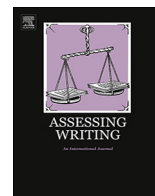


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Connecting writing assessment with critical thinking: An exploratory study of alternative rhetorical functions and objects of enquiry in writing prompts

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigated the effects of prompts on students' writing performance and critical thinking. Two groups of Chinese undergraduates ($n = 129$) responded to two distinct prompts with differing rhetorical functions and objects of enquiry. The comparison group responded to a conventional prompt modelled after prompts in high-stakes English tests which tend to converge over narrow ranges, while the experimental group responded to a prompt with problem-solving as the main rhetorical function, and behavioral economics as the object of enquiry. Various differences were noted between the two sets of essays related to standardized indexes of writing quality, as well as other rhetorical and linguistic features including: use of metadiscourse, essay organization, and use of certain lexical items. The comparison group outperformed the experimental one in several aspects of writing. However, the experimental group generated more diverse language and displayed enhanced critical thinking. We argue that the washback of high-stakes tests may result in a better performance in some respects in students' responses to conventional prompts. However, this may also reflect a cookie-cutter response to such prompts that arrives at the expense of a whole range of ignored rhetorical functions and objects of enquiry, some of which may stimulate increased critical thinking.

1. Introduction

Writing prompts are essential elements in both the assessment and pedagogy of English writing (Crusan, 2010; Weigle, 2002). They have thus become the focus of investigation in recent years. Rhetorical functions and objects of enquiry are two of the key variables when analyzing a writing prompt. Rhetorical function refers to the discursive purpose of the written response required by a prompt, e.g., evaluation, recommendation or explanation, while object of enquiry refers to the topic of the expected response. (Example prompts from past high-stakes tests are listed in Table 1 to illustrate the two terms). The literature indicates that both the rhetorical function and object of enquiry of a writing prompt may have significant effects on linguistic and rhetorical features within a response as well as the overall quality of students' writing (e.g., He & Shi, 2012; Hinkel, 2009; Lee & Anderson, 2007). However, to date few studies have investigated prompt effects on students' critical thinking despite the close interaction between critical thinking and writing. Critical thinking is defined as a set of cognitive abilities and thinking dispositions (Facione, 2015; Halpern, 2003)¹ which

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¹ For the purposes of the present study, cognitive abilities are the focus while the dispositional aspects of critical thinking have been left aside.

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Table 1
Example prompts for rhetorical functions and objects of enquiry.

Example Prompt	Rhetorical Function	Object of Enquiry
<i>Using a computer every day can have more negative than positive effects on your children. Do you agree or disagree? (IELTS)</i>	Evaluation (Making a judgment about the value or importance of a given entity or phenomenon)	The effects of using a computer on a daily basis
<i>Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? For successful development of a country, a government should focus its budget more on very young children education rather than on universities. (TOEFL)</i>	Hortation (Making an appeal about some actions as to whether they should be taken or not)	The focus of a country's educational budget
<i>Illiteracy has traditionally been viewed as largely a third world problem. However it is becoming apparent that in countries such as the USA and Australia, illiteracy is on the increase. Discuss possible causes for this and its effect on society. (IELTS)</i>	Explanation (Giving an account of the causes for a given entity or phenomenon)	The possible causes and effects of illiteracy

This table is adapted from Authors (2015).

are primarily embodied in people's language (oral or written arguments) (Palmer, 2012; Ramage, Bean, & Johnson, 2010). And according to Flower and Hayes (1981); MacArthur and Graham (2016) and many other researchers, the writing process involves intensive cognitive activities. These cognitive abilities (critical thinking) and cognitive activities (writing process) eventually manifest themselves in a writer's rhetoric. On the theoretical and empirical basis stated above, we think that by analyzing the linguistic and rhetorical features in students' essays, we would be able to investigate their critical thinking.

In addition to possible immediate effects on students' writing performance, writing prompts in high-stakes tests may have salient washback on writing pedagogy (Green, 2006; Qi, 2007). Green (2006), for instance, observed that a considerable amount of time in the writing classroom was spent on practicing prompts conforming to the IELTS (a high-stakes English test) standards. As such, appropriate writing assessment can be used to induce intended educational purposes, such as cultivating critical thinking abilities or other essential skills in students. However, studies (Liu & Stapleton, 2015; Moore & Morton, 2005) show that both rhetorical function and object of enquiry in the writing prompts of high-stakes tests may converge over narrow ranges. Specifically, rhetorical function tends to require evaluation or hortation (strong appeal or recommendation) and object of enquiry tends to be sociocultural in nature. Moore and Morton (2005) claim that such writing prompts emphasize the "spontaneous expression of opinion" (p. 64), and might bring about formulaic structures and limited sets of expressions and ideas in students' responses. In addition, such prompts may cause corresponding washback in the writing classroom, i.e., teachers may emphasize the practice of certain types of writing over others.

In the present study, the generally uniform writing prompts (in terms of rhetorical function and object of inquiry) found in high-stakes English tests were deemed conventional, based on the results from both Moore and Morton (2005) and Liu and Stapleton (2015), and it is hypothesized that writing prompts with alternative objects of enquiry and rhetorical functions may contribute to more diversity in terms of linguistic/rhetorical features and enhanced critical thinking in students' essays.

To test the hypothesis, we designed an exploratory study involving two groups of undergraduate students from a Chinese university. The study is meant to provide possible directions towards cultivating critical thinking in the English writing classroom. The comparison group responded to a conventional writing prompt; in other words, the prompt was similar to those found in high-stakes English tests. The experimental group responded to a prompt whose object of enquiry and rhetorical function was quite unlike those found in conventional prompts. First, the object of enquiry was in an area other than education, technology or social issues, i.e., the usual areas covered in high-stakes tests. Second, the rhetorical function required more analyzing and problem-solving instead of the usual evaluation and hortation. Scripts were collected and changed into electronic data. Both corpus and content analysis were performed on the data to compare and uncover patterns.

2. Review of literature

2.1. The effect of rhetorical function and object of enquiry in writing prompts

Studies have shown that varying objects of enquiry, i.e., personal or impersonal, specific or general, in writing prompts can elicit varying responses (2009, He & Shi, 2012; Hinkel, 1995; Tedick, 1990; Yu, 2010). Yu (2010), for example, by examining the correlation between the object of enquiry and the lexical diversity in test-takers' essays, found that lexical diversity is higher in test-takers' responses to impersonal topics. Hinkel (1995, 2009) found that students' language use when responding to particular writing prompts is dependent on their cultural and personal background, and topic knowledge. In light of these findings, Hinkel (2009) proposed that the use of new objects of enquiry in prompts that are less proximate to test-takers' own experience and opinions may lead to richer linguistic variety. Since language use reflects one's critical thinking (Palmer, 2012), Hinkel's recommendation (2009) has given impetus to the design of this research project, specifically, the need to explore the possible influence of writing prompts with distinct objects of enquiry on students' written argumentation and critical thinking.

As indicated by the literature, different rhetorical functions in writing prompts may produce various linguistic features (e.g., Hinkel, 2002; Reid, 1990; Spaan, 1993). Reid (1990), for example, compared writers' responses to two types of prompts (in terms of their rhetorical functions): 1) comparison/contrast (C/C) and take a position, and 2) describe and interpret a chart or graph (G). Student writers were native speakers of Arabic, Chinese, Spanish and English. Findings revealed that different rhetorical functions elicited responses that were measurably different in linguistic features. Specifically, writers used significantly more content words

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