DESIGNING ‘FAIR’ WRITING TESTING TASKS

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OVERVIEW OF THE WORKSHOP

THEORETICAL PART
- The importance of validity in writing tests
- The role of CEFR in assuring validity
- Focus on content validity – a framework for task analysis
- Guidelines for the design of effective writing prompts

PRACTICAL PART
- Task analysis and discussion of ‘perceived’ difficulty of a read-to-write task
- The importance of fairness – an example of a writing task
- Design of guidelines for effective writing prompts
AIM

The development of a construct validity framework for the design of ‘fair’ writing testing tasks by considering:

- demands of different writing task types
- task demands across writing test level
- task difficulty for different test-takers
THE IMPORTANCE OF VALIDITY IN TESTING

- Bachman & Palmer (1996): a model of test usefulness
  - construct validity

CEFR (2001)
An assessment procedure can be said to have validity to the degree that it can be demonstrated that what is actually assessed (the construct) is what, in the context concerned, should be assessed, and that the information gained is an accurate representation of the proficiency of the candidates concerned. (p.177)
CONTENT VALIDITY

A. THE TEST
- PURPOSE
- DEFINITION OF CONSTRUCT
- TARGET POPULATION
- TASK TYPE

B. TEST SPECIFICATIONS
- CONTENT
- STRUCTURE & TIMING
- CRITERIAL LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE
CONTENT VALIDITY
(PURPOSE)

To assess candidates’ level of proficiency in writing
CONTENT VALIDITY (CONSTRUCT)

The abilities that we want to test: determined by the theory of language the test is based on
CONTENT VALIDITY
(TARGET POPULATION AND TASK TYPE)

- Candidates’ age and literacy level
- Purves (1992: 112)

“Different tasks present different problems, which are treated differently by students and judged differently by raters”
CONTENT VALIDITY
(TASK ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK)

- GENRE (TEXT TYPE)
- COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSE
- GENERIC PROCESS
- TOPIC OR THEME
- DISCOURSE ENVIRONMENT (CONTEXT)
- IMAGINED WRITER AND AUDIENCE
- REGISTER / STYLE

(Adapted from the CEFR grid for writing tasks)
CONTENT VALIDITY (THE STRUCTURE)

Different types of prompts

- Bare prompts
- Framed prompts
- Text-based prompts (read-to-write tasks)

The need to define *task-type specific* variables
CONTENT VALIDITY
(CRITERIAL LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE)

Expected candidate level of performance:

- determined by general test guidelines and illustrative descriptors
POSITIVE ASPECTS OF READ-TO-WRITE TASKS

- They are authentic (Plakans, 2008)
- A source text can serve to activate the writer’s knowledge around a topic (Weigle, 2004)
- Using a source text provides a common information source for all test takers (Weigle, 2004)
- The essays are more directly comparable to each other (Weigle, 2004)
NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF READ-TO-WRITE TASKS

- Less proficient L2 learners do more copying and less combining of ideas (John & Mayes, 1990)

- Writers tend to develop their ideas less and rely heavily on the language of the source text (Lewkowicz, 1997)
THE KPG EXAMS

- KPG exams (Greek state certificate)
- Genre-based approach for writing task design

“The view on which the KPG exams are based is that lexicogrammar becomes meaningful only when it is linked to the purpose and the function of the texts. Different text types (genres) serve different social purposes and functions...”

(Mitsikopoulou & Dendrinos, in press)

- Target population: people living and studying /working in Greece
Based on the information from the website below, write a letter (180-200 words) to your favourite 12-year-old nephew Ronnie, explaining why downloading copyrighted music is unethical and trying to convince him that he should stop doing it.
Why is downloading music without paying for it an illegal act?

Music United for Strong Internet Copyright, a network of songwriters, musicians and performers dedicated to preventing the illegal reproduction of music, suggests discussing with your child the following reasons why he or she should not download free music:

- Stealing music is against the law
- Stealing music betrays the songwriters and recording artists who create it
- Stealing music stifles the careers of new artists and up-and-coming bands
- Stealing music threatens the livelihood of the thousands of working people employed in the music industry

What can I do to ensure that my child doesn’t break the law?

Help your child stop breaking the law by illegally downloading music. Help him or her resist the urge to steal by following the strategies cited by the Smithsonian Children’s Medical Centre:

- Teach your child about ownership at a young age
- Inform him or her about how s/he can have what s/he wants without stealing
- Be a good role model
- Develop an open relationship with your child
- Recognize honest behaviour
<table>
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<th><strong>Source text</strong></th>
<th><strong>Target text</strong></th>
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<tbody>
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<td><strong>Genre (text type):</strong></td>
<td><strong>Genre (text type):</strong></td>
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<td>Webpage text</td>
<td>letter</td>
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<td><strong>Communicative purpose:</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>explain &amp; convince</td>
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<tr>
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<td>uncle</td>
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<td><strong>Register / style:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impersonal / neutral</td>
<td>personal / informal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is an ‘intralinguistic’ written mediation task

‘intralinguistic’ VS ‘interlinguistic’ mediation (Dendrinos, 2006)

This activity requires that candidates read and understand the specific type of multimodal source text and selectively extract the necessary information to produce a text of a different genre, register and style than the original, suitable for the context of situation.

To perform the task successfully, candidates must have:

- the **linguistic competence** to produce a letter to their nephew explaining why downloading music is illegal
- the **sociolinguistic competence** to create a meaningful letter relaying the information in the source text in a way that is appropriate for the context of situation
- school, social and practical **literacy** to interact and mediate between the source and the target text
THE IMPORTANCE OF FAIRNESS

- Xi (2010): a definition of fairness
  - ‘comparable validity for relevant groups that can be identified’

- Consideration of test-taker age and literacy level
You recently saw this notice in an English-language magazine called Theatre World.

**Reviews needed!**
Have you been to the theatre recently? If so, could you write us a review of the play you saw? Include information on the characters, costumes and story and say whether you would recommend the play to other people.
The best reviews will be published next month.
Write your **review**. (120-180 words)
TASK DIFFICULTY IN CEFR

- CEFR (2001)

For establishing the potential difficulty of a given task for a particular learner (test-taker):

- Cognitive factors: task familiarity, required skills
- Affective factors
- Linguistic factors
EFFECTIVE WRITING PROMPTS: GUIDELINES

- Short, clear and comprehensive rubrics
- Given time for task completion
- Simple and clear language
- Clear and helpful layout
- Highlighted key pieces of info
- Appropriate amount of input
EFFECTIVE WRITING PROMPTS: GUIDELINES

- Logical presentation of input
- Lifelike writing situation
- Clarity of who is writing to whom
- Clarity of communicative purpose
- Specification of expected text-type
- Topic accessible for candidates

(Adapted from ‘Into Europe’, The Writing Handbook)
CONCLUSION

- Washback effect
- Development of linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic competence, school and social literacy
REFERENCES

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THANK YOU!

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