

Exploring Challenges in Learning English: A Qualitative Case Study of Teacher Education Students in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the English learning difficulties faced by elementary school teacher education students in the Intensive English Program at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis involving 25 students from the 2020–2021 academic year. The study specifically examines the challenges these students encounter with grammar comprehension, vocabulary retention, and pronunciation fluency. Key findings reveal that these difficulties are exacerbated by psychological barriers such as anxiety, traditional teaching methods, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. The research underscores the need for innovative, student-centered teaching strategies and contextualized learning methods to address these challenges. Practical solutions proposed include using interactive and communicative approaches, providing regular and constructive feedback, and fostering a supportive learning environment. These recommendations aim to improve English learning outcomes, contributing to the broader discourse on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. This study's novel contribution lies in its specific focus on the unique learning difficulties encountered by students in the Indonesian context, offering actionable strategies for overcoming these barriers in similar settings.

Keywords : Learning Difficulties, EFL Students, Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation

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INTRODUCTION

English plays a pivotal role as a global language in various domains, including education, business, and international communication. At Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang, English is a mandatory subject for all students, even those enrolled in non-English education programs such as the Elementary School Teacher Education Department. Despite its importance, many students face significant challenges in mastering English effectively. The results from the mid-semester and final exams of the 2020–2021 academic year reveal that 64% of students failed the mid-term exams, and 52% failed the final exams. This aligns with previous research by Ayu and Viora (2018), who found that students in various programs struggle with English language learning, particularly in grammar and vocabulary retention. These difficulties manifest primarily in grammar comprehension, vocabulary retention, and

speaking fluency. Puspitaloka and Wahyuna (2018) also highlighted similar challenges faced by Indonesian university students in mastering English, particularly in grammar and vocabulary.

According to Puspitaloka (2018), the primary issues in learning English include limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and inadequate understanding of grammar. Psychological barriers, such as a lack of confidence and motivation, further exacerbate these challenges. Sormin (2018) observed that these psychological barriers are often compounded by the lack of engaging instructional practices, which hinders effective language learning. These persistent difficulties highlight the need for an in-depth analysis to understand their root causes and develop targeted solutions to improve students' proficiency. To address these issues, Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang has implemented an Intensive English Program under the Language Development and International Affairs Office (LPB&KUI), aimed at enhancing students' English proficiency through focused learning over two semesters. However, the persistent low achievement among students indicates gaps in the program's effectiveness.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the specific English learning difficulties faced by elementary school teacher education students in the Intensive English Program. Using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, the research seeks to identify the underlying causes of these difficulties and provide actionable recommendations. The study focuses on three core areas: grammar comprehension, vocabulary retention, and pronunciation fluency, which are foundational to English proficiency. By investigating the students' struggles in these areas, the study aims to uncover both internal factors—such as psychological barriers and learning strategies—and external factors, including instructional methods and environmental constraints.

The theoretical framework of this study draws from existing literature on English learning difficulties. According to Swan (2005), grammar is a critical component of effective communication, while vocabulary supports comprehension and expression. Pronunciation fluency, though essential for oral communication, is often overlooked in traditional teaching methods (Thornbury, 2002). Previous research has highlighted various factors contributing to learning difficulties, such as lack of motivation, ineffective teaching methods, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom (Ninapuspitaloka, 2018; Sormin, 2018). Additionally, psychological barriers, such as anxiety and a lack of confidence, further hinder students' ability to learn effectively (Sari, 2019). This research seeks to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting English proficiency in the context of an Indonesian university, with a focus on both cognitive and environmental influences.

The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to identify the key challenges faced by students in mastering English, (2) to explore the underlying causes of these challenges, and (3) to provide practical recommendations for improving English language instruction. By explicitly stating these objectives, the study aims to offer actionable strategies to address the difficulties students face in learning English. Furthermore, it intends to contribute to the broader discourse on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly in the Indonesian context.

The expected outcome of this research is to offer practical solutions for enhancing English teaching strategies and program implementation. These recommendations will aim to foster more engaging and effective learning experiences, ultimately helping students build confidence and proficiency in English. Additionally, the findings are expected to benefit educators, program designers, and policymakers by providing a reference for improving English language education in similar contexts, supporting students' academic and professional success.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the difficulties faced by elementary school teacher education students in learning English at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang. The research was conducted during the 2020–2021 academic year and focused on students enrolled in the Intensive English Program. A qualitative methodology was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of the students' learning experiences and the factors contributing to their difficulties in mastering English. To ensure the relevance of participants' experiences, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select 25 students from the program. As suggested by Sugiyono (2011), purposive sampling is appropriate when participants are selected based on specific characteristics aligned with the research objectives. This approach allowed the researchers to gather rich and meaningful data from students who were directly experiencing the challenges under investigation. The sample size was considered adequate for qualitative inquiry, as it enabled in-depth exploration of individual experiences while still capturing diverse perspectives.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 25 participants to explore their perceptions, challenges, and attitudes toward learning English. This interview format provided flexibility for the researcher to probe emerging themes and clarify unexpected responses, resulting in detailed accounts of students' difficulties, particularly in grammar comprehension, vocabulary retention, and pronunciation. In addition to interviews, document analysis was carried out on students' test results, written assignments, and other academic records. This method helped identify recurring patterns of errors and learning difficulties, thereby strengthening and contextualizing the interview findings.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis through an iterative process. Initially, data reduction was performed by organizing and categorizing information into recurring themes, such as grammatical challenges, limited vocabulary mastery, and pronunciation issues. The data were then systematically displayed to identify relationships among themes and to highlight the core findings. Finally, conclusions were drawn through careful interpretation of the patterns that emerged, with validity ensured by cross-checking interview data against the results of document analysis. This analytical process enabled a comprehensive understanding of the students' learning difficulties and the underlying factors influencing them.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided their voluntary consent prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by anonymizing all personal data, and participants were assured that the information collected would be used solely for research purposes. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. These ethical measures were implemented to safeguard participants' rights and well-being and to uphold the integrity of the research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by elementary school teacher education students in learning English at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang. The data collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis revealed three primary categories of difficulties: grammar comprehension, vocabulary retention, and pronunciation fluency. These challenges are interconnected, with various underlying causes that contribute to students' overall struggles with English proficiency.

1. Difficulties in Grammar Comprehension

A significant majority of participants (96%) reported considerable challenges in understanding and applying English grammar rules, which are essential for effective communication. These struggles were particularly evident in areas such as tenses, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure. For example, one participant noted, "I always get confused about when to use the past tense and when to use the present perfect tense. It feels like the rules are so complicated."

The analysis of written assignments revealed common errors, such as incorrect verb conjugations and misuse of articles, demonstrating gaps in understanding fundamental grammar concepts. Sentences like "He go to the market yesterday" and "A apple is on the table" were prevalent, suggesting that students were unable to apply learned rules correctly in written communication. Students explained that the abstract nature of grammar rules, coupled with the lack of opportunities for practical application during class, contributed to these errors. One student highlighted, "We only learn the rules and write them down, but we rarely practice using them in real-life situations."

Beyond cognitive difficulties, participants expressed frustration with the memorization-heavy approach to grammar instruction. The overwhelming number of rules and their abstract nature often led to forgetfulness, undermining students' confidence. As one participant shared, "We memorize so many rules, but I often forget them after a while, especially when they're not applied consistently in exercises."

The lack of context-driven learning and practical use of grammar in real-life situations could be limiting students' ability to internalize and apply grammatical rules. To address this, more interactive grammar exercises integrated into real-world scenarios might be helpful.

2. Challenges in Vocabulary Retention

Vocabulary retention emerged as another significant challenge, with 72% of participants reporting difficulty in remembering and effectively using new words. Many students mentioned that despite learning many new words, they struggled to incorporate them into meaningful communication. One participant explained, "We learn so many words, but I don't know how to use them in sentences. They don't stay in my memory."

Analysis of test results and assignments revealed that students often misused vocabulary, such as using phrases like "I am very hungry to learn" instead of "I am eager to learn," indicating a lack of understanding of word meanings and contextual usage. Many students also pointed out that their vocabulary acquisition mainly occurred in isolation, without the opportunity to practice these words in speaking or writing.

Moreover, the lack of engaging vocabulary-building activities, such as games or multimedia resources, hindered the retention of new vocabulary. Students noted that most learning was limited to rote memorization rather than contextual learning.

Vocabulary retention could be significantly improved by incorporating more interactive, context-based learning methods such as vocabulary games, multimedia exercises, and practical speaking opportunities. These strategies would allow students to see the real-world use of new vocabulary and facilitate better retention.

3. Pronunciation Fluency

Pronunciation difficulties were also a major barrier, particularly in speaking activities. Over 60% of participants reported feeling anxious about mispronouncing words, which frequently led to a lack of participation in class discussions or oral presentations. One student expressed, "I know what I want to say, but I am afraid my pronunciation will be wrong, and everyone will laugh at me."

Document analysis of oral assessments revealed frequent inconsistencies in students' pronunciation, especially with sounds not present in their native language, such as the /θ/ sound in "think" and the /v/ sound in "very." These issues were compounded by the lack of focused pronunciation practice in the classroom, where most lessons emphasized grammar and vocabulary, leaving little room for oral skill development.

In addition, many students reported that they had limited exposure to authentic English pronunciation due to the scarcity of listening materials and opportunities to interact with native speakers. As one participant commented, "We only hear our teacher speak English, and sometimes even the teacher's pronunciation is not clear."

The anxiety surrounding pronunciation errors, combined with limited exposure to native speakers and the lack of focused practice in class, significantly impacts students' speaking fluency. Increased interaction with native speakers or high-quality pronunciation resources, such as audio recordings or apps, could help alleviate these issues and reduce student anxiety.

4. Underlying Causes of Learning Difficulties

The students' difficulties in grammar comprehension, vocabulary retention, and pronunciation fluency are influenced by both internal and external factors, including psychological barriers, instructional shortcomings, and environmental constraints.

5. Psychological Barriers

Many participants reported experiencing anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes. As Djamarah (2015) also suggests, these psychological factors significantly influence students' ability to engage with learning tasks, contributing to barriers in language acquisition. These psychological barriers significantly hindered their ability to engage in learning. One participant noted, "I feel like everyone is watching and judging me when I speak English, so I avoid it." This fear of judgment or failure prevented students from actively participating in class, further exacerbating their learning difficulties.

Creating a supportive, low-stress classroom environment where students feel safe to make mistakes and practice speaking is crucial. Peer-based activities and group discussions could help build confidence and reduce anxiety.

6. Instructional Shortcomings

The study revealed that traditional teaching methods, which heavily relied on lectures and rote memorization, were not effective in addressing students' individual learning needs. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of interactive and communicative activities, such as role-playing or group discussions, which could make learning more engaging. Furthermore, the absence of consistent, constructive feedback on assignments and oral presentations left students unsure about their progress.

Moving away from traditional lecture-based teaching to more interactive, student-centered approaches such as task-based learning, role-playing, and frequent feedback can foster greater engagement and a more dynamic learning environment.

7. Environmental Constraints

Environmental factors, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom, played a significant role in shaping students' learning experiences. Many students came from rural areas where English was rarely spoken, further limiting their language practice. Additionally, the lack of support from family members or peers who did not value English proficiency further hindered students'

motivation. One participant explained, “At home, my parents don’t understand English, so they think it’s not important.”

Exposure to English outside the classroom is crucial for reinforcing classroom learning. Schools could provide extracurricular programs, such as English clubs or conversation groups, to give students more opportunities for real-life language use.

The findings of this study highlight that students' difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are interconnected and influenced by both psychological and environmental factors. A holistic approach to teaching English that addresses cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of learning is essential for overcoming these challenges. By integrating interactive teaching methods, offering more opportunities for practice, and creating a supportive learning environment, educators can help students build confidence and proficiency in English.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation challenges faced by elementary school teacher education students in the Intensive English Program at Muhammadiyah University of Enrekang. These difficulties, rooted in cognitive, psychological, and environmental factors, resonate with broader issues identified in existing research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. This discussion interprets the findings in light of prior studies, highlights their implications, and proposes strategies to address these challenges effectively.

1. Addressing Grammar Comprehension Difficulties

Grammar serves as the foundation for constructing meaningful and coherent communication in any language. The significant struggles reported by students in understanding and applying grammar rules align with Swan’s (2005) assertion that grammar often appears abstract and complex to learners. The recurring errors in tenses and subject-verb agreement identified in this study reflect the cognitive load associated with learning grammatical structures, particularly for students whose native language lacks similar rules.

The reliance on rote memorization, as observed in the instructional practices, compounds these difficulties. Harmer (2010) emphasizes that effective grammar teaching requires contextualization, where learners see the relevance of rules through practical application. For example, instead of merely memorizing tense rules, students should engage in activities that allow them to use these tenses in real-life contexts, such as storytelling or role-playing. Such activities can make grammar learning more meaningful and help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

2. Overcoming Vocabulary Retention Challenges

Vocabulary is a critical component of language proficiency, enabling learners to express themselves accurately and effectively. The findings of this study highlight that students struggle with retaining and applying new vocabulary, primarily due to the lack of contextual learning and practice opportunities. This aligns with Thornbury’s (2002) observation that vocabulary learning is most effective when it occurs in meaningful contexts and is reinforced through repeated exposure.

The limited use of interactive and engaging activities, such as vocabulary games or multimedia tools, further exacerbates these difficulties. Gushendra (2017) demonstrated that incorporating music and interactive exercises can significantly improve vocabulary retention in language learning. Huyen (2002) demonstrated the effectiveness of using games to enhance vocabulary retention, as they make learning enjoyable and memorable. Incorporating multimedia resources, such as videos, podcasts, and interactive apps, can also expose students to new words in authentic contexts, improving their

retention and usage. Recent studies, such as Hawwini et al. (2024), show that strategic vocabulary training using contextualized resources enhances mastery in vocational education. Furthermore, integrating vocabulary learning into broader language tasks, such as writing essays or participating in discussions, can help students internalize new words and understand their practical application.

3. Enhancing Pronunciation Fluency

Pronunciation is an essential aspect of speaking proficiency, but it is often neglected in EFL classrooms. This study revealed that students face significant anxiety about mispronouncing words, which hinders their willingness to participate in speaking activities. Such anxiety is a common challenge in EFL contexts, as noted by Indah Sari (2019), and can be alleviated by creating a supportive and non-judgmental learning environment.

The lack of focused pronunciation practice and exposure to authentic English models further limits students' progress. Thornbury (2002) suggests that regular listening activities and interaction with native or proficient speakers can enhance learners' pronunciation. Teachers can incorporate pronunciation drills, shadowing exercises, and listening activities that expose students to a variety of accents and speech patterns. Additionally, tools such as speech recognition apps can provide immediate feedback on pronunciation, helping students refine their skills in a low-pressure setting.

4. Addressing Psychological Barriers

Anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes emerged as significant barriers to students' learning. These findings are consistent with those of Megawati (2016), who emphasized the impact of psychological factors on EFL learners' performance. Students who feel judged or unsupported are less likely to take risks or engage actively in language activities, according to Irham and Wiyani (2014), psychological aspects like lack of confidence and fear of judgment are crucial in shaping student participation and learning success which limits their opportunities for practice and improvement.

To address these issues, educators should focus on building a positive and inclusive classroom atmosphere. Sari (2019) emphasizes that fostering a positive and low-anxiety environment can significantly reduce students' fears and improve their language performance.

This can be achieved by encouraging collaborative learning, where students work in pairs or small groups to complete tasks. Peer collaboration reduces the pressure on individual students and fosters a sense of community. Providing constructive feedback and emphasizing progress over perfection can also help build students' confidence and reduce their fear of making mistakes.

5. Revisiting Instructional Strategies

The findings underscore the need for innovative and student-centered instructional strategies to address the challenges faced by students. Traditional lecture-based methods, which focus on rote memorization and isolated grammar exercises, fail to engage learners or address their practical needs. Harmer (2010) and Cameron (2001) advocate for communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL) as effective approaches for EFL classrooms.

Incorporating activities such as group discussions, project-based tasks, and role-playing can make lessons more interactive and relevant to real-life communication. For instance, students can practice grammar and vocabulary by creating and presenting short skits, which also provide opportunities to improve pronunciation. Integrating technology, such as language learning apps or online platforms, can further enhance engagement and provide additional resources for practice.

6. Overcoming Environmental Constraints

Environmental factors, such as limited exposure to English and lack of social support, significantly impact students' learning experiences. Students in rural areas often have fewer opportunities to hear and use English outside the classroom, which limits their ability to reinforce what they learn in class. This finding aligns with Sormin's (2018) observation that rural EFL learners face unique challenges due to their limited access to English-speaking environments.

To address this issue, institutions can establish extracurricular programs, such as English clubs or conversation groups, where students can practice speaking in a supportive setting. Organizing events like English camps or cultural exchange programs can also provide immersive language experiences. Additionally, encouraging students to engage with English media, such as movies, podcasts, and books, can expose them to authentic language use and help them develop their skills independently.

7. Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for educators, program designers, and policymakers. By addressing the specific challenges identified—grammar comprehension, vocabulary retention, and pronunciation fluency—educators can develop targeted interventions to improve students' English proficiency. Future research could explore the effectiveness of specific strategies, such as digital tools or immersive programs, in addressing these challenges.

Policymakers should consider allocating resources to support professional development for teachers, enabling them to adopt innovative teaching methods and create more engaging learning environments. Additionally, integrating language learning with other academic subjects can help students see the practical value of English and motivate them to excel.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without its limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small (25 students), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, the study focused on students from a single institution, meaning the results may not fully reflect the experiences of students from other universities or regions in Indonesia.

Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall bias. Future research could benefit from a larger, more diverse sample and a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data with more objective measures, such as classroom observation or language proficiency tests, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

While the study identifies key challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, alternative explanations for these difficulties should also be considered. For example, students' struggles may be partly attributed to individual differences in language aptitude or prior exposure to English rather than solely to instructional methods or environmental factors. Additionally, cultural factors, such as students' attitudes toward English and the influence of local language norms, could also contribute to their learning difficulties. Future research could explore these factors more deeply to gain a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by EFL learners.

This discussion highlights the interconnected nature of the challenges faced by students in learning English. By addressing these issues holistically and adopting innovative instructional strategies, educators can enhance students' confidence, motivation, and proficiency. This study contributes to the broader discourse on EFL education and provides actionable insights for improving English language instruction in similar contexts.

CLOSING

Conclusions

This study highlights the significant challenges faced by elementary school teacher education students in learning English, particularly in grammar comprehension, vocabulary retention, and pronunciation fluency. These difficulties are exacerbated by psychological barriers, traditional teaching methods, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Addressing these challenges requires innovative, student-centered teaching approaches, contextualized learning strategies, and greater opportunities for practice.

Educators should adopt communicative and interactive teaching methods that focus on real-world language use, fostering an engaging and supportive learning environment. This approach can include activities like role-playing, group discussions, and task-based learning, which not only enhance grammar and vocabulary retention but also encourage students to use the language actively. Regular, constructive feedback should be provided to guide students' progress, helping them build confidence and improve their language skills.

Moreover, institutions are encouraged to facilitate extracurricular programs, such as English clubs or conversation groups, that offer students more opportunities to practice speaking and listening in a non-academic setting. Digital tools and resources, such as language learning apps, online forums, and multimedia content, can also enhance language learning by offering students interactive and engaging content that they can access outside the classroom. These resources can help reinforce classroom learning, support independent study, and provide diverse perspectives on language use.

1. Policy Implications

Institutions should prioritize the professional development of English language teachers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to implement effective, modern teaching strategies. This includes training in communicative language teaching (CLT) methods and how to integrate technology into lessons. Policymakers should also allocate resources to improve the availability of language learning materials, both digital and physical, to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, have access to high-quality resources that support language acquisition.

2. Practical Applications for Students

For students, actively engaging in English practice through collaboration with peers, media consumption (such as listening to English podcasts or watching movies), and participating in extracurricular activities can significantly enhance their language skills. Students should seek opportunities to apply English in various contexts, both inside and outside the classroom, in order to make their learning more meaningful and practical.

Suggestions

Future research could explore the effectiveness of targeted interventions, such as immersive programs, language exchange opportunities, and technology-based learning, in addressing the challenges identified in this study. Investigating how these interventions can be tailored to meet the needs of different student populations would provide valuable insights into improving English education. Additionally, research could focus on examining the impact of cultural factors and individual differences, such as language aptitude, on the learning process. Comparing the effectiveness of traditional versus modern teaching methods in rural versus urban settings would also provide a deeper understanding of the environmental constraints that students face.

By implementing these strategies and continuing to explore innovative approaches to teaching and learning, educators and institutions can foster greater student confidence and proficiency in English, ultimately supporting students' academic and professional success.

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