

Test of Organizational Skills in Academic Writing:

ENG 105 Composition Class for ESL Students

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Abstract

Second Language (L2) learners who study at American universities often find difficulties in developing organizational skills and using compositional techniques to organize structured and logical sentence arrangements in academic writing. However, there are also problems in designing effective test that measures the ability to produce coherent and cohesive composition. This project examines the issues of students in ENG 105 of Program of Intensive English (PIE) in Northern Arizona University. To examine student knowledge related to writing organization, coherence, and cohesion, the test was designed into two different kind of tests; (1) test 1 in forms of multiple choice, sentence rearrangement, and cloze test item to measure learners specific capability in identifying main ideas, supporting details, and conjunctions; and (2) test 2 in form of extended-response essay question to measure learners' skill in applying the compositional techniques. Topical Structure Analysis (TSA) rubric (Knoch, 2007) is used and adapted to evaluate student's holistic ability in writing an academic essay. Results and analysis showed that the test item format, the applicability of the rubrics, and the inter-rater reliability should be taken into account to validate overall writing performance.

Keywords: academic writing, organizational skills, coherence, cohesion, TSA rubric

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Background

Mastery of written academic English is a crucial skill in American universities because students are expected to have adequate proficiencies in taking notes, writing reports, answering exams papers, and writing theses. Furthermore, composing effective and efficient essay requires skills in text organization, so L2 learners need to be able to link ideas into meaningful text. With that reasons, the knowledge of using cohesive devices (i.e., conjunctions) is critical to create coherent, structured, and logical flow of an essay (Doushaq, 1986; Kubota, 1998; Read, 1998). Unfortunately, international students who use English as their second language (L2) often find difficulties in writing adequate academic prose due to several factors such as, first language (L1) transfer and differences in writing convention from their native language. In his study, Reid (1992) argues that texts have “schematic structures” that are culturally variable. That is, if writers come from different cultural and language background from their audiences, they often have problems identifying audience expectations, which eventually causes failure in conveying message successfully.

Amidst substantial discussions that center on the effective test to measure the organizational skills among L2 learners, there have been critiques on the use of category of coherence in rating scales because it is argued that such category is prone to subjective scoring. In addition, the issues related to the reliability of writing evaluations may occur because of inter-raters criteria in assessing the writing quality, in which the scores given by raters do not reflect their actual writing ability. Therefore, Knoch (2007) developed the adaptation of topical structure

analysis (TSA) which proved successful in distinguishing different degrees of coherence and increase the reliability of inter-raters scoring. From the study, the use of adapted TSA rubric, which are designed with category of coherence in the rating scales, was beneficial in minimizing subjective scoring because raters have precise benchmark for writing assessment.

Research Questions

To investigate whether the test designed to measure L2 learners' capability in writing organization can be used to assess the intended constructs (i.e., cohesion and coherence) and the rubric used is valid and reliable, the assessment of L2 learners organizational skills in academic writing is trying to answer the following questions:

1. Does the test manage to measure ESL students' organizational skills (i.e., academic writing organization, cohesion or conjunction, and coherence or organizational flow)?
2. Does the rubrics used for evaluating students' academic writing performance valid and reliable?

Methods

Since the aim of our project is to measure ESL students' textual knowledge, including coherence and cohesion in academic writing, the test was administered to international students enrolled in ENG 105 Composition Class, Northern Arizona University. The participants were six Chinese and three Arabic speakers, and they were originally students from Program of Intensive English (PIE) in Northern Arizona University. The students' English proficiency level is level 5 or considered as higher intermediate.

For this project, we create eleven test items consisted of different sub-constructs in several different forms, such as multiple choice, sentence rearrangement, cloze test item, and extended-response essay question. 2 multiple choices, 2 sentence rearrangements, and 6 cloze

test items are considered as target-construct-specific test while extended-response test is in the form of a specific essay topic prompt (i.e., the issue of technology use and society) in which students need to write a maximum 250-word argumentative essay illustrating their belief regarding the topic in the prompt. Below is the item specification for this test.

The test was administered during a class session of ENG 105 Composition Class in PIE building with permission from the class instructor and PIE supervisors. The test was pencil and paper test, and the test sheets were provided by the test administrators. Before conducting the test, as suggested by PIE Research Protocol, the test administrators read and explained the verbal consent script since the test is part of the class research project. Then, students wrote their names on the consent form to indicate their agreement to participate in the project. During the test, students had to finish answering all eleven test items in thirty minutes, and they may not speak to each other. However, students could ask for clarification or further explanation regarding the test prompts from the test administrators. After the answers were collected, the first ten items of the test, which target specific sub-constructs, were scored dichotomously, either right (1) or wrong (0). Meanwhile, the essays were rated by two raters, who are also the test administrators, looking at the organization, cohesion/conjunction, and logical moves adapted from TSA cohesion rubric. Any differences in test rating or scoring were discussed further until agreement was made in order to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Results

For the purpose of looking at the data distribution, the test's descriptive statistics (see Table 1) are presented by comparing test 1, or test of specific target sub-constructs, (i.e., test item number 1-10), test 2, or performance-based test, (i.e., test item number 11), and the overall test (i.e., test item number 1-11). According to the table, it can be seen that test 1 could be

considered having a normal distribution, and platykurtic even though it has small variance between students' scores. However, this test data is relatively easy compared to test 2 which appears as the most difficult test. When combined together, the overall test is considered moderately difficult, and it has good score discrimination because of the large variance and normal distribution.

Table 1

Test Descriptive Statistics

	Test 1 (Item #1-10)	Test 2 (Item #11)	Both Tests
k	10	1	11
N	9	9	9
Mean	5.44	6.83	12.28
Mode	6	#N/A	#N/A
Median	6	6.13	12.13
Min	4	5	9
Max	7	9.75	16.75
Midpoint	5.5	7.38	12.88
Range	3	4.75	7.75
Variance (N<30)	1.03	2.59	6.37
SD (N<30)	1.01	1.61	2.52
Skewness	-0.27	0.63	0.43
Kurtosis	-0.76	-0.65	-0.68

Related to the validity of this test, test administrators are interested in looking at the correlations between sub-constructs in test 1 (i.e., test item number 1-10) and the correlation between test 1, which is targeting specific sub-constructs, and test 2 (i.e., test item number 11),

which is targeting the more holistic evaluation of students' writing performance. The result shows that a rather strong correlation between Main Idea 1, which is a multiple choice test form to identify main idea, and Main Idea 2, which is a restricted-response cloze test form to fill in the gap of a paragraph with an appropriate topic sentence. On the other hand, despite having fair correlations, it appears that the correlations between Main Idea 1 and Supporting Detail, Conjunction and Conclusion, as well as Main Idea 2 and Supporting Detail have negative value, which might be due to the influence of several unreliable items, such as Item 4 (Conjunction), Item 7 (Supporting Detail), Item 8 (Supporting Detail), and Item 9 (Conclusion). In terms of test reliability, Kuder-Richardson (KR-20) test for test 1 shows that the overall test has moderate reliability value of 0.54. Considering that the test has few numbers of items and few test takers, it can be expected that the test reliability is relatively fair. However, the correlation between rater 1 and rater 2 demonstrates relatively high inter-rater agreement with the value of 0.76. It can be an indication that the rubrics the raters referred to can be considered reliable. The high correlation between test 1 and test 2 also shows that the overall test is relatively reliable in measuring the target constructs.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

Developing organizational skills in academic writing is valuable for L2 learners who are studying in ESL context because university setting demands learners to be able to express ideas not only orally, but also through written tasks. For that reason, having adequate textual knowledge on using compositional techniques; producing and linking ideas in reasonable arrangements; and comprehending the use of cohesive devices will help L2 learners compose well structured essays in logical and meaningful manner. However, writing proficiency is not an innate skill that learners can acquire intuitively (Reid, 1992). Instead, in order to be

knowledgeable to the skills, learners need to learn the linguistic and rhetorical patterns in English composition, which can be achieved through constant practice and actual lessons. By identifying some writing organization problems encountered by ENG 105 students, we hope that this test, the data analysis, and score interpretation will be beneficial for ENG 105 instructors to see the progress of the students during the course and to be aware of challenges that the students might encountered in taking English Composition class.

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