DETERMINING THE DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY OF WRITING PROMPTS

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This presentation described variables that make writing tasks hard or easy. Writing instructors often need to determine the relative ease or difficulty of writing tasks, whether developing assignments for composition courses or prompts for purposes of placement, diagnosis, or assessment. Moffett proposes that writing tasks become more difficult as subject matter becomes more abstract and audiences more remote because of increasing demand on writers' cognitive development. But difficulty can also depend on the demand a writing task makes on writers' linguistic development. Poor writing may not be so much an indicator of an inability to think as it is of an inability to express one's thoughts because of lack of control over semantic, syntactic, and rhetorical potentials of language. Thus, to determine the difficulty of writing tasks, one must take into account not only their cognitive complexity but also the linguistic demands of varieties of content, writing contexts, and rhetorical purposes.

Much insight into the linguistic demands of language tasks can be derived from the work of Oral Proficiency Interviewers who have observed what features of content, context, and purpose actually challenge the linguistic competence of second-language learners. We proposed a rough guide to degree of difficulty in writing tasks, drawing on research in both cognitive and linguistic development, and demonstrated it with reference to particular writing prompts. We especially emphasized the challenge posed by the movement from personal and autobiographical topics to data-based or reading-based prompts.