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Grammatical Competence Among Pre-Service Teachers: Implications To Language Instruction

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Abstract — Grammatical competence plays a critical role in overall linguistic proficiency, especially for future educators. This study investigated the level of grammatical competence among 81 pre-service teachers in Cebu, Philippines, and explored its relationship with sex, initial age of exposure to English as a Second Language, and academic specialization. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a descriptive-quantitative design to assess grammar levels and a thematic-qualitative design to explore perceived contributing factors. Findings revealed that most participants were female, had been introduced to English during their formative years, and were specializing in Physical Education. The majority demonstrated an upper intermediate level of grammatical competence, indicating the ability to handle complex grammatical structures with some precision. Statistical analysis showed that sex, age of initial English exposure, and specialization had no significant relationship with grammatical competence. Participants identified five key factors as contributors to their current grammar proficiency: consistent use of English as a medium of communication, exposure to English literary texts, frequent practice of productive language skills, constructive feedback from mentors and peers, and individual motivation and attitude. It is concluded that while demographic and academic variables do not significantly affect grammatical competence, language instruction in teacher education programs should prioritize enhancing the identified influencing factors. Curriculum development should focus on universally applicable strategies to elevate pre-service teachers' grammatical proficiency to an advanced level, thereby improving their effectiveness as future language educators.

Keywords — grammatical competence, pre-service teachers, sex, ESL exposure, specialization

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I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar is immensely significant to linguistic competence, especially in second language acquisition (SLA), considering that most of the time, if not all, the rules of the first and second language differ, resulting in grammatical errors. Grammatical competence is the ability to understand and correctly use grammar rules to judge the appropriateness of a statement [1]. Its role in overall language proficiency is debated. Some researchers argue that grammatical competence directly influences proficiency in speaking and writing [2], while others contend that students may still exhibit high proficiency despite low grammar scores, depending on how skills are assessed [1].

Errors in grammar persist across learning levels and among teachers and students alike. Common issues include difficulties in punctuation [3], determiners [4][5], pronouns [6], prepositions [3][4][6][5], adverbs [6][7], modals [6], word classes [8], word order [5], voice [5], tenses [3][6][7], subordination [5][8], conditionals [6], and subject-verb agreement [3][8]. These are often influenced by first language interference or lack of explicit instruction on grammar rules [3]. The issue is widespread: studies report that only 47% of Filipinos can think in English, 69% can write it, and 55% can speak it [9]. Moreover, over 90% of Filipino English teachers reportedly struggle with basic grammar [7].

This study investigates how three long-debated variables, namely sex, initial age of exposure to English as a Second Language (ESL), and academic specialization, relate to grammatical competence. While factors such as attitude and motivation [10], first language [6], classroom experience [6], study style [11], and language use [12] have been shown to influence grammar skills, the relationship of sex, ESL exposure age, and specialization remains inconclusive.

Some research suggests that sex affects grammatical competence, with female students often outperforming males [13][14]. This is attributed to females' more effective grammar learning strategies [14][15], although contrasting studies show that males may exceed in grammar and fluency in spoken English [16]. Others, however, argue there is no significant difference between males and females in grammar competence [17][18][6][19][20].

On the age of initial ESL exposure, studies exploring the Critical Period Hypothesis suggest that early exposure offers advantages in pronunciation and reading [21][22]. However, more recent research argues that both children and adults can develop grammatical competence, albeit in different ways. Adults often outperform children in grammar assessments due to cognitive advantages [23][24], and language immersion remains a key factor in achieving competence, regardless of age [23].

Specialization also plays a role. English majors tend to have higher grammar proficiency [25][26], while non-English majors, though sometimes competent in grammar, struggle with language proficiency due to limited exposure and instructional support [27][28][29]. For pre-service teachers (PSTs) specializing in areas like mathematics or science, challenges in teaching content using English as a second language are common [30][31], showing that PSTs' grammatical competence must transcend specialization. Thus, teacher education programs must integrate linguistic training to support non-English majors in enhancing their communication and instructional skills [31][32][33][34].

Given these divergent findings, the current study examines how sex, ESL exposure age, and specialization relate to grammatical competence among PSTs in Cebu, Philippines. The study also explores the implications of these findings for improving language instruction in teacher education. In alignment with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education, this research aims to eliminate instructional disparities by recommending universally effective strategies for developing grammatical competence.

II. METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining descriptive-quantitative and thematic-qualitative approaches to investigate the grammatical competence of third-year non-English major PSTs in a state university in Cebu, Philippines. The quantitative component assessed the relationship between grammatical competence and demographic variables, namely sex, initial age of ESL exposure, and specialization, using a standardized grammar test that was adapted from the Oxford Online English grammar test [35] and aligned with CEFR levels from A1 to C1. Eighty-one PSTs were selected through random census sampling

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from three programs: Culture and Arts Education (25), Physical Education (35), and Technology and Livelihood Education–Home Economics (21). Participants had completed at least two years of coursework in the teacher education program. Data collection began following ethical clearance (Exemption Certificate 1292 / 2024-10), and participants completed a one-hour online grammar test via Google Forms after a brief orientation. Responses were logged using Microsoft Excel.

Further, descriptive statistics summarized the participants' profiles and grammar levels, while inferential statistics analyzed relationships and differences through non-parametric tests due to the data's non-normal distribution. The Mann-Whitney U Test was used for sex-based comparisons, the Kruskal-Wallis H Test for specialization, and Spearman's Rho for correlations with ESL exposure age. Statistical analyses were performed using Social Science Statistics and Statistics Kingdom calculators. The qualitative component explored perceived factors influencing grammar competence through an open-ended question. Responses were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-step approach, resulting in five main themes with corresponding sub-themes.

Finally, ethical protocols were strictly followed, ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality. The study's findings aim to inform improvements in language instruction for future PSTs.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Level of Grammatical Competence

The following table presents a grouped frequency distribution of the PSTs' scores in the 40-item grammar test by Oxford Online English alongside the proficiency levels defined by the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR).

Table 1.

PSTs' Level of Grammatical Competence.

Scores	Standard Deviation	Frequency	Percentage (%)	CEFR Level	Description
1-12	6.18	2	2	A1	Beginner
13-20			4	A2	Elementary
21-28		12	15	B1	Intermediate
29-35		42	52	B2	Upper Intermediate
36-40		22	27	C1	Advanced
x̄=30.91	**Total**	**81**	**100**		

Table 1 presents the grammatical competence levels of PSTs, showing a negatively skewed distribution (x̄=30.91; s=6.18) due to the high frequency of strong scores. Over half (52%) demonstrated an upper intermediate (B2) level, indicating proficiency with complex structures, conditionals, and passive voice. This is followed by 22 PSTs (27%) at the advanced (C1) level, capable of handling more nuanced grammar such as perfect tenses and modals. Twelve PSTs (15%) were at the intermediate (B1) level, while a small number were at elementary (A2; n=3) and beginner (A1; n=2) levels. These results align with [29] that PSTs generally possess fair grammatical competence in core areas like subject-verb agreement and parts of speech. However, the presence of PSTs at the lowest proficiency levels reflects ongoing concerns raised by [7] regarding teachers' struggles with basic grammar. The findings emphasize the need for consistent, high-quality language instruction throughout the educational pipeline, especially in teacher training programs.

Test of Differences and Relationship between the Demographic Profile and Level of Grammatical Competence

A Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test (D=.16783, p=.01833) indicated that PSTs' grammar scores were not normally distributed. As a result, non-parametric tests were used to analyze the relationship between grammatical competence and sex, ESL exposure age, and specialization.

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Table 2.

Differences in Levels of Grammatical Competence between Sexes.

	Male (n=24)	Female (n=57)	Z-value	p-value
	Mean Rank	Mean Rank		
Level of Grammatical Competence	45.23	39.22	-1.04	.3

A Mann-Whitney U test revealed no significant difference in grammatical competence between male and female PSTs (U=582.5, Z=-1.04, p=.3), with mean ranks of 45.23 and 39.22, respectively. These results suggest that sex does not significantly influence grammatical competence, challenging studies that reported otherwise [8][20][13] While some research argues that males and females differ in language acquisition and study styles [11], [19] found minimal differences in actual language use. This study supports the idea that grammatical competence is independent of sex [36][6][37]. Thus, grammar instruction may be implemented equally across genders without the need for sex-based differentiation.

Table 3.

Differences in Levels of Grammatical Competence between Specializations.

	Physical Education (n=35)	Culture and Arts Education (n=25)	Technology and Livelihood (n=21)	*H* statistic	p-value
	Mean Rank	Mean Rank	Mean Rank		
Level of Grammatical Competence	34.59	47.72	43.69	4.95	.084

A Kruskal-Wallis H test found no significant difference in grammatical competence among PSTs specializing in Physical Education, Culture and Arts Education, and Technology and Livelihood Education (H=4.95, p=.084), with mean ranks of 34.59, 47.72, and 43.69, respectively. This suggests that specialization does not significantly influence grammatical competence. These results reinforce findings by [27] who noted that students across disciplines can attain strong grammar skills. However, proficiency in English remains crucial for PSTs' teaching effectiveness [31] and future employment [38]. The findings also support the idea that PSTs should develop lessons that integrate both linguistic and subject-matter content [33] and that teacher mentors should use authentic, discipline-based materials to enrich grammar instruction [39].

Table 4.

Relationship between Levels of Grammatical Competence and Initial ESL Exposure Age.

	r_s	p-value (two-tailed)
Initial ESL Exposure Age Level of Grammatical Competence	-.06	0.58

A Spearman's Rho test showed no significant correlation between grammatical competence and initial ESL exposure age (r_s=-0.06, p=0.58), suggesting that the age at which PSTs first encountered English does not influence their grammar skills. Most respondents were exposed to English during early childhood (ages 2–6), yet this early start did not translate to higher competence. These findings align with [23] and [24], who argued that grammatical proficiency can be achieved regardless of when exposure begins. This challenges the emphasis on timing and instead highlights the importance of how English is taught.

Perceived Factors Contributing to Grammatical Competence

Based on the data gathered, the researchers extracted five perceived factors contributing to grammatical competence, namely: (1) Exposure to English as a Medium of Communication, (2) Exposure to English as a Literary Language, (3) Practice of Productive Language Skills, (4) Mentor and Peer Feedback, and (5) Personal Attributes.

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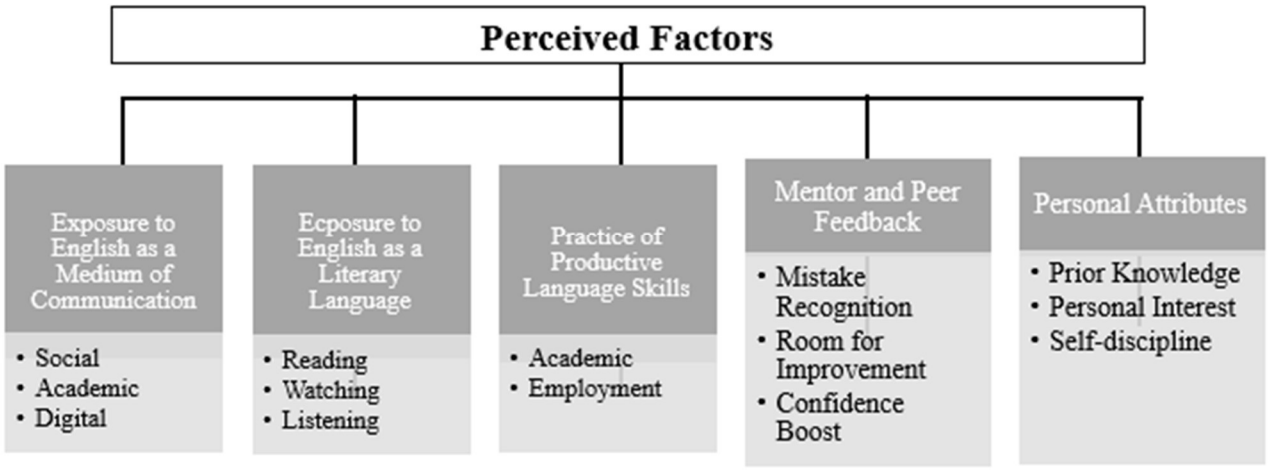
Figure 1.

PST's Perceived Factors Influencing Grammatical Competence.



PSTs perceived that consistent exposure to English as a medium of communication significantly influenced their grammatical competence. This exposure occurred socially, academically, and digitally, starting in early childhood and continuing into adulthood. Many recalled speaking English with family, interacting with foreign tourists, and being taught by teachers who used English exclusively in class, which helped them internalize grammar through context. This supports the view that grammar learning should be linked to real communication needs [40] and reflect the argument that grammar is best acquired as a flexible tool in social interaction [41]. In school, teachers' use of English as the medium of instruction, from basic education through university, encouraged students to respond and perform in English, aligning with the findings of [42] and [36] on the importance of language-rich academic environments. Digitally, PSTs reported learning grammar through online platforms, social media, and gaming, especially during the pandemic. Platforms like Facebook and TikTok have shown potential for improving English proficiency among students [42][43], while [44] emphasized how digital communication now dominates language use. These findings suggest that grammatical competence is not limited to formal instruction but is shaped by a variety of communication experiences. Language instruction should therefore integrate real-world and digital contexts to foster more meaningful and lasting grammar learning.

In addition, they perceived that exposure to English as a literary language significantly contributed to their grammatical competence, particularly through reading, watching, and listening. They cited books, Wattpad stories, articles, and emails as materials that helped them internalize grammar patterns naturally. This supports that reading enhances grammatical processing in second language learners [46] and its role in developing critical thinking and cultural awareness [47]. Literature also provides diverse form-meaning mappings that reinforce grammar learning [48], especially when used alongside structured activities [49]. Watching English-language films and tutorials was another key influence, helping PSTs grasp when and how to use specific grammatical forms, often without conscious awareness [50]. Video-based storytelling has been found to model authentic grammar use in real-world contexts [51]. Additionally, listening to podcasts, fluent peers, and teacher discussions helped PSTs absorb grammatical structures through repeated exposure. Listening fosters understanding of grammatical forms, lexical patterns, and accurate usage in speech [52][53] and supports the notion that grammar competence is linked to effective reception and interpretation of spoken language [1]. These insights imply that integrating literary input through reading, viewing, and listening into language instruction can significantly enhance grammatical development.

Further, consistent practice of productive language skills (i.e., speaking and writing) contributed to their grammatical competence. Many credited academic tasks such as writing research papers, delivering speeches, and preparing lesson plans as key opportunities to refine their grammar. These experiences not only enhanced linguistic accuracy but also promoted creativity, confidence, and self-directed learning, aligning with the findings that project-based learning (PBL) strengthens grammatical skills

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through active language use [54]. Beyond the classroom, employment-related experiences such as internships or part-time jobs also played a role. PSTs shared how working in ESL environments or engaging in professional communication tasks improved their grammar and overall confidence. Reference [55] noted that real-world writing and speaking tasks, like resume preparation and interviews, help learners adapt grammar to authentic contexts. Overall, regular engagement in productive language use, both academically and professionally, supports grammar development and prepares PSTs for clear and effective communication in real-life situations.

Moreover, receiving feedback from mentors and peers significantly enhanced their grammatical competence. Through oral and written corrections, they were able to identify errors, understand grammar rules more clearly, and improve over time. This aligns with the findings that peer correction and interaction are effective in second language learning, particularly in grammar-focused areas like noun-adjective agreement and tense usage [56]. Feedback not only enabled mistake recognition [57] but also provided opportunities for revision and growth [58][59]. PSTs emphasized that such feedback, whether from teachers, peers, or even family, encouraged them to revise their work and build grammatical accuracy. Structured feedback activities, especially peer review sessions with clear guidelines, have been shown to improve control over complex grammar points [60][56]. Beyond linguistic improvement, feedback also boosted PSTs' confidence. Many reported feeling more competent after repeated, constructive feedback. Research [61] showed that peer mentoring increased faculty confidence in grammar use. Similarly, [62] observed that peer support fosters a sense of belonging and self-assurance, reinforcing the value of feedback not just for grammar, but for broader academic and professional development.

Finally, PSTs believed that personal attributes, particularly prior knowledge, personal interest, and self-discipline, influenced their grammatical competence. These traits, both cognitive and affective, shaped how they approached grammar learning. Many recalled drawing on existing grammar knowledge to recognize and correct errors, emphasizing the foundational role of prior understanding in second language acquisition [63][64]. Some acknowledged gaps in that foundation, linking it to challenges in delivering accurate instruction. Interest also emerged as a powerful motivator; those with genuine enthusiasm for learning English reported being more attentive, curious, and driven—an observation supported by the link between interest with better grammar performance [65]. Personal motivation fosters metacognitive strategies like self-monitoring and evaluation, which improve grammatical accuracy [1][66]. Equally vital was self-discipline, with PSTs noting that consistent effort, time management, and overcoming procrastination helped improve their grammar skills. Research affirms that learners with strong self-discipline are better at managing complex grammatical tasks and benefit more from flipped and independent learning environments [67][68]. These insights highlight the importance of integrating differentiated, learner-centered strategies in grammar instruction that nurture these personal attributes to support grammar mastery.

Implications to Language Instruction

Language instruction in teacher education programs must be: inclusive to create equitable language learning opportunities regardless of sex; differentiated to address the challenges that come with the PSTs' varied starting points; and context- specific to prepare the PSTs to the linguistic demands of their respective fields. By shifting the focus from 'when' English is taught to 'how' it is taught, a premium is placed upon the quality of language instruction, which should span continuously from childhood through teacher education training. Moreover, language instruction should promote a merit-based approach, allowing continual production of language skills through task- and project-based language learning activities, and it should provide constructive feedback to help PSTs identify and work on where they can get better. It should also create opportunities for meaningful communication, and access to high-quality literary resources. Finally, fostering intrinsic motivation through varied cognitive and affective activities will also equip PSTs for their future roles while promoting lifelong language proficiency.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is concluded that there is a predominance of female PSTs, most of whom were introduced to English during their formative years. Most of them demonstrated an upper intermediate level of grammar competence, indicating the ability to manage complex structures and nuanced grammar. Additionally, language instruction in teacher education must further refine the grammatical competence of the PSTs to reach advanced levels for better pedagogical effectiveness. Key variables such as sex, initial ESL

exposure age, and specialization do not relate to grammatical competence. Hence, curriculum enhancements, particularly in language instruction, should focus on universally applicable teaching strategies rather than tailored approaches based on these factors. Finally, teacher education should promote the five other factors identified as potential influencers of grammatical competence: use of English as a medium of communication, exposure to English as a literary language, practice of productive language skills, feedback, and personal attributes.

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