

Grammatical Competence and its Impact to Listening and Speaking Proficiency: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT: *Grammatical competence is very important to tertiary students because this is needed in constructing reports or other important requirements. Grammatical competence is the ability to judge the appropriateness and correctness of a statement with definite reference to grammatical rules. This study aimed to identify the impact of grammar competence to the proficiency of students in listening and speaking. This study used the descriptive correlation research design to establish the relationship of the students' grammatical competence to their listening and speaking skills. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used to measure the strength of relationship between the two variables- grammatical competence, and listening and speaking skills. Based on the results of the study, grammatical competence has no significant relationship to speaking and listening performance of students. The result shows that students who have low grammatical competence can still achieve average or even high performance in speaking and listening courses. grammatical competence is not a valid indicator of listening and speaking proficiency.*

KEYWORDS: grammatical competence, listening and speaking proficiency

INTRODUCTION

During examination in writing and speaking, the accuracy of grammar used in an essay or speaking assessment affects the overall performance of the students. In the tertiary level, high grammatical competence of students is very advantageous for them because this gives them positive impression during recitation or speaking test. Grammatical competence refers to the ability to judge the appropriateness and correctness of a statement with definite reference to grammatical rules. Students usually have different brilliant ideas they want to share, but they have limited grammar knowledge to accurately document them, or they are hesitant to explain their ideas because they don't have the adequate grammatical competence to organized them.

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What is the importance of students' grammatical competence to their speaking and listening performance? Grammatical competence is very important because it adds good impressions to the listener and speaker as a whole. In classroom recitation, students are expected to listen attentively so they could completely comprehend the lesson and questions being discussed. After processing the lesson and questions asked, the students share their thoughts or ideas about the lesson at hand. To be very convincing to the teacher and classmates, the speaker should discuss his ideas using correct usage of grammar. As put by Burton-Roberts (1993), whatever a string of words on paper is, it is not a sentence, i.e. it has "no linguistic properties at all". What makes that string of words a sentence, are the mental properties projected onto them by the language speaker. Johnson (2014) claimed that grammar is a valuable tool for learning as well as understanding a new language. Correct grammatical construction of sentences keeps one from being misconstrued. Bradshaw (2011) said that most in-depth thinkers, regardless of their national identity, realize that correct grammar leads to the kind of power in leadership that comes from superior communication. Thus, to become a proficient and competent writer, speaker, and listener, one must be knowledgeable of the grammar of the language.

Mastering the English language requires adequate knowledge on the accepted grammar rules applied in it for accurate, clear, and meaningful communication. Knowing the grammatical competence of learners and the correlation of this to their listening and speaking proficiency could generate ideas on how to improve the teaching-learning process. When grammatical competence and speaking and listening proficiency of students are clearly identified, teachers can easily develop effective and efficient instructional activities that are suitable and applicable to the academic needs and capabilities of the learners.

In this study, the researcher investigated the grammatical competence of respondents and the significant connection of this to their listening and speaking proficiency. The researcher specifically documented and correlated the identified grammar competence of respondents, and their grades in listening and speaking skills.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The use of language in every aspect of a person's life is very crucial to his survival and success. According to Melekela (2010), language plays a crucial role in learning, and if the learner is handicapped in the language of instruction, then learning may not take place at all as the teacher and the learner will not be communicating. Thornbury (2000) emphasized that language is a complex system made up of words, phrases, clauses, and discourse patterns used to conjure up images that represent the speaker's own world. It evolves over rules - grammar. Grammar is one of the most difficult aspects of a foreign language to master. It is the rules that govern how a language's sentences are formed. He further explained that English grammar is "a system of syntax that decides the order and patterns in which words are arranged in sentences".

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In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Hornby (2000) defines grammar variously as (1) the rules in a language for changing the form of words and joining them into sentences; (2) a person's knowledge and use of a language; (3) a book containing a description of the rules of a language; and (4) a particular theory that is intended to explain the rules of a language or of language in general. Leaving aside the second and third meanings, definitions one and four are important to consider, as "grammar" is generally understood either as rules governing language or as linguistics which encompass theories giving explanation to those rules.

Other researchers have their own explanation and description of grammar. Ur (2009) described grammar as the way a language operates and combines words so as to express certain kinds of meaning, some of which cannot be conveyed adequately by vocabulary alone. These include the way ideas are grouped and related, and the purposes of utterances such as statement, question, request, etc. Grammar may also serve to express time relations, singular or plural distinctions and many other aspects of meaning. There are rules which govern how words have to be manipulated and organized so as to express these meanings such as when a competent speaker of the language will be able to apply these rules so as to convey his or her chosen meaning effectively and acceptably. In addition, Allen (2013) concluded that grammar may speak even louder and more insistently than those of its denotation; most of the connotations carry a negative overtone, and yet many of the connotations are based on misunderstandings of the basic definitions of the word. Developing an awareness of the multiple connotations associated with the subject of grammar may help English teachers to understand students' potential aversion to studying grammar, as well as their own difficulties or confusions about the subject. Furthermore, Burns (2009) explained that grammar is essentially about the systems and patterns people use to select and combine word. By studying grammar people come to recognize the structure and regularity which is the foundation of language and people gain the tools to talk about the language system. Similarly, Mellish and Ritchie (2008) articulated that in developing a grammar, one has to devise a suitable set of grammatical categories to classify the words and other constituents which may occur. It is important to understand that the mnemonic names given to these categories are essentially arbitrary, as it is the way that the labels are used in the rules and in the lexicon that gives significance to them.

Some scholars have different impressions about grammar. Celce-Murcia (2002) argued that mastering grammar is a complex process that requires "making a series of decisions about when and why to use one form rather than the other". Even long years of exposure and learning English language in school, the grammar of the target language is just one of the things that many students do not always get right. Majority of them find it difficult to study English because of the intricacies of its grammar. Hans and Hans (2017) believed that the better the grammar, the clearer the message, and the more likelihood of understanding the message's intent and meaning.

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What is more important in learning a foreign language? Fluency or accuracy? British Council Indonesia Foundation (2022) clarified what each skill actually means. Fluency is the flow and efficiency with which you express your ideas, particularly when speaking. A few grammar mistakes may appear here and there in the explanation, but it should be delivered in a way that is easy to understand and shows how comfortable you are with the language. In an academic or even professional setting, this is one of the skills to focus on for an oral presentation or debate. The way you explain your topic or prove your point – smooth, clear and concise without too many pauses or hesitations – is as important as the content of your presentation. Accuracy, on the other hand, demonstrates your ability to use the necessary vocabulary, grammar and punctuation correctly, such as verb forms (past tense, present tense, and so on), articles (a, an, the) and prepositions (in, on, from, at). This skill is particularly important for written assignments at university, such as essays and lab reports. It is also an absolute necessity in the work place, where an email or report that is riddled with grammar or punctuation mistakes may be viewed as unprofessional.

What are the factors influencing learners' speaking performance? Wang (2007) noted that speaking occurs spontaneously and transiently in real time, so producing spoken language can be very time-constrained. Influenced by cognitive factors, linguistic factors and affective factors, it is really challenging for learners to speak English fluently and accurately. Levelt (1989) enumerated and clearly explained the three speaking processes: conceptualization, formulation and articulation. Conceptualization deals with what information can be chosen to express the meaning. Formulation requires the speaker to find out what proper words to use in appropriate grammatical structure. And articulation needs the speaker to produce the speech with his articulatory organs. As all the three processes take place on the spur of the time, it is quite possible for learners to make mistakes in face-to-face communication. According to Hughes (2002), the three processes will make students' speaking filled with "hesitations, false-starts, grammatical inaccuracies and limited vocabulary". In this sense, both their speaking fluency and accuracy may be affected. McLaughlin and Heredia, (1996) asserted that human's mind is a "limited-capacity processor", so it is not easy to focus on everything at the same time. Similarly, Skehan & Foster (1999) explained that because of the limited attentional capacity, focusing on one area reduces students' attention to other areas. Over-focus on accuracy may result in the lack of fluency, and too much emphasis on fluency may lead to the lack of accuracy. In conclusion based on the above discussion about fluency and accuracy, it is a requisite for learners to keep a balance between speaking accuracy and fluency.

One factor that is considered the prerequisite of grammar competence and speaking proficiency could be their skills in listening. These skills have significant role in the success of English language learning. Purdy (1997) defined listening as "the active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal), needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings". Rost (2002) illustrated listening as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says, constructing and representing meaning,

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negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding, and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy. The capability to listen effectively contributes to the success of a meaningful communication. Mendelsohn (1994) specified that, of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9%. This only shows that students have more exposure to listening activities. Nunan (1998) emphasized that listening involves an active process of deciphering and constructing meaning from both verbal and non-verbal messages. Listening considered as a passive skill is a misinterpretation that may be connected to the process on how it is being assessed. Students are instructed to quietly do activities in the language lab, listen to pre-recorded dialogues, and write the answers to questions based on the audio.

Miscommunication usually happens when students have inefficient listening comprehension. Underwood (1989) enumerated seven causes of obstacles to efficient listening comprehension. First, listeners cannot control the speed of the speaker's delivery. Second, listeners cannot always repeat misheard or misunderstood words. Third, listeners with limited vocabulary usually stop and think about the unfamiliar word and cause them to miss some parts of the speech. Fourth, listeners may fail to recognize the signals which indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another. Fifth, listeners may lack contextual knowledge. Sixth, listeners have difficulty in concentrating in a foreign language. Seventh, listeners become worried and discouraged if they fail to understand a particular word or phrase.

To develop efficient listening comprehension, students should be guided during the listening process. DeVito (2000) has divided the listening process into five stages: receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. Receiving stage is the intentional focus on hearing a speaker's message, which happens when listeners filter out other sources so that they can focus on the speaker's message. In the understanding stage, listeners attempt to learn or identify the meaning of the message. Remembering stage begins with listening; if listeners can't remember something that was said, they might not have been listening effectively. If understanding has been inaccurate, recollection of the message will also be inaccurate. The evaluating stage is judging the value of the message where the opinion or idea of the listener will influence how the message is evaluated. Responding stage is sometimes referred to as feedback where the listener becomes the speaker expressing his ideas on the topics or questions being discussed.

To be acknowledged as proficient in a foreign or second language, one must know how to speak the language fluently. Speaking does not focus only on accuracy or grammatically correct sentences, but it also includes comprehensive areas of vocabulary knowledge, functions, pragmatics and social skills. In current teaching methodologies employed in the acquisition of a second or foreign language, the first emphasis in speaking is fluency rather than accuracy.

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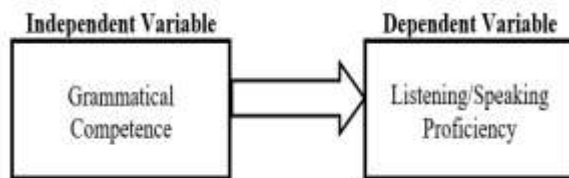
Oral communication or speaking skills are very crucial in language courses. Brown (1994) and Burns & Joyce (1997) agreed that speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. It is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving. Carter & McCarthy (1995) and Cohen (1996) believed that speech has its own skills, structures, and conventions different from written language. A good speaker synthesizes this array of skills and knowledge to succeed in a given speech act.

Grammatical competence, listening and speaking proficiency should be given equal importance in the teaching learning process to achieve a balance fluency and accuracy in both areas.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

This part presents the research paradigm, research objectives, research methodology, research respondents and instruments used in the study.

Research Paradigm



Research Objectives

General Objective: This study aimed to identify the impact of students' grammatical competence to their performance in listening and speaking proficiency.

Specific Objectives: It sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the grammatical competence of respondents?
2. What is the respondents' proficiency in listening and speaking skills?
3. Is there a significant correlation between the respondents' grammatical competence to their listening and speaking proficiency?

Hypothesis: "There is no significant correlation between the respondents' grammatical competence to their listening and speaking proficiency".

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used the descriptive correlation research design. The study established the relationship of the students' grammatical competence to their proficiency in listening and speaking. The correlation method interpreted the relationship between the proficiency of students in listening and speaking to their grammatical competence. Descriptive statistics like frequency counts, percentages, means, standard deviation, and weighted mean were used to analyze data to answer descriptive questions. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to determine the relationship between grammatical competence and proficiency in listening and speaking.

Respondents and Research Instruments

The respondents of this study were 28 (males) B1+ students from the English Language Institute of Royal Commission for Jubail, Saudi Arabia. The chosen section was identified by systematic and convenience sampling where all students in the section were included in the study. There were two research instruments involved in this study: Grammar final mark as a basis for grammatical competence, and listening and speaking final mark as basis for listening and speaking proficiency of respondents.

DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION

Final marks of identified respondents for grammar, listening and speaking were collected and verified. The data gathered were analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics like frequency counts, percentages, means, standard deviation, and weighted mean were used to analyze data to answer descriptive questions. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to determine the correlation between grammatical competence and listening and speaking proficiency of respondents.

The following questions were answered based on the analyzed and treated data.

1. What is the grammatical competence of respondents?
2. What is the respondents' proficiency in listening and speaking?
3. Is there a significant correlation between the respondents' grammatical competence to their listening and speaking proficiency?

Grammatical Competence**Table 1. Grammatical Competence of Respondents**

Number of Respondents	Grammatical Competence (raw score)	Mean of Grammatical Competence
28	2,164.9992	77.3214

Table 1 shows the **grammatical competence** of B1 Plus respondents. Based on the table, the mean of respondents' grammatical competence is 77.3214. This is considered as below average mark because the equivalent of this in the grading system (A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D+, D, F) is "C" which is very close to the highest marks lowest marks "D+ and D".

Listening and Speaking Proficiency**Table 2. Proficiency of Students in Listening and Speaking**

Number of Respondents	Listening and Speaking Mark (raw score)	Mean of Listening and Speaking Mark
28	2461.0012	87.8929

The table shows the total mark and mean mark of students in listening and speaking skills. Based on the table, the mean mark in listening and speaking is 87.8929 which is relatively high. Based on the grading system in the college, (A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D+, D, F), the equivalent of 87.8929 is "B+" which is very close to the highest marks "A" and "A+".

Grammatical Competence and Listening/Speaking Performance**Table 3. Correlation between Grammatical Competence and Listening/Speaking Performance**

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Gr Mark	77.3214	8.55507	28
LS Mark	87.8929	10.96911	28
Correlations			
		Listening Mark	Gr Mark
Gr Mark	Pearson Correlation	1	.155
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.557
	N	28	28
LS Mark	Pearson Correlation	.155	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.557	
	N	28	28

*. No Correlation

The table shows the correlation of grammatical competence to proficiency in listening/speaking. The result shows that there is no significant correlation between grammatical competence (77.3214) to performance in listening/speaking (87.8929) with the correlation of .155. Based on the result, there was no definite direction of the relationship. This only shows that there is a chance or possibility to get high mark in listening and speaking courses even if students have average or low grammatical competence.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This part summarizes all the research questions with their answers based on the analyzed and interpreted data.

What is the grammatical competence of B1 Plus respondents?

The grammar proficiency of B1+ respondents is 77.3214, which is relatively low. Based on the grading system (A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D+, D), the equivalent of respondents' grammar proficiency mark is "C".

What is the respondents' proficiency in listening and speaking skills?

The mean mark respondents in listening and speaking is 87.8929, which is relatively high. Based on the grading system in the college, the equivalent of 87.8929 is "B+" which is very close to the highest marks "A" and "A+".

Is there a significant correlation between the respondents' grammatical competence to their listening and speaking proficiency?

There is no significant correlation between grammatical competence (77.3214) and proficiency in listening/speaking (87.8929) with the correlation of 0.155.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following statements are the conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of this study.

Grammatical competence is not a valid predictor for the proficiency of student in listening and speaking courses. If student's grammatical competence is low, his proficiency in listening and speaking can still be average or even above average depending on the process of assessing these skills.

The grammatical competence of B1+ respondents is 77.3214, which is relatively low. There is a need to develop respondents' grammatical knowledge because they are about to proceed to their field of specialization. In the specialization level, they are expected to produce technical writing reports and other projects that are grammatically correct because they have already undergone 4 levels (A1, A2, B1, B1+) in English.

Based on the grammatical competence and listening and speaking proficiency results, there is a wide gap between the two variables. Respondents mark in grammatical competence (77.32 or C)

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK is near to the lowest mark in the grading system (A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D+, D), while listening and speaking proficiency (87.89 or B+) is near to the highest mark in the grading system.

There are three possible factors that affect grammatical competence of students. First possible reason is the level of difficulty of the assessment given. If examination is too difficult, even the smartest student will get an average mark. The second factor is the overall academic performance of respondents. Even if the level of difficulty is average, they will still get relatively low marks. The third factor is the assessment procedure. In grammar examination, students usually use paper and pencil assessment wherein they are not allowed to ask questions from their proctors even if they have difficulty in understanding the instructions given in the examination.

On the other hand, there are some reasons why respondents got relatively high performance in listening and speaking. First factor that affects performance of students in listening and speaking is assessment procedure. Since speaking tests are usually done face to face with the evaluator, students have the chance to inquire about unfamiliar words on the questions asked. Evaluators usually give clues and some clarifications to the questions being asked. Second, listening tests are conducted in computer labs wherein students have the chance to listen repeatedly on the recorded tasks. Based on these factors, it can be concluded that respondents got a relatively high performance because teachers who facilitated speaking tests gave clear and comprehensible instructions to respondents during the speaking tests, and recorded audios given in the listening tests were audible or clear and instructions were comprehensible to their level.

Grammar activities or exercises that are comparable to the questions given in assessment should be integrated in all grammar courses to develop knowledge in grammar, and ensure higher grammatical competence.

Teachers and examination planners should consider evaluating the nature and level of difficulty of grammar, speaking and listening tests or exams to ensure the validity and reliability of examination results.

Other researchers can investigate on the reasons why grammatical competence does not correlate to speaking and listening proficiency.

Statement of Competing Interest

The author has no competing interests.

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