Teaching English as a foreign language via four language skills

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Abstract

English is a compulsory foreign language in all public and private primary and secondary schools and universities in the Republic of Kosovo. English language is a separate subject in the "Curricular Framework of Pre-University Education in the Republic of Kosovo", where it is ranked after the mother tongue. Thus, English occupies a particular place compared to other foreign languages, especially in the secondary and university education system. In the study, survey method was adopted and the participants were composed of randomly selected 300 gymnasium students. The data were collected using a questionnaire developed by the researcher, an interview form and an observation form. The obtained data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequency and percentage. The results have revealed that the quality of English language education in the gymnasiums in the Republic of Kosovo needs improvement since students fail to use conjunctions' grammatical functions and meanings properly, they can only understand simple and familiar words, and complex and unknown words hinder students from understanding the concept.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, teaching English, language skills, education system of Kosovo

Introduction

The necessity to learn a foreign language, English in most cases, stems out of the growing status of English as a lingua franca and the increasing multicultural work practices (Mirici & Ekşi, 2016). In the education system of the Republic of Kosovo, English language is a compulsory foreign language in all education stages from the primary and secondary schools up to the university level. English has a separate and significant place the national document "Curricular Framework of Pre-University Education in the Republic of Kosovo" just after the mother tongue education. In other words, English occupies a central place compared to other foreign languages, especially in the secondary and university education system.

Teaching English as a second language at the gymnasiums aims:

- To develop students' skills to express themselves correctly and communicate without mistakes.
- To develop the student's skills to speak and write correctly and fluently.
- To increase the student's skills in reading and listening comprehension.
- To instill a sense of aesthetics, the appreciation of human values, and the moderate use of beautiful and valuable things in the student's mind.

Learning a language involves four types of skills. They are (1) listening; (2) speaking; (3) reading, and (4) writing. The first two are known as orality, while the last two are known as literacy. Meanwhile, orality and literacy shape linguistics.

Listening and reading are "channels" for acquiring information among these four skills. Thus, these two types of skills are named receiving skills.

The other two types of skills, speaking and writing, are used as "channels" for conveying information. Thus, these two types of skills are called productive skills. Listening is the "precondition" which enables other language skills.

The listening activity is not simply recording the speaker's (user's) expressions and repeating them meticulously, as in the tape recorder case. It is the process of capturing and extracting meaning from the spoken language. Listening includes:

- Catching the regular sounds of the language
- Processing and converting sounds into words
- Equipping words with meaning, finding and absorbing essence from words caught by ear
- The ability to understand and interpret the speaker's (user) expressions. Speaking is a much more difficult skill than listening. It is an act of creativity (Özkan, 2021).

Even though a person knows the language, the speaker (user) has to think about the idea they want to express,

start a monologue or conversation, or reply to the previous speaker (user). Speaking activity includes:

- Knowing the grammatical, lexical, and cultural features of the language
- The ability to speak without making grammatical mistakes
- Being aware of where, when, why, and what to talk about
- Correct pronunciation and the ability to make comprehensible presentations, and so on (Koral & Mirici, 2021).

Reading is the interpretation of written symbols through the habits of recognition and understanding. To perform the reading activity, the person (user) must have good knowledge of the following:

- Language knowledge
- Knowledge of the writing system
- The ability to recognize phonemes
- The ability to interpret and understand texts and so on.

While reading, the reader (user) interacts with the text, deciphers it, and constructs meaning during this process. The reading activity refreshes human (user) knowledge and is essential for achieving academic success (Saqr, 2021).

Writing is the process of conveying thoughts through written symbols, and it is a complex process. The writing activity includes:

- The ability to give the letters the right shape.
- The ability to transform ideas into written symbols.
- The ability to write without making grammatical mistakes.
- The ability to present and structure thoughts in a readable manner (Kahveci & Şentürk, 2021).

Main issues of language skills

All four these types of language skills are the basics of communication. Consequently, they form the foundations that enable language mastery, which is the capability to use knowledge while performing various tasks.

Despite the considerable and severe efforts of education experts and institutions responsible for improving the teaching of English in the Republic of Kosovo, the achievements of students of all levels in the field of English acquisition, in general, still need improvement. Accordingly, it is necessary to find out the causes of this low level of progress. However, before doing this, it is also significant to determine the quality of the student's progress in all English skills, find the problems encountered in learning this language and recommend their respective solutions.

Many opinions are expressed on this matter. However, we will only deal with some of them which we have used.

First, observing the interaction between students and teachers in a second-language classroom sheds light on the patterns of teacher-student and student-student interaction inside and outside the classroom. It identifies common mistakes made while using articles,

prepositions, and particles. Thus, it is explained that the learning of grammar should be started at the beginning of the lesson and that the development of numerous grammar exercises increases the interpersonal communicative competence of students (Karthiyayani, 2003).

Second, the study of reading comprehension shows that students' performance is better when the answers are presented clearly in the passage than when they are given scattered. Also, it has been noticed that parents' income and the student's previous school achievements play a primary role in the performance of reading comprehension, while gender and residence play a secondary role in this regard (Kothainayaki, 1994).

Third, the research of problem areas in the acquisition of communicative competence, as well as the inadequacy between the language curriculum, language learning, and students' language performance, reveals some of the strategies used by those who encounter difficulties in the communication process (Berg, 1971). Also, it is emphasized that the social and economic environment influences less than the parents' education and the situational and psychological factors in consolidating students' communicative competence.

Fourth, the investigation of spelling errors in the second language proves that they are primarily additions, deletions, substitutions, and inversions of letters. Errors originating from the interference of the first language are also specified simultaneously. Consequently, spelling exercises, mainly focused on confused words and vocabulary practice, help reduce spelling errors in students' written work. (Baskaran, 1996).

Fifth, exploring motivational problems in teaching and learning English as a second language reveals that they are relatively less in high than in low grades. Meanwhile, it is reasoned that the amount of words used in textbooks also determines the degree of motivation achieved (Faerch, & Kasper, 1980).

Sixth, the assessment of English teaching techniques, the text materials used for this purpose, and the performance of students in speaking and writing shows that the exam should test the mastery of four language skills, including spelling, word and sentence formation, grammar, phonology, reading and writing comprehension. Also, the texts are advised to contain more lessons written by local authors, that is, original ones, while minimizing poems in the text is required (Ellis, 2003).

The seventh, the measurement of students' communicative ability in speaking English, indicates phonological, lexical, and grammatical errors and proves that the communicative speaking ability of students who conduct lessons in English is better than that of those who conduct classes in the mother tongue. Furthermore, it is recommended that the curriculum designers and the relevant producers may prioritize communication skills for the students to develop the acquired knowledge (Chandran, A.,1999).

Eighth, the treatment of students' activation in the English class reveals that factors such as intelligence, shyness, evaluative capacity, commitment, psychological state, and attitude toward the text enable fruitful interaction. In particular, it is emphasized that students' shyness, mainly due to previous failures, causes avoidance of interactive performance. In contrast, the other factors above increase interaction in the English literature class (Jayanthi, 2002).

Ninth, analyzing the four types of language skills of English learners, that is, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, presents the phonological, grammatical, and orthographic errors in the production skills, whereas, concerning comprehension skills, underlines the ability to remember words and sentences. It is also proposed to encourage group discussions and the development of language games during the lesson, whereas introducing auditory and visual aids for teaching English is considered an appropriate and wise action (Cook, 2003).

Finally, tracking the achievement of students' communicative competence, based on the grades they received in specific test exercises, such as the identification of sounds and letters, the identification of word meanings, the application of word meaning in sentences, letter writing, and drafting, proves that the economic status and educational level of the parents exert a direct influence on the ability to use written English (Brown, 2005).

The studies from which we collected the opinions expressed above do not deal separately and exhaustively with learning English as the embodiment of the coordination of the four linguistic skills of English (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) in secondary schools. Therefore, besides the other reasons already mentioned, our paper focuses on this topic.

Method of the Study
The object of the study and the hypotheses
This study tries to identify the performance and problem areas in the process of learning the four language skills of English by students of gymnasiums in the Republic of Kosovo, as well as convey the correct recommendations for overcoming the problems or obstacles that they come across.

For this paper to be called completed, we have determined the fulfillment of these primary goals
1. Identifying the communication strategies used by second language students when they discover language deficiencies and encounter difficulties during the learning process in oral communication.
2. Identifying communicative, interlingual, and extra-lingual strategies students use during oral communication and assessing their speaking skills.
3. Identifying problems encountered by students while learning writing skills.
4. Identifying the interference of the first language in the students' written works in the second language.
5. Assessment of students' reading ability.
6. Identifying the student's capacity to comprehend vocabulary and discourse in the reading comprehension process.
7. Assessment of students' listening skills.
8. Identifying students' cognitive ability in listening to sounds, vocabulary, grammar, numbers, and information in the listening comprehension process.
9. Suggest recommendations for improving four types of English language skills.

Considering the collected data, the following hypotheses are performed for verification
1. The language in which the lesson is conducted directly impacts the acquisition of second language skills.
2. None of the variables (that is, neither gender, area, education, nor parents' income) play a role in developing second language skills.
3. If a student is good at listening, he will only be good at speaking; if a student is good at reading, he will only be good at writing.

To verify the first and the second hypotheses (1) and (2), the average variables of the language of instruction, gender, residence, education, and income of parents were identified, while to verify the third hypothesis (3), the average scores of students' performance in each skill.

Study sample
To carry out this work, 300 students from five public gymnasiums (Table 1), which belong to different areas of the Republic of Kosovo, were selected. Then, considering the variables of this paper, in continuation, 30 students were randomly selected from each school.

Table 1: Schools: Overview of data

No	School name	Language of instruction	Boys	Girls
1	Gymnasium "Zenel Hajdini", Gjilan	Albanian	30	30
2	Gymnasium "Kuvendi i Lezhës", Viti	Albanian	30	30
3	Gymnasium "Kuvendi i Arbërit", Ferizaj	Albanian	30	30
4	Gymnasium "Skënderbeu", Kaçanik	Albanian	30	30
5	Gymnasium "Ismail Qemali", Kamenicë	Albanian	30	30

To carry out this paper, gender, area, parents' income, and education were taken as variables (Table 2) and further analyzed into component elements.

Table 2: Variables: Overview of data

No	Variables	Subdivisions
1	Gender	Male
		Female
2	Area	Rural
		Urban
3	Parents' income	Low income (under five thousand euros)
		Medium income (five thousand to ten thousand euros)
		High income (over ten thousand euros)
4	Parents' education level	Educated
		Uneducated

Data Collection Instruments

This paper applies some modern methods and approaches usable in the field of linguistics, generally, and in the field of applied linguistics, particularly. They are:

Questionnaire method. To conduct this paper, four questionnaires in English were prepared, one for each type of skill, while the students were tested in the field through the pilot study. Also, relying on the results obtained through the pilot study, the questionnaires have been modified and have taken the final form. Final form questionnaires were used for data collection.

The interview method. A structured questionnaire was used to accomplish this method, which helped to collect students' data through interviews or conversations. In contrast, the student's answers were recorded with a tape recorder (Questionnaire I).

Observation method. In addition to the questionnaire and interview methods, the observation technique was used to fill the gap in the corpus of data obtained through the first two methods.

In addition to the above tools, a summary of personal data has been compiled to collect the information related to the variables included in the research from the students.

Findings

The role of social variables in the acquisition of English language skills has been identified, keeping in mind the points accumulated by the students. With the help of these results, the hypotheses are verified or rejected.

Hypothesis 1: The language of instruction directly influences the acquisition of second language skills. The points accumulated by the students of both languages of education according to different variables collected and their calculated average. This is reflected in the table below.
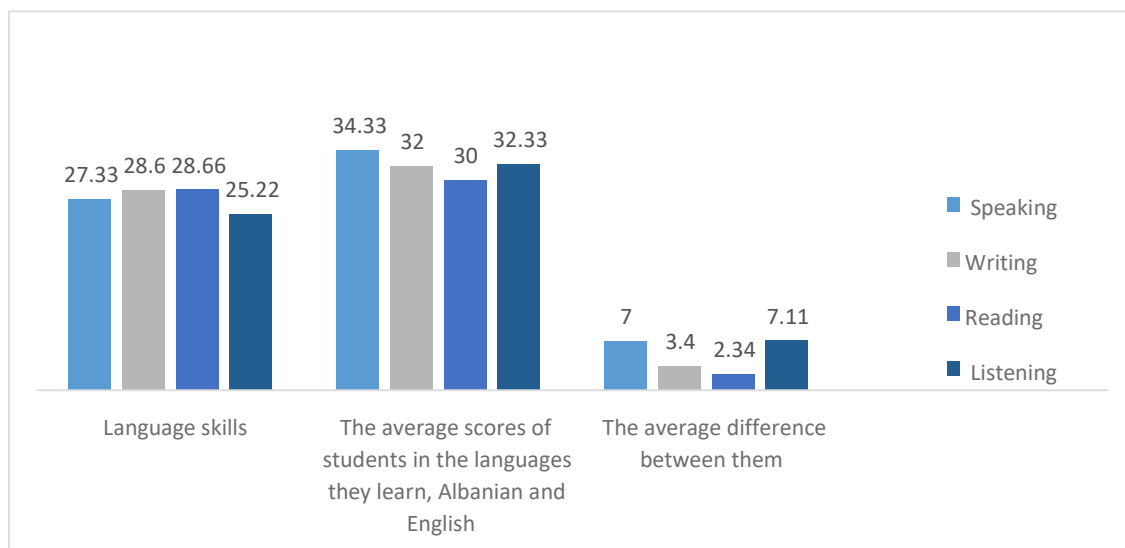

Figure 1. The language of instruction exerts a direct influence on acquiring second language skills.

As seen from the above data, the students who use English as the language of instruction has managed to

accumulate an average score equal to 34.33% in speaking, 32% in writing, 30% in reading, and 32.33% in listening.

Meanwhile, students who use Albanian as a language of instruction have an average score of 27.33% in speaking, 28.6% in writing, 28.66 in reading, and 25.22 in listening.

The difference in points between students who use Albanian as a language of instruction and those who use English in lessons is 7% in speaking, 3.4% in writing, 2.34% in reading, and 7.11% in listening.

Thus, the empirical difference shows that the students who use English in their lessons, in all language skills, have accumulated more points than those who use Albanian as the language of instruction. So, the first hypothesis is confirmed, which states that "the language of education has a direct influence on the acquisition of second language skills.

Hypothesis 2: No variable (a. gender, b. area, c. parents' income, d. parents' education) plays a role in developing second language skills.

To prove this hypothesis, as was said before, the average points accumulated by the students were calculated, considering each variable in all language skills.

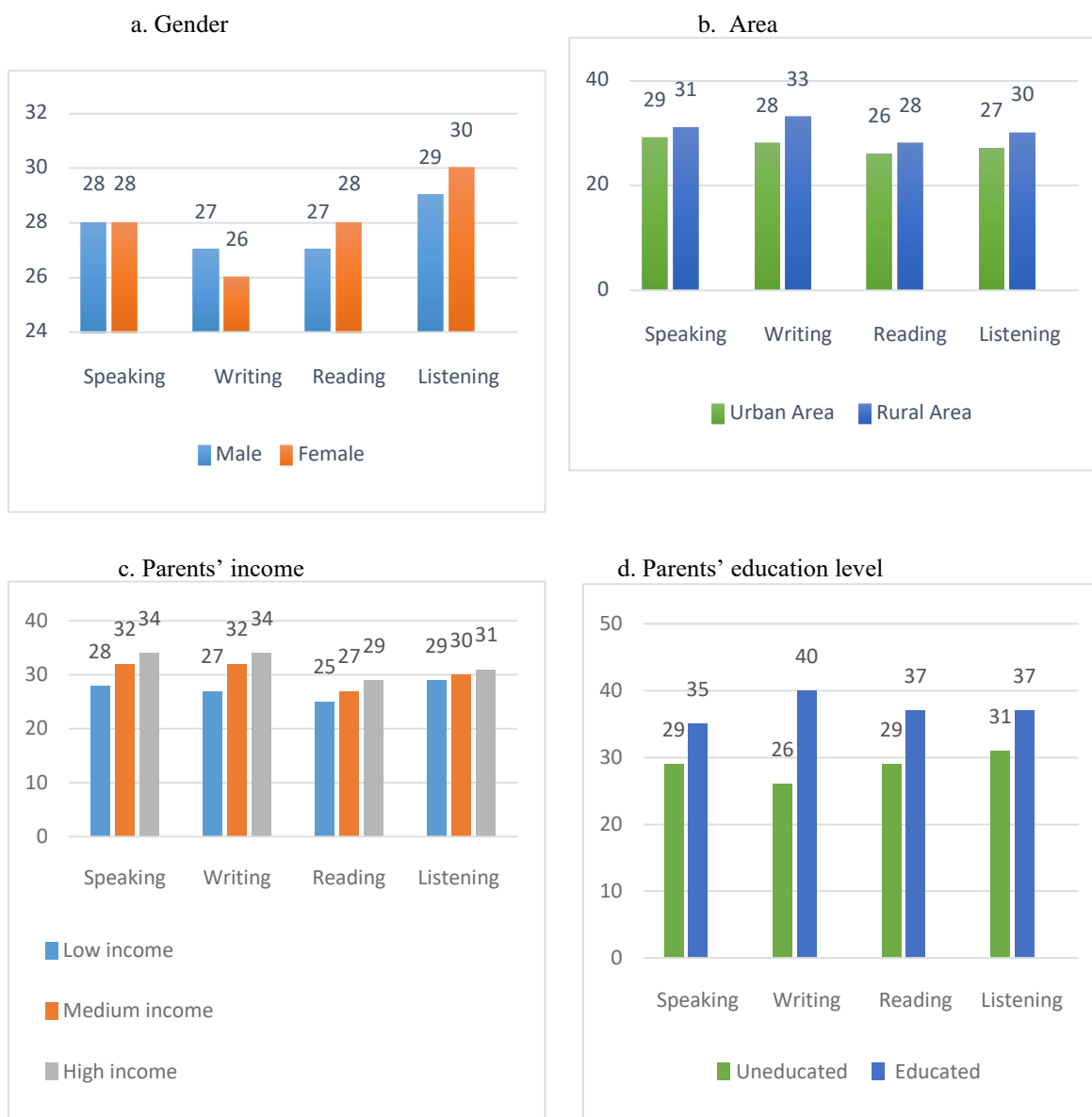The following table shows this quite clearly.

a. Gender

b. Area

c. Parents' income

d. Parents' education level

Figure 2. The empirical difference of students learning in English, in all language skills, by gender, area, parents' income, and parent's education.

As can be seen from the above data, in speaking skills, the average score difference between students with educated parents and those with uneducated parents is equal to 6%; between students of the high-income group and those of the low-income group, it is similar to 6%; between students from urban areas and those

from rural areas, it is equal to 2%, while that between male and female students is equal to 0%.

In writing, the average score difference between students with educated parents and those with uneducated parents is equal to 40%; between students of the high-income group and those of the middle-income group, it is similar to 2%; between students of the middle-income group and those of the low-income group, it is equal to 5%; between students from urban areas and students from rural areas, it is similar to 5%, while that between male and female students is equal to 1%.

In reading, the average score difference between students with educated parents and those with uneducated parents is equal to 8%; between high-income group students and middle-income students, it is similar to 2%; between students of the middle-income group and those of the low-income group, it is equal to 2%; between students from urban areas and those from rural areas, it is similar to 2%, while that between male and female students is equal to 1%.

In listening, the average score difference between students with educated parents and those with uneducated parents is equal to 7%; between students of the high-income group and those of the middle-income group, it is similar to 1%; between students of the middle-income group and those of the low-income group, it is equal to 1%; between students of the high-income group and those of the low-income group, it is equal to 2%; between students from urban areas and

those from rural areas, it is similar to 3%, while that between male and female students is equal to 1%.

The average score difference between and among the variables shows that students from well-educated families are better at acquiring English language skills than those from poor and uneducated families. In contrast, students' performance in urban areas is better than in rural areas. In reading, female students are better than male students. Even in listening, female students are better than male students. However, in speaking, female and male students have accumulated equal points.

As empirical evidence shows, the mentioned variables are essential in acquiring all language skills. So, the hypothesis that "no variable (namely, neither gender, nor region, nor family income, nor parents' education) plays a role in developing second language skills" is rejected.

Hypothesis 3: If a student is good at listening, he will only be good at speaking, and if a student is good at reading, he will only be good at writing.

Based on the average scores the students received concerning the performance in each language skill, we found that students who are good at listening are good at speaking and reading. Students who are good at reading are not only good at listening but also at speaking. Thus, as far as the second language is concerned, listening and reading pave the way for a good command of spoken and written English. So, it

cannot be said that a student who is good at listening is only good at communicating, nor that a student who is good at reading is only good at writing. In learning a second language, all relevant skills are interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, this hypothesis also needs to be revised.

CONCLUSIONS

The study on learning English by gymnasium students in Kosovo has fulfilled the objectives based on empirical evidence. Through this paper, we have identified the role played by social variables in the process of learning English as a second language.

We discovered from the findings related to discourse skills that students often use specific communication strategies to hide their linguistic deficiencies and weaknesses. And avoiding the topic of conversation is their first and foremost strategy. Thus, the collected data shows that seven percent of the students stopped talking in English on the given subject with the author of this paper due to anxiety, language shock, cultural shock, language deficiencies, and weaknesses.

In addition, syntactic avoidance is the preferred strategy to circumvent sentence construction. So, instead of constructing complete and correct sentences, students cling to elliptical structures to answer the questions they are asked.

Findings in writing skills show that students use the indefinite article "an" before words that begin with a consonant and "a" before words that start with a vowel, regardless of the initial letter or phoneme quality. Moreover, the indefinite article and definite article, at the same time, are used casually before nouns or noun phrases and are arbitrarily removed in cases where their presence is necessary.

Regarding reading skills, we discovered that in the test, where completion of incomplete sentences is required, fifty-four-point five percent of the students failed to complete the sentences by selecting one of the given alternatives. This happened due to needing to be made aware of conjunctions' grammatical functions and meanings, such as coordinating and subordinating ones used in sentences.

The findings in the field of listening skills show that in the test where the extraction of information based on the text is required, we found that 49% of the students managed to give correct answers, 31% of the students managed to give partially correct answers, 17% of students gave wrong answers. In comparison, only 3% of students still need to respond to the questions. This has happened because the dialogue included as an exercise is built with simple and familiar words, which enable students to understand it easily. Thus, we have concluded that simple and regular words facilitate students' listening comprehension.

Meanwhile, it has been noticed that complex and unknown words hinder students from understanding

the concept. So, they cannot infer or even guess the meaning of difficult and unfamiliar words through contextual cues. Thus, for example, encountering the words "test-fired," "missile," and "lethal" has made it difficult for them to understand the concept embodied in the discourse.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, we have suggested the following recommendations, which will help completely solve or at least minimize the problems that students encounter in learning English as a second language.

To develop students' linguistic competence, the language must be taught linguistically. So, the linguistic approach to learning English from the initial stage is beneficial for developing English competence.

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Different types of conversational discourse can be taught, and students should be given enough time to develop everyday speech during lessons.

While learning English vocabulary, they should be taught to explain and embed grammatical functions and linguistic features of words.

The differences and similarities between the first and second languages can be learned, especially while learning syntax, eliminating the skills of literal translation from the first to the second language.

While learning the pronunciation of words, phonetic similarities and differences between phonemes can be demonstrated in class, while numerous exercises in this area remain essential.

Students can simultaneously be motivated to interact with teachers and workgroups in English at home and in the school environment. In addition, watching English programs on television, listening to the radio, reading aloud, and reading newspapers would help in mastering spoken English.

To avoid mistakes in writing, students can practice writing stories while errors are found in written work, and then their reasons are shown to the students. Also, giving students exercises in the field of editing is necessary.

To avoid the interference of the first language in the sentences of the second language, the differentiation and distinction between the types of sentences in the first language and the second language can be made, which is clarified to the students. Awareness of both languages' sentence types would automatically eliminate syntax errors. So, it is necessary to make unrelenting efforts to raise students' syntactic awareness.

To avoid spelling mistakes, students can be given appropriate dictation and pronunciation exercises. Thus, by preventing the interference of the first language's sounds in the second language's pronunciation, spelling mistakes in the students'

written works would be avoided.

Practicing the distinction of lexical and grammatical units, recognizing unknown words, and grasping their direct and contextual meanings with the teacher's help increase reading comprehension.

In reading materials, easy and simple words can be used. In addition, challenging and unfamiliar words can be presented in contexts familiar to students. If the context is unknown, then the context and the terms would cause obstacles and difficulties for the students. Using unfamiliar and challenging words in familiar contexts for students would increase the latter's level of comprehension.

Reading comprehension instruction can be introduced. So, learning how to read, understand the text, and grasp the literal meaning of the words would increase students' reading ability.

In the lesson, reading games can take place. So, finding phrasal verbs, distinguishing between one, two- and three-syllable words, indicating abstract nouns, names of spirits, and things, as well as transitive and intransitive verbs in a sentence or discourse, would help the development of language competence, which would increase the ability of students' reading comprehension.

Learning listening comprehension should be addressed. This skill can be learned by clarifying how a context is understood, how to derive the meaning of an unknown word within a context, and how to grasp the contextual and situational meanings of words.

Developing listening games, distinguishing sounds, recognizing minimal pairs, recognizing morphemes, free and hard morphemes at the same time, recognizing word syllables, recognizing silent letters in words, and identifying parts of speech would help to increase the listening ability to distinguish second language phonemes, morphemes and phonetic variants of sounds.

Watching television and movies and listening to radio programs would help understand how native and foreign speakers use English. This would also help them to understand the dialectal variants of the language.

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