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Exploring the relationship of organization and connection with scores in integrated writing assessment

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, second language writing assessment has employed writing tasks that require only a single skill; however, in many academic contexts, writing requires the integration of several abilities, including reading and listening. To improve authenticity, integrated tasks are increasingly used in the research and assessment of second language writing. Scholars have proposed discourse synthesis as an underlying construct for these tasks. This study investigated performances on integrated reading-listening-writing tasks to consider how organization and connection, subprocesses in discourse synthesis, are reflected in scores. Four hundred eighty responses to an integrated writing prompt were analyzed for organizational patterns, coherence, and cohesion in relation to test scores. Raters coded essays for type and appropriateness of organization and coherence quality, while computational analysis was used to look at cohesion features. The results indicate that organization and coherence were related to writing score, with quality improving as score increased. However, the cohesion markers analyzed in this study yielded no statistical differences across the score levels.

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1. Introduction

Integrating writing with other language skills, such as reading or listening, is an approach to assessing academic writing that has recently gained attention. The rationale for integrated tasks is grounded in authenticity arguments, which claim that academic writing depends considerably on source material being read or listened to (Ackerman, 1991; Gebril, 2009; Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Leki & Carson, 1997; Plakans, 2009; Weigle & Parker, 2012; Weigle, 2004). These tasks are also designed to provide content and, thus, increase equity by minimizing the impact on writing performances of background knowledge, creativity, and life experience (Read, 1990; Weigle, 2004). Given the unique role of source material in composing responses to integrated writing tasks, research is needed on its possible impact on writing performance. This study examines an integrated assessment for evidence of organization and connection in writing.

Organization and connection are frequently featured in constructs of writing (e.g. Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), but are also present in conceptualizations of reading and listening where organizing and connecting emerge as elements crucial to text comprehension. Meaning construction views of language comprehension consider comprehension as the integration of ideas across parts of a text into a coherent whole (Kintsch, 1998; Nassaji, 2007; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Readers and listeners utilize textual features and their knowledge of text structure to create a mental model of what they are reading

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or listening to. This process involves external facets of organization and connection in the text as well as internal factors such as one's knowledge of how texts are organized and connected (Khalifa & Weir, 2009). Building a mental model through meaning and discourse construction is described as higher-level processing, which is built on lower-order processes such as decoding, word recognition, or parsing (Field, 2013). Discourse construction is also part of the underlying ability of writing (Cumming, 1998), and organization and connection play a role in this construct (Crusan, 2010; Weigle, 2002). In models of writing, meaning is constructed but with a productive result, i.e. text written by the writer rather than as comprehension. Since organization and connection are components of discourse construction and comprehension in reading and listening as well as in composing writing, a possible linkage emerges between these two skills and writing in integrated skills tasks. In fact, a model of discourse construction, called *discourse synthesis,* has appeared in first language research with the intent of connecting reading and writing processes.

In research investigating the construct validity of integrated assessment, scholars (Ascención, 2005; Plakans, 2009; Yang, 2009) have empirically substantiated evidence of *discourse synthesis* in writers' composing processes. This construct conceptualizes the underlying processes of connecting, selecting, and organizing in composing reading-to-write tasks (Spivey, 1990, 1994). When comprehending a text and writing an essay, the cognitive process of *organizing* is elicited (see the top half of Fig. 1). Another process identified in discourse synthesis is *connecting*, which also occurs in reading and listening as meaning is constructed and in writing as ideas are connected across a text. The third process, *selecting,* is related to choosing ideas from texts to include in writing. These processes emerge as writers compose integrated assessment tasks (Ascención, 2005; Plakans, 2009; Yang, 2009).

Organization and connection have long been accepted as foundations for academic writing and features of written performance. *Patterns* that structure the overall discourse in a text are used to organize writing. To connect ideas in a text, *coherence* provides a logical flow of ideas across a text while *cohesion* links specific propositions. These features have been represented in constructs, frameworks and rubrics in second language writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Jamieson, Eignor, Grabe, & Kunnan, 2008). For example, in the Writing Framework for the Internet-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT), an expected performance on an integrated text-based task is described in the following:

Organize the major idea/important information in a reading text or a lecture, select important information to include, and accurately communicate via another modality these ideas and this information as requested in a directive (Jamieson et al., 2008, p.79).

The lower half of Fig. 1 ties the processes of organizing and connecting to a potential model of their appearance in integrated task performances. However, clear evidence of this model and its relationship to scores has not been developed in research. The present study delves into organization and connection in the final written products of an integrated task to analyze whether certain features, particularly, organizational patterns, coherence and cohesion, are reflected in the resulting scores. The TOEFL is an example of a high-stakes standardized assessment that includes integrated reading-listening-writing tasks to evaluate writing. TOEFL used only an independent writing task until 2005, when major revisions to the test included the addition of an integrated writing task. This new task required a different rating scale, which included criteria related to organization and connection[1]. Research is needed to understand how these features are reflected in the performances from integrated tasks. The present study provides information for interpreting scores on integrated assessment, offering validity evidence for tasks and rating scales. The results contribute to the growing literature on integrated writing assessment to inform task development and scoring of tests used in academic English settings.

2. Background

Research on integrated writing has increased over the past decade, generating a baseline understanding of these assessment tasks for second language (L2) writing. Initially, interest lay in distinguishing between integrated and independent writing. Studies comparing holistic scores found correlations between the two task types (Brown, Hilgers & Marsella, 1991; Gebril, 2009; Lewkowicz, 1994; Watanabe, 2001), while identifying differences in specific writing features, such as development and rhetorical structures (Cumming et al., 2005, 2006; Lewkowicz, 1994). Comparing the processes of the two task types also illuminated contrasts in pre-task planning (Plakans, 2008) and strategy use (Yang & Plakans, 2012). Integrated tasks have been explored to determine how both reading and writing strategies are used; to collect evidence for the discourse synthesis processes of connection, organizing, and selecting (Ascención, 2005; Plakans, 2009; Yang & Plakans, 2012); and to understand how writers are affected by the source texts they are given (Plakans & Gebril, 2012, 2013; Weigle & Parker, 2012). These studies have provided valuable information about the construct that integrated tasks elicit.

The present study taps into another vein of research on integrated tasks that focus on the discourse features in written performances. Studies by Cumming et al. (2005, 2006) and Gebril and Plakans (2013) investigated how accuracy, complexity, and fluency relate to integrated writing scores. Cumming et al. (2005, 2006) and Watanabe (2001) studied rhetorical aspects of writing in integrated task performances and scores. Our study contributes to their research on rhetorical structure[2]

[1] See https://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/Writing_Rubrics.pdf

[2] Our study uses the phrase "organizational patterns" rather than "rhetorical structure" or "argument structure" as the focal task is summary writing rather than persuasive or argumentative writing. However, the idea behind these different phrases is nearly the same.

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