



Developing rubrics to assess the reading-into-writing skills: A case study



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ABSTRACT

The integrated assessment of language skills, particularly reading-into-writing, is experiencing a renaissance. The use of rating rubrics, with verbal descriptors that describe quality of L2 writing performance, in large scale assessment is well-established. However, less attention has been directed towards the development of reading-into-writing rubrics. The task of identifying and evaluating the contribution of reading ability to the writing process and product so that it can be reflected in a set of rating criteria is not straightforward. This paper reports on a recent project to define the construct of reading-into-writing ability for designing a suite of integrated tasks at four proficiency levels, ranging from CEFR A2 to C1. The authors discuss how the processes of theoretical construct definition, together with empirical analyses of test taker performance, were used to underpin the development of rating rubrics for the reading-into-writing tests. Methodologies utilised in the project included questionnaire, expert panel judgement, group interview, automated textual analysis and analysis of rater reliability. Based on the results of three pilot studies, the effectiveness of the rating rubrics is discussed. The findings can inform decisions about how best to account for both the reading and writing dimensions of test taker performance in the rubrics descriptors.

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1. Background to the study

Much real-world writing is composed in response to a text (or texts) requiring high-level reading skills to integrate the input materials into the written response (Chan, Wu, & Weir, 2014; Gebril, 2009; Gebril & Plakans, 2009; Plakans & Gebril, 2012; Weigle, 2004). For example, assignments at schools and universities often require reading multiple texts (e.g., books and articles), gathering information, developing thoughts, and then writing to produce an organised response which incorporates selected information from the sources. With an increasing number of international students who wish to study in English-medium courses and programmes, there has been a growing interest in the ‘integrated’ assessment of language skills in recent years, which enables stakeholders to infer how well a test taker may be able to handle this type of writing in real life. In this paper, such writing tasks are called “reading-into-writing¹” (Weigle, 2004), and they refer to single tasks

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¹ Although some researchers use the terminology ‘reading-to-write’, the term ‘reading-into-writing’ is usually used by large-scale testing providers as a category to refer to this task type. As this study is primarily concerned with language testing, the terminology of ‘reading-into-writing’ rather than ‘reading-to-write’ is used throughout.

Table 1
Prioritised recommendations for the ISE rubrics development project.

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- Develop new descriptors to differentiate the distinct features of performance elicited from the integrated reading-into-writing task and the independent writing task
 - Change from a holistic to an analytic approach to scoring to enable score reporting for diagnostic purposes and bring positive washback effect in teaching and learning
 - Change from generic performance descriptors to level-specific performance descriptors for the individual levels of the ISE suite to better reflect test takers' performance requirements at each level
 - Reduce the number of bands within each ISE level to four bands
 - Remove the checklist of language forms from the rubrics to avoid negative washback of teaching and learning in the classroom
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that require students to write a continuous text by drawing upon single or multiple reading materials which can be verbal, non-verbal or both. This integrated reading-into-writing task type has the potential to satisfy the need for greater validity in the assessment of test takers' writing ability as such a task type represents more closely how people write in real life than independent writing tasks (e.g., Cumming, Grant, Mulcahy-Ernt, & Powers, 2004; Cumming, Kantor, & Powers, 2001; Weigle, 2004).

Accordingly, some testing organisations such as Educational Testing Service and Trinity College London (hereafter Trinity) have developed and used reading-into-writing tasks in their tests. This enables closer investigation of the reading-into-writing construct, including consideration of how appropriate rubrics can be developed. This article reports a recent project to develop and validate rubrics for assessing the skills of reading-into-writing within Trinity's suite of Integrated Skills of English (ISE) examinations, which involve integrated tasks at four proficiency levels—ISE Foundation, ISE I, ISE II and ISE III. The four levels of ISE are targeted to align² with the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages from A2 (Basic User—Waystage), B1 (Independent User—Threshold), B2 (Independent User—Vantage) to C1 (Proficient User—Effective) (for more details, see Council of Europe, 2001). ISE has been designed to assess proficiency levels of test takers who are either in or entering into an educational context, and the “intended candidate is a young person or adult, typically at secondary school or college who is using English as a second or foreign language as part of their studies in order to develop their skills and improve their knowledge of a range of subject areas” (Trinity College London, 2015a: p.7). According to Trinity (2015a), ISE qualifications can be used as a proof of English proficiency for entering university or employment, enrolling into higher level of English study or further education, and/or for UK visa application purposes.

ISE consists of two modules, namely, *Reading and Writing* and *Speaking and Listening*. The work reported in this article is on the former, and is part of a larger ISE redevelopment project, the overall aim of which was to revise and update the original ISE suite³. Prior to the project, Trinity conducted a needs analysis for the redevelopment of ISE which involved (a) two independent academic reviews of the original examination (Chan, 2013; Green, 2013), (b) market research and (c) focus group interviews with original ISE teachers and raters. Based on the outcomes, the research team decided in collaboration with Trinity's test redevelopment team to prioritise the following recommendations for redeveloping the rubrics for the ISE reading-into-writing task (see Table 1).

The aim was to develop a suite of four sets of level-specific analytic rubrics for the reading-into-writing and independent writing tasks at ISE F (A2), ISE I (B1), ISE II (B2) and ISE III (C1). This paper will only address the rubrics for the reading-into-writing task. The set of rubrics for the reading-into-writing task⁴ at each ISE level was to have four analytic criteria and four bands⁵ to indicate an inadequate performance at the level, an adequate performance at the level, a good performance at the level, or a strong performance at the level.

Three key stages were planned for developing and validating the rubrics: defining the theoretical construct, developing the rubrics and validating the rubrics with empirical analyses of test taker performance, rater feedback and rater reliability. Methodologies utilised in the project included questionnaire, expert panel judgement and automated textual analysis. A suite of reading-into-writing rubrics was produced for use in the live test operation of ISE. The findings from this developmental work may help to inform decisions about how best to frame reading-into-writing activity through the task setting and instructions, as well as how to account for both the reading and writing dimensions of test taker performance in the rubrics descriptors.

² The original ISE suite was calibrated to the CEFR during a two-year period between 2005 and 2007. More information is available on the Trinity College London website.

³ The original ISE suite is available until 31 August 2015. The revised ISE exams are available from 6 April 2015 in the UK and 1 September 2015 outside the UK (Trinity College London, 2015b).

⁴ The wording in the rubrics in this article is from the development phase and may be different from those in the final version published on Trinity's website.

⁵ The 4 bands were labelled as Bands 0, 1, 2 and 3 during the development and validation phase of the ISE reading-into-writing rubrics, and thus are referred to as such throughout this paper. During the pre-testing phase (which is beyond the scope of this paper), the four bands were renamed as Score 1 (the original band 0), 2 (the original band 1), 3 (the original band 2) and 4 (the original band 3). Score 0 was then used to distinguish scripts which do not need further rating.

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