EFL students' strategies in learning grammar online

Nadya Irdani [a,1], Nur Fatimah [b,2,*], Arilia Triyoga [c,3]

[a, b, c] Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Jl. Ringroad Selatan, Kragilan, Tamanan, Kec. Banguntapan, Kabupaten Bantul, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55191 Indonesia

[1] nadyairdani@gmail.com ; [2] nur.fatimah@pbi.uad.ac.id [*]; [3] arilia@pbi.uad.ac.id

* corresponding author

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Students' learning strategies are part of teaching and learning success. The objectives of this study are to describe students' strategies in learning grammar through online grammar classes and to find out the students' problems and solutions in learning grammar online. This research is mixed method where the data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. One hundred and twenty-three students completed the questionnaire, and twelve students were involved in the interview sessions. All respondents are from the English Education Department. The result shows that the students apply all learning strategies; memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. However, the highest percentage of the learning strategy mostly used by the students is cognitive strategies (18.30%), while the least is affective strategies (14.76%). Moreover, students learning grammar online face technical and academic problems; unstable internet connection, lack of confidence in their English language skills, the teaching method, and mastery on the English language structure of the sentences. As solutions, the students combine different strategies such metacognitive strategy (self-management in learning), affective strategy (controlling emotions), social strategy (asking friends), memory strategy (using dictionaries, using learning applications, watching movies), cognitive strategy (practicing, reviewing). A variety of learning tasks need to be designed to suit the students' strategies in learning grammar online.

1. Introduction

Grammar is not an easy material in learning a foreign language because it has many complicated rules that can cause a lot of trouble for students. Povjakalova (2012) states that grammar refers to the rules through which words change form and combine to make a sentence, as well as the study and implementation of these rules. Many learners struggle with these complex rules and could not memorize and remember them (Lewis, 1993). When students try to speak English, most of them are confused about the grammar, which causes a lot of mistakes in speaking and writing. Therefore, it is essential to deal with how to teach grammar and how students learn it in the online class.

Indonesian students face difficulties in learning grammar because Indonesian grammar rules differ from English ones (Ameliani, 2019). That is also one of the problems of English education department students. When learning grammar, students appear to become passive, confused, shy, frightened of making mistakes, and bored, and students are sometimes tired in class when there is a grammar lesson. Therefore, according to Rimbarizki and Susilo (2017) it is necessary to encourage

students to be enthusiastic in learning so that they can participate in learning actively and pleasantly without feeling overwhelmed.

Furthermore, learning grammar has also been a problem for students, especially when learning it online during the pandemic. The learning factor itself also greatly influences the student's grammar mastery, such as motivation in learning student styles and strategies. In this pandemic, based on the researchers' observation and data from some lecturers, during online grammar learning, students learning grammar in the online class were often passive, and not motivated. Students were reluctant to ask for materials that they did not understand in online learning. They also felt shy to ask during the learning session.

Those grammar learning issues should be tackled because they tend to be hard for the students to proceed higher. To make learning grammar more fun and enjoyable, the students need to use strategies suitable to learn it. Grammar especially pedagogical one cannot be avoided because grammar is a fundamental element used in English language skills (Saaristo, 2015; Sun, 2017).

Online learning has the same goal, that is students being able to understand the material and apply it in life, but because of the different methods of delivering the material and its process, students must adapt themselves to this online learning. According to Rimbarizki and Susilo (2017), online learning is complex. It is felt by almost all students, especially those who have problems with internet connections. Some students experience difficulty in carrying out learning activities synchronously. Further, some lecturers only provide material and assignments without explaining to the students. In learning grammar, it is so difficult to understand if the lecturer does not explain it. Some students may be able to learn the materials independently. Some other students need more assistance in learning through other variety of tasks or learning activities, by watching, listening to audio texts, practicing, collaborating with peers, etc. Thus, their learning styles and strategies are of significance to concern (Huang et al., 2018; Balci, 2017). Along with the idea on the importance of learning grammar and how to learn it online, this article discusses how language learning strategies in an English Education Department were investigated in a grammar class conducted online.

2. Research Method

This is mixed-method research and it used questionnaire and interview to collect the data. The subjects of the research were students of an English Education Department in a university in Yogyakarta. The data obtained were on their learning strategies in learning grammar online, their problems and solutions in learning.

The population of this study is the sixth semester students of English Education Department (N=190). They learn English as a foreign language. The technique of sampling is purposive. Only students attending grammar in online class were selected. There were 123 participants filling out the questionnaire.

Table 1. The blueprint of questionnaire on students' strategies in learning grammar online

Aspect	Item Number
Memory Strategies	1-3
Cognitive Strategies	4-6
Compensation Strategies	7-9
Metacognitive Strategies	10-15
Affective Strategies	16-18
Social Strategies	19-20
TOTAL	20 items

The questionnaire was modified from Oxford's (1990) SILL (Strategy Inventory Language Learning), to be associated with learning grammar online, to reveal the strategy applied by students in learning grammar online. It is in English. The questionnaire was validated by an expert in English language teaching. After the validation process, the questionnaire was distributed to the research participants through Google form. This questionnaire consisted of 20 items with six categories of learning strategies and used a Likert scale ranging from 4 to 1 (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

The categories are memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. The blueprint is presented in Table 1.

The researchers calculated the percentage of each of the learning strategies and support the findings by doing interviews with the research participants to enrich the data. The interview was conducted entirely online to 12 participants. The purpose of the interview was to confirm and obtain deeper and richer data from the questionnaire. Further, it was also to find out the students' problems and solutions in learning grammar online.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Learning Strategies in Grammar Online Class

The results of the learning strategies used by the students of the English Education Department are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The Frequency of Learning Strategies of the Students of English Education Department

No.	Strategies	Percentage
1.	Memory strategies	17.26%
2.	**Cognitive strategies**	**18.30%**
3.	Compensation strategies	17.26%
4.	Metacognitive strategies	16.63%
5.	**Affective strategies**	**14.76%**
6.	Social strategies	15.80%

Based on the results in Table 2, it can be seen that the most frequently strategies used in learning grammar online is cognitive strategies (18.30%). Table 3 shows the sub-strategies in the cognitive ones that the students mostly confirmed are taking notes (87%), analyzing the structure of the sentences after learning grammar online (84,6%), and translating to Indonesian (91,9%). The following learning strategies applied are memory strategies and compensation strategies, they both get the same percentage, which is 17.26%. From these results, it is clear that direct strategies are more commonly used by the students in the English Education Department. Next, the strategies are metacognitive strategies with a total of 16.63%, followed by social strategies (15.80%), and the least used is affective strategies (14.76%). In terms of affective strategies, the students agree to the statements associated with positive attitudes in learning grammar online (excited (80,5%) and self-confident (71,6%)). From these results, it is found out that all language learning strategies are employed by the students, only a slight difference is found among the strategies. The details on the findings on the strategies in learning grammar online is presented in Table 3.

3.2. Students' Problems in Learning Grammar Online

Students faces some problems in learning grammar online, both technical and academic problems. Based on the interview session with 12 participants, it is revealed that they encountered learning problems such as unstable internet connection that causes the learning process to be disrupted, lack of confidence in their English language skills, the teaching method of the lecturers, mastery on the English language structure. Some excerpts are presented to support the findings.

> *"Yes, I have problems in learning grammar online. Sometimes I find it difficult to produce correct sentences, especially in completing assignments that require   the use of academic writing."* (Fina, interviewed July 30th 2021)

> "I have problems because I don't understand the material being taught and the   internet network is not stable, so I can't understand learning properly and   correctly." (Sarah, interviewed August 02nd 2021)

> *"To be honest I have many problems in my English grammar, that's why   sometimes I'm little bit not confident to say in English or even write in   English."* (Ama, interviewed August 01st 2021)

> *"Yes, I do. lack of confidence, have difficulty in pronunciation, and feel not having partners to practice."* (Ria, interviewed August 01st 2021)

"*It is difficult to understand the material.*" (Ani, interview August 01st 2021)

"*Teachers only gave the material but didn't explain it.*" (Amel, interview July 31st 2021)

Table 3. Strategies of English Education Department Students in Learning Grammar Online

No.	Items	Strongly Agree%	Agree%	Disagree%	Strongly Disagree%
	Memory strategies				
1.	I create sentences using English, so I can remember it.	29.3%	58.5%	8.9%	3.3%
2.	I give a bookmark for sentences that I did not understand while learning grammar online.	34.1%	47.2%	15.4%	3.3%
3.	I learn English grammar by reading e-book.	35%	45.5%	15.4%	4.1%
	Cognitive strategies				
4.	I try to understand the materials in learning grammar online by taking notes.	37.4%	49.6%	10.6%	2.4%
5.	I try to analyze the structure of the sentences after learning grammar online.	28.5%	56.1%	12.2%	3.3%
6.	I use Indonesian words if I do not know the English words.	48%	43.9%	6.5%	1.6%
	Compensation strategies				
7.	I use similar words if I want to ask while learning grammar online.	30.9%	56.1%	12.2%	3.3%
8.	I speak Indonesia and English words when I did not know the English words in learning grammar online.	48%	40.7%	10.6%	0.8%
9.	I create new words while learning grammar online if I did not know the right words.	25.2%	48.8%	16.3%	9.8%
	Metacognitive strategies				
10.	I use an online dictionary to find out the meaning of the words.	54.5%	36.6%	6.5%	2.4%
11.	I always write the materials while learning grammar online.	17.1%	52%	26.8%	4.1%
12.	I memorize the structure of the sentences in learning grammar online.	26%	50.4%	22%	1.6%
13.	I pay attention while watching English movie or watching YouTube.	49.6%	38.2%	8.1%	4.1%
14.	I divide specific time in learning grammar online.	17.1%	48.8%	29.3%	4.9%
15.	I look on the internet to learn English grammar.	40.7%	48.8%	8.1%	2.4%
	Affective strategies				
16.	I try to be excited while learning grammar online.	23.6%	56.9%	17.1%	2.4%
17.	I feel nervous every time I use English in learning grammar online.	26%	36.6%	26%	11.4%
18.	I have self-confidence every time I use English in learning grammar online.	22.8%	48.8%	27.6%	0.8%
	Social strategies				
19.	I ask the lecturer to repeat her/his words if I did not understand while learning grammar online.	32.5%	48.8%	14.6%	4.1%
20.	I and my friends chat on social media in English for practice.	28.5%	42.3%	26%	3.3%

3.3. Students' Strategies to Overcome the Problems

The students apply different strategies in dealing with existing problems in learning grammar online. However, it's undeniable that there are some common strategies to solve their problems. The

students combine different strategies such as metacognitive strategy (self-management in learning), affective strategy (controlling emotions), social strategy (asking friends), memory strategy (using dictionaries, using learning applications, watching movies), cognitive strategy (practicing, reviewing). Some participants confirmed the findings during the interview.

"I tried to read it again until I understand it". (Ani, interview August 01st   2021)

"...Going to café with a good Wi-fi to solve my problem." (Rafa, interview July 31st 2021)

"I use an electronic dictionary, ... I choose to study in groups ...." (Ria, interviewed August 01st 2021)

"We can search the materials in the internet to learn grammar because there are so many references there." (Akbar, interview July 31st 2021)

"I started by learning the basic grammar material first and then understanding   the structure and grammar formula and practicing them directly." (Husnul, interviewed July 31st 2021)

"Learn all of the theory, rules and sentence patterns, practice them." (Tyas, interviewed July 30th 2021)

""I am worried that my grammar .... is not satisfying. Although it's difficult, if I get used to it and keep practicing, then I will definitely be able to understand grammar gradually... I find solutions by asking questions and discussing with friends who understand better on grammar." (Sasa, interview July 30th 2021).

3.4. Discussion

From the research findings, it can be seen that the most frequently used learning strategy for online grammar learning in the English Education Department is cognitive strategies with a percentage of 18.30%. The students took notes, analyzed the structure of the sentences after learning grammar online, practiced, reviewed and translated to Indonesian. Some of these strategies are in line with Nikmalini (2014) who mentioned some techniques of cognitive strategies like practicing, receiving and sending messages, evaluating and reasoning, and building structure for input and output, some of which were employed by the participants of the study. Meanwhile, the least applied strategy that the students of English Education Department used is affective strategies with a percentage 14.76%. The percentage indicating, among others, the students' confirmation on their nervousness in joining online grammar class is higher than 50 % (Table 3). The similar result on the use of affective language learning strategies also occurred in another study by Lestari and Fatimah (2020). They stated the finding indicated that the participants might not be relaxed in using English in speaking. Similarly, a study on students' beliefs on learning strategies also results in the affective learning strategies as the least frequently used by the students at the English Education Department (Pratolo, 2017).

Further, the technical problems that the students have, revealed in this research are commonly found in online learning (Tarrayo, Paz, & Gepila Jr., 2021; Liang & Tsai, 2008; Frank, Reich, & Humphreys, 2003). During the process of online learning the students encountered technological problems and social problems. The internet connection sometimes is not good so that the students get disconnected during learning sessions. This disruption affects the students' achievement on grammar mastery. Other researchers have also conducted studies on learning grammar in the class for EFL learners, confirming English Education Department students' difficulties in learning grammar (Effendi, et al., 2017).

Another problem found out in this study is lack of confidence. It can appear during learning sessions or when the students use the language for communication. Teaching competencies and methods in delivering the materials matter. Learning grammar is not only knowing or understanding. More than that, it requires the students to apply it. The more time the lecturer explains, the less opportunity for the students to practice it. In the beginning of the pandemic all had to adapt themselves to online learning. The readiness and literacy of the lecturers in coping with the technology hinder them in varying the methods in online class managements. Their techniques in delivering the materials and in building the rapport with the students are still attached to the traditional ones in face-to-face learning and this results in the students' boredom. The grammar

learning achievement of the students in the online class is affected accordingly. To help the students learn grammar, Hong (2020) suggests gamifying system in flipped classrooms to reduce anxiety in learning English grammar. To provide a learning opportunity by asking the students to gamify questions is a challenge for the lecturer. This idea of gaming in learning grammar is also recommended by Lin, et al. (2020), Chu, et al. (2019), Nur, et al. (2020).

It is also evidenced that the students when learning grammar online combine different learning strategies. In terms of direct learning strategies, the students applied memory strategies, and cognitive strategies. The activities they did are using dictionaries, using learning applications, watching movies (memory strategies), and practicing, reviewing for cognitive strategies. Learning applications are common to use in learning a language (Yurko & Vorobel, 2020). In other studies, learning grammar is facilitated by games including the use of board games (Jumaidah, 2011; Metom, 2013; Virvou & Papadimitriou, 2014; Paris & Yussof, 2012; Lee, 2019; Koksal, et al., 2014). Another strategy suggested by Serfaty and Serrano (2020) is to learn grammar by using digital flashcards.

Designing tasks requiring students to work with their peers support their learning strategies in controlling their emotions included in the affective strategies. In relation to indirect strategies, they can apply social strategies in interacting with their classmates and lecturer during the teaching and learning process. Functioning online sheets like GoogleDoc or participating in a Google Class for collaborative tasks in learning grammar can be the option to take (Khalil, 2018; Esmaieelzade, 2014). At the same time, they also have time to manage themselves to get the best accomplishment in grammar learning.

4. Conclusion

Both direct and indirect strategies in learning grammar online must be the concern of the teacher as well as the students of English Education Department. Employing different strategies support the students' efforts to achieve their best learning targets. The technical problems in learning and those in academic matters need to be anticipated so that the students are still able to understand and to apply grammar as part of their learning language. Considering the highest percentage of cognitive strategies (18.30%) and the least frequently used i.e. affective strategies (14.76 %), the class can be better organized to stimulate more creative and interactive learning atmosphere so that the students can find suitable learning strategies for their online grammar learning and improve their competence for the higher learning accomplishment.

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