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

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This presentation reports on some findings from a multi-faceted investigation of 'read-to-write' task difficulty in the context of my PhD study. It focuses on the test taker's perspective and more specifically, it presents the results of research concerning test taker views of the difficulty entailed in the read-to-write activities of a particular examination battery, the Greek State Certificate of English Language Proficiency Exams (known as KPG).

'Read-to-write' activities require that test takers comprehend the meanings of a source text and interact with it in order to produce their written response. They differ from other types of writing activities because they combine reading with writing and therefore they assess multiple and complex literacy skills (Yang & Plakans, 2012).

In KPG writing, the difficulty of the source text, which is in fact multimodal, as well as output expectations depend on the proficiency level being tested. To be more specific, at C1 level, test taker output is to be very different from the original, the source text; sometimes it is to differ just in terms of content or communicative purpose, but other times also in terms of text type, generic process, register and style. On the other hand, at B1 level, the source text serves as a model for the target text and therefore, the text type, generic process, register and style are expected to be similar. Therefore, since the nature of the read-to-write activities differs per level, it is expected that test takers are encountered with different kinds of difficulty as each level.

The research this paper describes rests on the view that 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). Besides, as Elder et al. (2002) suggest, if test taker attitudes are a factor affecting the difficulty of tasks, then they should be considered in the investigation of task difficulty.

Based on the above, the research question this paper addresses is what KPG test taker views of 'read-to-write' task difficulty at B1 and C1 proficiency level are and how they differ. For the aims of the research, which covers four exam administrations, especially constructed questionnaires were used and a quantitative inquiry method was employed. Data have been drawn from the Research Centre for English Language Teaching and Testing (RCEL), University of Athens. The findings show that generally, there are distinct differences between B1 and C1 level test taker views of difficulty. The possible factors resulting in this differentiation are discussed by drawing insights from the relevant testing literature.

References

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