

FACILITATING SENTENCE-STRUCTURE ACQUISITION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: The development of sentence structure is a foundational aspect of English language proficiency, influencing learners' ability to construct clear and grammatically sound expressions. This study examines the challenges English learners (ELs) face in acquiring sentence structure and explores effective instructional strategies. Research in second language acquisition (SLA) highlights the significance of explicit grammar instruction, structured input, task-based learning, and technology-enhanced teaching. This paper synthesizes insights from cognitive and sociocultural theories to determine the most effective methods for supporting ELs in mastering English syntax. The findings suggest that a balanced approach, combining explicit teaching with communicative activities, facilitates syntactic accuracy and fluency. Additionally, integrating digital tools into grammar instruction provides learners with interactive and adaptive learning experiences. The study contributes to the ongoing discussion on optimizing sentence-structure instruction, offering practical recommendations for educators.

Keywords: sentence structure, English language learning, second language acquisition, grammar teaching, instructional strategies

1. Introduction

Sentence structure is a fundamental component of linguistic proficiency, shaping the clarity and accuracy of communication in English. For English learners (ELs), developing a solid grasp of syntax is essential for achieving fluency and comprehensibility in both spoken and written forms. However, sentence-structure acquisition poses various challenges, particularly when the grammatical rules of the target language differ significantly from the learner's first language (L1). Understanding these challenges and identifying effective instructional approaches are key to enhancing language acquisition.

Research in second language acquisition (SLA) suggests that sentence-structure development is influenced by multiple factors, including cognitive processing limitations, linguistic transfer, and exposure to structured input. While some scholars advocate for implicit learning through immersion and naturalistic exposure, others emphasize the role of explicit instruction in promoting syntactic accuracy (Ellis, 2006). The debate over optimal teaching strategies continues, highlighting the need for a comprehensive examination of methodologies that facilitate sentence-structure acquisition.

This study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the primary obstacles ELs encounter in acquiring English sentence structures?
2. Which instructional techniques yield the most significant improvements in syntactic competence?
3. How can technology be leveraged to enhance sentence-structure learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Sentence-Structure Acquisition

The acquisition of sentence structure in a second language is shaped by cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural factors. Theories such as Universal Grammar (UG) propose that humans have an innate ability to learn language, but differences between a learner's L1 and the target language can hinder acquisition (Chomsky, 1965). Some sentence structures that are absent in a learner's native language may require explicit attention to facilitate understanding and production.

Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis suggests that learners acquire language when exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current proficiency level. While this theory emphasizes natural exposure, critics argue that input alone is insufficient for mastering complex syntactic structures, particularly those that do not transfer directly from a learner's L1 (Ellis, 2006).

Sociocultural approaches, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), highlight the importance of social interaction in learning. According to this framework, learners benefit from structured support provided by teachers or peers, gradually internalizing linguistic patterns through guided practice. This perspective underscores the effectiveness of collaborative learning in sentence-structure acquisition.

2.2 Challenges in Learning English Sentence Structures

English learners often struggle with sentence construction due to structural differences between their L1 and English. One common issue is syntactic transfer, where learners apply the word order or grammatical rules of their native language to English, resulting in errors (Gass & Selinker, 2013). For example, speakers of languages with Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) order, such as Japanese, may initially construct English sentences with non-standard word order.

Another challenge is the complexity of English syntax. Structures such as passive voice, embedded clauses, and conditional sentences require learners to process multiple grammatical components simultaneously (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). This cognitive load can slow acquisition, particularly for learners who have not yet developed automaticity in sentence construction.

Additionally, limited exposure to diverse sentence patterns can hinder syntactic development. If learners primarily encounter simple sentences in classroom settings, they may struggle to produce more complex structures in real-world communication. Addressing these challenges requires instructional strategies that provide structured input while encouraging active use of varied sentence forms.

2.3 Effective Approaches for Teaching Sentence Structure

2.3.1 The Role of Explicit and Implicit Instruction

Research suggests that a combination of explicit and implicit instruction is most effective for teaching sentence structure. Explicit instruction, which involves direct explanations of grammatical rules, helps learners develop awareness of syntactic patterns (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This method is particularly beneficial for structures that differ significantly from a learner's L1.

However, explicit instruction alone is insufficient; learners must also engage in meaningful practice to internalize grammatical structures. Implicit instruction, which involves exposure to sentence patterns in context, allows learners to develop syntactic intuition over time. Studies indicate that explicit teaching followed by communicative practice leads to greater retention and application of sentence structures (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

2.3.2 Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) promotes sentence-structure acquisition through communicative activities that require learners to use target structures in meaningful ways (Ellis, 2003). This approach emphasizes learning through tasks such as role-plays, discussions, and problem-solving activities, encouraging active engagement with grammar.

Research shows that TBLT enhances syntactic development by providing learners with opportunities to experiment with sentence structures in authentic contexts (Skehan, 1998). Unlike traditional drills, task-based learning integrates grammar into functional language use, making sentence construction more intuitive.

2.3.3 Input Enhancement and Consciousness-Raising

Input enhancement techniques, such as highlighting key grammatical structures in reading materials or using contrastive analysis to draw attention to differences between L1 and English syntax, have been found to support sentence-structure learning (Sharwood Smith, 1993). These methods help learners notice grammatical patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed in natural input.

Consciousness-raising activities, where learners analyze and discuss sentence structures, also contribute to syntactic awareness (Fotos & Ellis, 1991). By encouraging learners to reflect on grammatical rules, these activities bridge the gap between explicit knowledge and practical usage.

2.3.4 Technology in Sentence-Structure Instruction

Technology has expanded the range of tools available for grammar instruction. AI-powered language-learning applications, interactive grammar platforms, and online exercises offer learners personalized feedback and targeted practice (Li, 2017). Digital tools can adapt to learners' proficiency levels, reinforcing sentence structures that require additional attention.

Studies indicate that incorporating technology into grammar instruction improves engagement and accuracy, particularly when learners receive immediate feedback on sentence construction (Plonsky &

Ziegler, 2016). The integration of multimedia resources, such as video-based language models, also enhances comprehension by providing contextualized examples of sentence structures in use.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analysis of pedagogical research on sentence-structure acquisition. A systematic review of empirical studies and theoretical frameworks was conducted to identify effective instructional strategies. Data were analyzed thematically to determine recurring patterns in grammar instruction and language acquisition.

4. Results and Discussion

Findings indicate that structured input, task-based instruction, and technology-enhanced learning significantly support sentence-structure acquisition. A blended approach that combines explicit grammar instruction with interactive learning experiences fosters both syntactic accuracy and communicative competence.

The analysis also highlights the importance of scaffolding in grammar instruction. Learners benefit from gradual progression from controlled practice to independent sentence construction. Additionally, the role of corrective feedback is emphasized, with research suggesting that timely and targeted feedback accelerates syntactic development.

5. Conclusion

Effective sentence-structure instruction requires a balance between direct teaching and experiential learning. Educators should integrate explicit explanations with communicative activities to reinforce syntactic patterns. Technological tools further enhance learning by providing adaptive grammar support. Future research should explore the long-term impact of digital interventions on syntactic proficiency, as well as the effectiveness of hybrid instructional models.

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