論　文

Issues in Teaching to the Writing Test: Preparing Students for the TOEFL® iBT Independent Writing Task

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Abstract

Students in the Department of International Studies at Doshisha Women's College are required to study overseas for one year at a college or university in an English-speaking country. For this reason, their first year is devoted to test preparation. Teaching such test preparation courses forces the instructors to face several issues related to "teaching to the test" such as effectiveness and the relationship to usual language teaching. These issues have been discussed in the literature to some extent but only a few studies address them in a specific context. This paper examines a course designed to prepare students for the independent writing task of the TOEFL iBT; it presents a detailed description of how the course is taught based on the reflections of four instructors, focusing on three issues related to teaching to the test: teaching writing as opposed to teaching to the prompt; the effect of the test rubric and the holistic scoring policy on teaching; and the use of textbooks. We conclude that teaching to the test is compatible with sound instructional practice.

Introduction

The curriculum of the Department of International Studies at Doshisha Women's College requires that from the second half of their second year, all students study overseas

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for one year at an institution of higher learning in an English-speaking country. As of February 2009, students could choose from 24 different colleges and universities in five different countries. Students must have a TOEFL score sufficient to meet the requirements of the school of their choice, which range from a low of about 45 (450) to a high of about 100 (600). The first year of the curriculum is devoted largely to test preparation, which means that the instructors face several important issues, such as the effectiveness of their courses and the relationship between language instruction and test preparation. This paper examines the problems of test preparation courses through an analysis of the instructors' reflections on three such issues, using the specific example of test preparation for the independent writing task on the TOEFL iBT.

We first describe the TOEFL iBT's independent writing task; we then present a brief description of the course designed to prepare students for this question. The paper's main section, using an action research approach, presents first a description of how the course is taught and then an analysis of three key issues: teaching writing as opposed to teaching to the prompt; the effect of the test rubric and the holistic scoring policy on teaching; and the use of textbooks. By focusing on the instructors' reflections, we hope to offer a new perspective on washback and teaching to the test.

Background

The TOEFL iBT Independent Writing Task

The program to develop a test of English as a foreign language began in 1962; over the years the TOEFL has undergone numerous modifications, resulting in the introduction of the iBT in 2005. The TOEFL was often criticized for negative washback (see e.g., Alderson, 2004, p. x) so it was a specific aim of the designers of the iBT to make a test that would produce positive washback on English language classrooms around the world (ETS, 2008b, §Test Use). As a result, the TOEFL iBT in its present (2009) form is unlike previous versions of the TOEFL, the main difference being that the test assesses communicative ability more authentically, particularly by including a speaking test and by using integrated tasks that require test takers to use multiple language skills.

An important exception to this improvement, however, is the retention of the independent writing task. This question requires the examinee to write an essay in 30 minutes in response to a given prompt and is scored holistically on a criterion-referenced scale of 5 to 0. It is similar to the TOEFL's previous writing task, know as the *Test of Written English*™ (TWE®) (ETS, 2008a, pp. 23, 25). According to the TWE *Guide*, "the topics and tasks are designed to give examinees the opportunity to develop and organize ideas and to express those ideas in lexically and syntactically appropriate English" (ETS, 2004, p. 6). Further, examinees are told to "write an essay that states, explains, and supports their opinion on an issue. An effective essay will usually contain a minimum of 300 words; however, test takers may write more if they wish. Test takers must support their opinions or choices, rather than simply list personal preferences or choices" (ETS, 2008a, p. 23). ETS publications make the strong claim for this essay question that "the writing tasks presented in TWE topics have been identified by research as typical of those required for college and university course

work" (ETS, 2004, p. 6). The main reason behind the decision to retain this question in the iBT seems to be that it tests applicants' ability to produce discourse types common in academic writing (Huff, et al., 2008, pp. 212-215).

Previous Research

Although there is a large body of research on the TOEFL as a test instrument, there are surprisingly few studies of TOEFL preparation courses. Alderson & Hamp-Lyons (1996) is one standard work; Johnson, Jordan, and Poehner (2005) take an ethnographic approach. Other studies, such as Heffernan (2003) and Narron, et al. (2003), present descriptions of TOEFL preparation courses and in some cases make claims for their efficacy. Wall and Horák's (2006, 2008) and Hamp-Lyons and Brown's (2006) as yet unfinished studies promise to provide many insights into TOEFL preparation.

Some research has been published on the issues taken up in the main section of this paper. (1) Concerning the teaching of writing, many scholars have pointed to a discrepancy between the demands of the independent writing task and the demands of actual college-level writing tasks, arguing that this task sends the wrong message about what academic writing should be (e.g., Weigle, 2006, pp. 224 ff.). Specifically, academic writing is usually based on research using external sources and is taught in a process approach with much rewriting and revision, clearly different from the independent writing task. (2) Rubrics and scoring methods have been widely debated for L1 writing assessment (see Wolcott & Legg, 1998, pp. 71-87 for a review of the research). For ESL writers, holistic scoring is especially problematic because of "the mix of strengths and weaknesses often found in ESL writings" (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997, p. 29). (3) In contrast to the first two topics, not much research has been published on textbooks and other test preparation materials. Hilke and Wadden (1997) surveyed several TOEFL preparation textbooks, finding many of them deficient; Hamp-Lyons (1998) published a severe critique of TOEFL test preparation materials, arguing that they are "educationally indefensible" (p. 334).

The Academic Writing Course

The first-year curriculum in the Department of International Studies is devoted largely to test preparation; students take several skills courses, each devoted to one of the six tasks on the TOEFL iBT. Among them, the "Academic Writing" course is a two-semester sequence specifically aimed at preparing students for the Independent Writing Task. During orientation, students are given a placement test with TOEFL-like questions, including a 30-minute (handwritten) essay on a topic drawn from previous TOEFL writing tests. Students are then streamed into one of 8 (2008) or 9 (2007) levels, from A (most proficient) down; the number of students in each class is about 12. The A class meets once a week for 90 minutes; all other classes meet twice a week for about 45 minutes each. All classes are held in computer-equipped rooms and all classes use a TOEFL iBT preparation textbook.

It is important to note that this "Academic Writing" class exists in a larger context. Because the TOEFL has two different essays in the writing section, our program has two types of writing preparation classes: one for the independent and one for the inte-

grated essay. Independent writing and integrated writing are separate but complementary parts of a fully developed academic writing skills repertoire. Independent writing instills in students the fundamental structure of the essay. Integrated writing requires students to learn note-taking and organizational skills (as well as listening and reading skills), which are required to follow the readings and lectures offered in post-secondary content courses. In addition, in integrated writing, students learn the basics of citing sources. These two courses offer students the skills necessary to move into further academic coursework during their second year in our program and in their studies abroad.

In addition, these two first-year courses are part of an even larger context. In the first term of their second year, the students take a single writing class specifically devoted to writing lengthy research papers. The students are able to utilize the skills they learned from their independent writing class (e.g., proper development of an introduction, clear and unambiguous thesis statements, good organization of information into thematically consistent paragraphs, smooth transitions between sentences and ideas, and well-constructed conclusions) as well as the skills from their integrated writing class (e.g., paraphrasing, citing sources, and synthesizing external material). In the first term of their second year we find that, in general, the students are quickly able to write well-organized, coherent, and accurately cited papers.

Reflections on Teaching to the Test

The Students

Before reaching university, students in Japan have generally been exposed to six years of English language study. However, that study has to a great extent been focused on grammar, translation, and passive memorization of vocabulary words to pass college entrance examinations. Most students are unprepared to write essays, take notes on readings or during academic lectures, or to participate in discussion about content material. These fundamental skills that are vital components of active involvement in academic studies in English settings are noticeably lacking.

What We Do

For the past two years we have taught the fundamentals of writing to the students in the Department of International Studies. One of the first aims of the course is to evaluate and improve computer skills. Many of our students are challenged not only by the idea of writing a 300-word essay for the TOEFL, but also by their inability to type and use word processing software. The vast majority of our students have had very limited exposure to academic writing instruction; therefore, the next goal is to equip students with the ability to plan and create traditional five-paragraph essays. They learn the very basic and important skill of supporting their ideas with examples and reasons. They also learn how to use cohesive structures, offer concrete support of thesis points, and other conventions that are required to write an academic essay. As for the upper level 'A' class, by the fall semester they have finished the textbook so their main work becomes two short academic essays for which students choose their own topics, learn how to use the library databases and Google Scholar, and study worksheets on citation techniques,

APA style, and plagiarism. The students' drafts are reviewed conference-style in class or by email and most students write several drafts of each essay.

Stephen Krashen's (2005) caveat: "Simply writing lots of 30 minute essays will not prepare a student to write a good 30 minute essay" are words that we take to heart. Our writing classes are designed so that the essays are not isolated events. There are numerous pre-writing exercises as well as evaluation and revision. The students spend a long time thinking about and discussing the prompts, and considering how the question could be answered. We practice brainstorming and making outlines. From the beginning of the first semester, we go through two or three drafts of a paper. Later in the term we begin to do peer editing and we often analyze student essays that were very well written. In addition, we do free writing exercises and sometimes we listen to or read something that we use as the source for our essay. Because of the intense class schedule that the students follow, they quickly develop the ability to plan, organize, and write TOEFL iBT independent writing section essays. Before the end of their first semester, the limiting factor for most of the students becomes their grammar skills, even more than their vocabulary limitations. To address this deficiency we do line-by-line grammar corrections of their essays, which the students then fix by making corrections to their saved Word files. We also collect student-generated grammar errors —— especially those that appear frequently. Then we make these errors the focus of specific in-class or take-home grammar-based activities. We give grammar quizzes, attempt peer corrections, and bring in skill-building handouts for structures that are underdeveloped (e.g., parallelism, cohesiveness, or tense). There is significant improvement, but as the complexity of their ideas and sentence structure continues to grow, the grammar improvement barely keeps pace.

Many teachers feel that the time limit and other test constraints contravene best practice for writing instruction. The time limit unquestionably places a constraint on the creativity and freedom associated with effective writing. In addition, some students do not perform well under pressure, and the quality of their writing suffers markedly when we compare their homework essays to their simulated test essays. This is one of the reasons, as mentioned above, for the necessity of pre- and post-writing activities. Teachers in no way should feel that the only effective teaching method is in simulating 30-minute essays. In a report of a large-scale classroom observation study, Green (2006) compared classes specifically aimed at writing-test preparation (the IELTS writing questions) and classes devoted to general academic writing. He found that "contrary to expectations," some test preparation teachers asked students to rewrite their essays and correct errors "though there would be limited opportunities for these under test conditions." A teacher who required this "reported that he saw the relevance of these exercises to IELTS in the awareness of essay structure they developed." Green sees this as a possible "instance of teacher beliefs about language learning and skill building outweighing the direct influence of the test format in guiding behaviour" (p. 359).

In our program, we focus more on skill building than on simulating tests; it is in the finding of a balance between these two objec-

tives that we are best able to help the students improve their writing skills while simultaneously preparing them for success on the test. The appropriate student use of dictionaries is another consideration for the teacher. In untimed writing practice, dictionaries are very effective tools that students can use to improve their English; however, in a timed essay format, we have seen that the use of dictionaries can be counterproductive as students spend an inordinate amount of time searching for just the "right" word.

It is necessary to remember that we are teaching students the basic elements of writing so that they can then display their ability to produce a college-level essay on the TOEFL. Proper instruction is required for students to be able to obtain a high mark on the iBT. This will necessarily include step-by-step development of student abilities in all the traditional areas of essay generation such as planning, outlining, cohesiveness, word-choice, complexity of grammar, etc. In fact, our classes are specifically designed to prepare first-year college students for the independent writing section of the TOEFL, and these classes employ all of the above-mentioned writing processes along with drafts and self/peer editing presented in a systematic way to help students develop their abilities as proficient academic writers.

As anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of this course, we offer the following. One student, Miyu (a pseudonym), entered the course with no typing skills and had never previously written an essay except for the one on our placement test. She had no computer skills and broke into tears the first time the class was asked to write a thirty-minute timed essay. In that first attempt at academic writing she wrote less than 50 words and would have received an iBT score of 0. At the end of the second term, under the same conditions, she was able to produce a 340-word essay that fulfilled the TOEFL criteria at a high-level three or low-level four. This course builds skills, develops confidence, and prepares students for writing academic essays in the future.

Issues

1) Teaching writing.

The main issue here is whether this type of test undermines the idea of good writing. As mentioned above, the independent writing task requires students to plan and produce an essay of at least 300 words in a thirty-minute time period. Current thought regarding sound practices in the teaching of writing maintains that producing an essay requires more than one draft. Process writing is not a trend, or a methodology; it is a necessary part of producing an academic paper. Writing teachers in both native English classes and EFL classes normally emphasize that writing is indeed a process. On the surface, the independent writing question seems to undercut or sabotage this tenet of legitimate writing instruction and writing itself. That would indeed be the case if a teacher were to simply "coach" to this question; however, as described above, our emphasis in this course is on building writing skills.

Another issue that has been raised with the TOEFL iBT is the constraints placed upon the instructor by the test prompts. Certainly, the types of essays the prompts require, such as explanation, arguing a position, compare and contrast, etc., are typical discourse modes that students will use in academic writing; the problem is, as Weigle

(2006, p. 225) has pointed out, in real academic writing, students are explaining, comparing, arguing, etc. based on what they have heard in lectures or on what they have read, not relying only on their general knowledge and personal opinions. As noted above, our class is designed to not only improve the students' scores on the TOEFL independent essay, but also to teach them the underlying skills necessary for academic writing. While some of the prompts may appear to be "content-free" in the sense that they do not require students to engage in outside research, they can be addressed in a way that builds higher level skills and critical thinking proficiency. For example, the prompt "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Teachers' salaries should be based on how much their students learn. Give specific reasons and examples to support your opinion." can be used as the topic of in-class discussion activities where students (or groups of students) debate the merits of both positions. While no outside research or statistical information would be included, a high quality essay would need to exhibit well-constructed and deeply thought-out ideas.

An additional point is that although many papers required in post-secondary content courses are done as take-home work involving research wherein students have the time to draft and thoroughly edit before submission, there are also many courses that require the writing of essays under timed conditions. Even Weigle states that "timed writing on examinations is by far the most prevalent form of academic writing, at least in the United States" (2002, p. 174). It is also the case that our students are likely to meet this kind of task on placement and proficiency tests once they arrive at the site of their overseas study (Hamp-Lyons and Kroll, 1997, p. 12).

2) The rubric and holistic scoring.

Another issue that needs to be examined is the efficacy of the scoring criteria for the independent writing test. The independent writing rubric produced by the Educational Testing Service is based on a five-point scale. A top score requires a paper that:
"effectively addresses the topic and task; is well organized and well developed, using clearly appropriate explanations, exemplifications and/or details; displays unity, progression and coherence; displays consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety, appropriate word choice, and idiomaticity, though it may have minor lexical or grammatical errors" (ETS, 2008a, p. 46).

This type of scale is comparable to other academic writing rubrics (see e.g., Ferris & Hedgcock, 2004, pp. 211 ff.) and internationally recognized writing test rubrics such as the IELTS; this scale can be considered a reasonable representation of what academic writing instructors expect students to be able to produce. On the other hand, it can also be construed as highly ambiguous for teaching purposes.

The rubrics seem to attempt to apply an objective set of standards to a subjective overall evaluation. With the writing graded on a 0-5 point scale (in 1 point increments), the rubrics are very limiting and are open to subjective interpretation. We have found it to be much more helpful to look at sets of essays that had been previously scored by ETS to get a better "feel" for how to score the essays.

As noted above, holistic scoring is not

appropriate for second language writers because there may be great differences between their language and their writing abilities; we regularly have a hard time determining the grade based on the official scoring rubric because many students address the topic and task fairly well (level 5) while displaying an "accurate but limited range of syntactic structures and vocabulary" (level 3) or worse; the opposite situation also occurs.

In scoring their own students' essays it is important for teachers not to be limited by the TOEFL scoring scale. For our students, the '0' and '1' scores are not relevant, so we are left basically with four different 'grades' that we can assign. There are no plus/minus options or, in this case, 1/2 point increments allowable under the TOEFL scoring rubric. Using this scale is very limiting in terms of giving detailed and helpful quantifiable feedback to the students, so we have circumvented this limitation by employing our own personal scoring systems. One such system employs a scoring cover sheet that allows for both peer and teacher feedback/evaluation by breaking down the scoring into different categories (e.g., organization, content, style, grammar, and length) to give students a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses.

3) Textbooks.

One unavoidable washback effect of the TOEFL iBT, and of most standardized tests for that matter, is the necessity for a program to select textbooks. While the TOEFL iBT is a "new" test, it contains components of its earlier iterations. One of the holdover sections is, in fact, the independent essay. Surprisingly, what we have found with most of the TOELF iBT writing textbooks is that while in terms of the new integrated writing task they are quite helpful, in terms of the old independent writing question they are lacking. For the TOEFL iBT writing section we have used several different publishers over the last two years, one of which was Compass Publishing's *Developing Skills for the TOEFL® iBT: Writing* (Edmunds & Mc Kinnon, 2006). It seems that this book had been put together rather quickly, and the sample essays are a bit short and underdeveloped. The other problem with this book and with most of the books we have used is that the grammar building activities are not specific to the question prompts and/or topics. The *Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL® Test: iBT Writing* (Phillips, 2008) has an extensive section on grammar but in no way is it connected to writing essays. The Longman does have a good section on coherence and also on connecting paragraphs. Overall, the coverage of the integrated writing question often includes general strategies, organization tips, and numerous sample essays; however, the independent writing question section of these texts usually includes a much more general and basic coverage of the skills and quickly devolves into merely a list of question prompts. The best book, albeit with shortcomings, is published by Thompson, *The Complete Guide to the TOEFL® Test: Writing iBT* (Rogers, 2007). The layout is done well. The outline examples are also more realistic, more the way a student would write them out quickly. There is a helpful section in which students have to analyze the prompts to make sure they have understood them clearly and then a section to practice brainstorming. The author also gives examples of transition words set into a paragraph so students can understand how

they work in an essay, not just as isolated sentences. The grammar section is done well, but we feel it also should be more comprehensive.

Conclusion

Our course has two specific objectives: to teach our previously underprepared students basic essay writing skills in English and to increase our students' scores on the TOEFL independent writing task. Quite honestly, if we were not teaching to this test question, the authors believe that this first-year writing class would be largely the same, especially in the first semester. The students would still need the basic organization and formatting skills. The major difference would be the need for using and citing outside sources. However, students in our program learn this skill in their integrated writing classes in their first year and in their academic writing class in the first semester of their second year. The issue here is that this is not purely an academic writing class. It is an introductory class in writing. Its effectiveness depends upon its existence as part of a larger program. We recognize the importance of students learning how to conduct academic research using external sources; nevertheless, the ability to focus on basic writing skills is aided by the content-free environment provided by the TOEFL independent essay. In addition, in an international studies department where students intend to study abroad, the TOEFL iBT provides a built-in motivation for the students to reach a relatively high level of competence in a short period of time and for the teachers to focus their instruction to most effectively achieve this result. Based on the needs and the structure of our department, we feel that it is not only an ethical but also an effective way to teach the underlying skills necessary for good academic writing.

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