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Testing vocabulary

5.1 Selection of items

A careful selection, or sampling, of lexical items for inclusion in a test is generally a most exacting task. Many of the more traditional types of vocabulary tests are designed in such a way that they test a knowledge of words which, though frequently found in many English textbooks, are rarely used in ordinary speech.

The first task for the writer of a vocabulary test is to determine the degree to which he or she wishes to concentrate on testing the students' active or passive vocabulary. The next task is to decide whether the lexical items in the test should be taken from the spoken or the written language. Selection of vocabulary can thus be thought of as falling into the following rough divisions according to the four major language skills:

Listening: passive/spoken
Reading: passive/written
Speaking: active/spoken
Writing: active/written

All four divisions can be included in a single test, of course, but even then careful consideration should be given to the different weighting each division will carry in the test: for example, should there be a greater concentration on those lexical items selected from the students' reading material? Generally speaking, the more elementary the level of the test, the greater the number of lexical items associated with the spoken language.

The test constructor's task is made much easier if all the students have followed a particular syllabus. Lexical items can then be selected from:

- the syllabus (including a word frequency list if available);
- the students' textbook (provided the items approximate to those used in natural speech situations);
- the students' reading material (e.g. simplified readers, literary texts); and
- lexical errors taken from students' free-written work (or from students' incorrect answers in a cloze test).

The following error, however, may be one of verb patterning or simply the wrong choice of verb:

Is the government going to contribute the new industry?

If an error of verb patterning, the correct version would be

Is the government going to *contribute to* the new industry?

If caused by the wrong choice of verb, it would be

Is the government going to *subsidise* the new industry?

Moreover, according to the findings of research¹ conducted into the effectiveness of distractors in multiple-choice vocabulary tests, those distractors based on students' incorrect answers in cloze tests (though moderately useful) were found to be less powerful than

- (a) the use of false synonyms (i.e. words with equivalent meanings to the key word underlined or shown in italics in the sentence but inappropriate in the particular context):

I'd like to book two in the circle, please.

seats = correct word

chairs = false synonym

- (b) contextually relevant items (i.e. words related to the context but different in meaning to the key word in the sentence):

'How much is a to Tokyo, please?'

'Nine hundred yen, and a return is sixteen hundred yen.'

single = correct word

ticket = contextually relevant

The test constructor is faced with a difficult problem if the testees have followed different syllabuses. Such a situation is generally associated with proficiency tests, in which a student's suitability and potential for a certain task are tested (e.g. university studies in the medium of English). In these cases, the tester may wish to base the selection of lexical items on those used in the tasks for which the student is being tested. An alternative method, appropriate for all kinds of tests, is the selection of items from such well-known word lists as *A General Service List of English Words* (Michael West – Longman), *Cambridge English Lexicon* (Roland Hindmarsh – Cambridge) and *The Wright Frequency Count*. These (and other) word lists, however, are based entirely on the written language; furthermore, no account is taken of difficulty levels (as opposed to frequency levels) and of areas where interference is encountered between the vernacular and the target language.

But testing the extent of a student's vocabulary is only one aspect of the whole problem: control of the vocabulary at his or her disposal must also be measured. An ability to discriminate between words is of the utmost importance at all but the elementary levels. In broader terms, this ability to discriminate may be regarded as developing a *feel* for the language.

Tests of vocabulary should avoid grammatical structures which the students may find difficult to comprehend. Similarly, tests of grammar should contain only those lexical items which present no difficulty to the students.

5.2 Multiple-choice items (A)

It is useful to distinguish between the following two major kinds of multiple-choice vocabulary items:

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

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

- A. unwell B. thin C. foolish D. weak

Group B 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

This section concentrates on Group A items and the next section on Group B. The following item types are examples of four vocabulary recognition items which fall within the first group.

Type 1 In this type of recognition item the stem is replaced by a picture. The testees see the picture and have to select the most appropriate word relating to the picture from four or five options. This type of item is clearly very appropriate at the elementary stages.



- A. running
B. jumping
C. standing
D. kicking

Type 2 Here the stem consists of a definition: the testees have to select the correct option to which the definition refers.

a person who receives and pays out money in a bank

- A. broker B. accountant C. creditor D. cashier

Type 3 The stem consists of a lexical item: the testees have to select the best synonym or definition.

advocate

- A. support B. advise C. contradict D. damage

dilatory

- A. growing gradually larger C. showing care and effort
B. slow in getting things done D. heavy with drops of water

Type 4 The stem here consists of a sentence. Hence, this type of recognition item is generally to be preferred to the previous three types in so far as the 'problem' word appears in context. Vocabulary is much more usefully tested in context since it is the context that gives specific meaning and relevance to a word, thus creating a situation which is as linguistically valid as possible in the circumstances.

It's rained *continuously* for two whole days.

- A. without stopping C. regularly
B. heavily D. at odd moments

Since subtle shades of meaning are often determined only by the specific context in which a particular word appears, it is generally advisable to provide fairly full contexts for vocabulary testing, especially at an advanced level. The fuller the context, however, the more difficult it sometimes can prove to find plausible distractors. Few good distractors, for example, can be found for the following item:

We've had to *put off* the meeting until next week. (postpone)

Synonyms are not always interchangeable in a context (without altering the meaning). However, where a word may be replaced by another in a particular context, testees may easily be misled into regarding synonyms as being generally interchangeable.

Guidelines for writing items

1 If the problem-area-being tested is located in the options (as in Type 2), the stem should be kept simple. If, however, the problem area is included in the stem (as in Types 3 and 4), the options themselves should be simple in so far as they should contain only those vocabulary items which the testees can understand.

2 Each option should belong to the same word class as the word in the stem, particularly when the word appears in the context of a sentence. If this rule is observed, there will be less danger of the context providing important grammatical clues for the testees. For example, although the first of the following test items is usable, options A, B and C in the second item would be grammatically incorrect when put in the context.

contemptuous

- A. deep in thought C. self-satisfied
B. without a sense of humour D. scornful

Ian was *contemptuous* of the efforts of his friends to raise some money for the charity.

- A. deep in thought C. self-satisfied
B. without a sense of humour D. scornful

3 The correct option and the distractors should be at approximately the same level of difficulty.² If the correct option is more difficult than the distractors, the testees will arrive at the correct answer by process of elimination. Thus, the test may have a negative effect on the testees: i.e. they will select the correct option not because they know it is correct but only because they know the other options are wrong. The following item measures the testees' knowledge of the distractors rather than their familiarity with the correct option:

theatrical

- A. angry B. histrionic C. proud D. foolish

The converse also holds good. If the distractors are more difficult than the correct option, the item may be equally unreliable. In such a case, there will usually be a tendency for the more able students to think that the correct option is too easy and therefore wrong; they are thus tricked into selecting one of the more difficult options:

suffice

- A. be adequate B. harass C. acquiesce D. be contrite