Understanding complexity in writing assessment tasks: Toward a useful analytical framework

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Assessment tasks

- Complex testing device
  - Multitude of characteristics that may impact/interact with performance
  - Parameters of specific task types? Models?
- Literature of speaking assessment
- Writing tasks?
- Variety of qual/quant procedures collect/analyze data, "describe in rich detail the interactions among specific tasks and specific test takers" (Bachman, 2002: 471)

Overview of my PhD research

➢ Mixed-methods study of difficulty and complexity in EFL writing assessment tasks

- Perceptions of task difficulty
- Analyses of task complexity
- Performances on tasks

Specifics

- Task set: 6-8 retired writing prompts (ECCE)
    - Focus of interviews / perceptions
    - Target of analysis / cognitive complexity
    - Source for written performances / subjected to analysis
- Non-test context
    - Test as facet in the difficulty equation?
    - Affective and pragmatic "baggage"
- Students/learners (academic EFL context)

Difficult or Complex?

- Robinson (2001):
  - Difficulty relates to learner factors which make a task more challenging (perceptions)
  - Complexity results from the cognitive processing demands of the task structure (analysis)

Approach to perceptions research

➢ Phenomenography

Qualitative approach that makes use of in-depth interview data to explore how Ps conceive of a phenomenon (Marton, 1981); unlike phenomenology, phenomenography "looks for ways that learners vary in the manner in which they conceive of the same phenomenon" (Micari et al, 2007: 460)

Identify "critical aspects" of tasks.

Data collection/analysis method

➢ ## Rep Grid technique / PCP (Kelly, 1955)

Personal construct theory is a theoretical framework that "provides a vocabulary with which to interpret the constituents and processes by which a person construes his or her experience" (Roberts, 1999: 119).

➢ ## Dyadic difference elicitation technique

(Fransella, Bell and Bannister, 2004: 28)

"There is nothing sacrosanct about the triad."

Teacher perceptions data

- In-depth interviews (n=5; ~30 min each)
- Constructs elicited (sample):
  - Specific / non-specific
  - Personal / general
  - Real life / artificial
  - Specified content / invented content
  - Concrete / abstract
  - 1st person / 3rd person

Teacher task ranking

➢ 5 teachers ranked 8 tasks in order of perceived difficulty

- In every case (but one), tasks 2, 5 & 6 appeared in the top 3 "most difficult" spots on the list

- In every case (but one), tasks 1 & 4 appeared in the two "easiest" spots

- The rest fell at various points in the middle.

Models and frameworks for analyzing cognitive complexity in speaking assessment tasks

- Robinson (2001, 2005)
  - Cognition Hypothesis/Triadic Componential Framework
- Skehan and Foster (1999, 2001)
  - Limited Attentional Capacity Framework

Related studies into cognitive complexity of assessment tasks

- Elder, Iwashita and McNamara (2002)
- Kuiken and Vedder (2007)
- Ishikawa (2008)
- Silver, Mesa, Morris, Star & Benken (2009)

In progress…

➢ Critically examining then adapting the existing models for use with writing tasks

➢ Applying the perception data to this adaptation

➢ Trialing the adapted models on the task set

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