

Testing ESAP writing using CBT with internet access



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As evidenced by a wealth of literature (Mercado, 2017, Charles, 2017, Christiansen, 2017, Henry, 2007, Salouti, 2002), use of the computer in English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) has become widespread in many parts of the world over recent decades. The internet is recognised as a valuable tool and source of information for both teachers and students, and word-processing software provides various opportunities to improve the quality of their written output. In this article, we share our experience of incorporating these tools into computer-based testing (CBT) of tertiary students at a university of applied sciences in Switzerland.

Teaching context

As part of the Bachelor of Science degree programmes, depending on their study programme, students are required to take English either for 4 semesters or for 2 semesters with the option to continue for a further two. The teaching/learning focus of the ESAP courses provided is two-fold; firstly, to enable students to cope with the requirements of their BSc studies, parts of which may be taught in English, and enable them to research the scientific literature, much of which is published in English. These competences can then be transferred to possible future MSc studies, which a

small but increasing percentage of our students choose to pursue. The second aim of the ESAP courses is to prepare students to be effective users of English in their future careers. As a small country with 4 national languages, English is essential in Switzerland for international business and may also be used as a *lingua franca* between Swiss citizens with different native languages.

Academic writing skills are included in each of the four semesters. The genres covered are in line with the learning goals described in the previous paragraph and include essays, reports, summaries, letters of application etc. From the beginning of the courses, students develop their writing skills on their laptops; they are encouraged to take advantage of online tools such as monolingual and bi-lingual dictionaries, collocation dictionaries, thesauri etc. as well as relevant features of word-processing software such as spelling and grammar checkers, and synonyms. Students are required to deliver their work to their teacher electronically (e.g. as an email attachment or via the university's learning platform). This is not only in line with the university's move towards 'paperless' studies but also reflects the working situation in which students can expect to find themselves once their studies have been completed.

Paper-based testing

In accordance with university regulations, students are assessed each semester in order to provide semester grades. In each of the English courses, that is, in semesters 1 to 4, writing skills are tested, reflecting the genres and topics covered in the particular course. Depending on the semester, the score awarded for writing makes up 25-40% of the final semester grade.

All exams have, until recently, been presented on paper with students completing the tasks by hand in the time-honoured way. However, in recent years, we became aware that, due to the pen and paper nature of the writing tests,

- they were not reflecting the way writing was being practised during the courses,
- students were not being given the opportunity to show their mastery of the online and word-processing tools we encourage them to employ in order to improve their writing,
- the writing tests were not in line with the electronic communication mode students can be expected to use in their future careers,
- the university's policy of paperless studies (which applies to an increasing number of students) was not being followed.

Trialling CBT with internet access
In response, it was decided to de-

sign and trial a writing test which sought to overcome the drawbacks of the paper-based testing system (see above). In other words, a test was needed which allowed students to complete ESAP writing tasks in the same way that they had done during their courses, on their laptops with access to online and word-processing tools to enhance the quality of their work.

The university's learning platform

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provides certain testing options, but as these are fairly limited and tend to focus on discrete points, it did not offer a solution for a task-based test of writing. We therefore decided to set the students the same task types as in the paper-based exams, but to allow them to complete the tasks on their computers with use of the internet and word-processing tools. While we were keen to have students benefit from online dictionaries, search engines etc., we

were mindful of the opportunities the internet provides to communicate with other students or third parties. For this reason, the following measures were implemented:

- Students were required to sign a declaration stating that they had neither given help to nor obtained help from anyone else.
- The test was trialled with small classes in classrooms which allowed the teacher to invigilate from behind the students so that their screens could be observed.
- Where the number of students exceeded 18, two teachers were present.
- The time allowed for the writing test was tight, so that students had to use the time given wisely to enable them to complete the tasks, and had little or no 'spare time' in which to contact others.

The first trials of the new writing test took place with fourth semester students at the end of the spring semester 2016. This particular time was chosen as students are tested during the final weeks of the semester in their individual classes in classrooms, rather than in larger groups in lecture theatres (which is the situation at the end of the first and third semesters), thus allowing all of the invigilation procedures described above to be put into place. The writing section of the exam formed 25% of the final mark, which was considered a 'safe' per-

centage to trial it with, and did not negatively impact on the willingness of students to participate in the first run of the CBT writing test. A further 25% of the final mark came from a paper-based test of reading, listening and vocabulary, which students sat immediately after the writing test, and the final 50% from a speaking test (study-related presentation) in the post-semester exam block.

Students were informed at the beginning of the semester that the writing exam would reflect their learning, and thus be computer-based. All students at our university are required to have laptops for their degree programmes, and arrived at the exam suitably equipped. The university has its own WLAN, which is highly reliable, but paper was available should any unexpected incident occur. Teachers also ensured that test rooms had a sufficient number of sockets so that students could connect to the electricity supply if necessary, and also that one or two spare laptops were on hand.

The writing task was given out in paper form with the declaration (referred to above) on the front page. This was written in German, the local language, to avoid any possible misunderstanding, then read and signed by the students before the test began. Students

were informed that what they submitted at the end of the test was what would be marked, in other words, work submitted at a later time would not be accepted. At the end of the writing test, students sent their work (in the case of the advanced level students, a report on trends and a summary of a study-related text) to their teacher as an

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email attachment. The paper-based part of the test (receptive skills and vocabulary) did not start until the teacher had received each student’s

writing tasks. While invigilating the paper-based test, the teacher took the opportunity to make sure that each attachment could be opened and read.

Results and findings

The results of the writing test were evaluated, and when compared to previous paper-based exams using the same task types were found to be slightly higher. Furthermore, scoring was less demanding as teachers found the computer-based written work easier to deal with than the intricacies of handwriting. In addition, formatting and the general appearance of students’ work had improved, especially as no words or parts of the text had been crossed out, which was often the case in



paper-based tests. Feedback was obtained from the students immediately after the written exam as well as once the test papers had been returned and in both cases found to be positive. Students shared the teachers' views that this type of test more closely reflects their needs and the computer-based world they operate in, and welcomed the move to computer-based testing of writing. In particular, they valued the opportunity to be able to easily amend and improve their work, as well as the use of online dictionaries and word-processing tools. Furthermore, the vast majority agreed that they were able to work more quickly on their laptops than with pen and paper.

Conclusion

Based on the results and positive feedback received, CBT was used

again a year later with a different set of fourth semester students and also extended to second semester students with an essay task. The results and feedback were similar to those from the first trial. In addition, a positive washback on students' motivation for writing during the semester was also observed. We are aware that this type of CBT with use of the internet depends to a certain extent on the honesty and integrity of students, and is only possible with smaller classes to ensure effective invigilation. However, we believe that the move to CBT with internet access has enhanced the validity of our writing tests, enabling them to more closely reflect students' academic and future professional needs, and intend to further explore its use in tests of ESAP writing.

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