



INVESTIGATING THE ENGLISH GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS: UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive-comparative research delved into the grammatical competence of tertiary students, specifically those in their first year at a state university in North Cotabato, Philippines. This study assessed the grammatical proficiency of 161 respondents using a standardized questionnaire. It also measured significant differences between the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and grammatical competence. Results revealed that the overall grammatical competence of the students was found to be low. Specifically, their proficiency in lexical categories and the construction of sentences, clauses, and phrases was subpar. Notably, their competence in subject and verb agreement was only average, signaling an area of concern. Regarding significant differences, only the sex and the types of previous senior high schools attended by respondents exhibited noteworthy distinctions in grammatical competence. The findings underscore the necessity for targeted pedagogical interventions and offer fresh insights into the prevailing state of grammatical competence among first-year university students. Overall, these findings accentuate the necessity for language teachers to revisit and consider comprehensive language teaching that integrates form-focused grammar instruction with communicative language use, addressing systemic deficiencies in curriculum guide and syllabus and language

teaching and learning opportunities to improve students' grammatical competence and overall proficiency in English.

Keywords: *descriptive-comparative, grammatical competence, first-year students, university context, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

English, as an international language, sets rules and standards to facilitate meaning and understanding. As such, grammatical competence in English is necessary because it is where an individual can express themselves, talk about ideas and emotions, learn to communicate, connect with people, request information, give advice, and assert their intentions (Sahagun, 2021). It can make an efficient global connection because grammar is the guiding principle of communications for diplomatic relations, commerce, news, education, and entertainment (Rao, 2019). In addition, grammar is essential because its primary purpose is to aid language learning (Chung & Pullum, 2015; Delfino, 2021). Nordquist (2019) defines grammar as a set of rules one should follow when making sentences.

Despite the clear importance of grammar in facilitating effective communication, many individuals, particularly second language learners, struggle to achieve high levels of competence. This widespread issue often leads to ungrammatical utterances (Mansurbek & Ilxom, 2022) and writing (Khaleghi et al., 2024), which can hinder clear communication and cause misunderstandings. The complexity of English grammar, inadequate teaching methods, and limited exposure to the language contribute to this problem. Studies have shown that learners frequently make errors due to a lack of understanding of grammatical rules, indicating a significant gap between the importance of grammar and the actual competence levels of many learners (Mansurbek & Ilxom, 2022; Khaleghi et al., 2024).

In Vietnam, 221 students from five universities responded to an academic grammatical study in English to help construct a proposed English language program for five key universities in the said country. The researcher found that Vietnamese students have "high" competence in the uses and functions of pronouns and prepositions. However, they are at the "poor" level in conjunctions, adverbs, interjections, and verbs. Thus, it was recommended that the English language program be enhanced to help improve students' second language acquisition (Tuan, 2017). Sahid (2019) also revealed that Indonesian students perceived grammatical competence as necessary for developing macro skills, mainly speaking skills. These Indonesian literature students built upon the notion that an individual can speak well if he is adept in grammar. Meanwhile, English Philology

students' grammatical competence was also measured using their essays in Lithuania. Mazlaveckienė (2018) detailed that their essays were subjected to error analysis, a frequent approach to this investigation. Results revealed difficulties in writing complex structures, and most of their sentences were akin to the structures of their mother tongue. However, while providing insightful information, these studies lack a comprehensive understanding of why students struggle with certain grammatical aspects and how these challenges affect their overall grammatical competence. They identify problems and argue the importance of grammatical competence but do not sufficiently explore the underlying causes or factors involved.

The present paper explores the grammatical competence of tertiary students in North Cotabato in the Philippines, building upon prior research which highlights the global importance of grammatical competence (Tuan, 2017; Sahid, 2019; Mazlaveckienė, 2018). Additionally, it intends to inform English language education practices while considering factors such as sex, age, parents' educational attainment, and even the type of school attended. This investigation is guided by the following null and alternative hypotheses.

Null Hypothesis:

Ho: There is **no significant difference** in the grammatical competence of the respondents vis-à-vis sex.

There is **no significant difference** in the grammatical competence of the respondents vis-à-vis the type of school.

There is **no significant difference** in the grammatical competence of the respondents vis-à-vis age.

There is **no significant difference** in the grammatical competence of the respondents vis-à-vis parents' educational background.

Alternative Hypothesis:

Ha: There is a **significant difference** in the grammatical competence of the respondents vis-à-vis sex.

There is a **significant difference** in the grammatical competence of the respondents vis-à-vis the type of school.

There is a **significant difference** in the grammatical competence of the respondents vis-à-vis age.

There is a **significant difference** in the grammatical competence of the respondents vis-à-vis parents' educational background.

This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of English grammatical competence by testing these hypotheses.

Among the myriad challenges tertiary students face in the Philippines, a notable one is the deficiency in English grammatical proficiency (Cabaruan & Cue, 2019; Sahagun, 2021; Labicane & Oliva, 2022). Recent studies have been published that explored the grammatical competence of tertiary education students in the country including the students of Iloilo State College of Fisheries (Panugot, 2023); English major students of Zamboanga del Norte HEIs (Rodriguez, 2023); first-year ESL students of Cagayan State University-Carig Campus (Labadia, 2023); BSED English Students of University of Mindanao, Digos City (Abendan et al., 2024); and tertiary learners in one of the state universities of Region VII (Cabico & Sales, 2023). Based on these studies, it becomes apparent that the bulk of research in this domain explored the grammatical competence of tertiary students in various regions and institutions within the country. However, a vital gap remains unaddressed amidst this plethora of existing studies: a university with linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse students. Previous studies have primarily focused on more prominent urban centers and well-established institutions, potentially overlooking unique regional challenges and educational contexts, specifically in North Cotabato.

Conducting a study in North Cotabato is crucial due to the distinct educational challenges faced by students in this part of the Philippines. It provides researchers valuable insights into these students' specific grammatical challenges, which may differ from those in more affluent areas and international contexts. The educational landscape in North Cotabato presents unique challenges, such as diverse socio-demographic backgrounds and varying levels of English exposure, which may significantly impact students' grammatical competence. The socio-demographic backgrounds in the locality may influence students' educational outcomes, making it essential to understand how these factors intersect with the students' grammatical competence. By focusing on this part of the country, the results of the study may also provide insights among English language teachers on the level of grammatical competence of the students and how they can modify their teaching pedagogies, which would help enhance the grammatical competence of English language learners in North Cotabato. The data can also help our policymakers make informed decisions to develop more effective English language programs and policies. Moreover, it may contribute to the enormous amount of international and national research, particularly concerning English grammatical competence, which was already done in this locality but not published.

1.1 Review of Related Literature

1.1.1 English Language

English has successfully placed its position as a language in multicultural communication, international business communication, and the international language of research (Rintaningrum, 2018). It is a widely recognized international language spoken by over 1.1 billion people globally (Ghosh, 2020). With this, the need to be proficient in English is apparent in both academic and industrial sectors since it does not only serve as the medium of instruction for core subjects but also aligns with numerous opportunities in a globalized economy (Ramos & Rodriguez, 2021). A'yun (2019) believes that acquiring and enhancing English macro skills primarily hinges on grammar as it maintains coherence and structure (Cagurangan, 2018).

1.1.2 Grammar

Chung and Pullum (2015) state that grammar for linguists is simply an assembly of principles that define how to put words together in a sentence. As Nordquist (2020a) maintains, it is “the organized study and explanation of a language and a set of rules and examples dealing with syntax and word structures of a language which usually intended as an aid to the learning of a certain language” (p. 1). Delfino (2021, p. 1) added that “grammar is a system of rules that allow people to construct sentences. It includes several aspects of language like part of speech, punctuations, and mechanics of language”. MacMillan (2017, p. 1) believes that “grammar is important because it explains the forms and structures of words, which are also called morphology, and how they are arranged in sentences, which are also called syntax”.

Given the definitions, it can be argued that all languages have sets of rules, called grammar, which govern how languages are used (Chung & Pullum, 2015). Jannat, Masum, and Rahman (2018) emphasize that grammar is not always about syntax and morphology but also a sequence of combining words into a huge group in the features of meaning. Furthermore, it allows someone to connect different words into a specific sequence. According to prescriptive grammar theory, individuals must adhere to and apply correct English grammar rules in their sentence construction (Al-Rushaidi, 2020; Nwoko, 2020). Nassaiji and Fotos (2011) argued that deficiencies in understanding grammar forms, meanings, and theoretical knowledge can significantly impact grammatical competence, posing challenges in accurate language use. A solid grasp of these elements is essential for composing grammatically sound sentences. Thus, understanding and applying grammar rules and sentence structures are

vital for achieving grammatical competence and effective communication.

In English, lexical categories such as nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections play an essential role in language learning. It is called the eight lexical categories, which indicate words' uses and functions (Millrood, 2014). A sentence in English has two essential parts: the subject, represented by a noun or a pronoun, and the predicate, which contains the verb and/or other lexical categories. Nordquist (2020) and Bamgbose (2021) explain that English grammar also contains modifiers, sentence elements such as predicate nominative, adverbial clause, adjective clause, simple predicate, complete subject, direct object, indirect object, prepositional phrase, object of the preposition. Also, it contains sentence structures such as simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences, appositives, participles, subject and verb agreement, and the functions and purposes of a sentence such as declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamatory.

There are four fundamental sentence structures in the English language which help convey different levels of complexity in writing. A simple sentence consists of a single independent clause. This structure is straightforward and concise. A compound sentence, on the other hand, contains at least two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction. This form allows for the expression of multiple related ideas. A complex sentence includes one independent clause and at least one dependent clause, adding depth and detail. Finally, a compound-complex sentence combines two or more independent clauses with at least one dependent clause, offering a rich and layered way to present information. Understanding and utilizing these sentence structures can significantly enhance the clarity and variety of written communication (Nordquist, 2020a).

More so, appositives and participial phrases play crucial roles in enhancing sentence variety and detail. An appositive is a word or group of words that identifies or renames another noun in a sentence, concisely describing or defining a person, place, or thing. For example, in the sentence "My brother, a skilled guitarist, will perform tonight," the phrase "a skilled guitarist" is an appositive that renames "my brother." Participial phrases, formed from verbs used as adjectives, add vigor and detail to writing. Present participles end in -ing, like "running" in "The running water was soothing," while past participles of regular verbs end in -ed, such as "baked" in "The freshly baked bread smelled delicious." Additionally, understanding the four functional types of sentences enhances communication by clarifying purpose and tone. Declarative sentences, such as "Babies cry," simply make statements. Interrogative sentences pose questions like "Why do babies cry?" Imperative sentences give instructions or express requests or

demands, exemplified by “*Please be quiet.*” Exclamatory sentences convey strong emotions, as in “*Shut up!*”

1.1.3 Grammatical Competence

Grammatical competence is the “linguistic competence of the unconscious knowledge of grammar that allows a speaker to use and understand a language” (Nordquist, 2020b, p. 1). An individual can identify and use the different features of a language correctly to construct and interpret messages in a sentence acceptably (Mclaren, 2010). It is the person’s knowledge of the grammar of a specific language and the mastery to use them in daily communication; the mastery to make numerous sentences of the different types and verbalize them in line with the rules of a language; and the ability to use the language to communicate conveniently which is appropriate to every situation. Thus, grammatical competence plays an important role in learning and becoming an effective communicator because it is an absolute part of acquiring linguistic competence (Mukhtarovna & Borisovna, 2020).

In the study conducted by Sabarniati and Zulkarnian (2020) among students in Indonesia, it was found that grammatical competence is fundamental to students’ speaking competence. Results revealed that these students of English as a foreign language repeatedly committed errors in subject and verb agreement in their speaking performance. In the Philippines, Sahagun (2021) investigated eighty (80) first-year college students taking up a Bachelor of Secondary Education who underwent a 100-item grammatical examination containing sections on lexical categories, subject-verb agreement, phrases, clauses, sentences, and sentence patterns in English. In the post-test, the study revealed that respondents had an average grammatical competence in all aspects tested. It was then recommended that students must make additional effort to read, study, and use the language in daily conversation both in school and at home. Also, teachers must make classroom discussions interesting and use an up-to-date teaching strategy to increase the students’ grammatical competence.

In Merza’s (2022) report, Filipino first-year students in a university in the Philippines were moderately competent in their English grammar competence. It was found that they have difficulty mastering the correct use of conjunctions, prepositions, and ruling indicators regarding nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The results indicated that the students lack the necessary grammatical competence and knowledge. The researcher suggested that *Worktext in Basic English Grammar* may be utilized to enhance their basic grammar skills. Mindajao et al. (2023) also argue that sophomore education students in the Philippines had poor

performance in the three areas of grammar: subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, and punctuation. The mastery of subject and finite functions was not established, leading to problems with the basic structure, forming questions and negatives, and marking tense and number agreement.

These studies reviewed primarily examined students' grammatical competence and highlighted common errors in their speaking, underscoring the significant role of grammatical competence in achieving overall communicative competence. Therefore, improving such competence is essential for constructing grammatically correct sentences and enabling individuals to communicate more effectively and appropriately in diverse situations. This foundational knowledge supports more precise expression and better understanding in both written and spoken forms of communication, thereby facilitating more effective interaction (Fikron, 2018).

1.1.4 Grammatical Competence and Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Many researchers have already analyzed the relationship between grammatical competence and the socio-demographics of English language learners. In the study of Andilab and Amante (2024), they reported that based on the generated data on the profile variables, particularly sex, second language acquisition, printed materials available at home, ICT available at home, and monthly family income, there is a significant positive correlation. They argued that the improvement of grammatical competence lies in the accessibility and availability of learning resources at home, which will likely depend on the financial situation of the learners. Hence, Fontanos and Ocampo (2019) asserted that learners should be supported with welfare benefits to alleviate education discrepancies and maximize grammatical competence.

In 2007, Yan investigated the grammatical competence of fourth-year English major students in terms of prepositions, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, modals, and active and passive voice. The study also determined the significant differences in grammatical competence, considering age, gender, and school from which they graduated. The results indicated that age did not significantly affect grammatical competence among fourth-year English major students. Regarding gender, both males and females showed strong proficiency in subject-verb agreement, yet both genders exhibited only fairly competence in prepositions, highlighting a common area for improvement. Regarding school type, graduates from public schools exhibited stronger skills in subject-verb agreement and prepositions compared to their private school counterparts. However, public and private school graduates demonstrated similar levels of competence in modals and

active/passive voice. In contrast, public school graduates showed moderate competence in verb tenses compared to private school graduates.

It was also purported by Tuan (2017) that students who come from rural areas were only given basic language opportunities, which best explains the low proficiency in terms of language. Their low proficiency was associated with their different educational and socio-economic backgrounds. In a similar study, Sioco and De Vera (2018) examined the relationship between profile variables and students' levels of grammatical competence. The results indicated that only a few variables significantly correlate with grammatical competence. They concluded that students' characteristics, including sex, grades, monthly family income, and access to online reading materials, significantly relate to their grammatical competence. Cagurangan (2018) further maintains that sex and year levels do not vary vis-à-vis grammatical competence among teacher education students except when grouped according to specialization. They posited that the university provides students equal opportunities for developing their grammatical competence and that English major students are more competent than others. Based on the study by Sioco and De Vera (2018) which explored the connection between parents' educational background and grammatical competence, it was found that the highest educational attainment of the student's parents shows a relatively even distribution but has a negligible effect on the grammatical competence of the respondents.

In 2023, Entong unveiled the grammatical competence of 39 first-year college students from BEED, BSED, BS Criminal Justice, and BSND board courses in a university in Basilan. Students were found to be least competent, and it was only in terms of the degree courses taken that a significant difference was observed. This significant difference could be because these programs have differences in terms of emphasis on language and communication skills as part of their curriculum. Moreover, Alova and Alova (2023) examined students' grammatical and academic writing competence; they revealed that their parents' educational attainment may have influenced these students. They concluded that parents' educational attainment does not influence students' proficiency in academic writing, particularly when comparing students whose parents have post-graduate qualifications. Their findings contradict Abbasian et al.'s (2020) claim that the association between parents' education and the student's language learning is statistically meaningful. The findings imply that while parental education is essential, it may not directly correlate with higher proficiency in grammatical competence among students.

Based on previous studies, socio-demographic factors such as sex, monthly family income, access to learning resources like online reading materials, and educational background play crucial roles in grammatical

competence. Andilab and Amante (2024) and Sioco and De Vera (2018) highlight the impact of home environment and financial resources on access to learning materials, which influence grammatical competence. Moreover, Entong (2023) demonstrates how courses and curriculum emphasis can affect linguistic skills, suggesting that educational programs tailored to language and communication skills enhance grammatical competence. Cagurangan (2018) further emphasizes that specialization within academic programs can influence students' grammatical competence. Thus, the present study aims to determine the respondents' grammatical competence in terms of lexical categories, kinds of sentences, clauses, phrases, and subject-verb agreement and to discover significant differences in the students' grammatical competence based on their socio-demographic characteristics.

Having cited the important related literature on grammatical competence and socio-economic factors in various contexts, the current study offers a perspective from students in a state university in North Cotabato, Philippines. These respondents are products of blended learning modality during their senior high school years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, they have not yet taken any English subject taught at the tertiary level during the conduct of this study. Moreover, this paper investigates the role of the socio-demographic backgrounds of the learners in their grammatical competence in the English language. These factors include the educational background of the mother and father, an aspect not examined in the previous studies, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how familial and educational contexts contribute to the grammatical competence of English language learners. Understanding these socio-demographic influences is essential for educators and policymakers to address educational disparities and optimize support systems, ultimately fostering improved grammatical competence among English language learners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used quantitative research methodology by collecting and analyzing numerical data. It is very appropriate for this kind of study as the quantitative approach finds patterns and averages, makes predictions, tests causal relationships, and generalizes results to broader populations (Bhandari, 2023). Specifically, it employed a descriptive-comparative research design. Using stratified random sampling, 161 first-year students enrolled in a state university in North Cotabato, Philippines, were chosen to participate (Parsons, 2017). A descriptive research design was utilized to achieve the first objective, which was to evaluate the

grammatical competence of the respondents. For the second objective, a comparative research design was used to assess the significant differences in grammatical competence among respondents based on their socio-demographic characteristics.

As shown in Table 1, respondents were predominantly females, constituting 70% of the sample, while males constitute 30% of the total number; the age range was between 17-19 years old. Additionally, a significant majority (88.2%) originate from public schools, while only 11.8% attended private schools. Regarding the educational background of the respondents' parents, a notable portion of mothers (57.1%) and fathers (28%) hold educational qualifications at the secondary level. A minority of parents were found to have no formal education.

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of tertiary students

Variables		Frequency (N-161)	Percent (%)
Sex	Male	49	30%
	Female	112	70%
Ages	17-19	131	81%
	20-22	25	15.5%
	23-25	3	1.9%
	26-28	2	1.2%
Previous senior high school	Private schools	19	11.8%
	Public schools	142	88.2%
Educational background of the mother		92	57.1%
	Secondary		
	Elementary	34	21.1%
	College	33	20.5%
	None	2	1.2%
Educational background of the father	Secondary		
	Elementary	45	28%
	College	36	22.4%
	None	3	1.8%

The standardized grammatical questionnaire developed by Belk and Thompson (1999) was used in this research to assess traditional grammar knowledge and elements of standard English usage. This inventory is divided into two parts: Part I measures grammatical knowledge, and Part II tests knowledge of standard English usage. Comprising 100 multiple-choice questions, it was a comprehensive tool for assessing grammatical competence among respondents. However, it was reduced and modified to 85 items as pronouns and modifiers were removed based on the suggestions of the experts who validated the questionnaire. The questionnaire was validated by two experts in the field of English, one an MA holder and the other a PhD holder, as suggested by Rodriguez (2023). Based on the experts' content validation forms, the questionnaire was valid with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.745. The content validation form was adopted from a department of a university in North Cotabato.

Furthermore, the authors interpreted the mean score results of this questionnaire using a scale with descriptive equivalents. The students' mean scores were converted into the mean percentage score by dividing them by the total number of items on the test and multiplying them by 100%. The mean percentage scores were interpreted using a descriptive equivalence from the DepEd Memorandum No. 160 series of 2012, adapted from the study of Sioco and De Vera (2018), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Mean Percentage Scores

Weight	Mean Percentage Score	Descriptive
1	96-100%	Mastered
2	86-95%	Closely Approximating Mastery
3	66-85%	Moving Towards Mastery
4	34-65%	Average
5	15-33%	Low
6	5-14%	Very Low
7	0-4%	Absolutely No Mastery

To commence the data collection process, the authors wrote and sent a formal letter to the Campus Director of the external campuses, seeking authorization to carry out the research. Following the approval, the first author solicited the aid of classroom advisers and program coordinators from various programs to arrange a schedule for data collection. Before administering the test, the first author elucidated the purpose and reassured the respondents that all data would be handled confidentially.

Additionally, the assessment instructions were provided and discussed with the respondents. Following the assessment, the first author gathered, examined, and checked the test papers, referring to the provided answer key. The results were recorded, arranged, and examined using Microsoft Excel. The first author personally oversaw the distribution and collection of the test papers. The respondents were given a total of 90 minutes to complete the assessment.

Descriptive statistics, such as frequency count and percentage distribution, were used to describe and interpret the socio-demographic data collected regarding the age, sex, and educational background of the study's respondents and their parents. The mean score results of the test were interpreted based on a scale with descriptive equivalents (see Table 2). To measure the significant difference, the authors used a T-test and ANOVA statistical tools (Petritis, 2018; Cayang & Ursabia, 2024).

Throughout the study, strict adherence to ethical guidelines set by the University was maintained, including upholding confidentiality and adhering to the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Before participating in the study, all the respondents were provided with informed consent forms describing the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits, ensuring voluntary participation (Ortega & Sumayo, 2024; Royeras & Sumayo, 2024). Following this step and ensuring a copy of their filled-out ICFs, the respondents agreed to participate in the study. Likewise, measures were implemented to safeguard respondents' privacy and anonymity throughout data collection, storage, and analysis (Redocto & Sumayo, 2024). These ethical considerations were paramount in maintaining the integrity of the research process and protecting the rights and well-being of all tertiary students involved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of grammatical competence among first-year students reveals key findings. These students show a "low" level of competence in lexical categories and identifying kinds of sentences, clauses, and phrases, indicating widespread difficulties across these areas. However, they exhibit an "average" level of competence in subject-verb agreement. Overall, the students' grammatical competence is low. Moreover, significant differences in competence are observed based on sex, and the type of high school attended, with private school students performing better. Age and parents' educational backgrounds do not significantly influence grammatical competence.

3.1 Grammatical competence of tertiary students

In this section, the grammatical competence of first-year students was assessed. They were measured on their competence in lexical categories, kinds of sentences, phrases, clauses, and subject-verb agreements. Presented in the tables and texts were the specific data for each area.

Table 3

Grammatical competence of tertiary students in lexical categories

	Mean	Range	Min	Max.	No. of items	Mean % score	Descriptive equivalence
Lexical categories	9.8	21	3	24	30	32%	Low

Table 3 shows the grammatical competence of tertiary students in terms of lexical categories. Their grammatical competence is “low,” which implies that most students have difficulty identifying vocabulary and their lexical categories based on their answers to questions about pronouns, adverbs, auxiliary verbs, linking verbs, adjectives, and conjunctions. This finding opposes the results provided by Sahagun (2021), in which students had “good” pre-test and “very good” post-test results. These differences in the results may have something to do with exposure, as students in the previous study had more exposure to the English language environment and opportunities. Second, variations in assessment tools and criteria could also account for the differences in grammatical competence. In the previous study, students prefer to read English reading materials, with most opting for short stories to improve their language exposure. This variation might explain the current study’s finding in terms of the lexical categories, as respondents appear to have had less exposure to the English language, resulting in inadequate grammar practice and poor performance in the assessment.

The low grammatical competence observed in this study reflects the challenges faced by Filipino freshmen in the study of Merza (2022), who were moderately competent in basic English grammar rules but struggled with specific areas such as conjunctions, prepositions, and adjective rules, all of which are lexical categories. In that investigation, it was believed that such was the case due to the lack of knowledge about grammar rules. As observed, tenses, word order, articles, and prepositions are found to be difficult (Widianingsih & Gulo, 2016; Mahdi, 2018; Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020; Tanpoco et al., 2019; Alvarez, 2017; Alfonso, 2016). The respondents of this present investigation seem to share the same problem as other English learners.

Table 4
Grammatical competence of tertiary students in kinds of sentences, clauses, and phrases

	Mean	Range	Min	Max.	No. of items	Mean % score	Descriptive equivalence
Kinds of sentences, clauses, and phrases	9.74	15	3	18	40	24%	Low

In addition, students demonstrated a low level of competence regarding the kinds of sentences, clauses, and phrases, as presented in Table 4. A pattern emerged in which most students struggled to identify the correct grammatical components in various sentence structures. For instance, when asked, “*How much do you remember about the thirteen original colonies?*” most students incorrectly chose the letter A (predicate nominative) instead of the correct answer, E (complete subject). Similarly, for the question, “*After he was restored as monarch of England, Charles II wanted to repay the nobles who helped him by granting them the area south of Virginia,*” the majority failed to identify the correct adverbial clause. This erroneous identification was consistent across questions involving different grammatical elements, such as the simple predicate, direct object, indirect object, and prepositional phrases. It seems that respondents lack knowledge of the grammar rules, resulting in committing errors (Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020).

This recurring issue with specific parts of speech highlights a broader gap in grammatical knowledge and application. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating challenges in mastering English grammar. Alfonso (2016) found that 136 first-year education students frequently made mistakes in various grammatical areas, including verb tenses, prepositions, verb forms, articles, adverbs, pronouns, adjectives, nouns, conjunctions, verb voice, interjections, and especially clauses. Merza (2022) also reported that teachers continuously observed how students struggled to express themselves in English due to their poor grasp of various grammatical components. Many students could not construct simple sentences or identify the correct verb tense. This confusion about the appropriate use of different grammatical elements was evident in all students inside the classroom. Thus, the results of the present investigation were somewhat expected, given the patterns noted in the literature. To address this challenge, English language instructors may

consider increasing activities to allow language exposure among students and encourage them to use and speak the language. This result is somehow different from the study of Sahagun (2021), where students' competence fell under the average level. Such a difference might concern the locality and language exposure of the respondents.

Table 5

Grammatical competence of tertiary students in subject-verb agreement

	Mean	Range	Min	Max.	No. of items	Mean % score	Descriptive equivalence
Subject-verb agreement	8.66	15	0	15	15	57%	Average

In the subject and verb agreement part, the students' grammatical competence is average, as shown in Table 5. They appear to have a fair knowledge of these grammar rules as they can use verbs associated with modals, tenses of verbs, and singular and plural verbs. This finding agrees with Sioco and De Vera's (2018) result, which shows that 94.4% of the 177 respondents have an average grammatical competence in this aspect of English grammar. In addition, Sahagun (2021) reported that the students have an average competence in subject and verb agreement, having a mean score of 19.84 on the pre-test and 20.36 on the post-test out of 40-item tests. Rosales and Ilagan (2019) also revealed that in their study involving 139 learners, respondents were moderately competent in morphology, semantics, and syntax. They argue that learners know how the units and essential components of language are combined, making it feasible for them to employ correct language usage. Alvarez (2017) also highlights that students demonstrate average proficiency in subject-verb agreement (SVA). Thus, the present paper suggests that students are knowledgeable in subject-verb agreement, as demonstrated by their average competence in the assessment. The teaching methodologies could have contributed to this result. As Alvarez (2017) maintains, the traditional approach to teaching these concepts, incorporating techniques such as board work, seat work, and word games, significantly enhances students' grammatical competence. It seems that effective instructional methods focusing on active learning and interactive activities play a crucial role in consolidating students' understanding and application of SVA rules, which the respondents of the current study might have also experienced. Although the average competence is a norm, it can be a benchmark for English language instructors to focus on strategies and techniques that would elevate students' understanding, competence, and application of grammar rules.

Table 6
Grammatical competence of tertiary students

	Mean	Range	Min	Max.	No. of items	Mean % score	Descriptive equivalence
Overall item	28.2	36	13	49	85	33%	Low

As presented in Table 6, the respondents' overall grammatical competence is low, implying that they have difficulties and limited knowledge in each grammar element. Their lack of exposure to readings from different genres, complex sentences, the absence of English at home, and up-to-date teaching strategies might have contributed to their low performance (Abendan et al., 2024). This contrasts with the study of Alvarez (2017), which reported average grammatical competence but supported Sahagun (2021), whose result showed low grammatical competence.

According to Canale and Swain (1980), grammatical competence is important in acquiring communicative competence because it is an integral part of one of its four components, as proposed. Grammatical competence will be acquired when language is used in daily social interaction. Thus, prescriptive grammar theory must be taught and obeyed in sentence usage, which requires individuals to use correct usage and accurately practice the rules of English grammar (Al-Rushaidi, 2020; Nwoko, 2020). Based on the results of this study, the respondents have low descriptive equivalence as determined by an 85-item test using prescriptive grammar. Grammatical competence is not achieved as one of the components of communicative competence.

These current results are explained and confirmed by the propositions of Nassaji and Fotos (2011) that if speakers have a deficiency in the forms and meanings of grammar and theoretical knowledge about them, grammatical competence is at stake and problematic, demonstrated by the low competence of the respondents. It is empirical for these students to become adept at the grammar rules if they want to level up their current level of competence. As revealed in the results, these first-year students appear to have difficulty with several elements, such as lexical categories and kinds of sentences, phrases, and clauses. Their errors in basic English rules imply that they still need robust teaching assistance from English language instructors so they can have an in-depth understanding of this aspect of the English language. These elements were part of the assessment made in this current study, and the "low" level speaks volumes of the lack of comprehensive understanding of the grammar rules. The low grammatical competence observed among students suggests significant challenges in

understanding and applying English grammar rules. This deficiency can hinder their ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, which are crucial skills not only in their academic life but as well as if they will go to their respective careers (Ramos & Rodriguez, 2021). Hence, it is suggested that language instructors develop comprehensive strategies, including exposure to varied reading materials, practice in complex sentence structures, and updated teaching methodologies. Additionally, integrating prescriptive grammar theories and even communicative language teaching into language instruction can provide a framework for students to learn and apply grammatical rules accurately and confidently. If these issues are addressed, there is a greater chance of improving the first-year students' grammatical competence and overall language proficiency.

Grammatical competence vis-à-vis sex, type of school, age, and parents' educational background

Table 7

Significant difference between grammatical competence vis-a-vis sex

Variables	Mean	DS	df	t-value	Mean diff.	p-value	interpretation
Sex							
Female	29.92	7.19	159	3.216	3.78	0.045	Highly significant
Male	26.14	6.02					

p-value at 0.05

Table 7 shows a significant difference in grammatical competence regarding sex because the p-value does not exceed 0.05. Thus, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. It affirms Sioco and De Vera's (2018) study, which found that sex is a significant factor in students' grammatical competence with a 0.05 p-value. However, it does not support Serquina and Batang's (2018) findings, which claim that sex does not affect grammatical competence. It also negated the study of Entong (2023), who found no significant difference in terms, and of Cagurangan (2018), who maintains that sex does not make any significant difference in the grammatical competence of teacher education students.

These conflicting results suggest that the influence of sex on grammatical competence might be context-specific, varying with factors such as sample size, educational environment, teaching methods, and cultural contexts (Sioco & De Vera, 2018; Andilab & Amantae, 2024). Language instructors should be prudent in generalizing the influence of

sex on grammatical competence and consider individual differences and broader teaching-learning activities that cater to both male and female students. It is not a sufficient factor to predict grammatical competence since other factors could be more relevant. For instance, Entong (2023) believes that the emphasis on language and communication skills in the curriculum could have led to the differences between these students, but not of sex and others. Regardless of their sex, the students' grammatical competence could also be correlated with other factors, such as language exposure (Sahagun, 2021), and may explain their differences succinctly.

Table 8

Significant difference between grammatical competence vis-a-vis type of school

Variables	Mean	DS	df	t-value	Mean diff.	p-value	interpretation
Previous schools							
Private	31.37	8.57	159	1.720	2.95	0.036	Highly significant
Public	28.42	6.79					

p-value at 0.05

Table 8 shows a significant difference in the types of previous senior high school attended in relation to grammatical competence. This means that students from private schools are more competent in terms of English grammar compared to students from public schools. This may be due to the lack of information and communication technology integration in the English teaching-learning process in public schools, which limited technological facilities cause. Private schools seem to have better facilities such as classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and competent and knowledgeable managers who impose strict disciplinary precautions on learning. Kunwar (2021) asserts that students' academic performance in private schools is far better than in public schools due to facilities, classrooms, and class size. In addition, private school teachers are more motivated to teach than teachers in public school teachers because it is one of the bases of their salary and other incentives, resulting in more comprehensive preparation of the lessons and materials (Sioco & De Vera, 2018) ultimately influencing the grammatical competence of the learners. As Andilab and Amante (2024) argue, grammatical competence relies on the accessibility and availability of resources the learners can enjoy. Since students who enrolled in universities come from different educational and socio-economic backgrounds, and most of them come from rural areas

and were only given basic language opportunities (Tuan, 2017), this could probably explain the low proficiency of the respondents in the present study.

Thus, if we desire to improve the grammatical competence of our students, the English language instructors in the university should consider revisiting the preparations made in the lessons and materials. Whether the university is a public school or a private one, teachers must strive for excellence.

Table 9

Significant difference between grammatical competence vis-a-vis age

Variables	Mean	SD	f-value	df	P-value	Interpretation
Age group						
17-20	28.73	7.31	0.820	157	0.48	No significant difference
21-22	28.28	5.98				
23-25	35	4.36				
26-28	28.50	2.12				

p-value 0.05

Table 9 shows the grammatical competence of the students vis-à-vis age. The mean scores for grammatical competence across different age groups vary slightly, with the 23-25 age group showing a noticeably higher mean score of 35 than the other age groups, ranging from 28.28 to 28.73. As presented, the standard deviation is lowest in the 26-28 age group (2.12), indicating less variability in grammatical competence within this group. We fail to reject the null hypothesis since the p-value is more significant than 0.05. This means there is no statistically significant difference in grammatical competence among the different age groups. The analysis indicates that age does not significantly influence grammatical competence among students, which supports the reports of Serquina and Batang (2018), Sioco and De Vera (2018), and Yan (2007). Therefore, age does not dictate grammatical competence.

Table 10
Significant difference between grammatical competence vis-a-vis parents' educational background

Variables	Mean	SD	f-value	df	P-value	interpretation
Mothers' Educational background						
Elementary	27.94	5.9	0.471	157	0.703	No significant difference
Secondary	28.64	7.82				
None	29.50	0.71				
College	29.94	6.06				
Fathers' Educational background						
Elementary	27.91	6.54	0.465	157	0.707	No significant difference
College	28.64	7.36				
Secondary	29.23	7.24				
None	31.33	6.08				

p-value 0.05

Regarding the educational backgrounds of the mother and the father, as presented in Table 10, neither parent has a significant difference in the students' grammatical competence. This finding implies that the educational experiences of the parents of the students do not contribute to respondents' competence. This result contradicts Sioco and De Vera's (2018) finding that mothers and fathers' educational attainment had little effect on the grammatical competence of their children. Also, it does not support the claim of Abbasian et al. (2020) that there is a meaningful association between parents' education and students' language learning. However, the current findings affirm Alova and Alova's (2023) report that parents' educational backgrounds do not influence the students' grammatical competence, highlighting that parental education may be significant. However, it may not directly affect or correlate with higher grammatical competence among the students. Further, they suggest that factors like educational background can be a starting point to improve grammatical competence. Home-based instruction can be given provided the parents are knowledgeable and have learned the grammar rules. Regarding the present investigation, parents' educational background may

not be significant, but their knowledge of grammar could still be beneficial if they actively engage in their children's learning. Activities at home to enhance grammatical competence should accentuate direct educational strategies and support rather than relying solely on parental educational backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research reveal a significant gap in the grammatical competence of first-year tertiary students, particularly in their understanding and application of basic lexical categories, sentence structures, clauses, and phrases. Despite their average performance in subject-verb agreement, which signals a partial understanding of grammatical rules, the overall low proficiency suggests a more rigorous instruction. As argued, the educational environment is pivotal in forming grammatical competence. Therefore, there is a need for comprehensive and targeted language education strategies that tertiary educators can use to improve the grammatical competence of higher education students. DepEd teachers can do form-focused grammar instruction that can be integrated into the proposed MATATAG Curriculum currently implemented in the basic education of the Philippines.

Despite the numerous significant findings of this research, some limitations were met. Firstly, the study only focused on grammatical competence, neglecting other aspects of communicative competence such as socio-linguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Secondly, the sample size and demographic characteristics of the respondents may not speak of the broader population, thereby limiting the research's ability to generalize the findings. Thirdly, the adapted research instrument was modified; pronouns and modifiers were removed, which, if included, could also give ideas on the knowledge of standard English in relation to the correct use of pronouns and modifiers of the respondents.

With the limitations stated above, it is recommended that future research delve into other aspects of communicative competence, allowing us to gain a comprehensive view of other competencies that students need in English. It is also suggested that the research be conducted in other educational institutions, especially in North Cotabato, where multiple private and public colleges and universities are present. This can provide more comprehensive insights from other students studying in these different educational institutions, allowing us to generalize the findings. Since this investigation used a modified questionnaire, future researchers may utilize a mixed-methods approach, employing exploratory sequential

design, to offer more context-specific findings. Lastly, researchers may also utilize qualitative research design to explore the reasons for committing errors in English grammar.

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AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Nel Marie Bandiola Galve, LPT: The first author conceptualized the study, conducted it, tallied and analyzed the data, wrote the results and discussion sections, and crafted the conclusion. He also formulated the recommendations, which were agreed upon by the second author. Galve also prepared the reference entries;

Gideon Sindad Sumayo, PhD: The second author checked, validated, and improved the presentation of the results and discussion sections made by the first author. He also did the language editing and formatting of the paper. More so, he revised and edited the paper following the comments and suggestions of the ASEAN Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities. All authors made approval of the final manuscript.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF GENERATIVE AI / AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

The authors declare that they used AI-assisted technology, particularly Grammarly, in their writing before submission and during the editing and revision stages of this research article, aiming to improve language and readability.

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