

A Grammatical and Syntactic Analysis of the Structure Section in TOEFL

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of grammatical competence among English teachers, focusing on their proficiency across various grammatical categories essential for effective instruction. The study reveals significant disparities in understanding, with scores ranging from a low of 34% in negative words to perfect scores of 100% in verb usage, adverb usage, and expletive constructions. While many teachers demonstrate a solid grasp of key structures such as appositives, comparisons, and subject completeness, notable weaknesses in areas like word order and passive voice highlight the need for targeted professional development. The findings suggest that while the average proficiency level is commendable, there are critical gaps that require immediate attention to enhance the overall quality of grammar instruction. To address these weaknesses, the paper recommends the implementation of specialized training programs and collaborative learning opportunities aimed at reinforcing teachers' understanding of challenging grammatical constructs. By fostering a commitment to continuous professional growth, educational institutions can improve teaching practices and ultimately enrich the learning experiences of students, laying a stronger foundation for their language skills.

Keywords: Adverb usage; English syntax; Grammatical competence; Sentence structure; Grammar instruction

1. Introduction

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test designed to evaluate the English language proficiency of non-native speakers (Erlita, 2024, p. 54). One of its critical components is the Structure and Written Expression section, which assesses a candidate's understanding of English grammar and syntax. This section presents various question types, including sentence completion, error identification, and sentence correction, aimed at measuring the test-taker's ability to use grammatical structures accurately. As a crucial indicator of overall language proficiency, this section not only tests knowledge but also the practical application of grammar in real-world contexts. Understanding the intricacies of this section can significantly enhance educators' approaches to teaching grammar, making this research timely and relevant.

For English teachers, particularly those in non-native contexts, achieving a high level of proficiency in grammar is essential. The TOEFL serves not only as a benchmark for their skills but also as a tool for professional development. In today's globalized world, where English proficiency is increasingly linked to career opportunities and academic advancement, the importance of the TOEFL cannot be overstated (Fera Tri Susilawaty et al., 2023, p. 124). This test provides teachers with insights into their own language abilities, allowing them to reflect on their teaching methods and identify areas for improvement. The novelty of this research

lies in its specific focus on the grammatical challenges faced by teachers in a vocational setting, providing a unique perspective on the intersection of teacher competence and student outcomes.

In this study, I focus on the grammatical and syntactical competence of English teachers at a state vocational high school in Cianjur. By analyzing the performance of 12 English teachers in the TOEFL's Structure and Written Expression section, I aim to gain insights into their specific strengths and weaknesses. This analysis is critical, as it enables the identification of the areas where teachers may struggle, highlighting opportunities for targeted professional development. Understanding these competencies is essential not only for enhancing personal teaching practices but also for fostering a more effective learning environment for students. The significance of this research is underscored by its potential to inform educational policies and practices in vocational high schools, where effective language instruction is paramount.

A significant aspect of my research is the identification of question types that present particular challenges to the participants. By closely examining their scores, I can discern patterns in the types of grammatical structures that are consistently problematic. This information is vital for understanding the gaps in knowledge that may affect their teaching practices and, consequently, their students' learning outcomes. Recognizing these challenges allows for a more focused approach to teacher training, ensuring that educators are better equipped to address students' needs. The novelty of this research also lies in its methodological approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative analyses to provide a comprehensive view of teachers' competencies.

Furthermore, the findings of this study will have implications beyond individual performance. They can inform curriculum development and teacher training programs by pinpointing the grammatical areas that require more emphasis. By addressing these challenges, educational stakeholders can enhance the overall quality of English language instruction in vocational settings. Moreover, this research underscores the importance of ongoing assessment and reflection among educators, encouraging a culture of continuous improvement. The significance of these findings extends to the broader educational landscape, as they can serve as a model for similar studies in other regions and contexts, promoting a more systematic understanding of language instruction challenges.

Additionally, this research contributes to the broader discourse on English language education in Indonesia. By focusing on the grammatical and syntactical competence of teachers, I shed light on an often-overlooked aspect of language instruction. Understanding the needs and challenges faced by English teachers can foster a more supportive educational environment, ultimately benefiting both teachers and students. The novelty of this study lies in its specific context and participant group, which allows for tailored recommendations that can lead to impactful changes in teaching practices. By drawing attention to these issues, I hope to inspire a more robust dialogue about the importance of grammar in language teaching across various educational settings.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the grammatical and syntactical capabilities of English teachers in Cianjur as assessed by the TOEFL. By exploring their performance in the Structure and Written Expression section, I seek to identify the question types that are most challenging for them. The findings will not only enhance my

understanding of the teachers' competencies but also contribute to improving English language education in the region. Additionally, this research has the potential to inform future strategies for teacher training and curriculum development. Ultimately, the goal is to elevate the quality of English instruction, ensuring that both teachers and students can thrive in their language learning journeys. The significance of this research lies in its potential to make meaningful contributions to the field of English language education, addressing critical gaps in teaching practices and learner outcomes.

2. Theories and Methods

In examining the grammatical and syntactical competence of English teachers, this research is primarily grounded in Error Analysis. This approach systematically identifies and categorizes errors made by learners, providing valuable insights into their understanding and application of grammatical structures (Majeed, 2019, p. 302). By focusing on the types of mistakes that teachers encounter, Error Analysis allows for a deeper exploration of the specific grammatical challenges they face. This theory is particularly relevant for English teachers, as it highlights the gaps in their grammatical knowledge that may hinder their effectiveness in teaching. Understanding these errors is crucial for developing targeted interventions that can enhance both teacher proficiency and student learning outcomes.

To analyze these grammatical challenges, I employ a Qualitative Method as the primary methodological approach (Warshaw & Upton, 2018, p. 298). This method involves gathering rich, descriptive data through tools such as interviews and open-ended surveys. By conducting semi-structured interviews with English teachers, I can explore their experiences, perceptions, and the specific difficulties they encounter in teaching grammar. This qualitative approach enables me to capture the nuances of their challenges, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these issues affect their teaching practices. The insights gained from these interviews will inform the development of targeted professional development programs designed to address the identified areas of difficulty.

Supporting the use of Error Analysis, Sociocultural Theory provides a valuable context for understanding the role of social interaction in language learning (Levi, 2017, p. 97). This theory emphasizes that language is learned through social engagement and cultural contexts, which significantly influence how teachers approach grammar in their classrooms. Acknowledging these sociocultural factors allows for a more holistic view of the challenges faced by teachers, as their backgrounds and experiences shape their grammatical competence. By integrating Sociocultural Theory with Error Analysis, I can explore how social interactions and cultural contexts impact teachers' understanding and teaching of grammar.

The qualitative method not only allows for a detailed exploration of teachers' experiences but also facilitates the identification of recurring themes related to their grammatical challenges. Through thematic analysis of the interview data, I can discern patterns that highlight the specific areas where teachers feel underprepared. This focused analysis provides actionable insights that can inform the design of professional development initiatives tailored to the needs of English teachers. By aligning these initiatives with the principles of Error Analysis, I aim to create targeted interventions that effectively address the identified gaps in teachers' grammatical knowledge.

The significance of using Error Analysis and a qualitative approach in this study lies in their potential to inform effective teacher training programs. By identifying specific grammatical challenges through qualitative data, I can develop interventions that address these issues directly. This dual focus not only enhances teachers' grammatical competence but also equips them with the pedagogical strategies necessary for fostering effective language instruction. Ultimately, this research aims to improve the overall quality of English language education in vocational settings by supporting teachers in their professional growth.

The integration of Error Analysis and qualitative methods provides a robust framework for understanding the grammatical and syntactical competence of English teachers (Minniberger, 2016, p. 108). By focusing on how teachers perceive and address their grammatical challenges, this research seeks to contribute to the advancement of English language education. The combination of these theories and methods not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the issues faced by teachers but also supports the development of effective strategies for enhancing both teacher proficiency and student learning outcomes.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of grammatical competence scores among English teachers reveals a range of proficiency levels across various categories. Notably, the category of negative words received the lowest score at 34%. This significant weakness indicates that many teachers struggle with the correct usage of negative constructions, which are crucial for expressing denial or contradiction in communication. The inability to effectively use negative words can lead to misunderstandings and inaccuracies in student writing. This suggests an urgent need for targeted training in this area, possibly through workshops that focus on practical applications and common pitfalls in using negatives in English.

Following this, the word order category scored 50%, reflecting considerable difficulty among teachers in constructing grammatically correct sentences. A proper understanding of word order is essential for clarity and coherence in both spoken and written communication. Misplaced words can drastically alter the intended meaning of a sentence, leading to confusion. This is another area that requires immediate attention, as it may hinder teachers' ability to instruct students effectively on constructing meaningful sentences. Professional development initiatives could include exercises that reinforce proper word order through interactive activities and peer review sessions.

The passive voice category achieved a score of 66%, indicating a moderate level of competence. While some teachers are familiar with passive voice constructions, the score suggests that many may not fully understand when or why to use them. Mastery of passive voice is important for academic writing, where the focus often shifts from the subject performing the action to the action itself. Further development is necessary to improve their instructional effectiveness, and this could be achieved through targeted workshops that not only clarify the rules but also provide practice opportunities to reinforce understanding.

Prepositional phrases scored 64%, suggesting that teachers have a basic understanding of this grammatical structure, yet there is still room for enhancement in teaching this area. Prepositional phrases are essential for providing additional details about time, place, and direction, which can significantly enrich sentences. A lack of proficiency in this area may lead to vague or incomplete sentence constructions in student writing. Therefore, instructional strategies should be developed that focus on the importance of prepositional phrases and how they can be effectively integrated into sentences, possibly through interactive writing exercises.

In contrast, the subject completeness category received a strong score of 84%, indicating a solid grasp of subject construction, which is fundamental to sentence formation. A well-formed subject is crucial for establishing the main idea of a sentence and ensuring clarity. This score suggests that teachers are confident in identifying and constructing subjects, which is encouraging for their overall grammatical instruction. However, further exploration into complex subjects and varying sentence structures could enhance their teaching and provide students with a deeper understanding of subject usage.

Appositives also scored 84%, demonstrating teachers' good understanding of this structure, which is essential for providing additional information about nouns. Appositives can add richness and clarity to writing by elaborating on a noun in an informative way. The ability to effectively teach this structure can help students learn to create more nuanced sentences. This understanding could be further strengthened through exercises that encourage the use of appositives in descriptive writing assignments, thereby enhancing students' writing skills.

The comparisons and parallelism categories both scored 84%, reflecting teachers' competence in forming comparisons and creating balanced, coherent sentences. These grammatical structures are vital for clarity and emphasis in writing, allowing for effective communication of ideas. The ability to use comparisons helps in making distinctions between items or concepts, while parallelism enhances the rhythm and flow of sentences. Further professional development could focus on advanced techniques for using these structures, helping teachers to instill these skills in their students.

Similarly, adjective clauses and independent clauses also received scores of 84%, indicating proficiency in using these complex structures, which are crucial for adding detail and depth to writing and forming complete thoughts. Understanding how to use adjective clauses effectively can significantly enhance the quality of student writing by providing essential context and information. Meanwhile, a solid grasp of independent clauses is fundamental for constructing clear and complete sentences. Teachers could benefit from additional resources and strategies to help students incorporate these structures into their writing seamlessly.

On the higher end of the spectrum, both adverb usage and verb usage achieved perfect scores of 100%. This indicates that teachers are highly adept at modifying verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs, as well as demonstrating exceptional mastery of verb forms and functions. Such proficiency is vital for constructing clear and effective sentences, enabling teachers to model good writing practices for their students. To maintain this high level of competence,

teachers should continue to engage in professional development that emphasizes the importance of these parts of speech in effective communication and writing.

Finally, expletive constructions also received a perfect score, suggesting that teachers are skilled in using constructions like "It is" or "There are," which are essential for emphasizing particular points in sentences. Mastery of expletive constructions can help students understand how to manipulate sentence structure for emphasis and clarity. This skill is particularly useful in academic writing, where clarity and precision are paramount. Continued focus on this area could involve practical exercises that encourage students to use expletive constructions effectively in their writing, further solidifying their understanding of sentence structure.

Overall, the analysis indicates a clear disparity in teacher competencies across different grammatical categories. The average score across all categories can be calculated to reflect a general level of proficiency among teachers. Given the scores, the average falls around 76%, indicating a generally strong command in several areas but also highlighting the need for improvement in others. The most significant weaknesses are in negative words, word order, and passive voice, all of which highlight areas needing immediate attention and professional development. In contrast, teachers exhibit exceptional proficiency in adverb usage, verb usage, and expletive constructions, with perfect scores reflecting their strong command of these areas.

To address the identified weaknesses, targeted training and resources should be developed with a focus on negative constructions, word order, and passive voice. By enhancing their understanding and application of these constructs, teachers can improve their instructional practices, ultimately leading to better learning outcomes for their students. Collaborative workshops, peer observations, and ongoing support can create an environment where teachers feel empowered to refine their skills and share effective strategies with one another. This comprehensive approach can significantly elevate the quality of grammar education provided to students.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of grammatical competence among English teachers reveals both strengths and weaknesses that are critical for informing future professional development efforts. While teachers demonstrate exceptional proficiency in areas such as verb usage, adverb usage, and expletive constructions, significant gaps exist in their understanding of negative words, word order, and passive voice. These disparities highlight the need for targeted training programs that specifically address these weaknesses, ensuring that all teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to effectively teach their students.

Moving forward, a comprehensive approach to professional development should be prioritized. This could involve specialized workshops, collaborative learning opportunities, and the creation of resource materials focused on the identified areas of concern. By fostering an environment of continuous learning and support, schools can empower teachers to

enhance their grammatical instruction, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes. The commitment to refining teaching practices in grammar will not only benefit teachers but also enrich the educational experience for their students, laying a stronger foundation for their communication skills.

In conclusion, while the overall average proficiency indicates a solid grasp of grammatical structures, addressing the specific weaknesses identified in this analysis is essential for the continued growth of both teachers and their students. By investing in targeted training and resources, educational institutions can ensure that teachers are well-prepared to meet the diverse grammatical needs of their students, thereby enhancing the overall quality of English language instruction.

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