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GRAMMAR IN LOW-STAKES, INFORMAL TESTING CONTEXT – DO DIFFERENT TASK TYPES INFLUENCE PERFORMANCE?

Abstract: Grammar has always played an important role in foreign language teaching, learning and testing theories and practices. The phenomena of grammatical competence and performance, as well as the ways in what they are assessed in both high- and low-stakes contexts are extensively investigated. The present study explores the potential of informal, low-stakes, grammar-based test forms, by adopting a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach. The answers provided by a group of 66 undergraduate B2 students were collected and analysed, through a prism of three different grammar task types focusing on the same grammatical items. The main findings of the study not only revealed some strengths and weaknesses in demonstrating grammatical competence accordingly but also pointed to some links between task types and performance. In the ambience where high-stakes testing is dominant, the study provides a contextualised, diagnostic view of testing grammar and contributes to the understanding of students' grammar competence and the ways how to assess it.

Keywords: grammar competence and performance, foreign language, low-stakes assessment, different task types.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing demands posed on the foreign language teaching framework, towards the end of the twentieth century, language assessment gained a redefined status within the scope of applied linguistics. The importance of effective testing can be reflected in its purpose of not only defining the extent to which language learners acquire previously taught concepts, but also obtaining a thorough, valuable insight into the subject matter, with the goal of improving language programmes (syllabi, curricula, teaching materials, etc.) and teaching practices. Creating an effective language learning environment, among other complex issues and indispensable aspects of foreign language teaching context, implies formulating effective ways of assessing learners' language competence and performance.

Although the imperative in modern language teaching lies in developing students' communicative competence through reinforcing receptive and productive language skills, the role grammar plays in this process is still of much concern and provokes opposing views and discussions among linguists, coursebook and test designers, language policy makers and language instructors. However, there is no doubt that the practice of testing grammatical knowledge via mere memorisation of grammar rules, text analysis and translation methods, prevalent throughout the last century, was questioned, making a new path towards alternative approaches based on "what students could 'do' with the language" (Purpura 2005: 2). Consequently, the importance of teaching and testing grammar is indisputable in modern applied linguistics, but, due to the complex nature of language acquisition, the ways these are carried out still lack a consensus and need improvements in terms of efficacy and purposefulness.

One of the aspects of testing unavoidably refers to the use of testing forms, which have continued to change over time, with the ultimate goal that of always striving towards consistency, reliability, and fairness. In this respect, it has been claimed that "[…] fair and valid testing hinges on score comparability and score transparency" (Kane 2013, according to: Deygers, Demeester, Gorp 2018: 1). This paper investigates some aspects of language testing, by focusing on grammar-based test forms and the possibilities low-stakes, non-standardised tests provide for – in terms of:

– assessing students' grammatical competence
– their potential to be used as the diagnostic means to help both learners and teachers identify the areas where improvements are called for,
– the interrelationship between task types and results obtained.

2. GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE TESTING

A number of questions have been posed concerning the relevance of grammar and the rules it relies on while communicating in a foreign language – but it appears that they have remained unanswered to the full extent – given their bidirectional role. Language competence and language performance have always been two intertwined poles, despite the dichotomous nature included in their characterisations.

Though grammar-related rules differ across languages – no language is free from their mechanisms. The innate ability of humans to acquire the links language grammar is based on continues to receive undivided support from its proponents. It is known that not much effort is required from children to start acquiring (and then using) the rules underlying the principles of their mother tongues. At the same time, a specific order of acquisition of the mentioned rules does exist – and is being followed by children around the globe, native-speakers of different languages

(Chomsky 1957, 1986). Then again, equally sonorous are the voices of those who still doubt the existence of *Universal Grammar* (UG), blaming the lack of empirical, supporting evidence for that. One of the most prominent UG counterclaims is the one stating that languages differ "in profound ways" (Dabrowska 2015: 1; Dabrowska 2012). It is not only that – it has been concluded that even those who ardently advocate the existence of UG still do not say much about its very nature, i.e., "existing theories of UG do not fare very well in explaining surface universals" (Newmeyer 2008, according to: Dabrowska 2015: 7)[1].

Anyhow, according to language acquisition theorists, the mechanisms humans use when acquiring (and learning) a second and/or a foreign language do not differ much from those applied in a mother tongue acquisition process. Namely, the existence of an autochthonous ability of humans to start the language acquisition process (according to *nativists*) is undisputed; mapping, i.e. copying the patterns one is surrounded by is another component of the process (according to *behaviourists*), and finally – the environment we are a part of can strongly influence our success (according to *interactionists*) (Ryan, Singleton 2004: 6–30).

The notion of grammar, irrespective of the language it belongs to, is a rather complex one – and, at the same time, the notion that both language teachers and learners are highly concerned about once they have embarked on a language learning path. The necessity to acquire, and then polish, the grammar of a foreign language one is about to master has always been a negotiable, yet undisputedly important issue.

Introducing grammar and its mechanisms in a specific language, when it is not one's mother tongue, even in its most basic forms, can be a daunting task for both language teachers and language learners. It has always been a goal of both sides to facilitate the process and, at the same time, exploit its potential for communicative purposes to the fullest.

As previously suggested, grammar has never ceased to play a prominent role in language teaching theories, policies and practices – taking up much space in language coursebooks/workbooks, teaching manuals, and being a rather highly exploited topic of countless language workshops, seminars, professional development training programmes, etc. Both theorists and practitioners have strived to find the most suitable ways of teaching foreign language grammar principles – ways that are understandable and applicable enough for the needs of teachers, on the one hand, and for language students, on the other hand. Moreover, their efforts in the teaching/learning process could additionally be supported by the introduction of *pedagogical grammars*, the goal of which is to enable teachers to understand the mechanisms applicable to the target language and to offer "relatively accessible ways of describing complex, linguistic phenomena for pedagogical purposes" (Purpura 2005: 22).

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[1] More about present-day *defence* of UG: Mendívil-Giró 2018; Boxell 2016.

The claim that grammar is and should be regarded as an inevitable and undivided part of language teaching process (Batstone 1994, according to: David 2007: 66), and that one's progress in the foreign language learning process is, in fact, illustrated via the ability "to know the grammatical structures of that language and to cite prescriptions for its use" (Purpura 2005: 1), gained massive support in the past, particularly during the 1980s; anyhow, it could be said that the end of the 20th century not only identified a number of questions of practical relevance of grammar-based knowledge, but also considerable opposition aiming to de-emphasise the role of grammar. Be that as it may, its use is still extensive in both testing grammar and vocabulary (Dimitrijević 1999: 126–133, 139–144).

A number of forms are used for testing grammar competence – ranging from multiple-choice, limited-production tests, selected-response tests (Purpura 2005: 129–135), to more open ones that require more complex writing, e.g., a paraphrase, elaborate answers, the drawing of conclusions, making connections between the chunks provided, etc. Language teachers around the globe have exercised most of them – extracting both their good and bad sides, i.e., maintaining the quest for an ideal test of language practitioners in mind, so that we can say that there hardly exists a test (or rather, a testing method) in a monolithic form (Gergely 2007: 65). However, it appears that it is not an uncommon occasion on what teachers face a number of questions as regards the best test form to be used whether to rely on a ready-made test or design one which will serve the specific purpose. A body of research has shown that language teacher literacy (resulting from seemingly insufficient professional training) concerning test design, distribution, monitoring, feedback, i.e. LTA competence is a note-worthy issue and not fully developed (Vogt, Tsagari 2014). While there are guidelines to follow when addressing the CEFR-based descriptors (e.g. *Manual for Language Test Development and Examining*, Council of Europe 2011), multilevel groups, heterogeneous personality traits, learning styles, accompanied by the current needs of the curricula, put down a burden on teachers' shoulders.

Sometimes, language learners are prone to believing that some forms of tests (only by their very form) can facilitate the testing process, and are less demanding compared to some other forms – e.g., the tests that already contain a spectrum of answers to choose from (referred to as MC, i.e., multiple choice tests) could appear to be deceiving, and possess the potential to make test-takers feel more confident than when they encounter tests with "blank spaces", considered to require more effort and suggesting no hints. In this regard, some theorists also claim that "[…] the scores might be inflated due to test-wiseness, or the test-taker's knowledge about test taking" and that "[…] MC tasks are inauthentic […]" (Purpura 2005: 129). Moreover, the shortcomings, such as their inadequateness for a number of different language scenarios/contexts, as well as the fact that "[…] they leave untested a part of the construct" (Gergely 2007: 67) could frequently be identified within the descriptions of MC tests. It is worth mentioning the importance of the role of the

language teacher as regards MC tests usage; while MC tests are generally accepted as less complicated for marking grades, if we want to take advantage of their full potential – and make them serve an adequate purpose in the right way, this would require much time and effort on the part of a teacher. Still, notwithstanding the efforts of a teacher, the question frequently arises as to whether the limited MC format is potent enough to enable the teacher to obtain full insight into a learner's language competence, or – can it, actually, provide the test-taker with the opportunity to exert all his/her knowledge of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic language levels (Leech 1983).

The relationship between task type and performance is by no means a new idea. Foster and Skehan (1996) illustrated the relevance of task type and the influence on language performance, i.e. language characteristics on the sample of three different tasks (Narrative, Decision-Making, Personal Information Exchange) to which a group of EFL students was exposed. The study concluded that the mentioned types of tasks yield different levels of accuracy and complexity.

The study conducted by Storch (1998) shed some light on the task-type and outcome relationship, revealing that, while performing collaboratively, ESL learners of intermediate proficiency were found to be "less likely to […] articulate reasons for their grammatical choices" when dealing with multiple-choice and cloze tasks (Ibid.: 187).

The influence of task types, as well as the planning/design process, familiarity, complexity, etc. on language performance has not ceased to draw attention in recent times; Révész and Han (2009) pointed to task type and content familiarity in relation to recast practices, while Niu (2009) examined differences in language material used as the outcome of oral and written collaborative tasks.

Finally, despite the usefulness and necessity of various testing forms, test scores may, at times, appear to be rather impersonal – as they represent a mere percentage, i.e., overall achieved success, the extent to which certain language chunks have (or have not) been acquired – but do not, however, illustrate one's learning process, his/her styles, the methods he/she was exposed to, strategies he/she opts for, motivation, as well as many other personal attributes that do affect the testing outcome.

This research focuses on the analysis of the results obtained from a set of grammar task types taken by undergraduate students assessed to be at the B2 CEFR level. Through the analysis and comparison of results obtained from three different grammar task types focusing on the same grammatical items, this paper aims at exploring the relatedness between different grammar task types and students' grammar performance, and exploiting how the obtained findings can contribute to the discussion on the role of grammar within the domain of foreign language teaching, testing and learning.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1. METHODOLOGY

The research focuses on the analysis of a corpus of tests containing different grammatical items taken by a group of undergraduate students, with the aim to assess their progress achieved after four months of being exposed to language content at the B2 level. The main objective of this analysis is to gauge students' learning progress in terms of their grammar competence, identify which aspects of grammar have been successfully attained, and which need more attention in the next period, and pinpoint the relationship between the task types and the test outcomes.

During the first term of the academic year 2018/2019, a group of 66 first-year students attended English classes designed to respond to the principles stated in the CEFR document, using materials and doing tasks intended to strengthen and improve students' language competence and skills at the B2 level and help them move towards the C1 level. At the beginning of the term, the students took a standardised, pen-and-paper test – Oxford Placement Test 2 (Allan 2006), containing 100 grammatical items. The test served as an instrument to identify the students' grammatical competence, and according to the diagnostic Key and Levels charts, which came with the test, there were 52 students at the B2, 4 of them at the B1, and 10 at the C1 level. After being exposed to the grammatical content and various types of exercises for one term in Contemporary English Language 1 classes, the students took an informal, low-stakes test containing those grammatical items studied and practiced during the period of four months. The test was created by the teachers who monitored the progress of the students and had a clear idea of the concepts and aspects which should be tested.

The test contained the tasks whose aim was to evaluate students' knowledge of particular grammatical categories – *verb forms* and *tenses* (present and past), as well as the *articles*. The tasks are differentiated, and designed to show how well the students understand these grammatical concepts, and to what degree they can apply their knowledge in different task types, by formulating correct answers. The main assumption the researchers started from referred to the problem students faced when there was a need to demonstrate the use of complex grammatical items and structures productively, rather than to show mere recognition in a receptive manner. Therefore, we opted for a tripartite test format which included tasks where production on the part of the students was needed – 1) completion tasks with the language in use in a wider context, 2) transformation tasks and 3) error recognition and correction tasks. Grammatical items were carefully formulated in different task types so as to provide the criteria of reliability and validity of testing.

The method applied in this research is combined, and it includes both qualitative and quantitative data. The test results were analysed and described not only in terms of their accuracy *per se*, but also through a prism of the correlation of the cor-

rect answers, or errors, and the types of tasks. The results show which grammatical items and the corresponding task types do not pose problems for the students, and what aspects need improvement. The research results also help teachers understand students' grammar competence better, and define it more accurately through a set of descriptors defined for the B2 level.

3.2. TEST RESULTS ANALYSIS

The focus of the research is on the correct use of grammatical categories of verb forms and tenses, as well as the use of the articles. These were the items the students had had most problems with in the placement test, and they were incorporated in the syllabus for the first term. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

– how well the students applied grammatical knowledge, and
– how well they used these items in three different task types, which included the following:

- completion tasks wherein the grammatical items are used in a wider context, e.g., the text starts with the sentence *I .... (never / consider) myself to be a very brave person until last Saturday*, which sets the time reference and affects the use of some verbs contained within the text;
- transformation tasks, e.g., *I planned to meet up with my friend Paul, but then he called and cancelled* with the key word *going* to be used in the target sentence;
- error recognition and correction tasks, e.g., *She has seen him recently*.

During the classes, the students were exposed to a variety of exercises and tasks related to the use of verb forms and articles, and all the above task types proved to be the most demanding and challenging. Therefore, the focal part of this research refers to the analysis of the results obtained from three different task types testing the same grammatical categories – those of verb tenses and articles – and the comparison of these in terms of correctness and errors made in different task types.

3.2.1. Results obtained from the completion task type

Articles

The uses of articles were tested within a coherent text, so that the students could show how well they understood various and complex uses of the articles in

a wider context, which demands a deeper understanding of the meaning of the articles, not just memorisation of the rules. The total number of the missing articles was 12. The results show that the students have a solid mastery of the rules, and apply them in most cases correctly when these rules are applicable in a straightforward way. Thus, only few incorrect answers were provided in the following examples: *the first day*, *a three-week long festival* (mentioned for the first time), *the most exciting*, *the festival* (already mentioned earlier in the text), *book lovers*, and other similar examples. All these show a very direct application of the rules, without any modifications of their meaning or taking into consideration some kind of exceptions to them. Unlike these examples, the results of the analysis show that the majority of students provided at least two or three incorrect answers resulting from the misinterpretation of the rules in certain contexts. The proper use of articles in these situations demand a deeper understanding of the rules themselves and the new context when the concepts are required to be applied. The main challenge the students faced was to determine whether some noun or a noun phrase was definite, and whether the context wherein they are used provides *definiteness* so that the definite article could be used. Another moot point was to determine whether any article precedes a noun phrase containing an abstract noun, e.g., *Then there was … extra pleasure of meeting other readers.*

Verb Forms / Tenses

The students were given a task to complete three different texts, comprising coherent, wider contexts with the verbs denoting actions and states – the total number of missing verbs is 32. The analysis of the tasks which examine the students' grammatical competence in terms of the use of the present and past forms reveals several tendencies. The following table illustrates usages of present and past tenses, the number of examples found in the tasks, and the percentage of correct answers.

Table 1. Verb forms / tenses used in contexts and the percentage of correct answers

Usage/category	No. of examples	%
Clear, straightforward indicator/adverb within a sentence	18	75
Active and state verbs	6	80
Aspect	8	65
Less obvious reference to time or event, stretching over the text	4	20

The analysis of the answers shows that the majority of students (over 75%) use correct forms and tenses in sentences which clearly exemplify specific grammatical rules relating to the uses, and in those sentences which are not ambiguous in terms of the time when something takes place. If there was a clear indicator in a sentence which straightforwardly pointed to a certain tense, the students were rather confident and accurate in the use of the tenses. For example, only two

students made a mistake in the following sentence *She hasn't taken any photos yet*, while the rest of the respondents provided the correct answer. Another example of a high percentage of accuracy is the sentence *While he was waiting at the platform, he heard some strange noises*.

Students also showed a good understanding of the difference between the active and the state verbs, and could identify different meanings and uses of the state verbs. Thus, over 80% of the students were accurate in providing the following answers in sentences such as *I am thinking of taking a course or a seminar*, or *I think it starts tomorrow*.[2]

The analysis of the answers relating to the use of verb forms in context shows that the most problematic grammatical category for students involves aspect, particularly the perfect aspect. When the action or the state denoted by the verb extends over time, the choice of the aspect in English is determined by the nature and meaning of this extension. If the relations between two or more actions or states denoted by verbs were more obvious, usually marked by some typical adverb or adverbial phrase, the majority of the students noticed these relations and formed tenses correctly, over 65% of the students. For example, the verb *think* in the sentence *Ever since I noticed that, I have been thinking of signing up, too* was used in the Present Perfect Continuous form by more than 75% of the students. Another example illustrating a rather obvious application of the grammatical rules relating to the perfect aspect is the sentence *By the time I reached the station, the train had come even closer*. Over 60% of the students provided the correct answer in terms of the tense choice. However, almost 15% of the students recognised that there was some kind of dependence between these two actions, but made the opposite choices, and completed the sentence in the following way *By the time I had reached the station, the train came even closer*. This shows that they were aware of the grammatical rule related to the time dependence between the Past Simple and the Past Perfect, but could not apply it properly in the context.

The most problematic examples were those which illustrated a less obvious reference to some other time or event, i.e., when there was no explicitly stated word or group of words denoting this connection. The context wherein the verbs occurred was not sufficient enough to provide all necessary information for the choice of tenses, and demanded a more detailed and thorough reading, going beyond the sentence boundary, posed challenges for the students. For example, the sentence *The driver probably … (not notice) that the train … (approach)*, belongs to a wider context, which indicates that the train had already been there when the driver noticed anything. The majority of students (more than 80%) used the verb *approach* in the Past Continuous, and, thus, neglected the wider context, outside the sentence wherein it directly belonged.

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[2] Further reading about the usage of the Present Simple Tense by EFL (Serbian-native) learners in Prodanovic (2016).

3.2.2. Results obtained from the transformation task type

Articles

The results showed that the transformation task was more challenging for the students, particularly in terms of recognising less common uses of the articles. For example, the most problematic task was to transform the sentence *The weather has been really lovely lately*, with the key word *most*, whereby the majority of the students did not recognise the absolute superlative (Đorđević 1997: 234), and used the definite article in front of *most*. There were 4 sentences to transform, and the students provided 60% of correct answers.

Verb Forms / Tenses

The verb forms and tenses were also tested in a transformation task type which comprised 8 examples, and the analysis of the answers reveals which uses were easier to spot and which ones were more challenging and need more attention. This task type demanded knowledge of more specific and detailed uses of the verb forms and tenses. The sentences given to be transformed contained the meaning which included specific uses of tenses, and the accurate transformation implied recognition of these uses and meanings and production of their equivalents. The following table illustrates the usages and the percentage of correct answers.

Table 2. Verb forms / tenses used in transformations and the percentage of correct answers

Key words / usages	No. of examples	%
Adverbs and adverbial phrases explicitly stated	4	75
Less frequently usages with less obvious key words	4	50

The items which were easier for students to answer correctly referred to common illustrations of the present and past verb forms. Thus, the majority of the students (over 75%) transformed the sentence *The fire spread to the second floor before the firefighters arrived* correctly, using the key phrase *by the time* in the target sentence. The adverbial phrase explicitly points to some action or state happening prior to the other, which reflects the relationship between the Past Simple and the Past Perfect Tense. Students were also good at transforming sentences of the type *Peter was riding his motorbike when a cat ran out in front of him*, with the conjunction *as* being the key word to be used in the target sentence.

The analysis of the sentences found in the transformation task type shows that the students did not recognise all uses of the present and past forms. Thus, the sentence *I planned to meet up with my friend Alex, but he called me and cancelled the meeting* posed a difficulty for over half of the students, and they did not know how to use the key word *going* and write a sentence with a similar meaning. The

use of the Past Continuous for a planned but not fulfilled action does not belong to a corpus of learned and acquired rules ready to be applicable in a different context. Other errors made in this task type refer to the wrong use of the following key elements: *first* (*This is the first time* + Present Perfect, or *This was the first time* + Past Perfect), *play* (the infinitive form to be used in *used to play* with past meaning), *is* (*She is meeting them* – as a part of the arranged future plan).

3.2.3. Results obtained from error recognition and correction task type

Articles

The most problematic task type was the one including error recognition and correction, and it consisted of 12 sentences (containing 10 examples for each category – articles and verb forms), 6 of which needed correction – 4 sentences had two mistakes (one related to a verb form and one to an article) and 2 had only one mistake (either a verb form or an article). The students first had to decide whether a sentence was grammatically correct or not (focusing only on verb forms / tenses and articles) – if it were, the students were expected to write *correct* next to the sentence, without any changes, and if it were not, their task was to underline the wrong element and rewrite/correct the sentence. The following table illustrates the percentage of correct answers and the wrong ones in terms of overcorrection.

Table 3. Error recognition and the percentage of correct answers

Category	No. of examples	Correct answers (%)	Overcorrection (no.)
Articles	10	60	6
Verb forms / tenses	10	70	4

The students faced difficulties in both recognising the incorrect form/forms and correcting it/them. What characterises their answers is overcorrection – they underlined correct variants and changed them, often providing incorrect answers. The overcorrection was particularly present in sentences addressing articles used or omitted within certain phrases, for example, *He committed a serious crime and now he is in prison*, or *I have flu*.

Verb Forms / Tenses

The results show that the error recognition and correction task type also posed a challenge pertaining to the application of grammar-based knowledge, with the same tendency of overcorrection, present in sentences addressing verb forms and tenses, state verbs and certain irregular verb forms. For example, the students underlined the word *raised* in the following sentence: *He raised his voice*, and corrected it, providing different answers, such as *was raising*, *had risen*, *rose*, *has*

raised. Another example illustrating overcorrection was present in the sentence *The bus left a couple of minutes before I reached the station*, wherein the majority of students underlined the verb *left* and changed it into the Past Perfect tense *had left*.

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the test results shows a rather consistent pattern of correct answers and recurrent errors made by the students at the B2 level. The comparison of the answers obtained from the corpus of tests and the grammatical descriptors defined by the CEFR are to a high degree in compliance, since the results can be interpreted so as to confirm that the students have "a relatively high degree of grammatical control". The analysis of the results points out to the high degree of accuracy in terms of formation of verb tenses and explicit application of grammatical rules. The students also have a good understanding of contextual uses of tense and articles when these are clearly defined and recognised within sentences. The answers provided by the students also show that the students make "occasional 'slips' or non-systematic errors" (CEFR 2018: 80). The best example of these *non-systematic errors* found in the students' test results can be illustrated by different answers they provided in different task types which tested the same grammatical item. One such example is as follows: the same usage of Past Perfect was given in all three task types, i.e., an action completed before another past action. The majority of students (75%) provided the correct answer in the transformation task type because they were given the indicative key phrase *by the time*, while only 20% of the students provided the correct answer when the same usage was given in a wider context, where the relation between two past actions stretched over a longer text.

One of the most challenging aspects of the tested grammatical items refers to the application of grammatical knowledge in a broader context. Although the students showed a good command of the rules concerning the form and the use of the verb tenses and the articles, they did not manage to maintain the control over the use of these grammatical items in longer contexts. This problem arises from a complex notion of aspect in the English language, which differs from the notion of aspect as perceived by a Serbian language speaker. Since aspect in English is an important characteristic of verbs, and is concerned with actions or states stretching over some specific time, context is very important for understanding the proper use of the tenses of the complex and highly developed verbal system.

The comparison of the nature of errors made in different task types contributes to a better understanding of the students' grammar competence, and points to another aspect the students need to work on in order to enhance their competence at the B2 level, and move towards being proficient language users – that involving mastering of specific uses of tenses and articles, and recognising various uses in contexts which are not explicitly defined. Transformations posed a problem for the

students because they demand not only a deeper understanding of the aimed grammatical items, but also other sentence elements and the lexical characteristics of the elements involved. The analysis of the results obtained from error recognition and correction task type provides an additional perspective on the students' grammar competence – it reveals the weak spots which need to be worked on, because these tasks challenge students to evaluate what they already know.

The errors related to the past simple and past participle forms of certain verbs show a discrepancy between grammatical knowledge of past tense formation and lexical knowledge of these verbs for the given reference level. Namely, all the verbs described to be the source of errors, such as *rise*, *raise*, *lie*, *broadcast* and *dig*, are defined as verbs belonging to the B2, or even B1 or A2 level in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. This is a vivid illustration of complexities any language instructor faces when relying on the CEFR principles and descriptors – although a verb can be described to belong to a certain level, it does not mean that grammatical knowledge of such a verb also coincides with the same reference level. Thus, this research contributes to a better understanding of grammatical competence and a "degree of grammatical control" (CEFR 2018) at the B2 level, related to the specified grammatical categories. However, this research enlightens only one aspect of grammatical competence described for the B2 level, and can be supported and deepened by the study of other grammatical items.

These results support the findings obtained from the research investigating the nature of language acquisition, grammatical competence and assessment (Foster, Skehan 1996; Storch 1998; Vogt, Tsagari 2014), and they point to the conclusion that different task types testing the same grammatical items can yield different outcomes and performances. The implications arising from these findings show that, in order to consolidate and enhance students' grammatical competence, the same grammatical categories should be approached through a variety of different tasks.

The results obtained from the analysis of the tests also serve as a formative assessment because they can be used to check on the progress of the students, showing how well the students perform the tested items and what has been achieved. They are also *diagnostic-oriented* and provide the information to be applied in the future teaching planning.

5. CONCLUSION

Reliability is what all the participants in the teaching-learning process strive for, no matter what language segments are the focus of a test. Both language learners and teachers, and especially test developers, are fully aware of the fact that a well-developed, thoughtful, and thus absolutely reliable test – no matter what its

form is – leaves no space for guessing, but mere knowledge of the matter application.

In this paper we investigated the role grammar plays in modern language teaching and testing. The research we conducted endeavours to respond to the challenge imposed on language instructors how to assess not only what the learners know and how well they understand grammatical rules and principles, but also how they apply and evaluate this grammatical knowledge they possess. In the research we relied on a grammar-based test composed of different grammar task types testing the use of verb forms and articles in the English language. The analysis and comparison of the results show that the tested students' grammatical competence is largely in compliance with the descriptors as defined in the CEFR for the B2 level. What strikes most is a good command of the aimed grammatical items when used in a context which clearly and straightforwardly reflects the formal grammatical rules. On the other hand, the comparison of the results obtained from different task types illuminates the complex nature of grammar testing, which demands a variety of reliable testing sources in order to obtain a more comprehensive perspective on learners' grammatical competence and performance.

The research provides relevant information not only for the assessment of the students' grammar competence and their progress, but also a more detailed picture what areas to work on. The findings obtained from the analysis of students' performance results also provide pedagogical utility, being indicative in terms of what needs to be improved, which further steps are to be taken so as to create an effective language learning environment in which students can make progress according to their abilities and competencies.

The results of the study show that different task types – completion, transformation, error recognition and correction, testing the same grammatical items – verb tenses and articles, can yield different outcomes. The most problematic task type was to find a mistake(s) and correct it/them, and what characterised incorrect answers was overcorrection. The findings also imply that the students applied grammatical rules and knowledge in tasks which explicitly contained these rules, with indicative elements within sentences. Although this small-scale study is restricted in its scope, it shows that more attention should be given to exercises comprising interdependent sentences within broader and more coherent contexts, as well as less obvious grammatical indicators, so as to consolidate students' grammatical competence in terms of different usages of verb tenses and articles.

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ПРОВЕРА ЗНАЊА ГРАМАТИКЕ У НЕФОРМАЛНОМ КОНТЕКСТУ – ДА ЛИ РАЗЛИЧИТЕ ВРСТЕ ЗАДАТАКА УТИЧУ НА УЧИНАК?

Резиме: Граматика је одувек заузимала важно место у оквирима наставе, изучавања и тестирања страних језика, како на теоријском, тако и на практичном нивоу. Отуда, појмови граматичке компетенције (competence) и стварног учинка (performance) неизоставан су део истраживања у вези са формалним и неформалим облицима тестирања. Овај рад, применом комбинације квалитативног и квантитативног приступа, а кроз призму три типа задатака који проверавају знање истих граматичких партија, анализира потенцијал различитих врста задатака, на примеру одговора које је дало 66 студената основних академских студија, чији је ниво познавања енглеског језика процењен као Б2. Резултати су показали не само слабије и јаче стране када је у питању адекватна примена граматичког знања, већ су указали и на својеврсне споне између типова задатака и учинка. У окружењу где формално, тестирање „са последицама" превладава, овај рад омогућава један дијагностички увид у питање провере знања граматике, те доприноси разумевању граматичке компетенције студената, као и начина на које се она може проверити.

Кључне речи: граматичка компетенција и учинак, неформално тестирање, различити типови задатака.