

GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE OF ESL TEACHERS

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The aim of this article is to report on a study investigating the grammatical competence of English Second Language teachers in secondary schools. This study came about as a result of the widespread concern that these teachers may not always be competent enough in English. We determined the teachers' familiarity with standard English grammar as well as their acceptance of Black South African English features. The findings indicate that teachers had problems with the grammatical structures tested and accepted some Black South African English grammatical features as correct usage.

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om verslag te doen oor 'n studie wat die grammatikale vermoë van onderwysers van Engels Tweedetaal-onderwysers in sekondêre skole gemeet het. Die studie is gedoen na aanleiding van 'n wydverspreide besorgdheid dat onderwysers van Engels nie altyd vaardig genoeg in Engels is nie. Ons het die onderwysers se bekendheid met standaard-Engels grammatika vasgestel asook hul aanvaarding van Swart Suid-Afrikaanse Engelse grammatikale verskynsels. Die bevindinge dui aan dat onderwysers probleme het met die grammatikale strukture wat getoets is en dat hulle sekere Swart Suid-Afrikaanse Engelse grammatikale verskynsels as korrek aanvaar.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of teachers of English Second Language in South Africa are second language speakers of English. The competence of these teachers is frequently questioned in the present educational dispensation. The comment made by Mr. Aubrey Matlole, an education official of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), is typical of what is being said. He is quoted by *Beeld* newspaper of 4 December 1998 as saying that [African] learners are disadvantaged by the fact that they are taught by teachers who are not always competent in English. In addition, there is evidence that typical Black South African English grammatical and lexical features have become so entrenched in the speech of teachers of English as a second language that teachers are unlikely to recognise these forms as non-standard.

A frequent problem is that comments on teachers' competence in English are often based on impressionistic data. The aim of this article is to present empirical evidence of teachers' competence in English grammar. Local dialectal features were also included in the survey conducted.

ENGLISH TEACHERS' COMPETENCE

Society at large has certain expectation of the teachers of its children. Amongst others, it expects teachers to be competent in and knowledgeable of the subject that they teach. In English Second Language, this means that the teacher must be proficient in the language and have a good (even expert) command of its grammatical system.

Stevens (1977: 74) argues that learners' achievements will be impaired if the teacher's command of the language is inadequate. The teacher whose language competence is inadequate becomes 'a constraint upon learning' as well as a 'great discouragement' for the learner (Stevens, 1977: 74). Stevens (1987: 16) argues that one of the minimum requirements of a language teacher is to have an 'adequate command of the language being taught'. The teacher's grasp of the language is inadequate if he makes errors or is inconsistent in his control of grammar, meaning or usage, and thus 'becomes an impediment to the learning of his pupils' (Stevens, 1977: 31). This makes the teacher's competence 'a make-or-break requirement' for successful language learning and teaching (Stevens, 1977: 74). Stevens' views reflect popular and professional opinion, and are typical of the expectations of society (parents and employers, in particular) of teachers of English.

The teacher of English serves as a model to his/her learners. There is ample evidence of the 'transfer of training' in the second language acquisition literature (cf. Ellis, 1994: 351). The English teacher also plays an important role in providing feedback to learners, especially on its grammatical system, in the correction of student output, and he or she acts as a resource, a source of information, in the classroom. The English teacher is therefore also regarded as a 'gatekeeper', ensuring that standards of correctness are maintained.

The problem, however, is that in the minds of many people the competence of many ESL teachers 'leaves much to be desired' (Van der Walt, 1989: 194-195). This statement is typical of what is often said about teachers of English Second Language. In announcing the 2001 matriculation results, the Minister of Education stated on public television that he thought English was very poorly taught in our schools. These concerns have also been raised with regard to the implementation of a communicative approach, which requires high levels of proficiency from English teachers (cf. Van der Walt, 1989).

GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE

This article focuses on aspects of grammatical competence only. Grammar is a central component in any model of language competence (Cook, 1992: 9; Bachman, 1990: 84). Knowledge of grammatical rules is essential in that one cannot use words unless one knows how they should be put together (Ur, 1996: 4). Moreover, 'the grammar is an interlocking system in which the grammatical choices themselves contribute to the communicative meaning' (Chalker, 1993: 7). Rules of word formation and sentence formation, and the ability to recognise correct sentences and organise them to form texts, are regarded as central components of grammatical competence (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992: 71; Verhoeven & Vermeer, 1992: 164).

It is therefore generally regarded as essential that the ESL teacher possess adequate competence in and knowledge of English grammar, just as a mathematics teacher is expected to know the content of mathematics.

GRAMMATICAL NORM IN ESL

Standard languages exist throughout the world. The grammatical written model in South Africa has traditionally been one particular dialect, viz. Standard British English, which is used as the basic model in many parts of the world. Its grammar has been codified, and is relatively homogeneous. In English language teaching, it serves as a norm, and as such it is prescriptive. A model and norm is essential in language teaching, as well as language assessment. Teachers of English in South Africa are expected to adhere to this norm.

It is also true that Standard British English is only one variety of English. In many territories where English is widely used as a second language, it has been institutionalised, and is used in education, government, and courts of law. As a result, localised varieties have arisen, with their own grammatical features and vocabulary items. These varieties are often referred to as 'new' Englishes (Kachru, 1985; 1992; 1997). Examples of new Englishes include Indian English, Singapore English and Malaysian English.

Proponents of these varieties have adopted a 'dialects rights' position (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998), and they argue that these nativised varieties of English should be recognised as legitimate varieties and models in schools (cf. Gupta, 1993). They reject the so-called 'language deficit' position, which regards nativised features as 'deviant' from standard English.

Many (if not the majority of) black speakers of English use grammatical forms which deviate from those of Standard British English. Some linguists argue that a 'new' English – Black South African English (BSAE) – has evolved in South Africa (cf. Wade, 1999; Makalela, 1998; Buthelezi, 1995; De Klerk & Gough, forthcoming). This issue is currently the subject of much debate (e.g. De Klerk, 1996; Titlestad, 2002). Linguists do not seem to agree on the model of grammar to be adopted in South Africa. On the one hand, there is a school of thought that argues that schools should aim at teaching learners Standard English. Titlestad (1995) argues that, in order to achieve better teaching of English, teachers of English must be competent in the grammatical structures of Standard English inasmuch as correct structure and grammar play a significant role in effective communication. The question of standard in grammatical usage cannot be overlooked when grammar is discussed. On the other hand, linguists such as Webb (1996) and Wade (1999) argue that a more tolerant approach to non-standard English should be adopted, and that teachers should be non-prescriptive and non-dogmatic in their approach to English.

In the light of the above discussion, a crucial issue is whether teachers of ESL accept BSAE features as correct usage. We therefore aimed at establishing not only their knowledge of Standard English grammar, but also to determine their acceptance of BSAE grammatical features.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

A one-shot cross-sectional survey design was used. The subjects were all the African ESL teachers in public secondary schools of the Potchefstroom Education District (n =51). These teachers taught English Second Language in Grades 7 to 12. 53 percent of the teachers were female, and 47 percent were male. 39 percent of the teachers had a teaching diploma qualification, 33 percent had a teaching degree, 18 percent had a teaching certificate (PTC or

SEC), eight percent had a postgraduate teaching degree, while one subject did not specify her teaching qualifications. 61 percent of the subjects had Setswana as mother tongue, 18 percent had Sesotho, 10 percent had isiXhosa, four percent each had IsiZulu and Sepedi, two percent were TshiVenda speakers, while one subject did not specify his mother tongue.

A grammar test consisting of three sections was administered. The first section consisted of a grammaticality judgement task designed by Metcalfe and Astle (1998). Subjects were requested to choose a correct sentence from two provided. The items tested were concord, pronouns, comparatives, prepositions, tenses, conjunctions, adverbs, and word order. The purpose of the test was to determine the subjects' knowledge of features generally regarded as Standard English.

The second section consisted of a grammar test taken from Terblanche et al. (n.d.). The items tested were the present tense, past tense, future continuous tense, past perfect tense, past perfect continuous tense, present continuous tense, present perfect tense, and the future perfect tense. The subjects were required to supply the correct form of the verb in brackets. The purpose of the instrument was to determine the subjects' knowledge of the English tense system.

The third section was a replication of studies by Roodt (1993) and Van der Walt (2001), but with different subjects, and comprised a grammaticality judgement task designed by Roodt (1993), in which subjects were asked to judge the correctness of various sentences, and to correct those they thought were incorrect. The task, which consisted of 17 items, contained 12 common grammatical BSAE and five Standard English sentences. The aim was to determine whether teachers of English recognised BSAE grammatical features and rejected them as incorrect usage. The following features were tested: determiners, nouns, verbs, pronouns, and adverbs.

The first two sections were marked for correctness in terms of the grammar of Standard English. In the third section, the subjects' choice was marked in conjunction with the correction they made: if the response was correct and the correction incorrect, the response to the item was regarded as incorrect.

RESULTS

Section 1

Section 1 tested conventional rules of grammar with which ESL teachers are traditionally very familiar. The results are presented in Table 1.

Sentences	Responses			
	Correct		Incorrect	
	No.	%	No.	%
1 (a) Every room, attic, cellar and garage was searched by the police.	25	49.0	26	51.0
(b) Every room, attic, cellar and garage were searched by the police.				

2 (a) Your birth certificate as well as your passport is required. (b) Your birth certificate as well as your passport are required.	24	47.1	27	52.9
3 (a) She's one of those girls who always look attractive. (b) She's one of those girls who always looks attractive.	20	39.2	31	60.8
4 (a) Are there less children in the village school today? (b) Are there fewer children in the village school today?	47	92.2	4	7.8
5 (a) The tycoon's estate was divided between his three surviving children. (b) The tycoon's estate was divided among his three surviving children.	49	96.1	2	3.9
6 (a) If either of the suspects is seen, he will be arrested. (b) If either of the suspects are seen, he will be arrested.	47	92.2	4	7.8
7 (a) "Nothing shall ever come between you and I," he told her. (b) "Nothing shall ever come between you and me," he told her.	43	84.3	8	15.7
8 (a) They are players who I think will one day be famous. (b) They are players whom I think will one day be famous.	11	21.6	40	78.4
9 (a) The secretary said he'd written back without delay. (b) The secretary said he'd wrote back without delay.	42	82.4	9	17.6
10 (a) If I was wrong, I'd be the first to admit it. (b) If I were wrong, I'd be the first to admit it.	23	45.1	28	54.9
11 (a) In competitive sport, one can't afford to rest on his laurels. (b) In competitive sport, one can't afford to rest on one's laurels.	47	92.2	4	7.8
12 (a) I can't stand the heat as she can. (b) I can't stand the heat like she can.	24	47.1	27	52.9
13 (a) The angler had only caught two small fish. (b) The angler had caught only two small fish	37	72.6	14	27.4
14 (a) It was a most unique experience for all of us. (b) It was a unique experience for all of us.	41	80.4	10	19.6
15 (a) She said she would wear neither the red nor the blue dress to the party. (b) She said she would neither wear the red nor the blue dress at the party.	16	31.4	35	68.6

16 (a) The reason why he fails to impress is that he lacks self-confidence. (b) The reason why he fails to impress is because he lacks self-confidence.	29	56.9	22	43.1
17 (a) I always lie my sweaters carefully in the drawer. (b) I always lay my sweaters carefully in the drawer.	46	90.2	5	9.8
18 (a) Come and stand beside us girls. (b) Come and stand beside we girls.	49	96.1	2	3.9
19 (a) Can I drive you home? (b) May I drive you home?	39	76.5	12	23.5
20 (a) I expected to have found the boys still in bed. (b) I expected to find the boys still in bed.	45	88.2	6	11.8

Table 1: Standard English Features

The average mark obtained by the subjects was 69%. Most teachers were familiar with the distinction between *less* and *few*, *between* and *among* and rules related to *either* and *between*. More than 50% of subjects indicated sentences related to the following rules as incorrect:

- use of objective form of pronoun ‘*who*’ (78% incorrect).
- use of ‘*neither...nor*’ (69% incorrect)
- concord - ‘*one of ... who*’ (61 % incorrect)
- use of present conditional ‘*If I were...*’ (55% incorrect)
- use of conjunction ‘*as*’ (53% incorrect)
- concord – singular nouns joined by ‘*as well as*’ (53 % incorrect)
- concord – the use of *every* (51 % incorrect)

Section 2

The results for Section 2, which focused on tenses, are presented in Table 2.

Sentences	Responses			
	Correct		Incorrect	
	No.	%	No.	%
1. It (A: rain) now and it is very likely that it (B: rain still) tomorrow.	A: 16 B: 13	31.4 25.5	35 38	68.6 74.5
2. When he walked into the room he found that most of his books (A: take) away.	A: 6	11.8	45	88.2
3. When she (A: leave) she said that she (B: find) the book that she (C: look) for for years.	A: 46 B: 13 C: 12	90.2 25.5 23.5	5 38 39	9.8 74.5 76.5
4. The young man (A: acquire) much experience since he (B: come) to the University.	A: 10 B: 43	19.6 84.3	41 8	80.4 15.7
5. Since I (A: come) here no rain (B: fall).	A: 48 B: 15	94.1 29.4	3 36	5.9 70.6

6. He (A: play) the part, if he (B: not offend) the producer at the last rehearsal.	A: 7 B: 13	13.7 25.5	44 38	86.3 74.5
7. "These toys (A: not be) with us a week before the doll (B: get lose)," he said.	A: 2 B: 28	3.9 54.9	49 23	96.1 45.1
8. That (A: use be) the rule, but it no longer holds good.	A: 28	54.9	23	45.1

Table 2: Tenses

The average mark obtained by the subjects in this section was 39%. More than half of the subjects made errors in the following tenses:

Sentence 1 A: Present continuous:	69% incorrect
B: Future continuous:	75% incorrect
Sentence 2 A: Past perfect:	88% incorrect
Sentence 3 B: Past perfect:	75% incorrect
C: Past perfect continuous:	77% incorrect
Sentence 4 A: Present perfect:	80% incorrect
Sentence 5 B: Present perfect:	71% incorrect
Sentence 6 A: Future perfect:	86% incorrect
B: Past perfect:	75% incorrect
Sentence 7 A: Past perfect:	96% incorrect

The results indicate that most of the subjects are not competent in the use of the English tense system, especially the perfect tenses. The verb is 'the central constituent of the English sentence' (Vaida, 1996: 64), and presents a major learning obstacle to learners. The teachers surveyed do not have an adequate understanding of the English tense system and are unlikely to facilitate and assist learners' development in it.

The average mark the subjects obtained for both sections one and two is 54%. This does not inspire much confidence in the subjects' knowledge of and skill in English grammar.

Section 3

The results of the grammaticality judgement proved to be very significant, as they show that most teachers accept BSAE grammatical features as correct usage.

The following BSAE features were accepted by more than 75% of the subjects:

Use of articles:

My matric results gave me a courage to apply for a bursary.

Non-count nouns used as count nouns:

I am very grateful to my Biology teacher because he gave me many good advices.

Extension of the progressive aspect:

My mother is having only Std 8 and does not earn a lot of money.

Use of 'too' as intensifier:

Sarah would like to work in a restaurant, as she likes cooking too much.

Use of quantifiers:

When the teacher gave me back my first test I saw that I had made some few mistakes.

The following feature was accepted by 65-74% of the subjects:

Omission of articles:

People must realise that smoking is ^ health risk and that smokers endanger other people's lives.

The following were accepted by 50-64% of the subjects:

Gender conflation in pronouns:

Mary did not want to lend me his dress to go to the party.

'Can be able' as a modal verb:

Would you buy me a new dress if you can be able?

The three categories above indicate a widespread acceptance of BSAE features. Specific use of articles (such as '*a courage*'), non-count nouns as count nouns (such as '*many good advices*'), extension of the progressive aspect (such as '*is having*'), 'too' as intensifier (e.g. '*too much*'), and quantifiers (e.g. '*some few mistakes*') can be regarded as entrenched amongst the subjects in this study.

The features indicated above are unlikely to be corrected by the majority of the subjects in this study. Teachers will model these features, with learners emulating them. It seems as if BSAE is well established in these black schools, and that its features serve as model and norm in teaching and assessment. These features have become fossilised, and have apparently become a permanent feature of English in African schools. These results seem to confirm suggestions that a 'new' English has already evolved in South Africa, supporting findings by Gough (1996), Van der Walt (2001) and Van der Walt and Van Rooy (2002).

A further significant result of the third section was that the following sentences, correct in Standard English and included as distractors, were regarded as incorrect by some of the subjects (percentages are included in brackets):

As I am very good at mathematics, I decided to take it as a subject (63%)

I attended boarding school as my parents lived in a rural area (49%)

Much money is spent on research to find a cure for AIDS (49%)

Take the bag in which I have put the clothes (37%)

I am the fourth child in our family and my sisters have spoiled me (35%)

The fact that these sentences were corrected by some teachers in the study is a further indication of the level of their grammatical competence.

The following picture emerges from the findings of this study:

- The subjects are unlikely to serve as good models of English usage.
- One can expect inadequate as well as incorrect feedback from these teachers.
- Assessment in tests and examinations is likely to be influenced.
- BSAE features have become entrenched in these English classrooms, and are likely to be transmitted to learners.
- The subjects are therefore unlikely to fulfil their traditional roles as gatekeepers in terms of Standard English.

The tutorial role the teacher of English is expected to assume is also affected because he/she is unlikely to act as coach and resource when learners are involved in activities that involve grammatical structures (cf. Harmer, 1991). The findings indicate that these teachers cannot serve as effective mentors, and the accuracy level in learner production is likely to be affected negatively as a result (cf. Elder, 1994).

The results may be ascribed to the quality of training these teachers received at colleges and universities. They may also reflect the quality of their schooling. We may also be witnessing the result of a specific interpretation of communicative language teaching, viz. that it is not necessary to teach and learn grammar. This, however, is a misinterpretation, as communicative language teaching makes provision for the adequate teaching and learning of grammar.

CONCLUSION

Although the findings of this study cannot be generalised to all teachers of English, we suspect that the problems discussed above are widespread. This raises the question of the standard of English that can be maintained in South Africa. On the basis of these results, it does not seem possible to achieve a good to adequate standard of English in education at present. By virtue of the fact that education always aims for the best, it is clear that a return to basics is called for in teacher education, both pre-service and in-service. As Todd (1984: 239) states, we need to 'educate the teacher': improve the grammatical ability of teachers, and teach them 'about' the language. This education should also include training in dialectal varieties of English, so that they should develop a perception of the role of a standard language in society. There is also a need for clarity on the standard of English to be achieved in our education system. The Standard language is the variety used by the educated, and is always chosen in situations where learners are being educated (cf. Davies 1999: 184). A Standard Black South African English has not yet been codified; BSAE is described and discussed as a sociolinguistic phenomenon; there is much theorising and speculation about it, but it has not yet been standardised. Standard British English remains the generally accepted written standard in South Africa, and it is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. It therefore remains the standard to be aimed at in education.

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