

Challenges in Grammar Learning Among EFL Students: A Case Study of an Indonesian University

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the grammar learning difficulties faced by first-semester English Education students at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang. A qualitative research approach was employed, involving semi-structured interviews and document analysis of 14 students' academic records. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on identifying recurring patterns in the students' experiences and challenges. The findings reveal three main categories of difficulties: cognitive challenges, instructional shortcomings, and environmental constraints. Cognitive challenges include struggles with understanding fundamental grammar concepts, such as tenses and subject-verb agreement, compounded by difficulties in retaining rules and applying them in practical contexts. Instructional shortcomings emphasize monotonous teaching methods, lack of contextualized practice, and insufficient feedback, which hinder students' progress. Environmental constraints, including limited exposure to English and inadequate social support, exacerbate these challenges. The study highlights the importance of adopting interactive, student-centered teaching methods and integrating grammar instruction into broader language skills. Practical recommendations include the use of innovative strategies such as project-based learning, grammar-focused digital tools, and the creation of Englishspeaking environments. These findings provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers to enhance the effectiveness of grammar instruction in EFL contexts and improve student outcomes.

Keywords: Grammar learning, EFL students, Qualitative Research, Teaching Strategies, English Education.

INTRODUCTION

English plays a crucial role as a global language, facilitating communication in academic, professional, and cultural contexts. In Indonesia, English is designated as the first foreign language taught at all educational levels, reflecting its importance in the national curriculum. Mastery of the four essential language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—depends on a solid understanding of grammar as a foundational element for effective communication. As noted by Swan (2007), grammar provides the structural rules that ensure clarity and coherence in language use. Without a strong grasp of grammar, learners face difficulties in constructing accurate sentences, which hampers their ability to communicate effectively (Azar, 1996).

However, grammar remains one of the most challenging aspects of English learning, especially for students in English as a Foreign

Language (EFL) contexts. At Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang, for instance, internal assessments show that 65% of first-semester students score below average in grammar tests, indicating a significant struggle with this fundamental aspect of language learning. These difficulties are attributed to multiple factors, including the perceived complexity of grammar rules, ineffective teaching methods, and limited opportunities for practical application. These challenges are consistent with He's (2013) findings on individual differences in grammar learning and the complexity of mastering grammar rules in foreign language contexts. Moreover, grammar is often viewed as a tedious subject, leading to low motivation among students to actively engage in its study (Akbari, 2015; Nawira, Anugrawati, & Muhsin, 2019). Similar difficulties in achieving effective English learning have been observed by Megawati (2016). The difficulties in learning grammar for Indonesian students are also highlighted by Prasetyo (2020).

These challenges reflect a broader issue within EFL contexts globally. Research highlights that barriers such as inadequate vocabulary, insufficient exposure to meaningful language use, and a lack of diverse instructional methods hinder students' ability to internalize and apply grammatical knowledge effectively (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011). This results in a passive approach to grammar learning, with students perceiving it as a rigid set of rules rather than a practical tool for communication. Students' perceptions toward grammar in the English classroom also contribute to these challenges, as discussed by Mirazna and Hikmah (2019).

Focusing on the local context, this study seeks to understand the specific grammar learning difficulties faced by first-semester English Education students at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang. Through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis, the research explores the underlying causes of these challenges, offering insights into how individual, instructional, and environmental factors interact to shape students' grammar learning experiences. The qualitative approach provides rich, descriptive insights into students' lived experiences, emphasizing the contextual and subjective aspects of their struggles, unlike quantitative studies that focus on numerical analysis.

This research aims to make meaningful contributions to English language education, especially at the local level. For students, identifying specific areas of difficulty will help them adopt more effective strategies for mastering grammar. For educators, the study provides valuable insights into refining instructional practices by incorporating studentcentered and contextually relevant methods. Interactive activities such as grammar games, role-playing, and project-based learning can make grammar instruction more engaging and accessible, enhancing student motivation and participation.

In terms of broader implications, this study contributes to curriculum development and teacher training by emphasizing the need for comprehensive training programs that equip educators with innovative teaching methods tailored to the needs of EFL learners, particularly in rural Indonesian contexts. By connecting the findings to existing theories and prior research, the study enriches the discourse on grammar instruction in EFL contexts. It validates established perspectives such as those of Swan (2005) and Coghill (2003) while offering localized insights into the unique challenges faced by students at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of reimagining grammar instruction in ways that are engaging, effective, and directly relevant to students' needs. By addressing the root causes of students' grammar difficulties and offering actionable solutions, this study contributes to improving English language education in Indonesia, with potential implications for other EFL contexts global.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the grammar learning difficulties faced by first-semester English Education students at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang. The qualitative method was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of students' experiences and the factors influencing their struggles with grammar. A descriptive qualitative design was utilized to collect and analyze detailed, narrative data, allowing the researcher to gain insights into the specific challenges encountered by students and their perceptions of grammar learning.

The research involved 14 first-semester students from the English Education Department as participants. These students were selected because they represented a population experiencing formal grammar instruction at the university level. Data collection was conducted using two primary instruments: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews provided an opportunity to gather rich, detailed accounts of students' perceptions, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to probe deeper into specific issues raised by participants.

Interview Question Validation:

Before conducting the interviews, a set of interview questions was developed based on a review of the literature on grammar learning difficulties and the specific context of EFL education in Indonesia. To ensure the relevance and clarity of the questions, the interview guide was reviewed by two experts in English Language Education (I syam & Zainil, 2010). These experts provided feedback on the wording, content, and structure of the questions, ensuring that they were appropriate for the study's objectives and suitable for firstsemester students. The revised questions were then pre-tested with a small group of students who were not part of the actual study sample. Based on their feedback, the questions were refined further to improve clarity and comprehensibility. This process ensured the validity of the interview questions, making them reliable tools for gathering meaningful data.

In addition, the researcher analyzed academic documents, such students' as grammar assignments and test results, to identify recurring patterns of errors and areas where students faced difficulties. The data collection process was followed by a thorough analysis, which involved three key stages. First, data reduction was conducted to simplify and categorize the information, focusing on relevant themes such as grammar difficulties and their causes. Irrelevant data were excluded to ensure clarity and coherence. Second, the reduced data were displayed systematically, highlighting key findings through narrative descriptions and thematic organization. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying patterns and relationships in the data, with verification achieved through cross-referencing between interview responses and document analysis results.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were prioritized. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before data collection began. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. By adopting this qualitative approach, the study aimed to uncover the underlying of causes grammar learning

challenges and provide actionable recommendations to enhance the teaching and learning of grammar for EFL students.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide an indepth understanding of the grammar learning difficulties faced by first-semester English Education students at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang. Data collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis revealed a range of challenges, categorized into three main areas: cognitive challenges, instructional shortcomings, and environmental constraints. However, these challenges varied significantly across individual participants, with some students experiencing more pronounced difficulties in certain areas than others. The following provides a detailed exploration of these categories, highlighting the unique challenges faced by individual students.

Cognitive Challenges in Grammar Learning

Among the cognitive challenges, many students struggled with grasping fundamental grammar concepts such as tenses, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure. However, the degree of difficulty varied among individuals. For instance, while some students consistently struggled with tenses (e.g., the present perfect vs. the past simple tense), others experienced more difficulty with subject-verb agreement. One student expressed confusion with sentence structures, especially in compound sentences, while another struggled primarily with

understanding the correct usage of articles and prepositions.

One student noted, "Even if I learn the rules today, I tend to forget them by the next week, especially if we don't practice much in class." This statement reflects the cognitive load experienced by many students, but it was particularly evident for those who had less exposure to grammar practice outside of class. Another student, however, mentioned that she struggled more with retaining grammar rules because she often found it difficult to differentiate between similar structures, such as "I have gone" and "I went."

Additionally, some participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of rules they needed to learn in a short period, which led to a lack of motivation for some, while others reported a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed. Interestingly, a few students showed greater perseverance, trying to practice independently through online resources or peer discussions, but even these students found it challenging to retain and apply grammar rules effectively without consistent practice.

Instructional Shortcomings

The findings also revealed significant gaps in the instructional approaches used to teach grammar. While many students reported similar dissatisfaction with monotonous, lecture-based teaching methods, individual differences in how students responded to these methods were noted. One student remarked, "Our classes mostly involve the lecturer explaining the rules, and we copy notes. There are no activities to make the learning process enjoyable." This sentiment was shared by many, but there were a few who felt somewhat engaged during lectures and found them helpful for reviewing key concepts.

Another significant issue raised was the lack of integration of grammar into practical language activities. While some students felt the grammar lessons were disconnected from their real-life language use, others were able to see some practical applications, especially in written However, assignments. students who participated actively in group work or class discussions seemed to benefit more, as these interactions allowed them to use grammar in context. For example, one student who was more engaged in collaborative activities expressed that grammar seemed more useful when practiced through group storytelling exercises, though still not sufficient in preparing them for real-world application.

Moreover, a consistent concern was the lack of feedback on grammar errors. Most students noted that they received minimal explanations of their mistakes, but individual responses varied. While some students reported feeling frustrated by the lack of feedback and repeated errors, others did not perceive this as a major issue, feeling confident in their ability to self-correct. One student explained, "When I make mistakes in my grammar exercises, the teacher just marks it wrong but doesn't explain why. So, I end up repeating the same mistakes." This was especially challenging for students who relied heavily on feedback to understand and improve their mistakes.

Environmental Constraints

Environmental constraints also played a significant role in students' grammar learning challenges, but the impact of these factors varied. Many participants shared that they had limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom, especially those from rural areas where English is not commonly spoken. However, some students had more access to English outside of class, such as those who lived in areas with more access to digital resources, where they could engage with English-language media. One participant stated, "I only use English during our grammar class. At home or with friends, we speak our local language, so I don't get much practice," while another shared, "I watch English-language movies and listen to English podcasts, so I get more exposure to the language."

In addition to limited practice opportunities, a lack of support from their social environment further compounded the challenges for some students. A few participants reported that their families did not encourage or value their English learning, which led to reduced motivation. One student shared, "My parents don't speak English, and they think learning it is not that important. They don't understand why I spend so much time on grammar." However, there were also students who received strong support from their families

and peers, which seemed to positively influence their motivation and confidence in mastering grammar. These students were more likely to practice grammar in informal settings, such as discussing language issues with friends or participating in online language forums.

These findings provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges faced by English Education students at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang, highlighting the varied experiences of individual students. While there were common themes across the group, such as struggles with understanding grammar rules and the lack of practical application, the degree of difficulty and the factors influencing students' learning experiences differed. For some, cognitive challenges were most pronounced, others, while for instructional and environmental factors played a more significant role.

These findings underscore the complexity of grammar learning for EFL students, especially in rural areas, where the lack of exposure to English outside the classroom and limited support systems contribute significantly to learning difficulties. Understanding these challenges in detail can help educators and institutions design more tailored and effective interventions to address the unique needs of individual students, fostering an environment that supports both their cognitive and practical language development.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal significant insights into the grammar learning challenges faced by first-semester students in the English Education Department at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang. These challenges are shaped by cognitive, instructional, and environmental factors, each contributing uniquely to students' struggles with mastering grammar. This discussion interprets the findings in light of existing theories and research, offering alternative explanations, and providing actionable recommendations to improve grammar learning outcomes.

Addressing Students' Cognitive Challenges

The cognitive difficulties students experience, such as confusion over grammar rules and challenges in applying them, align with prior research suggesting that EFL learners often struggle with the complexity of English grammar (Swan, 2005). However, it is possible that cognitive challenges are not the only factor. Some students may experience these difficulties because of their individual learning preferences or prior educational experiences, which may affect how they process and internalize grammar rules. For instance, students with stronger memorization skills may face fewer issues with retention, while others might require more visual or hands-on approaches to learning grammar.

Additionally, while rote memorization is often insufficient for long-term retention, it

could be helpful in the short term, especially for students who have limited exposure to the language outside of formal education. This suggests that a hybrid approach, combining rote memorization with contextualized practice, might be more beneficial for some students.

То address cognitive challenges, teaching strategies should emphasize scaffolding, where complex grammar concepts are broken down into smaller, manageable units. For example, instructors could introduce simpler tenses, such as the present simple, before progressing to more complex structures like the present perfect. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge that not all students may need the same level of scaffolding. Some students might benefit from more challenging tasks, while others may need more foundational support. Thus, differentiating instruction based on students' individual needs is essential.

Improving Instructional Practices

The findings highlight instructional shortcomings as a significant barrier to effective grammar learning, with students reporting dissatisfaction with traditional, lecture-based teaching methods. While these findings are consistent with existing literature (Akbari, 2015), it is also possible that some students prefer these traditional methods and may not respond as well to highly interactive approaches. It is important to consider that students' learning preferences can vary significantly, and a onesize-fits-all approach may not be effective for everyone.

Additionally, the lack of detailed feedback on students' errors is a common issue in grammar instruction. However, the frequency and quality of feedback may also depend on the lecturer's workload and the class size. In larger classes, it may be more challenging for instructors to provide detailed, individualized feedback. This suggests that addressing feedback gaps may require restructuring class sizes or providing additional support, such as peer review sessions or automated feedback systems using technology.

To enhance instructional practices, educators should adopt more interactive and student-centered approaches. Activities such as peer collaboration, group discussions, and grammar games can make learning more enjoyable and engaging. The effectiveness of interactive tools, such as Video Scribe Sparkol, in enhancing grammar ability has been demonstrated in a study by Syafii (2021). However, instructors should remain mindful that not all students may feel comfortable with these methods. Some students may prefer more structured, individual learning experiences, so it is important to offer a balance between interactive activities and more traditional methods that students may feel more comfortable with.

Overcoming Environmental Constraints

Environmental factors, such as limited exposure to English and a lack of support from

family and peers, play a critical role in students' grammar learning difficulties. These findings are consistent with Nawira, Anugrawati, and Muhsin's (2019) assertion that insufficient practice opportunities outside the classroom hinder students' ability to internalize grammar concepts. However, environmental constraints might also be exacerbated by students' attitudes toward learning English. For instance, some students might not prioritize language learning, even when opportunities for practice are available. In this case, motivation and selfregulation would play a key role in overcoming environmental challenges (Muayad, 2018). Moreover, while many students reported limited exposure to English in their local environments, the increasing availability of online learning platforms and digital media may offer alternative ways for students to engage with English outside of class.

Moreover, while many students reported limited exposure to English in their local environments, the increasing availability of online learning platforms and digital media may offer alternative ways for students to engage with English outside of class. Thus, while institutional efforts to foster language use in and outside the classroom are important, students' willingness to utilize digital resources may play a significant role in overcoming environmental constraints.

Creating opportunities for students to practice English beyond the classroom is essential. Institutions can establish English-

speaking clubs or peer tutoring programs to foster a supportive environment for language use. Encouraging students to engage with English media, such as movies, podcasts, or online forums, can help increase their exposure to authentic language usage. However, it is important to note that not all students may have equal access to such resources, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Therefore, providing equitable access to technology and learning materials should be a priority for institutions.

Connecting Findings to Broader Research

The challenges identified in this study reflect patterns observed in EFL contexts globally. Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) emphasize that grammar teaching requires a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical application. This aligns with the need for contextualized and interactive instruction highlighted in this research. However, it is possible that some students might benefit from a more focused, theory-driven approach in the early stages of their learning. This could provide a stronger foundation before engaging in more practical language applications. Widianingsih and Gulö (2016) also examine the grammatical difficulties encountered by second language learners, which further supports the need for effective instructional strategies that address these challenges.

The findings confirm the importance of addressing both cognitive and environmental factors to improve grammar learning outcomes. However, future studies could explore additional factors, such as students' socio-cultural backgrounds, psychological factors (e.g., self-efficacy), and prior learning experiences, which may also significantly influence grammar learning. Waruwu (2023) discusses how mixed methods can be applied in educational research to provide comprehensive insights into such challenges.

Recommendations and Implications

Based on the findings, this study recommends a multifaceted approach to improve grammar learning outcomes. Teaching methods should shift toward interactive and student-centered approaches, incorporating activities that make grammar learning engaging and meaningful. However, it is essential to recognize that not all students may respond equally to these methods. For example, students who are more introverted or who have different learning preferences might benefit from more individual or structured activities.

Moreover, institutions should invest in professional development programs to equip educators with innovative instructional strategies and tools. These strategies should be flexible enough to accommodate diverse student needs and preferences. Additionally, integrating grammar instruction into broader language skills should be prioritized, ensuring that students see its practical value in real-world communication. Efforts should also be made to create a supportive learning environment both inside and outside the classroom, which includes access to resources and encouragement from family and peers.

These recommendations have significant implications for curriculum development and policy-making EFL in education. By addressing the cognitive, instructional, and environmental barriers to grammar learning, institutions can enhance students' language proficiency and confidence. Future research could build on these findings by effectiveness of specific exploring the instructional interventions, examining the role of individual learning differences, and considering the socio-cultural factors that shape grammar learning experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the significant challenges faced by first-semester English Education students Muhammadiyah at University of Enrekang in mastering grammar. The main difficulties include understanding and applying fundamental grammar concepts such tenses, subject-verb agreement, as and sentence structure. These challenges are attributed to cognitive difficulties with grammar rules and retention, instructional shortcomings such as monotonous teaching methods, lack of practical application, and inadequate feedback, as well as environmental constraints like limited exposure to English and a lack of social support.

The study emphasizes the need for adopting student-centered, interactive teaching strategies that integrate grammar lessons into broader language skills. Providing contextualized practice opportunities, fostering supportive learning environments, and encouraging peer collaboration are essential steps for improving grammar learning. Furthermore, offering detailed, constructive feedback can guide students in correcting errors and improving their proficiency.

By addressing these interconnected challenges, the research contributes valuable insights to the discourse on grammar learning in EFL contexts, particularly in Indonesia. It underscores the importance of innovative instructional methods and the creation of supportive environments to enhance students' grammar competence and confidence. Future research should explore the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as digital tools or project-based learning, in overcoming these difficulties. Ultimately, the findings aim to inform educators and policymakers, providing practical recommendations for designing strategies that better support EFL learners and improve their language learning outcomes.

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We hope that this study will serve as a meaningful contribution to the improvement of English language instruction and inspire further research in this field.

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