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Strategies and Reasons When Addressing Grammatical Problems in Thesis Writing

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Strategies and Reasons When Addressing Grammatical Problems in Thesis Writing

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Abstract

English grammar plays an important role in writing, including master's theses. To write an acceptable thesis, students often use strategies to address grammatical errors. They also have reasons for their strategy preferences. In this mixed-methods study, we explored strategies graduate students use to address grammatical errors when writing theses and their reasons for using them. To investigate this, we engaged graduate English language learners (N = 68) at an Indonesian university. The findings showed that the most frequently used strategy was checking online sources (M = 3.99), while the least used strategy was paying someone to edit (M = 1.21).

Keywords: strategy, grammatical problem, thesis writing

1. Introduction

Writing is an essential language skill in teaching and learning English, and it is often considered the most challenging of the four language skills (Ceylan, 2019). Additionally, writing can serve as an indicator of students' language learning success, as it involves developing thinking skills to address issues of content, organization, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (Mohammad, Al-Mofti & Hussein, 2020; Ma, 2021).

To express ideas effectively, students should master five general components: content, form, grammar, style, and rules (Ampa & Quraisy, 2018). Students' writing often involves grammatical errors, which can impede readers' comprehension. Therefore, it is essential for students to address English grammar to ensure clarity. As Alufohai (2016) suggests, understanding grammar at the sentence level is fundamental.

Using English grammar effectively is a key determinant of success in academic writing in higher education, and students should possess strong academic writing skills as they are required to

complete various writing projects (Abdulkareem, 2013; Mutimani, 2016; Sanu, 2016; Supriyadi, 2015). In a master's program, for instance, the thesis is the final academic writing project, and students are expected to strive to write one free from grammatical errors and have strategies to address them when they occur.

Various studies have reported that master's students need to learn specific strategies, such as utilizing grammar books and online resources, to address problems related to the use of English grammar, but they still require guidance from their supervisors (Imani & Habil, 2012; Mohammed & Abdulhussein, 2015; Sugeng, 2016).

Other strategies reported include relying on intuition, pre-existing knowledge, the five senses, and paraphrasing. In addition, several studies have suggested broader strategies. Utami (2018), for instance, proposed that schools and teachers should enhance their teaching skills to improve students' grammar proficiency, thinking skills, and self-confidence. Thus, all parties must be involved in facilitating students' improvement.

Previous studies have primarily focused on analyzing students' grammatical errors and identifying strategies to address them. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding strategies specifically used to address grammatical errors in writing a thesis and the underlying reasons for these strategies. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating such strategies and students' rationales.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Grammar Problem-solving Strategies

Many students require assistance with grammatical errors when writing their theses. Grammar is one of the fundamental components of academic writing. According to Thornbury (1999), grammar is an integral part of learning the form or structure of a language and explaining the rules of how sentences are formed. Similarly, Lock (1996) stated that grammar is seen as a resource for creating meaning in written discourse. This implies that students need to organize and arrange sentences well to improve their writing skills. Therefore, students need to adopt strategies in their academic writing to address grammatical errors.

Strategies are necessary to help students overcome writing difficulties and experience growth. For instance, Imani and Habil (2012) stated that the strategies include (a) asking a supervisor for help, (b) referring to a grammar book, (c) asking the supervisor to introduce someone with experience, (d) copying functional patterns in books or articles; (e) learning functional patterns in articles or books, (f) avoiding complicated patterns or words, (g) using a pattern even if you are not sure it is correct, (h) paying someone to edit, (i) asking colleagues who are more experienced and knowledgeable, (j) asking the lecturer, and (k) using online sources. These strategies can be applied by students, particularly those who experience difficulties or errors when writing theses.

2.2 Writing Master Theses

Writing a thesis is often a requirement to complete graduate studies, and theses must be written in an appropriate formal academic style because they require logic and structure, as well as new developments, that help the reader understand the arguments presented. Swarni (2016) argued that theses should be written in correct, coherent language and in an appropriate style.

The thesis writing process involves presenting an argument combined with a description and discussion of the research that has been done. Good academic writing must be clear and concise, and theses must be written straightforwardly so the points conveyed can be interesting (Soles, 2010). Thus, it is necessary to avoid using unnecessary words, choose the right ones to convey the meaning of the writing accurately, and carefully consider all aspects of language to avoid making errors. If errors are made, students also need strategies to address them.

3. Method

The study used a mixed-method design to investigate the grammatical problem-solving strategies used by MA students (N = 68) at the University of Bengkulu, Indonesia, and students' reasons for using them. The students were aged 20-45 and in the second and fourth semesters of the academic year 2021-2022. The data were collected using an 11-item questionnaire, five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was adapted from Imani and Habil (2012) and delivered through Google Forms via the classes' WhatsApp groups. The data were further explored by conducting semi-structured interviews, which drew on the 11 questions. Forty-seven participants declared their willingness to participate in interviews, and eight were randomly selected. The interviews lasted an average of 8-10 minutes. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data were explored using Miles et al.'s (2014) emergent category procedure, which consists of stages of data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing.

4. Results

4.1 Strategies for Solving Grammatical Problems

Based on the data analyses, we found that students used 11 strategies to address grammatical errors. Of these, six were often used (items 11, 5, 2, 9, 1, 6), three strategies were sometimes used (items 4, 10, 7), one strategy was seldom used (item 3), and one was almost never used (item 8) (Table 1).

Table 1. Students' Strategies for Solving Grammatical Problems

Item	Strategies	M	SD
1	Ask a supervisor for help.	3.51	0.98
2	Refer to the grammar book.	3.66	0.92
3	Ask the supervisor to introduce someone with experience.	2.04	1.00

4	Copy functional patterns in books or articles.	3.26	0.89
5	Learn functional patterns in articles or books.	3.94	0.75
6	Avoiding complicated patterns or words.	3.50	0.76
7	Using a pattern even if you are not sure it is correct.	3.00	0.96
8	Pay someone to edit.	1.21	0.59
9	Ask colleagues who are more experienced and knowledgeable.	3.66	1.00
10	Ask the lecturer.	3.19	1.12
11	Checking online sources.	3.99	0.82

As shown in Table 1, the strategy most often used was checking online resources (M = 3.99), while the least used strategy was item 8, paying someone to edit (M = 1.21). The reasons for using the most and least strategies will be explained in the next section.

4.2 The Reasons for the Uses of Strategies in Solving Grammatical Problems

This section examined the reasons why master's students employ specific strategies to address grammatical problems while writing their thesis, with a focus on the most and least frequently used strategies. According to the data presented in Table 1, the strategy utilized most often was item 11, which involves checking online sources, while the least utilized strategy was item 8, which involves paying someone to edit.

The following is an analysis of the results of student interviews regarding the reasons for checking online sources. Several themes emerged: helpfulness, comprehensiveness, price, time (urgency), specificity (location of errors), speed, and ease.

> I often check the writing on online resources because I think it is practical and very helpful in my writing. The online resource application that I often use is the Grammarly application. This is because the application can be used for free [....] This application is very helpful. Moreover, if you use the premium one, the application will check the error checking in as much detail as possible. (Respondent 1).

> I think online sources can correct a few mistakes in my writing. It can be used to check my writing anytime and anywhere, so it's very efficient, especially during urgent times. I usually use Grammarly to check my grammar. It is very useful in helping to improve the quality of my writing. It also provides information about the location of the grammatical errors I have made so that the editing process becomes faster [....] (Respondent 2)

> I often use the strategy of checking writing on online sources because it is easier and doesn't need to go anywhere, and there are many online grammar check applications today. In checking grammar, I mostly use the Grammarly app. In my opinion, this application is easy to use in reducing grammatical errors in writing [....] Grammarly is also very helpful in correcting grammatical errors whose standard formulation is [....] (Respondent 8).

Based on the results, the least used strategy was item 8 (paying someone to edit). The following was an analysis of the results of student interviews regarding the reasons for using online sources. Several themes emerged: wanting to do it by oneself, having other resources available (online sources, instructor, senior peers), and wanting to learn more:

> I don't pay anyone to solve grammatical problems in writing a thesis. I tried to try it myself by checking online and asking the lecturer for help to check the grammar in the thesis that I made [....] (Respondent 7).

> I want to explore my own words, study independently or self-proofreading and learn to do my scientific work without editing it with the help of other people for a fee [....] (Respondent 5)

> I have never paid anyone to do my thesis. I work on it from my results and efforts. However, I often ask my seniors for help to re-check the thesis that I am working on, but not by paying for it [....] (Respondent 3)

In addition, an unexpected strategy emerged: *Watching English movies with subtitles* to overcome grammatical problems. The following excerpt for this additional strategy is illustrated as follows:

> Watching movies with subtitles [....] (Respondent 4)

> Reading or watching kids' movie or book as they rarely use figurative language for those, so I could learn "proper grammar" easier. [....] (Respondent 2)

5. Discussion

In this study, we explored strategies used by graduate students to address grammatical problems in writing a thesis and the reasons for using the strategies.

5.1 Strategies for Solving Grammatical Problems

The results indicated that 11 strategies were employed. This is consistent with Imani and Habil (2012). Among these strategies, students predominantly utilized the strategy of learning functional patterns from articles or books and checking online resources. This suggests that students primarily relied on recognizing functional patterns in written materials and consulting online resources to mitigate grammatical errors in their writing.

During the interviews, an additional strategy emerged, i.e., watching English movies with subtitles. This approach aligns with Hayati and Mohmedi (2011) and Nurrahmah and Romdanih (2020), who stated that students exposed to English movie subtitles exhibit greater English proficiency than

those who watched movies with subtitles in their native language. It is similarly associated with Roslimet al (2021), who reported that English subtitles can play an important role in developing grammar competencies (Roslimet et al., 2021).

5.2 The Reasons for the Uses of Strategies in Solving Grammatical Problems

The results showed that checking online sources was the most widely used strategy. The participants reported that online resources were beneficial because online sources can check grammatical errors and be used at any time. This finding aligns with McAlexander (2000), "Grammar checkers, now a part of most word processing programs, flag what they perceive as stylistic, grammatical, or mechanical problems in a document by highlighting or underlining them, and upon request comment on, explain, and sometimes suggest corrections for each problem" (p. 125).

The online source that students often used was Grammarly. This aligns with previous research (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Nova, 2018; Rao et al., 2019), which explained students often use this source when writing theses. The students reported that the application was preferred due to price, ease, speed, means of helpfulness, and identifying the location of writing errors, noting the types and forms of grammatical errors, providing suggestions for corrections, and providing an explanation and rule behind each error.

Conversely, the least often used strategy was seeking paid editing. This finding is attributed to cost and is in accordance with Azeez and Koy (2020). who found that paid proofreading was not often used. Additionally, the students reported being more inclined to seek other editing strategies: Wanting to do it by oneself, using other available resources (online sources, instructor, senior peers), and wanting to learn more.

6. Conclusion

Grammatical problems are often experienced by graduate students when writing master's theses. As such, it is necessary to use strategies to address grammatical issues. The results showed that 11 strategies were used. Of these, the most widely used was using online sources, and the least used was paying someone else to edit their thesis.

While this study has practical applications for teachers and furthers the literature in this area, the study was limited to students of the master's program in English education at the University of Bengkulu. Therefore, further research on a larger scale involving students from private and public universities, locally and internationally, is recommended, which would further inform the literature in this area.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests
We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Funding Disclosure/Acknowledgement

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