

## Students' Attitudes Toward Essay Versus Multiple-Choice English Language Exams

Dr. Mohammed EL-BADARIN\*

### □ ABSTRACT □

*The Purpose of this study is to examine students' attitudes toward essay versus multiple-choice English language exams. The analysis of the data is based on a sample of 150 English major students in the Department of English at Yarmouk University, Jordan. The subjects of this research answered a questionnaire of three parts. The findings of this study indicate that Jordanian students strongly prefer essay exams over multiple-choice exams. Essay exams are perceived as more pleasant, valuable, comprehensible, reflective of students' mastery of English, less tricky, less threatening, and fairer than multiple-choice exams.*

---

\* English Department, Faculty of Arts, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan.

## مواقف الطلاب تجاه الامتحانات الموضوعية والمقالية في اللغة الانكليزية

الدكتور محمد البدارين\*

### □ ملخص □

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة مواقف الطلاب نحو الامتحانات الموضوعية، والمقالية في اللغة الإنكليزية. لقد تكونت عينة الدراسة من 150 طالباً متخصصين في اللغة الإنكليزية من جامعة اليرموك، الأردن. لقد أجاب المشاركون في الدراسة على استبانة من ثلاثة أجزاء. وتشير النتائج إلى أن الطلبة الأردنيين يفضلون أسئلة المقالة على الأسئلة الموضوعية. وقد اعتبر الطلبة أسئلة المقالة أكثر متعة وقيمة واستيعاباً وبيانياً لمقدرتهم في اللغة الإنكليزية، وأقل خداعاً وتهديداً، وأكثر عدلاً من الأسئلة الموضوعية.

---

\* قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - كلية الآداب - جامعة اليرموك - إربد - الأردن.

## **Introduction:**

Investigating students' attitudes toward language testing procedures is an important factor that may influence achievement and performance on a test (Scott 1986, Phillips 1992, Zeidner and Bensoussan 1988, Bradshaw 1990). Since late 1980s, some researchers have started to focus on students' reaction and attitudes toward various test modes. However, research in this area is still very little. Zeidner (1987: 352-3), for example, states that "very little is presently known about students attitudes, dispositions, and preferences with respect to varying tests (e.g., achievement, personality, etc.) in general or test formats (e.g., essay vs multiple-choice) in particular." Zeidner (1987: 358) also argues that "examinee feedback appears to be one of the most valuable yet neglected sources of information about the subjective qualities of a classroom test or its components." Moreover, Bradshaw (1990: 13) admits that "in spite of moves in other areas of second language research ... very little is at present known about the attitudes and concerns of test-takers." Therefore, it is of utmost importance to both testing authorities and teachers to gain further insights into the attitudes of students toward varying test formats.

There are only three studies that deal with students' attitudes toward essay versus multiple-choice exams. These are direct relevance to our present study. First, Bradshaw (1990) conducted a study on the attitudes of a group of Italian and Spanish students toward a placement test consisting of a multiple-choice grammar test, a short answer reading test, and a close test. The analysis of the data revealed that the close test was rated more negatively than the reading test and the multiple-choice test, and the reading test was more negatively rated than the multiple-choice test. Moreover, she found that the attitudes of low scoring students were more negative than the attitudes of high scoring students.

Second, Zeidner (1987) investigated the attitudes of 174 high school students and 101 seventh and eighth grade students toward essay versus multiple-choice exams. He found that students rated multiple-choice exams

more favorably than essays exams with regard to most of the dimensions investigated.

Finally, Bridgeman (1992) compared the reactions of examinees toward quantitative questions of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) in open-ended format and multiple-choice format in terms of their difficulty, discrimination and correlational structure. He found that most students preferred multiple-choice tests over free response tests.

The main purpose of the present study is to investigate Jordanian students' perceptions, reactions, and attitudinal disposition toward essay and multiple-choice test formats. This study is significant. It will fill in a gap in the attitudinal literature by presenting a description and analysis of the attitudes and perceptions of Jordanian university students who come from a different educational and cultural background toward essay and multiple-choice exams of English as a second language. Further, it will compare the attitudes of these students with the attitudes of other students in previous studies.

### **Sample**

The present research was conducted on a sample of 150 English major students in the Department of English at Yarmouk University, Jordan. The sample comprised ninety female students and sixty male students who are native speakers of Arabic. As for the subjects' academic level, sixty-one were second year students, fifty-nine third year students, and thirty fourth year students. These students were aged between eighteen and twenty-three. They had taken an average of four multiple-choice exams. All of them were enrolled in English language and literature courses at the time the study was conducted.

### **Instrument**

The data for this study were elicited by means of an attitudinal questionnaire which was adapted from Zeidner (1987) and Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988). The questionnaire was composed of three parts. The first

part was designed to collect background information concerning the subjects' age, sex, major, academic level, and number of multiple-choice tests taken. The second part was constructed to gather data about the participants' perceptions and attitudes toward essays tests, whereas the third part was intended to elicit data about students' attitudes and reactions toward multiple-choice tests. Parts two and three consisted of thirteen bipolar attributes each of which described both essay and multiple-choice test modes. In these two parts, students were presented with the following thirteen attributes where they had to rate each exam by checking the attributes that best describes that exam as follows: difficult/easy, interesting/boring, fair/unfair, pleasant/unpleasant, valuable/valueless, non-threatening/threatening, not anxiety evoking/anxiety evoking, no cause to worry/cause to worry, comprehensible/incomprehensible, tricky/less tricky, enough time to complete test/not enough time to complete test, reflective of students' mastery of English/not reflective students' mastery of English, prefer this type of exam/do not prefer this type of exam.

### **Procedure**

The study was administered by the researcher who explained the purpose of the study and the directions for answering the questionnaire before it was distributed to the subjects. The participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and only be used for the purpose of this study. The overall numbers of responses to each bipolar attribute for both test modes were tallied and percentages were obtained. The classification of positive or negative attitude toward an exam was based on the number of positive or negative attribute given to each exam. If participants gave more positive attributes to a test, then that was considered as a positive attitude toward that test. However, if they gave more negative attributes to a test, then that was perceived as an indication of a negative attitude toward that test.

## **Results**

The subjects' reactions, perceptions, and attitudinal dispositions toward the two test formats are summarized in Table 1 below. The analysis and comparison of students' reactions to parts two and three of the questionnaire clearly demonstrated that the participants favored essay exams to multiple-choice exams. The essay test was perceived as being easier, fairer, interesting, pleasant, less threatening, less anxiety evoking, more valuable, and more reflective of students' mastery of English. However, the multiple-choice test was viewed as being difficult, more interesting, more pleasant, unfair, threatening, more anxiety evoking, less valuable, and not reflective of students' mastery of English as a second language.

Responding to the first item in the questionnaire which measures test difficulty, 69.3% of the subjects perceived multiple-choice tests as difficult, whereas 54% considered essay test difficult. Furthermore, reacting to the attribute

**Table 1**  
**Students' Response to Bipolar Attributes**

	Bipolar Attribute	MC	Exam	Essay	Exam
		No	%	No	%
1	difficult	104	69.3	81	54
	easy	46	30.6	69	46
2	interesting	105	70	89	59.3
	boring	45	30	61	40.7
3	fair	60	40	105	70
	unfair	90	60	41	27.3
4	pleasant	96	64	76	50.7
	unpleasant	54	36	72	48
5	valuable	80	53.3	125	83.3
	valueless	70	46.7	24	16
6	non-threatening	46	30.7	72	48
	threatening	104	69.3	78	52
7	not anxiety evoking	53	35.3	74	49.3
	anxiety evoking	96	64	76	50.7
8	no cause to worry	46	30.7	58	38.7
	cause to worry	103	68.7	91	60.7
9	comprehensible	54	36	118	78.7
	incomprehensible	96	64	32	21.3
10	tricky	125	83.3	28	18.7
	less tricky	23	15.3	120	80
11	enough time	106	70.7	114	76
	not enough time	44	29.3	36	24
12	reflects mastery of English	43	28.7	121	80.7
	does not reflect mastery of English	107	71	29	19
13	prefer this type of exam	38	25.3	122	81.3
	do not prefer this type of exam	112	74.7	28	18.7

"easy", 30% of the sample viewed multiple-choice tests easy, while 46% perceived essay tests as easy. It is evident, thus, that the subjects in this study viewed multiple-choice exams as being more difficult than essay exams.

Reacting to the second item of the questionnaire, 70% of the sample indicated that multiple-choice exams are interesting, whereas 59.3% of the sample stated that essay exam are interesting. Moreover, 30% of the participants believed that multiple-choice exams were boring while 40.7% believed that essay exams were boring. Therefore, it is obvious that our subjects consider both test modes interesting although they feel that multiple-choice exams are more interesting than essay exams.

Answering the third item of the questionnaire which measures test fairness, 40% of the subjects claimed that multiple-choice tests were fair, while 70% of the subjects claimed that essay tests were fair. Similarly, 60% of the students believed that multiple-choice tests were unfair, whereas 27.3% believed that essay tests were unfair. Thus, the majority of the subjects viewed multiple choice tests as being unfair and essay tests as being fair.

Replying to the fourth item of the questionnaire measuring test pleasantness, 64% of the participants thought that multiple-choice exams were pleasant, but 50.7% thought that essay exams were pleasant. Furthermore, 36% of the students rated multiple-choice exams as unpleasant, and 48% rated essay tests as unpleasant. The subjects in this study, therefore, tend to perceive both test modes as pleasant experiences.

In response to the fifth item of the questionnaire measuring test value, 53.3% of the participants reported that multiple-choice tests were valuable, in contrast to 83.3% of the participants who reported that essay tests were valuable. Likewise, 40.7% of the sample felt that multiple-choice tests were valueless, whereas 16% felt that essay tests were valueless. So, the majority of the sample perceived both test modes as being valuable.

In reaction to the sixth item of the questionnaire which measures test threat, 69.3% of the students regarded multiple-choice exams as threatening, while 52% regarded essay tests threatening. Similarly, 30.7% of the students stated that multiple-choice exams were non-threatening, and 48% stated that essay exams were non-threatening. Therefore, the majority of the students rated both test modes as threatening.



In answer to the seventh item of the questionnaire measuring test anxiety, 64% of the participants perceived multiple-choice exams as anxiety evoking, whereas 50.7% perceived essay exams as anxiety evoking. Further, 35.3% of the sample believed that taking multiple-choice exam is not anxiety evoking, in contrast to 49.3% who believed that taking an essay exam is not anxiety evoking. These responses clearly indicate that our subjects tend to view both test modes as anxiety evoking.

In reply to the eighth item of the questionnaire which measures test worry, the majority of the respondents felt that both test formats cause students to worry. The students' reactions to this item indicated that 68.7% of the sample acknowledged that multiple-choice tests cause them to worry, whereas 60.7% reported that essay tests may cause them to worry. On the other hand, 30.7% of the respondents stated that multiple-choice tests do not cause them to worry. These responses clearly indicate that both test modes are perceived as causing students to worry.

Reactions to item nine of the questionnaire which measures test comprehensibility suggested that 36% of the participants regarded multiple-choice exams as being comprehensible, in contrast to 78.7% who believed that essay tests were comprehensible. Likewise, 64% of the subjects admitted that multiple-choice exams were comprehensible, while 21.3% acknowledged that essay exams were incomprehensible. These reactions suggest that our subjects rate essay exams more favorably than multiple-choice exams with respect to test comprehensibility.

When asked about test trickiness, 83.3% of the respondents admitted that multiple-choice tests were tricky, in contrast to 18.7% who thought that essay tests were tricky. Similarly, 15.3% of the sample claimed that multiple-choice tests were less tricky, whereas 80% felt that essay tests were less tricky. These responses clearly illustrate that our subjects rated essay test formats more favorably than multiple-choice test formats with regard to test trickiness.

With regard to the subjects' reactions to the issue of time, the majority of the sample asserted that they were given enough time to complete both tests. To this effect, 70.7% of the subjects stated that they were given enough time to complete multiple-choice tests, and 76% thought that they were given enough time to complete essay test. Further, 29.3% of the students asserted that they were not given enough time to complete multiple-choice exams, and 24% believed that they were not given

enough time to complete essay tests. These reactions strongly suggest that our students positively rate both test modes with regard to their time.

The subjects' responses to the issue of test reflection of students mastery of English as a second language indicated that 28.7% of the sample believed that multiple-choice exams reflect their mastery of English, in contrast to 80.7% who believed that essay exams reflect their mastery of English. Moreover, 71% of the subjects felt that multiple-choice exams were not reflective of their mastery of English, in contrast to 19% who admitted that essay exams were not reflective of their mastery of English. Thus, our subjects rate essay exams more favorably than multiple-choice exams with respect to test reflection of students' mastery of English.

Finally, with respect to the issue of overall preference, the vast majority of the students in the sample, 81.3%, claimed that they preferred essay exams, in contrast to 25.3% who believed that they preferred multiple-choice exams. Similarly, 74.7% of the respondents indicated that they did not prefer multiple-choice exams, while 18.7% felt that they did not prefer essay exams. These responses strongly illustrate that essay tests are perceived much more favorably than multiple-choice tests.

### **Discussion:**

The results presented above strongly illustrate that our Jordanian university students of English as a second language have very positive attitudes towards essay tests, but they have negative attitudes towards multiple-choice tests. These results indicate that most of the characteristics attributed to multiple-choice tests are negative, whereas most of the characteristics attributed to essay tests are positive. Therefore, our Jordanian students rate essay tests far more favorably than multiple-choice tests. They perceive essay tests as difficult, threatening, anxiety evoking, causing to worry, interesting, fair, pleasant, valuable, comprehensible, less tricky, given enough time, reflective of students' mastery of English as a second language, and a preferable test mode. In contrast, they view multiple-choice tests as interesting, pleasant, valuable, given enough time, difficult, unfair, threatening, anxiety evoking, causing worry, incomprehensible, tricky, not reflective of students' mastery of English, and not a preferable test format.

The findings of this study are not in line with previous studies administered in different educational and cultural settings (Zeidner 1987, Bradshaw 1990, Bridgeman

1992). Unlike the subjects of Zeidner, Bradshaw, and Bridgeman who rated multiple-choice exams more favorably than essay exams, our Jordanian subjects evaluated essay tests more favorably than multiple-choice tests. They have positive attitudes toward essay tests, whereas they have negative attitudes toward multiple-choice exams. In their reactions to the questionnaire, Jordanian students gave nine positive attributes to essay exams, namely interesting, fair pleasant, valuable, comprehensible, less tricky, given enough time to complete, reflective of students' mastery of English, and preferable test mode, while they gave four negative attributes to essay tests, i.e., difficult, threatening, anxiety evoking and causing worry. On the other hand, when responding to the questionnaire, they assigned nine negative attributes to multiple-choice exams, namely difficult, unfair, threatening, anxiety evoking, causing worry, incomprehensible, tricky, not reflective of students' mastery of English, and not preferable test mode, while they assigned four positive attributes to multiple-choice exams, namely, interesting, pleasant, valuable, and given enough time to complete.

The view of the difficulty of multiple-choice exams can be attributed to the fact that students are not well exposed to this type of exams, and they do not know how to handle it. The difficulty of essay exams may be explained in terms of the students' inability to organize their answers and present only the relevant material. However, although students perceived both test formats as difficult, they viewed the multiple-choice exams as more difficult than the essay test format. The Jordanian students' perception of the difficulty of multiple-choice exams more than essay exams is different from the perception of Zeidner's (1987) and Bradshaw's (1990) subjects who view multiple-choice exams as being significantly easier than essay exams.

Our Jordanian subjects also perceived both test modes as interesting. However, they regarded multiple-choice exams more interesting (70%) than essay exams (59.3%). Our subjects' view of multiple-choice exams as being interesting is identical to the view of Zeidner's (1987) subjects who similarly viewed multiple-choice exams as more interesting than essay exams. It is obvious then that our subjects and those of Zeidner, who come from two different educational and cultural backgrounds, have the same attitude toward multiple-choice exams with respect to the attribute "interesting".

Furthermore, the respondents believed that both test modes are valuable although they claimed that essay tests are more valuable than multiple-choice exams (see Table 1). This perception of the value of both tests can be attributed to the fact that students view exams as valuable because exams encourage them to prepare well and work hard so as to obtain high grades.

Moreover, the subjects of this study characterized essay test as fair (70%), pleasant (50.7%), less tricky (80%), whereas they characterized multiple-choice exams as unfair, unpleasant, and tricky. This view contradicts the view held by Zeinder's (1987) subjects who felt that multiple-choice exams were fairer and less tricky, and the view held by Bridgeman's (1992) subjects who were almost equally divided on the fairness issue. Moreover, our subjects' view also contradicts the view held by the subjects of Bradshaw (1990) who believed that multiple-choice exams are fair and pleasant.

The subjects also characterized both test formats as threatening and anxiety evoking. However, they considered multiple-choice exams as more threatening and anxiety evoking than essay exams (See Table 1). Our Jordanian students' perception of the threat and anxiety related to multiple-choice tests contradicts the view held by Zeidner's (1987) subjects who reported that taking an essay test is more anxiety evoking than taking a multiple-choice test. This is another issue on which our subjects' attitudes differ from those of the subjects of Zeidner. It should be noted that our subjects are not used to taking multiple-choice exams, and their unfamiliarity with it might have negatively influenced their attitudes. Test anxiety may also be the product of test and time constraint (Scott 1986).

Similarly, our students viewed both test formats as causing them to worry. Yet, they claimed that multiple-choice exams cause them to worry more than essay exams do (68.7% and 60.7% respectively). This characterization can be explained in light of the fact that these are tests, and students always feel that way when taking them regardless of their mode. Moreover, this is another issue on which our subjects rate multiple-choice exams more negatively than essay exams.

However, our subjects were divided on the issue of test comprehensibility. The majority of the students thought that multiple-choice exams are incomprehensible, whereas a vast majority believed that essay exams are comprehensible. It seems that our subjects' inexperience and unfamiliarity with multiple-choice exams together with the test structure and content which the students consider as tricky-all these factors may negatively influence the subjects' attitude toward multiple-choice exams.

The majority of the students felt that both tests are given enough time to complete; i.e., they believed that the amount of time available for each test was appropriate. However, the subjects of Bradshaw (1990) claimed that the multiple-choice exam was given more time than other kinds of exams.

Further, the vast majority of students indicated that essay exams are reflective of students mastery of English as a second language, whereas a great majority of the subjects admitted that multiple-choice exams do not reflect their mastery of English. This is another dimension on which our subjects rate multiple-choice tests more negatively than essay tests. This perception is similar to the perception of the subjects of Zeidner (1987: 355) who felt that "grades on essay exams are more reflective indicators of the students' knowledge of the exam material compared to grades on multiple-choice type exams." This negative characterization is consistent with their perception of multiple-choice tests as difficult, unfair, threatening, tricky, and incomprehensible. They may also believe that, unlike essay tests that require presenting a lot of material, multiple-choice tests require sorting out the material and checking the correct response which sometimes can be a matter of guessing and good luck.

Finally, the overwhelming majority of the participants reported that they prefer essay exams more than they prefer multiple-choice exams. This degree of preference for essay over multiple-choice exams can be explained in terms of the negative attitudes they have toward multiple-choice exams. Because they have such negative attitudes toward this type of exam, it is only natural that they do not prefer such an exam.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we have investigated the reactions, perceptions, and attitudes of Jordanian students toward essay and multiple-choice exams. The analysis of the data has revealed that our students of English as a second language strongly prefer essay exams over multiple-choice exams. They have a more positive attitudinal disposition toward essay tests in contrast to multiple-choice tests with regard to the majority of dimensions assessed. On nine of the questionnaire's inventory items, essay tests are rated more favorably than multiple-choice tests. The general finding of this study is inconsistent with those of Zeidner (1987), Bradshaw (1990), and Bridgeman (1992) whose subjects strongly prefer multiple-choice exams and rate them more positively than essay exams. It is obvious, therefore, that students from varying educational and cultural backgrounds may have different attitudinal dispositions and perceptions toward a given test format.

## REFERENCES      المراجع

- Bradshaw, Jenny (1990). "Test-Takers' Reactions to Placement Test." *Language Testing*. 7: 13-30.
- Bridgeman, Brent (1992). "A Comparison of Quantitative Questions in Open-Ended and Multiple-Choice Formats. *Journal of Educational Measurement*. 29, 3: 253-271.
- Phillips, Elaine M. (1992). "The Effect of Language Anxiety on Students' Oral Test Performance and Attitudes. " *The Modern Language Journal* 76, 1: 14-26.
- Scott, M. L. (1986). "Student Affective Reactions to Oral Language Tests." *Language Testing* 3, 99-118.
- Zeidner, M. (1987). "Essay Versus Multiple-Choice Type Classroom Exams: The Student's Perspective. " *Journal of Educational Research* 8,6: 352-58.
- Zeidner , M. And M. Bensoussan (1988). "College Students' Attitudes Towards Written versus Oral Tests of English as a Foreign Language. " *Language Testing* 5, 1: 100-14.