

Variability in Language Performance : Verb Usage in Oral and Written Production

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INTRODUCTION

The variability in the learner's performance in the target language has been a subject of continual second language acquisition research. It has been suggested that variability appears in writings or in oral productions. In a written task, the learner's attention is focused on its form, while in a conversation, its content is the learner's primary concern. Krashen (1981) considers that learners may bring to their language production a knowledge of the rules. He further explains that when individuals focus on form, they monitor their language production by applying formally learned, consciously available rules. The variability in oral performance is explained in interlanguage studies. Kellerman (1985) and Ross (1979) suggest that a learner's interlanguage is very broad, either focusing on a language form or accomplishing a communicative task.

In courses where the 4 English skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are practiced, the skill performance variability in some students was a matter of concern for me. Some students performed well grammatically on writing tasks, but were unable to correctly produce the same grammatical structures in their oral tasks. Wishing to learn more about this variability in practice, for a one-year school term I conducted an investigation with a non-English major sophomore group of 34 students of the same school year and same department, both male and female. The purpose of this investigation was to assess the students' grammar competence, specifically with reference to verb phrases, which are the core of English sentences. I hoped that my project would give me feedback as to :

1. Possible variation in a learner's performance according to the type of test applied.
2. The percentage of learners who can appropriately use the correct verb phrase in both oral and written production.

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

I . ASSESSING THE TARGET LANGUAGE TRAIT

1. Test Application

Teaching grammar itself was not part of the program. The objective of this course was to develop the non-English major students' ability in the 4 basic English communications skills.

I wanted to maintain the course objectives presented in the syllabus. To encourage students to regard grammar tests as part of their course, I selected and adapted 2 narrative passages, 2 topic discussion passages and 2 conversation scripts from ESL textbooks that could be used as reading materials and later for conversation practice or discussion. I conducted 6 major tests. The assessment form was six quizzes. The students' command of five verb phrases was tested. Each test contained verbs mostly in (1) the present tense¹ (full verbs, especially in the 3rd person singular and primary verbs), in (2) the past tense¹ (regular (V-ed)) and irregular verbs), in (3) the progressive aspect¹, in the (4) perfect aspect¹, and (5) modal auxiliary verbs¹. The sixth test covered all the above 5 verb phrases.

Three types of tests were applied:

a. *Cloze test*

Two weeks before conducting each cloze test, I distributed handouts with a list of 30 verbs: 20 were extracted from a text and 10 were selected at random, completely unrelated to the context. With a two-week time frame, students would be able to check the meaning of the verbs. Thus, they would not come unprepared for the grammar quiz and subsequent language practice. The test was a passage with 30 blanks to be filled in. Twenty verbs were missing. The remaining ten sentences had to be completed with other lexical items such as articles and prepositions. The 30 verbs in the handout were printed in the quiz sheet below the text. The students had to find the one verb that best fitted in the sentence and make the needed form adjustment, for example, adding an auxiliary, when necessary. The total test score was 30.

b. *Multiple-choice test*

A multiple-choice test was given right after collecting the cloze test. There were 30 items. The same text and sentences with 30 blanks were followed by four choices. The total test score was 30.

c. *Blank completion test*

The third quiz was a blank completion test covering the same verb phrase. The test consisted of 20 items. The sentences in the test were different from those in the previous cloze and multiple-choice tests. The base form of a specific verb preceded each blank. The students were instructed to fill in the blanks with the appropriate form of the given verb. The total test score was 20.

2. Application Analysis

The 6 tests were designed to check the students' command of verb phrases. However, the nature of each test called for a different mode of operation. The cloze test demanded focus on the content of the text and knowledge of the way verbs function in a sentence. The multiple-choice type of test essentially involved recognition of the correct verb form from among four alternatives. The blank completion test focused on the production of the verb form.

In this investigation, percent scores were calculated based on the following criteria.

a. *Cloze test*

The non-verb entries were excluded in the score computation. So the total score was 20.

b. *Multiple-choice test*

Since the same text and sentences of the cloze test were used, the non-verb entries were also excluded in the score computation. Thus the total score was 20.

c. *Blank completion test*

The test covered only verbs, so there were no criteria changes in the scoring of the actual test. The total score was 20.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the percent scores for each test type and the students ' proficiency average score for the tested verb phrases.

Table 1 Results by test type and verb phrase

Verb phrases	Close test (%)	Multiple-choice (%)	Blank completion (%)	Total average (%)
Simple present tense	80	89	83	84
Simple past tense	65.5	70	62.5	66
Progressive aspect	74	84	75	77.6
Perfect aspect	40	55	43	46
Modal auxiliaries	70	75	65	70

The figures in Table 1 show that the results for the cloze and blank completion tests were quite similar, whereas the scores of the multiple-choice tests were higher in all 6 tests. The nature of the cloze and blank completion tests required linguistic knowledge, production and home preparation, which latter was to check the meaning of the verbs(reflecting a conscientious attitude toward study gradually disappearing among some recent students). In this light, the low scores were not unexpected. In the multiple-choice test the students were not asked to employ their writing skills. So the high scores may or may not reflect accurate measurement of the assessed trait. It is evident, however, that differences in test scores also reflect differences in individual proficiency levels. The 34 subjects of this investigation were not grouped in this course according to their language proficiency level. There were higher, intermediate and lower level students. At this stage, I assumed that the higher scores in the blank completion test belonged to the higher level students.

Summing up, studies in the language testing literature(Porter ,1983)provide evidence that test format might affect student performance. However, Porter explains that, given the limited knowledge concerning the effect of test forms, the employment of a variety of practical and reliable formats for testing each skill, including multiple-choice questions, is the only practical approach. Present language testing research enhances the validity of his statements.

II. ASSESSING THE TARGET TRAIT IN ORAL PRODUCTION

1. Application

After conducting the 3 quizzes, the text used in each major test, now in completed form (with the omitted words included), was distributed to the students for oral practice. The reading practice procedure involved silent, aloud and pair reading in the case of conversation. Lexical items were explained and comprehension of the content was checked and/or clarified through questions asked by the teacher.

Assessing passages

Expository and narrative passages

- a. Each student had to prepare a summary of the passage and use at least 10 verbs in the tested verb phrase. Students were not allowed to write complete sentences and paragraphs in the preparation period. I hoped that this rather severe restriction would gradually free them from depending totally on writing and help them develop the habit of forming English sentences in their mind. However, students were allowed to write only key words. I wanted to avoid overstressing them. Partial dependence on writing would encourage them to enjoy this activity. It was quite clear that the lower level students would not be able to complete this task without the use of writing.
- b. Students had to tape-record their summary before the end of the class.

Topic discussion passages

- a. First, students worked in pairs, asking each other questions on the passage topic.
- b. Then, they worked in groups of three or four people. Discussion followed.
- c. Time was given for each student to prepare a personal conclusion. At least 10 verbs in the tested verb phrase had to be used. For the same reasons given in the assessment activity of expository and narrative passages, the same policy of writing only key words was applied.
- d. Students had to tape-record their individual conclusion before the end of the class.

Assessing conversation scripts

Conversation scripts were used as model conversations. The conversations were situational and also presented functional features.

- a. Students were instructed to create similar conversations and use at least 5 verbs in the tested verb structure. Also, in this activity, I advised the students not to write the complete script of their new conversation. They were allowed, however, to make brief notes using one or two words. The idea was to free them from the habit of putting everything they want to communicate in written form, one of the learning objectives for this course. Pair oral practice was one of the main purposes of this task. Unlike a summary presentation, carrying on a conversation is an oral skill that involves a number of speakers. The presence of a conversation partner demands immense concentration on the part of the listener to

understand the message that is conveyed and to subsequently be able to produce an appropriate meaningful response. Especially in the case of Japanese learners most of whom come to college without enough oral English practice, this is a rather demanding type of classroom activity. Therefore, I reduced the number of verbs to be used in this conversation activity to 5 .

- b. Students were asked to tape-record their conversation.

2. Results

I played back the taped summaries and conversations and counted the correctly used verb phrases. Table 2 shows the results in percentages.

Table 2 Results by type of oral production

Verb phrases	Expository/ narrative passages (%)	Topic discussion passages (%)	Conversations (%)	Total average (%)
Simple present tense	75	70	75	73.3
Simple past tense	60	70	60	63.3
Progressive aspect	70	80	70	73.3
Perfect aspect	50	60	50	53.3
Modal auxiliaries	65	60	70	65

III . ASSESSING THE TARGET TRAIT IN WRITTEN PRODUCTION

1. Application

Assessing competence in use of verb phrases with the same input.

One way to compare the language performance of a verb phrase in both oral and written production is to assess competence using the same input.

- a. The week following the 3 quizzes(cloze, multiple-choice and blank completion), the oral practice and the recording assignment, I gave the students 10 minutes to review the practiced text. I advised them that they would have a written practice based on that text and that they would not be allowed to refer to the original version.
- b. With passages, students were asked to write a 100-word summary and use at least 10 verbs in it for the practiced verb phrase. In conversations, they were to write a similar conversation. The script of the two speakers were to contain at least 5 verbs in the practiced verb phrase.
- c. Students were asked to submit both the passage summary and the conversation script.

Assessing the practiced verb structure through a new output.

The course activities included a weekly journal assignment. Students were to bring a single page entry of 100 words on any topic of interest to them. This material was used in the following class for oral communication practice. The focus was on fluency, not accuracy. This

regular assignment was an ideal way to measure the production competence of the investigated trait. The assessment was conducted as follows :

- a. Students were to write a 100-word page entry with 10 verbs in the verb phrase practiced in class.
- b. They were to submit this assignment.

2. Results

The passage summaries, conversation scripts and weekly journal entries were checked, and the number of correctly used verb phrases was counted. Table 3 shows the results in percentages.

Table 3 Results by type of written production

Verb phrases	Expository/ narrative passages (%)	Topic discussion passages (%)	Conversations (%)	Weekly journal entries (%)	Total average (%)
Simple present tense	80	80	75	80	78.7
Simple past tense	60	70	60	75	66.2
Progressive aspect	80	75	70	85	77.5
Perfect aspect	50	55	65	65	58.7
Modal auxiliaries	70	70	70	75	71.2

IV . CORRELATION OF GRAMMAR TEST SCORES WITH ORAL AND WRITTEN PRODUCTION SCORES - THE PROBLEM OF VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

The tests were designed with the idea of checking the consistency with which the students could use 5 verb phrases in both oral and written production. Since the students' level of English proficiency had not been measured, the collected data in these tests show the learners' command of these verb phrases at the language level of the tested context. Data might have been different with texts containing more or less difficult vocabulary.

Table 4 shows the results obtained in Tables 1 , 2 and 3 . The average scores in percentage are shown from the highest verb phrase competence in descending order.

Table 4 Results of tests, oral production and written production in descending order

Verb phrases	Tests (%)	Oral production (%)	Written production (%)
(1) Simple present tense	84	73.3	78.7
(2) Progressive aspect	77.6	73.3	77.5
(3) Modal auxiliaries	70	65	71.2
(4) Simple past tense	66	63.3	66.2
(5) Perfect aspect	46	53.3	58.7

The 4 highest test score percentages show a mean difference of 6.4 percent between(1) the simple present tense and(2)the progressive aspect , 7.6 percent between(2)the progressive aspect and(3)the modal auxiliaries, and 4 percent between(3)the modal auxiliaries and(4)the simple past tense. Percentage differences rise to 20 percent between(4)the simple past tense and(5)the perfect aspect. The lowest test average scores involved verbs in the perfect aspect. Lower levels of proficiency for verbs in the perfect aspect prove that the students find this verb phrase the most difficult to understand when it is used, even in a multiple-choice type of test. It can also be assumed that the scores reflect that they did not have much class work on the perfect aspect before entering college. It should be mentioned here that the Japanese language does not have a grammatical structure similar to the English present aspect. This may be another reason for the difficulty Japanese students encounter when learning how to use this verb phrase.

Significant differences appear in Table 4. Test scores were higher than the scores for the oral and written production in verb phrases(1)simple present tense and(2)progressive aspect . Solving test problems involving verb phrases seemed easier for the students than performing oral activities or producing new written materials. In(3)modal auxiliaries and(4) simple past tense, oral production scores were also lower than test scores, but written production scores were slightly higher. On the other hand, scores in oral and written production were higher in the(5)perfect aspect. What could be a possible explanation for these results? Students may have scored low marks on perfect aspect tests because of the difficulty with the vocabulary level used in the test passages, possibly made worse because of lack of ability with regard to a particular verb phrase. As for the(5)perfect aspect, there was a score increase of 7.3 percent in the oral production and 12.7 percent in the written production. The review, study and task preparation time might have been well used to clarify or check unknown words and reconsider the use of this verb phrase, resulting in scores higher than in the tests. Better scores in communicative tasks are students ' signs of interest in improvement, a learning attitude that should be praised.

In my interpretation of the correlation data shown in Table 4, the question of data validity and reliability arises. In the literature on the concept of validity and reliability, Davies (1977) explains concurrent validity as test scores correlated with another measure of performance. In my investigation, oral and written performance assessments of the same tested context followed the grammar tests. With regard to reliability, Read(1981a, p.x-xi) emphasizes that ' It is generally accepted that a substantial, verifiable level of reliability must also be attained, if test results are to have any meaning. ' Moller(1981a. p .67) argues that ' Although reliability is something we should always try to achieve in our tests, it may not always be the prime consideration. ' Hawkey(1982 p .149) supports this idea with the following comment: ' If the construct validity of communicative tests is to be ensured, the reliability question is going to have to be accepted as subordinate. ' It is my belief that within the course program limitations, the minimum requisites for test validity and reliability were empirically fulfilled in the present investigation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The conclusions obtained in this investigation provide feedback on my two original questions: learner's performance variability according to the type of test applied and degree of appropriate performance use of verb phrases in oral and written production.

Tests measuring performance on verb phrases showed different results. Lower scores in simple past tense and perfect aspect mean they were difficult structures, especially the perfect aspect. Performance scores varied depending on the type of test. Scores of multiple-choice tests were higher in all tested verb phrases. The question remains whether or not this type of test indeed measured real ability, and to what extent the answers provided were not the result of pure guessing. If the students' English proficiency level was known beforehand, would the analysis of the applied tests show a different aspect of the learners' ability? The literature on this subject has shown that data on students' ability offer reliable and accurate information in the majority of cases. Unfortunately, all educational institutions in Japan have not yet adopted English ability testing to all students taking English communication courses. This hinders the learners' language improvement as classes and courses cannot be designed to suit the students' ability level, thereby hampering ability assessment and evaluation.

The correlation data of test results and oral and written production showed that integrating grammar tests with communicative function assessment made the whole assessment process more operational. The after-test class activities reflect realistic discourse processing. The scores in the oral and written production assessments of the four highest scored verb phrases appeared to be stable. Slightly lower scores in oral than in written production proved that oral performance demands more effort and is stressful. Only the perfect aspect verb phrase performance improved in the oral and written production. Review of the tested context and after-test activities proved to be effective in the process of learning this verb phrase. Why no improvement occurred in the communicative competence of the other four verb phrases remains unknown. With further empirical investigations, I hope to pinpoint in more detail the problems involved in the mastery of verb usage among Japanese learners of English.

NOTE

- 1 R. Quirk et al.'s verb phrases classification terminology. See Quirk et al.(1985)
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