

Grammar as A Tool for Enhancing Speaking Competence: A Narrative Inquiry into Students' Experiences

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Abstract. This study explores how students perceive and use grammar to improve their English Speaking abilities. Using a qualitative narrative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. Thematic analysis shows that a solid understanding of grammar helps students form clear sentences, maintain consistent tenses, ensure coherence, and increase their confidence in speaking. However, grammar alone does not guarantee fluency, as students face challenges such as limited processing time, spontaneous speech without considering structure, and interference from their native language. The study also highlights the importance of a supportive learning environment, the integration of technology, and quality instruction in effectively applying grammar in speaking contexts. These findings emphasize the need for a more contextual, communicative, and supportive educational approach to help students meaningfully use grammar for enhancing their speaking skills.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization that necessitates intercultural communication skills, the ability to speak English has become increasingly vital across academic, professional, and social settings. English is widely recognized as a lingua franca, enabling individuals to engage effectively in various international contexts. Among the factors influencing oral communication skills, grammar plays a crucial role in supporting both fluency and accuracy. Without adequate grammatical knowledge, messages risk distortion or misinterpretation, limiting communicative effectiveness. Therefore, grammar should not merely be perceived as a static set of rules but as a functional tool that helps learners organize ideas coherently,

logically, and comprehensibly. Ellis (2006) argues that grammar provides the structural resources necessary for producing meaningful and contextually appropriate utterances. Similarly, Celce-Murcia (2007) emphasizes that grammar is a central component of communicative competence, enabling speakers to construct accurate and pragmatically appropriate messages. Despite its recognized importance, many language learners continue to struggle with applying grammar spontaneously during speech, often leading to hesitation, delays, or reduced fluency. This problem highlights the need to explore how students perceive and utilize grammar to enhance their speaking competence in real-world contexts.

The role of grammar in speaking has been extensively examined in second language acquisition studies, particularly within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Alvarez (2017) underscores the value of integrating grammar instruction into authentic communication tasks, suggesting that contextualized practice enhances the ability to use grammar in real-time interaction. Kontogeorgou and Zafiri (2016) likewise demonstrate that embedding grammatical instruction in communicative tasks leads to improved oral fluency compared to teaching grammar in isolation. Building on this, Canale and Swain (1980) propose the concept of communicative competence, integrating grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic components essential for successful language use.

Larsen-Freeman (2015) views grammar as a dynamic, adaptive system, enabling learners to construct meaning flexibly across contexts. Richards and Renandya (2002) and Nassaji and Fotos (2011) also emphasize that explicit attention to grammar within meaningful tasks can significantly improve spoken performance. More recently, Dzimar, Puspitasari, and Rosyid (2025) adopt a narrative inquiry approach to examine students' strategies for overcoming grammar-related speaking challenges. Hinkel (2018) further stresses that integrating grammar into communicative instruction enhances both linguistic accuracy and pragmatic competence. Collectively, these studies affirm that contextualized, learner-centered grammar instruction positively impacts speaking development.

However, these investigations largely emphasize teaching strategies or general learning obstacles, leaving limited research on how students personally experience and internalize grammar as a tool for speaking. In particular, the processes by which learners use grammar to support fluency, coherence, and confidence in oral communication remain underexplored. This gap calls for a deeper understanding of learners' subjective experiences, which can reveal insights into the cognitive and affective dimensions of grammar use often overlooked in pedagogically focused studies. To address this research gap, the present study employs a narrative inquiry approach to investigate students' experiences in using grammar to enhance their speaking competence. Narrative inquiry provides a platform to capture learners' personal stories, uncovering their challenges, strategies, and evolving perceptions of grammar in oral communication. Data collection involved participatory observation and semi-structured interviews, offering in-depth insights into how students view grammar not only as a linguistic framework but also as a cognitive tool for fostering coherence, confidence, and communicative effectiveness.

While previous studies have largely focused on grammar instruction strategies or general speaking difficulties, this study differs by foregrounding learners' lived experiences in using grammar as a speaking tool. Rather than examining teaching methods or classroom techniques, the present research adopts a narrative inquiry approach to explore how

students personally perceive, internalize, and apply grammar in real speaking situations. This experiential focus allows for deeper insight into the cognitive and affective dimensions of grammar use, which have received limited attention in prior studies

This study pursues three objectives: first, to identify the challenges students face in applying grammar during speaking; second, to analyze aspects of speaking competence that can be improved through grammatical mastery; and third, to investigate internal and external factors influencing the effective use of grammar in oral communication. By addressing these aims, the research contributes theoretically by expanding discourse on grammar as a cognitive and functional resource in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Practically, the findings provide implications for educators, curriculum developers, and learners in designing experience-based, communicative grammar instruction that enhances speaking competence.

This study offers a novel perspective by shifting the focus from general teaching methods to learners' lived experiences. Such an approach enriches existing literature while offering actionable recommendations for creating more contextualized and supportive grammar learning environments. Through this lens, grammar emerges not merely as a set of rules but as an empowering tool that enables learners to articulate ideas with greater clarity, confidence, and fluency, ultimately contributing to their success in academic, professional, and social communication.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach utilizing a narrative inquiry design, which enables the researcher to thoroughly investigate the subjective experiences of participants regarding the use of grammar as a tool to enhance speaking competence. This approach was selected because it allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals derive meaning from their learning experiences, particularly in terms of internalizing grammar into their everyday oral communication practices. The narratives provided by the participants offer insights into their personal dynamics, challenges, strategies, and reflections on the grammar learning process they underwent.

The subjects of this research are active fourth-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Nurul Jadid University, residing in the Darul Hikmah dormitory in Karanganyar, Paiton. Participants were purposefully chosen based on their active engagement in both academic and extracurricular activities that necessitate English speaking skills. The selection of research subjects took into account the representation of students' speaking proficiency levels and their active participation in English-related activities. The primary data sources for this study consist of semi-structured interviews and participatory observations. In-depth interviews were conducted to delve into students' perspectives, emotions, and experiences regarding grammar usage in both formal and informal speaking contexts. The interview instrument was crafted with open-ended questions to allow participants to articulate their views and experiences freely. Additionally, observations were carried out during learning activities, group discussions, or class presentations to directly observe how grammar is applied.

Data collection took place over the course of one month and involved three stages: pre-collection (securing permission and introducing participants), core collection

(conducting interviews and observations), and post-collection (transcribing and verifying data). The data obtained from interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, while observational data were documented using an observation sheet based on indicators of grammatical accuracy, fluency, and coherence in speaking. Data analysis in this study utilized a thematic analysis approach. The analysis process began with a thorough reading and comprehension of the data, followed by a coding process to identify emerging patterns. Subsequently, the coded data were categorized into main themes related to aspects such as challenges in grammar usage, its impact on speaking competence, and factors influencing its effectiveness. The researcher then performed a narrative interpretation to construct a comprehensive and meaningful account of the participants' experiences. The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation techniques involving interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as member checking to confirm that the researcher's interpretations.

FINDINGS

In the Findings section, summarize the collected data and the analysis performed on those data relevant to the issue that is to follow. The Findings should be clear and concise. It should be written objectively and factually, and without expressing personal opinion. It includes numbers, tables, and figures (e.g., charts and graphs).

This section deals with the research findings. The findings obtained from the research have to be supported by sufficient data. The research results and the discovery must be the answers, or the research hypothesis stated previously in the introduction part. The findings section consists of a description of the results of the data analysis to answer the research question(s). The findings should summarize (scientific) findings rather than providing data in great detail. Please highlight differences between your results or findings and the previous publications by other researchers.

The analysis of interview transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documents generated three primary themes: **(1) aspects of speaking competence enhanced by grammar application, (2) challenges encountered in applying grammar during speaking, and (3) factors influencing the effectiveness of grammar in oral communication.** The summarized findings are presented in **Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3.**

Table 1. Aspects of Speaking Competence Improved by Grammar

No	Aspect Improved	Evidence from Data
1.	Clarity of sentence structure	Students produced more structured and understandable sentences
2.	Consistency in tense and verb form usage	Presentations and discussions showed more accurate tense application.
3.	Logical sequencing of ideas	Participants conveyed ideas in coherent, connected order.
4.	Vocabulary expansion through grammatical functions	Greater use of complex clauses and modal verbs.
5.	Increased speaking confidence	Students reported feeling more assured and professional when speaking.

Table 2. Challenges in Applying Grammar During Speaking

No	Challenge	Observed Impact
1.	Limited time for simultaneous thinking & speaking	Students prioritized fluency over accuracy in spontaneous speech.
2.	Habitual use of informal/unmonitored speech	Frequent recurring grammatical errors in class discussions.
3.	Lack of practice focusing on grammatical accuracy	Hesitation and stiffness during grammar-focused speaking tasks.
4.	Fear of making mistakes (linguistic anxiety)	Reduced participation and avoidance of complex utterances.
5.	Confusion between written and spoken grammar	Over-formalized or simplified oral structures.

Table 3. Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Grammar in Speaking

No	Influencing Factor	Observed Impact
1.	Frequent practice with corrective feedback	Better integration of grammar in oral communication.
2.	Habit of reflecting and recording grammar errors	Increased metalinguistic awareness over time.
3.	Supportive learning environment	Higher willingness to use complex grammar.
4.	Contextual understanding of grammar rules	Improved adaptability in various speaking situations.
5.	High individual motivation	More active participation in discussions and independent practice.

DISCUSSION

This study explored students' experiences in using grammar as a tool to enhance their speaking competence. The findings indicate that explicit and conscious attention to grammar contributes to improved sentence clarity, more accurate tense usage, organized expression of ideas, and increased confidence when speaking. These results emphasize that grammar is not merely a set of prescriptive rules but a functional resource that enables learners to communicate meaning more effectively.

In relation to the research objectives, the findings confirm that students perceive grammar as an essential scaffolding for oral communication, supporting their ability to produce well-structured and meaningful utterances. This aligns with previous studies by Kontogeorgou and Zafiri (2016) and Dzimar et al. (2025), who also reported that integrating grammar into speaking activities can accelerate speaking competence development. However, this study extends those findings by adopting a narrative inquiry approach, revealing the personal and emotional dimensions of how learners internalize and apply grammar knowledge in real communicative contexts.

The participants' narratives also shed light on significant challenges, such as limited time to consciously apply grammar in spontaneous speech, the tension between fluency and accuracy, and the persistence of ingrained speech habits. These challenges echo Bamanger and Gashan (2015) and Thai and Boers (2016), who observed that cognitive load and performance pressure can reduce grammatical accuracy. Yet, our findings suggest that such

obstacles can be mitigated through deliberate practice, reflective strategies, and supportive learning environments—factors that several participants identified as crucial for their progress.

An important implication of this study is the role of motivation and metalinguistic awareness in fostering grammar use in speaking. Participants with higher motivation and reflective habits reported greater success in applying grammar accurately and confidently. This observation supports Pan, Saragih, and Septiani's view that grammatical cohesion devices not only enhance discourse clarity but also build communicative confidence.

Taken together, these findings highlight that grammar instruction, when approached contextually and experientially, can function as a transformative tool for improving speaking competence. This study contributes to current discourse by bridging structural grammar knowledge with its practical, communicative application, reinforcing the argument that grammar should be taught as an enabler of authentic spoken interaction rather than as an isolated academic exercise.

The findings of this study carry important theoretical implications for understanding the role of grammar in speaking development. Consistent with Larsen-Freeman's (2015) view of grammar as a dynamic and adaptive system, the participants' narratives demonstrate that grammar functions as a cognitive resource that supports meaning-making rather than as a rigid set of rules. The improvement in clarity, coherence, and confidence observed in this study also aligns with Canale and Swain's (1980) concept of communicative competence, in which grammatical competence interacts with strategic and discourse competence during real-time communication. These results reinforce Ellis's (2006) argument that grammar provides essential structural support for meaningful language use, particularly in spontaneous oral production.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that grammar functions not merely as a set of prescriptive rules but as a strategic tool to enhance speaking competence. Through a narrative inquiry approach, it was found that students' conscious and contextual use of grammar improved sentence clarity, accuracy in tense usage, coherence in idea delivery, and confidence in oral communication. However, this study also revealed persistent challenges, including limited cognitive processing time, ingrained informal speech habits, and the tension between fluency and accuracy.

These findings highlight the need for grammar instruction that is contextual, reflective, and integrated into real-life speaking practice rather than taught as isolated rules. Such an approach not only builds linguistic accuracy but also fosters confidence and communicative competence. Practically, this suggests that English teachers and curriculum designers should prioritize experiential grammar learning within speaking activities to create meaningful, functional language use.

By linking structural grammar knowledge with its communicative application, this study advances the field by offering a more holistic perspective on grammar pedagogy. Future research could expand on these insights by exploring the role of technology-supported grammar learning in developing speaking fluency or investigating how affective

factors such as anxiety and motivation interact with grammar acquisition in oral communication.

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. This research employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design with a limited number of participants drawn from a single academic context, which may restrict the broader applicability of the findings. The study relied primarily on self-reported data obtained through interviews and participatory observations, making the results susceptible to subjective interpretation and recall bias. Furthermore, the absence of longitudinal data and quantitative measures of speaking performance limits the ability to capture long-term grammatical development and measurable changes in speaking proficiency.

In light of these limitations, future research is encouraged to adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches to examine the sustained impact of grammar use on speaking fluency and accuracy over time. Expanding research contexts across different educational levels and institutions may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of grammar application in diverse EFL settings. Additionally, future studies could explore the role of technology-assisted grammar learning tools, such as mobile applications or AI-based feedback systems, in facilitating spoken grammar development, as well as further investigate affective factors including motivation, anxiety, and learner autonomy in relation to grammar use in oral communication.

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