

TEACHER AWARENESS, IDENTIFICATION OF LEARNING DIFFICULTIES, AND EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR ENGLISH GRAMMAR MASTERY

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Abstract. English grammar learning poses a significant challenge for teachers, particularly in countries characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity, such as Indonesia. Although English language learning, which inherently encompasses grammar, is compulsory in Indonesian junior high schools, students face difficulties due to the absence of engaging learning strategies. This descriptive qualitative research delved into the perspective and experiences of three Grade 10 teachers from two private high schools in Yogyakarta. The focus was on their awareness of students' difficulties in learning grammar, their perception of the challenges encountered by students in mastering grammar, and their effective teaching strategies aimed at assisting students in overcoming these challenges. The research was conducted through one-on-one, in-depth interviews with the participating teachers. This study revealed that teachers possess the awareness to identify their students' difficulties in learning grammar. In addition, the challenges faced by students primarily stem from their limited exposure to English and lack of motivation. To address these challenges, teachers employ effective strategies such as guided spoken sentence construction and the use of games. These strategies not only provide a structured approach to grammar learning but also make the process engaging and enjoyable for students. By acknowledging the unique needs of their students and utilizing effective teaching methods, teachers play a crucial role in facilitating the mastery of grammar skills.

Keywords: *awareness; EFL teachers; grammar; obstacles; teaching methods.*

INTRODUCTION

Obstacles and challenges are frequently present during the teaching and learning process in the field of education. One common obstacle is the presence of learning difficulties among students, which can negatively impact their academic performance. It is essential to address these impacts through various means, such as investigating the underlying causes of these learning difficulties and identifying appropriate solutions to support students facing such challenges. For instance, teachers can assess students' learning outcomes to identify their weaknesses and the factors contributing to these weaknesses. By doing so, teachers can effectively diagnose students' strengths, weaknesses, and the difficulties they encounter in their learning

process. Understanding the reasons behind these weaknesses facilitates the development of strategies to overcome them.

Regarding the significance of education and the crucial role that teachers play in instructing students who face learning challenges, it is of utmost importance to acknowledge the awareness of teachers (Kakabaraee, Arjmandnia, & Afrooz, 2012). To evaluate whether teachers are capable of understanding the difficulties their students encounter in comprehending the lessons, it becomes essential to address the question of whether teachers are aware of the challenges faced by these students. This preliminary step is crucial before proceeding to the subsequent stages, which involve identifying the specific challenges that students encounter in the learning process. The

same principle applies to the learning of English grammar by students in Indonesia.

Grammar is a system of structured rules that govern the arrangement of sentences, phrases, and words in a given language. According to Pradeep (2013, p. 482), as cited in Tran and Nguyen (2019), grammar holds significant importance in the teaching and learning of the English language. Acquiring grammar skills is a vital component of the teaching-learning process, and it is often perceived as more challenging by students compared to other language skills. In Indonesia, students frequently encounter difficulties in learning grammar, which hampers their ability to effectively organize words and convey messages, thereby impeding their progress as proficient language users.

The significance of grammar is emphasized in any language learning, as it plays a vital role in constructing sentences and facilitating effective communication. It is asserted that individuals who use a language, whether consciously or subconsciously, become aware of its grammar. In the case of learning English, achieving proficiency in the four language skills, namely writing, listening, speaking, and reading, is contingent upon mastering grammar. Marzulina (2019) highlights the importance of English grammar for learners, as it helps prevent communication disruptions caused by grammatical errors across various language skills (Savage, Bitterlin, & Price, 2010).

Understanding linguistic structures becomes paramount in learning a foreign language, enabling accurate expression. Grammar serves as a mediator between the systems of sounds or written symbols and their meanings (Nelson & Greenbaum, 2018). The fundamental categories in grammar learning encompass pronouns, nouns, verbs, adjectives, conjunctions, adverbs, determiners, and prepositions (Close, 1982, as cited in Almuhammadi, 2020). Consequently, students must attain mastery of these rules to ensure accurate usage of the English language.

However, despite the significance of grammar, there have been observed difficulties in students' learning experiences. The acquisition of grammar is linked to cognitive abilities, and certain students encounter difficulties in utilizing grammar rules while constructing sentences. These challenges encompass struggles in word arrangement, correct tense usage, and distinguishing between the sentence structures of Indonesian and English, for instance (Ameliani, 2019). Uibu and Liiver's (2015) research emphasizes the significance of

identifying the origins of grammatical errors and implementing efficient pedagogical approaches.

Additionally, research conducted by Komara and Tiarsiwi's (2021) and Kaçani and Mangelli's (2013) delved deeper into learners' perceptions and difficulties they encountered when learning grammar. Komara and Tiarsiwi (2021) reveal that Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners consider grammar to be both challenging and essential. They attribute this perception to unclear instructional guidance and monotonous teaching approaches. Similarly, Kaçani and Mangelli (2013) ascertain that both teachers and learners encounter difficulties in applying grammar knowledge practically. They underscore the significance of teacher awareness in selecting effective teaching methodologies.

The teaching of English as a foreign language has undergone significant development in Indonesia. This is due to the requirement of English instruction for a duration of three years in junior high school and three years in senior high school (Lauder, 2008, as cited in Mattarima and Hamdan, 2011). Moreover, the overarching goals of English education in Indonesian high schools encompass the cultivation of oral and written communicative proficiency to attain information literacy, the promotion of awareness regarding English as a global language for competitive advantage, and the cultivation of students' comprehension of the interplay between language and culture (Indonesia Ministry of Education, 2006).

In Indonesia, the teaching and learning process of English is challenging due to the diversity of languages spoken. This diversity can influence the learning of English as a foreign language. Teachers play a vital role in this process, and there is a need for an improved approach to English language learning Hamied (2011). Issues such as policy changes, misunderstandings in teaching approaches, and effective language teaching methods for pre-service teachers have been identified. Effective strategies are required to avoid misunderstandings and maintain student motivation, particularly in grammar instruction. The teacher's role can have a positive impact by employing better strategies to engage students.

The identified issues provide a foundation for the researchers' investigation into the difficulties students face in learning grammar, as perceived by teachers. This study aims to comprehend the challenges encountered by students and examine the effective teaching strategies utilized by senior high school teachers in Yogyakarta. Both internal

and external factors that contribute to learning difficulties, including motivation, interest, environment, family, and language-specific challenges, are taken into account in this inquiry. The study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing interviews with English teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the identified issues and teaching strategies.

Teachers are expected to assume responsibility for the progress of their students. As such, during the learning process, teachers must be attentive to the individual capabilities of their students in order to facilitate optimal development and identify those encountering difficulties in their learning. In essence, teachers must possess the ability to recognize students who are facing challenges in their learning. To achieve this, teachers must possess a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the learning process and outcomes, as learning difficulties often arise from these factors. As a result, teachers will be able to recognize the perceived or actual challenges that students face, enabling them to come up with appropriate solutions and put into practice efficient teaching methods, particularly in the context of English grammar.

METHOD

The objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by students and effective teaching strategies for grammar instruction in high schools in Yogyakarta, as perceived and experienced by teachers. This research adopts a Qualitative approach for data collection. Creswell (2012) asserts that qualitative research aims to investigate a specific case and provide comprehensive information about a phenomenon.

The researchers employed a Descriptive Qualitative research design. According to Fox and Bayat (2007), descriptive research seeks to elucidate current issues or problems by gathering data that enables a thorough description of the situation. They also suggest that a qualitative descriptive design typically involves a thoughtful and logical combination of sampling, data collection, analysis, and representational techniques.

The study was carried out at two private high schools located in Yogyakarta. These schools were chosen due to the implementation of diverse English teaching activities by the English teachers as English is a mandatory subject for students at different levels (i.e., grades 10, 11, and 12) with a focus on grammar instruction. The English language teachers at these schools possess

extensive experience in addressing students' difficulties during grammar teaching activities. Additionally, they have expertise in employing effective strategies for teaching grammar. Consequently, these schools were deemed appropriate for the research setting. The research was conducted in December 2022.

The researchers involved several important considerations to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. In addition, a transparent and ethical selection process were undergone to minimize biases. The key step of choosing the research subjects was by adopting a purposive sampling technique. Purposeful sampling involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). This method was done to get an in-depth understanding and exploration of diverse perspectives. In addition, before conducting data gathering, informed consent was given to each participant ensuring that they understand the nature of the research and willingly agree to participate. Lastly, the researchers also implemented strategy to protect the anonymity of the participants by using pseudonym.

This study then involved three participants who are English language teachers from two high schools in Yogyakarta. The participants were selected based on the following criteria. Firstly, they were required to have a minimum of three years of experience in teaching English and have demonstrated effective strategies in teaching English grammar. Additionally, they should have experience teaching different classes within the same grade, which allows them to observe various student issues. This makes them suitable for this research. Secondly, the participants should have experience in teaching 10th-grade students. The choice of 10th-grade English language teachers is based on the focus of this study, which is on the issues faced by students in the early semester. Grade 10 is the first level in high school, and teachers with experience in this grade can identify specific areas where students encounter difficulties in learning grammar.

All participants involved in this study are female teachers. The researchers assigned pseudonyms to each participant, such as Mrs. Dera for the initial participant, a 26-year-old individual with three years of experience in teaching English. The second participant is referred to as Mrs. Ani, a 35-year-old with ten years of teaching experience in English. Lastly, the third participant, Mrs. Ana, is 40 years old and has ten years of teaching experience in English. The utilization of

pseudonyms serves as a means to safeguard the privacy of the research participants and their perspectives on student-related matters and perceived effective strategies. According to Allen and Wiles (2016), pseudonyms are fictitious names that researchers or authors frequently use to protect the confidentiality of participants.

In order to avoid bias, the researchers reflected on their own biases and minimized their influence on the selection process and data interpretation.

The data utilized for the purpose of this research were gathered by means of conducting interviews, specifically one-on-one, in-depth interviews. This particular method enables a focused investigation of individual perspectives on events that are associated with a restricted range of subjects or themes (Meurer et al., 2007). Furthermore, the researchers assert that this approach to data collection fosters a greater sense of intimacy compared to the utilization of focus groups.

The researchers employed an interview guideline as the research instrument (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). This guideline facilitated the systematic and structured questioning of participants. It encompassed three key inquiries pertaining to the research topic: identification of students' awareness regarding challenges in learning English grammar, exploration of the difficulties encountered by students in learning English grammar, and implementation of novel strategies to address these challenges.

The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to elicit more comprehensive information and explanations from the participants regarding the topic under investigation, given that it is the participants' native language. Data saturation was reached when collecting additional data no longer provided new or relevant information to further enrich the findings and conclusions of the study.

After the data collection process, which involved conducting interviews with participants, the subsequent phase involved the analysis of the collected data. The purpose of this analysis was to identify and address the research questions at hand. The various stages of data analysis encompassed the transcription of the gathered information, a process that ensured accuracy and reliability, followed by member checking, which involved verifying the data with the participants themselves (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Lastly, the data were subjected to coding, a systematic categorization process that facilitated the extraction of meaningful insights.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The awareness in acknowledging and identifying students' difficulties

The initial question presented to the participants investigated their awareness of the challenges encountered by students in acquiring proficiency in English grammar. All three participants recognized the importance of identifying the challenges their students encounter in learning English grammar.

"I am aware that I need to recognize things that might hinder the absorption of knowledge I convey to my students regarding English grammar. Without the awareness I cultivate, I would just continue teaching until all the material outlined in the syllabus for one semester is completed. The purpose is to identify beforehand what makes my students struggle in learning grammar." (Ani)

"Previously, I taught according to the syllabus. However, eventually, I found out that most of the material I delivered was not understood by my students. Eventually, I realized that the strategies I used needed to be reassessed. I saw that my awareness of the difficulties experienced by my students needed to be addressed first, and I should not prioritize myself without knowing what my students feel." (Ana)

"I realize that English has a different grammar structure than Indonesian. Therefore, I have to anticipate that it is likely that my students will encounter difficulties. I have to know that with the exercises I give from the material I have presented, whether they can easily complete them or not." (Dera)

Teachers' awareness of recognizing the difficulties experienced by their students significantly influences the subsequent appropriate steps, such as changing strategies to better align with students' abilities and psychology (Karunanayake et al., 2020). Without the awareness to identify students' weaknesses first, teachers might apply the wrong strategies in teaching their subjects. As expressed by Ana, she had to reassess the strategies used in teaching her students after realizing that the previous strategies were not suitable.

In other words, awareness of students' weaknesses in learning, including difficulties in understanding the material provided by the teacher, becomes crucial in planning appropriate interventions, namely suitable learning strategies (Kızılelma, Tuğba & Bağdat, Osman & Taştepe, Mehtap., 2023). With awareness to identify the

difficulties experienced by students in absorbing the material, learning becomes more directed, not solely based on completing all the syllabus material during one semester of instruction.

The challenges faced by students in mastering English grammar

The second research question of this study pertains to the challenges encountered by students in learning grammar, as observed by teachers. Through interviews, two primary difficulties were identified that students face during the process of learning grammar. These findings were derived from the first-hand experiences of English teachers, particularly in relation to students' acquisition of English grammar. According to the teachers, the following problems exist:

Lack of exposure to English

The participants indicated that one of the issues students face is the lack of exposure to the English language. This lack of exposure stems from English not being the students' first language, resulting in a limited background knowledge in learning English. They expressed that this difficulty is evident when students struggle with grammar concepts.

"They usually come from primary schools that have not taught English. Therefore, learning English, especially grammar, becomes very challenging for them. This also makes them fearful of learning English." (Ani)

"The exposure to English they receive is very limited. English is a skill that needs to be honed every day. However, in reality, English lesson has very few hours, so they are not adequately exposed. The grammar taught will be quickly forgotten because they do not practice it." (Ana)

"English is not a primary subject that must be practiced every day. So, students learn English with limited time. The repetition of lessons is minimal, resulting in inadequate exposure." (Dera)

The duration of students' exposure to the target language significantly affects the effectiveness of language teaching and learning. Exposure in this context pertains to the amount of time individuals spend engaging with the language through oral or written means, encompassing both formal and informal communication (Kozhevnikova, Elena, 2014). Within this exposure, individuals may assume either an active or passive role.

The absence of exposure to a particular subject has the potential to generate sentiments of incompetence or lack of interest in engaging with it (Rathnayake, 2013). For example, individuals who lack proficiency in the English language may exhibit a tendency to express disinterest in working or being in an English-speaking environment. Exposure aids individuals in becoming familiar with a subject, thereby enabling them to effectively overcome obstacles such as language acquisition, such as learning English.

Lack of motivation

All three participants agreed that the absence of intrinsic motivation to acquire knowledge and skills poses a considerable impediment that significantly contributes to the overall failure of the educational system. This particular issue is intricately intertwined with the disinclination to engage in the acquisition of a complex subject matter, specifically the intricacies of English grammar.

"They show a lack of motivation to learn English, especially grammar. When I am teaching, their faces tend to reflect anxiety. Perhaps they want the class to end as soon as possible." (Ani)

"The most crucial thing in learning is motivation. It is challenging to obtain from my students when they are learning English. Actually, they want to be able to speak English because they watch famous movies like Avengers, Spider-Man, and others, and these movies use English. However, when they find it difficult to learn this language, their enthusiasm diminishes." (Ana)

"Their motivation is very low. They are not interested in grammar lessons. They are lazy to memorize the given formulas, especially since they don't memorize vocabulary. As a result, they are reluctant to learn English. It seems like they are facing a heavy burden. Sometimes, this also causes my teaching motivation to decline." (Dera)

There has been consistent emphasis on the considerable challenges encountered in learning a foreign language (Akbari, 2015). Motivation is identified as one such challenge. Contrary to the notion that there has been minimal exploration of foreign language learning at the university level from a motivational perspective, this issue has captured the attention of numerous scholars. The motivation to learn a foreign language is intricate and may be influenced by various factors

(Galishnikova, E., 2014). One clear factor observed in the interview results with participants here is the difficulty felt by students in mastering English grammar. This makes the students reluctant to learn English, resulting in low motivation.

The teachers' effective strategies in teaching grammar

After comprehending the challenges encountered by the students, the participants initiated a contemplation process to devise a potentially superior pedagogical approach compared to the previous one, which primarily relied on the sequence of 'explaining, assessing comprehension, and concluding with exercises.' Upon discovering that the previous strategy resulted in a decline in students' motivation to learn, the participants ultimately devised multiple strategies with the objective of rekindling students' enthusiasm towards acquiring proficiency in English grammar.

Guided spoken sentence construction

Ani discovered an effective way to help her students understand English grammar, namely by using *guided conversation*. In this strategy, Ani also adopted the Preview-View-Review (PVR) strategy. The specific actions undertaken by Ani encompassed the following steps: Writing sentences in Indonesian (a); Translating them into English (b); Explaining grammar concepts (c); Providing vocabulary along with pronunciation (d); Guiding some students to articulate sentences with the given vocabulary (e); Asking students to practice on their own (f); Pairing students with each other for practice (g); Requesting each student to say two sentences using the new grammar and vocabulary; Inquiring about students' feelings during the learning session (h); Asking students to find new vocabulary and its pronunciation on the internet and practice at home to be checked in the next session (i).

In addition, through this strategy, Ani observed changes in her students, as they showed increased enthusiasm and interest in learning English, including grammar:

“When students are asked to be creative when they can't, it can demotivate them to learn. So, I think that when I guide them to learn little by little, but I'm sure they understand, the learning I provide will be more meaningful. They are more confident in expressing sentences with correct grammar. Maybe in the first stage, they just recognize and then imitate. However, that's much

better than them staying silent and not understanding at all. The PVR strategy also gives me an understanding that students will comprehend the material better when they first understand the context.” (Ani)

An appropriate teaching strategy enhances students' understanding (Safrani, 2013). One of these strategies is guided learning, where the teacher guides students to practice as demonstrated by the teacher (Klimova, 2014). Combined with the Preview View Review (PVR) strategy, guided learning, in this case, learning grammar with guided spoken sentence construction, becomes a simple yet suitable teaching strategy in Ani's classroom.

The strategy of Preview View Review is one of several dual-language teaching approaches employed to assist students in establishing connections between the target language and their native language (Williamson, 2017). This strategy supports bilingual learners by offering a preview and review of the lesson content in the students' dominant language. The emphasis is on building a cognitive framework and summarizing learning in the dominant language, without direct translation. While most instruction occurs in the target language, this strategy enhances understanding by incorporating elements in the students' primary language.

Utilization of educational games

Ana expressed her decision to utilize games as a means to enhance her students' motivation and interest in learning English grammar. Dera further emphasized the importance of incorporating grammar practice into language acquisition. According to Dera, traditional exercises, such as filling in missing words in sentences, play a vital role in reinforcing knowledge. However, they can easily become tedious for students. Moreover, these exercises often fail to instil confidence in students' oral proficiency with new language structures. Consequently, it is crucial to carefully select appropriate games that capture students' attention.

“I use various games to capture students' attention first. For instance, I write the names of students on the whiteboard, and then I show pictures, such as people walking, running, eating, and so on, asking them to write the words (walking, running, etc.) in both Indonesian and English. For example, I show a picture of a child eating. I ask them to write the word 'eating' and say one name added with 'is' with the meaning,

for instance, 'Tini sedang makan' and 'Tini is eating'. Initially, I only use five vocabulary words and repeat them until all my students understand." (Ana)

"Actually, I don't teach grammar with games, but I try to start my lessons with simple games. It turns out that this method is quite effective in attracting the attention of my students." (Dera)

Teaching English grammar is often perceived as a daunting task for both educators and students (Ajaj, 2022). However, incorporating elements of fun and play into the learning process can be an effective and enjoyable approach. The use of games in teaching English grammar has been shown to contribute to a more engaging and effective learning experience (Lilić & Bratož, 2019). These games offer several benefits, including increased engagement, motivation, contextual learning, repetition in an enjoyable manner, and promotion of communication. Examples of grammar games, such as Grammar Bingo, Sentence Relay, and Grammar Jeopardy, are provided to illustrate the practical application of this approach.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research paper delved into the various perspectives and experiences of teachers when considering the complexity of teaching and learning grammar. The comprehensive exploration of this topic has shed light on a multitude of valuable insights. The findings derived from this study unequivocally demonstrate that teachers exhibit awareness and astuteness in discerning the specific challenges that their students encounter in the process of mastering grammar. These challenges, as elucidated by the research, predominantly emanate from the students' restricted exposure to the English language and their inherent lack of motivation. It is imperative to acknowledge and address these underlying issues in order to facilitate a more effective and efficient learning environment for students.

To address the aforementioned challenges, teachers utilized effective strategies in their instructional practices. One such strategy involves employing guided spoken sentence construction exercises, wherein students are guided through the process of constructing sentences orally. This approach not only offers a structured framework for learning grammar but also serves to make the learning process more engaging and enjoyable for students. Additionally, teachers incorporate the use of games as another effective strategy. These

games not only provide a fun and interactive way for students to learn grammar but also serve to reinforce their understanding and application of grammar rules. By encouraging active participation and providing ample opportunities for practice, teachers are able to effectively enhance students' comprehension and utilization of grammar rules.

Thus, through the implementation of these strategies, teachers are able to effectively address the challenges associated with grammar instruction and facilitate students' overall learning experience.

Overall, this research emphasizes the significance and utmost value of teachers' awareness, their adeptness in discerning and pinpointing student difficulties, and the strategies they employ to better enhance the students' understanding of grammar lessons.

It is imperative for educators to recognize and acknowledge the distinctive needs of their students, and by doing so, they can implement effective teaching methods. Consequently, teachers assume a pivotal and indispensable role in not only facilitating but also fostering the acquisition and mastery of grammar skills among their students.

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