

TESTING WRITING SKILLS AT LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Testing is a universal feature of social life. Throughout history people have been put to the test to prove their capabilities or to establish their credentials. Given the centrality of testing in social life, it is perhaps surprising that its practice is so little understood.

What is true of testing in general is true also of language testing, not a topic likely to quicken the pulse or excite much intermediate interest. For many language tests may conjure up an image of an examination room, a test paper with questions, desperate scribbling against the clock. But there is more to language testing than this.

The vary nature of testing has changed quite radically over the years to become less impositional, more humanistic, conceived not so much to catch students out on what they do not know, but as a more neutral assessment of what they do.

The topic of our research is “Testing writing skills at lower secondary school”. As the title suggests, the present work wants to be a framework of what testing English as a foreign language means. In our teaching we may sometimes concentrate on following the syllabus and ignore our students’ needs. It is very important to take into consideration their needs at every stage of teaching: a teacher must ‘diagnose’ linguistic problems in order to teach effectively and get good results.

We have chosen this topic-“Testing writing skills at lower secondary school”- because testing is a neglected field in the sense that it is not approached professionally. It also has a major impact on people’s life and not only on test takers, in the sense that decisions are made on the grades the students obtain (see the high school graduation exams), but also the teachers who prepare and evaluate students. Parents are also influenced by the grades the students get. Furthermore, writing skills are difficult to test and they are marked subjectively. Until recently they were seen in a simplistic way, they were just grammar and vocabulary. Now, teachers have come to realize that writing skills are an important component of the communicative skills (i.e. being able to get the message across).

The writing skills are complex and sometimes difficult to teach, requiring mastery not only of grammatical and rhetorical devices but also of conceptual and judgemental elements. The following analysis attempts to group the many and varied skills necessary for writing good prose into five general components or main areas.

- language use: the ability to write correct and appropriate sentences;
- mechanical skills: the ability to use correctly those conventions peculiar to the written language - e.g. punctuation, spelling;

- treatment of content: the ability to think creatively and develop thoughts, excluding all irrelevant information;
- stylistic skills: the ability to manipulate sentences and paragraphs, and use language effectively;
- judgement skills: the ability to write in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose with a particular audience in mind, together with an ability to select, organise and order relevant information.

The actual writing conventions which it is necessary for the student to master relate chiefly (at the elementary stages) to punctuation and spelling. However, in punctuation there are many areas in which personal judgements are required, and tests of punctuation must guard against being too rigid by recognising that several answers may be correct. Unfortunately, tests of punctuation and spelling have often tended to inhibit writing and creativity.

Of far greater importance in the teaching and testing of writing are those skills involving the use of judgement. As Heaton (1995:135) points out:

The ability to write for a particular audience using the most appropriate kind of language is essential for both native-speaking and foreign student alike. The use of correct registers becomes an important skill at advanced levels of writing. Failure to use the correct register frequently results in incongruities and embarrassment. Whereas native speakers learn to make distinctions of register intuitively, students of foreign languages usually experience problems in mastering this complex area of language. The various kinds of register include colloquialisms, slang, jargon, archaic words, legal language, standard English, business English, the language used by educated writers of English, etc. The purpose of writing will also help to establish a particular register: for example, is the student writing to entertain, inform, or explain?

A piece of continuous writing may take the form of a narrative, description, survey, record, report, discussion, or argument. In addition to the subject and the format, the actual audience (e.g. an examiner, a teacher, a student, a friend) will also determine which of the various registers is to be used. Consequently, the use of appropriate register in writing implies an awareness not only of a writing goal but also of a particular audience.

After the purpose of writing and the nature of the audience have been established, judgement is again required to determine the selection of the material which is most relevant to the task at hand (bearing in mind the time available). Organisation and ordering skills then follow selection.

Grammar and structure

The testing of grammar is one of the mainstays of language testing. While such tests test the ability to either recognize or produce correct grammar and usage, they do not test the ability to use the language to express meaning. However, it can be argued that a basic knowledge of grammar underlies the ability to use language to express meaning, and so grammar tests do have an important part to play in language programs.

Controlled writing

There are several ways of controlling students' freedom of expression in their written work and, as a consequence, increasing the reliability of the scoring. However useful such methods are as teaching devices, they will only prove useful for testing purposes if each student is completely familiar with the particular task to be performed: hence the importance of clear instructions followed by at least one example. Sometimes there is even the danger that certain students will feel inhibited rather than helped by such control.

Free writing

The only really satisfactory way to assess a student's ability to write is by means of a composition test. An attempt should be made to determine the types of writing tasks with which the students are confronted every day. Such tasks will probably be associated with the writing requirements imposed by the other subjects being studied at school if the medium of instruction is English. Short articles, instructions and accounts of experiments will probably form the main body of writing. If the medium of instruction is not English, the written work will often take the form of consolidation or extension of the work done in the classroom. In both cases, the students may be required to keep a diary, produce a magazine and to write both formal and informal letters. The concern of students following a profession or in business will be chiefly with report-writing and letter-writing, while at college or university level they will usually be required to write (technical) reports and papers. As Heaton (1995:136-137) states:

In the construction of class tests, it is important for the test writer to find out how composition is tested in the first language. Although the emphasis in the teaching and testing of the skills in English as a foreign/second language will of necessity be quite different to the development of the skills in the first language, a comparison of the abilities acquired and methods used is very helpful. It is clearly ludicrous, for instance, to expect in a foreign language those skills which the students do not possess in their own language.

In the past, test writers have been too ambitious and unrealistic in their expectations of testees' performances in composition writing: hence the constant complaint that relatively few foreign learners of English attain a satisfactory level in English composition. Furthermore, the backwash effect of examinations involving composition writing has been unfortunate: teachers have too often anticipated examination requirements by beginning free composition work far too early in the course. They have 'progressed' from controlled composition to free composition too early, before the basic writing skills have been acquired.

However, once the students are ready to write free compositions on carefully chosen realistic topics, then composition writing can be a useful testing tool. It provides the students with an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to organise language material, using their own words and ideas, and to communicate. In this way, composition tests provide a degree of motivation which many objective-type tests fail to provide.

In the composition test the students should be presented with a clearly defined problem which motivates them to write. The writing task should be such that it ensures they have something to say and a purpose for saying it. They should also have an audience in mind when they write. How often in real-life situations do people begin to write when they have nothing to write, no purpose in writing and no audience in mind? Thus, whenever possible, meaningful situations should be given in composition tests. For example, a brief description of a real-life situation might be given when requiring the students to write a letter:

Your pen-friend is going to visit your country for a few weeks with her two brothers. Your house is big enough for her to stay with you but there is not enough room for her brothers. There are two hotels near your house but they are very expensive. The third hotel is cheaper, but it is at least five miles away. Write a letter to your pen-friend, explaining the situation.

Finally, the whole question of time should be considered when administering tests of writing. While it may be important to impose strict time limits in tests of reading, such constraints may prove harmful in tests of writing, increasing the sense of artificiality and unreality. Moreover, the fact that candidates are expected to produce a finished piece of writing at their very first attempt adds to this sense of unreality. Students should be encouraged to produce preliminary drafts of whatever they write, and this means giving them sufficient time in an examination to do this. Only in this way can writing become a genuine communicative activity.

Wrong testing may lead to wrong learning and discouragement. The rules of tests creating should not be broken, the items should be clear not confusing and their marking exact and objective. Besides, teachers should also try to be less rigid and more creative rather than stick to the methods and exercises given in a certain textbook. By our observations we made upon the way the English textbooks present testing, we think we succeeded, at least, in “ringing a bell” to improve this domain.

In conclusion, testing has progressed a long way since the pre-scientific era, with its disregard for reliability in favour of “fair” testing. It has passed through eras when reliability and objective testing were dominant to the period today when testers are more interested in how a candidate is able to use his/her knowledge of language in a communicative situation than a demonstration of the knowledge in isolation.

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