CHAPTER 9

MULTIPLE-CHOICE TESTS AND ITEM ANALYSIS

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The appendix to Arthur Hughes’s (1989) book Testing for Language Teachers includes a brief section on item analysis. It covers item facility, item discriminability (which Hughes calls “item-test correlations”), and distractor analysis. It also shows how to set up item analysis record cards for item banking. A second edition of Hughes’s book was published in 2002.

In an early study, Kyle Perkins and Sheila Brutten (1988) looked at a reading comprehension test in which they related students’ background knowledge (see Chapter 4) to the item discriminability of the test. They found that “reading comprehension items which depend heavily on a reader’s background knowledge” did not discriminate well among the test-takers (p. 7).

Moragh Paxton (2000), working in South Africa, takes a linguistic approach to critiquing multiple-choice testing. Paxton is critical of “the over-emphasis on multiple-choice testing in some large first year classes as well as the poor design and construction” of many multiple-choice tests (p. 109). She called for “the use of multiple-choice questions as part of a broader and more diverse range of assessment measures” (p.109). She also argued that in multiple-choice testing, “students are not given enough opportunity to develop communicative competence in the discourses of the academic disciplines they are studying” (p.109).

David Nicol (2007) has written about multiple-choice testing and learners’ developing self-regulation. More recently, a paper entitled “Multiple-Choice Tests Exonerated, at Least of Some Charges: Fostering Test-induced Learning and Avoiding Test-Induced Forgetting” was published by Jeri Little and her colleagues (2012). Their title is related to some of the dilemmas discussed in this chapter.

Also in 2012, Mansour Amini and Noraini Ibrahim-Gonzalez, working with university students in Malaysia, reported on the washback effect on vocabulary acquisition of cloze and multiple-choice tests. They concluded that “cloze tests, in contrast to multiple-choice tests, led to a better acquisition of vocabulary in the process of language learning” (p. 71).


HELPFUL WEBSITES


There is a good lecture about the history of language testing by Barry O’Sullivan available at http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/seminars/language-testing-looking-back-and-looking-forward. This lecture puts the multiple-choice item format into its historical context.

For more advice about writing multiple-choice items, there is a helpful article by Robert Frary (1995) titled “More Multiple-choice Writing Do’s and Don'ts,” published in Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation. In terms of the widespread use of multiple-choice items, it is interesting to note that this article was viewed nearly 70,000 times between 1999 and 2013! You can access the complete article through the following link: http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=4&n=11.