ABSTRACT

Making informed decisions on both vocabulary and grammar testing poses significant challenges to classroom test designers. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to present the results of a review of the vocabulary and grammar classroom testing conducted in a university EFL program and to propose a model for this kind of review. Some of the findings of this review revealed strengths, including a balanced combination of both written formal tests and performance assessments as well as an emphasis on form and meaning in grammar and context-dependent and independent items in vocabulary. Some of the areas of improvement include a limited use of item types in the tests and broad vocabulary and grammar descriptors in all the rubrics that do not indicate the specific vocabulary or grammar students are expected to use at the level. The model proposed can be used by other language teachers and programs to guide the review of their own vocabulary and grammar testing practices and develop a better understanding on how vocabulary and grammar can be more effectively tested.
INTRODUCTION

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), an approach that many current language programs ascribe themselves to, often focuses on meaning and fluency, neglecting explicit teaching of vocabulary and grammar. According to Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence is defined as “the interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the rules of language use” (p. 6). CLT creates a real challenge for the testing of these two sub-skills since the communicative approach to language testing focuses on tasks where vocabulary and grammar are not the primary focus of assessment. The task, according to Read (2000), “has become the basic element in contemporary test design...[and] includes judging students’ ability to perform open-ended, holistic and real-world tasks within their normal learning environment” (p. 5). However, many classroom tests continue to include explicit, separate components of grammar and vocabulary (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Thoma, 2009). Furthermore, the making of informed decisions on both vocabulary and grammar testing poses significant challenges for teachers because of the multifaceted nature of these sub-skills and the principles of effective test design (i.e., authenticity, validity, reliability, practicality, and washback in Brown, 2004), considering that in most contexts, teachers are in charge of designing tests. So several questions arise: how should grammar and vocabulary be tested in the classroom? Should these sub-skills be tested separately or integrated as a part of listening, speaking, reading, or writing? Is there a way to create vocabulary and grammar tests that show real vocabulary and grammar knowledge and use?

In the last decade, little research has been conducted on the testing of vocabulary and grammar, particularly at the classroom level. This is in contrast to the fact that grammar and vocabulary are essential elements in learning a language. Therefore, there is a need for more research and discussion in this area. Consequently, the purpose of this chapter is to review the summative classroom testing of vocabulary and grammar conducted in an EFL program in order to have a comprehensive view of the way these two sub-skills are tested and identify strengths and areas of improvement. Furthermore, the authors propose a model for the review process which also serves as a guide for the organization of this chapter. To summarize the model, the following stages (see Figure 1) are presented and briefly explained.

The first step in the model is to review the literature. At this stage, it is important to compile relevant fundamental concepts on assessment of the target skill or sub-skill. This is necessary in order to identify the practices for its testing and to provide a theoretical foundation for the work to be conducted.

On the basis of the practices identified in the literature, a checklist is created or adapted in order to specify clear criteria for the review. In the case of this review, a checklist was created, which can be used or adapted to match different contexts (see Appendix). Additionally, a plan to conduct the review process is devised.

After the criteria for the process and the checklist have been finalized, the actual review of the tests in the program is carried out. The main goal of this step is to characterize the current testing practices in place. Additionally, the formal and systematic analysis of the tests provides reviewers with a clearer understanding of the tests in place and the way they connect to each other (i.e., the consistency in their design and the progression in their language complexity). From this information, strengths of the testing practices and areas for improvement emerge (step 5, analyze findings).

Finally, the last steps (share findings with test designers and make adjustments) are closely related. The findings are shared and discussed in depth with test designers as a way to explore the reasons behind the decisions they make in designing exams. The purpose of this is to raise awareness of these aspects
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