

Analisis Sintaktis terhadap Kesulitan Konstruksi Frasa Nomina Bahasa Inggris dalam Konteks EFL

Annisa Nur Azizah¹, Tiara Fadiyah Rambe², Melani³, Siti Ismahani⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

Email : annisarusli2612@gmail.com¹, tiarafdyh24@gmail.com², kyomelani@gmail.com³,
sitiismahani@uinsu.ac.id⁴

Abstrak

Penguasaan karakteristik sintaktis Frasa Nomina (Noun Phrase/NP) masih menjadi salah satu hambatan utama bagi siswa Indonesia dalam mempelajari bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (English as a Foreign Language/EFL). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengklasifikasikan kesalahan-kesalahan sintaktis yang umum dilakukan oleh para pembelajar serta mengevaluasi bagaimana logika struktur bahasa pertama (L1) mereka menginterferensi pembentukan frasa nomina bahasa Inggris. Melalui analisis sintaktis, penelitian ini membandingkan kerangka bahasa Inggris yang bersifat pramodifikatif dan bercabang ke kanan (right-branching) dengan pola bahasa Indonesia yang berinti awal dan pascamodifikatif (post-nominal). Kajian ini juga menyoroti pentingnya sintaksis dalam menumbuhkan Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) serta mengkaji bagaimana kesalahan penggunaan modifier dan determiner menghasilkan pola kesalahan yang dapat diprediksi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa sering kali memindahkan pola urutan kata bahasa Indonesia ke dalam bahasa Inggris, sehingga menyebabkan kesalahan susunan dan penghilangan unsur secara sistematis. Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini menawarkan strategi pedagogis untuk meningkatkan pembelajaran sintaksis guna memperbaiki ketepatan berbahasa dan meningkatkan partisipasi siswa dalam konteks EFL.

Kata Kunci: Sintaksis Frasa Nomina, Pembelajar EFL, Interferensi L1, Kesalahan Sintaktis, Urutan Kata

A Syntactic Analysis of English Noun Phrase Construction Difficulties in EFL Contexts

Abstract

Mastering the syntactic properties of Noun Phrases (NPs) remains a major hurdle for Indonesian students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This research aims to categorize typical syntactic errors made by these learners and evaluate how their native language (L1) structural logic interferes with English NP formation. By applying a syntactic analysis, the study contrasts the prenominal, right-branching framework of English with the head-initial, post-nominal patterns found in Indonesian. The investigation also considers the importance of syntax in cultivating Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and examines how the misuse of modifiers and determiners leads to predictable error patterns. The results

indicate that students frequently transpose Indonesian word order onto English, resulting in systematic misorderings and omissions. Ultimately, this study offers pedagogical strategies for improving syntactic instruction to enhance linguistic precision and student participation in EFL settings.

Keywords: *Noun Phrase Syntax, EFL Learners, L1 Interference, Syntactic Errors, Word Order*

INTRODUCTION

The process of mastering English as a Foreign Language (EFL) remains a complex and persistent challenge for students, largely due to the difficulties of internalizing linguistic frameworks that differ from their native systems. From a linguistic perspective, much of the struggle in EFL proficiency stems from a student's grasp of syntax—the study of the internal configuration of sentences. It is argued that the teaching of syntax is a crucial catalyst for boosting student engagement, as it serves as an effective instrument for fostering Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), including application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Nofal, 2014). Specifically, cultivating these cognitive abilities requires students to engage in an intellectually disciplined process of conceptualizing and assessing information within a syntactic structure. Such a pedagogical focus is vital for transitioning learners from rote memorization to the practical application of grammatical rules in real-world communication (Nofal, 2014).

Within the broader structural organization of English, the Noun Phrase (NP) functions as a foundational element used to characterize various dimensions, such as quantity, length, or weight. The placement of these descriptors within the NP is critical, as their position restricts the types of dimensions they can define and dictates how they represent part-whole relationships (Schwarzschild, 2006). English noun phrases are governed by a specific right-branching hierarchy where modifiers are assigned to particular prenominal slots. Scholars have identified at least four distinct prenominal positions: position 4 for articles, position 3 for quantifiers, position 2 for adjectives, and position 1 for nouns that form compounds (Liberman & Sproat, 1992). Achieving mastery over these placements is essential because English requires a rigid ordering; for instance, modifiers in position 2 create a phrasal category, whereas those in position 1 merge with the noun to produce a compound noun (Liberman & Sproat, 1992).

Despite the importance of these rules, a significant barrier in EFL education is the persistent interference from the learner's native language (L1), particularly when the L1 follows a different structural logic. In the Indonesian context, research into noun phrase architecture indicates that the head noun is base-generated at the bottom of the Determiner Phrase (DP), with modifiers residing in additional projections that merge above it (Loewen, 2011). In contrast to English, where adjectives generally precede the head noun, Indonesian syntax utilizes an unrestricted adjunction model where there is no fixed sequence between a specifier and its head (Loewen, 2011). This fundamental difference in word order—where Indonesian typically places the modifier after the noun—creates a substantial syntactic gap for students to bridge.

The intersection of these two linguistic systems often leads to cross-linguistic interference, causing Indonesian students to unconsciously apply their L1 structural patterns to English. While English enforces strict regulations for count and mass nouns—often determined by how dimensions are tracked—Indonesian bare nouns are neutral regarding number and rely heavily on the surrounding context (Loewen, 2011; Schwarzschild, 2006). These structural mismatches, including the distinction between phrasal modification and compound structures, introduce significant syntactic and articulatory hurdles for the learner (Liberman & Sproat, 1992). Consequently, this research presents "A Syntactic Analysis of English Noun Phrase Construction Difficulties in EFL Contexts." The study aims to systematically classify the specific errors made by Indonesian learners and examine how the head-initial nature of Indonesian syntax drives recurring patterns of error in English NP construction.

Syntax is a specialized field of linguistics dedicated to the study of the rules and principles that dictate how individual words are integrated to form meaningful phrases, clauses, and sentences. In the realm of language acquisition, syntax serves as the foundational structural map that enables learners to generate logical and grammatically precise expressions in a new language. Marita and Jufrizal (2020) observe that syntax is one of the primary linguistic domains where interference from a learner's native language (L1) is most prevalent, as students often instinctively utilize the structural logic of their first language when trying to build sentences in a foreign tongue. This structural scaffolding is vital for effective communication, as it defines the relationships between lexical items to express nuanced and complex thoughts.

The Noun Phrase (NP) represents a basic syntactic building block that operates as a single grammatical entity, usually revolving around a central head noun or a pronoun. Dryer (2005/2006) describes noun phrases as the syntactic parts of a sentence that function as the arguments for verbs. Regardless of the language, the NP is the primary tool used to denote entities, individuals, or abstract ideas, making it a vital component of sentence formation. Achieving proficiency in NP usage is essential for EFL students because it requires a clear understanding of how various modifiers—including articles, adjectives, and possessives—cluster around a head noun to provide necessary context or descriptive detail.

A Noun Phrase is far more than a simple string of words; it is a layered, hierarchical arrangement where the head noun governs the grammatical behavior of the entire unit. In the EFL environment, the definition of an NP encompasses both simple structures, which may consist of just a noun or pronoun, and complex arrangements involving several tiers of modification (Dryer, 2005/2006). Gaining a firm grasp of the definition and utility of NPs is the critical first step for students attempting to master English grammar, as many syntactic errors in both writing and speaking are rooted in a basic confusion over how these units are structured and utilized across different linguistic systems (Bahar & Aras, n.d.).

The architecture of the English Noun Phrase is defined by a relatively fixed sequence of elements that are positioned either before or after the head noun. These phrases are characterized by a "fixed" order where determiners (such as the, a, some) and various pre-

modifiers (such as adjectives) almost always appear prior to the noun they modify. Dryer (2005/2006) points out that simple English NPs are heavily reliant on the use of determiners, particularly when dealing with singular count nouns. For instance, in a phrase such as "the red book," the determiner and the adjective are placed in a specific order to provide definite and descriptive data before the core noun, "book," is introduced.

In addition to simple modifiers, English NP architecture allows for extensive post-modification through the integration of prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and non-finite clauses. Dryer (2005/2006) classifies these as complex noun phrases, which serve to significantly broaden the information related to the head noun. Even within these complex forms, English maintains a strict "Head-Last" orientation for basic descriptive elements (e.g., "a beautiful morning," where the head noun "morning" follows the adjective). This demand for a specific word order and the obligatory use of possessive markers or articles creates a significant barrier for learners whose native languages operate under a different structural logic.

The intricacy of English NP construction also involves the precise sequencing of multiple adjectives, which must adhere to a conventional order (opinion, size, age, shape, color, origin, material, and purpose). Deviating from this "adjective order" often results in phrases that appear awkward or incorrect to native speakers. Marita and Jufrizal (2020) emphasize that English syntax demands high precision in these arrangements; when students fail to master these rules, they frequently fall back on direct translation from their native language. This results in syntactic interference, where the standard English NP structure is undermined by the rules of the L1, leading to errors in word order or the omission of essential grammatical markers.

The organization of Noun Phrases in the Indonesian language (Bahasa Indonesia) is fundamentally different from that of English, primarily due to its "Head-Initial" or Hukum D-M (Diterangkan-Menerangkan) rule. Under this system, the head noun - the primary object being described - usually appears first, followed by its various modifiers. As noted by Bahar and Aras (n.d.), while English uses the "Modifier + Head" pattern (e.g., "big house"), Indonesian utilizes the "Head + Modifier" pattern (e.g., "rumah besar"). This basic reversal of word order is the most striking feature of Indonesian NP syntax and is the leading cause of "misordering" errors when Indonesian students attempt to communicate in English.

Moreover, the Indonesian NP structure does not employ articles (like a, an, or the) with the same frequency or mandatory nature as English. In Indonesian, a noun is often capable of standing alone without a determiner while still representing a specific or general concept, depending on the conversational context. Sholah (2021) explores how the "mother tongue" shapes a learner's cognitive approach, noting that the lack of a rigorous article system in Indonesian often leads students to forget required determiners in English sentences. This lack of direct equivalence between the two systems means that Indonesian students must not only learn a new vocabulary but also develop an entirely different mental framework for constructing phrases.

Finally, the methods for indicating possession and plurality in Indonesian NPs are notably different from English. Indonesian indicates possession by placing the possessor immediately after the noun (e.g., "buku saya" for "my book") and denotes plurality through word repetition (e.g., "buku-buku") or the use of specific numerals without changing the noun's form. Bahar and Aras (n.d.) observe that these structural variances often lead to "misformation" and "omission" errors in English production. Because Indonesian NP syntax is more flexible regarding the markers that English deems mandatory, students often transfer these simplified or differently sequenced patterns into their EFL work, resulting in significant syntactic interference.

RESEARCH METHODS

Since the study's focus is on the theoretical analysis of syntactic structures rather than the collecting of actual data, it uses a qualitative research approach with a library research design. For linguistic studies that seek to investigate grammatical patterns, theoretical conceptions, and previously published findings, library research is especially suitable (Darmawansah & Indartono, 2019). There are no participants, tools, or experimental techniques used in this study because its goal is to examine English noun phrase construction issues in EFL contexts.

Additionally, the framework of L1 syntactic interference in EFL learning is used to interpret the comparative analysis results. Previous research has demonstrated that errors such as article omission, modifier misplacement, and misordering in noun phrase construction are often caused by the grammatical differences between English and Indonesian (Bahar & Aras, 2023; Marita, 2021). This methodological approach guarantees that the discussion of noun phrase issues is theoretically sound, academically valid, and relevant to EFL pedagogy by anchoring the study in known syntactic theories and empirical findings from previous research.

The data sources of this study consist of authoritative linguistics textbooks and peer-reviewed journal articles that discuss syntax, noun phrase structures, and first language (L1) interference in second or foreign language learning. Key references include works on noun phrase structure in English (Dryer, 2007), studies on syntactic interference among Indonesian EFL learners (Bahar & Aras, 2023; Marita, 2021), and research addressing the influence of the mother tongue on English language acquisition (Sholah, 2021). These sources were selected based on their academic credibility, relevance to the topic, and contribution to understanding structural differences between English and Indonesian noun phrases.

The data analysis technique applied in this research is descriptive-comparative analysis. This technique involves describing the syntactic characteristics of English noun phrases and comparing them with those of Indonesian noun phrases to identify structural contrasts. The analysis focuses on several key aspects, including the obligatory use of determiners in English, modifier placement, and word order within noun phrases. According to Dryer (2007), English noun phrases follow a relatively fixed structural order, which often contrasts with the more flexible and head-initial structure of Indonesian noun phrases.

Furthermore, the results of the comparative analysis are interpreted through the framework of L1 syntactic interference in EFL learning. Previous studies have shown that differences between the grammatical systems of English and Indonesian frequently lead to errors such as article omission, modifier misplacement, and misordering in noun phrase construction (Bahar & Aras, 2023; Marita, 2021). By grounding the analysis in established syntactic theories and empirical findings from prior research, this methodological approach ensures that the discussion of noun phrase difficulties is theoretically sound, academically valid, and relevant to EFL pedagogy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The current study shows that Indonesian EFL learners' challenges with English noun phrase (NP) creation are systematic results of structural incompatibility between English and Indonesian syntax rather than random mistakes. Rigid grammatical restrictions, such as required determiners, fixed modifier placements, and traditional adjective ordering, define English noun phrases. Due to these limitations, learners must process several syntactic factors at once, which greatly raises the cognitive demands of language production. Noun phrases are particularly difficult for learners who are still acquiring syntactic awareness because, as Dryer (2007) highlights, they function as hierarchical syntactic units rather than straightforward linear strings.

First language (L1) syntactic interference is a key element exacerbating these challenges. In contrast to English's modifier-initial structure, Indonesian noun phrase structure follows a head-initial pattern in which modifiers usually come after the noun. This well-known syntactic framework is frequently used by Indonesian learners to create English noun phrases, leading to predicted misordering mistakes. Crucially, these mistakes shouldn't just be seen as a sign of poor grammar. Rather, they represent a natural transfer strategy in the process of learning a second language, in which learners try to minimize processing burden by projecting new structures onto preexisting linguistic information (Marita, 2021). This viewpoint emphasizes that interference is not always bad but becomes an issue when there are significant structural disparities.

Beyond word order, one of the most important problems in the creation of English noun phrases is the recurrent misuse or absence of determiners. Determiners are necessary in English to indicate definiteness, specificity, and countability, in contrast to Indonesian. Learners frequently lack an intuitive grasp of these grammatical categories since Indonesian does not have an equivalent article system. As a result, determiner errors often continue even at high proficiency levels, indicating a propensity for fossilization. According to Sholah (2021), grammatical distinctions are more difficult to learn when learners' L1 does not encode them. From this perspective, problems pertaining to articles reflect deeper conceptual difficulty in grammatical representation in addition to syntactic issues.

The placement of modifiers and the sequencing of adjectives are another major source of difficulties. Modifiers, especially adjectives, must come before the head noun in English noun phrases and adhere to a fairly set order. In contrast, Indonesian noun phrases do not

enforce rigid adjective ordering rules and offer more flexibility. Because of this, noun phrases that are grammatically correct in Indonesian but strange or wrong in English are often produced by Indonesian learners. According to Dryer (2007), adjective ordering in English is typologically marked, which means that it is difficult to deduce without specific guidance. This result implies that learning complicated noun phrase structures requires more than just implicit exposure.

Crucially, these findings cast doubt on the widely held belief that more exposure to English inevitably improves grammatical accuracy. The results of this study show that explicit syntactic teaching is essential for correcting persistent noun phrase errors, even though exposure plays a significant influence in language acquisition. According to Darmawansah and Indartono (2019), when grammatical rules are taught methodically, instructional syntax can increase student involvement. Explicit comparisons between English and Indonesian structures in the context of noun phrase building may aid learners in reducing negative transfer and developing metalinguistic awareness.

The conversation also emphasizes how crucial it is to teach EFL using a contrastive and pedagogically informed approach. Teachers should see noun phrase errors as signs of deeper structural differences between languages rather than considering them as isolated faults. Teachers can help students reorganize their grammatical framework to better conform to English syntax by clearly pointing out differences in determiner usage, modifier position, and syntactic hierarchy. In addition to increasing grammatical accuracy, this method helps students become more aware and thoughtful language users.

Overall, this conversation supports the claim that systemic linguistic variables rather than surface learner deficiencies are the cause of noun phrase building difficulties among Indonesian EFL learners. Error patterns are recurrent and predictable due to the interplay between Indonesian structural flexibility and English syntactic rigidity. More than just repeated exposure is needed to address these issues; focused instruction, contrastive analysis, and consistent attention to grammatical form are all necessary. This study advances our knowledge of syntactic difficulty in EFL learning by placing noun phrase errors into a larger theoretical and pedagogical framework.

According to the study's findings, English noun phrase construction constitutes a key source of difficulty for Indonesian EFL learners since English and Indonesian syntax differ fundamentally. Rigid grammatical restrictions, such as hierarchical word order, fixed modifier locations, and mandatory determiner usage, control noun phrases in English. The more adaptable, head-initial structure of Indonesian noun phrases contrasts dramatically with these characteristics, making direct transfer from the first language a common and expected result.

The analysis it additionally demonstrates how learners' noun phrase errors are shaped by L1 interference. Errors like missing articles, misplaced modifiers, and improper word order are not haphazard blunders; rather, they are the result of the methodical transfer of Indonesian syntactic patterns into English. In particular, learners experience ongoing conceptual challenges due to Indonesian's lack of an article system, which leads to determiner-related errors that frequently defy correction even at higher skill levels.

These results demonstrate that greater exposure alone is insufficient to fully address noun phrase issues from an EFL perspective. Rather, they emphasize the significance of contrastive awareness and explicit syntactic training in EFL classes. Instructors are urged to highlight the structural distinctions between Indonesian and English noun phrases, particularly with regard to grammatical hierarchy, determiner usage, and modifier ordering. EFL instruction can more successfully lessen negative transfer and assist students in improving their grammatical accuracy by using a contrastive and metalinguistic approach.

Finally, by showing that noun phrase construction issues are caused by systemic linguistic incompatibility rather than learner deficiency, this study advances knowledge of syntactic difficulty in EFL learning. In order to better understand how instructional strategies can lessen noun phrase building challenges in a variety of EFL contexts, future research may expand this theoretical study by adding empirical learner data.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights that the difficulties Indonesian EFL students encounter when constructing English Noun Phrases are primarily driven by the fundamental structural gap between their L1 and the target language. The findings suggest that errors—such as placing adjectives after nouns or failing to use correct determiners—are systematic outcomes of linguistic interference rather than isolated mistakes. Through a syntactic lens, it is clear that the Indonesian head-initial structure frequently conflicts with the rigid prenominal requirements of English. Furthermore, integrating a syntax-based curriculum that promotes Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) can assist students in moving beyond simple memorization toward a deeper conceptual grasp of grammar. In summary, overcoming these construction difficulties requires a teaching approach that actively addresses cross-linguistic differences. Future educational efforts should prioritize comparative syntactic training to help students bridge the gap between Indonesian and English linguistic structures.

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