

TESTING

GRAMMAR & USAGE



## 13 Testing grammar

### Testing grammar

#### *Why test grammar?*

Can one justify the separate testing of grammar? There was a time when this would have seemed a very odd question. Control of grammatical structures was seen as the very core of language ability and it would have been unthinkable not to test it. But times have changed. As far as proficiency tests are concerned, there has been a shift towards the view that since it is language skills that are usually of interest, then it is these which should be tested directly, not the abilities that seem to underlie them. For one thing, it is argued, there is more to any skill than the sum of its parts; one cannot accurately predict mastery of the skill by measuring control of what we believe to be the abilities that underlie it. For another, as has been argued earlier in this book, the backwash effect of tests that measure mastery of skills directly may be thought preferable to that of tests that might encourage the learning of grammatical structures in isolation, with no apparent need to use them. Considerations of this kind have resulted in the absence of any grammar component in some well-known proficiency tests.

But probably most proficiency tests that are administered on a large scale still retain a grammar section. One reason for this must be the ease with which large numbers of items can be administered and scored within a short period of time. Related to that, and at least as important, is the question of content validity. If we decide to test writing ability directly, then we are severely limited in the number of topics, styles of writing, and what we earlier referred to as 'operations' that we can cover in any one version of the test. We cannot be completely confident that the sample chosen is truly representative of all possibilities. Neither can we be sure, of course, that a (proficiency) grammar test includes a good sample of all possible grammatical elements. But the very fact that there can be so many items does put the grammar test at an advantage.

Even if one has doubts about testing grammar in a proficiency test, there is often good cause to include a grammar component in the achievement, placement and diagnostic tests of teaching institutions. It seems unlikely that there are many institutions, however 'communicative' their approach, that do not teach some grammar in some guise or other. Wherever the teaching of grammar is thought necessary, then consideration should be given to the advisability of including a grammar component in achievement tests. If this is done, however, it would seem prudent, from the point of view of backwash, not to give such components too much prominence in relation to tests of skills, the development of which will normally constitute the primary objectives of language courses.

Whether or not grammar has an important place in an institution's teaching, it has to be accepted that grammatical ability, or rather the lack of it, sets limits to what can be achieved in the way of skills performance. The successful writing of academic assignments, for example, must depend to some extent on command of more than the most elementary grammatical structures. It would seem to follow from this that in order to place students in the most appropriate class for the development of such skills, knowledge of a student's grammatical ability would be very useful information. There appears to be room for a grammar component in at least some placement tests.

It would be very useful to have diagnostic tests of grammar which could tell us – for individual learners and groups – what gaps exist in their grammatical repertoire. Such tests could inform not only teachers but also learners, so that they could take responsibility for filling the existing gaps themselves. For this reason, it would be important for the tests to be linked in some way or other to learning materials. There is reason to believe that we may be on the point of having computer based tests of grammar that will be able to provide such information.

### *Writing specifications*

For achievement tests where teaching objectives or the syllabus list the grammatical structures to be taught, specification of content should be quite straightforward. When there is no such listing it becomes necessary to infer from textbooks and other teaching materials what structures are being taught. Specifications for a placement test will normally include all of the structures identified in this way, as well as, perhaps, those structures the command of which is taken for granted in even the lowest classes. For proficiency and diagnostic tests, the van Ek and Trim publications referred to in the Further reading section, which are

## *Testing for language teachers*

based on a notional-functional approach, are especially useful, as are grammars like the Cobuild English Usage.

### *Sampling*

This will reflect an attempt to give the test content validity by selecting widely from the structures specified. It should also take account of what are regarded for one reason or another as the most important structures. It should not deliberately concentrate on the structures that happen to be easiest to test.

### *Writing items*

Whatever techniques are chosen for testing grammar, it is important for the text of the item to be written in grammatically correct and natural language. It is surprising how often this is not the case. Two examples I have to hand from items written by teachers are:

We can't work with this class because there isn't enough silence.

and

I want to see the film. The actors play well.

To avoid unnatural language of this kind, I would recommend using corpus based examples. One readily available source for English is the British National Corpus sampler on CD.

Four techniques are presented for testing grammar: gap filling, paraphrase, completion, and multiple choice. Used with imagination, they should meet just about all our needs. The first three require production on the part of the candidates, while multiple choice, of course, calls only for recognition. This difference may be a factor in choosing one technique rather than another.

### *Gap filling*

Ideally, gap filling items should have just one correct response.

For example: What was most disturbing \_\_\_\_\_ that for the first time in his life Henry was on his own. [was]

Or: The council must do something to improve transport in the city. \_\_\_\_\_, they will lose the next election. [Otherwise]  
(Sentence linking can be tested extensively using gap filling)

Or: He arrived late, \_\_\_\_\_ was a surprise. [which]

An item with two possible correct responses may be acceptable if the meaning is the same, whichever is used: Thus:

He displayed the wide, bright smile \_\_\_\_\_ had charmed so many people before. [which, that]

But an item is probably to be rejected if the different possibilities give different meanings or involve quite different structures, one of which is the one that is supposed to be tested.

Patient: My baby keeps me awake all night. She won't stop crying.

Doctor: \_\_\_\_\_ let her cry. She'll stop in the end.  
[Just, I'd, Well, Then, etc.]

This item may be improved by including the words 'Then' and 'just' so that it cannot fill the gap.

Doctor: Then \_\_\_\_\_ just let her cry. She'll stop in the end.

(But if *you* or *I'd* is thought to be a possible correct response, then the item is still not acceptable)

It's worth saying here that if contractions like *I'd* are to be allowed in the gaps (and I would recommend this), the possibility should be made very clear to the candidates and at least one example of it should be given at the beginning of the test.

As was pointed out in Chapter 8, adding to the context can often restrict the number of possible correct responses to a single one. An extension of this is to present a longer passage with several gaps. These may be used to test a set of related structures, such as the articles:

(Candidates are required to write *the*, *a* or NA (No Article).)

In England children go to \_\_\_\_\_ school from Monday to Friday. \_\_\_\_\_ school that Mary goes to is very small. She walks there each morning with \_\_\_\_\_ friend. One morning they saw \_\_\_\_\_ man throwing \_\_\_\_\_ stones and \_\_\_\_\_ pieces of wood at \_\_\_\_\_ dog. \_\_\_\_\_ dog was afraid of \_\_\_\_\_ man.

And so on.

The technique can also be used to test a variety of structures.

(The text is taken from Colin Dexter, *The Secret of Annexe 3*.)

When the old man died, \_\_\_\_\_ was probably no great joy \_\_\_\_\_ heaven; and quite certainly little if any real grief in Charlbury Drive, the pleasantly unpretentious cul-de-sac

Testing for language teachers

\_\_\_\_\_ semi-detached houses to which he \_\_\_\_\_  
retired.

There can be just a gap, as above, or there can be a prompt for each gap, as in the example below.

**Part 5**

For questions **56–65**, read the text below. Use the word given in capitals at the end of each line to form a word that fits in the space in the same line. There is an example at the beginning **(0)**. Write your answers **on the separate answer sheet**.

**Example:**    **0**    **ability**

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**COMPUTERS THAT PLAY GAMES**

Computers have had the **(0)** *ability* to play chess for many years now, and their **(56)** ..... in games against the best players in the world has shown steady **(57)** ..... However, it will be years before designers of computer games machines can beat their **(58)** ..... challenge yet – the ancient board game called *Go*. The playing area is **(59)** ..... larger than in chess and there are far more pieces, so that the **(60)** ..... of moves is almost **(61)** ..... The game involves planning so many moves ahead that even the **(62)** ..... calculations of the fastest modern computers are **(63)** ..... to deal with the problems of the game.

In recent **(64)** ..... for computer *Go* machines, the best machine beat all its computer rivals, but lost **(65)** ..... to three young schoolchildren, so there is obviously still a lot of work to do!

**ABLE**  
**PERFORM**  
**IMPROVE**  
**BIG**  
**CONSIDERABLE**  
**COMBINE**  
**END**  
**IMPRESS**  
**SUFFICIENT**  
**COMPETE**  
**HEAVY**

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Paraphrase

Paraphrase items require the student to write a sentence equivalent in meaning to one that is given. It is helpful to give part of the paraphrase in order to restrict the students to the grammatical structure being tested.

Thus:

1. Testing passive, past continuous form.

When we arrived, a policeman was questioning the bank clerk.  
When we arrived, the bank clerk .....

2. Testing present perfect with *for*.

It is six years since I last saw him.  
I ..... six years.

### Completion

This technique can be used to test a variety of structures. Note how the context in a passage like the following, from the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) Testpack 1, allows the tester to elicit specific structures, in this case interrogative forms<sup>1</sup>.

In the following conversation, the sentences numbered (1) to (6) have been left incomplete. Complete them suitably. Read the whole conversation before you begin to answer the question. (Mr Cole wants a job in Mr Gilbert's export business. He has come for an interview.)

<b>Mr Gilbert:</b>	Good morning, Mr Cole. Please come in and sit down. Now let me see. (1) Which school .....
<b>Mr Cole:</b>	Whitestone College.
<b>Mr Gilbert:</b>	(2) And when .....
<b>Mr Cole:</b>	In 1972, at the end of the summer term.
<b>Mr Gilbert:</b>	(3) And since then what .....
<b>Mr Cole:</b>	I worked in a bank for a year. Then I took my present job, selling cars. But I would like a change now.
<b>Mr Gilbert:</b>	(4) Well, what sort of a job .....
<b>Mr Cole:</b>	I'd really like to work in your Export Department.
<b>Mr Gilbert:</b>	That might be a little difficult. What are your qualifications? (5) I mean what languages ..... besides English?
<b>Mr Cole:</b>	Well, only a little French.
<b>Mr Gilbert:</b>	That would be a big disadvantage, Mr Cole. (6) Could you tell me why .....
<b>Mr Cole:</b>	Because I'd like to travel and to meet people from other countries.
<b>Mr Gilbert:</b>	I don't think I can help you at present, Mr Cole. Perhaps you ought to try a travel agency.



## Testing for language teachers

### Multiple choice

Reasons for being careful about using multiple choice were given in Chapter 8. There are times, however, when gap filling will not test what we want it to test (at least, in my experience). Here is an example where we want to test epistemic *could*.

If we have the simple sentence:

They left at seven. They \_\_\_\_\_ be home by now.

There are obviously too many possibilities for the gap (must, should, may, could, might, will).

We can add context, having someone reply: *Yes, but we can't count on it, can we?* This removes the possibility of *must* and *will* but leaves the other possibilities.

At this point I would think that I could only test the epistemic use of *could* satisfactorily by resorting to multiple choice.

A: They left at seven. They \_\_\_\_\_ be home by now.

B: Yes, but we can't count on it, can we?

- a. can      b. could      c. will      d. must

I would also use multiple choice when testing discontinuous elements.

A: Poor man, he ..... at that for days now.

B: Why doesn't he give up?

- a. was working  
b. has been working  
c. is working  
d. had worked

(*Why doesn't he give up?* is added to eliminate the possibility of d being correct, which might just be possible despite the presence of *now*.)

Also, all the above non-multiple-choice techniques can be given a multiple choice structure, but the reader who attempts to write such items can often expect to have problems in finding suitable distractors.

Moderation of items is of course essential. The checklist included in Chapter 7 should be helpful in this.

### Scoring production grammar tests

Gap filling and multiple choice items should cause no problems. The important thing when scoring other types of item is to be clear about what each item is testing, and to award points for that only. There

### *Testing grammar and vocabulary*

may be just one element, such as subject-pronoun-verb inversion, and all available points should be awarded for that; nothing should be deducted for non-grammatical errors, or for errors in elements of grammar which are not being tested by the item. For instance, a candidate should not be penalised for a missing third person *-s* when the item is testing relative pronouns; *opend* should be accepted for *opened*, without penalty.

If two elements are being tested in an item, then points may be assigned to each of them (for example present perfect form and *since* with past time reference point). Alternatively, it can be stipulated that both elements have to be correct for any points to be awarded, which makes sense in those cases where getting one element wrong means that the student does not have full control of the structure. For items such as these, to ensure scoring is valid and reliable careful preparation of the scoring key is necessary.

# TESTS OF GRAMMAR AND USAGE

## Multiple - Choice Grammar Items:

### I. Item Types and Item Samples for Discussion and Practice

#### TYPE 1.

##### Place of options

- a. Tom ought not to ..... ( A. tell B. having told C. be telling  
D. have told ) me your secret , but he did.
- b. Tom ought not to ..... me your secret , but he did.  
A. tell  
B. having told  
C. be telling  
D. have told
- c. Tom ought not to ..... me your secret, but he did.  
A. tell  
B. having told  
C. be telling  
D. have told

#### TYPE 2.

Tom ought not to have told me your secret, but he did.

- A. *No change*  
B. tell  
C. having told  
D. be telling

#### TYPE 3.

- A. Tom ought not to tell me your secret, but he did.  
B. Tom ought not to having told me your secret, but he did.  
C. Tom ought not to be telling me your secret, but he did.  
D. Tom ought not to have told me your secret, but he did.

**TYPE 4.**

Tom ought not to have told me your secret.

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

**TYPE 5.**

\* This book belongs to Peter. It is .....

- A. Peter's book
- B. The book to Peter
- C. The book of Peter
- D. The book of Peter's

**TYPE 6.**

\* I ..... to go to my uncle's farm every weekend.

- A. am used
- B. used
- C. was used
- D. use

**TYPE 7.**

**A long way from home**

A 72-year old Samoan, who (1) ..... no English at all spent thirteen days (2) .... on buses in the San Francisco area after he (3) .... seperated (4) .... his family, police said.

He said that Faaitua Logo, (5) ..... moved to the United States two years ago, left his son and daughter-in-law (6) .... a few minutes in a market in San Jose (7) .....

something at a nearby stall. When he tried to return to them, he (8) .... not remember where they (9) .... for him.

(10).... first, he began to walk to their home in Palo Alto 20 kilometres (11)....., but later he (12) ..... on a bus. He changed from bus to bus (13) ..... the daytime and slept under bushes and trees, police said.

**TASK : Find appropriate distractors for the missing ones.**

- |                    |               |                 |              |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|
| (1) A. is speaking | B. speaks     | C. has spoken   | D. spoke     |
| (2) A. to ride     | B. was riding | C. ride         | D. riding    |
| (3) A. becomes     | B. became     | C. has become   | D had become |
| (4) A. with        | B. from       | C. by           | D. off       |
| (5) A. which       | B. that       | C. who          | D. what      |
| (6) A. in          | B. for        | C. since        | D. at        |
| (7) A. to buy      | B. ....       | C. ....         | D. ....      |
| (8) A. ....        | B. could      | C. ....         | D. ....      |
| (9) A. ....        | B. ....       | C. were waiting | D. ....      |
| (10) A. At         | B. ....       | C. ....         | D. ....      |
| (11) A. ....       | B. away       | C. ....         | D. ....      |
| (12) A. jumped     | B. ....       | C. ....         | D. ....      |
| (13) A. ....       | B. ....       | C. ....         | D. during    |

## II. Some tips for constructing multiple-choice grammar test items

A student's erroneous sentence :

*\*I hope you wouldn't mind on such a long period between my last letter and this one.*

**Item 1.**

**Step 1.** I hope you won't mind waiting for so long.

**Step 2.** I hope you ..... mind waiting for so long. I promise to reply  
sooner in future.

- A. won't                      B. wouldn't

**Step 3.** I hope you won't mind waiting for so long. I promise  
to reply sooner in future.

- A. won't      B. wouldn't      C. shouldn't      D. shan't

**Step 4.** I hope you won't mind waiting for so long. I promise  
to reply sooner in future.

- A. won't      B. wouldn't      C. couldn't      D. can't

**Item 2.**

**Error :** ..... and enjoys looking the children playing .

a. Old Mr. Jones enjoys ..... the children playing.

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

b. Old Mr. Jones enjoys ..... the children playing.

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

**ERROR RECOGNITION TEST ITEMS : How to construct them**

**TYPE I.**

**Instruction:** Each sentence contains four words or phrases underlined marked A, B, C, and D. Select the underlined word or phrase which is incorrect or unacceptable.

1. I'm worried that you'll be angry to me.

- A                      B                      C                      D

2. My car had broken down, so I went there by foot.

- A                      B                      C                      D

3. I didn't see Bill since he went into hospital last month.

- A                      B                      C                      D

**TASK:** Use the following sentences to construct error-recognition test items. The incorrect form has already been underlined in some of them.

1. Although the doctor is usually available for office visits, he isn't sometimes able to make house calls.
2. Over the past years, Marco had had the opportunity to travel to many remote areas of the earth.
3. I can't wear this dress to the party because I should have it dry-cleaned last week.
4. Don't you think that she would have helped you yesterday if she were able to do ?
5. Our friends have a son who is only nine years old but sometimes he acts as if he was nineteen.

**TYPE 2 :**

**TASK :** Write an appropriate instruction for the following.

**Instruction:**

1. Sun / is shinning / brightly today /, isn't it ? [    ]  
A            B                    C                    D

2. Tony's father / would not let him / to stay out / late at night. [    ]  
A                                    B                    C                    D

**TASK:** Use the following to construct the same type of items as the above.

3. It's a good plan, perhaps even better as the one presented earlier.
4. There have been twice more imported cars this year than in the previous year.
5. Between you and I , I don't approve of the manner in which the lawyer is handling the case.

## REARRANGEMENT ITEMS : How to construct them

Error: *You know how is it*

### TYPE 1.

a. \*You know how .....

- A. it is      B. is it

b. A: Won't I need a coat ?

B: Well, you know how .....

- A. warm is it today  
B. today it is warm  
C. is it warm today  
D. warm it is today  
E. today is it warm

**Instruction :** Complete each sentence by putting the words below it in the right order. Put in the boxes only the letters of the words.

1. A: Won't I need a coat ?

B: Well, you know how .....

A. it      B. today      C. warm      D. is

--	--	--	--

2. I wonder if ..... since summer.

A. grown      B. you      C. fatter      D. have

--	--	--	--

3. \* However, ....., you'll never pass the test.

A. You      B. try      C. hard      D. may.

--	--	--	--



4. The police are looking for .....

--	--	--	--

- A. big   B. two   C. cars   D. black

5. Not only ....., but he took me to his house.

- A. me   B. he   C. did   D. meet

--	--	--	--

## TYPE 2.

**Instruction:** Write out each sentence, putting the words or constituent parts in their correct order.

1. \*Not only .....

/ the examination / very difficult / unfair / was / but / it / was / also /

2. It is not advisable .....

/ the examination / late / up / night / to stay / before /

## COMPLETION ITEMS

### Type 1.

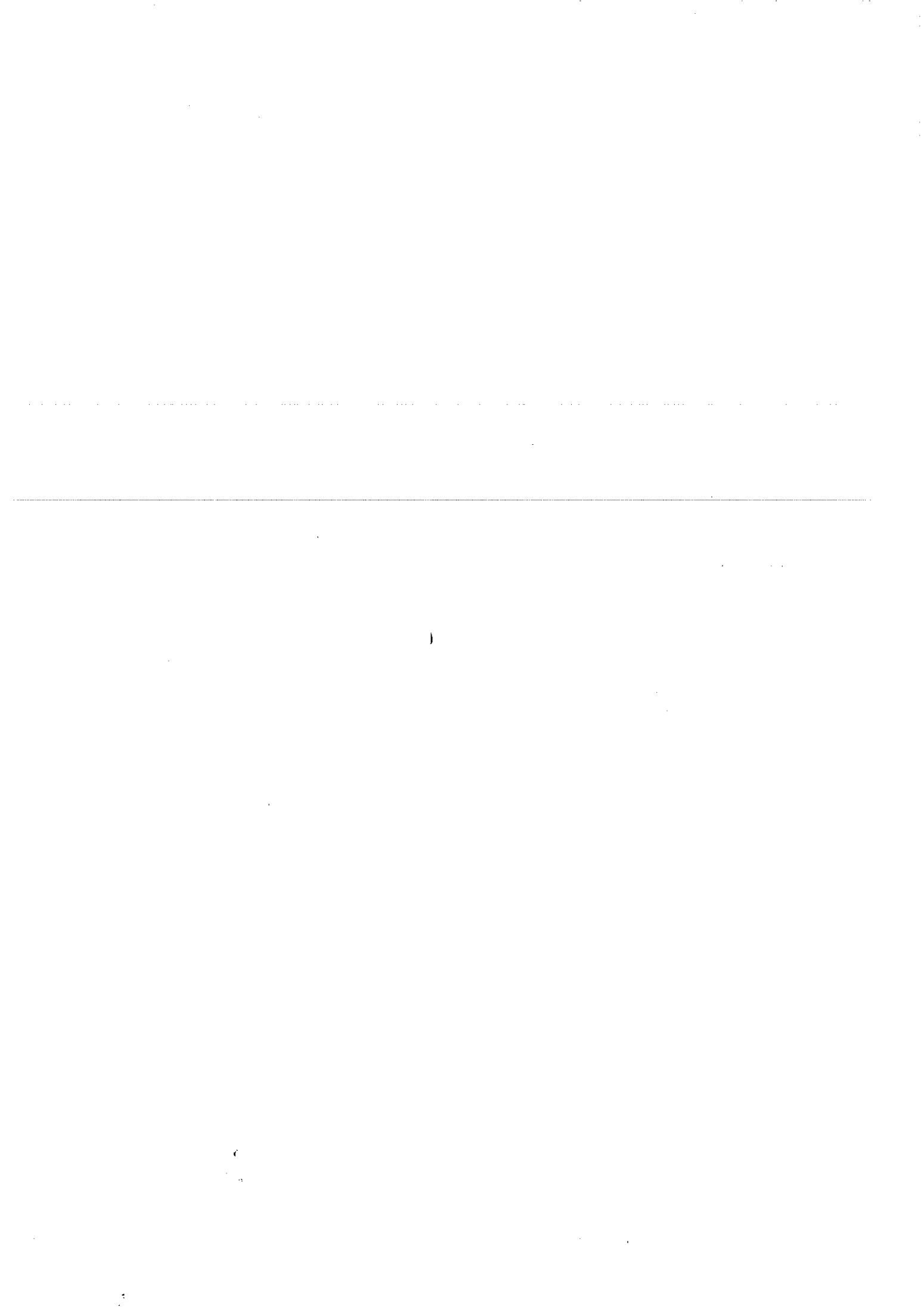
**Instruction:** Write one word in each blank.

1. The old man enjoys looking ..... the children playing.
2. The car belongs ..... Helen's mother.
3. David's drawing is better ..... Mary's.

### Type 2.

**Instruction :**

1. Can you see ..... sun shining through the clouds ?
2. I saw your brother ..... day before yesterday.
3. What have you been doing since I saw you ..... last summer.



**Completion Tests**

( For verb tenses )

\* I go to the cinema regularly, but I ..... to the theatre for months.

(There is not one single answer )

**Type III. Completion items in context**

A. It (1) ..... always useful (2) ..... practice  
 answering the types of questions (3) .....  
 you may (4) .....asked. However, (5) .....  
 is not enough simply (6) .....glance through  
 a past paper (7) ..... answer the questions (8)  
 .....your head.

B. Historians and antropolgists used think (1).....,  
 that ill health and disease prevalent among (2).....  
 primitive tribes. Results recent invetigations, (3) .....  
 however, have shown we much to learn (4) .....  
 from primitive people. Without benefit of (5) .....

**Constructing Transformation Items**

A. Rewrite each of the following sentences in another way, beginning each new sentence with the words given. Make any changes that are necessary but do not change the general meaning of the sentence.

1. I haven't written to her for a long time.  
It's a long time .....

2. In sunny weather I often go for a walk.  
When .....

( Suggest appropriate beginning words for the following )

- 3. I don't think it's necessary for you to stay any longer. ( ..... )
- 4. Joe can sing better than you. ( ..... )
- 5. Frances is good at tennis. ( ..... )
- 6. This book is too big to go on any of the shelves. ( ..... )
- 7. They believed that the earth was flat. ( ..... )
- 8. Why are you always getting on my nerves ? ( ..... )

B. Instruction: .....

- 1. Ten lessons make up the course. ( CONSIST )
- 2. I couldn't go swimming yesterday. ( ALLOW )  
( Give appropriate words in the blanks )
- 3. Remember that it is not necessary to answer the questions in the order set. ( ..... )
- 4. Most teachers also recommend you to leave five minutes spare at the end of the examination in order to check your paper. ( ..... )
- 5. We have been unsuccessful in solving the problem. ( ..... )
- 6. I intend to go to Austria next summer. ( ..... )

Constructing 'broken sentence' Items

\*Construct an appropriate INSTRUCTION for the following test item.

Take / drugs and stimulants / keep awake / while revise examinations / often be very harmful. / It be far better / lead / balanced life / and get enough sleep / every night.

Constructing Pairing and Matching Items

It usually consists of a short conversation.

COLUMN 1

COLUMN 2

<u>COLUMN 1</u>	(Letter)	<u>COLUMN 2</u>
Going to see a film tonight ?	(.....)	A. No, I didn't.
How was the film ?	(.....)	B. Most are, I think.
I can't stand war films, can you ?	(.....)	C. It's one of the reasons.
So you went to the cinema.	(.....)	D. I had a lot of work to do.
Do you find war film too violent ?	(.....)	E. Actually, I quite like them.
Have you ever seen a Japanese war film?(.....)	(.....)	F. Yes, I probably will.
I like war films.	(.....)	G. No, I haven't.
Is everyone going to see the film ?	(.....)	H. What a good idea! I prefer them to war films.
What about going to see a cowboy film instead ?	(.....)	I. So do I.
Why didn't you come with us to see the film ?	(.....)	J. All right. Nothing special.
Is that why you don't like war films?	(.....)	K. Not really. I quite like them

### Constructing Combination and Addition Items

Students are instructed to join each pair of sentences, using the word in brackets.

#### Combination items

1. You finish the paper. Then check your answers carefully. ( AFTER )
2. Some questions may be difficult. They should be left until later. ( WHICH )

#### Addition items

3. Have you answered all the questions ? ( YET )
4. Some students had not mastered the correct techniques for answering examination questions. ( STILL )

### Intrusion Tests

In this now test the learner has and to delete those words which sentence do not belong to the text. It same can be used as a test bright of reading speed, a on test of word order and a test table of these the use of articles. Sometimes the although .....

### A SAMPLE ON ERROR-CORRECTION TESTS

Select the underlined word or phrase that is not acceptable in standard written English and circle the letter indicating the incorrect form. Write the correct form in the space.

1. The host suggested that, although it is getting late, everyone remain for another cup of coffee.      A                      B                      C  
A

A   B   C   D .....

2. On the days that he's not busy, he liked to write poetry, or paint with water-colors, or cook an unusual dish.      A                      B                      C  
D

A   B   C   D .....

3. The only insects that make a food that people enjoy eating are the bees, which produce honey in their hives.      A                      B                      C  
D

A   B   C   D .....

4. Thunderstorms may occur when heated air full of water vapor rises, cools, and forming thick dark clouds.      A                      B                      C                      D

A   B   C   D .....

5. The idea which the world may be destroyed by nuclear weapons has raised questions about the justification of their development and use.      A                      B                      C  
D

A   B   C   D .....

6. One group was satisfied with the explanation whereas the other group wanted to explore the subject farther.      A                      B                      C  
D