

An Analysis of Letter Writing Tasks from the English Portion of Myanmar's University Entrance Examination 2009-2013

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(accepted December 5, 2014)

Abstract. This paper explores the letter-writing component on the English portion of Myanmar's University Entrance Examination, also referred to as the Matriculation Examination. Very little has been published to date regarding this examination in general, and this paper appears to be the first to address the letter-writing portion of this exam in detail. 165 letter-writing prompts used on the actual exams from 2009 to 2013, as well as six marking schemes used from that same period to assess examinee responses were analyzed. Inconsistencies in the difficulty level of the prompts as well as potential issues with the reliability of the current marking scheme(s) are discussed. The researchers ultimately advocate that the Ministry of Education and Myanmar's Board of Education revise their current approaches to creating letter-writing prompts and consider developing a more contextually-specific and dynamic assessment instrument capable of serving in a formative capacity in classroom-based instruction while also serving the assessment needs of examiners.

BACKGROUND

Education in Myanmar & the Matriculation Examination

The basic education system in Myanmar consists of a 5-4-2-system of five-year schooling (grade 1 to 5) for primary level, four-year schooling (grade 6 to 9) for lower secondary level and two-year schooling (grade 10 to 11) for upper secondary level. (Zaw Htay, 2013). Basic education culminates at the end of grade 11 with Myanmar's National Matriculation Examination, also known as the University Entrance Examination. Over 500,000 students take part in these exams annually. This comprehensive examination is comprised of six subject-specific tests, each of which is worth a maximum of 100 marks. The tests for Myanmar Language, English, and mathematics are compulsory, and the other three tests are some combination of chemistry, physics, biology, history, geography, economics, and optional Burmese. High marks in a subject earn *gondu* (distinction) status for that subject. Students who achieve distinctions in five or more subjects are generally guaranteed placement in one of Myanmar's medical universities, the most selective of

universities. Generally, only those students who pass with distinction are able to choose their university, while the remaining students who pass the exam are assigned to a university by the government, and those who do not pass the exam are not allowed to matriculate at any university in Myanmar whatsoever.

Assessing Writing- Reliability

Assessment of writing tasks on high-stakes exams such as the one studied here is an ever-evolving field. Reliability and validity are a constant concern for individuals and groups responsible for assigning scores to writing samples, as these scores very often carry real-life consequences. Establishing and implementing evaluative frameworks which are reliable is a challenging task. According to Hamp-Lyons (1990) there are four elements that can adversely impact reliability when assessing writing: the writer, the task, the raters, and the scoring procedure. For the purposes of this research only the latter three elements will be discussed.

Tasks themselves should be reliable. Particularly in cases where multiple forms of the same task are employed, each respective form must be shown to

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yield similar results. If these alternate forms do consistently yield similar results it is considered reliable (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Rater reliability includes inter-rater reliability and intra-rater reliability. Addressing inter-rater reliability, Stemler (2004) reminds us that it “must be demonstrated anew for each new study, even if the study is using a scoring rubric or instrument what has been shown to have high inter-rater reliability in the past.” (p.66). Addressing intra-rater reliability, Brown, Bull, and Pendlebury (1997) cite “the lack of consistency of an individual marker” (p.235, as cited in Jonsson & Svingby, 2007) as a significant threat. In order to mitigate threats to the reliability of scoring procedure, educators often turn to rubrics for assessment purposes. The degree to which rubrics created in and for ESL/EFL contexts can be successfully adapted to meet the needs of other language learning environs is debatable (East, 2009; Sasaki & Hirose, 1999), however there is significant empirical evidence suggesting that the use of rubrics in assessing writing increases the reliability of scoring. In a review of 75 empirical studies on rubrics, Jonsson and Svingby (2007) concluded that “the reliable scoring of performance assessments can be enhanced by the use of rubrics, especially if they are analytic, topic-specific, and complemented with exemplars and/or rater training.” (p.130). The latter part of this conclusion is critical, as it qualifies the benefits provided by rubrics as contingent upon the both the type of rubric used (analytic as opposed to holistic), and the manner in which the rubric is introduced to assessors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Very little research has been published regarding Myanmar’s National English Exam in general. Kirkpatrick and Hlaing (2013) provided a succinct overview of the English test overall, concluding among other things that, at the very least, “differences and disparities among regions and a multiple-version test creates doubt about the test’s ultimate reliability.” (p.14). Seemingly nothing about the letter writing portion of the exam specifically

has been published. Therefore the following research is primarily exploratory and descriptive in nature as it investigates the letter-writing task on the national exam and how it is assessed. To that end, this paper looks at the actual letter-writing prompts themselves, as well as the marking schemes used by exam raters as primary sources of data capable of fleshing out the requirements of this portion of the exam. The reliability of the letter-writing prompts, raters, and marking scheme(s) used by Myanmar’s Ministry of Education will be discussed in general terms, and some suggestions for improving both the task and assessment process will be offered.

METHODS

Materials

The letter-writing component of the English exam is worth a maximum of 10 marks (10% of the total exam). There are 11 official testing states/regions in Myanmar, and a different version of the exam is used in each of these states/regions, so 11 different versions of the exam are created each year. Therefore, between 2009 and 2013 there were a total of 55 English tests created for the Matriculation Examination. All matriculation examinations used in Myanmar from 2009-2013 have been published in their entirety by Myanmar’s Ministry of Education in book form (Ministry of Education, Myanmar Board of Examination, 2013). For this research only the letter-writing prompts were analyzed. As each exam’s letter-writing task always provides three prompts for examinees to choose from, there were 165 total letter-writing prompts used during this five-year span.

Each version of the exam has a corresponding marking scheme. The researchers obtained six marking schemes from different states and years. These marking schemes are generally not published, however their contents are not considered confidential after the matriculation exams have been evaluated, and the researchers have been given permission to reproduce and discuss the marking schemes in this report.

Procedures

Writer/interlocutor relationships as well as the number of tasks/messages required by the prompts were recorded for each of the 165 prompts. Recording writer/interlocutor relationships was very straightforward, as the prompts provide this information explicitly. Analyzing the number of messages required by a prompt was similarly simple considering the researchers had six marking schemes, with three prompt-specific summaries apiece, to use as a baseline information for interpreting what the Ministry considers a task/message.

RESULTS

Prompts

Figure 1 shows two prompts reproduced exactly as they were presented on the actual test. Each test includes three such prompts, and examinees must choose just one of the three prompts to write on.

Example 1 (Foreign, 2009)	You are Kyaw Swar . You live at No. 100, Shwe Zet Road, Myitkyina . Write a letter to your father , who is working in Yangon, asking him for some money and telling him why you need the money.
Example 2 (Magwe, 2013)	You are Nilar . You live at No. 195, 78th Street, Mandalay . You recently spent the weekend at your friend's hometown. Write a letter to your friend, Thidar , outlining what you enjoyed most about your visit and inviting her to visit you in your town in the near future.

Figure 1: Sample Letter Prompts

Test-takers are given the name and address of the persona they are to assume, as well as the name of the person to whom they are writing and/or the relationship they supposedly have with that person. This information is emboldened in the prompts, just as shown in Figure 1. These prompts follow a clear pattern. Example 1 in Figure 1 is a prototypical prompt. 156 of the 165 prompts used from 2009 - 2013 began with the exact pattern "*You are (addresser name). You live at (address). Write a letter to (addressee name)...*". Example 2 in Figure one is an example of one of the nine prompts that did not follow this pattern. Prompts such as this differed by inserting some information between the latter two sentences. Of the 165 prompts used from 2009-2013, 80 (48.5%) required examinees to write a letter to a friend, while the remaining 85 prompts required examinees to write to family members (cousin (22), aunt (17), uncle (12), brother (10), sister (10), parents (8), father (3), grandparents (2), mother (1)).

From 2009 to 2013, seven prompts (4.2%) required only one message be communicated, 138 prompts (83.6%) required two messages, 17 required (10.3%) three, and three prompts (1.8%) required examinees to communicate four messages. See Table 2 for a breakdown of the number of messages required by prompts year-to-year.

Marking Scheme

The marking schemes distributed by the Ministry of Education and used by exam evaluators consist of three sections presented in the following order: Prompt-specific summaries (See Table 2), general

Table 1: No. of Tasks 2009-2013

No. of messages	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	TOTAL
	Total (%)	Total (%)	Total (%)	Total (%)	Total (%)	Total (%)
1	4 (12.1)	–	1 (3.0)	1 (3.0)	1 (3.0)	7 (4.2)
2	27 (81.8)	31 (93.9)	29 (87.9)	26 (78.8)	25 (75.8)	138 (83.6)
3	1 (3.0)	2 (6.1)	3 (9.1)	5 (15.2)	6 (18.2)	17 (10.3)
4	1 (3.0)	–	–	1 (3.0)	1 (3.0)	3 (1.8)
Total	33 (100.0)	33 (100.0)	33 (100.0)	33 (100.0)	33 (100.0)	165 (100.0)

guidelines for marking (see Figure 2), and a scoring rubric (see Table 3). Exam raters are provided with a hard copy of the marking scheme on marking day.

The first element of the marking scheme is a set of prompt-specific summaries, as seen in Table 2. These summaries provide examiners with the address, addresser, addressee, message, and preferred tense for the letters. The message summary is critical, as students are evaluated on not only grammar but also the relevancy of their letter in terms of delivering the messages dictated by the prompt. However, by analyzing all 165 prompts from that same period they determined that the number of messages required by each prompt often varied.

The second element of the marking scheme consists of a set of general guidelines for marking

(See Figure 2). Raters are given six points to assess, and told to assess the whole letter while only marking incorrect elements or writing “IRR” in the case of letters which are not relevant to the given prompt.

Assess the following –

- Language (grammar, spelling, etc.)
- Facts
- Relevancy
- Organization
- Presentation
- Format of letter

Assess on the whole letter, underlining mistakes in grammar, spelling, etc.

Do not tick correct sentences.

Do not underline whole sentences, just the incorrect parts.

If irrelevant i.e. nothing to do with what has been asked – write IRR

Figure 2: General Guidelines for Marking

Table 2: Letter-Writing Prompts and Summaries

2009 Sagaing-Chin Letter Prompts		2009 Sagaing-Chin Letter Summaries	
Prompt 1	You are Marlar and your address is No. 41, Lower Main Road, Mawlamyine . Write a letter to your friend, Sandar who is working in a computer centre, asking her how she is getting on with her work and when she will have a holiday	Address: Addresser: Addressee: Message: Tense:	No.41, Lower Main Road, Mawlamyine Marlar Sandar (1) ask her how she is getting on with her work (2) ask her when she will have a holiday mainly Simple Present and Future
Prompt 2	You are Nyi Nyi . You live at No. 10, Aung Mingalar Road, Mandalay . Write a letter to your friend, Ko Ko who lives in Magway , telling him about your plans for the Thingyan festival and asking him about his plans for the festival.	Address: Addresser: Addressee: Message: Tense:	No.10, Aung Mingalar Road, Mandalay Nyi Nyi Ko Ko (1) tell him about your plans for the Thingyan festival (2) ask him about his plans for the festival mainly Future
Prompt 3	You are Zaw Zaw . You live at No. 24, Muse Road, Lashio . Write a letter to your friend, Kyaw Kyaw who failed the matriculation examination last year, giving him suggestions on how to learn his lessons for the coming examination.	Address: Addresser: Addressee: Message: Tense:	No.24, Muse Road, Lashio Zaw Zaw Kyaw Kyaw (1) give him suggestions on how to learn his lessons for the coming examination mainly Simple Present
2013 Bago Letter Prompts		2013 Bago Letter Summaries	
Prompt 1	You are Min Thu . You live at No. 10, Pyinnya Road, Maubin . Write a letter to your friend, Naing Naing , telling him that you have bought a computer and how you become interested in using it	Address: Addresser: Addressee: Message: Tense:	No.10, Pyinnya Road, Maubin Min Thu Naing Naing (1) telling him you have bought a computer (2) telling him how you become interested in using it mainly present perfect & present simple
Prompt 2	You are Chit Su . Your address is No. 145, Mingyi Road, Loikaw . Write a letter to your cousin, Thiri , telling her how you are trying hard for the examination and asking her whether you should join the University of Distance Education if you pass it.	Address: Addresser: Addressee: Message: Tense:	No.145, Mingyi Road, Loikaw Chit Su your cousin, Thiri (1) telling her how you are trying hard for the examination (2) asking her whether you should join the University of Distance Education if you pass it mainly present simple & future
Prompt 3	You are Phyu Sin . You live at No. 17, Mya Yadanar Road, Pyinmana . Write a letter to your aunt, May , who is working in Thailand, asking her if she is getting on in her work and when she is coming back.	Address: Addresser: Addressee: Message: Tense:	No.17, Mya Yadanar Road, Pyinmana Phyu Sin your aunt, May (1) asking her how she is getting on her work (2) asking her when she is coming back mainly present simple & future

The third and final element of the marking scheme is a holistic rubric allowing examiners to assign between zero and eight marks for the letter. There appears to be slightly different variations of scoring rubric. Table 3 reproduces the rubrics used in 2009 Sagaing-Chin and 2013 Bago side-by-side for ease of comparison.

In the case of 2009 Sagaing-Chin, exam raters were instructed to give a letter up to two marks so long as the “*address, salutation, and greeting, body, leave-taking and signature are correct.*” In other words, if students were able to produce the most fundamental elements of the letter they got two marks. There was even the possibility of earning a half mark so long as the address was written correctly. By contrast, earning two marks on the 2013 test in Bago meant that “*Ss attempted but with few relevant points and lots of grammatical mistakes.*” In the case of the exam in Bago, no points whatsoever could be earned by producing the fundamental elements such as the address, etc. The researchers had access to only a small number of marking schemes, making it difficult to determine which of

the two marking schemes is more common or if there were still other variations of the scheme. Of the six marking schemes collected (2008 Mandalay, 2009 Sagaing-Chin, 2012 Foreign, 2013 Bago, 2013 Yangon, 2014 (state unknown)), only the 2009 Sagaing-Chin rubric instructed exam raters to award points for the fundamental elements. The other marking schemes were identical to the one used in 2013 in Bago. Therefore, because the rubric used in Mandalay in 2008 actually matches the one used in Bago in 2013, it seems the rubrics either change slightly year-to-year or may consistently differ state-to-state.

DISCUSSION

According to Hamp-Lyons (1990) there are four elements that can adversely impact reliability when assessing writing: The writer, the task, the raters, and the scoring procedure. Test administrators are responsible for the latter three of these elements and therefore those elements will now be discussed in greater detail.

Table 3: Scoring Rubrics

2009 Sagaing-Chin*		2013 Bago**	
Guideline	Mark	Guideline	Mark
If the letter is not in the correct format – without the body of the letter	0	If the letter is totally irrelevant	0
If the address is correct	½		
If address, salutation and greeting are correct	1	If Ss attempted but only 4 or 5 sentences	1
If address, salutation and greeting, body, leave-taking and signature are correct	2	If Ss attempted but with few relevant points and lots of grammatical mistakes	2
If the letter is found to be a stereotyped, learnt by heart letter and relevant but with some mistakes	3	If Ss attempted with relevant points but lots of grammatical mistakes	3
If the letter is found to be a stereotyped, learnt by heart letter and relevant but with a few mistakes	4	If the letter is found to be a stereotyped, learnt by heart letter, relevant to given message with a few mistakes	4
If the letter is found to be the student's own writing, and relevant but with some mistakes	5	If the letter is found to be the student's own writing, relevant to given message with few serious mistakes	5
If the letter is found to be the student's own writing, and relevant but with a few mistakes	6	If the letter is found to be the student's own writing, relevant to given message almost without elementary mistakes	6
If the letter is found to be the student's own writing and almost flawless	7	If the letter is found to be the student's own writing, and almost flawless	7
If the letter is found to be the student's own writing, relevant, and flawless	8	If the letter is found to be the student's own writing, relevant to given message, and flawless	8
<i>If the examiner thinks the candidate deserves more than 8, consult the convenor. If the convenor thinks the candidate deserves more, consult the chief convenor.</i>		<i>If the examiner thinks the candidate deserves more than 8, consult the convenor. If the convenor thinks the candidate deserves more, consult the chief convenor.</i>	

*Myanmar Board of Examinations, 2009; **Ministry of Education, Myanmar Board of Examination, 2013

The Task

The letter writing exercise itself is highly formulaic. The task actually bears some similarity to IELTS General Training Writing Module Task 1. Figure 3 is an exact reproduction of an IELTS letter-writing task. It may be helpful to use the IELTS task as a reference point for discussing the letter-writing task used in Myanmar’s matriculation exam.

Task 1
You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

You live in a room in college which you share with another student. However, there are many problems with this arrangement and you find it very difficult to work. Write a letter to the accommodation officer at the college. In the letter,

- describe the situation
- explain your problems and why it is difficult to work
- say what kind of accommodation you would prefer

Write at least 150 words.
You do **NOT** need to write any addresses.
Begin your letter as follows:
Dear Sir or Madam,

Figure 3: IELTS General Training Writing Module Task 1 Prompt Sample (IELTS Partners, 2009-2013)

The similarities are clear: the task type (letter) is the same, and the context and messages the writer is required to convey are explicitly provided. There are also clear differences. The format in which the prompt is provided gives clear instructions regarding amount of time to spend on the task, lists the tasks clearly with bullet points, provides a minimum word count, explicitly states that writers need not provide their address, and provides the salutation for the examinee.

Unlike on the IELTS, where tasks are clearly marked by bullet points, the letter-writing prompts on the Myanmar matriculation examination embed the tasks within the prompt. This difference is rather representative of the major differences between the letter-writing task on each respective test: IELTS

provides very clear instructions for the examinee, while Myanmar’s matriculation examination simply provides three prompts and tells examinees to respond to one. This does not make the IELTS an inherently better test, necessarily, but making expectations clear to the examinees ostensibly gives them a clearer target.

One of the unique elements of the prompts on Myanmar’s exam is that they provide names and/or addresses for both the addresser and addressee. As a result, the letters composed by examinees are expected to use these names and addresses when composing the letter. In this sense, this letter-writing task is quite literally testing students’ ability to properly format a letter. Whether this is something the Ministry of Education really intends to test or not is unknown. The marking schemes have occasionally awarded points for these formulaic elements. Generally speaking, however, these formulaic elements seem to distract from the overall prerogative of the task: measuring students’ writing ability. IELTS, understanding that their task is really meant to measure an examinee’s ability to understand a context and respond to it in writing, eliminated the need for examinees to provide an address and a salutation.

Asking test takers in each state/region to perform writing tasks that may be of greater or lesser challenge than their test-taking peers in other regions is problematic. The Ministry of Education may not be ensuring that each state is providing three letter-writing prompts of relatively equal difficulty in terms of the number of tasks examinees are expected to tackle in their letter, and the pragmatic challenges presented by writing to different types of people. Case in point: The first two prompts for the 2009 Sagaing-Chin exam (see “message” in Table 2) ask the examinee to complete two tasks a piece, while the third prompt requires the completion of only one task. Moreover, each of these prompts asks examinees to write to a hypothetical “friend.” By contrast, each of the prompts in the 2013 Bago exam (see Table 2) asks students to complete two tasks, but addressees

include a friend, a cousin, and an aunt.

The Raters

As discussed earlier in this paper, Stemler (2004) advises that inter-rater reliability be demonstrated with each iteration of the exam, even if the marking scheme has been shown to be effective in the past. Ensuring intra-rater consistency is also crucial (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 1997). Rezaei and Lovorn (2010) warn that "without proper, thorough training, a rubric may become little more than a checklist" (p.21). After designing a rubric and having 326 college students use it to assess two writing samples they found that the rubric they had created was unreliable. They concluded:

"...if a rubric like the one used in this project, which was designed by a group of professors in a college of education, is shown to be unreliable, then what does this say about the thousands of rubrics being used every day in schools? What does this say particularly about those rubrics downloaded from the Internet and implemented without any training? The unexpected results indicated that making a quality rubric, and using it effectively, are not as easy as one originally assumes. We learned that rubrics should be developed locally for a specific purpose and a specific group of students. Like any tool, improper use is sometimes worse than not having used the tool at all." (p.30)

How might Myanmar's Ministry of Education address such an issue? The task of providing ongoing training to examiners in the use of a marking scheme is daunting, but part of the solution may be to develop a new marking scheme for use in classrooms as well as for assessment purposes.

The Marking Scheme

The inconsistency of the rubric portion of the marking scheme illustrated in Table 3 is problematic and threatens the reliability of the exam itself. Such

inconsistencies could also leave English teachers in Myanmar uncertain as to how the letter-writing portion of the exam will be marked. Will students get any credit for simply writing down fundamental elements such as the address, salutation, and leave-taking? Beyond the inconsistency of the rubric itself, there is also inconsistency between the assessment instructions (as shown in Figure 2) - which emphasizes language, facts, relevancy, organization, presentation, format - and the rubric (Table 4) which clearly values language, relevance, and *originality*.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the washback effect of large-scale, high-stakes tests such as Myanmar's matriculation examination is strong enough to impact classroom practices (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng, 1997; Luxia, 2007). Moreover, Jonsson and Svingby (2007) concluded that "rubrics seem to have the potential of promoting learning and/or improving instruction. The main reason for this potential lies in the fact that rubrics make expectations and criteria explicit, which also facilitates feedback and self-assessment" (p.141). According to Weigle (2002), holistic scales are not as reliable as analytic scales, but still exhibit an acceptable level of reliability. Speed and ease of use are the major advantages of holistic scales. In terms of making criteria explicit, however, clearly analytic scales are superior to their holistic counterparts. Turning once more to IELTS for an example, we see very thorough and categorized descriptors in their public band markers for the categories of *task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy*. (IELTS Partners, 2009-2013). Sample examinee responses along with a matching band score and detailed examiner comments describing why the band score was determined to be appropriate are also provided.

A more coherent, consistent, and contextually-specific rubric should be developed in Myanmar. One very well-known rubric which may be adaptable to use in Myanmar would be the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth,

Hartfiel, & Hughey, 1981). This instrument can be considered analytic when deployed in classroom practice, as it requires assessors of writing (i.e. classroom teachers) to assess content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics independently, thus providing students with feedback in each of these domains. It can also be considered somewhat holistic, as it allows for a final composite score to be generated quickly by adding up the score from each respective domain. An instrument such as this, capable of efficiently assessing writing samples on the matriculation exam while also providing formative feedback in the classroom leading up to the exam, could be developed to meet the needs of the context of Myanmar.

LIMITATIONS

The researchers were only able to collect six marking schemes. Also, official ministry data regarding exactly how raters are trained to use the marking schemes, as well as any evidence supporting the reliability and/or validity of those marking schemes, and student performance on the letter-writing task was not available.

CONCLUSIONS

Chalhoub-Deville and Turner (2000) state “developers of large-scale tests... have the responsibility to: construct instruments that meet professional standards; continue to investigate the properties of their instruments and the ensuing scores; and make test manuals, user guides and research documents available to the public” (p.537). The extent to which Myanmar’s Ministry of Education fulfills these responsibilities at present is debatable. On the one hand, teachers and students may know what to expect on the test because it has maintained the same format for many years (Kirkpatrick & Hlaing, 2013). On the other hand, the Ministry of Education might want to consider changing the letter-writing task in a manner which ensures each prompt is of an equal degree of difficulty state-to-state and region-to-region. Exam raters must be continually and consistently trained

to use a marking scheme that also may benefit from reformation. The Ministry of Education creates and distributes the marking scheme, and therefore they ultimately must continually provide evidence of the scheme’s reliability. Were an instrument along the lines of the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, et. al., 1981) to be deployed not only as the assessment rubric on test day but as a formative tool used consistently by English teachers preparing their students for the exam, familiarity with the rubric may enhance the capacity for teachers and students to identify and address the particular weaknesses in individual students’ letter-writing as they prepare for this high-stakes exam.

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