

# Teachers' and Students' Judgment of Grammaticality of Sentences

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**Abstract:** Understanding a language includes the ability to assess whether a construction in that language is grammatical or ungrammatical. To determine whether a construction is well-formed, a standard grammaticality judgment test can be used. In such test, participants make an intuitive judgment on the accuracy of form and structure in individual decontextualized sentences. This study involved 20 students and 20 teachers of English in Bina Nusantara University who were instructed to rate the grammaticality of twenty individual sentences. To justify their decision, the participants were also instructed to correct the ungrammatical sentences. The degree of dissimilarity of answers was evaluated by looking at internal linguistic criteria and usage of such construction. The results varied from unanimous decision on ungrammaticality for sentence like *She aren't care for me*, and a divided response on others, such as *Which man did Bill go to Rome to visit?* However, teachers tend to decide more sentences as ungrammatical, while the students considered more sentences as grammatical.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

What is a grammatical sentence? Fromkin, Rodman, Hyams (2017) say that a sentence is grammatical when it conforms to the rules of both grammars; conversely, an ungrammatical sentence deviates in some way from these rules. Both grammars, in their sense, are the mental grammar that speakers have in their mind and descriptive grammar, which is the linguists' description of the grammar and the language itself.

In the field of second language acquisition, these two kinds of grammar are termed as implicit and explicit knowledge (Ellis, 2009). Implicit knowledge is unconscious knowledge that speakers are not aware of possessing, while explicit knowledge is conscious knowledge that speakers are aware of possessing, although they might still not be able to verbalize it (Rebuschat & Williams, 2012). Therefore, sometimes people can be very confident when deciding the grammaticality of a sentence but they cannot explain why Dienes & Scott (2005).

To illustrate, let's see the following sentences:

1. *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*
2. *Furiously sleep ideas green colorless.*

Sentence (1) though illogical, is grammatical, while sentence (2) is ungrammatical. The first sentence is considered as grammatical because it follows the syntactic rule of an English sentence that

a sentence should consist of an NP as subject and a VP as predicate. Thus, the sentence can be analysed as:

NP (*colorless green ideas*) + VP (*sleep furiously*).  
Conversely, the second sentence violates the prescriptive syntactic rule of a good sentence since it begins with a VP (*furiously sleep*). However, the first sentence, although it is grammatical, is unacceptable because it is semantically anomalous. Anomaly is the phenomenon that a sentence, though grammatical is meaningless because there is an incompatibility in the meaning of the words. Several semantic anomalies are found in this sentence. The NP *colorless green ideas* is unacceptable because *ideas* is an abstract word that does not have color. Moreover, *colorless* and *green* are also contradictory, because something cannot be green as well as colorless at the same time. Besides being semantically anomalous, there are other reasons for speakers to reject perfectly grammatical sentences. Dabrowska (2010) notes several reasons such as violation of some prescriptive notions (*This is something I will not put up with*) and difficulty of processing (*The horse raced past the barn fell*). On the contrary, a sentence could be acceptable but ungrammatical (ex. *Watched some TV, then went to bed* as an answer to the question *What did you do last night*). The notion of grammaticality and acceptability of a sentence is introduced by Chomsky (1965) He posits that a grammatical sentence is generated by the speaker's grammar,

which is part of the language as delineated by his or her competence. On the contrary, an acceptable sentence is consciously accepted by a speaker as part of his or her performance. Grammaticalness is only one of the many factors that interact to determine acceptability. Schütze, (1996) summarizes that grammaticality judgment is a product of performance and intuition is part of competence.

Researches on grammaticality judgment have been extensively done in recent years. Rimmer (2006) mentioned that a grammaticality judgment test (GJT) is a standard method of determining whether a construction is well-formed or not. (Tremblay, 2005) claimed that GJT is one of the most widespread data collection methods that linguists use to test their theoretical claims. Yet, the use of GJTs has become quite controversial (Riemer, 2009) because of the absence of clear criteria to determine the exact nature of grammaticality. Tabatabaei & Dehghani (2012) also questioned the reliability of GJT as a means for measuring learners' linguistic competence (e.g. knowledge about syntactic structures and rules). Another issue is regarding the informants or subjects of the study. Rimmer (2006) employed English teachers in Russia which he termed as expert users. Similarly, Dabrowska (2010) compared the linguists and non-linguists' judgment ability.

Following the previous studies, this study uses GJT to measure the grammatical knowledge of the participants. However, unlike the other studies, the participants of this research are EFL university students and teachers.

There are three research questions which are discussed in this study:

1. To what extent do students and teachers perceive the grammaticality of the sentences?
2. Which sentences are considered the most ungrammatical by each group of participants?
3. What causes such different perception of grammaticality?

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The subjects for this research were twenty lecturers and twenty students from English Department Bina Nusantara University. All of the lecturers have at least master degree in English language or literature. While the students ranged from semester five to eight.

Subjects were presented with a list of twenty sentences. The instructions were to mark each sentence as grammatically "correct" or "incorrect" based on their intuition and knowledge. The researcher also asked the subjects to give suggestions of the "correct" or grammatical sentence for the incorrect ones.

The results were processed by calculating a ratio for each sentence between "correct" and "incorrect" judgment and also by comparing the rank of grammaticality judgment by students and teachers. The twenty sentences are presented below:

1. Who did you quit college because you hated?
2. She aren't care about me.
3. Either you or I are wrong
4. Which book would you recommend reading?
5. John angered while Susan amused the woman.
6. Who did John invite?
7. What did you bring that book to be read out for to?
8. The plane that the pilot that the police questioned flew crashed
9. John was bought the book
10. Bill sent London a package
11. John announced a plan to steal Bill's car late tomorrow.
12. The woman sitting next to the door's shoes are like mine.
13. You should lay down on the bed.
14. I wonder whether John can solve the problem
15. John teached me how tie my shoes.
16. I bought three mouses at the computer store
17. There's only one person who thinks of themself.
18. That is the sort of up with which will not put I.
19. Which man did Bill go to Rome to visit?
20. Susan trained like she'd never done before.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers and students showed different perception regarding the grammaticality of all the sentences. However only one sentence that gained unanimous opinion from all the participants, i.e. *She aren't care about me* (rejected by 100% of the subjects). The total results are presented in Table 1 in which the raw numbers of participants' responses were converted into percentages. The table only displays the percentages of the participants' responses who considered the sentences as **grammatical**. Thus, for sentence number 1, 15 % of the teachers considered the sentence as grammatical, while none of the students (0 %) considered it as "correct". However, the percentage obtained for each sentence does not signify a degree of grammaticality, nor does it indicate the correctness of their judgment. So, if a student judged a sentence as grammatical while a teacher judged the same sentence as ungrammatical, that does not mean that the student made incorrect judgment and the teacher made correct judgment.

Table 1: Grammaticality judgment by teachers and students.

Sentences	Teachers	Students
1	15 %	0 %
2	0%	0 %
3	45 %	35 %
4	50 %	30 %
5	30 %	60 %
6	70 %	65 %
7	10 %	45 %
8	20 %	10 %
9	15 %	45 %
10	20 %	35 %
11	50 %	50 %
12	15 %	30 %
13	90 %	95 %
14	60 %	80 %
15	0 %	30 %
16	35 %	80 %
17	20 %	65 %
18	15 %	10 %
19	40 %	35 %
20	60 %	75 %
Total	31.43%	44 %

The numbers shown in table 1 denote the percentages of the number of teachers or students who perceived that the sentences correct or grammatical. Thus, for sentence number 2, for example, none of the teachers or students thought that the sentence is grammatical. They all agreed that sentence number 2 *She aren't care about me* is ungrammatical. On the other hand, for sentence number 5 *John angered while Susan amused the woman*, as many as 30 % of the teachers agreed that this sentence is grammatical; while 60 % of the students thought that this sentence is grammatical. In total, the teacher group judged only 31.43% sentences are grammatical; on the contrary, the student group judge 44 % of the sentences as grammatical. This result shows that teachers can find more grammaticality issues in the given sentences. These findings can be similarized to Dabrowska (2010) regarding the comparison of linguists' and non-linguists' judgements of grammaticality. She found that linguists' judgments are sensitive to grammatical structure and relatively insensitive to lexical content; while non-linguists' judgement show clear interactions between lexical content and grammatical structure. In summary, teachers, who can be categorized as linguists, are more aware of grammatical rules while the students focus more on their intuition when judging the grammaticality of sentences.

From Table 1, it can be seen that for the teachers, the three most ungrammatical sentences are number 2, 15 and 7. The level of ungrammaticality for these sentences is shown by the low percentage gained for each sentence, i.e. 0%, 10 % and 0%. On the other hand, the students chose sentences number 1, 2 and 8, which gained 0 %, 0% and 10 %. Meanwhile, the sentences which caused different judgment between teachers and students are sentences number 16 and 17. Sentence number 16 was judged correct by 35% of the teachers but 80% of the students judged it correct. Similarly, sentence number 17 was judged correct by 20 % of the teacher but it was judged correct by 65 % of the students. The discussion for the grammaticality or ungrammaticality of these sentences is outlined below.

Sentence 1 : *Who did you quit college because you hated?* (15 % of teachers and 0% of students judged correct). The pronoun 'who' is used to ask questions about a person's identity. 'Who' can be the subject or object of a verb, but 'whom' is sometimes used in formal English instead of 'who' as the object of verb (Cobuild, 1992:200). While the use of pronoun 'who' should not be problematic, the adverbial clause *because you hated* present processing problem. The clause *because you hated* should not be included in the question because as (Biber, et al. ( 2000) said, questions are typically expressed by full independent clauses in the written register. Thus, questions consisting of two different clauses are uncommon. Moreover, there is a semantic anomaly in the first part of the sentence. The question word 'who' does not collocate with the verb 'quit college'. 'Who' is supposed to relate to the second part 'Who did you hate?'

Sentence 2: *She aren't care about me.* (0 % of teachers and students judged correct). This sentence is unanimously judged as incorrect by all participants because of the violation of grammatical rules. In particular, 'she' is a third person singular pronoun which should take a singular verb. In this case, 'she' should be followed by a singular auxiliary 'is'. Both teachers and students seem to have internalised this rule, so they can decide correctly that *aren't* is incorrect.

Sentence 7: *What did you bring that book to be read out for to?* (10 % of teachers and 45 % of students judged correct). This sentence is problematic because it contains three stranded prepositions at the end of the question. A preposition is said to be stranded if it is not followed by its complement and it is chiefly found in interrogative clauses (Bieber, et al., 2000: 105). Prescriptive grammarians have often claimed that stranded prepositions are unacceptable

and should be avoided. However, in some cases, stranded prepositions are normal where there is a close relation between the preposition and the preceding word, as in: *Who are you looking for?* Yet, in sentence 7, the antecedents for the prepositions are relatively far (*what...for, bring...out, to be read...to*). Also, a single question usually uses one stranded preposition, not three in a row.

Sentence 8: *The plane that the pilot that the police questioned flew crashed.* (20% of teachers and 10 % of students judged correct). This sentence is complex because it contains center-embedding of relative clauses. This sentence consists of three clauses that can be written as:

[*The plane [that the pilot (that the police questioned) flew]] crashed.*

Center-embedding poses an extreme processing load for English speakers (Comrie, 1989: 27; Odlin, 1989: 97). However, processing difficulty does not entail that his construction is ungrammatical.

Sentence 15: *Susan trained like she'd never done before.* (0% of the teachers and 30% of the students judged correct). The problem in this sentence is the preposition *like*. *Like* in this case functions as a preposition denoting a comparison, similar to the preposition *as*. Following the prescriptive grammars, *as* should link the first clause *Susan trained*, with the comparative second clause *She's never done before*. The second clause is a comparative clause marked by the use of present perfect tense *she had never done* and the time signal *before*. (Cobuild, 2005) describes that preposition 'like' and 'as' can be used to say that someone or something is treated in a similar way to someone or something else. (Huddleston & Pullum (2005) say that *like* + finite clause is relatively informal but it cannot be regarded as deviant. Most participants focused on the use of different tenses in the first and second clause so they judged this sentence as incorrect.

Meanwhile the sentences that show the biggest difference in perception are sentences number 16 and 17.

Sentence 16: *I bought three mouses at the computer stores.* (35 % of the teachers and 80 % of the students judged correct). 'Mouse' is a countable noun which has an irregular plural form, i.e. *mice*, instead of *mouses*. However, recently, the word *mouse* is used as a technical term for computer appliance. Oxford dictionary defines it as 'a small handheld device which is moved across a mat or flat surface to move the cursor on a computer screen'. So, the question is whether the plural of *mouse* in the computing sense 'mice' or 'mouses'? People often feel that this sense needs its own distinctive plural,

but in fact the ordinary plural 'mice' is more common, and the first recorded use of the term in the plural (1984) is 'mice'.

Sentence 17: *There is only one person who thinks of herself.* The use of *they/them/their* to refer to a singular person whose gender is unknown is controversial (Leech & Svartvik, 2002: 58) Yet, the pronouns *they* or *them* can be used for indefinite pronouns such as *someone* or *anyone* (Cobuild, 2005). Some people say it is wrong to use *them* for singular but clumsy to use *him* or *her* because it only suggest that the person is a male or a female. Another problem is the reflexive form *themselves*. In *themselves*, the plurality is double-marked (*them+selves*), while the noun is singular (*one person*), so the term *themselves* is used. Biber, et al. (2000:343) note that the form *themselves* sometimes occurs in the news corpus to fill the need for a dual gender singular reflexive pronoun.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study show that students and teachers have different perceptions regarding the grammaticality of sentences. In general, the teachers found more ungrammatical sentences than the students. The teacher group only judged 31.43 % of the sentences as correct or grammatical; while the student group judged 44 % of the sentences as grammatical. The results indicate that teachers were able to find more 'mistakes' in the sentences given. It is possible that the teachers are 'rules sensitive' meaning that they can spot irregularities immediately. For example, when they see the word 'mouses', most of the teachers consider this word as incorrect. On the contrary, some of the students might be ignorant of the grammatical rules. Thus, they tend to judge the sentences as grammatical rather than finding the irregularity in the sentences.

The findings of this study confirm Rimmer's (2006) indication that there are three competing motivations for rating the sentences as grammatical or ungrammatical. Those are: (1) appeal to usage; (2) appeal to rules; and (3) ignorance. In the case of the teacher participants, the first and second motivations apply to them. On the contrary, the most of the students show the ignorance to the rules.

Finally, the question of which sentence is grammatical and which is ungrammatical cannot be answered in a clear-cut fashion. Rimmer (2006) claimed that grammaticality judgment tests do not offer conclusive evidence to support the legitimacy of a specific construction. There is also no simple answer to the question posed by Han & Ellis (1998)

what are the grammaticality tests measuring? The results of this study cannot be taken as a proof of the grammaticality of sentences. Yet, they can be used as the basis for further studies. Thus, how do the results of this study affect the teaching of grammar for foreign language learners?

First of all, grammar is not at all chaotic. There are many very strong grammatical rules that can inform learners which can be taken from prominent grammar references (Oxford, Cambridge, Longman, Collins Cobuild, etc.). In case of disputed usage, teachers as well as students can turn into corpus for practical reference (Vickers & Morgan, 2005).

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