Exploring challenges in learning grammar during Covid-19 era

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Abstract. This study aimed to explore challenges in learning grammar in an Intermediate Grammar class during COVID-19 era. The participants were English as a Foreign Language students from 2019 until 2021 who failed in Intermediate Grammar class or received C-E as the final score of this class during COVID-19. Close-ended questionnaire and interview were used as the instruments to collect the data in May and June 2022. The questionnaire asked the participants to choose responses to the statements. In the interview, the researcher involved six participants from the survey to clarify and dig in their responses using the same questions on the questionnaire. The results of this study would seem to indicate that the students failed in learning grammar class during the COVID-19 era because the grammar materials were too difficult to understand, loud noises made them unable to study peacefully when joining the online class from home. Their online grammar class was boring, and students experienced a bad internet connection. In addition, teachers and friends seemed to take an essential role in enhancing students' grammar. At the end, this study proposed some explicit learning strategies to improve learners' learning in an online grammar class.

INTRODUCTION

Grammar is the study of words, and learning grammar gives the knowledge to put words together in a sensible order and add the right endings to make sentences with the correct grammar (Priya, 2015). Grammar is one important element, as a part of language, and there is no language without structure (Handayani & Johan, 2018). It makes grammar an essential material in mastering a language. Without grammar, we might have problems understanding each other. However, grammar has become one of the problems second and foreign-language learners face when studying other languages (Gulö & Widianingsih, 2016). Some might say that tenses are unimportant as long as you can speak and the person you talked to understands. That statement may have a point, but what if we want to say more complicated things that we do not know how to express ourselves or express ourselves? Should we use sign language? Probably not. We all might agree, especially English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, with the statement that tenses are the most difficult thing in learning a language because we need to think first and arrange the words and patterns when the action is happening: "present, past, and future" (Cowan, 2008, p. 350). Dealing with grammar, many schools in Indonesia implement a limited English learning system. What I mean here is that the teachers and schools do not give much time for their students to practice the use of English in learning whether it is tenses or grammar, listening, and pronunciation.

Several studies have found that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the education sector (Raharjo & Pertiwi, 2020). The challenges of learning tenses or grammar during COVID-19 are students' incapability to understand the use of nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, phrases, or clauses that help to better write English (Priya, 2015). The second one is the connection problem of their internet. Even though the internet is in their hands, students still face difficulty accessing the internet network because of the places they live (Efriana, 2021). The third challenge is related to unsupported devices; some students' parents and students do not have a computer or an android device (Iskandar & Wahab, 2020). The fourth one is building students' motivation to learn in an online situation. Teaching an online course requires different methods from the traditional classroom, so teachers must adapt or develop their skills to the online learning environment. The fifth challenge is about the one-way interaction online learning is a learning system without direct face-to-face between teacher and students (Allen & Seaman, 2007). It should be using cooperative learning. "Educators have found that cooperative learning groups foster language acquisition in ways that whole-class instruction cannot" (Hill & Flynn, 2006, p. 56). Last, the students might be less motivated to follow the lesson; with online classes, they can do whatever they want. "The key to motivating the child with attentional problems is to modify and adjust the learning environment" (Lavoie, 2015, p. 2).

A similar problem also happens at the English Language Education Program at Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana (henceforth ELEP-UKSW). Students must learn various tenses or grammar they did not even get in school. This situation might cause the students to have difficulties learning it, especially during COVID-19. Many students have failed grammar tests, such as in their Basic Grammar and Intermediate Grammar courses. With all those backgrounds in mind, I was curious to find EFL students' difficulties in learning grammar, especially in an Intermediate Grammar class at ELEP-UKSW, where many ELEP students failed to pass the class. This study aimed to answer the following research question: What are the challenges in learning grammar in an Intermediate Grammar class at ELEP-UKSW during the COVID-19 era?

Answers to this research question are hoped to provide some concrete information to EFL's learners about their challenges in grammar. After discovering the challenges, the students are expected to know their challenges in grammar and then try to study them well and find practical ways to deal with them. Moreover, I hope this study will be useful for lecturers to find practical ways that can help their students deal with challenges and help them pass the intermediate grammar class successfully.

METHOD

The participants of this research were from the Intermediate Grammar class at ELEP-UKSW. More specifically, there were 43 of the students of the 2019, 2020, and 2021 batches (total number of students = 43) who failed in the Intermediate Grammar class at ELEP-UKSW or the ones that received C-E as the final score of this class during COVID-19.

I used a questionnaire and interview to collect the students' responses. A type of close-ended questionnaire was used as the research instrument. This type of questionnaire allows participants to choose answers, use options, such as Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree in the questionnaire (Harun & Singh, 2021). According to Pujihastuti (2010), closed questions will reduce the variability of respondents' responses to facilitate the analysis. The questions in the table were used as a questionnaire of the research.

Meanwhile, I used a semi-structured interview during the interview. A semi-structured interview is more powerful to acquire in-depth information, flexible, and adaptable (Ruslin et al.,

2022). However, semi-structured interviews can allow the researcher to adapt them to their research questions as changes occur, while maintaining the main topic.

These were the activities I did in collecting the research data. Before conducting the questionnaire and interview between May and June 2022, I made 10 statements informed by the literature to explore the participants' experiences when taking grammar courses during the pandemic and put them on a Google Form. On the Google Form, I also asked them if they would be interviewed to clarify their responses to the questionnaire. For the interview, it was conducted via zoom meetings. I involved 6 of the participants that were willing to be interviewed and made an appointment. I engaged the participants to provide further clarifications to their answers on the questionnaire based on their knowledge and experiences that enabled them to answer the research questions. The questions used in the interviews remained the same. After the interview section finished, I showed the final transcript to the interviewees and let them see if it was accurate or the ones they really wanted to say. This member check strategy helped to ensure the credibility of the research findings (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019; Mali & Salsbury, 2022).

The data elicited from the questionnaire analyzed using a descriptive statistics technique. It Is a numerical and graphic technique to organize, describe, and present data (Fisher and marshall, 2019). Participant responses were processed using Microsoft Excel to produce descriptive statistics where frequencies and percentages were calculated and analyzed to answer survey questions. The data gained from interviews were read and checked multiple times. After gaining the data needed, I transcribed the data. I used thematic analysis to analyze the data from the semi-structured interview. Descriptive statistics are used to summarize data in an organized manner. Thematic analysis was the most commonly used method in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2014). In analyzing the data, I underlined words and phrases that showed the answer of the research question and made it as themes presented in the findings and discussion section of this research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
The results of the questionnaire data are described in Table 1 sections:

Table 1. Students' Challenges in Learning an Intermediate Grammar during COVID-19

No	Statement items	Scales			
		Strongly disagree	**Disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**
1.	The grammar materials were too difficult to understand.	2 Students 4,66%	18 Students 41,86%	20 Students 46,51%	3 Students 6,97%
2.	Loud and noisy sounds in my home environment made me unable to study peacefully when joining the online class from home.	3 Students 6,97%	8 Students 18,60%	26 Students 60,47%	6 Students 13,96%
3.	My online grammar class was too boring.	5 Students 11,62%	21 Students 48,83%	15 Students 34,89%	2 Students 4,66%

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4.	My poor internet connection made me less enthusiastic during the online grammar class.	3 Students 6,97%	12 Students 27,90%	22 Students 51,17%	6 Students 13,96%
5.	The teacher did not provide opportunities for students to participate in classroom discussions about the grammar learning materials.	19 Students 44,18%	19 Students 44,18%	4 Students 9,32%	1 Students 2,32%
6.	I experienced a bad internet connection so I could not follow the class discussion well.	5 Students 11,62%	15 Students 34,89%	18 Students 41,86%	5 Students 11,62%
7.	The English grammar has too many rules that confuse me.	1 Students 2.32%	10 Students 23,25%	28 Students 65,11%	4 Students 9,32%
8.	Learning grammar through a cell phone was difficult because the screen was so small and I could not see my lecturer's presentation and his or her learning materials clearly.	3 Students 6,97%	22 Students 51,17%	12 Students 27,90%	6 Students 13,96%
9.	This is my very first time learning English grammar.	11 Students 25,58%	22 Students 51,16%	8 Students 18,60%	2 Students 4,66%
10.	When I was confused about the materials, my friends did not help me.	10 Students 23,25%	26 Students 60,46%	4 Students 9,32%	3 Students 6,97%

1.

Each statement from Table above will have subtitles in the following sections where I described the questionnaire data and supported it with the interview excerpts. Then, I relate the findings with the relevant literature.

1. Questionnaire Item 1: The Grammar Materials Were Too Difficult to Understand

53,48% of participants felt that grammar was difficult to understand and 46,52% said that grammar was not difficult to understand, as some students said in the interview.

Excerpt 1

Jadi kalo misalnya, belajar dari grammar itu sangat susah ya. Karna, itu tadi formulanya itu kan jadi kita harus hafal strukturnya. Terus kan di setiap formula itu kan enggak selalu menggunakan vocab yang sama, misalkan kayak verb 1 verb 2 nya, jadi kita harus hafal kapan harus menempatkan dia pakainya v-ing dan kapan v3.
So for example, learning from grammar is very difficult. Because, that's the formula, so we have to memorise the structure. Then, each formula doesn't always use the same vocab, for example, verb 1 verb 2, so we have to memorise when to put v-ing and when v3. (student 5/ interview) (translated by the interviewer).

Excerpt 2
Sebenarnya sih materinya enggak sulit dan latihan soal adalah kuncinya. Perbanyak latihan soal-soal pasti nanti bisa.
The materials were not too difficult and practicing more exercise were the keys (student 2/ interview) (translated by the interviewers).

As evidenced in excerpt 1, student 1 agreed that the grammar materials were too difficult to understand but if you practice a lot, the result might change. It will help us in learning English when we understand the grammar (Ameliani, 2019).

2. Questionnaire Item 2: Loud and Noisy Sounds in The Students' Home Environment Made Them Unable to Study Peacefully when Joining The Online Class From Home

74,43% of participants agreed that noisy sounds in their home environment made them unable to study peacefully, and 25,57% said that they were fine with that, some used a headset to avoid noises. These statements appear to be as stated by excerpt 1 and 2:

Excerpt 1
Setuju, karena butuh tempat yang nyaman buat belajar. kalau di asrama berisik, tetapi saya memberitahu teman-teman untuk tidak berisik dan kooperatif dalam belajar. Agree because, need a comfortable place to study. If the dormitory was too noisy, I told my friends not to be noisy and to cooperate in studying. (student 1/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

Excerpt 2
Tidak setuju karena kita bisa menggunakan headset atau earphone pada saat kelas. Disagree because we could use headphone or earphone during the lesson. (student 3/ interview) (translated by the interviewer).

As evidenced in excerpt 1, agreed that loud and noisy sounds in my home environment made me unable to study peacefully when joining the online class from home. However, as in excerpt 1 and 2, you could tell homies or friends to lower their volume and use a headset to avoid noises. This is the same with Ablogami (2022) who believed that online learning carries some disadvantages; internet interruption, weak Wi-Fi signals, technical problems, and sound interruption.

3. Questionnaire Item 3: The Students Online Grammar Class Was Too Boring

60,45% did not agree that their online class was boring and 39.55% felt boring. These statements appear to be as stated by excerpt 1 and 2:

Excerpt 1
Lebih asik, ada diskusi tanya jawab, tidak ada rasa takut sama lebih percaya diri. It was fun, there was a question and answer discussion, no fear and more confidence. (student 1/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

Excerpt 2
Jadi waktu belajar kelas grammar online tuh, dosennya setiap pertemuan enggak menggunakan zoom, jadi cuma pakai WhatsApp, dia kirim file penjelasan kayak PPT gitu, terus kita pahami sendiri, terus dia share question di group WhatsApp, kemudian dia tunjuk orang yang ngerjain soal-soal gitu. Jadi kayak lebih belajar mandiri. So when learning grammar class online, the lecturer didn't use zoom every meeting, so only used WhatsApp and sent an explanation file like PPT, then we understood it by

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ourselves, then the lecturer shared questions in the WhatsApp group, then pointed to student who did the questions. So it was like more independent learning. (student 6/ interview) (translated by the interviewers).

As evidenced in excerpt 1 showed that most students did not agree with "my online grammar class was too boring." The lecturer made the students' online class and learning process atmosphere comfortable.

4. Questionnaire Item 4: The Students' Poor Internet Connection Made Them Less Enthusiastic During The Online Grammar Class

65,13% of participants felt less enthusiastic during online grammar class caused by poor internet connection and 25,57% felt normal because they prepared before attending online class. These statements appear to be as stated by excerpt 1 and 2:

Excerpt 1
Ya, bener banget tuh karna kalo koneksi jelek otomatis keluar jadi malas karna ketinggalan penjelasan dari guru. Yes, that's true because when the connection was bad, it automatically made me lazy. After all, I missed the explanation from the teacher. (student 4/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

Excerpt 2
Ya karena sebelum kelas itu setidaknya saya mempersiapkan diri biar lebih siapkan untuk mengantisipasi adanya bad connection, jadi saya double data, saya pakai Wi-Fi dan juga data pribadi begitu. Yes, because before the class I at least prepared myself to be more prepared to anticipate a bad connection, so I double the data, I used Wi-Fi and also personal data like that. (student 2/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

As evidence in excerpt 1 agree, poor internet connection made students less enthusiastic during the online grammar class. However we could find alternative ways, such as finding a better sport or signals. Internet interruption and weak Wi-Fi signals (Ablogami, 2022).

5. Questionnaire Item 5: The Teacher Did Not Provide Opportunities For Students To Participate in Classroom Discussions About The Grammar Learning Materials

As shown in Table 2, 88,36% agree that the teacher always allows students to participate in the classroom. These statements appear to be as stated by 1:

Excerpt 1
Gurunya selalu kasih kesempatan, always provide diskusi tapi dibagi jadi beberapa room soalnya kelasnya pakai zoom. The teacher always provides opportunities and discussions but divided into several rooms because the class uses zoom. (student 2/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

As evidenced in excerpt 1, most students did not agree with "The teacher did not provide opportunities for students to participate in classroom discussions about the grammar learning materials." Because the lecturers made the online class and learning process atmosphere comfortable to the students, not in one-way interaction online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2007). When the students were confused about the materials, their friends helped them.

6. Questionnaire Item 6: The Students Experienced A Bad Internet Connection So They Could Not Follow The Class Discussion Well

53,48% of participants experienced a bad internet connection, and 46,52% said that they did not experience a bad connection. These statements appear stated by excerpt 1 and 2:

Excerpt 1
Setuju, karena sama seperti nomor 2 saat sinyal tidak stabil membuat kurang bersemangat dan terlebih lagi kalau sinyal Wi-Fi di asrama tiba-tiba gangguan akan berdampak pada pembelajaran kuliah daring. Agree, same with number 2 because when the unstable signals moreover, when Wi-Fi at the dormitory suddenly had disturbance it made me less enthusiastic during the lesson. (student 2/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

Excerpt 2
Tidak setuju, karena seperti yang saya katakan sebelumnya. Karena sudah prepare berusaha cari tempat dengan koneksi yang lebih stabil. Disagree because same like what I mentioned before, better prepared to find a place with better internet signals. (student 1/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

As evidenced in excerpt 1, students experienced a bad internet connection, so they could not follow the class discussion well. However students could be better prepared to find a place with better internet signals. Same with Ablogami (2022) online learning carries the disadvantage of internet interruption.

7. Questionnaire Item 7: The English Grammar Has Too Many Rules That Confuse The Students

74,43% of participants said that grammar has too many confusing rules, and 25,57% said they did not experience a bad connection. These statements appear to be as stated by excerpt 1 and 2:

Excerpt 1
Setuju, aturan dan rules bahasa inggris di intermediate grammar lebih rumit, semakin banyak materi yang perlu dipelajari. Agree, There were a lot of complicated rules and materials in English that needed to be mastered in intermediate grammar. (student 2/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

Excerpt 2
Memang aturan rules dari intermediate lebih complicated tapi kembali lagi ke niat dan latihan soal, pasti bisa. Indeed, rules in intermediate were more complicated, but back to motivate yourself and practice, if you do it you can pass it (student 3/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

As evidenced in excerpt 1 agree that the English grammar has too many rules that confuse them and to avoid that students could practice and study together with their friends. This is connected to the study conducted by Atiqoch and Ameliani (2019). The results show that students have difficulties in grammar involves tenses, plurality, article, preposition and pronoun.

8. Questionnaire Item 8: Learning Grammar Through A Cell Phone Was Difficult Because The Screen Was So Small and The Students Could Not See Their Lecturer's Presentation and The Learning Materials Clearly

41,86% of participants agreed that learning grammar through a cell phone was difficult as and 53,48% of participants said that were not having difficulties with small screen:

Excerpt 1
Pake hp kalo mata minus jadi ga bisa liat dengan jelas. Use mobile phones if you have a minus eye so you can not see clearly. (student 4/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

Excerpt 2
Memang aturan rules dari intermediate lebih complicated tapi kembali lagi ke niat dan latihan soal, pasti bisa. Indeed, rules in intermediate were more complicated, but back to motivate yourself and practice, if you do it you can pass it (student 3/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

As evidenced in the interview, student agree that learning grammar through a cell phone was difficult. This findings differ from what Wang and Smith (2013) believed that learning grammar using mobile devices is a positive language experience.

9. Questionnaire Item 9: This Is The Students Very First Time Learning English Grammar

76,74% did not agree with that statement. These statements appear to be as stated by excerpt 1:

Excerpt 1
Tidak setuju, sebelumnya sudah dapat materi dari smk tapi cuma sekali-kali kayak tense, used to, passive sama active voice. I disagree, I have learnt the material from high school but only once in a while like tense, used to, passive and active voice. (student 3/ interview). (translated by the interviewer)

As evidenced in excerpt 1, some students have had time at secondary or vocational schools, but only a little and not as in-depth as they would at a higher level. This is connected to the study conducted by Ameliani (2019). The results show that students have difficulties in grammar involving tenses and oftenly forget what they have learnt.

10. Questionnaire Item 10: When I Was Confused About The Materials, My Friends Did Not Help Me.

As shown in Table 2 83,71% of the respondents agree that during online grammar learning their friends always helped and supported them in learning. These statements appear to be as stated by excerpt 1:

Excerpt 1
Tidak setuju, karena teman-teman membantu dan support belajar bersama. Disagree, because my friends helped me and supported me to study together. (student 2/ interview) (translated by the interviewer)

As evidenced in excerpt 1, most students did not agree with "When I was confused about the materials, my friends did not help me." some students felt their friends did not help them during the online grammar learning. "Educators have found that cooperative learning groups foster language acquisition in ways that whole-class instruction cannot" (Hill & Flynn, 2006, p. 56).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the causes and findings of students failing in learning intermediate grammar online classes are:

Firstly, the materials are difficult to understand. The material in intermediate grammar is more extensive than in basic grammar. Due to internet connection, many students are less responsive and active to the teacher's explanation. In addition, students have difficulty accessing the internet. Their residence, far from the city center, makes it difficult for students to access the

internet and follow the lessons. No wonder, if many students did not pass in this subject during the pandemic.

Although technology development is rapid, this development is not evenly distributed. just like what PBI-UKSW students experience. Some do not have adequate technology to help with their learning facilities. Due to poor economic backgrounds, some rely on 1 technology to survive the pandemic. Of course this will have an unpleasant impact on students, in the learning process.

Third, loud noises around the home environment. A conducive environment is important, as well as learning. a conducive home environment will help students learn, namely to focus more on understanding the teacher's explanation. if we have a less or even non-conducive environment, it will have a bad effect on learning.

Based on the research conclusions, the researcher would like to provide some recommendations for EFL lecturers and learners. The lecturers in PBI-UKSW and Indonesia do not rely on one technology in the teaching and learning process. They should use as many applications as possible and bring learning into life, so that the students can enjoy the learning process and not feel bored. The teacher should give the materials through a WhatsApp group, just in case there is a student/s that skipped the class due to internet problems. For the students in PBI-UKSW and Indonesia, do not be afraid and hesitate to ask questions about the teacher's explanation, be active in learning and don't be afraid to be wrong, because it is from these mistakes that we learn and improve ourselves. You can go to the library and use the computers there if you have difficulties with the internet, connection problems, and if you do not have a laptop. These findings can be used as a first step to be considered. The students must also prepare a sufficient internet connection and quota internet before attending the class whether it is approximately enough or not. Also before attending class, the battery should be in full condition so that it does not interfere with the learning process. Second, students must find a spot with the best signal connection before attending the class. Third, students must also be able to find other alternative paths. For example, if the signal is unstable, students can join their friend's gadget to participate in online learning in the grammar class. Therefore Intermediate Grammar class can be done offline or face to face with observing strict health protocol so that the number of COVID-19 will not increase.

The limitations of this research are when the data was collected, many participants were not able to be interviewed, and participants did not attend the classes fully. To overcome this limitation, future researchers might develop the same study by exploring challenges in learning grammar in a basic or advanced grammar class during the pandemic, post-pandemic, or at different levels, either in Indonesia or other countries. Future researchers can interview more students in the same or different context situations. This research only focuses on 2019, 2020, and 2021 batches of PBI-UKSW students learning grammar at the intermediate level amid COVID-19. Future researchers can dig deeper into their obstacles besides those exposed in this study, and what they often do to help the learning process. Other research data collection procedures (e.g., observing online grammar classes, recording those class sessions, and using an open-ended questionnaire) may allow future researchers to obtain richer data for detailing what students do. Future researchers can explore if the EFL students use the same learning strategies when learning grammar during the pandemic and after the pandemic is over.

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