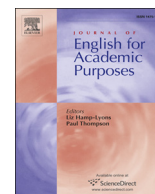


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Addressing the problem of outside assistance in pre-sessional writing assessments



Carolyn Westbrook ^{a,*}, Peter Holt ^{b,1}

^a Southampton Solent University, East Park Terrace, Southampton, SO14 0YN, England, UK

^b Sabanci University, Orta Mahalle, Universite Caddesi No: 27 Tuzla, 34956 Istanbul, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Reading-into-writing assessments on pre-sessional language programmes typically employ either a take-home essay format with a substantial reading component or an exam-based writing task with a reading component of perhaps only one or two pages. While both approaches reflect a welcome trend towards more integrative models of validity for the assessment of academic writing, their usefulness may nevertheless be undermined by their task design. The apparent recent increase in the activity of ghost writers, often facilitated by various technological means, can cast sufficient doubt over the authorship of take-home essays to invalidate the assessment. The exam-based task, on the other hand, may suffer from construct under-representation (Messick, 1996: 6) since its limited reading component requires little or no expeditious reading (Weir and Urquhart, 1998: 98–100) of the longer texts commonly associated with university study. This article describes a response to these validity issues in the form of an open-book-exam, concluding that the processing of longer texts outside the exam room combined with the security of a written response under exam conditions can reduce the time spent on dealing with plagiarism cases arising from outside assistance while at the same time demonstrating some positive washback on learning (Messick, 1996: 6) in terms of increased engagement with the source texts used.

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1. Introduction

Reading-into-writing assessments on foundation EAP programmes typically employ either a take-home essay task with a substantial reading component, or an exam-based writing task with a reading component of perhaps only one or two pages. While both approaches reflect a welcome trend towards more integrative models of validity for the assessment of academic writing and reading, their usefulness may nevertheless be undermined by their task design. The apparent recent increase in student writers seeking outside assistance to complete their work, often through various technological means, can cast sufficient doubt over the authorship of take-home essays to invalidate the assessment. The exam-based task, on the other hand, may suffer from construct under-representation (Messick, 1996: 6) due to the limited amount of expeditious reading (Urquhart & Weir, 1998: 98–100) of the lengthier texts usually associated with university study.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0)238201 3156.

E-mail addresses: Carolyn.westbrook@solent.ac.uk (C. Westbrook), pholt@sabanciuniv.edu (P. Holt).

¹ Tel.: +90 212 531 9222.

The Open Book Exam (OBE) cycle we present below was developed in response to the emergent problem of student writers' use of outside assistance when completing assessed take-home essays, and from our reluctance to reduce the degree of authenticity associated with the take-home essay task by using a much shorter exam-based reading-into-writing task. We first provide a brief description of the Sabancı University and Southampton Solent University foundation programmes, where the OBE has been administered, and the previous take-home essay cycles we have used on our respective programmes. Because our motivations for abandoning our broadly similar versions of the take-home essay task in favour of the OBE were almost identical, for the sake of brevity and clarity, the later sections are presented jointly.

2. Background on the Sabancı University programme

Sabancı University runs a year-long pre-session English programme for approximately 500 students comprising a range of general EAP skills in reading, listening, and speaking as well as text-based essay writing. As an English medium university, students are preparing for their first year of faculty study where they are required to complete foundation courses on Humanity and Society, Maths, and Natural Science. The vast majority of the students are Turkish, aged 18–20, and have little or no previous experience of text-based writing. A small minority are Arabic speakers from neighbouring Syria, or the Gulf States, or from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan or the Balkans, and similarly have little or no established background in academic writing. The Open Book Exam (OBE) cycle has been used mainly at B1 and early B2 levels, although many of the students enter at a lower level. It was developed as a tool to prepare students for a text-based response paper on the Humanity and Society course which requires students to read approximately 50–100 pages of text, cite sources, and paraphrase and synthesise content relevant to the prompt. In most cases, the OBE represents the student writers' first serious attempt at text-based writing.

3. The previous writing assessment on the Sabancı programme – the take-home essay

1. Students were assigned 4–5 texts (approximately 4000–5000 words) on subject matter broadly consistent with the Humanity and Society course, usually from popular social science or science journals, which they used to answer a two- or three-part prompt. Recourse to unassigned sources was not permitted.
2. In class, students skim read two of the texts to gain a general understanding of the content, after which they were set tasks which aimed to orientate them to the key content of the texts and to recognise redundant content in relation to the prompt. The remaining texts were set for homework with a similar set of tasks.
3. Based on their reading, students wrote an outline in response to the multi-part prompt and submitted it several days later. Writing tutors provided written feedback and held individual tutorials with the students.
4. Students wrote an essay draft of 400–600 words which they submitted several days later. The writing tutors again provided written feedback and arranged tutorials for a few days later.
5. Students wrote a final version of their work at home and submitted this for evaluation using in-house writing criteria.

4. Background on the Solent programme

Like many universities in Britain, Southampton Solent University runs a one-year international foundation programme for students whose English language level does not meet the university or Home Office requirements for undergraduate academic study. The course focuses on English language and academic skills, along with specialised content units related to the students' chosen degree programmes. As students on this course can proceed to courses across the university, the English language and academic skills courses are based on general, academic English.

Students on this course are generally aged 18–25 and come from all over the world. Most of the students on this course are low B1 when they arrive and, as is the case with the Sabancı students, many of them have very little or no experience of academic essay-writing. Consequently, the challenge of academic reading and subsequently writing a 1500-word academic essay was rather daunting.

5. The previous writing assessment on the Solent programme – the take-home essay

Students at Solent also previously had a take-home essay assignment; however, the format of the task was slightly different to the Sabancı writing assignment. In the first semester, students studied an academic skills course which taught them various academic study and research skills as well as reading and writing skills. They did a number of assessed tasks based on these academic skills before being required, in the second semester, to put all of these skills into practice by writing a 1500-word essay on a topic related to their degree programme.

1. Students decided on a topic themselves and then, together with the tutor, they agreed on a multi-part essay prompt based on the student's interests.

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