The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With Reference to Tamil

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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to find out the role played by the Multiple Choice Questions in assessment of Syntactic Aspects of language with reference to Tamil. The text focuses on the two aspects, viz., syntactic aspects, i.e., constituent elements and their characteristics, and the description about multiple choice questions along with the strategies for assessing syntactic aspects. It suggests a prospective model as to how the language aspects with reference to syntax could be assessed. They are illustrated by citing examples from Tamil.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With
Reference to Tamil   279

Objective

To identify the usefulness of multiple choice questions in assessing syntactic aspects of language in order to fulfill the prerequisites of systematic assessment.

Introduction

Anything that we teach in the classroom is required to be assessed to know the mastery over the particular subject matter. To test the mastery or achievement of anything, 'content' is needs to be identified. Without 'test content', assessment may not be possible. According to Subbiah (2008), content has to be derived from the 'object' being taken up for assessment. The object may be anything, i.e., may be concrete or abstract; product or process, etc. For example, while assessing language, the language itself will become the object, then it is obvious that 'contents' are to be drawn from 'language' itself. Since this article intends to assess 'syntactic aspects of language' it is obvious that the contents are to be drawn from syntactic aspects only.

To assess the mastery over the contents, tools or scales are required. In the present scenario, many tools are available to assess various forms of content. One of the commonly used tools to assess the mastery over the content or subject matter is 'written test'. Construction of the test paper involves the preparation of the questions. And the questions are prepared by using different question formats. "Multiple Choice" is one of the available question formats. The question raised here is, how this particular format is helpful in language testing in general and testing syntactic aspects in particular.

Main Text

Language can be viewed as a system of elements arranged in a given order acceptable to the native speakers. The placement of each element and the way it is related to other elements are being defined within that system (Trask R.L., 1999). As enlisted in the General Frame of Reference - GFR (2002) for language, literature, & personality published by CIIL, the study of

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With
Reference to Tamil   280

language can be divided into four levels, i.e., phonological level (the study of sounds), morphological level (the study of words), syntactic level (the study of sentence structure), and semantic level (the study of meaning of the words and sentences). Accordingly, syntax is one of the major components of language. According to Gleason (1970), syntax may be defined as the principles of arrangement of the constructions formed by the process of derivation and inflection into larger constructions of various kinds. Thus, syntactic level of language is concerned with sentence formation and word order including phrases and clauses. By arranging them under certain rules, one can produce indefinite number of meaningful sentences with limited lexical items, to conveying the message / information. The structural components that constitute syntactic aspects of language and their dimensional factors are discussed below.

Syntactic Components and Their Dimensional Factors

Assessment of 'language being learnt' is a lengthy process as it involves the identification and outlining of the constituent elements and the corresponding dimensional factors with reference to the syntactic level. According to GFR, the constituent elements that constitute the syntactic level are phrase, clause, sentence, sentence patterns, concord, etc. The dimensional factors of language are said to be form, boundary, structure, function, and meaning (Subbiah, 2008). Anything that we want to test is to be defined first. Therefore, we have to define the components that constitute the sentence and their dimensional factors. Since, the components that constitute the syntactic aspects are more than 40, only a few major components have been taken up in the present paper. These include Phrase, Clause, and Sentence and their dimensional factors Form, Boundary, Structure, Function, and Meaning.

Format of Multiple Choice Questions

To assess above said components, proper tool or scale is required. In general 'test' consisting of question items will act as a tool, and giving numerical values to each question items will act as a scale and sometimes even a single question item will be considered as a test. Therefore, to construct the better tool, appropriate strategies or methodologies are to be followed.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With Reference to Tamil 281

According to Bejar (1983), there are different approaches of item generation; among them he highlights one of the approaches, 'item-form approach,' which is based on item formats.

Generally we have two categories of item formats, objective category and subjective category. Under each category, we have five types of item formats. Among them 'Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ)' is one of the formats under objective category. The description of MCQ is given below.

A multiple choice type of a question item is basically a selection type, where the students are required to select the correct or the most appropriate alternative out of those given. They have since long been the most highly regarded and widely used form of objective test item.

Three Physical Components of a Multiple Choice Question

As far as the construction of a multiple choice question is concerned, it has three physical components, namely, stem, distracters / alternative, and key. The first step in the MCQ construction is to prepare a suitable stem in which the problem is to be precisely and completely stated. According to H. S. Srivastava (1999), the stem can be constructed in two forms: a question form or a completion form. While constructing the completion form of the stem, it has to be ensured that all the alternatives are in a language form, which correctly completes the stem and make it a full sentence. Subsequently, the correct response or key is to be prepared and then the set of distracters (incorrect responses) or alternatives are to be developed.

Distractors

The purpose of a distracter in a multiple-choice item is to discriminate between those students who have command over the specific knowledge and those who do not.

While developing the distracters, some of the points are to be kept in mind:

(1) The distractors / alternatives have to be homogenous.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With Reference to Tamil 282

(2) The distractors should invariably be of the same physical length.

(3) None of the distractors should provide any clue about the correct alternative.

(4) The alternatives should all be in the same language form.

(5) The alternatives should all be plausible, that is, even the incorrect answers may be mistaken as correct answers.

Complex Multiple Choice

The above description speaks only about the basic and simple structure of any MCQ. According to Robert L. Ebel and David A. Frisbie (1991), there are also K-type items or several multiple choice or complex multiple choice items where the examinees select the correct combination of choices and thereby exhibit their Higher Order Abilities also.

Examples

An example for simple or basic format of multiple choice question is given below:

Choose the category of meaning that the underlined portion   ⇐ (Instruction to the examinee.)
   in the sentence conveys.

     inta mōtiram cokkat taṅkattāl āṉatu.   ⇐ Stem

       a. akarātip poruL   ⇐ Key

       b. ilakkaNap poruL   ⇐ distractor

       c. cūzal poruL   ⇐ distractor

       d. uNarccip poruL   ⇐ distractor

How to Assess Language Aspects by MCQ

Any test or assessment in the context of language may be of two types: (1) Testing of skills like listening, speaking, reading, writing, etc. Here the focal point is testing performance. (2) Testing of mastery over a language as a subject. Here the focal point is testing linguistic competence. Here, in this article our concern is to test mastery over the language with reference to syntactical level and the examples are drawn from Tamil language.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With Reference to Tamil   283

"The scope of the term 'mastery' is limited and refers to only the knowing, comprehending, and recalling of a subject matter in terms of their rules, etc., implying that one who has mastered a subject" (Subbiah, 2008). In this perspective, 'mastery' of syntactic level of language mainly includes:

• Knowledge of the Terminology, facts and figures with reference to syntax, i.e., to test the knowledge of terminology related to syntax such as phrase, phrase structure, noun phrase, etc.

• Knowledge of tradition, convention, trends and movements, sequences, classification, categorization, frameworks, methods, and criteria related to the syntactic level of a language such as the rules governing arrangement of elements within the sentence, concord / agreement between subject and predicate, etc. Types and patterns of phrases, clauses, and sentences, method of arrangements of words, structural patterns, etc., can be assessed

• Knowledge of theories, principles, and structures of syntactic level of a language, e.g., structure of a particular language unit, theories, and principles behind the construction, etc., are assessed.

Likewise, it also includes

• Understanding / comprehension of syntactic aspects of language, i.e., comprehension of all the above components listed under knowledge level,

• Application: Applying the knowledge, i.e., ability to apply grammatical rules into practice, that is, rules of syntax.

These abilities are considered to be primary in 'mastery' and they can be very well assessed by MCQs except in a few cases. The following are some examples

Example -1

Choose the name of the resultant form after adding ' āna' suffix to 'mika vaLavaLappu' from the following

      a. adjective phrase

      b. adverbial phrase

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With
Reference to Tamil   284

c. verb phrase

d. noun phrase

Ans.: a. adjective phrase

Here, the knowledge of terminology for 'form' is assessed. The learner recalls the form and identifies the answer among the given ones.

Example - 2

Which of the underlined portion (phrase) functions as subject?

a̅nanta pavanil tay̅arikkappaTTa   inippu vakaikaL   nanr̅aka irukkum.
_____   _____   _____
            (a)   (b)   (c)

'The sweets prepared in ananta bavan are good'

Ans : b. inippu vakaikaL (The sweets)

Here, knowledge of criteria for 'inherent use of function' is assessed.

Example - 3

Choose the pattern which refers to the underlined clause.

kav̅eri v̅ankiya puttakankaL m̅ecaim̅el uLLana.

'The books bought by Kavery are on the table.'

a. noun + Noun …

b. noun + Verbal participle …

c. noun + Relative participle…

d. noun + infinitive …

Ans.: c. noun + Relative participle…

Here, knowledge of 'pattern of a structure' is assessed.

Example-4

Choose the contextual meaning of the underlined phrase from the given alternatives.

'enatu ilankaic celavu' enra kaTTurai ilankai parriya pala ceytikaLait tarukiratu.

'The essay on 'enatu ilankaic celavu' gives information about Srilanka.'

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With
Reference to Tamil   285

a. ilaṅkaiyil celavitta tokai

b. ilaṅkaiyil celavitta nēram

c. ilaṅkaikkuc cenrap payaNam

d. ilaṅkaiyil cantitta maṉitarkaL

Ans.:   c. ilaṅkaikkuc cenrap payaNam

Here, knowledge of comprehension or the 'contextual meaning' is assessed.

Example - 5

Choose the correct answer from the following.

Find out the sentence which does not have the subject-verb concord.

a. nāṉ cāppiTTēṉ

b. avaL tūṅkināL

c. nī pēciṉār

d. atu varum

Ans.:   c. nī pēciṉār

Here, knowledge of convention relating to 'pattern of a structure' is assessed. Here also it is only a process of identification.

Likewise we can assess each component through offering a variety of alternatives.

Limitations to MCQs

However, in spite of all these merits, the MCQs have their own limitations also. In the examples given above, we can see that only the dimensions form relating to content, structure relating to content, meaning relating to content, use relating to content have been assessed. The usage of a language unit in a context (function) is not effectively tested through MCQs. However, through MCQs we can assess the identification level and suitability level but will not be able to assess production level where the learner has to produce a new utterance. As regards

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With Reference to Tamil   286

the assessment of the components of syntactic concord, meaning relationship, etc., the MCQ is not a much suitable format.

Also MCQ has its own limitations in its construction. They are as follows: According to Christine Coombe, et al. (2007), MCQs are not suitable for testing of language skills or language as communication. MCQs encourage guessing, which can have an effect on exam results. But in the present situation this can be rectified through the statistical procedure 'guessing correction' which helps to find out the guessing probability.

Challenging and Time-consuming

It is challenging and time-consuming to write plausible distractors and produce good items. Also, according to Alderson J. Charles (1995), there is evidence that students taking multiple choice tests can learn strategies for taking such tests that 'artificially' inflate their scores. These include using techniques for guessing the correct answer, by eliminating implausible distractors, by avoiding two options that are similar in meaning, by selecting an option that is notably longer than the other distractors and so on. To avoid these things, proper measures have to be taken care of while preparing Multiple Choice Questions.

Since MCQs have certain drawbacks in assessing language aspects, it is therefore proposed to use other item types also for assessing many other aspects of language. For example, we can use completion type items in which examinees may be asked to put punctuation marks at the right places in a passage to discriminate between boundaries of different language units. The other problem is testing the usage of language effectively. For this we can use simple question, and conversion type and problem solving questions where the production of new language unit by applying knowledge can be assessed and they will be more suitable.

Conclusion

As far as language aspects are concerned we can assess all the abilities including higher order abilities and dimensional factors associated with the syntactic elements using MCQs. But,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With
Reference to Tamil   287

it is seen that the dimensional factors like boundary between language units (boundary markers, such as punctuations, function of an item to find out the usage of a particular language unit and the structure of concord), generally MCQ are not used. However, if the item writer is innovative, these aspects can also be assessed through the Multiple Choice Questions.

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Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With Reference to Tamil 288

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014**
Ms. R. Shakunthala, M.A., M.Phil.
The Role of Multiple Choice Questions in Assessing Syntactic Aspects of Language With
Reference to Tamil   289