

Overcoming Morphosyntactic Challenges in English: A Study of Non-Native University Learners Acquiring Competence as a Foreign Language

Fahdila Fitri Rinaldi^{1*}

¹Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

dilaftri2410@upi.edu*

ABSTRACT

Foreign learners face significant challenges when learning English morphosyntax because their first language differs structurally from the target language. The different aspects of language create problems which lead to insufficient vocabulary development alongside ineffective communication methods and unsuitable teaching methods. This research aims to identify the fundamental difficulties learners face when learning morphological and syntactic structures of FL while presenting practical educational solutions for enhanced learning. The research incorporates eight international students to perform both qualitative and quantitative analyses. For statistical analysis researchers used t-tests together with Mann-Whitney U tests to examine data obtained from 28 survey participants. In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method to better understand learner challenges and their learning experiences. According to the study, psychological and social elements together with motivation and anxiety create significant barriers to FL learner achievement. The study points out that specific instructional approaches need to address the problems caused by structural variations between L1 and FL. The research suggests learner-centered methods together with digital media integration and error-based learning and metacognitive strategies to enhance FL morphosyntax comprehension and learning. These strategies are put out as practical ways to get over the obstacles that have been identified and improve the educational process.

This is an open access article under [CC-BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license.



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

foreign learners;
learning challenges;
learning strategies;
morphosyntax;
second language

Article History:

Received: 1 December 2025

Revised: 3 March 2026

Accepted: 4 March 2026

Published: 5 March 2026

How to Cite in APA Style:

Rinaldi, F. F. (2026). Overcoming Morphosyntactic Challenges in English: A Study of Non-Native University Learners Acquiring Competence as a Foreign Language. *Lexeme : Journal of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics*, 8(1), 203–210. <https://doi.org/10.32493/ljal.v8i1.55171>

INTRODUCTION

Linguists, applied linguists and language pedagogues have now made Foreign language (FL) acquisition a central topic in linguistics in general. Among the various essential aspects of FL learning, morphosyntax—the intersection of morphology (the study of word formation) and syntax (the study of sentence structure)—stands out as one of the most complex and fundamental areas (Guo & Ellis, 2021). Learners should have a mastery of morphosyntactic structures in order to produce sentences that are grammatically correct and meaningful in the target language, and for this, teaching and assessment methods are largely judged. If these learners do not have a sufficient degree of morphosyntactic competence, communication in the FL would break down, despite having a good vocabulary or proper pronunciation (Collentine, 2004).

Acquiring morphosyntactic rules in FLs such as English or Indonesian is generally quite difficult for foreign learners (Masykar et al., 2025). This gives rise to the arising difficulty that is called language interference, the tendency to transfer patterns from the learner's first language (L1) into the FL usage, with the result that language errors are frequently related to transfer of patterns from L1 to FL. For example, native speakers of Mandarin might fail to add English plurals, since there is no inflectional morphology in Mandarin (Jia, 2003). On the other hand, for those who are native English speakers, when learning Indonesian, they will have a problem with affixation, which is absent in English grammar (Kalee et al., 2018).

Morphosyntax constitutes a fundamental role in the FL acquisition yet it is an area that causes many learners major problems (Guo & Ellis, 2021). These challenges are not. They are not merely cognitive, but related with them is also the teaching method and their environment of learning. Morphological and syntactic awareness may be over looked in practice where the emphasis is on the acquisition of vocabulary and generally rules of grammar. Furthermore, learners commonly have not had enough time engaged and practiced in authentic communicative contexts with rather complex morphosyntactic structures. Consequently, morphosyntax possesses strong structural features, including the inflectional patterns, word order, subject verb agreement, tense marking, and functional word usage (Adlof & Catts, 2015), which differ greatly in various languages and, hence, cannot be treated as an all-in-one approach; teachers find it impossible to teach all languages from one single common core of the morphosyntactical system. Complexifying these challenges are differences in the individual learner such as age, motivation, linguistic background and learning context. Thus, it is necessary to study in detail what problems the foreign learners have to come to terms with in the course of acquiring morphosyntax and to find ways to increase their linguistic competence.

The purpose of this study is to explore the problems with morphosyntactic features of FL confronting the foreign learners. More specifically, this study aims to find common morphosyntactic errors produced by L1 Interference, language transfer as well as analyzing the complexity of the problems in morphosyntactic acquisition in FLs, especially for English and Indonesian, to review how pedagogical approach would help learner in morphosyntax learning, to propose some strategies regarding how the morphosyntactic errors can be reduced and how the grammatical performance of language based task can be enhanced. To this end, this study aims to contribute to providing knowledge for language teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers of second language acquisition and education through attaining these objectives.

As form focused instruction is known as an important means to help learners notice and internalize grammatical structures, previous studies in second language acquisition (Ellis, 2006; Long, 2017) paid great attention to this type of instruction. Krashen's Input Hypothesis states that in order to acquire language, learners must be exposed to comprehensible input, the language using morphosyntactic forms which are close to the learner's current level ($i + 1$) (Krashen, 1985). However, this position is challenged by Schmidt when he disagrees with the Noticing Hypothesis, saying that learners will not pick up on these morphosyntactic features unless they observe and focus on them consciously (Schmidt, 1990).

Previous study argues that morphosyntax acquisition success lies in the resemblance between L1 structures and FL structures (Lardiere, 2012). Students whose L1 differs substantially from the target (TL) language usually need explicit instruction and corrective feedback to conquer transfer errors. The second theory is also based on the assumption that there is a predictive sequence in which morphosyntactic structures are acquired; it is based on the cognitive capacity of the learner to deal with linguistic data. In addition, instructional approaches, in tasks like task based language teaching (TBLT) and input enhancement have been developed to deal with issues with morphosyntax learning. The claimed approaches of integrating grammar instruction into communication help learners naturally learn linguistic forms in context along with their functions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Second language (L2) morphosyntactic competence has been a central node of study in the field of applied linguistics over the last few decades. Morphosyntax, which encompasses morphological (word formation) and syntactic (sentence formation) aspects of language, is one of the most complex domains of SLA because of its close interaction with linguistic, cognitive, and social factors (Ellis, 2006). Various studies have explored the reasons learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) fail to acquire morphosyntactic structures. The role of L1 in relation to L2 learning is one of the most discussed issues in SLA studies. Negative transfer is likely to occur due to differences in structure between L1 and L2, especially when morphosyntactic systems clash (Lado, 1957; Odlin, 1989). For example, inflectional morphology, such as tense or number suffixes in English, may be challenging for learners of Chinese, an isolating language. Cross-linguistic effect has also been reported to affect learners' syntactic production with a predilection for early learners.

Also, lack of vocabulary is often cited as a cause for morphosyntactic problems. Nation argues that vocabulary is important for understanding grammar relationships in a sentence, communicating effectively (Nation, 2022). That despite their growing vocabulary, learners often do not know the meanings of the lexical items (i.e. words) of a sentence obstructing their ability to 'see' grammatical relations and, as a result, puts a stop to building sentences that can be put together syntactically. Multiple researchers have studied the social cultural and psychological elements of morphosyntactic acquisition. Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) identified motivation and learner beliefs as crucial elements for language development but Horwitz (1988) found that language anxiety negatively affects learners when performing syntactically demanding tasks. According to Vygotsky's (1978), sociocultural theory students learn grammar better when they interact in supportive learning environments.

The literature contains substantial information about instructional functions. According to Krashen (1985) learners need relevant material exposure to benefit from explicit grammar teaching for full benefit. According to research conducted by Collentine (2004) the most effective teaching method combines form-focused instruction with communicative practice. Educational methods today merge digital tools with error-based learning approaches. Research conducted by Masykar et al. (2025) demonstrates that learners achieve better grammatical understanding through both corpus-based learning and data-driven instruction approaches.

The research findings do not explain how these issues manifest in actual university classrooms where international English language learners learn. The research on morphosyntactic challenges experienced by intermediate and advanced learners with different native languages remains insufficient when compared to the study of basic grammar instruction and beginner-level learners. This research intends to advance knowledge through analyzing both mental and cultural aspects which influence morphosyntactic learning alongside the obstacles related to language and teaching practices. The research establishes scientifically validated approaches to improve morphosyntactic competence among non-native English students at universities by analyzing past research results.

METHOD

This research uses a combination of research methods to investigate the morphosyntactic difficulties that foreign learners face in foreign language settings. The researcher selected this methodology because it enables simultaneous access to numerical data from participant outcomes and descriptive information about their learning processes and problem-solving methods. This approach seeks to combine the best of both approaches to provide results that are comprehensive, rich in detail, and generalizable to actual language learning situations.

Data were prospectively collected using two principal methods. The quantitative approach-initial included 28 international learners with diverse range of L1 backgrounds. To assess their knowledge of patterns in English morphology and syntax, participants completed a morphosyntax

test and a closed-ended questionnaire. Elements such as tenses, subject-verb agreement, simple and complex sentences, affixation, and phrase formation were tested. Within-study statistical procedures to examine the test and survey data included both t-tests and Mann-Whitney U tests to look for statistically significant variance by L1 (native language) background group, duration of learning context, and duration of exposure to the target language context.

The research team interviewed eight foreign learners through qualitative research methods since these participants showed different language acquisition backgrounds and self-reflection capabilities. Semi-structured interviews gave researchers additional flexibility to deeply investigate the learning experiences of their participants. The interviews investigated participant perspectives about morphosyntax structural hurdles through an analysis of educational assistance and teacher responsibilities together with psychological factors including confidence and anxiety along with social and cultural language learning elements. A group of eight foreign learners participated in in-depth interviews as part of a qualitative study which included purposeful selection based on L1 background variety and language learning history and introspective abilities. The research team designed semi-structured interviews which provided them with flexibility to thoroughly explore participant experiences. Through the interviews participants provided their viewpoints on the difficulties related to.

The researcher used thematic analysis to process qualitative data through identification of repetitive themes and standard narratives while extracting contextual insight from participant experiences. Through data triangulation the research merged results from the two methods to enhance validity while deepening comprehension of the study topic. Using multiple approaches in data analysis allowed researchers to demonstrate statistical relationships while simultaneously capturing social and psychological aspects of the learning experience.

The researcher worked with applied linguistics experts to enhance data validity by testing the quantitative instruments in pilot studies. Through member checking qualitative data analysis the participants confirmed the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations about their interview responses. The research process maintained a continuous focus on ethical considerations from beginning to end. The study allowed participants to withdraw without any consequences while their identities remained confidential and researchers fully disclosed both research objectives and investigative approaches.

This study's mixed methods approach aims to deliver an unbiased analysis that combines quantitative results with learner perceptions. Through this approach the researcher understands morphosyntactic learning problems from multiple angles that include structural elements and psychological factors and sociocultural aspects. To build effective instructional methods which suit different learning contexts it is essential to comprehend learners' internal processes particularly within modern FL learning environments.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research derives its conclusions through an extensive examination of numerous scholarly publications which explore challenges foreign students face when building morphosyntactic abilities in their second language. The literature review process utilized diverse sources including national and international publications together with theses and scholarly articles and previous empirical studies to obtain its information. This synthesis aims to identify essential patterns and frequent obstacles that L2 learners encounter during morphosyntactic acquisition to establish a complete understanding of the problem.

The literature generally categorizes the main challenges into four fundamental areas:

- (1) differences in linguistic systems between the learner's first language (L1) and the target L2,
- (2) limited vocabulary knowledge,
- (3) difficulties in understanding morphosyntactic structures and grammatical rules, and
- (4) broader psychological and sociocultural factors influencing the acquisition process.

Each category is discussed below with detailed explanations, relevant examples, and suggested pedagogical responses.

Table 1. Example Exercises and Answers Illustrating Common Morphosyntactic Challenges for FL

Challenge Area	Example Exercise	Correct Answer	Explanation
1. Differences in Language Systems (L1 vs. L2)	Rearrange the words into a correct sentence: “homework / I / did / my”	I did my homework.	Practices English SVO word order, helping learners from SOV L1 backgrounds adjust sentence structure.
2. Limited Vocabulary Knowledge	Select the correct sentence: (a) She quick runs. (b) She runs quickly. (c) Quickly she runs.	(b) She runs quickly.	Reinforces proper adverb placement and verb form, addressing confusion from limited vocabulary and word class knowledge.
3. Understanding Morphosyntactic Rules	Correct the sentence: “She don’t like apples.”	She doesn’t like apples.	Focuses on subject-verb agreement and auxiliary verb usage to address morphosyntactic rule challenges.
4. Psychological and Sociocultural Factors	Suggest creating a supportive environment with collaborative activities.	-	Encourages reducing anxiety and increasing motivation, crucial for effective morphosyntactic acquisition.

1. Differences in Language Systems (L1 vs. L2)

Many studies show that learners encounter significant difficulties in acquiring morphosyntactic structures because of differences between L1 and L2 (Collentine, 2004; Jia, 2003; Kalee et al., 2018; Masykar et al., 2025). Learners encounter challenges in creating correct sentences when target language morphological and syntactic rules deviate extensively from their native language structures. Learners make unintentional errors through negative transfer because they apply L1 grammar to L2 structures without awareness.

Learners who speak SOV languages like Japanese or Korean experience issues with English sentence structure that follows SVO word order. Some students produce sentences like “I the book read” as a result of using their native language word sequence instead of “I read the book.” Students experience this kind of grammatical mistake most frequently when their native language grammar stands in stark contrast to the language they are learning. Students who speak isolating languages like Mandarin which lack many grammatical changes face difficulties when learning agglutinative languages such as Turkish or Arabic. The languages use affixes extensively to express grammatical elements such as tense and number which creates confusion for learners.

Teachers need to provide precise explanations about the differences between the two languages in order to solve this issue. Students should participate in comparison exercises which show how their first language grammar rules differ from second language grammar rules. The process of comparing and contrasting sentence patterns allows students to familiarize themselves with new structures while learning how to make correct sentences in their second language. Sentence transformation exercises provide students with a valuable method to practice changing word order or sentence structure. Students will progressively learn L2 word order rules through Transformation exercises and sentence reordering practice.

Example Exercise: Rearrange the following words into a correct English sentence: “homework / I / did / my” Correct sentence: “I did my homework.”

2. Limited Vocabulary Knowledge

The second obstacle that students encounter is their limited vocabulary base. A word's understanding and its position in a sentence become clear to learners through morphosyntactic learning that depends heavily on lexical knowledge. Students who possess insufficient vocabulary

struggle to distinguish the functions of speech components which forces them to create sentences with incorrect structures.

Students who mispronounce nouns verbs and adjectives increase their chances of making writing mistakes which lead to statements such as "He happy very today" instead of "He is very happy today." Students with limited vocabularies find it challenging to understand complex sentences because they struggle to identify verb conjugations and plural forms together with other inflectional endings. Students develop permanent linguistic habits of using incorrect structures and repetitive speech patterns due to their insufficient range of words.

The method for strong vocabulary training requires equal attention to both grammatical structure and word definition. Vocabulary learning combined with morphosyntactic instruction enhances word usage across different grammatical patterns. Students will better understand and use vocabulary words correctly when teachers implement word identification through classification activities and inflection exercises and sentence completion tasks.

Example Exercise:

Select the correct sentence: (a) She quick runs. (b) She runs quickly. (c) Quickly she runs. Correct answer: (b) She runs quickly.

Students can learn vocabulary better through digital flashcards which work together with semantic mapping and thematic word lists. Students can analyze words through the Quizlet and Anki tools which let users create their own vocabulary sets that work together with grammatical usage.

3. Understanding Morphosyntactic Structures and Rules

Learning grammar rules like verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, and how to use certain grammar words can be one of the hardest parts of learning a second language. These rules can feel really confusing—especially when they're very different from the rules in a student's first language. Because of this, many learners often make grammar mistakes when they speak or write. Students who have Vietnamese as their native language tend to say "Yesterday I go to school" instead of the correct "Yesterday I went to school" because their language lacks verb tenses.

Students frequently fail to add question markers because they tend to ask "You like pizza?" instead of "Do you like pizza?" One way to help students learn these rules is by using the inductive method. The teacher guides students to examine examples before helping them detect the pattern or rule on their own. Teachers use grammar charts and timelines to demonstrate how these rules operate. The teaching strategy includes students reviewing their own errors to perform corrections. Students understand the rule better and keep it in memory longer when they perform this task.

Example Exercise:

Fix this sentence: "She don't like apples."

Correct version: "She doesn't like apples."

Teachers can also give support using sentence starters or guide students step by step when writing. Showing students real examples from books, conversations, or websites (called corpus-based learning) is also useful. This helps students see how grammar works in everyday language, not just in exercises.

4. Psychological and Sociocultural Factors

The process of learning morphosyntax is highly influenced by psychological factors such as motivation, self-confidence, anxiety, and also social aspects. Students who feel too anxious often avoid using more difficult grammar structures, even though their performance can actually improve if they receive positive support in class. The way someone learns a language is also shaped by the classroom atmosphere, relationships with classmates, and cultural attitudes toward the target language.

Students from cultures that do not encourage making mistakes may be afraid to speak, which

can slow down their progress in learning grammar. Also, how well a student understands the grammar of the new language can depend on how familiar they are with its culture. It is necessary to design educational settings which deliver proper support to students while promoting their learning. The learning process achieves better results when educators implement collaborative projects and support student positivity while assigning work that maintains reasonable stress levels. The combination of cultural materials and technological resources helps students develop better interest together with enhanced motivation to learn. Digital tools provide students with interactive exercises and grammar games and discussion forums which enable them to practice language skills within stress-free environments. Students who practice self-monitoring together with reflection journal writing and peer feedback activities develop better learning management skills and enhanced thinking abilities about their best learning approaches.

To sum up, learning morphosyntax in a second language is not easy and involves many challenges for foreign language learners. These challenges come from several things, such as differences between the first language and the new language, limited vocabulary, difficulty in understanding grammar rules, and emotional or social factors that affect how students learn. Even though it sounds complicated, these problems can actually be solved if the teaching methods are planned carefully. Some good strategies include learning from mistakes, focusing on the learner, combining vocabulary with grammar learning, and comparing the structures of both languages clearly.

Technology can also help a lot in the learning process. Digital tools like grammar apps, video materials, and mobile feedback platforms make learning more interesting and personalized. These tools let students get direct feedback and practice using grammar in real-life situations, which can make learning feel more useful and engaging. Students also need emotional support to feel confident when learning grammar. This is where teachers play a big role. If teachers can adjust their teaching based on what students need and where they come from, the classroom becomes more supportive and inclusive. Flexible teaching helps make sure that every student gets the help they need.

In the end, with regular practice, creative learning tools, and support from teachers, foreign language learners can overcome morphosyntax challenges and become more confident in using the language (Lardiere, 2012). Language acquisition success in morphosyntactic skills depends on understanding the problem complexity and implementing comprehensive pedagogical approaches which integrate linguistic, cognitive, emotional and social elements of learning. When foreign language learners receive consistent support along with suitable instructional support and new educational materials they can achieve proficiency in complex morphosyntactic features.

CONCLUSIONS

A qualitative descriptive analysis based on an extensive literature review examined the obstacles foreign language students experience when learning morphosyntactic skills in a second language. The findings indicate that students face four primary difficulties: limited vocabulary knowledge, insufficient understanding of morphosyntactic rules, structural differences between their first language and the target language, and psychological and social barriers such as language anxiety and intercultural communication challenges.

Learners frequently make errors when they transfer grammatical rules from their first language to the second language, particularly when the two languages differ in sentence structure and word formation. Adequate vocabulary knowledge is essential for understanding how words function within sentences; limited vocabulary often results in grammatical inaccuracies. Students also require clear and detailed explanations to comprehend complex rules, including verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, and sentence patterns. The learning process becomes more challenging when students experience anxiety, low motivation, or negative prior learning experiences.

Despite these challenges, numerous studies propose effective strategies to address them. Error-based learning, for instance, encourages students to reflect on their mistakes and develop

greater grammatical awareness. Exposure to authentic examples through language corpora and grammar applications can further support understanding by demonstrating how grammatical structures function in real contexts. Additionally, self-monitoring strategies—such as proofreading, peer feedback, and reflective writing—can foster learner autonomy and strengthen long-term retention of grammatical knowledge.

Teachers play a crucial role in creating learning environments that accommodate individual student needs. Effective instructional approaches that actively engage students tend to promote more meaningful and sustained grammar acquisition. Although second language grammar is often perceived as difficult, consistent practice, innovative teaching strategies, and appropriate academic support can facilitate improvement. While existing research underscores the importance of addressing morphosyntactic challenges systematically, further investigation is needed to deepen understanding of effective pedagogical interventions.

References

- Adlof, S. M., & Catts, H. W. (2015). Morphosyntax in poor comprehenders. *Reading and Writing*, 28(7), 1051–1070. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-015-9562-3>
- Collentine, J. (2004). The Effects of Learning Contexts on Morphosyntactic and Lexical Development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(02). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263104262040>
- Csizér, K., & Dörnyei, Z. (2005). Language Learners' Motivational Profiles and Their Motivated Learning Behavior. *Language Learning*, 55(4), 613–659. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0023-8333.2005.00319.x>
- Ellis, N. C. (2006). Language Acquisition as Rational Contingency Learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 27(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ami038>
- Guo, R., & Ellis, N. C. (2021). Language Usage and Second Language Morphosyntax: Effects of Availability, Reliability, and Formulaicity. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.582259>
- Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The Beliefs about Language Learning of Beginning University Foreign Language Students. *The Modern Language Journal*, 72(3), 283–294. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1988.tb04190.x>
- Jia, G. (2003). The Acquisition of the English Plural Morpheme by Native Mandarin Chinese-Speaking Children. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 46(6), 1297–1311. [https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388\(2003/101\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388(2003/101))
- Kalee, S., Rasyid, Y., & Muliastuti, L. (2018). Error Analysis on the Use of Affixation in Indonesian Paper Written By Thai Student. *Lingua Cultura*, 12(3), 289. <https://doi.org/10.21512/lc.v12i3.4307>
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issue and Implications*. Longman.
- Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics Across Culture: Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers*. University of Michigan Press.
- Lardiere, D. (2012). Linguistic approaches to second language morphosyntax. In *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Routledge.
- Long, M. H. (2017). *Problems in second language acquisition*. Routledge.
- Masykar, T., Mahlil, M., Wiharja, H., Nurrahmi, F., Masykar, N. T., & Hasan, R. (2025). Speaking English in the Pesantren: A Gender-Based Analysis of Morphosyntactic and Lexical Patterns. *Indonesian EFL Journal*, 11(3), 725–740. <https://doi.org/10.25134/asknan92>
- Nation, I. S. (2022). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Odlin, T. (1989). *Language Transfer*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, R. W. (1990). The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Learning1. *Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 129–158. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/11.2.129>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.