A Review of Research on Source Material Borrowing in Integrated Foreign Language Writing Assessment

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Abstract: The integrated writing assessment is a new form of academic English writing that has emerged in recent years and measures English learners' writing skills in academic contexts through a combination of reading and writing or listening and reading. The most significant change in the integrated writing assessment compared to the independent writing task is the addition of reading or/and listening prompt materials. By reviewing recent research on source material borrowing in integrated writing tests in both domestic and international literature, this paper summarizes the characteristics of source material borrowing in integrated writing assessments, the features of source material borrowing results, and whether scholars can predict candidates' writing performance by the content and manner of source material borrowing in integrated writing assessments. In addition, the paper identifies the challenges integrated writing assessments face and possible future trends.

Keywords: Integrated writing assessment, Source material, Borrowing

1. Introduction

Independent writing has long been a widely used test of second language writing, but its reliability, validity, and authenticity have been questioned and criticized by scholars and testing experts (Weigle 2004). With the reform and advancement of teaching and testing, integrated writing assessment is gradually gaining recognition and respect.

Integrated writing assessment is a form of writing in which students are provided with input material in the form of reading or listening and are required to process the input material by relating (Knoch & Sitajalabhorn,2013), processing, and integrating prior knowledge, personal experience, and relevant information from the input material. Integrated writing tasks include different combinations of multilingual skills, such as reading-writing, listening-writing, and listening-reading-writing tasks. Depending on the writing requirements, integrated writing assessments can be divided into three primary forms, such as synopsis, essay, and topic writing.

The Integrated writing assessment provides writers with real-world situations and stimulates them to use the target domain language, making it highly realistic and contextualized and able to meet the needs of communicative language testing. As a natural choice for language testing in this new context, integrated writing assessment has been widely used in large-scale, high-stakes foreign language tests at home and abroad, such as TOFEL iBT, PTE Academic, Test for English Majors-Band4/8, TEM4/8, and College English Test Band 4/6, etc.

However, integrated writing assessments are more demanding than independent writing tasks, characterized by the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the writing process, and the concepts they examine are more complex. One of the distinctive features of the integrated writing assessment is that it provides test takers with input material, so how test takers interpret and effectively borrow input material has been a hot topic in the field of integrated writing test research abroad (Abrams, 2019)[1]. Yet the number of relevant studies in China is small.

The author of this study argues that the borrowing of source material in integrated writing assessment has become a compulsory question in all major examinations at home and abroad. By analyzing the content and manner in which students cite source material in the integrated writing assessment, it is possible to understand the basic features and characteristics of students' responses to this type of question. The study will also provide teachers with some inspiration and help in guiding their students through the process of answering this type of question. In addition, there is little research in this area in China, so in order to draw the attention of domestic researchers and promote the development of relevant research and practice in China, the research questions that this paper aims to address are as follows.

(1) What are the characteristics of source material borrowing in integrated writing assessments?

(2) What are the characteristics of the content borrowed by candidates from source materials?

(3) Can the content borrowed from the source material predict the performance of candidates in writing?

Based on the answers to the three questions above, this paper looks at future research trends in the context of the challenges faced by integrated writing assessment.

2. Research method

The author searched for papers on integrated writing assessments through various databases such as Google Scholar, National Knowledge Infrastructure, Web of Science, ERIC and Scopus, which cover various aspects of research in this area. The author used different combinations of keywords for the search, such as: integrated writing assessment, integrated writing task, integrated writing tests, writing, TOFEL and so on. The author chose them as keywords because they are closely related to integrated writing assessment and they are all relevant directions for researchers in real-life contexts. The author found that most of the papers on this topic were empirical studies. Researchers select students from universities and colleges as their subjects and then investigate the cognitive validity of the integrated writing assessment, the way in which the source material is borrowed and how the content predicts essay scores.

The author reads the relevant papers on source material borrowing in integrated writing assessments at home and abroad in recent years, sorts out the research lineage, reviews the research results, summarizes and forms her own thesis ideas, and presents the findings of this paper in the form of a comprehensive statement.

3. Results

This section will answer and specify the three research questions mentioned above.

3.1. Characteristics of source material borrowing

The integrated writing assessment aims to test the dimensionality of candidates' multilingual skills. In addition, integrated writing assessment fits well with current approaches to language teaching, including task-based or content-based language teaching, both of which emphasize goal-directed language use rather than the separation of skills. This section will analyze three aspects of construct representativeness, authenticity, and test-taker preference to examine the characteristics of source material borrowing in the integrated writing assessment.

3.1.1. Construct representativeness

Constructs refer to underlying theoretical competencies intended to evoke assessment and influence how test results are interpreted. For integrated assessment, scholars provide evidence for the validity of constructs by (1) examining the relationships between the skills involved in the assessment and (2) examining a theoretical construct of literacy called discourse integration.

Sawaki, Quinlan, and Lee (2013) analyzed 446 written responses to the TOEFL iBT integrated writing assessment using a suite of factor analyses and found comprehensive competencies elicited. Researchers suggest that comprehension may involve general language skills that provide the integrative or transcendental competencies required for integration. This study shows that integrated writing tests can potentially assess multiple skills and a more general language use ability (Plakans, 2015).

As an alternative to examining each skill found in integrated tasks, discourse synthesis was considered a construct evoked by integrated assessments. This construct elicits three processes linking, selecting, and organizing texts (in both reading and writing).

3.1.2. Authenticity

The use of integrated writing assessment to increase the authenticity of an assessment is particularly relevant for English academic tests. Grabe and Zhang (2013) summarize the literature on integrated (reading and writing) assignments required in academic courses in a summary article on second language (L2) reading and writing for classroom instruction. In this context, assignments require students to use a

variety of skills, which are explored through integrated assignments. For example, they summarize and paraphrase original texts, compare and synthesize multiple texts and voices on a particular topic, and write research and response essays.

These types of tasks pose challenges for both L2 reading and writing skills. Therefore, teaching (Zhang, 2013) and assessing integrated reading and writing in second language learning is important to prepare students for success in academic classrooms.

3.1.3. Test-taker preference

In studies comparing integrated assessments with independent proficiency tests, a common theme is testing takers' preference for the integrated task (Yang & Plakans, 2012). When asked immediately after completing both tasks, the candidates report that the integrated task reduces their anxiety, increases their confidence, provides information and ideas about the topic (Plakans, 2008), and improves word choice and construction patterns (Plakans & Gebril, 2012).

3.2. Research on the characteristics of the borrowing results of source materials

This section focuses on the textual analysis of the essay from the perspective of how candidates use the source material to write in the integrated writing assessment. This section focuses on three aspects of the test takers: the linguistic borrowing features of the source material, the content borrowing features, and the degree of reliance on the source material.

3.2.1. Language borrowing from the source material

Researchers have different ways of dividing the ways of borrowing from the language of the source material, such as the bifurcation: direct borrowing and indirect borrowing (Ackerman, 1991)[2], the former includes direct quotation, unquoted copying (i.e. verbatim borrowing) and the latter includes paraphrasing and summarizing; verbatim borrowing and integrated forms (Plakans & Gebril, 2012); and the trichotomy: marked citation borrowing, unmarked citation borrowing and direct citation (Weigle & Parker, 2012). Despite the different divisions and names, they cover four common forms of linguistic borrowing: direct quotation, paraphrasing, summarizing, and copy.

Research on the characteristics of source material borrowing has focused on the links between candidates' language level, output tasks, and how they borrow source material. Most studies found that candidates' foreign language level influenced the quality and quantity of their borrowing of the source material. Generally, the amount of source material fully reproduced by low-level candidates is higher than that of high-level candidates. Paraphrasing and generalizing borrowing of source material increased significantly as the level of the foreign language increased. The text-borrowing characteristics of candidates at different language levels varied across output tasks. Cumming et al. (2005)[6] found that in TOEFL listening-reading-writing synthesis of terse writing, high-level test takers used more generalization, intermediate-level test takers preferred rewriting and exact copying, while low-level test takers may have little linguistic borrowing due to their inability to understand the source material well.

In addition, different input tasks also affect the way candidates borrow the language of the source material. Zhang Xinling and Zhou Yan (2014)[29] found that the modality of the input task influenced the borrowing styles of test takers at different language levels, with no exact copies in reading-writing and reading-listening-writing argumentative writing for high-level test takers, while low-level test-takers in the reading-writing test more than five times the number of exact copies than in the reading-listening-writing task.

3.2.2. Content borrowing from source materials

Content borrowing is the borrowing of ideas and thoughts from material based on the candidate's understanding of the source material. Compared to studies of linguistic borrowing, there are relatively few studies of content borrowing, which focus on the importance and sources of the content borrowed and the purpose of the borrowing. Plakans & Gebril (2013)[22] used material from the General Writing test on the TOEFL online test as source material and used multiple regression analysis to explore in depth the characteristics of content borrowing from the source material in terse writing. The content use of source material in the study was mainly related to (1) the importance of the content borrowed from the source material and (2) whether the content borrowed was from listening material or reading. The results showed that the higher-scoring essays borrowed more important content from the source materials and more content from the listening materials. In contrast, the lower-scoring essays borrowed less important content, mainly from reading materials.

The motives and purposes of candid"tes"borrowing of content from source materials have also attracted the attention of some researchers. Plakans & Gebril (2012)[20] found that candidates borrowed source materials for four main purposes. Firstly is to help candidates form their own opinions. Second, candidates to use source materials as support material for their own views. Third, the source materials provides language support to candidates like a dictionary, such as vocabulary, spelling, terminological expressions, etc. Fourth, Candidates draw on the chapter structure of the source materials. In addition, the study found that most undergraduate candidates regarded the content of the source material as a source of their own opinions, and only a small proportion regarded it as a source of supporting arguments (Machili et al., 2020)[15].

3.2.3. Degree of reliance on source material

The provision of input material in an integrated writing test has the potential to lead to over-reliance on and misuse of source material by test takers, particularly at low levels. However, the results of relevant empirical studies are inconsistent. Some studies have found that foreign language test takers rely more heavily on source materials when completing comprehensive writing tests (Gebril & Plakans, 2014)[7]. Yet other studies have had very different results. For example, Weigle & Parker (2012)[28] found that test takers did not borrow much from the source material and relied less on the original text, suggesting that this may be due to their relatively high level of English proficiency. Cumming et al. (2005)[6] found that among high, medium, and low-level test takers, low-level test takers may have borrowed the least amount of language from the source material in their TOEFL general synopsis writing because they did not understand the source material.

3.3. Research on the predictive power of source material borrowing on writing performance

The extent to which candidates borrow source material on an integrated writing assessment predicts their writing performance is one of the focal points of research on integrated writing tests. Some of this research has focused on writing outcomes, such as the impact of source-borrowing features in essay texts on essay scores (Plakans & Gebril, 2013)[22]. Another part of the research focuses on the predictive power of strategy use during source material borrowing on writing scores (Cheong et al., 2019; Payant et al., 2019)[3][17].

3.3.1. The predictive power of borrowing results in writing performance

Plakans & Gebril (2013)[22] investigated the predictive power of the results of source material borrowing on the writing performance of test-takers in the TOEFL reading-listening-writing terse essay. The study showed that three aspects, namely the importance of the borrowed content, whether the borrowed content was derived from listening or reading material, and the number of exact copies, had a significant effect on performance in terse writing. In Plakans and Gebril's study, source text borrowing characteristics predicted 55% of the variance in composite writing scores[9]. Whether or not content was borrowed from listening materials had the most significant effect on scores, explaining 31% of the variance, and whether or not significant content was borrowed explained 22% of the variance. In contrast, whether or not content from reading materials and exact copies were used contributed least to essay scores. Both were negatively correlated with performance, with more content borrowed from reading materials and more exact copies associated with lower essay scores[10].

Chen Ying et al. (2016)[31] also examined the predictive power of source material language and content borrowing outcomes on writing scores but using a combined reading-writing essay writing task. They found that of the four source text borrowing features – borrowing content importance, borrowing listening materials, verbatim borrowing, and borrowing reading materials – borrowing listening materials was the strongest predictor of writing scores (explaining 31% of the variance in writing scores), followed by borrowing content importance (explaining 22% of the variance in writing scores)[12]. The importance of the borrowed content was a strong predictor of writing performance in both the read-write and listen-read-write integrated writing tasks. This suggests that assessing source text ideas along the dimension of importance is an effective way to improve writing performance (Kyle, 2020)[14].

3.3.2. The predictive power of the borrowing process in writing performance

Compared to borrowing results, research on the predictive power of the source material borrowing process for performance is more fragmented and lacks quantitative results. Cohen found that the number of strategies used during the source material reading process was not a good predictor of high or low writing performance. Plakans also pointed out that although the high grouping of test takers used significantly more reading strategies than the low and middle groupings, the number of strategies did not

make a reliable prediction of overall writing performance and that the quality of reading strategies used was one of the key factors affecting writing performance. Cheong et al. (2019)[3] conducted a study on candidates' source material borrowing strategies for discourse synthesis. It is worth noting, however, that, unlike most related studies that only have one or two source materials, the source materials in this study consisted of six texts in various genres, such as speeches, news reports, surveys, stories, and argumentative essays[13]. The findings suggest that the quality of the discourse synthesis strategy is a good predictor of writing performance in a multi-text source material literacy synthesis writing task.

4. Discussion

Examining students' references to the source material in the integrated writing assessment provides a good indication of their language level. However, there are some challenges when using the integrated writing assessment (Plakans & Gebril, 2017)[21]. The most fundamental challenge is what psychometricians call task dependencies. The score on the integrated writing assessment depends on the candidate's comprehension of the source material (i.e., reading or listening ability). Without a sufficient understanding of the source material, learners cannot write effectively about them, thus compromising the validity of measures of writing ability for learners without adequate comprehension skills[18].

Moreover, there are thresholds of proficiency in a second language above and below which students may or may not be able to perform integrated writing tasks effectively (Cumming, 2013)[5]. There is ample evidence that second-language writers simply cannot write effectively about the source material without sufficient understanding. The implication is that integrated writing tasks are only appropriate for students who are close to or above this threshold of proficiency in a second language.

A further challenge in the integrated writing assessment concerned the marking of candidates after they had cited source material for their writing (Plakans et al., 2019)[23]. For human scorers of compositions, the problem is first to distinguish the written texts produced for such tasks[19]. These phrases are taken verbatim from source texts (which may or may not be appropriately cited) from phrases that are the original language of the test takers, and then to judge their appropriateness. This has certainly been a challenge in this area (Cumming et al., 2005)[6]. They found that we could not make these identifications reliably, and so needed a computer program to perform this role mechanically. But knowing how to make this distinction in a fair, consistent, and valid way is an area for much more research and policy development.

A final challenge, however, is to know how best to approach these issues in order to relate assessment to teaching and learning in a purposeful way. In particular, how can information from performance assessments (what students are doing in these contexts) be used for formative (Golparvar & Khafi, 2021)[8], diagnostic purposes (to inform what students need to learn next or what teachers should teach these students next)? Investigating these questions is properly the domain of research on assessment in learning and teaching contexts rather than formal achievement testing[24].

5. Outlook for future research

Through the above literature review, we can see that the research on the borrowing of source materials in integrated writing assessments in foreign languages generally shows the following characteristics: more research on foreign tests but less on domestic tests; more research on the borrowing results but less on the borrowing process; more research on the influence of language level and borrowing strategies but less on other factors; more research on the borrowing of source materials for tests but less research on the borrowing of source materials for teaching[27]. Therefore, researchers' future research directions can start from the following perspectives to enrich the research on source material borrowing in comprehensive foreign language tests and better serve the proposing and teaching practice of comprehensive writing tests.

5.1. Research on the borrowing process of source materials

For a long time, due to the limitations of research perspectives, methods, and tools, it has been difficult to break through the quantitative and qualitative bottlenecks in the study of source material borrowing process, so the borrowing process of the source material is still a direction that needs to be continuously explored (Homayounzadeh et al., 2019)[11]. On the one hand, scholars can draw on the research results of cognitive psychology on the cognitive-psychological processes of reading and writing

in the study of second language acquisition, conduct research on the sub-processes of source material borrowing in the comprehensive writing test from a cognitive perspective, explore the cognitive-psychological processes of source material borrowing (Ohta et al., 2018)[16], and propose a cognitive theoretical model with explanatory power, so as to better guide the practical research on the borrowing process.

On the other hand, with the advancement of technology and the increasing prevalence of machine-written examinations, candidates' source material borrowing processes can be recorded and analyzed in real-time, objectively and accurately through more advanced technologies, such as keyboard recording and analysis technology (Cho et al., 2013)[4], data mining technology and process recording technology. Therefore, future research on the borrowing process of source materials should make fuller use of new technologies and methods, expand the research sample, select more effective process indicators, obtain more empirical data on the borrowing process of source materials for different types of integrated writing tasks, and conduct multi-dimensional quantitative and qualitative analysis by combining mature research methods such as audio thinking, text analysis, interviews, and questionnaires, in order to deepen our understanding of candidates' borrowing process of source materials[30].

5.2. Research on the characteristics of source material borrowing in the Chinese context

The English-integrated writing assessment has been used in some large-scale, high-stakes examinations in China, such as the Test for English Majors-Band4/8, TEM4/8, and College English Test Band 4/6, and the college entrance examinations in some pilot provinces and municipalities, and its influence is gradually expanding. Still, few studies have dealt with the borrowing of source materials from test takers in these examinations in China, which is seriously out of proportion to the scale and practice of testing in China[31]. The highly contextualized nature of today's language tests dictates that foreign research findings may not be applicable to large-scale English examinations in China, so a targeted study of source material borrowing in domestic comprehensive writing tests is urgently needed.

On the one hand, theoretical and empirical research can be strengthened by studying in depth the characteristics of English learners' source material borrowing behavior in various large-scale tests in China, such as what source material is borrowed, when it is borrowed, how it is borrowed, why it is borrowed and what strategies are used[32]. On the other hand, comparative studies can be conducted, for example, to compare the characteristics of Chinese English learners' source material borrowing in different integrated writing assessments, such as the Gao Kao and the College English Test Band 4/6, in order to study the developmental characteristics of Chinese foreign language learners' source material borrowing ability. Researchers can also compare the similarities and differences in source material use between Chinese learners of English and learners of foreign languages from other countries and investigate them from a socio-cultural perspective[33].

5.3. Pedagogical Research on Source Material Borrowing

With the increasing use of integrated writing assessment questions, the development of foreign language learners' ability to borrow source materials has become an unavoidable issue in foreign language writing teaching (Uludag et al., 2019)[25]. However, until now, the development of the ability to borrow source materials has rarely been a specific teaching objective in teaching foreign language writing in China, and therefore little research has been conducted on this topic[34]. In this context, we should first analyze the structural framework and conceptual model of source material borrowing ability in the comprehensive test of foreign language writing so as to provide theoretical support for setting the teaching objectives of source material borrowing ability.

Secondly, based on relevant theoretical research, teaching practice research can focus on how to conduct teaching interventions on source material borrowing (Wang et al., 2017)[26], fully investigate the counteracting effects of integrated writing assessment, explore the developmental characteristics of students' source material borrowing abilities, and explore the specific problems of students' source material borrowing processes, etc[35]. In addition, teachers can also study how to develop students' awareness of borrowing source texts, how to develop students' borrowing strategies for selecting and transforming relevant information from source materials and integrating it into the target discourse, and how to improve the achievement of teaching objectives, so as to better realize the positive countervailing effect of the Integrated Writing Test on teaching and improve students' borrowing ability of source materials[36].

6. Conclusions

The integrated writing assessment requires candidates to complete a writing task based on the processing of input material in order to test their written expression skills. How to interpret and use the input material effectively is a significant challenge for foreign language learners and affects their level of performance in writing. Integrated writing assessments require a high level of competence, requiring candidates to process information, process and integrate and produce text simultaneously.

It is therefore important that the development of such questions adequately estimates the language level of the candidates and selects source text materials of appropriate difficulty to prevent excessive cognitive processing load due to the difficulty of the linguistic aspects of the materials. Secondly, it is important to ensure that the topics of the reading materials are explorable and distillable so that candidates can extract and transform the generated ideas in a targeted manner. In addition, clear instructions and requirements should be included in the task promptly to avoid overuse or even copying of source materials.

By reviewing recent research on source material citation in integrated writing assessments in the domestic and international literature, this paper summarizes the characteristics of source material borrowing in integrated writing assessments, the features of the results of source material borrowing, and whether scholars can predict test takers' writing performance through the content and manner of source material citation in integrated writing assessments. In addition, the paper identifies the challenges that integrated writing assessments are currently facing and the possible future trends. It is expected that future research on borrowing source materials in China will improve in quantity and quality and better serve the practice of writing tests and writing teaching in China.

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