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## Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives

**Editor**  
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**Disconnect between ‘Competence’ and ‘Performance’**

**Dr. D. Sankary, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., P.G.D.T.E., Ph.D.**

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### Introduction

Every language is used as a tool of communication, and English is no exception to this. The learning of a language, therefore, involves acquiring the ability of not understanding, speaking, reading and writing individual sentences in isolation only, but using them appropriately in real life situations. In the Indian ESL classrooms, a common assumption among the teachers seems to be that the essential task of second language teaching is to teach a selection of words and structures, that is to say, elements of ‘usage’ (competence), which they presume will ultimately result in appropriate ‘use’ (performance) by the learners. But, in reality, it is not so. For, as the great linguists Bowen and Stockwell emphasize, “the most difficult transition in learning a language is going from mechanical skill in reproducing patterns acquired by repetition to the construction of novel, but appropriate sentences in natural social contexts” (Foreword to Rutherford 1968).

### Definition of “Competence” and “Performance”

The capacity of an individual to understand the underlying system of rules (grammar) is called ‘competence’. And the actual use of this knowledge to produce language in real-life situations is called ‘performance’. The individual’s knowledge of

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the system of rules does not include his knowledge of its actual use. Therefore, 'competence' and 'performance' are the two different aspects of language; one does not naturally lead to the other (Chomsky, 1965). While competence is concerned with a language user's knowledge of abstract linguistic rules, performance is concerned with his use of the rules in the form of his language behaviour (Widdowson, 1979).

### **Background to the Study**

In the Indian context, the principal approach of ESL teaching generally happens to be promoting knowledge of the linguistic rules to develop the learner's "competence" by means of controlled "performance". In fact, what is achieved through this approach is only the ability to compose correct sentences. Ironically, the ability to compose sentences is not the only ability needed to communicate.

Communication takes place only when sentences are used to perform a variety of acts of an essentially social nature. Therefore, people can communicate not by composing different sentences, but by using different sentences to perform different language functions such as agreeing, disagreeing, describing, explaining, enquiring, suggesting and so on. Thus the knowledge or ability involved in putting different language items together to form sentences, and putting different sentences together to compose paragraphs may be called "competence". And, this knowledge or ability has very little value on its own. Indeed, it has to be supplemented by the ability to know how sentences count in their normal use as a means of communicating (Hymes, 1971). Such a knowledge or ability is required to "perform" a language act so as to function effectively in a society. And in the Indian context, what the ESL learners need the most in order to be effective bilinguals is good quality "performance" in the form of effective communication in real life situations and not just high quality "competence" in the form of top grades in memory based ESL examinations.

### **Description of the Study**

A study was conducted among the ESL learners at the tertiary level to assess their ability to perform tasks 'using' their acquired knowledge of 'usage' and explore the relationship between the learners' 'competence' and 'performance'. A total of 146 under graduate students were involved in this study.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- a) To assess the ability of the study group to use English through the medium of writing
- b) To measure the various skills and sub – skills of the study group which lead to proficiency in writing English

### **Tools Used for Data Collection**

#### **Task I – Framing Sentences**

This task required the learners to produce five individual sentences using the given five words. It tried to measure the learners' ability to compose single sentences

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conveying appropriate meaning which involved the use of the following four constituent elements.

- a) Content – meaningful idea expressed through the sentence revealing cognitive ability
- b) Structure – use of syntactic patterns accurately with the basic structural elements of sentence revealing linguistic knowledge
- c) Vocabulary – appropriate use of the given words in individual sentences, revealing cognitive skill and linguistic knowledge
- d) Grammar – accurate use of different grammatical units like, agreement, tense, number and so on in a complete sentence revealing grammatical competence

### **Task II– Paragraph Writing**

This task was meant to lead the informants to the next level of complexity, i.e., producing many sentences in order to compose a well developed, coherent paragraph on their own on a given topic in about 100 words. This involved the ‘use’ of a higher order skill, ‘text generation’ (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) in which a coherent text is composed using appropriate lexical and syntactic choices. This was used to measure the learners’ ability to generate a coherent text, which is semantically relevant to the given topic, using its essential components like

- a) Content – expression of meaningful ideas appropriate to the given topic
- b) Organization – development of the main idea into a logically well organized, coherent text using appropriate connectives, discourse markers and other cohesive devices
- c) Vocabulary – adequate and appropriate use of a wide range of words, idioms and other lexical items to convey the meaning of the text clearly
- d) Language use – appropriate use of sentence structures and accurate use of the other linguistic elements like agreement, tense, number, articles, pronouns, prepositions, word order and so on
- e) Mechanics – appropriate use of punctuation marks including capitalization, indention and proper format

### **Assessment of Proficiency**

The performance of the informants in the two tasks was evaluated as per the following scoring rubric with the total marks of each task being distributed equally among all its sub skills respectively.

#### **Proficiency Test – Scoring Rubric**

<b>S.No.</b>	<b>Task</b>	<b>Marks allotted</b>
1.	Framing Sentences	10
2.	Paragraph Writing	10
Maximum Score		20

### **Results and Findings**

The study group’s proficiency in performing the two given tasks is as follows.

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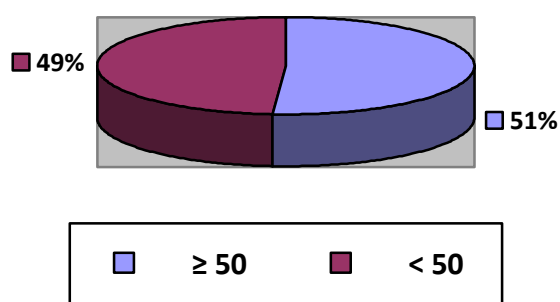
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### Study Group's Performance pattern in Task I - 'Framing Sentences'

Sub skills	Study Group's Performance Score			
	≥ 50		< 50	
	in Nos.	in %	in Nos.	in %
Content	118	81	28	19
Structure	44	30	102	70
Vocabulary	82	56	64	44
Language use	13	9	133	91
Overall	74	51	72	49

### Study Group's Proficiency in Task I - 'Framing Sentences'

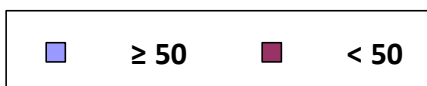
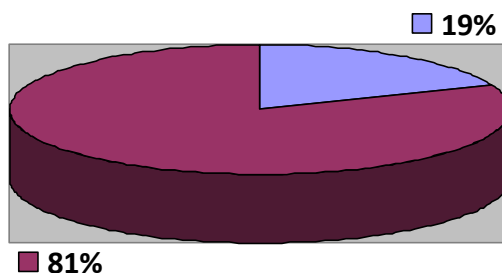


### Study Group's

### Performance pattern in Task II - 'Paragraph Writing'

Sub skills	Study Group's Proficiency Score			
	≥ 50		< 50	
	in Nos.	in %	in Nos.	in %
Content	83	57	63	43
Organization	45	31	101	69
Vocabulary	59	38	87	62
Language use	29	20	117	80
Mechanics	36	53	110	47
Overall	28	19	118	81

### Study Group's Proficiency in Task II - 'Paragraph Writing'

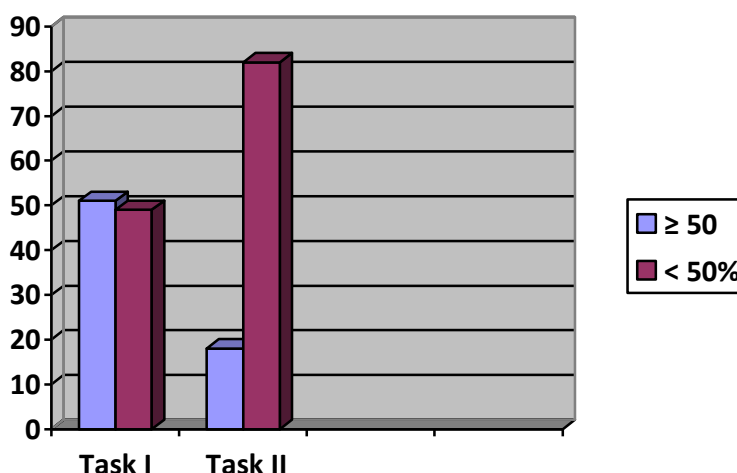


The results shown above indicate that the learners have performed the task of sentence making better than the task of paragraph writing.

**Comparison of Study Group’s Proficiency in Tasks I & II**

Range of scores (in %)	Study Group’s Performance Pattern			
	Task I		Task II	
	in nos.	in %	in nos.	in %
≥ 50	74	51	27	18
< 50	72	49	119	82
Total	146	100	146	100

**Comparison Chart of Study Group’s Proficiency in Tasks I & II**



As the table and the corresponding bar chart indicate, the study group has revealed a better proficiency in producing individual sentences, than in composing a free paragraph. This indicates that the learners are more skillful in producing individual sentences by mechanically reproducing their knowledge of ‘usage’

acquired through classroom learning than in generating a new text through creative 'use' of their acquired knowledge of 'usage' is poor.

## Conclusion

From the observations discussed above, it becomes evident that while the learners have acquired the 'competence' (usage) to construct individual sentences, their 'competence' has not got converted into the 'performance' (use) of composing a paragraph which is semantically appropriate to the given topic. This reveals the disconnect between the learners' 'competence' (knowledge of usage) and their 'performance' (knowledge of use). Thus this study proves beyond doubt that the 'competence' does not automatically transform itself into 'performance'. And, communication can take place only when a learner's 'competence' acquired through class room learning gets transformed effectively into 'performance' of speech acts in real life situations (Hudson, 1980).

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