

Exploring Grammar Learning Needs and Challenges: Insights from an Online Discussion Forum

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Abstract

This research article explores the grammar learning needs and challenges faced by English language learners through an analysis of questions collected from the online discussion forum. The forum, created by a group of researchers at Universitas Negeri Medan, serves as a platform for learners to seek guidance and support in their grammar learning journey. By conducting qualitative content analysis on 19 questions specifically related to grammar, common themes and patterns regarding grammar challenges were identified. The findings highlight areas of difficulty such as Subject-Verb Agreement, Direct and Indirect Speech, Punctuation (Hyphen usage), Relative Clauses, Understanding "Neither" and "Either", Verb Tenses, Passive Voice, Direct Quotations vs. Paraphrasing in Academic Writing. Addressing these challenges through targeted explanations, examples, and recommendations can assist educators and language instructors in supporting learners in overcoming grammar difficulties and improving overall language proficiency. The insights derived from this study contribute to the development of effective instructional strategies tailored to learners' specific needs.

Keywords: English grammar difficulty; Indonesian learners; online forum; linguistic disparities

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Introduction

Effective grammar instruction is pivotal for language learning, offering learners essential tools for accurate and efficient communication. Despite its importance, learners often face challenges in mastering grammar concepts, necessitating educators and language professionals to comprehend these hurdles and tailor instructional strategies to meet learners' specific needs (Ellis, 2006). A solid grasp of grammar is crucial for active language skills, especially in academic and professional settings, where clear expression and accurate information conveyance are paramount. English proficiency assessments such as IELTS allocate a significant 25% of their evaluation to grammar mastery in speaking and writing, underscoring its importance in gauging language proficiency. Moreover, in the workplace, employers increasingly emphasize strong grammar skills during job interviews, recognizing that applicants who articulate themselves coherently and demonstrate good writing skills are more likely to succeed (Rossiter, 2021). Furthermore, grammar proficiency significantly impacts comprehension in listening and reading, highlighting its multifaceted role in language proficiency (Hagen et al., 2022, p. 2; Steinlen, 2017, p. 420).

In recent years, online discussion forums have emerged as valuable platforms for language learners to seek guidance, clarification, and support in their language learning journey such as Brainly, Ruang Guru, etc. Related to such forums, a group of researchers at Universitas Negeri Medan created a forum where everyone can ask questions regarding English grammar. The forum created is called unimedenglishforum.com. In this forum, students acted as those who answer the questions from the member of the forum. This forum was designed only to accommodate English grammar discussions as EFL learners find grammar topics challenging (Mustafa, 2021). After

created, the forum had gathered grammar-related questions posed by forum members. By examining the questions, we can gain valuable insights into the specific areas where learners struggle and identify common misconceptions or difficulties that arise during grammar acquisition. Therefore, this research article aims to explore the grammar learning needs and challenges faced by language learners based on an in-depth analysis of questions collected from the online discussion forum.

Analyzing the questions from the online forum provides a unique opportunity to understand the real-time concerns and uncertainties that learners encounter in their grammar learning process. It allows us to go beyond theoretical assumptions and gain a practical understanding of learners' needs. By addressing these needs, educators and language professionals can create more effective instructional materials, strategies, and interventions to support learners in their grammar learning journey (Toci, 2014, p. 118).

The analysis of the questions will involve categorizing them into relevant grammar topics or concepts, enabling us to identify the most common grammar challenges learners face. By delving into these challenges and providing explanations, examples, and clarifications, we can address misconceptions and enhance learners' understanding of grammar rules and usage. Additionally, by identifying the specific learning needs expressed through the questions they asked, we can offer practical recommendations and instructional strategies tailored to address these needs effectively as (Ajaj, 2022, p. 45) pointed out that difficulties in learning grammar can be traced to the inappropriate curriculum. Therefore, such findings about regarding which grammar topics regarded as difficult by the students can be used as a reference to designing appropriate curriculum.

There are many benefits of using learner-generated questions in language learning contexts (King, 1990). Learner-generated questions can promote active engagement, critical thinking, and deep understanding. By analyzing the questions from the online forum, we can tap into these benefits and provide learners with the support they need to overcome grammar challenges and develop their language skills.

The findings of this research article have important implications for grammar instruction. By understanding the grammar learning needs and challenges faced by learners, educators can develop learner-centered approaches that promote engagement, address misconceptions, and enhance overall language proficiency (Ellis, 2006). The recommendations and instructional strategies derived from this analysis can inform curriculum design, teaching materials, and pedagogical practices, ensuring that learners receive the support they need to develop grammatical accuracy and fluency.

In summary, this research article aims to shed light on the grammar learning needs and challenges faced by language learners by analyzing questions gathered from an online discussion forum. By addressing these needs and challenges, educators and language professionals can design more effective grammar instruction, promote learners' language development, and foster successful language learning outcomes.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach to investigate the grammar learning needs and challenges encountered by language learners, drawing insights from questions posed on an online discussion platform. The data for this research article was collected from unimedenglishforum.com, dedicated to English grammar learning. The forum served as a valuable platform for learners to engage in collaborative learning, seek clarifications, and exchange knowledge on various grammar topics. A total of 30 questions were gathered from unspecified members of the forum, but for the purpose of this study, only the 19 questions directly related to grammar were used as the primary data source. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select a representative sample of questions from unimedenglishforum.com for analysis. The sample encompassed the 19 questions that demonstrated relevance to grammar topics, clarity of

expression, and represented a variety of difficulty levels and language proficiency levels among the learners. Qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the collected questions from unimedenglishforum.com. Qualitative content analysis is an autonomous method that constructs categories, descriptive themes, and themes of meaning from qualitative data, using varying levels of abstraction and interpretation (Graneheim et al., 2017). This approach involved a systematic examination and interpretation of the common grammar challenges expressed in the selected 19 questions. The questions were carefully reviewed, and their content was examined to identify the underlying grammar issues or uncertainties conveyed by the learners. Through the analysis of the 19 questions from unimedenglishforum.com, common themes and patterns related to grammar learning needs and challenges were identified. These themes were labelled based on recurring grammar topics or concepts that learners found particularly challenging. The identification of themes provided insights into the specific areas of grammar that presented the greatest difficulties for learners.

Based on the identified themes from unimedenglishforum.com, the researchers provided detailed explanations, examples, and clarifications for each grammar challenge or question. These explanations were grounded in relevant grammar rules, usage guidelines, and considerations of language proficiency levels. Furthermore, recommendations for instructional strategies and interventions were formulated to effectively address the identified challenges and cater to learners' specific needs. It is important to acknowledge that the findings of this study are based on a relatively small sample of 19 questions from unimedenglishforum.com. As such, the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of English language learners may be limited. However, the qualitative analysis approach allowed for a detailed exploration of the specific grammar challenges expressed in the selected questions, providing valuable insights into learners' needs and difficulties in relation to grammar learning.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present the analysis of the findings derived from the linguistic analysis of 20 language-related queries gathered from a prominent language-learning forum. The aim is to unravel the intricacies of grammar-related challenges faced by Indonesian learners transitioning to English. The discussions are structured around eight prominent grammar topics that emerged from the queries, providing a detailed exploration of each area. The findings offer valuable insights into the specific linguistic nuances, cultural influences, and educational context that contribute to the language-learning experiences of Indonesian learners.

Based on the questions asked in the forum, there are 8 grammar topics identified. They are:

1. Subject-Verb Agreement
2. Direct and Indirect Speech
3. Punctuation (Hyphen usage)
4. Relative Clauses
5. Understanding "Neither" and "Either"
6. Verb Tenses
7. Passive Voice
8. Direct Quotations vs. Paraphrasing in Academic Writing

The following is the findings and the discussion of each grammar topic asked:

Subject-Verb Agreement

Members of the forum have raised questions about Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA), a crucial aspect of English grammar. SVA involves adjusting the verb to match the subject's number and person, ensuring grammatical accuracy in sentences (Ahmed et al., 2022). Two specific questions were posed to gauge understanding in this area:

1. "Much of the money that people earn _____ for consumption.
 - a. are allocated
 - b. is allocated
 - c. allocated
 - d. allocating

2. Two of the most common characteristics of a hardworking individual _____ consistency and perseverance.
 - a. is
 - b. are
 - c. will be
 - d. are being

The first question assesses learners' shows that the learner did not have the competency in selecting the appropriate verb form for the singular subject "much of the money," while the second indicated that they did not have the ability to choose the correct form for the compound subject "Two of the most common characteristics."

Analyzing why these questions were posed reveals insights into the challenges faced by Indonesian English learners. While Indonesian does involve some agreement between subjects and verbs, it lacks the intricacies present in English. The grammatical structures of the two languages differ significantly, with Indonesian not employing subject-verb changes based on number as commonly observed in English. Moreover, the absence of grammatical gender in Indonesian contrasts with the gender-specific pronouns in English, demanding precise agreement with the subject.

The complexity of English verb tenses, incorporating various forms and changes, adds an additional layer of difficulty for learners accustomed to the more contextual and time-focused approach in Indonesian. Pluralization in English, both for nouns and corresponding verb forms, may prove more intricate than the straightforward process in Indonesian. Understanding the impact of relative pronouns in complex English sentences, such as "that," "which," or "who," further contributes to the challenge.

The challenges in mastering subject-verb agreement for Indonesian learners extend to limited exposure to English, cultural differences influencing expression, and the practice of translating directly from Indonesian. These factors collectively hinder the seamless application of subject-verb agreement rules, making it an essential area for focused attention and targeted learning strategies in English language acquisition.

Direct and Indirect Speech

In the forum, a notable inquiry surfaced regarding the use of direct and indirect speech. The question, "Can direct and indirect speech be used interchangeably, or are there specific situations where one is more appropriate than the other?" reflects a learner's interest in understanding the nuances of reported speech in English. Contrary to potential challenges arising from differences between Indonesian and English, the question seems motivated by a pursuit of proficiency and effective communication skills in English.

This inquiry is indicative of a learner's recognition of the strategic use of direct and indirect speech as tools for precise and contextually appropriate communication. The learner appears to be navigating beyond the mere structural disparities between the two forms and is delving into the pragmatic considerations that guide their application. This engagement suggests a commendable effort to not only comprehend the grammatical aspects but also to master the art of conveying messages effectively in different communicative settings.

Moreover, the learner's interest in the nuanced use of direct and indirect speech aligns with the broader goal of language proficiency development. The ability to discern when to employ

each form showcases a desire for a deeper understanding of language conventions, contributing to enhanced language skills.

In essence, the question on direct and indirect speech demonstrates an active engagement with the intricacies of English grammar and a conscious effort to refine communication strategies. This pursuit goes beyond linguistic challenges and reflects a commendable commitment to mastering the subtleties of the English language for effective and contextually appropriate expression.

Punctuation (Hyphen Usage)

A distinct inquiry within the forum pertains to punctuation, specifically focusing on the usage of hyphens. The question, "Kapan kita pakai tanda hubung (-) dalam sebuah frasa?" (Translation: "When do we use a hyphen (-) in a phrase?"), indicates a learner's curiosity about the nuanced application of hyphens in English.

Unlike some grammar concepts that might pose challenges due to differences between Indonesian and English, this question appears to stem from a genuine interest in understanding the principles of punctuation. The learner seeks clarification on the specific contexts or rules guiding the use of hyphens within phrases.

Possible motivations for this inquiry include:

1. **Clarity in Written Expression**
The learner may be interested in ensuring clarity and precision in written communication. Hyphens play a crucial role in eliminating ambiguity and enhancing readability.
2. **Grammatical Proficiency**
This question suggests a learner's proactive approach to honing grammatical proficiency. Mastery of punctuation rules contributes to overall language skills and effective written communication.
3. **Stylistic Considerations**
Understanding when to use hyphens involves considerations of style. The learner might be exploring how hyphens contribute to specific writing styles, such as formal or informal language.
4. **Avoiding Misinterpretation**
The question reflects an awareness that incorrect hyphen usage can lead to misinterpretation. The learner likely aims to refine their language skills to convey intended meanings accurately.

This inquiry, therefore, goes beyond a mere structural concern and delves into the practical and stylistic aspects of punctuation. It suggests a learner's commitment to developing a nuanced understanding of how punctuation contributes to effective written communication in English. The response to this question has the potential to enhance the learner's overall writing proficiency by addressing the subtleties of hyphen usage.

Relative Clause

Another topic found in the forum was about relative clause. A relative clause in English is a clause that modifies a noun or noun phrase and is introduced by a relative pronoun linking it to its antecedent (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2019). A forum member inquired about the use of relative clauses in this question, asking for an answer.

"In the realm of psychological theory, Margaret F. Washburn was a dualist _____ that motor phenomena have an essential role in psychology.

- a. who she believed
- b. who believed
- c. believed
- d. who did she believe."

This is another question that possibly arises as the concept of relative clause is different in Indonesian Language and in English. In Bahasa Indonesia, relative clauses are typically formed using relative pronouns, but the structure and markers may differ from English. One common way to introduce a relative clause in Bahasa Indonesia is by using the word "yang."

Here are some examples:

- English: The book that is on the table is interesting.
Bahasa Indonesia: Buku yang ada di atas meja itu menarik.
- English: The person who is speaking is my friend.
Bahasa Indonesia: Orang yang sedang berbicara itu adalah teman saya.
- English: The house which has a red door is for sale.
Bahasa Indonesia: Rumah yang memiliki pintu merah itu dijual.

In these examples, "yang" is used to introduce the relative clause, and it functions similarly to English relative pronouns like "that" or "who." However, the placement and structure of the relative clause in Bahasa Indonesia may differ, emphasizing the noun followed by the "yang" marker. This distinction in structure is one aspect that learners from Indonesia might need to adapt to when learning English relative clauses.

On the other hand, in English, Relative Clause is more intricate. English uses a variety of relative pronouns like "who," "which," and "that," each with specific use cases. The option to omit relative pronouns in English, especially in cases where they serve as the object of the relative clause, can be confusing for Indonesian learners who are accustomed to a more explicit structure. English often follows a Subject + Verb structure, while Indonesian might use a Verb + Subject structure. A study by Akmal, et al., (2020, p. 157) also suggested that adjective clause was a topic thought of to be difficult for Indonesian learners.

Understanding "Neither" and "Either"

Forum members have brought forth inquiries concerning the usage of "Neither" and "Either," delving into a nuanced aspect of English grammar. Both terms are pivotal in conveying negation and choices effectively, demanding a precise understanding of their application. The question asked is as follows:

"Saya tidak mengerti tentang neither dan either. Bisa gak saya diberikan penjelasan tentang topik ini?" (Translation: "I don't understand neither and either. Could you please provide an explanation about this topic?")

This question is about the learners' proficiency in utilizing "Neither" and "Either" to express disagreement and present choices, respectively. Analyzing the rationale behind these inquiries provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by Indonesian learners. The linguistic nuances of "Neither" and "Either" may not directly align with corresponding structures in Bahasa Indonesia, introducing a layer of complexity. The absence of clear equivalents in Indonesian for certain English terms, including these, can lead to ambiguity in translations.

Negation structures in Indonesian might not mirror those in English, impacting the accurate deployment of "Neither." Additionally, the idiomatic use of "Neither" and "Either" in various contexts, such as responding to negative statements or presenting alternatives, might be unfamiliar territory for Indonesian learners. The concept of agreement and disagreement expressed by "Neither" and "Either" can be nuanced, adding to the intricacy. Learners might find it challenging to grasp the subtleties of these terms in English, especially in situations involving choices or preferences. Language transfer, a common phenomenon among learners, may pose a hurdle. Relying on native language structures, learners may struggle to navigate the distinct idiomatic expressions and nuances embedded in the usage of "Neither" and "Either" in English. To overcome these challenges, targeted explanations, examples, and interactive exercises are essential. Providing contextualized scenarios where "Neither" and "Either" are naturally employed

can aid in clarifying their nuanced meanings in different situations. These findings underscore the importance of focused attention and tailored learning strategies to enhance the comprehension and application of "Neither" and "Either" for Indonesian learners of English.

Tense

The inquiry posed in the forum, "Tolong dong dijelaskan tentang kapan kita pakai simple past dan kapan past continuous tense" (Please explain when can we use simple past tense and past continuous tense), reflects a learner's keen interest in comprehending the nuanced distinctions between "simple past" and "past continuous tense" in English. This curiosity arises from the inherent differences in how time relationships are expressed in Bahasa Indonesia and English.

1. Bahasa Indonesia's Approach to Tense

Bahasa Indonesia, being described as a "tense-less" language, contrasts with English in its approach to verb tense. In Indonesian, temporal relationships are often conveyed through time expressions, adverbs, and context, without a distinct alteration of verb forms. This foundational difference becomes a potential source of confusion for Indonesian learners transitioning to English.

2. Simple Past in Bahasa Indonesia

In Bahasa Indonesia, past events are signaled using specific time markers like "kemarin," "tadi," or "dulu." Verbs, however, remain unchanged, and the temporal information is reliant on these contextual cues, for example, "Saya pergi ke pasar kemarin." (I went to the market yesterday.)

3. Past Continuous Aspect in Bahasa Indonesia

Bahasa Indonesia lacks a direct equivalent to the continuous or progressive aspect found in English. Instead, the ongoing nature of an action is conveyed through contextual details, exemplified by the use of "sedang" (literally "is in the process of"). The example is "Mereka sedang makan ketika saya datang." (They were eating when I arrived.)

Passive voice

A prevalent topic in the forum discussion revolves around passive voice, as indicated by the following inquiry: "When do we use passive sentences, and how is it structured?". This query likely stems from the recognition that the concept of passive voice differs between English and Bahasa Indonesia, presenting challenges for Indonesian learners. These are key implications of the comparative analysis of passive voice concept in both languages:

1. Verb Structure:

English requires altering the subject and object positions and utilizing the past participle form for constructing a passive voice sentence.

In Bahasa Indonesia, passive voice is often denoted by markers like "di" or "oleh," with the verb itself undergoing no change.

2. Implicit Agent:

English typically mandates the specification of the agent (the action doer) in a passive construction, e.g., "The book was read by her."

Bahasa Indonesia allows omission of the agent in passive constructions without compromising grammatical correctness, resulting in a more neutral statement, e.g., "Buku dibaca."

3. Contextual Usage:

The utilization of passive voice may differ based on cultural and linguistic norms. English might exhibit a higher frequency of passive voice usage in specific contexts compared to Bahasa Indonesia.

4. Linguistic Structure:

Bahasa Indonesia is categorized as a "voiceless" language, lacking a distinct grammatical voice system. In contrast, English possesses both active and passive voice systems.

Understanding these distinctions is vital for learners navigating between the two languages. Despite both languages employing passive constructions, disparities in nuances, linguistic markers, and contextual appropriateness may require Indonesian learners of English to adapt their comprehension of the passive voice concept during the language acquisition process.

Direct Quotation and Paraphrasing in Academic Writing

The learner's inquiry about "When is it appropriate to use direct quotations versus paraphrasing in academic writing, and how should they be properly introduced and cited?" reflects a thoughtful engagement with the intricacies of academic writing. The question suggests a desire to navigate the balance between incorporating external sources and presenting original insights, which is fundamental in scholarly discourse. The learner appears to be cognizant of the importance of academic integrity, seeking clarity on the instances where direct quotations are warranted and when paraphrasing is more suitable. This curiosity might stem from a commitment to avoiding unintentional plagiarism and maintaining ethical writing practices.

In terms of English proficiency, the learner's ability to articulate a question of this nature implies a solid grasp of the language. The inquiry involves a nuanced understanding of academic writing conventions, requiring a command of vocabulary related to citation, introduction of quotes, and awareness of the appropriate contexts for direct quotations and paraphrasing. This level of inquiry suggests an intermediate to advanced proficiency in English, where the learner is engaged in refining their writing skills for academic contexts.

Based on the findings, it can be seen that significant portion of the questions posed by learners on the online forum appears to stem from the differences between the English and Indonesian grammar systems. This indeed suggests that native language affects the acquisition process of English (Aal, 2016). The linguistic variations, such as the absence of certain grammatical features in Bahasa Indonesia, create challenges for learners when transitioning to English. This includes differences in subject-verb agreement, tense structures, and the use of relative clauses, among other topics. The recurrent theme of linguistic disparities suggests that learners are grappling with the intricacies of English grammar, highlighting the impact of language transfer and the need for targeted support in addressing these distinctions. The other reason why the learners asked certain questions is because of the curiosity of a more advanced concept of language use.

Conclusion

The research findings and subsequent discussion offer a nuanced understanding of the grammar challenges encountered by Indonesian learners of English who contributed grammar-related questions in the forum, revealing insights that have implications for instructional design, language proficiency assessment, and broader language education strategies.

One notable observation is the recurrent theme of linguistic differences between Indonesian and English grammar systems, which significantly influence learners' comprehension and application of specific grammar topics. The absence of certain grammatical features in Bahasa Indonesia, such as complex tense structures and distinct subject-verb agreement rules, contributes to the challenges faced by learners transitioning to English. The analysis of individual grammar topics sheds light on unique challenges within each area. For instance, subject-verb agreement poses difficulties due to differences in gendered pronouns and pluralization structures. Similarly, the understanding of relative clauses is hindered by the distinct structures in Bahasa Indonesia, where markers like "yang" are used to introduce relative clauses. Cultural and contextual influences emerged as significant factors shaping learners' expressions and understanding of grammar concepts. Limited exposure to English, cultural nuances, and the influence of Bahasa Indonesia on expression contribute to challenges in mastering certain grammar topics. These influences highlight the importance of incorporating cultural and contextual considerations in English language instruction. The questions posed by learners reflect varying levels of English proficiency, indicating a diverse range of

concerns across foundational and advanced grammar concepts. Additionally, the findings emphasize the impact of learners' proficiency levels on their ability to navigate complex grammar concepts, such as using "neither" and "either" idiomatically.

The research has implications for instructional design, emphasizing the need for targeted support tailored to address specific challenges identified through learner-generated questions. Recommendations can be formulated to bridge the gap between linguistic differences, promote smoother transitions for Indonesian learners, and enhance grammar instruction and overall language proficiency.

To sum up the findings offer a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted nature of grammar challenges faced by Indonesian learners of English. These insights provide a foundation for informed, learner-centered instructional approaches and interventions that can contribute to more effective grammar learning outcomes.

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