

A New Self-adaptive Separate Grammar Test for Online Young L2 Learners

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Abstract

Grammar, a core component of the language system, is usually tested through writing and speaking in major language tests for young second language (L2) learners, such as Cambridge Young Learners English Tests. This, however, can not be aligned with students' learning needs in the later stages of acquisition. Moreover, the form of grammar, which is a better reflection of learners' explicit knowledge of grammar, should deserve more attention in language tests. Taken together, a proposal that grammar should be tested separately arises. Thus, this paper introduces a new self-adaptive grammar test for online young L2 learners. As mentioned above, using the correct form of grammar is vital for L2 young learners. Assessing grammar through four skills are too vague and inaccurate to provide comprehensive diagnosis of grammar knowledge and skills. Hence, the speaker decides to test grammar separately. Meanwhile, considering the methods and purposes of online assessment, the question type we choose in this new test is multiple-choice, through which we can know students' specific weaknesses and strengths. Furthermore, many tests used to assess students' English level is unified. Few tests can test students' actual level. This new grammar test is self-adaptive which can provide students with different questions based on students' last question's performance. It can assess students' performance more accurately. Besides, this self-adaptive test also can save a lot of testing time. Therefore, students' grammar performance can be accurately and effectively tested.

Keywords: separate grammar test, self-adaptive, L2 young learners

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Introduction

This paper introduces a new grammar test, which aims to test students' knowledge of form of grammar which is vital for English Language Learners(ELLs) who do not have an English speaking environment to reinforce their awareness of form implicitly and aims to make other testing service know the importance of testing form of grammar separately. This test also provides a way to know the specific knowledge whether students have acquired or not by labeling each choice with specific grammar knowledge. Besides, this new grammar test is self-adaptive, which provides students with tasks aligned to their knowledge level, making the test time-saving and reliable.

Body

Grammar, the structural glue, the “code” of language, is arguably at the heart of language use, whether this involves speaking, listening, reading ,or writing (Purpura, 2004). Grammar was used to mean the analysis of a language system, and the study of grammar was not just considered an essential feature of language learning, but was thought to be sufficient for learners to actually acquire another language (Rutherford, 1988). The grammar itself is essential not only in the language and but in students’ learning paths, which needs to be tested in the students’ learning process.

We can see that there are many mainstream tests for ELLs around the world, such as Cambridge Young Learners English Tests, Aptis, TOFEL Junior, Key English Test (KET) ,and the like. To know the nature and test items, we can try to analyze these tests. The test items in Cambridge Young Learners English Tests are listening, reading and writing, speaking. The test items in Aptis are grammar and vocabulary, reading, listening, writing, speaking. The test items in TOFEL Junior are listening, language form and meaning, practice, reading. And the last one, KET includes listening, reading and writing, speaking. From the test items in these tests, we can find that grammar is seldom tested or tested through four skills (reading, speaking, writing ,and listening). We may have a question about whether these tests can check students’ grammar abilities or not.

Then, I will cite some writings written by primary school students in Shanghai. This writing task requires students to write a composition named “A birthday party” with no less than 40 words and at least three kinds of sentence structure. Here are the writings.

1. *“Today is my birthday. I invited a lot of my friends to my birthday. At first, we sang a song, than we eat a birthday cake. It taste so good. At last, we whatched a film. We all had a great time.”*

2. *“Today is my birthday. It’s on the seventh of July. I have a green party. My friends comes to my party. My friends have Alice, Dinny, Peter, Kitty and Jill. We are very happy. We like a green party.”*

3. *“My birthday is July of seven. My birthday party am vray happy. I can playing pame. I like birthday party.”*

From these writings, we can find a lot of mistakes, including spelling and grammar. Most of these problems are grammatical structure problems. In fact, students know what they want to express, but they can’t write it in correct form. We may say that it is quite easy for native speakers to write about this topic ,or we can say, to combine

different words in a particular rule, but for second language young learners, it seems that it is not as easy as native speakers. Native speakers pick up grammar as they learn to speak. They use grammatically correct sentences because the speakers surrounding them speak grammatically correct sentences. While for second language young learners, they feel confused when they should deal with sentence structures because they do not understand or even do not know the form used in English.

Therefore, in order to know the exact grammatical structure problems, I advocate using the discrete-point test to test grammar separately. Discrete point tests respond to the underlying assumption that language can be broken down into its component parts and that those parts can be tested successfully (Lado, 1961). These components are the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and the different linguistic components (morphology, graphology, spelling, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary) together with subcategories within these units. Accordingly, tests are devised in order to assess just one of these components. From these, the discrete-point test can be used to test grammar separately to know the specific knowledge that students know or don't know.

Discrete point test refers to the testing of one element at a time, item by item. This might involve, for example, a series of items each testing a particular grammatical structure (Hughes, 2003). From the analysis of some mainstream tests, we find that the grammar is often tested through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. We should test students' certain grammar knowledge at one time.

In terms of these theories, we can conclude that the discrete-point test may be a better choice to know students' specific knowledge of grammar. Such an approach demands a decontextualization that often confused the test-takers. So we can test students' grammatical structure separately and objectively.

Based not only on the requirements of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) and other standards, but on the analysis of the data from more than two hundred thousand young English learners in China, we design a grammar table that includes useful grammar points for second language young learners. We conclude 91 grammar points that can be divided into seven levels and eleven parts.

Linguistic Points	Level					
	AC2	AC3	AC4	AC5	AC6	AC7
Noun	regular form	irregular form	uncountable noun and quantifier	possessive case	noun phrase	/
pronoun	adjectival possessive pronoun	nominal possessive pronoun	reflexive pronoun	reciprocal pronoun	indefinite pronoun: neither, either, both, all, none	indefinite pronoun: the other, another, others
preposition	Preposition of location: in/at/on/under/behind/ in front of/next to/between	Preposition of location: from/to/around/ inside/outside Prepositions of manner: with	Preposition of location: at Prepositions of manner: by, in Prepositions of Time: at	Preposition of time: before/after/about/round/a quarter to	Preposition of time: near, next Preposition of time: during/since/until/for	/
article/quantifier	indefinite article	definite article	zero article	any/some/many	a little/a few/little/a lo	
adjective	single adjective	/	regular form of comparative adjectives & superlative adjectives	irregular form of comparative adjectives & superlative adjectives	adjective as post-modifier	sequence of adjectives
adverb	single adverb: now, here, home	adverb of degree	adverbs of frequency	adverb of manner	adverb of time	/
modal verb	can	would	shall/should	must/have to	may/might	/
non-finite verb	simple gerund	infinitive as object	gerund	infinitive as object complement	infinitive without "to"	set phrase
tense	present simple tense	present continuous tense	past simple tense	future simple tense	present perfect tense	past continuous tense
voice	/	/	/	simple passive voice	passive voice	/
sentence	special question	exclamatory sentence	dual object sentence	object clause	adverbial clause	attributive clause

Every grammatical point at a certain level is easier than the previous one or more difficult than the next one, such as the uncountable nouns and quantifiers are easier than irregular form nouns and more difficult than the possessive case. Therefore, if a student makes a mistake of a particular grammar point at a certain level, he will go to the previous question, the easier one. And if he solves the issue correctly, he will go to the next question, the harder one. All these operations can be achieved on computers.

The question type of discrete-point test is the multiple-choice type which has been proven to be a better way to test students' grammar performance in discrete-point tests effectively and efficiently. Here I will list some examples from many linguists, such as Rea, Canale and Swain, Bloor et al. They all use the multiple-choice type in their assessments.

1. *How....milk have you got?* (Rea, 1985)
(a) a lot; (b) much of; (c) much; (d) many
2. *We went....the store by car.* (Canale and Swain, 1980)
(a) at; (b) on; (c) for; (d) to
3. *My friend always goes home....foot.* (Bloor, 1970)
(a) by; (b) with; (c) on a; (d) on

The first question focuses only on testing whether students know the usage of uncountable nouns and quantifiers. The second question tests whether students know the collocation of "go". Besides, the third question tests whether students know how to use the preposition. From these three examples, the linguists only examine a particular grammatical structure at one time, which is achieved by the multiple-choice type. Then, I will list some typical examples from this grammar test our team designed.

1. *I see three _____.*
A. leaf B. leafs C. leafes D. leaves
2. *There _____ a meeting tomorrow afternoon.*
A. will be going to B. will going to be
C. is going to be D. will have

3. In the past ten years, many good movies _____ in our country.
- A. were made of B. have been made
C. had made of D. have made

Through the answer to the first question, we will know whether students acquire the grammar knowledge of the irregular form of nouns or not. Also, through the answer to the second question, we will know whether students acquire the knowledge of the form of future tense or not. Likewise, through the answer to the third question, we will know whether students know how to use the passive voice and present perfect tense.

Besides, we also label every choice with certain grammar knowledge. Take the third question as an example, the option A is labeled by the knowledge of knowing the passive voice, but not knowing the present perfect tense, the option B is labeled by the knowledge of knowing both the passive voice and the present perfect tense, the option C is labeled by the knowledge of knowing the present perfect tense but not the passive voice, the option D is labeled by the knowledge of not knowing both the passive voice and present perfect tense. This can tell us whether students know the specific grammar knowledge through a certain question or even the choice.

Conclusion

The purpose of our test is to gather information about the knowledge level of the test-takers which in turn aids the testers in making intelligent decisions about how to further proceed with teaching. In other words, we use tests to determine the learners' current knowledge level and what should be improved. From this, we believe our test is objective, accurate, time-saving, and user-friendly. It can be said that the test is objective, it is easy to score and achieving reliable scores. Besides, we can know students' specific weaknesses and strengths from this test. So we can say that the test is accurate. Being time-saving, this test is self-adaptive by providing students with tasks aligned to their knowledge level. Being user-friendly, it will give students individual feedback reports.

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