# Boosting Students' Grammatical Competence through Group Work Activities during Covid-19 Pandemic

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**A B S T R A K**

*Keterampilan tata bahasa adalah komponen yang harus dipelajari dan dikuasai oleh mahasiswa, khususnya mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris. Structure and Written Expression (SWE) dari tes TOEFL adalah salah satu keterampilan tata bahasa yang harus dipahami mahasiswa. Namun, kebanyakan mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan belajar SWE pada tes TOEFL sehingga tidak tertarik untuk mempelajari SWE. Maka, kegiatan diskusi kelompok dilakukan untuk membantu siswa dalam meningkatkan keterampilan tata bahasa mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (PTK) pada kelas intermediate grammar di sebuah universitas swasta di Batam. PTK dilaksanakan dalam dua siklus, dengan 14 siswa mengikuti kegiatan diskusi kelompok selama delapan kali pertemuan. Meskipun terjadi peningkatan pada siklus pertama, nilai rata-rata kelas masih berada pada kategori yang sama sebelum pengimplementasian diskusi kelompok yaitu "rata-rata". Selanjutnya dilakukan siklus kedua dengan beberapa perubahan kegiatan. Peneliti menemukan adanya peningkatan dengan rata-rata 72,65 yang berarti "baik". Hal ini dapat disimpulkan bahwa penerapan diskusi kelompok telah meningkatkan kemampuan grammar mahasiswa. Peningkatan signifikan dicapai dengan menerapkan dua siklus diskusi kelompok. Dapat digarisbawahi kegiatan diskusi kelompok ini diharapkan dapat dilaksanakan juga untuk meningkatkan keterampilan Bahasa Inggris mahasiswa tidak hanya keterampilan tata Bahasa tetapi juga keterampilan yang lain.*

**A B S T R A C T**

Grammatical skills are components that students, particularly English Education students, must learn and master. Structure and written expression (SWE) of a TOEFL test is one of grammatical skills that students must understand. However, students had difficulties learning SWE on a TOEFL test. Some students struggled to grasp the subject and others were uninterested in mastering SWE. As a result, group work activities were conducted to assist students in improving their grammatical skills. The study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) on an intermediate grammar class at a private university in Batam. The CAR was implemented in two cycles, with 14 students participating in group work activities for eight meetings. Despite an improvement in the first cycle, it was found that the class remained in the same category before the group work activities were implemented, which was "average." Next, the second cycle was done with a few changes to the activity. It was revealed that there was an improvement with an average of 72.65, which is "good." it can be concluded that group work implementation in the grammar class had improved students' grammatical skills. The significant improvement was achieved by implementing two cycles of group work. It can be highlighted these group work activities are expected to be implemented to improve students' other skills with different modifications.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Even though it is not the primary purpose, grammatical skills are the major component of English. To form meaningful words and speak fluent English, students must learn and fully understand grammar. Tomakin (2014) argued that persons will not be able to master a language if they are not learning the rules of grammar. Grammar is one of the disciplines in the curriculum that must be taken by students

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specializing in English Education. In this case, students are required to pass grammar classes in addition to other mandatory courses. In other words, it is compulsory for English Education students to understand how to create structures and to increase their fluency to master the four English skills (Zuhriyah, 2021). By mastering grammatical skills, students can help their peers to improve their pronunciation or writing skills. In other words, students who have mastered grammatical skills can provide corrective criticisms to their peers. This practice might encourage students to be more conscious of what is spoken and written by providing feedback. (Rosdiana, 2014). However, grammatical skills are difficult components to master in the process. According to several related studies, teacher-centered learning is ineffective because it can pamper them and it would make them unmotivated (Otukile-Mongwaketse, 2018; Ubulom & Ogwunte, 2017). As a result, students will only have limited opportunities to improve their thinking skills and are unable to solve problems critically.

SWE TOEFL material given in the grammar class of the university is the main focus of this study. During the classes, the subject and test materials were related to SWE. It is argued that SWE is a difficult topic of TOEFL because students must evaluate each question and find faults in numerous questions to give correct responses (Hajri et al., 2018; Muhajir & Gani, 2018). In fact, only some high-achieving students could comprehend the material correctly. In this case, the materials had to be re-explained to those who did not grasp them fully and it consumed a considerable amount of learning time. It helped low-achieving students to fully understand the topic, but it caused the high-achieving students to be fixated on a topic. As a result, the learning objectives were not optimally achieved.

During the observation, students were reluctant to ask about the provided materials. It was also found that there were students who got unsatisfactory practice question test scores. To explore the issue, interviews were conducted with two low-achieving students. In the interview, the students mentioned similar issues about the reluctance in asking questions because they were afraid of being teased by their peers about the materials that should be easy to understand. It is argued that fear of making mistakes and being humiliated by their peers causes students to be passive in class (Halimah, 2018). To solve these issues, methods to maximize the learning process so that all students, including low and high-achieving, could comprehend the material and achieve the desired learning objectives have to be found.

In this case, the study employed an effective strategy to improve the grammatical skills learning process. A strategy that focuses on student participation was implemented to help develop students' cognitive skills and critical thinking. Group work activities were used during the grammatical skills learning process. The focus of this method was to provide cooperative activities and interactions during the learning sessions. This method challenged the conventional idea stating that teaching should be guided by the teacher and low and high-achieving students should be taught separately. By implementing the group work activities, it was found that students tended to help one another. Therefore, group work activities could increase students' learning effectiveness in the classroom. Another study found that the method could provide a pleasant learning environment for the students, as well as enhance their social skills, increase communicative abilities, and serve as a positive role model in the learning process (Çelik et al., 2013). Khan and Akhtar (2017) revealed that group work activities allow low-achieving students to receive assistance from high-achieving students in understanding material. If a student's solution to a question is incorrect, capable students can correct the answer and explain.

This activity aims at developing and improving students' English skills in a group setting. Several studies implemented group activities to help students improve their speaking skills (Ha, 2020; Jayanth & Soundiraraj, 2016; John, 2017; Rospinah et al., 2021; Siahaan, 2019). These studies emphasize that group work is particularly helpful in enhancing EFL students' speaking skills since they chat with their peers. It reduces uneasiness when speaking and exercises their speaking skills. Prior studies also found that group exercise could increase students' grammatical understanding (Farisatma et al., 2017; Lan & Van, 2021). It was found that group work could also help students to improve their grammatical skill scores. Furthermore, Farisatma et al. (2017) who observed high school students and Lan and Van (2021) who observed economics and business administration students also employed the group work method. It was further revealed that General English (GE) was given because the learners were non-English students.

However, studies that implement specific group work on English Education students focusing on structure and written expression (SWE) are yet to be found. To fill the gap, this study employed group work methods that were given to different students in each meeting. Each student was included in a different group in each meeting. In addition, each group had a high-achieving student to supervise the discussion. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the group work process had to be conducted online. Therefore, this study aims at observing the effectiveness of the group work method in helping English Education students to improve their SWE grammatical skills. Since the group work sessions were conducted online, their advantages and disadvantages were also analyzed.

## 2. METHOD

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) as the researcher was actively participating in the teaching and data collection process. Allwright and Bailey (1991) explained CAR as a classroom study that uses an action to improve the quality of the teaching and learning process to achieve better results. Taking the idea into account, the CAR method was employed to assist students in improving their grammatical skills to meet their educational objectives. Arikunto (2006) stated that CAR can be used to solve problems in the learning process based on cycles. Depending on the study's needs, the cycle can be repeated.

This study employed a cycle with various stages that were adopted from McNiff (1992), which are planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The planning process consists of material preparation by the teachers and also preparing observation instruments. The acting process includes the activities that were done by the teacher to implement group work sessions in the classroom. Next, the observation process was done to analyze the effectiveness, as well as its advantages and disadvantages, of the group work session. Lastly, the reflection process was done to evaluate the results. The advantages and disadvantages of the group work session in the classroom were also taken into account for preparing the next cycle.

The study participants were English Education students of the class of 2021 at a private university in Batam. The 14 students who took part in this study were in their second semester. The researcher is a lecturer in this university who teaches grammar classes. The researcher taught grammatical skills to the students from the first to the second semester. In this case, the researcher was familiar with each student's background and competence. Therefore, CAR was simple to conduct.

The class observation had been done before the cycle started. In addition, the students' grammatical skill scores were also reviewed using document analysis. Before the group work session was conducted, two low-achieving students were interviewed to obtain feedback on grammar learning. During the group work, students were instructed to take a pre-test to get the class average score. Next, the average score of the class was calculated using the following categories.

**Table 1.** Students' Score Category

| Score | Category |
|---|---|
| 10-39 | Very Poor |
| 40-60 | Poor |
| 61-70 | Average |
| 71-80 | Good |
| 81-100 | Very Good |

After the class average score was obtained, group work activities were conducted four times in the learning process. Next, the students were provided with a post-test to analyze the improvement of their grammatical skills. In addition, the post-test scores were examined to establish the average score after group work was implemented.

Following the completion of the post-test, the two low-achieving students were re-interviewed to analyze whether the group activity implementation had improved their grammatical skills. Furthermore, the advantages and disadvantages of the implementation of the group work during the class were also asked. The obtained post-test scores were analyzed to receive the class average score. On the other hand, the interview results were transcribed to support the data of the study.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

After planning the approach, three observations were done in January 2022 to identify the students' shortcomings in the classroom. Document analysis was also done to determine students' grammatical skills. Furthermore, the difficulties of learning grammatical skills in the previous semester were also asked. This interview was conducted to learn about the students' experiences in studying grammar and to add to the researcher's assessment of the class from the perspective of the students. Following the observations and the document analysis, 40 pre-test items were given to 14 students. The test items were covering sentence completion and error recognition topics. The pre-test average score of the 14 students was 63.57, which was not categorized as good.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pre-test was conducted online. Microsoft Forms was used to administer the pre-test questions. Students who were taking the pre-test had to employ two different devices. The first device was a desktop or laptop to answer the questions, while the second was a

smartphone. A smartphone had to be connected to Zoom so they could be supervised when working on the pre-test questions. Although students had an hour and a half to complete the test, those who had completed them could exit the Zoom meeting.

During the pre-test, every student appeared to be focused on the questions. To save time, most students appear to answer the easier questions first. Some students seemed confused and they answered the questions randomly. As a result, some students had below-average scores. On the other hand, some students worked on the questions until the time limit was reached, but they still obtained low scores. According to document analysis, students who obtained low scores on the test were categorized as low-achieving students in the grammar class. Two students who obtained low scores were interviewed about the challenges they faced while working on the pre-test. They both agreed that they had enough time to work on the questions. However, they expressed that they got low scores because the questions were difficult and they did not review the materials before the test.

In the first cycle, group work was not implemented directly. First, introductory materials were given to students to activate their prior knowledge. During the group work, students were divided into three groups to discuss various materials throughout four meetings. In each meeting, the group members were changed. It should be noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the group work sessions were conducted online. In this case, Microsoft Teams were used to help with the learning process.

Before the students began to examine the materials, an overview of the topics that should be studied and discussed was given. To make the group, numerous rooms were made and students were directed to enter them according to the list that had been given. After four meetings of the group work session, the first post-test, which consisted of 40 questions related to structure and written expression, was given. It was found that the average score of the class had improved although it did not increase significantly. The class score was found to be average.

Before the second cycle was started, feedback interviews with two low-achieving students were conducted. Both students expressed that the group activity was helpful for them to learn about grammatical skills. The students believed because there were only four individuals in each group, they did not feel reluctant to ask questions if they still did not understand the topic. As a result, they got motivated to learn and to understand the materials. In addition, the students also expressed that the learning process became enjoyable and less stressful because the high-achieving students could explain the materials clearly and patiently to their peers. It was also found that students who participated in group work could understand learning materials independently and freely without the need for the lecturer's guidance.

However, the students had difficulties practicing group work. Despite the prior explanation, the students still experienced difficulties understanding the materials or answering the questions. It indicates that the lecturer's role in group work sessions is critical to increasing the quantity and quality of students' performance during the discussion. However, it was impossible to monitor all groups at the same time during the practice. The two students also reported that in several meetings, some students did not actively participate in the discussion and some high-achieving students tended to work independently.

After the interview process with the low-achieving students was concluded, the group work implementation was modified so it could be applied in the second cycle properly. The group members were modified by adding more high-achieving students to effectively support their low-achieving peers. The students were instructed to work collaboratively to understand the materials before the group work session. Then, each group discussion in Microsoft Teams was monitored. Groups that experienced difficulties with the problems were assisted. In addition, high-achieving students were also directed to assist their group members who did not understand the materials.

The second cycle was conducted throughout four meetings. The same number and type of questions were given to students. After numerous modifications, the second cycle of the group work implementation could be considered successful because students' average scores had improved and could be categorized as good. The results comparison between the pre-test and post-test can be found in the Table 2.

**Table 2.** The Improvement of Students' Achievement

| Aspects | Score | Category |
|---------|-------|----------|
| Pre-Test Scores | 63.57 | Average |
| Post-Test Scores 1 | 67.85 | Average |
| Post-Test Scores 2 | 72.65 | Good |

Based on the Table 2, it can be seen that the grammar learning session results that focused on structure and written expression had improved. Before the cycle was implemented, the class score was average. After four phases of group work were done in the first cycle, it can be seen that the class score

had improved even though it was still in the average category. Then, the second cycle of the group work implementation was done with several modifications. As a result, the class score had improved significantly and could be included in the good category.

**Discussion**

Despite the fact that the pre-test result was average, some students were found to obtain very low scores. Several CAR studies found that the pre-test assessment obtained poor results (Aeni & Arini, 2015; Kunlasomboon et al., 2015; Munir, 2019). Some students had low motivation so they were unwilling to study before the test. This is in line with Mauliya et al., (2020) who believed that poor motivation is one of the factors that make students fail to achieve satisfactory grades. In this case, students did not learn well during and outside of the classroom to improve their knowledge. It was shown that they did not make any effort to develop their skills. Furthermore, some students claimed that they had lack of self-confidence and interest in learning grammar because they felt their friends were easy to understand the materials meanwhile it was hard for them. Other students admitted that they had lack of interest in learning grammar because they felt boring when too much focus on grammar. This internal demotivating factors is in line with Ali and Pathan (2017) who stated that beside external factors which affected students' motivation, internal factors such lack of students' confidence is one of the most perceived demotivating factors in learning grammar.

Following the pre-test, numerous topics including subject and verb agreement, parallel structure, and comparatives and superlatives were taught using group work exercises. These topics were given according to the lesson plans that were developed before the start of the semester. Relevant teaching materials were prepared according to the lesson plans before implementing the group work. Teaching materials must be correctly produced and attractively presented by the teacher because they aid and improve student's knowledge during the learning process (Amadioha, 2009). Moreover, introductory materials to the students is also crucial in order to activate their prior knowledge. Prior knowledge is a foundation that students possess, therefore a student at a higher academic level should have a significant amount of prior knowledge (Suyitno et al., 2019). In other words, activating students' prior knowledge helps direct what they should discuss in class.

To improve students' lack of grammar, the researcher decided to use group work activities. During the group work, students were divided into three groups. The groups were always changed in each meeting. It was done so that each student could interact with different peers in each meeting so that they could obtain new insight and solve the problems by looking at the learning process from various perspectives (Jin & Lee, 2014). They used Microsoft Teams to discuss the materials. The Microsoft teams are really helpful in teaching and learning process. It ensures students follow learning process at the same time although in difference places (Ganesha et al., 2021; Patima et al., 2021).

In the first cycle, there were no difficulties while implementing the strategies. However, the scores did not increase well. It means that some students still faced difficulties in understanding the materials using the strategies. Hence, the researcher interviewed two students who got lower scores. Both students expressed that the group activity was helpful for them to learn about grammatical skills. As Farisatma et al (2017) and Lan and Van (2021) states that group work has a greater well of resources to tap and more information available because of the variety of backgrounds and experiences. It was shown that low-achieving students were supported by their high-achieving peers (Gödek, 2004). The interview results also show that group work implementation can improve students' motivation to study (Alfares, 2017; Burke, 2011; Othman & Murad, 2015). They were also allowed to be responsible for the discussion material (Vijayan et al., 2016). Several difficulties were also found while implementing these group work activities. The students claimed that the lecturer was impossible to monitor all groups at the same time during the practice (Baines et al., 2015). It was hard to maintain the students who did not actively participate in group discussion (Chiriac, 2014; LaBeouf et al., 2016), It made the low-achieving students struggle with the quality of the discussion materials.

To achieve satisfactory resust, the second cycle was done by the researcher (Khasinah, 2013; Syah, 2016). The improvement of these results was obtained from the modification that the researcher set in cycle 2. The researcher asked the high-achieving students truly help their friends who still did not understand the materials. The researcher, further, were always on standby and around the groups' rooms to see discussion process and avoid individual's contribution. This was also done to help students if there were difficulties during discussion. Researcher's role is needed to prompt students' success in achieving the learning objectives (Ayustina et al., 2018; Hung & Mai, 2020). It is confirmed from the low-achieving students that they were satisfied while doing group work activities in this cycle to because they felt the high-achieving students help them to understand.

4. **CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings, it can be inferred that group work implementation in the grammar class had improved students' grammatical skills. The significant improvement was achieved by implementing two cycles of group work. By employing the group work methods, students, especially low achievers, were helped in their learning. They believed complete support during discussions was provided for them, which made them understand the topic easier. However, several shortcomings of the group work method implementation were also found during the first cycle. For example, some students preferred to work alone, students who did not actively take part in the discussions, and the difficulties to monitor all groups at once. These shortcomings could be overcome by implementing the second cycle of group work sessions. As a result, the group work session could be implemented successfully which can be proven by the improvement of students' test scores. It should be noted that due to time limitations, the group work method was only implemented for eight meetings and it produced a good score category. Future studies are suggested to implement the group work method with more cycle meetings and more modifications. By doing so, the method may significantly improve students' skills better than this study.

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