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Writing Skills Exploration of Language Tests

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Abstract: Nowadays, more and more Chinese undergraduate students choose to go abroad for further study. IELTS then is a criterion to test if they are qualified to study overseas. Writing tasks are essential in writings and learning how to write them is meaningful to the test-takers when they have to go abroad to continue to study. This article is a pre-test for students to check their writing skills and is useful for their formal IELTS test. For the test-takers, taking this test can help them to prepare important IELTS in advance and can check their writing problems for them to improve which can be a very good learning experience.

Keywords: IELTS; Writing tasks; Pre-test; University students

Introduction

For this test, the learning group is Chinese university students who want to go abroad to study or living there. And to go abroad, for a non English-speaking country, Chinese students need to pass the official language test named International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). But to narrow the test down like its test content and target country which IELTS is mainly used for European countries and TOEFL is for America, the focus is on IELTS test. Since there are too many students in universities who want to go abroad to study all over China, the test is pretended to be taken in Wuhan, Hubei province which is in the central part of China.

The purpose of the test is to help students to double check their writing skills before the IELTS and it is a summative test. And the reason to choose writing skills is that many Chinese students are weak in writing English essays especially argumentative writings. It seems like Chinese logic is different from English because the English teachers always say that there is something wrong with students' writing logic. The biggest reason may be that the students think and write in Chinese way and then translate into English rather than directly thinking and writing in English. Thus many students can not get high grades in IELTS writing part and fail to pass the test. However, IELTS is very expensive for students to take very often especially when students just fail the writing part but the overall scores are okay. So the training school tests the students' writing skills in advance to check their problems and weaknesses and can give them advice. Then the students can prepare well to take formal language tests.

Chapter One Test Criterion

For the writing skills, the students may use not very often in real life since this is a technological time but there are some contexts for writing skills. There are many writing activities like "completing forms and questionnaires, writing reports, memoranda", etc(the CEFR, p. 61)^[1]. In this writing test, it mainly includes "creative and imaginative writing" and "writing personal or business letters" (the CEFR, p. 61)^[1]. From the overall written production, the test-takers need to learn how to and can "write clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion." (the CEFR, p. 61)^[1] For argumentative writings, appropriate and ample argumentation and explanation are necessary. So the students need to know how to express own opinions on a certain topic with several explanations to support the argumentation. Also, there is a writing part of describing the statistics and their relationship in the chart. In this part, the students need to learn how to observe the statistics and use the related vocabularies. And after taking the test, the test-takers can finish assignments, formal written texts and write letters in clear logic on their own. And also, the test-takers can sometimes write "clear, detailed, well-structured and developed descriptions and imaginative texts in an assured, personal, natural style appropriate to the reader in mind" (the CEFR, p. 62). But this criterion is for those who have already grasped great English writing skills and can improve themselves after the test. The main criterion is still the overall written production one.

Chapter Two Test Constructs

For the writing skills, in general competences, there is not much to mention but about the ability to learn, the study skills can sometimes

be used in writing skills. The study skills include “ability to make effective use of the learning opportunities created by teaching situations” like “maintain attention to the presented information”, “grasp the intention of the task set” and “make rapid and frequent active use of the language learnt” (the CEFR, p. 107)^[1]. In the writing part, there is much information to deal with in short times especially in the statistic writing. And in the argumentative writing, the test-takers need to firstly summarize the question instructions and express in own words. So the test-takers need to learn how to grasp the information behind the question quickly and flexibly use words to write.

As for communicative language competences, linguistic competences matter most in this writing test design, and according to the CEFR^[1], the general linguistic range is that the test-takers “can select an appropriate formulation from a broad range of language to express him/herself clearly, without having to restrict what he/she wants to say” (p. 110). The hope that the test-takers can flexibly express their own opinions without being restricted to vocabularies is the high standard of writing skills. To achieve this goal, the test-takers are required to have lexical competence like fixed expressions and broad vocabularies, grammatical competence like grammatical accuracy, semantic competence like lexical semantics and pragmatic semantics, and orthographic competence which is essential in written text. For semantic competence, the test-takers do not have to write down how to compose the entailment but the competence can be shown according to their writings.

Chapter Three Test Content

For the test content, there will be mainly three parts. Before the writing test begins, all the test-takers must give their electronic products to the examiner with only a bottle of water and pens in their hands. The whole writing test lasts for 1 hour and 40 minutes and three different sheets of paper will be given to the test-takers according to the writing test order. The first part is a small basic letter writing and the task can be complaint letter, request letter, advice letter, invitation letter or lost and found letter. For example, suppose that you are going to take vacations and invite one of your friends to stay in your house and take care of it. The test-takers need to write letters to the friend to explain the house-keeping instructions and express their thanks. This writing task needs to be finished in 20 minutes with more than 150 words. When the 20-minute bell rings, the test-takers must hand in the writings to the examiner. After this task, the test-takers can have 10 minutes’ break.

Then the second writing test will be given to the test-takers about the chart writing which can include pie charts, curve charts, bar charts or flow charts. There can be one or two connected charts for the test-takers to summarize information and describe statistics. The test-takers need to describe the statistics in the chart coherently in 20 minutes with more than 150 words.

After 10 minutes’ break, it comes to the last main writing task which is the argumentative writing. In this task, the test-takers need to express their own opinions about a certain topic, or discussing two different opinions given in the question titles against the same topic, or explaining a certain situation and giving solutions. For example, the test-takers need to share their opinions on a debate of whether electronic books are more popular than traditional printed books or not. The test-takers need to finish this task within 40 minutes with more than 250 words.

In formal IELTS writing, there are only two parts but for this test, it is designed to encourage the test-takers to learn and think more. The three tasks share the same criteria which are communicative quality, including coherence and logic, and vocabulary and sentence structure. In the task achievement, however, there are different band descriptors. Though the previous narrations suppose that the test-takers’ writing skills are in B2 level, to make the rating and scoring more as a whole, it starts from the basic level. Each task score is the average of the three grades. And the final writing score is the average of three tasks’ scores. The detailed rating and scoring are referring to the CEFR and IELTS band descriptors.^{[2][3]}

Chapter Four Validity, Reliability and Authenticity

For test validity, this writing test reflects the test constructs which derived from the test-takers’ criterion from informal letter to academic chart writing and argumentative writing. From general competences to sociolinguistic competence, the test all takes into consideration and concentrates most on linguistic competences. And as an achievement assessment, this test engages sufficiently with the curriculum content and can provide a reliable sample of learner achievement. For instance, the letter writing tests the test-takers’ use of politeness principle in written text and the chart writing tests the test-takers’ ability of data summary and vocabularies of data description. As for the argumentative writing, it is an all-round test for writing skills. For normal students who want to test their writing skills, there are many special competitions on campus. Since the test-takers are all the students who have already taken or planning to take the IELTS test, they must prepare a lot before. And the reason that they take this test is that they want to double check their writing skills so they must be familiar with the response formats.

Relating to reliability, this writing test results can be similar among the test-takers and provinces if the question titles are the same. But different task requirements can have different answers especially when the writing test is open to the public and needs to change the questions every time. The differences every time are the test topics. But the test content which tests letter writing, chart writing and argumentative writing is always the same. And the administration will always be the same which is the training school in Wuhan. For who administers and grades

this test, two native English speakers and an English teacher from China who are expert in IELTS writing are appropriate. One is responsible for task one and two and the other is responsible for task three. Another person will check their grading for a second time if there is a huge gap between these tasks' scores. And the training school will send the test-takers' task scores and the overall writing scores with their writings to their addresses.

References

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