

**The Role Of Reflection in the Canadian Academic English Language
(CAEL) Assessment**

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the effect of reflection on the quality of writing produced in the context of an academic writing test, specifically the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) Assessment. Over the past two decades, many researchers (Elbow, 1991; Emerson, 1983; Faigley, 1994; Fulwiler, 1988; Moon, 1999; to name a few) have examined the role of reflection in developing writing ability. It is generally agreed that reflection on the meaning of information and articulating this meaning in writing allows writers to “discover” (Britton, 1975; Emig, 1983; Freedman, 1987) and expand on their thoughts and ultimately produce more clearly developed writing.

Given that reflection allows writers to clarify ideas, educators at Carleton University (e.g., Fox, 2001) have suggested that, due to time constraints during the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) Assessment, a test accepted by many Canadian universities as a reliable indicator of academic English language proficiency, test takers are forced to read at a superficial level, skimming for keywords and details, and do not have a chance to reflect on the relationship between the information and the bigger question (the essay question). Thus the academic writing produced in this exam context may not be truly representative of the test takers’ ability (Fox, 1999).

In an effort to address this concern, three questions have been added to the first reading in the new versions of the CAEL Assessment. These questions are designed to encourage test takers to reflect on the main ideas of the article and how this information relates to the essay question. This paper examines test takers’ perceptions of the role these questions play in formulating their responses to the essay question. Particularly, the following questions will be examined:

1. Do the questions actually promote any kind of useful reflection during the testing time?
2. Do the test takers recognize this activity as different from what they had been doing in answering the previous questions?
3. Do these questions aid test takers in understanding the requirements of the writing task.

The answer to these questions will lead to recommendations on revising or eliminating the reflective questions included in the test.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section present a theoretical framework to support the inclusion of the reflective questions in the context of a test of academic writing, beginning with the importance of reflection in academic writing and then examining the test developer’s role in creating opportunities for reflection during the testing event. The second section will describe the Canadian Academic English Language Assessment. The third and fourth sections will describe the method used to conduct the research and the findings. The fifth sections will present a discussion of the findings.

The Importance of Reflection in Academic Writing

James Moffett (1968), one of the first to theorize about the role of reflection in writing, describes discourse as “(a) reflective and relational.....and (b) rhetorical” (p. 18). He hypothesizes that through reflection a writer builds a representation of the meaning of the text, creates an abstraction of the text in the mind. Using this representation as a framework, the writer is then able to select, reorganize and recombine information to form a new product. In writing an academic essay in an exam situation, the ability to select information relevant to the essay question, and going on to reorganize and

recombine this information to form an original piece of writing that answers the essay question is key and crucial to accomplishing the exam task.

James Britton (1975) suggests that there are three stages to the writing process—conception, incubation and production— and that these processes are constantly interacting with each other. “First the new experience — the reading or the experimenting — has to be fitted into the whole hierarchical complex of what the [writer] already knows and what he thinks and feels about what he already knows. Then.....he has to apply it to the writing assignment, which makes new demands on him” (p. 22). ‘Conception’ relates to Moffett’s idea of ‘creating a representation of the meaning of the text’ and ‘incubation’ echoes Moffett’s idea of ‘relational’, i. e., the writer must integrate or relate the new information (gained in the case of the CAEL Assessment in the form of a reading or a lecture) into an already existing understanding, however scanty, of the topic. These stages, which are accomplished cyclically and/or simultaneously, prepare the way for writing.

Peter Elbow (1991), defining the genre of academic discourse says academic discourse is about reasoning and “...being clear about claims and assertions”(p. 32). In this view more than ever, “good writing” must reflect the writer’s ability to abstract, choose relevant information and reorganize ideas to support claims. These activities may be said to define the act of reflection as it is integrated into the process of writing in an academic setting. It is clear, then, that the quality of the writing will depend on, in part, the amount of time available to a writer to assimilate, analyze and reorganize new information. In an academic writing exam setting such as the CAEL Assessment, test takers must be given opportunities for this reflection if the writing they produce is to be considered representative of the level of writing they are capable of producing in the normal course of academic study.

Writing as a Social Action: The Test Developer's Responsibility

Beginning in the late 80s to the present, the social view of writing has emphasized the interdependence of society and the individual in the co-construction of knowledge. Learning and understanding are considered inherently social and “explaining one’s thinking to another leads to deeper cognitive processing” (Palincsar, 1998, p.345). The role of reflection in teaching writing has greatly expanded as writers are asked to enter into dialogues with themselves and/or others, often through reflective journals. The use of reflective journaling highlights the importance given to the role of reflection in constructing knowledge. As Emig (1983) pointed out “...analysis and synthesis seem to develop most fully only with the support system of verbal language — particularly, it seems, of written language” (p. 123).

“All writing is inherently social” (Thralls, 1992, p. 64) and the writing produced in a testing context is no exception. In fact, testing is an intensely social interaction, as it is the process by which established members of a community evaluate the readiness of an applicant to participate in the activities that constitute the community. The test event is a collaboration between the test developer, rater and the test taker, a dialogue facilitated by the all test questions and responses. Bakhtin’s theory of language and collaboration states that “1) all communication is an *active process* involving collaborative partnerships, and that 2) collaborative partners are linked through a chain of *responsive reactions*” (1992, p. 65). In a test such as the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) Assessment, the test questions guide the test takers through the texts, indicating what is relevant, what may be ignored, mimicking, in a sense, a teaching situation. The responses of the test takers are an indication of their readiness to take this instruction. It is during this dialogue that test takers construct their audience (the rater) and develop a more complete understanding of the task. In a test like the CAEL Assessment, without guidance, test

takers may be surprised by the notion that, as Hunt says, “meaning is at the center of all written language” (1993, p. 113). In a testing situation where academic writing is evaluated, then, it is important that writers be encouraged or guided, by the dialogue between test developer and test takers, to reflect on meaning because “[w]ritten examinations discourage extensive premeditation of the writing. . . .it takes courage, or despair , to sit in an exam room just thinking” (Britton, 1975, p. 25).

This very brief overview of the role of reflection in academic writing and examination of the implications of the view of writing as a social action to test development point out that it is through reflection that writers define and redefine the writing task. It’s an ongoing process that takes place before and during the actual writing down of the ideas. It is dialogic, encompassing the writer and the text and target community. The act of reflection is at the heart of constructing meaning in written discourse and particularly academic writing. In exams of academic writing, when the pressure of time constraints and the concerns about outcomes may distort the natural writing process, unless opportunities for reflection are built into the testing procedure, the writing produced will not be truly representative of the abilities of the test takers, and thus conclusions based on test results will not be valid. It is on the basis of these assumptions that the three reflective questions were added to the Canadian Academic English Language Assessment. The real question is - Do these three question actually promote reflection? It is through the perceptions of the test takers themselves that the answer may be found.

At this point, however, it is necessary to become more familiar with the Canadian English Language Assessment.

THE CANADIAN ACADEMIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE (CAEL) ASSESSMENT

The Canadian Academic English Language Assessment (CAEL) is a high stakes test of English for academic purposes designed to assess the level of English language proficiency of test takers planning to study in universities where English is the medium of instruction. Rather than focusing on what a test taker *knows* about English, it tests the ability of the applicant to *use* English in an Academic setting, in other words meaning is central, rather than grammar and/or morphology. (Fox, 1999)

As Figure 1 below shows, the CAEL Assessment is an integrated, topic-based, criterion referenced performance (1999) test in which test takers read articles, listen to a lecture, and write a short essay all on one topic. The initial instructions emphasize the similarity of the tasks in the test to those in a first year university course. Following are the exact instructions given to test takers on the first page of the CAEL Assessment:

Instructions to the test taker:

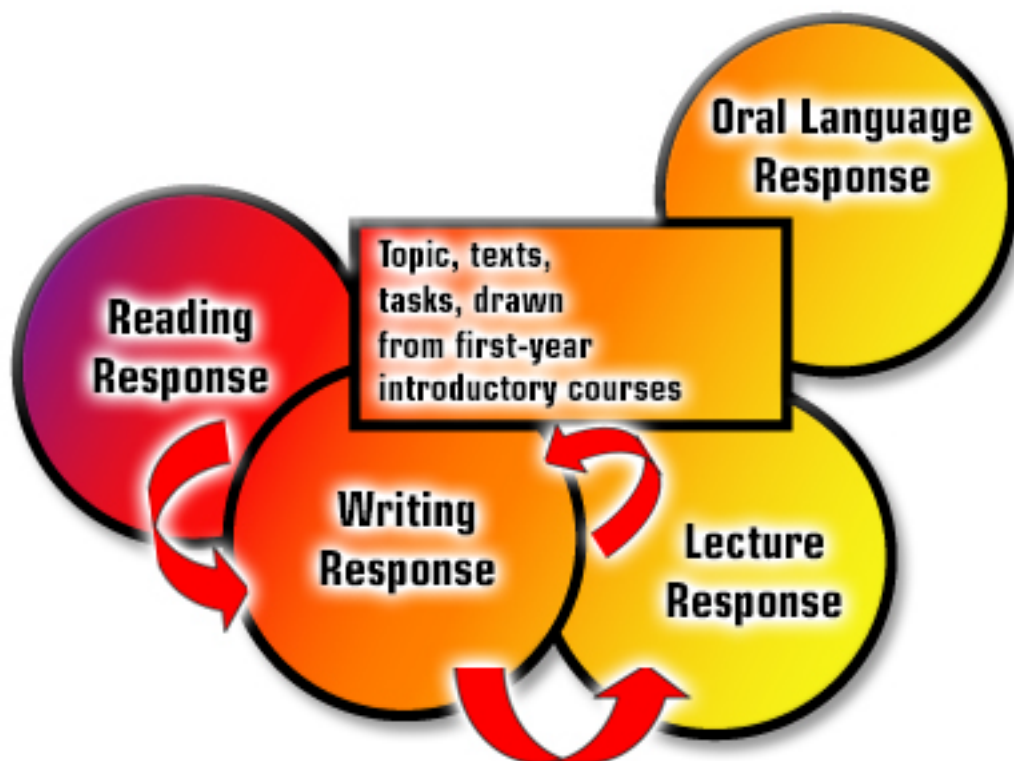
In this test you will be asked to do the things you would be expected to do in a university course. You will read two articles which provide you with background information on the topic and answer questions about them. You will listen to a university lecture on the same topic, answer questions as you listen. Finally, you will be asked to write an essay using information from the readings and the lecture. (Instructions given on first page of all CAEL Assessments)

Topics and texts are chosen from first year introductory university courses. Generally, in academic study, the gathering of information is approached with a specific question or line of questioning in mind. In other words, readers have a frame of reference which allows them to make judgments concerning relevant concepts and details. In the CAEL Assessment, as Figure 1 below shows, the test takers are first introduced to the essay

question to ensure that they are engaged in focused reading and listening. The readings and lecture are accompanied by questions which, when completed, provide the test takers with a scaffolded response to the essay question and the test taker is required to draw from both reading and listening texts to form a response to the essay question. In this way, the activities the test takers are asked to perform, represent the types of activities they will be required to accomplish in academic study (1999).

Figure 1 provides a representation of how the CAEL Assessment is constructed.

Figure 1



[Reading Response](#) - [Lecture Response](#) - [Writing Response](#) - [Oral Language Response](#)
(Fox, 2002)

All sections in the test are carefully timed. This does not change the inherent nature of the lecture as, in the classroom as well as in the test, participants listen as the professor discusses the relevant ideas. In the classroom, participants take notes while the professor

speaks, or they may be asked to fill in a diagram or an outline of some kind. During the CAEL Assessment lecture, participants must answer questions which focus their attention on relevant details of the discussion and fill in diagrams and/or charts.

The reading section, on the other hand, is slightly more impacted by the timed nature of the test. Test takers are informed at the beginning of the test that they will not have time to read every word of the article. In order to complete the questions, they are directed to read the question first and look for the information in the article. They are encouraged to skim the article for key words and to use their rhetorical knowledge of English academic writing to locate details. Under this type of pressure when test takers complete the questions they may have only a fragmented understanding of the main ideas in the article and how these ideas relate to the essay question. Figure 2 gives an example of one type of task found in the reading section. In examining the example, it is clear that the answers to the questions may be obtained by reading the question first and then skimming the article for key words.

Figure 2
CAEL Assessment Practice Test: SLEEP

<p>Chapter 2: SLEEP Sleep is a physiological state characterised by the loss of consciousness and a very marked slowing of the various functions of the mind and body. Periods of sleep are recurrent and necessary for the preservation of life. It is during such periods that the body apparently recuperates or regenerates from the effects of waking activity.</p>	<p>READING 1: "SLEEP" 15 minutes/17 points Read the questions below and then quickly scan the article to find the answers.</p> <p>1. According to the article, what are 2 characteristics of sleep? Put check marks (<u>Y</u>) beside the correct answers. (2 points) <input type="checkbox"/> Loud and excessive snoring <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of consciousness <input type="checkbox"/> Slowing of functions of body and mind <input type="checkbox"/> Dreaming and night terrors</p> <p>2. What is one reason we need sleep? (1 point) <input type="checkbox"/></p>
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The essay question asks test takers to use the information from the readings and the lecture to formulate a response to the essay prompt. Examples of essay topics follow:

- Using information from the readings and the lecture, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of reducing the number of hours of sleep an individual gets each day.
- Using information from the readings and the lecture, agree or disagree with the following statement
Humans should be able to work effectively with much less sleep.
- Using information from the readings and the lecture, answer the following questions. What is sleep? Is it possible to control the number of hours of sleep an individual needs each day to function well.

The essay is to be completed in 45 minutes. Although test takers are encouraged to take the first 15 minutes to review the information and plan the essay, many test takers, working under the pressure of time, do not use this strategy. In general, this situation does not reflect how academic writing takes place. Even the most disorganized students, the ones who leave every assignment to the last minute, will have some time, perhaps days and even weeks, to reflect on how they will approach a writing task. They will have heard their professors referring to the assignment and perhaps engaged in some discussion with other members of the class concerning different aspects of the assignment.

Certainly this time for reflection doesn't ensure a grade A paper; however, the question does arise as to whether or not, without time to reflect, the writing produced in response to the CAEL Assessment format truly reflects the ability of the test takers. If, indeed the CAEL Assessment Philosophy of Language Testing is to

- provide every opportunity, given the constraints of the testing setting, to allow test takers to perform at their highest level of ability
- take every measure possible to involve test takers in the testing process by incorporating their feedback in test development decisions and valuing their contributions (Fox, 2002)

then it is important to attempt to provide methods of encouraging reflection during the test. Adding these three questions to the end of the first reading is an attempt to give test takers a moment to reflect on what they have just read and how it relates to the larger

issue of the essay question. It is an attempt to refocus their minds on the initial question after the first introduction to the topic. Following are the question.

1. What are the most important ideas found in Reading 1?
(2 points)

 2. How will the information in Reading 1 help you to write your essay at the end of the test?
(2 points)

 3. Based on Reading 1, is it possible for humans to work effectively with much less sleep? (Put a check beside the best answer.)
 YES
 NO
- Explain:
(1 point)

Method

Although there are several ways the impact of these questions could be examine, for example, statistical analysis of overall results, examination of the test takers' responses to the questions or the markers' responses to the test takers' answers, or a categorization of responses in relation to the different band levels, the purpose of this paper is to examine particularly the test takers' perceptions of the questions.

In this light I wish to discover

4. if the questions actually promoted any kind of useful reflection during the testing time,
5. if the test takers recognized this activity as different from what they had been doing in answering the previous questions. and
6. if these questions aided the test taker in understanding the requirements of the writing task.

To examine test takers' perception of these questions, I have focused on an intermediate group of students enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes class at Carleton University. The CAEL Assessment with reflective questions was administered as part of course content, the only difference being that the results were used for diagnostic purposes as opposed to university entrance requirements.

This group of students is particularly salient in this situation, as they have all taken the CAEL Assessment before and therefore are able to compare this experience (with the reflective questions) to their previous experience of the CAEL Assessment (without reflective questions). After the test was completed, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Fifteen of the twenty-three students who took the test responded to the questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire will be examined, in the next section.

Results

For ease of reference, the information gathered by examining the test takers' responses to each question on the questionnaire is presented in chart form. First the question is listed, then the reason this question was included in the questionnaire is given, and last the findings are summarized. In each case the findings have been supported by quotes taken from the questionnaires, presented in the test takers' own words and identified by a number which refers to the number assigned to each questionnaire to protect the identity of the participants.

As previously mentioned, the participants in this study were members of an intermediate English for Academic Purposes class. The CAEL Assessment version with reflective questions was administered to them as part of diagnostic work. The questionnaire was completed after they had finished the test. Fifteen of the twenty-three test takers returned the questionnaires.

RESULTS — 15 Questionnaires

QUESTION	REASON FOR QUESTION	FINDINGS
<p>1. Did you think about the essay question at any time while you were answering the question to reading 1? Explain:</p>	<p>To discover if the essay question informed the test takers' reading of the information. In other words did the test takers have a clear idea of what was expected of them before beginning to read?</p>	<p>The question, itself, is problematic because when the test takers answer it they have already completed the reflective questions which are designed to clarify the task for them. They have difficulty remembering their thinking when they began the questions. However, the answers indicate that</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 5/15 did not think of the essay question because time constrains prevented them from thinking to deeply (1,4,5,8,10)* 2. 6/15 did think about the question and made some remark about how the reading related, e.g., "When I read the theory I can see how it affect the justice system (13." 3. 3/15 didn't understand the question.
<p>2. Can you identify any question in Reading 1 that might help you to write the essay? Explain:</p>	<p>To discover if test takers recognized the connection between the questions and the essay prompt, and particularly if they identified the reflective questions as useful.</p>	<p>Many of the test takers misinterpreted the meaning of this question, thinking that they were to pose a question on Reading 1. Of the five test takers who answered the question, they all identified the reflective questions as helping them in formulating a response to the essay question.</p>
<p>3. Did you find the last three questions of the reading difficult to answer? Explain:</p>	<p>To discovered if the test takers experienced the reflective activity— e.i. relating the information to the essay question — as more difficult than collecting information from the text.</p>	<p>10/15 test takers thought these questions were more difficult that the other questions. "Need to take time to think" (11). "Difficult to answer in my own words" (14). "We need to understand the whole article...and make our own decisions" (10). "There were not any direct answers in the reading" (5). "Due to the time limit, I was not able to concentrate on the text much so it was hard to write my ideas" (5)</p>
<p>4. Do you think there is a difference in the type of information being asked for in these three questions? Explain:</p>	<p>To discover if the test taker recognized the difference in the type of information asked for in the reflective questions</p>	<p>Most test takers 9/15 did not recognize the difference in the type of information sought in the three reflective questions as opposed to the preceding informational questions. However, those who did, 6/15, were quite clear on the difference. "A chance to express my own opinion " (15). "...had to have an overall understanding of the article " (4). "... the type of information s that being [sic] asked are the constructions of the essay" (2). "Need to conclude the answers from the reading rather than just finding and copying it" (7) "... we have to think carefully" (15).</p>

<p>5. Do you have any other comments about how you felt or what you thought while you were answering these questions?</p>	<p>To offer the test taker to add any information that may express ideas I was not aware of.</p>	<p>Only 5/15 test takers answered this question, but several interesting ideas surfaced.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gave a chance to re-think initial ideas. "I thought I was probably being too radical..." (13). 2. Gave a chance to think about the purpose of the article. "It makes me thinking about what's the main idea and the purpose of the article" (11). 3. Gave a chance to refocus on the essay question. "It was a good chance to gather more information for the essay" (7). 4. Gave a chance to find own words to express ideas. "It's difficult for me not to copy the content" (10). 5. Gave a chance to discover a personal voice. "Helped me see how I felt about the topic, I really appreciated a chance to express an opinion." (15)
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**Refers to number given to each participant.*

Comments:

Question 1; As mentioned, this question did not work well. I was trying to discover if they used the essay question to narrow the focus of their reading, or to begin the process of relating the information to the research question. I think that this information would be accessible through a face-to-face interview, where test takers could be guided into remembering their mental attitude before they answered the reflective questions.

Question 2: Unfortunately, this question also posed some problems. Most of the test takers misinterpreted the questions to mean that I wanted them to pose a question **on** the reading. They responded by suggesting a number of questions that would relate the meaning of the text to the essay question, for example, test taker 12 responded by saying “Because I could realize how understanding criminals means to understand a theory and the justice system at the same time.” This is a complex answer, showing a reflective quality, as well as the struggles to put this knowledge into writing, however, it was not the answer that I was looking for.

A revised edition of the question asking the test taker to write the numbers of specific question that helped in the writing response would work better.

Questions 3 & 4: Here I was attempting to distinguish between tacit and explicit knowledge of the difference in the question types, i. e., informational/reflective. The findings indicate that although most of the test takers (10/15 – Question 3) thought the reflective questions were more difficult, most of them (9/15 – Question 4) didn’t recognize that there was a difference. So, I concluded that students new tacitly that the

questions required more thought but didn't explicitly know why. I conclude, here, that it is not essential for test takers to actually know that they are involved in reflection for the activity to be useful. It was clear, however, from the answers of the test takers who did recognize the difference that the questions did, in fact, succeed in encouraging reflection on both the meaning of the text as a whole and its relation to the essay question.

Discussion

As stated in the opening paragraphs of this essay, reflection on meaning is an integral part of constructing a written response, especially in academic writing (Britton, 1975; Elbow, 1998; Emig, 1983; Freedman¹, 1987). As James Britton (1975) says, “[T]he writer is selecting from what he knows and thinks,... and embodying that knowledge and thought in words which he produces” (p. 23). This activity requires greater effort than finding information in a text, as shown by the responses of many test takers saying that the reflective question were more difficult than the informational questions. In a testing situation, where there is the pressure of time, test takers find it difficult to perform such reflective actions, feeling that there is not enough time to think. If it is true that academic writing is by nature, as James Moffett (1968) says, “reflective and relational” (p. 18), and as Peter Elbow (1991) maintains, that it involves “...being clear about claims and assertions” (p. 140), then, opportunities for reflection must be built into the construction of the test, .if the conclusions drawn from the result of the evaluation of such writing are to be valid,

In this light, then, we conclude that adding these three reflective questions to the CAEL Assessment is useful, as perceived by the test takers, themselves.

The first of the three research questions presented in the introduction of this paper asks if the reflective questions actually promote any kind of useful reflection during the testing time? Clearly, from the test takers' comments, the answer to this question is affirmative. Test takers recognize that there is a difference between skimming the article for key words, getting the answer "directly from the article" (10), and "concluding the answer from the reading rather than just copying it" (7). Given the time constraints, they mention that they don't have an overall understanding of the article when they have finished answering the questions. As one test taker remarked, "We had not enough time to think deeply. The only way was to skim the article in order to find the answer"(4). Therefore, they find it useful to look over the article as a whole to discover the purpose of the article and how it relates to the essay question. In this way they begin the process of selecting the information most relevant to constructing the essay. If the opportunity for this activity is not built into the construction of the test, then the writing produced will not exhibit the selective and relational features that mark academic writing.

The second research question asks if test takers recognize this reflective activity as different from what they had been doing in answering the informational questions. It's interesting to note here that most of the test takers did not **recognize** that they were involved in a different activity during reflection than during information gathering; however they **experienced** these questions as more difficult. It seems clear that test takers do not need to recognize and categorize the activity for it to be useful.

Test takers experience these reflective questions as different in character from the informational questions. As one test taker noted, "They make you think"(8). This activity is a necessary part of producing academic writing in which the new information "has to be fitted into the whole hierarchical complex of what the [writer] already knows and what he thinks and feels about what he already knows" (Britton, 1975, p. 22). It requires that

test takers recognize previous assumptions and modify or change them according to this new information. One test taker reveals this process when she noted, “I thought that probably I was being too radical when I supported...” (12). This clearly shows the process of fitting the new information into what she already knows. It is experienced as more difficult than simply skimming and copying, and yet it is appreciated as an opportunity to refocus on the initial question, to begin the process of finding original relationships among the ideas and original words to express them. Several test takers make this clear in the following comments: “I realized how understanding the theory of...” (12); “...because it’s difficult to answer in my own words” (14); “ need to think harder” (11) “a chance to express my own opinion (15) “there’s no answer in the text” (8).

The third research question asks if the reflective questions aid the test takers in understanding the requirements of the writing task. In other words, do the reflective questions help the test takers understand who the audience is, or more specifically, what the raters (the audience) are looking for. It is important in this context to recognize the role that past experience may play in how test takers approach tests. Many language tests focus on grammaticality and sentences construction (Fox, 1999). Test takers may not be prepared for an integrated, meaning centered test such as the CAEL Assessment. As Herrington (1985) mentions there are “problems when professors g[i]ve students mixed messages as to the audience for writing or when no issue is perceived”(p. 344). This is equally true in test situations where the audience is not a professor, but a rater. If test takers’ experiences of language tests have mainly encompassed multiple choice and non-integrated essay writing, they may not be aware of how important it is to integrate the information from the readings and the lecture in a test such as the CAEL Assessment. In this case, then, the writing produced in the exam context may not be representative of the

ability of the tests takers to perform in a classroom context, and therefore, the conclusions drawn from the test results may not be valid.

It is clear from the remarks of the test takers that the reflection questions refocus their attention on the essay question. These questions “helped in writing the essay because I knew I had to use the readings in writing the essay”(15). They help to clarify for test takers that academic writing is partly about taking a position in the conversation of others in the field (Giltrow, 2002). In other words, to succeed in this exam, it is essential to use the readings and the lecture as research or background, to support and elaborate the test takers’ own ideas. One test taker shows how she has understood this in the following comment: “People have done some researches, and it can help me to have more suggestions of writing the essay” (10). In making this clear to test takers, the reflective questions help to clarify the dimensions of the writing task. They help test takers to form an idea of the audience, in this case, the rater, to make more explicit what the audience/rater is looking for in a response. What Hunt (1993) says about reading is equally true about writing:

...the nature of the reading process is influenced by a range of variables which can be grouped into three categories: the reader, the text, and the situation. Just as altering the text will affect the nature of the process that occurs, and thus the kind of point or meaning that may be constructed, so changing the reader, or the situation in which the reading occurs, will equally affect that process and its outcome (p. 3)

In understanding who the audience is, and how the test fits into the situation/context of academic study, the test takers are better able to shape the outcome, e. i., the writing.

Voice

One important issue that emerged from examining the test takers’ responses to the questionnaire is what Giltrow (2002) refers to as “embracing the subject” (p. 325), or discovering the subjective position. Writers may wish to “expose the relevant social and political – *personal* – elements of {their} experience of the world” (p. 324). Here, an

important part of preparing to write is understanding and expressing personal opinion. Academic discourse “attempts to project an objective position” (Elbow, 1991, p. 141) however the position is never objective as “the individual mind can never transcend personal emotions, social circumstances and historical conditions” (Bizzell, as cited in Elbow, 1991, p. 140). Through reflecting on the meaning of the readings, test takers may discover or elaborate on their personal position on the topic. As one test taker said, “The questions should be in the test [because] they gave me a chance to express my personal opinion. The rest of the test was so objective. I really appreciated a chance to express my opinion” (15). Here we see the desire of the test taker to be recognized as part of the context, an entity or voice in the writing.

Although the reflective questions were not added to the test in order to allow test takers to present their personal opinions, this was clearly an important aspect of the response. In the context of academic study, discussion forms an important part of elaborating and clarifying thinking. As previously mentioned learning and understanding are considered inherently social and “explaining one’s thinking to another leads to deeper cognitive processing” (Palincsar, 1998, p.345). The test developer’s questions and the test takers’ responses form a dialogue in which the developer attempts to guide the test takers to an examination of the relevant information through the questions, intervening where appropriate to nudge the test takers from simply collecting pieces of information into the next phase which is relating this information to the larger question and discovering their own position which, ultimately, will lend authority to their writing. Indeed, the highest level awarded to the writing in the CAEL Assessment states that the “writer writes with authority and style”(Fox, 1999, p.18).

Implications

In examining test takers' perception of the usefulness of the reflective questions, it is clear that these questions help test takers to reflect on the meaning of the text and how it relates to the essay question; they allow test takers to form a clear understanding of the writing task; and they also aid test takers in discovering or clarifying their position on the topic. The questions should, therefore be included in all versions of the CAEL Assessment in order to "provide every opportunity, given the constraints of the testing setting, to allow test takers to perform at their highest level of ability" (Fox, 2002). The issues of where they should appear and how they should be marked are more difficult to assess.

Given the fact that some test takers don't have enough time to complete all the questions, only those test takers with superior reading skills may have the benefit of these questions. It is recommended, therefore, that the position of these questions be examined. Research should be constructed that would examine how these questions function if they are separated and placed in various positions throughout the readings, or at the beginning of the second reading, or if they are offered as part of the planning stage of the writing. It might also be suggested that reflective questions be added to the end of the lecture questions, as a standard feature of CAEL Assessment test construction.

When making these decisions, it is important to consider time constraints. It is not just enough to ask the questions, but it is also important to provide test takers with enough time to answer them. The target group in the case of the CAEL Assessment is first year university students. Therefore, these readings and questions should be piloted on members of this group to determine if they can accomplish the tasks with relative ease.

It is also important to consider how points are awarded for these questions. Are there correct answers to these reflective questions? If so, does awarding points for ‘correct’ answers defeat the purpose of the questions which is to allow the test takers to discover meaning or their position on the topic? (In the tradition of reflective journaling, one of the main elements was the element of not marking the writing. (Elbow, 1991)) If the test takers are to use the questions as tools to discover meaning, should they be told that any answer earns them a point? If any answer earns a point, do these questions still test reading? And do the points gained on these questions unfairly skew the total marks in favor of a faster, but not necessarily ‘better’ reader? In a test such as the CAEL Assessment, where the accumulation of points results in the awarding of levels, these issues must be carefully examined.

This paper has examined test takers’ perceptions of the usefulness of three reflective questions in constructing their responses to the essay question of a high stakes university entrance English language assessment. It is clear that, as reflection is a necessary part of academic writing, in any test context where academic writing is evaluated, opportunities for reflection need to be included in the testing situation. By including these questions, the Canadian Academic English Language Assessment is a more reliable tool in assessing academic writing skills.

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