

Investigating Grammar Learning Challenges for Effective English as a Foreign Language Instruction in Ethiopia

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Received: June 4, 2025 Accepted: September 16, 2025 Online Published: January 9, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n3p441

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n3p441>

Abstract

English has a significant impact on how educational systems are developed worldwide. Grammar significantly impacts second language learning by providing the structure for meaningful communication, which enables learners to express themselves clearly and effectively, and promotes a deeper understanding of written and spoken language. The purpose of this study is to assess the challenges associated with learning English grammar. A quantitative approach and a descriptive research design were used for this study. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select 137 undergraduate EFL students from the Rift Valley University, Burayu campus. Data were gathered through a questionnaire and analyzed using Excel and SPSS software. The results indicate that relative clauses, determiners, tenses, conjunctions, and prepositions were among the more challenging aspects of English grammar. Moreover, difficulties such as reported speech, articles, conditionals, passive, and active are found to be less challenging. Furthermore, the study reveals that most undergraduate students at different levels have challenges and issues when learning English grammar, which may be linked to outdated teaching methods, unsuitable curricula, and the students' uninspiring psychological states.

Keywords: English as a second/foreign language, grammar, inductive, learning, students, teaching

1. Introduction

English has become a global lingua franca and shapes educational policies, curricula, and teaching in higher education worldwide, including Ethiopia (Bolton, 2020; Rose & Galloway, 2019). Its role is critical for academic progress and global professional opportunities. For learners, mastering grammar is the essential foundation for effective communication. Without it, clear expression and accurate meaning are significantly compromised (Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Ellis, 2018). Thus, grammar is a critical part of the EFL learning process. Acquiring grammatical competence is fundamental for clear and precise articulation, forming the framework for language proficiency (Iqbal et al., 2017:56; Purpura, 2020). It is a crucial, non-negotiable component of language acquisition because effective language use relies on a solid grammatical foundation. Despite this importance, Ethiopian undergraduate EFL students often face grammar challenges. These issues arise from limitations in vocabulary and grammar knowledge, often worsened by interference from their first language (Gebregergis, 2023; Taye, 2019).

In Ethiopia and many educational contexts, traditional teacher-centered methods are still widely used. These approaches rely on rote memorization of rules and separate grammatical points. They do not focus on involving students in real communicative tasks or fostering critical and creative thinking (Nguyen, 2021; Ellis, 2020). As a result, students struggle to apply grammar contextually and automatically. Grammatical errors are more than technical mistakes; they can cause communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, and negative judgments about a writer's competence (Lee, 2020; Evans et al., 2021). Persistent struggles with English grammar lead to frustration, anxiety, and lower self-confidence among students (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2022; Zhang, 2021). This negative response becomes a major barrier to learning grammar. The present study focuses on these core objectives:

- To identify and explore the specific aspects of English grammar found most challenging by Ethiopian undergraduate EFL students.
- To investigate the underlying linguistic, pedagogical, and affective causes contributing to these English grammar learning difficulties.
- To propose evidence-informed pedagogical methods and strategies that can effectively help students overcome these challenges.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept of Grammar

Azar (2007) states that grammar is a set of established rules and procedures guiding sentence creation. Without grammar, it is impossible to create clear and meaningful sentences. Freeman (2001) elaborates, emphasizing that mastering grammar helps learners understand core language concepts and recognize correct sentence features. Zhang (2009, p. 184) argued that grammar should be the focus in second language teaching, as both grammar and vocabulary are keys to mastering English. Yet, learning grammar is viewed as harder than learning vocabulary, especially in EFL contexts, where certain concepts may be impossible to master without specific training. Grammar is an essential skill for all language learners. According to Palmer (1972), grammar is the most important part of a language, and any educated individual should be deeply interested in it. For second language teachers and researchers, it is vital to select the right grammatical elements for instruction. Shiu (2011) suggests that teachers benefit from understanding which language parts students find difficult. This knowledge helps decide what, when, and how to teach.

Grammar is one of the key components of teaching and learning a language (Canale & Swain, 1980). Furthermore, Ellis (2002) states that although language teaching methodologies have undergone substantial transformations in recent years, language instructors still need to address the problem of grammar education. Furthermore, the significance of grammar has been incisively explained by numerous linguists.

According to Bastone (1994, p. 35), "Language without grammar would be chaotic; countless words without the indispensable guidelines for how they can be ordered and modified." Grammar is a crucial component of teaching languages to foreign language learners. According to Widodo (2006), language learners can express themselves and interact with others by using their understanding of grammar and structure. Additionally, Widodo (2006, p. 122) showed that grammar is important for vocabulary learning, stating that "grammar gives learners a way to combine some lexical items into a good sentence so that meaningful and communicative statements or expressions can be formed." Grammar is hence a lexico-grammatical tool for meaning-making. Grammar undergoes form and meaning changes during the meaning-making process to guarantee proper usage in various contexts.

According to Ahangari and Barghi (2012), grammar knowledge is the most complex aspect of linguistic competence. Ellis (2008) asserted that language examiners cannot and should not ignore linguistic competency. Grammar is also vital to language description, as Rimmer (2006) shows, and a posteriori construct validation of language tests frequently finds grammar to be a substantial component in differentiating across score levels and describing overall competency. Schmitt (2002) states that "when learners focus on grammar, they can complete exercises satisfactorily; however, when they switch to a more communicative interaction, the grammar is forgotten" (p. 29).

According to Nassaji and Fotos (2012), grammar plays a crucial part in language instruction. Furthermore, Wang (2010) emphasized the importance of teaching grammar by claiming that it is the foundation of language ability and that language is meaningless without it. Furthermore, Wang (2010) claimed that our ability to discuss language is a function of the language's grammar.

Understanding grammar also enables us to recognize the elements that contribute to clear, engaging, and accurate phrases and paragraphs. When students read the sentences in poetry and stories, grammar can be a component of literary discussions (pp. 313–314). According to Wang (2010), "the fact is that grammar... still plays a big part in what many teachers, administrators, and parents consider to be basic literacy; grammar cannot be separated from the language" (p.315). Grammar is essential to learning and mastering a target language.

2.2 Empirical Literature

A number of studies have been investigated to identify the multifaceted challenges students encounter in mastering English grammar within EFL contexts (Burgess & Etherington, 2002: 437; Ellis, 2020). Many studies reveal that a primary challenge of learning grammar is that the curriculum is disconnected from authentic and real-world communication (Saeed and Jafar, 2016: 55) highlighted its incapacity to replicate real-world learning scenarios, a finding corroborated by recent studies indicating that curricula often remain heavily exam-oriented, neglecting communicative competence development crucial for practical grammar application (Nguyen, 2021; Gebregergis, 2023).

In addition, pedagogical limitations significantly contribute to grammar learning difficulties. Widianingsih and Gulö (2016: 142) observed that teachers struggle to diversify instructional methods for grammar and integrated language skills. Lack of variety in activities diminishes student motivation and engagement (Zhang, 2021; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2022). Furthermore, linguistic interference from the mother tongue (L1) presents a persistent hurdle (Schultz, 2001: 250). The discrepancies between L1 and English grammatical structures directly impede writing proficiency and accurate expression (Al-khresheh, 2021).

In addition, Ellis (2007) identified the complexity of seventeen different grammatical structures to determine which are more challenging than others. Verb complements, third person -s, plural -s, indefinite articles, possessive -s, regular past tense -ed, comparative, unreal

conditionals, and modals were the most challenging, according to the results. Maros et al. (2007) conducted research to determine the grammatical errors made by Malaysian EFL learners when they are writing essays. They discovered that the participants struggled to use proper English syntax in their writing. The findings showed that the utilization of determiners, articles, subject-verb agreement, the omission of the third person singular -s, and the copula "to be" were the primary causes of errors.

Scheffler (2008) also looked at the complexity of 11 grammatical elements in another study. Polish adult English language learners were asked to rate the difficulty of 11 specified grammatical elements. His research revealed that the most challenging grammatical elements were tenses, prepositions, -ing forms and infinitives, modal verbs, conditional sentences, and reported speech. On the other hand, the least challenging grammatical elements were adjectives and adverbs, pronouns, nouns, articles, and passive voices.

While the existing empirical research have shown the multifaceted challenges in EFL grammar learning (Saeed & Jafar, 2016; Nguyen, 2021), pedagogical limitations and teacher proficiency issues (Maros et al., 2007; Mahdi, 2018; Nasser, 2018), learner demotivation due to complexity and methods (Widianingsih & Gulö, 2016; Zhang, 2021), L1 interference (Schultz, 2001; Al-khresheh, 2021), and persistent difficulties with specific grammatical features (Shiu, 2011; Kang & Han, 2022), significant gaps remain untouched thus why the current study seeks to fill the following gaps: Firstly, there is a critical lack of context-specific, in-depth investigation into the precise grammatical features causing the most difficulty for Ethiopian undergraduate EFL students, particularly considering the potential influence of Amharic and other languages (Gebeyehu, 2023), which differs markedly from the L1 backgrounds often explored. Secondly, while affective factors like frustration and anxiety are acknowledged (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2022), their specific interplay with pedagogical practices and institutional constraints within the unique Ethiopian higher education environment is underexplored as primary causes of grammar learning difficulties. Thirdly, the literature often treats curriculum design, teacher methodology, resource limitations, and learner affect as somewhat separate issues; this study aims to investigate their interconnectedness and relative contribution to grammar learning challenges in the Ethiopian context, moving beyond generalized findings to provide actionable, context-specific insights. , this research directly addresses these gaps by empirically identifying the most challenging grammar aspects, uncovering the root causes within Ethiopia's unique EFL setting, and proposing tailored pedagogical strategies.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive research design was employed in this study. Descriptive research is used when the objective is to describe the characteristics of a population or phenomenon being studied. In this case, the goal is to assess the factors that influence undergraduate students' grammar learning. This design is appropriate because it allows the researcher to gather detailed and factual information about how students perceive and experience grammar learning.

3.2 Research Approach

The study uses a quantitative research approach, which involves collecting and analyzing numerical data to identify patterns, relationships, or trends. This approach is useful for studies aiming to generalize findings from a sample to a larger population. In this context, the quantitative approach allows the researcher to identify the dominant issues affecting grammar learning, quantify their impact, and analyze the data.

3.3 Sample Size

The study involved a sample of 137 undergraduate English as a Foreign Language learners from Rift Valley University, Burayu Campus. The size of the sample is vital for ensuring the reliability and generalizability of the results. A sample of this size is adequate for descriptive analysis and enables the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions about the wider student population at the university.

3.4 Sampling Technique

A simple random sampling technique was employed to select the participants. This technique ensures that every student in the population has an equal chance of being selected, which helps to eliminate bias in the sample. Random sampling is considered one of the most effective methods for obtaining a representative sample, thereby enhancing the credibility and generalizability of the findings.

3.5 Data Collection Tool

The primary data collection tool used in this study was a structured survey questionnaire. This tool was carefully designed to align with the study's objectives and includes Likert scale questions, which ask respondents to express their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements (e.g., Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). These questions were used to gather data on students' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to grammar learning. To ensure reliability and validity, the questionnaire was piloted with a small group of students before the main data collection. This step helped refine the questions for clarity, relevance, and effectiveness in measuring the intended variables.

3.6 Data Analysis Method

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods via SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), Version 28. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the responses and highlight key trends in the data. To ensure the reliability of the survey instrument, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. The value obtained was greater than 0.7, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency among the questionnaire items.

4. Results

1. How difficult do you find using adverbs correctly in sentences?

Table 1. The difficulty level of using correct adverbs

	Percentage
Very Easy	8.03%
Easy	10.95%
Neutral	15.33%
Difficult	22.63%
Very Difficult	44.53%

Table 1 reveals significant challenges that Ethiopian undergraduate EFL students encounter in using correct adverb. 44.53% of students responded "Very Difficult." This highlights that adverbs is a critical learning barrier. This result aligns with a research that identifies adverbs as a problem due to their syntactic flexibility, semantic nuances, and positional variations within sentences (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2016). In addition, 22.63% of students reported the using correct adverbs as "Difficult," since adverb mastery demands advanced metalinguistic awareness and consistent contextual practice (Jones, 2020). Such difficulties persist even among advanced learners; as Smith (2019) notes, inappropriate adverb usage in spoken and written production remains common among L2 speakers which reflects gaps in implicit knowledge. However, 15.33% of respondents remained "Neutral". Conversely, some participants (10.95%) found correct adverb usage as "Easy". In addition, 8.03% of the students found using the correct adverbs as "Very Easy". Learners possess robust correct adverbs usage through extensive reading, structured output practice, or form-focused instruction.

2. How challenging is it for you to use possessive forms correctly?

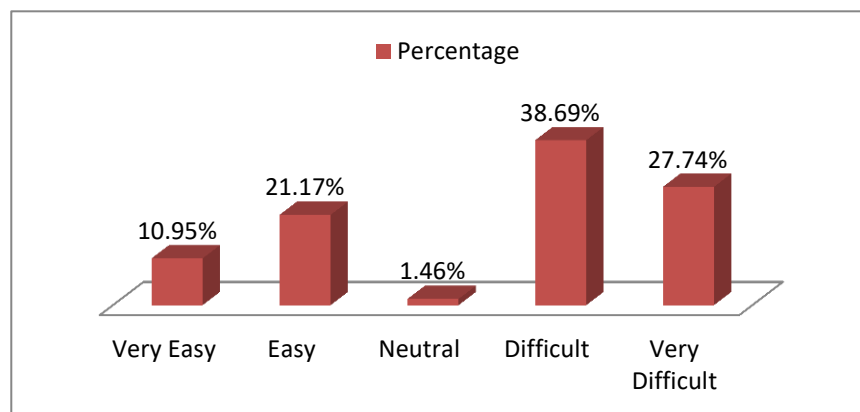


Figure 1. The difficulty level of using the correct possessive forms

Figure 1 underscores a significant pedagogical hurdle in mastering English possessive forms which is a considerable difficulty for Ethiopian undergraduate EFL learners. 66.43% of respondents (combining 38.69% of students found using the correct possessive as "Difficult" and 27.74% of the students found using the correct possessive as "Very Difficult". This aligns robustly with Garcia's (2019) research, which identifies the morphological complexity of possessives encompassing irregular noun forms, compound constructions, and subtle distinctions in determiner usage as a multi-layered cognitive load that consistently impedes accuracy across proficiency levels (DeKeyser, 2018). However, 21.17% of students reported that using correct possessive as "Easy" and 10.95% students reported that using correct possessive as "Very Easy". This finding align with study like Brown (2015), which emphasizes the demotivating effect of possessive rules; it suggests that systematic contextual engagement can mitigate perceived difficulty through implicit knowledge development (Nassaji, 2017). 1.46% of students were "Neutral". These learners possess partial knowledge but lack fluency, which leads to inconsistent application (Bialystok, 2018).

3. How difficult is it to correctly use the third person singular?

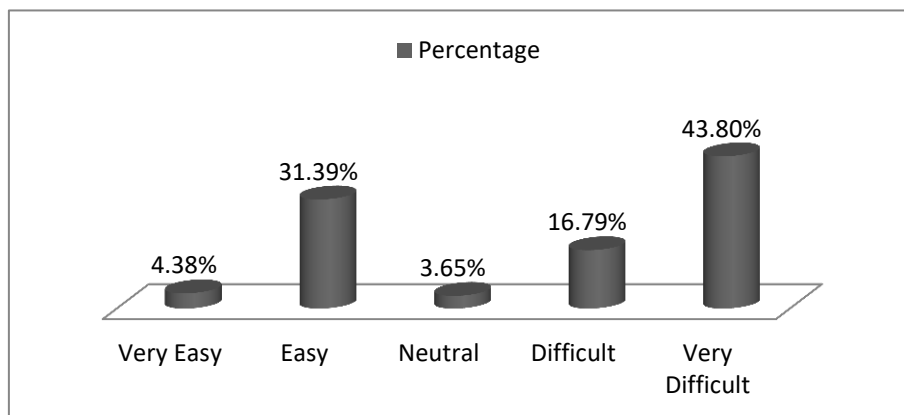


Figure 2. The difficulty level of using correct the third-person singular

Figure 2 underscores the persistent challenge of third-person singular verb inflection among Ethiopian undergraduate EFL learners, with a striking 43.80% rating it "Very Difficult." This group struggle signals a critical procedural gap in morphosyntactic automation, where learners cognitively grasp the rule but fail to apply it consistently in real-time production a phenomenon extensively documented in SLA research (Lardiere, 2007; Derakhshan, 2021). An additional 16.79% find it "Difficult," reflecting fragile declarative knowledge: these learners understand the rule in isolation but stumble during communicative tasks due to processing constraints (VanPatten, 2015). 60.59% face significant hurdles, confirming Ellis's (2007) observation that 3PS inflection remains a "robust learning problem" even for advanced learners, particularly in L1s lacking analogous morphology. Conversely, 31.39% report third-person singular usage as "Easy," attributable to high-frequency exposure and structured practice enabling implicit knowledge development (Ellis, 2020). This group benefits from extensive reading/listening input where third-person singular forms are recurrently modeled. The 4.38% finding it "Very Easy" represents learners with automatized procedural knowledge, likely developed through immersive engagement or form-focused instruction that reinforced pattern recognition, supporting Brown's (2019) contention that mastery correlates with contextual experience and metalinguistic confidence. 3.65% responded neutral. Most students possess explicit rule awareness but lack fluency, leading to hesitation and self-correction (Bialystok, 2018).

4. How easy or difficult do you find using different tenses correctly?

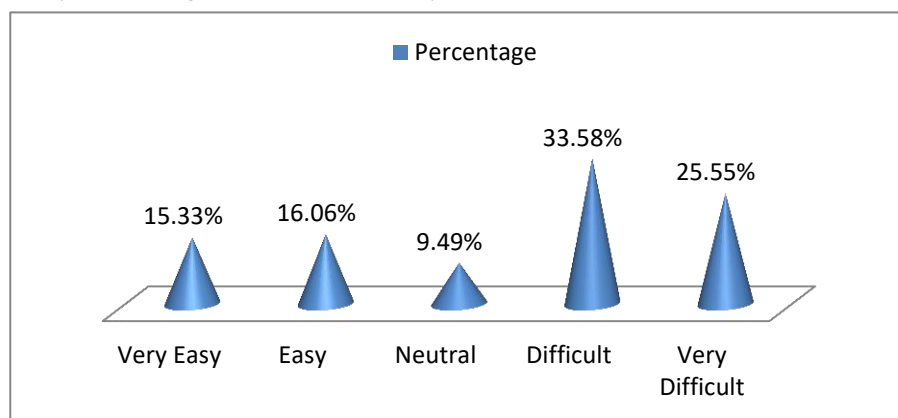


Figure 3. The difficulty level of using the correct tenses

Figure 3 reveals students' challenge in mastering English tense-aspects. 33.58% of participants reported using correct tense as "Difficult". In addition, 25.55% of respondents found using the correct tenses as "Very Difficult." Cumulatively, 59.13% of students face significant difficulties. This finding aligns with Darus and Subramaniam's (2009) study on English tense-aspect systems (progressive vs. perfect), and sequence of tenses concepts often lacking direct equivalents in Ethiopian languages like Amharic (Gebeyehu, 2023). However, 16.06% of the students found using the correct tenses as "Easy". In addition, 15.33% of the respondents found the correct use of tenses as "Very Easy". This demonstrates students' confident in tense control. This proficiency correlates strongly with exposure to rich input (e.g., academic texts, films) and deliberate practice in contextualized output which enable implicit pattern recognition (Ellis, 2020). 9.49% of participants responded neutral. This finding reflects Bialystok's (2018) analysis, which states that learners recognize errors but cannot prevent them during communication.

5. How challenging is it for you to use quantifying phrases?

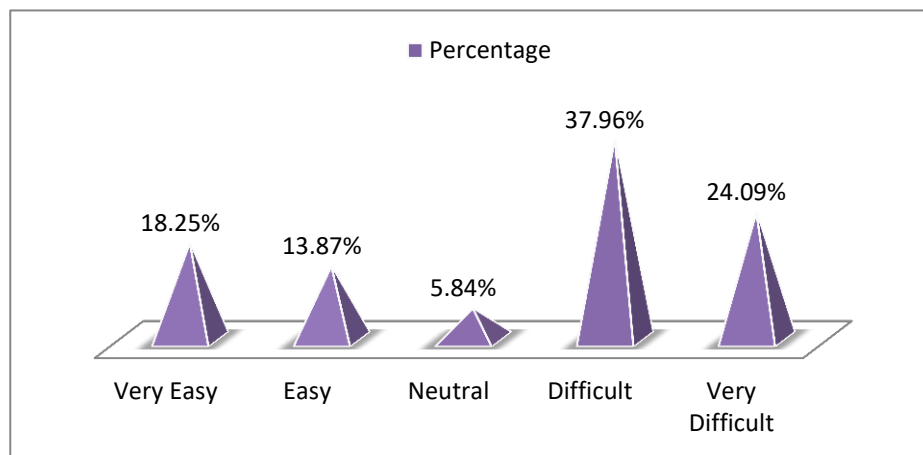


Figure 4. The difficulty level of using correct quantifying phrases

Figure 4 reveals quantifier phrase usage as a significant grammatical challenge for Ethiopian EFL learners. It indicates that 37.96% of students reported using the correct quantifiers as "Difficult". In addition, 24.09% of learners found using the correct quantifiers as "Very Difficult". This shows that majority of the students face substantial difficulties in using quantifiers (some, any, few, little, much, many). This grammatical interface connected with the semantic nuance, count/non-count nouns, and this complexity exacerbated when L1 quantifier systems lack direct equivalents (Gebeyehu, 2023). As John (2018) observed, learners face challenges in distinguishing near-synonyms, particularly with abstract nouns (much knowledge vs. many facts). Conversely, 13.87% of the learners found using the correct quantifiers as "Easy". And 18.25% of the respondents found using the correct quantifiers as "Very Easy". These findings demonstrate that those students acquired this grammar knowledge through extensive exposure to authentic discourse where quantifiers are frequently modeled. This result validates the role of implicit learning and collocational familiarity gained from meaning-focused input which enable intuitive usage without metalinguistic analysis (Ellis, 2020). 5.84% respondents remain "Neutral". This result also aligns with Bialystok's (2018) analysis-control model, where learners possess declarative knowledge but struggle with real-time processing demands.

6. How difficult is it for you to use conjunctions correctly in sentences?

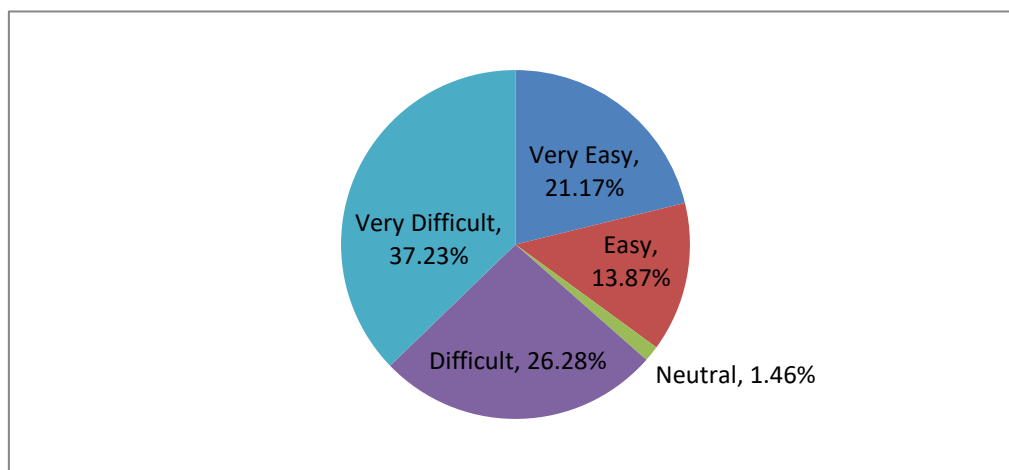


Figure 5. The difficulty level of using the correct conjunctions

Figure 5 shows that using correct conjunction usage is a critical challenge for Ethiopian undergraduate EFL learners. The analysis shows that 37.23% of the respondents found using the correct conjunctions as "Very Difficult". In addition, 26.28% of the respondents reported that using the correct conjunctions as "Difficult". This highlights conjunctions such as however, although and whereas) as complex discourse connectors which require advanced understanding of logical relationships across sentence boundaries. This finding aligning with Lamessa's (2023) research on the cognitive demands of cohesive device mastery. These difficulties manifest as fragmented discourse coherence in academic writing which impedes clarity (Liu & Braine, 2023). In contrast, 21.17% of respondents found using the correct conjunctions as "Very Easy". In addition, 13.87% of the participants found using the correct conjunctions as "Easy". This grammar knowledge can be acquired through extensive engagement with complex texts where conjunctions used in a daily communications. This proficiency correlates with metalinguistic awareness of discourse functions (Halliday & Hasan, 2023). However, 1.46% of the students

responded "Neutral".

7. How challenging is it to distinguish between singular and plural forms in English?

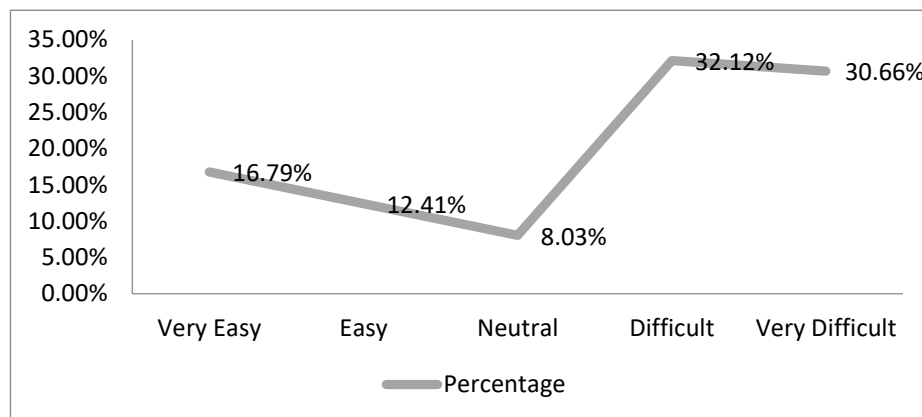


Figure 6. The difficulty level of using correct singular and plural forms

Figure 6 reveals morphological mastery of English number marking as a significant challenge for Ethiopian undergraduate EFL learners. This analysis shows that 32.12% of the respondents found using the correct singular and plural noun makers as "Difficult". In addition, 30.66% of the participants reported that using the correct singular and plural noun makers as "Very Difficult". This shows that the majority of the students face fundamental acquisition barriers in nominal morphology. These results align with Spada and Tomita's (2010) findings that highlights irregularities, variable suffixes, and zero-plural forms create persistent confusion for learners from L1 backgrounds like Amharic/Oromo, where pluralization follows distinct morphological or semantic rules. Conversely, 16.79% of the respondents found using the correct singular and plural noun makers as "Very Easy". And 12.41% of the participants reported that using the correct singular and plural noun makers as "Easy". These findings demonstrate automated control which suggest an effective internalization of pluralization pattern through high-frequency exposure and structured practice. This proficiency correlates with metalinguistic awareness of morphological rules and extensive engagement with plural genres. However, 8.03% of the students responded "Neutral".

8. How difficult is it for you to use pronouns correctly?

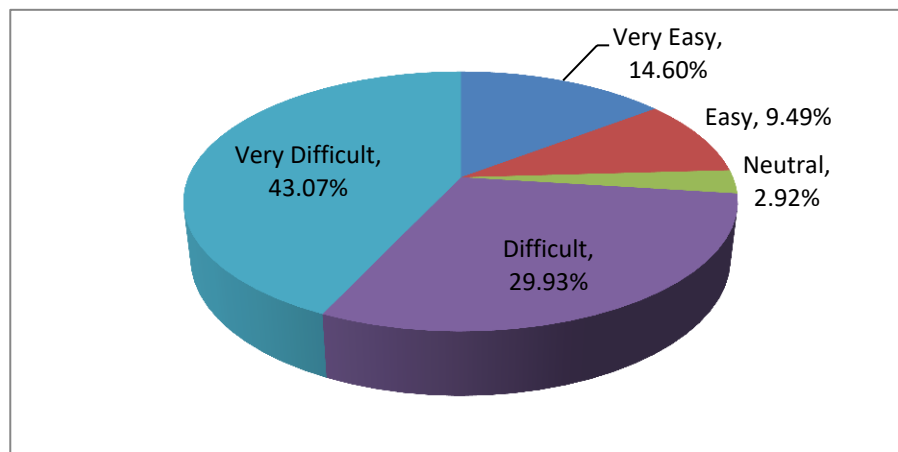


Figure 7. The difficulty level of using correct pronouns

Figure 7 reveals profound challenges in mastering English number morphology among Ethiopian undergraduate EFL learners. 32.12% characterizing singular/plural usage as "Difficult" and 30.66% as "Very Difficult". This substantial majority underscores a critical acquisition barrier in nominal inflectional patterns, corroborating Spada and Tomita's (2010) findings regarding learner confusion stemming from irregular plurals, variable suffixation rules, and zero-marked nouns (deer-deer). These challenges are particularly acute for speakers of Amharic and other Ethiopian languages, where pluralization systems employ distinct morphological strategies such as suffixation or lexical changes that lack direct equivalence to English patterns (Gebeyehu, 2023). In contrast, 29.20% of learners demonstrate confident and 16.79% of respondents reports "Very Easy" and 12.41% of respondents agree that it is essay to master pluralization rules through extensive reading engagement and contextualized practice. 8.03% of the students responded "Neutral". This manifests the inconsistent application of rules.

9. How easy or difficult is it for you to use modal auxiliaries?

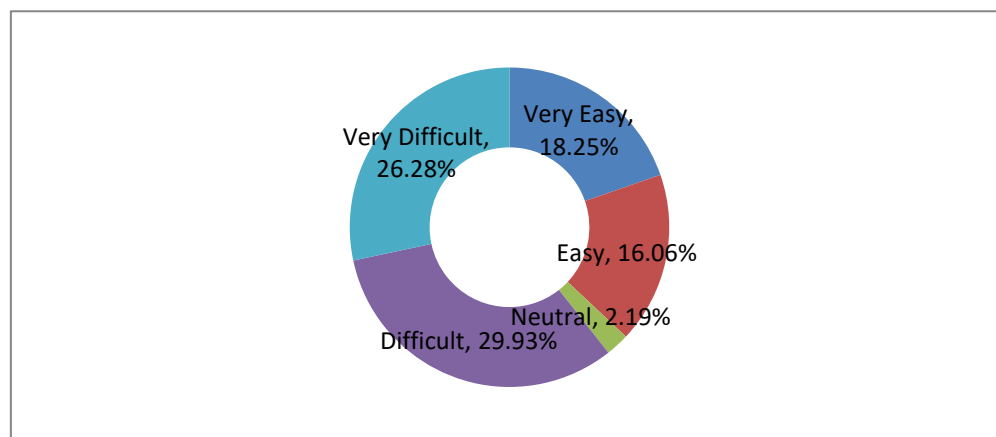


Figure 8. The difficulty level of using the correct modal auxiliaries

Figure 8 reveals a difficulty among students concerning the combination of modal auxiliaries. The analysis indicates that 29.93% of respondents found using the correct modal auxiliary as "Difficult". In addition, 26.28% of participants found it "Very Difficult". This shows that over half of the participants encounter problems in applying these verbs correctly. This finding aligns with research by Luvuno and Ajani (2021), who highlighted that the contextual nuances of modal auxiliaries frequently confuse learners. They stated that students must grasp not only the core meanings but also the subtle differences in usage across various situations (Luvuno & Ajani, 2021). Conversely, 18.25% of students found using modal auxiliaries as "Very Easy". Besides, 16.06% of the respondents considered it "Easy". This means over one-third of the participants feel more assured in their ability to employ these verbs accurately. A very small group, representing 2.19% of participants, remained "Neutral" regarding their ability. This category represents learners who possess a basic understanding of the rules but lack consistent confidence or reliability in their application.

10. How challenging is it for you to use comparative and superlative forms?

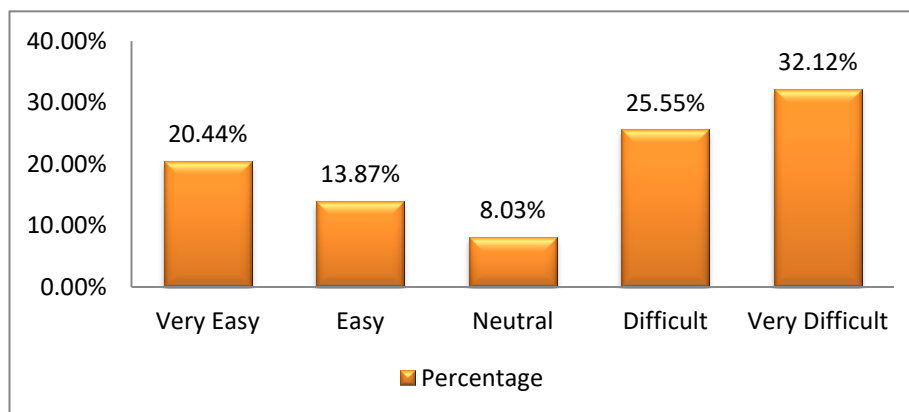


Figure 9. The difficulty level of using the correct comparative and superlative forms

Figure 9 indicates the the difficulty that the learners face challenges in using the comparative and superlative adjective forms. This data shows that 32.12% of respondents found this grammatical feature as "Very Difficult". In additional, 25.55% of the respondents reported that using the correct comparative and superlative as "Difficult". Cumulatively, over half of the participants struggle with these structures. These challenges align with Treis' (2018) observation that learners grapple with irregular paradigms and exceptions to standard morphological rules. Contemporary research further attributes these difficulties to the complex interplay of syllable-based formation rules, suppletive forms, and context-dependent usage requirements (Murphy, 2021), creating substantial obstacles for grammatical accuracy. Conversely, a combined 34.31% of learners express that they using the correct comparative and superlative forms (20.44% find comparatives/superlatives "Very Easy" and 13.87% consider them "Easy.") This hows that these students benefit from prior mastery of pattern recognition and rule internalization. This align with Johnson's (2018) assertion regarding contextualized practice finds reinforcement in recent pedagogy studies, which demonstrate that iterative, meaning-focused exercises those comparing real-world entities or scenarios that enhance both accuracy and automaticity (Lee, 2022). Meanwhile, 8.03% of respondents responded a "Neutral".

11. How challenging is it for you to use articles correctly?

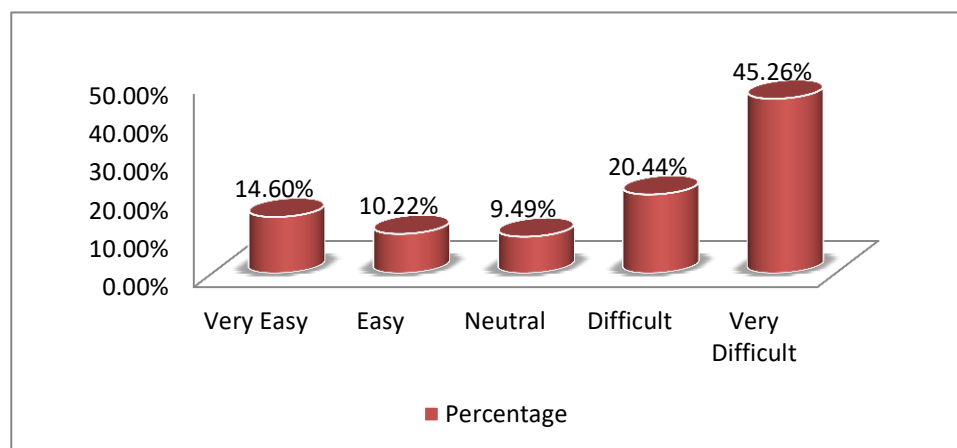


Figure 10. The difficulty level of using the correct articles

Figure 10 highlights a substantial challenge in mastering English article usage ("a," "an," and "the"), with 45.26% of respondents identifying this grammatical feature as "Very Difficult" and an additional 20.44% rating it as "Difficult." Cumulatively, this reveals that over two-thirds of learners face significant obstacles in article selection. This finding supports cross-linguistic research indicating that article acquisition presents exceptional difficulty for EFL speakers (Kojima & Popiel, 2023). Contemporary studies further attribute these struggles to the complex interaction of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic rules governing (Ionin, 2021). The absence of direct equivalents in many first languages compounds these challenges which requires learners to internalize abstract conceptual distinctions that lack morphological markers in their native systems (Master, 2020). Conversely, 14.60% of respondents reported article usage as "Very Easy". In addition, 10.22% of the respondents found using the correct articles as "Easy". This indicates that students internalized the relevant grammatical distinctions. This divergence underscores the critical role of comprehensive input and deliberate practice, as extensive exposure to authentic discourse contexts significantly enhances article acquisition (Sarko, 2022). However, 9.49% of the students responded that using the correct articles as "Neutral". This shows that learners who grasp basic rules (e.g., "a/an" for singular countable nouns) but struggle with advanced applications involving generic reference, abstract nouns, or institutional uses (Crosthwaite, 2020).

12. How difficult is it for you to distinguish between passive and active voices in English?

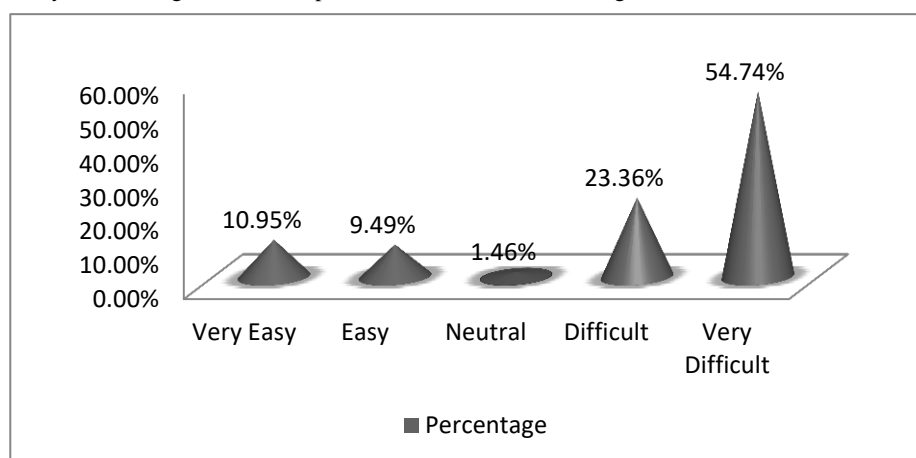


Figure 11. The difficulty level of using the correct passive and active voices

Figure 11 reveals difficulties in mastering active-passive voice. The analysis indicates that 54.74% of respondents found this grammatical feature as "Very Difficult". In addition, a 23.36% of the respondents reported it as "Difficult." Cumulatively, over three-quarters of learners struggle with syntactic transformations required for voice alternation. This finding aligns with Unver's (2017) observation of inherent complexity in passive constructions, a challenge substantiated by contemporary research attributing these difficulties to structural ambiguity in patient-agent relationships and cross-linguistic variations in thematic role mapping (Hinkel, 2022). However, 10.95% of the respondents considered voice distinction as "Very Easy". and 9.49% of the respondents found it "Easy". This result indicates that some students have enhanced metalinguistic awareness or substantial L2 exposure and underscores the pedagogical value of systematic practice, as explicit instruction on syntactic restructuring rules significantly improves voice recognition and production accuracy (Rezaei, 2021). Whereas, 1.46% of the students remained "Neutral". According to Keck & Kim, (2022) learners who understand simple rules but lack processing truncated passives or aspect-marked constructions.

13. How challenging is it to ensure subject-verb agreement?

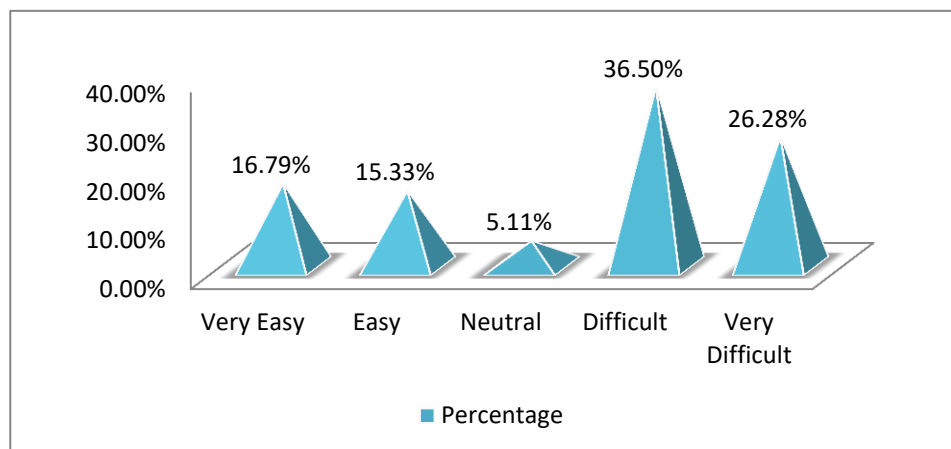


Figure 12. The difficulty level of using correct subject-verb agreement

Figure 12 reveals significant challenges in mastering subject-verb agreement. This data shows that 36.50% of respondents found this grammatical feature as "Difficult" and 26.28% of the respondents considered as "Very Difficult." Cumulatively, nearly two-thirds of learners struggle with using the correct subject-verb agreement. The alignment between subjects and verbs in complex constructions is a challenging task for L2 learners (Putri et al., 2023). Contemporary research attributes these difficulties to processing limitations in working memory during real-time sentence formulation, where learners often default to proximity agreement rather than grammatical hierarchy (Jiang, 2021). However, 16.79% of the respondents found SVA "Very Easy" and 15.33% of the participants found it "Easy". This indicates that a proficient students benefit it from enhanced grammatical sensitivity or substantial exposure to inflectional patterns. Whereas, 5.11% of the students responded that using the correct subject-verb agreement as "Neutral". This indicates that learners with knowledge of basic rules but inconsistent application in syntactically complex rules.

14. How difficult is it for you to differentiate between countable and uncountable nouns?

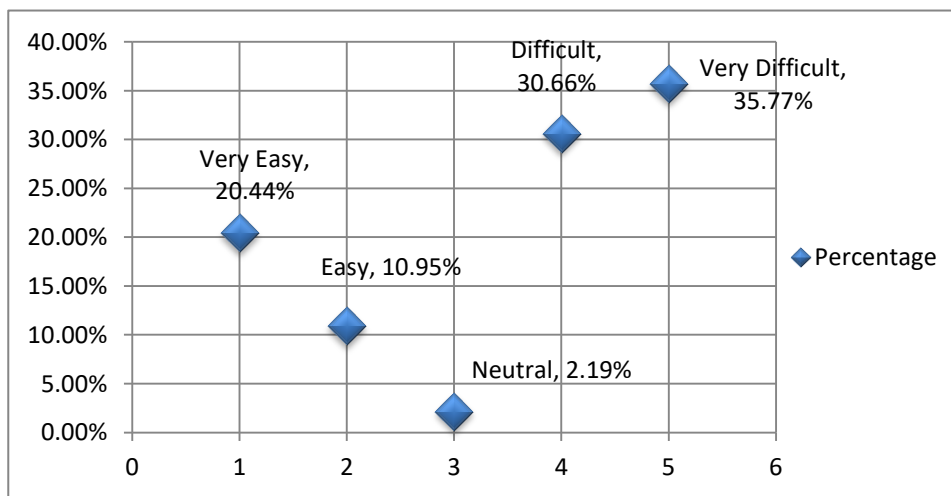


Figure 13. The difficulty level of using countable and uncountable nouns

Figure 13 underscores significant challenges in distinguishing countable and uncountable nouns. The analysis shows that 35.77% of respondents found this grammatical distinction as "Very Difficult" and 30.66% of the respondents found it as "Difficult." This reveals that over two-thirds of learners struggle with countable and uncountable nouns. A finding attributed to cross-linguistic variation in conceptual categorization and exceptions in English noun classification (Choi, 2022). As Parkinson (2023) notes, mastery requires internalizing not only categorical rules but also lexical exceptions and pragmatic constraints, explaining the high prevalence of reported challenges. In contrast, 20.44% of the respondents considered this distinction as "Very Easy", and 10.95% of the respondents found using the correct countable and uncountable nouns as "Easy". This suggests that a confident minority benefits from enhanced lexical awareness or substantial exposure to noun quantification patterns. Whereas, 2.19% of the students remained "Neutral". This indicates that learners who grasp rules but struggle with application in authentic contexts with abstract nouns, common nouns, and collective nouns that resist binary classification (Murphy, 2022).

15. How difficult is it for you to form sentences using reported speech?

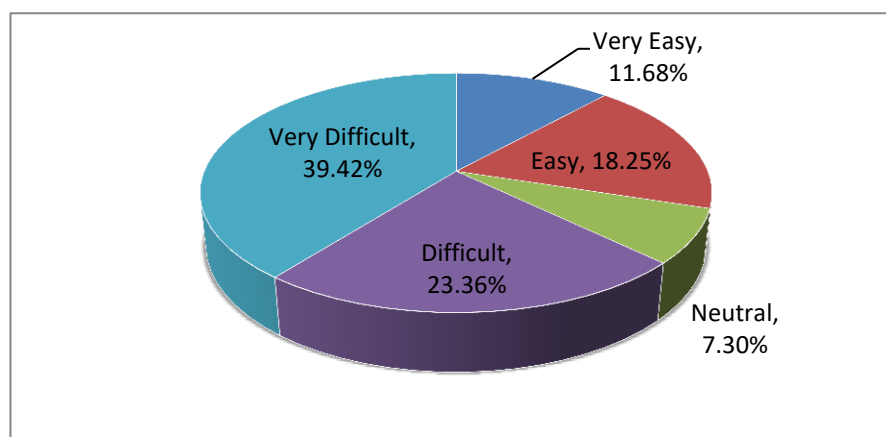


Figure 14. The difficulty level of using the correct reported speech

Figure 14 reveals substantial difficulties in mastering reported speech, with 39.42% of respondents rating this grammatical feature as "Very Difficult" and a further 23.36% as "Difficult." Cumulatively, over 60% of learners struggle with syntactic and deictic transformations required for converting direct to reported discourse. This finding aligns with Jayakumar et al.'s (2023) identification of multiple complexity factors, including back-shifted verb tenses, pronoun adjustments, and pragmatic shifts in temporal references. Contemporary research further attributes these challenges to the cognitive processing demands of simultaneous perspective-shifting and syntactic restructuring (Park, 2022), when reporting questions or modal expressions (Thompson, 2023), creating multilayered acquisition barriers. However, 11.68% of the respondents found using the correct reported speech as "Very Easy". In addition, 18.25% of the participants considered it as "Easy". This indicates that a confident minority (approximately 30%) benefits from enhanced metalinguistic awareness or substantial exposure to narrative contexts. This underscores the pedagogical value of scaffolded practice, as systematic consciousness-raising activities significantly improve accuracy in tense and deixis transformations (Basterrechea, 2023). Nevertheless, 7.30% of the students remained "Neutral". This indicates that some learners grasp rules but demonstrate inconsistent application with exceptions involving timeless truths and modal verbs (Kemp, 2024).

16. How difficult is it for you to use infinitive and gerund forms correctly?

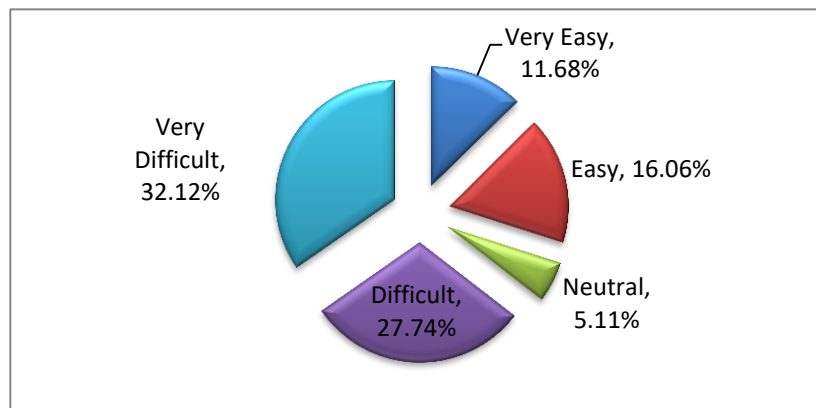


Figure 15. The difficulty level of using correct infinitive and gerund forms

Figure 15 reveals significant challenges in mastering infinitive and gerund usage. The analysis indicates that 32.12% of respondents rating this grammatical pattern as "Very Difficult". Besides, 27.74% of the participants found using the correct infinitive and gerund as "Difficult". This shows that a combined 59.86% of learners struggles with these non-finite verb forms. This result aligns with Gu's (2020) findings regarding the complexity of selection rules. In addition, the recent research by Chen and Larsen-Freeman (2023) further demonstrates that these difficulties stem from three primary sources: (1) the verb-specific nature of complementation patterns, (2) subtle meaning differences in certain contexts, and (3) exceptions to general patterns based on syntactic function. The cognitive load required to memorize which verbs take infinitives, which take gerunds, and which accept both creates substantial learning hurdles (Ellis, 2022). However, 16.06% of the respondents found these grammar pattern as "Easy". Besides, 11.68% of the respondents found it as "Very Easy". And 27.74% of learners found using the correct infinitive and gerund as "Difficult". These groups may benefit from enhanced pattern recognition abilities developed through extensive reading (Schmidt, 2022). A small percentage, 5.11%, of the students remained "Neutral". This shows that few

learners understand basic distinctions but struggle with advanced applications, particularly when dealing with perception verbs, adjectives with different meanings, or passive constructions.

17. How difficult is it for you to use conditional clauses in sentences?

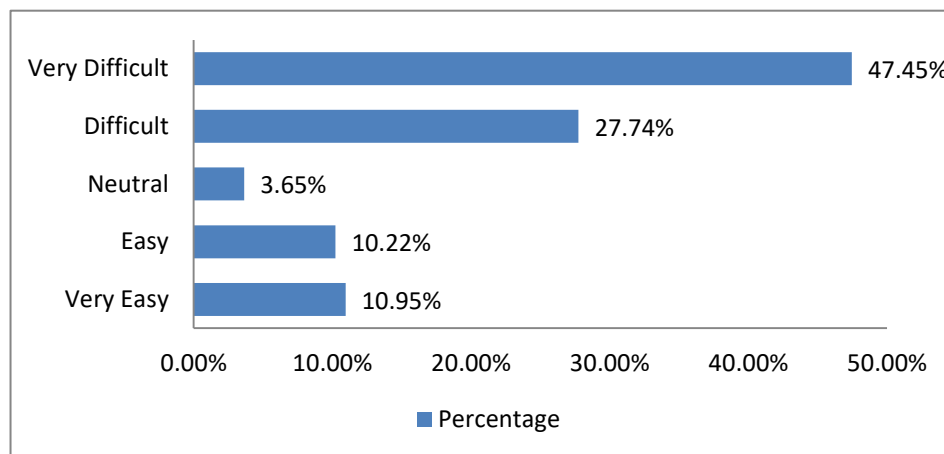


Figure 16. The difficulty level of using correct conditional clauses

Figure 16 demonstrates that conditional clauses present substantial challenges for the majority of learners. This analysis indicates that 47.45% of the respondents found using the correct conditional clause as "Very Difficult". In additional 27.74% of the respondents considered it as "Difficult." This indicates that a combined 75.19% of learners struggles with conditionals clause usage. This result aligns with Muayad's (2018) findings and is further supported by recent cognitive linguistics research showing that conditional constructions require simultaneous processing of complex temporal relationships, hypothetical reasoning, and syntactic patterning (Ifantidou & Hatzidaki, 2023). The difficulty stems from the need to coordinate multiple grammatical elements: (1) tense sequencing across clauses, (2) modal verb selection appropriate to the conditional type, and (3) pragmatic awareness of hypothetical versus real situations (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2022). These cognitive demands are compounded by the four primary conditional types and their numerous mixed variations, each requiring distinct verb tense combinations (Gabrys-Barker, 2023). On the other hand, 10.95% of the participants found using the correct conditionals as "Very Easy". Besides, 10.22% of the participants found it "Easy." This shows that a total of 21.17% of participants have mastered this grammar pattern. A small percentage (3.65%) of the students responded "Neutral," which represents few learners understand basic conditional rules but struggle with application in cognitively demanding contexts, particularly when dealing with mixed conditionals or implied conditionals (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2023).

18. How challenging is it for you to use prepositions correctly?

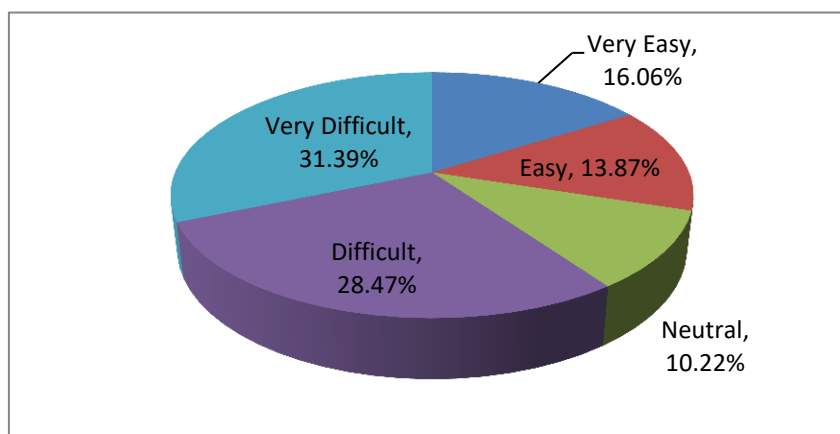


Figure 17. The difficulty level of using correct prepositions

Figure 17 reveals challenges in mastering English preposition usage. This analysis shows that 31.39% of respondents found this grammatical structure as "Very Difficult". In additional 28.47% of the respondents considered this grammar pattern as "Difficult." This means a combined 59.86% of learners struggles with prepositions. This finding aligns with Omenogor and Akpojisheri's (2024) findings regarding the polysemous nature of prepositions. In addition, the recent cognitive linguistics research (Tyler & Evans, 2023) demonstrates that these difficulties stem from three primary sources: (1) the highly context-dependent meaning variations of core prepositions, (2) the

abstract metaphorical extensions of spatial meanings, and (3) the lack of consistent one-to-one mappings between prepositions across languages. Particularly problematic are phrasal verbs and prepositional phrases where the meaning becomes idiomatic; requiring holistic learning rather than compositional (Liu, 2023). On the other hand, 16.06% of the participants found using the correct preposition as "Very Easy". And 13.87% of the respondents found this grammar pattern as "Easy". This indicates that approximately 29.93% of participants have developed relative proficiency in using correct preposition. These groups may benefit from enhanced pattern recognition abilities developed through extensive reading, supporting the usage-based acquisition hypothesis (Bybee, 2022). Whereas, 10.22% of the students responded "Neutral". This result shows that few learners grasp basic preposition uses but they struggle with metaphorical applications.

5. Discussion

The overall analysis of the data confirms that majority of the respondents have challenged using the correct grammar patterns in their spoken and written materials. The results of the analyzed data indicate that over two-thirds of learners (67.16%) have moderate to extreme difficulty in understanding grammar. This needs a paradigm shift in grammar instruction: rather than isolated rule-teaching, interventions should integrate collocation drills, sentence-combining exercises to address positional flexibility and pragmatic functions (Liu & Jiang, 2021). Furthermore, diagnostic assessments should identify adverb causing major difficulty. In addition, the finding confirms possessive forms as a critical challenge for the majority of the respondents. This also needs a shift beyond traditional rule-explanation toward inductive, consciousness-raising tasks that guide learners to self-discover patterns in authentic texts (Ellis, 2020). Moreover, the result demonstrates that the majority of respondents face significant difficulty in using the correct modal auxiliaries. In addition, the major grammar challenges that students encounter are relative clauses, determiners, tenses, conjunctions, and preposition. Moreover, difficulties such as reported speech, articles, conditionals, passive, and active are the other grammar difficulties that learners face. Identifying these grammar difficulties enables educators to design targeted grammar instruction and provide ample repetition practice (Ellis, 2006), thereby furnishing learners with a more solid foundational understanding and boosting their confidence in using these grammar patterns effectively. Addressing these difficulties through focused teaching strategies represents a key avenue for learners grammar improvement. Furthermore, the result demonstrates that the majority of participants lack a deeper understanding of English grammar. These findings highlight the critical role of deliberate, contextualized practice and explicit grammatical guidance in mastering this specific grammatical domain (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Addressing the identified challenges, syntactic positioning and contextual appropriate through focused pedagogical strategies is paramount for equipping learners with the necessary skills to use grammar effectively and confidently in communication.

Similarly, the finding reveals that infinitives and gerunds remain a substantial hurdle for most learners despite its foundational role in communication. This requires pedagogical interventions emphasizing structured output practice, explicit instruction on inversion patterns, and enhanced awareness of L1-L2 syntactic contrasts (Ortega, 2021). Integrating scaffolded production tasks into communicative activities such as information-gap exercises or problem-solving scenarios can systematically build accuracy while maintaining engagement, ultimately addressing the rule-application deficits identified across proficiency levels (Nassaji, 2020). In addition, the data confirms that article and preposition usage constitute one of the most persistent grammatical hurdles for English language learners. This also needs pedagogical interventions that move beyond rule memorization. As Sarko (2022) demonstrates, consciousness-raising tasks that contrast article usage across genres and discourse contexts improve accuracy. Furthermore, corpus-based exercises that highlight various grammar patterns in authentic texts help learners internalize constraints on proper article selection (Crosthwaite, 2020). Moreover, the finding confirms SVA as a persistent threshold concept in English grammar acquisition. Diagnostic error analysis should inform targeted instruction which focus on high-frequency error patterns such as collective noun agreement and long-distance dependencies (Liu, 2022). As Putri et al. (2023) advocate, scaffolded production exercises progressing from controlled sentence-combination tasks to discourse-level editing practice significantly enhance accuracy. ESL instructors should further employ contrastive metalinguistic explanations highlighting L1-L2 structural differences, thereby addressing the cognitive and cross-linguistic roots of SVA errors identified across proficiency levels (Ortega, 2021).

Generally, targeted educational strategies that integrate explicit rule explanation with extensive contextualized practice, diagnostic feedback, and metalinguistic awareness activities should be employed to address the multifaceted nature of grammar difficulties.

6. Conclusion

Grammar is one of the key components of teaching and learning a language. It significantly impacts second language learning by providing the structure for meaningful communication, enabling learners to express themselves clearly and promoting a deeper understanding of written and spoken language. Students continue to struggle with learning English, its grammar, and they experience weaknesses in their grammar that manifest in their spoken or written language. , the purpose of this study is to examine the challenges associated with learning English grammar and to provide strategies for overcoming these challenges. The findings of the study revealed that students at different stages encounter numerous challenges when studying English grammar such as relative clauses, determiners, tenses, conjunctions, prepositions, reported speech, articles, conditionals, passive, and active. The findings of the study show that students have difficulties in understanding English grammar. These issues can be linked to outdated teaching methods, unsuitable curricula, and students' lack of enthusiasm. Most teachers are unable to vary the ways they teach English grammar, and they do not focus on communicative teaching activities. Additionally, the majority of the students lack motivation to learn English grammar. Furthermore, the study suggests strategies to help students overcome the challenges associated with learning English grammar. These strategies are using contemporary grammar teaching methods, motivating students to practice grammar exercises, and boosting students' self-confidence.

Acknowledgments

We greatly appreciate the valuable support of Rift Valley University.

Authors' contributions

Dr. T. Jayasudha revised the manuscript.

Ramesh Pettela revised the manuscript.

Dr. G. Arun edited the manuscript.

Dr. Dhanyamol C.T edited the manuscript

Dr. Ramaiyan D edited the manuscript

Dr. Lamessa Oli developed the concepts presented in the article, developed the questionnaire, collected, analyzed and interpreted data, discussed the research findings, ensured the overall clarity of the paper, and wrote the manuscript.

We, authors provided critical insights in edition and revision of the final version of the manuscript

Funding information

This research is not funded with any grant from public, commercial, or non-profit funding agencies.

Competing interests

We, the authors, declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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