

How to make the assessment of grammar skills more efficient?

Alexandra NOZADZE*

Abstract

Whether liked by students and teachers or not, assessment of grammar skills is a necessity due not only to admission exams, school administration, etc. demand to hold it, but also to the necessity simply to know where you are and how well you can communicate (some grammar errors can make an utterance either vague or totally incomprehensible). The contemporary approach to assessment of grammar skills demands that at least some, “crowning” tasks are authentic / communicative. Teacher and student views on advantages and disadvantages of various assessment tasks have been studied through interview, and results presented as tables. Tips for making the assessment of grammar skills more efficient are offered.

Key words: Grammar Skills, Assessment, Authentic, Semi-Authentic, Mechanical, Traditional, Communicative, Perceptive Skills, Productive Skills

1. Introduction

According to Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011, p. 69), researchers have debated for decades whether grammar should be taught in the classroom. Students often look on grammar teaching as a necessary evil at best. Many teachers are unwilling to teach grammar due to their own low skill level, students’ low motivation and other reasons (Borg, 2010). Teacher’s attitude towards grammar teaching and, correspondingly, assessment, depends very much on his/her own accuracy and fluency of grammatical skills, his or her self-confidence (Borg, 2001). The attitude to grammar testing, in such circumstances, is also not very positive. Baron (1982, p. 226) even writes that an English teacher is often perceived as “an unattractive grammar monger whose only pleasure in life is to point out the faults of others.”

On the other hand, grammar testing is a necessity, due not only to admission exams, school administration, etc. demand to hold it, but also to the necessity simply to know where you are and how well you can communicate (some grammar errors can make an utterance either vague or totally incomprehensible). See some examples of sentences which are ambiguous due to their structure:

- He gave her cat food. (Did he give cat food to a woman/girl? Or did he give food to her cat?)
- The man saw the boy with the binoculars. (Who was with the binoculars, the man or the boy?)
- They are hunting dogs. (These are hunting dogs? Or Some people are hunting the dogs?)
- I saw her duck. (I saw poultry that belongs to her or I saw that she ducked?)
- I told her books were funny. (Her books are funny? Generally books are funny?) (Have fun, 2012).
- I love my husband. – So does she. (Whose husband does she love?)

According to Larsen-Freeman (2009), in the traditional approach to assessing grammar, grammatical knowledge is defined in terms of accurate production and comprehension, and then assessed through the four skills. Testing is typically done by means of decontextualized, discrete-point items such as sentence unscrambling, fill-in-the-blanks, error correction, sentence completion, sentence combining, picture description,

elicited imitation, judging grammatical correctness, and modified cloze passages. Such formats test grammar knowledge, but they do not assess whether test takers can use grammar correctly in real-life speaking or writing. A significant contribution of the communicative or proficiency-based approach in the 1970s and 1980s was a shift from seeing language proficiency in terms of knowledge of structures, which could best be assessed using discrete-point items, to the ability to integrate and use the knowledge in performance, which could best be assessed through the production and comprehension of written texts and through face-to-face interaction under real-time processing conditions (McNamara & Roever, 2006, p. 43–44). In the latter, more integrative, approach to grammar assessment, grammatical performance is typically assessed by raters using scales that gauge grammatical accuracy, complexity, and the range of grammatical structures used. The judgments are subjective, and because the assessment formats are more open-ended, they are subject to possible inconsistencies. For this reason, certain factors, such as rater severity and prompt difficulty, must be examined, usually accomplished by means of generalizability theory or item-response theory (Purpura, 2004).

According to Rea-Dickins (2003), the five characteristics to measure communicative grammar are:

1. The test must provide more context than only a single sentence.
2. The test taker should understand what the communicative purpose of the task is.
3. He or she should also know who the intended audience is.
4. He or she must have to focus on meaning and not form to answer correctly.
5. Recognize is not sufficient. The test taker must be able “to produce grammatical responses.”

It is interesting that students, notwithstanding the dislike, expect being taught grammar and assessed explicitly (Borg, 1999). This attitude gives them a feeling of security. Meanwhile the majority of teachers thinking in a contemporary way, in congruence with contemporary theories, prefer to teach and assess grammar in an authentic way, implicitly.

* Assoc. Prof., Faculty of Education, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia; E-mail: Nozadze77@mail.ru

2. Research goal

My goal was to analyze the tasks used for assessment of grammar skills, to find out what language teachers and students think to be the advantages and disadvantages of these tasks and, based on their ideas, to work out recommendations for making the assessment of grammar skills more up-to date and effective.

3. Research method

The research held was qualitative. I tried to work out a model, which would reflect assessment task types as well as teacher and student attitudes.

I applied practical (course books) and theoretical literature analysis to prepare a list of tasks used for the assessment of grammar skills. In Rea-Dickins (2003), Porpura (2004), Purdue University (n.d.), Jameson and Chapelle. (2006), and many other resources types of tasks for grammar skills assessment are analyzed. In Nozadze (2013) I have discussed the task types and have classified them from several viewpoints:

- a) Mechanical/traditional vs. creative/contextual/authentic
 - b) Tasks for assessment of grammatical aspects of listening, speaking, reading, writing
 - c) Formative vs. summative assessment
 - d) Assessment by the teacher, peer and self-assessment
- Questions for an interview were prepared (see Appendix 1). The interviewees were volunteer EFL teachers (5) who are

recently teaching grammar or have the corresponding experience and freshman BA students (15) from International Black Sea University. Answers were audio recorded and then analyzed.

Based on literature review and teacher and student interviews I have tried to summarize the reasons for teachers and students liking or not liking certain types of grammar assessment tasks in tables 1 and 2 below. In appendices 2 and 3 you can see sample teacher and student interviews. Unfortunately, I understood that not all teachers are aware of existence and necessity of authentic tasks for assessment of grammar skills. Also students are not very happy concerning the objectivity of their grades and many of them find both grammar learning and assessment not very efficient.

4. Advantages and disadvantages of tasks for grammar skills assessment

Tasks 1-7 in the tables below are traditional, language-centered, tasks 8-10 may be viewed as semi-authentic, while task 11 is authentic. It means that

- a) in real life we never do or need gap filling or multiple choice,
- b) we regularly write letters, speak with each other (dialogue) or in front of public (monologue),
- c) only sometimes we interpret sentences, we do not fill in the

Table 1. The reasons for teachers and students liking grammar assessment tasks

	Task type	Teachers' view	Students' view
1	Gap filling (initial form given or a choice of forms offered)	Easy to make up and check, develops automatisms	easy to fulfill
2	Multiple choice test (choosing a morphological form, syntactic structure, or word order)	Easy to check, develops automatisms	
3	Transformation (person, number, tense, voice, mood, degrees of comparison, statement \leftrightarrow question)	easy to make up, develops both automatisms and cognitive skills	
4	Clause combining (accompanied or not accompanied by transformation)	easy to make up and check, develops speaking/writing strategies	easy to fulfill
5	Making up sentences from the given words (accompanied or not accompanied by grammatical transformation)	easy to make up and check, develops speaking/writing strategies	
6	Error identification	easy to check, useful for future language teachers	
7	Error correction	easy to check, useful for future language teachers	
8	Choosing or independent sentence interpretation, based on the grammatical form/structure (while listening or reading)	develops linguo-pragmatic competence, listening/reading comprehension strategies	
9	Text – based (and probably the situation is described) gap filling	easy to make up and check, is almost communicative	is communicative, sometimes even entertaining
10	Grammatical games (dominoes, etc.)	Motivating	motivating
11	Authentic (essay, letter, dialogue, monologue on a topic – grammatical comprehensibility assessed)	is communicative	is communicative

Table 2. The reasons for teachers and students not liking grammar assessment tasks

	Task type	Teachers' view	Students' view
1	Gap filling	mechanical, a chance to guess the correct answer by chance	dull, uncommunicative, often not enough context
2	Multiple choice test	more than 2 choices may be difficult to make up, mechanical, a high probability to guess the correct answer by chance	dull, uncommunicative, often not enough context, sometimes confusing
3	Transformation	mechanical, no comprehension may be involved	dull, uncommunicative
4	Clause combining	Mechanical	dull, uncommunicative
5	Making up sentences from the given words		dull, uncommunicative, often difficult (if the sentence is long)
6	Error identification	mechanical, a high probability to guess the correct answer by chance, may cause error fossilization	dull, uncommunicative, difficult, often confusing
7	Error correction	may cause error fossilization	too difficult, often the meaning of the sentence, due to the error, is obscure
8	Choosing or independent sentence interpretation, based on the grammatical form/structure (while listening or reading)	difficult to make up, the choosing is mechanical, there is a high probability to guess the correct answer by chance; independent interpretation is difficult to assess	difficult, demands high level of analytic skills
9	Text – based (and probably the situation is described) gap filling	it is difficult to find authentic texts containing many target forms	
10	Grammatical games	students may not concentrate attention on grammar	
11	Authentic (essay, letter, dialogue, monologue on a topic – grammatical comprehensibility assessed)	difficult to assess	may not concentrate on grammar and make errors not made under other conditions

As making up some tasks is not easy for the teachers, due to lack of self-confidence or just laziness and lack of creativity, they prefer to use professionally made tests. But they forget that there may be a discrepancy between the test and students' knowledge.

While teachers find some advantages with tasks 1-7 (drills), students do not like most of them. Though they perceive some of them as easy and are glad to gain grades, they find them dull. While error self- and mutual correction are really useful, somebody's error correction where you cannot elicit what the speaker/writer wanted to say is, if you ask me, not only useless (except for future teachers who will need to do it), but even harmful, as, if the student cannot find the error, error fossilization may occur. The semi-authentic tasks 9 and 10 is mostly supported, while task 11, though causing certain problems, is positively viewed due to its communicative nature.

5. Some tips for effective assessment of grammar skills

Thus, we can see that it is difficult to organize the assessment of grammar skills in such a way that both teachers and students are happy and that the testing results really reflect the ability of students to communicate in the target language effectively (from grammatical viewpoint) is rather difficult.

Still, I would like to give some tips:

- 1) To avoid the boredom, hold tasks 1-7 as a competition between pairs or small groups or as a game.
- 2) Make gap-filling and multiple choice text based as often as possible, choose interesting by contents texts for that.
- 3) To avoid guessing by chance influencing the grade too much, involve 4-5 options, where applicable.
- 4) Give effective examples demonstrating how a grammar mistake can turn an utterance into an ambiguous one
- 5) Teacher's book should contain a rich bank of assessment tasks made up by professionals which are relevant to the given book.
- 6) Use more text-based and situation-based assessment tasks.
- 7) Do not use only tasks dealing with writing, involve tasks dealing with speaking, listening and reading. Involve both productive (speaking, writing) and receptive/perceptive (listening, reading) tasks.
- 8) Ratio of drills to semi-authentic and authentic tasks should be in favor of the authentic tasks. Remember that assessment only on drill-type level does not prepare for real-life problem solving.
- 9) Not only grades and correctly done tasks should be emphasized, but also the development of the strategies of fulfilling the tasks that involve difficulties. Avoidance and meaning elicitation strategies should be discussed and practiced.
- 10) The grammatical aspect of self-editing strategies need to be practiced. Let successful students speak out how they do it.
- 11) When the activity is difficult, model it (fulfill it yourself, or ask a bright student fulfill it first).
- 12) Work out a good rubric for authentic tasks, let students participate in making it up. Provide discrimination in assessment between mistakes not causing ("local") and causing misunderstanding ("global").
- 13) While assessing, concentrate on student achievement instead of failures, teach students to turn their errors into useful

lessons, steps to future success, instead of negative memories.

6. Conclusion

Teaching and assessment of grammar skills is not just an unpleasant necessity, it can be turned into a useful and even enjoyable enough experience, if real life tasks, student problems and teacher requirements are taken into consideration and brought into balance with each other.

References

- Al-Mekhlafi, A.M. and Nagaratnam, R.P. (2011). Difficulties in teaching and learning grammar in an EFL context. *International Journal of Instruction*, 2, 4, p. 69-92
- Baron, D. (1982). *Grammar and good taste: Reforming the American language*. New Haven, NJ, Yale University Press
- Borg, S. (1999). The use of grammatical terminology in the second language classroom: A qualitative study of teachers' practices and cognitions. *Applied Linguistics*, 20 (1), p. 95-126
- Borg, S. (2001). Self perception and practice in teaching grammar. *ELT Journal*, 52 (4), p. 273-281
- Borg, S. (2010). Contemporary themes in language teaching education. *Foreign Languages in China*, 7 (4), p. 84-89
- Have fun with your students. (2012). Retrieved March 26 from <http://elicincanan.edublogs.org/2012/06/25/have-fun-with-your-students-ambiguous-sentences/>
- Jameson, J. and Chapelle, C.A. (2006). 3rd ed. *Focus on Grammar. An Integrated Skill Approach*. Pearson and Longman
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2009). *Teaching and Testing Grammar*. P. 518-536
- McNamara, T. & Roever, C. (2006). *Language testing: The social dimension*. *Language Learning* 56, Supplement 2
- Porpura, J.E. (2004). *Assessing Grammar*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge
- Purdue University. (n.d.). *Teaching and assessing grammar*. Retrieved March 25 from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/756/01/>
- Rea-Dickins, P. and Germaine, K. (2003, 6th ed.) *Evaluation*. Oxford University Press. Oxford

Appendix 1: Interview questions

1. What tasks do you use/ are used for assessment of grammar skills in your class?
2. Are they enjoyable / useful? Why or why not?
3. How do you / how does the teacher motivate students to benefit from grammar tests?

Appendix 2:

Transcript of recording of a sample teacher interview

A (interviewer): What tasks do you use for assessment of grammar skills in your class?

B (interviewee): Opening the brackets, multiple choice, mingled words, error correction. And when I ask them to speak on a topic I record them and then ask to do self-correction.

A: Do they fulfill the tasks from the book, from the board (projector), from handouts? Do they do it orally or in written?

B: Home tasks are fulfilled in written. Writing helps fixing attention and better memorization. In class we usually just read the tasks from the books/board/handouts, to save the time. Sometimes students work in pairs or small groups.

A: Do you assess such pair/group work? How?

B: They do it together and then I ask one from some pairs or each group and both/all get the same grade.

A: Are they happy? I mean don't they mind getting low grades and blame the friend(s) for it?

B: Not really.

A: How do you check/assess homework?

B: Sometimes orally in class, but without formal assessment. Once a month I collect their writings and do the formal assessment.

A: Do you use sentence-based or text-based tasks?

B: Both. But, unfortunately, books seldom offer text-based ones, so I have to write them myself. But it is worth it, I see that students are not so bored and do not get tired so quickly as when the tasks are sentence-based.

A: Do you think that sentence-based tasks are useful?

B: Not so much. I have a feeling students do it to get rid of them, not to learn in a thoughtful way. This is why, while speaking, they can hardly make up a normal sentence, think for a long time, and make minor and big mistakes.

A: Do you think this is due to lack of practice?

B: Partially. But partially because the drills and assessment tasks permit to fulfill them thoughtlessly. And they are not communicative enough.

A: How do you motivate your students to benefit from grammar tests?

B: I ask them to write down their typical mistakes and then to revise corresponding rules and practice more. I tell them this is necessary to avoid repeated errors.

A: Thank you for an interesting interview.

Appendix 3:

Transcript of recording of a sample student interview

A (interviewer): What tasks are used for assessment of grammar skills in your class?

B (interviewee): Well, doing tasks is a very important activity for our brain. Of course, our lecturer is aware of this and she is trying to offer different kinds of grammar tasks, such as gap filling, multiple choice, transformation, making up sentences, error correction, error identification, and so on.

A: Are they useful/enjoyable? Why or why not?

B: Personally, I like most of them, but especially transformation and making up sentences. I like transformation tasks, because they help us to understand, memorize and identify parts of speech, such as adjectives, nouns, adverbs, and so on. As a result, we use them correctly in our oral speech and writing too. Making up sentences also help us to improve our language skills. They show us the correct structures of the sentence and also make us get used to using parts of speech correctly. I mean - word order. In addition, this is an enjoyable task, because you learn how to write and speak correctly.

A: How does the teacher motivate you to benefit from grammar tasks?

B: Teacher always tells us that we should learn from our mistakes and asks us not to repeat them. She also asks us to write down our typical mistakes as it is important, because by considering them, we realize what is wrong and in the future we avoid repeated errors. Our teacher tells us to revise corresponding rules and practice more.

A: Does the teacher have any specific teaching method?

B: Actually yes, she does. She always brings us interesting power point presentations. I mean, she puts there funny and entertaining pictures accompanied by sound effects, which really catch our attention and help with memorizing this or that topic. For me, the visual method is very important and I think my classmates will agree with me.

A: Are there any tasks which you find less productive?

B: Well, actually there are some. For example, to my mind, multiple choice test and error correction are uncommunicative, confusing and sometimes dull. Though, I think that doing those tasks is as important as doing other ones.