

Green Anthony & Hawkey Roger

The process of writing items for a task-based test of reading

This paper reports a study of language test item writing and editing processes, an area of assessment expertise that has rarely been accessible to those outside large testing organisations. Based on retrospective reports and direct observation, the paper compares how trained and untrained item writers select and edit texts and craft items suitable for a task based test of reading.

Seven item writers were asked to prepare texts and items for the IELTS academic reading test. Four had been trained and certified by the test provider; the others were experienced in ELT but had not previously written for a high stakes test such as IELTS.

The two groups of item writers brought their texts and items to separate focus group sessions led by the researchers. In the first session, members of each group discussed how they had selected and edited their texts and how they had generated the items. Attention was also given to how the item writers had learned their techniques.

In a second session for each group, the item writers, observed by the researchers, worked to further refine their material to make it more suitable for the test (as trained item writers usually would in a test editing meeting).

The study provides unprecedented insight into the process of generating items for task based tests. Reflections from experienced item writers about their expertise and the comparison between trained and untrained item writers suggest important lessons for item writer recruitment and training programmes, and for test validity.