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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.