

Understanding Chinese EFL Learners' Perceptions of Test Fairness of TOEFL iBT Independent Writing Test

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Abstract: Test fairness has been discussed since 1960s. Since then, its definition and its extension have been heatedly elucidated. Reviewed the current literature body, there has been little studies done pertaining to understand the perception of Chinese learners who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) of the test fairness of TOEFL iBT independent writing part. In this article, three participants were chosen by using purposeful sampling. Base on the results of semi-structured interviews, TOEFL iBT independent writing part is relatively fair and unbiased culturally, but it should be not the only method to gauge learners' writing competence. Some influential factors of TOEFL iBT should be paid more attention to.

Key words: test fairness: the perceptions of Chinese EFL learners: TOEFL iBT independent writing test

Introduction

According to Statista.com, more than 300,000 Chinese Students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are currently studying in American colleges and universities in the academic year of 2015-2016. Before most of their arrival, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) iBT is a must high-stakes test for them. Given that TOEFL iBT is pivotal for Chinese EFL learners, and one of the most widely recognized high-stakes language proficiency tests to assess international students' benchmark for degree study, the test fairness of TOEFL iBT should be justified not only in terms of validity, but from the international students, the test takers.

The test fairness of high-stakes tests, like TOEFL, International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Graduate Record Exam (GRE), should be undergirded by many people as these test scores are applied to assist test takers to the decision making to various purposes such as admission to overseas universities (Uysal, 2009).

According to Xi (2010)'s definition, "Fairness is defined here as comparable validity for indefinable and relevant groups across all stages of assessment, from assessment conceptualization to the use of assessment results." To fill this blank, the purpose of this study is to understand Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of the test fairness of TOEFL iBT independent writing test. The study centers on the following research questions:

- 1.How do Chinese EFL learners perceive the TOEFL iBT independent writing topics?
- 2.How do they agree with their scoring report on TOEFL iBT independent writing task?

Literature Review

According to Cole and Zieky (2001, p. 369), "During the late of 1960s and early 1970s, there was an intense burst of interest in fairness research, but the results were less than satisfying. The late 1980s began the current era with its growing awareness of the complexity of the issues involved and a focus on fairness as an aspect of validity." After almost four decades, the studies on testing fairness have been witnessed fruitful achievements. Based on the located literature, we drew a literature map (see Figure 1) to guide us to understand the relevant literature.

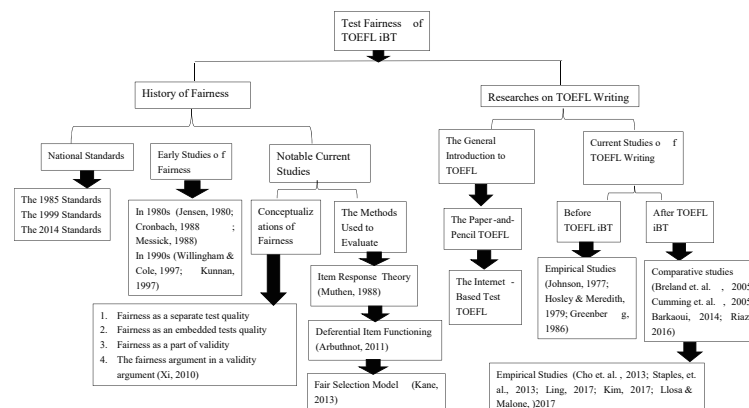


Figure 1 The Literature Map

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of the test fairness of TOEFL iBT independent writing test. The literature that was cumulated and reviewed in the aforementioned chapter has been self-evident that a deficiency of in-depth qualitative studies is one of the research gaps in this field.

It was the researchers' responsibility to handle the results of the interviews, code the transcriptions, interpret the "experiences" given by the participants. The method of analyzing data was open coding, that is, developing codes into themes (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The basic information of three participants and interviews was shown in Table 2.

Table 2 The summary of participants and interviews (N = 3)

Participant	Gender	The length of interview	The educational level
A	Male	25 min	Master
B	Male	30 min	Master
C	Female	35 min	PhD

Findings

Based on the coding processes, four themes were found: the evaluation of the fairness of the writing topics (Theme 1), writing rubrics (Theme 2), interpretation of writing test scores (Theme 3), and other potentially influential factors (Theme 4).

Theme 1: The evaluation of the fairness of the writing topics.

For the TOEFL iBT independent writing topics, Participant A and Participant C agreed that these writing topics were not difficult for them to follow. However, Participant B pointed out another perspective of the writing topics. He said: "... cultural destination. The word of destination...because at that time, I, the first time, my vocabulary was not much. For this word, I can't know the deep meaning of this word...en, it will, for example, "society influence". Until recently, I still check it from my memory...because "society influence" is very big, especially, when, at that time, I didn't understand its meaning."

Theme 2: Writing rubrics

By talking about the TOEFL iBT independent writing topics, 3 participants all mentioned the independent writing rubrics which were provided by ETS (Educational Testing System) online. Participant A used the following words to evaluate the TOEFL iBT writing rubrics: "objectively", "guidance", "useful", and "fair".

There was a disagreement for Participant B. He said: "I know it before. For me, for my old level, I think even level 3 I can not make it. I think they are too high for me, even for international students..."

Theme 3: Interpretation of Writing test scores

When asked about the scores in TOEFL iBT independent writing part, Participant A thought he did a good job in this part. However, he also put forward that if his writing scores were regarded as his academic writing ability, that would be limited, and it would be worth further research because one's academic writing ability is based on what he/she reads and what he/she learns or communication with his/her advisor.

For how to interpret the writing scores, Participant B and Participant C both emphasized more on a person's actual writing capability rather than one-time writing score. The quotes to reflect this idea were listed as follows: "I don't agree. One person wants to do anything, in this world, he or she should have many aspects. People can not judge a person from their surface."

Theme 4: Other potentially influential factors

Participant A and Participant C didn't take the use of keyboard in writing as a constraint. Instead, they said it is not difficult to do and practice more will make writing efficient within a short time.

For Participant B, he addressed that keyboard typing posed difficulty to him. He said: "Yes, it will. From the writing speed, it is my biggest headache. I am not good at typing in computer. I am good at writing by my pen."

Apart from keyboard typing issue, another issue was figured out, that is, the setting of the test venue. Participant B pointed out that the setting was also a disturbance for him. He said: "For me, more people, I will feel more nervous. I have some problems of dealing with nervousness ... The people beside me, for me, I am not an excellent student."

Discussion

As discussed in previous part, four themes were coded. The first two themes were to answer the first research question while the other two to answer the second research question.

Answers to the First Research Question: Theme 1 and Theme 2

The first research question: what do you think about the topics in TOEFL iBT independent writing test? Based on this study, majority of the participants (67%) perceived that the topics were not challenges for them if they prepared for that. However, 33% participants pointed out some vocabularies in the topics were challenging for them. Regarding the ETS writing rubrics, not all the participants agreed that they

are fair. For test takers, they valued more on how their writing would be graded even though they were not asked about this aspect. With regard to the writing topics, they valued more on real-life or cultural fairness on the topics, particularly the vocabulary used in the writing topics.

Answers to the Second Research Question: Theme 3 and Theme 4

Pertinent to the second research question: “How do the Chinese EFL learners interpret their TOEFL iBT writing scores?”, it is unfair to judge a person’s writing capability via one writing test. Instead, the writing capability should be gauged through multiple aspects. In addition, several potentially influential perspectives were found: keyboard typing and the setting of the test venue. What’s more, the way of completing writing test, keyboard writing, was triggered another aspect that could be a potentially influential one to affect the fairness of TOEFL iBT writing test.

Conclusion

Based on the results from interviews, the independent writing topics, the writing test format, and the writing rubrics of TOEFL iBT were relatively fair to test Chinese EFL learners, while the application of using the test results might need more consideration. Moreover, the ETS writing rubrics need to be used in a more considerable manner. In this study, we found two potentially influential factors: keyboard typing and the setting of a test venue. Fairness of any test is the centrality for all the test takers. In this study, we tried to understand the independent writing part of TOEFL iBT and we hope that more thorough researches could be done to understand the whole picture of TOEFL in the near future.

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