



## Article

# Developing Students' Grammatical Competence through Syntactic Synonymy in English Language Teaching: A Theoretical and Experimental Study

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**Abstract:** The development of grammatical competence is important in effective foreign language communication and professional teacher training. This article describes the theoretical foundations of syntactic synonymy and grammatical competence, consists of theoretical basis of syntactic synonymy, description of practical manual prepared by the requirements of the academic discipline "Practice of language aspects" and the results of pedagogical experiment. Syntactic synonymy enables learners to express the same idea through different grammatical structures, promoting grammatical flexibility, contextual accuracy and communicative effectiveness. The findings show that integrating syntactic synonymy into foreign language teaching contributes to the improvement of students' grammatical competence.

**Keywords:** grammatical competence, syntactic synonymy, grammatical flexibility, contextual accuracy

**Citation:** Kamilovna, A. S. Developing Students' Grammatical Competence through Syntactic Synonymy in English Language Teaching: A Theoretical and Experimental Study. American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research 2026, 7(8), 14-20

Received: 19<sup>th</sup> May 2026

Revised: 21<sup>st</sup> Jun 2026

Accepted: 08<sup>th</sup> Jul 2026

Published: 03<sup>rd</sup> Aug 2026



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## 1. Introduction

The new socio-economic policy creates favorable conditions for the professional preparation of students in pedagogical higher education institutions, enabling them to achieve new goals in their academic and professional development. This modernization requires effective foreign language teaching through the use of different teaching methods and tools, as well as innovative educational technologies [1]. One of the most important foundations for modernizing foreign language education in pedagogical higher education institutions is the competency-based approach. This approach focuses future teachers' attention on their ability to apply their knowledge in their future professional practice as foreign language teachers [2]. At the same time, it develops their willingness to select and implement appropriate methodological system for solving professional tasks with specific educational context. A key aspect of preparing graduates of pedagogical higher education institutions to meet these contemporary demands-is the development of foreign language communicative competence [3]. However, its successful development is impossible without the formation of all its core components. One of the most significant of these is grammatical competence, which enables learners to use language forms accurately, appropriately, and effectively in a wide range of communicative situations [4].

Practical experience shows that many students face certain difficulties in the situational use of grammatical structures and lack sufficiently developed skills and abilities for the accurate use of grammatical forms in foreign language communication,

which significantly reduces the overall level of their communicative competence. Grammatical competence involves not only the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but also the ability to choose the most appropriate syntactic variant according to the communicative context, reflecting learners' productive, flexible, and creative use of language. The process of teaching foreign languages is changing from memorizing grammatical rules to forming communicative, functional, and contextual speech activities [5].

In particular, teaching syntactic synonymy, which enables learners to express the same meaning through different syntactic structures and select grammatical constructions appropriate to the communicative context, plays an important role in developing students' grammatical flexibility, paraphrasing skills, academic writing abilities, and the accuracy of both spoken and written communication [6].

In modern research, syntactic synonymy is being extensively investigated in close connection with modern philology, language teaching, translation studies, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, and digital education. Synonymy is an important semantic phenomenon in linguistics that expresses the semantic similarity between lexical units and syntactic constructions, and it is a sentence or phrase that has the same or similar meaning, but has a different structure in terms of form [7]. From linguistic perspective, syntactic synonymy has been the subject of extensive scholarly investigation. One of the earliest contributions to this field was made by Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Peshkovsky, who introduced the term *grammatical synonyms* in the early twentieth century and defined them as "words and word combinations that are close to each other in their grammatical meaning." This concept laid the foundation for subsequent studies on syntactic synonymy and the functional variation of grammatical structures [8]. Separating syntactic synonymy from morphological synonymy, he included cases of convergence in the meaning of individual grammatical forms (times, moods), different sentence construction schemes, synonymy of prepositions, conjunctions, and particles, as well as the possibility of replacing a noun with a pronoun and even word order variants. The provided examples demonstrated the expression of the same thought through different linguistic means [9]. The researcher, without putting forward a theoretical justification for classifying different syntactic constructions into the same synonymic series, only tried to show the rich expressive potential of the language. One of the major theoretical foundations for the study of syntactic synonymy originates from Noam Chomsky's theory of transformational-generative grammar. Within this framework, the relationship between *deep structure* and *surface structure* is central to the analysis of sentence meaning [10]. Chomsky demonstrated that two or more different surface structures may be generated from a single deep structure, indicating that structurally different sentences can give the same underlying meaning and thus function as syntactic synonyms. In contrast to formal approaches to grammar, the *systemic functional approach* proposed by M. A. K. Halliday and Christian M. I. M. Matthiessen explains grammar primarily as a resource for making-meaning [11]. From this point, grammar is viewed not merely as a system of formal rules but as a functional resource that enables speakers to express ideas, establish interpersonal relationships, and organize coherent texts. This approach is particularly valuable in teacher education because it emphasizes the communicative and contextual dimensions of grammar, highlighting its role in authentic language use rather than in the mechanical application of grammar rules [12]. Consequently, it provides a strong theoretical foundation for developing grammatical competence through meaningful language use, including the appropriate selection of alternative syntactic constructions in different communicative contexts. O.D. Akhmedova's dissertation "Syntactic synonymy and structural features of some subordinate constructions of the Uzbek language that express Russian prepositional clauses" analyzed how Russian subordinate clauses are rendered in Uzbek through different syntactic constructions and shows that synonyms are formed in different structural models [13]. Her research focuses on the analysis of syntactic variants and cases of agreement that arise in the process of translating subordinate sentences from Russian into Uzbek. The works of O.D. Akhmedova provide

an opportunity to consider the issue of equivalence in translation, linguistics, and the language corpus on a practical basis [14].

A. P. Chulanova introduced the concept of dynamic synonymy, emphasizing that the interchangeability of sentences and discourse units should be evaluated within their communicative context rather than in isolation. According to Chulanova, syntactic synonymy is not a fixed structural phenomenon, but a dynamic one, in which alternative syntactic forms may change depending on the development of discourse and communicative intentions [15]. This approach helps to understand syntactic synonymy not as a static model, but as a variability that arises according to functional necessity in the context. In particular, it creates a scientific basis for evaluating syntactic synonymy within the framework of speech strategy by analyzing the variability between complex sentences and poly-semantic units. These studies serve as a practical basis for the comparative analysis of constructions not only in Russian syntax but also in other languages. Especially in the process of translation, synonymy at the syntactic level will be seen as a necessary equivalence strategy. Syntactic synonymy is defined as the ability to express identical or closely related semantic content through alternative grammatical constructions. This phenomenon enhances the communicative potential of language by providing speakers with multiple syntactic options for conveying the same meaning, allowing them to adapt their linguistic choices to specific communicative contexts, pragmatic goals, and stylistic requirements.

Randolph Quirk, in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, defines syntactic synonymy as follows: "Different syntactic constructions may express the same propositional meaning, although they differ in structure and discourse function." This definition highlights that syntactic synonymy is not merely a matter of formal variation but also reflects functional differences in language use. Consequently, the ability to recognize and appropriately employ alternative syntactic constructions constitutes an important component of learners' grammatical and communicative competence. According to Quirk, syntactic synonymy is fundamentally based on semantic equivalence. Although sentence structures may differ grammatically, they may express the same propositional meaning. This phenomenon is particularly widespread in English, reflecting the flexibility and expressive potential of the language system. By selecting alternative syntactic constructions, speakers can highlight different components of a sentence, thereby influencing information focus, communicative emphasis, and pragmatic interpretation.

Philologist D. Birber describes the communicative nature of grammatical competence as follows: "Exposure to alternative syntactic structures enhances learners' grammatical flexibility and communicative competence." This idea justifies the methodological basis of the research, teaching students to use different syntactic constructions develops their grammatical flexibility.

## 2. Materials and Method

This study uses a qualitative and comparative methods, which involves analyzing the most significant theoretical and empirical sources on the topic under study. The review includes an analysis of classical and contemporary publications, providing a complete overview of the topic. Relevant publications and study works were analyzed using comparative, descriptive, and thematic content analysis to identify key theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and current research trends. The findings of the review served as the basis for identifying pedagogical potential of syntactic synonymy as a way of developing students' grammatical competence in foreign language teaching.

## 3. Result

In Uzbekistan in specialties "English language and literature" the course practical grammar is taught based on a contextual approach. This article proves that the course Practical grammar should include a specific range of topics and activities that will help develop linguistic flexibility, speech variability, and thereby enhance students' grammatical competence. The experiment was carried out on first-year students of higher

educational institutions such as Nukus State Pedagogical Institute, Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, Urgench State University and National Pedagogical University named after Nizomiy with the specialty "English Language and Literature" throughout the semester in each of the four universities. For this course, a manual titled "Syntactic Synonymy in Use" was also prepared and published by the requirements of the academic discipline "Practice of language aspects". In this article one of the sections from this manual is presented to show examples of educational material and explain the effectiveness of these exercises for forming students' grammatical competence based on syntactic synonymy.

#### Lesson 4. Modal verbs

Modal verbs are very common in both spoken and written English, but there are also many alternative ways to express similar meanings. These include expressions such as **be able to**, **have to**, **have got to**, **be to**, **be supposed to**, **be going to**, and **used to**, as well as adverbs like **probably** and **maybe**, among others. Some of these substitutes are especially frequent—for example, **have to** is often used instead of **must** to express strong necessity, **probably** instead of **must** to show strong probability, and **maybe** instead of **may**, **might**, or **could** to express possibility.

#### Modal verbs and their equivalents in speech

The modal verb *must*, the equivalents *to have (to)*, *to be obliged (to)*, *to be (to)*, as well as the multifunctional verb *will* express a strong form of possession. *Must* is a personal imperative verb and expresses the speaker's personal desire or even demand. This modal verb needs to be used very carefully. Ex: I must get my hair cut.

In addition, *must* is used in official and written speech, often in impersonal sentences.

*To have (to)* expresses obligation based on any rules or laws, authority of another person, or circumstances. Ex: Children have to go to school until they are sixteen.

*To be obliged (to)* is also an equivalent of the modal verb of possession, but it is used much less frequently than *to have (to)*. The difference is that *to be obliged (to)* is somewhat more formal and expresses an obligation related to social, legal, and moral aspects.

The equivalent *to be (to)* expresses obligation due to any agreement, according to a plan or schedule. Ex: The train is to arrive. Why is it still at the station?

*Should and ought (to)* express weak obligation or advice. Both modal verbs express what the speaker believes to be true.

Ex: You're always asking me for money. I think you should spend less.

You should be more careful with your money.

Activating students' practice.

**Activity 1.** Replace the sentences with modal verbs. Add any other words you need.

1. Bruce \_\_\_\_\_ (*is able to*) finish most crosswords in under ten minutes.
2. Chris hadn't gone to the Enrique Iglesias's concert because he \_\_\_\_\_ (*wasn't able to*) get tickets in advance.
3. I \_\_\_\_\_ (*had the opportunity to go*) to Oxford but I decided to go to a more modern university.
4. You \_\_\_\_\_ (*were wrong to tell*) Angela. You know she can't keep a secret!
5. If you have a cashpoint card, you \_\_\_\_\_ (*are not forced to*) go into the bank to withdraw from your account.
6. We \_\_\_\_\_ (*were made to*) apologize to the administration for being rude of our schoolboys.
7. I \_\_\_\_\_ (personal obligation) forget to phone Julie tonight!
8. \_\_\_\_\_ (*Were you obliged to*) talk about two pictures during the interview?
9. Children \_\_\_\_\_ (*are not allowed to*) be left outside.
10. The weather \_\_\_\_\_ (*will probably*) be very nice tomorrow.

**Activity 2.** Rewrite the following sentences using a modal.

1. It's essential that we leave on time tomorrow morning.
2. It's not a good idea for you to work so hard.
3. It's possible that he that they will be here soon.
4. It's not necessary for you to apologize.
5. Am I allowed to smoke in here?

6. He knew how to speak four languages by the time he was twelve.
7. I want to help you but I'm not able to.
8. I think it's a good idea for me to stay in tonight: I've got a lot of work to do.
9. Do not tell him any of this: it's vital that it remains a secret.
10. I intend to finish this essay before I go to bed.

Activity 3. Write what to say using can, could, may, might, shall, must, would, would you like, would you mind. There may be several possible answers.

1. Ask someone to answer the phone for you.  
Would you answer the phone for me please?
2. Invite a friend to go for a swim this morning.
3. Offer to make someone a sandwich.
4. Give someone permission to use your phone.
5. Suggest going for a picnic this afternoon.
6. Ask someone to wait here for you.
7. Request an appointment to see your bank manager, Ms Arnold.
8. Give your son permission to go out but tell him to be back before dark.
9. You are in a train. Ask another passenger if you can open the window.
10. Offer to answer the phone.

The main goal of the experimental study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a transformational and communicative exercise system based on syntactic synonymy in developing grammatical competence. In the experiments, students were divided into experimental and control groups and in the experimental group, a new methodology based on syntactic synonymy was applied, while in the control group, traditional grammatical teaching methods were kept. The experiments were conducted in three stages:

1. Diagnostic stage
2. Formative stage;
3. Control and analysis stage.

At the diagnostic stage questionnaires and interview methods were used to identify the level of students' grammatical competence. Furthermore, approaches for developing students' grammatical competence and practical assignments with relevant methodological recommendations were reviewed and discussed. This made it possible to ensure the effective organization of experimental activities and to create conditions for the practical implementation of the developed methodology. Philologist and methodologist D. Nunan writes: "Experimental research in language teaching seeks to establish causal relationships between pedagogical intervention and language development" [8]. This idea highlights the methodological significance of experimental research. That means that the main task of the experiment is to determine how the methodology used in the research influenced the students' mastery of grammar.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of the experiment confirm the effectiveness of the methodology based on syntactic synonymy. Students learn to select different syntactic variants according to the communicative situation. The results of experimental group compared to control group:

- a. Grammatical errors decreased;
- b. Syntactic diversity increases.
- c. Communicative competence is developed;
- d. reflexive grammatical skills were formed. At the same time, in students' written works:
- e. Complex syntactic constructions
- f. Pragmatic variability
- g. Stylistic coherence has improved significantly

The students of the experimental group showed high results in performing grammatical transformations.



According to the post-test results:

From overall 407 students, 197 assessed themselves as reliable in identifying syntactic synonyms;

113 have reached a very high level of confidence;

The largest number of respondents noted that syntactic synonymy develops writing, speaking skills and noted that the following competencies were particularly developed:

- a. Sentence variety;
- b. Grammatical flexibility
- c. Paraphrasing skills;
- d. Communicative fluency;
- e. Stylistic awareness. R. Huddleston, a linguist, points out the communicative significance of syntactic variants as follows: "Alternative clause structures differ primarily in the perspective from which the event is described." The experimental results clearly and practically confirmed this opinion. Students learn to select various syntactic variants according to the communicative situation.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that grammatical competence should be considered more than just the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences. It also involves the ability to select and use alternative grammatical structures according to communicative context, discourse purpose and pragmatic intention. For this reason syntactic synonymy represents an important pedagogical resource for developing students' flexibility in written and oral speech. The works of Peshkovsky, Chomsky, Quirk, Halliday and Matthiessen, Ahmedova and Chulanova provide a theoretical foundation for understanding syntactic synonymy as linguistic and functional mechanism of language use. The results of the pedagogical experimental further support the theoretical assumptions. Students who participated in experiment demonstrated noticeable improvement in recognizing, transforming, and appropriately selecting grammatical constructions in different communicative situations. Carefully designed transformation exercises, contextual tasks, paraphrasing activities, and communicative practice made students not only master grammatical forms but also apply them meaningfully in oral communication. Thus, the learning process based on syntactic synonymy provides students with comprehensive development of skills in understanding grammatical forms, transforming them into other forms, preserving content, distinguishing stylistic differences, and choosing the appropriate variant for the communicative situation.

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