

## **What tasks should we use in the grammar class?**

### **Abstract**

The notion that grammatical knowledge can be differentiated according to whether this knowledge is fully automatized (implicit knowledge) or not (explicit knowledge) raises important questions for the teaching and acquisition of grammatical ability. In this paper we will show whether or not tasks designed to elicit explicit grammatical knowledge are enough to prove students' grammatical ability.

The corpus was made up of 40 tests in which the students' implicit and explicit knowledge of grammar was elicited by tasks of different nature. On the one hand, the tests included a task that required the students' production and identification of particular grammar structures. On the other hand, a task was designed to write a paragraph about a particular grammar point. This activity aimed to assess the learners' implied knowledge of cohesion, junctives and logico-semantic relations, in a context that they would provide. The main objective of this task was to focus the students' attention on meaning and content and thus assess their "acquired" knowledge of cohesion, junctives and logico-semantic relations.

To analyze the corpus, we tabulated the results using simple percentages that were later compared. The results show that although the students obtained good results in the tasks designed to test explicit knowledge of some grammar forms, they had not fully acquired these structures as was shown by the task meant to test implicit or automatized knowledge.

## **Introduction and Theoretical Framework**

The studies investigating the effects of teaching and learning on grammatical performance present a number of challenges for language assessment. First of all, the notion that grammatical knowledge structures can be differentiated according to whether they are fully automatized (i.e. implicit knowledge) or not (i.e. explicit knowledge) raises important questions for the testing of grammatical ability (Ellis, 2001). Given the many purposes of assessment, we might wish to test explicit knowledge of grammar, implicit knowledge of grammar or both. For example, in certain classroom contexts, we might want to assess the learner's explicit knowledge of one or more grammatical forms, and could, therefore, ask learners to fill in blanks, detect errors, and answer multiple-choice or short-answer questions related to these forms. The information from these assessments would show how well students could apply the forms in contexts where fluent and spontaneous language use is *not*. Inferences from the results of these assessments could be useful for teachers wishing to determine if their students have mastered certain grammatical forms. However, as teachers may be well aware, this type of assessment would not necessarily show that the students have actually internalized the grammatical forms and are able to use them automatically in spontaneous or unplanned discourse. To obtain information on the students' implicit knowledge of grammatical forms, testers would need to create tasks designed to elicit the fluent and spontaneous use of grammatical forms in situations where automatic language use was required. According to Purpura (2004) comprehensive assessment of grammatical ability should attempt to test students on both their explicit and implicit knowledge of grammar (p.45). In this work we will show how the students performed in the different tasks designed to assess implicit and explicit grammatical

knowledge. These results might help FL teachers determine how students learn grammar in ELT classes.

## **Methods and Materials**

We have analyzed a corpus made up of 40 actual tests in which the students' implicit and explicit knowledge of grammar was elicited by tasks of different nature, namely, form-focused and meaning-focused tasks. The tests were first term tests that students took in their Grammar II<sup>1</sup> classes in 2014.

On the one hand, a form-focused task included in the test was analyzed. This activity required the students' production and identification of particular grammar structures in order to elicit their explicit knowledge of grammar. The students had to detect the cohesive function of certain phrases in a text, and fill in blanks with suitable junctives, state the type and the syntactic and semantic analysis of each one.

On the other hand, a task designed to elicit the students' explanation of a particular grammar point was included so as to elicit the students' implicit knowledge of grammar. In this particular activity both content and grammar in use were taken into account when allotting the marks to the exercise. The students had to write a paragraph explaining the main characteristics of written and oral texts as they had been taught the differences between these two forms of texts. Apart from testing that content, the activity aimed to assess the learners' implicit knowledge of cohesion, junctives, punctuation and logico-semantic relations in a text that the learners themselves would provide. The main objective of this task was to focus the students' attention on meaning and content in order to assess their "acquired" knowledge of the grammar points they had been taught.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the name of the grammar course students take in third year at Facultad de Lenguas (UNC).

The participants were students of English at university level who were taking the English Grammar II course (third year), at Facultad de Lenguas, National University of Córdoba.

To analyze the corpus, we tabulated the results using simple percentages that were later compared. We took into account the percentages the students obtained in the tasks designed to elicit explicit knowledge and these were compared to the percentages obtained in the activity designed to elicit implicit knowledge.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results indicate that in the task that elicited the learners' automatized grammar forms or implicit knowledge, the students were not as successful as in the form-focused task. In contrast, an important number of these same students succeeded in those tasks designed to elicit the learners' explicit knowledge of grammar. This reveals that the learners had achieved explicit knowledge of the grammar structures they had to study for the test (cohesion, logico-semantic relations, junctives, use of punctuation of junctives) and performed well in that task. However, it was demonstrated that although the students had achieved the explicit knowledge as shown by the task designed to test explicit knowledge, they had not fully acquired these structures to use them automatically or spontaneously as was shown by the meaning-focused task. For instance, the students had to fill in blanks with suitable junctives –coordinators, subordinators and connectors- and most of them got a passing grade in that task (77% of all the students). However, when they had to produce a free text about “the main characteristics of written and oral texts” they did not perform as well as in the other task (only 37% of these same students got a pass in that activity). Moreover, several students showed to have serious problems with the use of junctives in

context. The following example has been drawn from the data to illustrate this phenomenon: “*Written texts are context independent, however, oral texts are usually context dependent.*”

The table below graphically shows the percentages obtained by the students who did better at the form-focused tasks, and the percentages allotted in the meaning-focused tasks (poorer results). Out of 40 term exams, 77% of the students did fairly well (obtained 60% or a higher percentage) in the form-focused tasks in comparison with 37% of students that did well in the tasks meant to elicit implicit knowledge of grammar structures.

Type of task	Good performance	Bad performance
<b>Explicit knowledge – form-focused task</b>	<b>77%</b>	23%
<b>Implicit knowledge - meaning-focused task</b>	37%	<b>63%</b>

**Table 1. Comparison of both tasks**

These results might indicate that most of the students had a good grammar performance when it came to carrying out form-focused tasks. However, when they had to produce grammar in context the grades were much lower, thus showing that they either did not know the topic they had to write about<sup>2</sup> or they produced poor grammar when discussing the questions. In many cases, the students clearly showed that they had not acquired the grammar points to be tested in the exam because they made mistakes that proved that. The examples from the meaning-focused tasks that follow intend to illustrate this contradiction. But first we will present the tasks that were included in the test in depth.

---

<sup>2</sup> The students had been taught the differences between written and oral texts in class as that topic is part of the Grammar II syllabus.

The form-focused task read as follows:

**Read the following passage carefully. Do the items in bold type have a cohesive function? If so, provide the name of the cohesive device and indicate what sections in the text the items refer to or stand for. Then, provide the missing junctives in the text. Do not use the same junctive more than once. Do not change the punctuation. Determine the type of junctive used.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Who can wear a bow tie? And is a bow tie always an acceptable replacement for a normal tie?

I answered this question last fall, \_\_\_\_\_ (1) as the bow tie seems to be a trend **that** won't die, it merits an update.

In short, the answers are anyone and yes.

In depth, \_\_\_\_\_ (2), things get a little more complicated. The current streetwear vogue for bow ties is largely a hipster-ironic **one**. They are not being worn by middle-aged men in business settings; they are being worn by guys with beards in jeans and cardigans.

The only guys wearing them for dressy occasions are fashion designers, who match them with garish Vegassy dinner jackets or shorts, \_\_\_\_\_ (3) they wear them with other deliberately goofy, garish or parodic outfits. And then these guys tell chic retail boutiques to try to get us to dress in **similar** ways.

In downtown Toronto, I have recently had to pass, a couple of days a week, two shops on the **same** street with the same absurd get-up on a mannequin in **the window**. The costume is: a dark classic suit jacket, a black bow tie, a suit waistcoat, a pair of shorts and dress shoes.

Obviously, anyone who actually dressed this way would be either auditioning for a role as Little Lord Fauntleroy or an actual Edwardian 11-year old. (There are other references to an archaic fussiness, too: a watch chain, a bowler hat, an umbrella.) I can imagine no less sexy an outfit for a grown-up.

**This** is an example of the difference between fashion and style. Fashion is what is out there for you to choose from; style is what you choose to do with **it**. You don't have to follow it all. Fashion may be all about particular ideas at the moment, \_\_\_\_\_ (4) few of us want to dress in ideas.

Of course, a bow tie with a conventional suit or sports jacket will always get you into a club with a ties-only dress code. **It** just won't necessarily get you into the hearts and dreams of the ladies there.

As we can see, in the tasks above the students were supposed to fill in blanks, determine relations in terms of cohesive devices and syntactic and semantic relations. The students were not really asked to produce a meaningful text of their own.

On the other hand, the meaning-focused task was the following:

**In a paragraph of approximately 10 lines answer the following question: What are the main characteristics and differences of written and spoken texts?**

Grammar II students are supposed to handle an important number of structures because they have been exposed to the foreign language for three years and have taken three grammar courses. This knowledge of the language is shown in their written texts since these texts are typically more ambitious than texts produced by first or second-year students. However, when these students focus their attention on meaning, they make mistakes that reveal that they have not automatized several structures. In the following section we will show some of the mistakes found in the texts the students produced when explaining the differences between oral and written texts.

1. *In contrast, oral texts are detached and it's written in an impersonal style, for example, with passive voice.* (G19) (Problem with pronominal reference)
2. *... entertain, and get things done; but, they do it ...* (G19) (Problem with punctuation of junctives)
3. *... using connectors to join them; while in written texts the complexity is ...* (G115) (Problem with punctuation of junctives)
4. *In contrast with the oral discourse, in which there is address to the receiver.* (G120) (Problem with junctives, sentence fragment)

According to the results of the study, the students handled the use of junctives (choice and punctuation) in the task that elicited explicit knowledge; this is confirmed by the percentage showing that 77% of the students did well in that task. Nevertheless, they produced faulty texts in terms of punctuation of junctives, use of coordinators, subordinators and connectors -as shown by examples 2, 3 and 4- when they focused attention on meaning. There were also many instances of problems with the building of cohesive ties -as shown by example 1-. All these cases demonstrate that the students in general did well when focused on the grammar form they had studied, but this knowledge had not been acquired fully since when they had to produce a meaningful text they made mistakes related to those same grammar forms.

## **Conclusions**

At the Facultad de Lenguas, undergraduates enrolled in the Translation and Teaching programs make grammar mistakes which reveal that, despite having studied particular grammar structures they have not actually acquired them fully. This problem surfaces when students communicate in English both orally and in writing and it has been expressed by an important number of teachers who teach courses at this university. This study has demonstrated that teachers and researchers need to know which the mistakes that students handle just to pass a test are and which mistakes are the ones that they have fully acquired after instruction. In order to do this, teachers of EFL should design their tests and teaching practices with form-focused and meaning-focused tasks to elicit both explicit and implicit knowledge of grammar. However, more research is needed to go deeper into this topic and thus arrive at more rigorous conclusions.

## **References**



- Bachman, L. F. y A. A. Palmer (1996) *Language Testing in Practice*: Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Canale, M. y M. Swain (1980) "Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing", *Applied Linguistics* 1(1), 1-47.
- Chiang S. Y. (1999) "Assessing Grammatical and Textual Features in L2 Writing Samples: The Case of French as a Foreign Language". *The Modern Language Journal*, 83, II, 219-232.
- Connor, U. (1984) "A study of cohesion and coherence in ESL students' writing." *Papers in Linguistics: International Journal of Human Communication*, 17, 301-316.
- Ellis, R. (1987). *Second Language Acquisition in Context*. Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Ellis, R. (1994). Second language acquisition research: an overview. En *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2000). Task-based research and language pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research*, (4)3, 193-220.
- Ellis, R. (2001) Some thoughts on testing grammar: an SLA perspective. In C. Elder, A. Brown, E. Grove, K. Hill, N. Iwashita, T. Lumley, T. McNamara, K. O'Loughlin (eds.), *Experimenting with Uncertainty: Essays in Honour of Alan Davies* (pp.251-63). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martin, J. y J. Rothery (1986) "What a functional approach for the writing tasks can show teachers about good writing". En B. Couture (Ed), *Functional Approaches to Writing*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 241-265

Purpura, J. E. (2004) *Assessing Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.