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A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON ENGLISH GRAMMAR PROFICIENCY KNOWLEDGE OF DIPLOMA STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The aims of the study were to determine the most frequent grammatical errors made by students and their performance in a grammar test. Hence, 183 diploma students from a local university were chosen to assist in this study. The instrument of the study was a final test consisting of two reading comprehension passages and a grammar section. For the purpose of the study, the students' answers of the grammar section were analysed. The grammar section consists of 10 questions covering different parts of speech and tenses which were randomly chosen. It was found that the majority of the students' performance in a grammar test is in the middle range. Most of them did not perform badly but neither did most of them excel at English grammar. Based on the findings there seemed to be a need for a more enhanced focus on the teaching and learning of English grammar for Malaysian ESL students. However, because this is a small study that examined only one batch of students, the results of this study may not be too significant for a more generalised conclusion. Thus, continuous study should be done with regard to aspects of grammar knowledge and its teaching and learning in Malaysia.

Keywords:

Grammar, Grammar Knowledge, Performance, ESL Students

Introduction

The online Cambridge dictionary (2019) described grammar as more or less a study or use of rules on how language can change form or be combined with others to express meaning. Thus, knowledge of grammar would allow language users to use a language properly in a systematic way. For language acquisition purpose, specifically English as a second language (ESL), the study and acquisition of grammar is mostly believed to be secondary to the acquisition of skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. This does not mean that grammar is not important. In fact, knowledge of grammar allows speakers of the same language to be able to communicate with each other because of their knowledge of grammar system and structure of that language, that is, the meaningful rules of grammar (Lin, 2008). Furthermore, grammatical knowledge is important in determining the meaning and the quality of the written text (Ahmed, 2016). Grammatical error analysis studies are also commonly carried out by researchers, at times linking the knowledge of grammar to the ability to write or read in ESL. In Malaysian context, many studies have been conducted on common grammatical errors in the writing of ESL students pointing out the importance and connection that grammatical knowledge has on the teaching of other types of ESL language acquisition skills (Stapa & Izahar 2010, Hong, Rahim, Hua & Salehuddin, 2011). Overall, though, for many ESL teachers and learners, knowledge of the English grammar may not be as important as the ability to use the language. In fact, for language acquisition purpose, most still believed that learners should focus on acquiring communicative ability that can enable success in delivering and receiving messages rather than whether the messages is sent and received in a correct grammatical composition. Even though the rise of communicative language teaching has led to a downturn of attention to grammar, both researchers and L2 instructors, has reexamined the important role of grammar in L2 learning and demonstrated that teaching grammar helps learners reach a higher level of language competence (Lee, Schallerts & Kim 2015).

Problem Statement

To most ESL learners in Malaysian schools, learning English grammar is difficult (Jalok et al., 2019). This is supported by Suppiah, Subramaniam and Subrayan (2017) who said that because of the lack of learning time allocated for English lessons in Malaysian schools, the learning of the language especially for grammatical component is complicated. Nevertheless, it is advantageous for students to have a good grasp of grammar in order to excel in ESL learning as based on the Malaysian curriculum (Singh, Singh, Razak & Ravinthar, 2017). Thus, it would be important to examine the proficiency and knowledge of grammar of the ESL students for it may influence the learners' ability to master other sets of language acquisition skills.

Research Questions

1. Which are the most frequent grammatical errors made by students in their grammar test?
2. How do the students perform in their grammar test?

Literature Review

Grammar knowledge is part and parcel of language acquisition. Learning grammar may enable the learners the ability to fundamentally use the language efficiently based on the knowledge (Al Abri, Al Seyabi, Al Humaidi & Hasan, 2017). Thus, the extent of a learner's grammatical knowledge may help or hinder learner's ESL acquisition. However, current trends in language teaching worldwide and in Malaysia has not been putting too much importance on grammar acquisition believing that grammar can be learned incidentally thorough acquisition of speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills. Such belief is reflected in ESL content syllabus

primarily in Malaysian schools. In Malaysia, language syllabus has also developed to the extent that grammar teaching takes a back seat to a communicational syllabus that dealt with the situational or communicative use of language (Asraf, 2017). It is a communicative approach with the mostly believed idea that students should focus on meaning and communication as grammar would take care of itself during this process (Singh et al. ,2017). This means that the teaching and learning of ESL in Malaysia has been focusing on making sure that learners can use the language communicatively and this knowledge is tested primarily via the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Grammar is a component, but it is essentially assessed as part of the reading, writing, or speaking tests. Success in these other skills is an indication of success in attaining the language. Thus, the current English language syllabus in the Malaysian schools nowadays is unlike a grammar-based syllabus, which is arranged based on grammatical items. Instead, it is arranged to familiar themes with contexts such as home, schools and community through which the language skills and language content are to be taught in an integrated manner (Asraf,2017). Integrated ESL learning does not just end in Malaysian schools but has also carried through to higher learning institutions.

In higher learning institution such as University Teknologi MARA (UiTM), the teaching of ESL for diploma students is integrated based on the teaching of the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Most Diploma students take up to three semesters of English language courses, representing three different levels of English language mastery. Grammar is a component at all levels but only specifically tested in level 1. Grammar component then is only tested indirectly through reading, writing, speaking, and listening tests subsequently in subsequent levels. Students' performance in all these skills then is assumed to be reflective of students' grammatical prowess. Such assumption may always be difficult to support. There are researches that examines students' ESL performance that does not always reflect such assumption. Singh and Daud (n.d.) students at all levels in Johor campus are seriously handicapped in writing fluent and grammatically accurate texts, so much so that they have dropped in their performance in the respective examinations. On the other hand, Nayan and Jusoff (2009) found that UiTM students/respondents of their study have more tendency to make errors in the general rule of subject verb agreement. Another finding of the same grammar rule and students' writings also stated that analysis of UiTM Dungun students' writings indicated that students have problems with different subject and verb agreement rules (Najlaa'Nasuha binti Mohd Radin & Fong, 2012). Analysis of UiTM Negeri Sembilan students' speech on the other hand, revealed that students make various types of grammatical errors due to interlingua transfer factors (Karim, 2013). The same problems involving grammatical errors were also detected in UiTM pre-degree students' writings (Ab Manan, Zamari, Pillay, Adnan, Yusof & Raslee, 2017). Ahmad (2017) concluded in his study of students' written and spoken English in UiTM Penang that respondents involved in his study are weak grammatically and Lee (2019) finding on UiTM students' writings revealed mixed results with regard to students' grammatical accuracies with students' tendencies to commit certain errors and yet excelling at other ESL grammar problem.

Grammatical knowledge and prowess of Malaysian students not just in UiTM but in any other institution of higher learning or in any lower learning institution for that matter has been researched by Malaysian researchers too and result has been mixed as well. Nevertheless, the consensus seems to be that acquiring ESL means acquiring communicative ability through an integrated content approach. The questions is how effective is the English language learning approach use in Malaysia as there are indications that it has produced learners with poor

mastery of grammar since the focus is on fluency at the expense of accuracy (Wee, 2009; Abdul Rashid, Goh & Wan, 2004; Subramanian & Khan, 2013 as cited in Idek, Lee & Sidhu, 2014). This has led to concerns on how best to ensure that the teaching and learning of ESL in Malaysia is good enough to guarantee that students are able to not just communicate but to communicate well in English. Dawber (2019) argued that a case can therefore be made for a grammar/linguistics course per se, either optional or obligatory with different grammarians' ideas and frameworks can be compared and discussed. A study involving the teaching of grammar at a tertiary institution in Malaysia revealed that teachers are of the opinion that grammar should be taught explicitly as a stand-alone content not just an incendiary, to ensure that all aspects of grammar that students are expected to know must be taught (Rahman & Rashid, 2017). While that may or may not suits UiTM purpose of English language teaching and learning, it is also important to acknowledge that UiTM needed to ensure they can produce the highest quality of graduates based on the needs of the learners and the guarantee that any discrepancies between the existing program and the ideal program to match current existing job requirements do not exist (Ahmad Mazli bin Muhammad; Aini Akmar binti Mohd Kasim; Maisarah binti Ahmad Kamil; Marina binti Ismail; Norhayati binti Idris; Nor Azah binti Mohd Rathi; Turisiana binti Ahmad Buhari; Zaemah binti Abdul Kadir, 2019)

Methodology

Sample

183 respondents from the diploma computer science programme were chosen to sit for Level 1 English course test. English language was taught with the integration of the four language skills namely speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Grammar component was not taught in isolation but integrated with the four skills. The students however have had years of English lesson prior to sitting for the level one English course. They had in the previous year sat for the Malaysian Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and acquired at least a credit in the English Language. Thus, they are assumed to have a minimum ability of English and are qualified to sit for the paper.

Instrument

The instrument of the study was a final test consisting of two reading comprehension passages and a grammar section. For the purpose of the study, the students' answers of the grammar section were analysed. The grammar section consists of 10 questions covering different parts of speech and tenses which were randomly chosen.

Findings & Discussion

RQ1. 1. Which are the most frequent grammatical errors made by the students in their grammar test?

Parts of Speech (Grammar topics)	(✓) Answers		(X) Answers	
	Frequency f	Percentage %	Frequency f	Percentage %
Q1. Conjunction	118	64.48	65	35.52
Q2. Noun	66	36.07	117	63.93
Q3. Pronoun (demonstrative)	67	36.63	116	63.39
Q4. Article	121	66.12	62	33.88

Q5. Adjective	83	45.36	100	54.64
Q6. Subject-verb agreement	6	3,28	177	96.72
Q7. Preposition	66	36.07	117	63.93
Q8. Present Perfect Tense	62	33.88	121	66.12
Q9. Adverb	79	47.13	104	56.83
Q10. Noun	153	83.6	30	16.4

Table 1: Students' Grammar Knowledge Error Analysis

It is shown in Table 1 that more than half of the students answered question 1 (64.48%) and question 4 (66.12%) correctly. From the percentages, it indicates that the topics involved which were 'conjunction' and 'article' are quite easy for the students to understand. 96.72% of the students (177) failed to give correct answer for question 6, with only 3.28% or 6 of them managed to answer it correctly. It shows that the students have minimum understanding of the topic for question 6 which was 'subject-verb agreement'. The data shows that more than 60% answers given were incorrect for questions 2, 3, 7, and 8. The four questions asked about 'noun', 'pronoun', 'preposition', and 'present perfect tense'. The percentages indicate that the students have not fully understood the topics. For questions 2 and 3 (noun and pronoun), the percentages of wrong answers chosen by the students are quite similar which are 63.93% and 63.39%. For Questions 7 and 8 (preposition and present perfect tense), 63.93% and 66.12% of the students answered the questions wrongly. Majority of the students also got the wrong answer for Question 9 (adverb) at 104 or 56.83%. Finally for question 10 (noun), 83.6% managed to answer it right. However, 16.4% or 30 of the students failed to get it correct. For question 5 (adjective), 54.64% of the students failed to give correct answer.

From the test result obtained, it can be concluded that students have distinctive levels of understanding on different grammar topics or parts of speech. The level of understanding of one topic and how it can be applied in sentences differs from another topic. From the analysis of grammar test answers, 'subject-verb agreement' is the most problematic topic and gives a lot of confusion to students. Although students can understand the rules, they encounter problems when they want to apply the rules in sentences. This is in accordance with the findings of Nayan and Jusoff (2009), and Najlaa' Nasuha binti Mohd Radin and Fong (2012) in their studies which indicated that students have difficulties in applying the general rules of this grammar topic in constructing sentences. Other topics like 'article', 'conjunction' and 'noun' are generally easy for students to understand; however, they can be confusing to students depending on the context the words are used. Students find it hard to choose the correct answer if they have limited vocabulary and do not understand the context. The same problem occurs with other grammar topics tested such as 'pronoun', 'adjectives', 'adverbs', 'preposition' and 'tenses. The ability to understand the rules of the grammar topics must be supported with students' knowledge and language skills to enable them to use the grammar rules meaningfully in different sentences and contexts. This is in line with Asraf (2017) who highlighted that the success of attaining the language is achieved when the learners can apply the language correctly in an integrated manner with four basic skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

RQ2. How do the students perform in their grammar test?

No of Students	Performance
1	0%
3	10%
18	20%
35	30%
35	40%
33	50%
40	60%
13	70%
4	80%
1	90%

Table 2: Students' Grammar Knowledge Performance

Based on the table above, most of the students performed averagely in the grammar test. 1 of the students failed altogether and got a score of 0% out of the 10 questions tested. Another student managed to score 90% and that is the only highest score. 3 students scored 30% followed by 18 at 20, then 35 at 30% and 40%. Another 33 students scored 50%. 40 students, the largest group, scored 60%. The number then drop to 13 students who scored 70%. The higher the score or performance grade the smaller number of students. Only 4 students scored 80% and none of the students got 100% correct. Based on students' performance here, it can be concluded that most of the performance are in the middle range. This indicated that while the majority of the students have adequate knowledge of English grammar, in general it is not excellent either.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis done on the students' performance in the grammar test, it can be concluded that most of the students' overall performance were in the middle range. Most of them did not perform badly but neither did most of them excel at English grammar. As for the specific types of grammatical content that were most frequently wrong, it is identified that this batch of students may have a big problem applying subject-verb agreement rules in using the English language. Other parts of English language grammar component were also problematic as more than 50% of the students made error with that particular part of speech. Nevertheless, because this is a small study that examined only one batch of students, the results of this study may not be too significant for a more generalised conclusion. Thus, further study should be done to examine students' grammar knowledge especially in cases of indirect teaching and learning grammar.

Overall, based on the findings there seem to be a need for a more enhanced focus on the teaching and learning of English grammar for Malaysian ESL students. For societies whose first (and second) language is not English, there is still a need for structural practices so that the foundation of linguistic knowledge can be built up before further communicative tasks are given (Chung, 2017). While students should be fully equipped to have the skills to effectively communicate, they should also be able to do it well. This means that grammatical concerns in English language teaching in Malaysia should not take a back seat to other language skills and

knowledge. Unfortunately, in times of a more appreciation for communication based learning, grammar teaching is not deemed too essential and this is the approach taken by syllabus creators. Ultimately we have to be careful because, it could be the system that might be failing them, rather than the teachers (Dawber, 2019). Thus, continuous study should be done with regard to aspects of grammar knowledge and its teaching and learning in Malaysia.

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