

AN EFL PERSPECTIVE TO THE GMAT ANALYTICAL WRITING ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA) has been part of the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) since 1994. Since an estimated 25% of the GMAT's examinees are non-native speakers of English, this writing test has the potential to greatly affect international examinees. This paper describes the AWA and its scoring and examines some issues and concerns it raises for international examinees. Finally, it presents some recommendations for English teachers based outside English-speaking countries on how they can use what they have learned about the AWA to ensure that their students' AWA papers are scored carefully and used wisely in admissions and diagnostic decisions.

Key words: GMAT, writing assessment, non-native English speakers

1. Introduction

The Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) is taken by over 250,000 examinees every year, an estimated 25% of which are non-native speakers of English. Educational Testing Service (ETS) administers the GMAT under the direction of the Graduate Management Admission Council, (GMAC) a select group of 121 graduate business schools. Since it began 45 years ago, the GMAT has consisted of two main sections: a quantitative section consisting of problem solving and data sufficiency and a verbal section with reading comprehension, critical reasoning, and sentence correction. Both the quantitative and verbal parts of the GMAT consist of multiple choice questions. In October, 1994, a two-part Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA) was added to the GMAT making it the only standard examination given in higher education to offer a writing test to such a large and global group of examinees. The author, an ESL/EFL teacher, was a scorer for ten of the first twelve major AWA scoring sessions held from 1994-1997. This paper will give an EFL perspective to the AWA by describing this test and its scoring, presenting some issues it

raises with respect to international examinees, and suggesting ways EFL teachers can become more knowledgeable about it.

2. The AWA and its Scoring

According to the *1997-1998 GMAT Information Bulletin*, the GMAT "is designed to help graduate schools of business assess the qualifications of applicants for advanced study in business and management" (p. 4). MBA programs have historically tended to favor applicants with high quantitative scores on the GMAT (O'Reilly, 1994) and may have followed this approach even more closely with international applicants. These same business schools and the employers who hire their graduates, however, are now placing more emphasis on communication skills. The addition of the AWA to the GMAT at the request of the GMAC reflects this shift in emphasis and is a significant change to the GMAT (Schmotter, 1995). A second significant change in the GMAT occurred in October 1995, when all parts of the GMAT, including the AWA, were computerized worldwide, with the exception of about 30 countries.

The AWA consists of two thirty-minute impromptu essays, one an analysis of an issue and the other an analysis of an argument. (See appendix for sample prompts.) Both essays are a required part of the GMAT; failure to write a response will cancel the examinee's scores from the objective part of the GMAT. Each examinee's paper is holistically scored on a scale from one to six by two different readers. Using the *AWA Scoring Guide*, (GMAC, 1997) readers evaluate papers based on analysis, development, organization, use of language, and control of standard English usage (Rogers & Rymer, 1996b). Each examinee, therefore, receives a total of four scores, two from the issue paper and two from the argument paper. These four scores are then averaged together for a final analytical writing score that is reported separately from the quantitative and verbal GMAT scores. If a paper's two scores differ by more than one point, it is scored by a third reader with the two closest scores then being averaged. Graduate schools of management do not see individual scores for each paper an applicant writes; only the final AWA score appears on each examinee's GMAT score report. Schools, however, are sent reduced photocopies of the applicants' papers. In the past these papers were handwritten, but now with computerized testing, they are being word-processed.

3. Concerns

The analysis required by the AWA presents a challenge to all examinees, but may pose special difficulties for international examinees, aside from the obvious and largest one of all, writing in a second language. Examinees from some cultural backgrounds may hesitate to clearly state and then support their personal opinions in the issue paper or critically analyze the information in the obviously flawed prompt in the argument paper. For example, international examinees sometimes spend several paragraphs praising the merits of the prompt in the analysis of an argument paper before beginning to analyze its logic. Writers are not specifically penalized for this style since the readers who score AWA papers are instructed to read supportively and reward writers for the analysis they may present later in their papers. The reader training guidelines also remind readers that examinees may use many different kinds of international English and that it is not appropriate to grade for fine points of American style. Still, candidates from some cultures may be disadvantaged because they end up using valuable time and energy on what they may feel is a necessary politeness strategy.

The move to the computerized GMAT offers faster score reporting times and test scheduling at an individual examinee's convenience, advantages to international examinees as well as to those based in the U.S. These advantages, however, literally come at a price, a hefty increase in the GMAT fee from \$85 to \$125 in the U.S. and to \$160 in areas outside of the U.S. This increase in the GMAT fee for international examinees will make an already expensive exam even more of a financial burden, especially for candidates in developing countries. Computerization of the GMAT also means examinees are now required to word process rather than handwrite their AWA papers. Obviously this should help candidates quickly revise their rough drafts, but those with rudimentary keyboard skills will suffer. This possible keyboard bias seems to have concerned ETS enough to allow examinees taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) the option of either handwriting the Test of Written English (TWE) or word processing it when the TOEFL is computerized in 1999. In countries where the computer-adaptive GMAT is offered, however, no such option has ever existed. GMAT examinees can complete a short tutorial before they begin the computer-adaptive portion of the GMAT, but this will not help a candidate learn to type faster.

Nevertheless, basic computer skills are considered a prerequisite for anyone intending to enroll in an MBA course and GMAC's president, David Wilson, has advised examinees with concerns about taking a computerized test to "get over it" (Cheaklos, 1997, p. D3).

One of the aims of the AWA is to assist MBA programs in admissions decisions. It is in this area where it is least clear how the test is affecting international students. ETS researchers Bridegeman and McHale (1996) studied the performance of minority group members on the AWA using data from the first AWA administration in 1994. They concluded that for examinees who indicated their best language was not English, performance on the AWA was not poorer relative to performance on the verbal section of the GMAT. Unfortunately, this research only involved U.S. citizens who indicated their best language was not English, a decidedly small group in comparison to international examinees. Rogers and Rymer (1995) concluded that elite, highly competitive schools (institutions similar to those in the GMAC that requested the AWA be added to the GMAT in the first place) are using it to differentiate between the many highly qualified applicants they consider. It is not as clear if the AWA is being used effectively at other, less competitive institutions outside the GMAC or if it is even being used at all. Noll and Stowers (1997) found that 38% of the GMAC schools they surveyed were using AWA scores to "identify" non-native speakers of English, but after that, what? An additional question they raised for further research is whether "identifying" non-native speakers of English with the AWA is an appropriate use for the test.

4. Recommendations

EFL teachers should educate themselves about the AWA and other similar writing tests their students may face before studying at an English medium institution. The GMAT already has a writing component and beginning in 1999, the Graduate Record Examination, (GRE) the equivalent of the GMAT for students pursuing graduate studies in fields besides business, will also introduce a writing test. When TOEFL is computerized in 1999, the TWE will be offered with every individual TOEFL administration, not just five times a year as it is now. For better or worse, it appears that writing tests are not disappearing and their results are being used to make important decisions that affect international students. EFL teachers can best serve their students by staying informed about these tests.

One way for EFL professionals to educate themselves about the AWA is to serve as readers for the test. This will not directly help international examinees do better on the AWA, but it will certainly allow their teachers to become more familiar with the test and thus better able to help students prepare for it. The individuals who scored the paper and pencil AWA in its first three years were mostly teachers of business management, English composition, English literature, business communication, and English as a second language. The author estimates that ESL teachers comprised about 20% of these AWA readers. Since the computer-adaptive GMAT began in October 1997, AWA papers have been scored by readers living within commuting distance of four major metropolitan areas in the U.S. In the near future, however, ETS plans to have readers score the AWA papers on-line by computer in their homes or offices. This will allow EFL professionals in countries outside the U.S. to qualify as AWA readers and to participate in scoring these papers.

EFL professionals need to consider using their perspective and expertise to contribute to research on how the AWA is used in admissions and diagnostic decisions. Research on the AWA is limited mainly because the test has only been offered since 1994. Nevertheless, lack of published research on the effect of the AWA on all non-native speakers of English, not just those with U.S. citizenship as in the Bridgeman and McHale study (1996) is a major gap considering non-native speakers make up approximately 25% of GMAT examinees. Many graduate schools of business have taken a wait-and-see approach to using the AWA in admissions decisions because GMAT scores are good for five years, and all candidates for admission may not have AWA scores on their GMAT score reports until 1999. Still, universities are putting policies in place and some of them may be misguided. The author knows of at least one graduate business program in the U.S. which requires fully admitted MBA students with AWA scores of 3.5 or lower to take a special writing course for MBA students, with one section reserved for non-native speakers of English. This policy is partly commendable since one of the main ways the AWA can be misused is by shuttling all students with similar AWA scores but very different needs into a one-size-fits-all writing course (Rogers & Rymer, 1996c). In fact, the AWA's holistic scoring virtually guarantees that examinees may receive identical AWA scores for quite different reasons. What is disturbing about this university's policy, however, is that it seems to view some of these reasons as better than others; the ESL section of the MBA writing course does not carry elective credit good toward graduation, unlike the native speaker section. Policies such as

these which so greatly affect international students point out the need for EFL professionals everywhere to continue the important work of educating others about second language learning.

Finally, just as Raimes (1990) suggested that teachers keep a critical eye on the TWE and the changes ETS made in it, EFL teachers need to be watching the AWA and its developments closely too. In terms of its effects on students studying in English-speaking countries, the GMAT's AWA is second only to the TWE in numbers of global examinees. EFL teachers need to educate themselves and their students about the AWA, participate in its scoring, and do their own research on its effects on their students. Doing this will help ensure that AWA topics are free of possible cultural bias and that the AWA papers of international examinees are scored fairly and used wisely in admissions decisions.

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APPENDIX

Analysis of an Issue: Sample Topic

"People often complain that products are not made to last. They feel that making products that wear out fairly quickly wastes both natural and human resources. What they fail to see, however, is that such manufacturing practices keep costs down for the consumer and stimulate demand."

Which do you find more compelling: the complaint about products that do not last or the response to it? Explain your position using relevant reasons and/or examples drawn from your own experience, observations, or reading.

Analysis of an Argument: Sample Topic

The following appeared as part of an article in a daily newspaper. "The computerized onboard warning system that will be installed in commercial airliners will virtually solve the problem of midair plane collisions. One plane's warning system can receive signals from another's transponder--a radio set that signals a plane's course--in order to determine the likelihood of a collision and recommend evasive action."

Discuss how well reasoned you find this argument. In your discussion be sure to analyze the line of reasoning and the use of evidence in the argument. For example, you may need to consider what questionable assumptions underlie the thinking and what alternative explanations or counterexamples might weaken the conclusion. You can also discuss what sort of evidence would strengthen or refute the argument, what changes in the argument would make it more logically sound, and what, if anything, would help you better evaluate its conclusion.

Graduate Management Admission Council, *1997-1998 GMAT Information Bulletin*, pp. 30-31.