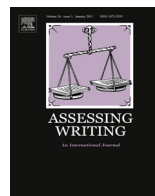




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Assessing Writing



A closer look at integrated writing tasks: Towards a more focussed definition for assessment purposes



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ABSTRACT

The use of integrated tasks is increasingly common in second language assessment in both high stakes and classroom contexts. However, because of the vague definition of what constitutes an integrated task, the types of tasks included in this area and the assessment of the resulting writing is highly varied. In this paper, we argue for a better definition of the term 'integrated writing task'. We start by reviewing current definitions available in the literature, discuss the construct underlying integrated tasks and then propose a number of features which we feel need to be present in integrated tasks. We then propose a new, narrower definition of the term. We hope that this will result in better task design, improved assessment outcomes for test takers, more detailed test specifications, better replicability of research and a shared research agenda.

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1. Introduction

Integrated writing tasks have in recent years grown in popularity and have been adopted widely as tools to measure second language learners' writing ability. The integrated task of the writing section of the Internet-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT) is one example. According to

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Cumming et al. (2006), the Educational Testing Service introduced the integrated task on the TOEFL to “improve the measurement of test takers’ writing abilities, create positive washback on teaching and learning as well as require test-takers to write in ways that are more authentic to academic study” (p. 1). Other authors have argued that such tasks address authenticity and validity issues, improve test fairness, and provide learners and test takers with content and language support for their writing (Cumming, Grant, Mulcahy-Ernt, & Powers, 2004; Feak & Dobson, 1996; Fox, 2004; Leki & Carson, 1997; Plakans & Gebril, 2012; Raimes, 1998; Read, 1990; Weigle, 2004). However, Plakans (2012) cautions that “while benefits exist for integrating skills in assessment, numerous challenges surface that warrant attention when developing and using such test tasks” (p. 250).

One of the fundamental challenges, we believe, lies in the lack of a clear and sufficiently thorough definition of integrated tasks. Whilst several studies (e.g., Ascención Delaney, 2008; Esmaeili, 2002; Gebril, 2010; Plakans, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Plakans & Gebril, 2012; Yang, 2009, 2012) have been conducted to gain more insight into different aspects of integrated writing tasks, to date the tasks themselves have not been clearly defined (see also Cumming, 2013; Yu, 2013). A more focussed, slightly narrower definition of these tasks could improve test design and improve replicability of research including a coherent research agenda.

This paper will start by exploring some current definitions of integrated writing tasks,² discussing what we feel are clear shortcomings. We will then describe some of the myriad of task types currently used under the umbrella of integrated writing tasks. Following a discussion of the construct underlying such tasks, we will describe features of tasks and rating scales which need to be present for a task to be classified as ‘integrated’. We conclude the paper by providing our own definition of integrated tasks and a framework for validation of such tasks.

2. Existing definitions of integrated writing tasks

Although quite a few studies on integrated writing tasks exist, only a small number of them touch upon the issue of task definition. For example, Ascención Delaney (2008), examining the construct of reading-to-write tasks, explains that they are “instructional tasks that combine reading and writing for various educational purposes” (p. 140). Plakans (2009b) has expanded the definition a little further by including other skills. To her, integrated writing tasks are those which “elicit writing performance that involve other abilities such as reading or listening” (p. 252). In her other work, she has provided a very broad definition of integrative language tasks, describing them as “tasks that require more than one skill for completion” (Plakans, 2012, p. 249). In the most detailed definition we found, Cumming et al. (2005) describe integrated tasks as those in which test takers are required to “produce written compositions that display appropriate and meaningful uses of and orientations to source evidence, both conceptually (in terms of apprehending, synthesising, and presenting source ideas) and textually (in terms of stylistic conventions for presenting, citing, and acknowledging sources)” (p. 34).

3. Integrated writing tasks currently in use

As is evident from the definitions provided above, integrated writing tasks have been defined broadly, and the definitions appear to centre on the issues of skill amalgamation and source use. With such broad definitions, it is not surprising that the term integrated task has been applied to a copious array of task types. In this section, we will present some of the writing tasks currently described in the literature as integrated tasks. It will be seen that these vary considerably in their features.

The most common task type found in the literature on integrated writing tasks is one that provides reading material and requires learners to compose a text based on the information present in the material, thus known as a reading-to-write task. Several different versions of reading-to-write tasks can be found in the literature. Firstly, summary tasks have been used in studies by Ascención Delaney (2008) and Yu (2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). These require test takers to write a summary of a passage.

² We will only focus on assessment tasks (and not all pedagogical tasks) in this paper, although the principles may also apply to those.

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