



The Validity of Multiple Choice and Essay Composition Proficiency Assessment for English Language Learners

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Abstract

Students take assessment methods designed to examine their command of the English language in all four skill domains – reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as outlined by individual states. There has been much debate on whether multiple choice questions or essay compositions are valid in assessing students' English language proficiency. This paper aims to determine whether multiple-choice tests or written compositions are more reliable in gauging students' English competence. The author underlines that multiple choice tests could be successfully employed to test grammar, listening or reading skills. This research incorporated a qualitative methodology by utilizing deductive content analysis. The results of this study demonstrate that using multiple-choice questions is valid because they help students develop abilities for independent learning and raise their level of English proficiency. The deductive approach began with developing a theory that multiple choice questions are the most valid method of assessing a learner's proficiency in the English language. The author then found relevant and credible articles that address the research question. A hypothesis was then developed that teachers who use multiple choice questions can assess learners' English language proficiency compared to those who use compositions. Conclusions about the validity of the multiple choice questions are drawn and future research directions are also proposed.

Keywords: Assessment, Compositions, English proficiency, Essay questions, Independent learning, Multiple choice questions.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This paper examines the validity of using multiple-choice questions to evaluate students' English proficiency.

1. Purpose and Significance of the Study

It is common practice to use proficiency tests as placement tools or diagnostic instruments to establish a student's starting point in a language learning programme. These exams are created to evaluate the student's current level of knowledge and predict their future performance on related tasks. Validity is often regarded as being of the utmost essential for any assessment that is to be considered effective. The ability to communicate in English through one or more modes of communication, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing, is the primary focus of tests that measure English language proficiency. All students, irrespective of their level of English proficiency, should be given the opportunity to exhibit their knowledge or abilities on the subject matter that is being assessed. This research aims to address the question whether multiple choice questions or essay compositions achieve better validity in assessing a learner's English proficiency. It also aims to critically assess the validity of using multiple choice questions or writing compositions in assessing learners' English proficiency. The study is significant because assessment is a critical part of learning in education. The significance of this research lies in the fact that it will contribute to the advancement of both knowledge and scientific theory. This study will expand upon previous studies that have shown how a student's level of English proficiency might provide crucial information about their academic prospects and the types of assistance they may require as an English language learner.

2. Review of the Literature

According to Kenyon, MacGregor, Li, and Cook (2011) districts and elementary schools use the results of English proficiency assessments to place English Language Learners (ELLs), evaluate the efficacy of programs, and aid ELLs in making progress in their English language learning. As Abedi (2008) stated, the inclusion of academic English in English language proficiency exams is necessary to ensure the reliability and validity of the assessments and to aid English language learners in meeting academic content standards. The Department of Education asserts that tying together tests of English language learners' English proficiency with tests of their knowledge of academic content will help ensure that the learners not only become proficient in English, but also in topics like math and science. Assessments of learners' English language skills are based on evaluations of academic English in order to better aid the learners' ability to study the subject matter.

The validity of multiple-choice exams is contingent on the systematic selection of questions, considering both the subject matter and the required depth of knowledge. While most educators try to choose questions that represent a cross-section of the subject matter that will be tested, they frequently fail to consider the difficulty level of the questions they choose (Ali, Carr, & Ruit, 2016; Jing, 2019). In addition, because it is simple to create questions that call for merely the recollection or recall of material, they tend to place a heavy emphasis on questions of this kind. The use of multiple-choice tests by educators as a means of evaluating students is extremely frequent, particularly in reading tests. According to Tarrant and Ware (2012) a multiple-choice test is suitable for determining levels of knowledge and comprehension, and it also has the potential to be designed to determine levels of application and analysis. The multiple-choice exam is gaining popularity due to its increased reliability, validity, and convenience of scoring (Tarrant & Ware, 2012). It often consists of four different possibilities. The person taking the test must carefully analyze all the choices and select the answer they believe to be the most appropriate.

However, there are several advantages and disadvantages associated with using multiple-choice tests. According to Klufa (2014) one of the benefits of this kind of test is that the results can be reviewed very quickly, even for many students. This is one of the advantages of this sort of test. It is preferable to use multiple-choice questions since the results of exams can be achieved quickly with this type of question. There is no impact of any subjective aspect in evaluation with this type of question. If the teachers administer this kind of test, it will be simple for them to evaluate the performance of many students or classes at once. Most of the questions on this test ask about the primary concept, the purpose of the text, a character in the story, the meaning of words, and other similar topics, which encourages the readers to use their abilities to comprehend the material.

The importance of multiple-choice questions as an instrument for assessment is widely acknowledged because these questions are legitimate and reliable, can be administered to many students at once, and are simple to grade with a computer or a scanner. In addition, multiple-choice questions can be used to evaluate knowledge and cognition and cover expansive subject matter in the curriculum. However, multiple choice questions do have a few drawbacks, such as the requirement of experts to construct them, the fact that they encourage students only to skim the material, and the fact that they can mislead particularly bright students who read more deeply than is necessary for answering the questions (Rios & Wang, 2018). In contrast, essay questions allow students to delve deeper and more accurately portray who they are. Additionally, short essay questions are sensitive and can allow students to demonstrate their talent on a high cognitive level; yet, they take up more time and leave room for bias if they are not carefully crafted.

Essay items are distinct from selected response multiple-choice items in three ways, as described by Rios and Wang (2018). First, they allow for assessing more complex learning outcomes, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Second, students can choose the information they want to include and decide how to organize it. Third, students must provide an answer without seeing it presented, significantly reducing the possibility of guessing. According to the author, teachers favor essay tests because they provide a thorough evaluation of student's knowledge and critical thinking and an opportunity to gauge and enhance their writing skills (Rios & Wang, 2018). Through the essay tests, students will try to formulate their answers to the questions and write clearly and concisely about their thoughts and ideas.

Essay composition has its advantages and disadvantages. Rios and Wang (2018) outlined two significant benefits of essay tests, which include reducing measurement error from guessing, allowing for revision, and

boosting the test's construct validity. The students will not have to struggle on an essay test because they can structure their replies based on their judgment of the question's intent. Nevertheless, the author affirmed that essay tests do have an array of disadvantages. As [Rios and Wang \(2018\)](#) asserted, essay item grading can be time-consuming, expensive, subjective, and inaccurate compared to selected response grading. The ability to ask many questions on many topics in a short time is similarly constrained by essay items.

3. Methodology

This research incorporated a qualitative methodology by utilizing deductive content analysis. According to [Elo and Kyngäs \(2008\)](#) if the analytical framework is operationalized from prior knowledge, then the deductive content analysis is the method to employ. As a result of the fact that the objective of this research was to investigate whether or not essay questions or multiple choice questions are valid methods for determining a learner's level of English proficiency, deductive content analysis was the most feasible.

4. Research Question

This study sought to build analysis to answer the following research question; Do multiple choice questions or writing compositions achieve better validity in assessing a learner's English proficiency? The three articles were selected from Google Scholar using the key terms English learners' assessment, multiple questions, and essay composition.

5. Methodology Selected

The deductive content analysis is the best method to use as it will show what previous research says about the validity of multiple choice questions or essay compositions in assessing learners' English proficiency. As [Elo and Kyngäs \(2008\)](#) affirm, analyzing data in a deductive fashion allows researchers to see if their hypotheses or models hold up to the data. As such, this research question was influenced by prior knowledge on the validity of multiple questions in assessing students' prior knowledge.

6. Data Collection and Analysis

The deductive approach began with developing a theory that multiple choice questions are the most valid method of assessing a learner's proficiency in the English language. Then, the researcher found three suitable articles that answer the research question. A hypothesis was then developed that teachers who use multiple choice questions can assess learners' English language proficiency compared to those who use compositions. The data analysis was conducted based on the findings from the three articles.

7. Findings

The results of this study indicate that multiple choice questions provide a more valid means of evaluating the language skills of English language learners. The factors that prompted students to become self-directed learners were explored by [Lee et al. \(2021\)](#). The research showed that not only did most students try to guess at the right answers, but also many of them attempted the multiple-choice assessments online more than once which could clearly demonstrate their ability and willingness to study independently. Students also reported that incorporating the search and inquiry skills further demonstrated motivated initiatives, the proactive plan to address their limitations through the independent search for relevant resources, the determination of learning goals, and the evaluation of learning performance. ([Lee et al., 2021](#)). The study findings show that multiple choice questions can cultivate independent learning skills, thus enhancing students' motivation and improving their English proficiency.

Students prefer multiple choice questions to test their proficiency in the English language. A study by [Gupta, Jain, and D'Souza \(2016\)](#) aimed to gain students' perspectives on multiple choice or essay questions in assessing their English language proficiency. According to the study's findings, students preferred multiple choice questions because the assessment evaluated their ability to recall factual information and were able to put in more effort in preparation compared to essay composition. Additionally, the findings showed that students were more motivated to use superficial tactics and goals when studying for a multiple-choice examination than for an essay assignment. 64% of the students surveyed believed they only needed to recognize the correct answer, while 82% believed that they could rule out the incorrect choices ([Gupta et al., 2016](#)). These findings suggest that students prefer multiple choice questions to essay compositions because they encourage knowledge recall and encourage them to prepare more for the tests.

Multiple choice questions have been used to assess student's listening skills. A study by [Álvarez and De Pablo Lerchundi \(2012\)](#) used a representative sample of 214 students who completed multiple choice questions. The researcher aimed to examine whether the assessment method addresses the students' knowledge of the grammar and the vocabulary associated with this B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The findings showed that multiple choice questions can tell whether or not a student has reached the required B2 level according to the CEFR ([Álvarez & De Pablo Lerchundi, 2012](#)). Furthermore, according to [Mead and Rubin \(1985\)](#) listening, like reading comprehension, is usually defined as a receptive skill comprising both a physical process and an interpretive, analytical process. Listening tests typically resemble reading comprehension tests except that the students are required to listen attentively to a monologue or dialogue from the recording. Multiple choice questions can be used to examine different levels of literal and inferential comprehension abilities of the students. However, it is of vital importance to make sure that the answers deemed to be correct should only be derived from the recordings, without reliance on the students' prior knowledge or experience in specific domains.

8. Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, multiple-choice testing is the most popular and valid kind of evaluation because of its simplicity of administration, focus broadly on representation of course materials, allows students to prepare more, and enables objective grading. However, students using this approach are required to make decisions about the single best answer after extensive research and considering all relevant factors. As a result, multiple-choice questions must be carefully examined to ensure they accurately reflect students' levels of understanding.

Overall, an examination of the results in this research shows that high levels of reliability and validity of multiple choice question test to measure student's English language proficiency. A first look at the data suggests that the multiple-choice questions used to assess students' knowledge are doing their job. To be clear, there are constraints on this evaluation due to the nature of the test being used. However, the conclusion that this kind of test is the most valid with respect to what it intends to analyze is affected by the situation in which the test is conducted.

Even though this study showed that multiple choice questions are more valid in assessing learners' proficiency of the English language, one of the major limitations is inadequate research on this topic. It is possible that there would be different results if there were myriads of research examining this phenomenon. Further research on teacher and faculty perspectives on the validity of multiple questions is needed to strengthen the strength and reliability of these findings.

9. Conclusion

Assessing English language proficiency requires teachers to choose the most appropriate assessment method. The present study demonstrated that multiple choice questions are more valid in assessing learners' English language proficiency. The results of this study demonstrate that using multiple-choice questions helps students develop abilities for independent learning and ultimately raises their level of English proficiency. These findings are useful in various school settings to help English language learners to become proficient in the English language.

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