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Exploring Students' Attribution: Why Did Students Fail in Their Online Basic Grammar Class?

Putri Indah Lestari[1]*

[1]English Language Education Program, Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: 112019050@student.uksw.edu

Article Info

Abstract

Grammar is one of the crucial components that must be mastered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students when they want to learn English. Undoubtedly, many students think grammar is quite challenging to understand and master. In an English Language Education Program at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia, many EFL students failed their Basic Grammar classes. Therefore, this study aims to explore the EFL students' attributions or reasons for their failure in their Basic Grammar class. The data were gathered through a semi-structured interview with five EFL students who failed their Basic Grammar class. My preliminary results indicate some factors that cause them to fail in their Basic Grammar classes, such as the lack of knowledge, internet connection, and students' factors. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: *EFL students, grammar, online learning*

INTRODUCTION

Grammar is one of the important aspects that need to be understood when someone wants to learn English (Ameliani, 2019). Besides, grammar influences success in English because it has an important role in learning English as a second language (Mirazna & Hikmah, 2019), such as in the success of communication (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

However, many English as a Foreign Language (henceforth called EFL) students face difficulties in comprehending grammatical rules, even though they have been taught in-depth, such as how to differentiate sentence structur (Sani, 2016). Indonesian EFL students are distracted by the difference between Indonesian and English sentence structures, and it sometimes makes them use Indonesian sentence structures when writing English sentences (Ameliani, 2019). Moreover, some Indonesian university students are sometimes confused about how to arrange sentences. They find it difficult to structure sentences with accurate tenses but sometimes they use the incorrect form then their sentence becomes wrong; there are many complex sentence structures and sometimes confusing to understand (Prasetyo, 2020). These are some problems that students usually face when they learn about grammar.

Basic Grammar class at the Language Education Program at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia is a compulsory subject that must be taken by students as a prerequisite to take advanced grammar classes or writing classes in the following semesters. The fact is that many students fail this grammar class. With that fact in mind and considering the essential place of grammar in learning English as reviewed in the literature, the researcher is interested in exploring further attributions for the students' failure in their Basic Grammar class. More specifically, this research aims to answer the following research question: *What are EFL students' attributions for their failure in their Basic Grammar class?*

EFL students enrolled in the Basic Grammar course or comparable classes have the option to utilize responses for the research inquiry to get their inputs/practical suggestions about what they should/ should not do to be successful in their grammar classes. This research also aims to provide input for EFL teachers in helping their students who failed in their grammar classes.

Literature Review
This part provides a review of the literature which is relevant to the research objective. This includes the definitions of attribution, grammar, and previous studies on why EFL students fail in their grammar classes.

Definition of Attribution
Generally, attribution is a description of the reasons why someone experiences success or failure in learning. More specifically, Dörnyei (2001) explained that attributions are "explanations people offer about why they were successful or failed in the past" p. 118). Attribution also refers to explaining the reasons for the progress, success, or failure students experience in language learning (Mali, 2015). Lei (2009) believed that attributions made to success or failure in learning will result in changes in dreams and emotions, which may affect an individual's determination to learn and achieve academically. Demetriou (2011) argued that students' attributions to success or failure can help them to improve their role as learners. Students' attributions can also be used to motivate students to become successful in their learning (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006).

Definition of Grammar
There are some definitions of grammar. First, according to Ameliani (2019) (Ameliani, 2019)grammar is the main thing in the process of using language and is an important part of

spoken and written language. Next, grammar is usually considered a set of rules that determine the proper order of words at the sentence level, and as an important part of language, there can be no language without structure (Handayani & Johan, 2018). According to Al-Mekhali and Nagaratman (2011); Sani (2016), grammar is the study of how a collection of words and their component are put together to form a sentence.

Previous Studies on Why EFL Students Fail in Their Grammar Classes
Previous studies revealed some factors why EFL students failed in their grammar classes. First, in research conducted in Magelang Indonesia involving seventh grade of Junior High School students, the failure might be because of various rules that students need to master, such as those related to tenses, plurality, articles, prepositions, and pronouns (Ameliani, 2019). Second, the study conducted by Effendi et al. (2017) reported that the failure might be because of the lecturers' aspect. For example, the lecturers are aware of the deductive approach. Deductive approach is a teaching method where the teacher provides or explains a theory about the material being taught and then gives examples to the students. They think that deductive approach is not good enough for students but in fact, the students stated that they are only comfortable with deductive approach because it has become a habit in schools for a long time.

Effendi et al. (2017) also reported that the failure was caused by the students themselves. For example, the differences in the sentence structure between English and Indonesian make them difficult to understand. 20% of the research participants stated that they are not interested in studying in the English department so they lack motivation to follow the class and last, most of the students (59%) are less active in asking questions in class. The data of this study was collected from tests, observation sheets, questionnaires, and interviews. The participants were English department students in semesters 2, 4, 6, and six lecturers who taught at the level studied.

Widianingsih and Gulö (2016) investigated grammatical errors commonly made by second language learners of English. The data was collected from the third and fourth-year students studying at a foreign language college, using descriptive qualitative ones. The result showed that the major kinds of errors made by the students are related to plural markers, articles, verbs, and tenses. Additionally, Susanto (2018) investigated students who failed their first independent grammar course in the Language Education Program at the Faculty of Language and Arts in a private university in Central Java, Indonesia, Using a semi-structured interview with 8 PBI students who failed Basic Grammar and had to repeat the courses, the results of this study showed some challenges faced by EFL in learning grammar. There are top four reasons why they failed in grammar courses. The first reason is negative views about grammar. The participants saw grammar as something difficult and confusing and one of the participants said that grammar was not easy as she had expected. The second reason is the class situation. One of the participants said that the class situation was too noisy and other students made her/him less focused during the class. The next reason is complicated grammatical items and ineffective individual learning strategies.

Additionally, Akmal et al. (2020) conducted a study about EFL learners' difficulties in structure and written expression. The failure might be related to problems in understanding determiners, conjunctions, adjective clauses, apposition phrases, and reduced clauses in the structure section. The researcher collected the data from 15 participants through a purposive sampling mechanism from the seventh-semester students of the Department of English Language Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry. In Oman, Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) investigated EFL students' difficulties in learning grammar. The results

indicated that the students invariably face serious difficulties concerning EFL grammar instruction in an EFL context, with students facing them to a greater extent than teachers.

Handayani and Johan (2018) conducted a study about the problems faced by foreign language students in their grammar learning. The data of this research was collected using a descriptive research method. The results showed that the most problems faced by EFL students in their grammar learning are tenses. Most of the students use wrong verbs when they write in English. These problems can be caused by the teaching method or the ability of the students themselves. The researcher will use the findings reported by the previous studies above to see if the research participants of this study have the same or different attributions from those reported by the previous studies.

RESEARCH METHOD
The Study
This research aimed to explore EFL students' attributions for their failure in their Basic Grammar class at the Language Education Program at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. To achieve this goal, the researcher approached her study qualitatively. By using a qualitative method, the researcher tried to find out and describe facts that happen (Nassaji, 2015) related to the students' attributions as they are without any attempts to modify or control the research participants' behavior (Mali, 2017). The qualitative data could express a deeper understanding of individual participants, including their opinions, perspectives, and attitudes (Nassaji, 2015).

Context of the Study
The research was conducted in the Basic Grammar course in the Language Education Program at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. This course was designed to increase student awareness of the importance of grammar for effective communication and assist students with basic knowledge and skills of English Grammar. This course was selected because many students failed in the Basic Grammar class, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when students were required to do their classes online. Therefore, the selection of the research setting could enable the researcher to know the students' attribution for their failure in Basic Grammar classes at the Language Education Program at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia.

Research Participants
In selecting the participants, the researcher used criterion sampling, which required researchers to have a set of criteria in selecting their research participants (Ary et al., 2010). Previous researchers (Erişti et al., 2012); Mali & Salsbury, 2021) also used the same sampling technique to select their research participants. This kind of sampling helped the researcher in the data collection process to involve seven participants that match the following criteria: students who had taken the Basic Grammar course but they failed and had to repeat the course once or twice. The participants consist of male and female students who are currently in their fourth to sixth semesters.

Data Collection Instruments
To collect the data, this study used a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interview is a data collection method which has a list of questions ordered to be asked and probes from the interviewer in order to clarify more information (Mackey & Gass, 2005). This type of interview could also give the participants opportunities to explore their ideas toward their attribution for their failure in Basic Grammar classes. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interview question of this research was adapted from Alhaysony and Alahisoni

(2017). The main interview question is *what are the reasons or factors that cause your failure in your Basic grammar Class?*

Data Collection Procedures
The data collection began on June 9, 2022, when the researcher started contacting the participants via email, and then communication continued through WhatsApp. Each participant had a different interview schedule, as the researcher adjusted to their availability. The interviews were conducted from June 10-15, 2022, and each interview session took 15-30 minutes to complete. At the beginning of the research, the researcher contacted one of the teachers who taught Basic Grammar (repeat class) to find out who the students were in that repeated Basic Grammar class. The researcher then began to contact the students via email. In addition to contacting the teacher, the researcher also asked for suggestions and contact numbers of the participants who would be interviewed. After the researcher obtained the participants' contact numbers, they contacted them via WhatsApp and informed them of the purpose and interview procedures. This interview was conducted online through two applications, Zoom and Gmeet. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher introduced themselves, conveyed the research purpose, and then the interview session began with questions that had been previously shared by the researcher. After all of the interview sessions were done, the researcher transcribed the interview transcript using *InqScribe* and then moved the data to *Google Docs.*

Data Analysis Procedures
After collecting the data, the researcher transcribed the interview data. In this section, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from the interview in which the data was analyzed and categorized under themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dawson, 2009). In this phase, the researcher transcribed data from the semi-structured interview and reread it to develop the themes.

Research Trustworthiness
To ascertain that the findings of this research are truthful, the researcher used a member checks strategy to get the participant's feedback. The researcher asked the participants to review the data transcription. This was done to recheck the accuracy of the data, clear up miscommunication, and it might help obtain additional information from the(Ary et al., 2010)m (Ary et al., 2010).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
This section presents the findings on the students' attribution for their failure in their online Basic Grammar classes. Similar to Mali (2015), the researcher aimed to display the attribution by classifying the research findings to explain the students' attributions that caused them to fail their online Basic Grammar classes.

Three themes emerged as the results of the data analysis: (1) the lack of the students' background knowledge and understanding about the material; (2) the lack of the students' motivation to learn the material; (3) the internet connection problems.

Theme 1: The lack of the Students' Understanding Of the Material
Most of the students argued that online grammar classes were not effective because they couldn't do their best performance in class and it made them fail in their grammar classes. All the participants said that the first reason that made them fail in their grammar class was because of the lack of understanding of the material. These are some participant's answers:

Excerpt 1
Actually, the main reason is that I didn't study enough and I didn't understand the material well because of the bad internet connection which made the explanation from the lecturer unclear. Then I became so lazy, I didn't even review the material and study again at home and I even spent too much time playing games at home, which made me get bad grades. (Student 2/interview/translated by the researcher)

Excerpt 2
To be honest, I don't think that my knowledge is good enough. The thing is, it's difficult to understand the material at first. But once I get it, it means I get it. However, I still need to study more to fully understand it. For example, when I was in junior high school, I didn't really understand the basics, but I started learning it myself. In senior high school, I improved, but in college my understanding declined again because the material given is more complex, such as the tenses and other grammatical things. (Student 2/interview/translated by the researcher)

Excerpt 3
During the last class, as I said earlier because I used to have no knowledge about Basic Grammar, I didn't know anything. Then when learning Basic Grammar, it's like learning a lot of patterns, learning a lot of tenses and having to be able to memorize and of course having to understand how to use them. So, it's hard for me to learn it and to understand it, I need someone who will guide me, like it doesn't have to be just the lecturer who explains it but there must be other people who teach me again. Like when I had a tutor, there was also a tutor who helped me when I didn't understand the material explained by the lecturer in class, so there was a tutor I learned from again. However, I still had difficulty understanding the material and perhaps this was one of the reasons I failed. (Student 5/interview/translated by the researcher)

As the data showed, a lack of understanding could be one of the major reasons why the students failed their online grammar classes. Grammar is a complex subject that requires a solid understanding of rules, structures, and patterns. Without a clear understanding of these concepts, students may struggle to apply them in practice, leading to errors and mistakes in their written or spoken communication. The failure might also happen because of the lack of the students' background knowledge. Based on the answers from the interviews, it can be seen that students' lack of understanding of the material taught in class has a big impact on the students' failure in Basic Grammar class. It can be seen from the participants' statements above that the lessons about grammar that they got from junior high school to senior high school were not enough. What they learned was not as deep and detailed as what they learned in college. Therefore, this causes students to have difficulty adjusting to the situation and difficulty following the grammar class.

Some other students also mentioned similar things about their lack of understanding of the grammar materials.

Excerpt 4
The reason I failed in this class is because I still don't really understand certain parts of Basic Grammar, such as tenses, adjective clauses, and I'm most confused with the use of "who and whom, whose". I still often get them mixed up and confused when applying them to sentences. Also, during the pandemic, it was difficult to study together with friends, so when I was at the dormitory, I used to study with friends, but online we only communicate via WhatsApp or Google Meet, so it's difficult to have discussions with friends. (Student 3/interview/translated by the researcher)

Excerpt 5
I think the reason I failed in the Basic Grammar class is because I haven't mastered the material yet. I still don't understand how to use verbs or tenses correctly, and I'm still

confused about how to arrange words with proper grammar. (Student 6/interview/translated by the researcher)

Based on the two statements above and some previous statements, it can be seen that students mostly struggle to understand tenses. The complexity of English grammar rules, including verb tenses, make them difficult to understand for English language learners. The rules for tense usage in English can be complex and confusing, as there are many irregular verbs, exceptions to the rules, and the meaning that depends on the context in which the verb is used. Additionally, English verb tenses often do not have direct equivalents in other languages, which can make them difficult to learn and use accurately. Moreover, mastering verb tenses requires a lot of practice, exposure to different forms and examples, and an understanding of the rules, which can be time-consuming and challenging for some learners.

As a result of the interview, the researcher revealed that the most mentioned students' attribution for their failure in Basic Grammar class is the lack of understanding. This finding is in line with Akmal et al. (2020) who said that the students' failure might be related to problems in understanding determiners, conjunctions, adjective clauses, apposition phrases, and reduced clauses in the structure section. This is related to the researcher participants' statements which talk about the difficulty that they face. The difficulties in understanding grammatical things, such as the tenses, the use of adjective clauses, how to use correct verbs and tenses, how to arrange with good grammar, etc. The most problems faced by EFL students in their grammar learning are tenses, most of them use wrong verbs when they write in English (Handayani & Johan, 2018). The researcher compared her findings with previous studies.

The interview data also revealed that they had difficulty understanding many types of tenses in Basic Grammar class due to their lack of knowledge of the material. This resulted in students repeating their Basic Grammar class. This finding supports Widianingsih and Gulö's (2016) argumentation that the major kinds of errors made by the students are related to plural markers, articles, verbs, and tenses. Additionally, complicated grammatical items and ineffective individual learning strategies become one of the reasons why students failed in their grammar courses (Susanto, 2018).

Theme 2: The lack of the students' motivation in learning the material
Another reason why students failed in their Basic Grammar class is because of the lack of self-motivation to learn the material, as some students said in the interview.

Excerpt 6
Sometimes I had a tutor class, but during the tutoring session, they didn't seem to take it very seriously. When they were explaining things, I was more focused on playing around. I understood it when the tutor taught me. But I got a test, the questions given were different. Sometimes it confuses me and I end up making mistakes, and I also don't study much. (Student 5/interview/translated by researcher)
Excerpt 7
In my opinion, online classes are not very effective because we become less focused, lazy, and sometimes feel sleepy. As a result, I may not fully understand the material presented by the lecturer, and perhaps this is also one of the reasons why I failed in my first Basic Grammar class. (Student 6/interview/translated by the researcher)
Excerpt 8
I used to neglect grammar and when I finished a class, I didn't review the material that was explained by the lecturer. Now, I have to start learning independently because I can't rely on the lecturer or tutor. (Student 7/interview/translated by the researcher)

The participants' statements above might also indicate that online classes have a negative impact on the participants. The number of distractions encountered during online classes has decreased their motivation to learn. The lack of self-motivation can be another reason why students may fail in their grammar classes, especially in online classes. Online classes often require students to be more self-directed and motivated than in traditional classroom settings, as they may not have the same level of in-person interaction, guidance, and accountability from their instructors and peers. This can make it challenging for students who struggle with self-motivation to stay engaged and on track with their coursework. All the things that the participants face are interrelated.

This finding agrees with Effendi et al. (2017) who stated that (20%) of students are not interested in studying in the English department so they lack motivation to follow the class and most of the students (59%) are less active in asking questions in class. One of participant's statement in *Excerpt 6* who stated that she/he used to neglect grammar supported Susanto's (2018) view that the first reason students failed in their grammar course is negative views about grammar. The participants saw grammar as something difficult and confusing and one of the participants said that grammar was not easy as she had expected.

Theme 3: The internet connection problems
The reason why they failed the Basic Grammar class was also caused by the poor internet connection. In online learning, it is inevitable that internet connection problems can be a barrier for students in their learning process. The participants stated that the unstable internet connection sometimes made the lecturer's explanations unclear, which led to a lack of motivation among the participants. They stopped paying attention to the lectures, and one participant even expressed a negative attitude toward the Basic Grammar course. Poor internet connection can disrupt students' learning process and this is a serious problem. These are student's statement related to internet connection problems:

> Excerpt 9
> Actually, I understood the lecturer's explanation better when the class was offline. I understand offline classes better than online ones. Online classes cause me problems, such as internet connection issues and disruptions. (Student 1/interview/translated by researcher)
> Excerpt 10
> I often experience that, especially when there is a signal problem. Here, the signal is generally poor, so the Zoom or Meet sessions frequently disconnect by themselves. As a result, the explained material becomes less clear, and I find it difficult to comprehend. (Student 2/interview/translated by researcher)

The participant's statements above mean that internet connection has influenced their learning process. Internet problems can be a big problem in online classes. Online classes have reduced the interaction between students and teachers, as well as among students themselves. Participants also say that online classes, combined with poor internet connections, make them less motivated to learn. Moreover, external disturbances like surrounding noise during online classes further hinder their focus and concentration. Below is another students' statement:

> Excerpt 11
> My previous Basic Grammar was online. I feel that online learning is less effective because sometimes the internet signal is poor. This makes me less enthusiastic about learning when there are network disruptions. In my opinion, offline classes would be more effective because I can better understand and comprehend what the lecturer is

explaining. Actually, I can understand the explanations given in every online class, but I can't focus as well because sometimes there are disruptions, such as bad internet connections, loud noises from outside the house, and other things. (Student 4/interview/translated by the researcher)

Internet problems can sometimes cause students to fail in their online classes. A reliable and stable internet connection is essential for online learning because it allows students to access course materials, participate in live lectures, and submit assignments on time. If the internet connection is weak or unstable, it can cause disruptions such as frozen screens, buffering videos, or dropped calls, making it difficult for students to fully engage in the class. This can lead to frustration and decreased motivation, which can ultimately affect their learning outcomes. When students feel comfortable while learning a language, they become more motivated. To help students feel more comfortable, it is recommended to minimize their workload, provide a good internet connection, and create a conducive learning environment (Widayanti & Suarnajaya, 2021). However, if a student's internet connection is frequently disrupted or slow, they may miss out on critical course content, fail to participate in online discussions, or miss assignment deadlines, which can negatively impact their grades and overall academic performance. Therefore, having a stable and reliable internet connection is crucial for effective online learning.

CONCLUSIONS
The study comes with three main conclusions about why students failed in their Basic Grammar classes. First, the lack of students' understanding made it difficult to follow the class. Second, students often mentioned as the cause of their failure was their lack of self-motivation to learn. Third, internet connection problems influence the learning process during online classes.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that several factors contribute to students' failure in their Basic grammar class. These factors include a lack of understanding and a lack of self-motivation. However, there are several strategies that students can use to improve their performance in future grammar classes. First, students should prioritize their grammar studies by setting clear goals, creating a study schedule, and seeking out additional resources such as grammar guides and online forums. Additionally, students should work to improve their understanding of grammar rules and structures by practicing frequently and seeking feedback from lecturers, tutors, or peers.

Finally, students should take steps to maintain their motivation and engagement in offline or online grammar classes by actively participating in class discussions, seeking out opportunities for collaboration, and utilizing technology tools effectively. Last, to avoid problems caused by poor internet connection, students can make use of the campus facilities that have been provided, namely Wi-Fi. Students can also go to comfortable places that provide internet access such as cafes or coworking areas, where they can focus better on studying. In some cases, internet connectivity issues may prevent students from accessing online exams, which can significantly impact their grades. Therefore, having a stable and reliable internet connection is crucial for students who are pursuing online learning. By employing these strategies and taking an active approach to their grammar studies, students can increase their chances of success in their Basic grammar class and future language studies.

The limitations of the study need to be acknowledged, as there is a lack of students

participating in this study. In addition, participants were not asked about how they dealt with internet problems during online classes. For future researchers, they could use different sampling methods to collect potential participants, or perhaps create something interesting to attract potential participants to the topic being studied. To address the second limitation, future researchers could further explore how students deal with internet problems during online classes. Future researchers could also explore more about how students deal with online class problems. This strategy may serve as a guideline or recommendation for researchers and students who may be involved in a similar study.

Acknowledgments

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