Alternatives

The alternatives in a multiple choice test item are as important as the stem. They should be formulated with care; simply being incorrect should not be the only criterion for the distracting alternatives.

Popular distractors are:

- An incorrect response related to the situation and which sounds convincing.

- A common misconception.

- A statement which is true, but which does not satisfy the requirements of the problem.

- A statement that is either too broad or too narrow for the requirements of the problem.

Research of instructor-made tests reveals that, in general, correct alternatives are longer than incorrect ones. When alternatives are numbers, they should generally be listed in ascending or descending order of magnitude or length.

Matching

A matching test item consists of two lists, which may include a combination of words, terms, illustrations, phrases, or sentences. The learner matches alternatives in one list with related alternatives in a second list.

In reality, a matching exercise is a collection of related multiple choice items. In a given period of time, more samples of a learner's knowledge usually can be measured with matching rather than multiple choice items. The matching item is particularly good for measuring a learner's ability to recognize relationships and to make associations between terms, parts, words, phrases, clauses, or symbols listed in one column with related items in another column. Matching reduces the probability of guessing correct responses, especially if alternatives may be used more than once. The testing time can also be used more efficiently.

The following guidelines help in the construction of effective matching test items:

- Give specific and complete instructions. Do not make the learner guess what is required.

- Test only essential information; never test unimportant details.

- Use closely related materials throughout an item. If learners can divide the alternatives into distinct groups, the item is reduced to several multiple choice items with few alternatives, and the possibility of guessing is distinctly increased.

- Make all alternatives credible responses to each element in the first column, wherever possible, to minimize guessing by elimination.

- Use language the learner can understand. By reducing language barriers, both the validity and reliability of the test is improved.

- Arrange the alternatives in some sensible order. An alphabetical arrangement is common.

Matching-type test items are either equal column or unequal column. An equal column test item has the same number of alternatives in each column. When using this form, always provide for some items in the response column to be used more than once, or not at all, to preclude guessing by elimination. Unequal column type test items have more alternatives in the second column than in the first and are generally preferable to equal columns.