The Effectiveness of Online Item Writer Training in Improving Item Writing Quality

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**STUDY AIMS**
Investigate effectiveness of item writer training / impact of training on item quality

- Test item quality contributes to test validity
- Operational aspects of item writing are overlooked in language testing research / publications

**RESEARCH QUESTION**
Does a three-month online item writer training course impact on the item writing quality of a group of novice item writers? If so, in what ways?

**PARTICIPANTS**
- British Council China assessment consultants
- 3 female, 7 male
- English – first language (Australia, RSA, UK, USA)
- Age range 29-60, mean 42
- Education: BA (100%), MA (60%), teaching qualification (100%)
- ESL/EFL teaching experience range 5-36, mean 13

**DATA ANALYSES**
- Quantitative analysis of item evaluations
- Qualitative analysis of interview transcripts
- Comparative analysis of quantitative and qualitative data

**EXPERIMENTAL PILOT STUDY DESIGN**

**PRE-COURSE PHASE**
- Pre-course item writing tasks:
  * A2 & C1 three-option multiple choice grammar items
  * B2 writing prompt
  * B1 listening task (6 gap-fill items) + input text
  * item specifications provided
  * Tasks graded against Quality Review Checklists
  * Interviews with trainees: item writing process / approach / difficulties, etc.

**ITEM WRITING COURSE**
- 11-week course
  - Six 2-week modules
  - Input → item writing practice → group discussions → tutor feedback
  - Online delivery: hosted on Edmodo, asynchronous group discussions, email
  - Progress assessment

**POST-COURSE PHASE**
- Item writing tasks (same as pre-course)
  - Production of new items, not improvement on pre-course ones
  - Interviews with trainees: item writing process / approach, course influence

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSES OF ITEM EVALUATIONS AND INTERVIEW DATA:**

**FOUR TRAINEE ITEM WRITER PROFILES**

**Reflective approach to item writing**
- FELIX
  - Item quality high from the outset, remained so post-course
- pinpointed areas of difficulty
- worked to improve
- saw inter-relationships b/w item writing criteria

**Ability to articulate item writing process**
- remembered what he wrote / how he did it in minute detail
- recollected his thought process while writing items

**Reflected and worked on weak areas**
- FLORA
  - Item quality improved considerably pre- to post-course
- Pre-course: did not mention distractors in the interview
- Post-course: discussed distractors extensively

**Coping strategies to deal with difficulties**
- Pre-course: aware of but unable to achieve text authenticity
- Post-course: found a coping strategy

**NO MENTION OF SOME ASPECTS OF SPECIFICATIONS PRE- & POST-COURSE INTERVIEWS**
- GREG
  - Item quality somewhat improved pre- to post-course
- Lexis and grammar requirements: not observed pre- & post-course, absence of reflection
- Better in-text distractors for listening task post-course, talked about distractors post-course (NOT pre-course)
- Text authenticity: talked about pre- & post-course; excellent text authenticity pre- & post-course

**THOUGHTFUL APPROACH to item writing process & careful ADHERENCE TO SPECIFICATIONS may contribute to item quality**

**CAREFUL ATTENTION to all aspects of specs & COPING STRATEGIES to deal with difficulties may contribute to item quality**

**LACK OF REFLECTION may block the possibility for improvement in item quality**

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