

Common Written English Grammatical Mistakes in the Students from the Applied Linguistics School at
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Abstract

To determine the most common written English grammatical mistakes in the students from the Applied Linguistics School at PUCESE, a prospective quanti-qualitative investigation was carried out using the methods of analysis and synthesis and hermeneutic, with a survey which contained open and closed questions so as to know specific information and students' opinions, and a test applied to all the students from the Applied Linguistics School, where they had to write a short essay about their expectations in the referred school. The results showed that all the students agreed that grammar must be taught through all the semesters so that they can learn this linguistic component of English appropriately. The most common written English grammatical mistakes are related to the use of the definite article, conjugation of verbs in the third person singular, use of prepositions, conjugations of verbs in the past, use of modal verbs and use of the passive voice. It is concluded that grammar should be taught with more frequency during the studies. Besides, teachers need a didactic material with activities and methodological orientations to work with grammar in the classroom.

Key words: grammar; written mistakes; English; students; Applied Linguistics

Introduction

Grammar is one of the most important linguistic components to include in the English language teaching learning process because of the fact that without grammar the language cannot be developed very well, and there could be some misunderstanding in the communication between people. Certainly, grammar is the spinal cord and the most important element to speak good English and be able to communicate correctly.

Every time when there is a need to write something, people are being judged because to have a good grammar shows simply good education and makes people more educated, so it is important for everyone to spend a little time perfecting it.

There have been some observations in the students from the Applied Linguistics School from Esmeraldas about the essential grammatical mistakes they make in the use of English at the moment to write, something that also influences in their speaking skill. This may occur because some students start the career without much knowledge about English. In addition, only grammar is taught in the first level, so over the course they keep doubts and they are not clarified properly.

Teachers, on the other hand, have lack of time to work with the grammatical mistakes adequately because they need to include this topic in the different subjects, the majority of which do not deal with grammar specifically. These teachers would benefit with information about common mistakes the students make, so that they can be reduced by systematic teaching.

This is why the problem of this investigation is: Which are common written English grammatical mistakes of the students from the Applied Linguistics School at PUCESE?

Other important questions to consider are:

What do theories reveal about the common written English grammatical mistakes that students make?

Which is the real situation of the Applied Linguistics' students at PUCESE concerning written English grammatical mistakes?

How can written English grammatical mistakes be avoided?

What is Grammar?

According to Harmer (1999), grammar is partly the study of what forms (or structures) are possible in a language. Grammar is one of the most important part in language learning because it studies the syntax and morphology of sentences. Grammar analyzes if the words are chained together in a particular and correct order to make sentences in the ideas that want to be expressed. If there is not a correct grammar, it is difficult for people to develop the other skills very well.

Greenbaum and Nelson, (2002), state that grammar is a set of rules which allow us to combine words in English into larger units. Referring to that concept grammar is syntax. There are some possibilities to apply some combinations of words in English, while others are not possible. For example, when the native speakers of the language are speaking or writing, they put all the words they use in the correct order, the same happens, when a person, who is not the native speaker of the language has received enough knowledge and studies about how to use a correct grammar in English.

Implicit and Explicit Grammar

Explicit Grammar is more focused and concentrated on the grammatical items. Explicit grammar teaching is a main method in the traditional grammar method for the fact that the teacher provides the explanation about the use of grammatical rules, the correct steps that should be respected by students to acquire an academic writing, and finally the knowledge. Students obviously must follow those points and learners are able to know everything about the language, but in other words, some students are unable to use the language itself appropriately in contextualized situations, these students consistently make errors when they try to use the language in context. Zheng (2015) said that "Explicit Grammar teaching refers to the teaching methods making form as the center, it emphasizes to learn the grammatical rules purposefully (p. 557).

On the other hand, teachers use an Implicit Grammar Teaching because there are some of them who prefer students to produce and use the language in communicative situational scenes in which they have to think by their own, but inducing the grammar rules through the communicative use of language. It seems like students

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are learning unconsciously, but fortunately, it is not like that because students are focusing more on meaning rather than on form. Vairamuthu (2013) established that it is important “to recognize and acquire grammatical patterns in real life situations. Simulations are introduced in the classroom” (p. 611).

The mentioned author designed some advantages if teachers use the implicit way for teaching grammar, like the following:

- There is high level of motivation among students.
- The sessions are more enjoyable and students show greater keenness on lessons.
- Students are prompted to focus more on meaning than on form, in an implicit manner.
- There is restriction on the use of grammatical terms of which students are generally “allergic”.
- The approach appropriately guides students to correct error.

Mistakes vs. Errors

There are some different types of mistakes in written English, established by an author who coincides in his investigation. Fitikides, (2002), according to him there are mistakes in:

-The construction of sentences, for the fact that most of the students do not use the verbs correctly and commit some violations of this rule in the conversation and also in writing, for example they say: you “was”, for “you were” and he “don’t” for “he doesn’t”. The following examples are incorrect usage:

“The steamer, with the crew and passenger, were [was] lost”.

“What signifies [signify] good opinions, when our practice is bad?”

“Day after day pass [passes] away”

-The use of prepositions is generally considered at the present day to be perfectly legitimate English idioms. The use of prepositions is very important and indispensable but there are some mistakes students make and the sentences sound inelegant for incorrect usage, as the following examples:

“To rise *beyond* [above] that is given to the few”

“Alike independent *on* [of] another”

“How different *to* [from] this is life of Fulvia!”

“The wisest powers need not think it any diminution *to* [of] or derogation *to* [from]

“In pursuance to [of] the provisions of their charter

-The use of the indefinite article [a] and [an]. They cannot be used with a plural noun, but with a noun of multitude; as, “an army”, “a fleet” and etc. [A] is used before all words beginning with a consonant, or a consonant noun, [An], before all words beginning with a true vowel or a silent h; as,

“a man”, “a woman”, “a youth”, “a European”, “a unit”, “such a one”, “a harpoon”, “a harangue”, “an angel”, “an Indian”, “an hour”, “an honest”.

-The definite article [the] may be used before a noun, whether singular or plural, except abstract terms, or names of virtues, vices or sciences. Articles are also often inserted erroneously, as the following examples:

“That is the kind of *a* man of whom we are speaking.”

“What sort of *a* charm do they possess?”

“What species of *a* reptile is this?”

“Men to whom this kind of *an* organization has been given generally have active minds.”

“He was a better mathematician than *a* linguistic.”

-The appendix refers to when the person does not use the verbs correctly referring to the third person singular, in accordance to the foregoing rules:

Play, plays	Do, does
Eat, eats	Go, goes
Break, breaks	Sleep, sleeps
Write, writes	Buy, buys
Pray, prays	Refer, refers
Comply, complies	Jump, jumps

Fitikides, (2002), described that there are different types of mistakes in written English that students make when they write and some of those mistakes are fossilized because they are not corrected in the precise moment and are kept during the academic life. The author referred to a list of those mistakes in written English that some students make, such as: Use of certain prepositions, use of the gerund, use of certain tenses, negatives, third person singular, indefinite articles, VERB TO BE, definite article, questions, correct order of words, use of will and shall and singular and plural.

Some causes of written English grammatical mistakes

One of the causes about written English grammatical mistakes established by (Ruin, 1996) quoted by (Johansson, 2010) is the lack of motivation students may have, so it is important to engage student's attention in the teaching of grammar and motivate them to the English language learning process. Most of them feel frustrated when they make grammatical mistakes and frustration provokes disinterest. Grammar is the most difficult part in the acquisition of a new language, especially in English.

Khsawneh (2010) pointed out “that the students identified that the teaching method and the environment are the main causes of their weaknesses in English”. (Adas & Bakir, 2013, p. 254) said that it is always

recommendable to change the environment, changing the positions of the chairs or grouping the students for them to feel more comfortable. This author outstands the interference of the mother tongue in the target language because there could be a misunderstanding in the usage of that rule or doubts that are not clarified at the right moment.

Abdulrahman & Alshumainieri (2015) added that “the common cause of mistakes is that students often make an effort to communicate faster in order to develop language fluency. Consequently, they lack concentration and forget about other aspects of their speech such as grammar, word choice and vocabulary” (p.127).

On the other hand, grammar is not just a set of rules or exercises in which students are going to develop their writing skill. Grammar is tied with the use of the language and involved with some patterns that some students memorize in order to develop the communicative competence (Sañudo, 2013).

It is important to implement interesting activities in writing by means of which students must be involved in order to make the experience very valued. If that is followed by the teacher encouraging students’ participation, and at the same time using the language correctly, helps to avoid fossilization of errors. The professor must take into consideration what type of exercise is going to be applied in order to make the learning of grammar in the target language easier.

The lack of students’ motivation provokes weakness in their learning. According to different views there have been some students’ expressions in which they have mentioned that the environment and the method used by teachers are not correct, it is important to be focused on the topic and purpose of the lesson, according to that the professor must prepare an interesting method that functions with the topic.

Griffiths & Sönmez (2015) quoting Gray (2004) conducted that it is important that teachers always provide students a short grammatical lesson in which they can discuss what grammatical problems they have found out in the different assignments and how they can solve them in order to improve their grammar and write correctly. If teachers do this, it is possible that students reinforce their knowledge and avoid many grammatical mistakes that were committed before.

In addition, as mentioned by Griffiths, (2008), students learn from error corrections, but it is essential that corrections are first noticed. In other words, it is relevant that students first of all get focused on their errors, then to raise students’ awareness of the correct forms and provide opportunities and motivation so that they can use these corrections for their advantage and improvement.

Griffiths & Sönmez (2015) quoting Zhou (2008) commented: “error correction should be done softly with a gentle attitude and humor and teachers should be careful about the students’ self-esteem” (2008, p. 133).

Al-Buainain, (2006) pointed out that “it is the teachers’ responsibility to adopt, modify or even develop remedial procedures that can elevate the students’ level and minimize their errors. Teachers should try to find the best method to deliver the lesson to their students”.

As future English teachers we have to take into consideration that in education there have been different modifications as we know, in the past, the teacher was the only who was able to make modifications in the mistake, but nowadays everything has changed and the students are who realize and learn from their mistakes achieving their autonomy.

There are many activities that teachers can use to make English classes more vivid and active. Since many years ago teachers have used the same and repetitive activities that do not fulfill the main objectives, which is to enable students to learn grammar correctly and consequently get some mistakes that can be fossilized with time. When this happens, learners feel pressured because teachers are pushing them to memorize structures that are not contextualized or used in everyday speech; this is why students do not know how to use those structures in a flexible and practical way.

Communicative language teaching: as a tool to teach grammar

Learning a language through a communicative method can be more useful and appropriate because it provides a better opportunity to communicate than the traditional way of teaching grammar, like grammar based- approach. But it is very important to say that teachers are able to use the communicative approach and the traditional grammar method and, hence it is much better if they mix them in the lesson, above all because learners first learn the grammar through exercises, grammar rules explained by the teacher and it is very feasible that they produce what they learned before by means of communication, conversations, debates, or opinion about something they like. That is how teachers can obtain perfect results in students’ communicative competence and provoke that students apply the grammatical patterns acquired before. (Cordero & Pizarro, 2013)

Method

This investigation followed the mixed methodology: quantitative-qualitative, with the methods of analysis and synthesis and hermeneutic.

The techniques used were the survey, a test and the observation. The survey was applied to a sample of 45 students, 7 men and 38 women, who study at the Applied Linguistics School at PUCESE. To have a greater confidence and effectiveness, this survey was placed inside the school, where we focused on 10 questions, which were closed or open, in order to determine common written English grammatical mistakes. The method

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to process the information was: the percentage manual method using illustrative figures to show the results in a better way.

A test was applied to the students from the Applied Linguistics School in which they had to write a composition about the expectations of their studies. This test was made in order to collect the common written English grammatical mistakes in the students from the Applied Linguistics School and have an idea about their weaknesses and strengths.

Results

A test was applied in order to determine the students' more frequent mistakes, as can be seen in figure 1. It revealed that the most common ones are related to the use of the infinitive, verb tenses and the conjugation of the verbs in the third person singular.

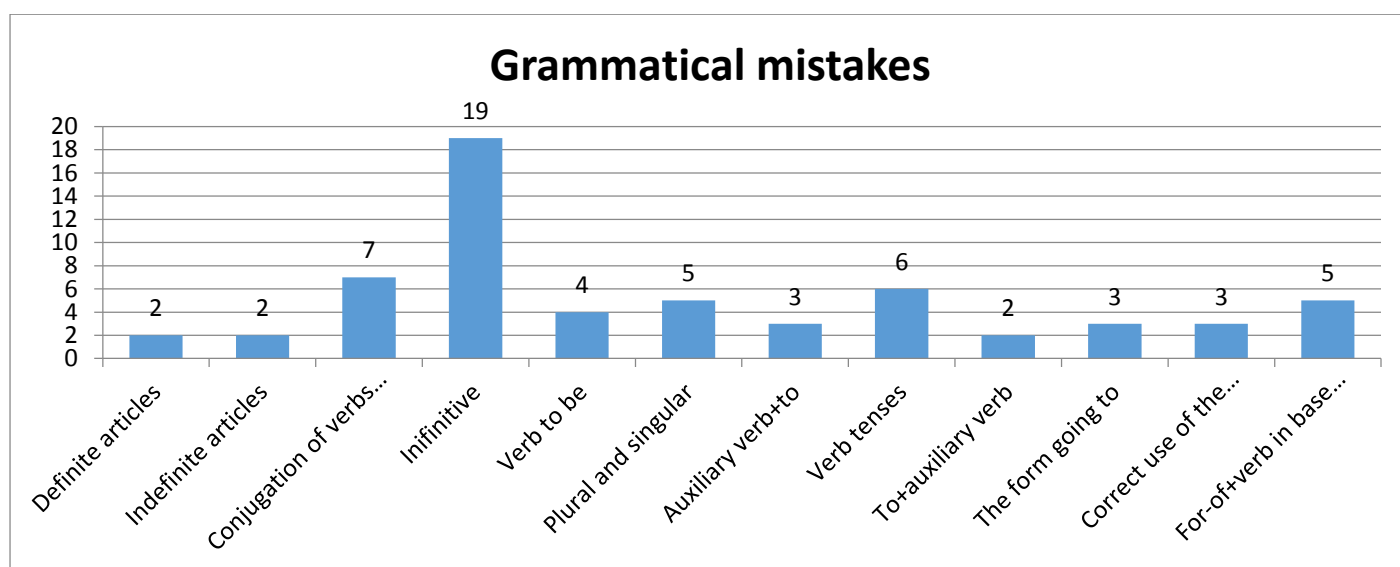


Figure 1: Common written English grammatical mistakes
Source: Test

This result shows the necessity to work basically with the infinitive, verbal tenses, as well as with the conjugation of verbs in the third person singular.

Regarding the need to study grammar as a subject till the end of the studies, as can be seen in figure 2, the students surveyed affirmed that they had this urgent need.

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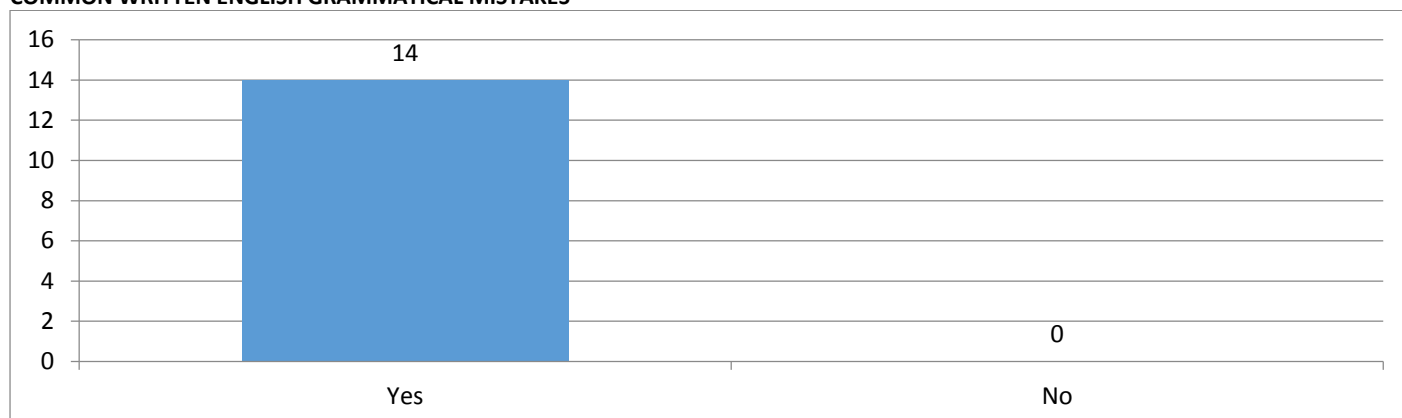


Figure 2: Need to study grammar till the end of the university studies
Source: Survey

The results show that the students are aware of the problem they have in grammar, so to teach them is easy. They think that studying grammar just in the first two levels is not enough to clarify and eliminate some determined doubts and mistakes that may become fossilized.

The students also demonstrated to be aware of the written English grammatical mistakes they have, as it is shown in figure 3. If they are conscious of this problem, they have a good predisposition for learning.

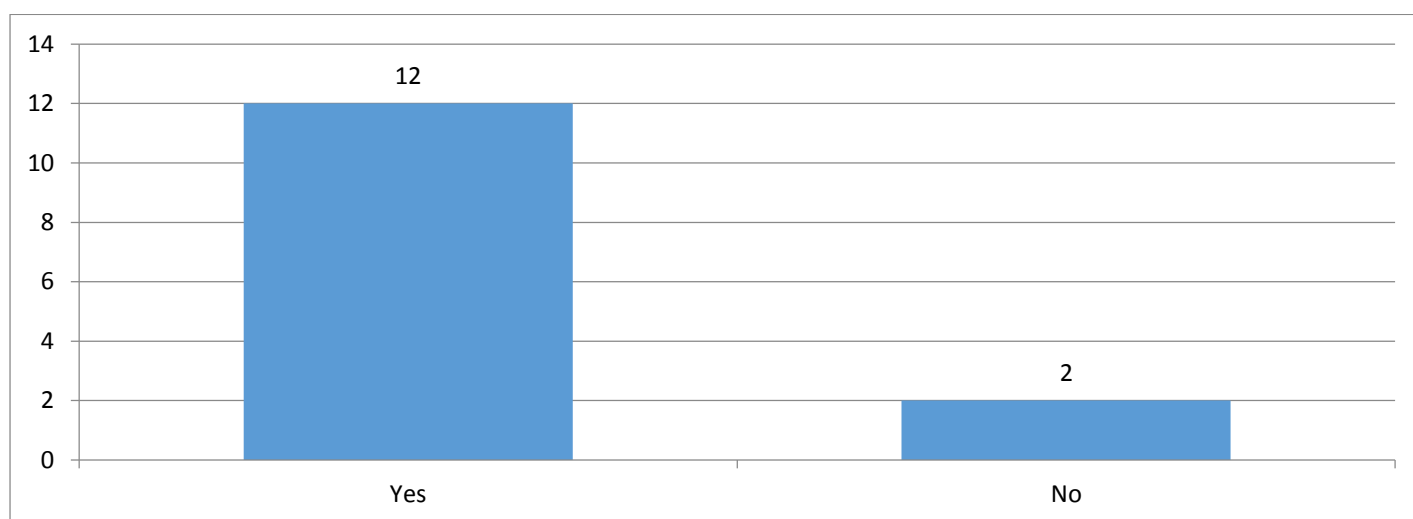


Figure 3: Problems in written English because of grammatical mistakes
Source: Survey

Regarding the mistakes that the students more frequently make when writing English, as shown in figure 4, they are related to the use of prepositions and the passive voice. In addition, they also present difficulties in the use of the definite and indefinite articles and in the conjugation of verbs in the third person singular.

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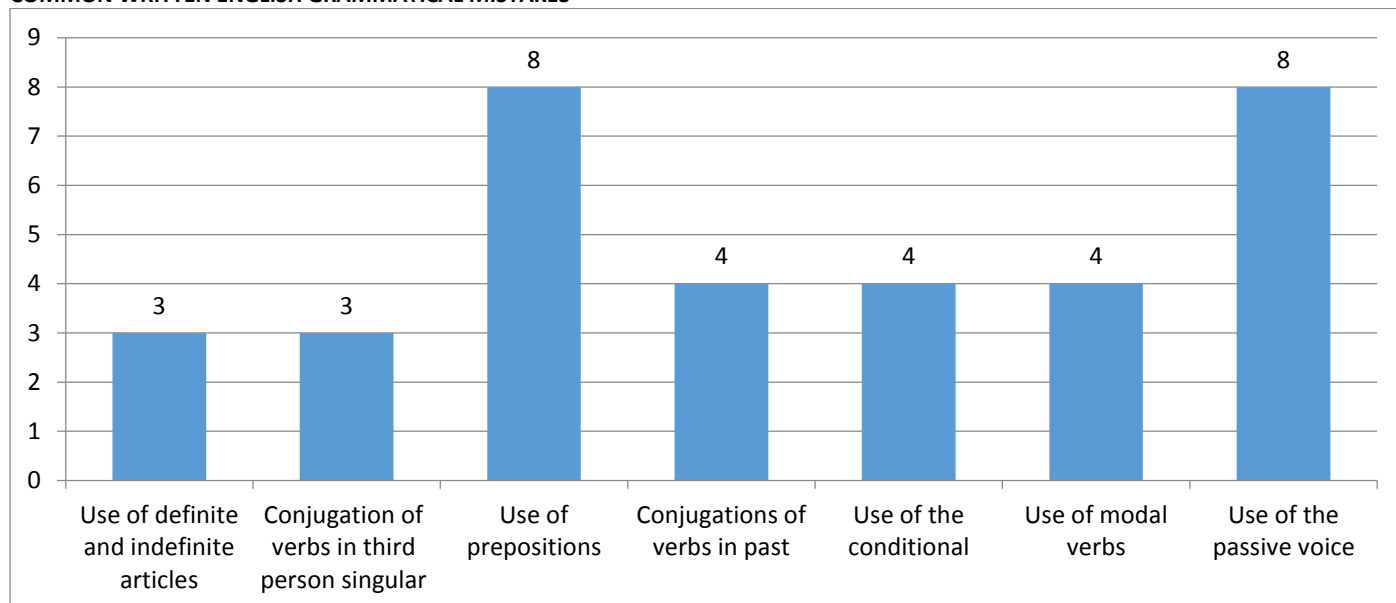


Figure 4: English grammatical mistakes more frequently made
Source: Survey

When requesting the techniques by means of which the students can improve their grammar, as can be seen in figure 5, the students made reference to reading texts and the teacher's explanation.

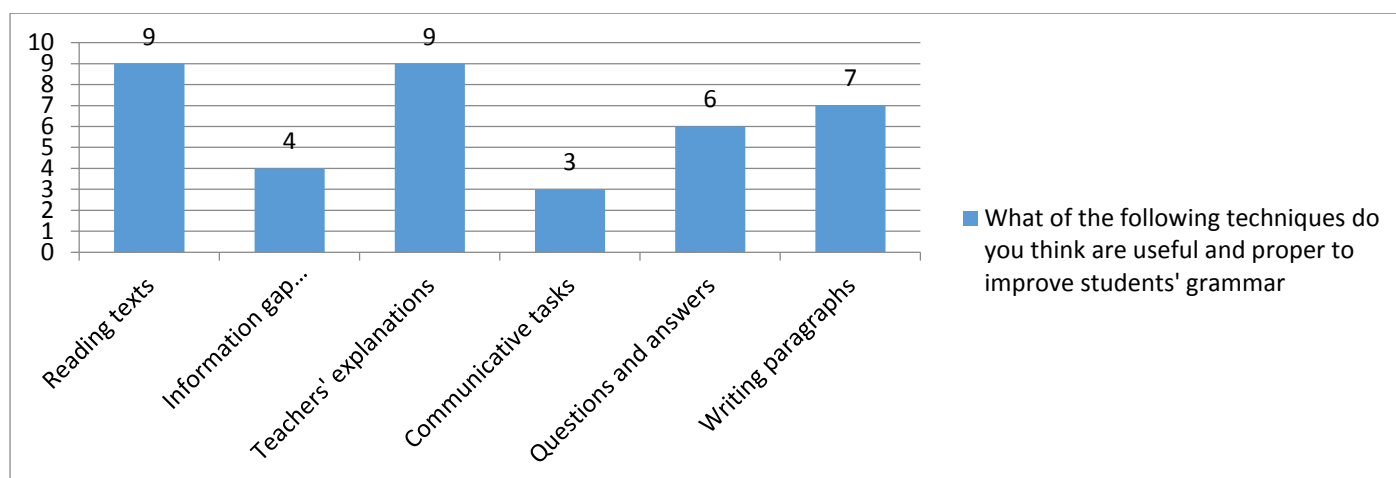


Figure 5: Techniques students consider useful to improve grammar
Source: survey

Discussion

Some of the results that have been obtained in this investigation coincided with the ones found by other authors (Bigelow; 1891, Fitikides; 1981, Bond; 2009) in relation to the mistakes that the students tend to make at the moment they write.

Students from the Applied Linguistics School considered that it would be good and efficient to study grammar as a subject till the end of the career so that they can have enough knowledge about this important

linguistic component of the English language, from which the development of the rest of the skills depend. It would be beneficial if teachers taught grammar through each subject without leaving the content and purpose of their lessons.

Conclusions

Because of the fact that the students do not receive grammar as a subject during all the semesters, until they finish the university, some grammatical mistakes tend to become fossilized in their minds.

Grammar is the spinal cord of the language so it is necessary that the Applied Linguistics School students learn it appropriately in order to improve their communicative competence in the English language.

Teachers need to use adequate methodologies and techniques that facilitate the teaching learning process of grammar.

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