Introducing the Writing Section of the NEAT in Korea

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Abstract

This paper introduces the writing section of the National English Ability Test (NEAT) developed for college entrance exam in Korea. It will discuss the nature of the writing tasks of the NEAT, rating domains and rater training procedure.

1. Introduction

The National English Ability Test (NEAT) was launched by the Ministry of Education and the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE) in 2009 to replace the English section of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) in Korea. It had been indicated for a long time that the CSAT exercises negative washback on English teaching and learning practices in classrooms in Korea. Because the CSAT only tests receptive skills such as listening and reading skills, teachers and students in Korea tend to focus on those skills just preparing for the test. For the reason, the NEAT was designed to test not only the receptive skills but productive skills as well including speaking and writing skills. It was hoped that the NEAT could improve the current English teaching and learning practices in Korea encouraging teachers and students to work on productive skills as well as receptive skills. And thus, it will ultimately contribute to normalizing English education in public schools in Korea and enhancing communicative competence in English.

The NEAT has two levels according to its constructs and purposes. Level 2 of the NEAT is designed to mainly measure basic academic English ability. It measures the ability to use English in academic domains. The domains include economics, education, politics, philosophy, and so forth that are related to academic areas. Level 3, on the other hand, is

designed to measure lower level of practical English ability. It measures the ability to use English in non-academic domains such as transportations, communications, shopping, restaurants, sports, hobbies and so forth that the examinees are exposed to in their daily lives. The examinees may choose one of the two levels according to their purpose and use the score for their college entrance. The students who want to specialize in majors related to English take Level 2 and those who want to specialize in majors that are less related to English can take Level 3. As mentioned above, the NEAT tests all of the four language skills. The listening and reading sections of the NEAT are composed of multiple-choice items but the speaking and writing sections consist in the items that require extended production responses. Also the NEAT is an Internet-based test. All of the processes related to the test such as test administration, rater training, item development, and score report are all made in a virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) system over the Internet cloud. In this paper, the writing section of the NEAT will be introduced. The tasks in the writing section, scoring rubrics and rater training will be discussed.

2. Tasks in the Writing Section of the NEAT

There are two tasks in level 2: Writing about daily lives and Expression one's own opinion and four tasks in level 3: Selective picture description with given words, One-picture description, Letter writing and Two-picture description and inference.

1) Writing about daily lives

This task measures the ability to describe personal experience about a given event or an object in one paragraph (60-80 words). For a given topic, three items are suggested that the test takers should use when writing. The topics for this task can include personal experience or thoughts about an event or an item such as the most memorable birthday party, favorite food, or a person that affected their life for example. The test takers' responses are rated on task completion, content, organization, and language use. In order to get higher points, they are required to use more than 60 words and all of the three items.

2) Expressing one's own opinion

In this task, the ability to express one's own opinion about a controversial topic using one or two paragraphs (80-120 words) is measured. In this task, test takers are given a topic and the ideas supporting pros & cons for the topic. They are supposed to take pros or cons for the topic and compose an argumentative essay. In a response, to get higher points, they are required to include introduction and conclusion, use the two given supporting ideas and their own one, and use more than 80 words. The issues or topics for this task are, for example, advantages or disadvantages of paper books, the Internet, coed classes, energy drinks and so forth. Responses are rated on task completion, content, organization, and language use.

3) Selective picture description with given words

This task measures whether the test takers have the ability to compose a short message (15-25 words) fulfilling a communicative function assigned to a task. In this task, the test takers are given three situations and key words belonging to each of the situations. They are asked to choose one situation and describe it using given key words. Situations are the ones that require the test takers to fulfil various communicative functions such as apologizing, advising, recommending, suggesting, and so forth. Responses are measured on task completion, content, organization, and language use. In order to get higher points, the test takers should use more than 15 words in 2-3 sentences and both of the given key words. Also they should successfully deliver the intended message.

4) One-picture description

In this task, measures the ability to describe the people in a particular place is measured. The test takers are given a picture where people are taking some actions in places such as a classroom, school gym, living room, park and so forth. Responses are rated on task completion, content and language use.

5) Letter writing

This task measures the ability to compose an email for a practical purpose. The test takers are supposed to write an email for various purposes such as suggesting friends to participate in an event, asking a manufacturer for information about a product, or replying to their friends, for example. Three pieces of information are given that the test takers need to include for responding. Responses are measured on task completion, content, organization, and language use. Test takers should use more than 40 words, include all of the information given and successfully deliver the intended message in the task.

6) Two-picture description and inference

In this task, the ability to make a description and an inference is measured. The test takers are given two pictures to describe and one question mark to infer. The exemplary situations that the test takers describe in this task include the ones where a person forgets to bring the money in the restaurant, is late for the test because he or she woke late in the morning, passes the stop that they have to get off in the subway and so forth. The responses are measured on task completion, content, organization and language use. The test takers should use more than 40 words, and appropriately describe and infer the situations.

3. Rating Domains of the Writing Section of the NEAT

The rating domains of the writing section of the NEAT include task completion, content, organization and language use. Task completion examines the extent to which whether the test takers successfully fulfill the assigned task. For example, it measures whether they use more than the given number of words, they include all the given information, or the response is relevant to the assigned topic or subject. There is a so called ‘Golden Rule’ in task completion, which suggests that the performance on task completion places on a limit upon scores of other rating domains. Thus, for instance, no matter how the test takers are grammatically accurate in the response, they cannot score high if they used less than the given number of words or the response is not relevant to the topic of the task. Content examines whether the main idea in test taker’s responses are deeply discussed. This

rating domain particularly looks at the extent to which supporting details are adequately provided. Organization examines coherence and cohesion of the response. It measures the extent to which the ideas are developed in a logical manner and sentences are connected cohesively using proper transition words. Lastly, language use is the domain which evaluates the diversity and accuracy of the responses. It examines the extent to which the test takers used a wide use of sentence structures or used correct grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation. The rating scales are generally constructed from 0 to 3 or 0 to 5 in consideration of rating consistency. 0 is assigned only when the responses are not relevant to the given topic or curses or abusive languages are found. Table 1 presents the rating domains and scales of the NEAT writing tasks.

Table 1

Rating Domains and Scales of the Writing Tasks

Tasks/Domains	Task Completion	Content	Organization	Language Use
Writing about daily lives	5	5	5	5
Expressing one's own opinion	5	5	5	5
Selective picture description	5	3	3	5
One-picture description	5	3		5
Writing an email	5	5	5	5
Two-picture description and inference	5	5	5	5

4. Rater Training

Figure 1. Rater training of the writing and speaking tasks.

It should be mentioned first that the trainees are trained for rating responses from speaking and writing section together. Thus, once they pass the test, the trainees will serve as raters for speaking and writing sections of the NEAT. There are some restrictions on who should apply for the rater training. The certified secondary school English teacher and after-school English class instructors are only eligible for the application. The training process is illustrated in Figure1. Because the rater training of the NEAT takes place over the Internet cloud, the trainees are trained at home using a personal computer and it takes usually 60 hours to complete the training. The trainees are first supposed to watch video clips of each of the tasks of the speaking (8 clips) and writing (6 clips) sections, where they learn about the tasks and study scoring rubrics. Rating examples are also provided for each of the tasks. After that, they do pilot ratings twice where the trainees are supposed to rate 20 responses of each of the tasks. Because at the pilot trainings benchmark scores are also provided, the trainees can compare their scores and the benchmark scores. Thus, the trainees can have

opportunities for re-examining the rubrics and close the gap when a large difference is found between their scores and the benchmark scores. At the rater qualification test, the trainees rate another 10 responses for each of the tasks. Correlations and agreement ratios are computed between their scores and the benchmark scores. Only the trainees will be certified as on-line raters of the speaking and writing sections of the NEAT whose results are above the standard. To serve as raters of the NEAT administrations, the certified raters have to be recertified before each of the administrations.

5. Conclusion

It is regrettable to say that the NEAT has been officially discontinued since the Ministry of Education in Korea announced in August, 2013 that the KSAT English section would not be replaced with the NEAT. It was worried that if speaking and writing tests are introduced into the current KSAT, the workload of the students could increase and at the same time students may begin to depend on after-school private education for speaking and writing which contradicts with the government policy that after-school private education should be eradicated. Even though the NEAT was closed, it should have contributed to changing English teaching and learning practices in classrooms in Korea in positive ways. Ever since the NEAT was launched in 2009, approximately 1000 English teachers in Korea have been certified as item writers, and 2500 were certified as raters. It is hoped that these certified teachers with the knowledge and expertise for a large-scale standard test such as the NEAT obtained during the training sessions will begin to make a change in their classroom.

Appendix

The NEAT writing tasks are presented below for your information.

1. Writing about daily lives

자신이 장래에 선택하고 싶은 직업을 떠올려 보고, 그 직업에 대해 다음 내용을 포함하여 쓰시오. (60-80단어)

- the name of the job
- the description of the job
- the reasons why you want to have the job

- Think of the job you want to have in the future and describe the job including the items below (60-80 words)

2. Expressing one's own opinion

다음의 표에는 종이책(paper book)의 장점과 단점이 정리되어 있다. 이를 참고하여 자신의 입장을 선택하여 서론을 쓰고, 한 가지 이유를 추가하여 세 가지 이유를 모두 논한 후에 결론을 쓰시오. (80-120단어)

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Introduction</p> <p>↓</p> <p>1. not requiring any electronic devices</p> <p>2. easier to make notes</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Conclusion</p>	<p>Introduction</p> <p>↓</p> <p>1. heavy to carry</p> <p>2. taking up too much space</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Conclusion</p>

- The disadvantages and advantages of paper books are provided in the box below. Take one side of them and express your opinion. You should include introduction, conclusion, and the two pieces of evidence suggested in the box as well as your own one. (80-120 words)

3. Selective picture description

친구가 수업이 끝나고 분식집에 같이 가자고 하는데, 이를 거절해야 하는 상황이다. 다음에 제시된 세 가지 상황 중 하나를 선택한 후, 주어진 단어나 어구를 활용하여 상황에 알맞게 거절하는 메시지를 완전한 2~3개의 문장으로 작성하십시오. (15-25 단어)

(1)	(2)	(3)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - science project - school lab 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - baseball game - friend's house 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - birthday cake - grocery store

-One of your friends asks you to go to a snack bar but you would like to reject the suggestion. Choose one of the situations below and write a message using the key words in the box (15-25 words)

4. One picture description

아래의 글은 학교 체육관에 있는 사람들의 행동을 묘사한 것이다. 다음 그림을 보고 (1)~(4)의 빈칸에 각각 10개 이내의 단어를 사용하여 문장을 완성하십시오.

There are some students in a school gym.

The girl with glasses is (1)_____.

The boy in a striped shirt is (2)_____.

The two girls in short sleeves are (3)_____.

The five boys with gloves are (4)_____.

- There are some people in a school gym. Describe the actions of the people in the picture. (less than 10 words)

5. Writing an email

다음은 준수(Junsu)가 학교방문의 날(Annual Homecoming Day)을 맞이하여 다른 학교 친구들을 초대하는 이메일이다. 다음에 주어진 세 가지 정보를 포함하여 글을 쓰시오. (40-50 단어)

1. Date & Hours:	June 10, 2012 (10:00 am~ 5:00 pm)
2. Place:	Hankuk High School
3. Activities:	Games, barbecue party & music concert

Hi, there!

Best wishes,

Junsu

- Junsu would like to invite his friends for his school's Annual Homecoming Day.
Write an email using information provided below. (40-50 words)

6. Two-picture description and inference

다음 그림 1, 2, 3은 순서대로 일어난 일이다. 그림 1과 2에 나타난 상황을 각각 묘사하고, 이에 따른 그림 3의 내용을 추론하여 쓰시오. (40-50 단어)

- Pictures 1, 2, and 3 below represent events that happen in sequence. Describe pictures 1 and 2 and infer picture 3. (40-50 words)