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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Vocational English Students' Perceptions of Learning English Grammar

**Aditya Nur Patria**

*Department of Information and Culture, Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia*

**Corresponding Author:** Aditya Nur Patria, **E-mail:** [anpatria@lecturer.undip.ac.id](mailto:anpatria@lecturer.undip.ac.id)

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**ABSTRACT**

The vocational college is commonly known as a place to prepare students to be ready for work in the industry. Hence, the English language taught in this institution should be more functional or applicable rather than theoretical and analytical. The present study aims to investigate the perception of students taking the English language stream in the Applied Foreign Languages program at a vocational college toward learning English grammar. There are 40 student participants involved. The data are collected using a 13-item questionnaire to identify students' perception of the importance of learning grammar, the relevance to their study and future career, and their feeling toward learning grammar. Analyzed using descriptive statistics, the data indicate that students consider learning grammar important. Their perception tends to be positive regardless fields of their future career. However, translation is the field career in which many students choose and seem to demonstrate a positive perception toward learning English grammar.

**KEYWORDS**

Grammar, language learning, perception, vocational college, L2 learning

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### 1. Introduction

Foreign language education has long shifted its focus from grammar to communicative use. This is particularly due to the demand of the globalized world, which puts a great emphasis on communication skills rather than grammar analytical skills (Klimova, Klimova, & Dubinka, 2019; Asrifan, Vargheese, Syamsu, & Amir, 2020). Although grammar alone is not sufficient to enable English language learners to use the language in real life communication, that does not necessarily mean that grammar is completely disbanded from language learning and teaching. Some scholars (e.g. Freeman, 2008; Wong & Barrea-Maryls, 2012; Uranbileg, 2022) point out that grammar can be embedded in language education despite the focus on meaning or content. Hence, grammar is still relevant for English language learners in their L2 acquisition process, whether taught explicitly or implicitly.

Teaching grammar may be affected by the teacher's belief or perception of this aspect of language. There is an extensive number of studies conducted to understand the teachers' beliefs in teaching grammar in English language classes. Wong and Barea-Marlys (2012) found mixed results related to teachers' belief in the importance of grammar in communicative language teaching. Many of the teacher participants in their study believed that grammar instruction was not necessary. Meanwhile, a few participants believed that explicit grammar instruction is helpful. Other scholars (Burns, 2011; Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011) demonstrated that grammar is more effective when incorporated with the teaching of other skills rather than taught separately. Despite the number of research focusing on the teachers' belief in grammar instruction, students' perception of grammar in L2 learning tends to be overlooked. Some studies focusing on high school students' perception of grammar indicated that grammar is considered essential in L2 learning (Jean & Simard, 2011; Sevik, Yalcin, & Bostancioglu, 2018; Mirazna & Hikmah, 2019). None of these studies focused on the perception of vocational college students on grammar learning. Hence, the present study attempts to shed light on this issue.

Vocational education has received a lot of attention in Indonesia over the past few years. The Indonesian government's support for vocational education in the nation-state has been escalating since the establishment of the Directorate General of Vocational Education in 2019. There is an expectation for vocational education in higher education to supply workforces in the industrial and working worlds (Indonesian President, 2022). In other words, the graduates from vocational college are those ready to work because of their competence and skillful performance in their respective fields. Hence, there should be a match between the industrial and working worlds' needs and the learning process in a vocational college. English taught in vocational college is presumably more practical and less theoretical. Meanwhile, grammar teaching tends to be analytical and theoretical. The present study is interested in identifying vocational college students' perception of the learning of grammar. By using descriptive statistics, the research investigates possible relations between the students' career aspirations and their perception of grammar learning.

## 2. Literature Review

The notion that grammar should not be learned separately has been long-standing in communicative language teaching. This idea encourages the incorporation of grammar in teaching and learning activities (Freeman, 2008; Wong & Barrea-Maryls, 2012; Uranbileg, 2022). Grammar itself has long been criticized for its role in language pedagogy because the teaching and learning process tends to be analytical. It does not necessarily lead the second language (L2) learners to attain the goal of the acquisition, i.e. the ability to use it in real-life communication (Klimova et al., 2019; Asrifan et al., 2020). In traditional grammar class, students are asked to form a sentence according to particular aspects of grammar taught, treating a language as a set of formulas that can be applied straightforwardly. Uranbileg (2022) argue that this kind of method is not sufficient to allow students to utilize the L2 outside classroom. Real-life communication also takes into account the understanding of the pragmatic, discourse, and socio-cultural of the community.

To succeed in L2 learning, both students and teachers should have a common goal. This goal is partly influenced by their belief and perception of L2 learning itself. Belief is defined as "statements teachers made about their ideas, thoughts, and knowledge that are expressed as evaluations of what 'should be done,' 'should be the case,' and 'is preferable'" (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004, p. 244). Sodik & Wijaya (2017) defines perception as a system of behaviours which constantly changes. As perception arises from belief and both are closely related, it is difficult to separate them. In this study, the term perception will be used to refer to both belief and perception.

It is not uncommon that teachers' and students' perceptions of grammar instruction differ. Some studies (Schulz, 1996; Hawkey, 2006) found that students preferred the emphasis on grammar while their teachers tended to favor it less. Apparently, teachers tend to have a preference for avoiding a great emphasis on grammar in L2 classrooms. Several scholars (Burns, 2011; Al-Mekhlafi, 2011; Wong & Barea-Marlys, 2012) found that teachers tended to favor communicative language instruction. They preferred incorporating grammar instruction into their classrooms, focusing on the communicative use of L2. On the other hand, Mirazna and Hikmah (2019) noted that vocational school students tended to enjoy learning grammar. They also found that grammar is essential in L2 learning. The latter finding is similar to that in Jean and Simard (2011) study on high school students. Conversely, they found that the students did not find the learning enjoyable. Another study on vocational school students also indicated that the students perceive grammar as a core of L2 learning (Sevik et al., 2018).

The past research on L2 grammar learning perception tended to focus on either vocational school students or university students in general. The focus of the present study, therefore, is on the perception of vocational college students (university level) toward English grammar in their classroom learning. The L2 learning process may rather be different in the context of a vocational college program offering a degree in English linguistics. Although many subjects in this vocational program incorporate grammar in the teaching and learning processes, grammar is also taught separately as a subject. Even there are four subjects of grammar, each taken in a different semester.

The demand to have applicable skills is high in vocational colleges. The Indonesian Presidential Regulation No. 68 (2022) states that vocational education prepares students to work or create a business. Furthermore, the Indonesian Coordinating Ministerial Regulation on "National Strategies of Vocational Education and Training" (2022) mentions that vocational education prepares students to fill in the needs of industry and working worlds. Hence, there must be a match between the demand from the work and industry worlds and the skills taught and trained in vocational education. Thus, there is a demand that English taught in vocational college should be more practical rather than theoretical or analytical. However, grammar is usually taught by analyzing a set of formulas, and thus, it tends to be theoretical and analytical. On the other hand, grammar is somehow considered desirable in job positions requiring direct communication with consumers, such as in tourism or call centre (Bolton, 2008; Prachanat, 2012). Other jobs that may require a good level of grammar competence are translation, international commerce, and law.

**3. Methodology**

Following some previous studies (Schulz, 1996; Hawkey, 2006; Mirazna & Hikmah, 2019), the present study uses a descriptive quantitative approach. The participants in the present study are 40 students of the Applied Foreign Languages program at a vocational college in Indonesia. All of the participants are in the English stream and either in the third or fourth year, having completed all subjects concerning English grammar in the first 2 years of their education. There are four compulsory subjects of grammar that they learned.

The data collection was done by distributing a questionnaire containing 13 statements related to grammar learning. The questionnaire in the present study adopted the one developed by Mirazna and Hikmah (2019) with some modifications to adjust to the objective of the present study seeking to understand the relevance of grammar toward students' career aspirations. Information related to the field of the participants' career aspirations was also obtained through the questionnaire. There are 13 items of statements which identify the participants' perception of grammar learning in their vocational education. The student participants were asked to indicate their agreement toward the statement with a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being "strongly disagree" while 5 is "strongly agree". After the data were collected, the descriptive statistical analysis was done using SPSS v26.

**4. Results/Findings**

The result of the descriptive statistical analysis is presented in table 1. The descriptive statistical analysis of the data, in general, shows that the vocational college students agree with 9 out of 13 statements in the questionnaire, as indicated by the mean value over 3. Higher mean values in statements 1 through 8 indicate that learning grammar is considered favorable. When the result is seen closely, it shows that most students tend to agree that learning grammar is essential in studying the English language and the need to increase their skills in grammar, indicated by the highest mean values of 4.18 and 4.28, respectively. The finding that takes grammar as a pivotal part of English learning is similar to that in the earlier studies (Jean & Simard, 2011; Mirazna and Hikmah, 2019; Sevik et al., 2018). It shows that even vocational college students also perceive grammar as an essential part of English learning, just like school students do.

No	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I think learning grammar is important in the context of studying English.	4.18	0.87
2	I think learning grammar can help me to communicate in English well.	4.00	0.88
3	I think by learning grammar, I can measure my ability in learning English well.	3.88	0.79
4	I think that learning grammar can help me to be successful in acquiring English.	3.78	0.78
5	I think I need to increase my skills in grammar.	4.28	0.96
6	I feel that learning grammar is relevant to vocational college students.	4.00	0.96
7	I think learning grammar is important for my career aspiration.	3.95	0.90
8	I like learning grammar.	3.28	1.06
9	I think learning grammar is easy.	2.65	1.03
10	I think learning grammar is fun.	2.90	1.03
11	I feel learning grammar is difficult.	3.75	0.95
12	I feel that learning grammar is very boring.	2.98	0.97
13	I can follow grammar lessons in the classroom very easily.	2.93	0.89

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of students' perception of data

Interestingly, students do not find learning grammar a fun or easy activity. It is indicated by the mean values of statements 9, 10, and 13, which are equally below the mean value of 3. It is similar to the perception of vocational school students toward grammar learning (Mirazna and Hikmah, 2019). These findings, however, contradict that statement 12, which indicates students' disagreement toward the statement that learning grammar is very boring, though the mean value nearly reaches 3. This shows that learning grammar is challenging for many students, but it does not necessarily mean that it is very boring. It should be noted that the use of the adverb "very" may affect the students in answering statements 12 and 13. It is possible that the use of this adverb gives them the impression of an extreme level of boredom or ease; thus, they tend to give a lower score for these statements.

To understand further the vocational college students' perception of the relevance of grammar learning with their career aspirations, statements 6 and 7 should be discussed further. Statement 6 indicates the students' perception of the relevance of Both statements have relatively high mean values of 4 and 3.95, respectively. This finding shows that the students perceive learning

grammar as not only related to their L2 acquisition success but also to their future careers. When the mean values of both statements were categorized based on the students' career aspirations, it can be seen in table 2 that most students equally agree with both statements, as indicated by the mean values over 3.

No	Career Aspirations	N	Statement 6		Statement 7	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	Commerce	2	4.5	0.71	3.5	0.71
2	Education	3	4.33	0.58	3.67	0.58
3	Translation	9	4.22	0.83	4.11	0.93
4	Governance and policy-making	4	4.50	0.58	4.5	0.58
5	Media and public relations	12	3.50	1.17	3.67	1.07
6	Tourism and hospitality	10	4.00	0.94	4.10	0.88

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of students' perceptions based on career aspirations

Apparently, the students perceive that grammar is an important part of their future careers, regardless of which field they choose. Unfortunately, due to the sample size, a significant correlation cannot be found in the data. However, the finding related to students having career aspirations in translation as well as tourism and hospitality may be the most reliable one among the data, as indicated by the number of students and standard deviation. Their need to learn grammar is similar to the finding in Prachanat's (2012) study. On the other hand, students choosing career aspirations in media and public relations have the least mean value. This indicates their reluctance on the importance of grammar in their career compared to the students in other categories of career aspirations.

Although translation should be a field in which grammar is of utmost importance, the result does not necessarily show the highest mean value of 5 for this category. Considering the number of students choosing this career (*N*), the mean value and the standard deviation, it can be concluded that the level of agreement among students is considerably high. The mean value for translation is lower than that for commerce, education, governance and policy-making. However, it should be noted that the number of students choosing these 3 fields of career tends to be smaller in size compared to the number of students choosing translation.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the results of the present study demonstrate that students of vocational college tend to agree with grammar learning. The perception that grammar is an essential part of L2 learning is similar to the finding of some earlier studies (Jean & Simard, 2011; Mirazna and Hikmah, 2019; Sevik et al., 2018). Unlike the result of the study conducted by Jean and Simard (2011), the present study finds that the students do not consider grammar learning "very boring." However, they still consider learning grammar challenging.

The present study also demonstrates how the perception of the importance of L2 grammar is not related to the students' career aspirations. All of the participants equally consider grammar relevant to their vocational study and their future career. Among the fields of careers presented, translation seems to have the most reliable result, although this should be analyzed further with the larger sample size. Overall, the present study shows that grammar is still perceived as an integral part of L2 acquisition, vocational study, and career aspirations of the students. As the students have a positive perception toward learning grammar, what is left to do is for the lecturers or teachers to facilitate a better learning environment and experience for the students to learn grammar. The results of the present study should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size. Future research may need to use a larger sample size and incorporate interviews to better understand the students' perceptions of the use of grammar in their careers.

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