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Writing as construct in the Grade 12 Home Language curriculum and examination

Abstract

The newly introduced Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) contains a plethora of genres and writing tasks, aimed at helping learners develop dexterity in written communication. Accordingly, writing also features as a dominant construct in the Grade 12 school-leaving examination, with an entire language paper (Paper 3) being devoted to the assessment of this ability. There are a number of material concerns with the writing component of the national curriculum, particularly in relation to the testing of this ability in a timed examination setting. The kinds of examination tasks do not provide a valid or reliable basis for measuring proficiency in written communication. Moreover, the separation of skills reflected in

both the curriculum and Grade 12 language papers may serve to inhibit rather than advance writing proficiency. This paper problematises the nature of the writing tasks, on the basis of the accepted principles of validity, reliability and fairness in language testing. Data gleaned from an analysis of Home Language papers reveal a disturbing lack of comparability of standard, as well as the prejudicial treatment of some learners. A more responsible approach to the measurement of writing ability is advocated.

Keywords: Home Language assessment, writing ability, construct validity

1. Relevance of the Home Language writing component of the school curriculum

The ability to communicate effectively and formally through the written medium remains essential, even in our technologically driven world that seems to be so influenced by social media and new abridged forms of writing. Besides the relevance of writing proficiency for personal, professional and business purposes, writing is considered to be an instrumental educational tool that facilitates understanding and meta-cognitive processing of information, as well as critical thinking (Rosenberg & Gabelnick, 1998; Weigle, 2002; Chaffee, 2014). Dexterity in writing, especially in tertiary contexts, is generally associated with evidence of “originality of thought, the development of ideas, and the soundness of the writer’s logic” (Weigle, 2002: 5). It is thus disturbing to note that the writing ability of Grade 12 school-leavers is being questioned, not only at institutions of higher learning (Butler, 2007; Archer, 2008; Van Dyk, Zybrands, Cillié & Coetzee, 2009; Bharuthram & McKenna, 2012), but also in the employment sector (Horn, 2006; Solidarity Research Institute, 2012). In fact, even at postgraduate level some graduates appear to battle to express themselves lucidly and coherently, as recent results of postgraduate literacy testing reveal (Du Plessis, 2012, 2014; Pot & Weideman, 2014).

Whereas spoken proficiency in a first language tends to develop spontaneously, writing requires explicit teaching (Grabowski, 1996; Elbow, 2000; Dovey, 2010). In the South African school context, students are not necessarily first language speakers and the term Home Language (somewhat contradictorily) refers to the highest level of language instruction, regardless of whether this is the dominantly used language (Department of Basic Education, 2011: 13). It can thus not be assumed that spoken proficiency in a Home Language (HL) will be at the level of a first language, and even less so that writing ability will be on a high level. In this respect the distinction between English as a First, Additional, Second or Foreign Language is becoming increasingly difficult to make in multilingual societies such as ours. The point, however, remains that writing ability requires concerted effort and development.

Every school language curriculum has a writing component that, together with other skills, is supposed to receive considerable attention in the language classroom. The newly introduced Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) is no exception, and includes a variety of genres and writing tasks aimed at helping students to develop dexterity in written communication. In as much as the learning programme may provide ample suggestions of what learners should be able to perform on the writing side of the syllabus, there are a number of material concerns in this section of the school curriculum. Firstly, it is uncertain to what extent educators are investing time and energy in developing the writing skills of their students, especially considering the prescribed process approach to teaching writing (planning, drafting, revising, editing, proofreading and presenting), and doing that on a regular basis throughout the school year. Secondly, not all educators may be equally well equipped to teach or assess writing at HL level. Thirdly, writing is not merely a technical skill, but may also be conceptualised as a

social construct (Bharuthram & McKenna, 2012), which makes certain kinds of writing unsuitable for timed examination contexts.

The above concerns are particularly relevant on the assessment side of the curriculum. It is an established fact that teachers model their classroom instruction to a large extent on the content of examination papers from previous years (part of the negative washback effect in language testing terms, since that may undermine the broader interpretation of the curriculum and encourage ever narrower, examination-oriented interpretations of what should be taught). In the interests of ensuring that students receive the opportunity to develop relevant skills in written communication, this paper sets out to examine the validity of the writing section of the Grade 12 HL examination through an analysis of the writing component of CAPS and a selection of examination papers. By scrutinising the selection of writing tasks given to students, an indication can be obtained of the kind of writing that is being prioritised and its applicability to authentic contexts, as required by CAPS. The emphasis on writing tasks far removed from the needs and interests of learners can compromise the validity of the teaching and assessment of writing proficiency and thwart attempts to cultivate an interest in writing. It is further postulated that the separation of language skills in CAPS into “speaking”, “listening”, “reading” and “writing” (in spite of references to adopting an integrated approach) is likely to hamper the development of writing proficiency. In fact, it can be argued that the process of arriving at producing a text in writing is so intertwined by prior processes of *finding* information (by listening, enquiring, discussing, reading, and so forth) and *processing* that information (again by digesting it, provisionally analysing it, presenting it by articulating it, discussing and summarising it) that it would be difficult to separate it from other ‘skills’ in the first instance (Weideman, 2013). What is more, such separation can in fact impede rather than facilitate the instruction and development of writing, as well as its imaginative and adequate assessment.

2. Essential principles for the assessment of written discourse

Students are certified competent, awarded bursaries and selected for certain fields of study or allowed to enter professions largely on the basis of inferences drawn from examination results. In the interests of equitable and socially responsible educational measurement, a number of frameworks founded on theoretical principles have been devised to ensure a measure of fairness and accountability in language assessment.

The technical term validation has been coined by assessment experts to refer to the process of collecting evidence in support of inferences of ability made on the basis of test or examination scores (Kane, 2004; Weir, 2005; Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Chapelle, 2012; Van der Walt, 2012). It may also be conceived of as a design principle, that calls on test developers to “[s]ystematically integrate multiple sets of evidence in arguing for the validity of a test” (Weideman, 2012, 2013). This process, however, is equally

applicable to the curriculum and teaching side in the case of an achievement-based school-leaving examination. In this respect, Frederiksen and Collins (1989: 27) point out that a test (or examination) may be considered to be “systemically valid” when it “induces in the education system curricular and instructional changes that foster the development of the cognitive skills that the test is designed to measure”. This in essence relates to the notion of consequential validity and desirable washback. If, however, the test or examination has a negative effect on the development of the abilities it is purportedly designed to measure, the validity argument is weakened. The objective of this paper is thus to validate the current format of the HL writing paper, and subsequent to that, build an argument for an effective system of writing development in the classroom. Although the teaching plan in CAPS specifies the number of hours that are to be designated for writing activities (on average 2 hours per week), it is clear that educators are advised to model their classroom writing activities on the kinds of tasks contained in previous examination papers (cf. p. 72 of CAPS in particular). This is likely to narrow the curriculum and encourage the development of a general and basic writing ability, rather than a specific and advanced proficiency.

Today much of the emphasis in the validation of language assessment instruments falls on the issue of construct validity – a notion which some language testing authorities consider to be the superordinate form of all validity and one which “integrates considerations of content, criteria and consequences into a comprehensive framework for empirically testing rational hypotheses about score meaning and utility” (Messick, 1995: 742). Rather than joining the ongoing debate as to whether validity is a unitary concept (Weideman, 2012), the approach adopted in this paper will be to view validation as a process that is multi-faceted and dependent on numerous variables aimed at eliciting evidence on the basis of which credible inferences of language ability may be made. Moreover, validity will not be considered only as a potential “inherent property” of the HL examinations (Read, 2010: 288), but rather as “a function of the way in which the results can be meaningfully interpreted”. To be able to justify the interpretations of scores achieved in the HL examination would then require evidence of both a theoretical and empirical nature for the construction of a validity argument.

The following principles (although not an exclusive list) are considered to be of primary importance for the development of a socially-accountable validity argument (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004a, 2004b; Weir, 2005; Weideman, 2009, 2012, 2013; Read, 2010; Van Dyk, 2010):

- Construct validity (also referred to as theory-based validity)
- Context/content validity (also referred to as authenticity)
- Scoring validity (more commonly known as reliability)
- Consequential validity (incorporating the notion of fairness)

Construct validity is achieved when the abilities to be assessed are founded on accepted theories of language, cognition and communicative competence. It is essential that conceptual clarity be sought on the construct to be measured before commencing with the test design phase (Patterson & Weideman, 2013). Without this, any validation exercise will be reduced to futility. Apart from identifying the construct, it should be articulated in full on the basis of a “theoretically defensible definition of what it is that should be measured” (Patterson & Weideman, 2013: 108). In other words, there must be a high correlation between what the test or examination purports to measure and “indices of behaviour that one might theoretically expect it to correlate with” (Weir, 2005: 18). The underlying language and cognitive processing that takes place when performing writing operations in real-life contexts thus needs to be replicated in the operationalization of the sub-skills to be measured.

The conceptual framework that underlies CAPS goes back to linguistic ideas originating in the early 1970s on a differentiated communicative competence (Habermas, 1970; Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 1978) that makes actual language use possible through varied repertoires of functionally defined language acts (Searle, 1969; Wilkins, 1976). Based on an analysis of the new curriculum, a general underlying construct for the HL examination papers has been articulated in a report to the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, commonly referred to as Umalusi, as follows:

The assessment of a differentiated language ability in a number of discourse types involving typically different texts, and a generic ability incorporating task-based functional and formal aspects of language (Du Plessis, Steyn & Weideman, 2013: 19).

Apart from the notion of construct validity, the second necessary condition for the validation of the HL examination is referred to as context or content validity, and pertains both to the creation of a conducive environment for assessing particular abilities and the authenticity of tasks:

A conscious effort should be made to build into tests as many real-life conditions as are feasible ... unless steps are taken to identify and incorporate such features it would seem imprudent to make statements about a candidate’s ability to function in normal conditions in his or her future target situation (Weir, 2005: 56).

Weir prefers to speak of context rather than content validity so as to reflect a socio-cognitive approach to language testing. He describes context validity as “the extent to which the choice of tasks in a test is representative of the larger universe of tasks of which the test is assumed to be a sample”, with due consideration to the “linguistic and interlocutor demands made by the task(s) as well as the conditions under which the task is performed” (Weir, 2005: 19). Of consideration here is the necessity to ensure that the

tasks which are to be performed in the test correspond with the actual tasks that will be performed outside the test context in the target language usage (TLU) domain. Bachman and Palmer (1996: 39) use the term *authenticity* to refer to this correspondence. They assert that authenticity can assist test takers to perform at their best levels since it facilitates a positive affective response towards the test tasks. As such it is an important control variable for what they consider to be test usefulness.

Reliability in language testing provides an indication of the consistency of measurement and is a prerequisite for validity (Davidson & Lynch, 2002: 134; Hughes, 2003: 50; Weir, 2005: 22; Van Dyk, 2010: 121). Unfortunately the Department of Basic Education does not currently employ any of the sophisticated statistical procedures available to determine reliability of measurement. In the absence of statistical data, no evidence can be provided to support a validity argument in this respect and the reliability of the assessment of the HL examination papers must be questioned. Furthermore, without any indication of marker reliability, there can be little mention of equivalence or fairness of assessment and the attainment of intra-rater and inter-rater reliability (Weigle, 2002: 49; Weir, 2005: 34; Bachman, 2004: 169; Brown, 2012: 413) which are conventionally employed to reduce measurement error.

Criterion-related validity is established by correlating a test score with another measure of the same ability obtained at a different time (Weir, 2005: 36; Read, 2010: 289). Technically speaking, the results of students obtained as part of school-based continuous assessment (CASS) could be used for this purpose. Unfortunately, however, CASS has been identified as a serious area in need of reform and school-based continuous assessment has been found to be extremely unreliable (Umalusi, 2011: 5; Prins, 2014: 11), making the measurement of criterion-related validity problematic.

Consequential validity is considered to be part of the dimension of fairness in language testing (Shohamy, 2006; McNamara & Roever, 2006). Every care needs to be taken to guard against potentially harmful (unfair) social effects on the examinees as a result of the measurement process, as well as undesirable influences on the instruction side (negative washback or a narrowing of the interpretation of what language learning entails).

In summary, the increasingly sophisticated empirical indicators available in language assessment today make it more professional and increasingly specialised. The confidence that may be placed in the HL writing paper is considered to be directly proportional to the evidence of ability collected in the process to support the validity of the evaluation instrument (Davies, Brown, Elder, Hill, Lumley & McNamara, 1999: 220; Van der Walt, 2012: 145). The validation process then can be said to refer to the “systematic presentation of this evidence as a unity within a multiplicity of arguments” illustrating the relationship of the HL examination to the definition of the construct being assessed (Du Plessis, 2012: 25).

3. Methodology

A comparative study was undertaken of the writing component of CAPS (Department of Basic Education, 2011) and the 2005 outcomes-based curriculum (Department of Education, 2005, 2007, 2008) that formed part of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Thereafter, a detailed analysis was made of the writing tasks in the examination

papers of three Home Languages¹ written in November 2012. The objective hereof was to determine to what extent the current format of the examination papers reflects the objectives of the curricula. The decision to examine the suitability of the NSC examination papers in terms of the objectives of CAPS is based on the premise that the momentum built up by previous styles of assessment and the continuity with current ways of examining language ability are unlikely to change quickly and dramatically (Prinsloo, 2004; Weideman, 2014). Items in the examination papers were also evaluated qualitatively in terms of the core elements of construct, context and consequential validity referred to in the literature surveyed above, to evaluate their suitability to generate evidence of writing ability.

4. Findings

4.1 Curriculum objectives

It is clear that CAPS shares the core principles and objectives of its predecessor. The same emphasis is accorded to the development of “high knowledge” and “high skills” and the teaching approach remains text-based, communicative and process driven. For writing development, four hours per two week cycle are recommended (40% of contact time), and the schedule even stipulates which weeks should be used for transactional writing and which for essay writing. Somewhat ironically, CAPS advocates “frequent writing practice” (Department of Basic Education, 2011: 11), whereas its predecessor emphasised that students should “write every day” (Department of Education, 2007: 19). Taking the above into consideration, it is unlikely that CAPS will have a more positive effect on developing the writing ability of students than its predecessor did, especially in the light of the continued separation of skills and what seems to be the encouragement of isolated writing slots, as opposed to viewing writing as an integral part of processing knowledge across different subject areas on a daily basis.

4.2 Construct validity of Paper 3

Although the curriculum indicates that both generic and differential writing ability are to be developed, it seems that the construct of writing has not been articulated well

1 Unfortunately, practical constraints precluded the comparison of a greater selection of papers. Past examination papers are obtainable from: <http://www.education.gov.za/Examinations/PastExamPapers/tabid/351/Default.aspx>.

for the purposes of examination and that there is hardly any assessment of differential ability, especially in the essay writing section. In fact, the choice of topic, style, genre, register, audience and purpose in this component is left wholly to the students. The six to eight topics (some simply consisting of a visual image) are broad and open to any interpretation. As a result, the discourse fields are not defined and any register or style of

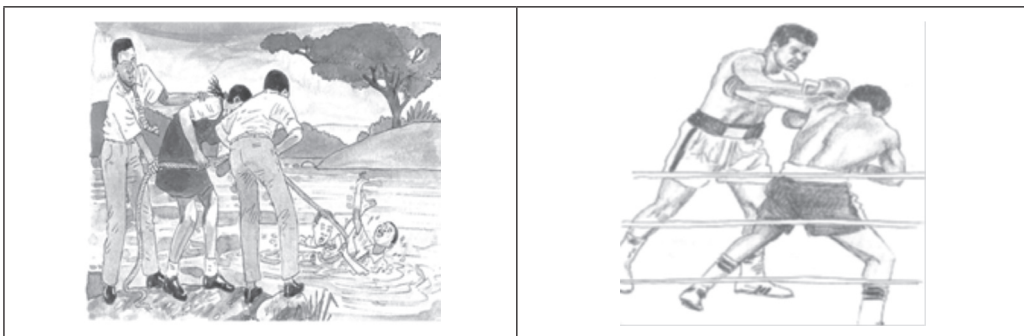
writing could be acceptable. Moreover, the same rubric is used to assess different types of essays, which is also problematic. Argumentative writing requires a different rubric to narrative writing, for example. Through the inclusion of such vague writing prompts and the use of one generic rubric, the typical features of writing and normal conventions that apply are reduced to irrelevance. Tables 1 and 2 show the variation in topics across three sets of HL papers.

Table 1: Verbal writing prompts from a selection of HL papers (Paper 3, Section A, November 2012)

<p>English 2012</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A path worth exploring 2. 'When night falls over Africa, cities light up, creating patches of light visible from space. Compared to other places on the planet, the continent is pretty dark, but that is changing.' 3. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist – that is all. 4. If you run with the wolves, you will learn how to howl. 5. Tumbling from the heavens 6. 'The first wintry day you who sang like a robin at last fell quiet.
<p>Afrikaans 2012 (translated)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The nicest holiday ever! 2. cheers yesterday ... hello today 3. 'I want to farm with words, breed my own cultivars ...' (full poem provided) 4. South Africa is a land of ample opportunities. 5. My wish list for life

<p>Sesotho 2012 (translated)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You were at a special function. Write an essay based on this heading: A day I will never forget 2. Many writers of books, singers and film stars do not get benefits from their art work. Write an essay based on the following heading: Problems caused by illegal copying of books, CDs and DVDs. 3. It is your desire to see yourself being a star in one of the areas of entertainment. Write an essay by completing the following heading, and explain what you would like to be: If only I could be a star ... 4. Usually school trips end up with tragedy and heartbreak these days due to accidents that occur on our roads. Choose a side and write an essay based on this heading:
<p>Sesotho 2012 (translated)</p>	<p>School trips should be continued / School trips should be discontinued.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Weather conditions have changed dramatically due to air pollution. Write an essay about this heading: Problems caused by air pollution and ways in which air pollution can be prevented. 6. Cell phone use has become too common among the learners. Write an essay based on this heading: The advantages and disadvantages of cellphone use among the learners

**Table 2: Visual essay prompts from a selection of HL papers
(Paper 3, Section A, November 2012)**



Sesotho Paper 3 (2012)



English Paper 3 (2012)



Afrikaans Paper 3 (2012)

It is obvious that the above tasks differ vastly in cognitive and communicative challenge and do not assess the same writing construct. Highly intellectual and philosophical tasks (e.g. topic no. 3 in the English paper) do not share the same construct as “stream of consciousness” personal reflection type of writing tasks (see Weigle, 2002: 8), for example topics no. 5 and 3 of the Afrikaans and Sesotho papers respectively. Moreover, expository topics that require recall of factual or topical knowledge, such as topic 2 of the English paper and 5 of the Sesotho, also differ in construct. The analysis reveals four dominant kinds of essay writing, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Analysis of verbal and visual writing prompts (Paper 3, Section A, November 2012)

	Writing prompt	General theme	Topical	Philosophical/Poetic
English	1			X
	2		X	
	3			X
	4			X
	5			X
	6			X
	7	X		
	8			X
Sesotho	1	X		
	2		X	
	3	X		
	4	X		
	5		X	
	6	X		
	7	X		
	8		X	
Afrikaans	1	X		
	2			X
	3			X
	4		X	
	5	X		
	6			X
	7			X
	8			X

While the Afrikaans and English papers reveal a preference for philosophical and poetic writing ability as the main indicator of writing proficiency, the Sesotho paper seems to favour the sharing of personal observations or experiences of a general nature. For the purpose of the above analysis, general topics are considered those which all students should be able to relate to. Topical themes, however, require specific subject knowledge

and recall of factual material, while philosophical topics demand advanced and abstract reasoning and global imaginative ability. Owing to the lack of clear specifications, potentially philosophical topics such as item 3 in the English and Afrikaans papers could also be produced as poetic narratives. The same criticism can be levelled at the visual writing prompts provided in the respective HL papers. These are open to equally broad interpretation and in our opinion are inappropriate at HL level. The liberty granted examinees to elect what kind of writing they wish to produce, makes it impossible to categorise any of the essay topics as narrative, descriptive, expository, discursive, reflective or argumentative, which detracts from the curriculum specification of the mastery of a much fuller range of genres.

The absence of clear task specifications in all three papers is a serious deficiency; the only specification given is the length of the essay (400–450 words). The writing prompts in the Sesotho paper attempt to achieve greater specificity by adding a qualifying sentence or two, but still no indication is given of the purpose of the writing or audience, crucial aspects that would require differentiation of style and register, for example. If no purpose or audience is specified, then much leeway needs to be left for the learner's freedom to interpret the exact nature of the writing task, which consequently imposes an undesirable restriction on the examiner's responsibility to assess a piece of productive language.

Sections B and C of Paper 3 (longer and shorter transactional writing, respectively) are also problematic. The analysis of items reveals a tendency to turn these into creative compositions. Compare the following items from Section B (November 2012):

- 2.1 Write an article for the year book on an exceptional teacher who greatly influenced learners' lives. (Translated from Afrikaans paper, November 2012)
- 2.2 Your school has just returned from an educational tour, but unfortunately most learners have lost their belongings. Write a report in which you outline this incident. (Translated from Sesotho paper, November 2012)

Through the above formulation of writing tasks, the distinction between transactional and creative writing becomes obscured, the only difference being the length of the writing required (180–200 words for Section B). The intention of the curriculum to have a multiplicity of genres, registers and modes assessed is again undermined.

The kind of writing required in section C (100–120 words) is generally of such a basic and abridged nature (e.g. giving directions to reach a location, posting a notice or message on social media), that it can barely provide any indication of writing ability. This section is ill suited to the assessment of 'high' language ability and should be removed. The following serve as illustrations of the rudimentary level of ability required in section C:

- 3.1 You have posted a message about a person, using social/digital/other media. Write a single diary entry in which you reflect on the message². Note: Your tone may be informal but you may not use slang.
(English paper, November 2012)
- 3.2 Soon a big chain store will be opening next to where you stay. Big discounts on merchandise will be given the day it opens. Write directions for your friend on how to get to the store.
(Translated from Sesotho paper, November 2012)

There is evidently a lack of conceptual clarity on what kind of writing ability should be assessed in the different writing sections, a matter that will undoubtedly undermine the construct validity of Paper 3.

4.3 Content and context validity

Although examination tasks may be aligned with the curriculum objectives, this does not imply their automatic suitability for inclusion in timed-examination settings. Tasks such as the writing of dialogues and interviews are particularly surprising, as there can be little authenticity in asking learners to contrive these artificially. The inclusion of formal and informal speeches is also questionable, since the writing and delivery of speeches already constitute part of the oral component of the curriculum and as such form part of school-based assessment, resulting in unnecessary duplication of examination. It should be noted that the new curriculum states expressly that “these forms of writing are intimately connected with speaking, and should not be done purely as writing exercises” (Department of Basic Education, 2011: 36). Yet there are examples in the English and Afrikaans November 2012 papers of exactly this.

Situational authenticity is problematic in Paper 3. Essay topics do not resemble the kind of writing ability required of post-matriculants, and as such do not fulfil the notion of target language usage alignment, a regulative condition for context validity (Weideman, 2009). The configuration of predominantly narrative and philosophical type of topics in the English and Afrikaans papers carries us back to the England of the 1960s and the “personal growth version of literacy education” that privileged this kind of writing as definitive (Prinsloo, 2004: 87). In her analysis of South African examination papers nearly a decade ago, Prinsloo sharply criticised the kinds of essay topics set as being distanced from:

the concerns or likely interests of the learners, echoing the essayist predilection for writing as reasoned social comment, a form of writing that assumes a middle-class location (Prinsloo, 2004: 87).

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- 2 The writing prompt is ambiguous and seems to view the writing of a diary entry as synonymous with posting a message on social media. Matters are further confused by the instruction to “reflect on the message”. Should examinees first fabricate a message to post, and then write a diary entry reflecting on that fabrication?

There seems to be little regard in the examination tasks for the transformed educational landscape of South Africa and disparate frames of reference of the examinees. On the matter of expository topics that require topical knowledge, Prinsloo considers these to provide occasion for “expounding ignorance” (Prinsloo, 2004: 87).

It should be borne in mind that more general topics in no way preclude students from displaying poetic or philosophical prowess, but help to create a more equitable context for writing assessment amongst students with vastly different educational backgrounds and frameworks of exposure. If creative composition is to be retained as an item in the HL papers, the topics should rather be those to which all examinees can relate in terms of personal experience. Consideration should, however, be given to designing alternative writing tasks that could not only provide a more equitable testing environment, but prepare students for tertiary writing contexts too, a neglected area of academic development (Bharuthram & McKenna, 2012) at school level.

The transactional writing tasks also lack situational authenticity and would benefit from greater specificity in the wording of the prompts (e.g. the intended audience and purpose of the transactional text) and differentiation in terms of the design of the marking rubrics.

Table 4: Analysis of writing tasks in Paper 3, Section B, November 2012

	Writing prompt	Formal letter	Interview	Review	Report	Formal speech	Informal speech	Obituary	Article	Full specifications	Authenticity
English	1	X								X	X
	2		X								
	3			X						X	
	4					X					
Sesotho	1										
	2				X						
	3	X									X
	4			X							
Afrikaans	1								X	X	
	2	X								X	X
	3				X					X	
	4							X		X	

Table 5: Analysis of writing tasks in Paper 3, Section C, November 2012

	Writing prompt	Social media	Poster	Directions	Postcard	Diary entry	Invitation	Flyer specifications	Full specification	Authenticity
English	1	X								X
	2		X							X
	3			X					X	X
Sesotho	1				X					
	2			X						X
	3							X		X
Afrikaans	1				X				X	
	2					X			X	
	3						X		X	X

Only the formal letter writing tasks in Section B bear any resemblance to the kind of longer transactional writing that learners may need to engage in after matriculating. Although the shorter transactional tasks required in Section C may have greater authenticity (with the exception of the obsolete postcards and diary entry), as already pointed out they are too short to provide evidence of writing ability. This calls into question the context validity of the whole of Paper 3.

4.4 Consequential validity

The broad variation in writing topics and cognitive challenge required through the inclusion of so many divergent writing prompts makes it impossible to compare performance between candidates and across language groups (cf. Hughes, 2003: 94). For example, examinees may elect to complete easier tasks for which they may potentially be awarded equally high marks as their fellow students who have attempted the more challenging tasks. Not only does this create an unfair basis for assessment, but it is problematic to infer that students who obtained high marks for Paper 3 will be able to produce appropriate writing in post-school contexts that require differential ability (e.g. at university). A further complication hereof is that institutions of higher learning are brought under the erroneous impression that their incumbent students are adequately prepared lingually speaking for academe. In this sense, the examination of writing ability in Paper 3 can have an undesirable washback effect in the classroom and make it difficult to argue a case for systemic validity.

5. Conclusions

Data gleaned from the analysis of a selection of HL papers reveal a disturbing lack of comparability of standard not only across languages, but within the same examination papers. Writing tasks that require a global imagination and general knowledge, as well as those that depend on philosophical or poetic aptitude, could potentially disadvantage examinees and be considered unfair towards some learners.

The creative composition in particular continues to be privileged as a natural and “definitive indicator of the capacity to write” (Prinsloo, 2004: 86), even though this kind of writing has little relevance beyond the school room. Although it can be a rewarding experience when conducted under different circumstances, within the constraints of a pressurised examination setting other writing tasks would be preferable.

In view of the questionable validity and potentially unreliable assessment of the writing tasks, careful consideration needs to be given to the number of marks allocated for Paper 3, especially in view of the prescribed process approach to writing and the difficulty of generalising writing ability assessed under timed conditions to a broader context of writing. The inferences made on the basis of the scores of the examinees lack credibility and cannot be viewed as reliable predictors of language performance in authentic communicative settings.

A possible way forward would be to limit Paper 3 to two sections, and at the same time radically reduce the number of topic choices. Moreover, in the interests of attaining greater equivalence of standard across language groups, the same writing paper could be given to all learners. A team of writing experts representing each of the HL subjects could assume responsibility for designing the paper. A further suggestion would be to design specific rubrics for each writing prompt, since this could help to increase the validity and reliability of the marking substantially.

Unfortunately, the current analysis of examination papers discloses a hesitance on the part of education authorities (and the examiners they appoint) to consider an alternative design for the HL papers. In particular, there is a need to include alternative writing tasks that accommodate the transformation of South African society, and that approximate the interests and needs of the students. As long as Paper 3 continues in its current format, it is likely to have a negative washback effect on writing development. It should also be clear by now that a curriculum such as CAPS cannot be expected to remedy the situation on its own. A more responsible approach would be to develop the required language skills holistically through a natural and integrated process of daily application, and that in all subject areas. In short, a return to the broader objectives of a mastery of a multiplicity of discourse and text types, genres and registers that are envisaged in the curriculum would go a long way towards ensuring a fairer assessment of language ability and increased proficiency in writing ability.

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