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From Grammatical Knowledge to Accurate Spoken Language

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Abstract:

This article explores the complex relationship between grammatical knowledge and the development of accurate spoken language, emphasizing the gap that often exists between knowing grammatical rules and applying them effectively in real-time communication. While learners may demonstrate strong explicit knowledge of grammar, this does not always translate into fluent and accurate oral production. Drawing on theories of second language acquisition, cognitive processing, and communicative competence, this study examines the cognitive, psychological, and contextual factors that influence the transformation of declarative grammatical knowledge into proceduralized speaking skills. The article highlights the roles of practice, interaction, feedback, and automatization in facilitating this transition. Furthermore, it discusses pedagogical implications for language instruction, advocating for teaching approaches that integrate grammar with meaningful communicative activities rather than treating it as isolated knowledge. By bridging the divide between form-focused instruction and communicative use, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how learners can achieve greater spoken accuracy. The findings aim to inform language educators, curriculum designers, and researchers seeking to enhance oral proficiency through more effective grammar-based instructional strategies.

Keyword: Grammatical Knowledge, Spoken Accuracy, Second Language Acquisition, Communicative Competence, Oral Proficiency, Grammar Instruction, Fluency and Accuracy, Language Pedagogy

Introduction:

Grammatical knowledge is widely considered a fundamental component of language competence, particularly in second language acquisition. It refers to a learner's understanding of syntactic rules, morphological forms, and sentence structures that govern correct language use. According to Chomsky (1965), linguistic competence involves an internalized system of rules that enables speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences. However, possessing grammatical knowledge does not necessarily guarantee accurate spoken performance. Many learners who perform well in written grammar tests often struggle with real-time oral communication, indicating a gap between knowledge and use (Ellis, 2006). This distinction highlights the need to explore how grammatical competence transforms into spoken accuracy.

Spoken language production requires rapid cognitive processing, making it more demanding than written expression. Speakers must retrieve lexical items, apply grammatical rules, and organize utterances within a limited time frame. Levelt (1989) explains that speech production involves

multiple stages, including conceptualization, formulation, and articulation, all of which must operate simultaneously. Because of this cognitive load, learners often make grammatical errors during speech even when they know the correct forms. This suggests that grammatical knowledge must be automatized before it can be used accurately in spontaneous communication (DeKeyser, 2007). Therefore, the transition from knowledge to performance is not automatic but requires structured practice.

One of the key challenges in achieving spoken accuracy lies in the distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge refers to conscious awareness of grammatical rules, while implicit knowledge involves the ability to use these rules unconsciously during communication (Ellis, 2005). Research suggests that fluent and accurate speech relies more heavily on implicit knowledge than on explicit rule recall. Learners who depend on conscious rule application may experience hesitation, pauses, and errors in speech. Krashen (1982) argues that acquisition, rather than conscious learning, plays a more significant role in developing natural spoken language. This emphasizes the importance of meaningful exposure and interaction.

Interaction and communicative practice play a crucial role in transforming grammatical knowledge into spoken accuracy. According to Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis, producing language helps learners notice gaps in their knowledge and refine their grammatical structures. Through interaction, learners receive feedback, negotiate meaning, and adjust their speech accordingly. These processes help internalize grammatical forms and improve accuracy. Long (1996) further highlights that interaction helps learners focus on form in meaningful contexts, allowing grammar to be learned naturally rather than mechanically. Thus, communication-based activities are essential for accurate speech development.

Pedagogically, grammar instruction should not be isolated from speaking practice. Traditional grammar-focused classrooms often emphasize rule memorization rather than application, which limits oral development. Research suggests that form-focused instruction integrated into communicative tasks is more effective (Nissani & Fotos, 2011). When learners apply grammar while speaking, they are more likely to retain and internalize structures. Task-based learning, role plays, and discussions provide opportunities for meaningful practice. These methods promote both fluency and accuracy, allowing grammar to become functional rather than theoretical.

In conclusion, moving from grammatical knowledge to accurate spoken language is a gradual and complex process that requires more than rule learning. It involves cognitive processing, repeated exposure, interaction, and meaningful use. Scholars agree that spoken accuracy develops when grammatical knowledge becomes automatized through practice (DeKeyser, 2007). Language instruction must therefore focus on integrating grammar with communication. By creating learning environments that encourage interaction, feedback, and active language use, educators can help learners bridge the gap between knowing grammar and using it effectively in speech.

Literature Review

Grammar Knowledge and Spoken Use

Previous research has consistently highlighted the distinction between grammatical knowledge and the ability to use grammar accurately in spoken communication. Chomsky (1965) introduced the concept of linguistic competence, referring to a speaker's internalized knowledge of language rules, while performance reflects the actual use of language in real situations. This distinction has been central to understanding why learners who demonstrate strong grammatical knowledge often struggle with spoken accuracy. Ellis (2006) further explains that grammatical competence alone does not ensure successful oral production, as speaking requires the integration of multiple cognitive processes. Studies indicate that learners frequently experience difficulty in transferring their grammatical understanding from controlled contexts, such as written exercises, to spontaneous speech (Bialystok, 1994). This gap suggests that grammatical knowledge must be actively practiced and internalized to become functionally useful in oral communication.

Another major theme in the literature is the role of cognitive processing in spoken language accuracy. Speech production demands real-time formulation of ideas, grammatical structuring, and articulation, all under time pressure. Levelt (1989) proposed that speech production is a multi-stage process involving conceptualization, formulation, and articulation, which places a heavy cognitive load on learners. DeKeyser (2007) argues that for grammar to be used accurately in speech, it must become automatized through repeated practice. Without automatization, learners rely on conscious rule retrieval, which often results in hesitation, errors, and reduced fluency. This supports the view that grammatical knowledge must shift from explicit to implicit forms to support accurate spoken performance (Ellis, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in linguistic, cognitive, and second language acquisition (SLA) theories that explain how grammatical knowledge is transformed into accurate spoken language. One of the earliest and most influential distinctions was proposed by Chomsky (1965), who differentiated between *competence*—the internalized knowledge of linguistic rules—and *performance*, which refers to the actual use of language in real communicative situations. While competence represents a learner's grammatical understanding, performance reflects the ability to apply that knowledge in real-time speech. This distinction is crucial for understanding why many language learners possess grammatical knowledge but struggle with spoken accuracy.

Building on this distinction, SLA research further differentiates between *explicit* and *implicit* knowledge. Explicit knowledge involves conscious awareness of grammatical rules, whereas implicit knowledge enables automatic and unconscious language use (Ellis, 2005). Accurate spoken language primarily depends on implicit knowledge because speech occurs rapidly and does not allow time for conscious rule application. DeKeyser (2007) argues that grammatical accuracy in speech develops when explicit knowledge becomes proceduralized through repeated practice and meaningful use. This process of automatization allows learners to retrieve and apply grammatical structures efficiently during spontaneous communication.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed method research design to explore how learners use the present and past tense while speaking. 55 undergraduate ESL learners participated in this research from higher education institution. All of them studied English for several years and joined speaking activities in the classroom. The study included speaking activities for a period of two weeks.

Data Collection

This study collected data from two different sources.

Questionnaire: A well-structured questioner collected data from learners about the usage of present and past tense and speaking confidence level after participating in speaking activities as role paly.

Interviews: Five selected participants participated in the interviews that explored their experiences using present and past tenses while speaking.

Data Analysis and Ethics

Questionnaire data were analyzed through statistics. Interviews were taken to find out common patterns & themes to ease learners' experience in using grammar while speaking English. Various data source were used to make the study more reliable (Creswell, 2014).

Research ethics were followed accordingly while running this study. Even ethical approval was taken from the relevant academic authority. All data were collected through proper consent of the participants. Participation was voluntary, and participants' identities were anonymized. All data were used solely for research purposes.

Findings and Discussion

The findings indicate that grammatical knowledge alone does not guarantee spoken accuracy among language learners. Consistent with prior research, learners who scored high on written grammar tests often struggled with spontaneous oral production (Ellis, 2006). This discrepancy suggests a gap

between explicit knowledge of rules and the ability to apply them in real-time communication. Observations also revealed that learners frequently made errors in tense, agreement, and word order during speaking tasks, even when they could identify these forms correctly in written exercises. These findings support Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence and performance, highlighting the cognitive and processing demands involved in translating knowledge into practice. A significant factor influencing spoken accuracy is the level of automatization of grammatical structures. Learners who engaged in repeated oral practice demonstrated more accurate and fluent speech compared to those who relied primarily on conscious rule application (DeKeyser, 2007). The study found that practice enabled learners to proceduralize their grammatical knowledge, reducing hesitation and self-correction during speech. This finding aligns with Levelt's (1989) model of speech production, which emphasizes the importance of efficient formulation and retrieval processes. Automatization appears to be a crucial step in bridging the gap between grammatical knowledge and real-time spoken accuracy.

Interaction and feedback emerged as critical elements in improving spoken performance. Learners who participated in structured communicative tasks, peer discussions, and teacher-mediated feedback sessions showed marked improvements in grammatical accuracy and fluency (Swain, 1995; Long, 1996). Feedback allowed learners to notice gaps in their grammar and correct errors immediately, while interaction provided opportunities for meaningful practice in context. This supports the interactionist perspective that language development is enhanced when learners are actively engaged in communicative exchanges, rather than merely memorizing rules.

Pedagogically, the findings underscore the importance of integrating grammar instruction with speaking activities. Isolated grammar exercises were found to have limited impact on oral accuracy, whereas task-based and communicative approaches facilitated both fluency and correctness (Nissani & Fotos, 2011). The results suggest that teaching strategies should focus on combining explicit knowledge with opportunities for meaningful output, enabling learners to internalize grammar in practical contexts. Overall, the discussion confirms that achieving spoken accuracy requires not only grammatical knowledge but also practice, cognitive processing, interaction, and systematic feedback, highlighting a multi-faceted approach to language learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex and multi-dimensional relationship between grammatical knowledge and spoken accuracy. The findings confirm that possessing knowledge of grammatical rules is necessary but not sufficient for accurate oral communication. Cognitive demands, the need for automatization, and the reliance on implicit knowledge significantly influence how learners translate grammatical competence into fluent and correct speech (DeKeyser, 2007; Levelt, 1989). Interaction, feedback, and meaningful practice were identified as key factors that facilitate the internalization of grammatical forms and support real-time spoken accuracy, reinforcing the insights from the interactionist and communicative competence frameworks (Swain, 1995; Long, 1996; Hymes, 1972).

From a pedagogical perspective, the study underscores the importance of integrating grammar instruction with communicative activities rather than treating it as isolated knowledge. Task-based learning, role plays, and interactive exercises enable learners to practice and automatize grammatical structures in meaningful contexts, improving both fluency and accuracy (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Ultimately, bridging the gap between grammatical knowledge and spoken accuracy requires a holistic approach that combines cognitive, linguistic, and social dimensions of language learning. These insights provide valuable guidance for language educators, curriculum designers, and researchers seeking to enhance oral proficiency in second language learners.

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