Investigation of the "Critical Response" Domain in the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW)

by Hyun-Joo Kim

Introduction

As measures of academic writing ability and readiness for college courses, integrated-skills writing tasks have become popular mainly because they are more representative of what students are asked to do in real life than the impromptu, independent-skills tasks on short prompts. The CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW) also employs an integrated-skills task, requiring students to read a text and integrate it into their written responses.

Although several studies examine validity of integrated-skills tasks (e.g., Cumming et al., 2005; Gebril, 2009; Kim, 2009; Lee, 2006; Lee & Kantor, 2005; Plakans, 2008), none of them have looked at a critical component in such tasks as the ability to read critically and to integrate the source text into written responses. While this ability is what distinguishes the integrated-skills tasks from traditional independent-skills tasks, and is considered an essential skill in college-level writing, it has often been neglected in writing assessment. In fact, the CATW is one of the few large-scale standardized writing tests where the construct is specified and scored separately. CUNY's new and unexplored scoring domain, called the "Critical Response to the Text and Writing Task," is one of the five scoring dimensions in the CATW, along with development of ideas, organization, and two language-use domains.

Given its importance and the lack of research, the current study investigated the new domain by looking at how students performed on that particular category in the CATW.

Method

Two writing tasks consisting of a short reading passage and a prompt were administered to 104 ESL students at LaGuardia Community College, where several levels of ESL classes are offered for students who have failed the CATW. One of the tasks was a practice CATW prompt provided by CUNY; the other task was created by an instructor. Students' essays in response to the tasks were collected, and then scored by two certified CATW raters based on the rubric (refer to the CUNY website, http://www.cuny.edu/academics/testing/cuny-assessment-tests.html, for more information on the rubric used).

Results

While the lowest possible scores were zero and the highest were five, the minimum and maximum scores earned by the participants ranged from 2.00 to 4.50 across the five domains, as shown in Table 1. The lowest score was found for "Critical Response" (3.25), closely followed by "Development" (3.26), indicating that these two were most challenging for the students.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Critical Response	2.00	4.25	3.25	.45
Development	2.00	4.50	3.26	.44
Structure	2.75	4.25	3.49	.39
Lang. Use: S and W	2.75	4.50	3.49	.45
Lang. Use: G, U, M	2.50	4.50	3.44	.42

In addition, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships among the five domains (Table 2).

Table 2

Correlations

	Critical Response	Development	Structure	Lang. Use: S and W	Lang. Use: G, U, M
Critical Response	1.00				
Development	.79**	1.00			
Structure	.71**	.74**	1.00		
Lang. Use: S and W	.54**	.55**	.66**	1.00	
Lang. Use: G, U, M	.47**	.33*	.53**	.82**	1.00

Note: ** indicates correlation is significant at the .01 level (2 tailed).
* indicates correlation is significant at the .05 level (2 tailed).

The highest correlation (.82) was found between "Language Use: Sentence and Word Choices" and "Language Use: Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics." This finding seems reasonable, considering the two domains are measuring some aspects of language ability. The next strongest relationship (.79) was between "Critical Response to Text and Writing Task" and "Development"; in other words, students' ability to read critically and respond to main ideas was highly related to the ability to develop essays. As students' development of ideas would largely depend on how they understood main ideas in the reading, this high correlation makes sense.

In contrast, the smallest correlation was found between "Development" and "Language Use: Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics" (.33), followed by the one between the "Critical Response" and "Language Use: Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics" domains (.47). Again, these findings seem reasonable, as the ability to use language correctly is somewhat related to the ability to read critically and develop ideas, but they are still distinct skills.

Discussion

The current study showed that the "Critical Response" domain was the most difficult category for students. One possible reason for that is because they might not have been familiar with that domain as well as they were with the requirements of the writing task. While traditional writing exams like independent-skills tasks require students to read a short prompt and write an argumentative essay, integrated reading and writing CATW tasks ask students to read, summarize, and respond to a text in a personally meaningful way, which is very different. In the

present study, as the students took the essay exams at the beginning of the semester, they might not have been exposed to this type of task, resulting in lower scores. Their prior schooling may not have exposed them to the very specific set of skills needed to score well on the exam. This indicates an urgent need for curriculum modification, given the importance of critical-thinking skills.

Furthermore, the correlation analyses yielded interesting insights regarding "Critical Response." As expected, all the five scoring domains produced a positive correlation, implying that students who did well on one dimension did well on another domain. The degrees to which they were related with each other varied, however. The ability to understand and respond to a text was strongly associated with the ability to develop a personal essay in relation to the given text, which might be somewhat distinct from the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately.

The results of the present study suggest a potential gap that needs to be addressed in classrooms. While there is no question of the importance of critical-thinking skills for academic success, students might need more help with developing such skills as part of writing instruction in their ESL classes. In other words, it is challenging for students to understand a reading and to write a response essay, weaving what they read with their own experience and examples and turning it into a coherent piece of writing. Without proper instruction, our students lacking such vital skills might be at a disadvantage.

References

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