

GRAMMATICAL COMPLEXITY IN SPOKEN ENGLISH: TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF A SPECIFIC ORAL PROFICIENCY OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

COMPLEXIDADE GRAMATICAL NA FALA EM INGLÊS: RUMO À DEFINIÇÃO DE UMA
PROFICIÊNCIA ORAL ESPECÍFICA DE PROFESSORES DE INGLÊS COMO LÍNGUA
ESTRANGEIRA

COMPLEJIDAD GRAMATICAL EN LA ORALIDAD EN INGLÉS: HACIA LA DEFINICIÓN DE
UNA COMPETENCIA ORAL ESPECÍFICA DE LOS PROFESORES DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA
EXTRANJERA

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ABSTRACT: Considering the historical context of unsatisfactory conditions in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Brazil (Consolo, 2017), this research study aims to collaborate with the analytical criteria for assessing grammar in the oral test of an examination that evaluates EFL teachers' proficiency. Since the progress of a foreign language learner can be observed by the grammatical forms that s/he manages to properly produce (Luoma, 2004), in this study we focus on grammatical complexity, which is the degree of sophistication of production of those forms (Ortega, 2003). We use performance data from the oral test of the EPPLE (Proficiency Examination for Foreign Language Teachers) examination and from online English lessons taught in a Language and Literature course at a Brazilian public university. The unit of analysis is the *AS-unit* (Foster *et al.*, 2000). We analyzed how compound verb tenses are characterized in participants' speech, and present quantitative and qualitative results. Our results showed that present perfect was the compound tense students had the most difficulties with. Most students seemed to be familiar with past simple, and they chose to use this tense instead of present perfect. In the oral production of less proficient students, present perfect was replaced by present simple.

KEYWORDS: Assessment; EFL teacher education; Grammatical complexity; Linguistic competence; Spoken language.

RESUMO: Considerando o contexto histórico de condições insatisfatórias no ensino de inglês como língua estrangeira (ILE) no Brasil (Consolo, 2017), este trabalho objetiva colaborar com os critérios analíticos de avaliação da gramática de um teste oral de um exame que avalia a proficiência oral de professores de ILE. Como o progresso de um aprendiz de língua estrangeira pode ser observado pelas formas gramaticais que ele produz adequadamente (Luoma, 2004), optamos pelo aspecto complexidade gramatical,

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que é o grau de sofisticação dessas formas (Ortega, 2003). Os dados utilizados são de participantes do teste oral do EPPLE (Exame de Proficiência para Professores de Língua Estrangeira) e de aulas on-line de inglês em curso de Letras de uma universidade pública. A unidade de análise é a *AS-unit* (Foster et al., 2000). Analisamos como os tempos verbais compostos são caracterizados na fala dos participantes, e apresentamos os resultados quantitativos e qualitativos obtidos. Os resultados mostram que o presente perfeito é tempo verbal composto com o qual os alunos têm mais dificuldade. Muitos alunos parecem estar familiarizados com o passado simples, e escolhem usar esse tempo verbal em vez de o presente perfeito. Entre os casos de alunos menos proficientes, o presente perfeito foi substituído pelo presente simples.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Avaliação; Competência linguística; Complexidade gramatical; Formação de professores de inglês como língua estrangeira; Linguagem oral.

RESUMEN: Considerando las condiciones insatisfactorias en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en Brasil (Consolo, 2017), este trabajo tiene como objetivo colaborar con los criterios analíticos para evaluar la gramática de una prueba oral de un examen que evalúa la competencia oral de profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera. Como el progreso de un aprendiz se puede observar por las formas gramaticales que produce adecuadamente (Luoma, 2004), optamos por el aspecto de la complejidad gramatical, que es el grado de sofisticación de estas formas (Ortega, 2003). Los datos utilizados son de participantes en la prueba oral EPPLE (*Exame de Proficiência para Professores de Língua Estrangeira*) y de clases de inglés en línea en un curso de idiomas en una universidad pública. La unidad de análisis es *AS-unit* (Foster et al., 2000). Analizamos cómo se caracterizan los tiempos verbales compuestos en el discurso de los participantes y presentamos los resultados cuantitativos y cualitativos. Los resultados muestran que el presente perfecto es el tiempo compuesto con el que los estudiantes tienen mayor dificultad. Muchos estudiantes parecen estar familiarizados con el pasado simple y eligen utilizar este tiempo en lugar del presente perfecto. Entre los casos de estudiantes menos competentes, el presente perfecto fue sustituido por el presente simple.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Evaluación; Formación de profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera; Complejidad gramatical; Competencia linguística; Lenguaje oral.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is known that evaluating and being evaluated are intrinsic facts of human life (McNamara, 2000). In educational contexts, assessment, evaluation, and testing have always been controversial and complex topics, yet very relevant aspects connected with the experiences of teaching and learning (Furtoso, 2011).

Regarding the relationship between assessment and language teaching and learning processes, Baffi-Bonvino (2010, p. 20) points out the need to move assessment away from a traditional concept of value judgment and turn it into “a process of observing the development of learning which considers, in the case of teaching contexts, the student and the content as inseparable elements”.

It is necessary to recognize, however, that research on assessment, with a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, has much contributed to a broader and more inclusive view of language ability, as well as to a better understanding of social and political issues in the scope of which the uses of evaluation are inserted (Bachman, 2014). With these advances, a very latent challenge still persists in the area of assessment: “how to meet our challenges responsibly - both methodologically and ethically - as we develop and use assessments about language in the real world” (Bachman, 2014, p. 2).

For the area of teacher evaluation, this issue is even more delicate, mainly because it was found that many undergraduate students of Language and Literature courses¹, and English as a foreign language (hereinafter EFL) teachers still do not feel prepared or comfortable speaking the target language - in this case, the English language (Consolo, 2004). This happens due to ‘a vicious cycle’ (Consolo, 2017) that has been maintained for years in the Brazilian educational system, mainly in the public sector. In this cycle, many candidates for a teaching career, even after approximately seven years of English classes in Elementary II and Middle School,

¹ These courses are known as “Letters courses” (*cursos de Letras*) in Brazil.

enter universities with low levels of proficiency in English. Depending on the quality of the English language education they have in their undergraduate courses, even without having reached an adequate level of proficiency, these students graduate from (some) teacher education courses and occupy positions as English teachers in regular schools, continuing, therefore, this vicious cycle.

Considering that such a vicious cycle is fueled by insufficient teacher training at the university (Almeida Filho, 1992) and that one of the desirable effects of evaluation is the influence it can have on the teaching and learning processes of an area of knowledge (Fulcher, 2014), it is necessary that evaluation practices move towards new educational policies and, therefore, improvements in language teacher education. Oliveira (2021) proposes a new panorama for teacher education and teacher assessment, in which a washback of assessment is included, as illustrated in Figure 1:

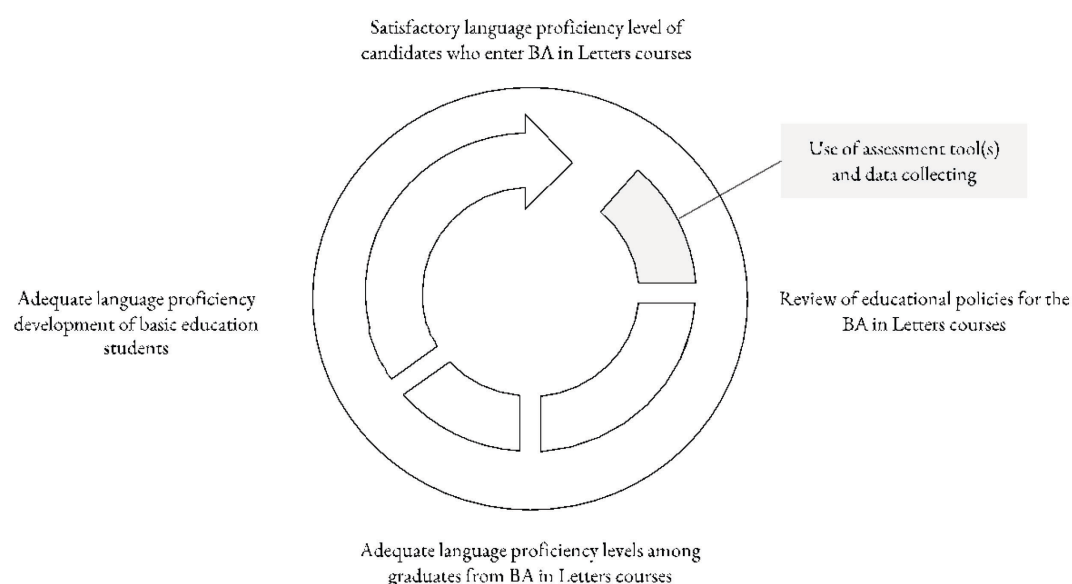


Figure 1: The new cycle proposed by Oliveira (2021, p. 19), with the desired washback effect in the cycle of unsatisfactory conditions previously pointed out by Consolo (2017)

Source: Oliveira (2021, p. 19 – translated by the authors)

In this new cycle, the application of (an) assessment tool(s) with data collection would instigate a re-elaboration of educational policies for Language and Literature courses, which are the legitimizing spaces of the teaching profession (Baghin-Spinelli, 2002, *apud* Borges-Almeida, 2009). Thus, an increase in the level of proficiency among such undergraduates would be stimulated, motivating teachers-to-be to work harder on their foreign language skills and, as a consequence, experience a satisfactory development in their linguistic proficiency to teach foreign languages.

The Proficiency Examination for Foreign Language Teachers (hereinafter EPPL²) is characterized as an examination in constant development and improvement – and aims to assess the written and oral linguistic proficiency levels of foreign language teachers, both in pre-service education and those already acting in teaching contexts. According to Consolo (2018), based on the considerations of Scaramucci (2000), the term proficiency represents “a (procedural) ability to use competence and a theoretical construct related to the teaching/learning goal within the different approaches” (Consolo, 2018, p. 128). EPPL thus proposes to simulate real situations of general language use and real situations of FL teaching to verify how these (future) professionals would use their language skills.

For Messick (1996) and Carroll (1980) (*apud* Scaramucci, 2004), it is more likely that the washback effect of an examination is

² In Portuguese, *Exame de Proficiência para Professores de Línguas Estrangeiras*.

positive when the examination is authentic, direct and aims to simulate real communication situations through authentic tasks or tasks that reproduce real-life communicative situations.

Considering the EPPLE not only as an important examination for teacher assessment – but also as a potential driver of significant changes in language teacher education, our research study aimed at continuing to improve the definition of criteria for the evaluation of FL teachers' language proficiency. In line with Consolo's (2018) statement that proficiency can be assessed according to the various aspects of language (discursive, phonological, grammatical, lexical, and semantic), this study has the grammatical aspect of oral language proficiency as its main focus, and analyses grammatical complexity in teachers' oral productions. The study is then intended to investigate how the characteristics of grammatical complexity in the oral linguistic proficiency of (future) teachers of English as a foreign language enrich the definition of criteria for the assessment of their proficiency. To do so, we analyze data of test takers' performance on the EPPLE oral test and of undergraduate students in online English language (EL) classes of a Language and Literature course at a Brazilian public university, which took place remotely, for two years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important to mention that the existing EPPLE proficiency scales emerged from the performance of examinees. Our data include the EPPLE oral tests, as well as a new type of data – the recordings of online English lessons, which had not been considered in previous studies about the EPPLE oral test. In those lessons, we found relevant information about the students' performance, since they contain different moments of students speaking the language for longer periods of time than in the EPPLE tasks and for different purposes.

In the next sections, we discuss the justification and relevance of the chosen topic, present the main theoretical bases that support this study, and the methodological procedures adopted to carry out our investigation. Finally, we present the results and the bibliographical references.

2 BACKGROUND AND TOPIC RELEVANCE

The relevance of this investigation is justified by the need to define clearly and specifically the aspects of language that constitute the linguistic proficiency (LP) of the (newly) certified English language teacher, so as to improve the linguistic and communicative aspects that support the assessment criteria of teachers' LP.

These criteria are directly linked to the concept of construct. Fulcher (2014) makes a point related to the linguistic achievements of students: even though it is not possible to observe these achievements directly, we often hear teachers say that learners have "achieved" something. These assertions are made based on observable behaviors that are of interest in a particular teaching context. The construct, in turn, is "a concept that is deliberately defined for a 'special scientific purpose'" (Fulcher, 2014, p. 18). According to Fulcher (2014), in the case of defining speech as a construct, as in the EPPLE examination, it is extremely important that the construct is defined in terms of observable "things" that can be assessed and/or tested; and to which grades can be assigned. Conversely, a construct definition is useful when such a definition becomes operational. Therefore, this research study contributes to the operationalization of the EPPLE construct.

On the importance of research on grammatical complexity, Norris and Ortega (2009) point out that, because the subsystems of complexity are composed of multiple parts, researchers need to make an effort to define their aspects more specifically, that is, what such subsystems are constituted of. Therefore, we understand that grammar, which is a broad and complex category, is subject to investigation, mainly to better understand the structural variations found in oral linguistic performance.

In addition, the EPPLE oral test, which initially had only holistic rating scales to assess candidates' general performance, at present also counts on the *analytic rating scale*, proposed by Oliveira (2021), with descriptors of grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation to assess oral skills. For the grammar descriptor, the author pointed out to a "strong indicator of problems with the evaluative criteria and their respective descriptors, as well as with the interpretation of the construct by the evaluators" (Oliveira,

2021, p. 112). As a result of such low reliability in the use of the analytic scale of the EPPL examination, it seems relevant to continue with the improvement of analytic assessment criteria of oral skills, including the issue of grammatical complexity, a component of LP required in EFL teachers' speech.

3 THEORETICAL REVIEW

Considering the context and the relevance of the theme of this investigation, in this section, the main concepts involved in this research study are presented, namely evaluation, proficiency (and proficiency to be a language teacher), language, grammar, grammar of spoken language, metalanguage, and grammatical complexity.

Assessment, according to Brindley (2001), concerns the "variety of ways to collect information about a learner's linguistic ability or achievement" (p. 137). The author also defines proficiency assessment, which refers to the assessment of a learner's general language skills regardless of a specific course or curriculum. EPPL fits in this type of assessment, more specifically of the proficiency of in-service teachers or prospective teachers.

Furthermore, Brindley (2001) distinguishes formative assessment from summative assessment. The latter concerns the assessment usually practiced at the end of a course, semester, or school year, while the former takes place during the teaching and learning process and uses the results of assessment for possible improvements in teaching. Understanding formative assessment is relevant since part of our data are online classes in which teachers-to-be present seminars, which aim to train them to present topics, give explanations, and lead discussions in a foreign language.

The importance of investigations in the area of assessment lies in the fact that it can be associated with objectives to be achieved in language teaching. Investigations also provide data that can be a reference for changes and improvements in teaching (Consolo, 2017). This power exerted by the evaluation on the participants involved and also on society in general is called the washback effect, sometimes a controversial term due to its conceptualization and comprehensiveness (Scaramucci, 2004).

Regarding the concept of proficiency, although it is often related to the area of languages, the term is widely used and is not restricted to language. Due to this wide use and the different meanings attributed to it, Scaramucci (2000) points out the existence of a terminological misunderstanding of the term 'proficiency', which seems to be commonly used without conscious attention.

In her terminological considerations about proficiency, Scaramucci proposes two dimensions. In the first dimension, which concerns non-technical (or broader) use, proficiency is widely referred to in everyday life and the specialized literature, and is often based "on impressionistic judgments, made holistically, of the generally oral performance of an L2 or FL speaker" (Scaramucci, 2000, p. 13), therefore not relying on systematic assessments (such as proficiency exams) and/or certain specific criteria. On the representation scale of this dimension, in which the proficiency reference is the native speaker, there is a "cutoff point" that separates the proficient from the non-proficient language user.

For Scaramucci (2000), technical (or restricted) use, in turn, disregards an "absolute" concept of proficiency to favor a "relative" concept, which depends on the specificity of each language use situation. This use considers, therefore, the question "proficiency for what?" and, therefore, its scale of representation presents levels of proficiency. At the end of the article, the author defends a distinction between the concepts of "competence" and "linguistic-communicative ability", as she considers them clearly distinct and suggests that the term "competence" be replaced by "linguistic-communicative competence" since the latter encompasses both structural and communicative aspects. For her, proficiency refers, then, to the goal of FL teaching and learning.

Considering the technical use of the term proficiency presented by Scaramucci (2000) and "linguistic proficiency to be a teacher" as an answer to the question "proficiency for what?", this research work, supported by the theoretical reflections of Consolo (2018, p. 131), understands teacher proficiency as "manifestation, in a given classroom context and for specific purposes of communication and pedagogical actions, of the elements that make up linguistic competence".

In every concept of language assessment and proficiency, concepts of language and grammar are embedded. We are in line with the definition proposed by Larsen-Freeman (2003), that language is “a dynamic process of pattern formation through which humans use linguistic forms to mean in ways appropriate to the context” (p. 142). This view of language is also in line with the dynamic view proposed by the author that grammar is not a static product governed by rules, a closed and absolute system, but a dynamic process in which forms have meanings and uses in an open, interconnected system (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Therefore, in the author’s tripartite model, grammar is formed by three dimensions: form, meaning, and use. Therefore, “grammaring” is the ability to use grammatical structures accurately, with meaning and appropriateness (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Pre-service teacher education courses, and language teaching and learning in general, benefit from these concepts to the extent that it is understood that the three dimensions of grammar are learned in different ways and therefore need to be taught in different ways. Larsen-Freeman (2003) points out that it is necessary to “make clear the learning challenge for each grammatical structure” (p. 41).

Since the oral modality is of interest in this research study, it is relevant to discuss specific characteristics of the speech domain.

Historically, oral skills have been neglected when compared to comprehension and writing skills. Bygate (2001) points out that speaking in a foreign language has occupied a peculiar place in the history of language teaching and that it has only managed to emerge in recent decades as a branch to be taught, learned, and evaluated. As for the brief or almost non-existent teaching of oral skills in regular public schools in Brazil, a great influence of changes in the entrance exams of renowned Brazilian universities and guidelines of the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) is remarkable, which are strongly focused on oral skills (Consolo, 2017).

Regarding orality, Luoma (2004) points out that, when people hear someone speak, they automatically pay attention to how that person “sounds” and, based on that, reach some conclusions – many of them subconscious – about the personality, place of origin, attitudes of that speaker. According to the author, “while speakers, consciously or unconsciously, people use speech to create an image of themselves for others” (Luoma, 2004, p. 10). When it comes to a FL teacher, this speech is even more observed, monitored, evaluated, and investigated.

With regard to grammar, Luoma (2004) points out that the progress of a language learner can be observed through the grammatical forms that he manages to produce properly. Thus, evaluating grammar becomes very important when it comes to proficiency evaluation, as it is easy to detect both in speech and writing. However, the author draws attention to the fact that the grammar of orality must be evaluated differently from the grammar of writing since they are different linguistic manifestations.

A very significant first difference between speaking and writing, for example, is the fact that speakers do not speak in sentences, but speak in forms that Luoma (2004) calls *idea units*, and this occurs, among other reasons, to help listeners understand spoken language in real-time. As a result of this temporal limitation, these units tend to be syntactically simpler (with more coordination and less subordination), delimited by intonation contours, and marked by hesitations and pauses – characteristics of spoken language. Another very salient difference is the fact that orality is, in general, less planned than writing, that is, it is characterized by greater spontaneity.

Other characteristics are typical of speech and cannot be considered grammatical deviations. This is the case of topicalization, which is an emphasis given to the initial element in order to introduce a topic and guide listeners before saying something about it (Hilliard, 2014). We also highlight tails,³ which serve to emphasize the point of the beginning while creating an informal tone or expressing a personal opinion or judgment about something (Hilliard, 2014). In addition to these characteristics, repetitions, ellipses, generic words, reformulations, and fillers are common, typical of orality and noticeable in our data. And, in addition to considering the peculiarities of orality, it is also necessary that we always pay attention to the type of speech we are evaluating and also to the particular context of this evaluation in terms of social and situational needs.

Although we recognize that the foreign language teacher’s proficiency is constituted by different competences (Almeida Filho,

³ A ‘tail’ refers back to a pronoun, and commonly give more information about this pronoun. Tails help a listener to understand more easily what a speaker is referring to. For example: They’re not cheap to buy, *cars in Singapore*.

1993), due to a methodological focus, we deepened on grammatical competence, and, more specifically, grammatical complexity. It is worth mentioning, however, that grammatical complexity is not seen as more important than other aspects of a FL teacher's speech, but it is as essential as the other aspects involved in communicative processes. Metalinguistic competence, also relevant to this study, is the use that teachers make of the language to communicate with the students at the same time s/he uses language to talk about her/his own language (Almeida Filho, 1993). Therefore, it is characterized as part of the specific domain required of the teacher and is, therefore, one of the skills that differentiates her/him from another speaker of the same language. Elder (1994, *apud* Fernandes, 2011) and Martins (2005, *apud* Fernandes, 2011) define this specific domain as (1) the ability to use FL as a means and an object of teaching, (2) the ability to produce organized input and adequate it to the students and (3) the ability to talk about the form (structure) and use of the language through the language itself (in this case, it is the metalanguage itself).

In addition to its importance for the teacher's speech, metalinguistic knowledge is also essential for the FL learner, "once he has knowledge of his first language, he will use the conscious realizations of language to acquire the knowledge of FL, relying on their general language skills" (Fernandes, 2011, p. 71). This means that, as the learner's metalinguistic knowledge increases, so does her/his FL knowledge (and vice versa).

There are three parts in the EPPL oral test:

In the first, the examinee is asked to talk about himself, from the perspective of a student and speaker-user of the foreign language being evaluated and, according to the candidate's experiences, also as a teacher of that language. In the second part of the oral test, a brief video excerpt is shown, based on which the candidate answers questions about its topic and content. In the third part of the test, candidates must demonstrate their proficiency in the use of metalanguage, that is, the specific language for pedagogical activities. Problems of a realistic nature faced by students are presented, about aspects of the foreign language in question, for which the examinees must offer explanations and solutions. (Consolo; Silva, 2014, p. 75)

In the seminars held during online classes, which also constitute data in this investigation, the student-presenter had to speak in a foreign language; about a previously chosen cultural topic and conduct the presentation as if it were a class, interacting with other colleagues, asking questions, offering explanations and providing instructions, for example. Therefore, the student-presenter had to make use of metalanguage in his or her speech, and the grammatical complexity of this metalanguage is a focus of this discussion.

Grammatical complexity - also called syntactic complexity or maturity and linguistic complexity in the literature, is the "amplitude of forms that emerge from linguistic production and the degree of sophistication of these forms" (Ortega, 2003, p. 492 *apud* Borges-Almeida, 2009, p. 87). According to DeKeyser (2005), the complexity of the structures is directly related to the difficulty of acquiring these structures by the learner. The author points out that the relationship between grammatical complexity and grammatical acquisition occurs at three distinct levels, namely the complexity of form, the complexity of meaning, and the complexity of the form-meaning relationship. However, he states that these three factors disregard the psycholinguistic acquisition difficulty. Therefore, the complexity lies in the "[...] transparency of form-meaning relationships to a learner who is processing language [...], at least for learners who are left to their own resources instead of presented with a reasonably complete set of rules about form-meaning relationships" (DeKeyser, 2005, p. 3).

Kuiken *et al.* (2019) state that speakers of a language can make different lexical, morphological, and syntactic choices because of linguistic factors (internal to the language itself) or external. The authors dedicate themselves to investigating the variation in complexity - especially syntactic - due to different external factors. According to these authors, variation can occur due to different levels of proficiency (called developmental variation), modality (oral or written), types of tasks and genres, and also variation in source and target languages. In addition, there are also variations resulting from differences between learners (depending on each one's prior knowledge, interest in the language, personality, etc.) or related to the same learner, such as differences in performance at different stages of learning (Kuiken *et al.*, 2019).

Given these variations, we decided to analyze data from two different, yet interrelated contexts, the online lessons and the answers provided in the oral test. We understand that the complexity of the speech of EPPL participants may be different from the students' speech in seminar presentations, considering, for example, the difference in objectives. Furthermore, we believe that variations in complexity due to learners' personal differences are inevitable. However, we are interested in identifying variations in complexity due to the different levels of proficiency of the participants so that, in due course, these characteristics can support evaluative criteria for the grammatical component.

For the analysis of grammatical complexity, the main measures available for research pointed out by Norris and Ortega (2009) are the average length (of the T-unit, of the C-unit, of the clause, etc.) and the amount of subordination. In addition to these, it is still possible to find works that measure complexity through the amount of coordination, variety, sophistication and acquisition time of grammatical forms and the total frequency of use of certain forms considered as sophisticated and complex. The authors point out to a concern with the (limited) prioritization of subordination to measure complexity at all levels of development.

Considering a conception of complexity as structural variety, we decided to analyze complexity from a more targeted and specific perspective, seeking to verify the use of compound verb tenses in the participants' speech (such as the present perfect). In our view, the difficulty of these forms can be found both in the form, given that these tenses need auxiliary verbs, and in the form-meaning relationship that may not be so transparent in some circumstances, as is the case of the perfect aspect.

In her work, D'Ely (2006) discusses the relationship between four elements of proficiency: fluency, grammatical complexity, lexical density, and accuracy. The results show that these elements compete for the speaker's attention at the time of speech so that when he focuses on one, he tends not to pay attention in the same way to the others.

In the following section, we present and discuss the methodological procedures adopted to conduct this research study.

4 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This research study, of a qualitative nature, also uses quantitative procedures, with the main objective of contributing to the improvement of the evaluative criteria of grammar for the oral proficiency of the (future) teacher of English as a foreign language.

The research is inserted, more broadly, in the context of Brazilian public higher education, more specifically, in the Language and Literature course, which is the "legitimizing spaces" (Baghin-Spinelli, 2002) responsible for enabling students to become teachers of a given target language (in this case, English). The data are of two different natures: EPPL oral tests and online English language classes, which are part of a database of the project entitled "Assessment of the language teacher's linguistic-communicative-pedagogical proficiency: operationalization of the construct in the Proficiency Examination for Foreign Language Teachers (EPPL)", coordinated by Douglas Altamiro Consolo and approved by the Research Ethics Board of one of the two universities where this study was conducted.

The participants in the EPPL oral test data are graduated or undergraduate students of *Language and Literature* courses from two Brazilian public universities, one in the state of São Paulo and the other in the state of Minas Gerais. A total of 29 tests, taken between 2015 and 2017, comprises the sample. Twenty-eight tests were taken in the electronic format, and one test was taken in a face-to-face interview format.

The participants of the online English language classes are from a Brazilian public university in the state of São Paulo. They were in the penultimate and last years of a Language and Literature course with dual qualifications, in English and in Portuguese, from a full-time day course and from an evening course. These classes took place online in 2020 and 2021 through Google Meet platform due to the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, which forced students, professors, and staff to work from home. Some of these lessons were taught by the professor responsible for the subjects and others were organized so that students could present seminars (in English) on a cultural topic previously chosen by them.

Due to a methodological focus, we chose to analyze the videos of those students who were in their final year (the fourth year of the full-time period and the fifth year of the evening period). Although students actively participated in all classes, we also chose to discard classes taught by the professor in charge of the subject. It seems more useful for us to investigate the oral proficiency of these students while they present the seminars, because the grammatical competence, which is of interest in this current work, manifests itself more evidently in these moments. Furthermore, as in the EPPL, these moments are characterized as evaluative. Sixteen seminars were analyzed.

At first, we organized the data into folders. EPPL transcripts were placed in a specific folder. The recordings of the classes were separated by class and, later, separated into folders of classes taught by the teacher in charge and classes in which the seminars were presented.

In the case of EPPL, as the tests had already been previously transcribed by other researchers through the CLAN program, we reviewed these transcripts (in combination with the respective audios). The audios that did not have finished transcripts were also transcribed. In addition, it was necessary to adapt the codes used in the transcripts according to the needs of this study.

Online classes were also transcribed. Since the videos were very long and not supported by CLAN, we transcribed them using the PHON software (Figure 2). This program, which is very useful for phonetic and phonological analyses, allows us to have access to the video, audio, and spelling transcription at the same time, which helps in the understanding of some passages and in their analysis. It also allows us to return to the passages more easily, whenever necessary. Because of this concomitant access, it also allows us to more readily identify when a participant's speech is a result of reading aloud from a slide or spontaneous production.

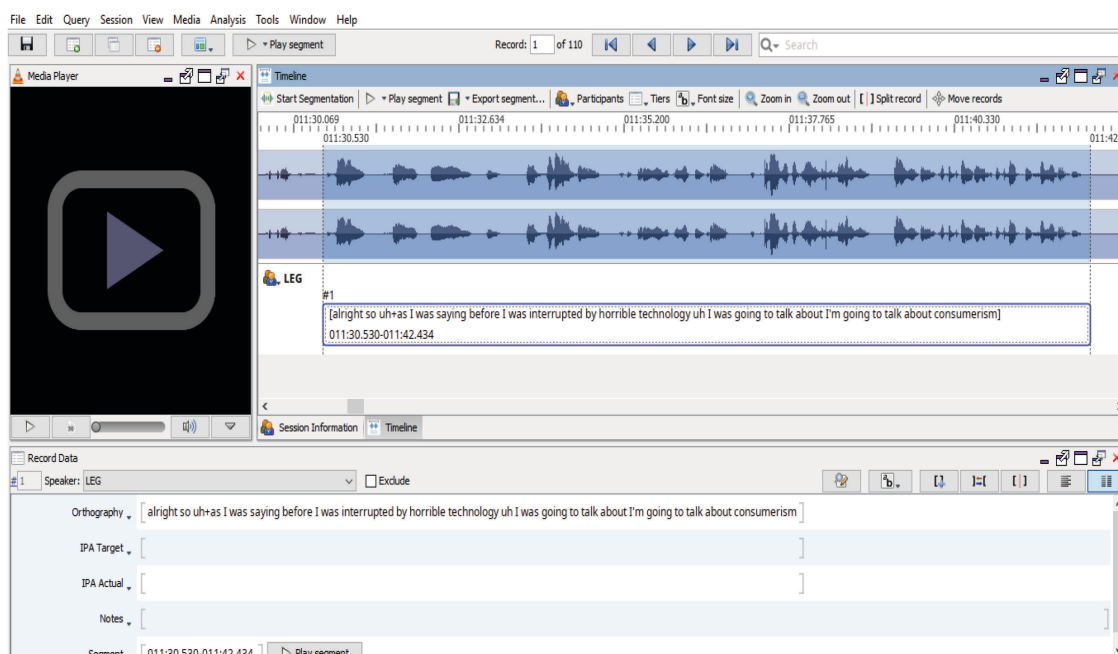


Figure 2: Screen of one of the sessions started in the PHON software

Source: The authors

For the transcription of students' seminars, we chose to make a clipping. In the videos, we noticed that some students start presenting immediately after the recording starts, while others, for different reasons, start later. In order to standardize the data, all these videos were transcribed from the beginning of the presentation until the 20-minute seminar was completed. It is also important to mention that only the speech of the student-presenter was transcribed. Even in interaction with the other students, the teacher, and the communicative situation, we analyzed, in each video, only the proficiency of the student-presenter.

Once transcribed, we organized the tests and classes into folders and different documents (one for each participant) to segment them. For the segmentation, we adopted a unit of analysis that, although based on syntax, considers aspects of oral production, such as pauses, false starts, and conversational markers: the Analysis of Speech Unit or *AS-unit* (Foster *et al.*, 2000). By considering several non-syntactic segments, Norris and Ortega (2009) suggest that the *AS-unit* seems to be more appropriate for the analysis of oral data.

For the segmentation in the chosen unit of analysis, some symbols are required. Disfluent passages such as repetitions, hesitations, filled pauses, conversational markers (e.g., *well*), self-corrections, and restatements have been enclosed in braces { }. Next, AS-unit limits were indicated between vertical bars | |. Sentence limits, in turn, were marked with two colon signs :: and, in the case of embedded clauses, these were placed between angle brackets < >. The + sign was used to indicate short pauses. In the excerpt below, we exemplify this segmentation in one of the EPPL oral tests.

*LUC: | I think :: Mister Duncan is talking to and speaking to + {uh} anyone else :: who's learning English as a foreign language | the second video extract is about a man + :: who's trying {to &pronoun} to properly pronounce + {a} a certain sentence in English | I believe :: that {the video} + the videos <that I just saw> :: provide me the information :: that English language students and teachers shouldn't be worried about :: + pronouncing + {uh} the language + in a specific way |

It is worth mentioning that the reading excerpts in both analysis contexts are disregarded because they do not constitute spontaneous oral production excerpts and are therefore not part of the AS-unit count. Also, seminar presentations where there is a lot of reading and/or almost full support on the slides were discarded for the same reason.

Grammatical complexity was analyzed from quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Several studies that have already been carried out have investigated the question of grammatical complexity and the evaluation of this aspect that is so valuable to the oral proficiency of the FL teacher (Borges-Almeida, 2009; Busnardi, 2012, among others). As shown by Norris and Ortega (2009), there are works in the area dedicated to measuring complexity by the size of the units of analysis (*T-units*, *c-units*, *AS-units*), by the amount of subordination, by the amount of coordination, by the variety and sophistication or by the overall frequency of use of certain forms considered sophisticated and therefore complex. There are also works that combine some of these measures or that use qualitative and quantitative measures.

We recognize that subordination is one of the elements that make up the grammatical complexity of speakers - especially those with an intermediate and intermediate-advanced level of proficiency (Norris & Ortega, 2009), even though this type of construction is less frequent in the oral modality than the written modality. However, Norris and Ortega (2009) say that it is problematic, for theoretical and empirical reasons, to rely only on subordination measures to understand the complexity construct. According to these authors,

At best, positing that elaboration occurs by subordination across all levels of development is too limited a view of complexity. At worst, on the basis of subordination measures alone, we may completely misinterpret whether an increase or a decrease is indicative of a positive or negative change in performance, because a decrease in subordination at the highest levels of proficiency may be related to an increase in the overall complexity of the language performance. (Norris and Ortega, 2009, p. 566).

Considering then a more multidimensional proposal that conceives complexity as structural variety, sophistication, and also something acquired over time (Norris and Ortega, 2009), in this research study, we propose to investigate the use of tenses and verbal aspects (more specifically of compounds, such as past continuous, present perfect, present perfect continuous, past perfect, past perfect continuous, future perfect, future perfect continuous) in the speech of the participants, since these are significant for an adequate, complex and precise speech of the FL teacher. In addition, these verb tenses may be more difficult for EFL learners to acquire. Another criterion we considered is the occurrence and salience of some of these tenses and verbal aspects in our data, often

produced inappropriately.

For a quantitative analysis of complexity, we looked for two indices, namely unit-deviation and unit-without-deviation:

Inappropriate complexity cases



Total number of AS-units

Appropriate complexity cases



Total number of AS-units

According to the unit-without-deviation index, the more complex the student's speech in relation to the chosen criterion, the higher his/her level of proficiency is. On the other hand, the higher the unit-deviation index, the less complex the student's speech is. In addition, we intend to discuss the relationship between deviations in complexity in tenses and verbal aspects and the training of professionals. Therefore, some questions are necessary to guide these discussions:

- 1) In which tense and verbal aspect do participants have more difficulty with? What would be a possible explanation for this?
- 2) Which tense and verbal aspect is easier for participants to produce? What would be a possible explanation for this?

We emphasize that the same methodological procedures used to analyze grammatical complexity apply to both types of data, the EPPLE oral tests and the seminars. In the next section, we present how these steps have been followed, and some results found through them.

5 RESULTS

In this section, we present the results about grammatical complexity, in the linguistic performance of participants of the EPPLE examination and the online classes contexts. Table 1 below presents the participants, the number of incorrect and correct verb forms, the total number of verb forms, the index of unit-deviation, and the index of unit without deviation. These numerical results were derived from the value in the "total" column and in descending order, starting from the highest total number of occurrences (12) to the lowest (1).

Participant	Incorrect cases	Correct cases	Total	Unit-deviation index	Unit-without-deviation index
TAS	4	8	12	0,054	0,109
ISA	6	5	11	0,076	0,064
LIG	1	10	11	0,020	0,20
CLC	2	7	9	0,034	0,120

THY	0	9	9	0	0,142
CAS	0	7	7	0	0,101
JEQ	3	4	7	0,051	0,068
RIC	2	5	7	0,055	0,138
THI	3	4	7	0,05	0,066
LAC	1	5	6	0,10	0,052
SAB	2	4	6	0,038	0,076
SUE	0	5	5	0	0,096
TAC	2	3	5	0,032	0,049
BAA	0	4	4	0	0,063
CAH	1	3	4	0,016	0,05
DAL	0	4	4	0	0,08
GUS	0	4	4	0	0,072
JOA	0	4	4	0	0,048
LID	2	2	4	0,027	0,027
CLA	1	2	3	0,028	0,014
DES	2	1	3	0,040	0,020
LUC	0	3	3	0	0,115
MAC	0	3	3	0	0,130
RIT	3	0	3	0,090	0
ROB	1	1	2	0,023	0,023
BRU	1	0	1	0,038	0
DEM	0	1	1	0	0,027
KAR	1	0	1	0,028	0
MAR	1	0	1	0,023	0
TOTAL	39	108	147	0,823	1,95

Table 1: Number of incorrect, correct and total complexity cases, and unit-deviation and unit-without-deviation indices of EPPLE examinees

Source: The authors

From Table 1, it is possible to notice that all participants had at least one occurrence of some compound tense, whether it was grammatically accurate or not. A first possible reason for such occurrences is the fact that the exam itself stimulates the participants to use some of these verb tenses through some questions of its tasks. Figure 3, which is from the first part of the EPPLE oral test in the electronic format, contains questions about participants' personal and professional information. The first two points are simpler

and only ask for the name and city of the participants. In the third point, for example, it is possible to notice the presence of present perfect continuous (have been learning) to question the period of time in which these participants have been studying English (an action that began in the past and extends to the present). In the next point, the question also asked about work experiences as a teacher of English as a foreign language and, therefore, present perfect (have already worked) is used.

PART 1: Who are you ?

Tell us some information about yourself, for example,

- your name,
- where you are from,
- how long you have been learning English,
- if you have already worked as an English teacher (any details about your experience as a teacher?), and
- your future plans concerning the area of ELT (English Language Teaching).

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Figure 3: First task of version 3.0 of the oral test of the EPPL examination

Source: Colombo (2019)

When answering the question “How long have you been learning English?”, 14 of the 29 candidates showed that they knew the present perfect continuous structure and used it appropriately from the point of view of form (have or’ve + been + past participle of the verb), meaning, and use. The aforementioned candidates were CAS, DAL, DEM, GUS, ISA, JEQ, JOA, LAC, LID, LIG, LUC, MAC, THI, and THY. The excerpts below exemplify some of the correct cases:

Excerpt 1

*CAS: | and I’ve been studying + English since I was twelve |

Excerpt 2

*GUS: | and I have been teaching English for about two years |

Regarding the AS-units that contain deviation, we highlight some excerpts in which participants struggled to use present perfect, deviating in form. As we can see in the following two excerpts, TAC used the verbal tense correctly from the point of view of meaning and use. In excerpt 3, she uses it to talk about her English learning experience, which started at one point in the past and continues to this day, while in excerpt 4, she uses this verb tense to talk about her learning experience in various schools, but without specific temporal marking, which is configured as proper use. There is deviation, however, in the past participle of “learn”:

Excerpt 3

*TAC: | {uh} I have learn English :: since I was + eight years old |

Excerpt 4

*TAC: | {uh} I’ve learn {uh} {the school} in several schools |

In other cases, participants used the verbs in the simple past. TAS used “learned” in excerpt 5 instead of “have learned”. Because of her high number of correct cases, it is possible to assume that she may have had memory lapses. CLA (Excerpt 6) said “taught” instead of “have taught” to talk about her professional experiences. However, it is relevant to point out that, in two other cases of her speech, more complex verbal tenses were used accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. In the case of KAR (Excerpt 141), it is noticed that there was a deviation in the only case present in her performance – “had” instead of “have had” -, a possible indication of the fact that she does not know how to use this tense.

Excerpt 5

*TAS: | and I: learned the basic + by myself |

Excerpt 6

*CLA: | I: taught English i:n {&w &é} (name of a school) |

Excerpt 7

*KAR: | before this period I had {&ano} others experience in {English} + English |

It is also relevant to discuss cases in which present perfect was expected and the participant did not use the verb in the simple past, but in the present simple. Excerpt 8 shows that RIT, a participant with several grammatical deviations in terms of precision, used the verb “learn” in its base form or the present tense form to talk about her academic experience. The following excerpt shows that she uses present tense (“I participate with”) to replace the structure “I have been in”. Soon afterward, she also uses the verb “work” in the present tense to refer to the past, which indicates that she did not know or had not mastered these past forms.

Excerpt 8

*RIT: | I only learn English in: my graduation at {&E} (name of university) |

Excerpt 9

*RIT: | [3] I think :: that I participate with this situation {uh} {a a &sit} a similar situation {in: uh} :: when {I} I work {with + in} + in school {uh} as PIBID English |

In addition to present perfect and present perfect continuous, it was possible to identify occasional occurrences of past perfect, past continuous, and modal verbs in the past. ISA (Excerpt 10) talked about a past that preceded another past, thus making it necessary to use the past perfect. The grammatical slip identified was in the form of the past participle. Past continuous was identified only in the speech of TAS, who talked about events from his school days and, through this tense, tried to make the interlocutor visualize that scenario (Excerpt 11). In 12, however, she made a slip because she used “were standing up” to explain that this was an action that happened repeatedly, as a habit in the past. However, “we used to stand up” or “we would stand up” would be more appropriate forms. Finally, in Excerpt 13, participant THI correctly used the modal “should” in the past tense to talk about something that someone should have done.

Excerpt 10

*ISA: | right now + {i:n} + before this moment I had already decide to: bake a cake |

Excerpt 11

*TAS: | {uh} once I studied in a school :: where teachers: were not so worried about:t :: what we were doing |

Excerpt 12

*TAS: | {we;} {uh} we were standing up on the chairs + or: + on the tables |

Excerpt 13

*THI: | and {uh} the person should've used {uh} {she} “she is probably in Salvador” |

We conclude, therefore, that other verbal tenses of compound forms (past perfect continuous, future continuous, future perfect, and future perfect continuous) possibly did not appear in the speech of the participants of the oral test as a result of what the tasks themselves raise or even allow. In the case of present perfect and present perfect continuous, it is expected that the participants, in the EPPLE versions presented, show how much they know the structure, meaning, and use of such verb tenses.

As for the results of one of the groups of online classes, in Table 2, we present the participants, number of cases with deviation,

number of cases without deviation, total number of cases, and respective deviation-unit and unit-without-deviation indices. This table is also organized in descending order based on the total number of cases found.

Participant	Incorrect cases	Correct cases	Total	Unit-deviation index	Unit-without-deviation index
ISV	13	11	24	0,063	0,053
AMA	10	6	16	0,040	0,024
LEG	4	12	16	0,018	0,054
MEM	5	7	12	0,038	0,053
RAL	4	2	6	0,027	0,013
ANC	1	4	5	0,005	0,022
CAM	2	3	5	0,014	0,021
LOC	1	0	1	0,006	0

Table 2: Number of incorrect, correct, and total complexity cases and unit-deviation and unit-without-deviation indices of students from group

1

Source: The authors

From these results, we highlight ISV's performance, who transited (or needed to transit and was unable to) among different verb tenses, mainly past simple, past continuous, present perfect, past perfect, and past perfect continuous. A relevant point is the fact that her presentation slides did not contain any supporting text, so the entire presentation was based on spontaneous production. 11 out of 12 AS-units with accurate cases of complexity consisted of past continuous (Excerpt 14), and one occurrence of past perfect (Excerpt 15). As for this excerpt, we also point out an inadequacy related to past perfect ("had"), since the most appropriate form could be "had been to".

Excerpt 14

*ISV: | they were teaching men :: how to do stuff |

Excerpt 15

*ISV: | those men who had great colleges {uh} :: who had studied for + {their own} their whole lives :: they had no more {job} jobs |

A notorious fact is that present perfect accounts for the totality of complexity deviations produced by the participants AMA, ANC, CAM, LOC, and RAL, to almost all deviations produced by MEM, and to half of the deviations produced by ISV and LEG. Thus, out of 40 deviations, 31 are related to present perfect (77.5%):

Excerpt 16

*ANC: | {okay} + {uh} have you pay attention to that to the lines {to the} + to what Ross says oh my god? |

Excerpt 17

*MEM: | yeah did you watch it? |

In Excerpt 16 we can see an attempt by ANC to use the present perfect tense, making a slip only in the past participle form of the verb 'pay'. From the perspective of meaning and usage, the tense was used correctly. In addition, in the other three occurrences, this student was able to use the structure correctly. In Excerpt 17, MEM used the past simple verb form ("did you watch it?") when

present perfect (“have you watched it?”) would have been more appropriate to ask if the other students had ever watched a certain film. This last excerpt differs from the previous one because the student did not identify that present perfect was necessary.

We also highlight participant LEG (12), whose correct examples constitute almost all cases of the use of present perfect. On several occasions, the student used this verbal tense spontaneously, accurately, meaningfully, and also appropriately. This indicates that this tense was acquired by her and was available to use whenever necessary.

In Table 3, we present the information from the second group of students from the online classes.

Participant	Incorrect cases	Correct cases	Total	Unit-deviation index	Unit-without-deviation index
PEF	10	3	13	0,072	0,021
RES	3	3	6	0,026	0,026
JOA	4	2	6	0,024	0,012
JOV	4	2	6	0,020	0,010
WIT	4	0	4	0,036	0
ISM	4	0	4	0,034	0
CAA	3	0	3	0,017	0
LEF	0	1	1	0	0,013

Table 3: Number of incorrect, correct, and total complexity cases and unit-deviation and unit-without-deviation indices of students from group

2

Source: The authors

As can be seen, PEF was the participant with the highest number of occurrences (total of 13); however, he also obtained the highest number of deviations. Eight out of ten deviations comprised the use of present perfect. Excerpt 18 refers to an action from a moment before the present, temporally marked by “never” and “before”. The following excerpt refers to a deviation in the use of past perfect, whose form has been replaced by past simple (“learned” instead of “had learned”):

Excerpt 18

*PEF: | yeah I never {read} read it before |

Excerpt 19

*PEF: | and 0he used + a lot of things that he learned in the war + in his life :: to propose {a more + &freed} a free way to education {you know} more contact with nature + at all |

As for the deviations of the other participants, all of them concern the use of present perfect. Thus, 30 out of 32 deviations are of the same tense and verbal aspect, which corresponds to 93.75% of the total. As in group 1, most deviations in the use of present perfect refer to participants not identifying the need to use this tense, especially when dealing with experiences, recent events, and actions whose tense is not specified or relevant.

6 CONCLUSION

In this article, we presented an important issue concerning the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in Brazil, that is, the grammatical competence in oral proficiency, and how the assessment of grammar in spoken language can play an important role in encouraging the re-elaboration of educational policies for Language and Literature courses. The EPPL, an examination that aims at assessing (future) teachers' proficiency, has had its construct constantly revisited and improved by research. We chose to focus on the discussion of the grammatical complexity criteria for the EPPL since this aspect had not been sufficiently contemplated in previous research.

For data analysis, which comprised speech productions in the EPPL oral tests and in online English language classes, we segmented participants' speech into AS-units, a special unit that considers aspects of oral language, and focused on compound verb tenses (such as the present perfect). We checked whether (future) teachers could use them accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately.

Our results showed that the compound tense students had the most difficulties with was the present perfect. In some specific cases of the tests and of online lessons, the difficulty is related to form, mainly in the past participle of the verbs. However, in general, students found greater problems in identifying certain moments when it was necessary to use present perfect, such as when talking about an action or situation that ended in the past without a specific time reference or to talk about an action or situation that started in the past and extends into the present (usually followed by "for" or "since"). A possible reason for the complexity of this tense is the perfect aspect. DeKeyser (2005) points out that some structures are more difficult to be acquired by speakers if their mother tongue does not have that structure or uses it in a different way. Therefore, as most students seem to be familiar with past simple, they choose to use this tense instead of present perfect. In the oral production of less proficient students, present perfect was replaced by present simple.

In addition, it was possible to verify that, in both contexts, past continuous deviations were rare. And, when necessary, most students used this tense in a precise, meaningful, and appropriate way. It is also important to highlight that the use of past perfect continuous, future continuous, future perfect, and future perfect continuous was not identified in the EPPL tests or online classes.

Based on those discussions, we have elaborated grammatical complexity analytical descriptors for the EPPL's oral test (Chart 1). For band 4, we have considered the frequency with which participants use compound verb tenses, as well as their accuracy, meaning, and appropriateness. For band 3, accuracy is maintained during at least half of the participant's speaking time. The main difference between bands 2 and 1 is that, for the second one, there are attempts (even if they are inadequate), while for the first one such attempts are inexistent.

Band	Descriptors
4	When necessary, tenses and complex structures are accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately used most of the time.
3	Tends to use complex structures accurately when necessary, at least half the time of his/her speech.
2	May attempt to use more complex structures (such as verb forms) with inadequacies in form, meaning, or use.
1	Does not use more complex verb tenses, even when prompted by the task.

Chart 1: Bands and grammar descriptors for the EPPL oral test

Source: The authors

As for the limitations of our study, we first mention the methodological focus restricted to grammatical competence, more specifically, grammatical accuracy and complexity. It is important to consider that FL teachers' proficiency is not restricted to linguistic aspects; such proficiency includes sociolinguistic, pedagogic, strategic, and discourse aspects, that should also be investigated.

We hope that, with future applications of the EPPL examination, they can be used for the evaluation and classification of candidates, as well as that examiners can discuss and document opinions and perceptions about the proposed criteria, so that the descriptors suggested here can also contribute to the continuation of the improvement of these ranges in future research and, therefore, for a greater validity of the EPPL examination.

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