

Does A Multiple Choice Test Always Bring A Bad Back wash ?

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Recently instructors and authorities concerning Thai higher education had perceived the news which seemed to worry them --two leading Thai universities ranked low among other universities in Asia. Then came another horrifying news in the Nation (July 1997) which might bring a nightmare to Thai educators; that is, the Evaluation of Education Achievement or EEA has lately results evaluating students from 40 countries from 1994 to 1996 which showed that Thai primary and secondary school students' performances in the tests were unsatisfactory. Is Thai education at risk? One of the many reasons for the poor scores, stated in the news, was due to students being used to multiple choice exams while EEA used descriptive tests. The questions being raised at the moment is whether the multiple choice exam is a bad

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type of testing or whether teachers well understand the purposes and functions of the multiple choice and the descriptive tests.

Normally, many teachers, when it's due to submit exam papers, tend to plan the formats of the tests : how many question items they need for the multiple choice test (or it is called the 'objective test' in testing principles), and open-ended questions to have students give descriptive answers (or we usually call this kind of test, the 'subjective test'), and then the teachers will hurriedly browse through textbooks to get the idea of writing exam questions. Rarely do they realize that they have to study the learning objectives of the course they are teaching before considering what kind of test will be appropriate to evaluate students' performances. Pimporn Chandee of University of Waikato, New Zealand (1996), in her research on the evaluation of English language teaching programs for Thai university students, found out that there is little relationship between what is taught and what is tested and assessed. Therefore, it is conspicuous that so many tests fail to measure accurately whatever it is that they are intended to measure, and of course, students' true abilities are not always

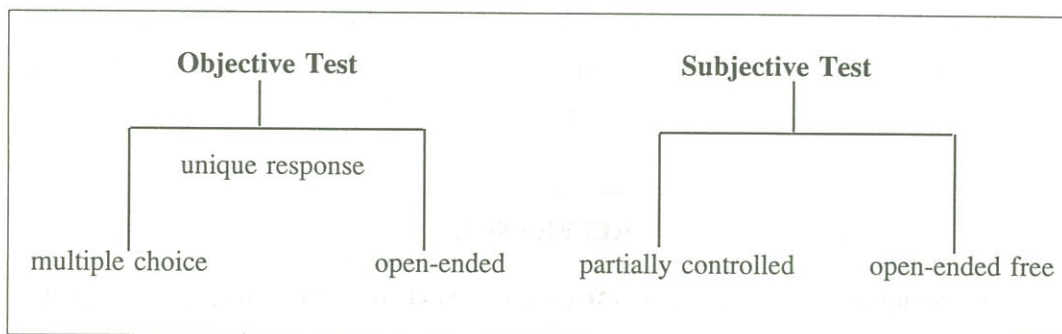
reflected in the test scores they get.

What teachers should ponder most is that test results is the backwash of teaching and learning. The backwash can be harmful or beneficial. If the test content and testing techniques are at variance with the objectives of the course, then there is likely to be harmful backwash. (Arthur Hughes 1989 : 1-4) At this point, if the teachers want to know how well their students can write, they must have their students take the test which aims at evaluating the writing skill. There is absolutely no way the teachers can get a really accurate measure of the students' writing ability by means of a multiple choice test. This is one of the dangers in constructing tests. Test constructors have to be able to defend their tests and understand principles behind them. According to Professor Joseph Foley's handout presented in "Language Testing Workshop" at Dhurakijpundit University (June 1997), test constructors have to have some idea of what they are testing and how they are testing it so that the test can give much more precise and accurate results that the teachers can devise to assess what their students have learned what they are

supposed to have learned.

As a matter of fact, the objective test (the multiple choice test) is not absolutely distinctive from the subjective test (the descriptive test) since the objective test can possibly have various correct answers, and in the same way, some kinds of

sentence completion and cloze test can be objective. In other words, there is an overlap between the objective and subjective tests as illustrated in the following diagram (Achara Wongsotorn 1986 : 116)



The advantage of devising the objective test is convenience in scoring and this kind of test is of high reliability. When testing is conducted with a large number of students like the University Entrance Examination and computer-scoring has to be implemented instead of manual scoring, the multiple choice test can serve this goal. Nevertheless, good multiple choice items are difficult to write. A great deal of time and effort has to go into their construction. Too many multiple choice tests are written where such care and attention is not given. The result is a set of poor items that cannot provide accurate subjective test such as

measurement.

By contrast, writing the subjective test doesn't require much time except when scoring. The descriptive test which mostly consists of open-ended questions can be of use to teachers because it can act as a stimulant to verbal communication and it encourages students to express their ideas by describing a process and debating an argument. However, some people are doubtful about objectivity in scoring. Take writing an essay for instance, the scoring of a composition may be considered more subjective than the scoring of a multiple choice test with the correct responses

unambiguously identified. In this sense, there should be ways of obtaining reliable subjective scoring, especially of marking compositions ; that is, the criteria for fluency and accuracy should be in proportion.

This article doesn't point out that the subjective test can better evaluate students' performances than the objective test. Nor does the article imply that the

objective test is easier than the subjective test and that it brings a bad backwash to teaching and learning. Moreover, it doesn't make any difference which kind of tests the teachers should use. What use the teachers expect to make of the test scores and whether the information the test provides is relevant to any decision the teachers must make about their students make difference.



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