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Grammatical Competence and Oral Fluency Level of Class Ten Students in the Kathmandu Valley

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Abstract:

Grammatical competence is an important constituent of total communicative competence in any language. Grammatical competence paired with fluency are considered to be good indicators of communicative competence. Obviously, it takes a long time to acquire communicative proficiency. In this regard, thirteen years is a pretty long period to learn any language, and to achieve communicative competence in that language. Objectives: The main objective is to critically assess the grammatical competence and oral fluency level of class ten students of the Kathmandu valley after studying English for ten to thirteen years. Method: A descriptive-cum-exploratory qualitative research design was adopted to assess the proficiency level of the students. Class Observation of teachers, and Oral Performance tests of class ten students were used as the tools of evaluations. Purposive sampling was used for the selection of thirty schools in three districts of the Kathmandu Valley whereas random sampling was used to select the respondent students of mixed ability for the oral performance test. The test items for the oral test were based on fixed criteria: different elements of grammatical competence. Interviews, Class Observations and Oral Test answers were tape-recorded for detailed study and analysis. Result: The over-all result of the oral performance test shows that the learning outcome, in general, is rather frustrating. Let alone government schools where most of the students belong to lower-class unprivileged families, even in private schools, or rather in so called A grade private schools, the condition of the English proficiency from the viewpoint of grammatical competence is rather frustrating. Except one school out of 30 schools none could secure 40% mean. Conclusion: The current English teaching practices in most schools need to be improved for better learning outcome and better communicative proficiency. Beside, communication-oriented grammar books and the main-skills books which are compatible with communicative approach should be introduced. Hands-on Teacher straining programmes should be organized by schools with a view to updating and boosting the English teachers' linguistic knowledge and ELT skills.

Keywords: Grammatical Competence of class ten students, Oral Fluency Level of class ten students

1. Introduction

In private schools, students have an exposure to the English language for a pretty long period of 13 years, and in government schools they study English for 10 to 11 or 12 years. It is worth exploring whether the learning outcome of this long period is satisfactory or frustrating. The researcher has made an empirical study of the class ten students studying in 30 different schools of three districts of the Kathmandu Valley: Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur.

In English-medium private schools, English is taught under immersion programme, and the nature of English instruction is what we call CBI that is content based instruction. The medium of classroom instruction is English; all subjects except Nepali are taught in English. There is English speaking environment on the school premises. All the students are supposed to speak English even outside the classroom in their informal conversation with school-mates and teachers. All the teachers communicate with them in English. In such a situation, it is not surprising that students are able to speak English with limited proficiency even if the English subject is not taught in the classroom in the most effective way. However, most teachers themselves complain that the quality of their students' academic English is not desirable. This situation triggered in me the curiosity to investigate the truth and reasons behind the poor quality of English among school children studying in private as well as government schools of Nepal, in particular of three districts: Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur. The investigation focuses, in particular, on one component of the comprehensive communicative competence: linguistic competence/grammatical competence which works like the skeleton and flesh of the whole body of communicative competence. It also endeavours to check the English speaking fluency level of the students. It is primarily an objective evaluation of the grammatical competence of the subjects. At the same time, it aims at evaluating the free communication of the respondent students with certain criteria as well as on the ground of over-all impression. In short, the test aims at assessing the English speaking accuracy as well as fluency level of the subjects.

Grammatical competence is one of the four elements of communicative competence. The four dimensions of communicative competence are: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence (Canal & Swain, 1980).

Obviously, grammatical competence is perhaps more important than other competences. It comprises of two pillars of language: grammar and vocabulary, however, it is much more comprehensive and inclusive. Grammatical competence includes vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics. (Richards & Schmidt, 1983) (p.7)

Canale and Swain (1980) say that grammatical competence deals with features and rules of language, vocabulary, word formation, and pronunciation, sentence formation to understand and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances.

Research supports the statement that a child of five or six years, in general, has already acquired 75% of the grammar of his/her native language, and is able to communicate effortlessly and effectively in matters related to daily life. Why are school children, despite more cognitive ability and nearly three times more exposure to English, unable to reach even the level of the communicative ability of native English children aged seven/eight?

The main objective of this study is to critically assess the grammatical competence and oral fluency level of terms of the English learning outcome of 10 to 13 years from KG to class ten.

2. Method

This research aims at finding out the grammatical/linguistic competence and oral fluency level of class ten students through an oral performance test. For this, predominantly qualitative research design was used, however, data were collected and analysed both in text and figures.

The setting was the schools of the Kathmandu valley. The target population was the students of class ten in the selected schools.

Purposive sampling was used for the selection of altogether 30 schools, 10 schools from each of the three districts: Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. Some parameters were used to select schools from each district. Schools comprised of both government schools and English medium private schools, schools in urban area as well as semi-rural area, reputed grade A schools as well as grade C schools. That's why purposive sampling was employed to achieve this purpose. As the private schools outnumber the government schools, six-four ratio was determined for the selection of schools in each district. Thus six private schools and four government schools in each of the three districts were selected as samples.

As the performance test had to be administered orally and individually within a period of 45 minutes in each school, 5 representative students of mixed ability from class ten were selected randomly.

There were fixed criteria for the construction of test items. First, the questions aimed at testing basics of grammatical knowledge, active vocabulary, pronunciation, communicative functions, and lastly oral fluency. Second, the questions were easy enough to be attempted by average students.

The sample size consisted of 150 class ten students of 30 schools from 3 districts.

The test administration took the duration of 4 months altogether.

All the answers were tape recorded for detailed analysis.

3. Results and Discussions

The results or findings of the oral performance test conducted in 30 schools of the three districts are as follows. There were altogether seven types of questions, of which six questions aimed at testing the linguistic accuracy and one last question was to test the students' oral fluency level. The marks attained by each school for each question, and the overall mean are given below in percentage.

Those schools which are not labeled as 'government school' in the chart below are private schools.

School's name	Tense Use	Preposition	Pronunciation	Active Vocabulary	Communicative Function	Action Word	Free Communication	Mean Percentage
1. School No. 1, Bhaktapur (Government school)	0	0	0	3.3	0	50	54.5	15.4
2. School No. 2, Bhaktapur (Government school)	20	20	0	0	0	25	72.7	19.6
3. School No. 3, Bhaktapur	82.5	60	34.2	20	0	20	85.4	43.1
4. School No. 4, Bhaktapur	33.3	44.4	0	0	0	50	76.3	29.8
5. School No. 5, Bhaktapur (Government school)	26.6	16	0	0	0	0	58.1	14.3
6. School No. 6, Bhaktapur	33.3	16	5.7	0	0	25	54.5	19.2
7. School No. 7, Bhaktapur	66.6	8	0	0	0	25	72.7	24.6
8. School No. 8, Bhaktapur (Government school)	66.6	4	0	0	0	25	72.7	24.4
9. School No. 9, Bhaktapur	53.3	20	0	0	0	25	76.3	24.9
10. School No. 10, Bhaktapur	53.3	48	0	3.3	0	25	74.5	29.1
11. School No. 11, Kathmandu	60	24	0	0	0	25	74.5	26.2
12. School No. 12, Kathmandu	33.3	32	0	0	0	50	72.7	26.8
13. School No. 13, Kathmandu	53.3	20	0	3.3	0	25	72.7	24.9
14. School No. 14, Kathmandu (Government school)	20	8	5.7	3.3	0	0	72.7	15.6
15. School No. 15, Kathmandu	26	24	0	0	0	25	74.5	21.3
16. School No. 16, Kathmandu	20	20	0	0	0	25	72.7	19.6
17. School No. 17, Kathmandu (Government school)	60	28	0	0	0	25	54.5	23.9
18. School No. 18, Kathmandu (Government school)	53.3	20	0	0	0	25	71.7	24.2
19. School No. 19, Kathmandu ('Grade A' school)	53.3	48	0	3.3	0	25	78.1	29.6
20. School No. 20, Kathmandu (Government school)	13.3	8	2.8	0	0	0	54.5	11.2
21. School No. 21, Lalitpur	26.6	28	2.8	0	0	25	74.5	22.4
22. School No. 22, Lalitpur	60	24	0	3.3	0	50	78.1	30.7
23. School No. 23, Lalitpur	53.3	12	0	0	0	25	74.5	23.8
24. School No. 24, Lalitpur (Government school)	13.3	32	0	0	0	30	70	20.7
25. School No. 25, Lalitpur	26.6	28	2.8	0	0	25	74.5	18.8
26. School No. 26, Lalitpur	53.3	28	0	0	0	25	76.3	26.2
27. School No. 27, Lalitpur (Government school)	53.3	20	0	0	0	25	76.3	24.9
28. School No. 28, Lalitpur (Government school)	40	0	0	0	0	25	69	19.1
29. School No. 29, Lalitpur (Government school)	26.6	8	0	0	0	25	60	17.8
30. School No. 30, Lalitpur	53.3	12	0	0	0	0	63.6	18.4

Thus we see that except for School No. 3, all other schools have an appalling mean score: just around 20 % marks which are considered failure marks. It is noteworthy that in the national level SLC exam many of these schools, particularly, private schools get around 70% mean score whereas individual scores of some of the students exceed 90 % marks in English. It is surprising that 29 out of 30 schools could not get even pass marks in the oral performance test of the research. Even School No. 19, so-called Grade A school obtained just **29.6 % overall mean score**.

3.1. Item-Wise Analysis of the Results

Let us analyze the results of the oral test item-wise in order to ascertain in which areas of grammatical competence the respondents fared well or badly.

3.1.1. Tense Use

School No.1 with 0% marks, School No. 2with 20%, School No. 4 with 33.3 %, School No. 5 with 26.6 %,School No. 12 with 33.3 %,School No. 14 with 20 %,School No. 15 with 26 %,School No. 16 with 20 %,School No. 20 with 13.3 %,School No. 21 with 26.6 %,School No. 24 with 13.3 %,School No.25 with 26.6 % and School No. 26 with 26.6 %mean score in Question No. 1related to Tense Use shows that most of the class ten students don't have the procedural knowledge of the use of the Simple Past Tense although they may have its declarative knowledge. Anyway, 15 schools out of 30 schools have got 40 or more than 40, with one school (School No. 3)securing82.5 mean score in Tense Use section. Obviously, the result suggests that there is a need to present and practice grammar points in context and in communicative framework/activity. Obviously, the questions like "What did you eat for lunch today? /What time did you go to bed last night?"are too easy questions to be answered correctly by class ten students.

3.1.2. Use of Prepositions

The poor mean scores like 0, 20, 16, 16, 8, 4, 20, 24, 32, 20, 8, 24, 20, 28, 20, 8, 28, 24, 12, 32, 28, 28, 20 and0 suggest that prepositional uses were perhaps not taught in situational and linguistic contexts. Only 4 schools could get 40 or above 40, with one school (School No. 3) securing the highest marks 60 in this question.

It is noteworthy that the students could not work out the correct answers like "a bird on the roof/a hole in the roof, a notice on the door, spread the butter over the bread, look into the mirror to check make-up".

3.1.3. Pronunciation

One of the goals of teaching/learning English is to enable the learners in oral communication to avoid confusion because of the use of faulty pronunciation, incorrect structures and inappropriate vocabulary. In terms of correct pronunciation almostcent percent students of the sample schools got0%marks, except one school that got 34 which is also below pass marks.

It is noteworthy that for the purpose of pronunciation test, very simple words like "woman, close friend, age, admit, leopard, wanted, moustache" were selected.

3.1.4. Active Vocabulary

Simple words of daily use like "pothole, pigtail, window-sill, flutter, pick the ear and slump down" were given to be used by the students, but in 30 schools, none of the 150 students could use those words. In School No. 3,one student used some words correctly and got 20 (though not pass marks) which is his individual mean score on that question. When he was asked how he knew those words, he attributed his answers to his regular watching of 'Discovery Channel'. The result shows clearly that the input of active vocabulary is poor in all types of schools.

3.1.5. Communicative Function

The result shows that all the 30 schools and 150 students got zero marks in the area of the communicative function. In this question, a role-play had to be done, in which the students had to introduce one classmate to her aunty. Nobody could start with "This is" The unfamiliarity of the students with this simple communicative function suggests that either so-called communicative syllabus is defective or the teacher doesn't teach English with the objective of communicative functions.

3.1.6. Action Words

In this question the researcher performed some actions, and the students had to describe the actions supplying appropriate word slike " shrug shoulders, snap fingers, twirl the moustache, yawn".Only3 out of 30 schools could get the score of 50 in this questions, others were below the pass marks. The result of this question also suggest that the active vocabulary of the students is really poor.

3.1.7. Free Communication

In this question, the students were required to tell something in short about their aim in life. Let alone government schools, even in English medium private schools where all the subjects (except Nepali)are taught in English, and speaking English is mandatory for students and teachers in the classroom as well as outside the classroom on the school premises, **free communication skill** comes under the rating of **B+** . On the other hand, some private schools' mean score in 'free communication 'go down up to **C**. This is the learning outcome of 13 years' study of English. Their speaking showed that they could communicate, but in survival English or broken English with poor grammatical accuracy and lexical appropriacy.

3.2. Comparison Between the Results of Government and Private Schools

The condition of performance result in government schools was more deplorable than that of the private schools. The case was worst in government schools of semi-rural areas. Inone of government schools, during the oral test it was noticed that out of5 respondents2 respondent students pronounced the word "girl" as **lun** {,biscuit as **la:s'6** , spread as **:kiL8**and bought as **afp6** . In the same school, some students were pronouncing the words "police" and "another" respectively as **kf]ln;**and**c0fg]b^**, which was marked during their response to several questions.

The result shows that considered as a whole, there is no marked difference between the accuracy level of private schools and government schools although oral fluency seems to be better among private school students, which is natural because of extensive exposure to English through classroom instruction of almost all subjects in English medium. Here, one question might be raised: if this

better oral fluency of private school students is the result of better English teaching or is it just a by-product of Content Based Instruction of all the subjects in English medium?

3.3. Findings of Class Observations

After observing the classroom teaching of the secondary level English teachers in 30 schools, the researchers got the following findings:

- i. Almost all the teachers were found to be teaching "grammar lessons" with the sole objective of exam-preparation. Grammar teaching was exam-oriented, not communication-oriented.
- ii. They presented grammar rules and got the students to practice the rules in isolated sentences, not in context.
- iii. There was no situational presentation of grammar points. All presentations were de-contextualized.
- iv. There was no manipulation of grammar points in linguistic context either – everything was just in isolation.
- v. Structural practice was not followed by communicative practice.
- vi. There was no "on-the-spot" pronunciation clinic.
- vii. There was no "on-the-spot" vocabulary development.
- viii. Many teachers did not mind if the students were paying attention to the lesson or not.
- ix. Many teachers conceived that communicative teaching means just letting the students talk whatever they like without marking their performance for giving feedback.
- x. In most cases, the teacher spoke with faulty pronunciation.
- xi. In most cases, the teachers were unable to provide models of real English to be picked by the students.
- xii. In many cases, the teachers' explanation of the rules were not reliable.
- xiii. Many teachers need to boost up their own linguistic competence and their English teaching skills to do communication-driven grammar teaching in order to maintain a balance between grammatical accuracy and oral fluency of learners.

3.4. Secondary Data Related to the Topic "Grammatical Competence and Oral Fluency"

In course of collecting secondary data regarding the topic "grammatical competence and oral fluency", the related literatures were studied. The review of related literatures shows that there have been several approaches/methods of teaching grammar. The oldest one is grammar-translation method which was followed by several others, worth mentioning of them are :audio-lingual method, OSS Approach, Direct Method. The current ELT approach is Communicative Approach, also known as Communicative Language Teaching. This is the most dominant current ELT approach prevalent throughout the world where English is taught and learnt as ESL (English as a second language) or as EFL (English as a foreign language). The classic CLT has been modified a lot since it was first introduced in mid 1970's. In this era of post-modernism, even 'post-communicative' and 'post-methods' concepts are under discussion. However, the essence of CLT is unanimously accepted everywhere: the learning outcome of ELT (English language teaching) must be the development of communicative ability in practice. Nowadays, grammatical competence is considered an essential component of comprehensive communicative competence (Canale, 1980).

It is noteworthy that Strong Version of Communicative Approach, also known as Deep-end Communicative Language Teaching, does not approve of grammar teaching, however, Shallow-end or Weak version which is the improved form of this approach holds the view that grammar cannot be ignored in language teaching. According to Mukminatien, "although **functional syllabus** is used in this method, grammar is still the main component of the syllabus, even if it is dressed up in functional labels" (Mukminatien, 2001).

In fact, grammar can even help to enhance communicative proficiency. As Harmer remarks, "at this stage, it is enough to say that grammar teaching – of both the overt and covert kind has a real and important place in the classroom" (Jeremy, 1997).

The weak version or focus-on-form model of CLT includes explicit grammar teaching (Nunan, 2001).

In Communicative Language Teaching, grammar teaching employs the methodology called Focus-on-Form (Ellis, 2006). The term 'focus-on-form' is rather somewhat confusing, as contrary to its name its main focus is on 'meaning' with attention to form only in course of communicative activity. Actually, Focus-on-Form is of two types: "Focus-on-Form" (*planned*) and Focus-on-Form (*incidental*). Both start with a communicative task. The former approach requires a focused task to elicit predetermined grammatical structure (Virginia & Bygate, 2008).

In the latter approach, attention to form in the context of a communicative activity is not predetermined but actually, the need of focusing on certain forms appears incidentally depending on the participants' performance as the activity proceeds. Unlike *planned Focus-on-Form*, where the attention to form is of intensive nature, in the *incidental Focus-on-Form*, attention to form is of extensive nature, so attention can be directed to a wide variety of grammatical structures during the same task. In both approaches, no separate grammar lessons are taught, but rather grammar teaching is integrated into a single communicative task. Thus Focus-on-Form leads to acquired grammatical knowledge through conscious attention to linguistic form, and at the same time being engaged with understanding and producing meaningful messages.

4. Conclusion

The poor score of the oral performance test is a solid proof that something is wrong with the current English practices, in particular with the input and interaction of English in the classroom. The result clearly shows that the learning outcome of 13 years in private schools and of 10 /11 years in government schools is not satisfactory from the viewpoint of grammatical accuracy. The students lack practical knowledge of grammar-in-use, for example, they were unable to use the correct prepositions depending on situations, neither were the majority of students able to reply using the correct verb tense. They seem to have just a shallow declarative knowledge of

grammar points, studying English just for exam preparation. Although the school exam result shows that the students can successfully solve discrete-point grammar questions asked in isolation in the exam, the result of the performance test showed that they lack practical ability to communicate accurately in context. In other words, they lack procedural knowledge of English grammar although they may have the declarative knowledge.

The poor active vocabulary stock of the students makes it evident that the teachers were perhaps indifferent to exploit the situations and events inside and outside the classroom to present common words like "pigtail, pothole, window-sill, pick the ear, snap fingers, shrug shoulders, yawn." The result also suggests that course-books might not be compatible with communicative principles, and might lack plentiful materials for the communicative practice of the necessary components of a language like grammar-in-use, vocabulary-in-use, pronunciation clinic and adequate functional activities.

The result also shows that the root cause of the faulty pronunciation of the students lies with their teachers' faulty pronunciation because the students pick up what they hear from their teachers.

The result shows that the English performance of government school students is lower than that of the private school students, particularly, in fluency area, however, there is not marked difference in accuracy area. The learning outcome of 10 to 13 years' study of English cannot be rated as satisfactory.

The study has concluded with the following recommendations:

There is a pressing need of improving current English teaching practices in the schools of Nepal. First of all, the school management should realize its necessity instead of being content with the superfluous performance of the students in the SLC exam, and should conduct English teachers' in-school hands-on training programmes where the teachers will be practically groomed on how to give communication-oriented grammar lessons, and how to develop and expand the students' active vocabulary stock to be effective communicators. In such TPD programmes, techniques like "on-the-spot pronunciation clinic, on-the-spot grammar clinic, on-the-spot vocabulary development" and the methods of "situational grammar teaching", "utilizing magic moments of the classroom and outside events" and others like "planned Focus-on Form", "Incidental Focus-on Form" and "Samples plus Systems" can be demonstrated through mini demo lessons, requiring the teachers to follow the same after the demo lessons.

For desirable vocabulary development, "in-school reading" programme and "at-home reading" programme of intensive as well as extensive nature should be launched.

The English course-books need to be adapted so as to make them more compatible with communicative language teaching principles, and to make them more outcome-oriented.

Although deep-rooted personal beliefs persist and don't easily change, the English teachers need to change their beliefs and attitude regarding the need of correct or at least intelligible English pronunciation, and should rectify their own English pronunciation in order to provide right model pronunciation to their students.

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