

Teachers' Perception towards Difficulties in Teaching and Learning EFL Grammar

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Abstract

Some obstacles still come up in teaching and learning English grammar nowadays. Recognizing the difficulties that teachers and learners face helps teachers choose appropriate teaching options. The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perceptions of the difficulties they and learners face in teaching and learning EFL (English as a Foreign Language) grammar. Forty teachers in junior and senior high school in Metro participated in this study. All participants completed a questionnaire using five-point Likert-type to find out what the teachers' perceptions are concerning teaching and learning grammar. The data results were interpreted based on the mean scores. The result shows that the teachers and students still face many difficulties in teaching and learning grammar such as difficulty with implicit grammar instruction, difficulty to use the rule of grammar accurately in both written and spoken communication, difficult in using certain terms of grammatical terminology, difficulty to correct student errors of grammar within a spoken communicative context, difficulty in the use of authentic text, and difficulty with communicative activities. This finding hopefully may help the teacher in selecting appropriate teaching options that will suppress difficulties and problems for their learners and encourage students' learning of English grammar.

Keywords: teachers' perceptions, difficulties, teaching and learning grammar

Abstrak:

Beberapa kesulitan muncul dalam proses belajar mengajar bahasa Inggris saat ini. Sadar akan kesulitan guru dan siswa dalam mengajar dan belajar tata bahasa Inggris dapat membantu guru dalam memilih pilihan pengajaran yang tepat. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menyelidiki

persepsi guru mengenai kesulitan yang dihadapi oleh guru dan siswa dalam mengajar dan belajar tata bahasa EFL (English as a Foreign Language). Empat puluh guru SMP dan SMA di Metro berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Semua peserta mengisi kuesioner menggunakan skala tipe Likert untuk mengetahui bagaimana persepsi guru tentang pengajaran dan pembelajaran tata bahasa. Skor rata-rata digunakan untuk menginterpretasikan data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru dan siswa masih menghadapi banyak kesulitan dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran tata bahasa meliputi kesulitan dengan pengajaran tata bahasa secara implisit, sulit untuk menggunakan aturan tata bahasa secara akurat, baik dalam komunikasi tulisan maupun lisan, sulit dalam menggunakan istilah tata bahasa tertentu, kesulitan untuk memperbaiki kesalahan tata bahasa siswa dalam konteks komunikasi lisan, kesulitan dalam penggunaan teks otentik, dan kesulitan dengan aktifitas-aktifitas yang komunikatif. Temuan ini dapat membantu guru dalam memilih pilihan pengajaran yang tepat yang akan meminimalisir kesulitan dan masalah bagi siswa mereka dan mendorong pembelajaran tata bahasa Inggris siswa.

Kata kunci: persepsi guru, kesulitan, pengajaran dan pembelajaran tata bahasa

A. Introduction

After Independence Day in 1945, as determined by central government policy, English is the first foreign language taught in junior and senior high schools. English classes in Indonesia should enable students to express themselves by using the language. This ability should mean that the student is not only able to use the language to communicate with other people in everyday life, but also able to use the language well grammatically. Teaching approaches have been developed over the years.

According to Lee (2004), most Indonesian schools still face difficulties in teaching English grammar in Indonesia although some methods such as Grammar Translation Method (1945), Oral (1968), Audio-lingual Method(1975), and Communicative Language Teaching method (1984 and 1994) have been applied. The teachers are obliged to guide students with communicative activities unconsciously focus on grammar. In fact, some difficulties always appear in the teaching and learning grammar.

Being aware of the difficulties that teachers and learners face in teaching English grammar can help teachers choose appropriate teaching technique that minimize learners' difficulties and problems and facilitate students' learning. These difficulties can be obtained from the teachers' perception because the teacher is the planner of the class activity and the observer who knows how the teaching and learning process is.

Perception is generally what the individual see in the environment by seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and smelling and then it becomes the information that is interpreted. Robbins (2005) defines perception as the process by which individuals organize and interpret their sensory input to give meaning to their environment. According to B. von Haller Gilmer, perception is the process of understanding a situation, of adding meaningful associations to sensations. People see an object and it is understood and interpreted variously. So that, the teachers have also their perceptions especially in the process of teaching and learning in the classroom.

English teachers usually believe that teaching grammar explicitly will help students to provide the fundamental base in learning English grammar so that learners can build and apply knowledge in both written and oral English. According to them, having direct knowledge of grammar rules provides a sense of security. Perhaps a better approach is to think of grammar as one of the many language resources that help us communicate. We should understand how grammar relates to what we want to say or write, and how we expect others to explain our use of language and its emphasis.

According to Widdowson (1990: 86), grammar is not a constraining imposition but a liberating force: it frees us from a dependency on context and a purely lexical categorization of reality." Based on this definition, many learners and teachers tend to view grammar as a set of restrictions on what is allowed and disallowed in language use. While in the view of Larsen-Freeman

(2002:103), the conception of grammar is something that liberates rather than represses is one that is worth investigating.

According to Widdowson (1990:86), grammar is a liberating force, not a restrictive rudeness. Based on this definition, many learners and teachers tend to see grammar as a set of restrictions on what is and isn't allowed in the use of language. While in the view of Larsen-Freeman (2002:103), the notion of grammar that is liberating rather than oppressive deserves investigation.

According to Kacani, L. & Mangelli, S. (2013) in their study, difficulties in learning and teaching grammar is related to certain pedagogical issues. The first issue is about comprehension and production. DeKeyser and Sokalski (1996) argued that some grammatical structures are easy to understand but difficult to produce, while others are easy to produce but difficult to understand. The next problem is the complexity of grammatical features. Some researchers (DeKeyser, 1995; Ellis et al. 2009; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Spada & Lightbown, 2008) believe that some language forms (such as English articles) are simple in structure but very complex in function, because they have many different functions. (according to their identified noun types, situation and discourse context). In this case, complex features require complex interpretations, even using technical metalanguage (as generic/specific references or countable/uncountable nouns).

The third issue relates to linguistic form, which is the accurate use of a grammatical feature, semantic meaning, which is the comprehension of the message encoded by a lexical item or lexico-grammatical feature, and pragmatic use, which is the proper application of a lexico-grammatical feature in a context (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). According to Larsen-Freeman, a grammatical feature may be easy in relation to one aspect but complex in another. For example, English passive voice is easy to study but more difficult to use. Therefore, it is a challenge for FL learners to use grammatical structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately in specific communicative contexts.

The last issue is about implicit or explicit knowledge. Ellis (2006) makes a distinction between two senses of grammatical learning difficulties: the first is “the difficulty learners have in understanding a grammatical feature,” and the second is “the difficulty learners have in internalizing a grammatical feature so that they are able to use it accurately in communication” (p. 88). According to Ellis, a grammatical feature may be difficult to learn as explicit knowledge, but easy as implicit knowledge, and vice versa (Ellis et al. 2009, p. 164).

Grammatical difficulties in FL acquisition have also been discussed in relation to other factors, such as rule complexity, salience of a grammar form in the input, communicative force of a grammar form, learner's developmental stage, L1 transfer, and individual differences in language aptitude (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Burgess & Etherington, 2002). Previous research on student and teacher perceptions of grammatical language teaching and learning found different perceptions between students and teachers. Students prefer formal and explicit grammar instruction and error correction, whereas teachers prefer less grammatical communication activities (e.g. Schultz 1996, 2001; Spratt 1999; Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam 2011; Kacani & Mangelli 2013).

Aman (2020) found that teachers believe that grammar consists of rules for sentence formation and the use of appropriate tenses, and that grammar should focus on both form and meaning. Explicit instruction and discussion of grammar rules in the classroom is considered extremely important in helping students acquire English and develop their skill in writing. In addition to the necessity of grammar, a number of problems are also found in grammar teaching and learning, such as teachers spending a lot of time to give explicit grammar instruction in their classrooms; the teachers' belief that despite extensive grammar instruction, students were unable to transfer their knowledge of grammar to communicative use; the teachers faced difficulty in finding authentic and relevant teaching materials; some teachers mentioned

that the technicality of some grammar rules makes it very difficult to teach English grammar to elementary students.

Souisa & Yanuarius (2020) found that teachers used certain methods such as teaching grammar deductively, inductively, explicitly, implicitly, focused on form, and focused on meaning, and they still faced challenges in teaching grammar. The challenges faced by English teachers are the characteristics of students in terms of learning styles and attitudes, limitations in the reference of English teaching methods and trainings. Therefore, this study aims to find out the difficulties faced by teachers and students based on teachers' perceptions. By finding the difficulties in teaching and learning English grammar can hopefully help the teachers and curriculum designers in selecting appropriate teaching options or techniques especially in Lampung region since the previous research has not been done yet here.

B. Method

The study was designed to be descriptive quantitative using a questionnaire and the subjects responded each statement on a five-point Likert-type attitude scale (from 5 for "strongly agree" to 1 for "strongly disagree"). The researcher used SPSS to analyze the data. The study was carried out in Metro, Lampung. Ten schools were selected randomly. The subjects represented the context EFL instruction at different levels in Metro. The sample size was 40, with 20 middle school English teachers and 20 high school teachers. The number of subjects was greater than the minimum required to perform useful statistical analyzes according to Cohen and Manion (1994: 77).

The questionnaire used in this study, consisting of 20 items, is the questionnaire used by Burgess and Etherington (2002) in their study. Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam (2011) and Kacani & Mangelli (2013) also used this instrument in their research so that this instrument is considered to be reliant. The questionnaire was distributed to 40 English teachers in Metro. To interpret the data, the researcher used the mean score.

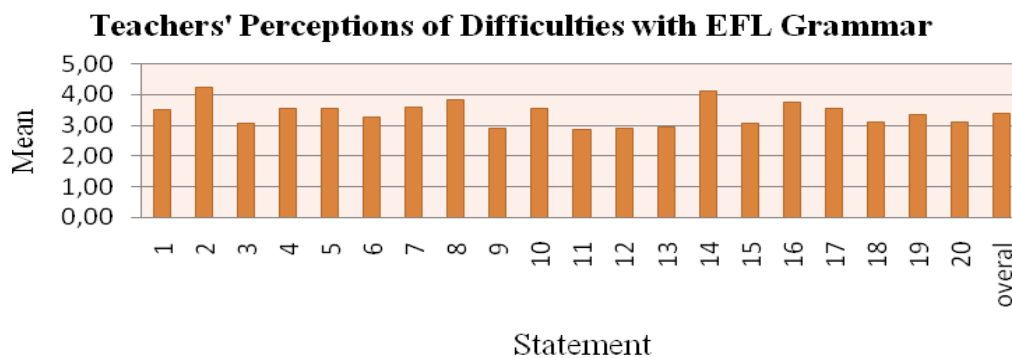
The questionnaire focused on the following pedagogical issues: 1) explicit grammar teaching (statement number 3, 4, 5, and 13), the transfer of declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge (statement number 1, 17, and 18), the use of grammatical terminology (statement number 14 and 19), error correction (statement number 15 and 16), problem-solving activities (statement number 2 and 20), the use of authentic texts for grammar teaching and learning (statement number 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12), the use of spoken and written communicative activities (statement number 17 and 18).

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Findings

Regarding the research objective, the result showed that the teachers and students still had many difficulties in teaching and learning grammar such as difficulty with implicit grammar instruction, difficulty to use the rule of grammar accurately in both written and spoken communication, difficult in using certain terms of grammatical terminology, difficulty to correct student errors of grammar within a spoken communicative context, difficulty in the use of authentic text, and difficulty with communicative activities. The overall mean of 3.39 and standard deviation of 4.658 from the spss results indicate that the teacher preference is fairly high to accept the difficulties in teaching and learning EFL grammar. It can be inferred that teachers and learners still face some problems in the classroom.

Figure 1. Teachers' Perceptions of Difficulties with EFL Grammar



The description on the teachers' perception can be seen from figure 1 above showing the illustration. The overall mean is above 3. It represents the tendency of the teachers' perception to agree on the difficulties in teaching and learning EFL grammar.

2. Discussion

The questionnaire includes some pedagogical issues in EFL grammar teaching and learning. These issues consist of explicit grammar teaching, the transfer of declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge, the use of grammatical terminology, error correction, problem-solving activities, the use of authentic texts for grammar teaching and learning, and the use of spoken and written communicative activities.

Table 1. Difficulties with EFL Grammar in term of Explicit Grammar Teaching

Item No.	Statement	Total (N)	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
3	My students expect teachers to present grammar points explicitly.	40	1	5	3.05	1.218
4	My students prefer to learn grammar from one sentence examples.	40	1	5	3.55	.986
5	My students prefer to find matches between meaning and structure for themselves.	40	2	5	3.55	.815
13	A lack of explicit grammar teaching leaves my students feeling insecure.	40	1	4	2.95	.876

The first pedagogical issue in EFL grammar is about explicit grammar teaching. From table 1, it is found that statement number 3 (My students expect teachers to present grammar explicitly) and statement number 13 (A lack of

explicit grammar teaching leaves my students feeling insecure) produced a mean score in the medium level (3.05 and 2.95). It means that teachers find their learners feel neutral in terms of explicit or implicit knowledge. It may be still confusing whether teaching in traditional grammar (explicit teaching) is better than in implicit teaching. Moreover, the recent curriculum demands the teachers to teach grammar implicitly and communicatively. As a result, it may be challenging to teach grammar in context without neglecting focus on form.

The responses of statement 5 (My students prefer to find matches between meaning and structure for themselves) resulted a mean score of 3.55 (see Table 1) which is fairly high. The perception of students' preference for an inductive method of learning grammar is not surprising even though the mean is not too high. The teachers may refer to learners' preference in learning certain grammatical structures inductively rather than deductively. The students can be more interested in some activities that lead to the grammar rules at the end of the class rather than in learning the rules at the beginning of the class activity.

Regarding to statement 4 (My students prefer to learn grammar from one-sentence examples), which refers to explicit grammar teaching, the mean score produced by all responses in the questionnaire is 3.55 (see Table 1). It indicates that the learners based on teachers' perception, still need explicit grammar teaching by learning from one-sentence examples. It means that the students need teaching the rule of grammar in details. The clear explanation is easily comprehended by all students with different ability. It indicates that the students face difficulty with implicit grammar instruction.

Table 2. Difficulties with EFL Grammar in term of Declarative and Procedural Knowledge

Item No.	Statement	Total (N)	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	My students find it difficult to transfer	40	1	5	3.50	1.086

17	their grammatical knowledge into communicative language use. My students find it difficult to improve the accuracy of their grammatical language within a totally communicative writing activity.	40	1	5	3.55	1.085
18	My students find it difficult to improve the accuracy of their grammatical language within a totally communicative speaking activity.	40	1	5	3.10	.900

The second pedagogical issue is about declarative and procedural knowledge. Statement 1 (My students find it difficult to transfer their grammatical knowledge into communicative language use), is determined teachers' beliefs regarding the possible transfer of declarative knowledge (i.e., knowledge about grammar) into procedural knowledge (i.e., ability to use that knowledge in actual communication). The responses gave a mean score of 3.50 (see Table 2). This suggests that responding teachers found this process of transfer from one type of knowledge to another as a difficulty for some of their students. Students can do well on grammar exercises, but fail to achieve such grammatical accuracy in real-life communication. It means that learners still have difficulty in converting grammatical knowledge (declarative knowledge) to the ability to apply this knowledge to actual communication (procedural knowledge). This is also supported by the results of statements 17 and 18 (3.55, 3.10) respectively, which show that learners have difficulty in using the language correctly both in writing and speaking.

Table 3. Difficulties with EFL Grammar in term of Grammatical Terminology

Item No.	Statement	Total (N)	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
14	My students find grammatical terminology useful.	40	3	5	4.10	.496
19	My students find it difficult to use grammatical terminology.	40	3	5	3.35	.580

The third pedagogical issue is the use of grammatical terminology. Grammatical terminology, for example part of speech including noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc, in the EFL classroom is as a necessary part of the explicit method in teaching grammar. Grammatical terms are needed to use when students and teachers discuss about grammar (i.e., in meta-linguistic discussion), that is one of the characteristics of explicit language teaching (Stern 1992: 327).

Two statements (14 and 19) attempted to examine teachers' perceptions of students' feelings about the use of grammatical terms. Statement 14 (My students find grammatical terminology useful) and statement 19 (My students find it difficult to use grammatical terminology) produced mean score of 4.10 and 3.35 respectively. This suggests that teachers find it useful for students to use grammatical terminology, but it becomes difficult to use specific terms. The utility of grammatical terms can be seen as a student's preference for explicit grammatical instruction.

Table 4. Difficulties with EFL Grammar in term of Error Correction

No.	Statement	Total (N)	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
15	Teachers find it difficult to correct student errors of grammar within a written communicative	40	1	5	3.05	1.413

16	Teachers find it difficult to correct student errors of grammar within a spoken communicative context.	40	1	5	3.75	1.006
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The fourth pedagogical issue is about error correction. Error correction is required in oral or written communicative context to avoid fossilization of errors in the learners' inter language. Statement 15 (Teachers find it difficult to correct student errors of grammar within a written communicative context) and Statement 16 (Teachers find it difficult to correct student errors of grammar within a spoken communicative context) gave mean score of 3.05 and 3.75 respectively (see Table 4). From these results, it can be inferred that responding teachers found it more difficult to correct students' verbal communication than to correct written communication. This may be due to the teacher's perception of learners' feeling of insecurity. Teachers should encourage students not to be afraid of making such mistakes because learning happens from mistakes. This should be taken into account by the teacher.

Table 5. Difficulties with EFL Grammar in term of Problem-solving Activities

No.	Statement	Total (N)	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
2	My students are motivated by problem-solving techniques for learning grammar.	40	2	5	4.25	.899
20	My students are frustrated by problem-solving techniques for learning grammar.	40	1	5	3.10	1.194

The fifth pedagogical issue is problem-solving techniques or activities. The problem-solving techniques related to grammar teaching are inductive techniques, which require learners to find form-function matches by themselves. (e.g., Hall and Shepherd, 1991). Problem solving techniques in statement number 2, from the teacher's perceptions, motivate the students to learn grammar because they are valued 4.25. Besides that, the lower mean (3.10) of statement number 20 implies that their learners are not too frustrated with problem solving activities. In short, this technique can be considered as a suitable teaching option in teaching grammar.

Table 6. Difficulties with EFL Grammar in term of Authentic Text

Item No.	Statement	Total (N)	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
6	My students find it difficult to handle grammar presented within authentic texts.	40	2	5	3.25	.899
7	My students find authentic texts difficult because of the wide variety of structures which appear.	40	2	5	3.60	.744
8	My students find authentic texts difficult because they are too culture bound.	40	2	5	3.85	.921
9	My students find authentic texts difficult because of the vocabulary used.	40	1	5	2.90	1.277
10	My students cannot find form-function matches in authentic texts without explicit direction from teachers.	40	2	5	3.55	1.037
11	Teachers find the use of authentic material too time-consuming.	40	1	4	2.85	.802
12	Teachers find it difficult to produce tasks of a suitable level from authentic texts.	40	1	5	2.90	.778

The sixth pedagogical issue is the use of authentic texts. Statements number 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 are the statements concerning to authentic texts. Because language is context-sensitive (a sentence can only be fully understood in context), grammar is best taught and practiced in context (Weaver, 1996). Although authentic texts tell how target structures are used in communication, the linguistic term of unfamiliar vocabulary and synthetic complexity can make them difficult to understand. For this reason, the general approach taken by textbook writers today is to simplify authentic texts so that they are “retain their flavor” (Thornbury, 2008). Therefore, simplified authentic texts must be used. The text can be narrative text, recount text, descriptive text, etc.

Based on teachers’ perceptions, students have difficulty in learning grammar when presented and practiced in authentic texts. The students have more difficulties with cultural boundary (statement 8: 3.85), variety of structures (statement 7: 3.60), finding form-function matches (statement 10: 3.55), handling from presentation within authentic texts (statement 6: 3.25) and vocabulary (statement 9: 2.90). The reasons for higher mean scores can be the lack of explicit grammar and different cultures; while that of lower scores may be the vocabulary and structure use of simplified authentic texts and integration of explicit and implicit grammar lessons. Thus, teachers’ perceptions about the use of authentic texts are they tend to believe that they are not too time-consuming (statement 11: 2.85). Meanwhile, teachers found it less difficult to create suitable tasks from authentic texts (statement 12: 2.9). It indicates that the teacher had no severe difficulty in preparing authentic material while the students had quite difficulty in using them.

Table 7. Difficulties with EFL Grammar in term of Spoken and Written Communicative Activities

Item No.	Statement	Total (N)	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
17	My students find it difficult to improve the accuracy of their	40	1	5	3.55	1.085

	grammatical language within a totally communicative writing activity.					
18	My students find it difficult to improve the accuracy of their grammatical language within a totally communicative speaking activity.	40	1	5	3.10	.900

The seventh pedagogical issue is the use of communicative activities. The uses of communicative activities are stated in statements 17 and 18. According to Richard (2002:36), communicative activities can help learners gain comprehensible input and output what is believed to lead to the development of linguistic and communicative competence. These activities are convinced to give major benefit in learning language. Statements 17 and 18 address the difficulties students may experience in improving grammatical-language accuracy in fully communicative activities. The mean scores of these statements are 3.55 and 3.10, respectively. The results showed that all communicative activities, whether written or oral, gave difficulties for students in learning grammar and improving grammatical accuracy, with written activities proving to be more challenging than oral activities. This may be due to a lack of sufficient attention focus on form in purely communicative activities or tasks even though they aimed at developing students' grammatical knowledge. So that, learners focused more on the meaning or what is delivered in these interactive activities.

D. Conclusion

From the result of this study, it indicates that both teachers and students still face difficulties in teaching and learning EFL grammar. It suggests that this problem needs to get attention for the success of EFL grammar. It helps teachers

to decide on the right techniques and teaching plans to improve teaching and to enhance learning of EFL grammar to their learners. EFL curriculum and material developers also should consider teachers' and learners' difficulties to provide suitable materials. More interviews are needed to explore the information details concerning these difficulties. This study is limited in one region in Indonesia, so that the future research should be conducted in a broader area.

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