

Assessment of Grammatical Competencies of Polytechnic Students

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Abstract

Grammatical competence is the most important competence to the polytechnic students. The effectiveness of learning language requires that users of a language be provided with the right knowledge to cope with its complexity and demanding nature especially in the area of Grammar. In this sense, this study seeks to draw attention to some of the important features of grammar skills. The objective of this study is to assess the grammatical competencies of polytechnic students of Kanchipuram District. It aims to find the difference in their grammatical competencies considering their gender, specific field in diploma, place of living, medium of instruction and their parent's education.

Keywords: competence, assessment, grammar, polytechnic students, etc.

Introduction

Competence is a term that can be used both scientifically and in everyday language. Underlying a large variety of meanings, it is possible to determine a small semantic core that is captured by the terms “ability”, “aptitude”, “capability”, “competence”, “effectiveness” and “skill”. Competence can be attributed to individuals, social groups or institutions, when they possess or acquire the conditions for achieving specific developmental goals and meeting important demands presented by the external environment.

“Competence” is defined in Webster’s dictionary as “fitness or ability”. Words given as synonyms or related terms are “capability”, “capacity”, “efficiency”, “proficiency” and “skill”. This concept of competence has been and is used in a very specific and arbitrary manner in biology, immunology, and in some other scientific disciplines as well.

Grammatical competence is the knowledge of the language code, i.e. its grammar and vocabulary, and also of the conventions of its written representation (script and orthography). The grammar component includes the knowledge of the sounds and their pronunciation (i.e. phonetics), the rules that govern sound interactions and patterns (i.e. phonology), the formation of words by means of e.g. inflection and derivation (i.e. morphology), the rules that govern the combination of words and phrases to structure sentences (i.e. syntax), and the way that meaning is conveyed through language (i.e. semantics).

The learning of grammatical structures and forms is found significant in learning a language for any learner (EFL or ESL) which includes the study of rules governing the usage of language. Grammar is the life of a language without which it is called as a ‘corpse’. Each language has its own grammar i.e. set of rules framed in order to use that language by a group of people. Hence acquisition of grammatical competence is found crucial for the learners and students in particular.

Grammatical competence is the ability to recognize and produce the distinctive grammatical structures of a language and to use them effectively in communication. Grammatical competence focuses on command of the language code, including such things as the rules of word and sentence formation, meanings, spelling and pronunciation. The goal is to acquire knowledge of, and ability to use, forms of expression that are grammatically correct and accurate. Grammatical competence acts to promote accuracy and fluency in second language production (Gao 2001), and increases in importance as the learner advances in proficiency (Díaz-Rico & Weed 19).

Diaz-Rico and Weed imply “this type of competence focuses on the skills and knowledge necessary to speak and write accurately, and becomes increasingly important to the English learner in more advanced stages of proficiency,” (Diaz-Rico & Weed 58). As students travel through the stages of language proficiency, grammatical competence becomes more important. Freeman and Freeman suggest grammar is “a set of prescriptive rules they were taught in school” (Freeman & Freeman 217). Herrera and Murry state “grammatical competence “calls for curriculum and instruction that prepares the CLD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) student to incorporate and apply the language code” (Herrera & Murry 64). Grammar is the glue that binds the English language together.

Teachers need to realize that grammatical forms need to be explicitly taught for students to reach higher levels of academic language proficiency. However, grammar needs to be taught in context. As Larsen-Freeman (2001) points out, we need to pay attention to the three dimensions of grammar: form, meaning and use. Simply teaching grammar rules and/or having student memorize verb conjugations will not help students acquire grammatical competence (67).

Technical college (polytechnic) students are learning English grammar and communication skills for two semesters in Tamilnadu. Mastery over grammatical structures and forms are essential to the young learners to frame sentences and speak. Grammar helps them to speak the language properly.

All the four skills of a language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are included in the curricula in order to develop the communication skills of the Polytechnic Students. In addition to that, grammar items are also embedded to make the teaching learning process contextualized and more activity based learning to ensure proper textual orientation. The students of polytechnic colleges are expected to develop their competencies in language skills and grammar as well which are found crucial to get employment after their graduation.

Hence, this study has been attempted to assess the grammatical competencies of the polytechnic college students from Kanchipuram District, Tamilnadu.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the grammatical competencies of polytechnic students in Kanchipuram District.
- To find the difference in their grammatical competencies considering their gender, Specific field in diploma, place of living, medium of instruction and their parent’ education.
- To find out the significant differences in the performance of the respondents in terms of Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing & Grammar.

Studies on Grammatical competencies

Rod Ellis (2006) has conducted a study on how learners acquire a second language (SLA) has helped to shape thinking about how to teach the grammar of a second language. There remain, however, a number of controversial issues. It also considers eight key questions relating to grammar pedagogy in the light of findings from SLA. These eight questions address whether grammar should be taught and if so what grammar, when, and how. Although SLA does not afford definitive solutions to these questions, it serves the valuable purpose of problematising this aspect of language pedagogy. It concludes with a statement of my own beliefs about grammar teaching, grounded in my own understanding of SLA.

Oliver Mason (2007) described an approach to the description of sentence structures based on a linear model. The sentence is segmented using automatically identified multi-

word units from a large corpus; recurrent elements from the corpus are matched up with fragments of the sentence. After positioning the current work in relation to recent related research we present two sample analyses and discuss the usefulness of this approach to syntactic description and possible applications.

Munir Shuib (2009) has reported a study of Malaysian primary school teachers' grammatical awareness. In particular, the study seeks to examine the English language teachers' nature and level of grammatical awareness. Questionnaire and interview techniques were used to elicit data from primary school teachers who were following their B.Ed TESOL programme in Universiti Sains Malaysia in 2006 and 2007. Findings of the study shed light on an important facet of primary school English language teachers' meta linguistic awareness in Malaysia, and informs the improvement of teacher education in the country.

Tracey & Balamurugan (2013) throw lights on the ways and techniques for teaching grammar and it is undertaken to find out the reason as to how and why the learners of English. This study aims at developing grammatical competence among students. Since, grammar is an inseparable part of language teaching, this study tries to explore the strict confine to the learning on the use of English grammar at the higher secondary level.

Hui he (2013) has analyzed the individual differences that influence FL learners' grammar acquisition and grammatical competence improvement through interview, questionnaire and observation, four college students majoring in English participated in the study. Basing on the study of FL learners' individual differences in grammar learning and the integration between explicit grammatical knowledge and implicit grammatical competence in grammar acquisition, this paper constructs an FL learners' grammatical competence training model according to different students' individuality, aiming at narrowing down the gap between top students and ordinary students' grammatical competence in non-native context and the gap between FL learners' English grammatical knowledge and their grammatical competence. The results, to a certain degree, will be beneficial to the improvement of FL grammar teaching quality.

Masoud Amiri Dehnoo & Muhammad R.Namy Soghady (2013) has discussed the multiple intelligences and learners' grammatical ability in an article. The focus of the paper is to illustrate how different types of intelligences can affect learners' grammatical ability by considering learners' performances in different types of grammar tests.

Praise & Meenakshi (2015) focused on the role of Grammar in Communicative Competence and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Communication skills are best facilitated through CLT and it is an approach to language teaching, how learners learn from a language and the kind of classroom activities that best facilitate learning and the roles of teachers and learners in a classroom. The goal of CLT is communicative competence by not only applying grammatical rules of a language to form correct sentences, but also to know how, when and where to use these sentences and especially to whom. Grammar is the foundation for communication, which helps in the understanding the meaning and intent of a message. Recent national and international events make it clear that our country lacks quality of communication which has an impact in understanding our fellow citizens.

Studies reviewed have given a detailed report of the grammatical competencies of the students at various levels. It further shows that there is less number of studies conducted on grammatical competencies of the students across the globe. Hence an attempt has been made to investigate the grammatical competencies of the polytechnic students in Kanchipuram District.

Methodology

The participants of the study have been selected from the Polytechnic colleges of Kanchipuram District. There are 200 participants from Mechanical, Computer, Civil, EEE and ECE departments. The contents in the research questionnaire have been clearly explained in their vernacular language.

The research instrument has been designed by taking the expected outcomes mentioned in the First Year Communication English I and II syllabi in M-scheme for the Polytechnic students by DOTE, Tamilnadu. The instrument is composed of two parts. The first part contains the personal profile of the respondents like age, gender, department, place of living, medium of instruction and parents' educational background. The second part consists of 30 grammatical competencies aims to elicit the responses of the students. They help the students to learn to use correct, polished, and structured English. They develop their speaking and writing skills too.

Frequency Analysis has been employed to find out the frequency of the grammatical competencies for their academic purposes. Frequency helps to understand the number of occurrences of each response chosen by the students selected from the polytechnic colleges. T-test is also used to determine the significant differences in students' grammatical competence and to find out the significant differences in the performance of the respondents in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The results of the study provides the frequency of the requirements of the secondary skills and helps to organize subsequently skills in terms of the most essential and least essential for effective transfer the information in the classroom.

T-test has also been used to determine the significant difference in polytechnic students' grammatical competence considering their gender, specific field in diploma, place of living, medium of instruction, and their parents' education. It also helps to find out the significant differences in the performance of the respondents in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

Findings of the study

The study has assessed the grammatical competencies of the Polytechnic College students of Kanchipuram District by using Frequency Analysis. The competencies that are found very important after the analysis are hierarchically arranged. The competencies in the questionnaire have been subdivided under five categories: Grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The competencies which are found very important in each category are the findings of the study after the assessment of polytechnic college students' grammatical competencies.

In grammar, 'identifying nouns' is placed at the first position with the mean value of 81% among all the competencies in this category. It indicates that these polytechnic students are more interested in naming words which covers names of persons, equipments, records, works, books, topics, and so on. It doesn't mean that other competencies in the category are found less important for these students. In listening, 'identify and use appropriate pronunciation' is placed at the top position with the mean value of 46% among all the competencies within the category. It is a clear indication that they listen to the sounds of English language in the classroom and meetings by the teachers and resource persons as well. In turn this helps them to imitate the same when they appear. Listening is the most basic and essential skill for the speakers of English as a second language. In Speaking, 'speak on given frames in pairs' is placed at the first position with the mean value of 47.5% among all the competencies in this category. It indicates that these polytechnic students are more interested in speaking when they are given frames in pairs which motivate them to develop their

speaking skill and negates shyness when they are on stage. In Reading, 'comprehend and respond to simple text' is placed at the first position with the mean value of 36.0% among all the competencies in this category. It shows that they wish to comprehend the text and respond if the content looks simple and easy to read which indicates that their level of reading is still at the beginner's level. Proficiency in reading skill helps them to read job advertisements, lab manuals, and so on. In writing, 'write own resumes' is placed at the first position with the mean value of 64% among all the competencies in this category. It indicates that these polytechnic students are more interested in writing their own resumes for getting employment. It is shown in the result that they are keen in writing their resumes for jobs.

The second objective of the study is to find the difference in the grammatical competencies considering their gender, specific field in diploma, place of living, medium of instruction, and their parents' education. In order to find out the significant difference in polytechnic students' grammatical competence considering their gender, specific field in diploma, place of living, medium of instruction, and their parents' education. The level of grammatical competencies of polytechnic students in terms of their gender shows that the female students have given more importance to grammar than the male students with the mean value of 30.57. Female students dominate male students in terms of acquiring grammatical skills.

It is further shown in the results that the Civil Department students have given more importance to speaking (1.97), reading (2.23) and writing (12.50) than listening and grammar skills. Computer students have given more importance to listening (6.00) and grammar (31.48) skills. It is shown that the students from mechanical, ECE, and EEE have not shown interest in developing their grammatical competencies.

Polytechnic students from rural areas have shown greater interest in developing their grammatical competences. It is shown in the findings that the mean scores of the rural students are found high than the urban students in terms of speaking (1.73), reading (1.98), writing (11.78), and grammar (29.44). The urban students are found good listeners with the mean score of 5.35 than their counterpart in the same skill. It concludes that the students from rural areas have shown greater improvement in developing their grammatical competencies.

Tamil medium students have understood the significance of acquiring grammar, listening, speaking, reading and writing skills than their counterparts (urban). The difference between Tamil and English medium student in terms of speaking skills is found to be nominal (0.03). It shows a clear indication that even the Tamil medium students have learnt through Tamil, they have aspirations and interest towards English language. In learning grammar, Tamil students are at the upper hand with 30.94% mean value than English students.

It is concluded that students of Illiterate parents gave more importance to grammar with the mean value of 30.69 which shows that the illiterate parents have positive approach in developing the grammar skill of their kids even though they remain illiterate. Parents with school education have given more importance to writing skills than illiterate and graduate parents.

The third objective of the study is to find out the significant difference in the performance of the respondents' in terms of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar skills. Students emphasis more on the importance of grammar with a mean score of 29.40 which indicates that they do not specifically rate listening, speaking, reading and writing skills during their course of study. They study English as a subject in whole not skill-based which weakens their performance in the basic skills of English language. The

knowledge in these skills will definitely lead them to get more marks in the examination or employment.

Conclusion

The study has found the difference in their grammatical competencies considering their gender, specific field in diploma, place of living, medium of instruction, and their parent education. The identified language skills are hierarchically arranged according to their importance in language curriculum of the polytechnic students. The findings of the study can be used by the syllabus designers of Polytechnic Colleges to decide the grammatical contents of the Communication English paper in Semester I and II. It can be used by the trainers of communication skills to redesign their training modules for the polytechnic college students. It can also be used by the language teachers concerned for Polytechnic College students to give priority to the skills of the English language.

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