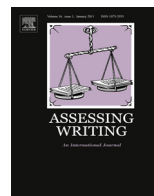




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Assessing Writing



Examining genre effects on test takers' summary writing performance



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ABSTRACT

The task demands of summarization are closely related to the characteristics of source texts, and genre is an essential characteristic. This paper reports an empirical study that examines how text type (genre) affects test takers' performance on summarization tasks. A sample of 86 students was drawn from an undergraduate program in a Chinese university. The students first wrote summaries of a narrative text and subsequently wrote summaries of an expository text. Genre effects were examined from three perspectives: students' summary scores, summary scripts, and perception of these effects as reflected in questionnaire surveys and post-test interviews. MFRM analysis showed that participants performed better on expository writing than on narrative text summarization overall. The difficulties of the rubric components differed, with several differing significantly across the tasks. However, the participants generally considered the narrative text summarization to be easier than the expository task according to the results of the questionnaire surveys and interviews. Factors that led to this contradiction between performance and perception were explored by examining the participants' summaries and their accounts of the task difficulty and test-taking processes. Implications are discussed with reference to summarization task design, summarization teaching, and the relevance of genre effects in the creation of equivalent versions of tests.

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1. Introduction

Driven by the need for task authenticity, studies of integrated reading/writing tasks that involve summarization have begun to resurface (Yu, 2009). Most of these studies are related to the new TOEFL (e.g., Cumming, Grant, Mulcahy-Ernt, & Powers, 2004; Cumming et al., 2005; Cumming, Kantor, & Powers, 2002; Trites & McGroarty, 2005). However, few studies of language testing have investigated which textual features of the input material may affect summarization performance and how this effect occurs (but see Yu, 2009). For example, it is unclear whether the use of texts of different genres (e.g., narrative, expository, and argumentative) may have different effects on summarization performance.

Given the potential for the use of summarization in assessment and the fact that summarization is essential for academic success, investigation of the effects of the textual features of input material on summarization performance is imperative for language testing research and test validation. Thus, the present study examined the effect of genre on students' performances on two summarization tasks that used two types of source texts, one narrative and the other expository. The decision to investigate the genre effect was based on two major considerations. First, genre constitutes an important aspect of the test method and affects test takers' performance (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Second, genre is one of the primary textual features that influence summarizers' performance (Hidi & Anderson, 1986). The literature that examines these issues will be reviewed in the following section.

2. Related literature on genre effects

2.1. Genre effects on task performance

According to the framework of test method facets (Bachman, 1990), genre is an essential element in the input test takers receive. Bachman (1990) argues for the importance of aspects of test methods as follows:

We know that test performance is also affected by the characteristics of the methods used to elicit test performance. . . These characteristics, or "facets". . . are of particular importance for designing, developing, and using language tests, since it is these over which we potentially have some control. (p. 118)

Despite the importance of genre in task design and development, this facet of the test method has not received sufficient attention from researchers. Though few studies have been conducted on this issue, these studies have shown that learners perform differently on tasks in response to genre changes. For instance, young learners were found to perform differently on both text comprehension (e.g., Langer, 1985) and production (e.g., Hidi & Hildyard, 1983) in tasks involving different text genres, and their performance was often significantly better for narratives than for other genres. Langer (1985) conducted a study with 67 children in different grades who read and wrote similar types of stories and reports. The findings indicated that stories led to longer retellings than did reports, and genre effects on the overall recall of content were also significant. One reason for this difference, according to researchers, is that children have more experience with and possess more working knowledge of narrative than other genres, such as science and poetry (e.g., Kamberelis, 1999; Kamberelis & Bovino, 1999).

The process of reading for literary and informative purposes is also different for middle and high school students. In her qualitative study of 36 students, Langer (1990) found that students' overall orientation toward literary meaning building involved exploring a horizon of possibilities, whereas their reading of informative texts involved maintaining a point of reference. The particular concerns that were emphasized and the reasoning strategies that the students used differed substantially between the two contexts. Similarly, genre exerts effects on higher education students' reading for understanding (e.g., Francis & Hallam, 2000; Olson, Mack, & Duffy, 1981). Olson et al. (1981) examined the knowledge and strategies college students employ while reading stories and essays. They found that story readers have an essentially prospective orientation; they generate predictions and look ahead to what is next. In contrast, readers of essays have a retrospective orientation; they fit the current

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