

Teachers' and Administrators' Concerns About the TOEFL Test of Written English¹ CATESOL EXCHANGE

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) now includes a 30-minute direct writing assessment, the Test of Written English (TWE) (Greenberg, 1986; Stansfield, 1986; Stansfield & Webster, 1986). It is graded holistically, on a 6-point scale, by trained readers. The test has, up to now, been administered on some but not all test dates, and its use by university administrators as part of entrance criteria for applicants is optional. Indeed, the TWE is still so new that many university administrators do not know of its existence and those who do have not had sufficient experience with it to have an adequate sense of its advantages or problems.

In contrast, administrators of English/American Language Institutes (ELIs/ALIs) have more immediate knowledge of the TWE and more direct interest in it because of their role in preparing students to take the TOEFL. To investigate practitioners' sense of this new instrument, I interviewed several professionals in the fields of English as a second language and composition. The types of positions held by the interviewees were: administrators or assistant administrators of ELIs/ALIs, chair of an English department, coordinator of a writing program for international students within an English department, testing specialist, directors of teacher preparation, and teachers in ELIs/ALIs. (Some of these positions overlapped.) Two of the subjects were involved in the development of topics of the TWE itself, and 3 were readers at the TWE grading sessions. Altogether, 8 professionals were interviewed. Although these informants have preferred to remain anonymous, the information they provided shows some common concerns among ESL and composition teachers and administrators.

Amount of Time for the Essay

The TWE was developed after surveys of faculty in various fields, both at the professional and undergraduate levels, showed two topic types to be most "authentic and valid" (Stansfield & Webster, 1986, p. 17): one, *comparison-contrast plus defense of a position*; the other, *analysis and interpretation of a chart or graph* (Greenberg, 1986, pp. 535-536). Some of the interviewees questioned whether these topic

types can be addressed adequately within the short time available for writing the TWE essays. That is, you might often assign a comparison-contrast plus position but would you ask for such a piece of writing to be done in 30 minutes?

Difference Between the Two Topic Types

Educational Testing Service (ETS) researchers have found through pretesting that the performance on the task of argument using comparison-contrast as an organizational strategy correlates so highly with performance on the chart-graph interpretation that only one sample need be taken. Therefore, at each administration of the TWE, one or the other of these two topic-tasks is presented (Stansfield & Webster, 1986). Despite this reassurance in the literature, most people interviewed felt that the topics requiring comparison-contrast plus position were too different from those requiring chart-graph interpretations to have face validity (Greenberg, 1986). That is, test researchers may be able to show to their satisfaction that two apparently different tasks give the same value of evidence or result, but if users perceive too great a difference in the tasks themselves, they will not have confidence in the measurement. However, ETS test makers have never claimed that the two topic types elicited the same writing skills, only that writers would score roughly the same on either of the two writing tasks.

Differences Among Comparison-Contrast Topics.

In any one administration of the TWE, three different topics are used. One reader at a TWE grading session expressed concern because of the three topics being read in a particular grading session, the topic of the advantages and disadvantages of having a factory built near your town did not elicit as much text overall as did the topic of the comparative values of learning by experience or learning through books and schooling. The logistics of giving a world-wide test come into play here. The TOEFL is given on a single date several times a year. However, enterprising test takers can arrange for someone to take the test on the same date in an earlier time zone and call ahead with information about the test. Therefore, the globe is divided into three different time zones and different topics are given in each place. As it turns out, the factory topic at this particular test administration was given in Asia, and according to one researcher, Asians generally produce shorter text than, say, Europeans. As the test givers are able to provide more information to people involved in the teaching, scoring, and receiving roles of the TWE, such concerns as this one may diminish.

Teaching to the Test

Although the TESOL literature of the past 10 years gives careful attention to rhetorical strategies and analysis of various types of written discourse, it is unlikely that such attention has yet filtered to the TOEFL

“cram schools” that exist in the United States and abound in other parts of the world. Some ELIs/ALIs try hard not to teach merely for taking the TOEFL. The extent of this more academic orientation may depend partly on how closely connected such institutions or programs are to academic departments. However, as one director of an ELI pointed out, for many institutes, TOEFL preparation is their sole reason for being. It seems a shame, one director of a composition program suggested, that attention to writing in TOEFL preparation schools may be limited to two quite specific models, the comparison-contrast plus position and the chart-graph interpretation.

Training of ESL Teachers

The problem of teaching to the test exists not only at TOEFL schools in other countries. In the U.S., at the university level, ESL teacher-training programs do not yet include enough theory or research in the teaching of writing, although a few programs at the forefront do include course work in this area. The development of the TWE may lead to the expansion of the writing component in teacher preparation, but we need to take care that we do not allow consciousness of the TWE to foster a narrowly instrumental mode of teaching and a dependent mode of learning.

Greenberg (1986) asserts that ESL professionals can have an effect on testing by voicing their concerns. The interviews reported here reflect the feeling that finally the importance of direct assessment of writing has been acknowledged and that, as a result, more people will see the value of attending to writing in ESL teaching. Although the likelihood of teaching to the test—that is, teaching the specific forms of the test essays to the exclusion of other types of writing—is a major source of concern for ESL professionals involved in writing, there is a sense in which teaching for the test may be beneficial: As a director of ESL teacher training said, where before you didn't have to think about writing for TOEFL, now you do. ■

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