DILS

DEVELOPMENT IN LANGUAGE STUDIES
e-ISSN: 2811-3845

Vol. 6 No. 1 (2026) 26-31
https://publisher.uthm.edu.my/periodicals/index.php/dils

Grammatical Error Awareness and Grammar Learning Approaches Among Malaysian Undergraduate Students

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.30880/dils.2026.06.01.003

Article Info

Received: 30 April 2026
Accepted: 30 September 2026
Available online: 30 October 2026

Keywords

Grammatical error awareness, grammar learning approaches, ESL, MUET

Abstract

English is the second language in Malaysia and plays an important role in higher education. However, many Malaysian undergraduate students remain weak in English grammar despite years of formal instruction. This study investigates grammatical error awareness and approaches to grammar learning among 40 final-year Malaysian undergraduate students, using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. An online questionnaire with 15 grammar items and four open-ended questions was used to collect the data. The findings showed a low mean score of 5.83 out of 15 (38.9%), indicating weak grammatical awareness, particularly in auxiliary verbs, tense forms, singular and plural noun forms, and adverb usage. Thematic analysis of the open-ended responses identified four themes: grammatical instrumentalisation for professional credibility; L1 interference and code-switching; the declarative-procedural knowledge gap; and grammar memory attrition. Most participants (45%) had experienced the deductive learning approach, which is less effective than the inductive approach for long-term grammar learning. MUET band scores also did not consistently reflect grammar performance, raising concerns about their reliability as a proficiency indicator. The findings are hoped to assist educators and policymakers in improving grammar instruction in Malaysian higher education.

1. Introduction

English is the second language in Malaysia and has been a compulsory subject in schools since the National Language Act of 1967. Grammar has been formally taught since Year One under the Standards-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) introduced in 2013 (Azman, 2016). Despite this, Malaysian English as Second Language (ESL) learners at the tertiary level continue to show significant grammatical weaknesses in their writing and speaking (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Rashid et al., 2023). This is a worrisome situation because undergraduate students are expected to use English extensively in their future academic work and in the workplace after graduation. Employers have also repeatedly expressed concern that graduates cannot communicate or write well in English despite holding formal qualifications (Ismail et al., 2022; Kaur & Hamid,

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2021). Moreover, Malaysia's Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index ranking dropped from 13th in 2017 to 24th in 2023 (EF Education First, 2023), further highlighting the seriousness of the problem. Hence, this study investigates grammatical error awareness and grammar-learning approaches among final-year Malaysian undergraduate students, with the aim of providing useful insights to improve grammar instruction in Malaysian higher education.

This study aims to assess participants' grammar performance through error identification and correction tasks, identify the most common grammatical errors, determine the grammar learning approaches participants have experienced and their relationship to performance, and explore participants' views on the role of grammar in academic and professional communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Grammar in Second Language Acquisition

Grammar is one of the most important aspects in second language acquisition (SLA). Krashen's (1982) Monitor Model explains that language can be acquired either subconsciously through natural exposure or consciously through formal instruction. The Monitor Hypothesis further explains that formally learned grammar acts as an editor during writing or speaking tasks. However, it can be assumed that many Malaysian learners have declarative knowledge of grammar rules but are still unable to use them automatically in real communication. This is a gap that DeKeyser (2007) explains through skill-acquisition theory, in which grammar becomes procedural only through extended and meaningful practice. Unfortunately, in Malaysia's examination-oriented classrooms, grammar is mainly practised through isolated exercises rather than through real communicative tasks, which limits the development of automatic grammatical use (Muñoz-Basols et al., 2022; Nassaji, 2022).

2.2 Grammatical Errors Among Malaysian ESL Learners

Many past studies have documented the types of grammatical errors made by Malaysian ESL learners. Maros, Tan, and Salehuddin (2007) found that the most common errors among secondary school students were related to the use of articles, subject-verb agreement, and the copula 'be'. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) also found frequent tense and preposition errors in student writing. At the tertiary level, Ab Rashid et al. (2021) found that Malaysian undergraduates continued to make tense and verb agreement errors in their academic writing. Rashid, Yunus and Wahi (2023) similarly reported that grammar problems persist among Malaysian undergraduates despite years of formal instruction. These past findings confirm that grammatical errors among Malaysian ESL learners are consistent and recurring across educational levels.

2.3 Grammar Learning Approaches and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET)

The two main approaches to grammar instruction are (1) the deductive approach, which is teacher-centred and rule-first, and (2) the inductive approach, which is more student-centred and discovery-based. In Malaysia, the deductive approach is more commonly used because it suits the examination-oriented culture of the education system (Darmi & Albion, 2022). However, research has shown that the inductive approach tends to produce better long-term retention of grammar (Nassaji, 2022).

Besides, MUET, the standardised English proficiency test required for entry into Malaysian public universities, has also been criticised for its strong washback effect, in which students memorise essays and practise past questions rather than develop actual language competence (Mahmud, 2018). Lim and Hashim (2022) further argued that MUET does not fully capture the language competencies needed in higher education and the workplace. Hence, it can be assumed that relying solely on MUET as a proficiency indicator may not give an accurate picture of students' true grammatical competence.

3. Methodology

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative data were collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative thematic analysis to explain the quantitative findings. A total of 40 local, full-time, final-year undergraduate students from a public university in Malaysia participated in this study. The focus on final year students was deliberate, as these students have completed the full duration of their programme and are expected to have reached a relatively stable level of English language competence. All participants were Malaysian students for whom English is a second language, had been learning English formally since Year One, and had sat for the MUET examination. Purposive sampling

was used with the following criteria: Malaysian nationality, final-year enrolment at a Malaysian public university, and a MUET band score.

The data collection instrument was an online questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. Part A consisted of 15 grammar items (10 on error identification and 5 on error correction), which had been adapted from Saengboon (2017) and other established grammar resources. The grammar structures tested included auxiliary verbs, subject-verb agreement, singular and plural noun forms, adverb usage, and tense forms such as past perfect, past progressive, and future perfect. Part B had four open-ended questions on grammar learning difficulties, the importance of grammar, learning approaches experienced, and views on MUET as a proficiency indicator. Quantitative data from Part A were tabulated in Microsoft Excel to calculate frequency counts, percentages, and a mean score. Part B responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) six-phase thematic analysis framework, applied inductively.

A key limitation of this study is the sample size of 40 participants from a single public university, which limits the generalisability of the findings to broader quantitative contexts despite providing rich qualitative insights.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Overall Grammar Performance

The overall performance of the 40 final-year participants was relatively poor, with a total mean score of only 5.83 out of 15 (38.9%). The highest score of 13 was achieved by only one participant (2.5%), while the lowest score of 2 was recorded by two participants (5%). Most participants scored between 4 and 8, showing that the majority performed below average. This is consistent with Saengboon (2017) and Rashid et al. (2023), who reported similarly poor grammar performance among tertiary-level ESL students. It is important to note that all participants had completed more than twelve years of formal English education and had passed MUET. Plus, as final-year students, they had more exposure to academic writing than those in earlier years. Hence, it can be assumed that the low performance reflects not a lack of instruction, but a deeper issue of how grammar knowledge has been taught and internalised. These findings are consistent with Krashen's (1982) Monitor Hypothesis, which explains that formally learned grammar rules do not automatically become part of a learner's acquired competence.

4.2 Error Analysis by Grammar Type

4.2.1 Auxiliary Verbs.

All 40 participants (100%) failed to correctly identify the auxiliary verb error in Question 1. This is a very striking finding as auxiliary verbs are a fundamental part of English grammar. Maros et al. (2007) also found that auxiliary verb errors were common among Malaysian secondary school students, and the present study shows that this problem persists even at the final-year undergraduate level.

4.2.2 Singular and Plural Noun Forms.

Only 22.5% answered Question 3 correctly, and only 5% of the 40 participants answered Question 4 correctly. These results were quite surprising as noun number forms are among the first structures taught in primary school. However, it can be assumed that L1 interference plays a major role here, as Bahasa Melayu does not morphologically mark noun number, making it difficult for learners to apply plural forms consistently in English (Odlin, 1989; Ab Rashid et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Tense Forms.

An interesting recognition-production gap was observed in tense-related items. While 62.5% correctly identified the past perfect error in Question 9, only 7.5% could correct the same error type in Correction Question 1, and only 27.5% correctly produced *were lying* instead of *were laying* in Correction Question 2. This confirms that recognising errors in multiple-choice format is cognitively less demanding than producing correct forms independently (Norris & Ortega, 2000), and shows that tense errors remain a major issue at the undergraduate level.

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4.2.4 Adverb Usage.

Only 45% could distinguish *altogether* from *all together* in Question 6, and just 22.5% correctly identified the adverb-adjective distinction (*quickly* vs. *quick*) in Question 10. It can be assumed that unfamiliarity with lower-frequency adverbs in everyday Malaysian English contributed to these results, as grammar instruction in Malaysia tends to focus more heavily on verb tenses and noun forms (Muñoz-Basols et al., 2022).

4.3 Qualitative Thematic Analysis

4.3.1 Theme 1 (Grammatical Instrumentalisation for Professional Credibility)

A large majority (92.5%) agreed that grammar is important, mainly for practical and career-oriented reasons. They linked good grammar to looking professional in the eyes of lecturers and employers. However, despite this awareness, performance on the grammar tasks remained poor. Hence, it can be concluded that awareness of grammar's importance alone is not enough to develop actual grammatical competence (Dörnyei, 2009).

4.3.2 Theme 2 (L1 Interference and Code-Switching)

Participants frequently reported that mixing English with their mother tongue, whether Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin, or Tamil, has disrupted their grammatical accuracy in English. Structural differences between English and their L1s, such as the absence of tense markers in Bahasa Melayu, often caused systematic errors. This is well supported by Selinker (1972) and Odlin (1989) on interlanguage and L1 transfer, and is further explained by Lim and Hashim (2022), who noted that code-switching is a socially normalised practice in Malaysian multilingual settings, making formal grammatical accuracy in English harder to maintain.

4.3.3 Theme 3 (The Declarative-Procedural Knowledge Gap)

Many participants shared that they could state grammar rules but found it very hard to apply them automatically under time and social pressure. This reflects Anderson's (1983) distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge, and DeKeyser's (2007) argument that proceduralisation requires extended communicative practice, which is rarely provided in Malaysian grammar classrooms, where rule memorisation and exam drills dominate (Rashid et al., 2023). This theme provides the clearest explanation for the recognition-production results gap observed in Section 4.2.

4.3.4 Theme 4 (Grammar Memory Attrition)

Several participants noted that complex grammar rules learned in secondary school had faded over time, especially structures such as the past and future perfect tenses. They associated this with the lack of formal grammar instruction at university and the infrequent use of these structures in daily communication. This is consistent with Schmid (2011) on language attrition and Mukundan et al. (2021), who warned that the reduction of explicit grammar instruction in Malaysian secondary schools has left university students with weaker foundations than before.

4.4 Grammar Learning Approaches and MUET

Among the 40 participants, 45% had mainly experienced the deductive approach, 42.5% the inductive approach, and 12.5% an interactive approach. Participants who had mainly experienced the inductive approach tended to perform better on error-correction tasks, suggesting that discovery-based learning develops a more lasting and transferable understanding of grammar (Nassaji, 2022). Those with an interactive approach experience also showed more balanced performance across both task types. The dominance of the deductive approach is not surprising given Malaysia's examination culture (Darmi & Albion, 2022), but this heavy reliance may be one of the key reasons students are unable to use grammar independently in real situations.

Additionally, MUET band scores did not consistently correlate with performance on the grammar task. The highest score of 13 out of 15 questions was achieved by a Band 4 holder, while some Band 5 holders scored as low as 3 to 8. Only 57.5% of participants felt their MUET band accurately reflected their English proficiency, with 42.5% citing unequal skill weightings as a reason for the distortion. This is consistent with Mahmud (2018) on the MUET washback effect and Lim and Hashim (2022), who argued that MUET does not capture the full range of language competencies needed in higher education. Hence, it can be concluded that MUET alone cannot reliably indicate a student's true grammatical competence (Musa et al., 2022; Kaur & Hamid, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This study investigated grammatical error awareness and grammar-learning approaches among 40 final-year Malaysian undergraduate students. The quantitative findings showed a low mean score of 5.83 out of 15, with the most critical weaknesses in auxiliary verbs, noun number forms, tense forms, and adverb usage, confirming that grammatical problems common at the secondary level persist even at the final-year undergraduate stage. The qualitative analysis further explained these results through four themes: (1) grammatical instrumentalisation for professional credibility, (2) L1 interference and code-switching, (3) the declarative-procedural knowledge gap, and (4) grammar memory attrition. Together, these themes show that the problem lies not in a lack of grammar instruction, but in how grammar has been taught and whether it has been sufficiently internalised for use in real communication.

Hence, this study recommends that English language educators in Malaysia incorporate more inductive and communicative grammar activities to help students develop deeper and more lasting grammatical competence. Besides, the reliability of MUET as a proficiency indicator for degree entry also needs to be re-examined, as it may not accurately reflect students' actual grammatical ability. Given the constraint of a 40-participant sample from a single public university, future research should expand to larger, multi-site cohorts to test the quantitative generalisability of these qualitative insights. Therefore, future studies should consider larger samples from multiple Malaysian public universities and employ richer qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews and think-aloud protocols, to provide a more comprehensive picture of Malaysian undergraduate students' grammar learning experiences.

Acknowledgement

The authors highly appreciate the successful collaboration and mutual cooperation that drove this research, as well as the unwavering support provided by the Centre for Language Studies, UTHM.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: ***study conception and design:*** *Nur Farina binti Azizan and Nurul Atiqah binti Johar;* ***data collection:*** *Nur Farina binti Azizan;* ***analysis and interpretation of results:*** *Nur Farina binti Azizan;* ***draft manuscript preparation:*** *Nur Farina binti Azizan and Nurul Atiqah binti Johar. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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