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## Multiple Choice - how to prepare students and make tasks more interesting.

#### What are multiple choice activities?

Multiple choice (m/c) activities are becoming increasingly popular in tests and examinations because although they are difficult to construct they are easy to mark. In some cases they are marked by computer.

M/C activities are used for testing grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, comprehension and even writing.

The rubric (instruction) may ask students to select:

- a. (test) the correct answer
- b. the best answer (where more than one alternative may be correct).
- c. The correct answers (where more than one alternative may be correct)

Students must be careful when reading these instructions.

M/C activities can also be used to poll opinions. Look at the poll on the Snapshot website at <a href="http://www.longman.com/snapshot/teachers/poll.shtml">http://www.longman.com/snapshot/teachers/poll.shtml</a>

Students usually enjoy m/c activities because they don't like 'pen-pushing' (writing) and they have the idea that m/c activities are 'easy'.

#### Preparing students for m/c tests (1): Writing m/c tests

If your students are at intermediate level or above, you should consider teaching them a little about the construction of m/c items. In fact, it is useful and enjoyable to ask students to construct m/c tests for each other.

A multiple choice item consists of three parts: the stem, the answer and the options or distractors.

(The examples below are taken from Writing English Language Tests by J. B. Heaton (c) Longman 1988)

#### The Stem

The stem is the first part of a multiple-choice item and is often called the question even though the stem may have different forms.

He accused me of ..... lies.

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



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Everything we wanted was to hand.

- a. under control
- b. within reach
- c. well cared for
- d. being prepared

According to the writer, what did Tom immediately do?

- a. He ran home.
- b. He met Bob.
- c. He began to shout.
- d. He phoned the police.

Beware of 'giving away' the answer in the stem. For example:

A person who builds houses is called a

- a. builder
- b. architect
- c. designer
- d. decorator

#### The correct option

The correct option or 'answer' should always be grammatically correct within the context of the stem. It should also be about the same length as the other options. Beware of items like this:

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

- a. die
- b. cough and vomit
- c. be unable to breathe because of something trapped in the throat
- d. grow very angry

Beware of always making c) the correct option. It is very easy to do if you are writing quickly!

### The distractors or incorrect options

These should be reasonably attractive and plausible. They should not be much 'easier' or 'more difficult than the correct option, for example:

You need a ...... to enter the airfield.





- a. permutation
- b. perdition
- c. permit
- d. perspicuity

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

- a. that
- b. the
- c. a
- d. an

Also we should beware of distractors which are obviously ridiculous.

What was Maria wearing on her head?

- a. A bonnet
- b. A scarf
- c. A tiara
- d. An elephant

Distractors are usually written based on the mistakes which students regularly make in their written work. The Longman Dictionary of Common Errors is very useful if you are planning to write your own multiple choice grammar items.

Public examiners such UCLES take immense trouble to write and test their multiple-choice items. Students can have fun and also gain valuable insights if they try to write their own multiple-choice tests. These could either be tests on various items of grammar, vocabulary or on a reading comprehension text.

Students enjoy writing tests and also enjoy doing tests written by other students.

#### Preparing students for m/c tests (2): Why are the wrong answers wrong?

Students can improve their performance in m/c tests by developing the skill of eliminating the distractors. In all forms of multiple-choice tests, it is very useful to work through the test, not only looking for the correct answers but also explaining why the distractors are wrong. Although students will not be required to do this in the test, this activity sensitises students to the ways in which distractors are written. This can speed up the elimination of wrong options and the discovery (perhaps by elimination) of the correct option.





### Making multiple choice tests more fun

Give the students a few minutes to guess the answers in a multiple choice test. Then give them a longer period to work through the test carefully and see which of their guesses were correct. It might also be useful to work through the test together to see why they were correct.

#### Getting the maximum score

In multiple choice tests, there is traditionally no score if none of the options have been chosen. At the same time, there is no penalty for incorrect choices. So students should always be told to attempt every question in a multiple-choice test. Remember in a true/false test they have a 50% chance that a guess will be correct. If there are 3 options, they have a 33% chance of guessing the correct option. If there are 4 options their chances are reduced to 25%. Even if there are 5 options they have a 20% chance of gaining a mark. So tell them to attempt every question!

