

STUDENT'S DIFFICULTIES IN IDENTIFYING SUBJECT AND VERB IN TOEFL STRUCTURE QUESTIONS IN SMA NEGERI 2 PEMATANGSIANTAR

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the difficulties experienced by 11th-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar in identifying subjects and verbs in TOEFL structure questions. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative method, the study involved 30 students who completed a 20-item TOEFL-style grammar test, supported by classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The aim was not only to quantify their test performance but also to analyze patterns of grammatical errors and explore the underlying causes. The results revealed that only 5 out of 30 students (16.7%) achieved the minimum passing score of 70, while the majority made consistent errors in identifying correct subject-verb relationships. The most problematic items involved prepositional phrases, subject-verb inversion, and sentences with indefinite pronouns. Using Corder's (1967) error classification model, the common types of errors were identified as misformation, omission, and misordering. The study found that these difficulties were influenced by first language interference (Bahasa Indonesia), limited grammar instruction, and a tendency to rely on test-taking shortcuts rather than structural analysis. Grounded in the theories of Brown (2001), Krashen (1982), and Sharpe (2004), this research emphasizes the gap between knowing grammar rules and applying them accurately under test conditions. The findings highlight the importance of enhancing grammar teaching methods, especially in preparation for standardized English tests.

Keywords: subject-verb identification, TOEFL structure, grammar errors, EFL learners, second language acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

In the globalized era of education, English proficiency tests such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) have become important benchmarks for assessing students' language competence, particularly for academic and professional purposes. Among the various sections of the TOEFL test, the structure and written expression section—although now integrated into the writing and reading portions of the TOEFL iBT—remains a critical aspect in understanding students' grammatical competence. One of the most persistent challenges that students face in this section is correctly identifying the subject and verb in complex sentence constructions. Grammar plays a pivotal role in English language acquisition, and the ability to identify grammatical components such as the subject and verb is fundamental for sentence construction and comprehension. According to Brown (2001), understanding the relationship between sentence elements is essential in mastering the syntactic structure of a language (Simanungkalit & Herman, 2026). When students fail to recognize subjects and verbs accurately, especially in structurally complex sentences, it often leads to incorrect interpretations and responses on standardized tests like the TOEFL. Students learning English as a second language frequently struggle with grammar due to various cognitive and linguistic factors. Krashen (1982), in his Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory, explains that grammatical competence is acquired through both conscious learning and subconscious acquisition. However, learners often experience what he refers to as input limitations, where exposure to complex grammatical forms is insufficient, leading to gaps in structural understanding. These gaps are particularly evident in test settings that require precise grammatical analysis, such as TOEFL structure questions. A detailed exploration of student errors is further supported by the Error Analysis framework proposed by Corder (1967), who emphasized the importance of learner errors as indicators of language development stages. By analyzing the errors students make when identifying subjects and verbs, researchers and educators can understand the linguistic patterns that hinder successful language acquisition and develop targeted pedagogical strategies to address them. In the context of TOEFL preparation, students are expected to deal with various sentence structures, including inverted word orders, complex clauses, reduced clauses, and passive constructions (Saragih et al., 2025). As Sharpe (2004) notes in Barron's TOEFL iBT, the structure section of TOEFL requires

test-takers to apply a solid understanding of English grammar under time pressure (Simanjuntak et al., 2025). Students must distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, many of which challenge even intermediate learners due to the subtle placement of subjects and verbs in syntactic patterns unfamiliar to them. The difficulty in identifying subjects and verbs may stem from several factors, including insufficient grammar instruction, interference from the students' first language, limited exposure to authentic English usage, or a reliance on surface-level test-taking strategies. For Indonesian learners, for instance, the subject-verb agreement rules and sentence structures in Bahasa Indonesia differ significantly from those in English, which may contribute to consistent misidentifications during grammar tasks. This study focuses on investigating the difficulties faced by 11th-grade students in identifying subjects and verbs in TOEFL structure questions. It aims to describe the types of errors made by students, explore the frequency and patterns of these errors, and identify possible underlying causes. By doing so, the research seeks to contribute to the enhancement of English grammar instruction in EFL contexts and provide insights into better test preparation strategies for learners.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Definition of Grammar

Grammar is the foundation of language structure. According to Chomsky (1957), grammar is a set of rules that generate the sentences of a language. He introduced the concept of generative grammar, which explains how finite rules can produce an infinite number of sentences. This theory emphasizes that grammar is not only descriptive but also psychological—embedded in the native speaker's mind.

In the field of second language acquisition, Ellis (2006) differentiates between explicit knowledge (knowing grammar rules) and implicit knowledge (using grammar automatically).

Both types are crucial, especially in test settings like TOEFL where explicit grammar understanding is tested.

Moreover, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) proposed the Grammar Teaching Framework, which includes three dimensions: Form (structure and rules), Meaning (what the sentence means), and Use (in what context the form is appropriate). This framework helps teachers integrate grammar meaningfully, which is essential for overcoming issues like identifying subjects and verb in real contexts.

2.2 Subject and Verb in English Grammar

The subject is typically the noun or pronoun performing an action or being described, while the verb expresses what the subject is doing or what state it is in.

Quirk et al. (1985) in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, explain that subject-verb agreement is influenced by syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic elements. For example:

- Syntactic: Singular vs plural (e.g., She walks vs They walk)
- Semantic: Collective nouns (e.g., The team is winning vs The team are arguing)
- Pragmatic: Subject that seems plural but functions singularly (e.g., Mathematics is difficult)

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) also note that identifying subjects and verbs requires knowledge of phrase structure rules, especially when dealing with clauses and modifiers.

2.3 Overview of TOEFL Structure Section

The TOEFL structure section examines grammatical knowledge in academic English. According to Bailey (2004), TOEFL preparation demands both syntactic awareness and speed in analysis (Br Pangaribuan et al., 2025; Napitupulu et al., 2026). Students need to recognize not only rules but also exceptions, which are often tested in sentence completion and error identification.

Additionally, Green (2007) states that standardized language tests often focus on grammatical sensitivity, which refers to a learner's ability to notice when language is grammatically acceptable or not (Damanik et al., 2025; Napitu et al., 2025). Misidentifying the subject or verb often reflects a gap in this sensitivity.

2.4 Common Student Difficulties in Identifying Subject and Verb

a. Complex Sentences

Thompson (2001) explains that EFL learners often fail to identify the subject in complex or reduced clauses because they rely too much on linear word order instead of analyzing syntactic roles.

b. Interference from First Language (L1)

- b. Odlin (1989) defines this phenomenon as language transfer, where features of the native language influence second language learning—positively or negatively. For Indonesian learners, the lack of verb conjugation in Bahasa Indonesia creates problems in subject-verb agreement in English.

c. Lack of Grammar Instruction

According to Nunan (1999), grammar instruction should not only be rule-based but should integrate noticing, input enhancement, and consciousness-raising. Without these strategies, students may memorize rules but fail to apply them accurately in contexts like TOEFL.

d. Surface-Level Test Strategies

Cohen (1998) argues that test-taking strategies can either help or hinder students, depending on whether they are used strategically or mechanically. Students who skip deep analysis of sentence structure tend to choose incorrect answers due to surface cues like word familiarity.

e. Inversion and Passive Construction

These are often misinterpreted because they deviate from canonical S-V-O order. According to Swan (2005), test writers intentionally use these forms to challenge learners' ability to identify Grammatical relationship in altered sentence patterns.

2.5 Previous Studies

In addition to prior studies the following researchers offer deeper insights:

- Richards and Schmidt (2010) emphasize that grammatical errors are not just mistakes but indicators of interlanguage development. These errors help teachers understand where the learner is in their acquisition path.
- Nazara (2011) in his study on Indonesian learners, found that a majority of students failed to distinguish between main verbs and verb-like adjectives or nouns, especially in passive or reduces relative clauses
- Yule (2006) supports the use of grammatical consciousness-raising in language learning, which can help students recognize patterns and improve their syntactic analysis.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study applies a descriptive qualitative design to explore the difficulties faced by students in identifying subjects and verbs in TOEFL structure questions. According to Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input ($i+1$). However, students may struggle when input is too complex or not made meaningful.

Therefore, this research does not only quantify the errors, but seeks to analyze them deeply, in line with Brown's (2001) emphasis on interactive and learner-centered pedagogy. The qualitative

approach enables the researcher to interpret students' grammatical understanding as a dynamic process influenced by both internal and external factors.

3.2 Research Subject and Setting

The participants of this study are 11th-grade students from SMA NEGERI 2 Pematangsiantar who are learning English as a foreign language. These students are at an intermediate level and have had some exposure to TOEFL-format grammar exercises.

Based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, students' emotional states—like anxiety or motivation—can influence their language processing. By conducting the research in their natural school setting, this study aims to minimize affective barriers and collect more authentic data. Additionally, Brown (2001) emphasizes the importance of considering learner differences and classroom context in understanding language behavior.

3.3 Data Collection

Techniques In alignment with Krashen's theory, particularly the Monitor Hypothesis, this study collects data to observe how learners consciously apply (or fail to apply) grammar rules under test-like conditions. The data were collected using:

- a) Grammar-Based Test Students completed 20 TOEFL structure questions focusing on subject-verb identification. This reveals how well students internalize grammar rules versus relying on conscious rule application.
- b) Documentation Students' answer sheets were analyzed to trace consistent grammatical errors. This connects with Brown's (2001) emphasis on performance analysis as a way to uncover gaps between competence and performance.
- c) Interviews (Short, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the students' reasoning and strategies. This reflects Krashen's idea that learners often overuse the "monitor" when they are not confident, especially in test settings.

3.4 Research Instrument

The main instrument was a TOEFL-style multiple-choice grammar test focused on subject and verb identification. Each item was chosen to reflect structures that often challenge learners, such as:

1. Inversion
2. Reduced clauses
3. Passive constructions

These reflect Krashen's theory where inadequate exposure to complex structures leads to fossilized errors. Meanwhile, Brown (2001) advocates for task design that encourages learners to notice and internalize grammatical forms—not just recall rules.

The questions were adapted from reliable sources and validated by experienced teachers, following Brown's principle of authentic and valid assessment in EFL classrooms.

3.5 Data Analysis Technique

The analysis was carried out in several stages, supported by Krashen's and Brown's frameworks:

1. Identifying Errors, Errors related to subject and verb identification were marked. This supports Krashen's view that errors reflect natural stages in interlanguage development.
2. Classifying Errors Using Corder's (1967) Error Analysis model, errors were grouped into types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Brown highlights that error analysis helps diagnose developmental stages and instructional needs.
3. Frequency Analysis, The frequency of each error type was calculated to reveal patterns. For Krashen, frequent errors may signal insufficient exposure to particular grammatical

input, while Brown would suggest these are areas needing focused instructional intervention.

4. Interpreting the Findings The causes of errors were interpreted using:

- Krashen's theories: Input limitations, over-monitoring, lack of acquisition
- Brown's principles: Gaps between declarative knowledge (knowing rules) and procedural competence (applying rules automatically)

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Data

To ensure research credibility, several techniques were used:

- a. Triangulation: Combining test results, documentation, and interviews ensures multiple perspectives, aligned with Brown's principle of multi-faceted evaluation.
- b. Expert Validation: Instruments and findings were reviewed by English teachers to ensure accuracy and fairness.
- c. Member Checking: Students were asked to confirm their interview responses, ensuring authenticity—consistent with Krashen's idea that learner perspective matters in SLA research.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analysis of the data obtained through the TOEFL structure test, classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews. The goal is to describe students' difficulties in identifying subject and verb in TOEFL structure questions.

4.1 Test Result Overview

The test consisted of 20 TOEFL structure questions focusing on subject and verb identification. A total of 30 students from class XI participated. Each correct answer was worth 5 points, for a total possible score of 100. The passing grade (KKM) was set at 70.

Student Score Distribution: - Score 70 and above (passed): 5 students - Score below 70 (failed): 25 students

Table. 1.1 Student Score Distribution

Score (Correct Answers)	Number of Students
14(70)	3
13(65)	2
11(55)	3
10(50)	1
9(45)	4
8(40)	3
7(35)	4
6(30)	5
5(25)	1

4(20)	1
3(15)	1
2(10)	2

This shows that only 16.7% of students reached the minimum competency, indicating a significant struggle with the topic.

4.2 Error Distribution by Question

The following table shows how many students answered each question incorrectly:

Table 1.2 Error Distribution by Question

Question	Number of Errors
1	19
2	2
3	5
4	7
5	3
6	7
7	3
8	4
9	11
10	6
11	5

12	4
13	2
14	4
15	7
16	9
17	8
18	1
19	8
20	9

Most Difficult Questions: - Question 1 (19 errors): Subject-verb agreement with prepositional phrase. - Question 9 (11 errors): Indefinite pronoun (“everyone”) as singular subject. - Question 16, 20 (9 errors each): Inverted structure and noun clause subject. - Question 17, 19 (8 errors each): Subject identification and passive construction.

These errors highlight key difficulties in: - Distinguishing the true subject in sentences with prepositional or modifying phrases. - Recognizing singular indefinite pronouns. - Understanding subject-verb inversion. - Parsing clauses where the subject is not at the beginning.

4.3 Discussion

The analysis reveals that students face significant difficulty identifying the correct subject and verb in sentences with complex structures. Based on the Error Analysis theory (Corder, 1967), the errors can be grouped as follows:

- Misformation: Incorrect use of verb form despite correct subject identification (e.g., using “are” for singular subjects).
- Omission: Ignoring auxiliary or main verb in complex or passive constructions.
- Misordering: Confusion in inverted structures (e.g., “Here are...”, “What they need is...”).

From the interviews and observations, common causes of errors include: - Interference from L1 (Bahasa Indonesia): Different syntactic rules such as flexible word order and lack of verb conjugation. - Inadequate grammar instruction: Limited focus on advanced structures like inversion and compound subjects. - Over-reliance on word familiarity: Choosing verbs based on proximity or familiarity rather than syntactic correctness.

These findings are consistent with Krashen’s (1982) theory on input limitations and Brown’s (2001) view on procedural versus declarative grammar knowledge.

V: CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the majority of 11th-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Pematang Siantar struggle with identifying subjects and verbs in TOEFL structure questions. The most common errors occurred in questions involving prepositional phrases, inverted structures, and indefinite pronouns. These difficulties are linked to both linguistic and instructional factors, including interference from the students’ first language and insufficient practice with complex grammar structures.

5.2 Suggestions

1. For Teachers:

- Integrate more practice with complex sentence structures.
 - Focus on clause-level grammar analysis and inversion.
 - Use contrastive analysis with Bahasa Indonesia to clarify differences.
2. For Students:
- Develop awareness of sentence components (subject, verb, object).
 - Practice TOEFL-style questions regularly.
 - Seek feedback and analyze errors to improve accuracy.
3. For Future Researchers:
- Expand sample size and include longitudinal studies.
 - Investigate effectiveness of intervention strategies.
 - Compare different schools or levels for broader generalization.

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