

and circular in shape.

D

The stylist will seize on “there is”—surely it is superfluous? “Remember that nothing in...” sounds more decisive and efficient as the opening of a sentence. But then comes the “which”—not at the candidate’s disposal here, and thus not to be thrown out. The “which” construction forbids the omission of the word group marked “A” after all. As to “the nature”—this is a trap for the French or German student, for in these languages *nature* often requires a definite article. But here “the nature” is *noli me tangere*. Option C, *as the Eiffel Tower*, could be omitted. But then we would have to carry out further changes in the sentence, like excising the “as” which precedes “high.” So the key must be D, “in shape.” This is an addition which, although it does not violate laws of grammar or of idiom, is simply “deadwood,” a tautology which needs to be cut if the sentence is to meet high standards of good English.

It will be immediately apparent that this is potentially a “discrete point” item, using the principle of the “sore finger” format (Bonheim and Kreifelts 1979, Bauer 1991). One might think it assignable to the general area of “idiom.” But further considerations of various kinds, not only of vocabulary or idiom, will play a role if the candidate is to come to the one and only correct answer. The sentence as it stands is grammatical, though not elegant. But that is not the point here. The item constitutes a test of editing skills, and needs to be solved at the level of what is nowadays called “text grammar.”

For over twenty years we have been using the omission format (we call them “omis,” a pun that plays on the diminutive which young German children use for their grandmothers, the “Omas”). They have been included in university entrance examinations and in national scholarship tests. The point-biserial discrimination indices are on average almost double those achieved in standard items involving English idiom. Apparently the right solution to an omi is often based on an application of sentence logic rather than on the application of discrete-point language skills. Thus the candidate who can do one omi correctly is likely to be good at doing the others as well.

The reason for this becomes evident if we look at the conclusions which the candidate must draw so as to find the right answer to the item cited above. The interrelations of a number of words and phrases have to be taken into consideration, partly on a grammatical, partly on an idiomatic or stylistic basis. An overriding sentence logic plays a role as well. A student who has all the skills needed to construct correct and acceptable sentences and texts will

This is a gap in facility indices, incidentally, that our reading comprehension items of the more conventional type do not reveal. An investigation of the reason for this phenomenon must be left to a later study. A likely hypothesis is that the more conventional sub-categories of reading comprehension are taught in schools as well as universities. University students, then, may have reached a learning plateau which does not apply to the omi, for that enters the ambit of a kind of editorial competence of which only the more advanced university students gradually become aware. One can attempt to be more precise about what kind of competence this is: it is an acknowledged fact that a beginner revises a paper by looking at local problems; the spelling of a word, the choice of one that is more appropriate or exact, the placement of a comma, the cutting of an overly long sentence into two. The expert edits with paragraphs and suprasegmental structures of argument in mind, considering rhetorical strategies which develop not simply from one sentence to the next but over a multi-paragraph section of the paper. How this is learnt, and whether it is in some direct way teachable, we do not yet know.

One advantage of the omission item in its one-or-two correct answer form is that many of our candidates hope to be teachers or translators or editors one day, and of course no text to be edited ever sends out signals to the effect that each sentence has only a single error or a single correct wording. The idea that there can be more than one error raises the face validity of an editing item without reducing the unusually high discrimination indices. These indices are in turn reflected in high reliability values.

One is tempted to analyse such items in greater detail to see what they actually test. It is a question that factor analysis has not yet made clear, although it shows that the omission item differs from the rest. A nationwide scholarship examination offers a suitable framework for such an analysis because a variety of other domains and item types are included in a test of 230 items and the following item parcels:

1. Vocabulary
2. Idiom
3. Style
4. Literary and Linguistic Terminology
5. British Civilization
6. Literary History
7. Reading Comprehension, including omission items
8. Grammar

A factor analysis of test results obtained by 279 candidates showed that the cluster of omission items was the only one with a high loading on one factor, whereas all the other parts were more or less dominated by the other factor 1. Subtests 1 and 2 are related to 3, all of the items being in some sense lexical ones, whereas 4, 5 and 6 all test knowledge rather than skills—so it is understandable that as a group they stand somewhat apart from the others in a computerised factor analysis. We must note, however, that factor analysis does not say what the factor is—that is a matter on which we can make an informed guess, based on an analysis of what the items seem to be testing. That it tests editing skills, then, is our thesis, but it cannot be said to have been proved conclusively.

The omission item, then, seems to allow us to test something that is a little different from other standard formats, though it can also be reduced to a set of mere grammar or idiom items. If this is so, proficiency in a cluster of such items seems to be related to vocabulary skills as well. What is probably special about the omi at its best is that it forces the candidate to look at the interrelations between sentence parts. Thus it involves a higher-order skill which more advanced students have to a marked degree, and which characterizes the kind of competence which has helped these students survive a set of hurdles over which some 75% of our students fail to leap. Unfortunately, a study of the prognostic value of the omission items, desirable though it might be, is not possible given the restrictions on time and budget imposed upon us at present.^a

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