

TESTING STUDENTS THROUGH THE WRITING SKILLS

FITRAH YULIAWATI

Universitas Islam Madura

fitrahyuliawati@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Four major skills in communicating through language are often broadly defined as listening, listening and speaking, reading and writing. In many situations where English is taught for general purposes, these skills should be carefully integrated and used to perform as many genuinely communicative tasks as possible. Where this is the case, it is important for the test writer to concentrate on those types of test items which appear directly relevant to the ability to use language for real-life communication, especially in oral interaction. Thus, questions which test the ability to understand and respond appropriately to polite request, advice, instructions, etc. would be preferred to tests of reading aloud or telling stories. In the written section of a test, questions requiring students to write letters, memos, reports and messages would be used in place of many of the more traditional compositions used in the past.

Key term: *testing, writing, skill*

Introduction

The writing skills are complex and sometimes difficult to teach, requiring mastery not only of grammatical and rhetorical devices but also of conceptual and judgemental elements. The following analysis attempts to group the many and varied skills necessary for writing good prose into five general components or main areas.

Language use: the ability to write correct and appropriate sentences;

Mechanical skills: the ability to use correctly those conventions peculiar to the written language –e.g. punctuation, spelling;

Treatment or content : the ability to think creatively and develop thoughts, excluding all irrelevant information;

Stylistic skills : the ability to manipulate sentences and paragraphs, and use language effectively;

Judgement skills : the ability to write in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose with a particular

audience in mind, together with an ability to select, organize and order relevant information.

The actual writing conventions which it is necessary for the students to master relate chiefly (at the elementary stages) to punctuation and spelling. However, in punctuation there are many areas in which personal judgements are required, and test of punctuation must guard against being too rigid by recognizing that several answers may be correct. Unfortunately, test of punctuation and spelling have often tended to inhibit writing and creativity.

Of far greater importance in the teaching and testing of writing are those skills involving the use of judgement. The ability to write for a particular audience using the most appropriate kind of language is essential for both native-speaking and foreign students alike. The use of correct registers becomes an important skill at advanced levels of writing. Failure to use the correct register frequently results in incongruities and embarrassment. Whereas native speakers learn to make distinctions of register intuitively, students of foreign languages usually

experience problems in mastering this complex area of language. The various kinds of register include colloquialisms, slang, jargon, archaic words, legal language, standard English, business English, the language used by educated writers of English, etc. the purpose of writing will also help to establish a particular register : for example, is the student writing to entertain, inform, or explain?

A piece of continuous writing may take the form of a narrative, description, survey, record, report, discussion, or argument. In addition to the subject and the format, the actual audience (e.g. an examiner, a teacher, a student, a friend) will also determine which of the various registers is to be used. Consequently, the use of appropriate register in writing implies an awareness not only of a writing goal but also of a particular audience.

After the purpose of the writing and the nature of the audience have been established, judgement is again required to determine the selection of the material which is most relevant to the task at hand (bearing in mind the time available). Organizations and ordering skills then follow selection.

Testing composition writing

An attempt should be made to determine the types of writing tasks with which the students are confronted every day. Such tasks will probably be associated with the writing requirements imposed by the other subjects being studied at school if the medium of instruction is English. Short articles, instructions and accounts of experiments will probably form the main body of writing. If the medium of instruction is not English, the written work will often take the form of consolidation or extension of the work done in the classroom. In both cases, the students may be required to keep a diary, produce a magazine and to write both formal and informal letters. The concern of students following a profession or in business will be chiefly with report-writing and letter-writing, while at college or university level they usually be required to write (technical) reports and papers.

On the large public examining body explicitly states the kinds of writing tasks its examinations test and the standards of writing expected in the performance of those tasks:

A successful candidate will have passed an examination designed to test

ability to produce a selection of the following types of writing:

Basic level : Letter; postcard; Diary entry; Forms

Intermediate Level : As Basic Level, plus Guide; Set of instructions

Advanced Level : AS Intermediate Level, plus Newspaper report; Notes

The candidate's performance will have met the following minimum criteria:

Basic Level: No confusing errors of grammar or vocabulary; a piece of writing legible and readily intelligible; able to produce simple unsophisticated and sentences.

Intermediate Level: Accurate grammar, vocabulary and spelling, though possibly with some mistakes which do not destroy communication; handwriting generally legible; expression clear and appropriate, using a fair range of language; able to link themes and points coherently.

Advanced Level: Extremely high standards of grammar, vocabulary and spelling; easily legible handwriting; no obvious limitations on range of language candidate is able to use accurately and appropriately; ability to produce organized, coherent writing, displaying considerable sophistication.

In the construction of the class tests, it is important for the test writer to find out how composition is tested in the first language. Although the emphasis in the teaching and testing of the skills in English as a foreign / second language will not of necessity be quite different to the development of the skills in the first language, a comparison of the abilities acquired and methods used is very helpful. It is clearly ludicrous, for instance, to expect in a foreign language those skills which the students do not process in their own language.

In the past, test writers have been too ambitious and unrealistic in their expectations of testees' performances in composition writing; hence the constant complaint the relatively few foreign learners of English attain a satisfactory level in English composition. Furthermore, the backwash effect of examinations involving composition writing has been unfortunate; teachers have too often anticipated examination requirements by beginning free composition work far too early in the course. They have 'progressed' from controlled composition to free composition to

early, before the basic writing skills have been acquired.

However, once the students are ready to write free compositions on carefully chosen realistic topics, then composition writing can be a useful testing tool. It provides the students are ready to write free compositions on carefully chosen realistic topics, then composition writing can be a useful testing tool. It provides the students with an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to organize language material, using their own words and ideas, and to communicate. In this way, composition tests provide a degree of motivation which many objective-type tests fail to provide.

In the composition test the students should be presented with a clearly defined problem which motivates them to write. The writing task should be such that it ensures they have something to say and a purpose for saying it. They should have an audience in mind when they write; how often in real-life situations do people begin to write when they have nothing to write, no purpose in writing and no audience in mind? Thus, whenever possible, meaningful situations should be given in composition tests. For

example, a brief description of a real-life situation might be given when requiring the students to write a letter:

Your pen-friend is going to visit your country for a few weeks with her two brothers. Your house is big enough for her to stay with you but there is not enough room for her brothers. There are two hotels near your house but they are very expensive. The third hotel is cheaper, but it is at least five miles away. Write a letter to your pen-friend, explaining the situation.

Composition titles which give the students no guidance as to what is expected of them should be avoided. Examples of poor titles which fail to direct the students' ideas are A pleasant evening, My best friend, Look before you leap, A good film which I have recently seen.

With the emphasis on communicative testing, there is a tendency for test writers to set tasks asking the students to write notes and letters in their own role (i.e. without pretending to be someone else). Tasks requiring the students to act the part of another person are often avoided as it is felt they are less realistic and communicative. However, this is usually far from being the case. It is

useful to provide the students not only with details about a specific situation but also with details about the particular person they are supposed to be and the people about (or to) whom they are writing. Compare, for example, the two following tasks:

Write a letter, telling a friend about any interesting school excursion on which you have been.

You have just been on a school excursion to a nearby seaside town.

However, you were not taken to the beach and you had no free time at all to wander round the town. You are very keen on swimming and you also enjoy going to the cinema. Your teacher often tells you that you should study more and not waste your time. On the excursion you visited the law courts, an art gallery and a big museum. It was all very boring apart from one room in the museum containing old-fashioned armour and scenes of battles. You found this room far more interesting than you thought it would be but you didn't talk to your friends or teacher about it. In fact, you were so interested in it that you left a small camera there. Your teacher told you off because you have a reputation for forgetting things. Only your cousin

seems to understand you. Write a letter to him, telling him about the excursion.

Although the former task is one which students may conceivably have to perform in real life, the latter task will result in far more realistic and natural letters from the students simply because the specific details make the task more meaningful and purposeful. The detailed description of both the situation and the person involved helps the students to suspend their disbelief and gives the task an immediacy and realism which are essential for its successful completion.

Two or more short compositions usually provide more reliable guides to writing ability than a single composition, enabling the testing of different registers and varieties of language (e.g. a brief, formal report). If the composition test is intended primarily for assessment purposes, it is advisable not to allow students a choice of composition items to be answered. Examination scripts written on the same topic give the marker a common basis for comparison and evaluation. Furthermore, no time will be wasted by the testees in deciding which composition items to answer. If, on the other hand, the composition test forms

part of a class progress test and actual assessment is thus of secondary importance, a choice of topics will cater for the interests of each student.

Finally, the whole question of time should be considered when administering tests of writing. While it may be important to impose strict time limits in tests of reading, such constraints may prove harmful in tests of writing, increasing the sense of artificiality and unreality. Moreover, the fact that candidates are expected to produce a finished piece of writing at their very first attempt adds to this sense of unreality. Students should be encouraged to produce preliminary drafts of whatever they write, and this means giving them sufficient time in an examination to do this. Only in this way can writing become a genuine communicative activity.

Setting the composition

In addition to providing the necessary stimulus and information required for writing, a good topic for a composition determines the register and style to be used in the writing task by presenting the students with a specific situation and context in which to write. Since it is easier to compare different performances when the

writing task is determined more exactly, it is possible to obtain a greater degree of reliability in the scoring of compositions based on specific situations. Furthermore, such composition tests have an excellent backwash effect on the teaching and learning preparatory to the examination.

The difficulty in constructing such compositions arises in the writing of the rubrics. On the one hand, if the description of the situation on which the composition is to be based is too long, Then, the text becomes more

Grading the composition

The chief objection to the inclusion of the composition question as part of any test is generally on grounds of unreliability. Considerable research in the past has shown how extremely unreliable markers are-both in their own inconsistency and in their failure to agree with colleagues on the relative merits of a student's composition.

Markers may award their marks on (i) what a student has written; (ii) what they believe the student meant by what he or she wrote; (iii) handwriting and general appearance of what the student has written; and (iv) previous

knowledge of the student. Moreover, two markers may differ enormously in respect of spread of marks, strictness and rank order. For example, marker A may give a wider range of marks than marker B (i.e. ranging from a low mark to a high mark); marker C may have much higher expectations than marker A and thus mark much more strictly, awarding lower marks to all the compositions; and finally marker D may place the compositions in a different order of merit. An example of these differences can be seen in the following table.

	spread	standard	order
	A B	A B	A B
Jefri	14 10	14 9	14 9
Helen	11 9	11 6	11 12
Diana	10 8	10 5	10 10
Romie	7 7	7 2	7 11
Dave	5 6	5 1	5 6

The whole question of unreliability, however, does not stop here. Even if a student were to take two composition examinations of comparable difficulty, there would be no guarantee whatsoever that he or she would score similar marks on both examinations. This particular type of unreliability is more common to the composition paper than to any other and is termed test/re-test reliability. A

further complication results from a lack of mark/re-mark reliability: in other words, if the same composition is marked by the same examiner on two occasions there may be a difference in the marks awarded.

In spite all such demonstrations of unreliability, composition is still widely used as a means of measuring the writing skills. The value of practice in continuous or extended writing cannot be stressed to greatly. A student's ability to organize ideas and express them in his or her own words is a skill essential for real-life communication. Thus, composition can be used to provide not only high motivation for writing but also an excellent backwash effect on teaching, provided that the teacher does not anticipate at too early a stage the complex skills required for such task. Moreover, if a more reliable means of scoring the composition can be used, sampling a student's writing skills in this way will appear a far more valid test than any number of objective tests of grammar.

It is impossible to obtain any high degree of reliability by dispensing with the subjective element and attempting to score on an 'objective' basis,

according to a carefully constructed system of penalties. However, composition marking can be improved considerably once the subjective element is taken into account and once methods of reducing the unreliability inherent in the more tradisional methods of assessment are employed. To start with, testees should be required to perform the same writing task. Although there may sometimes be a case for a limited choice of composition topics in the classroom, attempts at accurate assessment of writing ability can only be successful if the choice of topic is severely restricted or abolished completely. A well-defined task in terms of one or two situational compositions can help enormously to increase the reliability of the examination.

Controlled writing

There are several ways of controlling students' freedom of expression in their written work and, as a consequence, increasing the reliability of the scoring. However, useful such methods are as teaching devices, they will only prove useful for testing purposes if each student is completely familiar with the particular task to be performed: hence the

importance of clear instructions followed by at least one example. Sometimes there is even the danger that certain students will feel inhibited rather than helped by such control.

Conclusion

Success in traditional tests all too often simply demonstrates that the student has been able to perform well in the test he or she has taken – and very little else. Test may be constructed primarily as devices to reinforce learning and to motivate the student or primarily as a means of assessing the student's performance in the language. In the former case, the test is geared to the teaching that has taken place, whereas in the latter case the teaching is often geared largely to the test. Standardized tests and public examinations, in fact, may exert such a

considerable influence on the average teacher that they are often instrumental in determining the kind of teaching that takes place before the test.

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