

IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING MATERIALS IN ASSESSING LANGUAGE SKILLS IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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Annotation: This thesis is dedicated to highlighting the importance of developing materials in assessing language skills in teaching English.

Keywords: Language testing, consequential validity, construct validity, ethics, pedagogy, writing.

INTRODUCTION

Educators, researchers and language theorists need not remain passive victims of the assessment industry. George Hillocks, in his paper “Fighting Back: Assessing the Assessments”, argues that educators must confront assessment issues head on. By providing a list of questions educators and researchers can use to interrogate high-stakes writing tests, he in part lays the foundation for such an attack. His article, however, fails to provide a framework through which a coherent body of research related to the assessing of assessments can be developed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The basic format of Alberta’s English 30-1 writing exam is as follows: Students are given a maximum of three hours to complete two essay questions. These questions are linked thematically. The first question, the *Personal Response to Text Assignment*, is designed to stimulate student thinking for the second question, the *Critical/Analytical Response to Texts Assignment*. The exam permits students to respond to the questions from either a personal, critical or creative perspective. As well, the exam permits students to express their ideas in any form that they deem appropriate to the ideas they wish to express.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal Response to Text Assignment. The suggested time for students to complete this assignment is between forty-five and sixty minutes. Before writing, students must read through four pages of print text and visual text provided. These texts are followed by a prompt which places them into context or which focuses the students’ attention to elements of the text that are most relevant to the writing prompt that follows. The prompt in the January, 2004 version of the exam read: “What do these texts suggest to you about the significance of our memory of the past? Support your

idea(s) with reference to one or more of the texts presented and to your previous knowledge and/or experience (Alberta Education, 2004, p. 7). Below the prompt, was a series of reminders for students:

- Select a *prose form* that is appropriate to the ideas you wish to express and that will enable you to effectively communicate to the reader;
 - Discuss ideas and/or impressions that are meaningful to you (p. 7).
- Four pages for planning and four pages for writing were provided.

This section of the exam is generally graded according to two, five-point analytic scales. The first scale, *Ideas and Impressions*, is focused on the quality of students' ideas, reflection and exploration of the topic. It also focuses on how effectively they support these ideas, reflections and explorations. *Presentation*, the second scale, focuses on:

- The effectiveness of voice and its appropriateness to the intended audience of the prose form the student has chosen;
- The quality of language and expression;
- The appropriateness of development and unifying effect to the prose form.

Markers are prompted to consider the proportion of error to the complexity and length of the response. The scale is somewhat relative; within different contexts certain types of errors will be scored more severely than others.

The assignment is generally marked using five, five-point analytic scales: (a) *Thought and Detail* is focused on how effectively the students' ideas relate to the assignment and on the quality of the literary interpretations and understandings the students develop; (b) *Supporting Evidence* is focused on the selection and quality of evidence and on how well the supporting evidence is integrated, synthesized and/or developed to support the student's ideas; (c) *Form and Structure* is focused on how well the student's organizational choices result in a coherent, focused, shaped and concluded discussion and in a unifying effect or a controlling idea that is developed and maintained; (d) *Matters of Choice* is focused on how effectively students' create voice through their use of diction, syntax, and other factors; (e) *Matters of Correctness* focuses on the student's correct use of sentence construction, usage, grammar and mechanics. Markers are required to consider the proportion of error in relation to length and complexity when assessing Matters of Correctness.

To determine what the exam values, one must look at the content, the scoring mechanisms and the structure which collectively constitute the exam. An analysis of the content and scoring mechanism reveals the following: The exam values knowledge about language structure – the structure of ideas, of paragraphs, of sentences. The exam also values knowledge about language as a tool through which one communicates ideas. To this end, it values idea formation and support, and it values the creation of

appropriate voice. Knowledge about voice is complex requiring knowledge about diction, syntax and punctuation.

An analysis of the exam's structure also reveals the knowledge and skills valued by the exam. Primary among these values is one's ability to generate, organize and effectively present one's ideas within tightly controlled timeframes. As a consequence of this emphasis on time controls, the exam also seems to place a value on one's ability to work effectively under pressure.

CONCLUSION

The discussion contained within this double issue is very important in terms of consolidating and expanding upon our current understandings of what counts as knowledge about language. This collaborative approach to defining knowledge is an essential element of academic discourse and it provides an effective platform upon which to build future practice. Current flawed language assessments, however, stand in the way of real progress in pedagogy. Collaborative approaches to challenging the validity of such tests will help remove this barrier. Additionally, through collaborative design, current problems can be avoided in future assessment development. Language theorists, seasoned educators, students and other stakeholders can work with assessment specialists to help them better understand the constructs they are measuring, and support them as they design tests that better reflect and support pedagogy. In fact, rather than minimizing the expectations for test validity on the basis of construct complexity and the difficulty involved in defining measurable constructs, assessment specialists should recognize the need to engage in collaborative design and should begin building research networks which include teachers, students, language and literacy specialists, curriculum developers and cognitive psychologists. Validity-based research provides both the rationale and the push for collaborative assessment design in language education. The issue is real, the time is now.

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