ARTICLE

Analysing Students' Mastery of Reported Speech Questions in a South African University

Matodzi Nancy Lambani [ID] *, Farisani Thomas Nephawe* * [ID]

Department of English, Media Studies and Linguistics, University of Venda, P.O. Box X5050, Thohoyandou 0950, Limpopo Province, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Reported speech is a critical tool for communication in the English language. However, reporting questions can be challenging for some non-native English students at the university level. This study, conducted at a South African University, analysed students' mastery of reported speech questions. The choice of a South African University as the study location was based on [reason for choosing this location. A qualitative research method was employed to provide in-depth knowledge of the mastery of reported speech questions. The qualitative approach was chosen over the quantitative because it explores the depth and complexity of human experiences and cultural contexts overlooked by quantitative methods. The study's population comprised 26 English Language Teaching (ELT) Honours students registered in the 2023 academic year. Ten purposively selected students participated in this study since the researchers considered only the current registered students in the department. A questionnaire comprising nine reported speech questions was utilised. The study found that students were skilled at using short and simple sentences appropriately compared to compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. However, these students performed remarkably after receiving specific training on using reported speech questions. This study's implication promotes the use of reported speech questions by non-native English students to enhance competence in English. The study is beneficial to students, lecturers, and syllabus designers. Future researchers can conduct further studies about the use of reported speech questions. This study argues for the effective use of reported speech questions by ELT students in South Africa and worldwide.

1. Introduction

Reported speech question, a ubiquitous feature of the English language, is often presented as direct speech within quotation marks in a specific conversational context regarded as the trouble-telling sequence [1] or indirect speech with "the subtleties and nuances playing a significant role in conveying meaning, shaping narratives, and enriching discourse" [2]. Both forms complement the verbal process, often using wh-question words including 'what', 'when', 'who', 'where', 'why', and 'how'. When reporting someone else's words, whether verbatim or rephrased [3], the appropriateness of the context is crucial. Reporting the reported speech questions is not merely a record-keeping exercise but a powerful paraphernalia that shapes the use of English. In this situation, referring to other people's words to account for characters' sayings and thoughts is an everyday activity in conversation. Reported speech involves a relation between two communication events using a communication verb/*verba dicendi* by "mentioning the speaker to whom the narrator assigns the ownership of sayings or thoughts" [4]. In this essence, this verb codifies verbal activities by giving information and explaining the speaker's communicative intentions, such as assuring, promising, and asking. On the other hand, utilising reported speech questions appropriately is a strenuous exercise for non-native speakers of the English language in the classroom environment.

The present article sought to determine the level of mastery of reported speech questions by non-native English students who studied the English Teaching module at a South African university. English mastery by speakers whose first language is not English is associated with the intentional assimilation of rules and conventions required in teaching and learning [5, 6]. Proficient users of the English language are expected to understand the reported speech questions because they are one of the cognitive tools for learning and production [7]. Based on this insight, the reported speech question such as 'What did I hope to get from it?', "the pronoun I reflect a shift of the deictic centre to the first-person narrator's viewpoint" [8].

In the reported question in '*What did I believe to benefit from it*?', for example, the pronoun *I* represent the narrator/character. The viewpoint pecking order yields the unusual effect of having *I*, typically referring to the speaker; refer to the addressee instead. Based on this insight, this situation calls for significant comprehension of reported speech questions to avoid poor competence in the English language. Nevertheless, some users still commit errors when endeavouring to promptly communicate their explicit [9–11] ideas in a well-organised manner.

In South Africa, some students study English for academic specialists because it empowers them to communicate all the time [12] eloquently. However, using English as an official language in South Africa has some limitations in that poor competence may often result in non-native speakers [5]. Some users of English in various areas, including education, socio-economy, politics, and religion, experience difficulties in producing eloquent propositions [10]. Kendall [12] adds that teaching reported speech questions to students from multicultural backgrounds is not relatively easy. Li et al. [13] add that respondents experienced difficulties using reported speech questions regarding interviews, pre-tests, and classroom meetings.

Several investigations were conducted to master the speech questions the ELT Honours students reported at South African University. However, minimal information has been obtained. This study sought to bridge the gap by using reported speech questions. Dalimunte and Salmiah [14] investigated the use of reported speech questions and found that they experienced difficulties. Chandras [15] conducted a study using reported speech questions and found that the students could not use them appropriately. Jee et al. [16] investigated the use of reported speech questions and discovered that students make mistakes in transposition surrounding questions and place adverbials in the wrong position. Mihovilić [17] studied the use of reported speech questions and found that students experienced difficulties. Similarly, Van Cranenburgh and Van Den Berg [18] surveyed Dutch quote attribution and found that the users could not use reported speech appropriately. Additionally, information obtained from so-

cial media texts can serve as a valuable tool for evaluating the mental well-being of individuals[19].

Reported speech questions require changes in the areas, including word order, tenses backshift, and adverbs of **time** and place based on the reporting time[20]. To report speech questions indirectly, the reporter changes the subject and auxiliary[21, 22]. On the other hand, when reporting direct questions that require 'Yes/No' answers[23]. Indirect speech questions use the conjunction *if* or *whether* between initial phrases and reported questions. The reporting verbs for the polar questions 'Yes/No' are introduced by a reporting clause fronted with 'do' and its appropriate forms, such as 'does' and 'did', and their various types[24]; and the forms of the verb 'to be.' When using reported speech questions, the reporting clause is kept in statements together with the verb asked, requiring information, for example,

- *Mulalo asked: 'Do you eat peanuts?'.*
- *Mulalo asked: 'Don't you like peanuts?'.*

    The correct answers are

- *Mulalo asked me if I ate peanuts.*
- *Mulalo asked me if I did not like peanuts.*

In the answers mentioned supra, it is evident that although the auxiliary verb *does in the direct questions, the auxiliary 'do' is not included in the reported questions; the* third pronoun 'you' becomes the first pronoun 'I'. The verb 'eat' becomes 'ate'. Additionally, the question mark is completely removed to turn the question into a statement form. In this regard, the auxiliary verb can only be used where the question is in a negative form[25], as in:

- *He asked: 'Did you travel by bus this morning?'*
- *He asked me if/whether I had travelled by bus that morning.*

In this situation, the reporting question differs from the direct question because it consists of the reporting clauses: *asked me if/whether* and a pronoun where the word order becomes a statement[26]; the tense changes from simple past to past perfect tense and an alteration adverb of time *that morning* takes place when English users introduce questions beginning with the wh-words such as *who, where, why, what,* and *how,* the word that begins the question in direct speech occurs. Like 'Yes/No' questions, the wh-word questions have all the changes except the reported clause that starts

with a *wh*-word. On the other hand, when the users report the wh-word questions, the original words are repeated without any inversion[24] except the pronouns and show how the *questions* follow all the rules for appropriately utilising the reported speech questions, such as a *wh-word* and a *how* questions. Based on this insight, using the *wh-word* and a *how* accordingly is hectic for most students whose first language is not English.

2. Review of Literature

The study was underpinned by Chomsky's[27] grammatical competence theory, cited in Rahmonova and Khamidova[28]. This theory was better than others as it overtly concerns grammar rules governing combining words and phrases for structuring appropriate sentences. The notion of 'reported speech' refers to the presentation of discourse that purports to be from a prior occasion and emanates from another person. Holt[29] claims that reported speech involves "replaying the words of another speaker or the same speaker on a previous occasion in spoken or written discourse."

2.1. Exploring Reported Speech

Reported speech encompasses a broader range of linguistic phenomena, including direct quotations and paraphrased statements. Holt[29] suggest it incorporates "the content of what is being reported and how it is presented and interpreted by the reporting speaker or writer." Reported speech can take several forms, including statements, questions, commands, and exclamations, each with its conventions and grammatical structures. However, in this study, the focus was on reported speech questions where interrogative sentences are converted into indirect speech, often changing word order, verb tense, and punctuation[20] to indirectly convey inquiries, requests, or expressions of uncertainty.

2.2. Cultural and Linguistic Variations

The resolutions and norms governing indirect and reported speech may vary across cultures, languages, and communicative contexts. In English, linguistic features, including verb conjugations, pronoun usage, and sentence structures, can differ from those of the other languages[2], translating into difficulties in reported speech comprehension[1],

expression, and perception of reported speech.

2.3. Impact on Written and Oral Communication

Indirect and reported speech profoundly impacts written and oral communication, shaping how they are explored. Reported speech involves a broader range of linguistic phenomena, such as direct quotations and paraphrased statements[3]. Also, they play a significant role in communicating information, opinions, and arguments in various contexts, including business communication, legal proceedings, and political discourse[2]. In oral propositions, indirect and reported speech enables dialogue, negotiation, and persuasion because they allow addressers to transmit complex ideas, emotions, and intentions with nuance and subtlety[4]. Indirect and reported speech is effective in English language and communication, leading to expressing thoughts, feelings, and experiences with precision, nuances, and creativity.

With the mastery of the mechanics and conventions of indirect and reported speech questions, students navigate the convolutions of language more effectively, whether as writers, speakers, or listeners[6]. Through their complex functions and cultural variations, indirect and reported speech may be cumbersome to non-native speakers of English. However, they enrich narratives, foster empathy and comprehension, and fill the gaps between individuals and communities, expressing[2] and interpreting others' words.

As the findings from the previous research in this study indicate that students experience difficulties in using reported speech questions, the objectives of this study were to identify the areas of reported speech question mastery by ELT Honours students at a South African University and to evaluate their usage in communication. The study attempted to answer the following questions: 1) What are the areas of reported speech questions mastery by ELT Honours students at a South African University? 2) How can the areas of reported speech questions mastery by ELT Honours students at a South African University be described?

3. Materials and Methods

The study adopted a qualitative approach over a quantitative one because it is "crucial for exploring the depth and complexity of human experiences, capturing emotions, motivations, and cultural contexts that quantitative methods may overlook"[30]. An exploratory research design was utilised to investigate the research questions that have not previously been explored[31] in-depth. However, Vaughan[30], states that the limitations of using a qualitative approach are that 1) It's a time-consuming process, 2) The researcher cannot verify the results of qualitative research, 3) It is a labour-intensive approach, 4) It is challenging to investigate causality, and 5) Qualitative research is not statistically representative. In addition, whether the result can be a true reflection of the investigation is unknown. Hence, researchers can only get answers from the questions they ask[30] from the respondents.

The research respondents were 10 purposively selected ELT Honours students out of 23 registered in the 2023 academic year at a South African University since the researchers considered only the current registered students in the department. Although this study is limited to 10 students, the researchers hoped to obtain credible, reliable, and valid results from the actual population of their choice. Nevertheless, Voxco[32] argues that the limitations of purposive sampling over probability are that 1) It provides invalid inferential statistical procedures, 2) It is prone to researcher bias, 3) it is challenging for the representative nature of samples, 4) There is a risk of data manipulation by participants, 5) There is no way to evaluate reliability and 6) It can still produce inaccurate results. In this essence, purposive sampling has many drawbacks, although it is mainly applied in qualitative research.

3.1. The Profile of the Respondents is Shown in Table 1

Data visualisation in **Table 1** depicts 10 respondents registered in a South African University in the 2023 academic year and represented by five columns with 11 rows where 10 respondents are illustrated. The first column on the extreme left entails the number of respondents, the second shows gender (males and females), the third shows the educational background, and the fourth on the extreme right is the students' English competence status. In the gender column, there are males and five females, respectively. The respondents' ages range between 21 to 27.

Table 1. Demographic profile of selected ELT Honours students (n = 10).

Respondents	Gender	Age	Educational Background [Passed ENG Level 3 (P), Failed Level 3 (F)]		English Competence
1	Male	22		F	Poor
2	Female	22		F	Fair
3	Male	21	P		Good
4	Female	23		F	Fair
5	Female	28	P		Good
6	Female	25	P		Good
7	Female	23	P		Poor
8	Male	26	P		good
9	Male	24		F	Fair
10	Male	27	P		Good

Table 1 depicts five males and five females. On the one hand, the males were aged 21, 22, 24, 26 and 27, but on the other hand, the females had 22, 23, 23, 25, and 28 age limits. There were six passes and four failures in their ENG level three regarding educational background. The number of males who passed ENG level three was three, while two failed. The number of females who passed ENG level 3 was three, while those who could not pass within one year were 3. Regarding the students' competence in English, three males were competent, while one had a poor competence level. Two males displayed fair competence levels, while only one had a poor competence level. Concerning the competence level of the female respondents, one female had a poor level, two had a good one, and the other two had a fair one. Generally, the respondents' intelligence quotient (IQ) is nearly similar, as displayed by their competency level before the finalisation of the outcomes. Based on this interpretation, it was not easy to speculate the general outcome of their response to the use of reported speech questions.

A table involving nine direct speech questions was employed using 'Yes' or 'No', *wh-word*, and the *modals* involving reporting questions. In this sense, the questions were arranged using simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. Respondents were allocated 45 minutes to complete the task. The permission to collect data was obtained from the Research offices at the University of Venda. The researchers carefully observed informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and harm to the respondents. Regarding the data availability statement, the researchers pledged the authors' lesson analysis availability upon request since it was from the classroom environment.

Data were analysed using Delve Thematic Analysis software due to its new enhancements that manipulated the coding systems and found, grouped, refined, and organised themes to streamline code merging processes[33]. The researchers used the following steps for running thematic analysis software: precoding work, open code work, clustering of initial codes, clustering of selected codes, reviewing, revising, finalising the themes, and writing the narratives[34]. Therefore, data were analysed using thematic analysis because it can organise sort and package coned and patterns accordingly.

However, the limitations of using Delve Thematic Analysis software are that the analysis depends on its interpretative nature. The identification and analysis of themes are dependent on the researcher's perspective. In this regard, this subjectivity may lead to variations in the analysis and interpretation of the results, where various researchers might identify different themes within the same dataset. As interventionary studies involving humans require ethical approval, the present study was waived for ethical clearance. Hence, only informed consent was utilised as it might have taken too long to receive a response from the concerned parties.

4. Results

In this study, the findings based on reported speech questions were analysed using a questionnaire in **Tables 1–5** comprising three columns: sentences, themes, and errors. Data were sorted, organised, and analysed[15] regarding 'tense backshift.' Also, they were arranged in line with the 'what question', 'how-question', 'which', 'why', 'can questions', and 'adverbs of time' word orders.

4.1. Tense Backshift

The following **Table 2** illustrates a 'tense backshift' from which the students were requested to respond accordingly:

Table 2. Tense Backshift.

Sentences	Themes	Errors
Johnson: 'Why do you want to teach here?'	From present to simple past tense 'want' versus 'wanted'.	1
Johnson: 'What will you do to ensure they do not affect this position?'	From present to simple past tense, 'do not affect' against 'did not affect'.	2
Johnson: 'What are the types of subjects you intend to teach?'	From present to simple past tense 'intend' versus 'intended'.	1
Matshema: 'What qualities will you bring here?'	From present future to past future, 'will' against 'would'.	1
	From the present modal to the past modal, 'may' versus 'might'.	3
Matshema: 'Can you tell me the difficulties you have experienced since last year?'	From present perfect to past perfect tense, 'have experienced' against 'had experienced.'	1

After examining the respondents' responses to **Table 2**, the researchers gave them the following 'what-question word order' to show their skills in dealing withthis type of speech question.

4.2. What-Question Word Order

Table 3 specifically dealt with the use of the 'what-question' requiring responses from the respondents.

After looking at the respondents' responses in **Table 3**, the participants then responded to the use of the 'how-question word order'.

4.3. How-Question Word Order

Table 4 hereunder comprises two questions that address the use of the 'how-question'.

The above-illustrated table is now followed by questions that deal with two wh-questions and one modal.

4.4. Which, Why, and Can-Question Word Orders

In the **Table 5** illustrated hereunder; four questions were provided.

The provided questions were answered professionally and followed by adverbs of time dealing with word order.

4.5. Adverbs of Time Word Order

Table 6 addresses only the following three questions.

In **Table 6**, the respondents also answered the three questions appropriately.

Table 3. Use of 'what-question'.

Sentences	Themes	Errors
Johnson: 'What are your weaknesses, and what will you do?'	'What were my weaknesses' unlike 'what my weaknesses were'	6
	'What would I do' instead of 'What I would do'.	2
Matshema: 'What are your expectations?'	'What were my expectations 'versus 'What my expectations were'.	3
Cotze: 'What are your strengths?	'What was my strength' versus my strengths were.'	3
Johnson: 'What positive contributions will your studies make towards improving the performance of students?'	'What positive contributions would my studies make' against 'What positive contributions would my studies make.'	6

Table 4. Use of 'How-question'.

Sentences	Themes	Errors
Cotze: 'How will you best utilise your strengths?	'How would I' instead of 'how I would'.	6
Matshema: 'How do you envisage to alleviate these challenges?'	'How did I envisage' unlike 'how I envisaged'.	8

Table 5. Use of 'which, why, and can questions'.

Sentences	Themes Regarding Word Order	Errors
Cotze: 'Which of your accomplishments are you most proud of?'	'Which of my accomplishments I was proud of?'	0
Johnson: 'Why do you want to teach here?'	Wh-word *why* instead 'I wanted'.	0
Johnson: 'Where exactly in Limpopo would you like to work?'	'I wanted to know where…'.	0
Matshema: 'Can you describe any major difficulties faced?'	'…asked to describe' instead of 'if I could …'	0

Table 6. Adverbs of time.

Sentences	Themes	Errors
Matshema: 'How do you alleviate these challenges?'	'these' instead of 'those'.	4
Cotze: 'What are your expectations today?'	'today' instead of 'that day'.	4
Cotze: 'How will you utilise your strengths for this position?'	'this' instead of 'that'.	8

5. Discussion

Table 2 depicts five respondents who made mistakes regarding tense backshift from simple present to past simple tense. Nevertheless, some students (9) were conversant with the rules about using indirect speech questions. One respondent did not know the rule and used tenses for the question: *Why do you want to teach here*? Versus wanted. Furthermore, two respondents could not change the present tense phrase in the question in …*they do not affect this position negatively* because they were unaware of the appropriate use of reported speech questions. They wrote *do not* and disregarded *did not.* One respondent could not sequence the present tense verb *intend* in the question *with the type of subjects you intend.* Moreover, the other student could not change the present perfect tense phrase '*have experienced'* to the past perfect tense phrase *had experienced.* The skill for changing verbs from present to past tense was difficult and showed that students did not master using reported speech questions. This situation is concerning because these students have been studying English for over nine years or more at their secondary school level. This finding supports Chandras[15], who found that many respondents could not use the reported speech appropriately.

Three respondents had trouble regarding a change from the past tense modal verb *may* to *might* in the question: *What qualities will…that other candidates may not?* Although changing the modal verb 'may' to 'might' is as easy as changing 'can' to 'could', the participants in context experienced difficulty using reported speech questions. The present finding supports Ashraf et al.[24] and Farooq and Farid[21], who suggest that respondents experience difficulties using reported speech questions. Nevertheless, the irregularity of the past tense modal forms and the multiple functions of the modals could explain the challenges for foreign speakers of English. However, committing such a horrible mistake was expected of university students who claim to have developed enough competence in the use of the English language by how they smartened themselves as they communicated. Also,

the finding is congruent with Dalimunte and Salmiah's[14] suggestion that a change in the timeframe of the action poses challenges to non-native language English users.

Table 3 illustrates that twenty errors were committed regarding the word order change regarding the use of the wh-word, such as from direct to reported speech questions. In this regard, it is concerning that the university students embarrassed the researchers towards comprehending the word order change. The highest number of errors were committed when reporting a compound sentence with two wh-words like *what,* as in: *What are your weaknesses?* and *What will you do?* The same highest number of errors (six) was committed in the compound and complex sentences with polar questions and wh-word *what.* Three respondents could not use the correct word order for wh-word *what,* as in *What are your strengths? How will you utilise your strengths?* Instead of placing it at the end of the sentence, they fronted the noun expectations with the helping verb, such as were. Two respondents could not use the correct word order for the compound question: *What are your expectations?* However, they could use simple sentences appropriately in the reported speech questions. This finding supports Mihovilić[17], who suggests that reported speech statements can be challenging for non-native English speakers.

Table 4 depicts fourteen errors committed when the respondents attempted to report the *wh*-word question *How.* Six respondents committed word order errors when changing the second part of the first *wh*-word from direct to indirect speech; instead of writing the statement, they repeated the question. Eight respondents could not use the correct word order regarding wh-word *How*; when changing it into a reported speech for the question *How will I best* to *How I would best* when required to combine the two statements into one compound sentence. As noticed in the reporting of wh-word *what,* it was challenging to manage compound sentences. Therefore, the majority of the students, in one way or another, were bamboozled by using the reported speech questions in such a manner that they hardly expressed themselves considerably. In this regard, the *respondents' wh-, how*

questions and the adverb of time were difficult. This finding aligns with Ashraf et al. [24], who suggest that reported speech troubles non-native speakers about 'word order'. In addition, the respondents could not work out longer sentences requiring simultaneous changes to more than three grammatical aspects. The suggestion is that mastering the use of reported speech questions is a daunting exercise.

It was, therefore, established that the respondents could not manage questions with two simple sentences. It is evident that they were not aware of the rules regarding the use of unaware of the regulations regarding using simple sentences. For example, they could not combine the two statements into a compound sentence, as expected. Instead, most decided to deal with the statements individually because they overgeneralised the rules. In addition, the participants' response suggests that unexpected grammatical aspects in a question could be challenging for respondents, even with questions they would have managed correctly if they were simple sentences. If the task did not involve reported speech questions, they might have efficiently combined the two simple sentences into a compound sentence.

This finding is congruent with Farooq and Farid's [21] suggestion that EFL learners fail to master the use of reported speech questions, although they have spent much time studying this skill. Moreover, the present finding supports Chandras [15], who suggests that the wrong use of pronouns contributes to the difficulty experienced by the respondents regarding the use of reported speech questions. Therefore, this finding indicates that reported speech for long questions poses challenges for non-native English respondents at South African universities. Therefore, it is worth noting that the mastery of speech questions reported by the respondents in this context is not an easy task.

Table 5 shows that all the respondents could report the question correctly without any errors in word order. *Which of your accomplishments are you most proud of*? This could be attributed to the fact that the question was short, and they were expected to change the present tense into the past tense. This suggests that the shorter the question, the more accessible respondents can handle word order. All the respondents could use the appropriate word order for the wh-word *why*. This correspondence suggests that they were competent in reporting questions. Moreover, the respondents did the same with the 'where-question' in the same sentence.

No respondent committed an error in reporting the 'where-question'. *Johnson asked me why I wanted to teach in Limpopo Province and where exactly I wanted to teach in Limpopo province.* Eight respondents avoided using the modal *can* used in the question form. Only two respondents could not use the modal form while reporting the question *Can you describe* by stating that *if I could describe?* Although it is not necessarily incorrect to respond the way they did as they wrote *to describe any,* they were expected to respond to the question the way it was phrased. This finding supports Ashraf et al. [24], who suggest that reported speech troubles in non-native English speakers.

Table 6 illustrates that four respondents could not use the adverb of the time *these* to *those* in the second part of the statement about *how I alleviate those challenges.* One respondent wrote the word *to,* seeming to be a careless error, but the researcher cannot account for the error type as it is unclear whether the respondent knew the correct adverb. Eight respondents did not backshift the adverb of time *this* to *that* in the compound statement *your strengths for that position.* In the previous statement of wh-word *what*, nine respondents were competent because they could utilise the same adverb of time such as *that.* Contrarily, one respondent was unable to change it. Four respondents used the incorrect adverb time *today* instead of *that day* in the statement '*discussing that day were'.* Four respondents did not backshift the adverb of time *last year* to the *previous year* in the statement *that the schools had experienced the previous year.* This finding is congruent with Chandras [15], who found that many respondents could not use the reported speech appropriately.

Although the respondents were proficient in using the adverb of time when reporting short statements, they could not respond appropriately when reporting the speech question compound sentences. These findings show that the ELT Honours respondents at a South African University were not fully proficient in using reported speech questions; the respondents could only report questions used in simple rather than compound and complex sentences. Reporting compound sentences posed challenges to the respondents in dealing with adverbs of time and using punctuation marks. The respondents committed errors of omission when dealing with long sentences, which require using more than three grammatical aspects in a sentence.

The outcome of the present study is similar to the pre-

vious research because although some students performed better, the majority of the ELT Honours respondents could not understand the appropriate use of reported speech questions. Compared with the former research, these results contributed to the body of knowledge because the correct use of reported speech questions can meliorate university students' recognisable competence in the English language.

6. Conclusions

The present study endeavoured to answer the research questions regarding the mastery of reported speech questions at a South African University. Due to the complexities of reported speech questions, some respondents experience difficulties even in simple sentences, such as compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. In examining students' application of the rules regarding the appropriate use of reported speech questions, the researchers noted a slight improvement in their ability to construct meaningful sentences. The majority of the students could not identify and interpret the use of direct and indirect speech questions. The participants still used the wrong pronouns and verbs, which contributed to the difficulty experienced by the respondents concerning the use of reported speech questions. However, some students could demonstrate their expertise in engaging reported speech questions. Furthermore, they were able to indicate some comprehension of the role of sequencing in speech representation. Thus, the researchers could not claim that students attained a better understanding of reported speech questions as satisfactory differences existed among the participants.

The study findings suggest that unless frequent practice in the reported speech questions is done, students can become incompetent with simple or complex reported speech questions. Although long and complex statements cause respondents to commit errors, including tense backshift, word order, and backshift of adverbs of time, frequent practice using reported speech questions can solve some challenges. This study recommends that learners and teachers be well-acquainted with the appropriate use of reported speech questions. The syllabus designers and curriculum developers must devise plans to improve the use of reported speech questions by the ELT Honours University students.

The limitation of this study was that data were collected from the same participants on the day and time allocated for a specific lesson. This study implies that reported speech questions are helpful when one reports a particular event. Students and lecturers benefit from the frequent practice of reported speech questions. Future researchers can conduct further research on the mastery of reported speech questions. Furthermore, the present study recommends the appropriate use of reported speech questions by all ELT Honours students at a South African university and most universities worldwide.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation, M.N.L. and F.T.N.; methodology, M.N.L.; software, F.T.N.; validation, M.N.L. and F.T.N.; formal analysis, M.N.L. and F.T.N.; investigation, M.N.L., and F.T.N.; resources, F.T.N.; data curation, M.N.L.; writing original draft preparation, M.N.L.; writing—review and editing, F.T.N.; visualisation M.N.L. and F.T.N.; supervision, F.T.N.; project administration F.T.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

This study generated data from the authors' lesson analysis since it was from the classroom environment.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Riccioni, I., Philip, G., Fermani, A., et al., 2023. Linguistic Features and Pragmatic Functions of Direct Reported Speech in Italian Troubles Telling Sequences. Language & Communication. 90, 63–81. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2023.03.001

[2] Taboada, M., 2024. Reported Speech and Gender in the News: Who is Quoted, How are They Quoted, and Why it Matters. Discourse & Communication. 18(6), 17504813241281713. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813241281713

[3] Crespo Allende, N., Silva, M.L., Sepúlveda Toro, J., et al., 2024. Reported Speech Uses in Children with and without Developmental Language Disorder. Child Language Teaching and Therapy. 40(2), 178–196. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/02656590231216433

[4] Sah, P.K., Karki, J., 2023. Elite Appropriation of English as a Medium of Instruction Policy and Epistemic Inequalities in Himalayan Schools. Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development. 44(1), 20–34. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1789154

[5] Seethal, C., 2023. The State of Languages in South Africa. Language, Society and the State in a Changing World. Springer International Publishing: Cham, Switzerland. pp. 169–185.

[6] Coetzer, T., Livingston, C., Barnard, E., 2023. Eleven Grade 1 Teachers' Understandings of Mathematical Language in a South African Context. Reading & Writing-Journal of the Reading Association of South Africa. 14(1), 409. DOI: https://journals.co.za/doi/full/10.4102/rw.v14i1.409

[7] Dancygier, B., 2019. Reported Speech and Viewpoint Hierarchy. Linguistic Typology. 23(1), 161–165. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/lingty-2019-0004

[8] Tamayo, J.P.M., Terrion, J.L., 2023. "Un Paso Atrás, Dos Adelante": Reporting the Experiences of Spanish-Speaking Latin Americans Navigating and Adapting to the Canadian Workplace. Journal of International Migration and Integration. 24(4), 1865–1889.

[9] Bartolomeu Pires, S., Kunkel, D., Kipps, C., et al., 2024. Person-Centred Integrated Care for People Living with Parkinson's, Huntington's and Multiple Sclerosis: A Systematic Review. Health Expectations. 27(1), e13948. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13948

[10] Carretero, M., Domínguez Romero, E., Martín de la Rosa, V., 2024. Reported Speech in Opinion Newspaper Articles and Political Speeches: An English/Spanish Contrastive Approach. In Constructional and Cognitive Explorations of Contrastive Linguistics. Springer International Publishing: Cham, Switzerland. pp. 239–260.

[11] Kendall, G., 2021. Beall's Legacy in the Battle against Predatory Publishers. Learned Publishing. 34(3), 379–388. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1374

[12] Li, J., Jongerling, J., Dijkstra, K., et al., 2022. The Influence of Utterance-Related Factors on the Use of Direct and Indirect Speech. Collabra: Psychology. 8(1), 33631. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.33631

[13] Dalimunte, M., Salmiah, M., 2019. Students' Ability to Change Direct into Indirect Speech and Indirect into Direct Speech. Budapest International Research and Critics Institute (BIRCI-Journal): Humanities and Social Sciences. 2(2), 178–185. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33258/birci.v2i2.249

[14] Chandras, J., 2022. Hypothetical Reported Speech as Pedagogical Practice in Multilingual Classrooms in India. Language and Education. 36(4), 297–311. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2021.1981368

[15] Jee, G., Kotecha, S.J., Chakraborty, M., et al., 2023. Early Childhood Parent-Reported Speech Problems in Small and Large for Gestational Age Term-Born and Preterm-Born Infants: A Cohort Study. BMJ Open. 13(4), e065587.

[16] Mihovilić, Ž., 2023. Errors and Remedies in Indirect Reported Speech in High School EFL Learners. Available from: https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:131:869004 (cited 10 February 2024).

[17] Van Cranenburgh, A., Van Den Berg, F., 2023. May. Direct Speech Quo (Attribution for Dutch Literature. Proceedings of the 7th Joint SIGHUM Workshop on Computational Linguistics for Cultural Heritage, Social Sciences, Humanities and Literature; Dubrovnik, Croatia, 5 May 2023. pp. 45–62.

[18] Uludag, K., 2024. Exploring the Association between Textual Parameters and Psychological and Cognitive Factors. Psychology Research and Behavior Management. 17, 1139–1150. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2147/prbm.s460503

[19] Bangerter, A., Mayor, E., Doehler, S.P., 2023. Reported Speech in Conversational Storytelling during Nursing Shift Handover Meetings. Discourse Processes. 48(3), 183–214. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2010.519765

[20] Farooq, S., Farid, A., 2023. Error Analysis of Punjabi ESL Learners' Imperative's Direct and Indirect Narration. Global Language Review. 29, 356–367. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/glr.2023(VIII-II).29

[21] Tademo, U., 2023. Exploiting Hypothetical Reported Speech in the Business English Classroom. English for Specific Purposes. 72, 16–19. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2023.06.002

[22] Henderson, H., Sullivan, C.E., Wylie, B.E., et al., 2023. Child Witnesses Productively Respond to "How" Questions about Evaluations but Struggle with Other "How"

Questions. Child Maltreatment. 28(3), 417–426. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595231175913

[23] Ashraf, M.A., Nawab, R.M.A., Nie, F., 2023. Tran-Switch: A Transfer Learning Approach for Sentence Level Cross-Genre Author Profiling on Code-Switched English–RomanUrdu Text. Information Processing & Management. 60(3), 103261. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2022.103261

[24] Schmauss, L.S., Kilian, K., 2023. Hedging with Modal Auxiliary Verbs in Scientific Discourse and Women's Language. Open Linguistics. 9(1), 20220229. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2022-0229

[25] Mardar, I., 2020. Using Analogies in Teaching Indirect Speech to Romanian Students. 4th International Scientific Conference SEC-IASR 2019; Editura Lumen, Asociatia Lumen, 28 July 2020. pp. 209–219.

[26] Chomsky, N., 1965. Aspects of theory of syntax. The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA.

[27] Rahmonova, S., Khamidova, D.M., 2024. Enhancing Communicative Competence in Students: Strategies and Implications. Development and Innovations in Science. 3(3), 60–63. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1051/bioconf/20248404008

[28] Holt, E., 2009. Reported speech. The pragmatics of interaction. pp. 190–205.

[29] Vaughan, T., 2021. Ten (10) Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Qualitative Research. Poppulo. Available from: https://www.poppulo.com/blog/10-advantages-and-disadvantages-of-qualitative-research (cited 3 May 2024).

[30] Renjith, V., Yesodharan, R., Noronha, J.A., et al., 2021. Qualitative Methods in Health Care Research. International Journal of Preventive Medicine. 12(1), 20.

[31] Voxco, 2024. Purposive Sampling: Advantages and Disadvantages in Research. Google. Available from: https://www.voxco.com/blog/purposive-sampling/ (cited 16 May 2024).

[32] Delve, 2024. About Delve. Google. Available from: https://www.softwareadvice.com/qualitative-data-analysis/delve-profile/ (cited 11 April 2024).

[33] Nephawe, F.T., Nemakhavhani, M.S., 2024. Analysing Indispensability of Scaffolding Strategies to Enhance the Teaching of English Syntactical Structures to Grade 10 Learners. Journal of English Language Studies. 9(2), 172–190.

[34] Hecke, J., Kalpokas, N., 2024. The Guide to Thematic Analysis. Atlas Ti Scientific Software Development Gmbh. Available from: https://atlasti.com/guides/thematic-analysis (cited 15 April 2024).