



University of Athens

Faculty of English Studies

Are read-to-write tasks difficult for L2 candidates? Test taker views and perspectives

Vasso Oikonomidou

PhD Candidate

Supervising Committee:

Assoc. Prof. B. Mitsikopoulou

Prof. B. Dendrinos

Assist. Prof. K. Karavas

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An overview

Test taker views of read-to write task difficulty

- The aim and focus of the presentation
- The rationale for the study
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The aim and focus of the presentation

- To report on some findings from a multi-faceted investigation of 'read-to-write' task difficulty in the foreign language examination context – more specifically, the KPG examination battery
- Focus on 'perceived' difficulty (the test takers' perspective)

The rationale for the study

- Considering learners' perceptions is as important as focusing on test taker actual performance when it comes to investigating task difficulty (Nunan & Keokbe, 1995; Tavakoli, 2009).
- If test taker attitudes are a factor affecting the difficulty of tasks, then they should be considered in the investigation of task difficulty (Elder et al., 2002).

The rationale for the study

KPG writing tasks have two characteristics:

- They are read-to-write
- They are genre-based (socially-situated)

‘Read-to-write’ tasks are different from other types of writing activities in the sense that they combine reading with writing and therefore they assess multiple and complex literacy skills (Yang & Plakans, 2012).

The context of the study

- the Greek State Certificate of English Language Proficiency Exams (known as KPG)
- B1 and C1 level: Writing Activity 1 (intra-linguistic mediation)



CEFR reference levels (2001)

B1 Level: Threshold
Operational Proficiency

C1 Level: Effective

Independent user

Proficient user

The context of the study


B1 Level (KPG Writing Activity 1 – November 2010)

Teens International, a magazine you like to read, gives an award each month. Last month, it presented the BEST DAD AWARD. Roza di Paolo wrote why her father should get the award (see her text below) and her father won. This month the magazine is running a contest for the BEST FRIEND AWARD. Write an **original text** (100 words), **explaining why** your best friend should get this award. (Do *not* sign with your real name. Sign as Nick)

Teens International

Tell us about your best friend

Last month we asked readers to tell us about their parents. This month we want you to tell us about your best friend. Write and you might win this month's prize!



The best dad award

There are many reasons why my dad is simply the best. First of all, he takes care of me, my brothers and my mom when we are sick. At night, if we are not feeling well, he stays downstairs with us. Plus, he cleans up after us when we're in a hurry to go to school. Actually, my dad should win because he is a fun dad. He loves to do things with us and always keeps his promises. I believe my dad deserves to be chosen because he works hard at the office and at home. He often cooks and vacuums the house on Saturdays. He deserves to win the dad award because he is THE BEST DAD EVER!

Roza di Paolo, age 13



The best friend award

The context of the study

C1 Level (KPG Writing Activity 1 – November 2010)

Read this letter which appeared in *Patras Daily*, an English newspaper published in Greece, and respond to it. Your **response letter** (180-200 words) should **argue** that family values are still very alive in Greece. Use some or all of the points below. You may also use a couple of your own. Sign as H. Psathas.

POINTS

Many young people still live at home until they get married

Three or four generations of people get together on holidays to have a good time

Grandparents still look after their grandchildren on a regular basis

It's still considered taboo to place parents in an old

Lost family values?



Dear Patras Daily, I have been living in Greece for five years now.

I decided to leave the UK to come to live in Greece in the hope of creating strong family bonds and clear family values. I thought family ties were an integral part of the Greek culture and something I firmly believe in. Family life in England, where I was born, has changed dramatically in the last decades and family values have almost disappeared. I thought that by moving with my family to Greece, things would be different. Unfortunately, however, I found out that family values actually do not exist here either. I did not experience the life that my mother had told me about: three generations under the same roof, kids respecting their parents and the older members of the family, parents looking after their children even after they are adults, mothers staying home to raise their children and fathers being the breadwinners.

However, what I have been experiencing is a totally different reality. Parents so absorbed in work and social life that they forget about their kids. Women so interested in their careers that a strong and healthy family unit is the least of their concerns. Greek parents do not seem to listen to their children's problems and the Greek family today talks only on mobile phones! Divorce rates are on the increase, and so are children with psychological problems and learning difficulties. Teenagers, who are depressed and have no dreams for the future, show no respect to their parents, and they rarely enjoy a family meal because they're too busy studying.

My experience here has convinced me that Greek families have become as bad as families in many other 'developed' countries. The 'Greek family bond' is actually one more myth...

Jonathan Ward
Patras, November 2010

Research Questions

- What are KPG candidates' views of difficulty entailed in read-to-write activities at B1 and C1 proficiency levels?
- To what extent are the B1 and C1 level candidates' views of task difficulty different?

Method of investigation

➔ **Data:** questionnaires developed by the KPG test development team as part of survey conducted by the Research Centre for English Language Teaching Learning and Assessment (RCEL) at the University of Athens in cooperation with the Greek Ministry of Education.

- ❖ Two levels (B1+ C1)
- ❖ Four exam administrations
- ❖ Total number of questionnaires: 3,115

Method of analysis: quantitative – statistics (SPSS)

Method of investigation

Description of activities

B1 Level (source + target text)	Text type	Generic process*	Communicative purpose	Topic
May 2008	Reader's response	describe	describe	Influential people
May 2009	article	describe	describe	Special school events
May 2010	Reader's response	describe	narrate	experiences
November 2010	Reader's response	describe	Describe and explain	Best..award (people)

*as defined by Knapp & Watkins (2004)

Method of investigation

Description of activities

C1 Level (source + target text)	Text type	Generic process*	Communicative purpose	Topic
May 08 Source May 08 Target	webpage text letter	Explain & instruct Argue	Inform Explain & convince	Downloading music
May 09 Source May 09 Target	Reader's response	Describe Describe & argue	Explain & suggest Disagree & explain	Good teachers
May 10 Source May 10 Target	Reader's response	explain	explain	The internet
Nov 10 Source Nov 10 Target	letter	argue	argue	Greek family values

*as defined by Knapp & Watkins (2004)

Method of investigation

Questions on test take profile per exam period

	MAY 08	MAY 09	MAY 10	NOV 10
AGE	√	√	√	√
SEX	√	√	√	√
OCCUPATION			√	√

Method of investigation

Questions on the KPG Writing test per exam period

	May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov. 10
1. Overall, I found the writing test difficult.	√	√	√	√
2. I found Activity 1 difficult.	√	√	√	√
3. I found the rubrics of Activity 1 difficult.	√		√	√
4. The presentation of the activity (e.g. pictures, graphs) helped me understand the activity.	√		√	
5. I had written a text of a similar genre to the one required in Activity 1.	√		√	√
6. The time given for writing test completion was sufficient.		√	√	√

Findings

B1 Level test taker profile

		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	November 10
Age	12-	26	52	17	12
	13-18	295	585	92	63
	19-35	73	85	5	15
	36+	15	32	2	7
Gender	Female	234	421	60	50
	Male	165	329	57	41
Occupation	Pupil	0	0	109	77
	Student	0	0	2	3
	Worker	0	0	5	16

Findings

C1 Level test taker profile

		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	November 10
Age	12-	0	0	1	0
	13-18	222	382	166	151
	19-35	253	261	65	89
	36+	25	36	20	31
Gender	Female	338	431	157	145
	Male	156	255	87	107
Professional Identity	Pupil	0	0	155	139
	Student	0	0	28	21
	Worker	0	0	58	84

Findings

B1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov10
		Question 1:	Not at all	17%	15%
Overall, I found the writing test difficult.	A little / Quite	70%	68%	69%	68%
	Much / Very much	14%	18%	1%	3%

Findings

B1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov10
Question 2: I found Activity 1 difficult	Not at all	38%	34%	48%	50%
	A little / Quite	45%	38%	49%	48%
	Much / Very much	17%	27%	3%	1%

Findings

B1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
Question 3: I found the rubrics of Activity 1 difficult	Not at all	52%	N/A	68%	69%
	A little / Quite	32%	N/A	32%	30%
	Very / Very much	16%	N/A	0%	1%

Findings

B1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
Question 4: The presentation of the activity helped me understand the activity.	Not at all	21%	N/A	23%	N/A
	A little / Quite	46%	N/A	56%	N/A
	Much / Very much	32%	N/A	21%	N/A

Findings

B1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
Question 5: I had written a similar text type to the one required in Activity 1.	Yes	63%	N/A	47%	66%
	No	37%	N/A	53%	34%

Findings

B1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
Question 6: The time given for writing test completion was sufficient.	Yes	N/A	80%	82%	85%
	No	N/A	20%	18%	15%

Findings

C1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
Question 1: Overall, I found the writing test difficult	Not at all	14%	17%	21%	14%
	A little / Quite	74%	61%	76%	82%
	Much / Very much	12%	21%	3%	3%

Findings

C1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
Question 2: I found Activity 1 difficult	Not at all	38%	42%	52%	42%
	A little / Quite	52%	42%	45%	56%
	Much / Very much	9%	17%	1%	2%

Findings

C1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
		Question 3:	Not at all	69%	N/A
I found the rubrics of Activity 1 difficult	A little / Quite	25%	N/A	22%	21%
	Much / Very much	5%	N/A	2%	0,4%

Findings

C1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
Question 4: The presentation of the activity helped me understand the activity.	Not at all	32%	N/A	29%	N/A
	A little / Quite	27%	N/A	58%	N/A
	Much / Very much	20%	N/A	12%	N/A

Findings

C1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
		Question 5: I had written a similar text type to the one required in Activity 1.	Yes	63%	N/A
	No	37%	N/A	27%	18%

Findings

C1 Level		Exam period			
		May 08	May 09	May 10	Nov 10
Question 6: The time given for writing test completion was sufficient.	Yes	N/A	78%	89%	90%
	No	N/A	20%	11%	10%

Findings

Differences between B1 and C1 level

➔ Chi-square analysis (for the comparison)

More B1 level test takers....

- ❖ regarded the writing test as easy ($X^2 = 27,034$, $df = 4$, $sig. (2-tailed) = ,000$).
- ❖ regarded Writing Activity 1 as difficult ($X^2 = 60,697$, $df = 4$, $sig. (2-tailed) = ,000$).
- ❖ regarded task rubrics as difficult ($X^2 = 60,880$, $df = 4$, $sig. (2-tailed) = ,000$).
- ❖ regarded the presentation of the activity as helpful ($X^2 = 33,883$, $df = 4$, $sig. (2-tailed) = ,000$).

Findings

Differences between B1 and C1 level

More C1 level test takers...

- ❖ seemed to be acquainted with the text types required in the KPG exams (*Fisher's Exact Test* = ,000).
- ❖ regarded the time given for test completion as sufficient (*Fisher's Exact Test* = ,022).

Findings

Do perceptions correlate with performance?

Level * Test taker performance Cross tabulation						
		Test taker performance			Total	
		unsatisfactory	moderately satisfactory	fully satisfactory		
Level	C1	Count	114	338	79	531
		Expected Count	129,9	322,6	78,5	531,0
		Residual	-15,9	15,4	,5	
	B1	Count	68	114	31	213
		Expected Count	52,1	129,4	31,5	213,0
		Residual	15,9	-15,4	-,5	
Total	Count	182	452	110	744	
	Expected Count	182,0	452,0	110,0	744,0	

Conclusions

The results showed that...

- ❖ At both levels test takers did not find the KPG writing activities particularly difficult.
- ❖ At both levels test takers did not have difficulty in understanding task rubrics.
- ❖ Time was not found to be a factor affecting task difficulty.
- ❖ Familiarity with text type and practice does play a role.
- ❖ Generally, there was agreement between perceptions and performance.

References

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Thank you!



vasoikon@enl.uoa.gr