
**SOME FACTORS TO BE BLAMED OR WHAT?
EFL LEARNERS DIFFICULTIES IN CONSTRUCTING ENGLISH SENTENCE**

Oleh

Hijjatul Qamariah¹⁾ & Rizka Marlisa Aini²⁾

^{1,2}Department of English Language Education, STKIP Bina Bangsa Getsempena, Banda Aceh

JL. Tanggul Krueng lamnyong, No.34, Rukoh, Darussalam, 23112, Banda Aceh, Indonesia

Email: [1](mailto:hqamariah@gmail.com) & [2rizkamarlisaaini@gmail.com](mailto:rizkamarlisaaini@gmail.com)

Abstract

This is a qualitative study on investigating EFL learners' difficulties in constructing English sentence pattern. EFL learners have difficulties in constructing English sentences because of some reasons. To know what difficulties that EFL learners experienced, 30 secondary school students of X MIPA (Natural Science Program) and X IPS (Social Science Program) were selected as the participant of the research. The age ranges of the students are 15-16 years olds. Interview was used as the main data collection instrument. The result showed that there were five themes elicited from the interview data. Those are, vocabulary is the main problem, Word order is important to learn, Interlanguage is another important issue, Example based teaching is preferred, and integrated grammar with other skills. From the research findings it is also indicated that there are many factors caused learners' grammar mastery levels. None of those factors can be judged to affect deeply than others. In teaching side, teachers' understanding about the needs of the learners is important. Providing better and appropriate input while teaching should not also be taken for granted by the English language teacher, assigning proper activities and feedback probably can add the comprehensible input for the learner in leaning grammar. In the learning side, however, learners should know their needs and better learning strategies. Some strategies are working very well for some learners, but not to the others, because inappropriate learning strategies can lead to ineffective learning process.

Keywords: EFL Learner, Learners' Difficulties & English Sentence Pattern

INTRODUCTION

Constructing a sentence in English requires not only the ability to understand part of speech and word order, but also the ability to make the meaning in the sentence comprehensible. It therefore can be made when the sentence structure and punctuation make sense, otherwise the readers will try hard to re-read to understand the meaning (Exley & Kitson, 2020; Jovanovska, 2019; Lai & Piñango, 2019). It is a difficult case for ESL and EFL learners to structure a well and meaningful sentences. This issue however, is not a new case in English Language teaching. Out of four English language skills, grammar plays a significant role in building and filling out the puzzle of English language proficiency. It has

been an intriguing research topic, and the significance of grammar has widely admitted by linguistics, researchers and teachers as well (Huang, 2019). Some experts also said that without grammar, there is no language, the teacher who teach foreign language should also teach grammar (Wang, 2010), people cannot talk well if they do not understand grammar and cannot write efficiently and professionally without grammar knowledge (Dalil & Harizi, 2013; Debata, 2013).

There have been argued and claim that there are many problems faced by the EFL and ESL learners regarding the English sentence construction. A difference structure of sentence in L1 and L2 has been a very prominent factor among others (Eckstein & Ferris, 2018;

Burhanuddin, 2020). Even though, in the process of second language learning, learners' interlanguage is always on the consistent way of changing and improving (Wang, 2020), but it does affect learner learning process. The level of the students also produced many errors. A study conducted by Doolan and Miller (2012) showed that the error types of verb errors, prepositional phrase errors, word form errors, and total identified errors were made by Generation 1.5 writers versus L1 writers.

The influence of mother tongue is also believed becomes one of the factors affecting learners' errors in writing sentence structure, the complexity of grammar points, teachers instruction and quality of textbook also trigger the mistake in English grammar (Qamariah & Wahyuni, 2020; Alhaysoni & alhaisoni, 2017; Qamariah & Wahyuni, 2016; Qamariah, 2015). Vocabulary knowledge is also important for EFL and ESL learners in writing a good sentence. It is as stated by Sermsook, Liamnimit, & Pochakorn (2017), besides interlingual and intralingual interference. Furthermore, for EFL and ESL learners learning English tenses and conditionals expose the challenges as it triggers the same construction, for example Past Simple, can have as divergent references as the past and the present (Drożdż, (2020).

Teaching grammar is always a controversial debate among the language practitioner. There are a believe that grammar should be taught after the learners has acquired a certain level of ability (Ellis, 2006), appropriate teaching method should also be implemented in teaching grammar (Sheen, 2006), teaching grammar should be whether it is implicit or explicit (Rahman & Rashid, 2017), inductive and deductive teaching should be employed in grammar classes depending on the circumstances (Ahmad, Hussaion & Radzuan, 2017), integrating the grammar with other skills (Tran & Nguyen, 2019)

Learners learning strategies in understanding grammar should also be taken into consideration. Sing, Sing, Razak and

Ravinthar, (2017) stated that understanding students' error and their causes are important. It leads to the strategies that the learners take in learning grammar (Alsied, Ibrahim & Pathan, 2018). Providing visual and audio visual, auditory and social task or solitary activities are strategies that learners used in learning grammar, therefore, grammar-learning activities should also appropriately address to learners' preferred strategies in different context.

This study therefore would like to shed an insight of how grammar should be learned and taught. By knowing the learners difficulties, it can be known some factors affecting learners' understanding about grammar. Hence, there will be some consideration for teachers to take in teaching appropriate strategies and technique. Different context, level of the learners, complexity of grammar features should also be taken into consideration in teaching.

METHODS

Research design

This study uses descriptive qualitative method to obtain the objective of the research. According to Margono (2010:8) that descriptive method is a method that seeks to provide a systematic and careful with the actual facts and nature of certain populations which aims to solve the current problems and collect data or information to be arranged, described, and analyzed.

Research site and participant

In this study, the students participating are the secondary school students of X SMA Negeri 12 Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in academic year 2020/2021. The researcher took 30 students of X MIPA (Natural Science Program) and X IPS (Social Science Program) as the subject of research. The age ranges of the students are 15-16 years olds. In this case, the researcher uses purposive sampling choosing the subject of the research. The researcher only took 30 students to be analyzed because they were able to construct a sentence in English

compared to the other students. This was proven when they did the exercise of writing descriptive text; they have good score from their English teacher and pass the minimum completeness criteria in writing.

Data collection and analysis

In collecting the data, interview is used as the main data collection instrument. The researchers interview the participants through the help of the Whats app application. It consists of 10 questions which include five questions related to their strategies in learning how to write English sentences and five more questions are about the difficulties of learning English grammar. The participants write their answers for each question through text messages of whatsapp application.

The data were analyzed by using Creswell analysis model. The six steps of data analysis include transcribing interviews, optimally scanning material, and cataloging each visual material among others. The second step according to Creswell (2013) is reading or looking at all the data. It is done to obtain the information of the whole meaning from the data.

The third phase is coding the data. In this stage, a researcher organizes the collected data by categorizing text and then labeling the categories with a term.

In the fourth step, the coding process is utilized to come up with a description of the people, setting, or categories/themes for analysis. Step five represented the data to confer the outcomes of the analysis. The last step, but not least, is making an interpretation of the findings or the results. Therefore, the researcher follows the following step in analyzing the data; transcribing the interview, reading and examining all the data, coding, representing and interpreting the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Based on the result of the interview, the researcher found the data as follows. The following questions are related to the way the learners learn the English sentence pattern.

1. What makes you difficult in writing an English sentence?

From 30 students participating in this study, most of the students stated that vocabulary is the most challenging thing in writing the sentence. They do not know the vocabulary to state the main topic in the sentence. Fifteen of the students reveal that if they have many vocabularies, it will be easier to write the sentences. As is quoted in the excerpt from their answer in the interview: “ I do not have many vocabularies, I do not know what to write”. Another students also mentioned that: “ I only know some simple vocabs, and I use the same vocabs every time, so I cannot write well”.

2. What do you do in order to write a good sentence in English?

From the result of the interview, it is revealed that there are some ways that the students do to improve their writing a good sentence in English, one of dominant one is memorizing vocabulary. It is stated by around 16 students. They said, it is the common way they do to add English vocabularies. About eight students mentioned that they usually learn the part of the speech in the sentence. So they know what word to use in writing the sentence. However, they also said it needs more time to do this and it is also difficult because sometimes the words are in many forms. Four of the students said that they seldom memorize the vocabulary, they only follow the sentence model and make the other form with their own by finding the correct word form from the dictionary. Then, only two of them, who stated that they read English text book and try to learn the pattern of the sentence from the textbook.

The following is the quote from the interview excerpt: “I will memorize more vocabularies, maybe, so I can write different sentence”

Here is also the statement from one of the participant: “ I think I need to follow the sentence sample from teacher, so that I can make my own sentence”

3. Why do you think it is difficult to write a sentence in English?

When the researcher asked the participant about the reasons why constructing English sentence is not easy, sixteen of the participant said that English sentence pattern is different from Indonesian. They always have problem in ordering the words in the sentence and it make their sentences incorrect. In Indonesian they do not need to worry about the order of the words, because meaning is easily to be understood. But in English the order of the words can affect the meaning and sometimes can make the sentence does not have any meaning. Besides, seven students said that, tense is also the problem for them to write correct sentence. Sometimes when the sentence does not have any time expression it will be confusing for them to write. Five other participant revealed that, English sentence has many things to considered before writing them. They said that the subject and the verb are confusing. It changes many times in different context. Moreover, only two of the participants stated that, English sentence pattern is very complex. When writing a sentence in English, we have to think about the verb, noun, adverb and many other things, and it is very hard.

The excerpt from the interview: “English is very difficult, it has reverse pattern from Bahasa Indonesia, I have many difficulties”

“ Tenses are many, I have to change verb form many times, I always make mistake”

4. What does your teacher usually require you to do to improve you understanding of English sentence?

Teacher encouragement in teaching plays an important role, so does when the researcher asked the participants on what the teacher suggest them to do to improve their ability in writing English sentence, about 19 students answered that the teacher commonly assigned them to write the sentence with different pattern of word orders. They said it helps them but it sometimes very difficult to understand because of lack vocabulary. They don't know many words to use. The sentence looks the

same but when it is assigned to them, they find it hard to construct. Seven of them revealed that, teacher usually asked them rewrite the sentence pattern and give some other words to use by changing the certain part of the sentence. It also helps them to write English sentence. And the rest of them asserted that most of the time teacher writes on the board several scrambled sentences and they usually ordered them into the correct one.

Here are the excerpts from the interview: “my teacher gives many different exercises, sometimes I have to focus on word order in the sentence”

“The exercise is good for learning, when the teacher explain I think I can understand, but when I have to write by myself, I make many mistake”

5. What make you easily understand how to construct English sentence pattern?

Regarding the way that is probably easier for the students to construct the English sentence, most of the students stated that they can understand easily when the teacher explain about the sentence pattern by giving example not the formula of the sentence. It is as an excerpt: “It is easy for me when the teacher implicitly explain the sentence pattern by directing us to the pattern”. Another student also mentioned that: “one day the teacher start the lesson and asked what did we do last night? Then she wrote one of our answer on the board by writing the correct one of the pattern, I guess. It is a slightly different from my friend answer, without telling that this is the correct one”. While eight of the students stated that they do not know exactly what make them understand of how to write the sentence. Six of them has similar answer that they need to see the pattern of the sentence then they can write them. And only of them, giving exercise to write the sentence by juggling the word can help them know the correct word order.

Furthermore, the following are the data about learning grammar that the students experience in the classroom.

1. Is learning grammar important? Why? And why not?

From the result of the interview about students opinion on the importance of learning grammar, the participants mostly answer that, grammar is important to learn because all skills in English requires grammar. Meanwhile only six participants perceive that communication skill is important, they said the important of learning English is the ability to speak English. When you can talk in English, they said, it is enough. And six others stated that, grammar is important but it is not as important as other skills. To master grammar means we also need to learn other skills.

The following is the excerpt from the interview: "It is important because all skills need grammar, if we want to write, we need to know grammar, speaking also like that"

Another interview excerpt: "I still cannot speak when I learn grammar; I think speaking is more important"

2. Is grammar difficult? Why? And Why not?

When the researcher asked the participants about this question, half of the students said that, grammar is not easy to learn. It is complicated because it is too different from the Indonesian and makes them confused. Ten participants argued that, grammar is difficult but it is better than learning speaking and writing. They said those two skills are more difficult. And the rest of the participants mentioned that grammar is difficult when they have to learn about tenses. There are many tenses they have to understand, but if it is about adjective or comparative it much easier to understand.

Here is the excerpt from the interview result: "It is difficult, because it has different pattern from Bahasa Indonesia. It has different word order"

Another excerpt from the interview: " I think grammar is difficult, but speaking is away too difficult and writing is more confusing"

3. What do usually do to learn grammar?

Regarding the ways that the students do to improve their understanding on grammar,

about ten students revealed that they learn the sentence pattern by understanding the part of the speech used in the sentence. About 8 of the students said, they only learn the verbs, regular and irregular verbs, because they are very important in the sentence. And about seven of the participants they do many practices from English text book. Then seven students from the interview listed that, memorizing vocabulary, and read English textbook and do some exercises is regular thing they do to learn grammar and English language.

The following is the excerpt from the students interview result: "I think sentence in English has part of speech, I need to learn more the part of speech"

"I have problem with the form of the word, I think to memorize some verb vocabularies"

4. What do you think the teacher should do in teaching grammar?

Many participants (about 18) of them agreed that the teacher should explain more examples when teaching grammar and relate it to daily examples. They said they more understand when it is related to their life. Ten participants answer almost similar that the teacher should not teach grammar explicitly. It means that the teacher should provide example first then explain the formula of the sentence. Only two of the students agreed that the teacher should give the formula of the sentence pattern in teaching grammar, so they can follow the formula and write their own sentences.

Interview excerpt from the student answer: "I think I understand the grammar when teacher give more examples then telling the formula, I cannot remember the formula"

5. What do you think you should do in learning grammar?

When it is related to their opinion of what they should do in learning grammar, they tell the expectation of what they should actually do in learning grammar. Most of the students see grammar as the supplementary knowledge they should know if they want to speak English well. Therefore twenty of the students agree that they should learn grammar implicitly and

should be integrated with other skill such as speaking and writing. They assumed that if they only grammar alone, they maybe understand the pattern but they doubt that they can use that in other skills. As the excerpt from the interview result: “learning grammar should be, together with other skill so we know how to use the pattern of the sentence in the speaking”

Other also mentioned that: “meaningful learning is important, if we learn grammar and understand the formula, but we do not know when I speak or write, I think it is meaningless”

Discussion

It has been discussed earlier that the teaching grammar is essential in second language teaching. One of which is because L1 and L2 are different in term of many aspects. Learners need to know the structure of the L2 and can apply it in any skills of the English language. From the result of the interview in this study, it has been found that some of the findings are similar to the previous findings. There are many problematic issues related to the grammar teaching. It is not only dealing with the learners but it is also related to teaching itself.

It has been found that constructing English sentence in English is a complex thing for EFL or ESL learners. As sentence have several parts and different word order, EFL or ESL learners’ needs to really know how a good sentence should be structured. They for sure do have difficulties in doing this.

Based on the interview result with the participant, it is found several themes relating this issue:

a. Vocabulary is the main problem

From the interview result, it is figure out that learners have limited vocabulary in English, and this affect their ability in writing a sentence in English. Even when the researcher asked what they should do to improve their ability in writing English sentence, adding and memorizing vocabularies were stated as the thing that they are going to do. They perceive vocabulary as an important thing to have and know. It is in line with the Sermsook,

Liamnimit & Pochakorn (2017), who stated that knowledge of English vocabulary, is the problematic issue in EFL and ESL English sentence. Limited knowledge of vocabulary is believed can hinder the learners in writing a good sentence in English.

b. Word order is important to learn

From the analysis of the data, it is assumed that besides having vocabulary knowledge, learners perceive that understanding the word order in English sentences is important and it will make them understand the structure of the sentences. Word order is a vital thing in English sentence. It is in line with the findings in Sermsook, Liamnimit, & Pochakorn (2017) and Burhanuddin (2020) that Understanding word order can benefit learners to understand English sentence structure.

c. Interlanguage is another important issue

As the learners mentioned that English has different sentence pattern from their mother tongue, it is indicated that interlanguage interference affects learners’ ability in structuring English sentences. It is similar to the finding of research conducted by Wang (2020), that it is undeniable that interlanguage influence the learners in learning English language

d. Example based teaching is preferred

From the interview result, it is found that relating to the way how English sentence should be taught, many learners stated that learning from example is much easier helping them learning English sentences rather than memorizing the formulas. It gives them, more clear explanation about the language English sentences.

e. Integrated grammar with other skills

About how the grammar should be taught, the researcher found a surprising finding that EFL learners participating in this study asserted that they want the grammar is taught together with other skills such as speaking or writing, so they assumed that it will be meaningful to study about grammar if they can apply it to other skills. A study conducted Ahmad, Hussaion, and Radzuan (2017),

supported that most of EFL students at university agreed if the grammar is taught integrated with other skills.

Based on the findings in this study, it can be concluded that, grammar is the core thing of English language that should be paid better attention since it goes to any skills of English. It has been understood that, many things can affect learners' mastery of English sentence structure. There are many factors caused that mastery levels. None of those factors can be judged to affect deeply than others. In teaching side, teachers' understanding about the needs of the learners is important. Providing better and appropriate input while teaching should not also be taken for granted by the English language teacher, assigning proper activities and feedback probably can add the comprehensible input for the learner in leaning grammar. Teaching reflection is always needed to give a better and effective teaching. In the learning side, however, learners should know their needs and better learning strategies. Some strategies are working very good for some learners, but not to the others, because inappropriate learning strategies can lead to ineffective learning process.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

From the result of the study, it can be concluded that, learning English structure or grammar is important for EFL and ESL learners. To be able to speak and to write and also to understand other skills, grammar knowledge can be very helpful. English sentence structure has some word orders that are different from L1. Therefore simple grammar knowledge should be mastered by EFL learners. Many methods can be used in teaching grammar as long as they are suitable with learners need, level and proficiency. Using appropriate strategies in learning grammar can lead to effective learning process.

Some suggestions either for grammar instruction or learning strategies:

1. Teacher should know that English grammar is complicated for EFL or ESL Learners.

2. Teacher should do teaching reflection to provide better teaching strategies and technique in teaching grammar.
3. Providing more appropriate input can make learners better understand the grammar aspects.
4. EFL and ESL learners should know what strategies work better for them
5. Doing proper grammar activities can add better understanding towards grammar aspect.

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