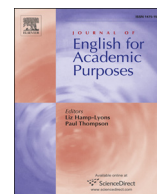


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Source-based tasks in academic writing assessment: Lexical diversity, textual borrowing and proficiency

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ABSTRACT

With the growing interest in integrating reading with writing to assess academic English writing, several questions have been raised about the role of source vocabulary in test takers' writing and, consequently, how scores from these tasks should be interpreted. The current study investigates issues related to the influence of textual borrowing on lexical diversity and the difference in lexical diversity across test scores on integrated tasks. To this end, 130 students in a Middle Eastern university completed a reading-based integrated task. The essays were analyzed for lexical diversity using CLAN software, a computer program developed to compute lexical diversity. Then to illuminate the impact of the source texts, vocabulary originating from the reading were removed from the essays, and the D index was recomputed for a lexical diversity score with borrowed vocabulary omitted. A paired samples *t*-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to answer the research questions. The results showed that borrowing from source texts significantly affects the lexical diversity values in integrated writing. Further, the results demonstrated that lexical diversity plays a substantial role in integrated writing scores.

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1. Introduction

Integration of multiple skills in second language (L2) academic writing settings has recently received increasing attention, with many testing programs employing integrated writing tasks in their assessments. For example, the Internet-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT) uses an integrated writing task based on both reading and listening sources. A more generic term used to describe the integration of reading and listening materials in writing tasks is source-based writing, where students synthesize information from multiple sources while producing texts. Research has proposed that integrated tasks improve the authenticity of academic writing assessment since they simulate, in part, actual practices in academic contexts (Gebril, 2009; Knoch & Sitajalabhorn, 2013). According to Weigle (2004), students "are rarely if ever asked to write essays based solely on their background knowledge; before they write on a given topic they are expected to read, discuss, and think critically about that topic" (p. 30). Academic writing literature shows source-based writing as common in university classes (e.g., Carson, 2001; Hale et al., 1996; Moore & Morton, 1999). Jordan (1997) suggests a number of skills required in an academic setting that are closely related to source-based writing: (a) summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing, (b) using quotations and bibliography, and (c) locating and analyzing evidence.

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Source-based writing also provides background knowledge and, consequently, offers writers resources for unfamiliar topics (Gebriil, 2009; Weigle, 2004). Sources help students generate more ideas when working on unfamiliar topics and also help them support their argument. In addition, research has reported that L2 writers frequently use source texts for language support while composing integrated tasks including the borrowing of words (Cumming, 2002; Weigle, 2004; Plakans & Gebriil, 2012). These advantages have contributed to the popularity of source-based writing among both teachers and testers in different academic contexts.

However, the design and use of integrated writing tasks are not without challenges, and issues related to the effect of source text materials on writing performance have been a concern. The literature has reported a number of problems associated with source-based writing tasks, including problems with task design, inappropriate textual borrowing practices, and the various conceptions of plagiarism in different instructional settings (Hirvela & Du, 2013; Pennycook, 1996; Shi, 2010; Weigle, 2004; Gebriil, 2010). One concern that has not received due attention in research is how source materials affect lexical quality of academic writing. While an assumption may exist that writers use source text vocabulary as they write in integrated tasks, research has not confirmed this assumption nor has it determined if this lexical borrowing significantly affects examinees' scores. Such research is needed to provide empirical validity evidence for score interpretation.

Understanding discourse features in written performance is also essential in developing integrated test tasks and rating scales. For example, rating scales are often designed based on intuitive methods (Brindley, 1991; Fulcher, 2003), and thus such assumptions about writing at different score levels may be verified through this line of research. Cumming et al. (2005) stress the importance of analyzing text features at different score levels in integrated writing for this purpose:

The discourse of written texts cannot be assumed consistent for examinees with differing levels of proficiency in English, so consideration also needs to be given to how the written discourse of examinees varies in particular tasks with their English proficiency. This information is needed to verify, or refine, the scoring schemes being developed to evaluate examinees' performance on these writing tasks (pp. 8–9).

With integrated tasks questions arise as L2 writers borrow vocabulary items from sources, such as, how does this affect the overall lexical quality of their writing? What is the relationship between these newer integrated writing tasks and lexical quality? Such questions highlight the need for more research exploring the relationship between lexical quality and performance on integrated writing tasks. For this purpose, this study investigates whether lexical diversity is affected by borrowing words from source materials in integrated tasks, and the difference in lexical diversity across integrated writing score levels.

2. Literature review

The following section includes an overview of the construct of lexical diversity, lexical quality research in L2 writing, and research on lexical diversity in integrated writing contexts. These three strands were identified based on the recurrent themes in the literature and their relevance to the current study. The first section on the lexical diversity construct clarifies the operational definition of lexical diversity. This section is followed by a detailed survey of lexical diversity research within the L2 writing context while the third strand narrows down the discussion into mainly lexical quality in source-based writing contexts, the main focus of the present study.

2.1. What is lexical diversity?

Lexical measures in second language (L2) writing research are critical because they help identify the quality of a written text as well as a writer's vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary size (Laufer & Nation, 1995). Issues related to lexical quality are important in instructional settings especially for curriculum development and for decisions related to selection of class materials. They are equally important in a writing assessment context where this evidence could provide information about typical profiles at different proficiency levels.

Various terminology exists to describe lexical quality, including lexical range, verbal creativity, semantic abilities, semantic proficiency, semantic factors, vocabulary size, lexical richness, lexical sophistication, lexical variation, lexical density, and lexical diversity (Crystal, 1982; Fradis, Mihailescu, & Jipescu, 1992; Laufer, 2003). As Yu (2010) indicates, there is a sense of “nomenclature diffusions and confusions” in the literature, which has resulted from using different concepts interchangeably, quantifying lexical quality with various measures, and using lexical quality to describe both “language abilities of producers” and “the quality of products” (p. 238). A number of researchers have attempted to deploy an umbrella term for the various concepts. Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim (1998) used the term ‘lexical complexity’ to refer to the range and size of vocabulary produced by a language user arguing that any investigation of lexical complexity should consider how “varied or sophisticated the words or word types are” (p.101). Malvern, Richards, Chipere, and Duran (2004) used the label “vocabulary richness” to subsume both lexical sophistication and lexical diversity. In a related vein, Read (2000) classified lexical richness into four different components: lexical variation (diversity), lexical sophistication, lexical density, and number of errors (lexical accuracy).

The current study focuses on lexical diversity, which Malvern et al. (2004) define as “the range of vocabulary and avoidance of repetition” (p. 3). They argue that these terms could be used synonymously with lexical variation; however ‘lexical diversity’ is more commonly used in language research. The term lexical diversity was adopted from John B. Carroll

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