اختبار الأداء النحوي لمتعلمي الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية

الملخص

لم يحظ اختبار المهارات اللغوية بالمزيد من البحث العلمي إلا مؤخراً. لذلك نسعى في هذا البحث إلى دراسة أحد مظاهر الاختبار اللغوي وبالأخص اختبار الأداء النحوي مع إشارة خاصة إلى متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية. يهدف البحث إلى تسليط الضوء على أربعة عوامل يجب أخذها بعين الاعتبار عند اختبار الأداء النحوي عند متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية. ويقسم هذا البحث إلى ثلاثة أقسام رئيسية إذ يتعلق القسم الأول منها بالضوابط والمتطلبات التي يجب مراعاتها عند تصميم اختبار ناجح وخاصة متطلبات الثبات والموثوقية والعدل. وأمّا القسم الثاني من البحث فيركز على أنواع مختلفة من الاختبارات التي يخضع لها متعلمو اللغة وتشمل هذه الأنواع اختبار تحديد المستوى الذي يجرى قبل البدء بدورة اللغة والمذاكرات التي تُجرى في منتصف الدورة لتقييم التقدم الذي حققه المتعلم والاختبار الأخير الذي يُجرى في نهاية الدورة. يتطرق البحث أيضا للأشكال المختلفة للأسئلة التي ترد في الاختبار النحوي النموذجي مثل تصحيح الأخطاء، وإكمال الجمل، وترتيب الكلمات، وتحويل التراكيب، وتغيير الكلمات وربط الجمل، الخ.

أخيرا يطرح البحث بعض النتائج والتوصيات التي تخص مدرسي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية آملين من هذه التوصيات إذا نفذت من قبل المدرسين في صفوفهم أن تجعل التدريس ذا فاعلية أكبر، وهذا ينعكس من خلال حصول المتعلمين على درجات أعلى في الاختبارات مما يعكس مقدرة لغوية أفضل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأداء النحوي، الاختبارات، الأسئلة، الوثوقية، الثبات، اختبار التوفل.

risk of doing too many tests as this may do more harm than good. That is, over-testing learners could be harmful.

As for the objectives of testing, Heaton (1975) provides a set of other reasons that justify testing students' language performance. One of the reasons behind testing is encouraging students to make a greater effort because a test may help in increasing motivation in learners and this yields good results as students become more interested. Needless to say, the appreciation of something leads to being good at it. Another reason for testing learners' language is to find out about their learning difficulties. Through these tests teachers diagnose the problems learners face and this enables them to tackle these problems and make teaching more effective. Moreover, testing can be done for the purpose of selecting and placing students in classes of various levels: low, intermediate, advanced, etc. Testing for the sake of selecting is common in certain situations, as is the case when one has a number of candidates for a job or for a place on a course. The purpose of the test in this case is to compare the performances of various candidates or applicants and select only the best. As for testing for placing, this is the case where one needs to sort a number of candidates or applicants into different groups according to their linguistic competence. Yet a further reason for testing learners can be for the sake of finding out about their language proficiency. This kind of test is usually used to find out how suitable a person is for performing a particular task. Thus, a person's proficiency in a particular area such as medicine, physical studies, or social sciences, for example, is measured in order to decide how suitable the person is for this kind of study. One example of this kind of test is IELTS, which is administered by the British Council to overseas students who plan to study in UK. These are some of the most important purposes of testing learners' language.

3. Constraints and Requirements of a Good Test
For every test to be a good one, it has to meet certain constraints and requirements. As for the constraints involved, Davies (1991) lists a number of principles, such as that a test should not be a mere exercise because there are differences

between a test and an exercise. For example, a test may be difficult for some test-takers whereas an exercise must never be difficult for any participant. However, if an exercise is difficult, it ceases to be an appropriate exercise. Another principle that a test should take care of is giving information for action; a good test is a measurement of a characteristic of an individual. This means that a test is something positive and its information can be put to use for the benefit of the individual. Finally, an adequate test is one that can be used to extend our idea of validity.

In addition to the constraints and principles mentioned above, a good test has to meet a number of requirements, such as fairness, reliability and validity. There is some sort of overlap between some of these requirements. For example, Davies (1991) argues that it is actually difficult to separate between reliability and validity. However, the rest of this section is dedicated to giving a separate account of each of these requirements on its own.

3. 1. Reliability

It is a fact that performance tests may vary according to the variation in the context or the time of the test. In fact, this may result in some degree of inconsistency in the scores that a test-taker gets on different tests. Furthermore, it is also the case that in many countries, grammatical performance tests are not mechanized or automated, which means that they are still subject to the examiner's human judgement which could be highly subjective. These are tow straight cases of how a language proficiency test might be unreliable. Thus, in order for a test to be valid, it has to be reliable. Reliability, as defined by Brown (2005: 175), is "the extent to which the results can be considered consistent or stable." Thus, the scores of a test administered to a group of students should be very much the same if the same students were to take the same test again and again. However, although reliability is a very necessary requirement for validity, yet it is not a sufficient one. For instance, if one's watch is two minutes slow, they will be over-reporting the time by two minutes.

Although the watch will be consistent in telling the time, but it is wrong. In this case, the measurement is not valid. The measurement will be valid if they under-report the time their watch tells by two minutes. However, for a different view on the relationship between reliability and validity, one can see Salvucci et al.(1997). Furthermore, assessment of the test-taker's performance, particularly in cases where there could be many skills to be tested, may lack reliability. This could be due to different assessment factors. For example, the reliability of a writing skill test score may be affected by various factors such as the raters, the mode of discourse, and several other factors (Parkes, 2000).

3. 2. Validity and Fairness

One of the key issues in determining whether a test attains validity or not is how well and how completely it assesses or measures what it is intended to measure and how assured one can be that it is not measuring some other irrelevant factors. Thus, the validity of a test has to do with whether the test does indeed measure what it sets out to measure or achieve what it is supposed to achieve.

One may argue that fairness is actually an integral part of the validity judegment, as fairness requires that an assessment should be valid for all who take it. For example, an assessment may be invalid because it measures an irrelevant factor, and this same assessment may be unfair because this irrelevant factor is associated with one group of students rather than with another.

Validity of a test, as argued by Alderson et al. (1995), is of various levels. One level of validity could be in terms of the content of the test. Thus, if your learners have been taught various grammar issues such as different types of passivisation, relativisation, negation, among other things, it is impossible that you can test them in everything they have learned. This is due to the fact that the questions on the test will be selective and representative. Hence there is a need for attaining content validity of the test.

Another level of validity is predictive validity. This aspect of validity is concerned with assessing the candidates' abilities for specific target situations. Alderson et al. (1995: 182) give the following example of predictive validity. Student teachers of a language have to pass a test of language competence before they enter the teaching practice. Predictive validation of this test would be through following up those students who passed the test and getting their pupils and fellow teachers to rate them for their language ability in the classroom. The correlation between the initial test scores and the ratings by pupils and fellow teachers would be the predictive validity of the test.

Moreover, there are also other types of validity including: concurrent, construct and response validity. According to the concurrent requirement of validity, a number of issues have to be dealt with including finding a suitable criterion measure, making sure that tests given on different days are of the same difficulty. As for construct validity, Henning (1987) states that the purpose of construct validation is to provide evidence that underlying theoretical constructs that are being measured in a particular test are themselves valid. Finally, there is response validity, which is defined as the extent to which the test-takers respond in the way expected by test designers.

4. Types of Grammar Tests

Heaton (1975) recognises different types of tests that fulfill various tasks. In particular, Heaton refers to finding out about progress , achievement and placement tests. In fact, one may include other types of grammar tests such as exit tests, among others.

4.1. Placement or Entrance Tests
Placement tests, or entrance tests as referred to by Baker (1989,p. 101), are those tests that are usually meant to help organisers of a particular language course to sort applicants

into different classes according to their linguistic aptitude. The need for a placement test is particularly necessary when the applicants to a language course show a great discrepancy in their linguistic performance. As such, a placement test will help in distributing the learners into different classes of various levels.

One advantage of this test is that the learner learns more effectively. A group of learners will usually learn more effectively if they have the material or content of the course that is appropriate to their level. Another advantage is that the teacher can use time more effectively as there is homogeniety among the individual learners within the group. Needless to say that in the absence of homogeniety, some learners are bound to suffer in some way. If the teacher targets the learners of the low level, those of the high level will get bored and uninterested; and if he/she targets the learners of the high level, those of the low level will be lost. Because it is not an easy task to strike a balance in such a case, it will be more appropriate to classify learners according to the level of language they can be immersed in. This is the main justification for offering entrance tests.

4. 2. Progress or Achievement Tests
The focus in these tests is on revealing the progress that the learner has achieved so far. This is the kind of in-course achievement test and it is usually conducted for the purpose of measuring the
learning / teaching process because it affects the learner's as well as the teacher's future behaviour.

4. 3. Exit Tests
These are tests that learners usually take at the end of a language course. In fact, it is almost the case that a language course ends with a test. One of the objectives of conducting such a test is to decide whether the participant will get a certificate or not. However, there are cases where the exit test may have a greater significance. One such case is when this test serves as the entrance test for the next course. The role and form of this kind of test, as pointed out by Baker (1989:

104), depend upon whether the course is a general course or whether it is intended and designed to target certain goals, as is the case with ESP courses.

5. Variation in Grammar Question Formation

In this section, we concentrate on the different ways according to which test questions can be formed. More specifically, we look at the different types of questions that usually appear in language skills tests, such as error correction, sentence completion, word ordering, construction transformation, word changing, and sentence combining.

5. 1. Error Identification and Correction Questions

Error correction constitutes one important type of grammar questions. In cases where the test-takers are doing an elementary course, it is quite possible to test their grammar knowledge by asking questions where they are required to match questions and answers. Consider the following example taken from a language teaching textbook by Beaven et al. (1995: 25)

    1. Are they married?   A. Yes, they do.
    2. Do they like tennis?   B. Yes, they are.

In more advanced language courses, test-takers may be asked not only to identify the error but also to correct it. This type of question could be found in more advanced grammar courses and in writing courses. Consider the following question taken from Oshima and Hogue (1991, pp. 178-9):

    3. The following sentences show faulty structure. Identify the problem and then correct the sentences.

       - The United States, no longer considered a "melting pot" society by many of its residents.

According to this type of questions, the person undergoing the test will be given a sentence with four words or phrases being underlined, and given the letters (A, B, C and D). All the test-taker has to do is to identify the error in one of these four expressions. This is one standard type of grammar questions that is used in TOEFL tests, e.g.

4. In <u>several of his paintings</u>, Edward Hicks depicted the
    A

    Quaker farm in Pensylvania <u>where</u> he <u>spends</u> <u>his</u>
    youth.   B   C
    D

In TOEFL terminology, this pattern of question is referred to as "written expression," according to which the test-taker has to point out which underlined expression is incorrect usually due to a problem in its form. In the example above, the expression in (C) is incorrect as it should be used in the past tense because the time frame of the whole sentence is in the past, given that the verb "*depicted*", which is taken to be correct since it is not underlined, is in the past tense. It would be a good idea, if possible, to collect actual errors of students' writing of this type of question.

5. 2. Multiple Choice Questions

Nowadays, multiple choice tests are used on a large scale for the purpose of testing the learner's competence in general. In fact, this kind of questions is common not only in grammar tests but also in tests that focus on the subject matter such as sciences. The merits of such questions are still debatable because multiple choice questions have both advantages and disadvantages.

On the one hand, multiple choice questions have many advantages and test-makers usually resort to this type of questions for various reasons. First, learners can be tested in areas that are very narrow or specific and it is impossible for test- makers to ask test-takers to discuss a point in writing a paragraph or an essay. The answer is just a word or a phrase. Thus, multiple choice questions will do the trick and help test-designers in checking learners' grammar ability even in very specific grammatical points such as choosing the appropriate preposition.

Another advantage of using multiple choice questions in grammar tests could be their practicality as these tests are usually easy to grade. For example, it is a standard procedure

in some institutes or colleges, in Syrian universities, to tally up the scores in an automated manner within minutes of completing the test. Obviously, this method of testing and grading saves much more time than the other method that uses a red pen to mark the answer paper where the test-taker is required to answer questions by writing essays, paragraphs or even sentences.

On the other hand, a multiple choice grammar question may have some disadvantages. It may appear in the form of a sentence with some missing element. The test-taker will usually be given four choices (A to D) as in TOEFL tests or five choices (A to E) as in GMAT tests. All that the test-taker has to do is to decide which of the four or five choices can be an appropriate answer to the question. Let us look at an example:

   5. Marmots spend their time foraging among meadow
      plants and flowers or ....on rocky cliffs.
      A. gets sun
      B. sunning
      C. the sun
      D. sunny

In this example, the test-taker has to choose from the list (A - D) and of course the correct choice is (B). Here, the issue is one of parallelism between "*foraging*" and "*sunning*" because of the coordinator "*or*". This is one type of multiple choice tests.

However, sometimes a multiple choice question may test more than one skill as is the case in testing comprehension that closely relies on understanding the sentence. Here the test-taker shows knowledge of grammar through choosing the apprporiate meaning of a sentence like:

   6. I have a few friends.
   A. I have many friends.
   B. I don't have many friends, but I am content.
   C. I want to have more friends.
   D. I don't have any friends.

The purpose of this type of question could actually be to measure the test-taker's knowledge of grammar through reading comprehension. Such a sentence shows the semantic implications of the use of a particular grammatical form (i.e., there is a relationship between understanding the grammar of the construction and determining its meaning).

5. 3. Sentence Completion Questions

According to this method of testing grammatical skills, test-takers will be required to complete sentences with missing items. This sort of test could be more appropriate for testing functional rather than lexical or content items (i. e., items that do not make a significant contribution to the meaning of the sentence such as prepositions, articles, conjunctions, pronouns, etc.). One example of this could be:

> 7. A. Could you pass me .... salt please?
>   B. Mary hurt .... when she was peeling the orange.
>   C. I gave the book .... Susan.
>   D. He went home .... had his lunch.

This kind of questions is appropriate for classroom teachers who want to help their students develop an ability to produce good grammatical forms in context. We have to say in this context that it is possible in some cases that there is more than one correct answer, and teachers should be aware of this fact when they grade these tests. A way out of this situation is to use questions where only one answer could be possible, and this can probably be achieved by providing a context for the question, as this reduces the ambiguity of the sentence and leads to one interpretation.

5. 4. Word Order Questions

Another way of testing the test-taker's grammatical competence is to ask him/her questions to gauge knowledge of the rules of word order. This kind of test is propably more adequate for beginners. According to this test, test-takers will be asked questions that require them to rearrange a number of scrambled words to produce grammatical sentences. Let us look at the following example taken from Beaven et al. (1995, p. 8)

> 8. Put the words in the correct order:

name/your/ what's ....?

This type of questions is intended to determine the learner's awareness of the basic constituents or components of the English sentence (i.e. subject, verb, etc.) and the learner's ability to rearrange them in a wh-question sentence (i.e., wh-word, verb, subject).

In more advanced courses, such as TOEFL test, the test-taker's knowledge of word order is checked through providing him/her with four choices, each of which has a different word order. An example of this is:

9. A. What did happen at the end of the story?
   B. What happened at the end of the story?
   C. Happened what at the end of the story?
   D. Did what happen at the end of the story?

Furthermore, learners' skills can be tested not only for knowledge of word order within a particular sentence but also for knowledge of sentence order. This method of testing could be conducted through providing the test-takers with a number of sentences and asking them to arrange these sentences in an appropriate order as in (10):

10. A. She ended up doing BA in history.

B. Nigel studied English at Cambridge University.

C. His sister wanted to do so / the same.

It is clear that the aim of such a question is to assess the test-taker's competence in co-referentiality and cohesion among words and phrases within a passage (i.e. a set of related sentences). The sentence containing the proform "*do so / the same*" should follow rather than precede the sentence containing "*studied English at Cambridge University*", given that "*do so / do the same*" actually stands for or replaces "*studied English at Cambridge University*". The same thing applies to the relationship between "*Nigel*" and "*his*" in sentences (B) and (C), respectively and "*his sister*" and "*she*" in sentences (C) and (A), respectively.

5. 5. Construction Transformation Questions

In this type of grammar question, the test-taker is given a particular construction and is asked to transform it into another one. The new construction may maintain the same meaning as in active/ passive structures and clefting, or it

may lead to a change in meaning as in negation. Consider the following examples:

11. A. Mary wrote two letters.

B. (passivisation) ....

12. A. Peter saw the accident.

B.(clefting) It is ....

13. A. George likes fish.

B. (negation) ....

14. A. It is illegal to exceed 120 km/h when driving in Kuwait.

B. Exceeding ....

Here, the test-taker may be given a hint to direct him/her toward the way the sentence has to be transformed as in (12) and (14). It has to be pointed out, however, that although such questions do test the test-taker's grammatical knowledge in the relevant grammatical areas, they fail to test the appropriate context in which they should be used. In other words, question (12) above provides us with feedback about the learner's ability to use clefting, but there is nothing in this question to inform us about the learner's knowledge of when to use clefting constructions (which are usually used for emphasis).

5. 6. Word Changing Questions

This is the type of question that provides the test-taker with an incomplete sentence and a word and requires him/her to insert the word in the sentence after he /she does whatever form changes necessary to the word. This kind of test is usually convenient for testing the learner's understanding of English tenses as well as word forms in general. Let us consider the following examples:

15. A. When I was in London, I .... shopping every weekend. (go)

B. This room is .... than the other one. (large)

C. The old man walks .... (slow)

In (15A), the test-taker is given the verb in the infinitive form and has to change it into the appropriate form or tense in accordance with the time frame of the sentence. In (15B and C), he/she has to use the appropriate form of the words in brackets, given that (15B) involves a comparison whereas (15C) requires an adverb of manner.

5. 7. Sentence Combining Questions

This is the case where test-takers are required to join two sentences to produce a structurally more complex sentence. A typical example of this question is the process of relativisation. Consider the following examples:

      16. A. He works in Kuwait.

          B. Kuwait is an Arab country.

      17. He works in Kuwait, which is an Arab
          country.

The construction in (17) is the outcome of joining the items (A) and (B) of (16). Another example of sentence combining questions is when a test-taker is asked to join two simple sentences to make a compound or complex one, as in the following examples:

      18. A. The cost of education has been rising.

          B. Many students are having financial
          problems.

      19. Because the cost of education has been
          rising, many students are having financial
          problems.

Again, the sentence in (19) is the result of combining together the (A) and (B) sentences of (18). Sentence combining questions are probably more common in tests of writing, because connecting sentences in this way could be done for to stylistic variation. For example, learners of English are repeatedly advised to use (17) instead of (16) for stylistic, rather than purely syntactic or grammatical purposes. Choppy sentences in (16) are looked at as bad style.

6. Implications for the Teacher

Most teachers are well aware of the impact testing can have on their teaching. According to Backman and Palmer (1996: 33), this impact "has been referred to by language testers as wash back." Teachers have to teach what is relevant to the test and much classroom time is to be spent in preparation for the test so that the characteristics of the instructional programme correspond to test tasks. Actually, this wash back effect is considered by Thornbury (2000) as one of the six

criteria that are taken into account when assessing effectiveness.

The six criteria mentioned above also comprise the positive spin-off: teachers can make the most of grammar tests in class subsequently to review the specific components of difficult grammatical structures, and thus to make testing learning experience as well.

Brown (2005: 25) suggests that teachers may also take an interest in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each individual student in terms of the instructional objectives for the purpose of correcting an individual's deficiencies "before it is too late." To achieve this purpose, diagnostic tests are designed and conducted at the beginning or middle of the course /term to enhance achievement by promoting strengths and eliminating the weaknesses of individual students, and thus they help students to focus their learning endeavours where they will be most productive.

Testing learners' language abilities is not an easy matter at all due to various factors, some of which are test-related while others relate to the person taking the test. As for the test, we have already emphasised in section 3 above the role of reliability, validity, and fairness as basic requirements for any adequate test. However, there are also numerous variables that may affect the test taker's grammar performance such as when the person is taking the test, what mood s/he is in, and how much sleep has one had the night before the test. This indicates that grammar tests should not give unclear instructions or ambiguous questions or items that result in test takers guessing. In other words, teachers/ testers have to minimize these features as much as possible because this may affect the reliability of the test.

Furthermore, when considering the testing of grammatical competence of L2 learners, the teacher/tester should take into consideration a number of factors the most important of which is that the proper relationship between teaching and testing is one of partnership. Testing should be supportive of good teaching and should have a remedial role for bad

teaching. This effect may be immediate and it may lead to a redesigning of the course or changing teaching material/textbook or conducting the class differently. That is, testing should have a beneficial backwash or impact on teaching.

7. Implications for Future Research

According to McNamara (2007:79), "language testing is a field in crisis, one which is masked by the impressive appearance of technological advance." The fast development in information technology and its applications have facilitated the movement of many national and international language tests toward computer-based testing (CBT). Texts and prompts, with pertinent instructions, are shown on the screen, and the candidates are required to type in their responses. Despite the advantages of CBT, such as automatic scoring and the availability of tests on demand, the use of computers in language testing is expected to raise many questions of validity.

Differences in test takers' performance can be due to different levels of familiarity and interaction with computers. This is an important issue since, for example, some keyboards have different layouts to other keyboards and thus they can expose the test taker to a stressful experience. Is there any inference we can make about the test taker's ability to handle grammar structures presented on computer screen corresponding to the same test taker's ability to handle grammar structures printed on paper? Further research is needed here to address such a question. Stoynoff and Chaipelle (2005: 99), when describing the TOEFL CBT, state that "No large-scale research has investigated the effect of taking a test on the computer rather than taking the same test using paper and pencil, and until such research has been carried out, test users cannot know whether the two tests test the same construct."

More attention to the issues of testing learners' grammar performance in EFL is not only a challenging but also a necessary endeavor that will contribute to the advancement of the development and use of performance tests for EFL learners not only in Syria but also worldwide.

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TESTING GRAMMATICAL PERFORMANCE OF EFL LEARNERS

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1. Introduction

Testing is a means of finding out to what degree the learners have mastered various skills. Testing of language competence in a particular language involves testing the language skills that the learners have been taught such as grammar, listening, reading, vocabulary, writing, etc. Tests are not only concerned with the particular material that the test- takers have studied in class but also with the potential performance on all materials of that level. In this paper, we focus on testing the learners' grammar competence.

There is a kind of consensus that a test usually reflects the progress that the learner has achieved. In other words, a test could be an indicator of the success or otherwise of the teaching, the syllabus or the materials used. Of the many things that can be assessed in the performance of EFL learners, testing of the grammatical performance in particular has been of great concern to language testers and educators. This paper focuses on the testing of grammar, which can be looked at as one of the main aspects of language testing. We hope that this study will give more insight into the process of testing EFL learners' grammar performance. Needless to say, it is only through the study of learners' performance that we can have access to their linguistic competence. We believe that this goal is worth investigating.

2. The Objectives of Testing

A test should have a purpose. However, tests can be conducted to achieve various purposes. Some tests are done for the purpose of checking the progress that the language learner has achieved; therefore, they are referred to as progress tests. It is advisable that these tests should be conducted regularly. But the teacher has to be aware of the