Investigating Grammatical Competence and Syntactic Knowledge of the English Majoring Postgraduate Students in Kerala

Dr.Afsal Jamal.P

Professor, Postgraduate Department of English, PTM Govt College, Perinthalmanna, Malappuram, Kerala

Dr Abdul Latheef. V

Head, Postgraduate Department of English, Govt Arts & Science College, Kondotty, Malappuram, Kerala

Abstract

Language, though remarkably complex in its syntactic structure, dialectical variations and functional specificities, is the most powerful tool that human beings use to communicate ideas and emotions in their day-to-day life and social situations. For an effective and meaningful transfer of thoughts and feelings, the selection, combination and patterning of words have to meet certain standards of acceptability. English, being widely taught as a second or foreign language across the world, a lot of research has been done regarding the approach and pedagogy of teaching grammar. Since grammar is the system of rules that enables users of a language to relate linguistic form to meaning, a sound knowledge of it plays a detrimental role in ensuring one's mastery over any language. The present study is an investigation to understand the extent of the grammatical competence and syntactic knowledge of English majoring postgraduate students in Kerala, a southern state of India.

Keywords: Grammatical competence, syntactic knowledge, morphology, phonology, communicative competence, linguistic transaction

Introduction

Berry (2021:19) defines grammar as "the system of rules that enables users of a language to relate linguistic form to meaning". The definition implies that grammar, in any language, plays

a detrimental role in transferring the real and intended meanings of messages being communicated. In Thornburry's view (1999) grammar is what speakers internalize through persistent exposure to a language and it is what makes a speaker's or writer's meaning clear when contextual information is lacking. In short, a sound knowledge of grammar has a significant role in ensuring mastery over all the macro skills of any language and explicit or implicit grammar instruction has to be an integral part of the courses or programs which aim at equipping learners with exceptional spoken and written skills in any language.

Grammatical competence is the capacity to identify syntactic, lexical, phonological and morphological features of a language and to apply this knowledge to encode and decode linguistic components like words or sentences to evolve meaning out of it. Whereas, syntactic knowledge is the understanding of how words can be clubbed into meaningful sentences, phrases or statements (Giovanelli, 2015). It is associated with how words are joined and sentences are framed in languages.

English, as a medium of instruction and as a language for international communication, is held in high esteem in Kerala, a southern state of India and this love, adoration and dignity assigned to English is very overtly visible in the form of signboards, mushrooming English medium schools and special policies for English language instruction even in government-run schools. Almost all universities in the state offer BA, MA and B.Ed. in English and the syllabus of these programs include courses which include advanced level grammatical competence and syntactic awareness in English. Since the mandatory qualification to be English teachers at school/ college levels is successful completion of these programs, the present study is undertaken to investigate the extent of prospective English teachers' grammatical competence and syntactic knowledge of the English and to identify the areas of English grammar where they underperform or show excellence.

Language acquisition and grammar

Understanding a language means, having a mastery over the four language skills, ie. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Hence, in order to speak a language fluently, it is mandatory to have a command over these skills, especially grammar too. In the learning process of a first language, grammar is learnt unconsciously by practice. But deliberate acquisition is necessary if it is a second language. It should be taught. There are multiple methods and approaches to learn a second language. Learning English grammar facilitates one to use the English language effectively and flawlessly with accuracy and fluency. Direct Method, Situational Approach, Bilingual Method, Eclectic Approach, Communicative Approach etc are some of these. Effective communication consists of how to use grammar and vocabulary for conveying ideas properly. So knowledge in grammar is necessary to attain this target. Applied linguists Canale and Swain in an article published in 1980 highlighted the relevance of the sub-competencies that are associated with communicative competence of a person. The four sub-competencies are *Grammatical, Sociolinguistic, Discourse* and *Strategic*. Here 'Grammatical', the capacity to frame meaningful utterances shows that grammar has its significance in deciding the communicative competence. Grammatical as well as Communicative/discourse competencies have to go hand in hand. The know-how of words and rules help a person to create sentences that are meaningful and communicative. The widely accepted idea is that communicative competence should be the ultimate aim of language education. Moreover, accuracy has to be concentrated along with fluency in linguistic transactions. Fluency can be acquired by practice, whereas accuracy in grammar can be developed only through a systematic learning of the rules and usages related to grammatical concepts.

Out of the four language skills, Reading and Listening are passive skills while Writing

and Speaking are active skills. In the case of passive skills, grammar does not hold much significance. It makes a huge difference as far as active language skills are concerned. One can't produce a fine language in Speaking and Writing without having a sound knowledge of grammar. Unfortunately, most of the undergraduate students never give due importance to grammar, the impact of which is reflected in their post graduate academic journey. A study conducted among the postgraduates as part of preparing this article attests this assumption. Sometimes these students lack minimum knowledge of the basic concepts of grammar like Tense, Clause, Parts of speech, 'if' clause, Verb etc. Lack of knowledge in this area, in fact, adversely affects their performance in the active language skills of Speaking and Writing. The oft quoted example "hang him not, leave him", "hang him, not leave him" shows how important grammar is in communicating the exact idea.

Specialization in English

The Universities in Kerala offer Bachelors and Masters Programs in English which include customized but advanced courses in Literature, Linguistics and Grammar. Since these programs are considered the mandatory qualifications to be appointed as English teachers in schools/college, learners who successfully complete these programs are expected to have sound knowledge of theoretical and functional grammar of English. On the contrary, there seems to be a glaring mismatch between the expected outcomes and the attained outcomes.

Graduates or postgraduates in English, in the experience of the researchers, often are found to have committed grammatical lapses which are rarely expected of their levels. This fact either points to defective focus placed in the syllabus of the grammar paper or unhealthy pedagogic practices adopted in teaching grammar. The undergraduates learn in detail every rule and use of English grammar. But, once they reach post-graduation, they almost fail to apply the theories or rules learned. The expected level of knowledge from a postgraduate is, of course, high

since most of them usually plan to become English language teachers in future. So, a deep knowledge in the subject along with grammar and its rules is the anticipated academic outcome from a postgraduate. The study, thus, focuses on the extent to which the English specializing students at postgraduate level attain the expected outcomes of grammar courses and what concepts or terminologies of grammar they are proficient in.

Methodology

Quantitative method is applied to administer the study. English majoring Postgraduate students of Kerala were given questions via Google forms. Fifteen multiple choice questions on various aspects of English language usage were given. Nearly 200 hundred responses were collected. In order to ensure the reliability of the study, replies were collected from students of the Government, Aided and Self-financing sector across the state of Kerala. These results were graphically represented using Microsoft Excel for a better comprehension. The results are converted into a bar diagram.

Result Analysis

In order to reach a conclusion on the topic of study, responses of students were collected with the help of fifteen questions which targeted different competencies of learners about grammatical concepts like tenses, clauses, word classes, sentence constructions, norms of tense sequences and sentence conversions. In general, the responses show that the grammatical competence and syntactic awareness of English PG students is just average.
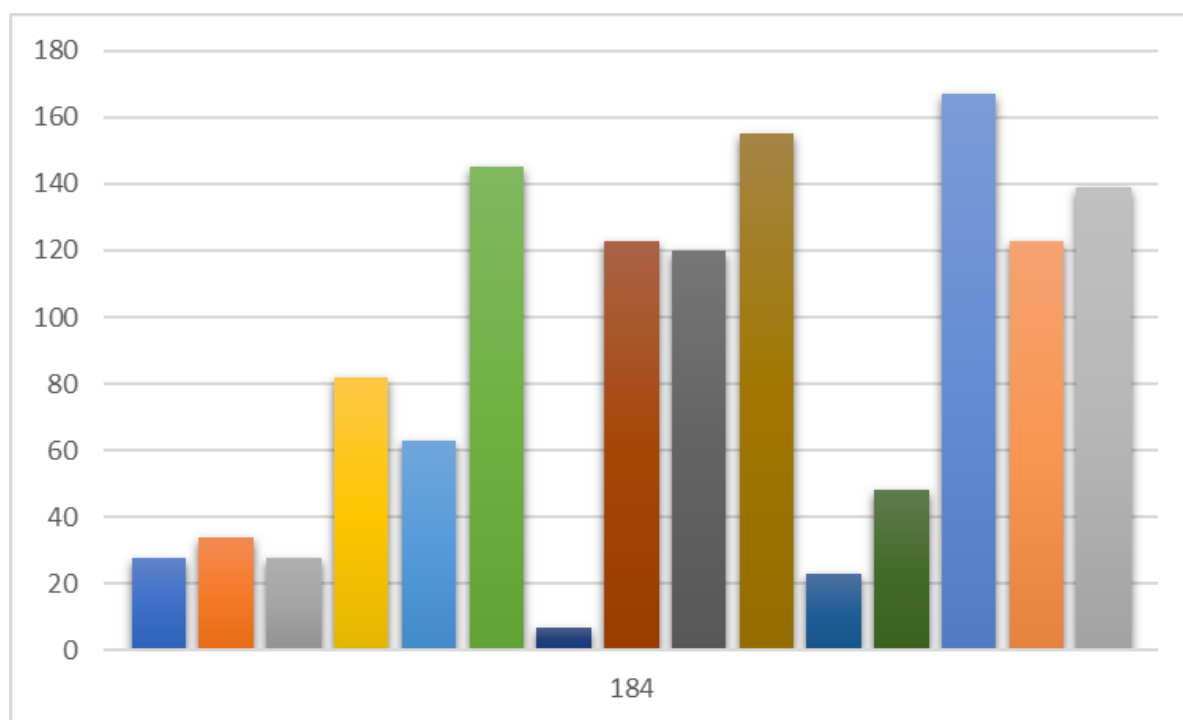
Out of the fifteen multiple choice questions, only nine questions were answered correctly by the majority. The fifteen multiple choice questions given to the students cover various grammatical concepts. The first question is on Concord awareness and the performance is poor (15.2%). Second question is on Clause awareness like Simple, Compound or Complex sentences and the performance is also poor (18.5%). Parts of Speech came under the third question and there also students' performance turned out to be poor (15.2%). Fourth is in the form of an embedded question in a sentence. The performance of the students is average here (44.6%). Awareness of grammatical terminology like Complement was checked in the fifth question and the result is less than average (34.2%). Comparatively good result (78.8%) was found in the sixth question which is on Clause awareness, specifically 'if' Clause. Seventh question, on Clause awareness,ie. to identify the correct statement, turned out to be tough. The performance is very poor (3.8%). Eighth on Question tag gave a good result (66.8%). Question number nine is on testing the awareness of Active/Passive sentence structures. Moderately good results are found in the response (65.2%). Identify the correct statement as Reported speech is the tenth question. In

this too, students came up with a good result (84.2%).Question number eleven checked the awareness on types of Clauses and the responses show that they know it quite well (66.8%). Poor performance (26.1%) is found in question number twelve which checked the Tense sequence. Result to test the awareness on Semantic categorization, question number thirteen, is excellent (90.8%). Fourteenth question is on Interrogative sentence structures and the result is good (72.1%). The results of the final question on Parts of speech also show that the performance is good (77.2%).

Students of first as well as final semesters were given the questions to answer. The maximum score by the first semester as well as third semester students is nine. The total average is 7.58 which is below average and the Median is 8/15.

Findings

The responses show that students are well versed with the basic grammatical concepts only like parts of speech, grammaticality etc. Competency in application level or advanced grammatical knowledge is lacking. Overall grammatical competence is 50% only. These responses underline that there are many areas to be concentrated at present in the scenario of English language teaching. Application of knowledge, Sentence construction, Sentence conversion, Clause awareness, Tense sequence and Sentence embedding are some of the areas where special emphasis has to be given at the earliest by the teachers while teaching and by the syllabus setters while revamping the course content.

Conclusion

A close look at the responses helps us to know that English language teaching has to be very particular about teaching the basic concepts of grammar and application of that knowledge

in order to facilitate students to produce accurate language. Awareness about sentence structure as well as vocabulary can enhance and enrich the linguistic competence. Hence, stress has to be on developing these skills at the early stages of English language acquisition. At the higher stages, more importance may be given to practicing the language by placing students in imaginary situations where they get opportunities to apply the acquired knowledge. Apart from these, grammatical components have to be enhanced by the authorities concerned in the present syllabus. Grammatical and theoretical concepts have to be integrated into the texts so as to facilitate students to learn grammar along with the content. Giving more focus on language elements in the Audit Courses too can support in improving the grammatical competence and syntactic knowledge of students in the present educational scenario at the higher education level.

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Reciprocal Teaching Strategy for understanding Mathematical Word Problems

Indu P.
Asst. Professor
Crescent B.Ed. College, Madayipara,
Kannur University, Kerala.

Abstract

Reading is a key tool for gaining knowledge, and young students must be taught the importance of focused and constructive reading. Reciprocal teaching, a remedial technique based on Vygotsky's theory of social interaction in cognitive development, enhances reading comprehension through four strategies: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. Teachers first model each strategy, then coach students, gradually shifting leadership to them. In mathematics, understanding word problems is increasingly vital yet challenging due to complex language and structure. A modified version of reciprocal teaching—predicting, clarifying, solving, and summarizing—helps students tackle word problems. In small groups, a student leader guides the process, from clarifying vocabulary to solving problems cooperatively. This method supports both student learning and teachers' assessment of individual comprehension.

Introduction

Reading is one of the most essential skills for acquiring knowledge. Developing the ability to read with comprehension is a habit that should be cultivated in students from an early age. It is crucial for young learners to understand the significance of focused and meaningful reading. To support this, educators employ various reading strategies and instructional methods to enhance students' reading abilities. One such approach is the reciprocal teaching technique, a remedial method designed to improve and strengthen reading comprehension skills.

Definition of Reciprocal Teaching Technique

Palincsar, who introduced this approach, defines reciprocal teaching as an instructional method that involves a structured dialogue between teachers and students about specific text segments. This dialogue is guided by four key strategies: summarizing, generating questions, clarifying, and predicting. The foundation of reciprocal teaching lies in Vygotsky's theory, which emphasizes the crucial role of social interaction in cognitive development. Engaging in discussions and verbalizing thoughts help learners refine their understanding and improve their thinking processes. Effective implementation of reciprocal teaching incorporates scaffolding, verbalizing thoughts, cooperative learning, and fostering metacognitive awareness at each stage. Initially, the teacher models each strategy, ensuring that students grasp the concept before proceeding. Following this, students practice under guided supervision, receiving feedback from both peers and teachers. Eventually, students take the lead in applying these strategies independently within group activities.

The Core Strategies of Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching consists of four fundamental strategies that enhance comprehension and allow students to effectively absorb information from a text. These strategies are outlined below:

1. Predicting

At this stage, students are encouraged to anticipate what they believe the author will discuss in the text. To make accurate predictions, students must draw upon their prior knowledge related to the subject, which helps bridge new information with what they already understand. Additionally, predicting aids in recognizing the structure of a text by highlighting the role of headings, subheadings, and embedded questions, which serve as useful tools for anticipating

content.

2. Summarizing

Summarization enables students to extract and consolidate the most crucial information from a passage. The extent of the summary may vary among individuals, with some summarizing a few sentences while others condense entire paragraphs or sections. When implementing reciprocal teaching, students are initially guided to summarize at the sentence and paragraph level before progressing to more extensive text sections.

- Students verbally summarize in pairs and then share their summaries within a small group.
- Small groups may create semantic maps that outline key points from each group member's contributions.

  Encouraging students to reflect on the following questions can enhance summarization:

- What key information does the author want me to remember?
- What is the central idea of this passage?
- What significant and logical questions can be formed based on the text?

3. Question Generating

Developing questions reinforces summarization by deepening comprehension. This strategy prompts students to assess the provided information and analyze its relevance to create meaningful questions they can answer themselves. Since questioning can be adapted to various levels, students should be reminded to formulate questions while reading and listening.

The three types of questions include:

- Literal questions (answers found directly in the text)
- Inferential questions (requiring interpretation)
- Critical thinking questions (demanding personal opinions or deeper analysis)

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Encouraging students to reflect on these aspects can enhance their questioning skills:

- What questions arise from what I have read?

- Which concepts in the passage remain unclear?

4. Clarifying

Clarification is essential for improving reading comprehension. When students are prompted to clarify specific ideas within a text, they become more aware of any difficulties they encounter. These challenges may stem from unfamiliar vocabulary, ambiguous references, or complex concepts. The clarifying strategy helps students recognize these barriers and adopt techniques to resolve them, such as rereading, looking up definitions, or seeking assistance.

Encouraging students to consider the following prompts can help with clarification:

- How do I pronounce this word?

- What does this term mean?

- I believe the author is saying…

- A word or phrase I did not understand was…

Steps in Reciprocal Teaching

1. Divide students into groups of four.

2. Assign each student a role: predictor, questioner, clarifier, or summarizer.

3. Have students read a few paragraphs of the assigned text.

4. The summarizer highlights key ideas from the passage.

5. The questioner poses questions about unclear sections, confusing information, or connections to previously learned concepts.

6. The clarifier addresses areas of confusion and attempts to answer any questions raised.

7. The predictor forecasts what might come next in the text or story.

8. Rotate roles to the right after each section of reading.

9. Continue reading and repeating the process with new roles.

The Teacher's Role

Teachers play a vital role in modelling, scaffolding, providing feedback, and offering explanations. Both educators and students collaborate to enhance comprehension, with the teacher guiding students as they become proficient in using the four strategies. Over time, as students develop confidence, the teacher's role gradually diminishes, allowing students to take ownership of their learning.

Reciprocal Teaching and Mathematical Word Problems

Comprehending mathematical word problems requires strong reading skills, as many problems contain complex wording, unfamiliar terminology, and distracting numerical data. Reciprocal teaching can be adapted to help students decode mathematical problems effectively.

While based on Palincsar and Brown's model, reciprocal teaching for mathematics incorporates four modified stages: predicting, clarifying, solving, and summarizing.

Applying Reciprocal Teaching to Mathematics

1. Students are placed in small groups, and a leader is chosen.

2. The leader instructs the group to read a word problem silently.

3. The leader asks group members to identify unfamiliar vocabulary or concepts.

4. Clarification is provided by group members who explain key terms.

5. The leader guides the group in identifying essential components of the problem.

6. The problem is summarized to ensure comprehension.

7. A plan for solving the problem is developed and checked for accuracy.

8. The problem is solved either individually or collaboratively.

9. A new leader is selected for the next problem, and the process is repeated.

Key Strategies of Reciprocal Teaching in Mathematics

1. Predicting

Students anticipate the type of mathematical problem they are dealing with, identify possible operations required, and estimate what the answer might look like. Prior knowledge, headings, and diagrams assist in making these predictions. A class-created chart with guiding questions can support students in this process, such as:

- Do we have all the necessary information to solve the problem?

- What do we already know?

- What information is missing?

2. Clarifying

Students list three categories of information:

- Unfamiliar terms or concepts

- Known facts and given values

- Information still needed to solve the problem

Collaboration plays a crucial role in clarification, allowing students to construct meaning through discussion. After clarifying all uncertainties, students reread the problem to reinforce understanding.

3. Solving

Students determine how to approach the problem without being confined to a single strategy. They are encouraged to visually represent their solutions using diagrams, numbers, and words. Emphasizing the use of diagrams helps students grasp the structure of mathematical problems.

4. Summarizing

Summarization serves as a self-reflection tool where students evaluate their contributions to the group task and analyze the effectiveness of their chosen problem-solving strategies. They justify their answers by highlighting relevant information and eliminating distractions. If verbal summaries are challenging, students may use diagrams to illustrate their understanding.

5. Recording

Throughout the process, students maintain written records of their work under each of the four headings. This distinguishes the mathematical reciprocal teaching model from the literacy-based approach. By integrating reading and writing, this step improves comprehension and retention while allowing for corrective feedback.

Enhancing the Effectiveness of Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching can be adapted to support students with learning difficulties. For example, if reading is a challenge, a group member can read the problem aloud. A student-created math dictionary containing definitions, examples, and visual aids can also aid comprehension.

The effectiveness of reciprocal teaching can be maximized through:

- Clearly explaining the purpose and significance of each strategy.

- Modelling strategies before student implementation.

- Providing multiple opportunities for guided practice.

- Encouraging students to explain and demonstrate strategies to peers.

- Highlighting when and where strategies can be applied.

Conclusion

Students often struggle with solving mathematical word problems due to difficulties in comprehension. Reciprocal teaching offers a structured, collaborative approach to improving understanding and problem-solving skills. It allows students to support each other in a non-intimidating environment while working toward a shared academic goal.

By incorporating techniques such as drawing diagrams, maintaining a glossary, and underlining key information, educators can further enhance students' problem-solving abilities. Reciprocal teaching not only streamlines classroom instruction but also helps teachers assess students' comprehension levels. Listening to students during discussions provides insights into their learning progress, enabling teachers to offer timely guidance. Although the early stages of reciprocal teaching require continuous monitoring, the need for supervision decreases as students become proficient in self-assessment and independent learning.

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