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Testing the writing skills

9.1 The writing skills

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. 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.

9.2 Testing composition writing

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.

One large public examining body¹ explicitly states the kinds of writing tasks its examinations test and the standards of writing expected in the performance of those tasks:

A successful candidate will have passed an examination designed to test ability to produce a selection of the following types of writing:

Basic Level: Letter; Postcard; Diary entry; Forms

Intermediate Level: As Basic Level, plus Guide; Set of instructions

Advanced Level: As Intermediate Level, plus Newspaper report; Notes

The candidate's performance will have met the following minimum criteria:

Basic Level: No confusing errors of grammar or vocabulary; a piece of writing legible and readily intelligible; able to produce simple unsophisticated sentences.

Intermediate Level: Accurate grammar, vocabulary and spelling, though possibly with some mistakes which do not destroy communication; handwriting generally legible; expression clear and appropriate, using a fair range of language; able to link themes and points coherently.

Advanced Level: Extremely high standards of grammar, vocabulary and spelling; easily legible handwriting; no obvious limitations on range of language candidate is able to use accurately and appropriately; ability to produce organised, coherent writing, displaying considerable sophistication.

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.

Composition titles which give the students no guidance as to what is expected of them should be avoided. Examples of poor titles which fail to direct the students' ideas are *A pleasant evening*, *My best friend*, *Look before you leap*, *A good film which I have recently seen*.

With the emphasis on communicative testing, there is a tendency for test writers to set tasks asking the students to write notes and letters in their own role (i.e. without pretending to be someone else). Tasks requiring the students to act the part of another person are often avoided as it is felt they are less realistic and communicative. However, this is usually far from being the case. It is useful to provide the students not only with details about a specific situation but also with details about the particular person they are supposed to be and the people about (or to) whom they are writing. Compare, for example, the two following tasks:

- (a) Write a letter, telling a friend about any interesting school excursion on which you have been.
- (b) You have just been on a school excursion to a nearby seaside town.

However, you were not taken to the beach and you had no free time at all to wander round the town. You are very keen on swimming and you also enjoy going to the cinema. Your teacher often tells you that you should study more and not waste your time. On the excursion you visited the law courts, an art gallery and a big museum. It was all very boring apart from one room in the museum containing old-fashioned armour and scenes of battles. You found this room far more interesting than you thought it would be but you didn't talk to your friends or teacher about it. In fact, you were so interested in it that you left a small camera there. Your teacher told you off because you have a reputation for forgetting things. Only your cousin seems to understand you. Write a letter to him, telling him about the excursion.

Although the former task is one which students may conceivably have to perform in real life, the latter task will result in far more realistic and natural letters from the students simply because the specific details make the task more meaningful and purposeful. The detailed description of both the situation and the person involved helps the students to suspend their disbelief and gives the task an immediacy and realism which are essential for its successful completion.

Two or more short compositions usually provide more reliable guides to writing ability than a single composition, enabling the testing of different registers and varieties of language (e.g. a brief, formal report). If the composition test is intended primarily for assessment purposes, it is advisable not to allow students a choice of composition items to be answered. Examination scripts written on the same topic give the marker a common basis for comparison and evaluation. Furthermore, no time will be wasted by the testees in deciding which composition items to answer. If, on the other hand, the composition test forms part of a class progress test and actual assessment is thus of secondary importance, a choice of topics will cater for the interests of each student.

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.

9.3 Setting the composition

In addition to providing the necessary stimulus and information required for writing, a good topic for a composition determines the register and style to be used in the writing task by presenting the students with a specific situation and context in which to write. Since it is easier to compare different performances when the writing task is determined more exactly, it is possible to obtain a greater degree of reliability in the scoring of compositions based on specific situations. Furthermore, such composition tests have an excellent backwash effect on the teaching and learning preparatory to the examination.

The difficulty in constructing such compositions arises in the writing of the rubrics. On the one hand, if the description of the situation on which the composition is to be based is too long, then the text becomes more

of a reading comprehension test and there will be no common basis for evaluation. On the other hand, however, sufficient information must be conveyed by the rubric in order to provide a realistic, helpful basis for the composition. It is important, therefore, that exactly the right amount of context be provided in simple language written in a concise and lucid manner. The following rubric, for example, can be simplified considerably:

You have been directed by your superior to compose a letter to a potential client to ascertain whether he might contemplate entering an undertaking that would conceivably be of mutual benefit . . .

The following are provided as examples of situational compositions intended to be used in tests of writing:

Type 1

Imagine that this is your diary showing some of your activities on certain days. First, fill in your activities for those days which have been left blank. Then, using the information in the diary, write a letter to a friend telling him or her how you are spending your time. Write about 100 words. The address is not necessary.²

1 Monday	Study!
2 Tuesday	study!
3 Wednesday	Final exams
4 Thursday	
5 Friday	
6 Saturday	Shopping. Driving lesson 2 p.m.
7 Sunday	Only two more weeks to wait!

Type 2

(Question 1)

While you are away from home, some American friends are coming to stay in your house. You are leaving before they are due to arrive, so you decide to leave them some notes to help them with all the things they will need to know while staying in the house. Your friends have never been to your country before so there is quite a lot of advice you need to pass on. Write your message on the notelet pad sheet below.

(A blank notelet follows.)

(Question 2)

While your American friends are staying in your house, they write to say that they are enjoying themselves so much that they would like to spend two weeks visiting some other parts of the country. They would like your advice about what to go and see and where to stay.

Write to your friends giving the best possible advice you can from your own knowledge and experience, with whatever special hints and warnings may be necessary. Make sure your friends know who they can write to for further information of an 'official' kind to help them to plan the best possible holiday.

Write your letter in the space below. It should be between 150 and 200 words in length.³
(A blank space follows.)

Type 3

Read the following letter carefully.

176 Wood Lane
London NW2
15th May

Dear Mr Johnson,
I wish to complain about the noise which has come from your home late every night this week. While I realise that you must practise your trumpet some time, I feel you ought to do it at a more suitable time. Ten o'clock in the evening is rather late to start playing. Even if you could play well, the noise would still be unbearable at that time.

I hope that in future you will be a little more considerate of the feelings of others.

Yours sincerely,
W. Robinson

Now write a reply to this letter. You do not play the trumpet but on two or three occasions recently you have played some trumpet music on your record player. You did not play the record very loudly – certainly not as loudly as Mr Robinson's television. You want to tell him this but you do not want to become enemies so you must be reasonably polite in your letter.

Care must be taken in the construction of letter-writing tasks to limit the amount of information to which the student must reply. If this is not done scoring can become extremely difficult.

Type 4 A dialogue can be very useful in providing a basis for composition work. In such a writing task, students must demonstrate their ability to change a text from one register to another, as in the following example:

Read the following conversation carefully.

MR BLACK: What was the weather like while you were camping?

LINDA: Not too bad. It rained the last couple of days, but mostly it was fine. We weren't able to visit the Gorge Waterfalls on the next to the last day, but . . .

MR BLACK: What a pity!

LINDA: Well, apart from that we did everything we wanted to – walking, climbing and just sitting in the sun. We even managed a visit to Hock Cave.

MR BLACK: How on earth did you get that far?

LINDA: We cycled. Oh . . . and we went to the beach quite a few times.

MR BLACK: Did you take your bikes with you?