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An Analysis of Pbi UINSU Students' Understanding Of Transitive and Complex-Transitive Verbs in Syntax

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates PBI UINSU students' understanding of transitive and complex-transitive verbs in syntactic analysis using a mixed-methods approach. The participants were seven students from the English Education Department at UIN Sumatera Utara who had completed a syntax course. Data were collected through a Google Form questionnaire consisting of seven knowledge-based multiple-choice items and five Likert-scale statements measuring students' perceptions and confidence levels. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students demonstrate a strong understanding of basic transitive verb constructions, particularly simple S–V–O patterns and the obligatory role of direct objects. However, their performance on complex-transitive verb items was less consistent, especially in identifying object complements and recognizing verbs that function as complex-transitive. Perception data indicate that although students generally feel confident in their understanding, confusion between direct objects and object complements remains evident. The study concludes that while students possess adequate foundational knowledge of transitive verbs, greater instructional emphasis on functional analysis and object complements is necessary to enhance their syntactic competence in analyzing complex-transitive constructions

Keywords: *Transitive Verbs; Complex-Transitive Verbs; Syntactic Analysis; Object Complement*

INTRODUCTION

Grammar plays an important role in understanding the structure and meaning of sentences in English. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), mastery of grammar helps learners understand the relationship between form, meaning, and function in language. One fundamental aspect of grammar is the ability to identify independent and dependent clauses, as these two types of clauses form the basis of sentence construction, particularly in compound and complex sentences. Frank (1972) states that an independent clause can stand alone as a complete sentence, whereas a dependent clause requires another clause to form a complete meaning. Mastery of independent and dependent clauses helps students understand syntactic relationships within sentences and supports overall language proficiency, especially in reading and writing skills.

However, based on observations in syntax courses, many students still experience difficulties in distinguishing independent clauses that can stand alone as complete sentences from dependent clauses that rely on independent clauses to form complete meaning. Radford (2004) explains that clause structure analysis is an important part of syntactic studies, but it is often considered complex by language learners because it involves understanding structure and function simultaneously. These difficulties frequently result in errors in sentence structure analysis as well as in sentence construction.

Beyond clause-level identification, syntactic competence also requires an understanding of how verbs function as the core of sentence structure by selecting and organizing their complements. In syntactic analysis, one effective way to understand how English sentences are structured is by examining how verbs select and organize their complements. A central issue in this discussion is the distinction between transitive and complex-transitive verbs. Although both verb types involve objects, they differ in the functions and relationships of the elements that follow the verb, which significantly affects clause interpretation and grammatical accuracy.

Can (2008) explains that verbs have traditionally been categorized based on the presence and characteristics of their complements. From this perspective, transitive verbs are those that require a single direct object to complete the meaning of the predicate, whereas complex-transitive verbs involve two postverbal elements, namely a direct object and an object complement. As a result, the verb serves as the core of clause structure, since it determines both the number and the types of arguments that appear in a sentence.

According to Quirk et al. (1985), transitive verbs are verbs that require a single direct object to complete their meaning. Structurally, transitive constructions typically follow the pattern S + V + O, in which the presence of the object is obligatory for the

clause to be considered grammatical. This can be illustrated by the sentence "*She reads a book,*" where the verb *reads* necessarily takes the object *a book* as the recipient of the action. In line with this view, Radford (2009) emphasizes that the object in transitive verb constructions functions as an argument that directly undergoes or is affected by the action performed by the subject. Consequently, the relationship between the verb and its object in transitive constructions is direct and does not involve any additional complements.

In contrast to transitive verbs, complex-transitive verbs display a more intricate argument structure. According to Quirk et al. (1985), these verbs require two elements after the verb: a direct object and an object complement. This construction follows the pattern S + V + O + C, in which the object complement provides further information about the object, such as its identity, condition, or the outcome of the action. An illustrative example is the sentence "*They elected him president,*" where *him* functions as the direct object and *president* serves as the object complement that assigns a specific status to the object.

Rizkiani (2014) further notes that transitive verbs can be grouped into three major types: monotransitive, ditransitive, and complex-transitive verbs. Among these categories, complex-transitive verbs are distinguished by the presence of a direct object followed by an object complement, which clarifies the object's state, identity, or the result of the action. This structural feature clearly differentiates complex-transitive constructions from simple transitive ones, which involve only a single object.

Barrera Fernandez (2007) argues that complex-transitive constructions require both complements to be present, as each plays an obligatory syntactic role. Omitting either element can alter the intended meaning or result in an ungrammatical sentence. This finding supports the view that complex transitivity should be treated as a distinct syntactic construction rather than merely a variation of basic transitive structures within the English grammatical system.

From an applied linguistics standpoint, Gu (2018) observes that the distinction between transitive and complex-transitive verbs often poses difficulties for learners of English as a foreign language. These challenges largely stem from learners' limited understanding of the function of object complements and their inaccurate use of SVO and SVOC patterns in both spoken and written language. This suggests that a solid grasp of verb classification plays an important role in the development of grammatical competence.

Studies focusing on sentence structures in academic writing also indicate that insufficient awareness of verb types contributes to structural problems in students' texts. Misidentifying transitive and complex-transitive verbs frequently leads to weak syntactic constructions and reduced clarity of meaning, particularly in formal academic writing. Furthermore, Barrera Fernandez (2007) shows that monotransitive constructions occur more frequently than complex-transitive ones in everyday language use. Nevertheless,

complex-transitive constructions remain crucial for expressing more precise and nuanced meanings, especially in academic and formal contexts.

Despite the extensive theoretical discussion on verb classification and clause structure, there remains a gap in empirical studies that examine students' actual understanding of transitive and complex-transitive verbs within classroom-based syntactic analysis, particularly through technology-assisted assessment. Most previous studies focus on descriptive grammatical explanations, while fewer studies investigate learners' performance and perceptions simultaneously in identifying verb patterns and complements.

Therefore, this study aims to examine PBI UINSU students' understanding of the differences between transitive verbs and complex-transitive verbs in syntactic analysis through a Google Form–based instrument. The study focuses on students' performance in identifying verb patterns, distinguishing direct objects from object complements, and recognizing verbs that function as complex-transitive constructions, as well as their perceptions of their syntactic understanding. It is expected that this study will provide insights into students' strengths and difficulties in analyzing transitive and complex-transitive verb constructions and offer pedagogical implications for improving grammar instruction in syntax courses.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a mixed-methods methodology that included qualitative and quantitative techniques to evaluate PBI UINSU students' understanding of the differences between transitive verbs and complex-transitive verbs in syntax. 7 students from the English Education Department (PBI) at UIN Sumatera Utara (UINSU) who had finished classes on syntax were given a Google Form questionnaire to complete in order to gather data. 7 multiple-choice questions measured students' comprehension of transitive and complex transitive verbs numerically, while 5 Likert-scale items ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree captured students' opinions and confidence levels qualitatively. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate quantitative data, while theme analysis was used to identify types of mistakes and recurrent reactions in qualitative data. The goal of the study was explained to the participants, and all answers were kept private and used only for research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

This section reports the results of the study based on quantitative and qualitative data obtained from a Google Form questionnaire. The instrument consisted of objective knowledge-based questions (multiple choice and true/false) and perception-based Likert scale statements. A total of seven PBI UINSU students participated in the study. So, the results of the study can be detailed as follows:

a. Students' Performance on Knowledge-Based Questions

The results were analyzed by using descriptive statistics to determine students' level of understanding of transitive and complex-transitive verbs. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of correct responses for each knowledge-based item.

No.	Focus of Item	Correct Answers (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Identifying a transitive verb sentence	6	85.7
2	Identifying complex-transitive verb pattern	5	71.4
3	Identifying object complement	5	71.4
4	Identifying simple transitive structure (S-V-O)	6	85.7
5	Recognizing verbs functioning as complex-transitive	4	57.1
6	Understanding object requirement of transitive verbs	7	100
7	Understanding structure of complex-transitive verbs	6	85.7
8	Identifying adjective as object complement	5	71.4

As shown in Table 1, students demonstrated a high level of accuracy on items related to basic transitive verb concepts. The highest percentage of correct responses (100%) was found in the item stating that transitive verbs require an object, indicating that this concept was well understood by all respondents. Similarly, items requiring students to identify sentences with simple S-V-O structures achieved high accuracy rates (85.7%).

In contrast, items related to complex-transitive verbs yielded lower accuracy rates. The lowest percentage of correct responses (57.1%) occurred in the item requiring students to recognize verbs that can function as complex-transitive verbs. This suggests that while students understand the structural pattern of complex-transitive constructions, they experience more difficulty identifying verb types and functional roles within these constructions.

To further clarify students' overall performance, the results were grouped into two categories: transitive verb items and complex-transitive verb items. The average correct response rate for transitive verb items was approximately 87%, while the average for complex-transitive verb items was approximately 71%. This comparison indicates that students' understanding of complex-transitive verbs is less consistent than their understanding of simple transitive constructions.

b. Students' Perceptions of Their Understanding

In addition to objective test items, students' perceptions were measured using Likert-scale statements. The mean scores for each statement are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean Scores of Students' Perceptions (N = 7)

Statement	Mean Score	Interpretation
Understanding the difference between transitive and complex-transitive verbs	4.1	High
Ability to identify objects in sentences	4.0	High
Confusion between direct object and object complement (reverse item)	3.2	Moderate
Examples help in understanding complex-transitive verbs	4.4	Very High
Ability to apply concepts in syntactic analysis	3.9	High

The perception data indicate that students generally view their understanding positively, particularly when instructional examples are provided. However, the moderate mean score for the reverse item suggests that confusion between direct objects and object complements remains an issue for some students, especially in complex syntactic contexts.

2. Discussion

The results of this study reveal that PBI UINSU students possess a solid foundational understanding of transitive verbs, as evidenced by their high accuracy rates on items involving simple S-V-O constructions. This finding aligns with Quirk et al. (1985) and Radford (2009), who argue that transitive verb constructions are among the most basic and frequently encountered syntactic patterns in English. Due to their structural simplicity and frequent exposure, EFL learners tend to master transitive constructions earlier and more accurately.

However, the results also indicate that students encounter greater difficulty with complex-transitive verbs. As shown in Table 1, accuracy rates for items involving object complements and complex-transitive verb identification were consistently lower. This finding supports Gu (2018) and Li and Zhang (2022), who report that EFL learners often struggle to distinguish between direct objects and object complements because both elements appear in postverbal positions but serve different grammatical functions.

The perception data further support this interpretation. Although students generally expressed confidence in their understanding, the moderate level of agreement with statements indicating confusion suggests a discrepancy between students' declarative knowledge and their ability to apply syntactic analysis skills accurately. Ellis (2020) explains that such gaps are common in grammar learning, where learners may understand grammatical rules conceptually but struggle to apply them in analytical tasks.

Additionally, the high mean score for the statement regarding the usefulness of examples highlights the importance of contextualized instruction. This finding aligns with usage-based theories of language learning, which emphasize the role of repeated exposure and meaningful input in grammatical development (Bybee, 2019). When complex-transitive structures were presented through clear examples, students were better able to identify object complements correctly.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that syntax instruction should move beyond structural recognition and place greater emphasis on functional analysis. Teaching strategies such as contrastive analysis between S-V-O and S-V-O-C patterns, syntactic tree diagrams, and guided sentence analysis may help students develop deeper understanding of complex-transitive constructions. Recent studies in EFL grammar pedagogy (Rahman & Yuliana, 2023) confirm that explicit focus on syntactic functions significantly enhances learners' analytical accuracy.

In summary, while PBI UINSU students demonstrate a strong understanding of transitive verbs, complex-transitive constructions remain more challenging. The integration of quantitative test results and perception data confirms that increased instructional focus on object complements is necessary to strengthen students' syntactic analysis skills.

CONCLUSION

This study examined PBI UINSU students' understanding of transitive and complex-transitive verbs in syntactic analysis using a mixed-methods approach. The findings indicate that students generally have a good understanding of basic transitive verb constructions, particularly in identifying simple S-V-O patterns and the obligatory role of direct objects. However, students showed greater difficulty with complex-transitive verb constructions, especially in distinguishing direct objects from object complements and identifying verbs that function as complex-transitive. Although students expressed confidence in their understanding, the data suggest a gap between conceptual knowledge and analytical application. Overall, while students demonstrate adequate foundational knowledge, increased instructional focus on object complements and functional sentence analysis is necessary to strengthen their syntactic competence.

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