EALTA SIG Assessing Writing

Warwick Writing Symposium, 3./4.December 2010-10-12
hosted by the Centre of Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK
organised by Claudia Harsch, convenor of the SIG

Participants and Programme

Friday

Strand 1 "EXCESSIVE ASSISTANCE AND PLAGIARISM"

Peter Holt, Sabanci University, Istanbul, Turkey

Presentation: Addressing the Problem of "Excessive Assistance" in Assessed Writing

While software programmes such as Turn-it-in help to detect instances of plagiarism in students' academic writing, they do not address another concern related to academic honesty; that of "excessive assistance", where a student may receive help from a peer or family member. One solution to the problem is to assess writing exclusively under exam conditions. However, by doing this, a degree of authenticity is lost as a "take home essay" in an academic context is usually dependent upon the incorporation of ideas and information from lengthy supporting texts. This presentation will outline an "open book" exam task which aims to preserve some of the authentic features of the "take home" essay, with its extensive reading element, while eradicating the possibility of excessive assistance. Through the construction of a modest corpus of the supporting texts, the "open book" exam also allows for the problem of student plagiarism from published sources to be addressed.

Discussion: assessing conciseness in writing

Peter would also be interested in any work that group members have done on assessing conciseness in writing: We assess a "short answer" writing task similar to the format used in our first year faculty exams, but I'm not sure how well our criteria accommodate the content /word limit relationship. I'd like to hear about any ideas or examples related to this aspect of assessing writing that you might know of.

Carolyn Westbrook, Southampton Solent University, UK

Bruce Howell, Reading University, UK

Discussion Session: Plagiarism and international students

In this session, participants will be invited to participate in a lively discussion about questions related to the issue of plagiarism by international students, for example, "how can we prevent students plagiarising by using translation tools such as Google Translate when we want them to write long academic essays?" Or "how can we design marking criteria which effectively take account of such forms of plagiarism in academic essays?" Another area for discussion might be paraphrase and patchwork plagiarism and how we can stop students resorting to this. Participants will be invited to submit questions for discussion and then to offer advice to others based on their experience/knowledge in order to develop a practical approach to some of the issues raised.

Strand 2: MARKING CRITERIA AND RATING DESCRIPTORS

Nukte Ocal Durhan, METU Northern Cyprus Campus, School of Foreign Languages, Cyprus

Presentation: The Challenges of Assessing Documented Academic Essays

This paper describes the insights gained through the teaching and assessment of academic essay writing skills at METU Northern Cyprus Campus School of Foreign Languages. At METU, which is a leading English medium university in Turkey, students are expected to write documented essays and academic papers throughout the freshman year. In the Modern Languages Programme we have gained extensive experience in setting, implementing and assessing academic essay writing tasks over the years. However, there are many difficulties and challenges we would like to share with the participants. The paper will specifically focus on the challenge of designing marking criteria and writing descriptors for the component parts of rating scales. One area of concern is how to assess different drafts during the writing process: how to change point allocation and the focus of the assessment while evaluating different drafts. Another important area is the role of paraphrasing skills. In all these academic reading and writing courses, students are expected to borrow and integrate ideas, so the teaching and testing of paraphrasing, summarizing and synthesizing skills has become a crucial training and assessment issue. This leads to the issue of plagiarism, what is considered plagiarism and how to penalize it. Finally, the paper touches upon the point of rater training and standardization. Paper presentation will be followed by a discussion in the group where participants will share their experiences and approaches. Hopefully, concrete projects and possible collaboration will also be discussed.

Sue Wharton, Ema Ushioda, University of Warwick, UK

Work-in-progress: Addressing the needs of international students with academic writing difficulties – a pilot project

Our centre is providing dedicated English language support programmes for first year undergraduates in Law and Statistics in 2010/11. The project aim is to engage in a detailed evaluation of students' learning and the pedagogical outcomes of these dedicated programmes. We will gather data from participating students and their English course tutors through a variety of approaches, including questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation and evaluation forms.

In addition, we will collect written assignments from these departments, which have been identified as challenging; we will form the texts into an electronic corpus for analysis. The analysis of students' writing will include comparisons with features of proficient academic writing as captured in the BAWE (British Academic Writing in English) corpus developed by the Centre in collaboration with the Universities of Reading and Oxford Brookes. This analysis will enable us to understand the specific nature of writing difficulties experienced by the students and to offer targeted support and advice to subject tutors and English language teachers.

Sophia Skoufaki, University of Essex, UK

Low-intermediate EFL writing assessment: Effects of topic and vocabulary variation

(Sophia Skoufaki, Siaw-Fong Chung and August Chao, National Chengchi University, Taiwan)

Studies examining whether vocabulary variation, that is, the variety of vocabulary used in speech or writing, makes a significant contribution to second language writing quality have yielded conflicting results of limited generalisability. Moreover, topic variation has been shown to sometimes affect and others not essay scoring. Motivated by this research setting, the present study has three aims. First, it probes into relevant research methodology issues. Second, it examines the role of vocabulary variation in the holistic grades given to paragraphs written in English by native speakers of Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan, an underrepresented learner population in such studies. Third, it examines whether topic variation affects the impact that vocabulary variation has on the holistic grading of these paragraphs.

The data are 12,000 paragraphs written by low-intermediate learners of English in Taiwan. Each group of 2,000 paragraphs was written on a different topic. The data were produced in the context of the Intermediate Level General English Proficiency Test (Intermediate GEPT), a proficiency examination for low-intermediate learners of English in Taiwan. They form part of the LTTC English Learner Corpus, which is currently under construction at National Taiwan University.

Sonja Zimmermann

g.a.s.t., Gesellschaft für Akademische Studienvorbereitung und Testentwicklung e. V., c/o TestDaF-Institut,

Presentation: Native speakers – a benchmark for foreign language performances?

The Test for German as a Foreign Language (TestDaF) is a language test for foreign learners of German who plan to study in Germany or who require a recognised certification of their language skills. To meet the demands for admission to an institution of higher education, amongst other skills test takers have to prove their ability to write a coherent, well-structured text appropriate in an academic context. But: How do we define "appropriate" in a testing context?

I would like to present first results of a qualitative study where we looked at written performances of a comparable target group of native speakers, and discuss the question, whether or how these findings may provide valuable input into the revision of the existing rating criteria and level descriptions by identifying characteristics of written language performances at an intermediate to high level in a foreign language.

Strand 3: RATERS' ISSUES AND LINKING WRITING TESTS TO THE CEFR

Martina Hulešová and Eva Kotrková, CERMAT - Centre on Measurement in Education, Prague, Czech Republic

Discussion session on rating issues:

- rater consistency
- rater agreement - is it necessary or is it better to average the rating
- how to deal with the situation where the rater is the candidates teacher
- how to deal with the situation where only one rater is possible - the quality control issue
- how to set cut off score and how to relate assessment criteria and the generated cut off score to the CEFR level/s

Claudia Harsch, University of Warwick, UK

Linking Writing Tasks to the CEFR

I would like to give a short overview over possible approaches to linking writing tests (tasks, rating scales and performances) to the CEFR levels and discuss their potential and shortcomings in the group. I would also like to discuss possible test-centred ways with you.

Strand 4: ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT OF EAP WRITING

Marina Gerassimenko, Ed D student, University of Leicester

Dynamic Assessment of EAP Writing

I am interested in exploring the use of Dynamic Assessment procedures as a part of EAP classroom assessment scheme to develop the writing ability of pre-sessional students in a UK university. DA positions assessment as a social practice within Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory. Dynamic Assessment (DA) views abilities not as stable traits (as they are approached in traditional, psychometric tests) but as flexible, changing, evolving. It has been proposed to focus not on the product of assessment as such because they are stable and reflect what learners have achieved but on the processes learners are undergoing during assessment, which are developing. One of the aims of DA is to identify the learner's potential for learning by providing learners assistance during an assessment procedure (Lantolf and Poehner, 2008). In this way, DA integrates instruction and assessment and therefore may well be used as an integral part of formative assessment. In teaching and assessing writing, especially academic writing DA may provide evidence for teachers of students' developing writing ability through problem-solving situations/ activities during an interactive feedback. Due to the novelty of the concept for L2 teaching/assessment and also because the ideas of DA root in educational and cognitive psychology, my interest as a researcher is in exploring the constructs of DA in their relationship to assessing writing.