

An analysis on students' difficulties in Intermediate English Grammar course

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to analyze the students' difficulties in learning intermediate grammar courses, especially in modal auxiliaries and reported speech materials as well as the factors of students' difficulties in learning grammar in English Education Department at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo. This research study used the qualitative method. The population was 10 students of third semester in English Education Department at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo. Next, techniques of data collection were observation sheet and interview. The result showed that most students have not understood and confused to use all the modal auxiliaries, the use of "to" and without "to", and they did not memorize the formulas pattern of positive, negative and interrogative sentence. Also, students were confused in displacement of tenses because they did not know the formula, and were confused how to use pronoun and time pronoun because they did not memorize. Furthermore, factors that affect the students' difficulties in learning grammar start from a lack motivation, learning strategies, teaching methods, educational background and family environment.

Keywords: students' difficulties, English grammar, modal auxiliaries, reported speech.

INTRODUCTION

Students' difficulties on intermediate grammar are mostly related to understanding the use of modal auxiliaries and reported speech. These difficulties are triggered because students are complicated to comprehend the use of grammatical rules. For instance, students are difficult how to make sentences using certain tenses, how to use pronoun, and how to write adverb

clause. From this case, students are required to have in-depth understanding in order to learn how English grammar is applied.

In general, the use of language becomes one of the important aspects in life to create environment full of conversations. According to Wibowo (2001), language is a system of symbols that contains meaning generated by sound that is arbitrary and conventional. As a means of communication, the use of language can express and exchange our feelings and thoughts with others. Interestingly, as a part of culture, language is certainly varied due to the distinction of ethnics and races. Thus, learning other languages, such as English, is considered very beneficial especially in wider global environment.

English is an international language universally used in various countries in expressing ideas and communication. The use of English is a needed skill in order to successfully compete in the globalization era. Generally, English has four basic skills; those are speaking, writing, listening, and reading. However, speaking is considered as the most important skill in learning English (Harahap et.al, 2015). Besides, there are other language aspects that support the learning process including vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Therefore, both language skills and aspects interrelate to each other in order to help students in learning English.

Furthermore, learning English requires knowledge on how to use appropriate basic structural patterns or grammatical rules. Grammar is a set of rules in forming words and constructing correct sentences. According to Linda and Peter, grammar is a theory of language that describes how it puts together. In-depth understanding of grammar will support learners to be able to create complex sentences. However, in fact, many students still do not have capability to comprehend the application of grammar. Hue-He (2013) stated that it can be influenced due to the lack of motivation, educational background, family environment, strategic learning, and teaching method.

The course of English grammar is generally divided into three levels; those are basic, intermediate, and advance grammar. The intermediate grammar is the initial learning obtained by university students usually to comprehend the use of tenses. However, most students frequently encounter some difficulties due to various types of tenses and its uses.

Regarding to this matter, the present research is attempted to focus more on the difficulties in applying reported speech and modal auxiliaries. To be more specific, it will attempt to discover what makes them failed to understand these rules. There are some previous studies that also investigated the students' difficulties in learning English grammar. First,

Qadariah (2010) discovered that transforming direct speech into reported speech became the major issue of students' difficulty in learning grammar. Meanwhile, Miranti (2019) argued, based on her research, the main difficulty was related to the use of intralingua. Moreover, McDounall (2012) identified that the most dominant factor influencing the students' error came from the application of intralingua error. Next, Mafhud (2021) revealed that the major students' problem was influenced by the existence of modal auxiliaries, especially in differentiating its use. Besides, Altayeb (2019) discussed that most students were unable to understand both the correct use and function of modal auxiliaries.

Based on those previous studies, the researchers attempt to provide a novelty in which this present study is conducted to explore more on students' difficulties specifically related to the grammar use of English reported speech and modal auxiliaries for intermediate level students. Furthermore, this present study is expected to assist students' getting better understanding on using these specific grammars. Besides, it will become a helpful resource to English lecturers in determining a certain teaching method that can be appropriately applied in teaching reported speech and modal auxiliary in order to reduce students' difficulties

METHODS

The present research is conducted using a qualitative method in which it allows the researcher to apply data analysis methods including sufficient knowledge, experience, and in-depth understanding of context. Moreover, the analysis is supported by the use of observation sheets, interview, and documentation. These supported methods are directly implemented to both students and English lecturers specifically at Sultan Amai Gorontalo Islamic State Institution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the interview form 10 students, they admitted that it is complicated to understand the use of reported speech and modal auxiliaries, such as memorizing formulas, writing positive or negative sentences, or making interrogative sentences. Based on their opinion, these difficulties were influenced by inappropriate learning strategy. For instance, they would prefer focus on memorizing the materials in doing presentation rather than discussing it with other classmates. In addition, the students also emphasized that they did not know how to change tenses, pronouns and times due to too many formula especially related to direct or

indirect speech. Furthermore, the lecturers also confirmed that the students' difficulty related to reported speech is due to the lack of practice.

1. *Factors influencing the students' difficulties*

Here are several factors contributing to students' difficulties in Intermediate Grammar Course.

- a. **Motivation:** All students said that they have lack of motivation to learn in which made them more difficult to understand the material especially related to English grammar.
- b. **Learning Strategies:** Mostly students said that doing discussion and presentation are not appropriate learning strategies. They argued that the lecturers should be more interactive and innovative to create other learning strategies in order to avoid students' boredom.
- c. **Teaching Method:** In fact, the method frequently used in grammar learning was students' presentation. The students thought that the lecturers better should use more interesting methods so students do not feel bored.
- d. **Educational background:** Students' educational background was considered as a very influential factor especially when they decided to choose to be an English Department student. They thought that the English material given in high school was still very basic and not sufficient. Thus, it affected how they had lack of knowledge about English grammar.
- e. **Family environment:** Students stated that family environment also influences how they learn grammar. They illustrated that if there is no a family member who has basic in English, it will be much more difficult to learn compared to students whose parents have knowledge about English grammar.

2. *Result of Observation Sheet*

From the results of the observation sheet, many students have difficulties in learning intermediate grammar, especially in modal auxiliaries and reported speech materials. These difficulties were experienced in their learning process such as during students' presentation. Due to having lack of understanding the materials, they felt more difficult to explain or give examples.

Discussion

Based on the interviews and observation sheet, mostly students have difficulties in understanding the material of modal auxiliaries and reported speech. They cannot memorize and understand how to apply the formula into the right sentence. For instance, they experienced

problem how to identify verbs with “to” or without “to”. Raimes (2004) supported that applying and understanding modal auxiliaries is not an easy task for students; they are still confused how to make a sentence using modal auxiliaries. Besides, mostly students also could not memorize positive, negative and interrogative sentence patterns due to the existence of too much formula. Ardakani (2015) stated modal auxiliaries are complicated for students because same modal can sometimes be used to express different functions. In addition, the use of sentence patterns, such as negative, positive, or interrogative sentence, would be difficult to understand if they did not memorize the formula (Hasan et al., 2019). The misplaced use of modal auxiliaries in positive, negative, and interrogative sentences is shown in the example below:

(+) S + V1 (s/es) + O/C
(-) S + do/does + not + V1 + O/C
(?) Do/does + S + V1 + O/C +?
(+) Fara can speak Spain well
(-) Fara cannot speak Spain well
(?) Does Fara speak Spain well

The students’ difficulty related to reported speech, especially direct and indirect speech is caused by too many tenses formula. Based on the data example above, the students are confused how to change the positive and negative modal sentences into an interrogative sentence. As Dalimmute (2019) stated that understanding direct and indirect speech needs to master the formula rules in order to change verbs and pronouns in the reported speech.

Furthermore, there are several factors that caused students’ difficulties in learning grammar (Hue-He, 2013). First, students need a motivation in which it influences how well their result. Based on the findings, they have low motivation to understand the material so that they failed in making sentences. Having strong motivation can determine the learners’ success or failure (Hamalik, 2011).

Second, learning English needs a suitable strategy that can be applied to the students. Monotonous strategy, such as students’ presentation only causes boredom and passive participation. Thus, the lecturers should apply more precise and varied strategies in order to help students understanding the grammar materials. In line with Dorny and Ryan (2015), the interactive learning depends on how well the lecturers’ strategy in delivering the materials.

Besides, Adunola (2011) also stated that if the lecturers cannot choose the right strategy especially in grammar, the learning process will become more difficult for the students.

Third, the appropriate teaching method also determined how well the students can understand the materials. According to Arham (2016), misusing a teaching method can cause learners' difficulty in understanding grammar. Based on the findings, only applying a students' oriented learning is considered not effective. Therefore, the lecturers are recommended to be more innovative in determining other supporting teaching methods.

Next, students from any different educational background, especially having no prior knowledge about English, will encounter more difficulties in understanding grammar (Habibie, 2020). Mellon (2010) stated students usually choose a specific department because they have prior knowledge gained from previous schools. Thus, having prior knowledge will be much easier for them to interpret what they are learning now.

Last, the existence of supporting family environment also gives contribution how the students can easily understand the materials. As Puneetkaur et.al (2013) stated that parental education provides a robust indicator of parental functioning that predicates children well across diverse communities. For instance, having a family member who has English fluency can certainly help students to learn the materials easier, especially related to grammar. However, if their family members do not have knowledge about English, it will make students more difficult to learn grammar. A student who has intelligence in learning but not supported by people surrounding, the result cannot be achieved maximally (Sugihartono, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

Mostly students encountered some difficulties in learning grammar, especially related to modal auxiliaries, how to form a correct sentence, also the use of direct and indirect speech. They felt confused because they could not remember the formula and how to change tense. There are several factors that obstruct students' understanding the materials; those are having low motivation, inappropriate learning strategies, ineffective teaching methods, educational background, and family environment. Based on the previous discussion, both students and lecturers need to discover some solutions to overcome the factors in order to successfully have smooth teaching-learning English materials, specifically about the use of modal auxiliaries and reported speech. For instance, the lecturers can provide more practical assignments. Last, it is recommended to future researchers to focus more analyzing the teaching-learning process such as the teaching methods or students' learning strategies.

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