

Advanced English Students' Perceptions on Grammar Usage

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Abstract

Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD) has an English program for the bachelor's degree in Modern Language with concentration on English. Students in this program are trained to work in the fields in which English is used, such as education, translation, interpreting, tourism, and so on. For this reason, students must struggle to perform in learning this language communicatively. The purpose of this study was to: (a) Determine the extent English language students perceive their grammatical competence; (b) Assess Students' self-perception about their English grammatical competence; (c) Explore professors' perceptions about students' English grammar proficiency; and (d) Interpret students' perceptions about their classmates' English grammar competence in the Advanced level I class in the modern language program at UASD during Term 2019-1. The data in this research study was collected through qualitative method approach. The study used focus group interviews to collect qualitative information. Only students and professors in Advanced level I classes were included in the study

ERIC descriptors: Qualitative study-focus groups- Advanced English students- Grammar perception-Dominican Republic

Chapter I: Introduction

It is known that a language makes sense because of grammar, but many students struggle to master it. Thus, they might get frustrated when they do not achieve the results they really want. Learning grammar requires an extensive dedication and practice in order to keep up with its mastery. Any English language student should recognize that grammar works as the core of oral and written discourse, so that, internalizing English grammar is essential to reach the goal of succeeding in communication. "Grammar is the base of English language. It operates at the sentence level and governs the syntax or word orders that are permissible in the language" (Zhang, 2009).

Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD) has an English program for the bachelor's degree in Modern Language with concentration on English. Students in this program are trained to work in the fields in which English is used, such as education, translation, interpreting, tourism, and so on. For this reason, students must struggle to

perform in learning this language communicatively. During the first six semesters of the Modern Language career, students must succeed in internalizing the subject contents of the syllabus to become fluent in the oral and written skills required to pass the advanced specialized classes. These English language subjects are essentially based on listening, speaking, reading and writing skills with emphasis on vocabulary, culture and grammar. Thus, mastering grammar skills will allow students to enhance an effective oral and written English communication which is required to acquire a wide grammar competence and to be proficient enough in the work field where English language is necessary. As some researchers advocate regarding the grammatical competence, “this type of competence is important because it provides skills and Knowledge so that students can learn to be understood in speaking and writing.” They add, “Grammatical competence increases in importance as learner advances in proficiency” (Díaz-Rico and Weed, 2010, p. 58).

The purpose of this study was to: (a) Determine the extent English language students perceive their grammatical competence; (b) Assess Students’ self-perception about their English grammatical competence; (c) Explore professors’ perceptions about students’ English grammar proficiency; and (d) Interpret students’ perceptions about their classmates’ English grammar competence in the Advanced level I class in the modern language program at UASD during Term 2019-1. It derives from the need to understand the grammar proficiency that the students have acquired in this level. Consequently, the data regarding the students’ grammar skills collected through this study can help professors and students not only in the university level, but also in other contexts in which this subject is taught under similar conditions. Therefore, the information about the students’ English grammar skills acquired in Advanced level I uncovered through this inquiry was relevant and dependable.

Statement of the Problem

Students who follow the English language program in order to acquire the necessary proficiencies in English language might be affected in their English learning if they do not take into consideration the requirements that learning grammar entails, since, it takes hard work to use grammar correctly in a language that is not their own, and it is

even harder mastering it. “Many students have a poor attitude toward grammar instruction, causing a lack of confidence in usage and writing” (Hutchinson, D.; McCavitt, S.; Rude, K.; and Vallow, D. 2002).

On the other hand, the majority of students in this university enroll in the English language career with little or no knowledge about the English grammar (Santana, 2016); thus, it might become a challenge for them to acquire the ability to communicate in English in an appropriate and accurate grammatical way. Furthermore, this fact might cause that students encounter hardships in acquiring grammatical competence and obtaining university progress.

Some of the English grammar handicaps students might encounter in communicating in the target language are pronoun usage, subject-verb agreement, adjective placement, gender and number use, verb conjugation, English tenses’ usage, and so on. Thus, professors and students provided the information regarding the English grammar skills acquired by advanced level I students at the end of the course, which might be of much value in this study.

This research observed Advanced level I students’ English grammar proficiency acquired throughout said course. Furthermore, it explored the appreciation students have of their classmates’ grammar skills and finally the professors’ views on their Advanced I students’ grammar skills.

Nature of the Problem

The university in which this research was conducted is a public higher educational institution, where the majority of students have a low socio-economic status. In this country, the Dominican Republic, the socio-economic status impacts upon the educational achievement. University Students, who have a low socio-economic-status, struggle in their educational process, since they begin their first academic education in the school. In their primary and high schools, they may have faced the educational difficulties of developing countries. Developing countries, as the Dominican Republic,

hold a public education system, in which the classrooms have too many students, and this may hinder the English learning and/or teaching in their classes in school. As Santana (2016) accounts for in his study, "The excessive number of students is detrimental to the learning process, specifically, in the basic levels in which the students should develop the basic skills to master a language" (p.1).

Another problem that public educational system presents is the lack of technology in classrooms, so that, students might not obtain the necessary knowledge in order to develop the English grammar structures and improve the English language. According to Santana's study (2016) the teaching classrooms should be provided with modern technological materials to make possible the improvement of the teaching and learning of the English language.

On the other hand, an important factor to point out is that the academic program that holds the public education system might not be strengthened enough with strategies and grammar instruction regarding the English subject in classroom. Thus, when students finish High School, their English grammar knowledge is poor. Azar (2007) advocates, "Grammar instruction is necessary and essential for learners to achieve advanced levels of proficiency in school language learning," (as cited in Lin 2008, p. 9).

If students' backgrounds and previous experiences regarding the English grammar learning are poor, this factor might be presented when they start their English career at this public university. In this case, students at UASD might have big difficulties to learn English grammar properly; so that, they might have encountered handicaps to reach the goal of grammatically communicate in an effective and appropriate way. Thus, the perceptions that Advanced level I students have regarding their different English grammar skills and the perceptions that professors have about their students' English grammar skills at this level validated the correlation that there might be between students' current English grammar experiences and their English grammar learning backgrounds.

Objectives

1. Determine the extent English language students perceive their grammatical competence at the end of Advanced level I class in the modern language program at UASD during Term 2019-1.

2. Assess Students' self-perception about their English grammatical competence at the end of Advanced level I class in the modern language career at UASD during Term 2019-1.

3. Explore professors' perceptions about students' English grammar proficiency in the Advanced level I class in the modern language career at UASD during Term 2019-1.

4. Interpret students' perceptions about their classmates' English grammar competence in the Advanced level I class in the modern language career at UASD during Term 2019-1.

Justification

English is the most used language in terms of work and business worldwide, and because of globalization it is expanding rapidly. "The ethnographic, political, economic, technological, scientific, and cultural forces have determined the international status of English" (Baugh and Cable, 2002; p. 9). The world has been competitive since its beginnings, and nowadays English is the language that businesspeople use to reach new markets.

In the Dominican Republic the situation is not different, as English becomes increasingly necessary in the work field. Some companies and institutions dedicate to hire people who master the English language communication skills. Consequently, people who have a deep English knowledge can obtain better job opportunities.

This research was conducted in order to perceive students' English grammar skills in Modern language career at UASD in Advanced I class. This research importance drew dependable outcomes to develop students' English grammar skills for them to succeed in the English language career. In consequence, it might reveal an average of the students'

real grammar level while taking this advanced level I at the university in which this study will take place, and where students and professors will help collect data providing their perceptions regarding the grammar skills acquired by students at this level.

Antecedents

For many centuries, scholars have worried about the grammar and have published different versions of books in order to improve the language and achieve a better understanding in communicating one another. Even though using grammar correctly is deemed to be a difficult task in learning a new language, grammar has been considerably developing through the time to make language learning easier.

The English grammar history begins in England with the history of the English language. According to Baugh & Cable (2002) the great English grammar achievement in changing the complexity of its structure begins in the late Middle English Period. These changes contribute to make the English grammar less complex than it was before. "At the beginning of the period English is a language that must be learned like a foreign tongue; at the end it is Modern English." "The changes in grammar may be described as a general reduction of inflections" (Baugh and Cable, 2002; p. 146).

Although English grammar today is less complex than centuries before, students still struggle with the hardships that learning it entail. Nowadays, scholars and linguists are still interested in English grammar and keep on writing different versions of books and provide different approaches, methods, and techniques in order for students to better understand the structures of English grammar. Experts might provide those means of learning grammar with the purpose that learners do not surrender or get frustrated when they have difficulties in learning the grammar of a foreign language.

According to Ruiz-Flores & Ruiz-Carballo (2007) methods, techniques and strategies are an extraordinary means to improve the English grammar skills; however, they think that when in the class are not used the suitable methods, techniques and strategies, the improvement of the English grammar skills in the leaning of the foreign language could be hindered.

In their experiment conducted in a school with fifth years students, where the means of the teaching and or learning of the English grammar in the class were not the most suitable, they implemented suitable methods, techniques, strategies, and activities and the results in the teaching and learning of English grammar skills in the fifth years classes were considerably much better. They affirmed that they are interested in the development of means that are very effective in the teaching of English grammar in class. Furthermore, they accounted for that they are going to continue conducting more experiments in the educational field in order to reach the goal to create effective methods, strategies and techniques to teach English grammar and obtain the necessary efficacy in implementing those means in the teaching and/or learning the English grammar skills in class.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do English language students perceive their grammatical competence at the end of Advanced level I class in the modern language program at UASD during Term 2019-1?
2. How do students perceive their English grammar proficiency in the Advanced level I class in the Modern Language program at the UASD during Term 2019-1?
3. How do professors perceive their students' English grammar proficiency in the Advanced level I class in the modern language program at UASD during Term 2019-1?
4. How do students perceive their classmates' English grammar competence while speaking in the advanced level I class in the modern language program at the UASD during Term 2019-1?

Chapter III: Research Methodology

Research Design

The data in this research study was collected through qualitative method approach. Creswell, defines mixed methods approach as one of the main reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory. This usually refers to the fact that not much has been written about the subject or the population that is being studied, and the researcher seeks to listen to the participants and build an understanding based on what is heard. The study used open-ended interview and open-ended questioners for data collection; furthermore, it was implemented focus group interviews to collect information

Participants

The participants of this study belonged to Language School at UASD. The Language school has 2470 students majoring in English language career. Only students and professors in Advanced level I classes were included in the study. The Modern Language program has three Advanced level I classes with twenty to thirty registered students in each. From these three classes, twenty students will be selected as the research subjects. This should help realizing not only students' self-perceptions of their grammar skills but also their perceptions of their classmates and not less important the point of views of the university professors.

The Research Instrument

For conducting this study, thoroughly observations, individual interviews, a focus group, was used to gather information using the research questions and an Open-ended questionnaire were particularly designed to collect data for this study. The content areas addressed in the interview were related to English grammar skills and the perceptions regarding these skills that students had of themselves, their classmates and the perceptions that professors had of their students' groups. The purpose of this interview was to observe and develop theories related to the general perceptions that students and professors have of English grammar Skills acquired in Advanced level I at UASD.

Procedure

In this study, Advanced level I students and professors in the Modern Language Career in Language School at UASD during term 2019-1 were selected. Their English grammar skills observed in Advanced level I classes. Then, the eight research subjects selected were interviewed in a focus group, which was named group A. Additionally, a questionnaire consisting of twenty items was applied to the selected research subjects. The three professors interviewed about their perceptions of the students' English grammar skills level individually. They were referred as professors A, B and C respectively. All of the participants were instructed to be as open as possible with their answers in order to obtain meaningful data that help develop theories for the research and help obtain dependable data. Professors' and students' views on grammar skills were analyzed to generate theories that may help expand further the researches on this theme.

Chapter V: Discussion

Overview

Findings from this study revealed that the students of Advanced I classes in the Modern Language program at UASD have little knowledge of their grammar skills. The findings show that most students of Advanced I classes have deficiencies in the English Grammar structures. Thus, in English writing, speaking, listening comprehension and reading comprehension, many students have big difficulties.

Findings revealed that likewise, students have difficulties with sentence order. For most of them, English grammar is difficult when they compare it to Spanish, their native language. Many of the students do not master the sentence adjectives and adverbs placement.

One important finding is that professors coincide that there are many deficiencies regarding the students' English grammar skills. Professors think that the inadequacies that students present at Advanced I level might be due to the little English grammar knowledge they have had in previous classes, in school, before beginning the university. One professor said, "It seems to be that their previous English classes before beginning

their university career were not focused on learning the English grammar structure, but only on the acquisition of the English language.”

Other findings showed that the majority of the students perceive that their classmates do not speak very good English. One of them literally said, “They make a lot of mistakes, I think their English grammar competence while speaking is regular or average at most.”

Discussion Question I

1. To what extent do English language students perceive their grammatical competence at the end of Advanced level I class in the modern language career at UASD during Term 2019-1? Regarding this question, it is revealed the extent to which the perceptions of the majority of the Advanced I classes’ students regarding their grammatical competence coincide, as findings showed that many students present big difficulties in their English grammar skills. They show inadequacies in the learning of the English grammar structures. However, some researchers agree that a poor knowledge of grammar structures can hinder the improvement of English Language. They think that grammar is the basis on English Language; and by improving the grammar structures, students will improve in all the grammar skills. (Ferraresi and Goldbach, 2008; Ellis, 2006; Richards & Schmidt (2013). “Belief that grammar is too important to be ignored, and that without a good knowledge of grammar, learners’ language development will be severely constrained.” For instance, related to reading comprehension skills, the results of Akbari’s study shows that, “As soon as learners learn how to manipulate syntactic structures in a text while reading a text, their comprehension is greatly promoted.” (Akbari, 2014, p. 125). Williams (2013) pointed out that all troubles L2 perusers experience are inferable from lacking semantic learning. It is likewise accepted that syntactic mindfulness helps perusers in achieving their perusing cognizance undertakings effectively.

Researchers agree that when students master all skills of English grammar, they will be able the reach the grammatical competence required to write and speak efficiently. Díaz-Rico and Weed (2010) claim regarding the grammatical competence, “This type of

competence is important because it provides skills and Knowledge so that students can learn to be understood in speaking and writing." They add, "Grammatical competence increases in importance as learner advances in proficiency."

Discussion Question II

How do students perceive their English grammar proficiency in the Advanced level I class in the Modern Language career at UASD during Term 2019-1? Regarding this question, findings showed that students of Advanced I classes at UASD university think that English grammar is difficult, for example, they think that the use of adverbs and adjectives in English are really a challenge because they never know where place them on a sentence in either way speaking or writing; and also they think that the order of a sentence in English language is complicated. Some researchers advocate that many students consider the mastery of English grammar structures a big difficulty because they do not recognize all the elements of a sentence. Findings of Akbari's (2014, p. 124) study shows that "Some of the L2 learners' comprehension problems resulting from lack or insufficiency of grammatical knowledge are that learners do not recognize the main sentence in a complex sentence and consequently failing to recognize the main verb of the sentence." He adds, "they do not recognize the role of conjunctive adverbs; they do not recognize the reference of the pronouns, among others." Some researchers claim "Many students have a poor attitude toward grammar instruction, causing a lack of confidence in usage and writing," (Hutchinson, D.; McCavitt, S.; Rude, K.; and Vallow, D. 2002). According to Azar (2007), "Without grammar people would have only individual words or sounds, individual pictures, and individual body language to communicate meaning."

Discussion Question III

How do professors perceive their students' English grammar proficiency in the Advanced level I class in the modern language program at UASD Domingo during Term 2019-1? Regarding this question, findings from this research showed that teachers coincide regarding their perceptions about the English grammar skills acquired by the students of Advanced I classes. Professors consider that students have a small knowledge in the English grammar skills. They think that it is due to the previous experiences that students had regarding the small knowledge of English grammar skills acquired in their school classes before beginning the university.

It is understandable that if students arrive to the university with a small knowledge of English grammar, they are going to face difficulties to speak and write in an effective way. Students must recognize they must try hard in order to surpass their previous experiences in acquiring a small knowledge of English grammar in their school, as if they dedicate and focus in grammar instruction, they might achieve an effective written and spoken communication in English language. As Smith and Allot (2016) advocate that syntax adapting, a few understudies may have a more logical learning style than others, however on the off chance that understudies want to utilize the English language precisely and smoothly, it is fundamental for them to get sentence structure rules instruction.

Current researchers are proposing the utilization methods, guidelines, or procedures in classes to the learning as well as training English punctuation structures so as to accomplish a viable and suitable composed and spoken correspondence in the unknown dialect. They insist that the most ideal approach to utilize a portion of these systems, guidelines or methodologies is joining them to acquire magnificent outcomes in improving the English syntax. Scientists likewise guarantee that a few directions can be actualized independent from anyone else in classes with no blend and even give great outcomes. As to that give incredible outcomes being consolidated, are found, for example, structure-based and sentence structure-based guidance. As per Nishimura, structure-based and punctuation based guidance, "Maintain that unknown dialect ought to be educated based on bits of linguistic parts, and students need to assemble each part by deductive adapting; at that point, they attempt to apply the principles to oral production"

(Cowan, R. 2008). He adds, “These approaches maintain focus on meaning and natural communication itself rather than on grammatical forms.”

Other grammar instructions suggested by researcher are the inductive and deductive learning and teaching approaches. According to Larsen-Freeman (2003), “It is unnecessary to apply inductive approach if the grammar rules are quite simple, but complex grammar items should be taught inductively in order to demonstrate usage of the rules in sentences clearly”. That means, while combining these two approaches in class, professors will manage the circumstances of when it would be necessary use one or another.” By using these two approaches in class, students will be able to learn the grammar structures through the strategies that each approaches provides; for instance, According to Canale & Swain (2012) “When learners take place in the learning process actively so as to discover the rules, they develop their autonomy, which makes them good language learner”. It is very plausible to show sentence structure by a mix of deductive and inductive instructing. It is all the more heightening for understudies' consideration both coordinated to sentence structure standards and significance in the meantime

Explicit and implicit combination to grammar learning and teaching is also suggested by researchers to improve to foreign language, according to Tran-Hoang-Thu in the teaching of explicit grammar “The rules of grammar are clearly stated and pointed out to the students.” And, in the teaching of implicit grammar “The rules are not pointed out but they are expected to be understood implicitly through various forms of exposure,” (as cited in Tran-Hoang-Thu, 2009). According to Ellis (2006), “Explicit knowledge, is generally conscious knowledge of grammatical rules learned through formal classroom instruction. ” (Brown, 2000). “Implicit knowledge is gained in the natural language learning process. ” Focus on Form and focus on forms approaches are as well suggested by current researchers. According to Diessel (2013)., focus on form, “Refers to an approach to teaching grammar whenever errors occur during a meaning-focused activity, whereas the focus on forms refers to teaching grammar in isolation,” Besides, researchers suggest the consciousness raising approach which can be used alone, without combining it with another Grammar instruction; that could be an excellent alternative to implement in class to grammar learning and or teaching, as it is considered one of the most effective

instruction in improving the writing and speaking English grammar in classes. It is defined as “an approach to the teaching of grammar in which instruction in grammar (through drills, grammar explanation and other form-focused activities) is viewed as a way of raising the learner’s awareness of grammatical features of the language.” (As cited in Atkins 2000, p. 4).

Discussion Question IV

4. How do students perceive their classmates’ English grammar competence while speaking in the advanced level I class in the modern language career at UASD during Term 2019-1? Regarding this question many students consider that their classmates’ English grammar competence while speaking is not so good. According to some researchers the competence of the spoken English grammar is necessary to achieve the goal of reaching an effective and appropriate written and spoken communication in the English language. As Deng & Lin (2016) accounts for in his survey of teachers from China and Singapore, “Teachers feel spoken grammar knowledge is useful for raising students’ awareness of spoken and written language.” Other researchers claim that implementing features of spoken grammar in class and combining them with the traditional grammar structures will help to the effectiveness of the learning of English grammar in class. As Costley, K.; & Nelson J. (2013) note, “Because features of spoken grammar serve important communicative functions relating to the unplanned, interactive, and interpersonal nature of conversation”. Furthermore, Al-Wossabi (2014) identifies features of spoken grammar related to fluency, such as fillers, heads, tails, ellipsis, and phrasal chunks, which allow students to adapt to the pressures of real time communication and speak more fluently and efficiently”

Recommendations for Future Research

After exploring the English grammar skills acquired by Advanced level I students and having obtained the findings already mentioned, some recommendations are exposed here for future researches:

The English language school should include a subject itself in the English language program based on spoken and written grammar instruction. It should be taught in parallel with the Basic English grammar subjects that are already included in the English language syllabus at this university. This spoken and written English grammar instruction subject should successively begin from level I to level VIII.

The English language school should implement a special syllabus for the spoken and written English grammar subject in which the four skills of English grammar, listening comprehension, speaking comprehension, writing, and reading comprehension be thoroughly taught in class using current, modern tendency of the techniques and activities where the English grammar be taught in both way communicative grammar and the structure of grammar activities.

English language school should make possible that the first three levels of spoken and written English grammar instruction strengthen the English grammar structures and communicative grammar of the students without caring about if they have had previous poor English grammar experiences before beginning the university.

Educators selected for the teaching of the spoken and written English grammar instruction classes should be trained to know the necessary techniques, strategies or instructions that combine the teaching of communicative grammar with the traditional grammar structure, as these types of instructions promise to achieve the goal of improving students' English grammar skills in order for them to become proficient in the English language communication.

The university and the English language school should create a rule which states that any student who fails the spoken and written English grammar instruction subject in the three first semester will be expelled of the English Language carrier and sent to an

educational counselor in order to help the student to choose the career in which he or she can be able to succeed.

Researchers should conduct more studies regarding English grammar skills in order to know about students' perceptions regarding their grammar to better understand their previous experiences regarding their small knowledge of English grammar structure. Furthermore, leading more researchers about English grammar skills, important theories could emerge to help students surpass their English grammar inadequacies in all educational field where English is taught as a foreign language.

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