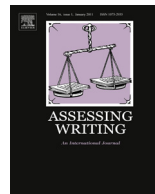




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Assessing Writing



Native and non-native students' interaction with a text-based prompt

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to continue in a vein of research which examines the effects of essay prompts on examinees' writing performance by closely investigating 40 student essays produced from a university-wide reading-to-write test. Quantitative and qualitative results of this study show that native and non-native writers at different proficiency levels exhibit variety in their selection of lexical items and propositional material from the background reading. Among other things, it is found that the higher-rated native group outperformed the other groups in their ability to identify topical information and in a better sense of what details from the source text to include. The two non-native groups, although able to locate superordinate propositions of the source text, lack native writers' ability to readjust their selection of material according to the author's epistemological stance. The lower-rated native writers paid little attention to the source text and merely used the substance of the text as a "springboard" to elicit their own opinions in response to the topic. Possible explanations for these results and their implications for writing pedagogy and assessment are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the past few decades, there has been resurgent interest in assessing writing proficiency through the use of direct tests. Such tests are preferred over the traditional multiple-choice measures mostly

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because they are considered more communicative and authentic in that they require examinees to produce actual writing samples instead of asking them to demonstrate their grammatical and lexical knowledge alone. However, with the increased use of direct measures of writing ability, there have come serious concerns about the reliability and especially the validity of these measures. To resolve the validity issue, a great number of studies have attempted to identify and investigate the factors apart from writing ability which may influence examinees' writing performance. (See, for example, the reviews by Charney, 1984; Hamp-Lyons, 1990; Huot, 1990a, 1990b.)

Of the factors that have been researched empirically, great attention has been paid to the prompt variable. Research in this area has attempted to investigate the effects of prompt variations on scores and textual features of the essays. In his review of the large body of literature on this issue, Huot (1990b) identifies three areas where the prompt variable has been manipulated or controlled as a means of observing its effects on ratings and written products. These three areas are discourse mode (e.g. Brown, Hilgers, & Marsella, 1991; Carlson, Bridgeman, Camp, & Waanders, 1985; Cumming et al., 2005; Nold & Freedman, 1977; Plakans, 2008, 2010; Quellmalz, Capell, & Chou, 1982; Reid, 1990), rhetorical specification (e.g. Brossell, 1983; Hult, 1987; Redd-Boyd & Slater, 1989; Yu, 2009), and wording and structure of writing prompts (e.g. Brossell & Ash, 1984; Hoetker & Brossell, 1989; Smith et al., 1985; Yu, 2009).

Of particular relevance to the present study is an emerging strand of research which has identified some relationship between the characteristics of writing prompts and textual features of writing by different groups of writers. In a study investigating the effects of three different prompt types: an open-structure response, a response to a single text, and a response to three texts on the same topic, Smith et al. (1985) found that the structure of the prompt appeared to make a difference in the quality, fluency, and total number of errors in essays composed by students at different writing proficiency levels. Reid (1990) analyzed a corpus of TWE essays and found that there were significant quantitative variations on several features of student texts written across different topic types and by writers from different language backgrounds. In a similar vein, Cumming et al. (2005) compared 216 essays written by 36 examinees for independent essays (i.e., the TOEFL Essay) and integrated reading-writing and listening-reading tasks (i.e., the TOEFL iBT). Their results not only demonstrated that the essays produced in response to these two prompt types differed significantly in lexical complexity, syntactic complexity, rhetoric and pragmatics; the results also showed some interesting correlation between language proficiency and examinees' verbatim uses of source texts. Compared with the most proficient writers, who tended to summarize the substantive issues raised in the source text, for example, the midrange writers were reported to rely heavily on paraphrases or verbatim phrases from the source text.

Research into the effects of the prompt variable has investigated not only the written products but also the writing processes of test takers when completing various writing tasks. Weasenforth (1993) showed that particular textual qualities in protocols, such as the choice of vocabulary and the ordering of propositional material in texts, appeared to be promoted by prompt differences. In a series of studies focused on reading-to-write tasks, Plakans (2008, 2009, 2010) and Plakans and Gebril (2012) analyzed the think-aloud protocols, post-writing interview data and written products from groups of L2 writers. Among other findings, their studies interestingly revealed how, despite individual differences, reading-to-write tasks could engage these L2 writers in the sub-processes such as discourse synthesis and mining texts.

Although research examining textual differences in students' essays or thinking processes due to prompt variations has helped us better understand how prompts affect writers, many of these studies have yielded inconclusive, and sometimes even conflicting, results. As Hamp-Lyons (1990) notes, "the 'topic variable' is itself a complex of variables" (p. 74). Until these variables are systematically identified and investigated, the complex interactions between prompts and writers may always remain unclear. The need to carry out more studies that would identify topic-related performance differences cannot be overemphasized.

The purpose of this study is to continue ongoing research on the effects of task/prompt on examinees' writing performance. However, instead of manipulating the task/prompt variable as most of the previous studies have done, this study takes a closer look at students' writing resulting from a reading-to-write test, with a specific focus on how this type of writing task may affect native and non-native

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