

# The grammatical competence of university students: Importance versus performance using Rasch analysis

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## **Abstract:**

Learning the grammar of a language is fundamental to all learners as grammar is not only the core of a language, but a theoretical tool in regulating the language. In Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, language instructors focus more on language functions and teaching of grammar is embedded in other language skills. Learners are expected to acquire grammatical competence through interactions with speakers of the target language inside and outside of the classrooms. In the context of learning English as a second language (ESL) in Malaysia, the environment outside the classroom unfortunately is not conducive for learners to acquire grammatical competence. Hence, it impedes grammatical accuracy of spoken and written discourse among most learners. The present study aims to measure the grammatical competence of undergraduate students in public universities in Malaysia. It employed a self-developed grammar test and a set of online teachers' questionnaire as research instruments. A total of 1694 first-year undergraduate students sat for the grammar test while the teachers' questionnaires were distributed to English language instructors at 3 public universities in Malaysia. The Rasch measurement model was used to analyse the data. From the findings, it was found that students had difficulty in answering the following grammatical items: tenses, subject-verb agreement, relative clauses and conditional. Interestingly, language instructors believe that these are the grammar items which are important for learners to acquire to be communicatively competent. The significance of this is that there is a need for language instructors to give equal importance for both language forms and functions for the learners to perform effectively in academic and professional settings.

**Keywords:** : ESL learners; Grammatical competence; Importance versus performance; Rasch analysis

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