13th ICLLCE 2019 Singapore 017-016 LIAO Xiaodan

# A Case Study of How Test Candidate's Perception Affects the Validity of Summary Writing in the National Matriculation English Test

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores whether candidate's perception affects the validity of summary writing. It involves two research questions: 1) What is the status of the candidate's perception of summery writing in National Matriculation English Test? 2) Does perception affect the validation of summary writing? If so, how does perception affect the validation of summary writing? A case study approach is used in this study. At first, the candidate's perception status was examined through one on one interview, exploration of test papers and observations of writing process, then some relative interventions were carried out in the form of lecture, experience, practice and reading to improve candidate's perception status. The results showed that the candidate's scores of summary writing was increased, the ability to differentiate the main ideas and details was fostered, the satisfaction with summary writing was improved. But the ability to express the main idea clearly and logically was not improved obviously, to which the potential explanation is that in the candidate's mind a long and complicated paragraph is the optimal way to get high marks but not the short and concise paragraph. From the above aspects, we can conclude candidate's perception does affect the validity of summary writing. Implication was obtained from the study. Besides the fostering of language competence and the training of test strategies, the background information and theoretical basis of constructing tests to improve the perception of a certain test item also need to be taken into study plan.

Keywords: Perception, validity, summary writing

## Introduction

With the development of the economy, science, technology and culture, and with the great improvement of students' language ability, *New Scheme of College Entrance Examination* was launched in 2017, according to which twice *National Matriculation English Tests* will be organized and offered for test candidates to choose freely to achieve a good validity and a high fairness. At the same time, the structure of the English test paper is also altered, in which the writing part witnesses the biggest change --- with the writing items increased from one to two and the total marks from 25 points to 40 points. According to *National Unified College Entrance Examination English Test Instruction*, the first section of the writing part is *Practical Writing* with a total score of 15, which acquires students to write a composition according to a certain situation within 80 words, and these situation includes complaining about a goods or service, writing a public speech draft and so on. The second section of the writing part adopts an alternative projects—*Summary Writing* or *Continuation Writing*—which are under an irregular alternate use with a total score of 25. All these changes highlight the importance of writing ability and also pose a great challenge to both students and teachers.

National English Curriculum Standards for Common Senior High School (NECS) gives a clear definition for key competences and the corresponding curriculum goals in English discipline ---language competence, culture awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. As for the language competence goals, students have a certain level of language sense, can apply the knowledge into a common context in an integrated way, can understand the meaning of oral and written texts, can recognize the means used for a proper meaning conveyance and can communicate with people in oral and written ways effectively. As for the thinking quality goals, students can differentiate and analyze the specific phenomena of language and culture, can sort out and summarize the information, can construct a new concept, can infer the logical relation, can judge all kind of opinions objectively and can foster an ability to think independently and innovatively by using language. From the Curriculum Standards, it can be seen that more importance has been put on the communicative ability and the integrated use ability (NECS, 2017). The ability to sort out, then summarize, and last construct information is also emphasized in the Curriculum Standards. Summary writing, as an exam item, is very suitable to test these abilities and help students to achieve them.

## **Validity and Summary Writing**

Validity. Validity in general refers to the appropriateness of a given test or any of its component parts as a measures of what it is purported to measure. A test is said to be valid to the extent that it measures what it is supposed to measure... any test then may be valid for some purpose, but not for others (Henning, 1987:89). Validity is a unitary concept. Although evidence may be accumulated in many ways, validity always refers to the degree to which that evidence supports the inference that are made from the scores. The inferences regarding specific uses of a test are validated, not the test itself (American Psychological Association, 1985).

Validity can be established in a number of different ways, which correspond to the different types of validity. Alderson (1993:170) uses the terms of internal validity and external validity to discuss the types of validity. According to Alderson, internal validity relates to the studies of the perceived content of the test and its perceived effect, and external validity relates to studies comparing students' test scores with measures of their ability gleaned from outside the test. There are many ways to assess the internal validity of a test, such as face validity, content validity and response validity. External validity involves concurrent validity, predictive validity, construct validity, of which the construct validity is the commonest and most important type.

Ebel and Frisbie (1991) explains the construct validity as follows: the term construct refers to a psychological construct, a theoretical conceptualization about an aspect of human behavior that cannot be measured or observed directly. Examples of constructs are intelligent, achievement motivation, anxiety, achievement, attitude, dominance, and reading comprehension. Construct validation is the process of gathering evidence to support the contention that a given test indeed measures the psychological construct the makers intend it to measure. The goal is to determine the meaning of scores from the test, to assure that the scores mean what we expect them to mean. If a test has construct validity, it is capable of measuring certain characteristics in accordance with a theory of language behavior and learning.

As for the validity of writing, the best way is direct test, which means to get candidates to write. Direct test has such advantages as positive backwash and easy construction. Zou (2011) summarizes the characteristics of direct tests of writing. First, direct tests in writing emphasize the authenticity in examination forms, close resemblance in content and real context. Second, direct tests can test the productive ability as a whole.

Three, directs test has a clear test objectives, so test paper makers know clearly what needs to be tested.

Arthur Hughes (1989: 83) states the writing problems which are worth consideration as follow: We have to set writing tests that are properly representative for the population of tasks that we should expect the students to be able to perform; The tasks should elicit valid samples of writing (i.e which truly represent the students ability; It is essential that the samples of writing can and will be scored validly and reliably.

Summary Writing. Most previous studies of summary writing abroad are focused in the university context with an empirical approach, and findings of these studies are as follows: explicit instruction and paraphrasing strategies can improve summary writing (Mcdonough, 2014); the practice of summary writing can Contribute significantly to the reading ability improvement (Lynda Taylor 2013; Marzec-Stawiarska 2016); less test-anxiety can make worse and high-test anxiety can make better the performance of summary writing (Mok & Wilson Shun 2016). Some other studies are conducted in the online context, such as Yang (2016) tries to show online peer feedback in summary writing can help construct academic knowledge, and Yang (2014) prepares language teachers for blended teaching of summary writing.

In China, some empirical studies in summary writing have been done to explore some strategies to improve summary writing. Jin (2016) conducts an empirical study to find out the test candidates' common mistakes in summary writing and presents solutions to them; Zhao (2017) finds the pedagogical interventions of concept mapping can improve the summary writing. The validation of summery writing has also been done from several aspects to prove that the summary writing in *National Matriculation English Tests* has an effective validation. Zhang (2010) finds the summary writing task and the marking criterion can evaluate candidates' language ability effectively and hence have a good validation. Li (2013) reports an empirical study that genre as a characteristic of the source text affects test takers' performance in summary writing task. Zhang (2017) concludes the rating scale of summary writing are the reflections of the theory of communicative language theory, which is the construct validation.

The previous studies about summary writing are mainly concerned with the strategies to improve writing performance. And in China, some studies have been done to prove the validation of the summary writing task in *National Matriculation English Tests* from validation itself. Even though constructing a proper test paper and a proper marking criteria is essential for the clarification and justification of the intended interpretations and uses of observed scores, in real situation the factors affecting the validation is more than these aspects, and writing strategies, psychological states, test perception are also factors exerting a great but indirect impact on the test validation, which are always ignored. Some test candidates only focus attention on the writing item itself narrowly, some external information such as test perception are seemed "useless" and are abandoned by them. But in the long run, this aspect is much more important for a lifelong study. Since candidates are not a test machine, they need know why they take the summary writing test, what the summary writing test is used for in the future and so on. So this study will investigate how the test candidates' perception affect the validation of summary writing in *National Matriculation English Test*, which will involve two research questions:

- 1) What is the status of the candidate's perception of summery writing in *National Matriculation English Test*?
- 2) Does perception affect the validation of summary writing? If so, how does perception affect the validation of summary writing?

## Research Procedures

# **Case Study**

This study is designed to explore how candidates' perception of summary writing affects its validity. Mary, a Grade Three student of a senior high school in Huzhou, is invited to participate the study. Huhzou Middle School is a top middle school. Mary's English scores in the first three semesters often ranked around No. 5 in her class, and she got 6 point in IELTS in the September of 2017, with 6 points in the writing part. In September of 2017, she started her third year study in the senior high school.

A case study approach is appropriate for my study. The first reason is I know the study object Mary better enough for a good cooperation in the study. The second reason is Mary needs me to help her solve the problem in her summary writing. The third reason is the case study approach can help me receive an in-depth understanding of the studied issue

Observations, interviews, reports and documents will be used to provide a rich description of the study.

# Diagnosis: Status of Candidates' Perception

Mary's scores often ranked around No. 5 in the first three semesters, but in the fourth semester she started to get lower scores and lower ranks because the new writing item – especially Summary Writing – was introduced into the *National Matriculation English Test*. In one exam of July, 2017, Mary got scores of 134 in English test, in which the summary writing lost 9 points (the total points are 25) and other parts together lost 7 points (the total points are 125). So language competence was not the reason to explain the loss of scores. Many students got little lower scores than before, but Mary got the lowest proportion of scores with respect to her high total scores. So from this aspect, the summery writing didn't reflect her language competence and failed to be valid to test it. Some other factors must have affected the validity of the summary writing test.

As for this situation, in the August of 2017, one-on-one interviews, exploration of test papers and observations of writing process were arranged to help diagnose the problems in order to answer the first research question: 1) What is the current status of the candidate's perception of summery writing in *National Matriculation English Test*?

Before one-to-one interview, interview outlines were prepared to collect data about her perception of summary writing:

- 1) How much do you know about summary writing?
- 2) What is the test purpose of summary writing?
- 3) What kinds of abilities are tested in summary writing?
- 4) What is the application of summary writing in the future real life?
- 5) What are your procedures when you do the summary writing?
- 6) What is the rating criteria for the summary writing?
- 7) What instruction about summary writing have you gotten from your class teacher?
- 8) Do you like the summary writing?
- 9) What are your difficulties when you do the summary writing test?
- 10) Do you feel nervous or tense when you do the summary writing test?

The interview was held at my home and in an informal way. According to Mary's answers, current status of her perception of summary writing (to answer the first research question) were identified and sorted into three main aspects which might cause her writing failure and the low validity of the test.

First, she has a poor perception of the background knowledge about summary writing, such as theoretical construct, purpose, application of summary writing.

For example, Mary said, "Summary writing is to summarize the main idea of a passage." "I never think much of the purpose of summary writing, I means it is a test, to test how much we have learned." "Summary writing is to test our writing ability and summary ability." Mary knew little about the construct of summary writing.

Second, she has no perception of the application in the future real life study.

"The application of summary writing I can think of is that when teacher analyze the text my class teacher will ask us to summarize the main idea of the passage. No other applications do I think of. "From what Mary said, it was found that she just knew one way to apply summary writing.

Third, she has a negative perception of summary writing. Since she doesn't know much about summary writing, especially the merits of it, as shown in the first and second factors, she dislikes the type of summary writing task.

"The traditional writing item (she means the writing with a topic and some prompts) gave us more freedom, and it could foster our creative ability. But in the summary writing we just retell other's story, and it's boring and restricts our thinking... I don't know why summary writing was introduced and traditional writing was abandoned. I can't see much good in summary writing."

After interview, then exploration of test papers and observations of writing process were carried out. It was found that she could not distinguish main points and supporting details since many sentences she wrote included only detailed information or phenomena. And there was no clear boundary between point and points. These data also confirmed the former conclusion about the current status of candidate's perception.

## **Intervention: Improving Candidates' Perception**

After current status of candidate's perception of summary writing were identified with the help of the multiple channels of data collection, pedagogical intervention was conducted to improve the candidate's perception, hence to find out whether it can improve the validity of summary writing test. The intervention was held in the August of 2017, once a week, three times altogether.

Table 1 Intervention to Improve Perception

No.	Time	Perception status	Intervention	Intervention contents
1	1 <sup>st</sup> week in August of 2017	poor perception of the background knowledge	Researcher gave a lecture	Background knowledge of summary writing, including definition, theoretical basis, purpose, ability to test, application, usefulness.
2	2 <sup>nd</sup> week in August of 2017	no perception of the application in the future authentic study	experienced	Application simulation of summary writing into the authentic situation in future study.
3	3 <sup>rd</sup> week in August of 2017	negative perception (attitude) of summary writing		Effect of negative perception on test performance.

18th & 19th March, 2019

The first time, as regards Mary's poor perception of the background knowledge about summary writing, a lecture was made to equip her with the background information about summary writing. The main content will be presented as follows.

A summary is defined as "a short statement that gives only the main points of something not the details" in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Brandon (2014) defines a summary as a "rewritten, shortened version of a piece of writing in which you use your own wording to express the main ideas. ... It requires you to discriminate among the ideas in the target reading passage. Summaries are usually written in the form of a well-designed paragraph. "There are four key words in the two definitions, "short" "main points" "rewritten" "own wording". It means that candidates should comply with the source text, concentrate on the main ideas, retell the source text in one own wording. Do not add personal information or many details, do not evaluate the source text, and do not copy the exact words.

The theoretical basis of summary writing is Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis. Swain thinks comprehensible output activities can facilitate the understanding of the comprehensible input, and finally promote the acquisition of language. In summary writing, the source text reading process is comprehensible input activities and the writing process is comprehensible output activities, two of which jointly promote the language learning. The second theoretical basis of summary writing is authentic assessment. In our daily life of using language, almost every activity involves reading, listening and writing together or input and output together, so summary writing is an authentic communicative activity.

The purpose of summary writing is to test candidates' reading ability of obtaining information, thinking ability of analyzing, generalizing and summarizing information, and writing ability of communicating and expressing one's own opinion. Summary writing as an integrated task is a valid way to test the comprehensive abilities, and has a high construct validity.

The second time, as regards no perception of the application in the future authentic study, many authentic application situations were offered to her to experience and practice. In current situation, summary writing is used by students to write down the main points of every lecture as class notes. It's a common way for students to tell parents what have been taught in school after they come back home. Summary writing reinforces comprehension skills in reading. Summary writing often happens when students recommend an interesting book to friends after reading it. In all these situation, summary is used every day, consciously or unconsciously, and it is a basic ability and has a wide application.

In the future situation, summary writing is frequently used in college study, especially in academic college study, in which students are required to read some assigned papers and write the main points of the papers before they attend the professor's lecture. In this sense, summary writing is to get students well prepared before they go to university to further their academic study. In the later college study or in the future, students need to write their own term paper, thesis, or dissertation, of which the abstracts are also a kind of summary writing. As is known to us, abstracts matter much to a high-quality paper.

The above authentic applications were presented to let Mary know learning to summarize effectively will help her in many ways.

The third time, as regards her negative perception of summary writing, some research results were shown to Mary about how a negative perception affecting test performance. The information that these research results conveyed was there was a positive correlation between attitude and performance. That meant if she wanted to improve her test performance, she had better hold a positive perception to summary writing at first. On the other hand, after Mary knew more about summary writing, such as

the definition, purpose, usefulness and application, her negative perception began to turn positive gradually, and she began to like this type of test.

The intervention was made to improve Mary's perception of summary writing, but what was the effect of the pedagogical intervention? Did it improve the scores and then enhance the validity of summary writing test? Maybe time would tell us.

# Results: Enhancing Validation of Summary Writing

In order to answer the second research question "Does perception affect the validation of summary writing? If so, how does perception affect the validation of summary writing?" Three areas of data were included: Mary's summary writing tasks assigned by me, scores Mary got in school summary writing test and Mary's self-report.

After each intervention, a summary writing task was assigned for her to practice, which means one summary writing task each week and three summary writing tasks altogether.

Table 2
List of Summary Writing Tasks while Intervention

No.	Time	Summary writing tasks	Genre
Task	1st week in	An essay about the writer's	Narrative
1	August of 2017	experience of saving a bunny	
Task	2nd week in	An essay about laugh and person's	Argumentative
2	August of 2017	health	
Task	3rd week in	An essay about self-made	Expository
3	August of 2017	billionaires and inherited	
	_	billionaires	

The essays were assessed from three dimensions, which were mainly from the perspectives of perception and meanwhile reflected the thinking quality goals in *Curriculum Standards*:

- 1) the ability to sort out information:
  - a. to include all the main points, that is, no important information is missing;
  - b. to understand the information correctly.
- 2) the ability to analyze information:
  - a. c) to differentiate the main points and details, differentiate that is, no minor information is used as important information.
- 3) the ability to reconstruct information:
  - a. d) to generalize the main information into points;
  - b. e) to have a clear boundary between points and points.

After three times of interventions and writing practices, Mary's consciousness was raised, she could identify and spot all the main information in the original text among the three tasks. Task 1, a narrative writing, seemed to be easy to tackle, so Mary met all measurement dimensions except for a clear boundary between points and points. In task 2, Mary did a worst job, and the potential reasons were the argumentative task is a little difficult and the perception of summary writing still not rooted in her mind. In Task 3, Mary showed a great progress, because only one dimension wasn't met properly in spite of the difficulty of the original text. The similarity among the three tasks was Mary couldn't state the points clearly and make a clear boundary between points and points. It seemed that she hoped to lengthen her sentences for the structure's complexity, which, she believed, would give her a good mark in language aspect. But in fact delicacy and

conciseness of language were more suitable to express points clearly. The measurement of Mary's summary writing tasks under the above three dimensions was showed as follows:

Table 3

Measurement Result of Summery Writing after Intervention

Measureme	the ability to sort out information		the ability to analyze	the ability to reconstruct information	
	a	h	information c	d	e
Task 1	$\sqrt{}$	$\sqrt{}$	$\sqrt{}$	$\sqrt{}$	×
Task 2	$\sqrt{}$	$\sqrt{}$	×	×	$\sqrt{}$
Task 3	$\sqrt{}$	$\sqrt{}$	$\sqrt{}$	$\sqrt{}$	×

The other important evidence about whether perception affects the validation of summary writing was the scores Mary got in school summary writing tests. In Senior high school, students take English exams every month, so four monthly exams from September to December in 2017 and one National Matriculation Test in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> of November were taken, among which the National Matriculation Test and Test in Nov of 2017 chose Continuation Writing as the writing task.

1able 4
Scores in School Summary Writing Tests after Intervention

No.	Time	Scores of	Total scores	
		summary writing	(150 in total)	
		(25 in total)		
Pre-test	July of 2017	16	134	
Post-test 1	Sept of 2017	17	130	
Post-test 2	Oct of 2017	20	135	
	Nov of 2017	Continuation Writing	(excluded)	
	National Matriculation	Continuation Writing	(excluded)	
	Test			
Post-test 3	Dec of 2017	18	128	

From the scores of Mary's summary writing tasks and scores of the whole English paper, we could find she made a steady progress in summary writing step by step. In the post-test 3, Mary seemed getting a lower mark than in task 2, but from the total mark of 128, it could be guessed that the paper in post-test 3 was a little more difficult. So from the scores of the school summary wiring test, it could be found an enhancement in scores and then in validity after the perception was improved.

Mary's self-report, which was written by Mary in November of 2017 after she took the first *National Matriculation English Tests*, was also included to check whether perception affects the validation of summary writing, because self-satisfaction is an important indicator to predict the future development tendency.

In Mary's self-report, she said, "I don't hate summary writing as before, on the contrary I begin to like it a little now, because summary writing is so useful in my daily life and so necessary for my academic college study in future, especially when I hope to study in England one day..." "In the November's National Matriculation Test of 2017, I got 136 scores, which was high in my class. And after the training of summary writing, I become more confident, and I set a great plan for myself, that is, I choose to sit the test for a second time in 2018 and strive for higher scores of 145. Because after I know more about summary writing, I am confident that I can achieve higher scores in summary

writing, hence higher scores in the whole English test. " "I now can understand more about teacher's comments on my writing papers in my school exams. I know what is summary writing and what's the use or application of summary writing, which helps me a lot, but I still feel difficult in transforming the source sentences into my own wording, because the first sight of the sentences impress on my mind too much. It's hard for me to break through the constraint of the source sentences..."

After sorting out Mary's self-report, some important information was identified: she began to like the test type summary writing, she became a little more confident of her summary writing, and she can understand teacher's comments on her summary writing, but she still felt puzzled about transforming the source sentences in her own wording.

Through the above three kinds of data, conclusion can't be made that her improvement is only due to the three interventions, because one semester's classroom teaching and her after-class practicing are also important factors. But we can't deny the fact that three interventions of perception improvement do have some effects on the improvement of summary writing. Because before interventions, Mary had high scores in English and ranked around 5, but after summary writing test was introduced into *National Matriculation English Tests*, she got lower scores only in the summary writing part. Candidate's language competence wasn't reflected through the summary writing test correctly, and the validity of summary writing part is low. After diagnosis and intervention, candidate's scores get improved and can match her language competence, so it was concluded the validity was improved as candidate's perception was improved. That's the answer to the second research question.

## **Implications and Conclusion**

This study investigated the validity of summary writing through a case study, to explore whether candidate's perception affects the validity of summary writing. The candidate Mary's perception status was examined through one on one interview, exploration of test papers and observations of writing process, then some relative interventions were carried out in the form of lecture, experience, practice and reading to improve candidate's perception status. The results showed that the candidate Mary made progress in summary writing. The scores of summary writing was increased, the ability to differentiate the main ideas and details was fostered, the ability to analyze and generalize information was improved, the satisfaction with summary writing and with herself was better, but the ability to express the main idea clearly and logically was not improved obviously. From the above aspects, we can conclude candidate's perception does affect the validity of summary writing.

Some implications were obtained from the study. For students and teachers, besides the fostering of language competence and the training of test strategies, the background information and theoretical basis of constructing test to improve the perception of a certain test item also need to be taken into study plan. Language competence, test strategies, test content and test types are main aspects that test validation needs to consider; at the same time, the perception of the test is also an important factor which exerts great effect on the test validation.

At last, this study is conducted in a case approach, which can get some vivid descriptions of the case, but the sample is small with only one, so the result is not generalizable. And more numerical data should be included in the follow-up study to increase the objectivity.

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