

# Examining the Conformity of the GEPT Test Takers' Output to the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy

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## Abstract

Language Testing (LT) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have always benefited from each other in research. In that sense, the present study proposed to test the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (NPAH) on the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT). The NPAH is a generalization found among human languages and discussed in many SLA studies, which predicts the ease of relativization as a function of the grammatical role of the head noun phrase (NP) modified by the relative clause (RC): subject (SU) > direct object (DO) > indirect object (IO) > oblique (OBL) > genitive (GEN) > object of comparison (OCOMP). The GEPT test data, sponsored by the Language Training and Testing Center (LTTC) for teachers and researchers in Taiwan, are perfect for testing such a theoretical assumption on the ground that, theoretically, it is believed the test of the NPAH would be salient only if the learners' native language and target language are different with regard to the RC construction. The GEPT meets those requirements in that its test data come mostly from native Chinese speakers learning English as a second language and, furthermore, Chinese and English happen to have so-called "mirror images" in terms of the RC construction. This study assumes if clear developmental sequences can be found among GEPT test-takers' RC production across levels as predicted by the NPAH, it would be fair to claim that the GEPT test tends to differentiate EFL learners from the SLA perspectives.

In this present study, the speaking and writing test responses of a total of 170 GEPT test-takers across four levels (50 elementary, 50 intermediate, 40 high-intermediate and 30 advanced) were first transcribed and tagged and then analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis indicates that the GEPT test-takers' language output did not entirely follow the NPAH predictions in that SU and DO relatives were not used in a way that is predicted, but the use of OBL relatives seemed to have followed the predictions to appear at the later stages of development in English. On the other hand, the qualitative analysis suggests that the GEPT test-takers' RC production at different levels seems to weigh differently in relation to their language proficiency. In other words, the GEPT test-takers at the four levels did show progress in their RC production from level to level in terms of their RC attempts, accuracy and types, even though this progress did not entirely follow the developmental sequence as predicted by the NPAH. However, such a mismatch should probably be attributed to the test-takers' L1 influence or other linguistic features other than the test itself.

Generally speaking, the GEPT test is believed to work as a reliable assessment tool for anchoring test-takers' RC development over its four levels in the following ways: It is expected to see test-takers who passed only the elementary level produced very limited RCs. Those who passed the intermediate level might still be unstable (or unable) in producing RCs but they could still manage to

get their meaning across without RCs. As for the high-intermediate level, test-takers who passed this level are believed to be able to produce RCs but not without some slight inadequacies. Finally, if test-takers managed to pass the advanced level, then supposedly they should have no problem producing RCs and their language proficiency is higher than simply knowing how to make correct RCs.