

## Unscrambling Jumbled Sentences: An Authentic Task for English Language Assessment?

Tension between creativity in language use and standardization in language assessment is manifested in the issue of authenticity in language assessment. A case in point is the use of jumbled sentences, also referred to as *jumbled lines*, *scrambled sentences*, or *shuffled sentences* or *sentence shuffling*, *sentence unscrambling*, *reordering jumbled words*, *text manipulation*, and *sentence builds*. Such assessment tasks have been criticized as inauthentic and dissimilar to real-world language use. Proponents of jumbled sentence tasks claim that use of jumbled sentences is valid in indirect language assessment on a psycholinguistic theoretical basis.

However, what these differing views may not recognize is that real-world communication in English as a lingua franca (ELF) is characterized by features not typically found in standard-English contexts. Language learners studying standard English varieties in regions where ELF communication occurs must learn to comprehend and respond appropriately to ELF communication.

This research identified jumbled sentences in ELF communication in Dubai/Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, and analyzed whether reordering jumbled sentences can be an authentic task for assessment reflecting real-world language use. Findings indicate that jumbled sentences did occur in a variety of contexts. Using naturalistic inquiry, 47 instances of real-world ELF communication in Dubai/Sharjah involving jumbled communications were observed between a taxi driver and a pedestrian, clerks and customers, security guards, janitors and teachers, presenters and their audience, store clerks, restaurant and salon personnel, and customers, and passers by. One such instance (“Want taxi Dubai you?” asked by a taxi driver) was used as the basis for developing scrambled sentence test items, which ranged from being inauthentic and non-interactive to being authentic and interactive. Also discussed is the issue of standards for evaluation of such test tasks in classroom assessment in schools in the UAE where English can be one subject in the curriculum, one of multiple languages of instruction, or the only language of instruction.

Keywords: jumbled sentences, authenticity, classroom language assessment, English in the United Arab Emirates

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