Composing processes in email writing test tasks: A validity study

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Since email has largely replaced snail mail as the cornerstone of intercultural communication, an increasing number of writing assessments (e.g., IELTS, TOEIC, BULATS) have adopted email writing tasks as means to assess general English writing proficiency. This shift has led to an urgent need for understanding the nature of email writing tasks. Previous research suggests an investigation of examinees’ processes when responding to performance-based assessment task (Bachman, 2002; Cohen, 1998, 2006) provides validity evidence for test use and interpretation of the test scores. To this aim, this study explores writers’ processes in composing email writing test tasks. Twenty EFL undergraduate students in Taiwan participated in think-aloud writing sessions and interviews. The data were analyzed qualitatively across writers and tasks. The results revealed that email tasks require global comprehension of the email prompt and threshold English writing ability. Differences were found across writers of varying score levels. Writers with more experiences in English writing were keenly aware of culturally appropriate email genre and reported coordinating various cognitive and metacognitive processes to complete these tasks. In contrast, writers with less experience and interest in L2 writing reported using a less interactive process due to a lack of email genre awareness. The study suggests email tasks require a solid understanding of genre, pragmatics, and sociocultural context necessary to manage reading and writing interactions. The findings provide insight into the nature of email tasks and contribute to the validity of email writing tasks. The study has implications for L2 writing assessment, development, and instruction

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