TITLE

Examining the Cognitive Processes Engaged by Aptis Writing Task 4 on Paper and on the Computer

This is a summary of a report by Khaled Barkaoui as part of the ARAGs Research Online Series. For a copy of the full report, see www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/publications/

WHAT WE LOOKED AT:

This describes the writing processes that candidates employ when they respond to Aptis Writing Task 4 and examines whether and how these processes vary depending on delivery mode (paper or computer), task, and candidates' English language proficiency and computer ability. Examining the processes that candidates employ when responding to a writing test can help us find out if the test engages candidates in using knowledge, Theory and research show that writing involves various processes such as planning, organization, monitoring, and revising and also that writers with different levels of expertise approach the writing task differently. We want to find out if candidates do engage in such processes or not and whether the test distinguishes between proficient and less proficient writers in terms of their writing processes. We also want to find out whether factors such as computer ability and delivery mode affect candidates' writing performance by examining whether candidates engage in different writing processes depending on their computer ability and delivery mode.

HOW WE DID IT:

To investigate these questions, we recruited 16 second-language learners of English at two different levels of English language proficiency (low and high) and computer ability (low and high). The participants formed four groups: high English proficiency and high computer ability; high English proficiency and low computer ability; low English proficiency and low computer ability; and low English proficiency and high computer ability. Participants were tested using a typing test to establish their computer ability. Each participant then completed two forms of Aptis Writing Task 4, one on the computer and one on paper. Each writing task involved writing two short messages, one for a familiar reader (a friend) and one for a less familiar reader (e.g., a club manager). Each participant was video-recorded while completing each writing task. We then asked each participant to watch the video-recording of their writing and to describe in detail what they were thinking while completing each writing task. These descriptions were audio recorded, transcribed, and then analysed. The analysis focused on identifying the writing processes that the participants reported using while completing each task such as planning, organizing, and revising.

WHAT WE FOUND:

Participants reported using a wide range of writing processes while responding to Aptis Writing Task 4. Some of the processes that they reported using (to varying degrees) include the following:

- Reading and analysing the writing task and its requirements
- Setting goals for their writing such as achieving particular effects on the reader

- Planning their response at various levels (e.g., overall and specific details)
- Organizing their ideas in a coherent way
- Translating their ideas into text and thinking about how to express their ideas using correct and appropriate vocabulary and grammar
- Monitoring, editing and revising their texts to improve them in terms of content, language and style
- Considering the reader and the effect of the message on the reader while engaging in several of these process

The processes that participants reported using are consistent with expectations regarding the processes that writers would engage in when writing in authentic (i.e., non-test) settings. However, the task also led some participants to engage in processes that are not typically engaged in when writing in authentic contexts such as making the response longer to meet the task requirement (instead of achieving a particular writing goal) and imagining or making up additional details about the task and situation in order to be able to complete the writing task.

The participants were aware of the differences in the level of formality required by the two parts of the task and tended to adopt a more formal style or tone and to think more carefully about what and how to write when writing to a less familiar reader than they did when writing to a familiar reader. When writing to a less familiar reader, the participants tended to consider how to express their ideas as well as to monitor, edit and revise their responses more frequently than they did when writing to a familiar reader. The two parts of the task, thus, seem to engage candidates in different writing processes.

Writing mode seems to have affected the participants' writing processes to some extent. In particular, the participants tended to write longer texts and to monitor, edit and revise their texts more frequently when writing on the computer than they did when writing on paper. The participants also expressed different preferences in terms of writing mode.

Participants with higher English language proficiency wrote significantly longer responses and obtained significantly higher scores than those with low English proficiency. Additionally, participants with low English proficiency tended to report more difficulties understanding the task, struggled to express their ideas, attended less often to the audience, and copied ideas, details, words and phrases from the task more frequently than those with high English proficiency. Also, the high-proficiency group adapted their writing processes across tasks more effectively than the low-proficiency group. Generally, it seems that the low-proficiency participants intended their messages to differ in terms of content (i.e., what to say), while the high-proficiency group intended their messages to the two audiences to differ in terms of form as well (i.e., how to say what they want to say).

Participants with high computer ability attended to various aspects of their writing more often than did those with low computer ability. Additionally, participants with low computer ability planned their responses more frequently when writing on the computer than they did when writing on paper and did not take advantage of the computer's capabilities for reviewing and improving their responses.

Overall, the findings confirm that Aptis Writing Task 4 engages candidates in using relevant writing processes and that these processes vary across audiences and candidates with different levels of English proficiency. Computer ability and writing mode seem also to affect the writing processes of at least some participants which highlights the need to continue to provide candidates with the option of choosing which writing mode to use when responding to the test.