# Multiple Choices the Only Choice: Pandemic-Stricken Online Test of Writing Skills in English

*Shubhada K. Deshpande*

## Abstract

The article reports how the online Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ), an assessment method for testing writing skills in English was dealt with despite the challenges inherent in the task. The Direct Response method wherein the examinees write compositions has been accepted as the most appropriate assessment method of writing skills worldwide. However, this article reports on how the challenge was converted to an opportunity to explore an effective way to implement the method using discourse markers and linking devices as essential criteria to assess the cognitive skills in writing. The paper also recommends that a blend of MCQ test and direct response makes the assessment effective.

**Keywords:** MCQs, online test, writing skills, assessment method, direct response

## Introduction

The unprecedented disaster of Covid-19 throughout the world created a major challenge for education as a congregation was the primary method for teaching-learning. The 'social distancing' led educators to look up to digital platforms for teaching. Virtual classrooms became a part of reality rather than a far-fetched notion. A developing country like India accommodated the virtual reality of their e-classrooms replacing physical classrooms, but the stakeholders worried about the nature of the assessment. The concern was because the pandemic struck India in March, the month of examinations. Whether multiple choice questions (MCQ) or open-ended questions, the format for the examination became an issue. After discussions, the University of Mumbai announced

its resolution to conduct online examinations with multiple choice questions (MCQs) as the assessment format. This article explores a few MCQ strategies the researcher tried out to assess writing skills.

## Literature Review

A literature review shows that MCQs are widely used for natural and social sciences compared to arts and humanities (Boitshwarelo et al., 2017). Further, MCQs are limited to assessing surface knowledge and cannot be applied to assess critical thinking and synthesis (Polat, 2020). Arooj et al. (2021) reports a significant correlation (r=0.73) between surface approach and MCQs; and short essay questions to deep approach (r=.80). On the other hand, other studies (Douglas et al., 2012; cited in Boitshwarelo et al., 2017; Simkin & Kuechler, 2005; cited in Boitshwarelo et al., 2017) state that MCQs are suitable for assessing the cognitive levels. Boitshwarelo et al. (2017) observe that case study-based MCQs can also be used to facilitate higher-order learning. These authors point out that online tests are used to assess meta-knowledge (creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration) but not for assessing humanistic knowledge (live/ job skills, ethical and emotional awareness, and cultural competence).

Writing skills are critical for professional and academic success. Two methods have generally been taken to measure and evaluate writing skills—the direct (essay writing) and the indirect (MCQ) methods (Cooper, 1984; Stiggins, 1981). Comparing the two methods, Cooper (1984) has thus summarized that the indirect assessment focuses on word and sentence levels characteristics like mechanics, diction, usage, syntax, and modification. In contrast, the direct assessment focuses on discourse level characteristics like a statement of thesis, clarity, organization, and rhetorical strategy. Cooper also notes that essay tests are considered more valid than MCQs to measure writing ability. He attributes the low-test score correlation between essay questions and MCQ to speed fluency and low reliability of essay questions. When the essay questions are made reliable through multiple assessments or statistical corrections for unreliability, the performance on essay tests and MCQs are closely related.

Breland and Jones (1982, p. 15 cited in Cooper, 1984) have argued that the essay tests 'may overlook important sentence-level indicators of writing proficiency'. The study further showed that 90 per cent of essay

tests were rated neutral on the use of modifiers, an important indicator of students' overall proficiency; Cooper has drawn attention to the fact that MCQs can address this critical skill. Brown and Abdulnabi (2017) have emphasized the need for statistical evaluation of items in MCQs before using them to ensure that high-quality items are used to draw inferences on performance and grading. They conclude that establishing the credibility of assessment is critical and requires commitment and effort for quality assurance in MCQs.

## Methodology

The Communication Skills in the English paper focuses on developing four communication skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Reading skills are divided into grammar, editing, comprehension, and summarization, and writing skills into essays, emails, reports, stories, blogs, and formal letters. The offline examination consisted of a blend of objective questions and questions expecting descriptive writing in response to assessing creative and formal writing skills. However, the pandemic made it mandatory to assess writing skills through MCQs.

The aspects of writing, including content, ability to generate ideas, logical coherence (and cohesion), rhetorical techniques, and tone flexibility, were challenging to test through MCQs. The teaching fraternity was invited to answer a WhatsApp questionnaire on the challenges in setting MCQs for testing writing skills. Based on the answers and the researcher's thinking, it was decided to use materials (e.g. contents from essays and articles, etc.) relating to real-life contexts. The following aspects were finalized as the essential areas to be tested through MCQs while testing the writing skills:

- Discourse Markers
- Content Building
- Use of Modifiers
- Organization of Content/Logical Coherence
- Creativity
- Register
- Tone of Communication
- Ability to generate ideas
- Editing

Of these, the ability to generate ideas and to edit were excluded from the MCQ assessment. The former was too challenging, and the latter was considered in another syllabus unit.

Time could be a constraint in using MCQs for testing writing skills as this pattern reduces the time allotted for examination. However, as the test could not expect the examinees to produce any written responses, it became obligatory for the paper setter to provide sample write-ups as a part of the questions to judge various sub-skills involved in writing. Therefore, the examinees needed to read through every write-up for different questions. To address this, the selected written material was reduced to a maximum of 3-4 sentences per question, and more than one question was based on one paragraph wherever possible.

The questions were framed as follows to assess various aspects of writing skills:

**Discourse Markers:** A short paragraph with multiple options were given, and the examinee had to identify the correct option. .

For example: *Read the paragraph and choose the  option that fits the blank.*

> *"The advantages of yoga are initiated because you're focusing on internal peace. Self-realization, focus, relaxation, and harmony are the foundation stones of yoga.*
> *One of the magnificent things about yoga is that regardless of the benefits it produces, there is no charge."*
> *The paragraph can be best looked at as the _____ of an essay.*
> *a. Conclusion b. Beginning c. Middle d. End*

Such paragraphs were used to test comparison, illustration or cause and effect relationship skills.

**Content Building:** A paragraph or a sentence from the prescribed texts with a missing part was given, along with a few options. The examinees had to select the option that best fitted the blank.

**Use of Modifiers**: Sentences with missing modifiers were given. The examinees had to select the correct modifier and fill the blank.

> *I have _____ found my online classes engaging throughout the pandemic.*
> *a. exceptionally b. hardly c. at first d. knowingly*

**Organization of Content/Logical Coherence:** Four jumbled sentences

from a paragraph were provided, and the examinees were asked to identify the correct sequence of the sentences as a paragraph. The multiple choices included four combinations of sequences, including the correct one.

Questions were also framed, providing a sentence with a blank space. The examinees were expected to choose the correct linking device from those given as the alternatives for the blank space.

**Creativity:** A small paragraph from an essay with multiple titles were given, and the examinees had to identify the title most suitable to the paragraph. Apart from this, a brief paragraph with a missing sentence was provided in the main question and the examinees were asked to choose the correct option containing the sentence that could fit in the paragraph

**Register:** Questions were framed with multiple options providing different expressions used in a specific type of content. For example, the main question asked the examinees to identify the expression most suitable to a specific part of a formal email.

**Tone of Communication:** As the examinees were expected to be familiar with different functions of an essay like persuasive, expository, reflective, etc.a question was framed with the beginning paragraph of an essay provided. The examinees were expected to identify the tone of communication in the essay.

**Observations**

- The areas of writing skills in English, which sounded challenging to be addressed by MCQs, were thus covered through discourse markers, organizational devices, etc.except for the creative ability to generate ideas. Perhaps writing skills cannot be tested by MCQs alone.

- Informal discussions and the existing research support the researcher's opinion that a blend of MCQ and direct response essay tests can serve the purpose of assessing the micro as well as macro skills involved in the process of writing.

- More still needs to be explored in the practical implementation of MCQ testing of writing skills.

- There is a need to develop more assessment strategies to develop MCQs for testing writing skills. Researchers must focus on using

advanced, technology-based tools and developing advanced software.

- It undoubtedly requires several years to develop a new assessment method. The success of the method depends on how effectively it can bring an observable change in the students' and teachers' behaviours.

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**Shubhada K. Deshpande** *teaches Communication Skills in English and Business Communication at Vikas College of Arts, Science & Commerce, Mumbai. Her PhD is on Communication and Interactional Skills.*

*shubh.deshpande73@gmail.com*