

## The Impact of Grammar Knowledge on Student Proficiency in Malaysian Elementary Schools

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore the relationship between explicit grammar knowledge and English proficiency levels among students. The study involved nine Indonesian teaching students who were divided into three groups, namely seven new teachers who were teaching English for the first time in elementary schools and two teachers who regularly taught English for communication. Data were collected through interviews and grammar assignments to assess their explicit grammar knowledge as well as their level of language proficiency. The results of the study showed that there was a tendency to associate explicit grammar knowledge and English proficiency. However, explicit grammatical knowledge is not the main determinant of proficiency level. In contrast, proficiency is more influenced by a combination of factors, such as individual preferences and study habits. Students who engage in implicit learning activities, such as regular communication and exposure to language in context, show higher levels of fluency than students who rely on explicit grammar instruction. Nonetheless, explicit grammatical knowledge remains important, especially in academic contexts that demand accurate and formal use of language. An approach that consciously integrates explicit grammar instruction is recommended to support skill development, especially in academic writing. In this way, implicit learning can improve fluency, while explicit learning favors accuracy and formal structure. In conclusion, combining explicit and implicit grammar knowledge into a balanced approach can improve overall fluency and accuracy. Teachers are advised to incorporate explicit grammar instruction into a context-based curriculum that supports immersive learning to optimize student language development.

**Keywords: Explicit Grammar Knowledge; Implicit Grammar Knowledge; English Language Proficiency**

### Abstrak

*Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi hubungan antara pengetahuan tata bahasa eksplisit dengan tingkat kemahiran bahasa Inggris di kalangan siswa. Studi ini melibatkan sembilan siswa pengajar Indonesia yang dibagi menjadi tiga kelompok, yaitu tujuh pengajar baru yang pertama kali mengajar bahasa Inggris di sekolah dasar dan dua pengajar yang secara teratur mengajarkan bahasa Inggris untuk komunikasi. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara dan tugas tata bahasa untuk menilai pengetahuan tata bahasa eksplisit serta tingkat kemahiran bahasa mereka. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya kecenderungan hubungan antara pengetahuan tata bahasa eksplisit dan kemahiran bahasa Inggris. Namun, pengetahuan tata bahasa eksplisit tidak menjadi penentu utama tingkat kemahiran. Sebaliknya, kemahiran lebih dipengaruhi oleh*

*kombinasi faktor, seperti preferensi individu dan kebiasaan belajar. Siswa yang terlibat dalam kegiatan pembelajaran implisit, seperti komunikasi teratur dan paparan bahasa dalam konteks, menunjukkan tingkat kefasihan yang lebih tinggi dibandingkan siswa yang bergantung pada instruksi tata bahasa eksplisit. Meskipun demikian, pengetahuan tata bahasa eksplisit tetap penting, terutama dalam konteks akademik yang menuntut penggunaan bahasa yang akurat dan formal. Pendekatan yang mengintegrasikan instruksi tata bahasa eksplisit secara sadar dianjurkan untuk mendukung pengembangan keterampilan, terutama dalam penulisan akademik. Dengan cara ini, pembelajaran implisit dapat meningkatkan kefasihan, sementara pembelajaran eksplisit mendukung akurasi dan struktur formal. Kesimpulannya, penggabungan pengetahuan tata bahasa eksplisit dan implisit menjadi pendekatan yang seimbang dapat meningkatkan kefasihan dan akurasi secara keseluruhan. Guru disarankan untuk memasukkan instruksi tata bahasa eksplisit ke dalam kurikulum berbasis konteks yang mendukung pembelajaran imersif guna mengoptimalkan perkembangan bahasa siswa.*

***Kata kunci: Pengetahuan Tata Bahasa Eksplisit; Pengetahuan Tata Bahasa Implisit; Kemahiran Bahasa Inggris***

## **Introduction**

Understanding the relationship between explicit grammatical knowledge and proficiency in a second language (L2) has long been a matter of debate in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL). Theoretically, explicit grammatical knowledge is considered beneficial for monitoring errors in language production but does not fully support the natural acquisition of L2 (Krashen, 2003). This approach is criticized because L2 production relies more on meaningful and understandable input than learning syntax rules. Ellis (2006) added that L2 competencies are more based on implicit knowledge gained through experience and interaction. However, a combination of explicit and implicit knowledge has been shown to provide the best results in language learning, especially if both types of knowledge are applied strategically (Ellis et al., 2009).

In the context of language learning in primary schools in Malaysia, teaching approaches often prioritize explicit grammar due to time constraints and curriculum demands to produce measurable results. However, this approach is often less successful in improving students' fluency, especially in the use of communicative language. This is exacerbated by a lack of exposure to the context of natural language use, both inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, it is important to explore how a combination of explicit and implicit grammar knowledge can be applied to meet the needs of students, especially at the elementary level. Previous studies have shown that explicit knowledge plays an important role in academic tasks, such as formal writing and reading comprehension (Hu, 2002; Elder & Manwaring, 2004).

Yoshida (2009) found that students with high proficiency levels often use their explicit knowledge to solve translation difficulties. However, other research indicates that the development of speaking fluency is more effectively supported by implicit knowledge gained using language in meaningful contexts (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In Malaysia, the exam-oriented education system places great emphasis on academic outcomes which are often measured through explicit grammar mastery. This creates challenges in integrating immersive, context-based learning approaches. In this situation, teachers are faced with a dilemma between meeting the demands of the curriculum and providing relevant and meaningful learning experiences for students.

This research is important to fill the knowledge gap on how a balanced learning approach can be effectively applied at the primary school level in Malaysia. This study

aims to identify the relationship between explicit and implicit grammar knowledge to students' English proficiency in Malaysian primary schools. To understand the relationship between explicit and implicit grammatical knowledge and language proficiency, several experts have highlighted the important role of each type of knowledge in language learning. According to Ellis (2004), explicit knowledge serves as a foundation for consciously learning grammar rules, while implicit knowledge provides a more natural basis in everyday use. Philip (2009) also emphasizes that these two types of knowledge complement each other, with explicit knowledge supporting the early development of language skills and implicit knowledge reinforcing fluency through repetitive practice.

In addition, Bialystok (1998) explained that optimal language competence requires an integration between a formal rule-based approach and a functional approach that emphasizes social interaction. Lightbown and Spada (2013) revealed that a learning environment rich in target language exposure can accelerate the development of implicit knowledge, while form-based teaching remains necessary to help students understand the complex elements of language. Swain (2005) adds that language production, both orally and written, helps internalize explicitly learned grammar rules. These findings point to the importance of learning strategies that combine both types of knowledge to ensure balanced language proficiency, especially in a language learning environment such as Malaysia, where the emphasis on academic outcomes often overrides the more natural aspects of communication.

## **Method**

The data was collected from five elementary school students as the subjects of this study. They are identified as Student A, Student B, Student C, Student D, and Student E. Student A, Student D, and Student E are female, while Student B and Student C are male. Students A, B, C, and D are in the first grade of elementary school, while Student E is in the second grade of elementary school. Students A, B, and C attend the same elementary school and can speak English fluently. They have an English class once a week at their school since first grade, in addition to participating in speaking classes for English lessons. Student A has been learning English since the first grade of elementary school, so she has been studying English for one year. She studied a little grammar in her class in the first grade. Her English score on her last semester report was around 90-93. Student B has been learning English since the first grade as well, so he has also studied English for one year. He studied grammar intensively in elementary school by attending an English course for two weeks. His English score on his school report was around 83. Student C has been learning English since the first grade of elementary school, meaning he has been studying English for one year. He studied a little grammar in elementary school. His English score on his last semester report was 90. Students D and E began learning English for the first time when they started using English for communication. Student D has been using English for communication since she was four years old and grew up in an English-speaking family environment. She currently studies English at school three times a week. Two sessions are for reading class, and one session is for grammar class. Her English score on her last semester report was 92. Student E has been using English for communication since the age of four. She joined an international class program in her elementary school at age six. Both Student D and Student E did not study grammar in elementary school while living in an English-speaking family environment. They began learning grammar in class when they started school in Indonesia. Student D began studying grammar in class in the first grade of junior high school, while Student E began studying grammar in the first grade of elementary school.

## Result and Discussion

The data obtained from interviews and grammar tasks reveal a nuanced relationship between explicit grammatical knowledge and English proficiency among the subjects. While explicit knowledge supports their abilities in listening, reading, speaking, and writing, it does not significantly influence their overall fluency or proficiency in English. Instead, personal interests and activities outside the classroom emerge as key factors shaping language development. These findings align with theories by Krashen (2003), who emphasizes the role of meaningful input, and Ellis (2006), who highlights the predominance of implicit knowledge in language acquisition.

Student A demonstrates a proactive approach by practicing grammar exercises, reading literature, maintaining a diary, and participating in English competitions like debates and storytelling. Her consistent practice aligns with Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis, which underscores the importance of language production in solidifying grammar knowledge. Her achievements in contests suggest that self-directed learning activities significantly contribute to building proficiency. Meanwhile, Student B actively engages in conversations with native speakers on Facebook and extensive reading, highlighting the role of authentic interaction and immersive reading in language acquisition, which reflects the findings of Lightbown and Spada (2013) on the importance of rich exposure to the target language.

Similarly, Student C relies on English movies and music, focusing on following dialogues and accents, a method that supports Vandergrift and Goh's (2012) argument that listening comprehension with authentic audiovisual materials enhances implicit grammatical knowledge and fluency. Students D and E, who have experienced immersive language environments while living with English-speaking families, highlight the critical influence of real-world exposure on their proficiency. Their self-directed learning through media and interaction mirrors the findings of Yoshida (2009), who observed that informal learning environments greatly contribute to L2 competence. Explicit grammar knowledge, however, primarily supports academic and formal language use.

For example, Student A uses this knowledge in competitive settings and personal writing, while Student E applies it in formal communication to convey respect, aligning with Hu's (2002) observation that explicit knowledge is vital in academic and formal contexts. Both Students D and E also leverage their explicit grammar skills to write academic essays, underscoring its utility in structured, rule-based tasks. Personal preferences and intrinsic motivations further influence their learning strategies. Student A, for instance, aspires to write globally acclaimed English books, while Student B envisions using English to disseminate religious knowledge.

These motivations resonate with Gardner's (1985) Socio-Educational Model, which emphasizes the impact of motivation and attitudes on L2 acquisition. Conversely, Student C, despite disliking grammar's complexity, learns it for practical purposes like travel and fluent communication, showing that utilitarian motivations also play a crucial role in shaping learning behaviors. These findings reinforce the idea that explicit grammar instruction alone is insufficient to foster holistic language proficiency. Instead, integrating activities that promote implicit learning, such as conversational practice, exposure to authentic materials, and interactive tasks can enhance fluency and accuracy. DeKeyser's (2003) theory of skill acquisition supports this balance, advocating for transforming explicit knowledge into procedural skills through extensive practice.

Educators should adopt a balanced pedagogical approach by combining explicit grammar instruction with immersive, context-rich activities. For instance, incorporating technology, such as language learning apps or virtual exchange programs, can provide students with meaningful opportunities for real-world interaction. Additionally, fostering



a learner-centered environment that aligns with individual interests like debates, storytelling, or creative writing can sustain motivation and engagement, as proposed by (Dornyei, 2009). Overall, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of language learning, demonstrating that while explicit grammar knowledge supports specific skills, broader proficiency is shaped by implicit learning, personal preferences, and authentic exposure. By recognizing and addressing these diverse factors, educators can develop more effective strategies to enhance language learning outcomes.



Figure 1. Photo by the Teaching Team, Taken On November 11, 2024, at Elementary School, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The results of the grammar tasks reveal that the subjects' explicit grammar knowledge does not always correlate with their proficiency level. Student A, who excels in English by studying it in school, can answer all questions, with 20 correct answers. Two other subjects, Students B and C, cannot answer all the questions, with 12 and 9 correct answers out of 20, respectively. Meanwhile, two subjects who were exposed to English as a means of communication, Students D and E, each answered 19 and 20 questions correctly. The results also indicate that Student D, who gained exposure to English through communication, struggles to explain grammar rules for incorrect sentences, although she can correctly identify errors in sentences.

Additionally, she does not know the names of the English tenses discussed in school. These findings suggest a correlation between the subjects' explicit grammar knowledge and their English proficiency level, although self-directed learning outside the classroom plays a more critical role. This aligns with Roehr's (2008) finding of a positive correlation between explicit knowledge and second language (L2) proficiency.



Figure 2. Photo English Fun Learning, taken on November 11, 2024, at Elementary School, Kuala Lumpur

This study's findings also support results from previous research. Ellis (2006) found a relationship between EFL students' explicit grammatical knowledge and their performance in listening comprehension, indicating that participants with higher scores in explicit grammatical knowledge also performed better in listening comprehension tests. Ercetin and Alptekin (2011) found a significant positive relationship between explicit L2 knowledge and reading comprehension among 51 Turkish university students. The findings of this study contrast with previous research. Macaro and Martin (2006) found that intensive grammar instruction was not significantly related to the productive skills of a group of 22 L2 learners of French. Their results indicated that explicit knowledge did not facilitate participants' writing performance, and intensive grammar instruction did not reduce errors in productive tasks (writing and translation).

Similarly, White and Ranta (2002) did not find a correlation between explicit knowledge and oral production tasks in the treatment group after teaching the grammatical structures. This suggests that explicit grammar instruction before the task did not impact students' oral production. This study also found that subjects who first learned English in school can achieve good English proficiency through activities outside the classroom. For example, Student A has a high proficiency level because she often participates in English competitions, which enables her to speak English as fluently as those exposed to English for communication purposes. This aligns with Cook's (2001) observation that to attain high proficiency levels, learners need to focus on form, with an interface between learned and acquired knowledge. In other words, initially explicit, learned knowledge can become implicit, acquired knowledge that may be used spontaneously in both spoken and written language.



Figure 3. Deeplearning Indonesian-English using currency taken on November 11, 2024, at Elementary School, Kuala Lumpur

This research also supports Krashen's (2003) argument that explicit grammar knowledge is only useful for monitoring purposes but does not contribute significantly to L2 acquisition. Another interesting finding from this study is that a subject who gained exposure to English for communication has difficulty explaining grammar rules for incorrect sentences, although she can identify correct sentences. This indicates that the subject's implicit knowledge plays a more significant role in her proficiency than the explicit grammar knowledge acquired in school. Therefore, even without formal explicit grammar knowledge from school, learners can achieve high proficiency levels if they are exposed to an environment where they use English in daily communication.

From these findings, it can also be inferred that to develop students' English proficiency, special attention should be given to individual differences among foreign language learners. Teachers should have an understanding of students' unique learning

preferences and needs in learning English, as well as their educational backgrounds. Flexible methods can be used to foster students' enthusiasm for learning according to their personalities, while helping them improve their grammatical competence effectively. According to Burns and Richards (2012), teachers tend to choose grammar teaching methods they find most compatible with instructional materials, classroom activities, and teaching methods. In terms of materials and the first explicit approach, which focuses on grammar as a knowledge-based system of rules, this is typically reflected in sentence-level exercises and test items that reward correct application of rules, aiming at accuracy.

The second, more implicit approach focuses on 'expression' in exercises and test items that reward learners' ability to use appropriate grammar, aiming to create meaningful texts. Ultimately, teachers will rely heavily on their perceptions of how to teach grammar and how their students approach learning it. Despite possible limitations in this study, which included a limited number of subjects, the findings suggest various practical pedagogical implications. This research indicates that explicit grammar knowledge is one of the elements that helps EFL learners achieve the fluency needed in their English performance, although it does not significantly impact students' proficiency levels. To raise students' awareness of grammar knowledge, conscious instruction in explicit knowledge is still strongly recommended. This means teachers should provide opportunities for students to focus on grammar forms, especially when developing their academic writing skills.

## Conclusion

The research reported here shows a correlation between students' grammar knowledge and their level of English proficiency. However, their proficiency is not greatly influenced by their explicit knowledge of grammar, as they also develop proficiency through other activities that suit their preferences for improvement. Therefore, the more implicit grammatical knowledge one has, the more fluent they will become. Knowledge of all the issues that have been discussed so far and the insights provided should help the teachers. Instead of drawing conclusions about students' intellectual abilities based on structural and grammatical issues, teachers should accept and overcome challenges in helping students achieve a higher level of English proficiency, because the higher the proficiency level, the better the student's speaking and writing quality.

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