
UNIT 21 TESTING GRAMMAR AND USAGE

Structure

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21.1 INTRODUCTION

At present the main thrust in language teaching is on the teaching of language as communication; to enable the learners to engage more effectively in natural "communication activities". To do so the learner must produce grammatically acceptable sentences appropriate for the occasion in the target language.

Although this is in total contrast to the earlier approach of learning grammatical patterns of the target language (with or without social contexts), yet the crucial role of the grammatical system in the successful communication of ideas and intentions cannot be denied. "The shift in emphasis in language teaching programmes has neither eliminated nor even reduced the need for teachers to assess their students' grasp of structural items of the target language. The requirement to assess grammatical competence is as necessary today as it ever was." (**Pauline H. Rea** : *An Alternative Approach to Testing Grammatical Competence*). It has been long accepted that the student's ability to recognise or produce correct forms is more important than his/her knowledge of grammatical terminology.

In this lesson we will discuss in detail both the **discrete** and **integrated** item types you can use to assess your learners' grammatical competence.

21.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the shift of thrust in teaching and testing of grammar;
- distinguish between discrete and integrated tests of grammar;
- explain the usefulness of different types of question to test discrete points of grammar;
- discuss the different types of integrated items for testing grammar.

21.3 DISCRETE AND INTEGRATED ITEMS

For many years, different aspects of English grammar like determiners (any, some), modals (may, can, ought to) or tenses (present continuous or past perfect) were assessed through single sentences.

For example :

Fill in the blanks as directed.

- a) Use appropriate words :
 - i) This year it has rained harder _____ ever before.
 - ii) You cannot leave _____ you have finished your work.
- b) Use appropriate forms of the verbs given in brackets.
 - i) The concert _____ when we reached. (just, begin)
 - ii) Mother _____ up the house before the guests arrived. (tidy).

Such isolated single sentences provided no context to test the students' ability to recognise or produce correct grammatical forms. Moreover, the items did not test the students' ability to use language to express meanings, attitude, emotions, etc. But such discrete items focus on the learner's attention on a particular aspect of grammar and make it possible for the learner to score marks (even in stressful conditions) in examinations.

Integrated items, on the other hand, provide a situation/context in which different grammatical aspects are tested at one go. Look at the following example :

Complete the passage below by writing one suitable word in each space.

Sohna : Jagdish Prasad is a boy of thirteen and serves food, tea, etc. to customers in a roadside hotel. His father, _____ tills a few bighas of land in his village in Bihar, is a small farmer. Poverty and drought forced him _____ his elder brother, who works in a factory, to seek means of livelihood here near Delhi.

Jagdish Prasad's day begins _____ 5 a.m. in the morning and he does not go to bed _____ it is 11 p.m. at night.

Thus the context clues enable the learner to derive the global meaning and supply the omitted items accordingly.

Check Your Progress

Notes : a) Write your answers in the space given below.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

1. Is teaching and testing of grammar important in the Communicative Approach to teaching English? Give reasons for your answer.

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2. How does a discrete item get its name?

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3. What is the most important differences between discrete and integrated items which test the grammatical competence of learners.

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Predominant among the item types which test discrete grammar points are:

- multiple choice items
- completion items
- word order items
- transformation items
- matching items
- error identification items

We will discuss these item types in the next few sections and in this section we will begin with multiple choice items.

Multiple Choice Items are constructed in two parts :

- the stem
- three or four distractors and the key

The stem can be an **incomplete statement** and the correct option completes the meaning, e.g.

Choose the correct word with a tick (✓) to complete the sentence.

- a) After I _____ the letter, I realised it was unstamped.
- A. was mailing
 - B. had mailed
 - C. had been mailing
 - D. mailed
- b) I _____ come to Delhi in February, but I am not very certain about it.
- A. must
 - B. will
 - C. can
 - D. may

The stem may be a **complete statement** based on which the student may have to ask a question. For example

Choose the right question with a tick (✓) to which the word(s) is/are in bold, the answer.

Bulbul and Meenakshi of Class XI D are planning and organising the Teacher's Day programme of this year.

- A. What are Bulbul and Meenakshi planning ?
- B. In which class do Bulbul and Meenakshi study ?
- C. Who are planning the Teacher's Day programme this year ?
- D. Where are Bulbul and Meenakshi going this year ?

The stem may be a **complete sentence** for which the correct answer has to be chosen. E.g.

"If it rains, the picnic will be cancelled".

This sentence means :

- A. If it rains the picnic will not be cancelled.
- B. If it does not rain the picnic will be cancelled.
- C. Unless it rains the picnic will not be cancelled.
- D. The picnic is cancelled because it is raining.

While framing multiple choice items we should be careful **not** to use a wrong grammatical form as a distractor e.g.

Choose the correct word with a tick (✓) to complete this sentence.

I _____ that you would bring some sandwiches.

- A. think
- B. thinks
- C. thought (this distractor is unacceptable)
- D. thought

Check Your Progress

- Notes :
- a) Write your answers in the space given below.
 - b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

4. What is wrong with the following multiple choice items ?

Choose the correct word with a tick (✓) to complete the meaning.

a) I will wait for you _____ the Rajghat bus stop.

- A. near
- B. at
- C. beside
- D. behind

b) Are you going to Calcutta next week ?

- A. I may.
- B. I will.
- C. I ought to.
- D. I needn't.

5. How can you improve item no. 4 ?

6. Frame your multiple choice items to test your learners' knowledge of grammar.

7. What difficulties, if any, did you have while framing these items ?

21.5 COMPLETION TASKS AND WORD ORDER ITEMS

Completion items are a useful means of testing students' ability to produce acceptable and appropriate forms of language. The omitted words have to be filled by the learner.

For example :

1. Fill in the blanks with **a/an** or **the** where necessary.
 - a) Paris is _____ capital of France.
 - b) _____ Mr. Nayar wanted to meet you.
2. Fill in the blanks with a personal pronoun. The person and number for each pronoun are given in the brackets.

Raghav and _____ (first person, singular) decided to clean the house.

Raghav insisted that _____ (third person, singular, masculine) would dust all the furniture. _____ (first person, plural) tossed a coin to decide.

In the lower classes, however, fill in the blank items can be made less difficult by providing a set of words at the end or some choice in the sentence itself. For example:

1. Fill in the blanks with an appropriate word.
 - a) There is a bridge _____ the river. (**on, up, across**)
 - b) An old man is sitting _____ the tree. (**under, over**)
2. Fill in the blanks with the appropriate words given in the word box.
 - a) Manish _____ do this sum. It is difficult.
 - b) Rahul _____ know my address. Do you ?
 - c) Find the answer yourself. I _____ tell you.

doesn't, can't, isn't, won't

Completion items, without given options, have the advantage of measuring production rather than recognition, testing the ability to use the most appropriate word in the given blanks e.g.

Fill in the blanks with appropriate **articles** and **prepositions** to complete the following text.

The lion safari _____ Nandan Kanan is _____ largest one _____ the country and covers an area _____ nearly 20 hectares.

J.B. Heaton (1988) in *Writing English Language Tests* provides an interesting example where an isolated sentence can be interpreted in a different manner and hence filled in with another set of correct prepositions.

As soon as possible the next day I sent my story _____ the editor _____ the magazine _____ which my best work usually appeared.

Heaton argues that it is quite possible to write a story **about** an editor and send the story about the editor **to** a magazine. As teachers, you must either be so careful that there can be no two answers or you have to give credit for all acceptable answers although you may not have **thought** of these while writing the item.

In **word order items** a learner is required to arrange items or parts of sentence in a meaningful and acceptable order.

For example :

1. Make a meaningful sentence by putting the words in proper order.
 - a) any questions/The elephant's child/asked
 - b) The crocodile/the elephant's child/for dinner/wanted to eat.
2. Make questions from these mixed words and phrases. Don't forget the capital letters and the questions marks.
 - a. mrs. nag/principal/is/of the school.
 - b. at the party/was/last week/she.

Check Your Progress

Notes : a) Write your answers in the space given below.
 b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.
 Fill in the blank with a suitable determiner.

8. I want _____ sugar in my tea.
9. How can you improve this item?
10. You must be familiar with substitution tables like the one given below.

She	goes	to school every morning.
He		
We	go	
You		

How is making sentences from this kind of a table different from a word order item?

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21.6 TRANSFORMATION ITEMS

Transformation items are extremely useful in testing learner competence in producing correct sentences. You are familiar with the following kind of transformation items.

1. a) Rewrite the following in **Indirect Speech**.
 - i) "Keep quiet, boys. Do not make any noise" said the teacher.
 - ii) I said to the teacher, "Please explain this question to me".
 - b) Telephone wires have been cut.
(Change the voice.)
 - c) There was hardly a young prince who did not desire to win her for his wife.
(Rewrite after removing negatives.)
 - d) Shall I ever forget those happy days ?
(Rewrite as assertive sentence)
2. He dismissed his old ministers and advisers. This was a foolish act.
(Combine these sentences into one beginning with. "It was foolish")

An important point which you should keep in mind while framing such transformation items concerns the marks to be allotted to the item. Let us look at this example :

Rewrite this sentence in reported speech.
He asked me, "Will you come to the club tomorrow ?"

What marks would you allot to this item ? Write it in this blank space _____ .

If you have written three then you are correct. If not, then you are wrong. Let us see why.

How many changes including those of punctuation do you expect your learners to make ?

Atleast six?

He asked me **if I** would come to the club **the next** day.
(Removal of comma, inverted commas and question mark (replaced by fullstop).
Introduction of if/whether, change in pronoun, change of adverb).

If for every change that you expect your learner to make you allot 1/2 (half) mark, you must have three marks for the six changes. Otherwise you'll find it very difficult to award marks to partially correct answers.

Check Your Progress

Notes : a) Write your answers in the space given below.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

11. Frame four transformation items testing your learner's ability to change narration, voice, sentence types and degrees of comparison.

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12. a) How many changes have to be made in the following item ?

The truck is being unloaded.

(Change into Active Voice.)

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b) What marks should you allot to this item ?

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c) What will your problem be if you allot one mark (1 mark) to this item ?

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21.7 ERROR IDENTIFICATION ITEMS

In an **error identification item** a learner is required to identify and sometimes rectify the error. Such items can be written in either of the two ways.

Simple Identification

Which of the underlined words is wrong in the given sentences ?

- a) I know a little Hindi, I can understand when my friends speak.
- b) I am worried that you'll be angry to me.

In which part of the following sentences does the error lie ?

- a) Mrs. Raghavan/enjoys/looking the children/playing in the park.
- b) Sun/is shining/brightly today,isn't it ?

Identification and Correction

1. Some parts of this mini-dialogue is incorrect. Identify it and write the correct form in the blank provided.

A : Ouch !

B : **What've** you done ?

A : **I have been hurting** my foot.

2. Correct the errors in the following sentences.

- a) I have not had some breakfast this morning.
- b) Bring me any water to drink.

Error identification items can only be effectively used when the learners have acquired some competence in the language. However, you can focus your students' attention on the common errors in the area which is being dealt with the classroom at that particular time, e.g.

The following sentences have **two** errors each. Rewrite the sentences after correcting the errors.

- a) A student who broke an window should stand up now.
- b) Earth revolves round sun.

Check Your Progress

- Notes :
- a) Write your answers in the space given below.
 - b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

13. Do you think that a student's writing or speech can be the most helpful source for error identification items ? Support your answer with examples.

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14. Frame four error identification items.

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21.8 INTEGRATED GRAMMAR TASKS

An important change has been brought in (especially in the testing of grammar) by the Boards which have introduced the Communicative Syllabus. Integrated grammar tasks, with a lot of emphasis on meaningful situations and global comprehension of the text used are being used. Four different task types are being used these days.

1. Location and Insertion of Omitted Words

In the following paragraph, one word has been omitted in each line. Mark the place where you think a word has been omitted, using '/'. Write the word you think has been omitted in the space provided. The first correction has been done as an example.

There/no doubt about it - fish is very good for you is
 Not only it contain protein and vitamins, as _____
 well as minerals such as calcium and iron, but it _____
 can also low in fat and calories. In _____
 white fish fat content can be as little as _____
 10% or 20%, and average serving provides _____
 at least one third of the daily recommended amount _____
 Niacin, which is vital for healthy skin. _____

2. Error Identification and Correction

The following passage is intended as a part of a **tourist** brochure, but it has not been edited. There is one error in each line. Underline each error and write your correction in the space provided. The first correction has been done as an example.

Nishat Bagh, Kashmir

Nishat Bagh, 11 Km. to the east of Srinagar is
situate on the banks of the Dal Lake situated
 with Zabarvan with the back. Water _____
 is supplies to it by the Harvan Stream. It _____
 commands a magnificent view of the lake
 but the snowcapped Pirpanjal mountain range. _____

3. Completion Items

Fill in each blank with one word that fits in the context. Read through the text once before you start filling in the blanks. (Remember that all the words will be grammatical/ structural words). The first one has been done for you.

Strange Silence at Zoo Lake.

The sprawling lake at the Alipore Zoo is no longer a favourite haunt for thousand of migratory birds _____ used to spend the winter months here. _____ a couple of years ago the tumultous cries _____ whistles of the "winter guests" from Siberia and _____ foothills of the Himalayas _____ be heard. But this year there is silence _____ the lake.

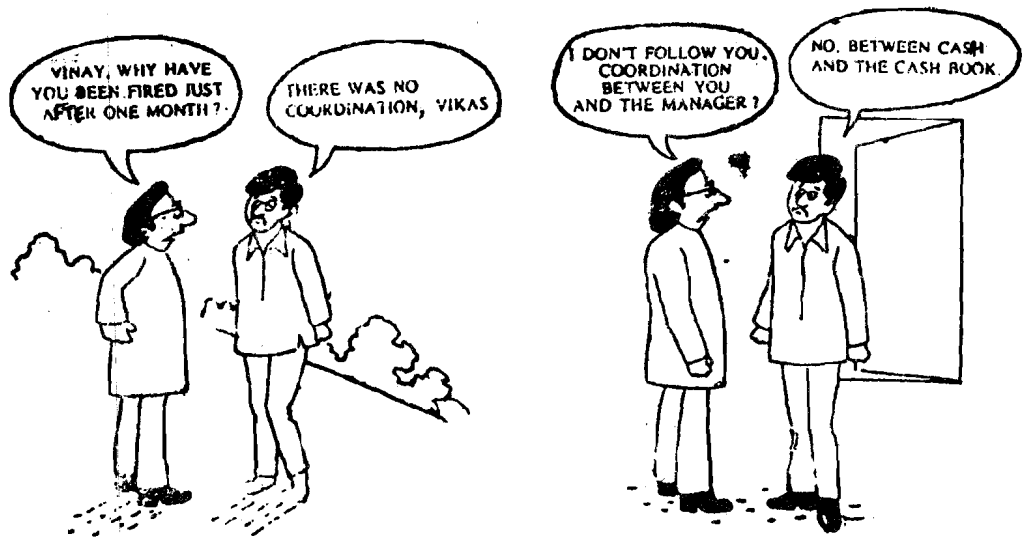
4. Controlled Composition

Below you can see a cartoon. Complete the following paragraph reporting what happened in the cartoon.

Vikas asked Vinay
 and Vinay replied
 At this, Vikas regretted

 Hearing this, Vinay

(If you look at it more carefully this is just another way of changing narration. An interesting but simple cartoon has been used to test the learners' knowledge of transformation instead of isolated sentences which do not have any relation with each other).



5. Cloze Tests

Another example of integrative approach in grammar testing is the use of **cloze tests** - which measure the learner's ability to negotiate meaning from the context despite gaps or interruptions.

In this kind of tests a passage is selected in which every seventh or ninth word is deleted and students have to fill in each gap using an appropriate word.

An example is given below :

Complete the passage by filling in the gaps.

Sometimes people sit up in bed and shout. Some people talk in their sleep, repeating phrases _____ during the day, or something else. They rarely _____ what they have said the next morning. Occassionally _____ may walk while they are asleep. Such sleep-walkers _____ clumsily, bumping into furniture. Their eyes may be _____ and they matter to _____. Unless they wake up they rarely remember anything the _____ day.

Apart from dreaming, the most common sleeping activity is _____. Snores usually disturb other people, but not the _____, although some people snore so loudly that they _____ themselves up too. The only way to stop _____ snoring is to wake them up.

In a cloze test each **acceptable** answer is awarded marks as it is not necessary that the learner would get the **exact** word which has been deleted. In the words of J.B. Heaton (1991), "If a reasonable equivalent is provided it should be acceptable".

Check Your Progress

Notes : a) Write your answers in the space given below.
 b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

15. What, from the students' point of view, are the advantages and disadvantages of the integrated grammar tasks ?

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21.9 LET US SUM UP

- The communicative approach to language teaching has not minimised the need and importance of grammar teaching and testing.
- The change in emphasis from learning of forms to language as communication has brought about changes in 'how' to test grammatical competence.
- Discrete items test single grammar points through isolated sentences.
- Integrated grammar tasks do not test one particular grammar point at one time. The tasks are always a number of sentences on a meaningful situation.
- Several items like completion, location and correction of errors or transformation exercises are common to both kinds of tasks.

21.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Yes. In the Communicative Approach accuracy and appropriacy have received more attention than ever before. Both are impossible to achieve without grammatical competence.
2. It tests discrete (single) grammar points through discrete (isolated) sentences.
3. Discrete point tests focus on one single area of grammar while integrated tasks do not focus on a single grammatical point. Such integrated tasks are more meaning-oriented and usually use small paragraphs, letters or other text types to test students.
4. All distractors are correct and acceptable.
5. By providing a picture in the first case and a context/situation in the second e.g.
 A : Where is the interview for this job ?
 B : At Calcutta
 A : Are you then going to Calcutta ?
 B : _____ etc.
6. Open-ended.
7. Open ended. (time consuming, finding plausible distractors would be common.)
8. Many determiners are acceptable (e.g. some/more/a little/less).
9. Specify determiners like fill in the blanks with **some** or **any**.
10. In word arrangement items one has to think of the structure and the meaning, but in a substitution table the structure is given. Only rarely does one have to make a choice for grammatical accuracy.
11. Open-ended.
12. a) A student must rewrite the sentence with four changes. (1) Supply an agent, (They, the coolies) subject verb agreement (plural verb - are) present continuous form (unloading) and change in subject object position - (the truck) at the end of the sentence.
 b) At least 2. ($1/2 \times 4 = 2$)
 c) The students will be either penalised for minor mistakes or marked too liberally.
13. Yes. You can pick up any examples related to tense, preposition or subject verb agreement.
14. Open ended (most common — double past tense - did wanted to go; pronouns - My father lost her car keys; or present continuous tense - I'm having two sisters).
15. Students whose competence level is high find the integrated tasks easier - but the average and the below average students do not always understand the nature of tasks. Also it is easier to take students to sustained writing tasks from such controlled compositions. In discrete test items, the students do the grammar exercises mechanically and do not transfer their knowledge to written work.

21.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Heaton, J.B. (1982): *Language Testing*, Modern English Publications Ltd., Great Britain

Heaton, J.B. (1991): *Writing English Language Tests*, Longman, Hongkong

Interact in English, Teacher's Book, (1993): CBSE, Delhi.