

# First Year University Students' Perception towards Grammar and Their Mastery in Understanding Basic Grammar

Tias Sil Romansyah<sup>1</sup>, Evi Lestaria<sup>2</sup>

Universitas Muhammadiyah Mahakarya Aceh

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\*Correspondence: Tias Sil Romansyah

Email: [tiassilr@gmail.com](mailto:tiassilr@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** This study explored the first-year university students' perceptions of grammar, their level of mastery in basic grammar structures, and the factors influencing their learning experiences. This study employed a qualitative research method. All 35 participants were the first-year students in a private university from several programs such as Psychology, Information Technology, Special Education, Management, and Communication. Various data collection techniques were employed: a survey and a semi-structured interview about students' perception towards grammar, a semi-structured interview about students' mastery in understanding basic grammar, and a semi-structured interview about students' learning environment and motivation. Data collection lasted 4 weeks. The data collected from the survey questionnaire were analyzed descriptively. The data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using content analysis. The findings revealed that while most students acknowledge the importance of grammar in communication, a significant portion finds it frustrating and difficult to master. The most common challenges include verb tense agreement, the use of conjunctions, and pronoun consistency. Factors such as learning environment, confidence levels, and teaching methods significantly influence students' grammar acquisition. Many students reported experiencing anxiety when making grammar mistakes, which hindered their willingness to practice.

**Keywords:** English grammar, students' perceptions, language learning, grammar mastery, qualitative research

## Introduction

Grammar is a fundamental component of language learning, influencing students' ability to communicate effectively. It serves as the foundation for both written and spoken communication, enabling individuals to construct coherent sentences and convey their thoughts accurately. Mastery of grammar not only helps learners understand the structure and rules of a language but also empowers them to participate meaningfully in academic, social, and professional settings. Proper grammar usage allows learners to express ideas with clarity, avoid ambiguity, and enhance their academic and professional success (Yong & Saad, 2023). In particular, English grammar has become an essential skill in today's interconnected world, where English is often the medium for global communication, business, and technology.

As a key pillar in language education, Taye & Mengesha (2024) stated that grammar proficiency is not merely about following rules but about developing a deeper understanding of how language works to express complex ideas and emotions. In an increasingly globalized world, proficiency in English grammar plays a crucial role in ensuring effective cross-cultural communication, career advancement, and access to a broader range of opportunities. While English grammar may present challenges for non-native speakers, mastering it is critical for success in both formal education and the workplace (Ouanhlee, 2023). Furthermore, the importance of grammar extends beyond formal written exams, affecting everyday interactions, online communication, and the ability to engage with global discourse.

In the context of English language education, however, many students face difficulties in grasping grammar concepts, particularly at the foundational level (Matiso, 2023). This issue is particularly significant among first-year students, who are often at the stage where they must transition from basic to more advanced linguistic skills. Addressing these challenges early on can help mitigate future struggles and provide students with the tools they need to communicate effectively in a variety of settings. Beyond its role in academic writing, grammar significantly impacts students' confidence in speaking and their ability to comprehend complex texts. Without proper grammar mastery, learners may struggle to construct logical and meaningful sentences, leading to miscommunication. Research indicates that students with strong grammar skills perform better in reading comprehension, writing tasks, and oral communication (Abay, 2021). However, students' attitudes toward grammar vary widely. Some view it as essential for communication, while others find it challenging and frustrating (Halim, Wahid, & Halim, 2021). Psychological factors such as anxiety and self-confidence significantly influence students' willingness to engage with grammar learning. Moreover, past learning experiences, instructional methods, and exposure to English outside the classroom shape their perceptions and attitudes.

Previous studies have explored the role of grammar in language acquisition. Krashen in Sudharshana (2021) suggested that explicit grammar instruction is less effective than natural language exposure, while Larsen-Freeman in Pawlak (2021) argued that a combination of explicit and implicit instruction yields better results. Similarly, Richards & Schmidt in Qu & Abd Rahman (2025) found that students taught through communicative approaches demonstrated greater retention and application of grammatical structures compared to those who learned through rote memorization. Furthermore, Swan in Chebr & Zeradna (2024) emphasized the need for contextualized grammar teaching, highlighting that students who learn grammar in real-life contexts perform better in language proficiency tests.

According to the previous studies, grammar can be categorized into different types, including prescriptive and descriptive grammar. Prescriptive grammar focuses on established rules and norms for correct language use, often found in textbooks and formal instruction. In contrast, descriptive grammar examines how language is used in real-life contexts, emphasizing the natural evolution of language structures (Pham, 2023). In addition, functional grammar emphasizes the practical use of grammar in communication, highlighting its role in conveying meaning effectively rather than strictly adhering to formal rules. Understanding these distinctions can help educators design more effective instructional strategies that balance structure and flexibility in language learning. By integrating these different approaches, educators can create a more holistic grammar curriculum that acknowledges both form and function. Additionally, the role of grammar in cognitive processing should not be overlooked. Studies in psycholinguistics suggest that grammar knowledge aids in sentence parsing, comprehension, and even memory retention, making it an essential skill beyond linguistic accuracy alone. The integration of cognitive and linguistic perspectives in grammar instruction can help learners develop a deeper and more intuitive understanding of grammatical structures (Wijnant, Rijt, & Coppen, 2021). Furthermore, modern linguistic research suggests that grammar is not a static set of rules but a dynamic system influenced by cultural and technological shifts. The increasing use of digital communication, for instance, has led to evolving grammatical conventions, requiring language learners to adapt their understanding of grammar to different modes of communication (Sun, 2024). This adaptability is crucial for effective communication in diverse contexts.

Several factors influence grammar acquisition, including motivation, exposure, learning environment, and instructional methods. Wazeer (2023) said that a supportive learning environment with engaging activities can significantly improve grammar retention and application. The debate on explicit versus implicit grammar instruction continues among linguists. Some argue that grammar should be taught explicitly with a focus on rule-based learning, while others advocate for more contextualized, communicative approaches. Traditional methods such as rote memorization and rule-based instruction may not always be effective, whereas task-based language teaching and communicative language teaching have been shown to improve grammar comprehension and application (Zamona, 2025). Additionally, multimodal approaches incorporating visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic elements in grammar instruction can enhance learning effectiveness (Eugenijus, 2023). Studies have found that learners benefit from interactive digital tools, collaborative learning, and project-based activities that integrate grammar within meaningful tasks. By diversifying instructional methods, educators can cater to different learning styles and increase student engagement in grammar learning. Moreover, research has shown that intrinsic motivation plays a significant role in grammar acquisition. Situmorang (2022) stated that students who perceive grammar as a valuable skill for their future academic and professional careers are more likely to invest time and effort in mastering it. Creating a learning environment that fosters motivation, curiosity, and practical application can lead to more successful grammar learning outcomes. Furthermore, peer interactions and social engagement in language learning have been found to enhance grammar acquisition. Group discussions, peer feedback, and cooperative learning strategies allow students to apply grammar in meaningful contexts, reinforcing their understanding and retention of grammatical structures (Pamzan, Javaid, & Ali, 2023).

Grammar plays a crucial role in all four language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. While grammar is often emphasized in reading and writing, its role in speaking and listening is equally important. Accurate grammar usage enables speakers to construct meaningful and structurally sound sentences, facilitating clear communication (Nosirova,

2023). In listening comprehension, understanding grammar helps learners decode spoken messages more effectively by recognizing sentence structures, tenses, and syntactic patterns (Suseno, 2024). Thus, grammar is an integral part of language fluency, not merely a set of abstract rules.

First-year university students often transition from a high school learning environment where grammar instruction was more rigid and examination-oriented. This shift to a university setting, which encourages self-directed learning, can make grammar acquisition more challenging. In Indonesia, where English is a foreign language, grammar is typically learned in formal classroom settings rather than through daily interactions, making it even harder for students to internalize and apply grammar rules naturally (Nunan in Alem, 2021). Cultural attitudes toward English learning and the fear of making grammatical mistakes often discourage students from practicing and improving their skills (Lightbown & Spada in Alqurashi & Assulaimani, 2021). Additionally, social and cultural perspectives on English learning influence students' confidence in using grammar. In some communities, speaking English with perfect grammar may be perceived as overly formal or even intimidating, further limiting students' willingness to practice.

As technology advances, augmented learning has significantly impacted grammar teaching (Mozaffari & Hamidi, 2023). Online grammar checkers, AI-driven writing assistants, and mobile applications provide learners with instant feedback, helping them identify and correct grammatical errors. However, while these tools can enhance learning, research suggests they should not replace active engagement with grammar concepts through structured instruction and guided practice. Although digital tools offer convenience and accessibility, they often fail to provide nuanced explanations regarding grammar rules and language use. Many AI-driven applications correct errors without explicitly teaching the underlying grammatical principles, potentially leading to surface-level learning rather than deep comprehension (Mohebbi, 2025). Additionally, overreliance on such tools may hinder learners from developing their own analytical skills in grammar correction, making them dependent on external aids (Thangthong, Phiromsombut, & Imsa-ard, 2024). To maximize their benefits, these tools should be integrated into a broader instructional approach that includes interactive exercises, teacher feedback, and opportunities for authentic language use. Studies indicate that combining technology with human interaction such as peer discussions, collaborative writing tasks, and teacher-led grammar explanations produces better long-term retention of grammar knowledge. Moreover, incorporating AI tools into formative assessments can provide personalized feedback, allowing students to track their progress and target specific areas for improvement (Owan, Abang, Idika, Etta, & Bassey, 2023).

Given these challenges, understanding students' perceptions of grammar and their level of mastery in basic grammar concepts remains an essential area of research. While numerous studies have explored grammar instruction and language acquisition, there is still a need to investigate how students personally perceive grammar and what factors influence their ability to grasp fundamental grammatical structures. This research aims to bridge that gap by providing qualitative insights into students' experiences, struggles, and attitudes toward grammar learning. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the first-year university students' perceptions of English grammar?
2. To what extent do they master basic grammar structures?
3. What factors influence their understanding and motivation to learn grammar?

By addressing these questions, this study hopes to contribute to the ongoing discussion on effective English language instruction and provide practical recommendations for improving grammar teaching methodologies. A deeper understanding of students' perspectives

can help educators create more supportive learning environments that foster confidence, engagement, and long-term retention of grammar skills.

## Methodology

The study was conducted to explore first-year university students' perception towards grammar and their mastery in understanding basic English grammar. To achieve this objective, a qualitative descriptive research design was employed. This approach was chosen because it allows for a straightforward description of students' perspectives, experiences, and challenges in learning grammar based on their own accounts. Unlike phenomenological or grounded theory approaches, qualitative descriptive research focuses on summarizing and presenting the data as it is, making it a suitable method for capturing students' real-life experiences and attitudes towards grammar learning.

The participants of this study were 35 first-semester university students from diverse academic disciplines in a private university who were enrolled in an English foundation course. They were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a range of perspectives regarding grammar perception and mastery. The sample size was designed to allow for a detailed exploration of individual experiences while maintaining manageability in data collection and analysis.

To obtain comprehensive insights, two primary data collection techniques were used: a survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey is a structured questionnaire was distributed to students to gather data on their perceptions of grammar, their level of understanding, and their learning environment. The survey consisted of four sections: first, general information including three close-ended questions to gather basic demographic data; second, students' perception of English grammar by following six open-ended questions to explore students' attitudes and experiences with grammar learning; third, grammar mastery with three open-ended questions to assess students' self-perceived proficiency in understanding basic grammar rules; and fourth, learning environment and motivation through three open-ended questions to identify external and internal factors influencing grammar learning. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to further explore their thoughts, challenges, and learning strategies related to grammar. The semi-structured format allowed students to freely express their opinions while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into specific topics that emerged from the survey responses.

A thematic analysis approach was used to examine the qualitative data collected from surveys and interviews. The data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into key themes that emerged regarding students' perceptions and grammar mastery. This method allowed for the identification of recurring patterns, such as common difficulties in learning grammar, students' preferences for learning strategies and external influences on their learning process.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing results from both the survey and interviews. Additionally, member checking was conducted, where participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations of their responses.

Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and their written consent was obtained. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential to maintain ethical research standards.



Overall, the qualitative research design allowed the study to gain rich, descriptive insights into how first-year students perceive and understand English grammar, contributing to a better understanding of the challenges and needs of learners in developing their grammatical competence.

The data were collected in the middle semester of academic year 2024-2025. The data collection process is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Data collection process

Process	Date
Informing students about the content of the study	2.1.2025-3.1.2025
Identifying the students	4.1.2025-7.1.2025
Following up with the participant	8.1.2025-9.1.2025
Conducting the survey to learn students' perception towards grammar	10.1.2025-12.1.2025
Interview about the students' perception towards grammar	13.1.2025-14.1.2025
Interview about the students' mastery in understanding basic grammar	15.1.2025-16.1.2025
Interview about the students' mastery in understanding basic grammar	17.1.2025-18.1.2025
Transcribing and organizing data	20.1.2025-22.1.2025
Analyzing data using thematic analysis	23.1.2025-27.1.2025
Validating findings through member checking	28.1.2025-31.1.2025

As shown in Table 1, the data collection process lasted four weeks and followed a systematic and progressive approach. Each stage was carefully structured to build upon the insights gained from the previous step, ensuring a comprehensive and detailed exploration of students' perceptions and mastery of grammar.

## Result and Discussion

The survey results reveal significant insights into first-year university students' perceptions, challenges, and attitudes toward learning English grammar. Below are the key findings categorized based on the research questions.

### 1. Students' Perceptions of English Grammar

A majority of students recognize grammar as a crucial component of English language learning, facilitating effective communication and academic success. However, perceptions vary:

- 80% of respondents agreed that grammar is essential for structuring sentences correctly and avoiding misunderstandings in written and spoken communication.
- 20% of students expressed frustration with grammar rules, indicating that its complexity sometimes hinders their confidence in using the language.
- Students who had prior exposure to English grammar through extracurricular activities or media consumption displayed a more positive attitude towards grammar learning.

One participant stated, *"Grammar is essential, but sometimes the rules feel overwhelming. I wish learning grammar was more interactive and less about memorization."* Another student mentioned, *"I feel more confident using English when I watch movies or listen to native speakers rather than studying grammar rules in a textbook."*

Table 2. Students' perceptions of grammar importance

Perception Category	Percentage (%)
Essential for communication	80%
Frustrating and challenging	20%

As shown in Table 2, it illustrates that the majority of students (80%) acknowledge the significance of grammar for effective communication. However, a smaller portion (20%) perceives grammar as challenging, highlighting the need for more engaging and accessible learning approaches.

## 2. Students' Mastery of Basic Grammar Structures

The self-assessment of grammar proficiency among students revealed varying levels of mastery:

- 45% of students rated their grammar proficiency as intermediate, while 30% identified as beginners, and only 25% considered themselves proficient.
- Common grammar challenges included verb tense agreement (65%), use of conjunctions (50%), and pronoun consistency (40%).
- Students who frequently practiced grammar outside the classroom reported better mastery than those who relied solely on classroom instruction.

A student reflected, *"I struggle with verb tenses the most. Sometimes I mix up past and present tenses, especially when speaking."* Another shared, *"Grammar exercises help, but I need more practice using them in real conversations."*

Table 3. Students' self-assessed grammar proficiency

Proficiency Level	Percentage (%)
Beginner	30%
Intermediate	45%
Proficient	25%

Table 3 demonstrates that most students rate themselves as intermediate (45%) in grammar proficiency, while a considerable portion (30%) still struggles at a beginner level. This suggests a need for more targeted grammar instruction and practice opportunities to help students move towards higher proficiency levels.

## 3. Factors Influencing Grammar Learning

Various factors were identified as influencing students' ability to grasp grammar concepts:

- **Learning Environment:** 55% of students felt that classroom interactions and peer discussions positively influenced their motivation, while 45% believed grammar was not emphasized enough.
- **Confidence and Anxiety:** 60% of students reported experiencing nervousness or embarrassment when making grammar mistakes, affecting their willingness to practice speaking or writing.
- **Teaching Methods:** Students favored communicative and interactive approaches, with 75% stating that listening, speaking exercises, and watching English media were more effective than traditional rule-based instruction.
- **Use of Digital Tools:** 70% of students had used online grammar checkers or mobile applications, finding them helpful in identifying and correcting errors, though they acknowledged that these tools should be complemented with active learning.

One participant commented, *"I get really anxious when speaking English because I'm afraid of making grammar mistakes. It stops me from participating in discussions."* Another student

highlighted, *“Grammar apps help me a lot, but they don’t explain why something is wrong. I still need teachers to guide me.”*

Table 4. Factors influencing grammar learning

Factor	Percentage (%)
Positive learning environment	55%
Anxiety/nervousness	60%
Preference for interactive learning	75%
Use of digital tools	70%

Table 3 highlights key factors influencing students’ grammar learning. The most significant influences include interactive learning preferences (75%) and the use of digital tools (70%), whereas grammar-related anxiety (60%) remains a major challenge that educators need to address.

Meanwhile, in analyzing the interview data, content analysis was applied to identify patterns, key themes, and meanings from participants’ responses. Based on the interview results, three main themes emerged: emotional responses toward grammar learning, challenges in understanding grammar, and students’ learning environment and motivation.

#### 1. Students’ Emotional Responses Toward Grammar Learning

The interview findings reveal that many students experience negative emotions when learning English grammar. One participant stated, *“I feel slightly anxious or frustrated, but I also see it as an opportunity to learn and improve.”* From this statement, two main sub-themes emerge: anxiety and frustration which students experience anxiety and frustration, especially when making repeated mistakes. Then, growth mindset which despite these negative emotions, some students perceive mistakes as opportunities for learning and self-improvement. These findings align with Horwitz et al.’s (1986) Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) theory, which suggests that language learning anxiety can influence students’ confidence and academic performance. However, the presence of a growth mindset indicates that some students exhibit resilience in language learning.

#### 2. Challenges in Understanding Grammar

Students face multiple difficulties in mastering English grammar, particularly in two key areas: First, structural differences between English and native language. One participant mentioned, *“I struggle to understand grammar concepts, the differences between English grammar and my native language, applying grammar in context, and distinguishing between formal and informal grammar.”* This statement suggests that structural differences between languages pose a significant challenge to understanding grammar. Second, complexity and rule exceptions. Another participant stated, *“The main challenge is its complexity, making it difficult to remember. For example, choosing the correct verb according to tenses, using conjunctions, and so on.”* It means the difficulty in remembering grammar rules, particularly tenses and conjunctions, was highlighted as a major obstacle. Content analysis indicates that students struggle not only with theoretical understanding but also with practical application. These findings align with Ellis (2006), who emphasizes that the complexity of grammar and its exceptions often lead to difficulties in second language acquisition.

#### 3. Learning Environment and Motivation



Students' learning environment and personal motivation play a crucial role in their grammar learning experience. The result of semi-structured interview shows that emotional reactions to mistakes. One participant expressed, *"I feel embarrassed and slightly frustrated when repeating the same mistakes, along with an awareness of the need to correct those mistakes."* This statement suggests that while students feel self-conscious and frustrated about their mistakes, they also acknowledge the importance of correcting them. The next one is external and internal motivation. Another participant noted, *"The lack of interest in English among others motivates me to master the language and prove its importance in expanding knowledge and strengthening international relations."* Student motivation can be intrinsic (self-improvement) or extrinsic (the desire to prove the importance of English to others). These findings support Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System, which suggests that second language motivation is shaped by internal drive (ideal self) and external factors (social expectations and challenges).

## Discussion

The findings reveal that most students recognize grammar as a crucial component of English language learning, with 80% acknowledging its role in structuring sentences and preventing miscommunication. However, 20% of the students expressed frustration with grammar rules, citing their complexity as a barrier to confidence in language use. This divided perception aligns with previous studies indicating that while some learners see grammar as essential, others find it challenging and demotivating. From the interview responses, students' emotional reactions toward grammar learning were also evident. Many participants reported feeling anxious or frustrated when faced with difficult grammar rules, especially when they repeatedly made the same mistakes. However, some students demonstrated a growth mindset, viewing errors as part of the learning process. This finding is consistent with Horwitz et al.'s in Xiaofei (2023) *Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)* theory, which suggests that language learning anxiety can influence students' confidence and performance.

Students' self-assessment of their grammar proficiency highlights a varied level of mastery. While 45% consider themselves intermediate users, 30% identify as beginners, and only 25% claim proficiency. The most commonly reported difficulties include verb tense agreement (65%), the use of conjunctions (50%), and pronoun consistency (40%). The interview data support this, as students frequently mentioned struggling with structural differences between English and their native language. One participant stated, *"I struggle to understand grammar concepts, especially the differences between English grammar and my native language."* It suggests that L1 interference plays a significant role in students' grammar difficulties. Additionally, some students mentioned that grammar complexity, particularly the numerous exceptions to rules, made it difficult to internalize concepts. Ellis in Daskan (2023) also emphasizes that complex grammar structures often hinder second-language learners' progress.

Several factors influence students' ability to grasp grammar concepts, including their learning environment, confidence levels, and exposure to different teaching methods. The study found that 55% of students believed that classroom interactions and peer discussions positively impacted their motivation, while 45% felt that grammar was not emphasized enough in their courses. Additionally, 60% of students reported experiencing anxiety when making grammar mistakes, which affected their willingness to engage in speaking or writing activities. It was reinforced by interview findings, where students expressed embarrassment and hesitation when making grammatical errors. One student mentioned, *"I feel embarrassed and slightly frustrated when I keep making the same mistakes, but I know I need to correct them."* It

highlights the emotional aspect of grammar learning and the importance of creating a supportive environment where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities rather than failures.

The study also highlights students' strong preference for communicative and interactive grammar instruction. A significant 75% of students reported that listening and speaking exercises, as well as exposure to English media, were more effective than traditional rule-based learning. Additionally, 70% of students used digital tools such as grammar checkers and language-learning apps to support their grammar acquisition. Interview responses further emphasized this preference, as students noted that traditional grammar instruction often felt too rigid and ineffective. One participant shared, *"Grammar exercises help, but I need more practice using them in real conversations."* While digital tools were perceived as helpful, students also acknowledged their limitations, particularly in explaining why certain grammar choices were correct or incorrect. This suggests that while technology can supplement grammar learning, it should not replace direct instruction and interaction with peers and teachers.

Overall, the findings indicate that students benefit most from a learning environment that emphasizes practical application, reduces anxiety, and incorporates engaging instructional methods. By adopting a more student-centered approach to grammar teaching, educators can better address students' difficulties and enhance their ability to use English grammar effectively in both academic and real-world contexts. The integration of explicit instruction with communicative practice, along with psychological support to reduce grammar-related anxiety, is key to improving grammar mastery among first-year university students.

## Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the perceptions and challenges faced by first-year university students in learning English grammar. While grammar is widely acknowledged as fundamental to effective communication, students' attitudes toward it are polarized: some view it as essential, while others find it overwhelming and frustrating. The findings indicate that most students struggle with specific areas of grammar, such as verb tenses and conjunctions, and require more practice to build their proficiency.

Moreover, factors such as classroom dynamics, teaching methods, and the use of digital tools all play significant roles in shaping students' grammar learning experiences. The study emphasizes the need for more interactive, communicative approaches in grammar instruction, which align with students' learning preferences. Additionally, addressing the emotional challenges, such as anxiety and lack of confidence, is crucial for fostering a more positive and effective learning environment.

To enhance grammar instruction, educators should integrate both traditional and innovative methods, balancing explicit grammar teaching with communicative tasks that engage students in meaningful language use. Teachers are encouraged to use digital tools as supplementary aids while focusing on in-class activities that promote active learning. Lastly, further research into students' emotional responses and motivational factors will be invaluable for tailoring more effective and supportive grammar teaching strategies.

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