

Linguistic Awareness or Grammatical Competence: What Dominates the Saudi Undergraduate EFL Classroom?

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Abstract—Globalization leading to massive geopolitical changes around the world has made it meaningful to reconsider the state of English education in Saudi Higher Education Institutions to gain a realistic understanding of their role and contribution in preparing native Arabic speaking Saudi EFL learners to establish themselves as global citizens. This study weaves around the twin axes of linguistic awareness and grammatical competence by evaluating these factors in a random sample of student participants (N= 120) from Hail University, KSA. They are exposed to two remotely administered tests the first of which measures their grammatical skills in English. In addition, linguistic awareness is measured using participants' acceptability judgements to four types of English syntactical constructions to gain a deeper understanding of their language awareness. Results show that just 17% of the participants could correctly answer the grammar test while 83% of them answered the test incorrectly. Further, in the acceptability judgement test, students answer the syntax with rare collocations (Yes=52.7%, No=47.3%), syntax with unusual collocation (Yes=41.3%, No=58.8%), syntax with frequent collocation (Yes=49.2%, No=50.8%), and syntax with wrong collocation (Yes=5.2%, No=94.8%). Language being a cognitive, social, and cultural construct, a comparative analysis of the results obtained from these two kinds of data is likely to bring the spotlight on the dominant component in the Saudi university EFL classroom, and hence, help identify the precise factors that need to be boosted.

Index Terms—first term, second term, third term, fourth term, fifth term

I. INTRODUCTION

The debate between advocates of linguistic awareness and grammatical competence in a foreign language came of age with the theories propounded by Chomsky who advocated that the aim of all language learning is communication and not necessarily, accuracy in language production. Studies that followed in the decades after Chomsky tabled his ideas swing on the two ends of the pendulum till date.

In a study with Kuwaiti pre-service teachers, Almusawi et al. (2019) found that deficient linguistic constructs affected English literacy coaching. The areas of deficit were wide including phonological, morphological and even orthographic awareness. Linguistic awareness in terms of phonological, morphological, and orthographic and vocabulary in relation to word reading and spelling was the subject matter of a study by Kim et al. (2013) to show that literacy skills in beginners draw on multiple linguistic awareness skills. Adaje and Onekutu (2019), on the other hand, showed in a study with English language students at a school in Nigeria that communicative competence is facilitated by grammatical ability, and concluded that teaching of grammar is a prerequisite to the development of linguistic awareness in English.

Linguistic Awareness and Grammatical Competence

As early as 1960, Chomsky drew the attention of language specialists to the implicitness of language which identifies the structural regularities of language, that is, the fact that every language is composed of certain elements irrespective of the number of speakers or the stage of development of language. Taking off from this, Cook (2008) defined grammatical knowledge as the language knowledge in one's mind and the ability to use this knowledge. The latter involves user's ability to recognize lexical, morphological, syntactical, and phonological features of language and exploit these to code and encode messages. As the term implies, it demands of the user to acquire knowledge of the grammatical rules of a language and is, when used in this sense, of a rather limited scope. Linguistic awareness shines as a broader term because attainment of this is a metalinguistic process and need not be learned behaviour or dependent on educational background like the former. Linguistic awareness, however, may still entail an element of grammatical knowledge but in a more imperceptible manner of acquisition. As far as the measurement of these two abilities is concerned, unlike linguistic awareness, grammatical competence can be measured by evaluating the produced structures for degree of grammatical accuracy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chomsky (2005) views language as an ideal solution to the conditions of legibility, where interaction between a linguistic approach and an integrated thought and speech centred approach facilitates sociocultural contexts (Chomsky,

2011). Grammatical competence is the knowledge of an ideal speaker-listeners (Chomsky, 1980), and their ability to convey their meaning effectively in a given context. While the communicative competence involves components such as grammatical and discourse competence, and sociolinguistic and strategic competence, it has been quite effective in transforming the process of classroom instruction as a theory. According to Hymes (1967), the person's ability to use the language appropriately in a given social encounter is what constitutes communicative competence.

It becomes obligatory to include language learners in active cultural dialogues and speech orientation when they see language as a means of intercultural interaction. Halimovna et al. (2019) infer the ability to use all types of speech activities: reading, speaking, listening and writing along with knowledge of linguistic skills and sociocultural patterns as communicative competence. Bachman (1990) sees language as the ability to understand and express thoughts mutually and also possess the skills to use grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation during speech activity in meaningful interactions and contexts. Canale and Swain (1980) view grammatical competence as the interconnection between both grammatical and psychological aspects of language use. Van Dijk (1977) ascertains the term 'competence' to determine the levels of language proficiency in second language learning. Language competence is about using skills, experience and acquired knowledge to complete an activity where learners get an opportunity to think and share their thoughts freely, solve problems together by focusing on content and formulation of thought.

Linguistic competence in foreign languages relies on modern technologies for a wider global experience including, but not limited to webinars, remote blended learning, and online master classes offered by leading countries with a rich experience in distance learning education (Muslimov et al., 2016). Hymes (1972) argues of primacy the sociocultural factors in language acquisition of children. Hymes then form a theory of how to speak properly in a given context when acquiring grammatical competence, even when they don't have enough experience of speech activities in social settings. Chomsky's (1977) assertion that an individual experiences pragmatic competence while interacting with his grammatical competence, set apart by the grammar, echoes Hymes's (1972) coinage of the term 'communicative competence' in the language development in children. Bachman and Palmer (2010) prefer to use knowledge instead of competence, thus making the knowledge both functional and sociolinguistic. Halliday (1973) maintains the significance of sociocultural contexts to mediate language connotations where the language is contextually organized. Purpura (2004) agrees with Bachman and Palmer's (2010) linguistic model, stating that encoding and decoding contextual meanings will lead to exploration of the grammatical functions and organizational knowledge.

Linguistic or grammatical competence bases itself on interaction with the speakers of other languages globally, and thus, Rizk (2003) cautions the use of inappropriate response as what is accepted in one culture may not be accepted in the other and vice-versa. When the EFL learners produce a grammatical speech to perfection, they may contravene societal norms of the second language because the inappropriateness of meaning trumps appropriateness of form or grammatical competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). Eslami-Rasekh (2005) adds that it is crucial for language learners to use the language efficiently in varying social contexts. Iranian EFL (English as a foreign language) students struggle to understand and produce a second language since their exposure to the native community and culture is limited. When they fail to recognize the language patterns and functions of speech acts of the second language, they begin to translate and transfer from their native language in order to produce proper sentences (Eslami-Rasekh & Mardani, 2010). It is essential that learners with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds develop an intercultural communicative competence for a successful second language acquisition (Byram, 1997; Houghton, 2009).

Mohammad and Hazarika (2016) claim that while all the language skills (LSWR) are of equal importance, writing is the skill most used in academic disciplines and also as a performance benchmark in classrooms to test the levels of academic performance in their field of study. The non-native language learners, therefore, need constant practice at multiple occasions to enhance their writing skills (Deshpande, 2014).

According to researchers, writing is not a naturally acquired skill but a set of practice patterns passed down culturally in a formal learning environment (Myles, 2002). Second language learners try to memorize spellings, learn structuring words and sentences, and use higher-order skills (As'ad et al., 2021) to communicate in different contexts and situations. Craig (2013) adds that the writing skills begin to develop early among students in higher education and as they advance, these learners gain proficiency in academic writing. Kroll (1990) asserts that the teacher needs to recognize the complexities involved for the language learners in mastering second language writing skills. The influence of the native language might be a big hindrance to their second language proficiency as observed in the context of Arabic-medium learners when the semantic differences in L1 and L2 interfered with simple sentence structure constructions and their writing skill in general. Cai (2013) states that these EFL students have a higher understanding of L1 at an undergraduate level but their L2 academic literacy persists at a lower level. Lamtara (2016) points out that when the EFL teachers are not adequately trained to engage, involve and motivate the non-native learners in refining their writing skills, most learners view the writing activities with some uncertainty. Hoch (2017) points out that a well-developed self-assessment checklist is critical in guiding the EFL learners to monitor their own errors in writing since many learners lose interest in these activities due to unsatisfactory and unproductive results and achievements (Westwood, 2004). Khan and Khan (2012) state that the interference of L1, where the native learners transfer the orthographic conventions of Arabic in their English spellings, leads to errors in their writing (Khan & Khan, 2012). Analogous factors lead EFL learners to believe that English writing skills are complicated features that surpass their cognitive abilities (Al Alami,

2013). According to Alfaki (2015), the difficulties EFL learners face includes not only lack of time for reflection and revision while attempting to write in a second/foreign language but also the inability to recognize that only a constant practice of semantic and syntactic features can produce work that is both original and creative.

According to Hameed's (2016) study, the students entering university education in Saudi Arabia exhibit low proficiency levels in English writing skills. Owing to the repetitive attempts at completing the undergraduate program, learners lose many valuable academic years, leading to frustration and stress. Hence, Sedhu et al. (2015) assert that EFL teachers promote the intended writing activity under a less stressful environment. Since writing requires the mastery of a variety of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies, it is one of the most difficult skills to master (Barkaoui, 2000). According to Robertson (2011), the English language instruction that relies on textbooks and workbooks often fails to receive the desired outcome from language learners because of the limited ability to comprehend the rules. Krashen (1982) adds that the main features contributing to the affective filter among the non-native language learners are anxiety and lack of motivation and self-confidence. Many second language learners use translation as a tactical strategy for translating L1 into L2; learners' limited lexicon in the second language is restrictive and pushes them into using a dictionary for the translation process (Hoch, 2017). Both the language teacher and the language learner are responsible for poor writing skills (Fareed et al., 2016). The outdated error correction methods and practices often demotivate the EFL learners and the teachers fail to provide constructive feedback to support the methods. This apparent lack of interest and other attitudinal barriers that align with past failures in English writing skills make the EFL learners hesitant to approach a writing task with positive preconceptions. Fareed et al. (2016) point out that this negative attitude towards their academic English language courses, transition of knowledge from L1 to L2, and lack of intercommunication between the teachers and the EFL undergraduates on ways to improve writing skills are some of the obstacles in the development of writing skills. To Quintero (2008) writing is a complicated skill to develop because students have to use their cognitive faculties to construct sentence structures, and the language teachers need to provide them with a range of topics consistent with their interests, and appropriate teacher feedback to keep them motivated. The study conducted by Rico (2014) identifies the internal and external factors that lead to poor writing skills for EFL learners. According to him, the factors responsible are: teaching methods, lack of fluency in target language, inadequate knowledge of the second language, language transfer, and time allotment. Lee (2005) finds that the issues are cognitive as well as affective in nature and the inadequate instruction and poor evaluation leaves the learners demotivated. Moreover, learners' academic performance is a direct outcome of the frequency in the use of the second language, both inside as well as outside the classroom (Mosha, 2014).

In a survey of the foreign students enrolled at 34 Canadian and American universities, the writing skills of undergraduate and graduate learners were tested using quantitative methods. Linguists investigated second language and testing (Canale & Swain, 1980; Munby (1981). Walz (1982) prefers a functional communicative approach than a grammatical one. Here, the stress is on the communicative purpose of the language, non-native culture and knowledge of the language in general rather than communicative incompetence.

According to the Canale and Swain's (1980) framework, communicative competencies are seen from a sociolinguistic competence vantage and not so much from a grammatical competence like the task-orientated writing catering to a specific discipline. Also, the teachers evaluated written material on discourse level and not on word or sentence level where the writing skills of native learners and non-native learners appeared to be quite similar but when grammatical competence influenced the evaluations of these writing tasks, native learners displayed a better word and sentence structural skills than the non-natives. However, it is worth noting that when non-natives believed there was leniency in evaluation, the coping or strategic competency played a big role in their success in academics.

Lloyd-Jones (1982) argues against the direct and indirect measures of writing evaluations in use as they might be limited in scope, stating several problems associated with them such as measuring writing skills by using a writing sample. According to him, a good piece of writing is an eclectic mix of skills and ideas and is not just an evaluation of different elements used for writing. Citing the work of Moffett (1968) and Kinnevy (1971), Odell (1981) emphasises the diversity in writing tasks including diverse modes, purposes, and audiences where the evaluators analyse writing from the outlook of skills and tasks involving analytical development and organisational structures. Quellmalz et al. (1982) used this parameter to study writing competency and confirmed that diverse modes of writing require diverse cognition levels and lead to different levels of performance in these modes.

In a randomised faculty survey from all departments at San Diego State University, Johns (1981) found that the non-native language learners scored highly in the receptive (reading and listening) skills and that writing should be taught as secondary to the receptive skills. In the writing sample study of writing tasks for the EFL learners, Buckingham (1979), states that advanced language learners need to emphasise sociolinguistic factors in their writing processes, attain flexibility to reach a specific reader's mind in academic settings and to organise their writing through logical sequencing specific to the language they are learning. Blenton (1982) suggests that in order for language teachers to meet communication expectations of the non-native learners, they need to recognize the cognitive and linguistic approaches to learning situations that can apply to future academic requirements.

Research questions

The study takes off from the aims stated in Vision 2030 document and focuses on the language aspect of the Saudi youth vis-à-vis their place in the global jobs market. Consequently, the questions it sets out to answer are as follows:

1. What is the grammatical competence level of Saudi EFL students in Higher Education Institutions?
2. Which is the metalinguistic awareness level of Saudi EFL students in syntactic constructions?

Research Objectives

Given the limited and focused approach of this study, its objectives can be summarized as follows:

1. To evaluate the thrust areas of the university level EFL teachers.
2. To connect between the linguistic performance and linguistic awareness of the Saudi university EFL learners.
3. To place grammatical competence and linguistic awareness in the context of language use in Saudi university EFL learners.

Significance of the study to the community

Irrespective of what the findings may point out, empirical data shows that the Saudi university EFL learner is generally not proficient in English if absorption of Saudi professionals in global jobs is seen as a criterion. This sad state of affairs which is also contrary to the stated national goals of Vision 2030, has prompted the current study. The researcher hopes that findings herein will be especially useful to guide state allocation of funds, formulation of education policy blueprints, train academicians, and educate learners.

III. METHODS

A. Research Design

A quantitative research design was applied in this study. Since the study is based on the twin axes of grammatical competence and linguistic awareness, two tests were included to measure each of these elements in the participants. The first of these was to measure the grammatical competence of the participants while the second measured their linguistic awareness via acceptability judgements. Acceptability judgments are reports of a speaker's or signer's subjective sense of the well-formedness, native-ness, or naturalness of (novel) linguistic forms. Their value comes in providing data about the nature of the human capacity to generalize beyond linguistic forms previously encountered in language comprehension. They have been used to probe the cognitive processes giving rise to the sense of acceptability itself, the central finding being that acceptability reflects processing ease. It is a widely accepted belief in academic circles in KSA that the EFL course content and corresponding pedagogy are driven by the achievement of linguistic competence as the earlier grammar driven approach failed to yield the desirable outcomes. With language learning globally taking communicative ability as the target, educational institutions in Saudi Arabia also directed their teachers to change learning objectives to attainment of linguistic competence. New materials were accordingly commissioned and these were ostensibly based on the new communicative approach. In other words, the earlier, toned-down versions of English books were now replaced by the more authentic, real life language materials congruent to the L2.

B. Participants

The study participants were 120 (random sample) advanced level learners of EFL at Hail University, Saudi Arabia. The participants were aged between 21-23 years and shared comparable educational background with a minimum of 12 years of training in EFL in a formal educational setting and an entry level score of 7+ in the IELTS exam which placed them in the advanced level learner group at the university. Thus, the group was homogenous in their current level of language proficiency though they were all native Arabic speakers with no family member being bilingual (except them) and their own L2 acquisition not being naturalistic.

C. Instruments

(a). Grammar Test

The first test measured the grammatical competence of the participants using 20 items that needed them to exercise their grammatical competence in English to answer. This was a standardized grammar test adapted from the IELTS grammar component and therefore was not validated otherwise. The test was administered remotely using Google forms links which were shared with the participants, much like the other test which measured their linguistic awareness. The purpose of the test was disclosed to the participants, and they were assured that the scores were sought purely for research. Being an advanced learner group, Arabic instructions or prompts were not provided with the test to the participants though they were asked to answer honestly and not seek the help of any book, reference materials or the internet to do so.

(b). Syntactic Construction Test

The second test was set apart from the first by a week which was also the duration allowed for submission of the first test. The second test comprised of 28 sentences in English which used four types of syntactical constructions. Seven sentences each were composed with (i) rare collocation; (ii) unusual collocation; (iii) frequent collocation; (iv) wrong collocation. The participants were directed to read each utterance with its highlighted section and decide whether it appeared acceptable to them or not. This required them to apply their metalinguistic knowledge in deciding the correctness of the item. It was clarified to them that the test was purely research oriented and their scores in it would not be added to the university exams, and therefore, they were to go with their intuition in answering the test.

D. Data Analysis

The grammar test administered in this study had questions at B2-C1 level which roughly translates to ‘proficient’ since the participants were all advanced learners of English. Since the test responses were sought in Google Forms, it was mandated that all questions be answered for the feedback to be accepted. This was done to ensure that participants do not leave questions unanswered so that one way or the other, a clear picture of their grammatical competence could be established.

IV. RESULTS

RQ1. What is the grammatical competence level of Saudi EFL students in Higher Education Institutions?

Table 1 below summarizes the frequency of correct/ incorrect responses to each of the twenty items. The study set itself certain questions to answer. Data gathered from test 1 answers the first question. As can be seen from the data in Table 1 and Figure 1, the performance of the participants in the grammatical competence test is rather bleak with none of the twenty items reaching the fifty percent correct mark. 17% of the students answered correctly the test whereas the majority of them (83%) answered the test incorrectly.

In stage two of the study, the researcher sought to correlate this performance with participants’ linguistic awareness which, it is surmised, has been boosted in recent years with the opening up of Saudi economy and society to winds of global change. This was also an era which saw an unprecedented growth of the internet, partly due to the compulsions of the pandemic, free and fast access to knowledge and entertainment from around the world, and rapid internationalization of Saudi education.

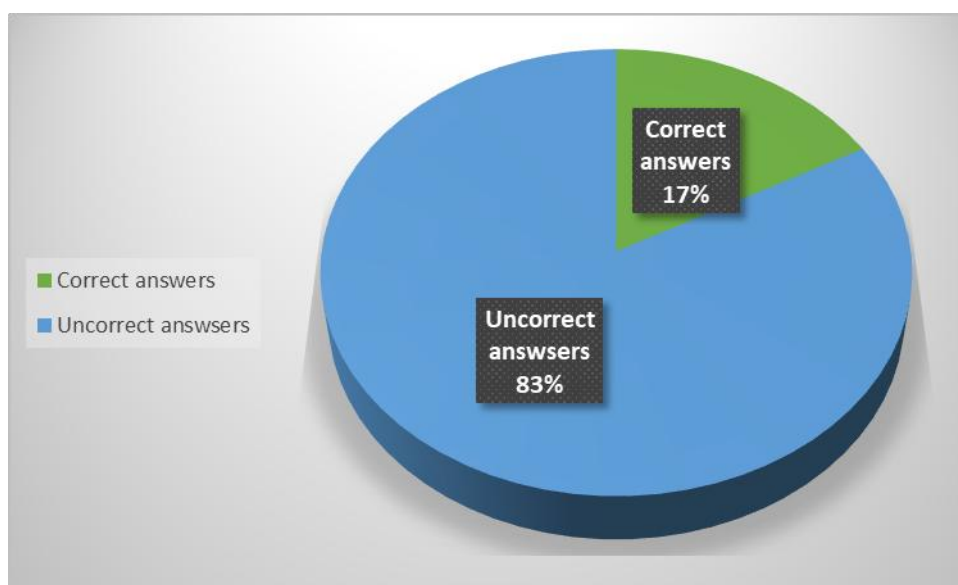


Figure 1. Students' Grammatical Competence Based on IELTS B2-C1 Level

RQ2. Which is the metalinguistic awareness level of Saudi EFL students in syntactic constructions?

As already noted, the second test sought to measure the extent of the participants’ metalinguistic ability in English through asking them to judge certain English syntactical constructions as viable (correct) or unviable (incorrect). They were asked to rely on their intuition in judging and not necessarily view the items through a grammatical lens. This test was also remotely administered using a Google Forms link. The 28 items in the test were equally distributed across four types of collocations viz., rare, unusual, frequent, wrong, to evaluate the accuracy of their judgement concerning acceptability of constructions. At the same time, the grammatical test scores clearly established deficient learned knowledge in English and what remained to be derived from the second test was the extent of random intuitive guesses which would point towards metalinguistic input in case there was reasonable unanimity in correct responses.

TABLE 1
STUDENTS' GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE BASED ON IELTS B2-C1 LEVEL

	Sentence	No. of correct answers	No. of Incorrect answers
1	There were about five hundred <u>or</u> so loads to transport.	18	102
2	Allow me to be the first to <u>congratulate you</u> on your performance.	12	108
3	I don't think he <u>will be</u> ready on time.	31	99
4	He managed to finish the race in spite of <u>having</u> blisters on the feet.	26	94
5	She didn't <u>have</u> to wait long for the bus, <u>only</u> a few minutes.	23	97
6	Most observers predict the bill won't see <u>the</u> light of day until January.	39	81
7	As an officer of law, I <u>get by</u> though I would like a better salary.	0	120
8	<u>No longer</u> do we expect politicians to tell us the truth.	25	95
9	Although well off the <u>beaten</u> track, the Hotel is nevertheless very easy to get to.	1	119
10	They were <u>supposed</u> to call earlier.	37	83
11	Yes, but the fact of the <u>matter</u> is that is that you can start a home-based business without much stress at all.	23	97
12	The conclusions of the climate deniers are <u>fundamentally</u> wrong.	8	112
13	I think organizing a conference <u>would</u> be an excellent idea.	16	104
14	<u>Slow as I am</u> , to get online, I am just posting the results of the weekend races.	12	108
15	By the time we <u>turned up</u> at the party, the band had stopped playing.	18	102
16	I <u>came across</u> some of my old photos when I was clearing out the shed.	37	83
17	There was a problem with the cooker, but I <u>have fixed</u> it now.	29	91
18	<u>Handled</u> carefully, a hamster can be a good pet.	8	102
19	The thing <u>is</u> , we haven't enough money for the tickets.	30	90
20	The weatherman <u>has predicted</u> a sunny day ahead.	14	106

RQ2. Which is the metalinguistic awareness level of Saudi EFL students in syntactic constructions?

As can be seen from Table 2 and Figure 2, in the case of rare collocations, as many as six of the seven items were voted with a yes on the acceptability judgement criterion (Yes=52.7%, No=47.3). Items 3, 4, 7 scored above 70 positive responses on their correctness which is more than 58% of the participant base. Item 5, on the other hand, scored a low 38 hits of correctness, one plausible reason for this could be that the idea is not culturally familiar in the Arab context. Items 9, 11, 14 of the unusual collocation parameters scored upwards of 70 hits for correctness (Yes=41.5%, No=58.5). These, coincidentally, also figure in the Arabic or L1 repertoire of the participants and it appears that they correlated the intended meaning with that found in the mother tongue and thus, accepted the statements as being correct. The syntactical constructions in this section relied on unusual collocations and this very feature of the utterances proved to be a stumbling block for the participants. However, the overall scores for all the seven items are still commendable, especially when the participants' performance on the learned inputs in test 1 is compared. Four of the seven items in the frequent word combination use achieved a score of more than 60, which goes to show the comfort level of the participants with language which they frequently encounter (Yes=49.2%, No=50.8). However, these usages do not have exact equivalents in their L1, which goes to show that more than L1 transference or correspondence, the participants relied on their metalinguistic knowledge to answer these. The biggest achievement in the second test, nevertheless, has been with the wrong language use in the last section which presented unviable English constructions. The majority of them (No=94.8%) reported that such collocations are not acceptable, while just (Yes=5.2%) said that these collocations are acceptable. Items 27, 28 were unanimously rejected as wrong, the other items in this section have also been judged by the majority as being incorrect.

TABLE 2
ACCEPTABILITY JUDGEMENT OF ENGLISH SYNTACTICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

		Yes	No
Syntax with rare collocations			
1	Luckily, a bush broke his fall.	61	59
2	He caught my eye and smiled.	57	63
3	See you! Catch you later!	73	47
4	Can you give us a hand?	79	41
5	I wonder if he will ask me out to dinner.	38	82
6	Ali would go to any extent to score a point.	64	56
7	He passed out in the sun.	71	49
Syntax with unusual collocations			
8	Aunt Green loves to fawn over her grandkids.	32	88
9	Can you stop crowing over this matter?	75	45
10	The security in-charge beefed up his boss on the spy cameras.	47	73
11	I was only sizing him up when he took to his heels.	78	42
12	She bristled at his insolence.	24	96
13	The drama plodded on as we all slept!	11	109
14	Old values are getting wiped out in the race for modernity.	82	38
Syntax with frequent collocation			
15	The Titanic sank on its maiden voyage.	64	56
16	The teacher got a big round of applause on his farewell.	72	48
17	The bomb went off early.	58	62
18	The soldier was in excruciating pain.	47	73
19	We came back as we ran out of money.	76	44
20	He was mean enough to drive anyone to crime.	29	91
21	She burst into tears on seeing her favorite vase break.	68	52
Syntax with wrong collocation			
22	We were thickly disappointed to lose the match.	11	109
23	He was highly happy to receive the award.	13	107
24	The team is hellishly talented.	7	113
25	We tried bitterly but failed to score a goal.	9	111
26	The newspaper is happily critical of the leaders.	4	116
27	We do love going to the quick food chains like McDonald's	0	120
28	The poet won a prize for committing fine verses.	0	120

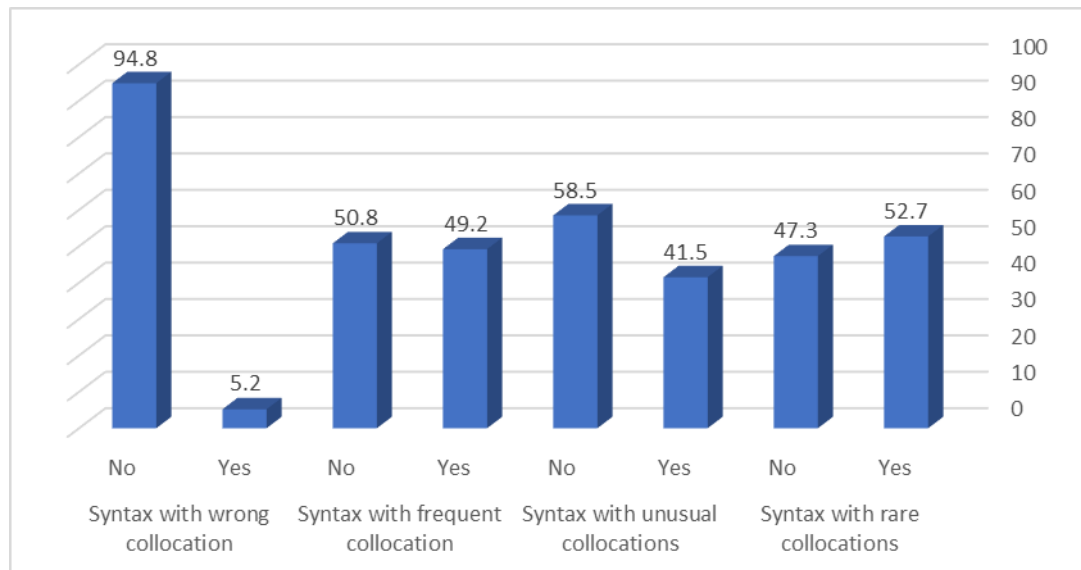


Figure 2. Acceptability Judgement of English Syntactical Constructions

V. DISCUSSION

This study wove around the twin axes of linguistic awareness and grammatical competence of Saudi EFL students. The study found that Saudi EFL students have a low proficiency level in grammatical competence. It was found that the majority of the students answered the grammar test which is based on IELTS incorrectly (73%) while just 17% of them answered the questions correctly. Although the researcher did not expect outstanding scores, even such low scores were not to be expected of advanced level learners. The researcher's classroom experience with EFL learners in the past pointed towards a firm grasp of grammar but it is also true that the earlier materials being specially prepared for the foreign language learner, were not of the requisite standard. This can account for the dismal performance on the IELTS standardized test. This low level of students' grammatical competence may be associated with superficial learning

system in high schools in addition to the study of English as a subject and not a language of communication. Eslami-Rasekh (2005) reported that Iranian students struggle to understand and produce a second language since their exposure to the native community and culture is limited. In such a case, Eslami-Rasekh and Mardani, (2010) reported that when they fail to recognize the language patterns and functions of speech acts of the second language, they begin to translate and transfer from their native language in order to produce proper sentences. Bin-Hady (2016) found that grammar is taught in Yemeni high school inductively and students were not exposed to real language use.

Furthermore, the study measured the extent of the Saudi EFL students' metalinguistic ability by reporting their familiarity with four types of collocations. The findings showed that students were highly aware of incorrect collocation, half of them were aware about frequent collocation, more than half of them (60%) were aware about sentences with unusual collocations and finally, less than half (47%) of them were aware about the syntactic construction with rare collocations.

These findings are attributed to constant training in differentiating between right and wrong expressions. Once again, their mother tongue too does not support such utterances where negative and positive attributes form a collocational pair. These findings are confirmed by Al-Ahdal and Almarshedi (2021) which found that the metalinguistic awareness of Saudi EFL students is satisfactory due to the satisfactory achievement in identifying the syntactic errors of some sentences provided to them.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The ability of foreign language learners such as the participants in this study to form correct acceptability judgements in L2 is a typical trait because in this case they rely on well-defined notions of correct as opposed to incorrect, a trait they acquire from long exposure to EFL materials, tests, and training. This was also voiced by some of the participants in the google forms link which elicited their views on acceptability judgements. In any case, the participants' superior metalinguistic performance in the second test as compared to the first which needed them to recall consciously learnt knowledge supports the hypothesis that the Saudi EFL learning process is steadily moving towards achievement of linguistic awareness, a happy finding since it firmly establishes them in the realm of intuitive language use, a process which is closely associated with L1 learning. An extension of this finding is that these learners are in a stage of language learning which is a precursor of bilingualism as they apply intuitiveness to L2 use.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be recommended from the results obtained in this study that learning focus be zoomed out of the earlier grammar intensive approach which entailed non-contextual language use training in the form of structured exercises. The findings of this study have clearly established that the Saudi EFL learner has come of age and is in a stage of learning where metalinguistic input carried more weight than linguistic input. In other words, materials and tasks which involve the learner in direct language use and exposure need to be encouraged in the classrooms and the testing focus also need to place greater premium on communicative rather than textual performance. This, however, will also mean conditioning the teaching community to move away from the textbook approach to an approach that fosters linguistic awareness.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

This study comprised a reasonable participant base, however, performance is not linear entity and factors such as gender and general classroom ecology need to be part of any study that measures learner performance. It is therefore recommended that future studies take gender into account as a potent factor. Further, the data here is mostly quantitative with the exception of the few comments that the participants freely included in their test. However, it is felt that a core qualitative component in the form of interviews would have added a new dimension to this study as the researcher would then be able to pinpoint the precise operations that occur in the learner's mind as they bank upon their metalinguistic knowledge for communicative purposes.

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