

Designing Presentational Writing Assessments for the Advanced Placement World Language and Culture Exams

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Abstract : This paper outlines the criteria that assessment specialists use when they design the 'Persuasive Essay' task for the four Advanced Placement World Language and Culture Exams (AP French, German, Italian, and Spanish). The 'Persuasive Essay' is a free-response, source-based, standardized measure of presentational writing. Each 'Persuasive Essay' item consists of three sources (an article, a chart, and an audio) and a prompt, which is a statement of the topic phrased as an interrogative sentence. Due to its richness of source materials and due to the amount of time that test takers are given to prepare for and write their responses (a total of 55 minutes), the 'Persuasive Essay' is the free-response task on the AP World Language and Culture Exams that goes to the greatest lengths to unleash the test takers' proficiency potential. The author focuses on the work that goes into designing the 'Persuasive Essay' task, outlining best practices for the selection of topics and sources, the interplay that needs to be present among the sources and the thinking behind the articulation of prompts for the 'Persuasive Essay' task. Using released 'Persuasive Essay' items from the AP World Language and Culture Exams and accompanying data on test taker performance, the author shows how different passages, and features of passages, have succeeded (and sometimes not succeeded) in eliciting writing proficiency among test takers over time. Data from approximately 215.000 test takers per year from 2014 to 2017 and approximately 35.000 test takers per year from 2012 to 2013 form the basis of this analysis. The conclusion of the study is that test taker performance improves significantly when the sources that test takers are presented with express directly opposing viewpoints. Test taker performance also improves when the interrogative prompt that the test takers respond to is phrased as a yes/no question. Finally, an analysis of linguistic difficulty and complexity levels of the printed sources reveals that test taker performance does not decrease when the complexity level of the article of the 'Persuasive Essay' increases. This last text complexity analysis is performed with the help of the 'ETS TextEvaluator' tool and the 'Complexity Scale for Information Texts (Scale)', two tools, which, in combination, provide a rubric and a fully-automated technology for evaluating nonfiction and informational texts in English translation.

Keywords : advanced placement world language and culture exams, designing presentational writing assessments, large-scale standardized assessments of written language proficiency, source-based language testing

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