



Standard English Grammar and Professional Identity: Perceptions of EFL Students in Language Education

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ABSTRACT

The demand for formal English proficiency both in academic and professional environments highlights the critical role of Standard English Grammar in building effective communication and professional identity. This study investigates how EFL students in a university's English Language Education Study Program perceive the importance of standard grammar in professional contexts. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected from first-semester undergraduate EFL students (N=40) through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire combined Likert-scale items with open-ended questions, while the interviews provided deeper insights into students' experiences and expectations regarding the teaching of grammar in their classroom. Findings show that the majority of students recognize standard grammar as essential for maintaining credibility and professionalism, especially in tasks such as academic writing, formal email correspondence, job interviews, and public speaking. However, a significant gap exists between students' awareness of the importance of grammatical aspect and their ability to apply it effectively in real-world contexts. The analysis also identifies students' concerns about the de-contextualized nature of grammar instruction and their preference for contextual, task-based learning approaches that simulate professional communication. The study underscores the need to align Grammar curricula with professional demands by embedding grammar instruction into authentic learning materials. These findings have implications for the development of EFL curriculum, emphasizing the integration of grammatical competence with professional literacy. By rethinking the grammar instruction through a contextualized lens, educators are expected to support students in constructing confident professional identities.

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INTRODUCTION

English as a lingua franca encompasses several fields such as education, business, and diplomacy. In the context of globalization, English proficiency has become not merely an added advantage, but a core necessity for professionals across disciplines (Gu et al., 2022; Nejadghanbar & Fotouhi, 2025). However, English proficiency does not only involve speaking fluently, but also a solid understanding of grammatical structure and formal language rules, commonly referred to as Standard English

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Grammar (Ko & Kim, 2021). Mastery of the standard grammar plays a crucial role in maintaining clarity, accuracy, and credibility in professional communication (Curtin, 2021; Kahveci, 2021).

In English language education, grammar instruction is often a central focus, yet it remains one of the most challenging aspects for students (Bagiyan & Shiryayeva, 2021). While many students are able to communicate verbally, they often struggle to construct grammatically correct sentences, particularly in formal contexts such as academic writing, professional reports, and business correspondence (Ajaj, 2022). This raises questions about the extent to which students recognize the importance of using Standard English Grammar in professional settings, and whether their awareness is influenced by the way grammar is taught during their academic journey (Çiftci & Özcan, 2021).

A review of the literature shows that students' perceptions of grammar influence both their motivation to learn and the strategies they employ. For instance, research by (Pham, 2023) found that positive attitudes toward grammar correlated with better learning outcomes. Similarly, (Munday & Hunt, 1970) highlighted how both teacher and student perceptions impact classroom grammar instruction. However, most existing studies focus on academic rather than professional contexts, indicating a gap that can be addressed by further research on the relationship between grammar perceptions and workplace demands. Furthermore, the rise of digital tools such as Grammarly and AI-based writing assistants has led to the assumption that grammar is now a secondary concern, as errors can be "automatically corrected." In reality, grammatical accuracy continues to serve as a marker of professionalism and credibility in many professional contexts—such as job interviews, presentations, and formal written communication (A. Y. Bagiyan et al., 2021; Cheng, 2021). Therefore, it is important to understand how students perceive the role of standard grammar in professional communication—something that cannot be fully replaced by technology (Letters, 2024).

Additionally, ELT curricula at the university level often fail to explicitly connect grammar instruction with workplace contexts. Grammar is frequently taught in isolation, detached from real-world applications, resulting in students struggling to apply their knowledge in practical situations (Hafeez, 2023; Zhang & Wang, 2022). Understanding students' perceptions of standard grammar can help educational institutions reevaluate current teaching approaches to make them more relevant and applicable to students' future careers.

This study is significant as EFL-major university graduates often pursue diverse careers beyond teaching, including roles as writers, translators, and administrative professionals in international settings—positions that demand formal and accurate communication. Mastery of Standard English Grammar is thus a crucial skill across these professions. Students' perceptions of grammar serve as indicators of their preparedness to meet such demands (Alam et al., 2024; Zuhriah, 2024). Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach, this research investigates students' views and experiences, aiming to inform instructional practices and support the development of grammar pedagogy aligned with professional communication needs.

METHODS

Design

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of first-semester EFL undergraduate students regarding the role and importance of Standard English Grammar in professional communication. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows for a rich, contextualized understanding of students' subjective experiences and beliefs. Rather than attempting to measure outcomes or test predetermined hypotheses, the research sought to describe, interpret, and uncover students' personal insights and perceived challenges related to grammar usage in academic and professional domains.

Subjects and Sampling Technique

The study was conducted at one public university in East Java, specifically within the English Language Education Study Program. This context was intentionally chosen due to the researchers'

academic affiliation with the institution, which not only provided ease of access but also ensured familiarity with the curriculum and student learning environment. The population of interest consisted of first-semester students who had recently completed Grammar course, ensuring that participants possessed basic knowledge and were in an ideal position to reflect on their grammar learning and its perceived relevance to professional contexts.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants who met specific inclusion criteria. These criteria included current enrollment in the English Language Education Study Program, completion of English Grammar course, and willingness to participate in both the questionnaire and interview stages of the research. A total of 40 students were selected to respond to the questionnaire instrument. From this group, 10 students were purposefully chosen for follow-up interviews. The selection was based on the diversity and representativeness of their initial responses, enabling the researchers to gain a broad spectrum of insights.

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of two primary instruments, i.e. a mixed-format questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed to capture students' perceptions in both structured and exploratory formats. The structured portion consisted of five statements rated on a Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," aimed at identifying general trends and attitudes towards grammar. These statements addressed some themes, e.g. the perceived importance of grammar in professional communication, the role of grammar in forming professional impressions, and self-reported challenges in applying grammar in formal contexts. The second part of the questionnaire included open-ended questions, allowing students to elaborate on their responses and express personal insights, concerns, or suggestions about grammar learning.

Following the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 selected students. The purpose of the interviews was to probe deeper into students' experiences, motivations, and expectations regarding grammar instruction and application. The semi-structured format allowed the interviewer to follow a guided list of open-ended questions while also encouraging participants to share unanticipated but relevant experiences or views. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was conducted in two stages to ensure comprehensive interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data. The first stage involved the descriptive analysis of questionnaire responses. Likert-scale items were tabulated and analyzed using frequency counts and percentages to determine patterns in student perceptions regarding the importance and application of Standard English Grammar in professional communication. This quantitative analysis provided an overview of general trends, such as levels of agreement or disagreement, which were later used to guide the qualitative exploration.

The second stage applied thematic analysis to the interview transcripts and responses to open-ended questionnaire items. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the researchers began by immersing themselves in the data through repeated readings. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, after which themes were identified, reviewed, defined, and refined for reporting. Three major themes emerged: 1) Awareness of the Role of Grammar in the Professional World, highlighting students' recognition of grammar as a marker of credibility; 2) Gap Between Theory and Practice, reflecting students' struggles to apply grammar knowledge in real-world tasks; and 3) Expectations for Contextual Grammar Teaching, emphasizing students' desire for more authentic, workplace-oriented instruction. These themes were triangulated with quantitative data to enhance validity.

Data Validity

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, two validation techniques were employed. First, data triangulation was used to cross-verify insights obtained from the questionnaire and interviews, enabling a richer and more reliable interpretation. Second, member checking was conducted by summarizing interview responses and returning them to the respective participants for verification. This process helped confirm the authenticity of the interpretations and reduced the risk of researcher bias.

Research Ethics

In terms of research ethics, the study complied with institutional and academic ethical standards. All participants were informed about the study's objectives and procedures and gave their consent voluntarily. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the process, and all data were anonymized to ensure privacy. The findings were used strictly for academic and publication purposes, with no identifying information disclosed at any stage.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 40 first-semester EFL students as respondents for the questionnaire and 10 students as participants in the interviews. The results from both the questionnaire and interviews show that the majority of students were aware of the importance of English Grammar in professional communication, but they still faced challenges in its implementation.

Students' Perception of the Importance of Standard Grammar

The following Table 1 presents the results from the Likert scale-based questions regarding students' perceptions on the importance of standard grammar.

Table 1. *The results of Students' Perception of the Importance of Standard Grammar*

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Standard grammar is important in professional communication.	65%	30%	5%	0%	0%
2.	I feel that grammar is not too important as long as the meaning is understood.	10%	20%	15%	40%	15%
3.	I believe grammar influences the impression of professionalism in communication.	50%	40%	10%	0%	0%
4.	I have trouble applying standard grammar in formal writing.	30%	40%	20%	10%	0%
5.	Grammar learning today is enough to equip me for the professional world.	15%	35%	25%	20%	5%

The results from Table 1 reveal a strong consensus among students regarding the significance of Standard English Grammar in professional communication. Specifically, 65% of students strongly agreed and 30% agreed with the statement that standard grammar is important in professional communication, totaling 95% of respondents affirming its value. Similarly, 50% of students strongly agreed and 40% agreed that grammar influences the impression of professionalism, further reinforcing the belief that grammatical competence contributes to credibility and respect in workplace discourse. These responses demonstrate not only cognitive awareness but also an affective valuation of grammar's role in shaping professional identity. Interestingly, while most students expressed strong agreement with these ideals, 30% of respondents still agreed (10% strongly, 20% agreed) with the statement that grammar is not too important as long as the meaning is understood. This signals a nuanced perspective,

where some students simultaneously acknowledge the value of grammatical correctness while also subscribing to a functional view of language use, particularly in oral or informal contexts.

However, despite this overall positive perception, the data also reveal significant challenges in grammar application. When asked about their ability to use standard grammar in formal writing, 30% strongly agreed and 40% agreed that they face difficulties, totaling 70% of respondents acknowledging struggles in implementation. Moreover, only half of the students (15% strongly agreed and 35% agreed) felt that current grammar learning was adequate to prepare them for professional tasks, while the remaining half either remained neutral or expressed dissatisfaction. These results suggest a disconnect between students' appreciation of grammar's importance and their confidence or competence in applying it. The data point to possible instructional gaps, particularly in integrating theoretical knowledge with practical applications, such as writing professional emails or engaging in workplace communication. Notably, the presence of 15–25% neutral responses across several items suggests a group of students who are uncertain or ambivalent—possibly reflecting inconsistent learning experiences or limited exposure to real-world communication demands.

The findings from the questionnaire provide critical insights into how students perceive grammar in relation to their emerging professional identities. The overwhelmingly positive perception of standard grammar as essential for effective professional communication aligns with broader literature on language education and *employability*. As emphasized by Ko and Kim (2021), mastery of grammar is often seen as a marker of academic rigor and workplace readiness. Similarly, Kahveci (2021) and Cheng (2021) argue that grammatical accuracy contributes significantly to the construction of a competent and credible professional image. These findings affirm that students—particularly those in teacher-training or language-related fields—understand the symbolic capital of grammar in both spoken and written communication.

Nevertheless, the data also reveal a tension between recognition and practice. While most students acknowledge the importance of grammar, many admit to difficulties in applying grammatical rules, particularly in formal writing contexts (academic writing tasks). This disconnect supports the claims of Çiftci and Özcan (2021) and Hafeez (2023), who criticize traditional grammar instruction for its overemphasis on de-contextualized rule memorization. Students may learn grammatical structures in isolation (text book materials) but lack opportunities to apply them meaningfully in authentic and professional scenarios. This limitation not only hinders practical competence but also undermines students' confidence in using grammar effectively, as seen in the 70% who reported difficulty in application. Thus, while student perceptions indicate a high valuation of grammar, these are not yet matched by instructional practices that bridge theory and application.

Additionally, the divergence of views in Statement 2, where 30% of students felt grammar was not crucial as long as meaning was understood, reflects a broader pedagogical tension between communicative fluency and grammatical accuracy. This perspective echoes the influence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which often prioritizes meaning-making over form (grammatical aspect) (Tsulaia, 2022). While this view promotes spontaneity and functional use, it may contribute to students underestimating the importance of grammatical precision in formal or high-stakes communication, such as job applications or academic writing. As Ilgūnaitienė (2021) notes, even in fluency-oriented frameworks, the relevance of grammar persists, particularly in environments where language reflects competence and credibility.

From a curriculum development standpoint, these findings underscore the importance of rethinking how grammar is taught. Students' recognition of grammar's professional value should be leveraged as motivation to develop instructional models that embed grammar within real-world tasks. Genre-based pedagogy and task-based language teaching (TBLT) could be explored to address this gap, as they situate grammar within authentic communicative acts. This is consistent with research by Al-Khresheh and Orak (2021) and Azizova (2021), who advocate for contextualized grammar instruction that should reflect real-world workplace and academic expectations. Such approaches not only enhance language proficiency but also foster learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness.

Moreover, the data suggest that students are not passive recipients of instruction; they actively reflect on their preparedness for future roles. The 50% who felt unprepared by current grammar instruction represent a call for transformation. As emphasized by Aryati (2014) and Neupane and Bhatt (2023), positive perceptions must be matched with experiential learning opportunities that reinforce skills in realistic settings. Without this alignment, students' potential to embody their professional identities may remain underdeveloped, despite their awareness of grammar's importance.

The findings reveal both opportunity and challenge. Students value grammar highly and recognize its role in establishing professionalism. However, their reported difficulties and instructional dissatisfaction highlight the need for pedagogical reform. Integrating grammar instruction with professional communication tasks—such as writing formal emails, delivering academic presentations, or simulating job interviews—may offer a more effective and relevant path forward. This shift is essential not only for improving language competence but also for supporting students' evolving identities as professionals in linguistically demanding fields.

Standard Grammar and Professional Identity

In addition to the questionnaire data, the findings from semi-structured interviews with 10 students offered deeper insight into the connection between grammatical competence and professional identity formation. Through thematic analysis, three dominant themes emerged: (1) Awareness of the Role of Grammar in the Professional World, (2) Gap Between Theory and Practice, and (3) Expectations for Contextual Grammar Teaching. These themes as presented in Table 2 reflect the complex ways in which students perceive, engage with, and anticipate the use of Standard English Grammar in professional settings.

Table 2. *Emerging Themes from Interview Data*

Theme	Description	Supporting Excerpt (samples)
1. Awareness of the Role of Grammar in the Professional World	Students recognize grammar as essential for formal communication and professional credibility.	<i>"Grammar is very important, especially if we want to work in an international agency."</i> (Informant 3)
2. Gap Between Theory and Practice	Students struggle to apply grammar knowledge in real-world communication tasks.	<i>"We rarely practice writing or speaking formally with correct grammar."</i> (Informant 7)
3. Expectations for Contextual Grammar Teaching	Students desire grammar instruction embedded in authentic, professional simulations.	<i>"It would be more helpful if grammar were taught through simulations of the professional world."</i> (Informant 1)

The first theme—awareness of grammar's role—was consistently mentioned by students when discussing formal communication. Many expressed that grammar plays a key role in shaping one's professional image, especially in high-stakes interactions such as job interviews, formal presentations, or correspondence with institutional authorities. As one student (Informant 3) remarked, "I think grammar is very important, especially if we want to work in an international agency. Incorrect grammar can create a non-professional impression." This view reflects students' internalization of grammar as a marker of credibility and competence, reinforcing its symbolic function in the workplace.

However, this recognition did not always translate into confidence or mastery, leading to the second theme: a perceived gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Students often mentioned that while they had learned grammar rules in class, they struggled to apply these accurately in formal writing or public speaking tasks. For instance, Informant 7 noted, "We often learn grammar theoretically online, but we rarely practice writing or speaking formally with correct grammar." This reflects a broader concern that grammar is taught in a decontextualized manner, making it difficult for students to use their knowledge in communicative tasks that mirror real-world demands.

The third theme centers on students' expectations for contextualized grammar instruction. Many expressed a desire for grammar learning to be embedded within professional simulations, such as writing job application letters, preparing presentations, or composing formal emails. Informant 1 suggested, "It would be more helpful if grammar were taught through simulations of the professional world, not just through exercises." This highlights students' growing awareness that their future roles—whether as educators, translators, or corporate professionals—require not just grammatical accuracy, but also the ability to apply it meaningfully within professional discourse.

The insights derived from the interviews align with growing scholarly interest in how language learners' professional identities are shaped by their perceptions and use of formal language features such as grammar. The theme of awareness of grammar's professional function supports previous studies by Cheng (2021) and Hafeez (2023), which argue that grammatical competence significantly contributes to how professionals are perceived in the workplace. For EFL learners, especially those preparing for global or multilingual contexts, grammar is not simply a linguistic skill—it becomes part of how they perform and project professionalism. This is especially relevant for pre-service English teachers and language-related professionals, for whom language proficiency is both a skill and a symbol of expertise.

The notion that grammar contributes to credibility and employability also reflects sociolinguistic realities described by Nejadghanbar and Fotouhi (2025), who examined how English language teachers manage their professional branding on social media. In formal written or spoken discourse, grammatical errors may be perceived not merely as mistakes, but as indicators of insufficient preparation or lack of rigor. As such, students' perceptions that grammar influences "professional impressions" suggest that they are internalizing normative expectations of correctness in professional spaces—a reflection of what Bagiyan et al. (2021) term the "real value of words" in identity formation.

At the same time, the interviews highlight a concerning disjunction between theory and practice, consistent with critiques from Çiftci and Özcan (2021) and van Rijt and Coppen (2021). Students appear to have acquired grammatical knowledge through rule-based instruction but struggle to activate this knowledge in applied contexts. This gap is not merely a pedagogical flaw; it speaks to a deeper misalignment between what is taught in university classrooms and the communicative demands of the professional world. If grammatical competence is central to professional identity, then the inability to apply grammar effectively in authentic tasks could hinder students' self-confidence and professional growth.

The third theme—students' expectations for more contextualized grammar instruction—offers a constructive direction for curriculum development. Students' calls for authentic learning experiences resonate with research by Al-Khresheh and Orak (2021), who advocate for the integration of grammar into real-world tasks such as writing cover letters or conducting mock interviews. This approach reflects principles from genre-based pedagogy and task-based language teaching, which emphasize teaching language through purposeful, communicative tasks situated in specific social contexts (Azizova, 2021; Ogwudile, 2022). Embedding grammar instruction into such tasks does more than enhance linguistic accuracy—it fosters the professional discourse practices students will need in their future careers.

Moreover, students' reflections on the inadequacy of current instruction serve as an implicit critique of monolithic approaches to grammar teaching. Traditional exercises, while valuable for rule acquisition, may fail to cultivate the pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic competencies needed for workplace communication. As Ilgūnaitienė (2021) notes, grammar remains important in tertiary education, but it must be taught in ways that connect form, meaning, and function. This pedagogical shift is especially urgent in EFL contexts like Indonesia, where English is often taught as a subject rather than as a tool for communication in real-world settings.

Importantly, students' desire for grammar to be taught "through simulations of the professional world" suggests that they are ready to engage with more advanced instructional designs. This readiness should be leveraged to create integrated learning experiences that combine grammatical accuracy,

genre awareness, and professional literacy. For instance, students can engage in collaborative projects such as mock business presentations or research poster sessions, where the focus is not just on grammatical correctness, but also on the effectiveness and appropriateness of language use in professional genres.

These findings also have implications for teacher preparation. If pre-service teachers are to become effective grammar instructors themselves, they must first experience grammar teaching that is meaningful, contextualized, and aligned with their professional goals. As Moon and Jannat (2022) emphasize, grammar teaching should move beyond abstract correctness toward communicative functionality. This paradigm not only equips students with linguistic skills but also helps them construct confident and credible professional identities.

The connection between standard grammar and professional identity is clearly recognized by students, but their ability to actualize this understanding is constrained by instructional limitations. The current findings call for a pedagogical shift toward context-rich, professionally oriented grammar instruction, supported by authentic tasks, reflective practice, and alignment with students' career trajectories. Such a shift is critical not only for improving grammar competence but also for empowering students to navigate and shape their identities in diverse professional domains.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that students in an English Language Education Study Program hold a largely positive perception of Standard English Grammar, particularly in its relevance to professional communication and identity formation. Quantitative data from the questionnaire showed that the majority of students believe grammar is essential for conveying professionalism, clarity, and credibility in formal settings such as job interviews, academic writing, and workplace correspondence. Qualitative insights from interviews further reinforced these findings, revealing that students are not only aware of grammar's symbolic value but also critically reflect on its application and pedagogical delivery.

Despite this awareness, a significant gap remains between students' understanding of grammar rules and their ability to use them effectively in authentic, professional contexts. This dissonance points to a limitation in current instructional approaches, which tend to emphasize decontextualized rule learning rather than communicative competence. Students expressed a clear demand for more contextualized grammar instruction—specifically, learning experiences that are embedded within realistic, professional communication tasks.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, grammar teaching in higher education must evolve to bridge the theory-practice divide by integrating professionally oriented tasks into the curriculum. Approaches such as genre-based pedagogy and task-based grammar instruction offer promising pathways for aligning linguistic knowledge with workplace readiness. Second, the development of professional identity among language learners is deeply intertwined with their ability to use grammar meaningfully. As such, grammar instruction should be positioned not merely as a technical subject, but as a critical component in preparing students for diverse roles in education, administration, translation, and beyond.

Future research may explore how specific instructional interventions—such as project-based grammar modules, role-play simulations, or digital grammar portfolios—impact students' grammatical performance and self-perception as professionals. Longitudinal studies are also needed to track how grammar competence develops over time and how it influences students' transition from university to the workforce. Additionally, comparative studies across institutions or disciplines could provide a broader understanding of grammar's role in shaping professional identity across different educational and cultural contexts.

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