INVESTIGATING SUBJECTIVE GRAMMAR DIFFICULTY IN ADVANCED GRAMMAR TEST:
A PERSPECTIVE FROM TEFL MASTER CLASS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract: As language teachers and language scholars, many of us do not realize that knowledge about language and grammar difficulty is like a double-edged sword. Unfortunately, grammar difficulty, as the unforeseen edge, has various uncovered variables that may benefit language learners. Therefore, our qualitative study aims to explore this issue by questioning the kinds of subjective grammar difficulties confronted by master TEFL students in the context of a grammar test. We recruited nine participants, consisting of eight students and one lecturer from an Advanced Grammar Class. Based on the interviews' result, three major themes of subjective grammar difficulty were identified, encompassing grammatical rules, the nature of the test itself, and teaching methods. Specifically, issues related to familiarity with tests, teaching approaches, test materials, and test-related pressure were recognized as sources of difficulty. The discussion centers on how second language (L2) users should perceive these challenges, with implications for the understanding of linguistic features, psychological influences, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education policy. This research underscores the necessity for effective teaching strategies and test materials tailored to the specific needs of L2 learners. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and addressing the psychological pressures they encounter during language testing.

Keywords: grammar difficulty; explicit knowledge; metalanguage; metalinguistic knowledge; cognition

Abstrak: *Sebagai guru bahasa dan akademisi bahasa, banyak dari kita yang tidak menyadari bahwa pengetahuan tentang bahasa dan kesulitan tata bahasa bagaikan pedang bermata dua. Sayangnya, kesulitan tata bahasa, sebagai sisi yang tak terduga, memiliki berbagai variabel yang belum terungkap yang mungkin dapat bermanfaat bagi para pembelajar bahasa. Oleh karena itu, penelitian kualitatif kami bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi masalah ini dengan mempertanyakan ragam kesulitan tata bahasa subyektif yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa magister TEFL dalam konteks tes tata bahasa. Kami merekrut sembilan partisipan, terdiri dari delapan mahasiswa dan satu dosen dari Kelas Advanced Grammar. Berdasarkan hasil wawancara, tiga tema utama kesulitan tata bahasa diidentifikasi, mencakup aturan tata bahasa, sifat tes itu sendiri, dan metode*

pengajaran. Secara khusus, masalah terkait keakraban dengan tes, pendekatan pengajaran, materi tes, dan tekanan terkait tes diakui sebagai sumber kesulitan. Diskusi berfokus pada bagaimana pengguna bahasa kedua (L2) seharusnya memandang tantangan ini, dengan implikasi untuk pemahaman fitur linguistik, pengaruh psikologis, dan kebijakan pendidikan Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Penelitian ini menegaskan kebutuhan akan strategi pengajaran yang efektif dan materi tes yang disesuaikan dengan kebutuhan khusus pembelajar L2. Selain itu, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya mengakui dan mengatasi tekanan psikologis yang mereka alami selama ujian bahasa.

Kata kunci*: kesulitan tata bahasa; pengetahuan eksplisit; metabahasa; pengetahuan metalinguistik; kognisi*

INTRODUCTION

Two decades ago, DeKeyser (2003) proposed the concept of subjective grammar difficulty as a link between innate grammar rules and the ability of language learners to comprehend them. This difficulty is mainly influenced by learner variables, such as developmental stage, motivation, and intelligence, which can impact whether a particular learner finds a particular grammar rule easy or challenging (Ellis 2006; Ellis 2008). On the contrary, the objective difficulty of grammar is highly influenced by the level of complexity and the novelty of semantic categories such as classifiers and articles (DeKeyser, 2003). The notion of grammar difficulty is similar to the term "L2 learning difficulty" in some literature (DeKeyser 2005).

Grammar difficulty, both subjective and objective, is a significant feature of cognition, specifically explicit knowledge (Ellis 2004). Explicit knowledge demonstration produces grammar metalanguage and grammar difficulty (Ellis 2006; Ellis 2008; Ellis and Roever 2018). Thus, grammar difficulty is both a product and a side effect of explicit knowledge. Therefore, it can be said that grammar difficulty and explicit knowledge are two sides of a coin.

Several studies have reported two noteworthy findings in grammar difficulty. Firstly, some English grammatical rules are regarded as the most difficult, including participles (Schoonmaker and Purmensky 2019), adjectives (modifying a noun) (Saengboon 2017), indefinite articles (Silva 2017), causatives (Dehgani, Bagheri et al. 2016), present perfect continuous (Graus and Coppen 2015), and third conditional (Scheffler and

Cinciala 2011). Interestingly, none of these studies produced identical or even slightly similar results, despite administering similar tests such as GJT (Grammaticality Judgement Test) and TOEFL-like. Secondly, test-taker perception also affects the difficulty of acquiring some rules. Factors such as the level of proficiency (Shiu 2011; Schneck 2021), the similarity of rules in L1 (Shiu 2011; Graus and Coppen 2015; Dehgani, Bagheri et al. 2016), the type of test (Xu and Li 2021), inadequate practice/experience in L2 (Dehgani, Bagheri et al. 2016), exception rules in English (Graus and Coppen 2015), language policy (Saengboon 2017), and incongruent conceptions of student-teachers' grammar cognition due to inconsistencies in the curriculum, incongruent teaching models, and uncertainty arising from the dichotomy of grammar as a pedagogical content knowledge or as a disciplinary knowledge (Graus and Coppen 2018) impact the perceived difficulty of acquiring some rules. Most of these studies (Graus and Coppen 2015; Graus and Coppen 2018; Schneck 2021; Xu and Li 2021) used different types of grammar tests to determine test-takers' grammar difficulty. However, subjective grammar difficulty can also be investigated through questionnaires and interviews (Shiu 2011; Graus and Coppen 2015; Silva 2017). Only Graus and Coppen (2018) conducted their study in a natural setting. Therefore, to contribute to the literature in this area, the authors suggest the need to investigate subjective grammar difficulty in a similar natural setting.

The study is intended to explore the subjective grammar difficulty that arises when students use their cognition (henceforth called 'explicit knowledge') during grammar tests by questioning: What subjective grammar difficulties are confronted by TEFL Master Students? This study offers lecturers and teachers a new perspective on how cognition works during grammar tests. Although language teachers and lecturers have gained various experiences in teaching and examining students' cognition, some of them may not realize how students' cognitions work. Through this reflection, teachers and lecturers can formulate better learning strategies for their students. On the other hand, this study allows students to gain insight

into their own cognition. Understanding cognition is not only about knowledge but also about how to perceive difficulties. Many students may not be able to reconstruct their knowledge because they are unaware of their difficulties. By participating in this study, students are expected to reconstruct their knowledge based on their difficulties.

METHOD

Research design

To obtain our research objectives, we employed Creswell's (2007) case study inquiry approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences during and after the test. The study took place within the context of an Advanced Grammar Class in the Master in TEFL program at a state university in Surakarta, Indonesia, with the Advanced Grammar Final Test as the case of our research. This test entitled TOEFL model examination contains 40 questions which are divided into section A and B. In section A, the students should answer 15 questions of multiple choices which take form of incomplete sentence. Section B contains 25 questions where the students should identify unaccepted word or phrase in a sentence and mention the grammatical rules or errors (e.g. parallel structure, subject-verb agreement) for each sentence. This test should be finished in 90 minutes.

Participants

The study included nine participants, consisting of 8 students and 1 senior lecturer, namely Mr. Arman (pseudonym). They associated to the same TEFL Master class since there was just one class for year 2016. These students also held part-time teaching positions in private courses and schools, contributing to the diversity of our participant group. The senior lecturer, who willingly participated in the study, is an assistant professor well-known for their extensive experience in teaching grammar. Remarkably, he serves as both the instructor of the Advanced Grammar Class in the TEFL program and the developer of this test.

Data collection and analysis

Due to the participants' busy schedules, interviews were conducted at various times and locations, coordinated between the authors and the participants to accommodate their availability. There were five questions that covered subjective grammar difficulties during or after the test, the most challenging and the easiest parts of the test, past experiences with grammar tests, opinions on grammatical terminology, and previous experiences using grammatical terminology. The questions administered in the interview were adapted from Graus and Coppen (2015). Each interview session lasted between 30 to 40 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comprehensive responses from the participants. We recorded these interviews using a smartphone to maintain data accuracy.

To ensure data credibility, we took several measures. All interview transcriptions were shared with each participant, allowing them to verify the accuracy of their responses. Participants endorsed the interview transcriptions with their signatures as evidence of originality and agreement with the content. Furthermore, to safeguard the confidentiality of our participants, pseudonyms were employed, aligning with ethical standards and protecting their identities. By implementing these measures, we aimed to create a well-structured and robust research framework, ensuring the integrity and reliability of our findings.

The interview data were analyzed following Ary et al.'s (2014) procedure, which involved three stages: organizing & familiarizing, coding & reducing, and interpreting & representing. When coding subjective grammar difficulty, themes were generated inductively based on the researcher's notes, as these themes might differ from those in other studies (e.g., Graus & Coppen, 2015; R. Ellis, 2006). Creswell (2007) suggests that there are no fixed rules for generating or developing themes inductively in qualitative studies as long as they relate to the data. Finally, irrelevant data were eliminated to prevent bias during interpretation. The process of interpreting & representing was divided into two phases: writing and interpreting findings. Firstly, the findings were organized based on the

themes and supported by quotes that served as evidence from the sources. Secondly, when interpreting the findings, we compared them with relevant previous studies and correlated their similarities and differences with various theories in this study

RESULTS

We found that there are three common patterns of subjective grammar difficulties namely grammatical rules, the test, and the teaching.

The Grammar Rules

The students assumed that they were incapable of classifying rules. Here, classifying rules meant putting the sub-rule into its referent (the main rule). For instance, one of them felt uneasy while classifying some errors, whether those errors referred to the rule of subject-verb agreement or subjunctive.

"For example, the lesson is about subject-verb agreement, but sometimes I forget that it is a part of subject-verb agreement. So, yeah, the difficulty in classifying the error is more related to the use of terms (grammar). Another example, the lesson is about subjunctive, but because I can't classify that lesson as a part of subjunctive, I made a mistake in explaining the reason when answering the test's questions." (Mutia/ Interview 1/ Jan 25th, 2017)

The ability to distinguish rules required a complete comprehension of the rules' meanings. Unfortunately, this comprehension had not been gained by them.

Next, an accurate and specific rule has clear and valid meaning, which is not overgeneralized. Here, the students had difficulty specifying their answers. Furthermore, they added that the lecturer's rules were different from the students'. The lecturer used a more specific rule for each of those items (e.g., subjunctive).

"Especially when it's time for the test... and the reasons are given, our (grammar rules) reasons and his (Mr. Arman's) reasons aren't the same. I mean, my answer (rule) is a problem with the verb, and the lecturer asked for a subjunctive, so it's going to be more detailed." (Gadis/ Interview 1/ Jan 25th, 2017)

Regarding this issue, the lecturer replied that the rules should be specific because each rule contained some sub-rules. For instance, in TOEFL Book II, the grammar rule such as 'the problem with the verb' is ambiguous. It should be specified into its sub-rules, such as a problem with

subject-verb agreement, the problem with appositives, and the problem with verb agreement after prepositional phrases. Based on this reason, a specific sub-rule could not be used to generalize the broader topic. To comprehend these rules, including their subs, the students should refer to their course book, i.e., TOEFL Book II.

"Yes, it's clearly different. That (the problem with the verb) is the 'umbrella' (of some sub-rules). There is a problem with the subject and verb, but there (in TOEFL Book II) are subs (rules). It is not all of them can be answered by 'the problem with the verb' but (a problem with) 'subject-verb agreement', 'the problem with appositives', 'the problem with (verb agreement after) prepositional (phrase)'. (The students) just (need to) refer to it (TOEFL Book II). There (TOEFL Book II), there is (not only) 'the problem with the subject and verb', there are (other) subs. So if this is the only thing, it only reaches the outside (general). How about this sub-? This is (too) general, it should be specific." (Mr. Arman/ Interview 1/ Jan 24th, 2017)

Lastly, specifying rules was important to avoid misleading and overgeneralizing one rule with another. Both rules (i.e., a problem with the verb and subjunctive) were related to verbs. However, the rule such as a problem with the verb had an ambiguous form and meaning. It was dilemmatic to judge whether this kind of rule would be considered as correct or incorrect.

An efficient rule is accurate and does not include any unnecessary terms or additional information. The students mentioned that although they knew the rules, they still required clarification and were unsure about how to express them concisely and specifically.

"The part that mentions the error (grammatical rule). I'm so confused about how the lecturer wants us to answer. A short answer, but... yes, that's it (specific). I know the reason, but writing it down... for one short sentence, it's a bit difficult." (Morgan/ Interview 1/ Feb 25th, 2017)

Other students admitted that their rules still differed from the lecturer's, even though they had already grasped the concepts. This difference pertained to the grammatical terms they used.

"The part that presents an argument (grammatical rule), based on the experience from the recent midterm test, our framework (understanding) and the lecturer's framework are different. So, perhaps we already understand, but the way of expressing it (grammatical terminology) is different (because it's more specific)." (Fadil/ Interview 1/ Feb 25th, 2017)

Comprehending the rules was insufficient to answer the test's questions if doubt and confusion were present among the students. As long as their efficient rules included essential concepts, their rules were considered accurate and provided correct answers.

The Test

While completing this test, the students experienced an indescribable pressure that momentarily confused them. In this context, the pressure was a burden of mental distress.

"During the test, it's more like there is... pressure, you know, like... so actually we can (do it), but for some reason during the test, suddenly (panic) about the test. So there is an intrinsic and extrinsic factor... but actually we can, (but) it becomes more stressful when you take the test." (Gadis/ Interview 1/ Jan 25th, 2017)

Some students were shocked. The reason behind their shock was that such inefficient explanations of a rule would be considered incorrect answers even though their selected choice (A, B, C, or D) was correct. They worried that they had missed the point.

"(The test part) which stimulates adrenaline so that it shocks the nerve cells when explaining the (grammatical) rules or reasons... Because (although) the answer (multiple choice in section 2) is correct, the rules or reasons are too lengthy and are also wrong, so yeah... 'I got no marks at all, crossed out.'" (Cecep/ Interview 1/ Feb 26th, 2017)

During the test, they also felt nervous, making it difficult to identify test errors, despite having learned and completed exercises in TOEFL Book II. Moreover, some students admitted that they were weak in grammar and structure.

"Maybe it's because of the tension, so (it's) hard to find (the error) during the test. I feel less confident in grammar and structure... sometimes when I study or do exercises in the book (TOEFL Book II) or others... I (can) find (the error), but during the test, I can't (find it)." (Lia/ Interview 1/ Jan 25th, 2017)

The test pressures, both directly and indirectly, affected these students' knowledge. These pressures made them doubt their own answers and even rendered them incapable of answering the test's questions.

The next issue is familiarity which refers to having experience or knowledge about the Advanced Grammar Test. According to their statements, the students were not familiar with the instruction of explaining the accurate rules in a grammar test. Some students mentioned that they

were mostly asked to select the correct choice in grammar tests without explaining the rules for ungrammatical sentences. For them, the instruction to explain rules was a new experience.

"I've been working on grammar or sentence structure in final test questions all my life, yes, we choose the right answer or the wrong answer, or make sentences based on such a pattern, without explaining why (the sentence) is wrong or actually, what the reason (grammatical rule) is or not. So that (explaining grammatical rule) is something new for me." (Morgan/ Interview 1/ Feb 25th, 2017)

At the same time, other students said that they were already familiar with explaining the rules in a long and detailed form for other grammar tests, except TOEFL (i.e., Advanced Grammar Test). Unfortunately, in this test, the lecturer asked the students to explain it in a short and specific form. While taking TOEFL, selecting the correct answers was their priority during their undergraduate years without considering the materials. They felt unfamiliar with TOEFL, which required rules to explain its errors, such as in this final test.

"I'm used to giving long, detailed explanations (grammatical rules). But during the test, the lecturer asked for a brief explanation, which used (grammar) terminology to narrow it down. In the past, I used to work on TOEFL questions without thinking about the material; the important thing is that I think about which answer is the right one, so sometimes when I find a question that is like the one the lecturer gave, which requires explanations, sometimes I have problems with that because I'm not used to working on TOEFL material followed by explanations, because in the past… even the original TOEFL test did not ask for explanations. So maybe I have a problem there because I'm not used to it." (Mira/ Interview 1/ Feb 24th, 2017)

In response to these statements, the lecturer explained that master students should be able to identify errors and explain their rules. In addition, the lecturer realized that the ability to select correct answers for the TOEFL had already been taught in many English courses. That's why, in Advanced Grammar, TEFL master students were taught this higher ability (i.e., explaining rules), which could not be taught in any English course.

"(answering the TOEFL question) It's not just checking it (correct or incorrect), this is what English private courses do. Now, for the master degree, we also look for the problem (errors and grammatical rule) - what is it, now it turns out that there are still many mistakes here (on the students' test papers), … Here, the problem (answering the grammar test) is not just correcting, but 'what' is the problem, 'how' it occurred, (such as) a problem with… subject-verb agreement." (Mr Arman/ Interview 1/ Jan 24th, 2017)

The students were still adapting to the Advanced Grammar Test, including its instructions. Although they had taken many grammar tests

since their bachelor degree, familiarizing themselves with this test took more time.

Another issue is the materials of the Advanced Grammar Test can be defined as the contents, topics, or subjects that are tested. Most students mentioned that the subjunctive, one of the test materials, was difficult because it had not been taught or presented in the Advanced Grammar Class. Moreover, that material was not included in TOEFL Book II, the course book. Some days before conducting this test, the lecturer had already reminded the students that the test would contain various materials that might not have been discussed in their classroom. However, some students were only focusing on the materials they had already learned in that class.

"There is material that has not been taught or presented. So when the UAS grammar turned out to be material that was not included in our guidebook (TOEFL Book II), for example, it was the subjunctive. Now, the subjunctive is verb-based... you can't use any modifications on whatever the subject is, like that. Well, that's where I forgot (to learn) the subjunctive material. That's where I made a lot of mistakes (on my answer sheet). Because, to me, the focus is on studying the materials that we have studied, which are mentioned in the book and what we wrote down. Even though, according to the lecturer, he has explained that 'The final term that you will complete is TOEFL-like, so the material exceeds what you read there,' he said. I ended up having trouble with the subjunctive." (Morgan/ Interview 1/ Feb 25th, 2017)

Moreover, other students added that the subjunctive drained their cognition. Fortunately, some could deal with the subjunctive by reading other books as references for study. From that experience, they realized that Advanced Grammar in the graduate degree required more than just general knowledge about parts of speech (e.g., subject, main verb) as in undergraduate degrees. It demanded more specific and detailed knowledge (e.g., noun phrase, noun clause).

"In my opinion, the difficult part is in the material. As for the material that drains my mind a little, that's right about the subjunctive. ... at the final test, after I read (other reference books), although there were new material difficulties (but they could be solved), because back in the (my) undergraduate, the standard TOEFL preparation was about parts of speech, so that's it, the division of nouns is not specific, in nouns there can be noun phrases, in noun phrases there are more specific ones. Many phenomena that occur in Advanced Grammar (classes) are like that (specifications), but more... there are several factors and chapters that have not been studied because of their detailed nature, like the subjunctive earlier." (Cecep/ Interview 1/ Feb 26th, 2017)

Regarding this issue, the lecturer confirmed that the subjunctive was one of the materials in the Advanced Grammar Test because this test adopted the TOEFL Model Examination. Meanwhile, TOEFL Book II only discussed the theories of TOEFL and could only cover some of the materials. Indeed, the TOEFL was a dynamic test that was difficult to predict because it had diverse materials. In addition, TOEFL items were very tricky, even though they looked simple. On top of that, the lecturer assumed that the students had already comprehended such a conditional clause (i.e., subjunctive) since they had already learned it during their bachelor degree. However, in this test, they still complained about that material.

"Yes, the subjunctive does exist (in the grammar test) because of this; it needs to be considered because what I use (for the grammar test) is the real TOEFL test, the book (TOEFL Book II) is (discussing) theory about the TOEFL test. So this obviously will not be able to cover all the material in the TOEFL because the TOEFL test is very dynamic, the material is extraordinary (a lot), so it is difficult to predict. ... Well, my assumption is that they have already passed their bachelor's degree, conditional clauses (a kind of subjunctive) should have been known, but yes, it turns out that, on average they still complain about how it is… That means all of the material has been studied; now, indeed, the TOEFL test is very tricky, something that is easy but when it is presented in the real TOEFL test, it is very tricky." (Mr. Arman/ Interview 2/ Jan 28th, 2017)

Indeed, incomplete materials in the course could be supplemented by learning from other grammar or TOEFL books. However, although the TOEFL's items were hard to predict, learning various materials from multiple books within days was not the best solution.

The Teaching

Before taking the Advanced Grammar Test, ideally, the students should complete many exercises related to the test because, in this test, they were asked to provide correct answers and explain how they reached those judgments. Some students admitted that they needed help explaining the errors because they rarely practiced exercises related to certain materials, particularly idiomatic expressions of phrasal verbs (e.g., turn down, run into, look after). Indeed, it was impossible to remember all of them.

"Because (explaining) the reasons earlier. In the test designed by the lecturer, we are not only asked to answer correctly but also to be able to explain correctly why the answer is correct. Sometimes, on some material that you can say I don't practice often (answering

questions), I find it difficult to explain it too. You see, in materials that are more like idiomatic expressions, such as the use of verbs followed by prepositions, etc. It is impossible to remember all of them." (Veni/ Interview 1/ Feb 24th, 2017)

Exercising various test items was essential for sharpening their existing knowledge because there was a possibility that knowledge would only be retained if it had been practiced within a specific period.

The lecturer argued that the difficulty in using metalanguage was closely related to the teaching approach while the students were still learning English in high school. An approach is a set of principles or ideas about the nature of language teaching or learning that would be consistent over time (Anthony, 1963). In the past, approximately 5-10 years ago, English was taught using the Communicative Approach. Later on, it changed to the Genre Approach, which focused its discussions on the genres of a text, such as descriptive, narrative, etc. Both approaches did not teach grammar explicitly because those genres forbade the use of (grammar) terminology. As a result, those students needed clarification in using terms (e.g., infinite/definite article). However, since they were students in the master degree program, they had to understand it. In his perspective, such (subject/verb) agreement was a common term because there were other more specific terms such as concord and infinite/definite article.

"Well, this is related to the background of English learning in high school. That's what they used. In the past (they used) the communicative approach, and now (they used) the genre approach. Those approaches are anti-terminology. So, there is only genre application. That's why there is a text genre in it. There is a description, a narrative, and so on. The use of grammar, practical grammar, does not involve the terms (terminology); it is clear. As a result, they will be confused with the terms. But, because they are master students, they must know, yes indeed, because the term (such as) subject-verb (agreement) is not a specific term, it is general, there are still (more specific ones such as) concord and infinite/definite (article) … yes, this is true, they are not trained, and this (the use of terminology) is indeed prohibited." (Mr. Arman/ Interview 2/ Jan 28th, 2017)

The students supported this argument through their experiences. They remembered that during junior high and senior high school, English classes were focused only on learning tenses and genres of texts. Moreover, some of them felt that their teachers did not use complicated terms such as inversion.

"They (junior and high school teachers) rarely mentioned it because it was more like tenses and text. So for terms (such as) inversion and so on, from my teachers in junior high and high school, I even felt that they didn't use it." (Lia/ Interview 1/ Jan 25th, 2017)

Furthermore, during junior high school, some students believed that there was no use of grammatical terms because they learned only about genres of the texts.

"There was no such thing (terminology) in junior high school. I remember that simple texts were still taught, and they were asked to answer questions from texts like that. If it's high school, it's more of a continuous tense... and it's only at the end of the last year of 3rd grade. Inversion was never mentioned at all during middle and high school." (Mutia/ Interview 1/ Jan 25th, 2017)

The different teaching approaches between schools and students' university levels could not be blamed, even though it manifested as one of the disadvantages for the students in learning (grammar) English. This disadvantage should be accepted by the lecturer and his students in order to find a beneficial solution for both sides.

DISCUSSION

Types of Difficulty

According to the interviews, the students were confronted by the complexity of grammatical rules. This finding was consistent with Graus & Coppen (2015). As Hulstijn & Graff (1994) stated, this complexity involves a relatively large number of criteria that need to be applied to produce the correct form of an ungrammatical sentence. Indeed, operating this production is closely related to the students' proficiency level, aptitude, and developmental stage.

In the current finding, the complexity of grammatical rules was caused by three particular skills. First, distinguishing and classifying the rules. The students need to understand a grammatical rule's definition and/or subs. For instance, subject-verb agreement and subject-verb inversion are similar, but each has different sub-rules. The sub-rules of the problem with the agreement are making the verb agree after a prepositional phrase and making the verb agree after certain words, while the sub-rules of inversion are inverting subject and verb after a place expression and

inverting subject and verb after negatives. The students should comprehensively understand these sub-rules and their examples to distinguish the error of ungrammatical sentences, whether it is classified into problems with agreement or inversion. Second, specifying the general rule. The students used overgeneralization to explain a specific rule. For instance, problems with the verb cannot be used to explain the subjunctive. A rule such as a problem with the verb has an ambiguous meaning that will mislead the students' understanding because many grammatical rules involve the verb (e.g., s-v agreement, inversion). Thus, this kind of rule is not acceptable in the test. Third, stating rules efficiently. Some students added unnecessary/ additional information to explain a rule in their answers. For instance, the problem with preposition vs. preposition "effect" matches with "on". Although both rules were correct, correcting the ungrammatical sentence was unnecessary in the test. It implied that the students had not fully understood the instruction of this test.

The complexity of grammatical rules indirectly influenced the students' cognitions as well. In its practical use, the students' incomplete comprehension caused overgeneralization and misleading the grammatical rules. If it does not receive immediate treatment, this problem may become fossilized.

Sources of Difficulty

It showed that the primary sources are familiarity with tests, the teaching approaches, the materials of the test, and the pressure of the test. As a comparison, this finding was consistent with Graus & Coppen (2015) where familiarity also became the source of this difficulty. In this case, familiarity covered the students' experiences with certain types of grammar. In their previous educations, the students never took a grammar test like the one they did in the TEFL graduate degree. Or, although some of them took a similar test, the answering method was different. A typical grammar test asks the students to write down the rules of ungrammatical sentences. However, it becomes an odd case if it is modified into a TOEFL Model

Examination, where the students should select the error based on multiple choices and also explain the rules. This evidence supported Alderson & Wall (Alderson and Wall 1993), who proposed 'the washback effect.' It could be defined as a situation where the students have already adapted to one type only; they may encounter difficulty with another type. Commonly, to help the students adapt to a new method, the lecturer may conduct exercises similar to the new test.

Regarding the teaching approaches, this finding was congruent with Graus and Coppen (Graus and Coppen 2018), Saengboon (2017), and Shiu (2011). In their interviews, the students realized that their school teachers rarely used terminology in English language policy. On the contrary, in their bachelor and master degrees, the students were responsible for learning various terminologies, especially in grammar classes. The change of approaches between schools with implicit learning and university with explicit learning indirectly negatively impacted the students. As the lecturer of Advanced Grammar said, the students in these decades were not taught to use terminology in their schools because it was forbidden. They were taught English under the implementation of the Communicative and Genre approaches. In Indonesia, the teaching approach has constantly changed in 5 years due to the educational policy of the Ministry of Education since this kind of case cannot be separated from political circumstances. Therefore, the development of English learning becomes the responsibility of stakeholders (Minister of Education, language experts, curriculum designers, headmasters, teachers, and students).

In relation to the material of the test, the current finding did not correspond to Graus & Coppen (2011), Scheffler (2011), and Saengboon (2017). While the current result revealed that the subjunctive was the most challenging material, the other previous studies showed different results. The other most difficult materials in previous studies were present perfect continuous in Graus & Coppen (2015), third conditional in Scheffler (2011), and adjective (modifying noun) in Saengboon. This disagreement was likely due to the different composition of test materials and the elicitation of data.

In the current study, the test consisted of 17 materials or grammatical rules, but the number of materials in those previous studies varied, either less or more. Furthermore, this study elicited data through interviews; other studies commonly used questionnaires. This brief explanation clarifies how these two factors might have affected the results.

Indeed, there are theoretical explanations for why the subjunctive is difficult. Based on DeCapua (2008), the subjunctive can be defined as the simple form of a verb in clauses following certain verbs or the form of the verb used to indicate hypothetical, contrary-to-fact situations. However, native speakers frequently avoid this rule for daily use. Furthermore, Downing & Locke (2006) add that it has very limited use in British English but more in American English. Consequently, EFL students are unfamiliar with hearing it in their daily learning except for the test purpose. To overcome these difficulties, William (2005) suggests that teaching the subjunctive requires a systematic approach because the form represents an unusual agreement pattern between subject and verb. According to these unique characteristics of the subjunctive, it is clear that non-native English speakers, such as EFL students, need special treatment to learn and use this rule.

The finding showed that many students felt an indescribable pressure during the test, whether from fear, nervousness, or a mixture of both. This pressure made them uncomfortable and unable to access their declarative memory – the storage of explicit knowledge (Anderson 2015). However, this finding was not found in the previous studies (Shiu 2011; Saengboon 2017; Graus and Coppen 2018). The authors believed that it was due to the students' interviews, which eased them into mentioning any possibility related to grammar difficulty orally. Another instrument, such as a questionnaire, has a narrower possibility of eliciting this data. On top of that, this finding strengthened Alderson & Wall's (1993) argument, which said that any learner instructed to do something under pressure would perform anomalously and experience apprehension. Also, the fear of

consequences of particular performances produces apprehension, which will affect performance.

Subjective grammar difficulty had various sources, according to the students' perceptions. However, the students should not regret their difficulties. As Ellis (2004) stated, confronting difficulty is one of the characteristics of explicit knowledge. In short, this condition is quite common and acceptable. Therefore, they should accept and reflect on it to reconstruct their explicit knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, subjective difficulties are inevitable for TEFL master students in Advanced Grammar Test. Several notable sources of their difficulties included the complexity of grammar rules, the pressures of the test, familiarity with the test, the materials of the test, and the change of teaching approaches. Although these sources were interconnected, the students appeared to frequently grapple with their subjective difficulties in this test. Importantly, all difficulties should not be viewed as a guilty matter because they serve as evidence of their demonstration of explicit knowledge.

The current study elaborates on some implications for Advanced Grammar Classes and other grammar classes (beginner, intermediate) that share similar contexts, especially in Indonesia. The following implications discuss the content validity of the test and the cognitive burden in producing metalanguage.

The adoption of TOEFL Model Examinations as the Advanced Grammar Test raises concerns about its content validity. Students noted that the subjunctive, one of the test materials, had not been taught by the lecturer and was absent from their grammar book (TOEFL Book II). Furthermore, even native English speakers tend to avoid subjunctives in daily conversation due to their unusual patterns, posing challenges for students answering test items containing subjunctives. To mitigate such disadvantages, it is advisable for the lecturer to teach all potentially tested

materials in the Advanced Grammar Test. Additionally, the production of metalanguage imposes cognitive burdens on both the lecturer and the students. While the lecturer, with decades of teaching experience, exhibits greater fluency in generating metalanguage through daily teaching, students, having only a few years of exposure to grammar, may lack fluency due to limited use. Encouraging students to use metalanguage regularly in their learning can help them gain experience, potentially reducing their cognitive burden over time. It is crucial for educators to consider these factors when designing effective teaching strategies and materials tailored to the specific needs of language learners, acknowledging the psychological pressures they encounter during language testing.

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