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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF LINGUISTICS IN THE TEACHING OF SPEAKING SKILLS IN EFL – A CASE STUDY IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: This study investigates the perceptions of high school EFL teachers in the Republic of North Macedonia regarding the role of linguistics in teaching spoken English. Employing an educational-linguistic framework, the study focuses on elucidating teachers' beliefs concerning the nexus between linguistics and the instruction of spoken English as a foreign language. Utilizing a quantitative approach, data were gathered through a questionnaire. The findings underscore a significant connection between linguistics and the teaching of speaking skills in English as a foreign language. Notably, teachers recognize the pivotal importance of grammar and vocabulary in the teaching of speaking skills. The study discusses the implications of these findings for English language teaching.

Keywords: *spoken English; linguistics; grammar; vocabulary; teacher beliefs; English language teaching.*

1. Introduction

English has become a global language, and the demand for learning it has been growing rapidly, especially among higher education students who recognize its importance for academic and professional success. However, teaching spoken English, whether as a Second Language (ESL) or a Foreign Language (EFL), presents various challenges for educators. These challenges include learner difficulties, teaching methods, curricula, assessment practices, and the selection of appropriate teaching materials (Richards, 2001). Traditionally, grammar has played a significant role in teaching and assessing speaking skills. Still, it is now widely acknowledged that fluency is the key factor. Fluency, which refers to the ability to communicate smoothly and effectively, takes precedence over perfect grammar (Crystal, 2010). EFL instruction has evolved to encompass various linguistic aspects, including language structure, pronunciation, and the historical, social, and anthropological influences on language. Therefore, English educators should have a comprehensive understanding of applied linguistics to develop advanced teaching materials that focus on promoting fluency while also addressing grammatical aspects for a well-rounded approach (Almutairi, 2021).

Despite receiving nine years of English language education in Primary School and three years in Secondary School, students in the Republic of North Macedonia face significant challenges in developing proficient speaking skills in English. The national curriculum and Concept Note for Primary Education emphasize the adoption of Communicative Language Teaching to facilitate effective communication among English learners (Dalcheska-Taleska & Vaneva, 2022). However, some teachers still prefer traditional teaching methods like the Grammar Translation Method, even though there is a pressing need for English as a means of communication. The quality of English language education in the country is affected by various factors, including inadequate teaching resources, the absence of a coherent language policy, insufficient funding, and a shortage of qualified teachers. In the realm of EFL teaching, an ongoing debate revolves around the balance between accuracy and fluency. Some argue for prioritizing accuracy, believing that learners must first master grammatical rules and structures before focusing on fluency. Others emphasize fluency, stating that learners need to communicate effectively in real-life situations where fluency often takes precedence over grammatical accuracy. This debate underscores the need to strike a balance between accuracy and fluency for effective EFL instruction.

In North Macedonia, the overlooked skill in English education is speaking, warranting further investigation into its pedagogy. Daskalovska (2020) stresses that a primary objective of language learning is the development of communicative competence, which involves effectively using language in everyday situations. To achieve this, learners must acquire not only grammar knowledge but also a substantial vocabulary, essential for active participation in various communicative scenarios. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the impact of linguistics, particularly grammar, in the teaching of speaking skills in English as a foreign language in high schools in the Republic of North Macedonia. The study will examine teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of accuracy in teaching speaking skills in EFL. As linguistics, grammar, and speaking skills are part of the national curriculum for English language courses, this research will shed light on the relationship and importance of linguistics in teaching speaking skills in EFL. The findings of this research can provide valuable insights for English language learners, teachers, and language policymakers, offering pertinent information about the significance of linguistics in the teaching of spoken English skills.

2. The Educational Landscape in North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, the realm of high school English language education is a distinctive one, marked by several noteworthy characteristics that demand careful consideration. High school EFL teachers in this region navigate a complex intersection of factors, including the age and language proficiency levels of their students, curriculum requirements, and the broader sociocultural environment. These unique features of the educational environment are vital for grasping how high school EFL teachers perceive the role of linguistics in teaching spoken English. The North Macedonian education system follows a twelve-year cycle, with high schools incorporating English language instruction into their

curriculum. English is typically introduced as a foreign language, and students are expected to develop proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Bureau for Development of Education, National Curriculum for Secondary Education, 2023). While national guidelines and textbooks may influence the curriculum, individual teaching approaches and practices can vary among schools and teachers. High school English language teachers in North Macedonia face distinct challenges. They work with adolescents who are in a crucial phase of linguistic development, requiring specialized approaches that consider both language acquisition and cognitive and social aspects. Furthermore, the linguistic diversity within North Macedonia may influence language use and perceptions of English within the country's cultural and multilingual context (Ministry of Education and Science). Understanding the perspectives of high school EFL teachers regarding the importance of linguistics in teaching spoken English is not only relevant to the local context but also contributes to the broader field of English language education. These teachers play a pivotal role in establishing the foundation for students' language proficiency, making their insights invaluable for shaping effective teaching strategies. Investigating their views can provide insights into how linguistic concepts are integrated into language instruction at this level, potentially influencing the development of language skills and fluency. This theoretical section offers an overview of the specific context of high school EFL teachers in North Macedonia, emphasizing the unique characteristics and challenges they encounter. It underscores the importance of understanding their perspectives and highlights the relevance of their experiences to the broader field of English language education. Investigating their perceptions of the role of linguistics in teaching spoken English will shed light on the specific needs and practices within this context.

3. The Significance of Linguistics in Teaching Spoken English

In the realm of language learning, two key components stand out: accuracy and fluency. In the contemporary landscape of language education, there seems to be a prevailing emphasis among learners on mastering grammar and achieving accuracy, sometimes at the expense of fluency. In the past there was a debate on the balance between accuracy and fluency which has persisted for many years. But it is now widely considered that fluency is the most important factor. Additionally, formalist proponents argue that language acquisition primarily involves acquiring forms and rules, while advocates of an activist standpoint contend that language acquisition revolves around mastering the practical usage of a language (Scrivener, 2005).

Linguistics holds a vital place in the world of language learning for both learners and educators (Spolsky, 2019a). It encompasses understanding the structure and meaning of language, as well as the contexts in which words are used. Five key components of linguistics—syntax, morphology, phonology, pragmatics, and semantics—guide language development and skill acquisition. Modern language instruction, such as English, should emphasize the enduring relevance of linguistics (Matkasimova and Makhmudov, 2020), which aids in

clarifying language history, word origins, and contemporary usage. Integrating linguistics into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching deepens students' language comprehension and real-world application. By bridging conversational and academic language (Thao and Tai, 2017), linguistics delves into language acquisition, cognitive integration, regional variation, and effective language representation (Vitalieva, 2021), addressing challenges in diverse language contexts. Scholars suggest using Halliday's functional linguistics framework in language teacher courses (Almurashi, 2016). In essence, linguistics is indispensable for teaching and learning EFL speaking skills, empowering both educators and learners to wield language effectively.

Fundamental linguistic concepts underpin effective EFL instruction (Pulatova, 2021). These concepts include phonetics and phonology, grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. They are interconnected and essential for enhancing speaking skills. Recognizing their significance and integrating them into instruction is crucial for improving EFL learners' spoken English proficiency. These linguistic principles contribute to accurate pronunciation, grammatical correctness, word choice, and effective communication (Thornbury, 2006). The integration of linguistic knowledge is pivotal in EFL teaching, aiding teachers in explaining language elements and structures. It encompasses grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and communication strategies. A profound understanding of linguistics assists teachers in selecting appropriate materials and fostering effective communication. It enhances word choice and linguistic awareness, ensuring effective English communication (Oxford, 2001).

Debates in EFL instruction focus on issues such as the balance between accuracy and fluency, explicit grammar instruction, technology's role, and the significance of linguistic knowledge (East, 2021). While some prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, others emphasize communication strategies and exposure to authentic spoken language. Daskalovska (2018) underscores the importance of developing speaking skills in foreign language learning, aligning with communicative language teaching approaches prevalent since the 1970s. Despite past efforts, previous methods often fell short of producing fluent speakers in the target language. Kocova (2021) highlights the direct impact of EFL teachers' methods on students' learning outcomes. Effective teaching styles depend on individual student behaviors, personalities, and teachers' implementation skills. Setting language production goals involves a dual objective: fostering correct language use and encouraging fluency with complexity. Language-learning tasks, categorized into Communicative Proficiency, Linguistic Analysis, and Language Production, play a role in achieving these goals (East, 2021).

In conclusion, linguistics plays a significant role in teaching spoken English as a foreign language, aiding educators in clarifying language structures and fostering effective communication. Integrating linguistic knowledge is essential for language acquisition and effective language usage. Understanding these linguistic concepts empowers both teachers and students, leading to linguistic competence and improved communication skills.

The present study aims to investigate the following research questions:

1. To what extent do English language high school teachers in the Republic of North Macedonia perceive the importance of linguistics in the teaching of spoken English?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between linguistics and the teaching of English language in high schools in the Republic of North Macedonia, as perceived by English language teachers?

4. Research design and methodology

In this study, we embarked on an educational-linguistic journey to delve into the insights of high school English teachers in the Republic of North Macedonia. Our focus was clear: understanding how these educators perceive the role of linguistics in teaching spoken English. Our participants were handpicked from public secondary education institutions in Skopje, Kumanovo, and Tetovo. A hundred English language teachers, with 90 holding bachelor's degrees and 10 with master's degrees, were asked to complete our questionnaire. They hailed from diverse age groups, spanning from 25 to 55, with the majority (60%) falling between 25 and 45. Notably, 65% of our participants were female, and most had accumulated 5 to 10 years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language.

To collect the valuable data we sought, we crafted a custom-designed questionnaire, with careful attention to detail. This questionnaire was no ordinary set of questions; it was a carefully structured tool with 18 thought-provoking queries thoughtfully divided into two sections, each serving a distinct purpose. Our aim was to ensure data validity and reliability, making every response matter. We employed a Likert-type scale, allowing our teachers to express their thoughts and beliefs effectively. This scale ranged from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree,” ensuring a nuanced reflection of their perceptions.

Before the questionnaire took its place in our study, it underwent a rigorous pilot phase. A small group of experts in language education and linguistics lent their invaluable insights, helping us refine and improve the questionnaire's clarity, coherence, and the effectiveness of the scale. The wording of our questions was not just casual language. It was rooted in relevant literature, drawing from scholarly articles, linguistics textbooks, and prior studies exploring the connection between linguistics and language education. This foundation was vital in ensuring our study's alignment with established concepts and theories. Our questionnaire wasn't just a set of random questions; it was put to the test for both validity and reliability. Experts in the field meticulously reviewed it to ensure it effectively measured the constructs we were exploring. We employed statistical methods to gauge its reliability through internal consistency analysis. English language was used as the language for our questionnaire. It was a practical and relevant choice for several reasons. English is the primary language of instruction in EFL contexts, exactly where our study aimed to assess teachers' perceptions. Additionally, proficiency in English is often expected among teachers in EFL settings, including North Macedonia. Our questionnaire, designed with precision, piloted for clarity, and rigorously validated, emerged as a reliable and valid instrument for our study. It was well-prepared to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the role of linguistics

in teaching spoken English in the context of the Republic of North Macedonia. In sum, our research utilized a robust methodology and apt data analysis techniques to investigate the perceptions of high school English teachers in North Macedonia on the role of linguistics in teaching spoken English.

5. Findings and discussion

Table 1. *The impact of linguistics in teaching spoken English*

Questions	Yes	No
1. Does linguistics have the potential to eliminate all the challenges associated with teaching English-speaking skills?	65	35
2. Can appropriate teaching methods be used with linguistics for the purpose of mastering speaking skills?	70	30
3. Can linguistics assist in creating effective and innovative teaching resources that allow students to experiment with new forms and methods of presentation?	55	45
4. Can linguistics help with grammatical explanations and teaching vocabulary and formulaic language to students?	79	21

Table 1 presents the responses of participating teachers to a series of questions related to the role and potential of linguistics in teaching spoken English. The table reflects teachers’ views on these issues, rather than a demonstration of causal relationships or direct impacts. The purpose of this survey was to gauge teachers’ perspectives and beliefs, shedding light on the extent to which they perceive linguistics as valuable in the context of teaching spoken English. The questions sought to assess their views on the potential of linguistics to address specific teaching challenges and enhance various aspects of language instruction. In response to the first question, which asked whether linguistics could eliminate all challenges associated with teaching English-speaking skills, 65% of participants responded affirmatively (“Yes”), while 35% expressed skepticism (“No”). This indicates that a majority of participants believe that linguistics can potentially contribute to addressing these teaching challenges.

The second question inquired about the use of appropriate teaching methods in conjunction with linguistics to master speaking skills. Here, 70% of participants answered positively (“Yes”), while 30% held reservations (“No”). This suggests a prevailing belief among participants that the integration of linguistics with suitable teaching methods can enhance students’ speaking skills.

The third question sought to understand whether linguistics has the capacity to create innovative teaching resources, allowing students to experiment with new forms and methods of presentation. In this case, 55% of participants responded positively (“Yes”), while 45% indicated doubt (“No”). While a majority acknowledge the potential of linguistics in resource development, there is noticeable skepticism regarding its innovativeness.

The fourth question focused on linguistics’ role in providing grammatical explanations and teaching vocabulary and formulaic language to students. Here, 79% of participants responded affirmatively (“Yes”), while 21% held a contrasting

view (“No”). This result indicates a consensus among the participants regarding the value of linguistics in the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and formulaic language.

In summary, it's important to underscore that Table 1 reflects the views and beliefs of participating teachers on the potential and significance of linguistics in teaching spoken English. While these results provide insights into their perspectives, they do not demonstrate causal relationships or direct impacts of linguistics on teaching. The survey serves as a valuable tool for understanding how educators perceive the role of linguistics in their teaching practices and their expectations regarding its influence on English language instruction.

Table 2. *The importance of linguistics in teaching speaking skills in English*

Questions	Yes	No
5. Is linguistics significant in comprehending the differences between conversational and academic language?	65	35
6. Should teaching speaking be grounded in an adequate theory, “the cognitive approach,” to develop its skills adequately?	73	27
7. Is understanding linguistics the primary step in teaching learners to speak the English language fluently and accurately?	42	58
8. Should teachers be aware of the speaking skills necessary for students at each stage so that they can develop and evaluate these skills properly?	80	20
9. Does linguistics assist in providing students with a more complete understanding of the morpho-syntax system of the English language?	75	25
10. Do linguistics-trained and specialized teachers assist learners in mastering the speaking skills of English?	60	40
11. Should EFL teachers focus equally on the different speaking sub-skills, including conversation management, discourse organization, pragmatic competence, and fluency, beside their usual focus on grammar and vocabulary?	90	10
12. Should speaking skills be practiced regardless of learners making errors and mistakes?	5	95
13. Is it more important to communicate the message than to make it grammatically impeccable?	60	40
14. Are teachers recommended to adopt task-based instruction in teaching speaking to their students?	70	/
15. Should supportive feedback be offered throughout the task cycle to help students identify their weaknesses in speaking and ways of overcoming them and to encourage their strengths, thus increasing their motivation and involvement in speaking?	80	20

Table 2 presents the responses to a series of questions related to the importance of linguistics in teaching speaking skills in English. Regarding the understanding of the differences between conversational and academic language, 65% of respondents consider linguistics significant. In the context of the cognitive approach as a foundation for developing speaking skills, 73% of respondents agree. In terms of understanding linguistics as the primary step in teaching fluent and accurate English speaking, only 42% of respondents share this view.

Regarding the awareness of necessary speaking skills at each stage of development, 80% of respondents believe this is essential. To gain a more complete understanding of the English language's morpho-syntax system, 75% of respondents consider linguistics valuable. Regarding the role of linguistics-trained teachers in students' mastery of English-speaking skills, 60% of respondents expressed agreement.

Regarding the emphasis on different speaking sub-skills such as conversation management, discourse organization, pragmatic competence, and fluency alongside grammar and vocabulary, a significant majority of 90% of respondents advocate for this approach. On the question of practicing speaking skills despite making errors and mistakes, only 5% of respondents agree, while 95% disagree.

Regarding prioritizing communication over grammatical impeccability, 60% of respondents support this perspective. Concerning the adoption of task-based instruction in teaching speaking, 70% of respondents are in favor. Finally, in the context of offering supportive feedback throughout the task cycle to improve students' speaking skills, 80% of respondents support this approach.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the perceptions of English language teachers regarding the role of linguistics in teaching spoken English. The majority of participants expressed a belief in the potential of linguistics to enhance the teaching of spoken English, particularly in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and formulaic language. This alignment with prior research, as highlighted by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), underscores the enduring significance of linguistic principles in language teaching. The agreement among participants on the value of linguistics in teaching grammar and vocabulary aligns with established theories emphasizing the importance of these linguistic components in effective language communication. However, it is essential to note that there was less consensus on linguistics' capacity to create innovative teaching resources and eliminate the multifaceted challenges associated with teaching English-speaking skills. These findings offer a nuanced perspective on the role of linguistics in EFL teaching. It is noteworthy that while participants acknowledged the value of linguistics in certain aspects of teaching spoken English, such as grammar and vocabulary instruction, there was a degree of skepticism about its potential to address broader challenges comprehensively. This variance in opinion may be attributed to the multifaceted nature of teaching spoken language, which extends beyond linguistic aspects to encompass diverse socio-cultural and pedagogical considerations.

The recognition of linguistics as significant in understanding the differences between conversational and academic language aligns with the theoretical framework introduced in the earlier sections of this paper. The connection to linguistic theory is evident, as these findings substantiate the importance of linguistics in navigating language variations across different contexts. The emphasis on providing a more complete understanding of English grammar through linguistics also resonates with the theoretical foundation, reinforcing the role of linguistics in deepening language comprehension. Furthermore, the

prioritization of communication over grammatical accuracy by the majority of participants reflects the contemporary pedagogical shift towards communicative language teaching. This aligns with recent language teaching methodologies, which underscore the importance of real-life communication and meaningful interactions in language instruction.

In comparing these findings with other research studies, it becomes evident that the debate around the role of linguistics in EFL teaching is a dynamic and evolving discourse. While some studies emphasize the significance of linguistic elements in language instruction, others highlight the need for a more holistic approach that encompasses not only linguistics but also socio-cultural and communicative aspects. The variability in these perspectives underscores the complex nature of EFL teaching and the importance of considering diverse factors in language pedagogy.

In conclusion, the findings from this study contribute to the ongoing dialogue regarding the role of linguistics in teaching spoken English. The results highlight the value of linguistics in certain aspects of language instruction, particularly in grammar and vocabulary teaching. However, they also underscore the multifaceted nature of teaching spoken language, with challenges that extend beyond the scope of linguistics. This complexity calls for a comprehensive approach to EFL teaching that integrates linguistic knowledge with broader pedagogical and socio-cultural considerations.

7. Conclusion

In summary, the results of the survey strongly support the pivotal role of linguistics in enhancing the teaching of spoken English. The majority of participants place significant importance on understanding linguistics in the context of teaching speaking skills, with a particular focus on grammar, vocabulary, and formulaic language. Moreover, respondents underscore the value of having linguistics-trained teachers and adopting a comprehensive approach to teaching speaking skills, encompassing conversation management, discourse organization, pragmatic competence, and fluency. These findings emphasize the need to prioritize effective communication over grammatical accuracy in teaching practices and to employ supportive feedback and task-based instruction for improving students' speaking skills.

8. Recommendations

Drawing from these compelling findings, it is strongly recommended that language educators take active steps to incorporate linguistics into their teaching practice and training programs, thereby enriching their understanding of language structure and usage. Additionally, teacher training programs should be thoughtfully designed to equip educators with the knowledge and skills necessary for embracing a holistic approach to teaching speaking skills. This comprehensive approach should span conversation management, discourse organization, pragmatic competence, and fluency, reflecting the multifaceted nature of spoken language. The research also underscores the importance of educators prioritizing

effective communication over an excessive focus on grammatical precision in their teaching. This recommendation encourages a shift toward pedagogical practices that motivate students to engage in meaningful conversations, even if it means making grammatical errors. Furthermore, educators should proactively provide supportive feedback throughout the speaking practice process, offering students the guidance they need to enhance their speaking abilities continually.

9. Implications

The implications of this research are far-reaching in the realm of language teaching and learning. It underscores the significance of integrating linguistics into the teaching practice of educators, allowing them to deepen their understanding of language and its grammatical intricacies. The study highlights the importance of embracing a comprehensive approach to teaching speaking skills, addressing conversation management, discourse organization, pragmatic competence, and fluency as integral components. The argument here becomes even more apparent when considering the dilemma of whether learners should focus on grammar when developing their speaking skills. As the study suggests, students may be more motivated to communicate effectively if they are not overly concerned with making grammatical errors. This is where linguistics plays a crucial role in striking a balance. Linguistics provides educators with a deeper understanding of grammatical structures and language rules, allowing them to navigate the fine line between fostering effective communication and addressing grammatical correctness. By incorporating linguistics, teachers can guide learners toward accurate and meaningful communication without overburdening them with grammatical concerns.

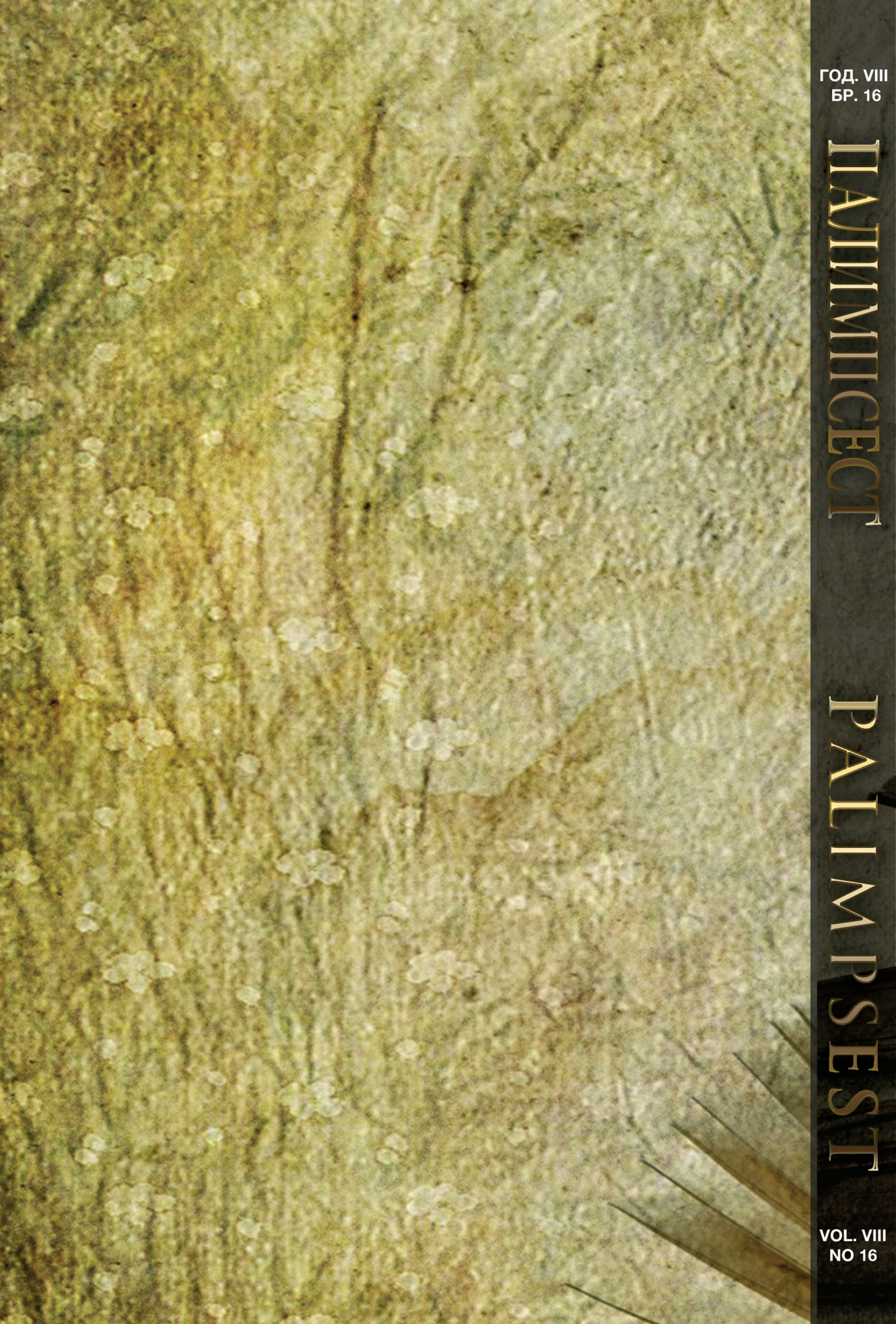
The emphasis on prioritizing communication over grammatical accuracy has notable implications for language learners. It nurtures a more conducive environment for effective communication, where students feel encouraged to engage in conversations and freely express themselves without being overly apprehensive about making occasional grammatical errors. This shift aligns with the overarching theme of the study, where the importance of linguistics in teaching speaking skills is deeply intertwined with enabling effective and confident communication.

Ultimately, these findings hold relevance for language educators, learners, and researchers, all of whom share the common goal of advancing the field of language teaching and learning by embracing a holistic perspective that harmonizes linguistics, effective communication, and language proficiency.

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