

Communicative Competence of ESL learners at school level in English Grammar

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ABSTRACT

Communicative competence is a crucial goal of English as a second language (ESL) education, particularly at the school level where learners develop foundational language skills. This study makes its attempt to ascertain the extent of communicative competence of standard IX students in English grammar. The study employed a quantitative survey design to diagnose the competence of standard IX students in English grammar. The English grammar diagnostic tool has been exclusively designed for standard IX students in their curriculum with ten dimensions namely self-introduction part using suitable phrases, identifying the pattern of sentences, selecting suitable pronouns, identifying correct form of verbs, substituting with suitable tenses, descriptive writing, dialoguing using keywords, opinion writing for a given picture, framing a meaningful sentence and rearranging sentences. The tool has been administered with 352 students, of them 184 were boys and 168 girls. Results revealed that students were below average in all the dimensions except self-introduction, rearrange the sentences and pronouns besides to the fact that girls were found better than that of their counterparts in English grammar. The findings have pedagogical implications for ESL teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers, emphasizing the importance of English grammar with communicative competence in school level ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Communicative competence, ESL learners, English language teaching, grammatical competence, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

English language proficiency has been viewed as structural, communicative, social, and functional competencies that put the language use, language users, contexts, situations, into account. Grammar is defined as a systematic pattern of language or simply understood as rules that form a language. This notion is eminent to often be used to describe grammar in variety of language including English. Not like others, English grammar is unique, and its movement is so dynamic over decades. If we look at historical side, English grammar has developed from old English structure to middle English to at last modern English construction (Gelderen, 2006). English grammar that exists now firms to modern English format where it tends to be seen as a prescriptive study or known as grammar; more up-to-date for learners to apply. Of course, the main purpose of teaching grammar is to help learners internalise the structures taught in such a way that they can be used in everyday communication. In the context of schools in Tamil Nadu, many researchers have studied English grammar for their own purpose. Both Tamil and English language consists of different grammatical components. The learners who have rich grammatical knowledge can read and write a language without mistakes (Qizi,2023). English has eight parts of speech: noun, verbs, pronoun, verbs, adjective, conjunctions, prepositions and interjections (Ravishankar and Shriram, 2018; Purwanto, 2024). Muhsin,2016; Singh et al.,2017; Sumathi, 2019 mentioned that, English learners who lack familiarity with the grammatical rules and concepts of parts of speech faced challenges in speaking English. Based on that, researchers were interested to find out, the level of English language competence and usage of parts of speech in ESL.

One of the challenges that language teachers face is developing the language competence of ESL learners so that they can use language correctly and appropriately in a variety of social contexts. In this sense, language competence not only refers to the underlying knowledge of the linguistic aspects of the language system under study, such as grammar but also an understanding of the extra-linguistic features of a given communicative scenario, all of which contribute to meaning and the interpretation of meaning. These can include gesture, silence or suggested meaning. In relation to this, language competence is divided into three main competency areas: grammatical competence, socio linguistic competence and strategic competence, where grammatical competence focuses on knowledge of the syntax or morphological structure of a language in order to derive at its meaning.

In most ESL classrooms, grammar is neither contextualized nor integrated with language systems and skills. Furthermore, grammar input and practice go in parallel lines without meeting anywhere in the process of learning because grammar rules are given either directly to the learners or asked them to discover the rules from the given examples without giving opportunities to practice using grammar in meaningful contexts. Then only practice that the learners get is the traditional form (Wang & Kabilan, 2024) focused discrete items and

homework written assignment. It is viewed that learners should be allowed to experiment grammar in communicative contexts because the central part of learning grammar is trying out grammar in contexts. Grammar taught as rules without giving any opportunities to use them in communicative contexts will neither develop ESL learners' grammatical competence nor make them as communicative competent users of English. Communicative competence is the learners' knowledge and skill that are necessary for communication in a community. According to Swain and Lapkin (1998) communicative competence consists of four different components such as grammatical competence (Purwanto, 2024), discourse competence (Ramanathan,2016), sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. The first two components go with linguistic aspects of communication while the last two go with the functional aspect of communication. Grammatical competence deals with sentence level grammar, whereas discourse competence deals with grammar of text (Ramanathan,2016). Sociolinguistic competence refers to the language rules and functions in socio-cultural settings. Strategic competence is either verbal or nonverbal communicative strategy that the user uses to continue communication when the communication breaks down. To be noticed first, grammar learning in schools in Tamil Nadu is a must as it is incorporated to school curriculum as second language from standard I onwards. This situation creates complexity, particularly in understanding the concept of grammar and how to apply it comprehensively.

ESL learners mostly do not have English knowledge background, they get problem in learning English. Hence this study makes its attempt to diagnose grammatical competence of standard IX students as ESL learners so as to suggest the school system to design opportunities for communicative contexts for students as ESL learners to enhance their competence in English Grammar.

2. Rationale of the study

Techno-influenced era played an essential role in English as a Second language (ESL) learning process. Grammar plays a crucial role in structured English, facilitated clear communication, boosted learners' confidence and enhanced comprehension (Ramanathan,2016; Ismoilov,2025).

Qizi (2023) examined, the role of grammar in ESL learning with mixed-methods approach. Focused the proficiency tests and assessments to evaluate grammar skills and language proficiency. Interviews and survey method were adopted to collect learner's perceptions and experiences. Results revealed that there is a relationship between grammar proficiency and language comprehension. Ghafar & Sawalmeh (2024) study found that, understanding grammar enhanced ESL learners' language proficiency and supported effective teaching strategies. Teachers have employed various technological tools to support students' language learning Wang & Kabilan (2024).

Slabakova (2021) focused on paradigms and findings of 30 years of research in the field of SL learning, with the help of mental representation and communication. Researcher adopted and analyzed the Bottleneck Hypothesis which offered a cohesive viewpoint on comprehending language acquisition. Results emphasised the positive significance on teaching- learning process of SL grammatical aspects. (Hidayat et al.,2020; Rezwana et al.,2022; Marina et al., 2023; Saleh et al.,2023) examined the challenges of teaching English grammar (includes teaching approaches, roles of teacher-student and preferences of learner) results revealed that, teachers preferred to use memorization techniques rather than a communicative approach to enhance English as a Foreign language (EFL) and linguistic competence among learners. Notably, grammatical errors were the most frequent type of error made by the students.

Following studies addressed the reasons of poor grammatical performance among various group of learners. Dissimilarities in vocabulary between English and native languages played a significant role in the occurrence of grammatical errors in English (Li, 2021). Karolina,2017; Subekti,2018 identified, lexical (misuse of vocabularies), grammatical (incorrect usage of verbs, subject-verb agreement, tenses and prepositions), morphological (formation of words prefix/suffix) and syntactical structure (errors in sentence formation) errors in students' communication. These kinds of diverse reasons may prevail and interrupted while learning of grammatical components, Eviyuliawati,2020; Hidayat et al., 2020; Mandarani,2020; Saefurrohman 2021; Darwis,2023; Kristensen,2023; Maysuroh et al, 2023; Castor & Buenviaje, 2024.

Previous studies were pointed out the importance of grammatical aspects and its challenges on ESL leaning process among varied grade of students. Based on that, researchers had an insight to explore the grammatical competence of standard IX students at present. Based on the results, investigators identified IX student's strength and weakness on grammatical parts. In further, investigators extend their research with (to develop a) new instructional model which would be offered a remedial action for ESL learning process among IX students. The rationale for conducting a diagnostic test, en-routed further research in a unique way.

3. Necessity Meeting Practice in ESL Learning Process

Grammar elements are indispensable in real-life scenarios. Understanding and utilizing grammatical elements is acted as a groundwork for various language learning process Swain and Lapkin 1998; Gelderen,2006; Rezwana et al.,2022. Incorporating grammatical components into ESL learning materials and practices ensured a comprehensive approach to ESL learning (Castor & Buenviaje, 2024). Such as introducing oneself, describing a place, expressing opinions or engaging in conversations. Hence, researchers focused on following components in the present study:

Components (Grammatical)	Definition	Usage in ESL	Example
Self-Introduction	Introducing oneself involves sharing personal details like name, age, occupation, interests, etc.	Essential for basic communication and building relationships.	Hello, my name is Rishi, and I'm a student of grade IX.
SVOC	To identify the form of a sentence structure - S (Subject): The noun or pronoun performing the action. V (Verb): The action or state of being. O (Object): The noun or pronoun receiving the action. C (Complement): Additional information about the object.	Through SVOC structures ESL learners can improve their ability to form coherent sentences and express themselves more effectively in English.	EX-1: The manager (S) appointed (V) Dev (O) as the team leader (C). EX-2: The news (S) made (V) him (O) sad (C).
Pronouns	Words are used instead of nouns to make speech or writing more efficient and less repetitive.	It is very essential for fluency and clarity. ESL learners must grasp different types (personal, possessive, reflexive, etc.) of pronoun and their uses.	He, She, It, Her, Him, They, Mine etc.,
Verb	indicates the actions	expressed actions or states.	She <i>dances</i> beautifully. He <i>runs</i> very fast.

Tenses	Verb indicates the time of an action or state	Fundamental for communicating when events happened. Understanding present, past and future tenses is a foundation for an effective communication	Present: I go to school. Past: I went to school. Future: I will go to school.
Preposition	Words used before noun or pronoun to express the place, direction, time.	Necessary to describe about location, time and relationship between object or people.	In, On, At, Under, Above, Below, Between, Among etc.,
Descriptive Writing	Based on given picture or content, learners should use sensory details to describe people, places, objects or experiences accordingly.	Helps learners to develop vocabulary and practice the usage (adjectives and adverbs) to create vivid descriptions.	The dawn was amazing, with hues of orange and yellow spreading across the sky.
Dialogue Writing	Writing that emphasized the spoken format between two or more people.	Essential for practicing conversational skills, understanding punctuation rules for dialogue.	How was your day? he asked. It was good, she replied.
Opinion Writing	Expression of the writer's personal views or beliefs on a topic.	Develops critical thinking and enhance language skills.	In my view, reading books is a better way to learn new things than watching videos.
Rearrange the Sentences	Reordering words or phrases in a sentence to improve clarity and grammatical correctness of a preferred language.	Practice in rearranging sentences can improve both writing and speaking skills of an individual.	Original: To the school, I went. Rearranged: I went to the school.

4. Research Method

The study employed a quantitative survey design to diagnose the competence of standard IX students as ESL learners in English grammar. Quantitative method is used for calculating the data as the result of the use of diagnostic instrument in this study. The instrument has been exclusively designed for Standard IX students in their curriculum with ten activities namely self-introduction part using suitable phrases, identifying the pattern of sentences, selecting suitable pronouns, identifying correct form of verbs, substituting with suitable tenses, descriptive writing, dialoguing using keywords, opinion writing for a given picture, framing a meaningful sentence and rearranging sentences. As mentioned, the instrument used in this research is a questionnaire (open and close) was developed by the investigators. The marks of this instrument ranges from 0 to 100 marks.

The participants involved in this research were 400 ESL learners as secondary school learners from 6 high schools in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu with the category of Government, grant-in aid and unaided. The data were collected from 352 students, of them 184 were boys and 168 girls. The investigators went to the schools with prior permission from concerned authorities for the collection of data. The instrument was given to the experts in English for content validation. On the basis of their expert opinion, rephrasing and reframing were done by the investigators.

Rasch model was employed to analyse the test items. It was used because of its dichotomous scoring system consisting of two categories namely the correct answer with a score of 1 and the incorrect answer with a score of 0. The items' difficulty level can be categorized into five: very difficult, difficult, moderate, easy and very easy (Setyawarno, 2017; Prasetyaningrum et al, 2023).

Table1: Items' Difficulty Level

Item No	Threshold	Interpretation
1	-3.60	Very Easy
2	0.11	Moderate
3	-0.67	Moderate
4	0.33	Moderate
5	-0.45	Moderate
6	1.20	Difficult
7	2.48	Very difficult
8	0.92	Moderate
9	1.06	Difficult
10	0.11	Moderate

Source: Field Survey

The threshold value of the Question output serves as the difficulty index. Theoretically, the level can be analyzed from the range of minus infinity to infinity (Muchlisin et al., 2019). The categorization of all 10 items was calculated and classified into the criteria in the above table1.

4.1 Data analysis and Interpretation

Descriptive statistics are presented below to observe the heterogeneity of this data set or to calculate the spread of students' scores in each section of grammar. This analysis of descriptive statistics is also initially conducted to grasp an overview of the relationship between each section with students' overall achievement (total score).

Table-2. Descriptive analysis

Grammatical Aspects	Percentage
Self-Introduction	69.20%
SVOC	30.10%
Pronouns	72.30%
Verb	48.04%
Tenses	23.07%
Preposition	26.00%
Syntax	
Descriptive Writing	25.03%
Dialogue Writing	27.10%
Opinion Writing	52.01%
Rearrange the Sentences	71.09%

Source: Field Survey

Table-2 revealed that, students' grammatical competence was below average in Tenses (23.07%), Descriptive Writing (25.03%), Preposition (26.00%) and Dialogue Writing (27.10%). In the part of verb (48.04%) and Opinion Writing (52.01%) students' grammatical competence

was average. In the part of Self-Introduction (69.20%), Rearrange the Sentences (71.09%) and Pronouns (72.30%) the competence was found above average level.

Table-3: t-Test statistical differences in grammatical competence

Grammar Differences		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-Test</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Q1: Self-introduction	Girls	46.54	Girls 0.499	1.774	350	.077
	Boys	42.43	Boys 0.497			
Q2: SVOC	Girls	41.61	Girls 0.487	0.524	350	.601
	Boys	40.58	Boys 0.494			
Q3: Pronouns	Girls	47.36	Girls 0.483	-.494-	350	.622
	Boys	47.39	Boys 0.491			
Q4: Verb	Girls	54.58	Girls 0.494	1.695	350	.091
	Boys	50.47	Boys 0.501			
Q5: Tenses	Girls	43.65	Girls 0.478	1.168	350	.244
	Boys	42.57	Boys 0.496			
Q6: Preposition	Girls	40.71	Girls 0.453	0.643	350	.521
	Boys	39.67	Boys 0.470			
Q7: Descriptive writing	Girls	50.46	Girls 0.500	0.849	350	.397
	Boys	49.40	Boys 0.493			
Q8: Dialogue writing	Girls	47.56	Girls 0.497	1.183	350	.238
	Boys	46.48	Boys 0.502			
Q9: Opinion writing	Girls	43.41	Girls 0.494	0.254	350	.800
	Boys	43.39	Boys 0.491			
Q10: Rearranging Sentences	Girls	45.52	Girls 0.501	1.686	350	.093
	Boys	42.41	Boys 0.494			
Total	Girls	48.54	Girls 0.248	1.816	350	.071
	Boys	42.48	Boys 0.257			

Source: Field Survey

Table 3 presents t-test results of grammatical features between ESL male and female students. None of the individual grammatical features showed statistically significant differences at the conventional $p < .05$ level. The closest items to reaching statistical significance were subject-self-introduction ($t(350) = 1.774, p = .077$), verbs ($t(350) = 1.695, p = .091$), and rearranging sentences ($t(350) = 1.686, p = .093$). Hence girls were found better in self-introduction, verbs and rearranging sentences than that of their counterparts. The overall total approached statistical significance ($t(350) = 1.816, p = .071$) which shows that grammatical competence of girls was better than that of their counterparts. These findings indicate that observable gender differences exist across various grammatical features but are not statistically significant.

The findings of this study are consistent with Faruk and Saha (2016), who found no significant difference between Bangladeshi students of different genders in a grammar test. Also, the findings of the study are in line with those who found no significant gender disparities in students' perceptions of grammar Khaliq et al. (2021); Ameen et al. (2023); Alharthi (2024); Alkhrisheh et al., (2019); Juhana et al., (2023); Zafeer & Maqbool (2022) and also consistent with other studies that found no significant gender disparities in students' writing assignments, included those by Alkhrisheh et al. (2019) and Almusharraf (2021).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

- ✓ The descriptive analysis revealed that ESL learners are below average in many of the components in English Grammar. The findings of this study indicate that there are not statistically significant differences between ESL students in grammar from their English achievement test. This lack of gender disparity could encourage educators to adopt a cohesive methodology for grammar teaching, focusing on effective teaching approaches that cater to all learners rather than tailoring instruction based on gender. This will cultivate a collaborative teaching atmosphere that offers equitable assistance to all students.
- ✓ Finding on gender differences in this study means that gender is a contributing factor to the challenges faced by ESL learners in grammar. Therefore, we need to conduct further research on factors such as socio- economic status, cultural influences and the functioning of the classroom. This could provide a more comprehensive understanding of ESL teaching, extending beyond gender and provide a clearer picture of the grammatical issues faced by ESL students. Curriculum designers should take these factors into account when developing curricula and evaluating student performance.
- ✓ This study's narrow focus on standard IX students limit the generalizability of its findings. By including language learners from a range of language settings in the study, it might be possible to give a more complete picture of how people learn languages. Also, conducting longitudinal studies to observe changes in grammar performance between genders over time could offer insights into the long-term language learning differences between genders. Finally, this study employed a solely quantitative approach, utilizing a single instrument, a questionnaire. A qualitative tool, such as interviews with students and instructors, would provide a more comprehensive picture of the teaching and learning processes.

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