

## Options in Multiple Choice Questions: Oh Really- Yours Sincerely, Adult Learners!

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the behaviour of options in a multiple choice (MCQs)/discourse completion (DCQs) question type used for teaching/learning/testing in an anthropogenic classroom. It presents a critical discussion of three items used in an undergraduate classroom. It reports the resultant emphasis that frames the anthropogenicity in this context, testifying that insufficient/loose verbal cues pinpointing the correct answer must be carefully structured to arrive at the 'right' answer. If this emphasis is ignored, it demotes it to 'teaching learners' contexts.

**Keywords:** Anthropogenic, pedagogy, MCQ, DCQ, options.

Large-scale tests of language proficiency test speaking through reading in the Multiple Choice question format (MCQs). It has also found its way into a formative assessment in large classes to teach appropriateness in "anthropogenic" (Deepa, 2022; Trott, 1991) proficiency courses.

MCQs are generally understood as having only one correct answer, with the other options functioning as distractors. The process of distractor elimination by the student/test taker is not easy.

The distractors could be close to each other or, based on background knowledge, other options seem viable, particularly in anthropogenic contexts where the verbal cues function differently or are inadequate. This is primarily because adult students (undergraduates in the context of this article) have their knowledge capital and world knowledge along with their cultural inputs. This article looks at how DCQs options behave with adult learners in language classrooms.

MTech first semester students (N=28) were given a set of 'mini tasks' as a part of their mandatory English language proficiency course. The tasks were a modified MCQ version of the discourse completion questionnaire (DCQ) adapted for Indian contexts (Sridhar, 1991). Students had to work in groups to arrive at their answers and explain why they chose the option as the answer. It was group work, not an individual one, which is a vital anthropogenic move that led to this study. If it was individual work or a mere test without discussing the answers rationale, the insights gleaned from this study would have been lost. The students were divided into six groups and assigned three items, so that two groups got one item. The instructions for the DCQs and the 'task prompts' are reproduced below.

### DCQ and the Prompts

*Given below are some dialogues with blanks in them. Choose the most suitable option to complete the dialogue.*

1. Murthy: Mishra's son, Gopichand, is 17, and he's already playing for India!

Krishna: \_\_\_\_\_

Murthy: He has this habit of blowing his own trumpet, doesn't he?

- A. I'm sure he must have bribed someone.
  - B. I bet we'll never hear the end of this.
  - C. He must be walking with his head up in the clouds.
  - D. I bet he won't last even one season.
2. Meera: How can I ever finish this on time? There is so much more work to be done.

Prema: \_\_\_\_\_

Meera: That would be wonderful. Thank you so much!

- A. Why don't you relax for a while?
  - B. Why don't you order dinner to be delivered?
  - C. Why don't I take leave of you?
  - D. Why don't I stay a little longer?
3. Bala: Did you watch the Men's final on Sunday?

Raj: \_\_\_\_\_

Bala: What! I don't believe it. It's the eighth wonder of the world.

- A. Couldn't. There was no power at home.
- B. Didn't. I've stopped watching TV.
- C. Didn't. We had unexpected guests.
- D. Couldn't. The children were watching something else.

The first item was meant to be interpreted as a sarcastic comment about a third person. The materials producer / paper setter intended the second as an indirect request for help as assumed by the verbal cues provided to reconstruct the context. The third was an informal stereotypical man-talk steeped in sports. The article discusses in detail the responses to the first question. The responses to the remaining two are summarized.

### Discussion

During the discussion, all the options for all three items were perceived as plausible answers in class. The discussions were vibrant and productive, with arguments on the interpreting of the verbal cues and their plausibility. From the teacher's perspective, the discussion exposed the insufficiency of these cues to arrive at the 'right answer'. These students went to the extent of modifying the item to arrive at one clear answer as envisaged by the teacher. They provided an alternative so that the choice was more evident, augmenting the openness of the task. According to the students, the openness gave them the 'space' to discuss the rationale for the option they chose as the answer. The discussion has significant implications for item writers; the verbal cues should be very tightly wound to lead to the 'right' answer beyond all reasonable doubts.

In the first task, it was assumed that the student would link 'we'll never hear the end of this' with 'blow your own trumpet' and choose option B. In the second task, it was assumed that option D would be the right answer because a response like 'wonderful' and 'thank you' would be prompted only by an offer to help when the friend was worried about extra work and maybe an implied deadline. The third item had option B as the expected answer with the contextual cue indicating the assumption that men are generally addicted to watching games on television and someone not watching it meant something odd or wrong, with the in-built sarcasm.

One group of students expressed that option A (I'm sure he must have bribed someone) was the correct answer for the first item. Their reasoning went thus: Krishna, Murthy and Mishra could be almost the same age and from the same village. Therefore, they would know the capabilities of Gopichand as a sportsperson. So, unless a bribe was offered, he could not have made it to the team. The reasoning also implied that Krishna and Moorthy could have been jealous of Mishra and his son because their children could not play for India.

Option C (He must be walking with his head up in the clouds) was picked as the correct answer by another group. The interpretation ran thus: In the Indian context, generally, fathers are happy with their children's achievements. Krishna and Murthy were aware of this. Constantly listening to Mishra talking about his son's achievement would have made Krishna and Murthy feel that Mishra would be walking with his head up in the clouds.

Option D (I bet he won't last even one season) was picked on grounds similar to option A. Here, the abilities of Gopichand, however, were the primary focus in the speech acts of Krishna and Murthy. They were sure of his failure to endure the pressures of playing for the national team.

Students argued that options A, C and D were plausible because the verbal cues indicating the context were insufficient to eliminate the other options. The teacher and students collaboratively tried to resolve the problem. Their efforts resulted in two suggestions:

- (a) provide tighter contextual verbal cues to exclude all the options but one as the correct answer,
- (b) keep the options but add an open-ended blank that would require the students/test-takers to explain their choice by creating their context as they understood it.

These adult students preferred the latter suggestion as it gave them more freedom to negotiate and discuss their choice in interpreting the context.

Similar discussions happened with all the other items in every group. In item two, option A (Why don't you relax for a while?) was chosen based on the assumption that Meera needed a power nap and Prema, a close friend, knew about this possibility. Option B (Why don't you order dinner to be delivered?) was plausible in the context where Meera was a family person in charge of feeding people at home, and 'work' could

include kitchen and housework. So, the ordering of food was justified. Option C (Why don't I take leave of you?) was acceptable if Meera was an introvert and could work only in quiet, undisturbed conditions; knowing this, Prema as a friend, chose to facilitate this.

In item three, students felt that option A (Couldn't. There was no power at home) was acceptable if Bala used solar power and generally never ran out of power; he was also a sports enthusiast. Understandably, such a person would find it problematic to believe that there was a power failure at his friend Raj's home, particularly during the match. Option C (Didn't. We had unexpected guests) could be that Bala entertains many guests and treats them with respect, as in Indian culture. He opted to spend 'quality time' with the unexpected guests. Option D (Couldn't. The children were watching something else) meant that Bala, being a person who loves children, sacrificed his game in favour of the children and did not have the heart to shoo them away selfishly.

The absence of clear verbal cues led to various possible interpretations and the perception that all options are plausible. The purpose of the task was to teach speaking indirectly through reading. The discussions made it evident that in anthrogonic classrooms, teaching speaking does not follow a narrow systematic pedagogy where the teacher is always right, and there is a clear 'right' and 'wrong' response with no shades of grey in between. The scoring key, used in teaching and testing contexts, provides the teleological answers in absolute terms of correct and wrong answers. Instead, negotiation and extemporaneous speech acts are the focus of speaking in adult classrooms. If not created, the opportunities for discussion and negotiation, will convert teaching/testing contexts into 'pedagogy' (Knowles, 1968, 1984). A teleological approach (assumes that the end always justifies the means) to pedagogy operates pervasively in language classrooms.

In contrast, a deontological approach (assumes that an end does not justify the means) seems more applicable in adult teaching/learning contexts. Even criminal acts such as manslaughter/murder are not absolute but are subject to scrutiny by lawyers in courts. The verdict is based on different kinds of admissible evidence available, provided, and proved to pin the crime. Ironically, anthrogonic language classrooms have ignored this approach. They have reduced individuals to being an objects 'subjected' to panopticon surveillance. There is no scope

for negotiation or validation of their rationale for choosing an option marked 'wrong' in the key. In the examples provided in this article, one cannot ignore the fact that all options are syntactically accurate and contextually relevant (even if categorized as distractors). The choice of the option rests on the construction of 'contextual verbal cues', and a lot is left to the students' interpretation.

## Conclusion

In adult classrooms, students are treated as children with limited or no schemata, knowledge capital of the world. In their everyday lives, adults live their life through negotiation, discussion, adjustment, compromise, and consensus; these realities cannot be divorced from the classroom or exam hall. Hence, there are no clear-cut answers in anthropogenic education but involve interpretation and consensus. We either acknowledge and accept the age-old tenet of testing, that 'the only thing objective about an objective type of item is its scoring' or tighten our contexts as item writers, or encourage discussion, negotiation and even dissent in anthropogenic classrooms.

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