ISSN: 1812-0512 (Print) 2790-346X (online)

Waist Journal for Human Sciences

Journal Homepage: https://wjfh.uowasit.edu.iq/index.php/wjfh/en

Research article

Identifying the Phonological, Semantic, and Syntactic Proficiencies of EFL Students at Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University

Res. Aya Hussien Ahmed[1], Prof. Dr. Shaima Mahdi Saalh [2]

Department of English Language, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, Iraq[1-2]

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: *Linguistic Proficiency, Phonological Proficiency, Semantic Proficiency*

***Correspondence author*:**

ayah2545@gmail.com

shaimaa.mehdi@coeduw.uobaghdad.edu.iq

Received: **24 June** 2026

Revised: 18 **July** 2026

Accepted: 19 **July** 2026

Published: 01 **November** 2026

1812-0512 /© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Wasit Journal for Humanities Sciences, Wasit University. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

***Cite*:**

Ahmed, A. H., & Saalh, S. M. (2026). Identifying the Phonological, Semantic, and Syntactic Proficiencies of EFL Students at Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University. Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, 22(4/Pt1). https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss4/Pt1.2139

ABSTRACT

This study identifies the level of linguistic proficiency among second-year EFL students at the University of Imam AlKadhim in three main areas: phonology, semantics, and syntax. The study adopted a quantitative descriptive design. A linguistic proficiency test was developed by the researcher and administered to a sample of 55 students. The test measured students' performance in phonological discrimination and production, semantic knowledge and relations, and syntactic accuracy and structure. The results revealed that students' phonological proficiency was significantly below the expected level, indicating weaknesses in sound discrimination and pronunciation. In contrast, students demonstrated a moderate level of semantic proficiency, showing relatively better performance in vocabulary knowledge and meaning relations. Syntactic proficiency was also found to be below the expected level, reflecting difficulties in sentence structure and grammatical accuracy. The findings indicate that EFL learners exhibit uneven linguistic proficiency, with relative strength in semantics and noticeable weaknesses in phonology and syntax.

تحديد الكفاءات الصوتية والدلالية والنحوية لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة الإمام الكاظم

الباحثة ايه حسين احمد[1]، أ. د. شيماء مهدي صالح [2]
قسم اللغة الانكليزية، جامعة بغداد، كلية التربية للبنات، العراق[1-2]

المُستخلص

تُحدد هذه الدراسة مستوى الكفاءة اللغوية لدى طلاب السنة الثانية في برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بجامعة الإمام الكاظم في ثلاثة مجالات رئيسية: علم الأصوات، وعلم الدلالة، وعلم النحو. اعتمدت الدراسة منهجًا وصفيًا كميًا. وقد طوّر الباحث اختبارًا للكفاءة اللغوية، وطُبّق على عينة من 55 طالبًا. قاس الاختبار أداء الطلاب في التمييز الصوتي وإنتاج الأصوات، والمعرفة الدلالية وعلاقاتها، ودقة النحو وبنيته. وكشفت النتائج أن كفاءة الطلاب في علم الأصوات كانت أقل بكثير من المستوى المتوقع، مما يشير إلى ضعف في التمييز الصوتي والنطق. في المقابل، أظهر الطلاب مستوى متوسطًا من الكفاءة الدلالية، مع أداء أفضل نسبيًا في معرفة المفردات وعلاقات المعنى. كما وُجد أن الكفاءة النحوية أقل من المستوى المتوقع، مما يعكس صعوبات في بنية الجملة ودقتها النحوية. تشير النتائج إلى أن متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يُظهرون كفاءة لغوية متفاوتة، مع قوة نسبية في علم الدلالة وضعف ملحوظ في علم الأصوات وعلم النحو.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكفاءة اللغوية، الكفاءة الصوتية، الكفاءة الدلالية، الكفاءة النحوية،

Introduction

English has become a global medium of communication, academic study, and scientific exchange, making the development of linguistic proficiency a central goal in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. In recent years, research has increasingly emphasized that language proficiency is not limited to grammatical knowledge or vocabulary recall, but involves the integrated ability to use language accurately and meaningfully across different communicative contexts (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980).

Linguistic competence, originally introduced by Chomsky (1965), refers to the internalized knowledge of language structure, including phonology, syntax, and semantics. Contemporary research, however, views linguistic competence as an interconnected system in which phonological, semantic, and syntactic components jointly contribute to meaning construction and language performance (Celce-Murcia, 2008; Boleda, 2019). Phonological proficiency refers to learners' ability to perceive and produce speech sounds accurately, including stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns that support intelligible communication. Studies show that phonological difficulties in EFL learners often stem from first language interference and limited exposure to authentic input, which affects pronunciation accuracy and fluency (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2014; Roach, 2009).

Semantic proficiency involves understanding word meanings, lexical relations, and contextual usage of vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge is considered a core component of language proficiency and strongly influences learners' performance in reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Nation, 2013; Yule, 2020). Semantic difficulties often appear when learners fail to distinguish between word meanings or use vocabulary appropriately in context.

Syntactic proficiency refers to the ability to construct grammatically correct and meaningful sentences based on appropriate word order and structural rules. Research indicates that syntactic development is essential for academic writing and language accuracy, while many EFL learners tend to rely on simple sentence structures due to limited grammatical competence (Radford, 2004; Downing & Locke, 2006; Fromkin et al., 2018). Despite continuous efforts in English language teaching, EFL learners still experience uneven development across phonological, semantic, and syntactic domains. This suggests that language instruction may not sufficiently support integrated linguistic development as proposed in communicative approaches to language teaching (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2008).

Recent research highlights the effectiveness of pronunciation-focused instructional techniques in improving learners' intelligibility. For instance, shadowing has been shown to significantly enhance Iraqi EFL learners' speech intelligibility by improving their ability to perceive and reproduce rhythm, stress, and pronunciation patterns in connected speech (Noori & Saalh, 2025). This suggests that integrating structured auditory and repetition-based techniques can contribute to developing learners' overall linguistic performance, particularly in pronunciation and oral communication skills.

In EFL contexts, English is mainly taught in formal classroom settings where emphasis is often placed on grammatical knowledge and examination performance. Research in applied linguistics indicates that learners often face persistent difficulties in pronunciation, vocabulary use, and sentence construction, which negatively affect their overall communicative competence (Nation, 2013; Roach, 2009; Radford, 2004).

Although previous studies have investigated different aspects of linguistic competence, most have focused on a single linguistic domain or examined the effects of specific instructional approaches on language learning outcomes. Few studies have attempted to identify phonological, semantic, and syntactic proficiencies collectively within a single assessment framework, particularly in the Iraqi EFL context. Moreover, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no previous study has examined these three linguistic domains simultaneously among second-year EFL students at Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive linguistic profile of these learners.

Therefore, it is necessary to systematically identify the phonological, semantic, and syntactic proficiencies of EFL students. Such an investigation provides a detailed linguistic profile of learners, helping to determine their strengths and weaknesses in each domain. The findings are expected to contribute to improving English language teaching practices and enhancing curriculum effectiveness in higher education contexts.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) continue to experience persistent difficulties in mastering the core components of linguistic competence despite long years of instruction. These difficulties are mainly observed in the areas of phonology, semantics, and syntax, which represent essential dimensions of language proficiency. Previous research indicates that learners often demonstrate uneven development across these domains, resulting in gaps in their overall linguistic performance (Nation, 2013; Fromkin et al., 2018).

In the phonological domain, EFL learners frequently face challenges in producing accurate English sounds, stress patterns, and intonation, which negatively affects their oral communication and intelligibility. Such difficulties are often associated with insufficient awareness of pronunciation rules and limited exposure to native-like input (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2014; Roach, 2009).

In the semantic domain, many EFL students encounter problems in understanding word meanings, selecting appropriate lexical items, and recognizing relationships between words in different contexts. These limitations reduce their ability to comprehend texts and express ideas accurately. Vocabulary knowledge is a central component of language learning and plays a crucial role in all language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Nation, 2013; Yule, 2020).

Regarding syntax, learners often struggle with constructing grammatically correct and meaningful sentences. This may lead to overuse of simple structures and frequent grammatical errors, which weaken the clarity and accuracy of communication. The development of syntactic competence is essential for effective language production and is strongly connected to overall language proficiency (Radford, 2004; Downing & Locke, 2006).

Although previous studies have provided valuable insights into different aspects of EFL learners' linguistic competence, they have mainly examined isolated components such as vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation separately. There is still a lack of comprehensive studies that investigate phonological, semantic, and syntactic proficiencies together among Iraqi university EFL students. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive assessment that identifies learners' strengths and weaknesses across these three linguistic domains.

Based on the above, the problem of the present study lies in the need to systematically identify and assess the phonological, semantic, and syntactic proficiencies of EFL students at Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University. Such an investigation is necessary to provide a clear linguistic profile of learners and to determine their strengths and weaknesses across these three fundamental domains. The findings are expected to contribute to improving English language teaching practices and enhancing students' overall linguistic competence.

1.2 Aims of the Study

The present study aims to:

-Identify the level of phonological proficiency among EFL students at Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University.

-Identify the level of semantic proficiency among EFL students at Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University.

-Identify the level of syntactic proficiency among EFL students at Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University.

1.3 Limits of the Study

The present study is limited to:

EFL students at the Department of English, Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University.

Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University, Iraq.

The study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2026–2027.

The study is confined to three linguistic domains: phonological proficiency, semantic proficiency, and syntactic proficiency.

A linguistic proficiency test designed by the researcher to assess the three targeted domains.

1.4 Definition of Basic Terms

1.4.1 Linguistic Proficiency

Linguistic proficiency refers to an individual's overall ability to understand and use the linguistic system of a language accurately and appropriately across its different components, including phonology, semantics, and syntax, in order to communicate effectively (Canale & Swain, 1980).

1.4.2 Phonological Proficiency

Phonological proficiency refers to the ability to recognize, distinguish, and accurately produce the sound system of a language, including phonemes, stress, rhythm, and intonation, to convey meaning effectively (Fromkin et al., 2018).

1.4.3 Semantic Proficiency

Semantic proficiency refers to the ability to understand and interpret the meanings of words, phrases, and sentences, as well as the relationships among meanings within different linguistic contexts (Yule, 2020).

1.4.4 Syntactic Proficiency

Syntactic proficiency refers to the ability to arrange words into grammatically correct sentences and apply the rules governing sentence structure in a language (Fromkin et al., 2018).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Phonological Proficiency

Phonological proficiency refers to learners' ability to perceive and produce the sound system of a language accurately, including the organization and function of speech sounds in communication (Fromkin et al., 2018). It focuses on how sounds are mentally represented and used to distinguish meaning rather than their physical production alone. A key aspect of phonological proficiency is vowel recognition, which involves distinguishing between similar vowel sounds that may change word meaning, such as /ɪ/ and /iː/. Features such as vowel length, tongue position, and lip rounding contribute to accurate pronunciation (Odden, 2013; Ladefoged & Johnson, 2014). Minimal pairs are also an essential component, as they involve word pairs that differ by only one sound and result in a change in meaning, such as "pat" and "bat." These help learners develop phonemic awareness and improve pronunciation accuracy (O'Grady & Archibald, 2010). Another important element is syllable structure and stress patterns. English syllables consist of onset, nucleus, and coda, and stress placement can change both meaning and grammatical function, as in "record" (noun) versus "record" (verb) (Fromkin et al., 2018). Phonological proficiency also includes connected speech processes such as assimilation, elision, and linking, which affect fluent spoken communication and listening comprehension (Roach, 2009; Yule, 2020). Research published in *Wasit Journal for Human Sciences* emphasizes that phonological variation plays a significant role in speech intelligibility, as differences in pronunciation patterns and sound realization can influence how clearly speech is understood by listeners (Al-Hamashi & Al-Attabi, 2026).

2.2 Semantic Proficiency

Semantic proficiency refers to learners' ability to understand and use meaning in language, including word, phrase, and sentence interpretation in different contexts (Crystal, 2008). It is essential for vocabulary development and comprehension in all language skills. A fundamental distinction in semantics is between sense and reference. Reference connects words to real-world entities, while sense relates to conceptual meaning within the language system (Lyons, 1977). Lexical relations are a core component of semantic proficiency. Synonymy involves words with similar meanings, antonym refers to opposite meanings, polysemy involves multiple related meanings of a single word, and homonymy refers to words that share form but differ in meaning (Yule, 2020; Cruse, 2004). Semantic roles such as agent, theme, and recipient describe relationships between verbs and sentence elements and support meaning interpretation (Fillmore, 1968; Levin & Hovav, 2005). Figurative language, including metaphor, simile, and personification, also forms part of semantic proficiency as it requires learners to move beyond literal meaning and interpret deeper conceptual meaning (Gibbs & Colston, 2006). Research in *Wasit Journal for Human Sciences* highlights that meaning in discourse is constructed through the interaction between lexical items and contextual factors, where semantic relations contribute to coherence and interpretation of texts (Jaber, 2024).

2.3 Syntactic Proficiency

Syntactic proficiency refers to learners' ability to correctly arrange words into grammatically well-formed sentences according to the rules of a language (Fromkin et al., 2018). It determines how meaning is structurally organized in communication. Sentence structure varies in complexity and includes simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences, each reflecting different levels of syntactic development (Downing & Locke, 2006). Syntactic proficiency also involves understanding grammatical transformations, which allow different sentence structures to express the same meaning by linking deep structure to surface structure (Radford, 2004). In addition, sentence types such as declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory forms reflect learners' ability to use language appropriately in different communicative situations (Lambrecht, 1994). Mastery of these structures indicates higher levels of syntactic proficiency in EFL learners. A study published in *Wasit Journal for Human Sciences* indicates that variations in sentence structure and clause relations significantly affect clarity and comprehension, highlighting the importance of syntactic competence in producing coherent discourse (Al-Hamashi & Al-Attabi, 2026).

2.4 Related Studies

Al-Dawood and Al-Sadi (2024) conducted a quasi-experimental study to investigate the effect of discourse analysis-based instruction on Iraqi EFL learners' reading comprehension and vocabulary development. The sample consisted of 120 university students, divided into an experimental group (60 students) and a control group (60 students). The study employed a pre-test/post-test design over one academic semester. The experimental group was taught using discourse analysis strategies, while the control group received traditional instruction. The results revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in both reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, indicating that discourse-based instruction enhances semantic competence and language understanding. Jahangard (2012) carried out an experimental study to examine the effects of grammar and vocabulary instruction on EFL learners' reading comprehension. The study involved 90 Iranian pre-university students, divided into three groups: a grammar instruction group, a vocabulary instruction group, and a control group. The research adopted a pre-test/post-test experimental design. The treatment lasted for one academic term. The findings showed that grammar instruction significantly improved syntactic processing, whereas vocabulary instruction enhanced semantic understanding. Both instructional approaches contributed positively to reading comprehension, although in different ways. Burhan (2018) conducted an experimental study to investigate the effect of lexical meaning instruction on Iraqi EFL learners' reading comprehension. The sample included 46 university students who were exposed to an instructional program focusing on lexical meaning awareness. The study employed a one-group pre-test/post-test design over an eight-week period. The results indicated that learners demonstrated significant improvement in semantic understanding and reading comprehension after the intervention. The study concluded that explicit instruction of lexical meaning plays a crucial role in enhancing semantic competence. The ERIC-based experimental study (2019) examined the effect of extensive

reading on vocabulary development and reading comprehension among EFL learners. The sample consisted of university students divided into an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group engaged in online extensive reading activities, while the control group followed traditional instruction. The study used a pre-test/post-test design to measure vocabulary size and reading comprehension. The findings revealed that the experimental group achieved significantly higher gains in vocabulary acquisition and semantic knowledge, confirming the effectiveness of extensive reading in language development.

El Garras (2024) conducted an experimental study to investigate the impact of teaching formulaic sequences on Moroccan EFL learners' syntactic and semantic development. The sample consisted of 84 university students, divided into an experimental group and a control group. The study employed a pre-test/post-test experimental design over a ten-week instructional period. The experimental group received explicit instruction in formulaic language, while the control group followed traditional teaching methods. The results showed significant improvement in learners' syntactic processing, sentence structure awareness, and vocabulary use, indicating that formulaic instruction enhances both syntactic and semantic competence. The reviewed studies indicate that previous research has mainly focused on improving individual language skills through different instructional approaches. Although these studies contributed to understanding language learning, they investigated phonological, semantic, or syntactic aspects separately. None of them attempted to provide a comprehensive linguistic profile by assessing the three domains simultaneously among Iraqi EFL university students. Therefore, the present study differs by identifying students' proficiency across phonology, semantics, and syntax within one integrated assessment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current study adopted a quantitative descriptive research design to identify EFL students' phonological, semantic, and syntactic proficiencies. Descriptive research is used to describe and analyze learners' linguistic performance without manipulating variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study aimed to determine the level of students' performance in the three linguistic domains and to explore their strengths and weaknesses based on test results. Data were collected using a Linguistic Proficiency Test, and analyzed using descriptive statistical methods.

3.2 Population and Sample of the Study

The population of the study consists of EFL students enrolled in the Department of English Language at Al-Imam Al-Kadhim University. The study sample consisted of **55 second-year students** selected randomly from the target population to ensure equal representation and reduce bias.

Second-year students were selected because they had already completed the introductory English language courses offered during their first academic year. At the same time, they were still in the process

of developing higher levels of linguistic proficiency. Therefore, they represented an appropriate population for identifying phonological, semantic, and syntactic proficiencies.

Table 3.1: *The Sample of the Study*

Sample	Number of students
Main Sample	55
Pilot Sample	40
Total	95

3.3 Research Instrument

The researcher developed a Linguistic Profile Test to collect the quantitative data. The test measures students' linguistic competence across three domains: phonology, semantics, and syntax.

The test consisted of 13 questions distributed across three sections. It included multiple-choice questions, matching exercises, sentence completion, pronunciation tasks, and short-answer questions. The total score of the test was 84 marks, distributed according to the table of specifications. The administration time ranged between 60 and 75 minutes. Test items were developed based on the relevant literature in phonology, semantics, and syntax to ensure comprehensive coverage of the targeted linguistic competencies.

The phonology section consists of five questions assessing students' oral phonological abilities, including vowel and consonant contrasts, syllable identification, word stress, phonological processes in connected speech, and pronunciation accuracy. The total score for this section is 35.

The semantics section consists of four questions measuring students' understanding of word meaning, including synonyms, antonyms, polysemy, homonymy, semantic roles, and figurative language. The total score for this section is 27.

The syntax section consists of four questions assessing students' knowledge of sentence structure, including sentence types, sentence transformation, clause functions, and word order. The total score for this section is 22. Overall, the Linguistic Profile Test provides a comprehensive assessment of students' linguistic competence in the three domains examined in the study

3.4 Validity

Validity refers to the extent to which a test measures what it is intended to measure and ensures that the interpretations of test scores are meaningful and appropriate (Bachman, 1990; Underhill, 1987).

Content validity was established by designing the Linguistic Profile Test to cover the three target domains: phonology, semantics, and syntax. A table of specifications was prepared to ensure that the test

items adequately represented the instructional objectives, language skills, cognitive levels, and score distribution across the three domains.

Face validity was established by presenting the test to a panel of seventeen specialists in Applied Linguistics, English Language Teaching, Linguistics, and Educational Psychology from the University of Baghdad, Al-Mustansiriya University, University of Babylon, University of Tikrit, University of Basrah, and Wasit University . Their comments focused on the clarity of instructions, suitability of test items, language accuracy, and content relevance. The suggested modifications were implemented before administering the final version of the test.

Construct validity was supported through a pilot study conducted on 40 second-year students from the Department of English at Al-Imam Al-Azam University. The pilot study was carried out to examine the clarity, appropriateness, and practicality of the test, as well as to determine the time required for its administration.

Table 3.2 *Table of Specifications*

Domain	Skill Measured	Total Score
Phonology	Pronunciation, vowel and consonant contrasts, syllables, stress, connected speech	35
Semantics	Lexical relations, semantic roles, figurative language	27
Syntax	Sentence types, sentence transformation, clause functions, word order	22

3.5 Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of a test in measuring what it is intended to measure under similar conditions (Cook & Beckman, 2006; Mills & Gay, 2019). The reliability of the Linguistic Profile Test was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha.

The overall reliability coefficient was 0.83, indicating high internal consistency. The subscale reliability values were 0.69 for phonology, 0.77 for semantics, and 0.69 for syntax, which are considered acceptable. According to George and Mallery (2003), Cronbach's Alpha values above .80 indicate good internal consistency, whereas values around .70 are considered acceptable for educational research. Therefore, the

obtained reliability coefficients indicate that the Linguistic Profile Test was sufficiently reliable for measuring students' linguistic proficiency.

3.6 **Hypothetical Mean**

The hypothetical mean for each section was calculated by dividing the maximum possible score by two. Accordingly, the hypothetical means were 17.5 for phonology (35÷2), 13.5 for semantics (27÷2), and 11 for syntax (22÷2). These values were adopted as reference points to determine whether students' performance was above or below the expected average level.

4 Results and Discussion

The study's statistical findings are presented in this chapter.

4.1 Results Related to the First Objective

To describe students' performance in phonological proficiency, a one-sample statistics test was conducted. Table (4.1) presents the mean score, standard deviation, and standard error mean for the phonology section.

Table 4.1 *One-Sample Descriptive Statistics for Students' Phonological Proficiency Scores*

Metrics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Phonology	55	12.6727	5.02974	0.67821

As shown in Table (4.1), the mean score of phonology was 12.67 with a standard deviation of 5.02. This indicates a relatively low level of phonological performance among the students, suggesting difficulties in pronunciation, sound discrimination, and phonological awareness. The standard deviation also shows variation among students' responses, meaning that performance was not uniform across the sample.

A one-sample t-test was conducted to compare the students' phonological performance with the test value (17.5). The results are shown in Table (4.2).

Table 4.2 *One-Sample T-Test Results Comparing Students' Phonological Performance with the Test Value*

	Test Value = 17.5					
Phonology	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
	-7.118	54	0.000	-4.82727	-6.1870	-3.4675

The results in Table (4.2) reveal that the calculated t-value (-7.118) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level (p = 0.000). This indicates that the students' phonological proficiency is significantly lower than the expected or hypothetical mean (17.5). This suggests that learners face noticeable difficulties in phonological competence, particularly in sound discrimination and pronunciation accuracy.

4.2 Results Related to the Second Objective

To determine the level of students' semantic proficiency, a one-sample descriptive analysis was conducted. The results, including the mean, standard deviation, and standard error, are presented in Table (4.3).

Table 4.3 *One-Sample Descriptive Statistics for Students' Semantic Proficiency Scores*

Metrics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Semantics	55	16.1636	6.53980	.88183

The results in Table (4.3) show the overall performance of the participants in the semantics section. To examine whether this performance differs significantly from the hypothetical mean, a one-sample t-test was conducted.

To determine whether students' semantic proficiency significantly differs from the hypothetical mean (13.5), a one-sample t-test was conducted. The results are presented in Table (4.4).

Table 4.4 *One-Sample T-Test Results Comparing Students' Semantic Performance with the Test Value*

Semantics	Test Value = 13.5					
	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
	3.021	54	.004	2.66364	.8957	4.4316

The results in Table (4.4) show that the calculated t-value (3.021) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level (p = 0.004). This indicates that students' semantic proficiency is significantly higher than the hypothetical mean (13.5). This suggests that learners demonstrate a relatively good level of semantic competence, particularly in understanding vocabulary meanings and lexical relations.

4.3 Results Related to the Third Objective

To determine the level of students' syntactic proficiency, a one-sample descriptive analysis was conducted. The results, including the mean, standard deviation, and standard error, are presented in Table (4.5).

Table 4.5 *One-Sample Descriptive Statistics for Students' Syntactic Proficiency Scores*

Metrics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Syntax	55	9.4364	5.09816	.68744

The results in Table (4.5) indicate the overall performance of the participants in the syntax section. To examine whether this performance differs significantly from the hypothetical mean, a one-sample t-test was applied.

To determine whether students' syntactic proficiency significantly differs from the hypothetical mean (11), a one-sample t-test was conducted. The results are presented in Table (4.6).

***Table** 4.6 One-Sample T-Test Results Comparing Students' Syntactic Performance with the Test Value*

	Test Value = 11					
Syntax	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
	-2.275	54	.027	-1.56364	-2.9419	-.1854

The results in Table (4.6) show that the calculated t-value (-2.275) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level (p = 0.027). This indicates that students' syntactic proficiency is significantly lower than the hypothetical mean (11). This suggests that learners have difficulties in syntactic competence, particularly in sentence structure and word order.

4.4 Discussion of the Results

The findings of the present study revealed variations in students' performance across the three linguistic domains: phonology, semantics, and syntax. Overall, the results indicate an imbalance in linguistic proficiency, where students showed relatively stronger performance in semantics compared to phonology and syntax.

The results of phonology indicated that students performed significantly below the hypothetical mean. This suggests that learners experience difficulties in sound discrimination, pronunciation accuracy, and phonological awareness. This finding is consistent with Barrera-Pardo (2004), who attributed phonological errors among EFL learners to first language interference and limited exposure to authentic input. It also aligns with Odden (2013), who emphasized the importance of vowel and consonant distinctions in developing phonological competence, as well as Fromkin et al. (2018), who highlighted that phonological development requires systematic exposure and practice. One possible explanation for this finding is that Iraqi EFL learners have limited exposure to authentic spoken English outside the classroom. Furthermore, the influence of Arabic phonological patterns may make it difficult for learners to distinguish English sounds accurately. Classroom instruction also tends to focus more on grammar and reading than on systematic pronunciation practice.

In semantics, the results showed that students performed significantly above the hypothetical mean. This indicates a relatively good level of semantic proficiency, particularly in vocabulary knowledge and lexical relations. This finding supports Nation (2013), who emphasized the central role of vocabulary knowledge in language proficiency. It is also consistent with Cruse (2004), who found that understanding lexical relations such as synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, and homonymy improves semantic competence. Furthermore, Fillmore (1968) and Levin & Rappaport Hovav (2005) confirmed that understanding semantic roles contributes to accurate meaning interpretation. The relatively better performance in

semantics may be attributed to students' continuous exposure to vocabulary through reading passages and textbook activities. Memorization of lexical items and repeated encounters with new vocabulary may also have contributed to their higher semantic performance.

Regarding syntax, the results revealed that students performed significantly below the hypothetical mean. This indicates weakness in grammatical structure, sentence formation, and word order. This finding is in line with Radford (2004), who stated that syntactic competence depends on mastery of sentence transformation rules. It also agrees with Downing and Locke (2006), who reported that EFL learners often rely on simple sentence structures due to limited syntactic development. Additionally, Fromkin et al. (2018) emphasized that syntax is a core component of linguistic competence and requires continuous practice. Another possible explanation is that English sentence structure differs considerably from Arabic. Consequently, learners tend to transfer Arabic word order into English sentences, resulting in grammatical inaccuracies. In addition, classroom activities often emphasize grammatical rules rather than communicative sentence production

Overall, the results suggest that while students demonstrate acceptable semantic competence, they still face significant challenges in phonology and syntax. This highlights the need for balanced instruction that develops all components of linguistic proficiency.

4.5Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the level of linguistic proficiency among EFL second-year students in the areas of phonology, semantics, and syntax. Based on the results obtained from the linguistic profile test and statistical analyses, it can be concluded that students demonstrate an uneven development across the three linguistic domains.

The findings revealed that students performed below the expected level in phonology, indicating noticeable difficulties in sound discrimination, pronunciation accuracy, and phonological awareness. This suggests that phonological competence remains a challenging area for EFL learners and requires greater instructional attention.In contrast, students showed relatively better performance in semantics, with results indicating a level above the hypothetical mean. This reflects a stronger ability in vocabulary knowledge and lexical relations, suggesting that semantic development is more advanced compared to other linguistic components.

However, the results also showed that students performed below the expected level in syntax, highlighting weaknesses in sentence structure, grammatical accuracy, and word order. This indicates that syntactic competence is still underdeveloped and needs further instructional support.

Overall, the study concludes that although students possess acceptable semantic proficiency, they face significant challenges in phonological and syntactic competence. This imbalance suggests the need for more integrated language teaching approaches that develop all components of linguistic proficiency in a balanced and systematic way.

4.6 Recommendations

1-English language instructors should allocate more classroom time to developing students' phonological proficiency through systematic pronunciation practice, minimal-pair activities, stress, rhythm, and connected speech exercises.

2-Greater emphasis should be placed on developing syntactic proficiency by incorporating communicative grammar activities that encourage students to produce accurate and meaningful sentence structures rather than relying solely on rule memorization.

3-Since students demonstrated relatively better semantic proficiency, vocabulary instruction should continue to be reinforced through contextualized reading activities and tasks that promote the use of lexical relations and meaning in authentic situations.

4-Curriculum designers are encouraged to provide a more balanced integration of phonological, semantic, and syntactic components within English language courses to promote comprehensive linguistic development.

5-English language teachers should employ a variety of technology-enhanced learning resources, including pronunciation software, interactive grammar platforms, and AI-assisted language learning applications, to provide learners with additional opportunities for practice beyond the classroom.

6-Continuous diagnostic assessment should be implemented to identify students' strengths and weaknesses in different linguistic domains and to provide timely instructional support.

7-Professional development programs should be organized for EFL instructors to enhance their knowledge of effective strategies for teaching phonology and syntax alongside semantic development.

4.7 Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research may consider the following directions:

Expanding the study to include larger samples from different universities. Investigating the effect of different teaching methods on phonological and syntactic development.

Exploring the relationship between linguistic proficiency and other skills such as speaking and writing.

Conducting comparative studies across different academic levels. Using qualitative approaches to explore learners' difficulties in depth.

References

Al-Hamashi, H. S. D., & Al-Attabi, H. K. (2026). *Silence and pauses in contemporary linguistic approaches*. Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, 22(1), 255–273. https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss1.1584

Alzaghir, A. M. J., Najarzadegan, S., Al-Farhan, H. K. N., & Mirsaeedi, A. (2024). *Impact of discourse analysis-based instruction on Iraqi EFL learners' vocabulary learning and reading*

comprehension ability. Journal of New Trends in English Language Learning, 4(2). https://doi.org/10.57647/jntell.2025.0402.13

Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford University Press.

Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (2010). *Language assessment in practice*. Oxford University Press.

Barrera-Pardo, D. (2004). *Phonological difficulties in EFL learners.*

Boleda, G. (2019). Distributional semantics and linguistic theory. *Annual Review of Linguistics, 5*, 213–234. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-linguistics-011718-011653

Burhan, N. H. (2018). *The effect of lexical meaning instruction on Iraqi EFL learners' reading comprehension*. University of Baghdad Journal. https://doi.org/10.36473/ujhss.v225i1.127

Campbell, D. T., & Stanley, J. C. (1968). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research*. Houghton Mifflin.

Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics, 1*(1), 1–47.

Celce-Murcia, M. (2008*). Rethinking the role of communicative competence in language teaching.*

Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. MIT Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design*. Sage.

Crystal, D. (2008). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*. Blackwell.

Cruse, D. A. (2004). *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.

Dawood, S. M., & Sultan, A. I. (2024). *The application of IRF discourse model on EFL university students in reading comprehension*. Journal of Language Studies, 8(1), 338–354. https://doi.org/10.25130/lang.8.1.15

Downing, A., & Locke, P. (2006). *English grammar: A university course* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/English-Grammar-A-University-Course-2nd-Edition/Downing-Locke/p/book/9780415286000

El Garras, M. (2024). *The effect of teaching formulaic sequences on EFL learners' syntactic and semantic development*. Canadian Journal of Language and Linguistics Studies.https://doi.org/10.53103/cjlls.v5i3.213

Jahangard, A. (2012). *The effects of grammar vs. vocabulary instruction on EFL reading comprehension*. (DOAJ article). https://doaj.org/article/a735300799444edeb31058d052e08031

Fillmore, C. J. (1968). The case for case. In *Universals in linguistic theory* (pp. 1–88).

Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2018). *An introduction to language* (11th ed.).

Cengage Learning. https://www.cengage.com/c/an-introduction-to-language-11e-fromkin/

Gibbs, R., & Colston, H. (2006). *Figurative language*. Cambridge University Press.

Ladefoged, P., & Johnson, K. (2014). *A course in phonetics* (7th ed.). Cengage Learning. https://www.cengage.com/c/a-course-in-phonetics-7e-ladefoged/.

Jaber, H. J. (2024). *Exploring semantic relations in the Quranic discourse of self: A study on textual syntax*. Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, 20(4). https://wjfh.uowasit.edu.iq/index.php/wjfh/index

Levin, B., & Rappaport Hovav, M. (2005). *Argument realization*. Cambridge University Pres

Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics (Vol. 1–2)*. Cambridge University Press

Messick, S. (1989). Validity. In *Educational measurement*.

Mills, G. E., & Gay, L. R. (2019). *Educational research*. Pearson.

Napoli, D. J. (1993). *Syntax: Theory and problems*. Oxford University Press.

Nation, I. S. P. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/learning-vocabulary-in-another-language/

Noori, M. L. Y., & Saalh, S. M. (2025). *The effect of shadowing technique on Iraqi EFL university female students' speech intelligibility*. Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, 21(4). https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol21.Iss4.1350

Odden, D. (2013). *Introducing phonology*. Cambridge University Press.

O'Grady, W., & Archibald, J. (2010). *Contemporary linguistic analysis*. Pearson.

Radford, A. (2004). *English syntax: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/english-syntax/

Roach, P. (2009). *English phonetics and phonology: A practical course* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/english-phonetics-and-phonology/

Schreiber, J., & Asner-Self, K. (2011). *Educational research*. Wiley.

Underhill, N. (1987). *Testing spoken language*. Cambridge University Press.

Yule, G. (2020). *The study of language* (7th ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/study-of-language/