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What goes through an examiner's mind? Using verbal protocols to gain insights into the GCSE marking process

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Background

The process of marking examinations is a complex one, requiring the examiner to engage in a variety of cognitive operations. These may range from matching and other simple and automatic judgement processes, through to much more sophisticated decision-making, involving memory, complex reasoning, and replicating candidates' own thought patterns.

While consideration has been given to marking practices used in the testing of English as a second language (for example, Milanovic *et al.*, 1996), those for some other examinations are less well explored. The cognitive strategies used by GCSE examiners, for example, have yet to receive as much attention.

Aims

The main aims of this empirical study were: (i) to investigate the strategies and thought processes used when marking GCSEs in two subjects; and (ii) to interpret them within the context of recent psychological theories of decision-making.

Method

Two GCSE examination papers were selected for use in the study on the basis of their contrasting contents and mark schemes. Mathematics used a 'points' scheme, whilst Business Studies relied on a 'levels' or 'banded' scheme. Small groups of experienced examiners were invited to mark samples of scripts, and using a 'think aloud' method, verbal protocols were obtained from them. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, the examiners were later questioned about their personal perspectives of the marking process.

Results

Qualitative analysis of the verbal protocols and interview responses yielded some interesting findings. Their theoretical and practical implications for best practice in GCSE marking are to be discussed.

References

Milanovic, M., Saville, N. and Shuhong, S. (1996) 'A study of decision-making behaviour of composition markers' in M. Milanovic & N. Saville (Eds.) *Studies in Language Testing* 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.