An Analysis of the Assessment of English Grammar Courses in Five Tertiary Institutions in Viet Nam

Duyen Thi Mai Pham
Cantho University, Vietnam
Campus II, 3/2 street, Ninh Kieu district, Can Tho city, Viet Nam

ABSTRACT: English language assessment should be aligned with teaching objectives; therefore, if the teaching goal is that English learners are able to use their target language in their real life, the learners' language performance should be assessed. By analysing the course syllabi, grammmar tests and teacher interview, this study aims to investigate the assessment of grammar courses of four tertiary institutions in Vietnam in connection to Purpura' s (2014 & 2005) grammatical assessment theories regarding assessed grammatical ability aspects, test tasks and grammar assessment approaches. The results should that (1) only learners' grammatical forms and semantic meanings are assessed; (2) Selected-response task types and The Discrete-Point Approach are mainly used to assess learners.

INTRODUCTION

English language assessment in general and English grammar assessment in particular should be closely aligned with the goal of instruction. In fact, if the teaching goal is to transmit grammar rules from teachers to students, the assessment of grammar knowledge is carried out by having students recite; and once the instruction goal is that students can apply grammatical rules for real-life purposes, the assessment should include tasks to require students to demonstrate their grammatical ability in communicate in speaking and writing.

Recently, Viet Nam has some innovations in English language teaching and learning particularly in testing and assessment. In fact, there is a shift from a stress on knowledge to language competences and a trend toward formative and classroom-based assessment practices. The researcher wonders whether there are any changes in the field of grammar assessment, and she is interested in conducting an in-depth research in the grammar assessment of grammar courses in the English Language teacher education program in four universities in Vietnam. In this study, the assessment of grammar courses in the four universities in Viet Nam is analyzed in connection to Purpura' s (2014 & 2005) grammatical assessment theories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study employs the grammatical assessment theories discussed by Purpura (2014 & 2005) as the framework for the study. Below are some summaries about grammar assessement discussed by Purpura (2014 & 2005).

(1) What aspects of learners' grammatical ability should be assessed?

Purpura's theoretical model of language knowledge was influenced by the theoretical models and conceptualizations proposed by Lado (1961), Canale and Swain (1980), Larsen-Freeman (1991), Rea-Dickins (1991) and Bachman & Palmer (1996). Purpura's (2014) theoretical model of language knowledge consists of the grammatical and pragmatic knowledge. Grammatical knowledge includes linguistic forms such as phonological/graphological, lexical, morphosyntactic, cohesive, information managerial, and interactional forms at the (sub)sentential and discoursal levels and semantic meanings associated with the forms. Pragmatic knowledge is meanings occurring in language use, and it is derivable from grammatical forms and their semantic meanings. Therefore, based on Purpura's (2104) conceptualization of language knowledge, a grammar test should include the components that can assess learners'ability about grammatical forms, semantic and pragmatic meanings.

(2) What are grammar test tasks?

Grammar test tasks consist of (1) *Selected-response task types* including the multiple-choice (MC) task, multiple-choice error identification task, the matching task, the discrimination task, and the noticing task; (2) *Limited-production task types* regarding the gap-filling task, the short-answer task, and the dialogue (or discourse) completion task (DCT); and (3) *Extended-production task types* which is about **t**he information-gap task (info-gap), story-telling and reporting tasks, the role-play and simulation tasks.

An Analysis of the Assessment of English Grammar Courses in Five Tertiary Institutions in Viet Nam

(3) **What are approaches to grammar assessment?**

Purpura (2014) discussed four approaches to grammar assessment. The first one is *The Discrete-Point Approach*, and in this approach selected response and limited response tasks are used to measure learners' grammatical ability. Selected response tasks can be designed in the forms of Multiple choice (MC), True/False (T/F) while limited response task can be gap-fill, error correction tasks. The second approach is *the Performance-Assessment approach*. According to this approach, learners' grammatical ability is assessed by performance tasks in spoken or/and written forms. *The L2 Production Features Approach* is the another approach to grammar assessment mentioned by Purpura (2014). To measure learners' grammatical ability, students are required to get involved in real-life discussions and many extended production tasks are designed to elicite learners' oral production.nnd the features in the discussions like *accurary, complexity and fluency* are elicited and assessed. The last grammar assessment approach discussed by Purpura (2020) is *The Development Approach*; and the goal of this approach is to measure learners' developmental proficiency levels of grammatical forms. To characterize learners' grammatical ability at different proficiency levels, test designers can employ diverse test tasks like Multiple choice (MC), limited response (LP) or Extended production (EP).

THE STUDY

Research questions

1. How are the assessments for the grammar courses described in the syllabi in the four universities?
2. How do teachers assess learners and what aspects of grammatical knowledge are assessed?
3. What are the teachers'viewpoints about the current assessment in grammar?

RESEARCH METHODS

Step 1: Analyze the assessment forms described in the syllabi of grammar courses in the universities.

Step 2: Analyze grammar tests including in-class tests and final tests from these universties.

Step 3: Interview 8 teachers responsible for grammar courses in the four universities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research question 1

How are the assessments for the grammar courses described in the syllabi in the four universities?

In the English language teacher education program (ELTEE program) in all four universities studied, there are 3 grammar courses namely Grammar 1, Grammar 2 and Grammar 3; or namely Basic English Grammar, Intermediate English Grammar and Advanced English Grammar in some universities. In four universities, each grammar course is 2 credits, and only in one university, each grammar course is 3 credits. Each credit is equivalent to 30 periods of teaching theories and 30 hours of practice. Regarding assessment, students' in-class activities are assessed 40-50% and the final test accounts for 50-60%. Students' in-class activities can include attendence, class participation, homework, groupwork, two in-class mini tests. The final test in one university is described as a 60-minute multiple choice test while other universities do not describe the final test. Generally, in most university in-class activities including attendance, assignment, mini-tests account for 50 % and final tests also represents for 50%; however, these universities do not describe the assignments, in-class mini tests and final test in details.

Research question 2

How do teachers assess learners and what aspects of grammatical knowledge are assessed?

To investigate deeply how teachers assess learners and what aspects of grammatical knowledge are assessed, the researcher collected the grammar tests and did interview the teachers in charge of grammar courses in these above institutions. The results are below:

(1) From the analysis of grammar tests including both in-class tests and final tests: Most grammar tests are designed as MC (multiple choice) tests; and a few tests include MC and limited responses such as gap-fill, error correction tasks. Only one test besides MC requires students to write short sentences and a short paragraph using targeted structures.

(2) From the teacher interview: First, it can be seen that the teachers follow the assessment described in the syllabi strictly. Second, as described in the syllabi teachers assess students' in-class activites 50% and final exam accounts for 50%. For about 50% in-class grades, most teachers use 10% for attendence and participation, 20% for 2 or 3 in-class tests and 20% for exercise correction, reflection and self-study. One teacher offers 30% for in-class test and 20% for students'grammatical exercise design via kahoot.

Research question 3

What are the teachers'viewpoints about the current assessment in grammar?

Most the teachers interviewed are satisfied with the current assessment of grammar and they are not likely to change the format tests into the ones which requires students produce more language. Below are the main reasons the teachers explained why they should not assess learners' extended production. First, it is time constraint. With only 60 periods, teachers just have enough time to provide grammatical knowledge, and they do not have time for assessing students' language production. Second, Grammar courses are just

basic ones, and the course objectives are to provide learners basic knowledge about grammar. Finally, with the basic knowledge of grammar, learners can develop their four language skills in the skills courses. However, there is also one teacher think that it is better if grammar tests are designed to test learners' writing because with the current tests based on MC, students can learn by heart or cheat by copying from others.

To summarize, from analysing syllabi, tests and interview teachers, it can be generally concluded that

(1) the percentages of grammar course assessment is divided into 50% for in-class activities and 50% for final tests.

(2) All teachers confirmed that they follow the syllabi of their schools strictly and they do not want to change the current assessment system for the grammar course

(3) the learners' grammar performance is not assessed, especially speaking ability.

(4) In comparision with Purpura's (2014 & 2005) grammar assessment regarding assessed grammatical ability aspects, test tasks and grammar assessment approaches, both in-class assessment forms and final tests in the four universities:

- focus on assessing learners'ability about grammatical forms, semantic meanings while pragmatic meanings are not assessed;

- focus on **Selected-response task types** including the multiple-choice (MC) task, multiple-choice error identification task, the matching task, the discrimination task, and the noticing task. **Limited-production task types** regarding the gap-filling task, the short-answer task, and the dialogue (or discourse) completion task (DCT) are sometimes assessed, but **Extended-production task types** which is about the information-gap task (info-gap), story-telling and reporting tasks, the role-play and simulation tasks are not completely assessed.

- focus on *The Discrete-Point Approach* - in this approach selected response and limited response tasks are used to measure learners' grammatical ability. Selected response tasks can be designed in the forms of Multiple choice (MC), True/False (T/F) while limited response task can be gap-fill, error correction tasks. The other approaches including *the Performance-Assessment approach*, t*he L2 Production Features Approach* and the D*evelopment Approach* are not applied.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that to assess learners' grammar performance is time consuming, and English learners can develop their grammar competence through other skill courses. However, once the goal of instruction is to develop learners' communicative competence and based on the findings, it can be suggested that learners should be assessed about grammtical forms, semantic meanings and pragmatic meanings, and teachers/assesors should use various task types and approaches in assessing learners' grammatical ability. To some extent, learners' grammatical ability should be performed via writing and speaking.

REFERENCES

1) Purpura, J. E. (2014). Assessing grammar. In Kunnan, A. J (Eds.). *Introducing the companion to language assessment* (pp.1-25). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published. DOI: 10.1002/9781118411360.wbcla200.

2) Purpura, J. E. (2005). *Assessing grammar* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.