Problems in writing skills

Ronald Ohlsen
writing proficiency test

• Students must write an essay of at least 450 and no more than 750 words about an article from a quality newspaper.
• The article presented to them deals with a theme related to their studies.
• Participants in the test are both native speakers of Dutch and students from foreign-language backgrounds in the third year of their studies.
writing proficiency test

The required level: C1

- I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length.
- I can write detailed expositions of complex subjects in an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues.
- I can write different kinds of texts in a style appropriate to the reader in mind.
## Writing Proficiency Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical Accuracy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling and Punctuation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check and Review</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthographic Control</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
writing proficiency test

B2

• I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests.

• I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view.

B1

• I can write straightforward connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest.
the test results
the test results

- C1: 26 native, 16 non-native
- B2: 55 native, 21 non-native
- B1: 19 native, 63 non-native
types of problems

- text types (what is an essay?)
- structuring the text
- sentence structure
- word combinations
- idiomatic expressions
- formal and informal language use
- write a conclusion
literature

- Alice van Kalsbeek & Folkert Kuiken:

Academisch taalgebruik in het Nederlandse wetenschappelijk onderwijs: stand van zaken en blik op de toekomst

Keywords: academic discourse, academic language use, academic literacy, (inter) cultural awareness, language and culture, social and cultural integration
academic discourse

- Academic language use has its own rules and conventions.
- Academic language is the language used in science: in scientific books, journals, articles, essays, dissertations, lectures, research reports, and the like (Hyland 2009).
- Students in higher education are generally very creative, in their language, their ideas as in their way of presenting.
- Condition is that students have acquired sufficient knowledge of the rules and conventions that apply to the transfer of scientific information.
Van Cummins (1979) distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

- BICS refers to the language used in daily situations: generally more concrete language is sufficient.

- CALP is the skill that students need in school situations: features more abstract language.
academic literacy

Various causes for a weak CALP:
(Hart & Risley 1995; Leseman & Van der Leij 2004; Schleppegrell 2004).

• basis: growing up in a low socio-economic environment.
• parents with a non-academic background who are not aware of the importance of school language use.
• teachers in primary and secondary education that pay little attention to language skills.
• Use from a language other than Dutch as a home language.
• a combination of these factors.
language problems of students

Rooijackers, Van der Westen and Graus (2009) and Peters and Van Houtven (2010) mention the following language problems of students:

- difficulty with language of instruction,
- weak reading skills,
- an inadequate reading vocabulary,
- problems with the complete and correct display of the content of a text,
- struggling to structure a longer text,
- register and sentence construction errors.
Kuiken & Van Kalsbeek (2014) mention the following language problems of students:

- no structure in texts and paragraphs
- awkward formulations.
- mistakes in spelling and grammar
- untidy, informal language use
Intervention

- diagnostic tests writing skills
- remedial programs
- language advice, a language mentor
- 'Better writing' courses
Intervention

Dervin & Liddicoat 2013; Kramsch 1993; Quist 2010:

• In teaching in academic language skills the cultural aspects of scientific discourse must be dealt with.

• The underlying cultural values that determine the meaning of language should be made explicit, both with regard to the acquisition of the oral as the written skills.

• Key concepts should be 'analysis', 'dialogue' and 'reflection'.
Intervention

The starting point for the integration of culture into academic skills must be the language that is used to be critically examined for the underlying (cultural) values (Turner, 2011):

why do the authors say that?
What do they not say?
Why do they use these words?
Why do they use that tense in this part?
Intervention

- Academic skills must be offered throughout the study.
- Academic writing skills must become part of the main courses.
- Teachers must consistently return poorly written texts instead of correcting them.
- A broad public debate must be set up about language use in society and at schools.
Intervention

Hans Bennis, director of the Language Union: “In high school, Dutch has become a 'service profession', useful for other subjects as a profession that revolves around good learning to read and write. I miss the content about language and literature. In this way, the study of Dutch is unattractive for students.”

Marc van Oostendorp, professor of Dutch at the Radboud University and affiliated with the Meertens Institute for research and documentation of the Dutch language and culture: “Dutch at school must become sexy again. A course in which students learn about the origin of Dutch literature and how the language is put together. It is better for your language skills if you can not only analyze a text using tricks, but really understand how a language works.”
Sources

• A. van Kalsbeek, F. Kuiken (2014) Academisch taalgebruik in het Nederlandse wetenschappelijk onderwijs: Stand van zaken en blik op de toekomst Internationale Neerlandistiek Volume 52 | Issue 3 Pages (from-to) 221-236.