

Developing a Formative Grammar Test for Intensive English Program Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this test project was to develop a grammar test for the Program in Intensive English at Northern Arizona University. The test assessed level 2 students' grammar ability based on their syllabus. Since it is syllabus-based test, it aims to measure students' achievement in their given particular grammar areas that they have covered in class. Thus, the test is a formative assessment, trying to find out students' progress and the effectiveness of instruction. The scores of the test demonstrated the students' progress and whether they have achieved the objectives of the content of course for the grammar part of the syllabus. The test scores along with other assessment methods the students have to go through as part of the program policy affects the level the students need to study for the following semester.

Background

Grammar knowledge has played an important role in the history of second and foreign language teaching and learning. For centuries, grammar was used as basic element of language; it was used to signify the analysis of language system. At those times, grammar knowledge was considered not only the essential aspect of language learning and teaching, but also sufficient for learners to learn another language (Rutherford, 1988). The role of grammar remained central and unquestioned in language curriculum until the 20th century. Teachers sought alternatives for language teaching and they advocated not only learning grammatical rules but also applying these rules in communicative contexts (Purpura, 2004). In this approach, the assessment of grammar was based on the application of rules of language to some linguistic context.

Grammar assessment plays an important role in diagnosing the students' strengths and weaknesses, deciding what to and what not to teach, giving student feedback, and seeing students' progress.

The idea that grammatical knowledge structures can be differentiated according to whether they are implicit or explicit. This raises important questions for the testing of grammatical ability (Ellis, 2001).

This test intended to test students' explicit grammatical ability. As detailed in Chapelle, Jamieson, and Hergesheimer (2003), assessment can be used to carefully articulate learners' abilities and interests with those reflected in available materials, where learners are seeking access to well-defined and interrelated language learning materials. As such, this test was designed to reflect the students' basic ability in two main grammatical structures, the present progressive and past progressive. Thus, this test was designed as an achievement test for its use (Stoynoff & Chapelle, 2005).

The present progressive and past progressive are often challenging to L2 learners in terms of their use and spelling. One of the challenges that these progressive aspects pose is that some verbs such as love, seem, want cannot be used in the progressive aspect. Another challenge is that of spelling. When the inflectional ending of the progressive aspect is added to some verb, the last consonant is doubled and sometime the final vowel 'e' is replaced by 'I'.

Methods

The participants in this test were 13 level-two students enrolled in the Program in Intensive English. Participants are between the ages of 18 and 25 and consist of male and female students. Some of the participants speak Arabic as their L1; some speak Chinese, and others Portuguese. Some of the students have been in the US for a couple of months and others have been here for a year or more. Level 2 Grammar and Writing workshop is divided into two groups and taught by two different teachers.

Initially, this test tasks were designed to test syntax and morphology as the main abilities for this test (Al-Kaboody, 2013). However, this test has been modified (in consultation with Dr. Jamieson and the other test developer, Ms. Stevens) to test students' knowledge of two grammatical structures, the present progressive and past progressive. As detailed by the table of specification (see Appendix B), the test was designed to test both morphology and spelling of these two tenses. The test had 10 items to test the past progressive morphology and 10 for the present progressive morphology. For spelling, the test developers designed 4 items for the past progressive and four items for the present progressive. Thus, this test consists of 20 items. It is important to note that the last section of the test is divided into morphology and spelling; as a result each item in section three is worth 2 points. Overall, the test has 20 items and it is worth 28 points.

Results

The results of the test were analyzed using the SPSS program by computing the item difficulty (P) and item discrimination (D). Table 1 shows the P value and the D value for each item in the test. The test includes a total of 20 items which are worth 28 points. However, section three of the test, which contains 8 items, is divided into spelling and grammar and thus was worth 16 points, 1 point for correct spelling and 1 point for correct grammatical tense. For that reason, this test's table of specification, descriptive statistics, and item statistics were based on the total score (28) rather than the number of items. As shown in table 1 below, out of the 20 test items, only 5 items displayed some weaknesses as shown by their negative score. Four of these items belong to the items that tested students' knowledge of the past progressive. Only one item from the present progressive items did not work for this test. All other items worked very well for the test.

Table 2

Grammar Test Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Test	K	M	SD	Min	Max	r	p _o	SEM
Total	28	24	4.00	16	28	.84	.91	1.60
Past progressive	14	11.31	2.25	8	14	.68	.84	2.28
Present progressive	14	12.69	2.32	6	14	.84	.94	1.60

Note: N=13; K= # of points

Table two demonstrates the descriptive statistics for the test. As can be seen, the test exhibits a high standard deviation (SD) of 4.00; however, the standard deviation is relatively low for the subconstructs of the test (past progressive 2.25 for past progressive, and 2.32 for present progressive). The table also shows variation in students' scores, as well; some test takers scored

really high while others scored low. The test has high reliability of $r = .84$. According to Subkoviak(1988), teacher-made tests designed to fill a single class period typically achieve test score reliabilities between .60 and .80. This test achieved even higher reliability of .84 than what Subkoviak estimated. The overall Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) for this test was low (1.60).

Relevance to PIE

This test is relevant to PIE for several reasons. First of all, this test was designed to find out students' achievement as accurately as possible, using scientific test design statistics. Second, grammar is a common area of instruction at the PIE, particularly for level 2 students. Thus, developing this test can help PIE teachers understand the stages of test design and the considerations that they have to think about before giving their students a grammar test. Third, it is a reliable test to measure students' achievement and decide if the students have achieved the objectives of the content of course for the grammar part of the syllabus. Finally, the test can enable teachers to find out the effectiveness of their grammar instruction and if they need to improve any areas in their future classes.

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