

4

Tests of grammar and usage

4.1 Introduction

The following are some of the most common types of objective items used to test awareness of the grammatical features of the language. Each type of item will be treated in greater detail in this chapter.

- multiple-choice items
- error-recognition items
- rearrangement items
- completion items
- transformation items
- items involving the changing of words
- 'broken sentence' items
- pairing and matching items
- combination items
- addition items

→ any other expansion reduction

It should always be remembered that such items as the above test the ability to recognise or produce correct forms of language rather than the ability to *use* language to express meaning, attitude, emotions, etc. Nevertheless, it is essential that students master the grammatical system of the language they are learning. Thus, classroom tests of grammar and usage can play a useful part in a language programme.

4.2 Multiple-choice grammar items: item types

The type of multiple-choice item favoured by many constructors of grammar tests is the incomplete statement type, with a choice of four or five options. This item may be written in any of the following ways:

Type 1 Tom ought not to (A. tell B. having told C. be telling D. have told) me your secret, but he did.

Type 2 Tom ought not to me your secret, but he did.
A. tell
B. having told
C. be telling
D. have told

Type 3 Tom ought not to me your secret, but he did.
A. tell
B. having told
C. be telling
D. have told

Type 4 Tom ought not to *have told* me your secret, but he did.

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

Item types 2 and 3 are preferable to 1 because the options do not interrupt the flow of meaning in the sentence: these items present the entire sentence so that it can be read at a glance. Unfortunately, type 1 confuses the reader because of the long parenthesis (i.e. the four options occurring between *ought not to* and *me*). Item type 4 shows the correct (or an incorrect) form as part of the sentence in such a way that it cannot be compared on equal terms with the other options: a correct option, for instance, is generally easier to recognise when it appears in the framework of the sentence than as part of a list of distractors.

Another item type appears below, but it is not recommended since it requires the testees to spend time on unnecessary reading. Not only is it uneconomical but it does not present the 'problem' (i.e. the options) as clearly as item type 2 does.

- Type 5**
- 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.

The following method is useful for testing short answers and responses:

- Type 6** 'Tom ought not to have told anyone the secret.'
- A. 'So ought you.'
 - B. 'Neither ought you.'
 - C. 'Neither you oughtn't.'
 - D. 'So oughtn't you.'

Item type 7 requires the students to select the alternative which is true according to the information conveyed in each sentence. Such an item may be included either in a test of reading comprehension or in a test of grammar: a knowledge of the particular syntax is necessary for the understanding of the sentence.

- Type 7** '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.

It may be argued that an understanding of syntactical patterning is just as necessary for the following item:

..... was Robert late last week?
Three times.'

- A. How much
- B. How many
- C. How often
- D. How long

Items which appear in a test of grammar and structure should be made to sound as natural as possible. The following mechanical test item:

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

can be rewritten as follows:

This book belongs to Peter, but that is

- A. Mary's book
- B. the book to Mary
- C. the book of Mary
- D. the book of Mary's

Note that distractors should generally be correct both in writing and in speech. The following item proved unsuccessful when it was included in a test because many of the more able students selected option D, the reason being that they pronounced *used to* quite correctly as *use to*/ju:stə/:

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

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

Note that the sample items discussed in this section have so far taken the form of short decontextualised items. In practice, however, such items would all form part of a paragraph or series of paragraphs of descriptive, narrative or expository prose. The provision of a detailed context in this way, however, often limits the range of grammatical features being tested. It is usually impossible, for example, to test the future continuous tense in a narrative set in the past (unless direct speech is used). Similarly, a paragraph describing a simple manufacturing process may not provide the test writer with the opportunity to test all the verb forms and tenses he or she may wish to test. This is the price to be paid for including more natural, contextualised test items. On the other hand, the advantage of such items as that on page 37 lies in the interesting and fairly authentic context (i.e. a newspaper article) which contains the items. This is real language used for a particular purpose. Furthermore, the provision of context helps to ensure that there is only one correct option in each case. Short decontextualised sentences can lead to ambiguity as they are usually open to several interpretations when used as stems for multiple-choice items. For example, option D in the following decontextualised item might be correct (as well as option B) if the student happens to know of a medical research establishment which pays volunteers to assist with research and deliberately catch a cold so as to be able to test various cures!

I couldn't take the test last week because I a cold.

- A. have caught
- B. had caught
- C. would catch
- D. was catching

Much better for testing purposes is the following item. The passage is taken straight from a newspaper article and thus the language is authentic and unaltered in any way. The context provides students with enough background knowledge and details to avoid ambiguity and alternative interpretations, and the newspaper report itself is very interesting. Does it really matter if it will not allow us the opportunity to test every point of grammar which we may want to test? Students taking this test are being given a real feel for the language they are learning.

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 had become separated (3) his family, police said.

(4) 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 could not remember where they (8) for him.

(9) first, he began to walk to their home in Palo Alto, 20 kilometres (10), but later he (11) on a bus. He changed from bus to bus (12) the daytime and slept under bushes and trees, 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
(4) A. He B. They C. One D. It
(5) A. which B. that C. who D. what
(6) A. in B. for C. since D. at
(7) A. to buy B. for buying C. and buy D. buying
(8) A. waited B. were waiting C. have waited D. wait
(9) A. For B. On C. In D. At
(10) A. far B. from C. near D. away
(11) A. would jump B. jumped C. has jumped D. would have jumped
(12) A. on B. at C. for D. during

4.3 Constructing multiple-choice items

Although it is not always possible to use samples of students' own written work to provide the basis for the test items, it should not be too difficult for constructors of classroom tests and school achievement tests to take advantage of the types of errors made by students in their free compositions and open-ended answers to questions.

The following extract from a student's letter is used here and in later sections to show how test items can be constructed. The letter was actually written by a student in a country where English is learnt as a foreign language. The errors have not been 'manufactured' for the purpose of illustration, but they do represent errors made by students from only one particular language background. The mistakes, therefore, will not be typical of mistakes made by students from many other language backgrounds and thus the distractors appearing later may be useless for such students.

There is very much time I didn't write you, and now I have a little free time. Winter is behind us and therefore I hope that you wouldn't mind on such a long period between my last letter and this one. You know how is it. Sun is shining, trees become green and it's difficult to stay closed among walls. Sometimes when the weather is sunny I go to walk through the park near my lodging and enjoy looking the children playing. You know, the day before yesterday while looking through the window I saw the wet street and people with umbrellas rushing for money and prestige. I suddenly remembered last summer that before to us. I suppose that you were not angry to me what happened. I think that it is not good to discuss about passed feelings.

Item 1

Let us ignore the error in the first sentence for the time being and concentrate on the error of tense after *hope*.

Step 1: The first step is to reduce the length of the sentence and to correct the error (and any other errors in the original sentence). Thus,

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

becomes I hope you won't mind waiting for so long.

Step 2: Next we write out the sentence, substituting a blank for the area being tested. We write in the correct option and the distractor which the student has provided for us. However, we have to add a sentence because in certain (rare) contexts, *wouldn't* may be correct.

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

- A. won't B. wouldn't

Step 3: We now add another two distractors. Again, we go to the written work of our students to provide these distractors. But if we cannot locate any suitable errors without too much difficulty, we use our own experience and knowledge of the target and native languages. Thus, two useful distractors which would also balance the existing two options might be *shouldn't* and *shan't*.

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

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

It may be argued, however, that *shan't* is acceptable usage amongst certain speakers, thus giving us two correct options instead of one. Though it is highly improbable that people in most areas would use *shan't*, there is a slight shadow of doubt. This is enough to make it desirable to remove *shan't* from our list of options.

Step 4: One suggestion may be that we replace *shan't* with *can't*. If students from a particular language background make such mistakes as *can't mind*, *can't* should be used as a distractor, and possibly *shouldn't* changed to *couldn't*. As can be seen at this early stage, the actual process of item writing is extremely subjective.

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

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

An alternative suggestion for a fourth option might be *don't* or *didn't*:

I hope you don't mind waiting for so long.
I hope you didn't mind waiting for so long.

Unfortunately, both *don't* and *didn't* are correct. However, in the following context, *didn't* is not acceptable:

'How long are you going to be?'
'About half an hour. I hope you mind waiting for so long.'

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