

Do examiners' approaches to marking change between when they first begin marking and when they have marked many scripts?

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Abstract

Background

Until recently the cognition of A-level and GCSE examiners has received surprisingly little attention. With this in mind some previous research at Cambridge Assessment focused upon A-level and GCSE examiners' cognitive processes and interpreted them within current psychological theories. Five different cognitive strategies which examiners used to mark were reported. The relationship between strategy usage and the reliability of marking was explored. As this was an initial exploratory study the research focused on when examiners were familiar with the mark scheme, had marked a number of scripts and had experienced two co-ordination exercises. The research drew from psychological research about decision making in domains like chess playing. Such theories explain that initially chess players have to think about the patterns on the board and what move to make, but that after much practice they can recognise patterns more quickly and automatically make the appropriate moves. From these theories the Cambridge Assessment research predicted that examiners might begin marking a particular question using particular cognitive strategies but later when they are more familiar with the mark scheme and candidates' answers they might use different cognitive strategies. However, the research at Cambridge Assessment did not have the data to explore (1) any changes in strategies between when examiners first begin marking and when they have marked a number of scripts (2) how examiners become familiar with mark schemes. The second issue is discussed briefly by Weeden (2000).

This paper reports on a second phase of research and the aim is to address some of the remaining research questions.

Aims

- (1) To explore (a) how the examiners' approaches to marking change (if at all) from when they first begin marking to when they have marked many scripts and (b) how examiners become familiar with mark schemes.
- (2) To relate examiners' approach(es) to marking to the reliability of their marking, if this is possible.

Participants

Two Biology and two Mathematics examiners took part in telephone interviews. All examiners who marked one of a small number of IGCSE examinations in a recent session were administered a questionnaire, including the examiners who took part in the interviews.

Method

Telephone interviews were conducted (with Biology and Mathematics examiners) on three separate occasions at strategically chosen occasions during a marking session. The examiners were interviewed about how they (a) familiarised themselves with the mark scheme, (b) marked questions and, (c) whether their approaches to marking changed from when they started marking to when they had marked many scripts. A semi-structured schedule was used during the interviews. The interviews were transcribed and used to inform a questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to all the examiners.

Findings

The findings of the study suggested that:-

- (1) examiners used all strategies in all subjects;
- (2) there were not many considerable differences between strategy usage as the examiners marked more scripts. However, when there were considerable differences these were mostly in the direction predicted by previous research;
- (3) There seems to be no consistent pattern linking the level of inter-examiner reliability and the considerable changes in strategy usage between the co-ordination sample and batch 1. Previous research suggests that when 'matching' is the most frequently used strategy the inter-examiner reliability is likely to be high (Greatorex and Suto, 2005). This premise held for English as a Second Language but not for Mathematics.

The limitations of these findings and the study are discussed in detail.

Please note that part of this paper was version for Research Matters: A Cambridge Assessment Publication and is available in issue 4
http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/Our_Services/Research/Research_Matters .