

4th Postgraduate Student Conference: Assessing and Analyzing Discourses

Faculty of English Language and Literature
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
Athens, 26 June 2014

Automatic text processing, cultural familiarity & reading comprehension performance: the case of the KPG English language exams

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This presentation focuses on the effect culture-specific schemata have on test-takers' attitudes to the texts and tasks of the reading comprehension module of the Greek State Certificate of English Language Proficiency exam (KPG). As such, the current study is closely linked to recent research in reading comprehension processes according to which a satisfactory understanding of the reading process, which involves operations at a number of different levels of processing, i.e. lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discoursal, depends not only on an accurate identification of the various text elements and the connections among them, but also on that of readers' prior knowledge of and interest in the topic as well as the strategies used to actively reconstruct text meaning (Bachman, 2000: 11; Drucker, 2003: 25; Khalifa & Weir, 2009: 19-20; Krekeler, 2006: 121; Rayner et al., 2011: 246-7; Rupp et al., 2006: 445). Findings from the KPG English Survey conducted by the RCeL on a national scale in the form of questionnaires administered to candidates sitting for the KPG exams will be presented (7,500 questionnaires administered during 2006-2008 examination periods) along with a discussion on text and task difficulty from the test-takers' perspective i.e. their level of familiarity with culture specific topics. Moreover, light will be shed on whether candidates' beliefs had an impact on their actual performance and empirical evidence will be provided as regards the level of cultural familiarity of specific test texts. Finally, an attempt will be made to find the relationship between background cultural knowledge and the readability level of English texts included in the reading test papers of the KPG examinations. Given the influence of culture-specific schemata, it is suggested that test designers should be particularly sensitive to the potential comprehension difficulties EFL readers may encounter due to their lack of familiarity with the culture-specific content presumed by a text and do their best to accommodate for any such discrepancies at an early stage of the test construction process.

References

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