

# The Effect of Grammar Learning on Speaking Ability of EFL Learners

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## Abstract

Nowadays, the most important aspect of language learning is how to express your ideas fluently in the target language in order to be understood by native speakers. To reach this aim, foreign language learners should know how to use different words and phrases in sentences. In other words, they should be familiarized with the grammatical points in the target language which have been overlooked in the recent years. Grammar learning and speaking are two significant poles in foreign language acquisition. It seems they are nearly related activities, but various opinions are expressed about the underlying relationship between these two components of language learning. Some indicate a positive relationship between grammar learning and ability to speak a foreign language and others depicts no and even a negative connection between these two aspects of language acquisition. This paper tries to have a brief review on the literature to investigate whether grammar learning and speaking influence one another. The results suggest that scholars have opposing views about this issue; however, most of them believe that grammar learning can have a positive effect on speaking a foreign language. At the end, the opinions of some Sudanese EFL learners (about 30 boys and girls) are presented as well to clarify the purpose of the study better.

## المستخلص

من اتجاهات تعلم اللغة الأجنبية هي أن تعبر بطلاقة في هذه اللغة المستهدفة حتى تفهم متحدثها الأصلي، وحتى تصل إلى هذا الهدف فلا بد من إجادة قواعد ومفردات اللغة المستهدفة. إذاً هناك ربط بين فهم قواعد اللغة الأجنبية وتحدثها بطلاقة، وإن قواعد هذه اللغة وتحدثها بطلاقة يمثلان قطبين أساسيين في التخاطب. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى استرجاع سريع للأدبيات السابقة حتى يستبين ما إذا كان هنالك تأثير في علاقة تدريس في قواعد اللغة الأجنبية مع متحدث تلك اللغة بطلاقة. أظهرت النتائج أن بعض اللغويين لهم فكر مضاد في هذا الموضوع ولكن معظم هؤلاء العلماء يرون أن للقواعد أثراً إيجابياً على تحدث هذه اللغة بطلاقة. وفي الختام أخذ رأي بعض الطلاب السودانيين ( ٣٠ طالباً من الجنسين) مختلف المستويات من جامعة السودان المفتوحة،

وَعُرِضَتْ أَرَائِهِمْ حَتَّى تَوْضِحَ الْهَدَفَ مِنَ الدِّرَاسَةِ بِجَلَاءٍ. وَعَيْنَةُ الدِّرَاسَةِ هِيَ مَجْمُوعَةٌ مَخْتَارَةٌ عَشْوَائِيًّا مِنْ طُلَّابِ جَامِعَةِ السُّودَانَ الْمَفْتُوحَةِ وَكَانَتْ وَسِيلَةً لِمَجْمُوعَةِ الْبَيِّنَاتِ عَنْ طَرِيقِ مَنْحِهِمْ زَمَنًا كَافِيًّا لِكِتَابَةِ آرَائِهِمْ حَوْلَ هَذَا الْمَوْضُوعِ ( كِتَابَةٌ فِقْرَتَيْنِ أَوْ ثَلَاثَ ).

### **Introduction:**

Nowadays, one of the hottest issues in the field of foreign and second language learning or teaching is how to converse fluently in the target language. Generally speaking, most of the EFL learners believe that their knowledge in English is nearly assessed by the way they can interact in the target language. They maintain that their linguistic knowledge and their abilities in other skills – reading, writing, and listening – are not that much important. What is significant is their ability in conversational situations. Of course, this believe belongs to lay and ordinary people. Unfortunately, a majority of EFL teachers and instructors follow this point of view in a broader sense, too. These instructors declare that in learning English EFL learners do not have to be trained from the grammatical point of view. Now, the question is that is really no relationship between the grammatical rules and learning to communicate fluently in a foreign language?

The linguistic knowledge in English consists of the ability to analyze and recognize the structural features and components in the language. These abilities are concerned with phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic issues. The building blocks of the communication are grammatical points which make the structure of a language. Before starting to speak many factors and components must be formed in a person's mind. First, the sounds should be matched with each other to shape different words. Second, these words need to be united together to form phrases, clauses, and at last sentences through which a particular meaning can be conveyed. Considering these facts, we can say that it is probably impossible to communicate in a foreign language without knowing the grammatical rules and structures of the target language. The focus of this paper is to review the literature in order to find any possible relationships between these two elements in the view of other researchers in this field of study. Also, at the end of this article, the opinions of a group of Sudanese EFL learners will be presented about this issue to clarify the aim of our research better.

### **Background:**

Language proficiency is a multidimensional construct which consists of different levels of abilities and domains (Carrasquillo, 1994). Speaking is an

interactive process of constructing meaning that concerns producing, receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Speaking skill is one of the major abilities that is somehow troublesome for EFL and ESL learners. The ability to communicate in a new language – target language – based on its grammatical, contextual, social, and cultural rules, and variations are always difficult for EFL learners (Shumin, n.d.). As mentioned before, one of the current questions in terms of speaking ability is the effect of learning grammatical rules on the level of speaking in the target language.

Meriam Webster Dictionary defined grammar as “the study of the classes of words, their inflections, and their functions and relations in the sentence.” Canale and Swain (1980) suggested that communicative competence includes grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Thus, we can say that grammatical rules are one of the fundamental aspects of speaking skill. According to Scacella and Oxford (1992, p.14).

Grammatical competence is an umbrella concept that includes increasing expertise in grammar (morphology, syntax), vocabulary, and mechanics with regard to speaking, the term mechanics refers to basic sounds of letters and syllables, pronunciation of words, intonation, and stress.

This implies that our learners should understand English language structures accurately to become fluent. Swan (1998) believed that knowing how to build and use certain structures makes it feasible to communicate common types of meaning successfully without these structures, it is difficult to make comprehensible sentences. He stated that in some social contexts, serious deviance from native-speaker rules can put off integration and arouse prejudice – a person who speaks badly may be considered uneducated or stupid.

The language competence means that one has a good command of grammar and words, and can speak, read and write in grammatical foreign or second language. In conversation, if someone made mistakes in his pronunciation, grammar or words spelling, it will lead to misunderstanding and tedium to others, and even spoil their relationship. Therefore, we should try to develop the students’ ability of using language in communication in a correct way (Zhong-guo & Min-yan, 2007).

Nakagawa (n.d) stated that we have two points of views in speaking. One view is that the learners should make himself/herself understood regardless of the grammatical mistakes in the target language, whereas another view insists on correctness in every aspect of language. The former is known as

the fluency-oriented approach in which the small grammatical or pronunciation errors are unimportant, especially in the early learning stages. In fact, too much emphasis on correcting them is considered harmful since it may impede the natural acquisition of spoken skills (Ebsworth, 1998).

The latter, in contrast, places most emphasis on accuracy by pursuing mainly grammatical correctness. This view is called the accuracy-oriented approach. Stern (1991) said that the teachers using this approach complained about the lack of success in the long run and the boredom they endangered among the students.

As Ebsworth (1998) said, a fixed stream of speech which is highly incorrect in vocabulary, syntax, or pronunciation could be so difficult to realize as to break a fundamental aspect of fluency being understandable. On the other hand, it is possible for the speaker to be stumbling but accurate. Sentence level grammatical accuracy that violates the basic rules of discourse and correctness is also probable.

The fluency-oriented approach, however, is not free of flaw. Possibly, the most fundamental is fossilization, errors that have become a stable part in the manner a learner speaks (Nation, 1989). Although the accuracy-oriented approach is fairly ignored among the present EFL pedagogues, one can still see in it some advantages over the fluency-oriented approach, especially concerning the points stated above. Firstly, feedbacks from the teachers provide learners with chance to correct errors. They will become aware of frequent mistakes before fossilization happens. It is true that modification of errors that are provided unconsciously may discourage learners from speaking. But correction itself can also be motivating, given in an appropriate manner, because it enables learners to make sure where exactly the problem happens in their speech (Nakagawa, n.d).

Speaking requires that learners not only know how to construct particular points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (*linguistic competence*), but also that they recognize when, why, and in what ways to produce language (*sociolinguistic competence*). Finally, speech has its own skills, structures, and conventions different from written language (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Carte & McCarthy, 1995; Cohen, 1996; Florze, 1999).

However, Krashen (1981) suggested that: What theory implies, quite simply, is that language acquisition, first or second, occurs when comprehension of real messages occurs, and when the acquirer is not 'on the defensive' Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious

grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. It does not occur overnight,

However, Real language acquisition develops slowly, and speaking skills emerge significantly later than listening skills, even when conditions are perfect. The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language. But allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production. (6-7).

Beside Krashen, Johnson (2004) believed that nowadays, English language teaching methods or approaches have some problems. These problems are: (1) lack of exposure to vocabulary (EFL learners. Most of the time, encounter unknown words). (2) early emphasis on speaking (in the early stages of learning, the emphasis need not be on speaking since working on listening skills will ultimately carry over to speaking (Bradlow et al, 1997, Rvachew, 1994).

While speaking is eventually essential for communication. Developing good listening skills is required for students to comprehend what the teacher is saying). (3) failure of automatic processing (the only way for processes to become automatic is through practice and repetition (Gray, Mulhere, & Neil, 2000; Segalowitz, Segalowitz, & Wood, 1998). And (4) dependence on translation and grammar-oriented approach (generally, the use of the native language and the study of grammatical rules interferes with the acquisition of a second language (Gabrielatos, 1998; Green, 1998).

However, Corbett (2009) stated that learners and teachers describe grammar and its significance in different ways. English learners believe that grammar is a rule which helps them to make a sentence in order to talk with other. They use grammar as an instrument to form meaning. But, grammar is not an ideal factor to produce a meaning. On the other hand, teachers define grammar as what they should say, do say and what they teach. The principal

goal of teaching is to realize combined goals, permit restructuring, focus on accuracy and increase fluency.

Buhary (2009) mentioned that you don't need a good knowledge of grammar to obtain your aim across in English. We see children achieve knowledge of new languages naturally because they learn that particular language without bothering about grammar. They may not even know what grammar is virtually, most of us learn grammar instead of learning to speak English. The only way is to practice the everyday English instead of worrying of fearing about grammar.

Reynaud (n.d) claimed that while children learn English without paying any attention to grammatical rules completely, adults require more than sixty hours of teaching per year. She said that the better a learner knows the grammar of a language the easier it will be for him to get knowledge of correct usage, and the easier it will be for him to communicate in the language and not be misunderstood by others.

Rumei Yu and Suzhern Ren (n.d) p. 54) claimed that 'grammar, on the one hand, seems not so appealing to foreign language learners. Whenever the word 'grammar' is mentioned, the learners will relate it to the complex sets of rules, which are boring and require a great deal of memorization. On the other hand, it has always been their No. 1 concern in the process of learning. Grammar is regarded as one of the key components in language.

As Palmer (1971, p.2), stated 'it is grammar that makes language so essentially a human characteristic. For though other creatures can make meaningful sounds, the link between sound and meaning is for them of a far more primitive kind than it is for man, and the link for man is grammar'. Bastone (1994, p. 3) also emphasized the importance of grammar when he declared that if there were no grammar, language would be disorganized, leaving us seriously handicapped.

Thus, knowledge of grammar is usually considered to be the essential area of the language system around which the other areas revolve, Cook (1996, p.14) emphasized this point when he claimed that 'however important the

other components of language may be in themselves, they are connected to each other through grammar. Grammar is often called the computational system that relates sound and meaning, trivial in itself but impossible to manage without'. In this case, grammar is known as an important coordinator of other components of language.

In a study by Wu, Ching-Hsuan (2007) on the effects of an explicit grammar teaching method on a group of English teacher candidates' spoken grammatical accuracy in Taiwan, it was found that grammar teaching could improve spoken grammatical accuracy of English teacher candidates in Taiwan, who are advanced English learners. Furthermore, the increased grammatical accuracy was not acquired at the cost of fluency.

As mentioned above, aside from some opposing views, most studies in the field of learning grammar and speaking indicate that grammar is one of the influential factors in speaking fluently. However, most EFL teachers do not pay attention to this issue, and believe that speaking a foreign language is just a reflection of first language acquisition; thus, in learning a foreign language we should consider our learners as children who want to learn their first language. In this case we do not need to learn grammar and it is necessary to add new words to our learners' vocabulary knowledge. In the rest of this paper, we are going to take a look at the framework of our study.

### **Our Study:**

The design of our study is mostly descriptive. In other words, as motioned before, the concern of this paper is to have a short review on the literature about the grammar and speaking. However, to clarify this subject better, we try to ask the opinions of some Sudanese EFL learners in this regard. We chose our subjects or participants from a group of students who were studying English at one of the institutes in Sudan. They were selected from different levels with different command of English. All the students were learning English through 'Interchange' system. They were asked to write about the influence of learning grammar on speaking English. No time limit was imposed on the learners; thus, they had enough time to write about their opinions in this regard at home. They were supposed to write about 2 or 3

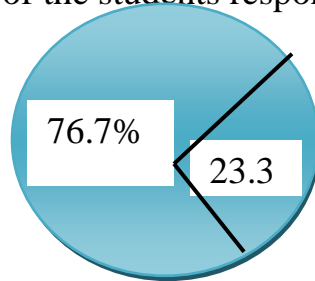
paragraphs to express their ideas. As mentioned above, these 30 students were from different levels of English, but each level was considered separately in terms of their English to observe the homogeneity of the participants. Here, you can find the opinions of the subjects in various levels.

۲۳ students out of 30 wrote on favour of the positive relationship and entwinement between grammar and fluency in speaking the language. This number (23) represents a percentage of (76.7%) and those who opposed the idea are( 7) students representing (23.3%) ( this can be clearly diagrammed as follows):

Table (1) the students’ response

Total No of students	Answered Positive	Answered Negative
30	23	7

Figure (1) the percentage of the students response



Thus most of our students believed that speaking is the most important skill in learning English or it's better to say a foreign language. They said their main aim is to learn how to speak; however, in order to reach this goal they have to learn grammatical rules and points because observing grammatical points is essential for putting words into proper sentences. However, none of them considered this issue, and they tried to speak in such a way that every body can understand their speech. Our subjects believed that learning grammar is always troublesome for them because most of the rules are very difficult to be learnt by the EFL learners, and sometimes EFL teachers are



not qualified enough to teach grammar so that they ignore grammar, and try to work on other skills – writing, listening, and reading.

Having studied the frame work of our research, now it is the time to discuss the results of the paper, to conclude the article with the overall views in this issue, and maybe to suggest future studies in terms of grammar and speaking a foreign or second language.

### **Conclusion:**

In line with the literature, the result of the paper depicted that in some Sudanese EFL learners' point of view, learning grammar is effective in speaking English as a foreign language. As shown in the background section of this research, most of the time, it was stated that in order to speak a foreign language fluently it is necessary to learn grammatical rules. It has been suggested that vocabulary knowledge and grammatical knowledge are complementary for speaking a language. However, we do not have a lot studies to investigate the relationship between grammar and speaking. Thus, it is recommended to conduct more studies in this issue to write appropriate materials for helping students speak easily. These kinds of descriptive researches can introduce new ideas in ELT to improve EFL teacher knowledge in different aspects of language learning. Also, more studies can be done in finding the effect of grammar instruction on learning other skills, such as reading, writing, and listening.

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