

Lecturers' Perception on the Effectiveness of Continuous Summative Assessment on Evaluating Grammar Skills among Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Grammar can be classified as the most prominent element in the context of English Language. However, grammar has always been a problem among undergraduates. Although they are given a sufficient amount of input during schooling days, they still face problems in using them. This is wholly because grammar instructions are not done in a continuous manner during their tertiary education. Many lecturers find it difficult in making sure undergraduates are able to utilize grammar in a proper manner regardless of assignments or presentations as English based subjects in tertiary education are only offered till the end of their first year. It is proposed that summative assessment should be conducted throughout the duration of study in their tertiary institution. This paper highlights the findings from an interview among 5 English lecturers who are currently serving in various private tertiary institutions. All respondents have 5 to 10 years of teaching experience in this field. The categories for the interview questions were built based on lecturers' understanding on summative assessment and the needs in understanding grammar in using English. The findings indicate that lecturers are keen in having continuous summative assessments in evaluating grammar skills among undergraduates throughout their tertiary education.

Sub themes: Grammar Instructions

Keywords: Grammar, Lecturers, Perceptions, Summative Assessment, Undergraduate,

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment can be classified as the most important procedure in determining students' performance throughout their learning process. According to Black and Wiliam (2008) assessment includes all the activities that the educator and students undertake to get information that can be used as an asset in further altering their teaching and learning so that students are able to cope with planned lessons. Besides that, assessment encompasses teacher observation, classroom activities and discussion, analysis on students which includes their assignment and many more. In general, the purpose of summative assessment is to determine the student's overall achievement in a specific area of learning at a particular time—a purpose that distinguishes it from all other forms of assessment (Harlen, 2004). Test items that closely align with course objectives and actual classroom instruction increase both content validity and increase reliability so assessors can make good decisions about the kind of consistency that is critical for the specific assessment purpose (Parkes & Giron, 2016). Therefore, it is defined that summative assessment will be a good assessment to be produced when the item is well constructed accordingly as it is to determine students' overall results.

Therefore, continuous summative assessment should be conducted in evaluating the grammar skills of undergraduate's students as teachers can be the best source of student achievement information. According to Michael Swan, a popular freelance writer, grammar is not just sentence building, it is the "device" which designs the entire English Language. Without grammar, a person is not able to understand the fundamental concepts of the language. Thus, continuous summative assessment can be used in making sure they are able to have the knowledge till they finish their tertiary education and will also create a long-term memory of these skills in them.

In Malaysia, students are only exposed to grammar during their primary and secondary school. If we look at the school syllabus, students in school are only exposed to grammar once a week or sometimes once a month just to fulfill the basic requirements of the curriculum. This becomes worse when grammar is not given any importance in their tertiary education. According to Din (2017) more than forty thousand Malaysian graduates could not get jobs in the working sector because they were not proficient in English. This contributes to the drop of the country's economic growth due to the high number of jobless individuals.

Lecturers in tertiary institutions are having difficulty with undergraduates as they are not able to understand the basic concepts in grammar which they are supposed to have common knowledge during their schooling days. The cognitive capabilities in certain students in terms of acquiring the language has not changed even as they have moved forward in their tertiary education years. This eventually makes the students lose interest in learning English and become unable to participate in their lectures and tutorial activities.

The current situation in the tertiary environment is students come to class without the correct use of grammar. Most tertiary and private institutions only practice two or three subjects that focus on grammar. For instance, at a tertiary institution in Selangor, students would be attending preparatory classes for English which serves the purpose of reviewing basic grammar components. This is not a continual process because it eventually stops in the midst of their undergraduate program as there are no continuous measurements over the skills. Thus, this leaves a negative impact because students take it for granted and only learn it for the purpose of passing.

Summative continuous assessment should therefore be conducted during their learning period in their respective tertiary institutions. This is because summative assessment focuses on how one is able to achieve goals rather than determining what the goals are. Moreover, the lecturer's belief and attitude towards the assessment will definitely show an impact towards the undergraduate student's progression in their grammar. With the efficient execution of this assessment towards grammar, the lecturer will be able to provide sustainable feedback to students about their progress that points out their strengths and weaknesses which needs their attention so that they are able to progress further. This will surely help them keep on track of their grammar and improve their grammar proficiency. Studies have shown that the beliefs held by teachers or lecturers can influence their teaching of grammar according to various factors such as the years of teaching experience (Arshad and Nurusus, 2015; Nurusus *et al.*, 2015). However, it is still unclear whether the beliefs regarding the use of continuous summative assessment in teaching and learning grammar are influenced by factors such as teaching experience.

Thus, this present study seeks to identify the perception of lecturers on the effectiveness of continuous summative assessment in evaluating grammar skills among undergraduates. It is hoped that when the perception is identified, the assessment is able to be conducted for all the undergraduates so that they are well prepared when they are to face the real world individually.

The aim of this study is therefore to identify the perception of lecturers on the effectiveness of continuous summative assessment in evaluating grammar skills among undergraduates which is

the most prominent way in ensuring students are given the necessary input on grammar so that they will excel in that particular language.

The study aims to address the following questions:

1. What is the difference in perception between lecturers on the importance of understanding grammar throughout the learning process especially during tertiary education?
2. What is the difference in perception between lecturers on the implementation of continuous summative assessment in improving grammar among undergraduates?

1.1 Studies on Continuous Summative Assessment and Grammar Skills among Undergraduates

In view of the relationship between continuous summative assessment and grammar skills, it is indeed important to have the continuous summative assessment as an ongoing final assessment in terms of evaluating and providing input on grammar skills among undergraduates. Grammar teaches us how to build sentences, about the types of words that we use and when we should use them.

Besides that, it is also shown that having frequent summative continuous assessment in a particular classroom will help to accelerate the student learning process (Good *et al.*, 1983; Slavin and Steven, 1995). It is important for students to learn grammar properly and it is believed that the implementation of continuous summative assessment on learning grammar will aid students in understanding the skills better.

In another research on timing of continuous summative assessment, feedback has shown that students will be able to learn a particular skill if there is immediate error correction and if that particular assessment is on task acquisition (Kulik and Kulik, 1988; Clariana *et al.*, 2000). The implementation of continuous summative assessment will surely provide students with sufficient knowledge because they are given an opportunity to use the language that they are currently learning. Besides that, students benefit from receiving better descriptions and examples that help them understand the assessment criteria that are assigned to them. On the the hand, it is seen that older students especially tertiary level students respond positively to teachers' continuous summative assessment. They find the work motivating and are able to learn throughout the assessment process. Summative assessments can be stated for internal purposes like regular grading for record keeping, informing decisions about choices within the university, and nonjudgmental feedback motivates students for further effort. Employing these strategies promotes changes in teaching that extend the range of students' learning experiences. These assessment practices are more likely to have a positive impact on the assessment itself when teachers recognize ways that the strategies help them learn more about their students and develop more sophisticated understandings of curricular goals. Thus, the lecturers will be able to help them continuously as it is very important for them to be proficient when they go out and face the working world.

In the same vein, grammar involves the properties and processes that trigger the use of language. The association of this is that students need to be aware of the rules and the knowledge they have stored within their brain. This will help them to analyse the language and be able to use it with proficiency.

Nevertheless, in terms of viewing grammar as a process that triggers the use of language, it also clearly suggests that grammar is not a question of competence but is a question of performance. This statement reflects the statement stated by Drach (2011) in which he stated that learners can

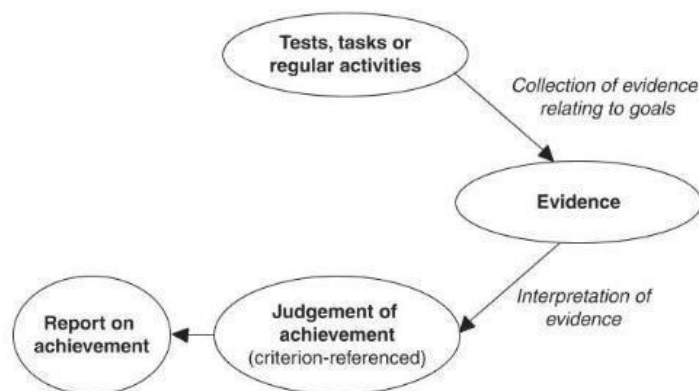
use the language creatively if they perform well in grammar. That merely refers to the ability of a person to effectively use his internalized knowledge to achieve the desired communicative impact which can be achieved through formative assessment.

Looking at all the studies and statements depicted above, it is essential to identify the perception of lecturers on the importance of integrating grammar and continuous summative assessment which will improve their proficiency in English language.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of assessment in educational settings dates back to the earliest school systems and it has a purpose to measure student achievement. (Gadsby 2012) argues that assessment is a very important tool to make sure that pupils have an effective learning experience. In addition to that, tweaking assessment to make it for learning (Assessment for Learning) “allows pupils to take ownership of their own progress and it creates independent learners” (Gadsby, 2012,p.12). Tamir suggested “to integrate assessment with the curriculum and to assess in more authentic contexts” (Pinchas Tamir, 1998). Gardner has defined assessment for learning as “the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there and therefore improve from their lack” (Gardner, 2012, p.3). In traditional settings, assessment is mostly used in its summative form as being something external and planned at the end of a learning experience. A big aspect which is related to assessment is feedback as a personalized; feedback is a boosting process that leads the pupil further down the learning path. According to principles of effective assessment mentioned by Harlen, effective strategies is needed to promote motivation and personal growth in the learning process and timely, constructive feedback is key to that (Harlen, 2006). Therefore, summative assessment is the key to providing good feedback to students.

Summative Assessment has as a purpose summarizing learning, but it also eventually helps in achieving good learning strategies and outcomes, therefore the distinction between formative and summative assessment could be fuzzy at times (Gardner, 2012, p.87). Nevertheless, Summative assessment focuses on reporting achievements and should be based on criteria in order to show the extent of realization of each learning outcome (Gardner, 2012, p.89). Summative assessments need to have “a certain level of dependability” and it could be monitored through quality assurance procedures for a sense of fairness and neutral representation of each pupil (Gardner, 2012, p.97).



According to Figure 1, summative assessments are evidence that need to be interpreted in order to finally judge student achievement. The assessment is the key to gauge students' understanding of a particular component. The evidence that is collected from the assessment will be judged and the next steps will be decided prior after the grading is done. Although there are plenty of questions in terms of reliability and validity of a particular assessment, it is stated that only by assessment, students' understanding will be able to evaluate.

Teaching English grammar effectively can enable the linguistic development and advancement of language learners by organizing their language skills sustainably and structurally (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). When the adequate focus is placed on form and meaning, learners will become capable of acquiring language skills efficiently to accomplish their targeted learning outcomes. Pagcaliwagan (2016) claimed that when English learners are given **constant exposure** to grammar, their ability to use those increases. Studies have shown that grammar skills are crucial for L2 language learners looking to augment their learning abilities. Nonetheless, experts researching L2 acquisition skills have been debating which grammar assessment to use for the last 40 years. While some believe that the best way to teach grammar is by teaching it. Instruction Over the last few decades, grammar instruction theories have gone through numerous revisions due to the on-going and long-standing discourse regarding the role of grammar in an L2 classroom. This has given birth to contradicting principles, methods, and ideologies. With all this contradiction happening around, it is indeed important that grammar needs to begin with assessments as that will be the easiest way to identify issues that the students are having. Teaching only will not be able to evaluate, and it is only with assessment, we are able to distinguish the outcome.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this study, a qualitative method has been used. Interview is used as the data collection tool (see Appendix A). There will be 10 questions that will be used to interview 5 lecturers who work in various private institutions with various levels of experiences to further variant the findings; There are 10 questions related to the major constructs of this research which are continuous summative assessment and grammar at tertiary level education. The perception is investigated thoroughly from the lecturers as they are exposed to various levels of students in their respective institutions. Each participant was interviewed over the telephone. They are also given the informed consent form (Appendix B) to further inform that their information will be kept confidential throughout the interview and the research studies. The interviews with the participants were conducted with the Google Meet videoconferencing. This interview could be recorded and transcribed with the Google Meet verbatim platform. Interview times varied and were scheduled at times conducive for both participants and the researcher. The researcher also took field notes during each interview.

The study examines how continuous summative assessment can provide immediate feedback for the teacher in evaluating a student's level of understanding. Therefore, the respondents are chosen according to their understanding towards continuous summative assessment and grammar. The data collected from participants will be divided into 2 parts. The first part will be illustrated to show the differences of likeliness or unlikeliness of the importance of teaching grammar approaches among them. On the other hand, a comparison between the lecturers on the implementation of continuous summative assessment has also been investigated.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lecturers are asked 10 questions from the interview question (Appendix A) prepared.

The first question is: **What do you think about the students' grammar competence among students in your institution?**

In this question, lecturers are expected to answer in regard to the grammar competence among their students in their respective institution. Majority of them answered that their competence is in the range of poor to average. The hesitation in Respondent 2 and 3 can be seen as a matter that needs immediate action to make sure students are able to absorb it as soon as possible.

Respondent 1 stated that: *"If you ask me based on my teaching for the past 5 years, I think it would be above average."*

Respondent 2 stated that: *"I think very few of them are very competent in grammar. The majority of the students do not have high competency in grammar."*

Respondent 3 stated that: *"Hmmm....Well, the student's here mostly comprise certificate students and most of them are SPM leavers. Their English is definitely poor. It baffles me because they have been learning English all their schooling life yet their grammar is poor. Things as simple as Articles, past and present, they get it all wrong."*

Respondent 4 stated that: *"Based on my 6 years of teaching experience, I've observed its average."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"I think it varies, depending on what programme the student is enrolled in and also on whether the student is a local or international student. Students who are in the TESL programme for instance may have a stronger level of grammar competence, and this is also the case with local students who have a higher level of grammar competence compared to international students."*

The second question is **Do you think students depend on and converse in their first language extensively most of the time which leads them to making many grammatical mistakes in English?**

In this question, the lecturers are expected to answer in terms of their observation in their course works and other related in class assignments that they have administered to their students.

Majority of them mentioned that their first language has influenced their mistakes in their work and conversation. In this question, many of them also had shown their concern over their first language influence.

Respondent 1 stated that: *"Yes...if you ask me, it is yes for it because if you ask me most of the students tend to do direct translation when they want to do their writing and also for speaking. So maybe this is what they have exposed themselves in the schools where they do direct translation. Maybe because this is a second language."*

Respondent 2 stated that *"Oh yes...Many of them do not speak English outside the classroom. They think in their native language and will have to translate to English when speaking and writing. Hence, they are bound to make mistakes influenced by their first language."*

Respondent 3 stated that *"It is definitely one of the contributing factors but not the only one for sure. Aaamm, it's probably the general lack of interest and the lack of awareness on the importance of the language. The student's attitude: the 'couldn't care less' attitude is what probably led them to the pitiful state of their grammar usage."*

Respondent 4 stated that *"Yes, they rely on their native language for translation."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"Not in the courses I teach – students only speak in English because they are going to be future English language teachers."*

The third question is: What is **your opinion over this statement? "Grammar incompetence causes students to have weaker grasp in English Language"**

In these questions, lecturers are expected to state whether grammar incompetence is an issue for students and majority of them are in favour except Respondent 3 who stated vocabulary is the issue.

Respondent 1 stated that: *"Okay, if you ask me for this particular statement, based on my experiences I would say students are always unmotivated to speak in English because they are afraid that they might have grammatical errors in the sentences in both skills...either writing or speaking."*

Respondent 2 stated that: *"I would say grammar competency is essential in mastering English language proficiency. So, grammar incompetence may lead to students having weaker grasp in the English language."*

Respondent 3 stated that: *"Ahhh, I am on the fence about this one. I believe grammar is important, but what's more important is the language itself. The vocabulary, the aesthetics of the language and the appreciation for the language. In other words, they should grasp English first and then grammar will fall in place or rather it will be easier to place grammar within the context. You can't learn language mechanics first before learning the language itself just like you can't be good at driving by learning about the car parts and engine systems. You need to learn how to drive first, then you can slowly identify and know about parts of your car. Haha, I hope I'm making sense."*

Respondent 4 stated that: *"Students are demotivated due to the anxiety in making errors."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"Not necessarily. Depending on what aspects of the English language is being looked at. For instance, a student could have weak grammar competence, but they could have knowledge related to theories of English language teaching, etc."*

The fourth question is: Do you **think students fail to express ideas in class due to their incompetence in grammar which eventually influences their pronunciation?**

Lecturers are requested to look at the comparison between pronunciation and grammar and overall, all of them do agree to the fact that pronunciation is affected by grammar except there is an additional idea from Respondent 3 stating that it is also because of vocabulary.

Respondent 1 stated that: *"Yes, it will be influencing their pronunciation because they might be nervous in delivering their ideas because they tend to think about the grammatical errors that they might make."*

Respondent 2 stated that: *"I think students fail to express ideas in class mostly due to their lack of vocabulary. Good grammar will allow them to express their ideas effectively. So, students will need both vocabulary and grammar to be able to express ideas successfully."*

Respondent 3 stated that: *"Again, I have a different take on this. Student's fail to express ideas because they lack vocabulary and not grammar. I believe if they had the right words for it, they could muster up a sentence to express themselves. At that point they aren't looking to be grammatically right. They are most afraid of saying the wrong thing. And ermmm no I don't think grammar influences pronunciation. No."*

Respondent 4 stated that: *"No, as some of them can provide one-word ideas and it doesn't affect their speech."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"Not necessarily. Perhaps some students who are bolder and have less language anxiety might still be open to expressing ideas in class in spite of their grammar incompetence."*

The fifth question is on **Do you think grammar components are not tested sufficiently in their tertiary education?**

Lecturers are to state the frequency of having assessment for grammar. Many of them tend to have it in minimal numbers and this eventually draws to the gap of not having grammar tested sufficiently in tertiary education.

Respondent 1 stated that: *"For this question based on my opinion, it is yes for languages-based subjects where we used look into grammar components, but I don't think so other core subjects of other fields are looking into this component much."*

Respondent 2 stated that: *"Unless the students are taking an English major, grammar components are not directly tested."*

Respondent 3 stated that: *"Now this I agree. Grammar is hardly tested at tertiary level but only because we expect them to come in with enough proficiency and knowledge on this because they have been learning this language at school for what....almost 11 years. I also believe that tertiary level is not the best place to test grammar components. If we speak about having a class just to brush their rough edges up, then perhaps. Testing them hmmm....i don't know if we should."*

Respondent 4 stated that: *"It is tested only during the English lessons."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"In the courses I teach, grammar components are not really the focus and play a more minor role."*

The sixth question is on **Are you aware of the types of assessments? Mainly summative and formative assessment?**

This question focuses on whether lecturers know about both the assessment and they are aware of the types of assessments.

Respondent 1 stated that *"Yes. Formative...usually we monitor the students' learning by providing ongoing assessment and feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning. Summative is basically to evaluate students' learning at the end of an instructional unit by comparing it against some standard or benchmark."*

Respondent 2 stated that *"Yes, I am aware of both the types that you have mentioned."*

Respondent 3 stated that: *"Yes, I am aware of these assessments. Teachers and lecturers have been working on these types of assessments for the longest time."*

Respondent 4 stated that: *Yes. Formative is ongoing feedback likewise tutorials provided to the students whereas summative assesses the entire unit."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"Yes, I am."*

The seventh question is on **Do you think conducting continuous summative assessment helps students to solve their problems in relation to grammar?**

This question focuses on whether continuous summative assessment is feasible to improve students' grammar proficiency and they believe that it can help students if let's say it is done effectively.

Respondent 1 stated that: *"Yes, if you ask me, it might help students to improve their language and their confidence in both skills which are speaking and writing."*

Respondent 2 stated that: *"I believe conducting assessments alone will not help the students in solving their problems in English grammar. They will have to do a lot of work on their own and always be mindful of the grammar aspects they have learnt previously when they are constructing sentences in their speech and writing."*

Respondent 3 stated that: *"I don't know realistically how this may be feasible, but if it can be done then I would really recommend it. The feedback from the assessment will help the student identify and rectify their issues with grammar."*

Respondent 4 stated that: *"Yes, students will be aware of the errors and work on it accordingly. It's helpful for the long term."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"It depends on whether the focus of the assessment is on grammar. Also depends on whether the feedback given on these assessments touch on aspects related to grammar."*

The eighth question is on **Continuous assessments help teachers to track students' grammatical problems and will be able to provide feedback accordingly. Provide your opinion.**

This question actually requests lecturers to answer whether continuous assessment is a good way to monitor students' achievement. Everyone agrees to it.

Respondent 1 stated that: *"For this question I would yes, so that the lecturers can prepare proper assessment to help the students."*

Respondent 2 stated that: *"Yes, it will give the teachers a chance to gauge the students' competency in grammatical aspects and provide appropriate feedback to the students."*

Respondent 3 stated that: *"Definitely. All assessments that are continuous, formative or summative gives students and teachers enough insights into a situation. It's like diagnostics. Only with assessments will you know what are the areas that the students are struggling with. You could almost get a pattern. Students always leave a trail. Haha, and when teachers find this out, they will nab that grammar issue and deficiency by its neck. Students will also be able to see for themselves where they are weak at and perhaps do some self-study or exercises to address the issue. Teachers could also provide suggestions and extra exercise for the student"*

Respondent 4 stated that: *"Yes, for the preparation of better assessments which further helps learners in reducing and recognising errors made."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"Somewhat similar answer to the previous question. Depends on what is the focus of the assignment. For instance, in some subjects I teach relating to the teaching of literature, grammar is not the focus."*

The ninth question is on **Do you always provide an assessment which gives importance to grammar?**

This question requires the lecturer to provide whether they have done assessment in terms of grammar thoroughly. Most of them stated they have but very minimal.

Respondent 1 stated that: *"Based on my experience I would say yes because I am teaching language papers. So, the first component that we will be looking into would be grammar because it is a language-based subject. So, all the assessments and my preparation for the class tasks, I will be giving importance for the grammar component."*

Respondent 2 stated that: *"I would say all the assessments in University Malaya that I have conducted give importance to the content and grammar rather equally. As far as I can remember, there was none that gave an utmost importance to grammar."*

Respondent 3 stated that: *"Only if the subject requires it. Like if I am teaching English then yes. I do give importance and will give importance to grammar. There will be time and assessment dedicated to brushing the student's grammar. However, if I am teaching a subject that doesn't require teaching grammar, I still give feedback through their assignments and their essays. I still correct the grammatical errors they make."*

Respondent 4 stated that: *"Yes, it's integrated with every skill."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"No."*

The tenth and final question is on **Do you think feedback that is given from the continuous summative assessment proves to be a good solution for students?**

The final question focuses on whether assessment and corrective feedback plays a very important role in gauging students' performance. All agreed that it is important and continuous summative assessment will allow such feedback for students.

Respondent 1 stated that: *"Yes so that they can improve fast because when you give feedback frequently to the students, they can learn from their mistakes very fast so that we can find a good solution for them to help them to improve their language at an early stage."*

Respondent 2 stated that: *"It may help them with their grammar comprehension, but it is not a solution. It is because feedback alone will not be effective."*

Respondent 3 stated that: *"It is definitely one way. Errr, may not be the solution in entirety but it's a good start. Only when the teacher takes it seriously and does it continuously and hmmm tirelessly; the*

student's will pay attention and focus. Only then they will take it seriously. There are other ways to encourage and solve this issue, but it requires effort and motivation from the students mainly. They need to work hard. They must like and want to have or possess flawless English grammar.

Respondent 4 stated that: *"Yes, students learn from the mistakes made."*

Respondent 5 stated that: *"Yes, feedback can play an important role in students' learning."*

5. CONCLUSION

Summative assessment is an efficient technique that can be used in assessing students to improve their understanding on the matters that they are learning. If assessing grammar becomes an on-going evaluation throughout their tertiary years, educators will be able to achieve the learning outcome goal. This will definitely help the students to know and recognize the standards and be able to correct them before they finish their education years in university. Therefore, all educators should take account of the importance of using summative assessment in assessing grammar proficiency among students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the lecturers that are involved in this research. Without them, the research will not be able to be completed. Besides that, a very big thank you to all the researchers that we met as they have provided us with resourceful information that is important for our research.

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