

Some Disputed Issues Concerning Linguistic Points in English Language Instruction

A. Dzo'ul Milal¹, Raudlotul Jannah²✉
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya^{1,2}
✉ raudlotuljannah@uinsa.ac.id

Abstract:

Despite its relatively consistent and definite subject, linguistics, particularly in its practical application within educational contexts, presents issues that may be disputed regarding language instruction practices, especially English Language Teaching (ELT) within Indonesian context. This paper focuses on the points of dispute, their sources, and potential solutions. As an argumentative article, the data were collected and analysed based on the reflective views of the writers. First, the disputes were described. Then, their sources were identified. Finally, solutions were suggested. It was revealed that the disputed points were related to tenses, sentence types, and question tags. Concerning the English tenses, the dispute is whether there are twelve or sixteen tenses in the English language. Related to sentence type, the debate is whether there is a nominal sentence in English. On the question tags, it is argued that question tag rules are vague and inconsistent. The sources of those debates mostly referred to interlanguage informational transfer and divergent approaches towards English language systems. After presenting a detailed description, the writers ultimately presented solutions to the disputes by the end of the paper.

Keywords: language instruction, linguistic disputes, question tags, sentence types, tenses

INTRODUCTION

Grammar instruction plays a vital role in enabling learners to construct and comprehend sentences in a meaningful and accurate way. However, teaching English grammar frequently gives rise to pedagogical disputes, particularly within the Indonesian educational context. This is due to the fact that grammar is not merely a set of prescriptive rules, but also it reflects a dynamic system influenced by usage, variation, and pedagogical interpretations. In English language classrooms, certain grammatical topics often become contentious—either because of divergent teaching approaches, influence from learners' first languages, or inconsistencies between prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar in actual usage.

While linguistic theory provides a structured set of grammatical rules, their practical implementation in classrooms is often fraught with complexity and contention. These

challenges emerge not only from contrasting interpretations of English grammar but also from interlanguage influences and the dynamic evolution of linguistic norms (Cowan, 2008; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language, the instruction of grammar is expected to help learners understand and use the language accurately and meaningfully. However, discrepancies between the grammatical systems of English and Bahasa Indonesia, coupled with variations within English itself—such as prescriptive versus descriptive approaches—frequently lead to confusion and inconsistency. These issues become especially apparent in areas such as English tenses, sentence types, and question tags, which often serve as flashpoints for disagreement among educators, curriculum designers, and textbook writers.

This paper investigates the nature and origins of such linguistic disputes in English instruction in Indonesia. It highlights how specific grammatical topics—most notably tenses, sentence structures, and question tags—have become recurrent sources of confusion in both teaching and learning practices. This paper aims to present a critical analysis of some commonly disputed issues in English grammar instruction. Through reflection on both structural and functional perspectives, we seek to demonstrate how these disputes arise and how they can be addressed effectively within the framework of modern English language teaching.

CORE DISPUTES IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

Teaching English grammar in Indonesia often faces serious challenges because of ongoing disputes that affect how the subject is explained and understood. These problems come from big differences between English and Indonesian grammar, as well as from confusion within English itself—such as different rules, exceptions, and teaching methods, or inconsistencies between prescriptive grammar and actual usage. Besides, the issues of linguistic disputes also stem from diverging perspectives on what constitutes “correct” or “appropriate” English, how it should be taught, and whose norms should prevail in pedagogy (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2010). As a result, teachers may give mixed explanations, and students may struggle to learn clearly and consistently. Among the most prominent areas of dispute are:

Dispute 1 – The Number of Tenses in English

There is an ongoing debate about whether English has twelve or sixteen tenses. Some believe there are sixteen, including the usual twelve (present, past, and future tenses—each with simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous forms) plus four more called “past-future” tenses. Others argue that only twelve are valid because the so-called past-future forms don’t reflect real-time situations.

The root of the dispute lies in whether tense is defined purely morphologically or functionally. Teachers should clarify that the twelve-tenses model is pedagogically sufficient and aligns more closely with practical communication. Constructions like “would have been going” are better categorized under modal or conditional forms rather than as tenses.

The writers of the paper agree that English has only twelve real tenses. Past-future forms should not be called “tenses” at all. Instead, they belong to a different grammar category—like the subjunctive mood—because they express imagined or hypothetical situations, not real actions in time. In short, the twelve main tenses are based on actual time references, while past-future forms are more about possibility or imagination than real events.

Most contemporary linguists and pedagogues, such as Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), also support the twelve-tense model grounded in the combination of three-time frames (past, present, future) and four aspects (simple, progressive, perfect, perfect progressive).

Dispute 2 – Sentence Type

A common dispute in English grammar instruction, especially in Indonesia, concerns sentence types. Some teachers classify English sentences into two types: verbal and nominal. According to this view, verbal sentences have verb predicates, while nominal sentences have noun predicates. However, this classification is misleading when applied to English.

The writers argue that all English sentences are verbal, as the predicate in an English sentence must always be a verb. This includes action verbs (transitive or intransitive) and linking verbs, such as *am*, *is*, and *are*. For example, in sentences like *She drinks milk*, *He walks alone*, and *We are happy*, the verbs function as predicates, making all of them verbal

sentences. Even one-word commands like *Read!* are complete sentences with an implied subject (*you*) and a verb predicate.

The confusion often arises due to interlanguage interference. In languages like Indonesian or Arabic, it is grammatically acceptable to have sentences where the predicate is not a verb—for instance, *Ayahku guru* (Indonesian) or *Ummii thobiibah* (Arabic), where both subject and predicate are nouns. These are correctly termed nominal sentences in their respective languages. However, when translated into English, such structures are ungrammatical without a linking verb (*My father is a teacher*) or (*My mother is a doctor*).

Some teachers mistakenly apply rules from Indonesian or Arabic to English, treating English sentences like *Nancy is a doctor* as nominal. This is incorrect, as the linking verb *is* serves as the sentence predicate. Therefore, labelling such English structures as nominal ignores the function of the verb and leads to misclassification.

In conclusion, based on English syntax rules, all grammatically correct English sentences require a verb predicate, and thus, English has only verbal sentences, not nominal ones. The dispute arises mainly from the improper transfer of grammatical concepts across languages.

Dispute 3 – Question Tags

Question tags present a significant area of dispute and difficulty in English instruction, particularly for Indonesian learners. These tags are not only syntactically complex but also carry pragmatic functions that are often overlooked in teaching. Structurally, question tags require an accurate understanding of polarity rules—that is, whether the tag should be affirmative or negative depending on the main clause. For example, *She is coming, isn't she?* (positive statement → negative tag), and *He didn't go, did he?* (negative statement → positive tag). This contrast often confuses learners who are unfamiliar with such grammatical patterns.

More critically, question tags are deeply rooted in pragmatic usage, serving not only to seek confirmation but also to express politeness, soften commands, or show irony, agreement, or disbelief. These subtle social cues are difficult to grasp for learners whose native language, like Bahasa Indonesia, lacks a direct equivalent. In Indonesian, confirmation is usually achieved by using short questions like *kan?* or *ya?*, which are not structurally tied to the sentence in the same way English tags are. This difference leads

many learners to either omit question tags altogether or produce non-standard forms such as *You are happy, yes?* or *She can come, can?*, which may sound unnatural or incorrect in English.

The pedagogical dispute arises when teachers either overemphasize the mechanical formation of tags without addressing their communicative purposes, or fail to teach them at all, viewing them as too advanced or unnecessary. This results in students being structurally confused and pragmatically underprepared, especially in conversations where tag questions serve important social functions.

Thus, question tags are not just a grammar issue but a key indicator of pragmatic fluency, and their neglect or misinterpretation in teaching represents a deeper issue in English language instruction in Indonesia.

Dispute 4 – Article Usage

Article usage in English is a major area of difficulty and dispute for Indonesian learners due to the absence of direct equivalents in Bahasa Indonesia. In Indonesian, nouns can stand alone without articles and still make sense, which often leads learners to omit articles in English. For instance, learners might say *“I have cat”* instead of *“I have a cat,”* or *“He is the doctor”* when they mean to express a general profession: *“He is a doctor.”*

The confusion is not only structural but also **conceptual**. English articles carry meanings related to specificity, familiarity, and shared knowledge—features not grammatically marked in Indonesian. This often leads to errors in both overuse and underuse of articles. Learners may mistakenly apply *“the”* to generic nouns, or fail to use *“a/an”* for singular countable nouns when introducing new information.

The dispute in teaching arises from how articles are presented in the classroom. Some teachers rely heavily on rules related to countability or singular/plural distinctions, while others use translation-based explanations that do not reflect the real semantic functions of articles. As a result, many learners develop a superficial understanding of article use, unable to apply them correctly in actual communication.

Moreover, Indonesian learners struggle with **zero article contexts**, such as when referring to general ideas (*I like music* vs. *I like the music you played*), and the distinction between *a* and *the* in first vs. subsequent mention. These subtleties are rarely taught explicitly, yet they are crucial for developing **natural-sounding English**.

In sum, the article system in English poses a unique and unresolved challenge for Indonesian learners, not just because of structural differences, but due to the deeper **semantic and discourse-level functions** articles serve—functions that are often overlooked in standard grammar instruction.

Dispute 5 – Prepositions

Prepositions are another challenging and disputed area in English grammar instruction for Indonesian learners. Unlike English, which has a wide range of prepositions with precise and sometimes idiomatic meanings, Bahasa Indonesia uses simpler and more flexible locative or temporal markers that are often determined by context. For example, in Indonesian, the prepositions *di*, *ke*, or *pada* can cover multiple meanings that English divides into “in,” “on,” and “at.” This difference leads to frequent confusion and misuse. Learners may say “*in Monday*” instead of “*on Monday*”, or “*at the morning*” instead of “*in the morning*.”

The dispute in teaching arises from how prepositions are explained. Many teachers focus on memorization or translation rather than on usage patterns or contextual rules. This often fails to clarify the subtle differences between similar prepositions, such as when to use “*at the station*” vs. “*on the train*.” Additionally, English prepositions often appear in phrasal verbs (e.g., *look after*, *run into*, *give up*), which do not translate directly into Indonesian, further complicating comprehension.

Indonesian learners may transfer their first-language habits into English, assuming prepositions are optional or interchangeable, which leads to fossilized errors. Because of these semantic and functional gaps, English prepositions remain one of the most error-prone and misunderstood elements of grammar instruction in Indonesian classrooms.

ORIGINS OF DISPUTES

The origins of these linguistic disputes can be traced to both theoretical and historical foundations. English grammar teaching, especially in postcolonial contexts, has historically been shaped by prescriptive norms that were codified in the 18th and 19th centuries. These norms, influenced by Latin grammatical structures, were formalized in school curricula across British colonies and later disseminated through English language textbooks and syllabi (Crystal, 2006).

Prescriptive grammar continues to influence classroom instruction in Indonesia, particularly through imported textbooks and examination-oriented curricula. Despite the growing body of research advocating for descriptive and usage-based approaches, many teachers remain constrained by exam formats and institutional expectations. These conditions foster a rigid view of grammar that emphasizes rule memorization over functional use.

Another major factor is 'language transfer', particularly 'negative transfer' from Bahasa Indonesia to English. According to Odlin (1989), learners tend to project their native language structures onto the target language. Given Bahasa Indonesia's lack of inflections, articles, and subject-verb agreement, students naturally omit or simplify these elements when speaking or writing in English. Furthermore, English teachers in Indonesia often come from diverse educational backgrounds, some trained in linguistics while others follow traditional teaching paradigms. This inconsistency creates a lack of standardization in grammar instruction, and teachers may disagree on whether certain forms are errors or acceptable variants, further confusing students. Sociopolitical factors also contribute to these disputes. English in Indonesia is seen both as a tool of global communication and as a symbol of Western dominance (Lauder, 2008). This ambivalence affects attitudes toward the "ownership" of English, creating tension between adopting native norms and developing localized varieties that reflect Indonesian usage and identity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

The pedagogical implications of these disputes are considerable. For one, grammar instruction in Indonesia often becomes overly corrective, focusing on what is "wrong" rather than what is communicatively effective. This emphasis on correctness can discourage learners from taking risks in speaking or writing and may stifle creativity and fluency (Ellis, 2003).

Teachers themselves face dilemmas when confronted with conflicting rules or models. Should they teach British or American grammar conventions? Should they accept emerging features of Indonesian English, or insist on native-speaker norms? These decisions affect classroom materials, assessment strategies, and student attitudes. Moreover, linguistic disputes complicate curriculum development. Syllabi may be based on prescriptive grammars that do not align with actual usage, leading to mismatches

between what is taught and what students encounter in real-life communication. As a result, learners may succeed in exams but fail to communicate effectively in real-world situations.

Another critical implication involves teacher training. Many educators are not exposed to recent developments in applied linguistics or second language acquisition. Without an understanding of issues like fossilization, interlanguage, or variation, teachers may lack the tools to address errors constructively or to differentiate between genuine mistakes and acceptable language innovation.

Finally, standardized testing frameworks like TOEFL or IELTS, which are often used to measure grammatical proficiency, may not accommodate the linguistic realities of Indonesian learners. Such tests emphasize native-like accuracy and ignore the pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of grammar use, leading to a narrow conception of language competence.

PROPOSED RESOLUTIONS

To address these disputes effectively, grammar instruction in Indonesia must embrace more context-sensitive and learner-centered approaches. One viable solution is the **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)** model, which views grammar not as a set of isolated rules but as a tool for achieving communicative goals (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In CLT classrooms, grammar is taught through interaction, negotiation of meaning, and task-based activities that reflect real-life use.

Usage-based Approaches, drawing on corpus linguistics and cognitive linguistics, offer another resolution. By exposing students to high-frequency structures in authentic contexts, these methods help learners acquire grammar through usage and exposure rather than through rules alone (Ellis, 2003). Teachers can use learner corpora and internet-based resources to design lessons around actual language patterns used in newspapers, social media, or academic writing.

A third promising strategy is **Contrastive Analysis**, where learners are made aware of the structural differences between English and their native language. This approach enables students to identify potential pitfalls due to negative transfer and develop metalinguistic awareness (Odlin, 1989). For example, explicit comparison of English and

Indonesian passive constructions can clarify when and how the passive voice should be used.

Teacher training must also evolve to include courses in linguistics, second language acquisition, and critical pedagogy. Such training should empower teachers to navigate the gray areas of grammar, including contested points like split infinitives or non-standard varieties of English. Continuing professional development through workshops, academic journals, and online communities can further enhance teachers' grammatical literacy.

Lastly, grammar assessment should be aligned with communicative goals. Instead of testing discrete-point grammar in isolation, educators should design assessments that evaluate students' ability to use grammar in context—through essays, presentations, and dialogue simulations.

CONCLUSION

Linguistic disputes in English grammar teaching in Indonesia are complex, multifactorial, and deeply embedded in broader educational, sociocultural, and historical contexts. They include technical challenges, such as teaching tenses or articles, as well as ideological debates over language standards and instructional methods. These disputes affect not only what is taught but also how teachers and students experience language learning.

The persistence of these issues highlights the need for more reflective, inclusive, and evidence-based approaches to grammar instruction. Embracing communicative, usage-based, and contrastive strategies can help teachers move beyond rote instruction and foster more meaningful learning experiences. Moreover, professional development and institutional support are essential to empower teachers to manage linguistic variation and uncertainty in the classroom.

By acknowledging and addressing these disputes, educators can better equip learners with the grammatical competence needed to participate effectively in global and local contexts. Future research should explore how these strategies work across diverse Indonesian classrooms and how learners perceive and respond to different grammatical models. Only by reconciling theory with practice, and rules with reality, can we ensure that grammar instruction serves its ultimate purpose: to enable confident, competent communication.

REFERENCES

- Canagarajah, A. S. (1999). *Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Heinle & Heinle.
- Cowan, R. (2008). *The teacher's grammar of English: A course book and reference guide*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2006). *How language works*. Penguin.
- Crystal, D. (2007). *How Language Works*. Russia: Penguin UK.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. K. (2005). *A student's introduction to English grammar*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lauder, A. (2008). The status and function of English in Indonesia: A review of key factors. *Makara, Social Humanities*, 12(1), 9–20.
- Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pennycook, A. (2010). *Language as a local practice*. Routledge
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 10(3), 209–231.