the researcher observed no studies investigating teachers' critical thinking abilities on a comparative basis in the Iranian EFL classrooms. Consequently, a study investigating novice and experienced teachers' collaborative assessment and its effects on their critical thinking skills was conducted in order to enhance Iranian EFL teachers' awareness of how they think.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The present study aimed at investigating the effects of collaborative assessment on enhancing Iranian EFL teachers' critical thinking skills by comparing the effectiveness of individual versus collaborative writing assessment. Moreover, the potentially different influences of that assessment on critical thinking of two

different groups, novice and experienced raters, would be investigated to find out the relationship between experience as a moderator variable and critical thinking in a collaborative assessment. After that, investigating different methods and criteria used by novice and experienced teachers in subjective rating of some sample writings would be an interesting topic to be explored. Accordingly, the specific objectives of this study were assessing the levels of teachers' critical thinking skill and determining the amount of variance in that skill which can be attributed to the variables of individual vs. collaborative assessment, and the years of experience. Finally, the criteria used by novice and experienced raters for subjective rating of a text would be explored.

1.4. Significance of the Study

Improving students' critical thinking has been a significant issue since long time ago, and recently it has been invested on more and more. Unfortunately, most teachers in an EFL setting suppose that they have little or no time to focus on the thinking process of themselves and their students, and just try to cover the content. In some parts of their teaching they may encourage students to think, but according to Wright (2002) in such situations "they