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Testing Writing Skills

The aim of this paper is to discuss possible ways of increasing the efficiency of writing tests. First there will be considered the question what should be measured by means of a writing test. Then a short review will be presented of existing writing tests, with special attention being paid to the particular skills to be measured by such tests. Finally, suggestions will be presented for designing and scoring writing tests.

Before deciding on a specific form for a writing test, it is necessary to determine what the test will measure and how it will be evaluated. In making these decisions, account must be taken both of the functions of written language - which include recording things, making possible distant contact, enabling the precise formulation of ideas, and freezing the memory - and of the fact that written language conveys more information, relying upon exclusively linguistic devices, than spoken language, which relies heavily upon paralinguistic devices. Indeed, writing is, in comparison to speaking, a very sophisticated activity, which involves at least the following enabling skills*:

1. Expressing information
/a/ explicitly
/b/ implicitly

*The list is based on a table presented to the author during the seminar devoted to communicative testing held at Ryńa in March, 1985.

- 2. Expressing conceptual meaning, e.g. comparison, cause, purpose, result, means
- 3. Expressing the communicative value /function/ of sentences /e.g. definition, example/
- 4. Expressing relations within the sentence
- 5. Expressing relations between parts of a text through lexical cohesion devices, e.g. lexical set/colllocation
- 6. Expressing relations in a text through grammatical cohesion devices
- 7. Using indicators in discourse, e.g.
 - /a/ introducing an idea
 - /b/ developing an idea
 - /c/ transition to another idea
 - /d/ concluding an idea
- 8. Planning and organising information in expository language

An important factor in determining what tasks a writing test should require is the language proficiency of the students who are to take it. The short presentation below will focus on some of the techniques that the author considers particularly useful in assessing student writing skills at different levels of language proficiency, which correspond to different stages of instruction in writing: pre-writing, guided writing, and free writing.

The techniques most commonly employed at the pre-writing stage are: sentence-completion/multiple-choice, sentence correction/multiple-choice; error-recognition, copying, sentence combining, sentence expansion, and sentence reduction. The first three techniques typically test an examinee's knowledge of grammar, although they may also be used to check his ability to grasp conceptual meaning, or to discern and express the relations that hold between the parts of a sentence. An example of a multiple-choice question that might be given at the pre-writing stage is:

Regardless how poor you are you can always say "I could be poorer".

A/ regardless B/ no matter C/ despite D/ however

The remaining techniques are better suited to evaluation of sub-skills involved in writing.

Copying is a pre-writing activity that may take different forms, one form being the substitution table. A "balloon" substitution table, such as, e.g.:



need not be an automatic rewriting exercise, since it requires much thinking on the part of students, who must not only match words or phrases, but also put them in the correct order. Eliminating one of the columns or replacing it with a picture makes it possible to test a student's ability to express information and conceptual meaning. In the above example, the student's ability to express purpose can be tested by eliminating the column with infinitives.

Sentence combining requires the student to join two or more independent statements into one complex or compound sentence /Valette 1967: p. 146/, as in, e.g.:

This book is not very interesting. I thought it was.

/Orampell 1962: p. 64/
/Vadson 1983: p. 103/

Some people come late. They will not get good seats.

In addition to serving as a measure of a student's ability to use conjunctions or relative pronouns, and his understanding of verb tenses, modes and word order /sentence-combining may require sentence-internal changes/, sentence-combining can serve as well as a measure of his ability to express information clearly, and grasp concepts such as purpose, result, or reason. At a more advanced level sentence-combining can be used as a measure of a student's ability to express the communicative value of a sentence, to express relations between the parts of a text through the correct choice of lexical and grammatical cohesion devices, and to use indicators in discourse. For these purposes the students may be given a longer text, and asked to fill in blanks with appropriate transition-words, or asked to use transition- or cohesion-words in

combining simple sentences.

Sentence expansion and sentence reduction are sentence-level tests and so measure lower-order skills: the ability to express conceptual meaning and to grasp the communicative function of sentences. Like sentence-combining tests, they check the student's ability to express his ideas in different ways - a very important writing skill. In Madsen /1985; p. 103/, we find the following example of a sentence to be expanded:

He told us about a man who had a wooden leg. /with/
/replace the underlined clause with a phrase beginning with
the cue word/

There are other techniques for testing beginners which allow one to gauge paragraph unity and organization. One such technique involves jumbled sentences, which the students must put in order. Jumbled sentences are only partially effective in gauging paragraph unity and organization, however, because in "unjumbling" sentences, the student is not required to use his own words, phrases or arguments. Another way to test elements like unity and organization is to add an unrelated sentence or sentences to a unified paragraph and have the student find it/them. Students are not thereby required to write on their own, however, rendering such an exercise of limited value as a direct measure of writing skills.

To sum up, limited-response items such as the preceding are of limited potential for testing higher-order skills, although they are objective tests that are suitable for students with limited ability in English, and which expose students to acceptable sentence and paragraph structure.

At the next stage of language development, guided-tests replace controlled tests, the content of student work being determined by the teacher but with freedom for the student to use language creatively. One such test involves building a paragraph from an outline. Here, the more detailed the outline, the more controlled the task. The outline may present questions to be answered by the student as he constructs a paragraph. In such an exercise the student may be asked not to limit himself to the questions, or may be given a list of words around which a paragraph should be constructed.

Other types of guided-writing tests are based either on dialogues that the student must change in various ways - supplying the words

of one of the participants, as in the open-ended dialogue, or converting dialogue into a narrative - or on texts which provide a basis for writing dialogues. At this level, particularly useful tests for measuring writing skills are tasks based on tables, diagrams, graphs, maps, and pictures. They can measure the skills involved in using indicators in discourse, and expressing, by means of grammatical cohesion devices, relations among parts of a text. Tasks based on tables, maps and diagrams may, in addition, be used to test skills involved in co-ordinating related information by means of expository language. They also test such skills as planning and organising information, which are required in extended writing. Following are examples of such tasks:

- a/ A map shows three stages in the development of a small town: the Middle Ages, the 19th century and post 1945. /The examinee is required to describe the town in the Middle Ages, or to outline the development of the town since the Middle Ages/.
- b/ A telex from the flight manager of British Airways is presented. /The examinee is required to use the information in the telex to prepare a report for newspapers/.

Such tasks provide the structure needed both by those students who are not ready to write on their own and by advanced learners. The most direct way of measuring students' writing ability is the composition. It calls upon both lower-order and higher-order skills, and so can measure the student's ability to organize his thoughts, to choose his vocabulary, and to formulate his sentences as well as his ability to use grammatical structures appropriately, with correct punctuation and capitalization.

The composition as a writing test, however, has drawbacks: it is unreliable, students performing better on some topics and on some occasions than on others; and its scoring is subjective and time-consuming. Yet, composition is too valuable a test to be ignored. Following are ways in which these drawbacks can be minimized.

To increase the effectiveness of the composition as a writing test, topics should be chosen that reflect the interests and needs of the students. Polish students who apply to the British Council to go to the United Kingdom to do a course should be given different

topics than first-year university students of English. The first group might be required to give a concise account of their previous training in a given subject, to write about their reasons to study in the United Kingdom, to write a business letter, or to take notes on a lecture on the given subject. The latter group, on the other hand, might be asked to write a précis of a critical evaluation, or a letter inviting English colleagues to come to Poland for a course. The criteria for marking would be made to depend on the topic chosen, or task assigned.

To increase the objectivity of scoring, a set of ratings based on performance criteria for writing should be specified. In Carroll /1980: P. 136/ we find the following set of ratings, which may serve as a model for examiners:

- 9 Band
- 9 Expert writer. Writes with authority, accuracy and style. Has a mastery of appropriate and concise English.
- 8 Very good writer. Clear and logical presentation with accurate language forms and good style. Just the occasional slip or infelicity reveals she is not a native writer. Often approaching 1st-Lingual competence.
- 7 Good writer. Can develop a thesis systematically with well-structured main and subordinate themes and relevant supporting detail. Generally accurate and appropriate language, layout and style. Responds to tone or purpose of writing task. Mainly distinguished from Band 8 performer in fluency, accuracy and appropriateness.
- 6 Competent writer. Uses a wide range of skills to convey thesis-presenting it in quite a well-structured fashion, arranging main and supporting themes and details logically. Use of lexis and grammatical patterns reasonably accurate. Slight limitation of style and mastery of appropriate idiom in an otherwise intelligible presentation.
- 5 Honest writer. Conveys basic information competently, but logical structure of presentation will lack clarity. Work will show several slips and formal errors. Use of style and conveyance of tone is present but not consistent. Essay may well lack interest but the basic message gets through.

- 4 Marginal writer. Presentation has coherent appearance. Several factual statements can be sequentially made. Work lacks logical structure and use of discourse markers. Often makes lexical and grammatical errors. Uses basic punctuation conventions. Uses restricted range of skills. Basic theme is conveyed but imperfectly.
- 3 Extremely limited writer. Produces a string of sentences rather than an essay. Some theme but not logically presented. Use of simple sentence structure and restricted lexis with errors and inappropriacies abounding. Main merit is the conveyance of straightforward information.
- 2 Inherrent writer. No working facility: perhaps sporadic uses.
- 1/0 Non-writer. Not able to write.

The performance criteria for writing may be modified by the teachers after the careful consideration of the students' needs but the scoring based on such criteria is valuable as it helps to assess the overall ability of a student to write and it is quick to do.

To conclude, I would like to point out that the best way to evaluate writing skills is to combine traditional objective tests and subjective tests, such as composition or tasks based on pictures or maps. If the tasks of both types of test are carefully designed and, if in case of subjective tests, the criteria of evaluation are specified and consistently used, then the validity, reliability and objectivity of the writing test can be greatly increased.

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Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł omawia najważniejsze typy testów sprawności
pisania w języku obcym oraz wskazuje na sposoby zwiększenia ich
efektywności. Z przedstawionej analizy testów obiektywnych wynika,
że należą one skutecznie skontrolować stopień wyrobienia tzw. "niż-
szych" sprawności językowych związanych z pisanem, ale nie są wy-
starczającym miernikiem sprawności "wyższych". W związku z tym,
na średnim i zaawansowanym poziomie nauki języka obcego należy je
łączyć z testami subiektywnymi /wypracowanie, zadania oparte na
obrazkach, mapach, wykresach czy tabelach/, których efektywność
można zwiększyć przez odpowiedni dobór tematów oraz konsekwentne
zastosowanie wcześniej opracowanych kryteriów ocen.

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