

Test-taking Strategies in Skills-integrated Writing Tasks

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to see how test takers tackle with skill-integrated test items, especially writing tasks. The results showed the unfamiliarity of Japanese learners with skills-integrated assessment, and the lack of their writing ability. There is a strong need to consider and discuss how to introduce skills-integrated writing assessment in Japan.

Keywords

Integrated-skills assessment, Writing, TOEFL-iBT®

Introduction

The skills-integrated test items are used in various language tests recently. For example, in the TOEFL-iBT®, the skills-integrated items are included in the sections of speaking and writing. Concurrently, the Ministry of Education's new Course of Study in Japan (2017) encourages English teachers to provide skills-integrated instructions in the classroom without providing any assessment models. Since teaching purposes and evaluation methods should be consistent with each other (Brown, 2012), skills-integrated types of evaluation are desirable for such classes.

1 Theoretical Background

Integrated assessment can be defined by the use of tests that combine two or more skills, such as reading/writing or reading/listening/speaking (Plakans, 2011, 2012, 2013; Cumming, 2013; Read, 2015). For example, as in the TOEFL-iBT®, skill-integrated tasks require test takers to use the information provided by the reading and listening materials to answer with written and/or spoken responses.

According to Plakans (2012, 2013), there are many benefits to skill-integrated tests. They can deal with language skills for actual interaction,

thus have more authenticity. Moreover, students can receive positive washback effects from these tests.

However, there are also problems with integrated-skills tests. As in Cummins (2013), they involve both comprehension (i.e. of source information from reading and/or listening) and production (of either writing or speaking), so they require a minimum level of language proficiency for examinees to exhibit reliable performance. Also, the interpretation of the results is tricky because of the combination of language comprehension and production. At the same time, since the genres of the required writings are not defined clearly, it is difficult to score them (Cumming, 2013).

2 Purpose of the Research

1. To find what kind of strategies are commonly used for integrated-skills test items by Japanese University students.
2. To see how different types of strategies are used by different types of students.

3 The Study

Barkaoui, Brooks, Swain & Lapkin (2013) studied the strategy uses on the TOEFL-iBT® speaking items. They studied about 5 strategies referred to approach, communication, cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies. They found more strategies used for the skill-integrated items than for the independent test items.

In this research, following the study of Barkaoui et al. (2013), we asked 87 Japanese university students to explain the strategies they had used for TOEFL-iBT® writing items in the form of free written comments. Although Barkaoui et al. (2013) investigated the strategies used for integrated-skills speaking test items, this study examined those for the writing test items taken from the textbook by Collins (2012).

4 Results

Written feedback of the participants was analyzed and put into 5 categories: (a) approach, (b) communication, (c) cognitive, (d) metacognitive, and (e) emotional.

Many participants mentioned their unfamiliarity to skills-integrated writing tests. Figure 1 shows the distributions of these strategies, where cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies were used most often.

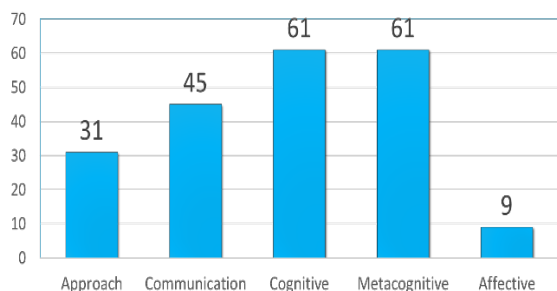


Figure 1: The distribution of strategy used

Table 1 shows the correlations between the frequency of each strategy use and participants' writing scores.

Table 1: Correlations between strategy use and writing scores

	<i>r</i>
approach	-.26*
communication	-.26*
cognitive	-.25*
metacognitive	-.22*
affective	.13
numbers of strategies	.09

Note: * $<.05$

Most of the strategies had negatively significant correlations with writing scores, though the numbers of strategy use had no significant correlation. This might be because the kinds of strategies the participants used were so varied and therefore no meaningful patterns were detected. It is also possible that test-takers with high scores took some strategies for granted and did not report them.

5 Conclusion

Japanese students were unfamiliar with integrated-skills assessment, though it has been emphasized in the Ministry of Education's new Course of Study (2017, 2009). Student's use of strategies is quite varied and it was not related with their scores.

It is apparent that more studies and analyses are necessary to discuss how to teach and assess the writing skills through integrated-skills tests.

6 References

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