



Writing prompt convergence in high-stakes tests: Exploring rhetorical functions and objects of enquiry



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ABSTRACT

The writing prompts in high-stakes tests have become an issue of concern due to their possible effect on test takers' writing performance and potential washback on writing pedagogy. In the present study, the prompts ($n = 120$) from three of these tests, TOEFL, IELTS and TEM4 (a language test in China), were investigated for two elements – their specific rhetorical function and object of enquiry – to examine whether these prompts displayed certain patterns. Results revealed that both of these elements converged around a narrow set of themes and functions. Specifically, a preponderance of prompts required responses that were either evaluative (44%) or hortative (23%) (recommending). As for the objects of enquiry, three sociocultural themes were dominant: education (34%); technology (20%); and current social issues (15%). These findings may indicate that the prompts in high-stakes tests are converging around a restricted set of themes, which may be generating prescriptive responses that fail to appreciate the full range of linguistic and argumentative possibilities normally expected in academic writing. Here, we propose that a wider range of writing prompts with alternative rhetorical functions and objects of enquiry be considered in high-stakes tests in order to facilitate students' writing and thinking development.

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1. Introduction

Writing prompts are standard features in many high-stakes tests assessing second or foreign language (L2) proficiency. In response to a writing prompt, test takers normally have a limited amount of time to compose a passage that is subsequently scored by raters using a pre-established rubric (Froncek, Hirschfeld, & Thielsch, 2014). While these high-stakes tests encompass other sections focused on reading, listening and grammar, the writing section usually accounts for a significant portion of the final grade. Given the importance of the writing section, the nature of a prompt has come to be viewed as an important element, and thus has received considerable research scrutiny in recent years.

When analyzing a prompt, several variables can be isolated, such as the length (both of the prompt itself and the expected

response), the topic, the rhetorical specification of the expected response, and whether it includes specific goal instructions or not, among other features (Kroll & Reid, 1994). One particular concern among these criteria is the topic (referred to as the “object of enquiry” in this study) of a prompt. Another concern is the rhetorical specification (referred to as the “rhetorical function” in this study, meaning the discursal purpose of the written response required by a prompt), e.g., explanation, comparison or description.

Previous studies have demonstrated that both the object of enquiry and rhetorical function of a prompt can have a significant effect on students' writing performance (Hinkel, 2002). First mentioned by Selinker, Trimble, and Trimble (1976), Selinker, Trimble, and Trimble (1978), rhetorical function has received considerable attention in the field of writing research. Substantial empirical evidence indicates that different rhetorical functions in prompts can elicit a variety of linguistic forms (Ginther & Grant, 1997; Hinkel, 2002; Hoetker, 1982; Reid, 1990; Spaan, 1993). Likewise, the “object of enquiry” in writing prompts, a term highlighted by Moore and Morton (2005), can have an important

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bearing on a written response in terms of modal verb uses (Hinkel, 2009), lexical diversity (Yu, 2010), and general performance and overall score (Cho, Rijmen, & Novak, 2013; He & Shi, 2012; Lim, 2010; Lee & Anderson, 2007).

These effects are especially significant with prompts in high-stakes tests because in addition to influencing the immediate written response, they may have salient washback on writing pedagogy (Wall, 2000; Weigle, 2002). Specifically, if prompts converge around a narrow set of rhetorical functions and objects of inquiry, classroom teaching may likewise be confined to these same themes (Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Moore & Morton, 2005). However, few studies have explored this area. To fill the research gap, the present study examines the key elements of writing prompts in high-stakes tests. To be specific, the writing prompts of three high-stakes tests are investigated for their specific rhetorical functions and objects of enquiry to determine whether these prompts demonstrate rigid patterns.

Three tests were chosen because of their high-stakes nature and large numbers of test takers: the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL), are two of the most widely known international language tests; Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM4) is a Chinese English proficiency test for English majors at university. In 2011, 1.7 million people took the IELTS in 130 countries (IELTS Annual Review, 2011). ETS, the parent company of TOEFL, claims to have tested 27 million students in total and has locations in 165 countries (ETS, 2013). The TEM4 is confined to Chinese test takers and is written by about 270,000 students a year.¹ It should be noted that this Chinese test was chosen, despite its lack of international exposure, because of its high-stakes nature: all undergraduate English majors in mainland Chinese universities are required to pass this test to qualify for a bachelor's degree. In addition to the high-stakes nature and large number of participants that these three tests have, all of them have a writing section that contains two writing tasks.

As the writing prompts of high-stakes tests can have a considerable washback effect on academic writing courses and the written texts that test takers produce, an investigation into the contents of their prompts holds potential to advance research in L2 writing instruction and assessment.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Considerations in designing writing prompts

There are several psychometric considerations and limitations that should be addressed when deciding on the specific object of enquiry and rhetorical function of a writing prompt. Essentially, the writing task on a high-stakes test should be reproducible and equally accessible to test takers (Case & Swanson, 2001), which to some extent limits the scope of prompts.

Beyond the accessibility issue, Reid and Kroll (1995) claim that the prompt content should allow test takers to have an authentic audience and purpose, and it should also be rich enough to develop multiple perspectives. With this in mind, Wolcott and Legg (1998) identified two broad categories of object of enquiry for essay prompts; personal and general, both of which have their own advantages and disadvantages. Personal topics are clearly accessible to all and are generally more engaging, which can also help avoid marker fatigue (Weigle, 2002). The drawback of personal topics, however, is their lack of applicability to academic contexts.

¹ An English test called CET (College English Test) in China includes a much greater number of participants (9.5 million annually (Cheng, 2008)); however, since the writing prompts are in Chinese and the expected length of responses are short, this test was not selected.

Horowitz (1991), for example, noted this gap between the topic chosen for writing prompts on tests and what students encounter in their academic courses. General prompts, which usually concern contentious issues, also have their own set of pluses and minuses. While controversial topics can increase motivation to write, at the same time, they bring undue advantages to those who have familiarity with the subject matter. On the other hand, limiting topic choice to “safe” or generic content can result in batches of uninspired scripts that are boring for both writers and readers (Weigle, 2002).

Numerous studies have examined L2 writing prompts (e.g., Horowitz, 1986, 1991; Hale et al., 1997; Moore & Morton, 2005; Paltridge, 1997; Reid, 2001; Way, Joiner, & Seaman, 2000); however, most studies investigating prompts have been confined to classifying the type or genre of writing task (in these cases) in universities, i.e., annotated bibliography, summary, essay, case study, research report, book review etc., rather than closely examining the rhetorical functions required of students by the prompts.

It appears that one of the most powerful forces shaping the selection of rhetorical function for prompts is the university environment itself. One example in the literature discussing prompts is an interview study in which Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) describe a writing program in a large American university. Teachers and supervisors in this study claimed that L2 students “need some form in which to express themselves . . . for immediate use in writing academic essays and essay questions. The deductively organized essay is therefore seen as an efficient solution to this problem” (p. 556–557).

Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) point to other rhetorical structures, such as compare-contrast and problem-solution; however, they note that teachers' feedback on students' drafts encouraged an element of the deductive. This focus on the deductive appears appropriate in an academic realm where the goal is to advance knowledge through analysis and argumentation, and this may explain why certain types of prompts requiring student writers to take a stand seem to consistently appear in prompts.

Most of the considerations mentioned above are covered in some form or other by Cumming, Kantor, Powers, Santos, and Taylor (2000) in their *Working Paper for TOEFL*; however, a question arises whether the criteria outlined above restrict writing prompt content into too narrow a subset of topics and sub-genres resulting in generic responses and subsequent washback into the classroom. This question may benefit from some discussion about the rhetorical function and object of enquiry in the writing prompts of high-stakes tests.

2.2. Convergence of rhetorical function and object of enquiry in writing prompts

In the study introduced above, Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) note that the object of enquiry in the prompts they investigated centered largely on socio-cultural issues (family values, working women, and eldercare). A similar focus is seen in List 1 (below) of L2 studies compiled by the authors that include examples of writing tasks (meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive): List 1 Writing prompt topics in recent studies

- whether to wear school uniforms or not (Hirose, 2003)
- should women work or not; should students have part-time jobs or not (Hirose & Sasaki, 2000)
- whether university students should live at home or not (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008)
- whether computer games should be forbidden in universities or not (Liu & Braine, 2005)

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