

An Insight into the Current Scenario of English Grammar Proficiency of Undergraduate Students and Need of Benchmarked Assessment for English Grammar in Pakistan

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Abstract: *It is a well-known fact that without proper system of assessment and valid assessment tools, teaching cannot bear any fruit. Assessing what we want to assess needs such instrument that can help and let us know that we have achieved our goals or at what level we have reached. Current review paper has investigated the current scenario of English grammar proficiency at Pakistan, its assessment system and need of a benchmark assessment and assessment tool. The world is craving towards benchmarking in every field of life to see their strengths and weaknesses, this is the time for Pakistan to decide and take measures to benchmark not only its industries, commercialism but its educational system as well.*

I. Introduction

It is an obvious and proved fact that despite being official language and second language, English has not found its base in Pakistan and majority of Pakistani students find it difficult to communicate in English language even after studying it since secondary schools (Butt & Rasool, 2008; Sarwat & Khursheed 1994). With many other relevant factors, the lack of grammar proficiency can also be regarded as the great hindrance in this journey towards achievement in English (Mansoor, 2010; Farooq, Uzair-Ul-Hassan, Muhammad, Wahid 2012). It is also seen in different studies that examination system of Pakistan does not assess the grammar proficiency of students specifically. There is summative assessment system which assesses overall English language proficiency at the end of the year or semester, in which reading, comprehension and writing is assessed with slight portion of grammatical exercises (Warsi, 2004). This examination is called as assessment of memorization and cramming by many researchers (Mahboob, 2012). This examination system does not tell us specific grammar proficiency of students at matriculation, intermediate, and under-graduation level. The grades obtained by students do not tell about grammar proficiency of students. ESL teachers do not know the proficiency of students in different skills which makes it difficult for them to design required instructions for students having different proficiency levels.

Knowledge may be important but it is an art to communicate it meaningfully, appropriately and accurately (Larsen-Freeman 2011). Grammar is the essential thing both in writing and comprehension, as it is the study of rules that makes a sentence structure (syntax) out of words and how word order is structured to convey meanings (Mahboob, 2012). Grammar, being the essential part of language structure and language learning needs special attention in teaching methods, syllabus and policies. To achieve that purpose, we need to see the current status of grammar by designing a benchmark test to assess the proficiency of students in it. There has never been specific test for grammar in Pakistan. In 2008, Government of Pakistan gave policy of benchmarked educational system but no work has been done up to now in benchmarking. (Shamim, 2010). Hence, the current paper will discuss the benefits of benchmark test and assessment of English grammar proficiency in light of prevailing models of benchmark in grammar proficiency.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the current status of grammar proficiency of undergraduate students of Pakistan.
2. To investigate the assessment of grammar proficiency at Pakistan
3. To examine the benchmarked assessment of grammar proficiency and need of it in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. What is the current status of grammar proficiency of undergraduate students of Pakistan?
2. What is the assessment system for grammar proficiency at Pakistan?
3. How significant the benchmark tests and instrument for grammar proficiency can be for Pakistani?

II. Methodology

This is a qualitative study that will describe all the facts based on the literature review pattern. All the data is taken from secondary sources.

Background of the Study

There would have been no more better description of English language than “tyrannosaurus rex” (Swales, 1997), as a “Trojan horse” (Cooke, 1988, cited in Pennycook, 1995, p. 39), and as the “gatekeeper to positions of prestige in society” (Pennycook, 1995, p. 40). Although the term was used as danger to the countries’ local language but it can also be used as English is the Trojan Horse, without which we cannot enter the world of opportunities both in terms of employment and in economic growth of individual and country, particularly in countries like Pakistan. In Pakistan the official language despite all differences, since its coming on the map of world, is English (Rehman, 2008). Therefore, all institutions of Pakistan, May they be private or public sectors, intend to appoint the people who are fluent in spoken and written English. The lack of fluency in English language is considered as the barrier in finding space in high ranked jobs or career opportunities.

III. Literature Review

Grammar is the study of rules and regulations of structure of any language. One cannot write or speak well without having proper knowledge about the syntax of a language (Nassaji and Fotos 2011). In Pakistan there is realization that without proficiency of English language, individual and collective development is not impossible (SPELT, 1986; Rehman, 2000). This need is felt more in private sector institutes rather than state controlled schools, colleges and universities (Shamim,2008; Rehman,2010). In private sector schools, there are some standards and quality ESL education but their fees are not affordable by the majority of Pakistani people. For them the source of education is government institutes where fees and expenses are not too much. Due to lack of trained teachers, low facilities and infrastructure, the practice of teaching English at government sector institutes is not satisfactory at all (Warsi, 2004). Teaching through traditional ways of grammar translation method, cramming of rules, texts and exercises has been the practice at Pakistani schools and colleges. When it comes to the examination, there are many flaws to be seen (Warsi, 2004). The syllabus, the teaching methods and examination contents have no relation with each other. The examination seems like assessing and examining cramming proficiency of students not any proficiency in ESL generally and grammar particularly. The grades are given jus to pass or fail the students or to compare them with each other. It does not show or give information about the proficiency of students in particular skill.

Benchmarking

Scot (2011), in his report “ Benchmarking: A literature Review” illustrates Benchmarking as a tool to improve performance. According to ECU it is a systematic and continuous process to compare two products, institutions, and their performance with their exemplars in order to improve their outcomes by identifying, adapting and implementing best strategies and practice.

Benchmarking is a process which tells us the strengths, weaknesses, problem areas. It can guide us towards the right measurements to be taken and finding solutions of the problems after they are noted. In education benchmarking helps to compare not only the standards of institutes but also compare the proficiency of students. Once the proficiency of students is benchmarked, it becomes easy for teachers and administrators to design policies and courses according to their proficiencies and needs.

In Pakistan, benchmarking is the need of time to raise the standards of English grammar as world is again going towards written communication rather than speaking. People prefer texting than calling on phone, emails, research and academic writing, internet discussions, social media usage, all has given heed to the need of grammar once again. One can have great accent of English, vast exposure to English but in academic writing and communication you cannot survive without having proper knowledge of grammar (Debata.PK, 2013). Therefore, I have focused on benchmarking English grammar of undergraduate students of Pakistan.

Status of Grammar at Pakistan

It is a widely known fact that one can have great accent of English, vast exposure to English but in academic writing and communication you cannot survive without having proper knowledge of grammar (Debata.PK, 2013). Various studies have been conducted on Pakistani students’ week English language skills and grammar (Shamim 2009; Rehman 2010, 2008; Farooq, Uzair-Ul-Hassan, Muhammad, Wahid 2012), the latter conducted a study on Matriculation and intermediate students to find out the writing difficulties of students. He found that lack of grammar knowledge, punctuation marks, vocabulary and spelling were the major difficulties for students of these classes. According to him English is the 2nd language for Pakistan and everyone needs to have acquisition of it for daily academic and professional usage. He further argues that teaching of grammar at primary and secondary is not up to mark. Teachers teach only through traditional methods such as

Grammar translation and cramming methods. That is why students in matriculation and intermediate find English and grammar as difficult subject and fail to meet the needs of examination of these standards.

Rehman, in 2010 conducted a study on the English Language Teaching institutes of Pakistan. He divided the institutes in three categories, State-controlled elitist institutes, private elitist institutes and vernacular institutes where medium of instruction is Urdu(Urban areas) or local languages(Rural areas). He gives view that elitist school give good learning exposure to students while the situation in vernacular institutes is not satisfactory, where majority of Pakistani students study. According to him teachers of these institutes lack training of ELT and teach students through grammar translation methods and old ways of teaching such as repetition of text and solving grammar exercises themselves for students. He blames such practices for the poor result of students' in matriculation and intermediate examination (Rehman2004;2010). He further illustrates, "English is also a hurdle in the very process of getting higher education at all. The rate of failure in the matriculation, intermediate and BA examinations is highest in English."

Shamim (2009) discussed this situation in detail and argues that in elite schools the situation is better but majority of Pakistani students study at public sector schools and colleges where situation is worse in terms of English teaching and learning. In comparison to private schools that are called English medium schools, the public sector schools have low resourced classrooms, and untrained teachers who mostly teach through grammar translation method and using Urdu or local languages as medium of instruction (Shamim, 2009; Umar-u-Din, Khan, Mehmood, 2010). According to Shamim (2009), elite students also get exposure of English language at home as well, whereas public sector school's students do not get such opportunity at home. All these things contribute in the poor result of these students in examination and securing high ranked jobs (Rehman,2004; Sarwat&Khursheed, 1994) .

Sarwat and Khursheed (1994) gave somehow the same findings in their study that students fail in matriculation and intermediate due to the lack of trained teachers in ESL. The teachers mostly use Urdu or local languages as medium of instructions and teach students through grammar translation methods, cramming and repetition of rules and exercises.

The Federal Service Commission of Pakistan & Sindh Public Service Commission in their annual report in 1998 stated clearly that most of the students fail in English subject because of less proficiency. FPSC is the institute which holds competitive examination for selection of high jobs in government departments. SPSC is the provincial body which selects candidates for higher jobs in Sindh Province. Rehman (2004) pointed out that most of these jobs are taken by elite class or students of English grammar schools and colleges due to the high proficiency of English and writing skills; while the chances for public sector schools or students are very low due to poor skills of English (Rehman, 2004; Federal Public Service Commission 1998). This should be noted that FPSC and PSC have papers of English mostly comprised of grammar sections.

Warsi (2004) in his article " Conditions under which English is taught at Pakistan" states that despite studying English for 6-8 years, the students are weak in communicating in English at undergraduate level. According to him lack of linguistic approach in teacher, curriculum mishandling, faulty examinations, defective methods, inappropriate books, and untrained teachers are reason of it. Like other scholars he also criticizes the translation method especially in rural areas. He further illustrates that learning grammar in chunks and sets of rules is ineffective method that is barrier in students' communicative competence.

Benchmarked Assessment and Instruments for Grammar Proficiency at Pakistan

All these studies show that not only the teaching and learning of grammar is weak in Pakistan but the assessing system is also erroneous (warsi,2004), which bears no fruit in students' academic and professional life (Rehman,2004; Shamim,2009). In examinations the students are assessed on their overall skills which are mostly based on cramming of texts, and exercises (Umar-u-Din, Khan, Mehboob, 2010). There is no assessment for students' specific skills or proficiency of listening speaking, creative writing or grammar (Warsi, 2004).

"Although there are many placement tests for undergraduate students at different universities of Pakistan but all of those consist of overall reading, writing and grammar skills. The grades obtained from those tests can not inform about students' grammar proficiency level. Hence a benchmark test of grammar can accurately stand for the grammar proficiency level of undergraduate students.

In 2008, new education committee was formed in supervision of then Education Minister Zubeda Jalal. The Committee came up with the ideas of new curriculum designs and benchmarked education. Steps were also taken to flourish English language at public schools, colleges and universities. Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, in favor of all these decisions passed a resolution of increasing credit hours of English at all public and private sector universities of Pakistan.

Significance of Benchmark Test for Grammar Proficiency

In regards the above mentioned information and decisions about benchmarking and English language flourishing, designing of a benchmark test would be of high importance. Such an intervention would not only

help the government of Pakistan in their decisions but would also contribute towards the learning of students who come from different educational backgrounds. Benchmarking test shows the student where they stand and what they need more to learn. Once all that is decided, then only can teachers know what should be taught to whom.

Benchmarking test is beneficial not only for low proficiency students but for high proficiency students as well. In mixed class education, if a teacher comes up to level of low proficiency students, it will have no interest for high proficiency students and they create classroom management and discipline problems. Time of high proficient students is taken for granted in these situations, but after benchmarking they can also study and learn things according to their needs and proficiency.

Hence, Benchmark test of grammar proficiency would contribute towards the betterment of university students' grammar proficiency enhancement specifically and teaching and learning grammar at Pakistan generally.

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