

Multiple Minimal Choices: Ideology and Multiple Choice English Language Testing in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Thailand's educational system is plagued by rote learning, deference to authority, and habits of uncritical thinking. One of the culprits is the emphasis on regurgitating "facts" through multiple choice language testing. This paper addresses the ideological responses and habits that multiple choice language tests demand and reinforce. Through an examination of practice questions for vocabulary tests at a major Thai university a number of contentions about multiple choice vocabulary testing are developed. Students need to imagine the examiner's ideal context for the statement that is tested and they need to anticipate the examiner's value system and ideology. These tests breed conformism and punish curiosity about the language. The time and energy that students spend in studying for them retards and deforms more important aspects of linguistic performance and also their intellectual growth in general.

Answers? A mechanism for avoiding questions (Saul, 1995, p.25).

Introduction

"Teach these girls and boys nothing but facts," was the motto of the utilitarian ideologist Mr. Gradgrind, the teacher anti-hero of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. Mr. Gradgrind's students are empty vessels "to be filled ... full of facts" so that they can neatly slot into the bleak industrial system of Victorian Britain (1854, p.1.) Tropical Thailand, 150 years later, seems a long way from Dickens' grim Coketown. But "facts" cast an oppressive shadow here too. When Grammy, a major

entertainment organization with well-established links to the Thai government, launched a takeover bid for the Matichon newspaper group, people were worried that these papers would be stripped of their editorial freedom. No problem, said Paiboon Damronongchatham, Grammy's boss: "Do not worry about media freedom. You can write both negative and positive news, so long as it is based on the facts" (Cited in "Matichon vows to fight", p. 1: 1.) But, as Charles Darwin said, for a fact or an observation to be of any use it must be at the service of some theory. Whose facts and which facts out of the overwhelming mass of facts available to us should the news be based on is the vital question.

Thailand's education system is overloaded with so-called facts and undersupplied with doubt. In a debate about a controversial textbook dealing with the political uprising and violent repression of October 14, 1973, the director-general of the Education Ministry's Department of Curriculum and Instruction Development, Praphatpong Senarith, made the astonishing statement that "A book for students must present only definite truth – there should not be anything debatable in it". One wonders how Thai students are supposed to develop the critical faculties that most educationalists seem to agree are missing when the material they are presented with is supposedly immune from criticism. But Praphatpong presents a remarkably blunt ideological basis for the selection and, presumably the evaluation, of what will eventually no doubt be established as the solid and unchallengeable facts: "Many people [who read the book] could not agree on certain points such as its remarks about the Constitution. The purpose of school textbooks is to create [social] unity. If instead they cause divisions, our purpose is not met ... The book needs some more corrections" (Cited in Tangwisutijit, 2002.) It seems that a fact which is judged to have the potential to cause social disunity will be dropped from the historical record and become a non-fact and matters of interpretation, i.e. remarks about the Constitution, will need to somehow be transmuted into indisputable facts before they are admitted. Praphatpong's remarks could have been scripted by Orwell in one of his bleaker moments.

Multiple Minimal Choices

Because of its convenience, its ability to test large numbers of students cheaply and quickly and because of its pretensions to objectivity, multiple-choice English language testing in Thailand is widespread and popular. For instance at Mahidol University, the quite prestigious Thai university where I teach, Masters level students can be judged as qualified to

undertake the task of writing a thesis in English solely by virtue of having passed a multiple choice English language test written by myself and my colleagues at The Language Center in the Faculty of Graduate Studies. (Incidentally, I see these tests as having the same sort of problems as the one I will analyze in this paper; it is a requirement of the job that I write them, not a labor of love.) Multiple choice English language tests in Thailand reinforce and inculcate the ideology of facticity that Paiboon and Prahapatpong express and they deny the counter ideology in which facts are less certain and conditional on context, values and point of view. Multiple choice questions presume that there is a single correct answer to every question. This presumption is enacted in the tests and because students, naturally enough, want to pass their exams they imbibe this presumption and learn to think of language as a mere constellation of facts. There is one correct answer and one only for every question. Multiple choice testing does severe harm not only to their linguistic abilities but also to their capacity for critical analysis. Any attempts to get students out of the habits of rote learning are diminished. In a multiple choice exam students literally cannot “think outside the box”.¹

In this paper, I examine a number of multiple choice English language exam questions designed to test vocabulary knowledge and I try to show that in these questions there is no single correct answer. The questions are drawn from a popular examination crib for a Ramkaemhaeng University English course. Ramkaemhaeng is the largest university in Thailand in terms of student numbers. The booklet, compiled and edited under the pseudonym of Tutor Kung is *EN 102: Basic English Course Examination Questions*. All exam questions are from this booklet. The sample questions are printed in italics in the text with the question and page numbers. The booklet is essentially a rehash of previous years’ examination questions that students learn by rote in the hope that the ones they have learnt will be recycled for their exam. Having taught English in Thai universities for five years, I believe that these questions are quite representative of the type of question that students are asked in English language tests.

To suggest the ideological bent of the questions, I have divided the questions into five ideological categories: morality and character, politics and economics, behaviour, “Thainess”, and language. All, however, are subsumed under the category of ideologies of thought. There are numerous similar examples that had to be left out because of lack of space. What they test is not linguistic competence but instead the examinee’s adherence to the examiner’s moral, behavioral, political, economic and

social expectations and norms. For the most part this is not because the questions are particularly badly written (although some are). Essentially, it is the form that is at fault, not the particular instance, because the multiple-choice form compels students to step into an ideological trap. Some of the examples below may seem trivial but the habits of thought that they engender are pernicious.

Morality and Character

92. *The thieves _____ more food and drink for themselves and the hostages.*

1) *required* 2) *concerned* 3) *emphasized* 4) *demanded* (p. 61)

Thieves are often demanding people. But they and their hostages may really have been hungry and thirsty, in need of food and drink, requiring it, without actually demanding it at all. On the other hand, in their negotiations they might have emphasized this request above other demands such as those for a million dollars in unmarked notes and a plane to Brazil. However, the ideological response that is asked for is that thieves are always and only the bad guys, always demanding and never politely requiring. It reflects a wider ideological position – that there are good guys who are good and only good and bad guys who are just bad. This makes it easier to shoot the bad guys. See my comments later on Thailand's "war on drugs".

167. *Sombat does not understand what the teacher says; he _____*

1) *raises his hand to ask the teacher* 2) *goes out of the classroom*
3) *explains the lesson* 4) *pays more attention to the*
classes (p. 65)

What type of character is Sombat? Is he shy, rebellious, precocious, confident, lazy or diligent? What type of character is the teacher? Is he stern, impatient, kind, understanding, competent or incompetent? To predict Sombat's behaviour in these circumstances we need to know the answers to these questions. A good boy is supposed to raise his hand politely to ask the teacher but a bad boy might just decide it's a waste of time and walk out. (Incidentally, there is a grammatical ambiguity here too: does "he" refer to Sombat or to the teacher? Multiple choice grammar tests are riddled with ambiguities caused by their contextual void.)

170. Since he has inherited a large sum of money from his father, _____

- 1) he is handsome 2) nobody likes him
3) he is very rich 3) everybody praises him (p. 65)

Wealth is an aphrodisiac. It can make an ugly man very attractive. A gold-digging woman might find that a man's handsomeness increases with wealth. He becomes handsome and people, hoping to get what they can out of his new-found wealth, might flatter him shamelessly while in their hearts despising him for the arrogance which his new-found wealth has engendered. Shakespeare put the idea into better words:

Gold! yellow, glittering, precious gold! No, gods, I am no idle votarist. Roots, you clear heavens! Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair, wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant.

(Timon of Athens, Act IV, Sc. iii)

Unfortunately an appreciation and understanding of Shakespeare or a mere coincidental sharing of ideas with him won't count when it comes to collating the scores. There is much, much less in the philosophy of these tests than Shakespeare ever dreamed of. Money makes you rich and that's it.

Politics and Economics

13. The _____ proved that he was guilty.

- 1) truth 2) evidence 3) capture 4) occasion (p. 58)

Thailand's legal system has some interesting features. Routinely, alleged criminals are brought out in front of media throng and made to "re-enact" their crimes. Any presumption of innocence is totally undermined by these pieces of police produced theatre. Suspects are shown holding the gun or knife over the dead body, pointing to the stash of marijuana or amphetamines that they are said to have smuggled and, in one, thankfully, widely criticized case, a re-enactment of an attempted rape, the actual victim was shown being threatened by the alleged rapist. The "capture" proves guilt.

In the 2002 "war on drugs" the government ordered that blacklists of drug traffickers be drawn up. Only the "bad guys" were put on the

blacklist, the government assured us. Some 2500 people died in the “war on drugs”. Many were found with a few token amphetamine pills placed strategically on their bodies. That, I suppose, was the “evidence”. The government has claimed that these killings were the result of internal gang wars but scant evidence has been advanced to support these claims and there seems to have been no attempt to investigate these murders. Nevertheless, the war on drugs has been acclaimed as one of the government’s successes and, in general, most people seem to accept that these “extra-judicial killings” were a price worth paying for that success. The occasion of the “war on drugs” was sufficient proof of their guilt. And of course sometimes evidence does prove guilt and sometimes this evidence is an indication of the truth.

40. To _____ the poverty one has to work harder.

1) export 2) import 3) accelerate 4) overtake (p. 59)

Poor people and poor countries are poor because they are lazy. This is the ideological assumption behind this question. But history shows that in many colonial and neocolonial countries which were encouraged to get into cash crops, such as cocoa in western Africa, coffee in Africa and South America, and rubber in South-East Asia, harder work led to greater production of the cash crop and the dismantling of subsistence economies, and consequently to lower prices for the cash crop, higher prices for food and hence to greater poverty. Hard work can import and accelerate poverty.

Wealth also exports poverty. For every rich person there must be poor people. Wealth and poverty are largely comparative terms. If one country develops the technological and financial resources to rid itself of poverty, it then exports the noxious, backbreaking, poorly paid industries to other countries. Wealthy countries outsource industries such as ship breaking and recycling of hazardous wastes such as those from batteries to countries such as India where an army of desperate and ill-equipped laborers work extremely hard in horrible conditions to make a pittance. Poverty has been exported. And, necessarily, imported.

46. My father was poor, so his sons and daughters _____ nothing.

1) rescued 2) accomplished 3) inherited 4) showed (p. 59)

Men of good fortune
Often cause empires to fall
While men of poor beginnings
Often can't do anything at all (Reed, 1973)

As the Lou Reed song puts it, the children of the poor have less chance of accomplishment than those of the rich. Or think of “rescuing” belongings in a flood. The poor man’s shanty with its meagre belongings is more easily washed away than the rich man’s solid two-storey house with all the goods upstairs. This is a situation that seems to have happened in the floods caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. A Reuters report says that “the victims of the hurricane were overwhelmingly African Americans, too poor to flee the region as the hurricane loomed, unlike some of their white neighbors.” (“Superpower’s struggle leaves world shocked”, 2005, p. 6A). Perhaps we should think too about the tsunami that hit Southern Thailand in December of 2004. Many reports have indicated that local “influential people” – a Thai euphemism for politically connected gangsters – are grabbing land from the poor with the connivance of officialdom. Before the tsunami the villagers felt themselves to be in secure possession of the land but they have rescued nothing from it. (See Sakboon, 2005; Tangwisutijit & Warunpitikul, 2005). In one case, reported by Sanitsuda Ekachai (2005), a woman was prevented by armed goons from entering the area where her daughter had been washed away. She was only able to find the body ten days later. The poor often inherit nothing, rescue nothing, accomplish nothing and have nothing to show in the end.

28. *The new electricity rate will affect all _____.*

1) buyers 2) sellers 3) producers 4) consumers (p. 58)

Producers sell, consumers buy, and a change in the price of electricity would have ramifications for all of them.

159. *Nowadays, _____ demand products that are safe for the environment*

1) consumers 2) processors 3) producers 4) merchants (p. 65)

At different points of the production and distribution cycle, processors, producers and merchants are all consumers. In any case, they may have similar interests as consumers in wanting to ensure environmental safety. Certainly, many businesses claim that they want their products and services to be environmentally safe. Like the previous question, the ideology that this question insinuates is that each person can be neatly slotted into one of these classes – and that they must stay there and adopt the appropriate attitudes. Must consumers be the only ones who are allowed concerns over the environment?

120. *Working hard leads to _____ for all people*

1) *damage* 2) *understanding* 3) *conclusion* 4) *success* (p. 79)

We are always told that hard work is the key to success – and success means money, wealth, power and, paradoxically, leisure, the escape from hard work. But looking around me, I see that this is not true. The hardest workers in Thailand are labourers on – officially – 175 baht a day but often – unofficially, particularly for Burmese immigrants – much less. I have seen a worker who was painting the eaves of a building that was under construction. He was perched on flimsy one rail bamboo scaffolding, five storeys above the ground. The area he was painting was just out of the reach of his brush. He had to stretch so that the ball of his foot was the only part of his body that had contact with the scaffolding. The contact of his paintbrush with the building provided the counterbalance that stopped him from falling. One false move would definitely lead to damage and, it could be said, a conclusion. Working hard can also lead to understanding. Many philosophers, notably Karl Marx but also several Catholic popes, have said that work is the defining characteristic of humans and that through authentic, unalienated work humans realize themselves and understand themselves. All answers are eminently plausible.

Behavior

26. *She only writes _____ books not novels.*

1) *intelligent* 2) *smart* 3) *scholarly* 4) *scholastic* (p. 58)

“Scholarly” is given as the correct answer as it is the presumed opposite of novelistic, and multiple-choice exams force us to think in dichotomies. But this is a false dichotomy. What of a book such as the best-selling novel *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, Professor of Semiotics at Bologna, Europe’s oldest university? It and many other books show that the novel is a form that is sufficiently broad to encompass and explain scholarly work and to do so in a scholarly manner. Furthermore, one may share the opinion of the novel that prevailed until the Victorian age. The novel and the theatre were widely regarded as trashy, popular “unintelligent” forms, not “smart” and vastly inferior to poetry, for instance. This view is not uncommon today.

A writer may also write scholastic books. The Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia defines scholasticism as a “philosophical and theological movement that attempted to use natural human reason, in particular, the philosophy and science of Aristotle, to understand the supernatural content of Christian revelation”. It goes on to say that “The term scholasticism is also used in a wider sense to signify the spirit and methods characteristic of this period of thought or any similar spirit and attitude towards learning found in other periods of history.” If we accept this definition, then writers are capable of producing scholastic works today. All answers are correct.

155. _____ your hand if you don't understand.

1) raise 2) grip 3) hold 4) grasp (p. 64)

When an English teacher walks into a Thai class, the conventional response is for the class leader to issue this instruction to the class, “Please stand up!” Then the class says in one voice: “Good morning teacher, how are you?” I have a friend who was tired of receiving this greeting every day. He wanted to stretch their English beyond the parrot phrases he was used to. So he has taught his classes a new response. Now his class greets him with mock surprise and amazement saying, “Oh, my God, it's Ajarn Michael.” The conventional instruction is to raise your hand but there is no reason that a teacher might not instruct his students to stand on their heads, jump up and down, bark like dogs or run around the room like headless chickens. So gripping, holding and grasping the hand are eminently possible.

193. It is difficult for someone to _____ smoking.

1) continue 2) get rid of 3) give up 4) enjoy (p. 66)

I am a smoker. I have tried many times to give up. I am well aware of the health consequences and the social disapproval. I need to stop smoking. I should stop smoking. It is difficult to continue smoking when I know of the potential consequences. But it is equally difficult to give up smoking. I wish I could get rid of smoking but it is difficult. The health authorities are trying to get rid of smoking but they are finding it difficult. I used to enjoy smoking when I was a teenager. I felt cool, sophisticated, sexy. Now that the government has put pictures of diseased lungs, ugly women, autopsies, images of death and hospitalized victims on cigarette packets it is very, very difficult to enjoy smoking.

Thainess

76. *It is a Thai tradition to respect the _____*
1) *elderly* 2) *conventional* 3) *various* 4) *refined* (p. 61)

In English we can transform an adjective into a noun, for example “the good, the bad and the ugly”. Therefore, all of these forms are grammatically correct. They are also semantically possible. But one of the ideological doctrines that this test pushes in a number of questions is that Thai society is based on certain immutable values. A student who understands the examiner’s ideology will know that the one correct value pointed to here is respect for the elderly. But anyone’s opinion about what Thai society’s traditions are is just that, an opinion, not a fact. A critic of Thai society might see an old couple begging on the street as evidence against the proposition that Thais have a respect for the elderly. A critic might see the prevalence of uniforms, the spirit of deference to authority embodied in the Thai cultural cornerstone of *kreng jai*, and the constant edicts by the Ministry of Culture against spaghetti strap bras, new trends in youth culture and risqué *luk thung* songs as evidence of respect for the conventional.² On the other hand, more favorably disposed critics might think that Thailand is a normally tolerant culture which might lead them to say it has respect for the various. And the nature of certain aspects of Thai culture such as Thai dance and manners could lead one to say that there is a respect for the refined. All are plausible.

109. *Men and women have _____ right [sic] in this society.*
1) *permanent* 2) *similar* 3) *accurate* 4) *equal* (p. 79)

The question does not specify which society we are talking about so if we look at the question from a broad viewpoint all could be correct – unchanging rights, close to equal rights, clearly defined rights, and rights that are exactly the same. It would not be hard to think of a society that fits each of these patterns. However, let us assume that the imagined context of this question – which seems to be the case for many of the questions – is Thai society. Equal rights are enshrined in the constitution but many specific laws give the lie to this. For instance, the property rights of Thai men and women are quite different when they marry foreigners. And recently Cabinet Minister Wattana argued that as a Thai cultural value women are duty-bound to prostrate themselves to their husbands. He said nothing about men doing the same.

Language

1. *The _____ bus hit a motorcycle in front of Ramkhamhaeng University yesterday.*

- 1) *murderous* 2) *scenic* 3) *bereaved* 4) *crowded* (p. 57)

Anyone who has lived in Bangkok and been on or near an empty bus careening along the roads, screeching into bus-stops, never quite stopping and forcing passengers to leap on or off, disregarding lights and pedestrian crossings, will find the idea of a “murderous bus” absolutely plausible and apt. By prescribing “crowded” as the one correct answer, the examiners are teaching students that the rich rhetorical device of personification does not exist in English.

62. *Her _____ skin is the result of a drastic weight loss.*

- 1) *prehistoric* 2) *crushing* 3) *weathered* 4) *gnarled* (p. 60)

Ugliness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. There is no reason, apart from subjective preference, to prefer any of these alternatives. They are all equally possible descriptions of skin and of skin on the body of someone who has undergone a drastic weight loss.

97. *He’s a man of strong _____*

- 1) *exploration* 2) *belief* 3) *thought* 4) *convictions* (p. 62)

“Strong convictions” is the cliché but why are any of the others unacceptable. Perhaps because they are not clichés? Multiple-choice questions regard the cliché, the stock phrase, the received idea as instances of the ideal linguistic performance.

183 *A _____ was waiting for the train.*

- 1) *crown* 2) *cloud* 3) *clown* 4) *crowd* (p. 66)

Metonymy is a figurative device whereby the part signifies the whole. *The crown is the symbol of the nation* means much the same as *the king is the symbol of the nation*. If a king is waiting for a train, so, metonymically speaking, is a crown. But perhaps there is disaster looming. Terrorists (or freedom fighters – ideology dictates our choice of term here too) have primed a bomb to go off in the tunnel up ahead. The train leaves the station in fine weather but a cloud – a common image of impending trouble – is waiting for it.

The possession of over-sized shoes and a big red nose does not condemn a person to only travel with the circus caravan. Clowns have as much right as anyone to wait for trains.

Conclusion

In what sense then are the answers to these questions constrained by ideology. First of all what is ideology? In a narrow sense it is a specific set of beliefs. We can talk of the ideology of capitalism, of democracy, of communism. And, at times in these questions, the expected correct answers can be traced to particular ideologies. But in a broader sense ideology is the cognitive framework within which each person makes sense of the world, “the beliefs, values, and ways of thinking through which human beings perceive, and by recourse to which they explain what they take to be reality”(Abrams, 1993, p. 241.) Communication and language can only exist when there are elements of ideology that are shared. And of course, every examination demands that the examinee concede somewhat to the examiner’s ideology.

The problem with multiple choice language tests is that the concession must be total. While an examinee writing an essay answer to a question at least has the possibility of influencing and changing the way the examiner thinks about the world, of producing his or her own ideology for the examiner’s consideration, the multiple choice test leaves no such room. In most of the questions I have analysed here, it is not terribly difficult to work out what the “correct”, “appropriate” or “best” answer is supposed to be. But to do that we have to abandon any temptation to think our own thoughts, to use language flexibly and creatively, to think of an unusual context, to think an uncommonplace thought, and indeed (as I have sometimes done in this article), to stretch, strain and test language; instead we must implicitly subscribe to the contexts we assume the examiner has in mind and the values that he or she imagines as universals. Multiple choice exams are justified because they are “objective”, assessed by neutral quantitative methods and not by risky qualitative methods. This is not true; they are ideologically loaded. This paper itself can certainly be criticized as being excessively polemical, relying itself on ideology, parading personal biases rather than giving neutral numbers. But in the test questions I have analyzed here the

ideology is disguised, bathed in the aura of objectivity that the examination room confers. Examination systems that use multiple choice testing ask students to get into the habit of surrendering their intellectual independence, stifling their curiosity and switching off their linguistic imaginations each time they sit an exam. The effects cannot be good.

Notes

- ¹ See Tan (2003). Amy Tan, the Chinese-American author of the novels *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, writes of the frustration she felt with multiple choice English language tests and the way in which they thwarted her youthful creativity. For a more general critique of the pernicious effects of standardized mental and IQ tests such as the American SAT, see Peter Sacks (2000).
- ² This would presumably be the position for instance of art instructor Sutee Kunavichaayanont (Cited in Pholdhampalit, 2005, p. 12A) whose exhibit for the Venice Biennale features a print called *Stereotyped Thailand*, depicting row upon row of identical students. Sutee says, "The repetition represents identical thinking ... Our country has no variety in the thinking process. The education system doesn't allow us to think beyond certain accepted norms."

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