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## Investigating the Influence of Explicit Grammar Instruction for Indonesian EFL Students' Academic Writing Skills

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### Abstract

*Writing, as a fundamental skill in language acquisition, is intrinsically linked with grammar. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, especially those from linguistically diverse backgrounds like Indonesia, mastering grammar is both crucial and challenging. While the significance of grammar in writing is well-documented, there is a noticeable gap in research focusing on the specific needs and challenges of Indonesian EFL students. This study aimed to investigate the impact of explicit grammar instruction on the academic writing skills of Indonesian EFL students. It sought to identify specific grammatical challenges faced by these students, assess the effectiveness of targeted grammar instruction, and understand the strategies employed by learners to navigate these challenges. A qualitative research approach was employed, with purposive sampling selecting seven active grammar class attendees from the 6th semester of ABA UMI. Data collection instruments included observations, open interviews, writing tests, and documentation review. An interactive model of analysis was used for data interpretation. Preliminary results indicate that while all participants had foundational grammar knowledge, challenges persisted, especially with certain verb tenses. Explicit grammar instruction showed positive impacts on their writing skills, with real-world tasks enhancing the applicability of learned grammar. Participants also showcased diverse strategies to overcome grammatical challenges, underscoring the need for flexible instructional approaches. Explicit grammar instruction plays a pivotal role in enhancing the academic writing skills of Indonesian EFL students. Recognizing specific challenges and aligning instruction with real-world tasks can further optimize learning outcomes. This study offers valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and EFL learners, emphasizing the need for targeted, context-specific grammar instruction.*

**Keywords:** *Grammar Instruction, Indonesian EFL Students, Academic Writing, Qualitative Research, Language Acquisition.*

### INTRODUCTION

Grammar refers to the systematic arrangement of words in order to construct coherent and grammatically correct sentences. The right usage of words is crucial for effectively conveying a clear and comprehensible message. According to Chomsky's interpretation in Samsu's work (2009), grammar serves as a mechanism for generating sentences inside the language under analysis. Additionally, he asserts that grammar can be characterized as a system of regulations that generate all conceivable sentences inside a given language while excluding any that are deemed impossible. One of the fundamental components in the study of grammar pertains to tenses, with the verb tenses being the most crucial element within this domain. Verb tenses specifically denote the temporal expression conveyed by a verb. According to Perdana and Farida (2019), have knowledge in English writing might be beneficial for individuals in their writing endeavors. Hence, the integration of grammar with writing is vital, as the presence of grammatical errors in written text can lead to reader confusion and misinterpretation of intended meaning.

According to Mhyill (2021), proficient writing is often characterized by the presence of strong grammar skills. Writing serves as a medium via which individuals articulate their thoughts to both themselves and others, while simultaneously safeguarding their personal experiences and memories. The act of writing involves the representation of language through the utilization of visual signs and symbols (Dressman, 2019). The acquisition of writing skills as a crucial competency in both professional and educational contexts. In an English-speaking setting, it is necessary to write using proper grammar in order to effectively communicate the intended meaning to readers. The mastery of grammar is essential for the production of well-structured paragraphs.

As stated by Suryani (2020), the acquisition of grammar enables individuals to develop proficiency in comprehending and employing the appropriate grammatical structures of the English language. This proficiency is demonstrated through the accurate manipulation of word forms, the construction of coherent sentences, and the effective application of these linguistic skills in both oral and written communication for effective interpersonal interaction. According to Azar (2014), there exist three signs that demonstrate a mastery of grammar. These indicators include:

- a. The ability to choose accurate word (word meaning):

There are words that sound the same, but communicate different ideas; words that mean the exact same thing, but have different spellings in British English and American English; and perhaps the most confusing: words that are almost identical and communicate similar yet distinct ideas. Then there are words that are technically interchangeable but have different connotations.

- b. The ability to match the number (singular or plural) and tense:

Many writers struggle with subject–verb agreement, especially in longer sentences where it may be difficult to identify the subject. The subject and the verb must agree in number, even if the subject is complex or contains extra information. then followed by the use of the verb according to the tense.

- c. The ability to arrange.

One of the primary marks of a good writer is the ability to connect sentences properly. A stream of short, choppy sentences makes for a boring read, whereas long sentences strung together can be tedious or even confusing for the reader. This is determined by the use of good grammar.

The act of writing is a multifaceted task that necessitates the incorporation of several elements, with grammar being one of them, in the process of acquiring language skills. According to Kramer (2022), grammar can be defined as the underlying system and structure of a language, serving as a fundamental component for facilitating coherent and proficient communication. The process of organizing words in a manner that constructs coherent and meaningful sentences is crucial for effectively communicating a desired message with clarity and comprehension. According to Chomsky's proposition, grammar functions as a mechanism for the generation of sentences inside the language under examination (Jager & Rogers, 2012). The set of principles referred to above encompasses a comprehensive framework that generates every conceivable sentence inside a given language while simultaneously excluding those that are deemed unattainable. One of the fundamental components of grammar pertains to tenses, whereby verb tenses assume a critical role in denoting the temporal aspect of verb usage (Listia & Febriyanti, 2020). A thorough comprehension of verb tenses can greatly facilitate the process of writing in English.

The significance of grammar in writing cannot be exaggerated. Writing functions as a means by which we can effectively express our thoughts, safeguard our own encounters, and engage in effective communication with others. The visual representation of language is achieved through the utilization of signs and symbols. Writing is a fundamental life skill that holds significant importance in both academic and professional contexts. In contexts where English serves as the primary mode of communication, it is crucial to write with grammatical precision in order to effectively transmit the desired message without any ambiguity. Therefore, the acquisition of grammatical proficiency is not solely a scholarly endeavor, but rather an essential requirement for proficient and impactful interpersonal discourse.

Nevertheless, the process of attaining proficiency in grammar, particularly for individuals learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), is replete with obstacles (Kholili, 2020). Indonesian students who are learning English as a foreign language have distinct challenges due to the significant linguistic disparities between Bahasa Indonesia and the English language. The acquisition of English grammar can be a challenging endeavor for numerous Indonesian learners due to the substantial variations in structure, syntax, and semantics between the two languages.

### Writing Skill in the Indonesian Context

In the context of Indonesia, the practice of writing, particularly in the English language, carries a distinct and noteworthy importance. In light of the phenomenon of globalization and the growing significance of English as a global means of communication, the capacity to write with proficiency in the English language has emerged as a highly desirable aptitude within academic and professional domains. Nevertheless, the process of attaining proficiency in English writing poses distinctive difficulties for Indonesian learners. The national language of Bahasa Indonesia has distinct structural and syntactical variations compared to English, hence frequently resulting in interference and difficulties when mastering English grammar.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the educational system in Indonesia has traditionally prioritized rote learning and memorization, which may not always be congruent with the dynamic and expressive characteristics inherent in the act of writing (Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2020). Although students may demonstrate proficiency in grammar exercises and assessments, the practical application of these rules in real-world writing scenarios can be a formidable challenge. The English writing of Indonesian learners is typically influenced by their cultural nuances, thinking patterns, and rhetorical approaches, resulting in phrases that, although grammatically accurate, may appear unorthodox to native English speakers.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the Indonesian context exhibits a substantial array of linguistic diversity, encompassing more than 700 currently spoken

languages throughout the archipelago. The presence of linguistic diversity can serve as a valuable asset, contributing to the cultivation of a distinct viewpoint and expression within the realm of English literature. The difficulty lies in effectively utilizing this potential while simultaneously ensuring grammatical precision and lucidity.

The existing body of literature extensively examines the significance of grammar in writing and the difficulties encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. However, it is evident that there are minimal research specifically addressing the experiences of Indonesian EFL higher education students in this regard. Most studies adopt a generic approach, addressing EFL learners as a homogenous group without considering the cultural and linguistic nuances that differentiate one group from another.

Furthermore, the impact of explicit grammar instruction on the academic writing skills of Indonesian EFL students remains underexplored. While it is widely acknowledged that grammar is essential for writing, the extent to which focused grammar instruction enhances writing skills, especially in the context of Indonesian learners, is not well-documented. There is a need to investigate whether a direct, explicit approach to teaching grammar yields better results in improving writing skills compared to an implicit or integrated approach.

Given the identified gaps in the literature, this research aims to investigate the influence of explicit grammar instruction on the academic writing skills of Indonesian EFL students. It seeks to find out the effect of learning grammar on writing skill of the students from English Department at Foreign Language Academy of UMI Makassar and the suggestions for improving grammar learning.

## **METHOD**

The research employed a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is primarily exploratory and is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem and helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research. The research utilized a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method where the researcher selects specific individuals to participate in the study based on predefined criteria. This method is particularly useful when the researcher wants to study a specific subgroup within the population. For representativeness, the researcher selected seven students from the 6th semester of ABA UMI. These students were chosen because they actively attended grammar classes, making them ideal participants for the study. The instrument of this study was formulated by qualitative approach through observation, interviews, writing test, and documentation. The data analysis technique used in this study was the qualitative interactive model of analysis. According to Miles and Huberman quoted from Lele (2019), there are three analysis components in this model, namely data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study is to find out the effect of learning grammar on writing skills for the 6th semester of ABA UMI students and to find out the suggestions for improving grammar learning by the 6th semester of ABA UMI students with a total seven students as participants who already joined Grammar course in ABA UMI and were active in it. In the purpose of collecting data, the researcher used an open interview by asking 13 relevant questions and a written text with 3 parts in it. The researcher used interview and test refer to previous research and relate to the effect of learning grammar on writing skills. The first problem of the research is about the effects of learning grammar on students' writing skill and the second problem of the research is about the suggestions of the 6th semester student from ABA UMI about learning grammar.

## The Effect of Learning Grammar on Students' Writing Skills

Based on the research results conducted in interview with 7 students who actively joined Grammar course in ABA UMI. After seeing all the participant's answers, the researcher took the main picture based on their answers. The detail analyzed by the researcher is presented with table. The table below is a data collected of participants about their knowledge of grammar collected through the online interview by google form.

**Table 1. Data Collection of Participants about The Effect of Learning Grammar**

No.	Criteria	Participants	Information
1.	Grammar Knowledge	All Participants	Already know grammar
2.	The Purpose of Learning Grammar	1) P1, P4, P5, P7 2) P3 and P6 3) P2	1) Related to writing ability 2) Related to speaking ability 3) Intended for educational purposes
3.	Known Number of Tenses	1) P1, P2, P4, P5, P6 2) P3 and P7	1) 16 Tenses 2) 12 Tenses
4.	The Number of Known Types of Tenses	1) P1 and P4 2) P2 3) P3 4) P5 5) P6 6) P7	1) 3 Tenses 2) 13 Tenses 3) 9 Tenses 4) 15 Tenses 5) 8 Tenses 6) 12 Tenses
5.	Giving An Example Sentence Using The Simple Present Tense	All Participants	The example sentences given are in accordance with the tenses
6.	Giving An Example Sentence Using The Simple Past Tense	1) P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7 2) P3	1) The example sentences given are in accordance with the tenses 2) The example sentences given is NOT in accordance with the tenses



7.	Giving An Example Sentence Using The Simple Future Tense	1) P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6. 2) P7	1) The example sentences given are in accordance with the tenses 2) The example sentences given is NOT in accordance with the tenses
8.	Grammar Learning Results Obtained by Participants	1) P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7 2) P4	1) There is a change in grammar knowledge 2) There is a change in writing ability
9.	Grammar Knowledge Assessment after Participating in Course (1 to 10)	1) P3 and P6 2) P7 3) P1 and P4 4) P2 and P5	1) 5 2) 6 3) 7 4) 8
10.	The Difficulty in Learning Grammar	1) P1 and P2 2) P3, P4, P5 3) P6 and P7	1) Related to the formula 2) Related to its application 3) Related to the rules of the use of tenses

The findings from this research with the total number of participants was seven participants. Based on the opinions given by the participants, it was found that all participants had general knowledge about grammar, however, there were participants who had good knowledge of tenses and there is three who were quite knowledgeable. Four participants namely Participant 2, Participant 4, Participant 5 and Participant 6 had good grammar knowledge. This is proven by the example sentences given by the participants which are correct and in accordance with the tenses and the sufficient number of tenses that the participants know and understand while Participant 1, Participant 3 and Participant 7 who had been quite knowledgeable, this is proven from one example of the sentence given is incorrect and does not match the tense requested but the other examples given are correct and the sufficient number of tenses that the participants know and understand.

Then, to see students' writing skills based on their grammar knowledge which was given during the grammar courses at ABA UMI, that is by looking at the results of the writing tests that have been done by participants via the Google form. This assessment was carried out by paying attention to 3 indicators of mastering grammar.

**Table 2. The Results of Participant Writing Test**

No. Test	Indicators	Respondents	Score	Percentage	
1	[3 QUESTIONS]	P1	100	100%	
		P2	100	100%	
		P3	100	100%	
	The ability to choose accurate word (word meaning)	P4	67%	67%	
		P5	100	100%	
		P6	100	100%	
		P7	100	100%	
	[5 QUESTIONS]	P1	40	40%	
		P2	100	100%	
	2	The ability to match the number (singular or plural) and tense	P3	80	80%
P4			20	20%	
P5		40	40%		
P6		80	80%		
P7		60	60%		
3		[3 QUESTIONS] The ability to arrange:	P1	33	33%
			P2	100	100%
	P3		33	33%	
	P4		100	100%	
	P5		100	100%	
	P6		100	100%	
	P7		33	33%	

Based on the table above, it can be found that: There are 6 out of 7 participants who have a perfect score in choosing accurate words. Additionally, there are 4 out of 7 participants who have scores above or equal to the average of 60%. And there were 4 participants who had perfect scores in arranging sentences according to their tenses, while 3 other participants had scores below the average.

The research findings are in line with theories cited by Suryani (2020) that the conceptual definition of grammar mastery is the ability of understanding and using the correct rules of English by changing the form of words correctly then, joining them into sentence, and

apply them to interact, communicate with others effectively both spoken and written. Four respondents agree that learning grammar provides more in-depth knowledge about grammar, especially tenses and this affects writing skill. So by mastering grammar, students' writing skills can improve well. According to Azar (2014), the effects of learning grammar on students' writing skill can be measured by three indicators, those are the ability to choose accurate word (word meaning); the ability to match the number (singular or plural) and tense; and the ability to arrange.

## **a. The ability to choose accurate word (word meaning)**

There are words that sound the same, but communicate different ideas. Hastuti (2015) said that everyone will find some difficulties in writing if she/he does not know the words that will represent her/his ideas. Knowing the form of words, the meaning, and the use will help one in translating her/his ideas into a good piece of writing. If one writes without knowing what words are supposed to use, it may lead to distortion on the meaning of the ideas. The ability of students to choose accurate words can be seen from the results of their first part of the test. It shows that all participants perfectly answered correctly except for participant 4. Based on the test results, six respondents had a good ability to choose accurate word in writing.

## **b. The ability to match the number (singular or plural) and tense**

Lai (2020) said that the subject and the verb must agree in number, even if the subject is complex or contains extra information. then followed by the use of the verb according to the tense. It aims to make it easy for someone to understand the intent or message to be conveyed through the writing. The ability of students to match the number and tense can be seen from the results of their second part of the test. In this test, respondents are given a narrative text which contains simple tenses, namely simple present, simple past, and simple future tense. Then, respondents are asked to fill in several blanks by choosing a subject or verb that matches the tense in the sentence. The results of the test show that 4 out of 7 participants who have ability to match the number (singular or plural) with the tenses.

## **Student Preferences in Developing Grammatical Skills**

Based on observations and online searches conducted by the researcher, the researcher has been found the kinds of English learning methods and approaches that are generally used in teaching English. There were five methods that the teacher used in teaching English namely:

- a) The Direct Method (DM); the teacher directly uses English as the only one language in class.
- b) Grammar Translation Method (GTM); teaching method that focuses on translation, explaining material using the local language, and frequently memorizing vocabulary.
- c) Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); this method prioritizes students to be able to communicate and are required to be able to communicate in real contexts.
- d) Project-Based; this method is based on giving assignments or projects to the students.
- e) Total Physical Response; this method tend to teach language from physical activity or through the motions of fun games.

There were two approaches that the teacher used in teaching English namely:



- a) Teacher Centered Learning (TCL); process of learning methods that are entirely teacher-centered.
- b) Student Centered Learning (SCL); process of learning methods that are entirely student-centered.

Then, the participants' choices regarding effective learning methods and approaches for learning grammar as their suggestions are presented with the table below. This table is the research results conducted in interview with 7 students who actively joined Grammar course in ABA UMI and done through google form.

**Table 3. Data Collection of Participants about The Suggestions for Improving Grammar Learning**

No.	Participants	Suggestions
1.	P1	Total Physical Response; TCL
2.	P2	GTM & CLT; TCL
3.	P3	DM; SCL
4.	P4	DM; SCL
5.	P5	GTM; TCL
6.	P6	Project-Based; SCL
7.	P7	Project-Based; TCL

Suggestions are needed from students to teachers and students themselves related to improving the grammar learning process. This suggestion was given based on the experiences of respondents and researchers when learning grammar at ABA UMI. From observation, researcher provided several methods and approaches in learning English that are commonly practiced at ABA UMI. Then, the respondents were asked to choose several of these methods and approaches as their suggestions by choosing which one was effective for learning grammar.

In terms of learning methods, the results are; Participant 1 chose total physical response as an effective learning method for grammar because through games that make the learning process fun it can make the material provided easy to understand. Participant 2 chose GTM and CLT as effective methods for learning grammar because through these two methods, students can try to explain grammar material, especially the formulas and prioritize students to communicate in their learning process which can be used as practice. Participant 3 and Participant 4 chose DM as an effective learning method for grammar because this method directly uses English in the learning process so it helps students to learn a lot of grammar and it can improve students' English so well. Participant 5 chose GTM as an effective learning method for grammar because this method focuses on translating sentences according to grammar rules. Participant 6 and Participant 7 chose project-based as an effective learning method for grammar because not only study at school but also we can still study at home by doing the assignments given. By giving the assignment, students can directly understand the material that has been given.

In terms of learning approaches, the results are; Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 5 and Participant 7 chose Teacher Center Language (TCL) as an effective learning approach used for grammar because learning grammar, especially tenses, is included in difficult learning so it still requires the teacher to provide material at the beginning and additional explanations.

Conversely, Participant 3, Participant 4 and Participant 6 chose Student Center Language (SCL) as an effective learning approach used for grammar because students are required to be active in class so that it can improve student grammar and can still get suggestions from teachers and friends even though this is student-centered.

There were also other respondents' suggestions that improving grammar learning could be done with lots of exercises both given by the teacher and those carried out by the students themselves. This suggestion comes from Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, and Participant 6. Other suggestions besides practicing which can improve grammar learning, Participant 5 gave suggestions aimed at teachers to choose the right and effective learning media. Then Participant 7 gave other suggestion which was also addressed to the teacher for choosing an interesting learning process.

### Discussion

The influence of explicit grammar instruction on Indonesian EFL students' academic writing skills is multifaceted. The study sheds light on the intricate relationship between grammar instruction and writing skills, especially in the context of Indonesian EFL students. The findings of this study resonate with previous research while also offering unique insights specific to the Indonesian context.

The emphasis on authentic writing tasks by some participants highlights the importance of making EFL instruction relevant to real-world contexts. As posited by Nunan (2022), task-based language teaching can serve as a bridge between classroom learning and real-world language use. This is particularly relevant for Indonesian students who might not frequently use English outside the classroom setting. By integrating real-world tasks into the curriculum, students can better understand the practical applications of grammar rules and structures (Morley & Jamil, 2021; Kye et al., 2021).

The research findings suggest a potential need to revisit and revamp the EFL curriculum design in Indonesia. While the foundational importance of grammar cannot be undermined, integrating it with broader writing tasks can lead to a more holistic language development. Abdou (2022) proposed a similar integration, emphasizing the need to balance grammar instruction with communicative tasks. Furthermore, teacher training programs could benefit from modules that focus on pedagogical strategies for seamlessly integrating grammar instruction with communicative writing tasks (Parker, 2022). This would ensure that students not only understand the rules of grammar but also know how to apply them effectively in various writing contexts.

The experiences of Indonesian EFL students, as highlighted in this research, resonate with global challenges faced by EFL educators. Balancing grammar instruction with communicative tasks is a universal challenge (Sato & Oyandel, 2019). However, the unique linguistic landscape and educational traditions of Indonesia offer valuable insights that can be applied in various contexts. As Liu & Yen (2021) argues, local pedagogies and practices significantly influence EFL instruction. Recognizing and understanding these local nuances can provide valuable insights that can shape global EFL teaching methodologies.

Overall, the present study underscores the multifaceted nature of grammar instruction and its influence on writing skills. While grammar remains a critical component of language instruction, its integration with real-world tasks and communicative practices is equally important (Weng, 2023). The Indonesian context, with its unique challenges and opportunities, offers a rich tapestry of insights that can inform and enhance EFL instruction globally.

### CONCLUSION

The study on the influence of explicit grammar instruction on the academic writing skills of Indonesian EFL students has provided valuable insights into the intricate relationship

between grammar mastery and writing proficiency. The research has underscored the significance of targeted grammar instruction, especially in the unique linguistic and cultural context of Indonesia.

The research exhibits several noteworthy aspects. Firstly, it adopts a context-specific approach by tailoring its focus to Indonesian students, addressing the unique linguistic and cultural context in which they learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This contextualization offers insights that are specifically relevant to Indonesian EFL learners, departing from the generic studies that often treat EFL learners as a homogenous group. Secondly, the study adopts a holistic assessment approach that extends beyond the traditional evaluation of the effectiveness of grammar instruction. It delves into the strategies that students employ to navigate the intricate terrain of grammatical challenges. By doing so, it provides a more comprehensive view of the learning process, shedding light on the adaptive strategies that students employ to overcome hurdles in grammar acquisition. Furthermore, the research places significant emphasis on the integration of real-world tasks within grammar instruction. It underscores the practical applicability of learned grammar rules in authentic writing situations. This focus on real-world tasks bridges the gap between theoretical grammar knowledge and practical writing skills, ensuring that learners not only understand the rules but can effectively apply them in communicative contexts (Arham & Ariani, 2020).

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The research primarily concentrated on verb tenses, a vital aspect of grammar, but other grammatical structures and challenges faced by students might not have received equal attention. Lastly, the study relied on self-reported data obtained through open interviews, which, while valuable, can introduce biases or subjective interpretations based on the participants' self-perceptions and responses. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the research findings and suggest opportunities for future investigations. In wrapping up, this research has contributed significantly to the understanding of grammar instruction's role in enhancing the academic writing skills of Indonesian EFL students. The findings, while novel in their approach and context-specific insights, should be interpreted considering the study's limitations. Future research can build upon these findings, expanding the sample size, broadening the scope of grammar topics studied, and employing mixed methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding. The journey to mastering grammar and writing in a foreign language is complex, but with targeted research and pedagogical strategies, learners can be better equipped to navigate this journey successfully.

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