

# **THE EFFECT OF TEST FORMATS ON READING COMPREHENSION TESTS**

by

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## Abstract

### **The Effect of Test Formats on Reading Comprehension Tests**

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This experimental study was carried out to examine the effect of test formats, namely multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions, on reading comprehension tests. The study also aimed to find out if the results of reading comprehension tests were affected by the students' proficiency in comprehending the test questions as well as their written ability in relation to answering the reading comprehension questions.

The study involved 34 students from Sekolah Menengah Kuching High, Kuching. These students were equally divided into two groups. The students in the experimental group and the control group were administered six reading comprehension tests with the multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions respectively.

The results of the reading comprehension tests administered to both the control and the experimental group were analyzed using the t-test for Independent Samples. The findings revealed that there is no significant difference in the results of the reading comprehension tests in relation to the test formats examined.

The implication from the study carried out underlined the need to consider the affect of test formats on reading comprehension tests. Recommendations were made with regard to the exploration and the examination of the effect of other test formats in reading comprehension tests.

*Abstrak*

***Kesan Format Peperiksaan Ke Atas Ujian Pemahaman***

Ellena Chai Mung Ling

*Kajian eksperimen ini dijalankan untuk mengkaji kesan format peperiksaan, iaitu soalan aneka pilihan dan soalan respons terbuka yang memerlukan jawapan pendek ke atas ujian pemahaman. Kajian ini juga bertujuan mengkaji samaada keputusan ujian pemahaman dipengaruhi oleh kemahiran pelajar memahami soalan peperiksaan dan juga kemahiran pelajar dalam menulis jawapan untuk menjawab soalan pemahaman dalam ujian tersebut.*

*Kajian ini melibatkan 34 pelajar dari Sekolah Menengah Kuching High di Bandar Kuching. Pelajar-pelajar ini dibahagikan dengan sama rata kepada dua kumpulan. Pelajar dalam kumpulan ujikaji telah diberi enam ujian pemahaman yang mengemukakan soalan aneka pilihan, manakala pelajar dalam kumpulan terkawal diberi enam ujian pemahaman yang sama di mana soalan yang terlibat adalah jenis soalan respons terbuka yang memerlukan jawapan pendek.*

*Hasil dari ujian pemahaman yang diberikan kepada kedua dua kumpulan ujikaji dan kumpulan terkawal dianalisa dengan menggunakan "t-test for Independent Samples". Berhubung dengan kajian ke atas format ujian, analisa telah menunjukkan bahawa keputusan ujian pemahaman dalam kumpulan ujikaji dan kumpulan terkawal tidak mempunyai perbezaan yang nyata.*

*Implikasi dari kajian yang dijalankan menitikberatkan perlunya pertimbangan diberikan kepada kesan format peperiksaan ke atas ujian pemahaman. Beberapa cadangan untuk meninjau dan mengkaji kesan format peperiksaan yang lain ke atas ujian pemahaman turut dikemukakan.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE .....	i
APPROVAL SHEET .....	ii
ABSTRACT .....	iii
ABSTRAK.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
LIST OF TABLES .....	x
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	xi
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION	
Introduction.....	1
Background of the Study .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	4
Purpose of the study .....	5
Research Hypothesis .....	5
Research Questions .....	6
Significance of study .....	6
Definition of terms .....	7
II LITERATURE REVIEW	
Introduction .....	11
Language Testing in Malaysia .....	11
Reading Comprehension Tests .....	13
Purposes for Testing Reading Comprehension .....	13
Methods of Testing Reading Comprehension .....	15
Multiple Choice Questions .....	16
Short Answer Questions .....	17
Review of the Original Study by Shohamy (1984) .....	18

III	METHODOLOGY	
	Introduction .....	24
	Research Design .....	25
	Samples .....	26
	Sampling .....	26
	Instruments .....	28
	Data Collection Procedure .....	29
	Data Analysis Procedure.....	31
	Limitations of Study .....	32
IV	ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	
	Introduction .....	33
	Analysis of Reading Comprehension Tests .....	35
	Discussion .....	39
	Test Format .....	40
	Proficiency Levels of the Students .....	43
	Summary .....	45
V	SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
	Introduction .....	46
	Summary of the Study .....	46
	Implications .....	47
	Recommendations .....	47
	REFERENCES .....	50
	APPENDICES	
	Appendix 1 Reading Comprehension Text 1 .....	52
	Appendix 1a Reading Comprehension Test 1 (Open- Ended English Questions) .....	53
	Appendix 1b Reading Comprehension Test 1 (Multiple Choice English Questions).....	54
	Appendix 1c Reading Comprehension Test 1 (Multiple Choice Chinese Questions) .....	55
	Appendix 1d Reading Comprehension Test 1 (Multiple Choice Iban Questions) .....	56

Appendix 1e	Reading Comprehension Test 1 (Multiple Choice Bahasa Melayu Questions) .....	57
Appendix 2	Reading Comprehension Text 2 .....	58
Appendix 2a	Reading Comprehension Test 2 (Open- Ended English Questions) .....	59
Appendix 2b	Reading Comprehension Test 2 (Multiple Choice English Questions).....	60
Appendix 2c	Reading Comprehension Test 2 (Multiple Choice Chinese Questions) .....	61
Appendix 2d	Reading Comprehension Test 2 (Multiple Choice Iban Questions) .....	62
Appendix 2e	Reading Comprehension Test 2 (Multiple Choice Bahasa Melayu Questions) .....	63
Appendix 3	Reading Comprehension Text 3 .....	64
Appendix 3a	Reading Comprehension Test 3 (Open- Ended English Questions) .....	65
Appendix 3b	Reading Comprehension Test 3 (Multiple Choice English Questions) .....	66
Appendix 3c	Reading Comprehension Test 3 (Multiple Choice Chinese Questions) .....	67
Appendix 3d	Reading Comprehension Test 3 (Multiple Choice Iban Questions) .....	68
Appendix 3e	Reading Comprehension Test 3 (Multiple Choice Bahasa Melayu Questions) .....	69
Appendix 4	Reading Comprehension Text 4 .....	70
Appendix 4a	Reading Comprehension Test 4 (Open- Ended English Questions) .....	71
Appendix 4b	Reading Comprehension Test 4 (Multiple Choice English Questions) .....	72
Appendix 4c	Reading Comprehension Test 4 (Multiple Choice Chinese Questions) .....	73
Appendix 4d	Reading Comprehension Test 4 (Multiple Choice Iban Questions) .....	74
Appendix 4e	Reading Comprehension Test 4 (Multiple Choice Bahasa Melayu Questions) .....	75
Appendix 5	Reading Comprehension Text 5 .....	76
Appendix 5a	Reading Comprehension Test 5 (Open- Ended English Questions) .....	77

Appendix 5b	Reading Comprehension Test 5 (Multiple Choice English Questions) .....	78
Appendix 5c	Reading Comprehension Test 5 (Multiple Choice Chinese Questions) .....	79
Appendix 5d	Reading Comprehension Test 5 (Multiple Choice Iban Questions) .....	80
Appendix 5e	Reading Comprehension Test 5 (Multiple Choice Bahasa Melayu Questions) .....	81
Appendix 6	Reading Comprehension Text 6 .....	82
Appendix 6a	Reading Comprehension Test 6 (Open- Ended English Questions).....	83
Appendix 6b	Reading Comprehension Test 6 (Multiple Choice English Questions) .....	84
Appendix 6c	Reading Comprehension Test 6 (Multiple Choice Chinese Questions) .....	85
Appendix 6d	Reading Comprehension Test 6 (Multiple Choice Iban Questions) .....	86
Appendix 6e	Reading Comprehension Test 6 (Multiple Choice Bahasa Melayu Questions) .....	87
Appendix 7	Informal Conversational Interview Questions .....	88
Appendix 8	Borang Pengesahan Status Tesis .....	89

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## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Differences in the Original Study and Present Study .....	4
2	Results of the Reading Comprehension Tests (1997 – 2002) .....	34
3	Results Of 1997 (SPM) Reading Comprehension Tests For Group A And Group B .....	35
4	Results Of 1998 (SPM) Reading Comprehension Tests For Group A And Group B .....	36
5	Results Of 1999 (SPM) Reading Comprehension Tests For Group A And Group B .....	37
6	Results Of 2000 (SPM) Reading Comprehension Tests For Group A And Group B .....	37
7	Results Of 2001 (SPM) Reading Comprehension Tests For Group A And Group B .....	38
8	Results Of 2002 (SPM) Reading Comprehension Tests For Group A And Group B .....	39

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MC	=	Multiple Choice
OE	=	Open Ended
ESL	=	English as a Second Language
UPSR	=	Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (Primary School Assessment)
PMR	=	Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah (Lower Secondary School Examination)
SPM	=	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysia Certificate Examination)

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the background of the study, the research problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and research hypothesis as well as the significance of the study. Definitions of key terms relevant to the study are also defined.

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

In ESL classrooms, teachers assess the achievement of students in learning a language through the administration of language tests. These tests enable teachers to evaluate students' performance in relation to the various language skills like speaking, listening, reading and writing. Apart from this, the results of the tests provide teachers with feedback on the effectiveness of their teachings. This also allows teachers to gain further insights on what has been learnt and what needs to be stressed in further teaching. In other words, language tests not only enable teachers to detect the students' "strengths and weaknesses" (Hughes, 1989, p.7) in their language proficiency, they also act as an instrument to measure the language proficiency of students. To the students, the language tests act as an indicator of their linguistic abilities, by allowing them to check their own progress in learning English.

In language testing, where tests such as reading comprehension tests are carried out to assess the students' language proficiency, the results vary due to a number of factors. Pumfrey

(1977, p. 42) commented that the test results of test takers can be different even when the same test is re-administered after a lapse of time or when parallel tests are administered. The differences in the results of the tests may be caused by the positive or negative attitudes as well as the motivation of the test-takers towards the tests. Even the physical environment where the reading comprehension test is administered can affect the results of the test. The lighting, seating and the temperature of the room can all play a part in influencing the performance of the test-takers during the tests. The test format or test method in language tests can also affect the scores obtained by the test-takers. Studies (Klein –Barley, 1981; Shohamy, 1983, 1984; Bachman, 1983; Alderson, 1983; Kobayashi, 2002) were carried out with respect to this area of language testing and the investigations showed that the different test formats resulted in different scores for the test-takers.

The present study aims to replicate a study conducted by Shohamy (1984) by exploring the effect of test formats on reading comprehension tests in a Malaysian ESL classroom. In the original study by Shohamy (1984), the researcher investigated the effect that different test formats employed in reading comprehension tests have on the students' scores. The test formats, in the reading comprehension tests taken by twelfth-grade students in Israel, were carried out in the form of multiple-choice (MC) questions and open-ended (OE) questions. The results of the study provided insightful information on the effect of test formats, language and text on the scores obtained by students with regards to reading comprehension tests. The researcher viewed that such study provided evidence and information on the effect of test formats, language and texts on the results of reading comprehension test and concluded that

different test formats can make a difference in the testing of reading comprehension. Further details of the original study will be reviewed in Chapter 2 of this study.

In the present study, the researcher aims to find out if different test formats have an effect on the results of reading comprehension tests in Malaysian ESL classrooms. The current study will focus on the two test formats, namely, the open-ended (OE), questions and the multiple-choice (MC) questions on two groups of Form Four students from an urban secondary school in Kuching. Group A, the control group, will be given short reading texts with OE questions that require short-answers in English in their reading comprehension tests. Group B, the experimental group, will be administered MC questions set in Mandarin, Bahasa Iban and Bahasa Melayu, in their reading comprehension tests. The rationale for the languages of the reading comprehension tests in the experimental group will be explained in Chapter 2. The differences between the original study by Shohamy (1984) and the present study that the researcher intended to carry out are presented in table 1 as shown.

**Table 1**Differences between the original study by Shohamy (1984) and the present study

Study	Group	Test Format
Shohamy (1984)	Group A Control	Multiple choice English questions
	Group B Experimental	1. Multiple choice English Questions 2. Multiple choice Hebrew Questions 3. Open-ended English Questions 4. Open-ended Hebrew Questions
Present Study	Group A Control	Open-ended English questions
	Group B Experimental	Multiple choice questions (Mandarin, Bahasa Melayu and Iban)

**1.2 Statement of the Problem**

In testing reading comprehension, the results of such tests can be influenced by various factors. Among the factors mentioned, the students' comprehension of the questions in short-answer reading comprehension test can influence the results of the test. Alderson (2001, p. 86) noted students' comprehension of the questions plays a major role in affecting the results of reading comprehension tests. The differences in students' comprehension of the questions in the tests may be due to their English language proficiency, their reading skills and comprehension strategies.

The other factor that may influence the results of reading comprehension test is the differences in students' written language ability. There are students who are able to understand the test questions but their answering ability may be hindered by their written

language ability. As such, there is a possibility that variations in students' written language ability can affect the results in reading comprehension tests.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to find out whether:

1. the results of reading comprehension test are affected by different test formats, namely open-ended questions and multiple-choice.
2. the results of reading comprehension test, in relation to a particular passage, are affected by the students' proficiency in comprehending the test questions asked and
3. the results of the reading comprehension test are affected by the students' written ability in relation to answering the questions.

### **1.4 Research Hypothesis**

This study is based on the hypothesis that different test formats can affect on the performance of students in reading comprehension tests differently, thus resulting in the different scores obtained. The findings given in Shohamy's study (1984) suggested that different test formats in reading comprehension tests can affect the scores of the test-takers differently.

## 1.5 Research Questions

In line with the study in exploring the effect of test format on the results of reading comprehension test, this research aims to answer the following questions.

1. Do different test formats, namely OE and MC questions, affect the results of reading comprehension tests?
2. Do variations in students' language proficiency, in relation to their comprehension of the questions asked, affect the students' results in reading comprehension tests?
3. Do variations in students' written language ability in English affect the results in reading comprehension tests?

## 1.6 Significance of the Study

It is hoped that the findings can provide an insight to language teachers with regard to the effect of test formats, particularly in the testing of reading comprehension. The result of the study may enable teachers to be aware that differences in the results of reading comprehension tests may be caused by students' proficiency in comprehending the test questions, or their written English language ability in relation to answering the questions. It is hoped that, as a result of the findings, teachers would be sensitive to the factors concerned and hence, take the students' proficiency in comprehending the test questions as well as their written English language ability into consideration when constructing reading comprehension tests.

## 1.7 Definition of terms

The following terms associated with this study are explained as follows:

### 1.7.1 Test formats

Test formats refer to the techniques or methods used in the testing of students' language ability (Nesamalar Chitravelu, Saratha Sithamparam and Teh Soo Choon, 1995, p. 308). In testing reading comprehension, some of the test formats that are commonly used are short-answer questions, true/false items, selective gap filling and summary cloze. In this study, the test formats explored are the multiple-choice questions and the open-ended questions.

### 1.7.2 Reading Comprehension Tests

These refer to the testing of students' skills in understanding the contents of a given text through the use of different test formats as those mentioned in 1.7.1. According to Pumfrey (1977, p. 4), the reading comprehension tests are means of collecting informative data regarding the extent to which a child has mastered some aspects of reading skills. They not only provide teachers with information on the students' reading ability but also enable them to assess the students' comprehension skills as well.

### 1.7.3 Norm-referenced tests

Norm-referenced tests compare an individual's performance with that of others in the group where he belongs. In a language class, the results of these tests provide information on the test-takers linguistic ability in relation to the other candidates. The test-takers are graded according to the results of the test taken.

#### **1.7.4 Criterion-referenced tests**

Criterion-referenced tests refer to tests that determine the performance of an individual with that of a set of predetermined objectives or criteria. According to Hughes (1989, p.18), results from these tests show specifically “what a candidate can do in the language”. Unlike the norm-referenced tests, these kinds of tests enable teachers and test writers to understand the extent to which the test-takers have mastered the skills learnt within a learning period

#### **1.7.5 Progress tests**

Progress tests are administered to determine the development of a learner in learning what was taught. The results of such tests allow the teachers to review the teaching and learning process in the classroom and hence, plan further reinforcement or remedial activities according to the needs of the learners.

#### **1.7.5 Achievement Tests**

Achievement tests seek to obtain information on how successful the test-takers have been in learning what was taught within the learning period. According to Heaton (1988, p. 172), these tests are “more formal and are intended to measure achievements on a larger scale”. In Malaysia, achievement tests are carried out in the form of year-end examinations, the UPSR, PMR and the SPM examinations.

### **1.7.6 Reliability**

Reliability in tests is an important criterion as it enables teachers to obtain accurate and direct information on the performance of the test-takers. Given the various types of reliability, a test is said to have test/retest reliability if the results obtained are similar to the results of another test administered in the same condition, given the same group of test-takers but at different times (Hughes, 1989, p. 27). Inter-rater reliability exists when the results of a test after being checked by two or more raters are found to be consistent. This is done to ensure that the scores awarded by the first rater are reliable. Parallel tests, where similar rubrics and of difficulty level as well as length, are administered to the same group of test-takers and same tests re-administered after a certain period (Heaton, 1988, p. 162) are examples of other ways in which the reliability of tests can be obtained.

### **1.7.7 Validity**

Tests are valid if they measure what they are intended to measure (Heaton, 1995, p.159; Hughes, 1989, p.22). For example, a reading comprehension test that tests the reading comprehension ability of the test-takers is said to be valid whereas another reading comprehension test that tests the test-takers' writing ability is not. The validity of language tests are important because the results can then be used with confidence in order to obtain explicit and accurate information about the test-takers' abilities in using the language.

This chapter looked at the background of the study, the objectives of the research, the research questions, assumption, significance of the study and the definition of key terms relevant to the study. The following chapter will review the literature related to language testing as well as the

study conducted by Shohamy (1984) with regard to the effect of test formats on reading comprehension tests.

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## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a review of the related literature on the significance of language testing in the Malaysian examination system, the testing of reading comprehension, its purposes and the various methods involved in testing this component in the language skills, in particular, multiple-choice and open ended questions. Lastly, the original study by Shohamy (1984), with regard to the effect of test format on reading comprehension tests, will also be examined.

#### 2.2 Language Testing in Malaysia

Nesamalar Chitravelu, Saratha Sithamparam and Teh Soo Choon (1995, p. 300), pointed out that “tests serve the many of the needs of teaching”. In Malaysian ESL classrooms, language tests are administered to monitor the students’ language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening. There are tests such as the progress test that are given monthly to enable teachers to assess how much the students have learnt throughout the period of learning. Other tests like the achievement tests are administered at the end of the year to evaluate the efficacy of teachers’ teaching as well as the students’ mastery of the language skills taught in the year. The results of these tests serve to inform teachers as well as the students of the extent to which language is learnt in the classroom.

Progress tests are designed to enable teachers to check students' development in language learning based on what is taught within a specified period like a month or a term. The results of the monthly or term test serve to provide teachers as well as to the students with "immediate feedback" (Compendium 1991, p. 12) on what has been learnt in the classroom. They act as instruments in enabling teachers to diagnose the students' language ability and consequently, improve or enhance their learning through remedial and enrichment classes respectively.

Achievement tests are usually carried out at the end of the year to determine how much the students have achieved within the period of learning. In their research paper presented at the 28<sup>th</sup> IAEA (International Association for Educational Assessment) Annual Conference in Hong Kong, Dr. Ainan Abdul Samad and Dr Jamil Adimin (2002), pointed out that achievement tests should "measure the product of a learning process". Hence, the administration of such tests is to ascertain the students' learning. In Malaysia, achievement tests are standardized and developed by the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate. Examples of large-scale achievement tests in Malaysian primary and secondary schools are the UPSR, PMR and SPM, which are carried out at various levels of education in the schools.

According to the Compendium (1991, p. 17), tests are administered for "progress, achievement or placement purposes". Apart from the main purposes of the progress and achievement tests in language testing, these results are also used for placement purposes. Based on informal enquiries that were made, teachers from several secondary schools in Kuching agreed that students are grouped or streamed according to their academic achievement. In Malaysia, although placement tests are not administered specifically for placement purposes in secondary school but the

results of English achievement tests carried out at the end of the year play a role in influencing teachers in grouping the students in classes the following year where their level of abilities are at par with one another. This is to enable the teacher to plan teaching-learning activities to suit the students' learning abilities.

### **2.3 Reading Comprehension Tests**

Reading comprehension tests are ways used by language teachers to assess their students reading skills. They act as a gauge to determine the students' ability to interpret information from a given text. Nutall (1987, p. 137) commented that, responses in the reading comprehension tests "provide the teacher with a means of checking progress".

In Malaysian SPM examination, the students' reading skills are tested in Paper 1, where they are expected to read and comprehend the text provided. The test-takers are tested on their ability to make inferences, skimming and scanning skills for information from the text given in order to understand the words, sentences, facts, and ideas in the passage.

### **2.4 Purposes For Testing Reading Comprehension.**

According to Heaton (1995, p. 5), the teaching and testing of reading are "closely interrelated" and as Pumfrey (1977, p. 13) pointed out, they "go hand in hand". Reading comprehension tests are tools that enable teachers to understand and obtain feedback on the students' progress in their learning. A well-constructed reading comprehension test, which is

capable of revealing students' reading and comprehending ability, will affect the students' motivation and learning as well as the teacher's teaching.

A teacher's teaching can be affected by the results of the test given. Commonly known as the backwash effect, (Heaton, 1995, p. 1; Hughes, 1989, p. 70) the results of reading comprehension tests can affect the way the teacher teaches, for example, reading skills. At the same time, the teacher's teaching can also affect the results of reading comprehension tests.

As Heaton (1988, p. 6) commented, one of the various purposes of testing is for "comparison" as in progress tests and "selection" for placement purposes. In progress tests, the results of the reading comprehension tests will allow teachers to understand the development of the students in the area of the reading comprehension. When the tests results concerned are compared, teachers are able to know the learning ability, such as reading comprehension of the students. From the results of the reading comprehension tests, teachers are able to know and plan appropriate steps to improve or reinforce learning. This backwash effect of testing on teaching and learning, will lead to the reinforcement or enrichment of learning where tests showed good results. On the other hand, poor results in tests will be improved through stages of remediation. Results of language tests like reading comprehension tests are also useful in providing teachers with information about the language ability of the students. This will enable teachers to place students in groups where their reading comprehension abilities are similar. Such grouping will facilitate the teaching of skills, which students have not mastered or lacked in the language classrooms.