

EXPLORING SUBJECTIVE DIFFICULTY AS L2 EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE IN ADVANCED GRAMMAR EXAM

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Abstract

Perceiving the difficulty to complete an exam for students is possibly diverse. Indeed, this kind of difficulty called as subjective difficulty is faced by TEFL students in any degree. This study aims to explore kinds of subjective difficulty perceived by the TEFL master students in completing Advanced Grammar Exam. In this exam, the students are given tasks to identify the ungrammatical features of sentences and explain the errors in form of metalanguage. To obtain the data, a qualitative method was selected to analyze this case through collecting documents and conducting interviews. The finding revealed that most of the students difficult to explain the grammatical rules. It was influenced by several variables such as the accuracy of the grammatical rules, the familiarity of the task, and the materials of the exam. Practically, determining or producing metalanguage to explain the errors in the exam required not only the analysis process but also the metacognitive process. The issues related to explicit knowledge, metalanguage, and grammar exams were discussed as well.

Keywords: subjective difficulty, explicit knowledge, metalanguage

Introduction

Subjective difficulty is a relative perception of difficulties which are caused by any students' variables (e.g. perception, experience, grammatical rules) in language learning (DeKeyser, 2003; Ellis, 2006). In relation to explicit knowledge, Ellis (2006) argued that this difficult was interconnected by analyzed knowledge and metalinguistic knowledge. He defined, in brief, that *analyzed* knowledge was knowledge to analyze linguistic structures (e.g. phrases, in /dependent clauses, sentences). Meanwhile, *metalinguistic* knowledge was knowledge about metalanguage for labeling linguistic structures (e.g. I go to school –the underline word is verb). However, frequently, students' metalinguistic knowledge produces imprecise and inaccurate declarative rules (Ellis, 2004). This indicates that there is a difficulty perceived by students.

Many language learners and teachers have already understood explicit knowledge and subjective difficulty. However, there are only some of them who concern with its elements (e.g. metalanguage); particularly in language exams.

The use of 'metalanguage' is often interchangeably with 'terminology' since both are similar. Metalanguage is language's elements (mostly words and phrases) that used to talk about language. Generally, Fortune (2005) distinguished it into two categories: *technical* (e.g. verb) and *nontechnical* metalanguage (e.g. 'mean'). Meanwhile, terminology is a collection of (pedagogic and scientific) words (Berry, 2010). It is categorized into three types. First, *transparent* type is term which the meaning implies its referent (e.g. **past tense** refers to **the past event**). Second, *opaque* type is term which the meaning does not imply its meaning (e.g. **verb**). Third, *iconic* type is term which relies on a formal relationship to its referent (e.g. **-ed form** refers to **a verb in the past form**); it implies that this type is the 'combination' which connecting two types before. In brief, I conclude that terminology is technical metalanguage.

Most of these notions occur in a grammar exam which requires the use of metalanguage as its answers. For instance, Tsang (2011) found that the task of

explaining grammatical rules in form of terminology (e.g. *subject-verb agreement*) was the most difficult task than others (e.g. correcting) for in service Hong Kong English teachers. Dikici (2012) found that the pre-service teachers have weakness on some terminologies (e.g. *infinitive, conjugation*). Recently, similar exam had already been administered to examine his TEFL master students. To explore this case, two research questions were addressed as follows.

1. What is the most difficult grammatical rule in the exam?
2. What difficulty is perceived by the students in completing the exam?

Methodology

This study applied qualitative case study method. The data obtained through collecting the seventeen pieces of final exam results from 17 students. However, there were only 10 of them who willing to be interviewed. To enhance the credibility of data from the other instruments, I conducted two interviews (un- and semi-structured) with the lecturer. All names had been changed into pseudonym.

The final term exam entitled *TOEFL Model Examinations* was a multiple choices test which consisted of two parts. Part I consisted of 15 incomplete sentences. Part II consisted of 25 ungrammatical sentences (items number 16-40). Specifically, the items should be answered by 17 metalanguage (e.g. *the form of verb, subjunctive*) based on the lecturer's answers key. However, this study only focused on Part II. In this part, the students were not only demanded to select the correct answer (*a, b, c or d*) but also to make a reason of the answer by explaining its rules. Related to the scoring method, the lecturer gave 1 point if the selected answer and the rule were correct, ½ point if the selected answer was correct but the rule was incorrect, and 0 point if both answers were incorrect. After the exam, the lecturer gave feedback to the students related to errors they made and what the correct answers should be. As

noted, the results of the exam were scored and judged by the lecturer.

I analyzed the data in three steps. First, counting the students' error based on their exam. Second, classifying the answers key based on the categories of metalanguage (Fortune, 2005) and types (Berry, 2010). Third, interpreting the students and the lecturer's admission based on their interviews.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and the discussion were parts of a larger scale study (Arif, in press).

1. The most difficult grammatical rule was *subjunctive*.

Totally, there were 21 errors. It showed on item number 28 (16 occurrences) and item number 40 (5 occurrences).

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| <p>28. It is essential that the temperature (A) is not elevated (B) <u>to a point</u> where the substance formed (C) <u>may become</u> unstable and decompose into (D) <u>its</u> constituent elements.</p> <p>40. Professor Baker recommended that we (A) are present at the reception (B) <u>this afternoon</u> in order (C) <u>to meet</u> the representatives (D) <u>from</u> the Fulbright Commission.</p> |
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Figure 1. Sample of *Subjunctive* Items

On the item number 28, most of the students got 0 points because they were unable to analyze and find where the error located. It implied the students' analyzed knowledge was weak to complete this kind of item. On the contrary, the students' analyzed knowledge operated better on item number 40. Many students were able to find the error.

However, they failed to achieve 1 point because many of them were not able to explain the ungrammatical rule (*subjunctive*) accurately. Some inaccurate rules in their results were *past tense, there are two verbs, problem with to be, and verb agreement*. These rules were rejected by the lecturer because it had least or even no relationship with *subjunctive*. This indicated that the students' metalinguistic knowledge was not



accurate and weak. That was why on item number 40, they only got ½ point. Despite the students’ metalinguistic knowledge, other possibilities were related to the nature of metalanguage that they used to explain the ungrammatical rules.

Almost all of the answers were categorized as technical metalanguage; only *despite of* which was non-technical (see table 1). Totally, of the twenty four terminologies, these twelve were categorized as opaque. The opaque terms were *subjunctive* (2), *the form of verb* (2), *noun* (2), *subject-verb agreement* (2), *relative pronoun* (1), *adverb* (2), *pronoun* (1), *to-infinitive* (1), and *noun-the process of forming* (1). In short, the students were demanded to explain the answers of the exam which contained many technical metalanguage and opaque terms.

Table 1. Metalanguage and Terminology Analysis

Item number	Answer key	Type of terminology
16	Parallel	Transparent
17	Condition	Transparent
18	The form of verb	Opaque
22	Preposition	Transparent
23	Despite of*	(*non-technical)
24	Repetitive/double	Transparent
27	Past tense	Transparent
32	Pronoun	Opaque
33	Multiple number	Transparent
34	Adverb	Opaque
37	Subject/ verb agreement	Opaque
38	To infinitive	Opaque
39	Noun- the process of forming	Opaque
40	Subjunctive	Opaque
TOTAL		Non-tech=1 Technical=24 Opaque=12 Trans=12

This table is adapted from Fortune (2005) and Berry (2010)

Technical metalanguage, particularly the opaque type, was more difficult to be

used and learned than non-technical and transparent (see Ellis, 2006, p. 439). Moreover, *subjunctive* as the most difficult rule in this exam, was a ‘scientific’ term, not a ‘pedagogic’ term and it was also too complicated to be transferred to pedagogic use (see Berry, 2010, p. 35 and 80). Indeed, the use of metalanguage (or terminology) as the answers of a grammar exam was inevitable, however, it brought consequences. For instance, the majority of students failed to achieve the lecturer expectation because there was only one student who accurately wrote *subjunctive* in this exam.

2. Many students admitted that they faced difficulty in explaining grammatical rules. It was influenced by several variables such as the accuracy of the grammatical rules, the familiarity of the task, and the tested materials of the exam. The detail description as follows.

The Precision

The students were difficult to provide the correct and precise grammatical rules. The lecturer expected that the students were able to explain the error in a specific rule but they state it in general. For instance, Urumi wrote *problem with the verb* but the lecturer demanded *subjunctive*.

Alasan (rules) kita dengan alasan Pak Arman itu **tidak sama** gitu lho. Maksudnya, (*I wrote*) ‘*there is a problem with the verb*’ terus Pak Arman tuh mintanya ‘*subjunctive*’ gitu, naah ja dilebih terperinci (Urumi. Interview 6)

Such as mentioned in the finding of question number 1, many students made errors in *subjunctive* items, however, there was a significant difference in its errors’ occurrences per item. Most of the students failed to answer item number 28 correctly but they succeed to answer item number 40 (see Figure 1). Furthermore, based on the students’ results, the lecturer accepted (not considered as wrong rules) some rules for item number 40 were *bare infinitive*, *form of*

be+to+VI, and *problem in verb*. Here, it proved that the students were less-precise to explain the rule such as *subjunctive*. It was implied that the students relied on their explicit knowledge to complete this exam. Such as argued by Ellis (2004), one of the characteristics of explicit knowledge was students' grammatical rules are often imprecise and inaccurate. The finding showed how the students' explicit knowledge worked anomalously. Their analyzed knowledge was able to analyze and find the correct answers for the item 40; however, their metalinguistic knowledge was unable to provide the correct grammatical rules. It was quite possible that the students have not had the complete understanding about what *subjunctive* is.

The lecturer's expectation was reasonable because most of the answers had been written in the guidance book (*TOEFL book II*). The students were asked to answer the exam by stating the subs of a problem.

Di sana (*TOEFL book II*) kan ada *problem with subject and verb* kan ada sub-subnya (e.g. *appositive*), nah kalo hanya ini saja kan mencapai diluarnya (*general*) saja, sub ini bagaimana? **Ini kan general, mestinya ya spesifik.**

(Pak Arman. Interview 8)

He argued that this fault occurred because the students had not paid attention to the exam's instruction.

Sebenarnya itu sangat *basic* ya tapi **sering dilupakan, bagaimana instruksinya** itu, tapi mereka langsung pada mengerjakan jawabannya

(Pak Arman. Interview 8)

In fact, the lecturer not only accepted *subjunctive* but also several alternative answers as far as it had a relationship such as *bare infinitive*, *form of be+to+VI*, and *problem in verb* were some alternatives of *subjunctive*. Possibly, the lecturer recognized that *subjunctive* was too difficult for the students. That was why the lecturer appreciated these answers as the appropriate solution for him and his students.

This Advanced Grammar final exam entitled *TOEFL model examinations* but its

instruction (or task) had been modified. This kind of modification was quite similar with other kinds of exams such as metalanguage test in Tsang (2010) and Grammatical Judgment Test (GJT) in Ellis (2006). Basically, any type of test which requires the use of metalanguage is used to examine students' explicit knowledge. Related to the issue of reliability and validity, Ellis (2004, p.259) argued that such GJT can be reliable but it should be combined with another type of test (e.g. verbal reports). To measure and judge the students' explicit knowledge, the result of the final term Advanced Grammar was combined with the result of their previous exam (mid-term exam).

The Task

The students said that explaining the reasons or rules was a difficult task for them. Previously, they had already familiar with explaining errors in form of detail sentences since undergraduate degree. However, in this exam, the students were demanded to be able to explain it in form of brief and specific phrase of grammatical rules.

Mungkin karena ujian yang **menjabarkan alasan (*grammaticall rules*)**, kebetulan alasan yang... (in my undergraduate) saya **terbiasa dengan alasan yang panjang, detail**. Tapi pada saat ujian bapak memintanya alasan yang singkat dan istilahnya mengerucut padahal itu.

(Delon. Interview 4)

The lecturer explained that it aimed to distinguish Advanced Grammar Class with other informal English courses. He believed that the students were already 'advanced', so they would be able to not only identify the right/ wrong answer but also explain the grammatical error.

tidak hanya benar, benar, salah, (*in answering TOEFL*) ini kan **bukan sekedar mengecek** itu saja, ini yang dilakukan oleh kursus-kursus bahasa inggris di luar sana. Naah yang untuk S2, juga **dicari masalahnya (*grammatical rules that had been broken*)**

(Pak Arman. Interview 8)

The difficulty with the explanation task was similar with Tsang's study (2011). It indicated that this task was not only

perceived as the most difficult task for both teachers; the pre-service (the TEFL master students) or the in-service teachers. Tsang assumed that it was caused by the high cognitive demand.

To explain reasons or rules of an ungrammatical sentence required, at least, five serial processes before it came to the judgment or conclusion that there was an incorrect feature in a sentence. First, reading the ungrammatical sentence. Second, identifying the incorrect feature based on some underline words or phrases. Third, selecting the choice based on the judgment in identification. Fourth, determining the relevant rule based on the selected choice. Fifth, writing the rule in form of word or phrase or clause. As noted, the highest cognitive demand occurred in the fourth process because the students should reflect upon their own cognitions. Furthermore, they should be able to determine the precise rule among other similar rules. For instance, *problem with the form of the comparative & superlative* and *problem with the use of the comparative & superlative* are different based on its rule but both are related to comparative and superlative. This complexity was known as the metacognitive operation.

The Material.

The students said that there are some materials (*subjunctive* and *multiple numbers*) which have not taught in their class but it had already tested in the exam.

33. The new model (A) costs twice (B) more than (C) last (D) year's model

Figure 2. Sample of *multiple numbers* item

Ketika uas grammar itu ternyata ada **materi yang tidak dimuat** di buku panduan (*TOEFL book II*) kita seperti contohnya itu *subjunctive*. (Bagus. Interview 3)

Many of them confessed that they perceived difficulty on *subjunctive*. For instance, Kirana realized that she made errors in completing and explaining the

items which related to *subjunctive* in the exam.

Materi subjunctive, itu yang agak membuat kesalahan pada saat **membuat (explaining) alasan (grammatical lrules)** pada saat menjawab soal-soal ujian. (Kirana. Interview 1)

In her exam, she answered it with *article* (the rejected answer) for the item number 28 and *verb* (the accepted answer) for item number 40. In the same vein, Julian had the same difficulty such as Kirana's. He even said that *subjunctive* 'drained' his cognition.

Adapun **materi** yang 'sedikit' menguras pikirannya itu yaa.. betul tentang *subjunctive* (Julian. Interview 3)

Selecting incorrect features and explaining grammatical rules in ungrammatical sentences not only difficult but also 'exploit' (or 'drain') the students' explicit knowledge (see Ellis, 2004, p. 239). Again, it is one of the characteristics of explicit knowledge. It was common when the students said that the Advanced Grammar Exam was difficult; even for them, the 'advanced' and TEFL master students. Furthermore, this 'exploitation' affected the students' explicit knowledge to complete other items.

The lecturer admitted those *subjunctive* items existed in the exam. However, as justification, the TOEFL-like such he used as the exam had a similar characteristic with the real one which is dynamic.

Ya *subjunctive* itu memang ada karena gini, itu perlu diperhatikan karena mestinya yang saya gunakan ini kan test TOEFL yang sudah sungguhan, kalau yang bukunya itu kan teori tentang tes TOEFL sehingga ini jelas tidak akan sanggup untuk mengcover seluruh materi yang ada di TOEFL karena tes TOEFL itu sangat dinamis, bahannya luar biasa sehingga sulit diduga. (Pak Arman. Interview 8)

The lecturer's decision to use *TOEFL models examinations* as the final exam was in line with *TOEFL book II* as the guidance book. However, in order to develop the

students' explicit knowledge, some discussions or 'hints' related to the materials which would be examined were needed. This issue was similar with Dikici's (2012) finding which revealed that majority of the students favored the presentation of grammar before expecting them to use it. Even the students had already taught about *subjunctive* or other materials in their undergraduate degree, it was quite possible that their memories have vague.

Reaching the end of the interview, the lecturer agreed and realized that there was a problem with students' knowledge about terminology. So far, he assumed that the source of this difficulty was the students' educational background in high school.

Betul, nah ini kaitannya kan dengan **latar belakang pendidikan bahasa inggris di SMA**. Itu kan mereka kan menggunakan, dulu (*more than 5 years ago*) *communicative approach* terus sekarang (*recently*) *genre approach*, naah **ini sama, sangat anti (grammatical) terminologi** (Pak Arman. Interview 8)

This assumption was still unproven. To fill this gap, I invited other researchers to conduct inquiries to reveal the extent of students' knowledge of metalanguage in the undergraduate influence their explicit knowledge in the graduate degree. Furthermore, studies within metalanguage area such as: 1) the effectiveness of using metalanguage to improve TOEFL' score and 2) the comparative study between TEFL students' & TEFL lecturers' knowledge of metalanguage were still limited.

Conclusion

The students faced two main difficulties, namely the difficulty in understanding and explaining grammatical rules. First, the difficulty in understanding grammatical rules was subjective because the analysis of metalanguage and terminology could not provide a clear-cut result. Furthermore, it also influenced by others factors (e.g. familiarity). Second, the difficulty in explaining grammatical rules correctly and precisely was caused by their

weak metalinguistic knowledge since they rarely operated it in their previous grammar exams. It implied that the previous exams in their undergraduate degree have not facilitated to practice and examine metalinguistic knowledge.

To gain the students' metalinguistic knowledge gradually, I suggested to any lecturers who teach grammar to conduct more (pre) exams which facilitate not only analyzed knowledge but also metalinguistic knowledge (see Tsang, 2011, pp. 15-16; Dikici 2012, p. 218 as the references).

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