

## Chapter 3 Objective testing (J. B. Heaton)

### 3.1 Subjective and objective testing

The terms **subjective** and **objective** refer to the scoring of tests.

All types of test items require test-takers to exercise a **subjective** judgement. For example, in an essay test, the test-takers **must think of what to say** and **express their ideas in an orderly manner** as much as possible. In a multiple-choice test, the test-takers **have to judge carefully** all the alternatives and select the best one. In addition, we can say that **all tests are constructed subjectively** by the tester.

The tester decides:

- (a) which areas of language to test
- (b) how to test those particular areas and
- (c) what kind of items to use for this purpose.

The tester's decisions are all concerned with a subjective judgement.

We can say that it is only the **scoring** of a test that can be considered as **objective**. That is, a test-taker will get the same mark no matter which examiner evaluates the test.

Objective tests have usually only one correct answer and therefore they can be scored mechanically. Objective tests can be marked by computer. Such tests are used for testing large numbers of candidates because they can be scored objectively.

Some skills and areas of language, for example, reading and vocabulary, can be tested by objective methods of assessment. But some language skills such as speaking and writing can only be satisfactorily tested by a subjective examination. The students are required to perform a writing task similar to a real-life task of writing. Oral fluency can be checked by giving students the following stimulus and evaluating their responses in a subjective manner.

**You went to live in Cairo two years ago. Someone asks you how long you have lived there. What would you say?**

Answer 1. I've been living in Cairo since 1986.

Answer 2. I didn't leave Cairo since 1986.

Answer 3. I have lived in the Cairo City for above two years.

Answer 4. From 1986.

Answer 5. I came to live here before 1986 and I still live here.

Answer 6. Since 1986 my home is in Cairo.

The test item simulates a real-life situation but it is largely **subjective** because the response is whatever the students wish to say. Some answers will be better than others. How would you mark these answers?

Scoring: Problem of degrees of acceptability and ways of scoring all the possible responses. Careful guidelines should be prepared to **achieve consistency in scoring** the variety of responses.

Complete the sentences by putting the best word in each blank.

'Is your home still in Cairo?'

'Yes, I've been living here ..... 1986.'

A. for      B. on      C. in      D. at      E. since

Language simply does not function in this way in real-life situations. For instance, nobody asks you to complete a blank in a sentence in real life. Therefore this item tests grammar rather than communication.

Objective tests are difficult to prepare but easy to score, but subjective tests are relatively easy to prepare but considerable time is needed for marking.

### 3.2 Objective tests

Objective tests are criticized for being simpler to answer than subjective tests. But items in an objective test can be made as easy or as difficult as the test constructor wishes.

The test constructor selects and constructs test items carefully and then by conducting item analysis for each item after the test, he rewrites problem items so that all items can discriminate and can have appropriate difficulty level.

Another criticism about **objective tests** of the multiple-choice type is that they **encourage guessing**. However, constructing test items with four or five alternatives for each item may reduce guessing. The test-takers rarely make wild guesses. They try to guess the correct answer depending on their partial knowledge.

Grammar, vocabulary and phonology can be included in an objective test than in a subjective test.

An objective test will be a very poor test if:

- (a) the test items are poorly written;
- (b) irrelevant areas and skills are emphasized in the test simply because they are 'testable'; and
- (c) it is confined to language-based usage and neglects the communicative skills involved.

Objective tests **can never test the ability to communicate** in the target language, nor can they evaluate actual performance. A good classroom test will usually contain both subjective and objective test items.

### 3.3 Multiple-choice items: general

The multiple-choice item is one of the most difficult and time-consuming types of items to construct.

The main criticism of the multiple-choice item is that it does not lend itself to the testing of language as communication.

Because in real-life situations **we do not select** one option out of given four or five alternatives but **we produce** appropriate responses to various stimuli in real-life situations.

Multiple-choice items can provide a useful means of teaching and testing in various learning situations at the lower levels for testing **knowledge** of grammar, vocabulary, etc. rather than the ability to **use** language. They can be useful in measuring students' ability to recognize correct grammatical forms, vocabulary, etc. In this way, they can help both the students and the teacher to identify areas of difficulty in language teaching and learning.

Each multiple-choice item is constructed usually with four alternatives or options for grammar and with five alternatives for reading comprehension and vocabulary.

Stay here until Mr. Short ..... you to come.

- A. told
- B. will tell
- C. is telling
- D. tells

General principles in constructing multiple-choice items:

1. Each multiple-choice item should have only **one correct answer**.
2. Only one feature at a time should be tested.
3. Each option should be grammatically correct when placed in the stem.
4. All multiple choice items should be at a level appropriate to the proficiency level of the test-takers.
5. Multiple-choice items should be as brief and as clear as possible.
6. In many tests, items are arranged in rough order of increasing difficulty.

Study examples of multiple-choice items in your course book (pp. 28-32).

### **3.4 Multiple-choice items: the stem/the correct option/ the distractors**

1. The primary purpose of the stem is to present the problem clearly and concisely.
  - (a) The test-taker should be able to obtain a very general idea of the problem and the answer required.
  - (b) The stem should be short, but it should convey enough information to indicate the basis on which the correct option should be selected.
  - (c) The stem should not contain extraneous or irrelevant clues that may lead the test-taken to confusion about the problem being tested.

2. The stem may take the following forms:

(a) ***an incomplete statement***

He accused me of ..... lies.

A. speaking    B. saying    C. telling    D. talking

(b) ***a complete statement***

Everything we wanted was to hand.

A. under control    C. well cared for  
B. within reach    D. being prepared

(c) ***a question***

According to the writer, what did Tom immediately do?

A. He ran home    C. He began to shout  
B. He met Bob.    D. He phoned the police.

3. The stem should usually contain words or phrases which would otherwise have to be repeated in each option.

The word 'astronauts' is used in the passage to refer to

A. travelers in an ocean liner    C. travelers in a submarine  
B. travelers in a space-ship    D. travelers in a balloon

The stem should be rewritten as

The word 'astronauts' is used in the passage to refer to travelers in

- |                   |                |
|-------------------|----------------|
| A. an ocean liner | C. a submarine |
| B. a space-ship   | D. a balloon   |

The same principle applies to grammar items.

I enjoy ..... the children playing in the park.

- |                  |               |
|------------------|---------------|
| A. looking to    | C. looking at |
| B. looking about | D. looking on |

This item should be rewritten as

I enjoy looking ..... the children playing in the park.

- |       |          |       |       |
|-------|----------|-------|-------|
| A. to | B. about | C. at | D. on |
|-------|----------|-------|-------|

But if 'looking' is included as option, then the stem has to be rewritten as follows:

I enjoy ..... the children playing in the park.

- |               |               |
|---------------|---------------|
| A. looking on | C. looking at |
| B. looking    | D. looking to |

Since using 'look' without a preposition is **a common error** among language learner, it should be test.

4. The stem should allow for the number of choices which have been decided upon. For example, in comparisons the stem allows only for three options. The fourth option is not possible in this case.

Tom was ..... the other two boys.

- A. taller than
- B. smaller than
- C. as tall as

### **The correct option**

For normal purposes of testing, there should be one correct or best option. The correct option/actually all options/ should be the same length as the distractors. There is a tendency to make the correct answer longer than distractors in order to make it absolutely correct by qualifying a statement or word.

He began to *choke* while he was eating the fish.

- A. die
- B. cough and vomit
- C. be unable to breathe because of something in the windpipe
- D. grow very angry

### **The distractors**

- Each distractor, or incorrect option, should be reasonably attractive and plausible. It should appear right to any test-taker who is unsure of the correct option. Items should be constructed in such a way that students obtain the correct option by direct selection rather than by elimination of obviously incorrect options. Choice D in the following grammar item will be immediately by test-takers at this level.

The present tax reforms have benefited ..... poor.

- A. that
- B. the
- C. a
- D. an

Each distractor should be grammatically correct when it stands by itself. Otherwise test-takers will be exposed to incorrect forms.



- A distractor should be attractive to the test-taker who is not sure of the correct answer. Otherwise its inclusion as a distractor is superfluous/not necessary.
- Plausible distractors are best based on
  - (a) mistakes in the students' own written work
  - (b) their answers in previous tests
  - (c) the teacher's experience, and
  - (d) a contrastive analysis between the native and target languages.
- Distractors, especially in testing vocabulary, should not be too difficult nor demand a higher proficiency in the language than the correct option. In other words, the frequency of the distractors in vocabulary test should be higher than the correct option.

You need a \_\_\_\_\_ to enter that military airfield.

A. permutation   B. permit   C. perdition   D. perspicuity

Options A, C and D are less frequent than option B.

- Capital letters are only used in options which occur at the beginning of a sentence.

..... of petrol has actually fallen.

A. The price   B. Price   C. A price