

Determinants On English Grammar Learning: A Case Study Of First-Year English Major Students In Vietnam

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Abstract:

This study investigates the multifaceted factors influencing English grammar learning among first-year English major students at a university, Vietnam. Recognizing the pivotal role of grammar in effective language acquisition and communication, this research aims to identify both internal (student-related) and external (environmental and pedagogical) challenges encountered by learners. A mixed-methods approach, combining a survey questionnaire administered to 100 first-year English major students and classroom observation, was employed to gather comprehensive data. Findings reveal significant difficulties related to students' low English proficiency, passive learning styles, lack of motivation, and the pervasive influence of their mother tongue's grammatical structures. External factors, including the absence of dedicated English grammar textbooks, limited access to authentic reference materials, multi-level class compositions, and insufficient class time for grammar instruction, also emerged as critical impediments. The study highlights the students' strong desire for enhanced facilities, diversified exercises, and more engaging, motivation-driven teaching approaches. Based on these findings, the article proposes a series of pedagogical implications and recommendations for educators, curriculum developers, and students to foster a more effective and supportive environment for English grammar acquisition in the Vietnamese higher education context.

Key Words: English grammar learning, determinants, English major students, language acquisition.

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I. Introduction

Language serves as the fundamental conduit for human communication, enabling the expression of thoughts, ideals, and information. In an increasingly globalized world, English has solidified its position as a lingua franca, playing a crucial role in international relations, technological advancement, and cross-cultural understanding. Vietnam, in particular, has witnessed a surge in English language education, recognizing its importance for national development and global integration. Within the intricate tapestry of language, grammar stands as an indispensable component, providing the structural framework necessary for coherent and meaningful communication.

While the significance of grammar is universally acknowledged, its acquisition often presents considerable challenges, particularly for learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context where exposure to the target language is limited. Vietnamese students, like many other non-native speakers, frequently grapple with the complexities of English grammar, often influenced by the inherent differences between their mother tongue and English. These differences can lead to persistent errors and hinder communicative fluency.

This study delves into the specific difficulties faced by first-year English major students at a university, Vietnam, in their pursuit of English grammar mastery. By identifying the key internal and external factors that impede their learning process, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of these challenges and propose actionable solutions. The ultimate goal is to enhance the effectiveness of English grammar instruction and learning strategies, thereby empowering Vietnamese students to achieve higher levels of English proficiency and communicative competence. This paper builds upon previous research in the field, seeking to provide updated insights and recommendations relevant to the contemporary EFL landscape.

II. Literature Review

Grammar and Importance in Language Learning

The concept of "grammar" is multifaceted, encompassing various interpretations across linguistic theories. Harmer (1987) broadly defines grammar as "the description of the way which words change themselves and group together to make sentences." This perspective, echoed by Ur (1988) and Thornbury (1999), views grammar as a system of rules governing word formation (morphology) and sentence construction (syntax). Crystal (2002) further distinguishes between a specific sense, where grammar is a branch of language structure separate

from phonology and semantics, and a broader sense, where it encompasses both form and meaning. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009) similarly defines grammar as “the study and practices of the rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences.”

More contemporary views, such as Widdowson (1998), emphasize grammar’s role in indicating recurrent aspects of meaning and facilitating communicative economy. Larsen-Freeman (2003) extends this perspective, proposing that grammar is not merely about formal accuracy but also about meaningfulness and appropriateness in context. She defines grammar as “one of the dynamic linguistic processes of pattern formation in language, which can be used by humans for making meaning in context-appropriate ways.” Leow (2020) further supports this by emphasizing student-centered explicit learning approaches that enhance grammar acquisition through meaningful engagement. Similarly, Nassaji and Fotos (2021) highlight the importance of integrating form-focused instruction within communicative contexts to balance accuracy and fluency. This evolving understanding highlights grammar as a dynamic system crucial for effective communication rather than a static set of prescriptive rules.

The role of grammar in second language acquisition has been a subject of extensive debate. Historically, the grammar-translation method emphasized explicit grammar instruction as central to foreign language learning (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979). However, the rise of communicative language teaching (CLT) shifted focus towards fluency and meaning, sometimes downplaying explicit grammar teaching. Ur (1988) acknowledged the importance of grammatical rules for putting language together but cautioned against viewing grammar learning as an end in itself. Harmer (1987) also noted a general consensus that while students need to perform language functions, a strong grammatical base is essential.

Recent scholarship continues to affirm the critical role of grammar. For instance, Ellis (2006) argues that explicit grammar instruction can facilitate both accuracy and fluency, especially for adult learners. Larsen-Freeman (2014) further elaborates on the concept of “grammaring,” emphasizing the dynamic process of using grammar to make meaning, rather than merely knowing rules. Nassaji and Fotos (2021) reinforce this, advocating for a balanced approach where explicit grammar teaching supports communicative competence. This perspective suggests that grammar is not just a structural system but a cognitive and communicative resource. In essence, while the sole mastery of grammar is not the ultimate goal, a solid understanding and ability to apply grammatical rules are indispensable for accurate, effective, and successful communication in the target language (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 2005).

English Grammar: Structure and System

English grammar, unlike many other languages, heavily relies on word order for meaning rather than extensive inflection (Cleary, 1993). This characteristic often poses a significant challenge for learners whose native languages are highly inflected or have more flexible word orders.

Basic Word Structure and Order

English words are typically composed of bases (which can often stand alone as words) and affixes (prefixes and suffixes) (e.g., en-danger, slow-ly). A defining feature of English syntax is the prevalence of the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order, which became dominant after the Anglo-Saxon period (Linda Miller Cleary, 1993). While variations exist, the SVO structure is the most common and fundamental.

Morphology and Syntax

Morphology is the study of word forms, divided into lexical morphology (word formation) and inflectional morphology (grammar, conjugation/declination). A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning, and morphology examines how morphemes combine to form words. Affixation, the process of attaching bound morphemes to words, is a key aspect. Word formation processes, such as compounding (e.g., blackboard), zero derivation, back formation, and clipping, contribute to the lexicon.

Syntax refers to the rules governing how words combine to form sentences. English syntactic rules dictate specific arrangements, such as the placement of auxiliary verbs and negation (e.g., “Dogs barked” vs. “Barked dogs”; “Dogs are barking” vs. “Dogs barking”). Transformations, or the movement of phrases within a sentence structure, are also governed by these rules, ensuring grammatical correctness and clarity of meaning.

Parts of Speech

Understanding the function of different parts of speech is fundamental to English grammar:

- **Nouns and Pronouns:** Nouns name people, places, things, qualities, actions, and ideas. Pronouns replace nouns to avoid repetition (e.g., she, he, it).
- **Determiners and Qualifiers:** Determiners precede nouns, indicating specificity or generality (e.g., a, the, this, all). Qualifiers modify adjectives or adverbs.
- **Possessives:** Forms indicating possession (e.g., my, his, their).

- Adjectives: Describe nouns, providing information about size, shape, age, color, etc. (e.g., big, red).
- Verbs: Convey action, occurrence, or state of being. English verbs are characterized by a complex system of tenses (e.g., Simple Present, Present Progressive, Past Perfect Simple, Future Simple), each indicating specific temporal and aspectual meanings.
- Adverbs: Modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs, indicating how, where, or when an action occurred (e.g., carefully, here, soon).
- Prepositions: Form a closed class of words (e.g., in, on, of, with) that express temporal, spatial, or abstract relationships.
- Conjunctions: Link words, phrases, clauses, or sentences, expressing logical relations (e.g., and, or, but).

Clauses, Phrases, and Sentences

- Clause: A group of words containing a subject and a predicate. Independent clauses can stand alone as sentences, while dependent clauses cannot and rely on an independent clause for complete meaning.
- Phrase: A small group of words that adds meaning but lacks a complete subject-verb unit, thus not forming a complete idea.
- Sentence: The basic unit of language expressing a complete thought, adhering to grammatical rules of syntax. English sentences can be simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex, and serve various functions (declarative, interrogative, imperative, exclamative).

Contrastive Analysis: English vs. Vietnamese Grammar

A contrastive analysis of English and Vietnamese grammar reveals both similarities and significant differences that often contribute to learning difficulties for Vietnamese EFL learners.

Similarities

Despite their distinct linguistic families, English and Vietnamese share some grammatical commonalities:

- Basic SVO Structure: Both languages predominantly follow the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order for basic sentence construction (e.g., “I do my homework” – “Tôi làm bài tập về nhà”). This shared structure can be a facilitating factor for learners.
- Passive Voice: Both languages utilize a passive voice construction to emphasize the action or recipient rather than the performer. In English, it’s typically “be + Past Participle,” while Vietnamese uses structures like “Bị, được, do + transitive verb” (e.g., “The bag was stolen by him” – “Cái túi bị lấy trộm bởi anh ấy”).
- Compounding: Both English and Vietnamese form new words through compounding, combining two language elements (e.g., English: blackboard, inkpot; Vietnamese: “mua bán”, “quần áo”). This process is particularly common for forming compound nouns in both languages, often following a Noun + Noun structure.

Differences

The differences, however, often pose greater challenges:

- Word Order Flexibility: While both use SVO, Vietnamese exhibits significantly more flexibility in word order, especially concerning question words, which can appear at the end of a question. English, in contrast, has rigid rules for question formation (e.g., inversion). This rigidity in English can be a source of errors for Vietnamese speakers.
- Tense and Verb Conjugation: This is a major area of divergence. Vietnamese verbs do not conjugate to show tense; instead, time is indicated through adverbs (e.g., “hôm qua” for “yesterday”). English, conversely, has a rich and complex system of verb conjugations and tenses (e.g., Simple Past, Present Perfect, Past Progressive), which Vietnamese learners often find challenging to master (Nguyen, 2017). The distinction between simple and progressive aspects is particularly problematic (Nguyen & Tran, 2022).
- Determiners: The position and combination rules for determiners differ significantly. In English, determiners (articles, demonstratives, possessives) typically precede the head noun and have strict co-occurrence rules (e.g., “all these five apples” but not “all these her apples”). Vietnamese determiners can appear both before and after the head noun, offering more flexibility. Furthermore, the definite/indefinite distinction, clear in English articles (a, an, the), is often ambiguous or less explicitly marked in Vietnamese (e.g., “một” can be both a cardinal number and an indefinite article) (Phan & Nguyen, 2019).
- Nouns (Countability and Number): English nouns have a strict system of countability (countable vs. uncountable) and number (singular vs. plural), which dictates the use of specific determiners. Vietnamese nouns lack this strict distinction, leading to transfer errors where Vietnamese learners may not correctly apply English countability rules or singular/plural forms (Phan & Nguyen, 2019). For instance, a Vietnamese demonstrative like “này” can be used for both singular and plural nouns, unlike English this (singular) and these (plural) (Nguyen & Tran, 2022).

These linguistic differences highlight areas where explicit instruction and targeted practice are crucial for Vietnamese learners to overcome interference from their mother tongue and develop accurate English grammatical competence.

Factors Affecting Second Language Grammar Learning

Research on second language acquisition has identified numerous factors that influence grammar learning. These can broadly be categorized into internal (learner-related) and external (environmental/pedagogical) factors.

Internal Factors

- **Motivation and Attitude:** Motivation is a powerful predictor of success in language learning (Gardner, 1985). Students with high intrinsic motivation are more likely to engage deeply with grammar learning, persist through difficulties, and achieve higher proficiency (Dörnyei, 2005). Recent research by Dörnyei and Ryan (2023) emphasizes the role of learner identity and autonomy in sustaining motivation, particularly in EFL contexts where external rewards may be limited.
- **Learning Styles and Strategies:** Learners employ diverse strategies. Passive learning styles, characterized by a lack of active engagement, limited practice, and reliance on rote memorization, can hinder grammar acquisition. Active strategies, such as self-study, seeking clarification, and consistent practice, are more conducive to mastery (Oxford, 1990).
- **Prior Language Proficiency:** A student's existing English proficiency, particularly in vocabulary and overall structural knowledge, significantly impacts their ability to grasp complex grammatical concepts. Low proficiency can create a foundational barrier to understanding and applying new grammar rules (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).
- **First Language (L1) Interference/Transfer:** As highlighted in the contrastive analysis, the grammatical structures of the learner's native language can either facilitate (positive transfer) or impede (negative transfer/interference) the acquisition of target language grammar. For Vietnamese learners, the absence of verb conjugation and strict countability in Vietnamese often leads to negative transfer errors in English (Tran, 2018; Nguyen & Tran, 2022).
- **Anxiety and Fear of Making Mistakes:** Language learning anxiety, particularly the fear of making grammatical errors, can inhibit students from actively participating in class, practicing new structures, and experimenting with the language. This anxiety can lead to avoidance behaviors, further hindering learning (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

External Factors

- **Curriculum and Materials:** The availability and quality of teaching materials, especially dedicated grammar textbooks and authentic resources, play a crucial role. A curriculum that integrates grammar effectively across all language skills and provides diverse, engaging exercises is more effective than one that treats grammar in isolation or provides insufficient practice (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).
- **Teaching Methodology:** The pedagogical approaches employed by teachers significantly impact grammar learning. Traditional grammar-translation methods may focus on explicit rules but often lack communicative practice. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes meaning and fluency but needs to ensure sufficient attention to form (Ellis, 2006; Richards & Rodgers, 2024). Effective grammar teaching often involves a balanced approach, combining explicit instruction with opportunities for meaningful practice and feedback (Thornbury, 1999).
- **Classroom Environment and Conditions:** Factors such as class size, multi-level classes, and inadequate facilities (e.g., lack of audio-visual aids, noisy environments) can impede effective instruction and learning. Large, heterogeneous classes make it challenging for teachers to provide individualized attention and cater to diverse learning needs (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).
- **Class Time Allocation:** Insufficient class time dedicated to grammar instruction and practice can limit students' opportunities to internalize rules and develop automaticity. A rushed curriculum may prioritize coverage over deep understanding and application.
- **Opportunities for Practice and Application:** Limited opportunities to apply learned grammatical structures in real-life communicative contexts, both inside and outside the classroom, can hinder the transition from declarative knowledge (knowing the rule) to procedural knowledge (using the rule automatically) (DeKeyser, 2007).

This comprehensive review of literature provides a theoretical framework for understanding the various factors that may influence English grammar learning among first-year English major students at a university. The subsequent sections will detail the methodology used to investigate these factors empirically and present the findings.

III. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting English grammar learning. The primary aim was to identify common difficulties encountered by first-year English major students at a university and to gather their perspectives on potential solutions.

Participants

The participants in this study comprised 100 first-year English major students enrolled at a university. The sample included 97 female and 3 male students, all approximately 19 years old. These students hailed from diverse geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds, including remote and economically disadvantaged areas, contributing to a varied range of prior educational experiences. All participants had a minimum of 10 years of English language study, commencing from primary school. At the time of the study, they had completed their first semester at a university and were in their second academic term. Most students were reported to possess a relatively good command of English and demonstrated interest in their English lessons. To ensure anonymity and encourage sincere responses, participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential.

Data Collection Instruments

Two primary instruments were utilized for data collection: a survey questionnaire and classroom observation. This triangulation of methods aimed to enhance the reliability and objectivity of the findings.

Survey Questionnaire

A structured survey questionnaire was the main instrument for collecting quantitative data. This method was chosen for its efficiency in gathering general information from a large number of participants quickly and cost-effectively (Bell, 1993). The questionnaire was designed to achieve four key objectives: (1) collect relevant data on grammar learning difficulties, (2) ensure data comparability for analysis, (3) minimize bias in question formulation, and (4) maintain participant engagement through varied question types.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended (e.g., multiple-choice, Likert scale) and open-ended questions. It was distributed and collected over a period of three weeks, yielding 100 completed responses. The questions were categorized to explore the following aspects:

- Students' attitudes towards learning English and English grammar: Assessing their perceived importance and value of grammar.
- Students' frequency in practicing and checking English grammar: Quantifying their engagement with grammar outside formal instruction.
- Methods students often use to learn English grammar: Identifying common learning strategies.
- Students' evaluation of English grammar difficulty levels: Ranking specific grammatical features by perceived difficulty.
- Students' viewpoint on factors causing obstacles in grammar learning: Identifying internal and external challenges.
- Students' expectations for improving English grammar lessons: Gathering recommendations for pedagogical enhancements.

Classroom Observation

In addition to the questionnaire, a direct classroom observation was conducted in a first-year English major writing class. The observation aimed to gain firsthand insights into the actual teaching and learning dynamics related to English grammar in a real classroom setting. Detailed notes were taken on classroom procedures, teacher activities, student engagement, and the time allocated to grammar instruction. This qualitative data served as a means to cross-verify and enrich the quantitative findings from the questionnaires, providing a more nuanced understanding of the observed phenomena.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the survey questionnaires were primarily analyzed quantitatively using statistical frequency and percentage calculations. Tables and charts were generated to present the distribution of responses for each question category. Additional ideas and comments provided in the open-ended sections of the questionnaire were subjected to qualitative analysis to extract recurring themes and provide deeper insights.

The qualitative data obtained from the classroom observation was analyzed thematically. Notes on teacher-student interactions, instructional practices, student participation, and time management were reviewed to identify patterns and specific instances that illustrated the challenges and opportunities in grammar learning. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative analyses aimed to provide a comprehensive, objective, and reliable interpretation of the research findings.

Overview of the English Textbook

It is important to note the context of the English language curriculum at a university for first-year English major students. The main teaching materials consist of a new set of English textbooks approved by the university, specifically READING & LISTENING and SPEAKING & WRITING, both developed by the English Faculty of the university. Each book is divided into units covering daily life and business-related topics.

Crucially, there is no official, dedicated English grammar textbook for first-year English majors. Students are expected to acquire grammatical knowledge implicitly through the four integrated skills sections (reading, listening, speaking, writing). For instance, the writing course emphasizes the use of accurate grammatical structures in paragraphs, and the reading section aims to equip learners with vocabulary and grammatical structures. However, the writing section is often the most challenging due to its requirement for accurate grammar and typically receives limited time within each unit. This curriculum structure forms a significant external factor influencing students' grammar learning experience.

IV. Result

This section presents the findings derived from the survey questionnaire administered to 100 first-year English major students and the observations conducted in an English writing class at a university. The results are categorized into students' attitudes, frequency of practice, perceived difficulties, and expectations for improvement.

Findings from the Survey Questionnaire

Students' Attitudes Towards Learning English and English Grammar

The survey revealed a strong consensus among students regarding the importance of English. All participants (100%) unanimously agreed that English is crucial for communication, career advancement, and social mobility. They recognized the significant advantages of proficiency in all four skills (speaking, listening, writing, reading) for better education, employment opportunities, and professional promotion.

However, when asked specifically about the importance of English grammar, a slight divergence emerged. While a vast majority (67.5% "very important" and 12.5% "important") acknowledged the significance of grammatical structure, a notable 20% did not highly evaluate its role. This suggests a potential disconnect between recognizing the overall importance of English and explicitly valuing grammar as a distinct component.

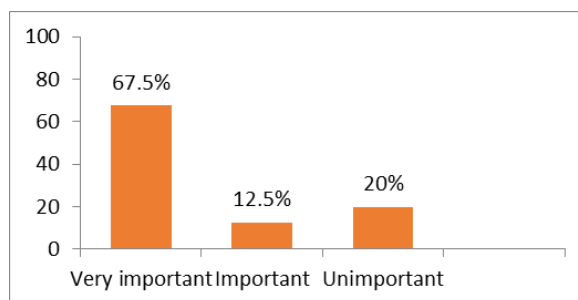


Chart 4.1: Students' evaluation of English grammar learning

Students' Frequency in Practicing and Checking English Grammar

The principle of "practice makes perfect" is critical in language acquisition. The survey explored students' engagement in practicing English grammar. While 64% reported practicing daily, 25% practiced only "sometimes," and a concerning 11% admitted to "not at all." This indicates that despite awareness of grammar's importance, a significant portion of students do not consistently engage in regular practice.

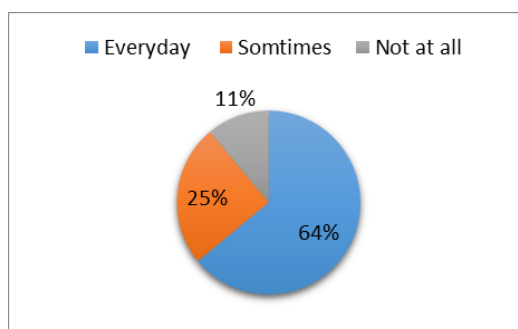


Chart 4.2. The students' frequency in learning English grammar

Furthermore, the frequency of checking correct grammatical structures before use presented a worrying trend. Only 5% of students “always” checked, and 12.5% did so “usually.” A mere 20% “often” used grammar correctly while speaking or writing. Alarming, 30% “sometimes” and 32.5% “never” checked or tried to express grammar correctly. This suggests a widespread lack of self-correction and a potential tolerance for grammatical inaccuracies among a substantial number of students.

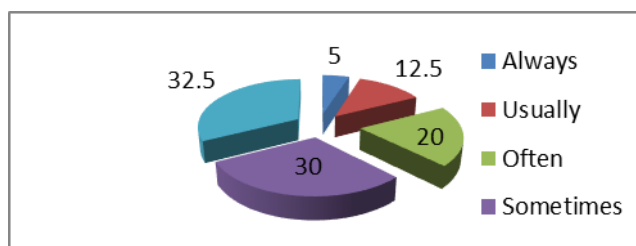


Chart 4.3. The students' frequency in checking correct grammar structure

Evaluation of English Grammar Difficulty Levels

Participants were asked to rank the difficulty of various English grammar features. The ranking results obtained from this activity were used to verify the ranking results obtained from the questionnaire survey. Only 10 of the 20 features were used because this was considered to be a more practical number for this kind of activity.

Table 4.1. Evaluation of students about the English difficult levels

Items	Percentage %
1. Nouns and pronouns	30
2. Determiners and qualifiers	25
3. Possessives	14
4. Adjectives	20
5. Verbs	75
6. Adverbs	10
7. Prepositions	25
8. Conjunctions	30
9. Clauses, phrases and sentences	65
10. Tenses	80

The findings clearly indicated that tenses were perceived as the most challenging aspect, with 80% of students reporting difficulty. This was attributed to the sheer number of tenses and the confusion arising from their usage. Verbs followed closely as the second most difficult area (75%), likely due to their wide variety of types and conjugations. Clauses, phrases, and sentences were identified as the third major obstacle (65%), primarily due to the significant differences in word order between English and Vietnamese.

Conversely, some areas were considered relatively easier: adverbs (10%), possessives (14%), adjectives (20%), and determiners and qualifiers (25%). Nouns and pronouns (30%) and conjunctions (30%) fell in the middle range of difficulty. These results underscore specific grammatical areas that require more focused attention and pedagogical support.

Students' Viewpoint on Factors Causing Obstacles in Grammar Learning

The most frequently cited obstacles were:

- Lack of authentic teaching materials (80%) and absence of an official English grammar textbook (80%): These two factors were identified by the vast majority of students as the biggest problems, highlighting a critical gap in curriculum resources.
- Students' low English proficiency (78%): This indicates that foundational language weaknesses hinder the acquisition of more complex grammatical structures.
- Students' passive styles in class activities (66%): A significant internal factor, suggesting a lack of active engagement and self-directed learning.
- Being afraid of making mistakes (65%): This psychological barrier often leads to reduced participation and practice.
- Students' lack of motivation in learning English (63%): A crucial affective factor impacting sustained effort.
- Having few chances to apply the learnt structures to practice (55%): Points to insufficient opportunities for communicative application.

Other factors, such as poor teaching conditions (40%) and multi-level classes (40%), were also mentioned but by a smaller proportion of students, suggesting they are contributing but less pervasive issues. Teacher's limited time for material development (20%) was the least cited external factor.

Students' Expectations for Bettering English Grammar Lessons

Students' recommendations for improving grammar lessons were categorized by facilities, textbook, teacher, and student factors:

- Facilities:
 - A strong majority (82.5% “strongly agreed”) emphasized the need for equipping enough necessary facilities.
 - 62.5% “agreed” that using reference materials for practicing grammar structures would make lessons more interesting.
- Textbook/Curriculum:
 - 55% “agreed” with the idea of increasing grammar periods in each section to allow more practice time.
 - 42.5% “agreed” that exercises need to be more diversified to avoid boredom, specifically advocating for more multiple-choice exercises.
- Teacher:
 - A high percentage (67.5% “agreed”) desired teachers to give various kinds of grammar exercises to aid memory.
 - 70% “agreed” that teachers should focus on creating motivation and inspiration to help students learn English grammar.
- Students (Self-Initiated):
 - Views on self-studying and finding exercises at home were largely neutral (45%).
 - Similarly, exchanging with teachers about misunderstandings was also neutral (35%).
 - Exchanging with classmates about misunderstandings garnered a higher “agree” response (50%) but still a significant “neutral” (27.5%).

These expectations highlight a clear demand for more resources, diversified teaching methods, increased practice opportunities, and greater motivational support from instructors.

Findings from Classroom Observation

The observation of a first-year English major writing class provided qualitative insights that largely corroborated the survey findings. The class demonstrated a focus on integrated skills, with a common lesson procedure involving a warm-up, main content presentation, and practice activities. However, a critical observation was the very limited time allocated specifically for English grammar instruction.

Despite teachers' apparent efforts to emphasize grammar, many students did not concentrate strictly on the lesson. During group work, a significant number of students struggled to express ideas in English, often resorting to Vietnamese, and some exhibited boredom, leading to off-task conversations. This suggests a gap between the teachers' intentions and the students' actual engagement and productive output.

The observation also revealed that teachers often spent considerable time presenting main topics, leaving insufficient time for reviewing grammatical structures or completing exercises. Only about half of the sentences in exercises were completed, and production activities were often neglected. This time constraint appeared to contribute to a “grammar-translation” like approach, where teachers primarily supplied knowledge rather than facilitating active use and practice. While teachers attempted to motivate students through questions and movement, most students remained shy and timid, participating only when directly called upon and showing interest primarily in games. This confirms the survey finding regarding passive learning styles and a lack of intrinsic motivation in the classroom setting.

Summary on Common Difficulties

Synthesizing the findings from both the questionnaire and classroom observation, the common difficulties faced by first-year English major students in learning grammar can be categorized into internal and external problems.

Internal Problems

- **Passive Learning Style:** Students often exhibit a lack of autonomy and active engagement in their learning process. They tend to study reluctantly, primarily to pass exams, and do not consistently employ effective learning methods or practice regularly. This leads to a stagnation in their grammatical abilities.
- **Lack of Motivation:** A significant number of students lack intrinsic motivation for grammar learning. This can be exacerbated by a fear of failure and making mistakes, leading to avoidance behaviors and a reluctance to engage with challenging grammatical concepts.
- **Infrequent Practice:** Directly linked to passive styles and low motivation, many students do not practice English grammar daily or consistently check their grammatical accuracy, hindering the internalization and confident application of rules.
- **Mother Tongue Interference:** The inherent structural differences between English and Vietnamese grammar lead to negative transfer. Students often unconsciously apply Vietnamese grammatical rules when speaking or writing English, resulting in persistent errors, particularly with tenses and word order.

- **Low English Proficiency:** A limited vocabulary and foundational understanding of English structures make it difficult for students to comprehend complex grammar explanations and express themselves accurately.

External Problems

- **Lack of Dedicated Grammar Textbook and Authentic Materials:** The absence of an official, comprehensive English grammar textbook and limited access to authentic reference books are major systemic issues. Students rely on integrated skills books, which cannot provide the in-depth grammar knowledge required for mastery.
- **Multi-Level Classes:** The wide range of English proficiency levels within a single class creates challenges for teachers to cater to individual needs and foster collaborative learning. This can lead to boredom for advanced learners and frustration for those struggling.
- **Insufficient Class Time:** The 45-minute lesson duration is often deemed too short to cover new material, revise previous lessons, and provide adequate grammar instruction and practice. This time constraint often forces teachers to prioritize content delivery over interactive activities and deep grammatical understanding.
- **Overloaded Curriculum:** English is one of many courses that students must learn, leading to limited time for dedicated English grammar improvement outside of class due to other academic demands.
- **Inadequate Facilities and Classroom Atmosphere:** While less frequently cited, poor teaching conditions (e.g., lack of audio-visual aids, noise) and a non-supportive classroom atmosphere can also impede learning.
- **Teacher Behavior (Implicit):** While not explicitly stated as a major problem, the observation suggests that teachers, possibly due to time constraints, may sometimes prioritize knowledge transmission over encouraging active student participation and error correction, leading to a less dynamic learning environment.

These findings collectively paint a clear picture of the significant hurdles faced by first-year English major students at a university in their journey to master English grammar.

V. Conclusion

This study embarked on an investigation into the intricate factors influencing English grammar learning among first-year English major students at a university, Vietnam. Recognizing grammar's foundational role in effective language acquisition, the research aimed to identify both internal (student-centric) and external (pedagogical and environmental) challenges. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining a comprehensive survey questionnaire administered to 100 students and direct classroom observation, a nuanced understanding of these difficulties emerged.

The findings unequivocally demonstrate that students face significant hurdles. Internally, issues such as low English proficiency, passive learning styles, a pervasive lack of motivation, and the persistent interference from Vietnamese grammatical structures significantly impede their progress. The fear of making mistakes also emerged as a critical psychological barrier, inhibiting active participation and practice. Externally, systemic deficiencies were identified, including the notable absence of a dedicated English grammar textbook, limited access to authentic reference materials, the complexities posed by multi-level class compositions, and the inherent constraints of insufficient class time allocated for in-depth grammar instruction and practice.

The study also shed light on the students' clear expectations for improvement. They expressed a strong desire for enhanced learning facilities, a greater variety of engaging exercises, and teaching methodologies that prioritize motivation and active participation. These aspirations underscore the need for a more dynamic, supportive, and resource-rich learning environment.

In light of these findings, this thesis proposes a series of actionable recommendations targeting curriculum developers, teachers, and students. These include the urgent need for a comprehensive English grammar textbook, the integration of authentic materials, the adoption of balanced teaching methodologies that blend explicit instruction with communicative practice, and strategies to cultivate student motivation and active learning. Addressing the challenges posed by mother tongue interference and fostering a safe, error-tolerant classroom atmosphere are also crucial.

While this study provides valuable insights into the specific context of A university, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The investigation was confined to a sample of 100 first-year English major students at a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to all Vietnamese EFL learners. Furthermore, while the mixed-methods approach provided rich data, the depth of analysis for certain factors was constrained by the scope of a graduation paper.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes significantly to the understanding of grammar learning challenges in the Vietnamese EFL context. It is hoped that the results and proposed solutions will serve as a valuable resource for educators, curriculum designers, and students, guiding efforts to refine teaching practices, enhance learning strategies, and ultimately foster greater success in English grammar acquisition. Future research could expand upon this study by involving larger and more diverse samples, exploring the long-term impact of specific pedagogical interventions, and conducting more in-depth qualitative analyses of classroom interactions.

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