

Multiple Choice Items: Tests and Usage

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ABSTRACT

Multiple choice is one of the tool to test language skills especially reading and listening. Multiple choice is commonly use to evaluate students' knowledge and performance. Sometimes it is not only for students but also for applicants or even workers. Thus, this study attempts to investigate what multiple choice items is and how it is used. The writer sees a need to carry out this study as it provides a platform to discover pedagogical implications that would benefit the teachers in terms of improving their knowledge and skill to know further and be able to construct multiple choice items.

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Introduction

Language is segmented into many small linguistic points and the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Test questions are designed to test these skills and linguistic points. This paper focuses on multiple-choice tests. This test can accommodate to test listening and reading skill whereas speaking and writing skill can be called as productive skill so to test these skills are suggested to test students to produce both oral or written into target language. On the other hand, Žlábková (2007: 14) stated that indirect test items try to measure a student's knowledge that lies beneath their receptive and productive skills. Multiple-choice test limitation is testing knowledge, this test belongs to indirect test. Tests of reading and listening skills should also reflect real life. Whereas, students perform tasks such as introducing themselves and writing a short paragraph or essay may be a good example of testing speaking and writing skills so it belongs to direct test. That is why this paper will focus on listening and writing skill. Besides language skills, multiple-choice item also test the some language aspects like grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. This paper will also investigate those language aspects in terms to multiple-choice item tests.

Multiple choice item is belong to discrete items as Oller (1979: 37) argued that "Whereas discrete items attempt to test knowledge of language one bit at a time, integrative tests attempt to assess a learner's capacity to use many bits all at the same time, and possibly while exercising several presumed components of a grammatical system, and perhaps more than one of the traditional skills or aspects of skills." It can be inferred that multiple-choice tests deals with discrete test not integrative one. On the other hand as Oller (1979: 231) stated that multiple-choice tests can be of the discrete point or integrative type or anywhere on the continuum in between the two extremes. The writer can point the example in the multiple-choice reading testing, there can be grammar and vocabulary tasks.

Multiple choice item also belong to objective test as Burhan (2009: 74) stated that "language tests can also be distinguished as subjective tests such as essay, precis, and translation or as objective tests, for example, multiple choices, true false and single word answer." Whereas subjective tests should be scored by a trained professional, objective tests can be scored by even a clerk with an answer key. It can be said that multiple choice is included as objective tests, it provides an answer key.

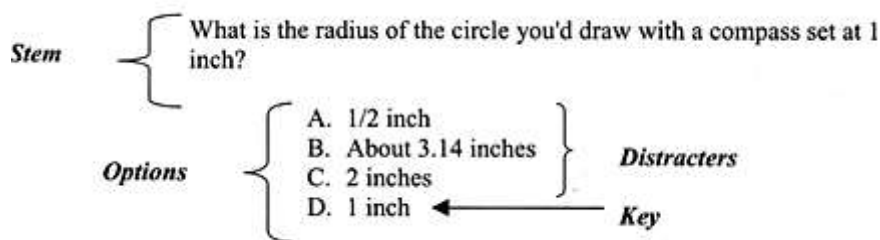
Multiple-choice tests have become popular due to their practicality and cost-effectiveness. It has been acknowledged that guessing on multiple-choice tests can adversely affect test reliability (Zimmerman & Williams, 1965 in Stewart, J. 2012). Since multiple choice item is one of popular test, this paper accomodates what multiple-choice item is, how it is constucted, why multiple-choice tests should be recommended in English language testing, and how multiple-choice test is used in testing language skills and language aspects especially reading testing, listening testing, grammar testing, spelling testing and vocabulary testing.

Discussion

1.1 The Nature of Multiple-Choice Tests

Multiple choice testing is an efficient and effective way to assess a wide range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities (Haladyna, 1999 in Parkes, 2012). So it can be said that the multiple-choice test is a very flexible assessment format that can be used to measure knowledge, skills, abilities, values, thinking skills, and so forth. Such a test usually consists of a number of items that pose a question to which students must select an answer from among a number of choices. Items can also be statements to which students must find the best completion. Multiple-choice items, therefore, are fundamentally recognition tasks, where students must identify the correct response.

A multiple choice test is constructed of multiple choice items, which consist of two, sometimes three, parts as shown below (Burton, S.J., Sudweeks, R.R., Merrill, P.F., & Wood, B. 1991).



The Stem of a multiple choice item is the part to which the student is to respond. In everyday language, it can be called as the question. The Options are the choices from which examinees are to choose. There are two kinds of options; the key is the correct or best choice and the distracters are incorrect or less appropriate choices.

The primary purpose of the stem is to present the problem clearly and concisely (Heaton, 1990: 30). Although the stem should be short, it should convey enough information to indicate the basis on which the correct option should be selected, for example like this below.

(a) He accused me of lies.

- a. speaking b. saying c. telling d. Talking

The correct option is the answer or the key. The correct answer from the question above is 'c'. It should be one correct answer to avoid confusing the students. For example:

(a). Who you cycle here to see us?

- a. ordered b. caused c. maded. let

This practice is not allowed because there are two possible correct answers in the options 'c' and 'd'. It is also important to remember that the correct option also should be approximately the same length as the distractors.

While the choices from which the students select their answers, it referred as options/responses/alternatives. One option is the answer, while the other options are distractors or incorrect option. It should be reasonably and plausible. Plausible distractors are best based on mistakes in the students' own written work, their answers in previous tests, the teacher's experience, and a constrastive analysis between the native and the target languages (Heaton, 1990: 32).

There are important points should be remembered for teacher when put the distractors. First, the distractors should appear right to any testee who is unsure of the correct option. Second, each distractors should be grammatically correct. Third, distractors should not be too difficult nor demand a higher proficiency in the language than the correct option. Fouth, capital letters are only used in options which occur at the beginning of a sentence. So it can be concluded as Kathleen (1996: 165) language testing specialists the essential characteristics of the distractors of multiple-choice items is that they should be plausible to those who lack the knowledge or ability for which the item is testing. Hence a lot of care should be put into the selection of the distractors.

Multiple-choice test is one of type of testing. In ELT, language testing should gives meaningful contribution to the language teaching and learning. According to Burhan (2009: 72) there are remarkable contributions the language testing makes to language

teaching and learning. First, tests can help create positive attitudes towards instruction by giving students a sense of accomplishment. Second, tests can help students learn the language. Motivated to obtain good test results, they are spurred to study hard. Third, tests can help to provide a measure of students' achievement in and upon the completion of language instruction. Fourth, tests can provide diagnostic tips as feedback for teachers. The feedback can be used to improve the programs. Fifth, tests define course objectives in that the students tend to study according to the types of tests given.

2.2 Constructing Multiple Choice Items

The reliability of multiple-choice tests is a function of the number of responses per item (Ajideh, P & Esfandiari, R, 2009: 165). So, when construct multiple-choice item, it is important to hand principles. There are general principles should be observed when multiple choice items are constructed (Heaton, 1990: 28-30). Firstly, each multiple-choice item should have only answer. Secondly, only one feature at a time should be tested: it is usually less confusing for the testees and it helps to reinforce a particular teaching point. Thirdly, each option should be grammatically correct when placed in the stem. Fourthly, all multiple-choice items should be at a level appropriate to the proficiency level of the testees. Fifthly, multiple-choice items should be as brief and as clear as possible. And lastly, items are arranged in rough order of increasing difficulty.

While prepare this test, there are some steps to be taken into account as Oller (1979: 255) stated obtain a clear notion of what it is that needs to be tested, select appropriate item content and devise an appropriate item format, write the test items, get some qualified person to read the test items for editorial difficulties of vagueness, ambiguity, and possible lack of clarity, rewrite any weak items or otherwise revise the test format to achieve maximum clarity concerning what is required of the examinee, pretest the items on some suitable sample of subjects other than the specifically targeted group, run an item analysis over the data from the pretesting, rewrite item that prove to be too easy or too difficult, assess the validity of the finished product, apply the finished test to the target population.

There are four steps of constructing multiple choice items described by Heaton (1990 37-39 in Zlabkova, L. 2007: 16):

Step 1: The first step is to know what the teacher wants to test and to have the sentence testing that. The teacher may think the sentence up or use sentences and errors made by students in their free composition and open-ended answers to questions.

I like tea but I haven't / don't like coffee.

Step 2: Next the teacher writes out the sentence substituting a blank for the area being tested and then writes in the correct option and the distractor which the student has provided.

I like tea but Icoffee.

A. don't like B. haven't like

Step 3: Now the teacher adds two more distractors. Again he or she may go to the written work of the students to provide these distractors. But if he or she cannot find any suitable errors without too much difficulty, the teacher uses his or her own experience and

knowledge of the target and native languages. Of course, it is necessary to be very careful and to not give more than one correct option. There is also a possibility to change the positions of the distractors.

I like tea but Icoffee.

A. doesn't like B. don't like C. haven't like D. like

Step 4: Finally the teacher should check to be sure that other options are not correct and ask his or her fellow teachers to try the test to find possible imperfections.

Based on adaptation from Gronlund (1998, 60-75), and Brown, J. D (1996: 54-57) the design of multiple-choice tests item as in the following

1. Design each item to measure a specific objective, for example

Where did George go after the party last night?

- A. Yes, he did
- B. Because he was tired
- C. To Elaine's place for another party
- D. Around eleven o'clock

The specific objective being tested here is comprehension of *wh*-questions.

2. State both stem and options as simply and directly as possible, for example

We went to visit the temples, fascinating.

- a. which were beautiful
- b. which were especially
- c. which were holy

Here, *which were* is repeated in all three options, it should be placed in the stem to keep the item as succinct as possible.

3. Make certain that the intended answer is clearly the only correct one, for example

Where did George go after the party last night?

- A. Yes, he did
- B. Because he was tired
- C. To Elaine's place for another party
- D. He went home around eleven o'clock.

'D' reveals that it is plausible answer, along with the intended key 'C'. the problem of designing multiple-choice items is eliminating unintended possible answers.

2.3 The Strengths and Limitations of Multiple-choice items

Based on Clegg, Victoria I & Cashin, William E. (1986) argued multiple choice test is recommended in language testing by considering its strengths and limitations. The strengths can be divided as firstly, multiple-choice items can be used to test all levels of learning from knowledge to evaluation. Secondly, multiple-choice items (MCIs) can assess the ability to integrate information from several sources. Thirdly, MCIs are very useful for diagnosing student difficulties if the incorrect options are written to reveal common errors. Fourthly, MCIs provide an excellent basis for post-test discussion especially if the discussion includes why the distractors are wrong as well as why the correct answers are right. Fifthly, MCIs can provide a more comprehensive sample of subject material because more questions can be asked. Sixthly, MCIs adapt to a wide range of content and difficulty

levels. Seventhly, MCIs require relatively less student time to answer. Lastly, MCIs can be easily and accurately scored by a person or machine.

In other words, multiple-choice tests are practical and reliable (Brown, 2004: 55). It is easy and consistent process of scoring on the other hand it needs more time to design such items and of course the objective is to design a large scale standardized test for repeated administrations, in this way multiple-choice tests are recommended.

Whereas the limitations or weakness of multiple-choice items (MCIs) are described as the following. Firstly, MCIs are open to misinterpretation by students who read more into questions than was intended. Secondly, MCIs may appear too picky to students especially when the options are well-constructed. Thirdly, MCIs deny demonstration of knowledge beyond the range of options provided. Fourthly, MCIs are difficult to phrase so that all students will have the options provided. Fifthly, MCIs take time and skill to construct effectively. Sixthly, MCIs are so easily constructed to assess basic factual knowledge that instructors often fail to test higher levels of thinking. Seventhly, MCIs are ill-suited to assess affective or attitudinal learning because they are easily “faked”. Lastly, MCIs encourage guessing after all one option is correct.

In other words, Hughes (2003: 76-78) described that a number of weaknesses of multiple-choice items are:

- the technique tests only recognition knowledge
- guessing may have a considerable effect on test score
- the technique severely restricts what can be tested
- it is very difficult to write successful items
- washback may be harmful
- cheating may be facilitated

While students’ multiple choice questions abilities may be trained and improved, this may not actually improve their English (Harmer, 2001: 323).

2.4 Multiple-Choice Items Usage

2.4.1 Multiple Choice Items: Testing Reading

Multiple-choice in this test can be divided into short texts and longer texts (Heaton, 1990: 116). Here is the example of multiple-choice from short text;

The president was talking to a young woman in the crowd when Tim suddenly caught sight of a man standing several yards behind her. The man had something in his hand: it was a short stick.

What made Tim notice the man in the crowd?

- A. He was very close to Tim
- B. The president was talking to him
- C. He was standing in front of the woman
- D. He was carrying a stick

The answer is ‘D’ that can be found in the short text. To test people’s ability to understand a language the examiners present passage or passages, usually about half a page to a page in length, and give an instruction more or less as follows (Gethin, A. (2012):

After each of the following passages there are a number of questions or unfinished statements about the passage. Each one has four suggested answers or ways of finishing; choose the one you think is best.

The standard of medicine in the United States is generally agreed to be very high. There is no shortage of well qualified specialists, and there is a lot of individual attention. Treatment is backed up by the latest in the way of medical technology. Doctors and hospitals do their utmost not to make mistakes, because if they do they risk being made to pay out enormous sums in compensation.

But the American health care system has what look like insoluble problems. There are in fact two systems side by side. One is the private system run on the basis of free competition. The other is the public system which had to be created because such a large part of the population, including many of the elderly, could not afford to pay for the absurdly expensive private treatment.

The public system is vast. A huge proportion - more than 10 per cent - of the United States federal budget goes on it. Yet there are still very large numbers of Americans who are not covered even by this service. The government tries to keep expenditure down and so sets limits to the income of people using the system. Millions of the unemployed are another important group that is excluded.

1. What is the state of the health system in America? It is
 - A. unsatisfactory.
 - B. satisfactory.
 - C. too risky.
 - D. too mechanised.
2. What can patients expect with regard to treatment in the U.S.A.?
 - A. Frequent mistakes by doctors.
 - B. Very honest hospitals.
 - C. Personal attention.
 - D. Some of the most skilful nurses in the world.
3. Among those Americans who cannot get proper health care are
 - A. some people who earn too much.
 - B. old people.
 - C. people with very large incomes.
 - D. private patients.

2.4.2 Multiple Choice Items: Testing Listening

For purposes of convenience, auditory tests are divided into two broad categories: tests of phoneme discrimination and of sensitivity to stress and intonation, and tests of listening comprehension (Heaton, 1990: 66-69).

- 1). Tests of phoneme discrimination, for example

The testees hear three sentences and have to indicate which sentences are the same and which are different.

- A. is that sheet over there clean?
- B. is that seat over there clean?
- C. is that sheet over there clean?

In each of these items one word is given on tape while three or four words are printed in the answer booklet. The testees are required to choose the written word which corresponds to the spoken word.

Spoken: den

Written: A. ten B. den C. ben D. pen

2). Tests of stress and intonation, for example

The examiner makes an utterance and the testees have to select the appropriate description to indicate whether they have understood the original utterance. The utterance is spoken once only, but the test is based on the principle that the same utterance may be spoken in several different tone-patterns indicating a plain statement, a question, sarcasm, surprise, annoyance, etc.

Spoken: I'll help Ann

Written: I'll help Ann

The speaker is

- A. reluctant to help Ann
- B. eager to help Ann
- C. making a plain statement

3). Tests of listening comprehension, for example (Brown, 2004: 133-135).

Dialogue and multiple-choice comprehension items

Test-takers hear:

Direction: now you will hear a conversation between Lynn and her doctor. You will hear the conversation two times. After you hear the conversation the second time, choose the correct answer for questions 11-15 below. Mark your answer sheet provided.

Doctor : Good morning, Lynn. What's the problem?

Lynn : Well, you see, I have a terrible headache, my nose is running, and I'm really dizzy.

Doctor : Okay. Anything else?

Lynn : I've been coughing, I think I have a fever, and my stomach aches.

Doctor : I see. When did this start?

Lynn : Well, let's see, I went to the lake last weekend, and after I returned home I started sneezing.

Doctor : Hmm. You must have the flu. You should get lots of rest, drink hot beverages, and stay warm. Do you follow me?

Lynn : Well, uh, yeah, but... shouldn't I take some medicine?

Doctor : Sleep and rest are as good as medicine when you have the flu.

Lynn : Okay, thanks, Dr. Brown.

Test-takers read:

What is Lynn's problem?

- A. She feels horrible
- B. She ran too fast at the lake
- C. She's been drinking too many hot beverages

The doctor said that Lynn.....

- A. flew to the lake last weekend
- B. must not get the flu
- C. probably has the flu

According to Dr. Brown, sleep and rest are medicine when you have the flu.

- A. more effective than
- B. as effective as
- C. less effective than

Dialogue and authentic questions on details

Test-takers hear:

You will hear a conversation between a detective and a man. The tape will play the conversation twice. After you hear the conversation a second time, choose the correct answers on your sheet.

Detective : where were you last night at eleven p.m, the time of the murder?

Man : Uh, let's see, well, I was just starting to see a movie.

Detective : Did you go alone?

Man : No, uh, well, I was with my friend, uh, Bill. Yeah, I was with Bill.

Test-takers read:

Where was the man at 11:00 p.m?

- A. In a restaurant
- B. in a theater
- C. At home

Was he with someone?

- A. he was alone
- B. he was with his wife
- C. he was with a friend

2.4.3 Multiple-Choice Items: Testing Grammar

Based on Hemphill (2001) inferred that probably the most common way of testing grammatical knowledge is the multiple choice test. For many years multiple choice questions were considered to be an ideal test instrument for measuring students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (Harmer, 2001: 323). These tests have the advantage of being easy to grade and being able to cover a lot of grammatical points quickly.

The most common type of multiple choice grammatical item is one in which the test maker gives the testee a sentence with a blank and four or five choices of a word or phrase which completes the sentence correctly. For example,

Because my mother was sick, I ____ to go home last week.
A. had B. have C. has D. hadn't

As also Heaton (1990: 35-37) provides another type of multiple-choice items in testing grammar by testing short answers and responses:

'Tom ought not to have told anyone the secret.'

A. 'So ought you.' C. 'Neither you oughtn't.'
B. 'Neither ought you.' D. 'So oughtn't you'.

And the type that requires the students to select the alternatives which is true according to the information conveyed in each sentence:

'Tom ought not to have told me.'

A. Tom did not tell me but he should.
B. Perhaps Tom may not tell me,
C. Tom told me but it was wrong of him.
D. It was necessary for Tom not to tell me.

Test of grammar should be made to sound as natural as possible. There is another type that give context. It provides testees with enough background knowledge and details to avoid ambiguity and alternative interpretations, here is the example:

A 72-year-old Samoan who (1) no English at all spent thirteen days (2)..... on buses in the San Fransisco areas after he had become separated (3)..... his family. Police said.

(1) A. is speaking B. speaks C. has spoken D. was speaking
(2) A. to ride B. was riding C. ride D. riding
(3) A. with B. from C. by D. off

Or editing task is usually in TOEFL test as below (Phillips, 2001: 219).
Choose the letter of the underlined word that is not correct.

The abrasively action of the wind wears away softer layers of rock.

A B C D

2.4.4 Multiple Choice Items: Testing Spelling

Another fairly widespread method of testing spelling is through the use of multiple-choice items usually containing five options, four of which are spelt correctly. The students are required to select the word which is incorrectly spelt (Heaton, 1990: 151). Here are the examples;

1. A. thief B. belief C. seize D. Ceiling E. decieve
2. A. happening B. offering C. occuring D. Beginning E. benefiting

In some texts only four words are given as options, the fifth option being *No mistake* or *All correct*, e.g.

- A. Exhibition B. punctually C. pieasure D. obeyed E. All correct

2.4.5 Multiple Choice Items: Testing Vocabulary

According to 'writing English language tests' there are two major kinds of multiple-choice vocabulary items; The item deals with synonyms and the item deals with context and grammatical clues (Heaton, 1990:52). Here is the example:

Choose the letter of the word which is nearest in meaning to the word in italics.

He's been very *feeble* since his illness.

- A. Unwell B. thin C. foolish D. Weak

Choose the letter of the correct or best word to complete each sentence.

Have you heard the planning committee's for solving the city's traffic problems?

- A. theory B. design C. proposal D. Purpose

By far the most popular method of testing a reading knowledge of vocabulary is the multiple-choice format, mainly for reasons of practicality; it is easy to administer and can be scored quickly (Brown: 2004: 194-196)

Multiple-choice vocabulary tasks

He's got married. He's.....

- A. young B. single C. first D. husband

If there's no doorbell, please on the door.

- A. kneel B. type C. knock D. shout

Contextualized multiple-choice vocabulary tasks

Oscar : Do you like champagne?

Lucy : No, I can't

- A. stand B. prefer C. hate

Manager : Do you like to work by yourself?

Employee : Yes, I like to work

- A. definitely B. impatiently C. independently

Multiple-choice cloze vocabulary task

I live in United States (1) three years. I (2) live in Costa Rica. I (3) speak any English.

- | | | |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. A. since | B. for | C. during |
| 2. A. used to | B. use to | C. was |
| 3. A. couldn't | B. could | C. can |

Gethin, A. (2012) argued that the most important aspects of vocabulary is what words go together with what other words, and what words are used in this or that real-life situation. As it is shown in this example:

The receptionist to ring another hotel to see if they had a room.

A.offered B. suggested C. recommended D. invited

The infinitive 'to' with 'ring' makes 'suggested' impossible. The use of 'suggest' here would be a classic mistake of students of English. 'recommended' and 'invited' would need 'me', 'us', or some other suitable pronoun or noun. So the best answer is 'offered'

Has there been any on the strike from the government?

A. reaction B. comment C. response D. criticism

'on' is the key word. 'reaction' and 'response' would need 'to' and 'criticism' would need 'of'. So the correct answer is 'comment'

Conclusion

In the conclusion, multiple-choice items is a test that requires students to select the correct answer to a question from alternative responses that are given by the instructor. Multiple-choice items have three elements including stem, correct answer, and distractors. When constructing multiple-choice item, there are some principles to be taken into account. Firstly, each multiple-choice item should have only answer. Secondly, only one feature at a time should be tested. Thirdly, each option should be grammatically correct when placed in the stem. Fourthly, all multiple-choice items should be at a level appropriate to the proficiency level of the testees. Fifthly, multiple-choice items should be as brief and as clear as possible. And lastly, items are arranged in rough order of increasing difficulty.

Multiple-choice item is one popular tests in language testing and from considering the strength and limitation that is discussed above so it is recommended to test the breadth of student learning, to test a variety of levels of learning, to test when there are many students who will be taking the test, to test when time is limited for scoring, and to test when it is not important to determine how well the students can formulate a correct or acceptable answer.

How multiple-choice items test are used in testing language skill and aspects especially this paper focuses on reading testing, listening testing, grammar testing, spelling testing, and vocabulary testing.

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