

The Role and Challenges of Grammar Teaching in Developing Students' English Writing Skills

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Abstract

Grammar teaching plays a crucial role in developing students' English writing skills, particularly at the university level. Academic writing demands the use of appropriate grammatical structures to convey ideas logically and clearly. However, in practice, grammar teaching faces various challenges, such as lack of student interest, monotonous learning methods, and limited learning time. This study aims to examine the role of grammar teaching and the challenges faced in improving students' writing skills. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach, using observation, interviews, and document analysis as data collection techniques. This study demonstrates that a good understanding of grammar significantly contributes to the quality of students' writing. However, challenges such as negative transfer from the first language (L1), low learning motivation, and a lack of varied pedagogical approaches require attention. These findings suggest the need for innovation in grammar teaching methods to effectively support the improvement of students' writing skills.

Keywords: Grammar, Writing Skills, English Teaching, Learning Challenges

Introduction

Grammar mastery is a fundamental aspect of English writing skills. Without a good understanding of language structure, students tend to produce incoherent and difficult-to-understand writing. In many universities in Indonesia, students' English writing skills are still relatively low, partly due to weak grammar mastery. Therefore, it is important to explore the role of grammar teaching and some of the challenges faced in the learning process. Grammar mastery is a primary foundation in English learning, especially in the context of academic writing. For non-native speaker students, grammar is not simply a grammatical rule, but an effective communication tool for conveying scientific ideas logically, systematically, and convincingly (Harmer, 1983 in Optimizing English Language Learning to Welcome a Golden Indonesia 2045).

In Indonesia, although students have studied grammar for 12 years from elementary school to university, research has found that grammar remains a major obstacle in academic writing (Ayuningtias & Wenanda, 2013). Common errors include omissions, subject-verb agreement, and the use of articles (a, the) influenced by mother tongue patterns (interlingual transfer). Factors causing these difficulties include: 1. Negative transfer from the mother tongue: Bredsmore (1982) states that the grammatical structure of the mother tongue can influence the production of the target language—for example, the absence of tense or plural markers in Balinese influences the grammatical errors of students at Udayana University. 2. Inadequate teaching methods: Many teachers still apply the traditional grammar approach (i.e., memorizing rules without contextual practice), so students tend to memorize but have difficulty applying them in writing (Optimization..., pp. 174-175 -). 3. Negative motivation and perceptions of grammar: Surveys show that around 66% of students consider grammar to be the most difficult material in learning English, followed by other skills such as speaking and writing. The

perception that grammar is confusing (77%) and unimportant (8%) also hinders the learning process.

Other studies also show that, although approaches such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) help improve writing skills, grammar mastery remains an important variable that influences the quality of writing (Putra, Unmas Denpasar, 2016)

This research strengthens the argument that the integration between grammar teaching and contextual writing practice needs to be optimized. Based on various empirical studies, it can be concluded that grammar teaching plays a key role in supporting students' academic writing skills. However, the success of grammar teaching is still hampered by non-contextualized methods, mother tongue transfer, and low motivation. Therefore, this research aims to explore an integrative approach—combining communicative methods.

Research Questions

1. What is the role of grammar teaching in developing students' English writing skills?
2. What are the challenges faced in teaching grammar for developing students' writing skills?

Research Purposes

1. To describe the role of grammar teaching in developing students' English writing skills.
2. To identify the challenges faced in teaching grammar related to writing skills.

Literature Review

The Urgency of Grammar Mastery in Student Writing

According to Thornbury (1999), grammar is a system of rules that govern sentence structure in a language. In second language (L2) learning, mastery of grammar is crucial for effective written communication. Grammar plays a key role in creating clear and logical sentence structures. Auliya et al. (2023) emphasized that grammar serves to avoid ambiguity and create "perfect" sentences in the writing of English Language and Literature students. Furthermore, Pujiawati (2018) highlighted that lexico-grammatical features are the main aspect that often causes difficulties for students when writing essays, so using tools like Grammarly allows students to become independent learners .

Student Grammar Errors: Types and Causes

Writing in English requires complex skills, including planning, organizing ideas, and applying grammar rules (Harmer, 2004). Grammar is a key tool in avoiding writing errors that can alter meaning. Various studies have identified the types of errors that frequently appear in student writing: Omissions and errors in subject-verb agreement and article usage (a, the) are the most common types of errors found in L2 students' writing. Ramadhiyanti (2021) classifies syntactic errors as noun phrases, verb phrases, and word form, order, and substitution—with a predominance of incorrect phrasing. The main causes of these errors are: Intralingual factors —internal processes of second language learning, such as overgeneralization and simplification errors—are in many cases the dominant factor. Interlingual transfer —the influence of native language structures on English, although the effect is sometimes smaller than intralingual transfer.

Effective Grammar Learning Model

Various approaches have been implemented to improve students' grammar skills: Flipped Classroom has been shown to improve students' grammar achievement, from 45% of students scoring >70 to 71% after the Cooperative Learning intervention—Picture and

Picture were used to teach grammar tenses (Past Tense, Present Perfect), resulting in an increase in writing scores from 73% to 97%, as well as positive feedback from students regarding more engaging and collaborative learning.

Integration of Grammar in Writing Approach

According to Prihatin (2021), a process approach to writing—which includes drafting, revising, and editing—is effective in improving the quality of students' scientific writing because it combines a continuous focus on grammar and content. Asianna Manik et al. (2024) also emphasize the importance of motivation, self-confidence, and an understanding of scientific structure as crucial factors in improving students' academic writing skills.

Challenges in Teaching Grammar

In the practice of teaching grammar in the classroom, various obstacles often arise and hinder optimal learning. These challenges stem not only from internal student factors, such as low motivation or the influence of the mother tongue, but also from the teaching approach used by the lecturer. Therefore, it is important to identify and understand these challenges in order to formulate appropriate solutions in planning and implementing grammar instruction.

Teaching grammar in the context of English language learning is not a simple matter. Although grammar is a crucial component of academic writing and communication skills, the reality on the ground shows that many obstacles are encountered in the teaching process. These challenges can stem from internal student factors such as low learning motivation, as well as external factors such as non-contextual teaching methods, time constraints, and the influence of the mother tongue (L1).

According to Richards and Renandya (2002), one of the major challenges in teaching grammar is making it relevant and meaningful in real-life communication contexts. Without the right approach, grammar teaching tends to be mechanical and inapplicable. Furthermore, studies such as those by Pujiawati (2018) and Ramadhiyanti (2021) also show that poor grammar mastery is often the main cause of students' poor writing skills. Meanwhile, research by Nassaji & Fotos (2011) shows that the main challenges in teaching grammar include an overly theoretical approach, a lack of contextual practice, and low student motivation. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers understand the dynamics of these challenges in order to design grammar learning strategies that are more contextual, communicative, and tailored to students' needs.

Implications for Research

Based on the findings of the literature review, the integration of contextual grammar learning methods (e.g., flipped classroom, cooperative learning) with the writing-process approach is seen as a promising strategy. Therefore, this study aims to explore in more depth how this integration can be effectively applied in grammar teaching to improve students' academic writing skills.

Previous Research

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between grammar instruction and students' writing skills. Pujiawati (2018) conducted a qualitative study of lexical and grammatical constraints in students' academic writing and found that the most common grammatical errors occurred in the use of tenses and clauses. This study emphasizes the importance of context-based learning interventions.

Ramadhiyanti's (2021) research analyzed grammatical errors in narrative texts written by beginning university students. Using error analysis based on the theory of Dulay et al., she found that omissions and misformations were the most dominant error types. This research supports the importance of directly applying grammar learning to writing. Manik et al. (2024) examined students' perceptions of academic writing and found that grammar was a major factor influencing their writing confidence. This study used survey methods and quantitative descriptive analysis. Candra (2021) studied the effectiveness of the *flipped classroom model* in grammar learning and found that this approach significantly improved student academic achievement compared to conventional methods. These results indicate that innovative learning models can improve grammar comprehension more effectively. Unlike previous research, which has largely focused on error analysis or method effectiveness, this study focuses on the role and challenges of holistic grammar instruction, particularly in developing students' writing skills, using a qualitative descriptive approach. Thus, this research is expected to provide new contributions to the classroom learning experience, from both students' and lecturers' perspectives.

Method

Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore in depth the perceptions, experiences, and challenges faced by students and lecturers in learning grammar related to writing skills. According to Creswell (2014, p. 4), a qualitative approach is suitable for understanding the meaning contained in the behavior and social experiences of participants in a natural context. "The researcher uses a qualitative descriptive method, namely collecting data systematically, factually, and accurately regarding existing facts" (Sugiyono, 2013, p. 244).

Participant

The subjects of the study were a lecturer teaching English Grammar and eight second-semester students of the English Language Education study program at Kutai Kartanegara University. The object of the study was the role of grammar teaching and the challenges that arise in the process of developing students' English writing skills. In this study, the informant selection technique used purposive sampling, namely selection based on certain criteria (Sugiyono, 2016, p. 124). The informant criteria were students who had taken at least two grammar courses and one writing course, and lecturers who had taught grammar for more than two semesters.

Instruments

Instruments in qualitative research serve as tools for obtaining accurate, relevant, and in-depth data. In this study, the primary instrument is the researcher themselves (human instrument), assisted by interview guidelines, observation sheets, and documentation. According to Moleong (2017), the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative research because only humans are capable of grasping the full meaning of a situation. As the primary instrument, the researcher is responsible for designing guidelines, conducting interviews, observing, and analyzing data. The supporting instruments in this research include:

1. Interview Guidelines: Designed in the form of flexible, open-ended questions, aimed at exploring the subjects' perceptions, experiences, and views regarding grammar

teaching and its influence on writing skills. Questions were tailored to the interviewee's position (lecturer or student). According to Patton (2002), semi-structured interviews give researchers the freedom to explore topics that arise during the interview while remaining within the framework of the main research topic. The interview guidelines cover several important aspects: a) Student and lecturer perceptions of the importance of grammar. b) Experience in teaching/learning grammar. c) Challenges faced in teaching grammar. d) The relationship between grammar teaching and writing skills. e) Suggestions and hopes for the development of grammar teaching methods.

2. Observation Sheet: Used to record grammar learning activities in class, including teaching methods, teacher and student interactions, and student responses. According to Creswell (2014), observation in qualitative research aims to understand behavior, events, and interactions in their natural context. The observation sheet in this study includes the following indicators: a) Methods used by lecturers in teaching grammar. b) Student response and involvement in learning. c) Integration of grammar in writing assignments or activities. d) Obstacles seen during the grammar learning process.

3. Documentation: Documentation includes the collection of various documents such as Semester Learning Plans (RPS), syllabi, teaching materials, student writing assignments, and evaluation notes. This documentation is important to provide additional data that strengthens the results of interviews and observations. With the interview guide, observation sheets, and documents compiled based on the theory and research objectives, it is hoped that the data obtained will be in-depth, accurate, and reflect the real conditions related to the role and challenges of grammar teaching in improving students' writing skills.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection techniques include: 1. Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with students and lecturers to find out perceptions, learning strategies, and challenges faced in teaching grammar. According to Moleong (2018, p. 186), semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore data flexibly while remaining focused on the main problem.

2. Participatory observation: Observations are conducted during the grammar learning process to see how the teaching approach is applied and how students respond to grammar material, especially that related to writing. 3. Documentation in the form of student writing (essays, academic writing assignments) is reviewed to analyze the extent to which grammar mastery is applied in real writing contexts.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model from Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three main stages: 1) Data reduction – Simplifying and selecting relevant data that aligns with the research focus. 2) Data presentation – Data is organized narratively and thematically. 3) Conclusion drawing and verification – Temporary conclusions are drawn, then verified through data triangulation.

Data Validity

In qualitative research, data validity does not refer to statistical validity as in quantitative approaches, but rather to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These four aspects serve to ensure that the data obtained truly reflects reality and can be scientifically accounted for. To maintain the validity of the data, researchers use triangulation of sources and techniques. Triangulation is carried out by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. Validation is carried out through direct confirmation with informants (member checking).

The steps in data validity can be described as follows: 1. Credibility: Credibility refers to the extent to which research data and results are trustworthy. To increase credibility, researchers conduct source triangulation (e.g., students and lecturers), technical triangulation (interviews, observation, documentation), and member checking (confirming findings with informants) (Moleong, 2018, p. 330). 2. Transferability: Transferability refers to the extent to which research findings can be applied to other contexts. To achieve this, researchers provide a thick description of the setting, participants, and context of the study (Creswell, 2014, p. 252). 3. Dependability: Dependability indicates the consistency of data across various situations. In this study, reliability was maintained through an audit trail and systematic documentation of the research process (Sugiyono, 2016, p. 270). 4. Confirmability: Confirmability ensures that research results are free from the researcher's personal bias. Researchers record subjective reflections and use transparent field notes to ensure objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability emphasizes data objectivity, meaning that the data obtained is not solely the result of the researcher's subjectivity. This is to avoid personal bias in the data collection and analysis process.

Results and Discussion

Results

This study aims to describe the role of grammar instruction and the challenges faced in developing students' English writing skills. Data were obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation. The following are the research findings, divided into three thematic subsections.

The Role of Grammar Teaching in Writing Skills

From the results of observations and interviews, it was found that students who have a good mastery of grammar can write more coherently, logically, and easily understood. They also tend to be more confident in conveying arguments in writing. The results of interviews with students and lecturers indicate that grammar is considered a fundamental component in building an effective writing structure. Lecturers stated that students who have a good understanding of grammar tend to be better able to: a) Develop coherent paragraphs, b) Avoid ambiguous or illogical sentences, c) Construct complex sentences that comply with academic rules.

"Students with strong grammar skills find it easier to convey arguments. They can organize tenses, sentence structure, and ideas more coherently" (Lecturer 1, interview, May 2025).

"I always emphasize the importance of grammar because it's the foundation of academic writing. Students who master grammar are usually able to convey ideas more clearly and systematically." (Lecturer 3, interview, May 2025).

"Grammar is like a thinking tool in English. If students master it, they can write more coherently and according to academic standards" (Lecturer 2, interview, May 2025).

"I feel like grammar is like a foundation. If I understand grammar, I'm more confident writing because I know my sentences are correct" (Student 2, interview, May 2025).

Analysis of student essay assignments reveals a strong correlation between high-quality writing and grammar mastery. Students who consistently use tenses and clauses correctly produce more academic writing.

Challenges in Teaching Grammar

Some challenges encountered in teaching grammar include the following: a) Students tend to memorize rules without understanding the context of their use. b) Teaching methods that are still teacher-centered. c) Lack of writing exercises integrated with grammar teaching. Negative transfer of Indonesian language structures. Therefore, it is important for teachers to understand the dynamics of these challenges in order to design more contextual and communicative grammar learning strategies. Identifying and understanding these challenges to formulate appropriate solutions in planning and implementing grammar teaching. Therefore, it is important to identify and understand these challenges to formulate appropriate solutions in planning and implementing grammar teaching. The following are some of the main challenges identified in this study. Based on interviews and observations, some of the challenges in teaching grammar include:

a) Negative Transfer from Mother Tongue

Most students translate ideas directly from Indonesian to English. This results in sentence structures that don't conform to English grammar rules. This is in line with the following interview results:

"Most students still think in Indonesian and then translate it into English. As a result, their sentence structure is often grammatically incorrect," (Lecturer 1, interview, May 2025).

"Students often construct English sentences using an Indonesian mindset. For example, they ignore tenses because Indonesian doesn't have a clear past or present tense." (Lecturer 3, interview, May 2025) .

"I often get confused because we don't use tenses in Indonesian. So when I write, I sometimes mix up the past and present tenses" (Student 3, interview).

"Sometimes I get confused because in Indonesian we don't have rules like tenses or article usage. So when I write in English, I often make mistakes because I'm using Indonesian logic," (Student 4, interview, May 2025).

b) Low Learning Motivation

Some students find grammar difficult and boring. They tend to be passive during grammar lessons, especially if the methods used are theoretical and conventional. As shown in the following interview:

"Grammar is difficult and has a lot of rules. Sometimes I don't want to take lessons because I'm afraid of making mistakes all the time." (Student 5, interview, May 2025).

"If the teaching method is just explaining formulas, I quickly get bored. I want to be given exercises that I can immediately use for writing" (Student 7, interview).

This quote shows a decrease in learning motivation that stems from negative perceptions of grammar, as well as uninteresting learning methods.

c) Less Contextual Teaching Methods

Observations show that grammar learning is often conducted separately from writing skills. Students are not given sufficient opportunities to apply grammar contextually in their writing.

"Our teaching system sometimes still focuses on grammar theory without direct writing practice. Grammar should be used, not just memorized," (Lecturer 3, interview, May 2025).

"I admit, grammar learning is sometimes still separate from writing skills. Ideally, grammar should be taught in context, for example, directly applied in essays or paragraphs." (Lecturer 1, interview, May 2025).

"Sometimes we only learn the formula, but don't know when to use it when writing an essay" (Student 1, interview).

"When I was studying grammar, I was often given formulas and practice problems, but rarely asked to write. I wanted to know what grammar was used for in real-life writing," (Student 6, interview, May 2025).

Grammar Strengthening Strategies in Writing

Some strategies suggested by lecturers and students to address these challenges include: a) Integrating grammar learning directly into writing activities. b) Using collaborative learning methods such as peer feedback and task-based writing. c) Encouraging students to use assistive technology such as Grammarly or Google Docs for independent grammar checking. Lecturers who implement this approach report improvements in the quality of student writing, both in terms of structure and word choice.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study align with previous studies, such as those by Pujiawati (2018) and Ramadhiyanti (2021), which found that grammar mastery significantly impacts students' writing skills. Furthermore, Harmer (2004) argues that grammar is a key tool for building effective written communication. Challenges such as negative transfer from the L1 and low student motivation were also identified in Nassaji & Fotos' (2011) research, which emphasized the need for a contextual and communicative approach to grammar teaching.

Solutions and Recommendations

To address these challenges, it is necessary to implement communicative and contextual learning approaches, such as task-based learning methods and integrating grammar into writing practice. The use of technology, such as grammar correction apps, can also support learning.

Conclusion

This study also revealed several challenges faced in the grammar teaching process. These challenges include: a) Low student motivation to learn, especially when grammar lessons are delivered theoretically and boringly. b) Negative transfer from the mother tongue, where students often translate sentence structures from Indonesian to English directly, resulting in grammatical errors. c) Lack of contextual teaching methods, where grammar is taught separately from writing skills, making it difficult for students to apply grammar rules in actual writing practice. d) Limited time and learning media, which often limit grammar practice to technical aspects and neglect its functional aspects in writing. Overall, this study confirms that to effectively develop students' writing skills, grammar instruction needs to be designed in a contextual, applicable manner, and integrated with writing activities.

Based on the findings, the researcher makes several suggestions as follows: a) For Lecturers or Teachers: It is recommended to integrate grammar learning directly into writing activities, rather than teaching grammar as a separate topic. Use a variety of engaging methods, such as group discussions, project-based writing, and grammar exercises in real-life contexts. b) For Students: Students are expected to be more active in developing their grammar skills independently through various resources, including AI-based technology, online forums, and regular writing practice. It is important to shift the mindset from seeing grammar as a burden to seeing grammar as a tool for academic communication. c) For Future Researchers: It is hoped that the scope of research can be expanded by involving more participants from various levels or institutions. Experimental research can be conducted to test the effectiveness of certain grammar learning models on students' academic writing outcomes.

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