The Use of Different Strategies by Writers in Integrated Writing Assessment

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an accelerating trend towards using integrated writing tasks (IWT) in second language (L2) writing assessment settings, which can be attributed to their ability to "mirror" (Payant et al., 2019, p. 87) actual academic practices that require students' comprehension and integration of source-based ideas into the production of written compositions. Nevertheless, Uludag et al. (2019) are of the opinion that these tasks present writers, especially those who are inexperienced, with certain problems associated with plagiarism and poor use of source ideas that result in disappointing test scores. In this sense, it is of practical significance to gain deeper insights into the nature of IWT and various strategies employed by proficient writers to assist not only novice writers in improving their writing performance and academic achievement but also inexperienced teachers in coming up with more effective instructional methods. This literature review is conducted to provide a short overview on IWT regarding definitions, test construct, benefits and challenges. Then, it continues to throw light on strategy use reported in previous research. The literature review ends with some conclusions and recommendations.

Keywords: Integrated Writing Tasks (IWT), Strategy Use, Second Language (L2), Source Text Use, Multiple-text Comprehension, Challenges

Introduction

Over the last decades, the integration of academic writing with other language skills such as reading and listening has continually attracted great attention of both test developers and teachers due to providing a more comprehensive picture of test takers' writing competence involving authenticity arguments (Plakans & Gebril, 2017). Nonetheless, IWT poses certain linguistic and cognitive challenges to writers, especially novice ones. More specifically, they have been experiencing difficulties related to inappropriate use of source ideas, simple paraphrases, verbatim copying, anxiety, or time management, which leads to unfavorable test results (Uludag et al., 2019). Therefore, this literature review is conducted to explore the nature of IWT, strategies and factors contributing to better writing performance with a view to helping inexperienced writers increase their band scores or become more successful in their academic lives. Relevant articles have been found in the databases of Linguistics and Language Behaviour Abstracts and Educational Resources Information Centre. The search key words include 'integrated writing tasks or assessment' and 'strategy use in IWT'. Furthermore, the criteria for selecting the articles are the recentness (from 2000 onwards) and the context (standardized tests or academic purposes).

Definitions of IWT

The use of IWT has gained in popularity and been the focus of attention among researchers, test developers, and teachers (Kyle, 2020). Therefore, there have been many viewpoints on examining the notion of IWT. Ascencion Delaney (2008, p. 140) who takes an interest in integrated reading-writing tasks suggests that they are "instructional tasks" that are characteristic of the combination of reading and writing for different pedagogical reasons. In a similar vein, Plakans (2009) offers a broader definition by describing IWT as tasks that require other skills such as reading and listening to produce language in written forms. Unlike the aforementioned researchers, Cumming et al. (2005) discuss the concept in more detail and state they are tasks in which test takers have to use source ideas properly and meaningfully to generate coherent pieces of writing. More recently, Knoch and Sitajalabhorn (2013, p. 306) provided a more comprehensive explanation that depicts IWT as those that request writers to comprehend, select, synthesize, organize, integrate ideas from one or more "language-rich source texts" into writing performance. In brief, irrespective of how vague or precise the definitions may be, these researchers reveal much similarity in their attempt to account for the act of source-based writing with the inclusion of ideas that are appropriately used and successfully integrated.

Test Construct

A better understanding of the initial construct underlying IWT is essential in that it helps to interpret test scores more accurately and provide a clearer account of test takers' behavior when completing the tasks (Knoch & Sitajalabhorn, 2013). Hence, scholars who aim at investigating the demands of IWT have devoted themselves to the cognitive processes that L2 writers, particularly those who are in tertiary contexts, undergo. For instance, Grabe (2003) shows that in order to accomplish source-based writing tasks, test takers have to decide what ideas to select from the texts, how to fit the ideas to the task requirements, how to represent and transform the information accurately and effectively. Furthermore, reflecting on the results of a study conducted to compare the performance of higher-level and lower-level writers, Plakans (2009) indicates that the abilities to select, organize, and connect ideas should be considered as academic writing constructs that enable valid interpretations of test scores. In general, previous

studies have proposed that the construct of IWT should feature major components such as selecting and synthesizing ideas from the source texts, making linguistic modifications, deciding on the writing structure, and connecting ideas from the sources with test takers' ideas.

Benefits of IWT

Research has suggested that there are two major advantages of employing IWT with respect to authenticity and test fairness. Firstly, integrated assessment is believed to exert a positive washback effect on teaching and learning processes in various academic contexts in that it is capable of tackling the problems of authenticity and validity (Knoch & Sitajalabhorn, 2013). It can be argued that students at levels of higher education are supposed to think critically, discuss, and reflect on the materials to which they have listened or read to write their assignments. Therefore, integrated writing assessment is completely different from independent writing assessment in which students can generate their written products by relying on their background knowledge or personal experiences rather than ideas from the source texts (Payant et al., 2019). Secondly, in Plakans and Gebril's (2012) view, source-based writing enhances the fairness of tests in that it aids writers in dealing with unfamiliar topics by providing content and linguistic support. As a result, more test developers and teachers are in favor of IWT.

Challenges of IWT

In spite of the abovementioned benefits of IWT, there are two considerable challenges concerning the use of source ideas and test construct identified in the current literature. To begin with, writers, particularly those who are novice, are reported to have trouble synthesizing and integrating source ideas effectively into their writing while attempting to avoid plagiarism (Uludag et al., 2019). More precisely, Keck (2006) shows that despite their awareness that textual borrowing without citing the sources is inappropriate, inexperienced writers tend to resort to word-for-word copying and simple paraphrasing and linguistic modifications at word levels that include the use of synonyms. What is more, Uludag et al. observe that novice writers appear to prevent themselves from incorporating source-based ideas in that they are afraid of misinterpreting or misrepresenting the authors' viewpoints, which leads to their ignorance of the use of source texts. Secondly, due to the test construct, integrated tasks require L2 writers to read and listen to the sources, select important information, and present their own stance, which is heavily reliant on their reading and listening comprehension abilities (Plakans, 2009). As a result, Payant et al. (2019) claim that they do not succeed in identifying salient information or concepts presented in the sources if their proficiency in listening and reading comprehension is at low levels.

Strategy use in IWT

1. Source Text Use

A related line of research has examined the correlation between the use of source-based ideas and the quality of writing and reported that the inclusion of source text information plays a vital role in predicting the test scores. In a study carried out at a university in the USA, Yang and Plakans (2012) investigated the strategies employed by 161 L2 writers in a TOEFL iBT integrated reading-listening-writing task through questionnaires. The findings revealed that three key categories of strategies performed different functions throughout the process of completing the task. Discourse synthesis that was the selection, organization, and connection

of source text information had a positive influence on the overall test score, which was administered by self-regulation strategies. On the contrary, Yang and Plakans (2012, p. 80) stated that "test-wiseness" strategies such as verbatim copying, patchwriting, and memory-based or template-based writing impaired the writing quality in every aspect. Likewise, after conducting a study involving 415 secondary school students from Hong Kong who accomplished an integrated reading-listening-writing task, Cheong et al. (2019) emphasized the great significance of discourse synthesis strategies over the whole process and cautioned L2 writers to be careful about how they organized, selected, and synthesized ideas effectively owing to the complex nature of multiple-text documents. Interestingly, they reported that multiple-text comprehension supported and mediated the use of discourse synthesis in that it helped test takers identify and select key ideas and concepts. Approaching the issue from a different angle, Plakans and Gebril (2013) examined the use of source ideas in written compositions with respect to areas of importance, origin, and textual borrowing. They utilized 480 real TOEFL iBT writing performances that had been scored and regression analysis to answer the research questions. The results showed that the integration of important information and the use of the listening source text differentiated the test scores. Specifically, higher-level writers included more key ideas from the listening source while their peers relied largely on the reading source for content and verbatim copying. Similarly, expressing the same interest in source text use, Uludag et al. (2019) undertook an investigation into the relationship between the number of source ideas incorporated, the level of content accuracy and linguistic modifications, and the band scores of 111 Canadian undergraduate students. These researchers found that students who used ideas from the sources more frequently and represented or interpreted them accurately were more successful in eliciting their writing performances than those who did not. This echoed the results of the study of Gebril and Plakans (2016) who indicated that source-related and diverse vocabulary increased lexical diversity that bettered the writing scores. In addition, a higher degree of linguistic modifications was found to be a strong predictor of the writing quality, which was in line with Plakans and Gebril's (2013) study. Examining the issue of linguistic modifications in detail, Kyle (2020) analyzed 480 TOEFL iBT essays and revealed that paraphrasing that involved semantic overlap or implicit reference to the source texts helped test takers perform better than word-level paraphrasing that used synonyms. Moreover, the explicit use of key content words that were unique to the listening source contributed to the test takers' success.

2. Multiple-text Comprehension

L2 writers' comprehension of information across different source texts is considered to be an important skill in academic contexts in general and a first precondition for IWT in particular (Karimi, 2015). There has been a growing body of research that supports the contributing role of strategy use in multiple-text comprehension. The results reported by Plakans (2009) who conducted a study involving 12 L2 writers from the USA and an integrated reading-listening task showed that the participants employed various reading strategies over the whole process of completing the task. Five categories of strategies that were setting goals, cognitive processing, "global" strategies, metacognitive strategies, and "mining" strategies were identified and found to function in different stages (Plakans, 2009, pp. 257-258). For example, goal-setting and global strategies were primarily used in the early stages where writers read and comprehended the texts while the strategies of mining were dominant in the while-writing phase where writers integrated source information into their writing. Furthermore, high-scoring writers employed global strategies (skimming, asking questions, and summarizing) and mining strategies (scanning, paraphrasing, and rereading) more frequently and effectively than low-scoring writers. In a similar vein, Cheong et al. (2019) stated that taking summary notes and

inferential reasoning much contributed to the test takers' multiple-text comprehension. Noticeably, by comparing the performances of 415 secondary school students on a Chinese (L1) IWT and English (L2) IWT, they concluded that those who succeeded in the L1 task were more likely to produce better L2 written compositions. Besides, L1-L2 transfer took place in that skills to understand and incorporate source-based ideas into L1 writing were beneficial to performance in L2 writing.

3. Pre-writing Activities

In the current literature, there have also been studies whose aim is to demonstrate the close relationship between pre-writing activities and test takers' writing performances. To begin with, in a study that involved 513 American university students, Joaquin, Kim, and Shin (2016) found that more than 50% of the participants made notes in the pre-writing stage. They were reported to employ a combination of strategies such as outlining, listing, and clustering, which helped them to outperform those who did not take notes. The second study that was carried out by Plakans and Gebril (2017) was also in favor of the significant role of pre-writing activities in assisting L2 writers to visualize their writing structure that balanced ideas from the reading and listening sources. Besides, features of better coherence and cohesion were included, which improved the quality of writing. More recently, Payant et al. (2019, p. 89) showed that pre-writing planning supported the whole process of writing in that it created "cognitive space" for selecting, developing, connecting, and reflecting on the source ideas, which resulted in anxiety minimization and higher band scores.

Conclusion

All things considered, it can be seen that integrated writing assessment has enjoyed widespread popularity among test developers and teachers due to its ability to enhance authenticity and validity. On the other hand, challenges associated with source-based idea incorporation and multiple-text comprehension are facing L2 writers, especially those who are novice. Therefore, to be successful in IWT, writers are expected to pay attention to the active interaction with the source texts by employing various strategies such as discourse synthesis that includes selecting, organizing, and connecting ideas; comprehension strategies like scanning, skimming, and asking questions; and pre-writing planning. More importantly, it can be of practical significance to teachers who need to teach explicitly referencing skills to students to address the issues of plagiarism and avoid test-wiseness strategies, and instruct them to include more information from the listening source to produce more favorable test results.

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