Effects of summary writing on oral proficiency performance within a computer-based test for integrated listening-speaking tasks

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Abstract. The effective design of test items within a computer-based language test (CBLT) for developing English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' listening and speaking skills has become an increasingly challenging task for both test users and test designers compared with that of pencil-and-paper tests in the past. It needs to fit integrated oral proficiency tasks into the framework of quantitative psychometric testing modes. It also needs to meet higher demands of test takers living in today's digitized world. To test if summary writing in integrated listening-speaking tasks is beneficial to EFL learners in decreasing their anxiety in the follow-up speaking task, a fifteen-week experiment was carried out at a CALL-based English audio-video speaking class (EAVSC). To measure the effects, both pre- and post-tests along with follow-up surveys were carried out. Analyses of correlated data show that there is a positive correlation between EFL learners' performance of summary writing and that of the follow-up oral test item, i.e. the personal statement.

Keywords: summary writing, anxiety, item design, personal statement.

1.   Introduction

Anxiety in the process of any test can be an unavoidable psychological factor which distracts test takers from their performance and usually affects their test results. Previous studies and classroom observations show that anxiety usually has negative effects on EFL learners' performance in a test, especially in a speaking

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test. Breeze (2004) states that, according to Fulcher's (2003) conclusion, in order "to provide a valid speaking test, it is necessary to capture the relevant aspects of speaking on the one hand, and prevent interference in the score from irrelevant factors, on the other" (para. 3).

In today's digitized world, conducting computerized integrated listening-speaking tasks can be even more challenging for EFL learners. As Grant, Huang, and Pasfield-Neofitou (2013) indicate, "while traditional modes of learning continue to remain important, relevant, and in demand, all disciplines need to embrace the challenges and opportunities online and blended learning bring" (p. 2).

Summary writing, a content-based task type, can be used to simultaneously test two or more language skills: listening and writing, or reading and writing. However, there is not much research concerning the issue, neither on the combination of summary writing with listening-based integrated tasks, nor on the process of conducting oral productive tasks in EFL classroom practice.

This study aimed at finding out if such innovative item design can minimize the negative effects of EFL learners' anxiety in a listening-based speaking task.

2. Method

2.1. Research questions

The specific research questions were:

- Is there a positive correlation between EFL learners' performance of summary writing and that of the personal statement?

- Is summary writing helpful to decrease EFL learners' anxiety in their follow-up oral output?

2.2. Research design

This study was carried out at the first author's EAVSC for non-English majors and lasted for fifteen weeks from February 25th to June 3rd, 2014. Two administrative classes were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental class and a control class. The course was conducted in a digital lab, which made it possible to do synchronous oral communication, random grouping, and speech recording and collecting. All the students were required to do their pre- and post-tests through a

self-developed web-based English language skills training system (see Figure 1), and data about their learning and responses to the various activities could be collected automatically.

The integrated listening-speaking test design was as follows: firstly students were given video/audio-based listening material and the media was played several times. During the period, students were required to do several listening comprehension tasks which included short-answer questions, multiple choices, true or false, sentence completion, constructing questions, and finally summary writing of the same material in five minutes. This was followed up with a one-minute personal statement about the same material (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A screenshot of the post-test on the teacher's interface of the system

To measure the effects of summary writing on oral proficiency performance, pre- and post-tests were carried out. In the pre-test, students in both classes were not required to do summary writing. During the fifteen-week period, the students in the experimental class were trained to be familiar with the above test mode and they were required to complete summary writing before the speech recording in post-test, while those in the control class were not. The study focused on whether summary writing had positive effects on decreasing anxiety in the oral production. As such, we intended to find out if there was a significant difference in anxiety between the two tests.

2.3. Instruments

One integrated listening-speaking test and two questionnaires, which include an anxiety scale of personal statement, were assigned to both classes. Additionally, some items about the effect of summary writing on the degree of anxiety in the

personal statements were added to the questionnaire for the experimental class during the post-test.

2.4. Data collection

All the students' personal statements were rated on the basis of IELTS Speaking Band Descriptions by two teachers to minimize bias. 51 (31 from the experimental class and 24 from the control class) copies of feedback from each questionnaire were collected and counted as valid.

2.5. Data analysis

Data was processed by using SPSS 17.0:

- Pearson correlation tests were used to illustrate the correlation between the score of the summary writing and personal statements.

- Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, percentage) were used to analyze the anxiety scale and the students' feedback in the experimental class with respect to the effect of summary writing on anxiety in the personal statements.

- Paired sample t-test was employed to find out if there is a significant difference in students' anxiety in each class between the pre- and post-tests.

3. Discussion

3.1. Summary writing and personal statements

As shown in Table 1, there exists a positive correlation between students' score of summary writing and that of the personal statements in the experimental class.

Table 1. Correlation between the summary writing and personal statements

		Personal statement
Summary writing	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	.549*
	Significance(two-tailed)	.001
	N	31

*: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.2. Analysis of two questionnaires

A paired sample t-test for the anxiety scale of the personal statements was used to measure if there was a significant difference in students' anxiety between the pre- and post-tests in both classes. The results show that there were no significant differences in both classes, with a level of significance value of 0.98 (t=-0.24, df=23, p>0.05) in the control class, and 0.08 (t=1.84, df=26, p>0.05) in the experimental class.

A paired sample t-test for the anxiety scale with respect to coherency and logic in the personal statements shows that there were no significant differences between the two tests in both classes, with a level of significance value of 0.15 (t=1.49, df=23, p>0.05) in the control class and 0.07 (t=1.89, df=26, p>0.05) in the experimental class.

Concerning the anxiety scale with respect to language expressions in the personal statements, items #4 and #11 in both questionnaires, i.e "*in the process of doing the personal statement, I felt so nervous that I forgot the words and expressions I had known before*" and "*in the process of doing the personal statement, I was too nervous to utter words and sentences*", were of particular interest. A paired sample t-test shows that the mean score of #4 in the experimental class pre- and post-tests were 3.70 and 3.11 respectively, with a level of significance value of 0.00 (t=3.17, df=26, p<0.05). The mean score of #11 in the experimental class pre- and post-tests were 3.67 and 3.19 respectively, with a level of significance value of 0.01 (t=2.80, df=26, p<0.05). Meanwhile, the p value of #4 and #11 in the control group was 1.00 (t=0.00, df=23, p>0.05) and 0.37 (t=0.91, df=23, p>0.05) respectively. This confirmed that the difference between the two tests in the experimental class was significant while in the control class it was not.

A paired sample t-test for the anxiety scale with respect to short-term memory loss in the personal statements shows that there were no significant differences between the two tests in both classes, with a level of significance value of 0.83 (t=-0.22, df=23, p>0.05) in the control class and with a level of significance value of 0.40 (t=0.85, df=26, p>0.05) in the experimental class.

The feedback from effect of summary writing on anxiety in the personal statements in the experimental class shows that most students felt that summary writing was helpful to ease their anxiety.

4. Conclusions

This study leads to the following conclusions:

- There is a positive correlation between EFL learners' performance of summary writing and that of the personal statements within a computer-based test for integrated listening-speaking tasks.

- In a listening-based oral test, summary writing, to a certain degree, may help in lowering EFL learners' anxiety in the process of oral performance since it can enable them to feel prepared in discourse organization before speech, especially in language expression.

However, in this study, some limitations still remain that may have biased the results:

- The number of subjects involved was not big enough to meet the statistic requirement for a reliable outcome.

- The relevant factors that may affect EFL learners' anxiety were not fully considered.

- The questionnaires may not include all the possible effects of summary writing on EFL learners' anxiety in the personal statements.

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