

# Testing English Grammar at PCL and Bachelor's Level

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## OUTLINE

This paper aims to present an overview of the grammar component incorporated in the PCL and Bachelor's level courses for Compulsory English and to suggest items to test the component at the final examinations. The observations in the paper are largely based on Developing English Skills, English for Further Education and A Communicative Grammar of English.

### 1. SIGNIFICANCE

The purpose of the English language test conducted annually at the end of a term as a part of the multi-subject university examinations is to measure learners' mastery at the skills prescribed in a course and to ensure achievement of minimum standards for certification required for further study, and job. This type of test, known as the 'achievement/attainment test', can render significant contribution to the effectiveness of EFL teaching/learning if it is well constructed. It assumes a still greater significance in the present context of Nepali education at both school and university levels, where the examination dictates what is taught in the classroom. Well constructed tests can contribute to inculcate positive attitudes towards teaching by giving students a sense of accomplishment and a feeling that the teacher's evaluation of the tests corresponds to what has been taught. Besides, such tests can also help students learn a language by making them work hard with due emphasis on course objectives and classroom teaching (Madse, 1983: 4). Hence the nature of tests must be precisely stated with the "was back effect" on designing syllabus and teaching and giving students a real sense of purpose in their learning task (Davies, 1977: 42).

### 2. THE GRAMMAR COMPONENT

The language subskills included in the evaluation scheme for Compulsory English at PCL and Bachelor's level and their weightage are as follows (CES, 1989):

<u>Language subskills</u>	<u>Weightage</u>		
	PCL	Bachelor's	Level
Reading	40%	I 40%	II 50%
Writing	30%	40%	
Grammar	20%/30%	20%	30%
Speech	10%	-	-

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Of all the language tests, grammar test, with ample weightage allotted in the evaluation scheme, seems to be the most popular for a number of reasons: (a) Much of EFL teaching is focussed on grammar. (b) Unlike in other language subskills, there is general consensus on what to test in grammar. (c) Grammar items, such as auxiliary verbs, are easy to identify. (d) Grammar can be tailored to the learners of different levels.

The design of a language test (and for that matter, a grammar test) depends on the nature of the selected items and their presentation in the textbooks. Hence, an overview of these items is in order. These items range from the formation rules of grammatical structures to the fairly advanced level of their use in real communication. The grammatical structures constitute not only the areas of difficulty for EFL learners, but also the core of the language (Thaker et al, 1983: ix). In addition, there are also structures peripheral to the core, i.e., stylistic variations, especially in The English We Use and A Communicative Grammar of English.

The grammar items included in the textbooks may, in the main, be grouped into the following categories from the viewpoint of their presentation:

- (i) Forms: negative, interrogative sentences, pronominals, tenses, degrees of comparison, participles, infinitivals, voice, narration, relative clause, conditional sentences, etc.
- (ii) Functions: purpose, concession, and expressions of time.
- (iii) Contrasts in Forms and Functions: simple present vs. present progressive, simple past vs. present perfect, have to vs. must, prepositions, and articles.
- (iv) Concepts: request, and future time.
- (v) Variations: regional and stylistic variations.
- (vi) Discourse.

### 3. ITEMS FOR TESTING GRAMMAR

A language skill may be tested by its use. An integrative writing test, requiring coherent organisation of ideas in suitable language, e.g., free/guided composition, is assumed to be the ideal way of assessing learners' mastery of language skills including grammar (Mackey, 1965: 406 and Davies, 1977: 9). The purpose of such a test has, however, been defeated for three reasons: first, the learner can prepare the answers of stock essay type questions in advance and cram them for reproduction in the examination. Secondly, this type of test may not be explicit about the extent of the learners knowledge of the language, since they may include only those structures of which they are confident and avoid those of which they are unsure. Finally, the scoring of such a test has

been found to be highly inaccurate, subjective and time-consuming. Nevertheless, there has been a strong plea to retain the integrative writing test for creative, authentic, and communicative use of language.

Keeping in view the Compulsory English textbooks, prescribed for PCL and Bachelor's level and also the shortcomings of the essay-type test, it would be better to adopt an eclectic approach to use, along with the integrative test, analytic type of test which selects discrete language skills and splits them into their constituents for testing them individually. Accordingly, the following items are suggested for testing the various categories of the grammar component mentioned in Section 2:

(i) Simple Completion Items

- (a) The Option Form: to test contrasting items like must/have to, articles, prepositions, contrasting tenses, relative pronouns, and agreement.

e.g., Fill in the blanks in the following sentences with must or have to, whichever is correct:

You ----- pay your debts in time.

- (b) The Inflection Form: to test the knowledge of inflections in tenses, degrees of comparison, participials, and agreement.

e.g., Fill in the blanks in the following paragraph with the correct present tense forms of the verbs given in the brackets:

It ..... (rain) all day today.

- (c) Free Response Form: to test tag questions, phrasal verbs, conditional and concessional structures.

e.g., Add question tags to the following statements:

Hamlet was indecisive, ----- ?

Or, Complete the following sentences appropriately:

If she gets up early, -----.

(ii) Sentence Combining

To test the expressions of concession, purpose and condition, relative clause and other linking constructions.

e.g., Combine the following pairs of sentences, first using although and then in spite of:

The hill was high. The children climbed it fast.

(iii) Sentence Reduction

To test expressions of purpose, participial constructions, and stylistic variations.

e.g., Combine the following pairs of sentences, using to infinitive for purpose:

We work hard. We can earn money.

(iv) Transformations

To test negative and interrogative constructions, and voice.

e.g., Change the following sentence into negative, interrogative and passive forms:

Farmers grow rice.

(v) Reported Speech

Turn the following passage into indirect speech:

....

(vi) Matching

To test conditionals, sequence of sentences, and mixed structures.

e.g., Match the following clauses to form meaningful acceptable conditional sentences:

If it rains the match will be cancelled.

(vii) Rearrangement

To test word order.

e.g., Arrange the following words and phrases in the correct order:

Went/the street/ the little boy/ down/ dressed in blue.

(viii) Stylistic Change

To test regional and stylistic variations.

e.g., Change the following expressions in formal style:

You never know what may happen.

(ix) Punctuation

e.g., Punctuate the following passage:

(x) Selection-Deletion Cloze Test

This test consists of a prose passage, usually a paragraph or more in length, from which selected words are deleted. The examinee is required to supply the missing words with the help of the context. As Madsen (1983: 47) points out, "At

the present time, no single test format is more popular than the cloze procedure. It is easy to prepare and rather easy to score." Such a test procedure is a good measure of integrative language skills, requiring the examinee to process the components of language simultaneously in almost the way people communicate. This test is also consistent with the general objective of the present courses which propose "to teach English in context adopting an integrated approach" (CES, 1989). For better performance in such a test, it is, however, necessary to instruct the examinee to look over the whole passage first before supplying the missing grammar items.

e.g., First read over the passage quickly, then read it carefully and fill in the blanks with appropriate articles (a, an or the):

My brother works in ----- shop, etc.

Other grammar items that can be tested efficiently by this procedure include prepositions, tense forms and usage, pronouns, agreement, etc.

(xi) Short Answer Items

Short notes on grammatical forms and their uses, contrasting uses of grammatical forms, different types of meaning and different ways of organising it, stylistic features of a given passage, linguistic devices to connect sentences in a discourse varieties of English, etc.

4. DEMANDS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GRAMMAR TESTS

There are certain criteria which must be satisfied to make an educational test an effective tool of teaching/learning and facilitate both the examinees and the markers in answering and scoring, respectively. These criteria include the following:

- (a) The test should be constructed in plain, simple language.
- (b) The types of test items should correspond to those in the textbooks, but the sentences therein should be replaced by unseen/original ones.
- (c) Test items for grammar points should be contextualized so that examinees can see the connection between grammar and the authentic use of language.
- (d) Instructions should be clearly stated (with examples of necessary).
- (e) Test items at different academic levels in terms of difficulty.

- (f) For scoring, correct answers of grammar test items should be supplied to markers and scrutinizers also with other guidelines in this respect.

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