

Measuring The First-Year Students' Ability of English Study Program on English Grammar in Academic Year 2023/2024

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Abstract

This study investigated the grammar proficiency of first-year students enrolled in the English Study Program during the 2023/2024 academic year. A quantitative descriptive approach with a post-test-only design was employed, involving 22 participants. Data were collected through a standardized 30-item multiple-choice test that assessed 17 key grammar topics, including tenses, passive voice, conditionals, and relative pronouns. The results indicated that students achieved a mean score of 45.14, categorized as "poor" according to the university's academic guidebook. None of the participants reached the "good" category threshold of 71, with scores ranging from 20 to 69. Topic-specific analysis revealed inconsistencies in performance, with only six test items correctly answered by 72% of students. The most challenging topics identified were causative verbs, conditionals, and gerunds, which require higher-order thinking skills, such as understanding sentence structure and contextual usage. Further analysis showed that students from state schools outperformed their peers from private schools, with mean scores of 52.8 and 38.75, respectively, although neither group met the threshold for "good" proficiency. These findings suggest significant gaps in students' grammar knowledge, particularly in complex topics, and raise concerns about the effectiveness of current teaching methods.

INTRODUCTION

Grammar is the backbone of effective communication, providing the structural foundation for constructing meaningful sentences. It is integral to mastering the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—yet remains a significant challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Differences in linguistic structures between native languages and English often hinder the acquisition process.

Despite its critical role, grammar remains a common stumbling block for students in the English Study Program. Past studies, including Raja (2021), indicate minimal improvement in grammar proficiency after a semester of instruction. Such findings raise concerns about the efficacy

of current teaching methods and underline the need for a comprehensive evaluation of students' grammar abilities.

The complexity of English grammar arises from its nuanced rules and exceptions, which can be particularly daunting for EFL learners. As Ellis (2006) highlights, understanding grammar requires both declarative knowledge (knowing rules) and procedural knowledge (applying rules in context), yet traditional teaching methods often emphasize the former. This disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical application underscores the ongoing difficulties students face in mastering grammar.

At the tertiary level, grammar proficiency is critical for academic success, particularly for students enrolled in English Study Programs. However, research has revealed that despite structured grammar instruction, students often demonstrate minimal progress. For instance, Raja (2021) found that after a semester of instruction, students exhibited only slight improvements in their ability to use grammar effectively. This raises important questions about the efficacy of teaching approaches currently employed and calls for a comprehensive evaluation of students' grammar abilities and the curriculum design supporting their learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Several factors contribute to the challenges faced by EFL learners. One of the primary issues is the reliance on traditional grammar instruction, such as drills and isolated exercises, which fail to foster meaningful learning. Adisutrisno (2008) emphasizes the need for grammar test items that not only assess knowledge but also aid in learning. However, many assessments are designed for rote memorization, leaving students unable to transfer knowledge to communicative contexts.

Moreover, linguistic interference from a student's native language often complicates the acquisition of English grammar rules. Krashen and Terrell (1985) argue that natural language acquisition methods, which prioritize meaningful input over explicit grammar instruction, may address this issue by reducing cognitive overload. Nonetheless, balancing explicit grammar teaching with naturalistic methods remains a challenge for educators.

This study aimed to address critical gaps in grammar teaching and learning within the context of first-year EFL learners in an English Study Program. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Assess whether students meet the university's "good" category threshold for grammar proficiency.
2. Identify specific grammar topics that pose the greatest challenges to students.

The findings of this study have the potential to inform improvements in both curriculum design and teaching strategies. For instance, integrating task-based and communicative approaches (Wilkins, 1983) alongside explicit grammar instruction could enhance learning outcomes. Additionally, incorporating formative assessments that align with learning objectives (Gronlund, 1985) may provide educators with valuable insights into student progress, enabling timely interventions.

Ultimately, understanding the nuances of grammar acquisition and addressing students' challenges can significantly improve their overall language proficiency. As Seely (2000) notes, effective grammar instruction is not only about teaching rules but also about empowering learners to communicate with clarity and confidence in diverse contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive design to evaluate the grammar proficiency of first-year students enrolled in the English Study Program. A descriptive approach was chosen to provide a detailed analysis of students' performance on specific grammar topics and identify areas where they struggle the most. This design allowed the researchers to objectively measure and categorize students' abilities based on their test scores.

Participants

The participants consisted of 22 first-year students from a mix of private and state high schools who had recently enrolled in the English Study Program. These students were selected as they represent a diverse background in terms of prior exposure to English grammar instruction, making them an ideal sample for understanding the grammar proficiency levels of incoming university students.

Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a standardized 30-item multiple-choice test designed to assess students' knowledge of 17 essential grammar topics. These topics included fundamental aspects such as tenses, passive voice, conditionals, and relative pronouns, which are critical for effective language use. The test was constructed to provide a comprehensive evaluation of students' grammar proficiency while adhering to standardized testing principles for validity and reliability.

Data Analysis

Student performance was analyzed using the scoring criteria outlined in the university's academic guidebook. Test scores were categorized into proficiency levels: "poor" (<46), "fair" (46-70), "good" (71-80), and "excellent" (81-100). This categorization facilitated a clear understanding of students' grammar abilities and highlighted the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the "good" category threshold. Additionally, an item-by-item analysis was conducted to pinpoint specific grammar topics that posed the greatest challenges to the participants, providing valuable insights for curriculum improvements.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The overall test performance revealed significant challenges in grammar proficiency among the participants, with an average score of 45.14 categorized as "poor." None of the students reached the "good" category threshold of 71, highlighting a critical gap in their grammar mastery. The highest score achieved was 69, while the lowest was 20, indicating a wide range of abilities within the group. Topic-specific performance showed inconsistencies, as only six items out of the 17 grammar topics were correctly answered by 72% of students, reflecting limited understanding across most areas. These results underscore the need for targeted interventions to address gaps in students' grammar knowledge.

Table 1. Detailed Summary of the Performance Across Each Grammar Topic.

Grammar Topic	Correct Answer Rate	Difficulty Level
Causative Verbs	31%	High
Conditionals	45%	High
Gerunds	40%	High
Relative Pronouns	59%	Moderate
Passive Voice	59%	Moderate
Tenses	45%	High

The analysis of school background revealed that students from state schools outperformed those from private schools, with mean scores of 52.8 and 38.75, respectively. Despite this difference,

both groups failed to meet the "good" category threshold, emphasizing a widespread need for improvement in grammar instruction regardless of school type.

The most challenging grammar topics identified were causative verbs, conditionals, and gerunds. These topics require higher-order thinking skills, such as the ability to understand complex sentence structures and contextual usage, which are often difficult for beginner students to master. The difficulties in these areas suggest that current instructional methods may not adequately address the cognitive demands of these topics.

These findings underscore several pedagogical implications for enhancing grammar instruction. First, curriculum refinement is essential to focus on the practical application of grammar rules within meaningful contexts to promote deeper understanding. Second, frequent formative assessments can provide ongoing insights into students' progress, enabling teachers to address learning gaps promptly. Finally, the use of interactive methods, such as group tasks and role-playing activities, can make grammar learning more engaging and facilitate better comprehension by integrating theory with practice.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that first-year students have not yet achieved an adequate level of grammar proficiency, as evidenced by their mean score of 45.14, which falls within the "poor" category. This indicated a significant gap in their foundational grammar skills. Additionally, key grammar topics such as causative verbs, gerunds, and conditionals were identified as particularly challenging for students, suggesting a need for targeted interventions in these areas. To address these issues, the study emphasizes the importance of implementing effective teaching strategies that focus on practical and contextual grammar instruction. Moreover, structured feedback mechanisms are crucial to helping students identify and overcome their weaknesses, ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes.

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