

THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW: FORMAL KNOWLEDGE ATTAINMENT AMONG STUDENTS OF ENGLISH AT THE FACULTY OF LETTERS, THE UNIVERSITY OF PORTO

Introduction

One way to test the assumption that students actually do learn is to administer the same test to students during the first week of their course (English I) and give the same test to students during the last week of their course (English IV). But what should that test consist of? Bearing in mind that “For many researchers and teachers, learning a second or foreign language is primarily a question of learning grammar, of learning the rules by which sentences are constructed in the target language.” (1) it was decided to focus the inquiry on a pre-defined area of the English language, verbal structures, and more specifically to investigate the ability of the students to make accurate judgements of grammaticality (whether or not a sentence is grammatically well-formed). While the quoted interpretation of learning a language may no longer apply so strongly, this task does create a high degree of explicitness in that “... asking a subject to decide whether an isolated sentence is grammatical or not draws attention to judging the form of a sentence, ...” (2) Furthermore this decision was based on the fact that this type of judgement forms part of many of the students’ post-graduate use of English: teaching English in secondary schools. As Ellis points out: “The kind of language use that the learner engages in determines the kind of knowledge he acquires. Similarly, different kinds of knowledge are used in different types of language performance.” (3) In general terms, more than half of the students at this Faculty take a degree in Modern Languages and Literature (*Linguas e Literaturas Modernas*) and more than half of those students pursue the teacher training option (*Ramo Educacional*). These students also opt for English in

combination with another language: Portuguese, German or French (*variantes*). In addition this type of knowledge or skill has been identified by Stern as being a major factor in achieving native-like proficiency: "As native speakers we possess norms of language use against which we can judge utterances we hear or produce ... This mastery of the forms of the language which is intuitive and yet can be conscious under certain circumstances is a characteristic of first language proficiency, which second language learners in the early stages of a second language lack entirely and acquire only gradually as they progress." (4)

Theoretical background

The "Monitor Model" of Krashen (5) seeks to explain differing language performances (how "much" and how "well" students "know" a language) in terms of language output which has been subject to regulation by a Monitor as distinguished from language output which has not. The substance of the Monitor is identified as being formalised linguistic knowledge which is only employed in a consciously aware manner when there is focus on form and sufficient time available: both conditions were in operation in the case of this inquiry.

However, appealing to the notion of a Monitor as envisaged by Krashen as the conscious application of rules that have been inculcated by formal classroom instruction does not reveal the range and levels and circumstances of use that a student or speaker's critical ability can cover. Monitoring can be interpreted in terms of being a more basic psycho-linguistic process: behaviour associated with monitoring of an overt kind can involve judgements, modifications or repairs at the level of lexis, syntax, discourse or truth.

It is important for students to develop various types of self-control (monitoring, reflecting, assessing feedback and so on) in terms of modifying their communicative behaviour to approximate to whatever might be regarded as the norm. As Klein has stated: "Progress in language acquisition requires the learner to match continuously his own language performance against the standards of the target language speakers. This matching task confronts the learner at all stages of the process: at the beginning the discrepancy is striking and cannot go unnoticed: the smaller it becomes, towards the end of the process, the greater the matching problem." (6)

Enquiry materials

Twenty EFL teachers were given a questionnaire containing 20 examples of verbal structures and asked to score these structures on a scale of one to seven according to degree of difficulty for students. The results of this questionnaire enabled the establishment of a rating table of grammatical difficulty (see Table One). By selecting the odd numbers from the rating table to be examples of “good grammar” and the even numbers to be examples of “bad grammar” the Faculty students were presented with a questionnaire containing a balanced distribution of grammatical and ungrammatical items across an empirically controlled range of grammatical difficulty (see Appendix One).

The limitation of the language items to be judged to verbal structure does not eliminate all the content problems in consideration of making grammaticality judgements. However, the exclusion of concerns such as prepositions, adverbial forms, comparative constructions and so on does allow for a defined area of inquiry: an area considered important, for example, in syllabus design and in the eyes of the students themselves reporting that “tenses are difficult in English”. Perhaps an over-simplified statement which has as its basis the complexity and flexibility of temporal perspective in English, made possible by the capacity to juxtapose states, events, duration, sequentiality, simultaneity and so on.

There are doubts as to whether the rating of grammatical difficulty is accurate as some examples concentrate more on form than meaning and vice versa. The almost infinite variety in the relationship between form and meaning does not permit any truly objective criteria of difficulty. Similarly some examples rely on combinations of verbal structures adding an inter-clausal to the intra-sentential dimension. However it may be possible to shed some light on second language acquisition processes through means of enquiry such as the one employed in this study since, according to Hatch: “Experimental measures allow us to test large numbers of learners on whatever syntactic structure we wish to investigate. These tests, frequently called cross-sectional studies, look at the learner at one point in his development. If several structures are tested, an accuracy order for those structures can be obtained. Hopefully, that accuracy order is similar to an acquisition order.” (7)

Overall questionnaire results

From the overall questionnaire results (see Table Two) the main focus should be placed on the results obtained in the area of the ungrammatical examples presented for judgement. It is impossible to gauge whether chance was a factor in an example being identified correctly as grammatical; the basis of judgement in these cases would require further, additional deeper levels of investigation beyond the limiting inquiry format of the questionnaire. For example, a learner interview format could be used to gain more insight into the initiating factors of “good grammar” decisions. At the same time it should be noted that the students, while engaged in an overtly linguistic task, were not pressurised as identified individuals, as the questionnaire was conducted anonymously.

Each of the three groups (according to language combination “variante”) showed some progress. In terms of proportional ratios of progress, the students of English/French progressed most (ratio: 18.5), followed by the students of English/German (ratio: 12.7), with the least progress being made by the students of English/Portuguese (ratio: 11.6). (These proportional ratios are calculated on the basis of the difference between the start and finish percentage being divided by the start percentage and multiplied by one hundred. The ratios are listed in Table Three.)

These results may in part be explained by the fact that the English/Portuguese students are those who receive the least exposure to foreign language teaching/learning and are as such less likely to be equipped with the type of mechanisms and knowledge about language that is required for this kind of judgement activity which calls for the employment of explicit grammatical awareness. It would appear that the English/French students and the English/German students reach broadly the same level with the English/French students progressing further proportionally, having started from a weaker position. This explanation is supported by official Faculty statistics concerning the minimum scores permitting entry into the first year of the LLM course: for English/German the score is 155/200 while for English/French the score is 138/200 (for English/Portuguese the score is 144/200).

Individual ungrammatical sentences

When considering the results obtained by English IV students, both sentence n° 1 (He wants have another sandwich) and sentence n° 8 (He had eat his lunch when the phone rang) were recognised as being ungrammatical in 100% of the responses. This degree of certainty is perhaps explicable in terms of the simplicity of the formal, structural error under consideration, that is to say, there is little beyond the regularity of the mechanics of grammar in doubt. Both of the structures here can be characterised as “early learnt” as the English I percentage scores were comfortably above 90%, leaving little room for improvement, which explains the low proportional ratio figures.

Indeed, the English I teachers at the Faculty of Letters would be surprised if errors of this nature had not already been largely eliminated from the production of the students at Faculty entry level (generally considered to be approximately the same as a Cambridge First Certificate pass) and as such would assume a high degree of success at this lower level skill of error recognition.

Sentence n° 3 (I have learning English for three years) also falls into this group of a very low proportional change (4.4) having started at the high level of 93.7% recognition of ungrammaticality but fails to reach the threshold of 100%. A speculative explanation could centre on the doubts the students had resulting from not being sure if the structure should be “I am learning English for three years” (a frequently seen L1 based assumption) or the grammatical “I have been learning English for three years”. These doubts may have caused confusion so as to allow sentence n° 3 to be considered a valid alternative.

A further structure which might be said to be an example of a relatively simple formal error is sentence n°15 (Does he has any brothers?) But, in this case, the score does not approach the 100% success benchmark, climbing from 83.6% to only 91.0% (proportional ratio: 8.9). The fact that the error has its basis in an interrogative form employing an irregular verb may be the root of the problem. If the example structure had contained a regular verb, perhaps the ungrammaticality would have been highlighted to a greater extent. In addition it should be noted that the difference between grammatical and ungrammatical is determined at the level of one single phonemic detail, and this in a structure which would normally be associated with the spoken channel. The surprisingly high failure rate of 9% at the end of the fourth year may indicate some form of fossilised error which due to the fact that it does impede the communicative or functional value of the sentence may have escaped correction procedures.

A similar explanation could be put forward for sentence n° 17 (Was the school build in 1926?) with the added formal complication of the passive voice being present. Here a more obviously irregular verb may have provided higher percentage scores. It could be that these two examples (sentence n° 15 and sentence n° 17) represent mere “slips” in the students’ capacity for making correct grammaticality judgements and the results would be different if the test/questionnaire were administered on a different day under different circumstances,

In contrast, the three structures which exhibit the highest proportional ratio scores (sentence n° 5, ratio: 28.6: He usually plays football but today he plays tennis; sentence n° 11, ratio: 28.3: If I had seen you, I would say “hello”; sentence n° 19, ratio: 24.1: If it will rain, we will go to the cinema) are all structures which involve a degree of formal as well as conceptual complexity, whereby any grammaticality judgement or comprehension is dependent on the ability to recognise elements such as whether states are permanent or temporary, degrees of probability, distinctions between different time references and irregularity of relationship between form and function. In this respect it would not be unreasonable that English I percentage scores should be comparatively low.

Conditional sentences present particular difficulties to Portuguese learners of English as it is an area very open to negative mother tongue interference, especially in making the distinction between what are commonly known as the First and the Second Conditional. There also exists the tendency for teachers/course books to lump these together, on the basis pattern similarity, with the Third Conditional, an approach to teaching which does little to clarify the profound distinctions that may need to be made in terms of meaning, attitude of the producer, time reference and so on.

It is interesting to note that a similar background of accepted teaching practice may be at the root of the low English I percentage score for sentence n°5 (He usually plays football, but today he plays tennis). The teaching of the present continuous form often occurs early in the syllabus, focusing on the kind of “What is Fred doing?”, “Fred is washing the car” picture prompt scenario. In a second phase of learning, students may be introduced to the present continuous for future plans/arrangements as an alternative/complement to the “going to” form. But the distinction in play here, the habitual/temporary contrast, falls outside of either of these two typical teaching contexts.

The correct use of the present continuous is also dealt with in sentence n° 13 (This flower is smelling of oranges) but here the result (97.8% correct

identification with a proportional ratio of 12.6) is more likely to be founded on the relatively straightforward learning chunk that some verbs do not normally appear in continuous form. This is significant also in terms of teaching methodology issues in that “ease of teaching” becomes a critical factor in success in learning. A proportional ratio of a similar level (14.5) occurs with reference to sentence n° 16 (I saw “Rambo” again last night, I saw it ten times before) with a final percentage score of 93.3%. The difficulty in identifying grammatical status here is linked to the absence of the present perfect verb form and requires a highly developed knowledge of how past time can be described through various verb forms in the English verb tense system. It is probable that the contrast between two clauses with distinct time references (“last night” and “before”) will have guided the students towards the unacceptability of the same verb form in both clauses: a distinction which also plays a part in sentence n° 5 (referred to above), but which seems to carry less force in comparison when related to present time (“usually” and “today”). However the inclusion of a more specific adverbial than “today” to indicate “at this point in present time” may have increased the students’ recognition of the need for the differentiation in concept referred to above to be marked by a different verb form.

Concluding remarks

Although the questionnaire and the task it required of the students was very limited it nevertheless reveals significant information about where progress is achieved and where knowledge remains in deficit. While acknowledging the self-evident truth that a more extensive investigation would be required to assess more fully the effectiveness of the faculty/university programme for teaching/learning, it is also worth noting what Davies makes clear: “What are needed for proof of the language knowledge residing in the programmes are separate proficiency tests which themselves demand a construct of their own i.e. a hidden syllabus ... Overall language control must be shown to operate in a variety of situations and on an array of tasks.” (8)

Bearing in mind that the ultimate aim of this faculty/university course should be to enable students to achieve 100% scores across the whole range of verbal structures, it could be argued that a similar questionnaire style activity, which exhibited tighter control over task-related and learner-related factors, could serve as an indication of how to focus the teaching of English

at the Faculty of Letters more specifically on developing, according to our students' needs, relevant different knowledge resources: "Formal instruction contributes directly or indirectly to the internalisation of these different knowledge types and in doing so enables the classroom learner to perform a wider range of linguistic tasks than the naturalistic learner." (9) This comparison could prove highly relevant as far as non-native teachers of English are concerned.

Any explanation of the distribution of the structures which exhibit the greatest proportional variation or failure to gain proximity to the ideal 100% threshold perhaps may be thought of as being related to the learning environment at the Faculty of Letters where emphasis is given to exploring the non-standard, more marked elements of verbal structures. The greater availability of teaching time, reference resource materials, access to native speaker university teachers and a syllabus fashioned in the knowledge that the target learners will, for the most part, become professional users of the foreign language should also be taken into account. These factors contrast sharply to the current situation that predominates in local secondary schools, where the multiplicity of variables such as pupil age, level of proficiency, educational framework, learner volition, language of instruction and target language status may interact to create less positive learning outcomes. However as Stevrens pointed out: "... the undoubted existence of inferior language teaching in no way obscures the existence — equally real but often overlooked - of superior language teaching, in which learners achieve high levels of command of the languages in direct response to deliberate schemes of teaching and learning." (10)

References

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Appendix One

FACULDADE DE LETRAS DA UNIVERSIDADE DO PORTO

Questionnaire for English Language Students

This questionnaire is part of project to try and find out more about areas of difficulty in English Grammar.

Many students are going to answer the questionnaire, it is NOT a test of any individual student so you don't need to write your name on any of the pages.

However, some further information would be useful:

- a) Is this your first attempt at this level/year? Yes/No
- b) What is the other language element of your degree course:
Portuguese / German / French

Please look at the twenty sentences in English on the following page and say if you think the sentences contain "good grammar" (correct) or contain "bad grammar" (wrong).

Remember this is not a test of your individual ability. Please answer all twenty questions.

THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. He wants have another sandwich. | Correct / Wrong |
| 2. I would buy the book if it was cheaper. | Correct / Wrong |
| 3. I have learning English for six years. | Correct / Wrong |
| 4. He didn't have any lunch yesterday. | Correct / Wrong |
| 5. He usually plays football, but today he plays tennis. | Correct / Wrong |
| 6. You like sugar in your coffee, don't you? | Correct / Wrong |
| 7. The boys were playing football and the girls were playing tennis. | Correct / Wrong |
| 8. he had eaten his lunch when the phone rang. | Correct / Wrong |
| 9 I always get up at half past eight. | Correct / Wrong |
| 10. He has already visited France many times. | Correct / Wrong |
| 11. If I had seen you, I would have say "hello". | Correct / Wrong |
| 12. He enjoys playing tennis. | Correct / Wrong |
| 13. This flower is smelling of oranges. | Correct / Wrong |
| 14. He makes me wash the dishes. | Correct / Wrong |
| 15. Does he has any brothers? | Correct / Wrong |
| 16. I saw "Rambo" again last night, I saw two times before. | Correct / Wrong |
| 17. Was the school build in 1926? | Correct / Wrong |
| 18. She told me she watched a lot of TV. | Correct / Wrong |
| 19. If it will rain, we will go to the cinema. | Correct / Wrong |
| 20. I wish the weather were better in England. | Correct / Wrong |

Have you answered all twenty questions? Thank you for your help.

Table One: Rating Table of Grammatical Difficulty: Mean Scores.

1) I always get up at half past eight.	1.40
2) Does he have any brothers?	2.40
3) He didn't have any lunch yesterday.	2.55
4) He usually plays football but today he is playing tennis.	3.05
5) You like sugar in your coffee, don't you?	3.15
6) He wants to have another sandwich.	3.20
7) The boys were playing football and the girls were playing tennis.	3.30
8) This flower smells of oranges.	3.55
9) He enjoys playing tennis.	3.60
10) If it rains, we will go to the cinema.	3.85
11) He makes me wash the dishes.	4.15
12) I have been learning English for six years.	4.40
13) He has already visited France many times.	4.60
14) I saw "Rambo" again last night, I have already seen it twice before.	4.65
15) She told me she watched a lot of TV.	4.70
16) Was the school built in 1926?	4.80
17) I would buy the book if it was cheaper.	4.85
18) He had eaten his lunch when the phone rang.	5.05
19) I wish the weather were better in England.	5.80
20) If I had seen you, I would have said "hello".	5.85

Table Two: Overall Questionnaire Results.

1) All sentences: Correct judgements

	English I	English IV
- Portuguese	78.9%	83.3%
- German	79.7%	84.0%
- French	77.2%	84.1%
Average:	78.2%	83.8%

2) Ungrammatical sentences: correct judgements

	English I	English IV
- Portuguese	81.2%	90.6%
- German	82.5%	93.0%
- French	78.9%	93.5%
Average	80.9%	92.4%

Table Three: Individual Ungrammatical Sentences (All Variantes).

	English I	English IV	Ratio
1. He wants have another sandwich.	98.9%	100%	1.1
3. I have learning English for 6 years.	93.7%	97.8%	4.4
5. He usually plays football but today he plays tennis.	64.6%	83.1%	28.6
8. He had eat his lunch when the phone rang.	94.7%	100%	6.0
11. If I had seen you, I would say "hello".	70.9%	91.0%	28.3
13. This flower is smelling of oranges	86.8%	97.8%	12.6
15. Does he has any brothers?	83.6%	91.0%	8.9
16. I saw "Rambo" again last night, I saw it two times before.	81.5%	93.3%	14.5
17. Was the school build in 1926?	58.7%	69.7%	18.7
19. If it will rain, we will go to the cinema.	78.8%	97.8%	24.1

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