

## **Teachers' Reactions to Short Answer and Open-Ended Test Formats**

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### **Abstract**

The main purpose of this study is to examine teachers' reactions toward short answer and open-ended test formats. The research is based on the reactions of a sample of 25 English language instructors at Yarmouk University. The participants responded to a questionnaire with 14 bipolar attributes. Moreover, in order to enhance the validity of the findings, the researcher conducted recorded interviews with the teachers to elicit their comments on some of the responses given in the questionnaire. The results of the study indicate that Jordanian instructors of English prefer open-ended tests over short answer tests.

## 1. Introduction

Language testing is an important and indispensable element of the educational process. It is of utmost importance for language teachers and language learners alike, because if a test is well-designed and properly administered it can effectively enhance the educational process. Furthermore, the results of the students' performance on these tests may have serious effects on academic careers, classroom relationships, motivation, and learning habits.

The two most commonly used types of the subjective format of language testing are the open-ended test mode and the short answer test mode. The items presented in an open-ended test format and the short answer test format have certain advantages over the items of the objective test format because they reduce measurement error by eliminating random guessing and eliminate unintended corrective feedback.

The reactions, perceptions, and dispositions of foreign language learners toward various test modes have extensively been investigated by so many scholars who emphasized the importance of these attitudes in planning and developing English language tests. However, research in foreign language teaching has recently started to focus on the issue of teachers' attitudes toward language testing. Some scholars have called for the study of teachers' attitudes toward various test modes. They have stressed the importance of teachers' reactions toward varying language testing techniques in preparing, constructing and administering tests. Moreover, the exam which incorporates students' as well as teachers' perceptions and reactions is more likely to reveal a superior face validity and reliability of its items.

## **2. Significance of the Study**

Testing techniques form an essential part of the educational process that affects almost all test-takers and test-makers. Besides, the results of these tests may have certain effects on students' academic performance, classroom interaction, learning habits as well as motivation. It is also evident that language teachers who spend a lot of their time preparing, conducting, and marking tests as well as interpreting results for their students may influence students' attitudes to various testing procedures. Similarly, Bradshaw (1990:14) argues that, "in addition, the reactions of teachers, whose lives are almost equally affected by testing procedures, but whose attitudes and opinions have been reported even less than those of test-takers, were elicited." Therefore, it seems very significant to investigate teachers' attitudes toward various test formats.

This research project is significant because it will fill in a gap in the attitudinal literature by offering a description of the attitudes and perceptions of a group of Jordanian language teachers toward open-ended and short answer test formats.

## **3. Previous Studies**

Research in the area of learners' attitudes toward various test modes has made a great progress during the past decade, and an examination of the related literature shows that numerous studies have been conducted to investigate these attitudes and perceptions (Zeidner 1987, Zeidner and Bensoussan 1988, Nevo 1985, Nevo and Stetz 1985, Scott and Madsen 1983, Bradshaw 1988, 1990).

However, despite this progress, very little has been done on the attitudes and perception of language teachers. Aside from the three studies conducted by Bradshaw (1990) and El-Badarin (1993, 1999), not much is at present available about the attitudes of English language teachers toward various modes of language testing. Bradshaw (1990: 27) states that "very little is known about either the attitudes of different types of teachers to testing techniques, or the effects on classroom relationships and motivation of differences in attitudes". In her study, "Test-Takers' Reactions to a Placement Test," Bradshaw examined the attitudes of students and teachers toward a multiple-choice test, a cloze

test, and a short answer test. She employed a questionnaire to elicit students' attitudes regarding certain features of each type of test. Bradshaw (1990, pp. 16, 17) also used a similar questionnaire for language teachers. She stated that

Teachers answered a questionnaire with similar questions on timing, clarity of instructions, difficulty, fairness, pleasantness, and interest. In addition they were asked how often they had used each type of test before, and how well they thought each of the tests would show the students' general level of English.

The results of the study indicated that language teachers perceived the multiple-choice and the reading tests as more valid than the cloze test. Moreover, she found that teachers' perceptions of the relative difficulty of the three types of test coincided with that of the students.

Furthermore, El-Badarin (1993) assessed the attitudes of English language teachers toward essay and multiple-choice exams. He reported that Jordanian teachers of English as a foreign language preferred essay exams to multiple-choice exams and rated them more favourably with regard to most of the test's attributes.

Another relevant study was conducted by El-Badarin (1999) who investigated the attitudes of test-takers toward short answer and open-ended test formats. He stated that foreign language learners of English perceived short answer exams more positively than open-ended exams. The results of El-Badarin's (1999) study can be of some significance to the present research because we can compare students' reactions to teachers' reactions with regard to the two test modes investigated.

It is quite evident from the scarce literature available that more research is still needed in this area. Bradshaw (1990:27) states that "the attitudes of teachers were also investigated in the present study, although the small number involved did not enable any firm conclusions to be drawn. This, however, also seems to be a fruitful area for research".

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the present research is to examine the attitudes and opinions of English language teachers toward open-ended and short answer test modes with regard to their difficulty, interest, fairness, pleasantness, anxiety, value, threat, range of material covered, trickiness, reflection of mastery of English, preference, and usage. In addition, the perceptions of these Jordanian teachers will also be compared to the perception of students.

#### **5. Procedure**

The study was administered by the researcher who explained the purpose of the study and the directions for responding to the questionnaire before distributing it to the instructors. The researcher also explained to the participants that short answer exams are different from objective exams such as multiple-choice, yes/no, true/false, blank filling and matching. Short answer exams are those that force students to change statements to questions, active to passive, positive to negative, etc. The teachers answered the questionnaire by marking the attribute which best described that test. All 25 questionnaires were completed by the teachers.

The overall numbers of responses to each bipolar attribute for both test formats were calculated and percentages were obtained. If the teachers gave more positive attributes to a test mode, then that was viewed as a positive response toward that exam. However, if the teachers gave more negative attributes to a test mode, then that was regarded as a negative attitude to that mode.

Moreover, in order to enhance the validity of the findings of this attitudinal questionnaire, another research instrument was used. The researcher conducted separate interviews with the 25 instructors in order to elicit their oral comments on some of the responses given in the questionnaire, namely those involving difficulty, range of material covered, mastery of English, comprehensibility, preference of type of test, and frequency of using either type of test (items 1, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14 see Appendix A). These items are thought to be the ones very often observed by teachers when preparing their tests.

## **5.1. Instruments**

The data for this research were elicited by means of an attitudinal questionnaire (see Appendix A) and recorded interviews. The attitudinal questionnaire was adapted from El-Badarin (1993) to suit the nature and objectives of the present study. The first part of the questionnaire elicited background information concerning the teacher's degree, position held, educational unit, and teaching experience. The second part collected data about the instructors' attitudes and perceptions toward the short answer test format, whereas the third part elicited data about the teachers' reactions and dispositions toward the open-ended test format. The second as well as the third part of the questionnaire included 14 pairs of attributes each of which describes both open-ended and short answer test formats.

Another research instrument was also employed in the study. The researcher conducted recorded interviews with the instructors in order to elicit their comments on some of the responses given in the questionnaire. These comments were used to enhance the validity of the teachers' responses to certain items in the questionnaire.

## **5.2. Sample**

The participants of this research were 25 English language and literature instructors at the Language Center and the English Department at Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan. The sample comprised 15 M.A. holders and 10 Ph.D. holders. All the instructors are native speakers of Arabic, and all of them have more than fifteen years of teaching experience.

## **6. Results**

The teachers' reactions to the 14 bipolar attributes describing the open-ended and short answer test modes are summarized in Table 1 below. An examination of the figures in the table shows that Jordanian teachers of English as a foreign language consider open-ended exams more difficult, a little fairer, more threatening, more anxiety evoking, more valuable, more comprehensible and less tricky than short answer exams.

**Table 1**  
**Teachers' Responses to Bipolar Attributes**

<b>Bipolar Attribute</b>	<b>Short Answer Test % Test %</b>	<b>Open- Ended Test %</b>
1- difficult	56	92
e easy	44	8
2- interesting	84	68
boring	16	32
3- fair	68	76
unfair	32	24
4- pleasant	72	44
unpleasant	28	56
5- non-threatening	88	20
threatening	12	80
6- not anxiety evoking	72	20
anxiety evoking	28	80
7- valuable	92	100
valueless	8	00
8- examines wider range of material	92	24
doesn't examine wider range	8	76
9- allows for success	84	76
doesn't allow for success	16	24
10- tricky	12	00
less tricky	88	100
11- reflects mastery of English	80	100
doesn't reflect mastery of English	20	00
12- comprehensible	84	88
incomprehensible	16	12
13- prefer this type of test	56	80
don't prefer this type	44	20
14- often use this test	60	40
not often use this test	40	60

The figures in Table 1 above indicate that both test modes were perceived as difficult. However, the overwhelming majority of the

teachers (92%) felt that open-ended tests were difficult, while 56% of the teachers felt that short answer tests were difficult. Moreover, although both test modes were considered interesting, the short answer test mode was perceived as more interesting than the open-ended test mode.

Furthermore, both test modes were viewed as fair. But the open-ended test was viewed as a little fairer than the short answer test. Moreover, the majority of the teachers (72%) believed that short answer exams were both pleasant and not anxiety evoking. Likewise, the majority of the sample (80%) acknowledged that open-ended tests were threatening.

The Jordanian teachers also perceived short answer and open-ended test modes as valuable (92% and 100% respectively). Moreover, 92% of the teachers felt that short answer exams examine a wider range of material, whereas 24% felt that open-ended exams cover a wider range of material. As for success expectancy, 84% of the subjects believed that students may have a chance of succeeding on short answer tests, while 76% believed that students may succeed on open-ended tests. Therefore, both test modes were perceived as having a high success expectancy.

The results of the study, moreover, show that both test modes were perceived as being less tricky. Similarly, short answer and open-ended tests were viewed as reflecting students' mastery of English (80% and 100% respectively). The results also revealed that both test modes were almost equally viewed as comprehensible.

The teachers were divided with regard to test preference. A great majority (80%) preferred open-ended tests, whereas only 56% preferred short answer tests. Finally, when asked how often they had used each type of test before, 60% mentioned that they had used short answer tests, and 40% mentioned that they had used open-ended tests.

## **7. Discussion**

From the figures in Table 1 above, it is evident that our Jordanian teachers view both test modes as difficult, interesting, fair, valuable, less tricky, allowing for success, reflective of students' mastery of English, and comprehensible.

It is also evident that our teachers of English as a foreign language perceived open-ended test formats as more difficult unpleasant,

threatening, anxiety evoking, not examining wider range of material, and preferable. On the other hand, when we examine these attributes more thoroughly, we find that our teachers perceived open-ended formats more positively than short answer formats. The subjects viewed open-ended exams as fairer, more valuable, less tricky, more reflective of students' mastery of English, more comprehensible, and less frequently used than short answer exams. However the subjects viewed short answer exams as less difficult, more interesting, and more allowing for success than open-ended exams. Therefore, our subjects rated open-ended exams more positively and favourably than short answer exams.

The findings of this research clearly indicate that our subjects view open-ended exams as a lot more difficult than short answer exams. In their oral interviews, the teachers explained that open-ended tests require a real selection of the type and range of material relevant to the answer. Moreover, the teachers argued that these tests call for a proper organization and a coherent presentation of the material included in the answer in the form of successive, well-developed paragraphs. The teachers also commented that many open-ended exams require some sort of argumentation and justification of the examinee's point of view. All these factors, according to the subjects, make open-ended exams more difficult than short answer exams.

Furthermore, the teachers' responses also suggest that short answer tests examine a wider range of material. The teachers' oral comments indicated that since answers are rather short, one can use a lot more items in a short answer test that would ultimately cover a wide range of material and address as many of the aspects of the material as possible. The instructors also claimed that, unlike short answer tests that involve answering some specific points or structures, essay exams usually address one issue that has to be discussed or analyzed thoroughly.

All the teachers pointed out that open-ended exams are reflective of students' mastery of English as a foreign language, whereas most of the teachers (20) believed that short answer exams are reflective indicators of students' knowledge of the language. This is another dimension on which Jordanian instructors rate open-ended exams more favorably than short answer exams. In their characterization of open-ended tests as more reflective of students command of English, the teachers commented that

students are not asked to use certain structures or patterns, but rather they are left to express themselves freely. The informants also stated that essay type tests necessitate the active use of the writing skill where all aspects of the language (syntax, semantics, morphology, diction) in addition to correct spelling and punctuation are employed. The teachers, therefore, believe that open-ended tests are more reflective of students' knowledge of English than short answer tests.

The majority of the informants also preferred open-ended tests over short answer tests. When asked to elaborate on their preference of essay exams, the teachers commented that they prefer open-ended exams because they think these exams are more valuable, fairer, less tricky, and more reflective of students' knowledge of English. This preference, therefore, can be explained in terms of the positive attitudes they have toward open-ended tests. Because they think favorably of essay exams, it is only natural that they prefer such exams.

In response to the item which measures how often they use each type of test, the informants indicated that they use short answer exams more often than essay exams. It is noted that the M.A. instructors are the ones who use short answer exams. These instructors mainly teach grammar, vocabulary, some writing, reading as well as listening comprehension; consequently, it is natural that short answer questions are very common in L<sub>2</sub> classrooms. However, it has been found that professors who teach academic courses such as linguistics and literature courses very often use open-ended essay exams. This is due to the nature of the subject matter of these academic courses where the instructors' main concern lies on the students' ability to argue and present their views coherently and persuasively in the form of an essay.

Furthermore, the results of this study indicate that Jordanian teachers of English as a foreign language rated open-ended exams more positively than short answer exams and viewed open-ended exams as a little fairer, more valuable, more comprehensible, less tricky, more reflective of students' mastery of English, and more preferable. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning here that Jordanian students view short answer exams as easier, more interesting, fairer, non-threatening, more pleasant, less anxiety evoking, less causing worry, allowing for success and more preferable (El-Badarin 1999). Although Jordanian students' reactions

differ from Jordanian teachers' reactions with respect to these attributes, both teachers and students agree that open-ended exams are more difficult, threatening, anxiety evoking, and unpleasant.

The researcher believes that language instructors, when preparing their tests, should take into consideration the subject matter of the course and its nature. Moreover, they should expose their students to different types of tests. In language oriented courses, where great emphasis is usually placed on short answer questions, teachers should expose their students to open-ended or essay questions, so that when they take more advanced and academic as well as theoretical courses, students would have already had an experience with such open-ended exams.

## **8. Conclusion and Implications**

In this study, a description of the reactions, perceptions, and attitudinal dispositions of 25 Jordanian instructors of English as a foreign language has been offered. The general findings of the study clearly indicate that Jordanian instructors preferred open-ended test formats to short answer test formats. The instructors rated open-ended tests more favourably and positively than short answer tests. As already noted, the instructors perceived open-ended tests as somewhat fairer, more valuable, less tricky, more reflective of students' mastery of English, and more comprehensible. On the other hand, they viewed short answer tests as less difficult, more interesting, and more allowing for success.

One of the interesting results of this research is that the perceptions and attitudes of our teachers are different from the perceptions and attitudes of Jordanian students of English who, unlike language teachers, viewed short answer exams more positively and favorably with respect to most of the attributes assessed. The other interesting finding of the present study is that FL instructors prefer short answer tests and use them more frequently than linguistics or literature professors who, on the other hand, prefer open-ended essay exams and use them more than short answer exams. So the nature and subject matter of the course determine, to a great extent, the type of test format employed to measure students' performance.

This research project has shed some light on the perceptions and reactions of language teachers toward two test modes, namely short

answer test and open-ended test. The findings of this study may help us improve the design of our testing procedures. However, the present research has not covered all aspects of these tests. More research is still needed, especially with larger samples and in other educational situations to enhance our understanding of the nature of these testing modes in particular and language testing in general.

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### Appendix A

#### An Attitudinal Questionnaire



Below is a list of pairs of attributes that may be used to describe tests. Please rate the open-ended test by checking ( ✓ ) the attribute which best describes this test.

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. ----- difficult                            | ----- easy                         |
| 2. ----- interesting                          | ----- boring                       |
| 3. ----- fair                                 | ----- unfair                       |
| 4. ----- pleasant                             | ----- unpleasant                   |
| 5. ----- non-threatening                      | ----- threatening                  |
| 6. ----- not anxiety evoking                  | ----- anxiety evoking              |
| 7. ----- valuable                             | ----- valueless                    |
| 8.----- examines wider range of material----- | doesn't examine wider range        |
| 9. ----- allows for success                   | ----- doesn't allow for success    |
| 10. ----- tricky                              | ----- less tricky                  |
| 11.-----reflects mastery of English -----     | doesn't reflect mastery of English |
| 12. ----- comprehensible                      | ----- incomprehensible             |
| 13. ----- prefer this type of test            | -----don't prefer this type        |
| 14. ----- often use this test                 | -----not often use this test       |

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Receiver 21/1/2001.