



Exploring Learner Reflections and Growth in Grammar Learning: A Thematic Analysis of Student Narratives in a Malaysian Tertiary ESL Classroom

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Abstract. This study investigates how Malaysian tertiary ESL students reflect on their grammar learning experiences after completing a 12-week course. Using a qualitative design, the research draws on written reflections collected through five open-ended questions and analyses the data using thematic analysis. Grounded in Zimmerman's Self-Regulated Learning Theory, the study examines learner perceptions, challenges, strategies, and personal growth. Findings reveal number of themes that reflect the learners' perception of their learning progress, challenges and how to overcome them, learning strategies, classroom practices, or teaching materials learners identified as effective or ineffective in their grammar learning journey, and personal and academic insights in learners' reflections. From that, this study contributes to the understanding of grammar learning in which strategies, challenges and reflections are interconnected as grammar learning is not only about accuracy but also involves the learners' identity, motivation and self-regulated growth. It also underscores the role of reflection in promoting learner autonomy, motivation, and identity development within the ESL classroom.

Keywords: Grammar learning, ESL learners, Learner reflection, Self-regulated learning, Thematic analysis

1 Introduction

Grammar plays a vital role in second language acquisition, serving as the foundation for constructing meaning and achieving accuracy in both written and spoken communication. In many English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, grammar instruction has traditionally focused on rule memorization and decontextualized exercises. [1] emphasizes that language rules are best acquired implicitly through engagement with meaningful language in authentic contexts. In Malaysian tertiary institutions, this issue persists despite years of formal grammar instruction. Students may demonstrate knowledge of grammar rules in isolated exercises but continue to struggle with fluency, coherence, and accuracy in authentic communication tasks, particularly in academic writing. In addition, they found it difficult to understand and to apply grammar rules when there are inconsistencies within the topics, for example, sentence structure and

word order [1]. Along with that, according to [24], the difficulties may also stem from insufficient contextualization, limited exposure to authentic language use, and learners' unfavourable attitudes toward grammar learning. This disconnection between knowledge and application calls for a deeper exploration of how learners experience grammar learning and how they reflect upon their progress.

In recent years, the role of reflection in language learning has garnered increasing attention. [9] note that reflection is widely regarded as a key transferable skill in lifelong learning, playing a vital role in ongoing personal and professional growth. They further argue that reflective learning is gaining importance in addressing the demands of a technologically advanced society and in fostering adaptability to constantly changing contexts. [10] highlight that self-reflection provides deliberate opportunities and consistent moments for reflective practice, which, as emphasized by transformative learning scholars, is essential for facilitating perspective transformation. By tapping into learners' voices through written reflections, educators can gain a more holistic understanding of student needs, preferences, and learning trajectories, moving beyond the confines of summative assessments and one-size-fits-all grammar teaching.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do ESL learners perceive their learning progress and challenges following a 12-week grammar instruction course?
2. What learning strategies, classroom practices, or teaching materials do learners identify as effective or ineffective in their grammar learning journey?
3. How do the reflective practices in the grammar-focused course manifest learners' personal and academic insights?

2 Literature Review

[18] strongly argues for universities to tailor language teaching to the field-specific literacy and conventions so that learners can participate and engage effectively as members of their academic community. [25] findings align with [18] who examines the substantial vocabulary demands required for engineering students to adequately comprehend technical texts across various engineering disciplines. Although vocabulary and grammar are not identical, they are closely intertwined to construct meaning and structures. In this case, L2 learners face a unique challenge since generic language skills are not adequate to navigate academic environments. What we also need to acknowledge is that grammar learning transfers to other subjects and skills [19, 28].

Simultaneously, reflective learning expedites the grammar class as it needs the learners to reflect upon their strengths and weaknesses, to monitor their progress, thus, to make a wise decision on strategies for improvement [14]. Therefore, engaging in reflective activities will allow learners to identify gaps in their knowledge and form more durable means of tackling complex grammatical structures. Autonomous learning, when fostered through reflection, increases students' ability to learn on their own, plus their motivation to take over grammar. Such strategies as reflective journals, logs and diaries seem to be effective practices in providing language learners with ways to document progress, note patterns in applying grammar forms and set realistic goals for

further improvement in the field of grammar. For example, [23] demonstrated that integrating learning logs enabled students to stay attentive to their grammar development, promoting and adapting strategies when difficulties were frequent. This led not only to greater grammar retention but also helped foster autonomy as learners depend less on their teacher and more on self-development. Likewise, [13] reported that reflective diaries, incorporated in language classes, enabled students to self-evaluate their grammatical proficiency as well as consciously steer their learning direction. Additionally, teachers found the reflective tools helpful in that they helped to reveal students' thinking and allowed them to provide more individualized instructional support.

Using [38] **Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)** theory highlights four interrelated processes: goal setting, strategic action, self-monitoring, and reflection, that explain how learners take agency in their academic progress. In grammar learning, these dimensions provide a useful lens to understand how students actively regulate their development. Goal setting enables learners to identify specific targets, such as mastering sentence structures or reducing careless mistakes. Recent studies show that clear goal orientation guides learners in choosing resources aligned with their strengths, such as visual aids, online materials, or structured grammar exercises. [22] explicit goals also predict persistence and attention in language tasks [30]. Strategic action involves the deployment of purposeful strategies, including deliberate practice, peer collaboration, and the use of digital tools. Research confirms that SRL-oriented interventions, such as reflective journals, portfolios, and interactive platforms, foster grammar accuracy while enhancing engagement [8]. Moreover, digital supports like quizzes and games strengthen practice and feedback loops, which are central to grammar acquisition [33]. Self-monitoring allows learners to track their own progress and notice patterns of error. When supported by feedback, self-monitoring encourages learners to evaluate their performance against set criteria and adjust strategies accordingly [34]. Studies emphasize that consistent self-monitoring not only reduces errors but also builds confidence and self-efficacy [36]. Thus, reflection consolidates grammar knowledge by prompting learners to evaluate outcomes, adapt their study methods, and recalibrate their goals. Reflection also sustains motivation, which is critical in the gradual and rule-based nature of grammar development [36]. Taken together, SRL explains why learners who set explicit grammar goals, apply active strategies, monitor performance, and reflect critically demonstrate greater improvement than those who rely only on passive exposure.

In this study, an integration of SRL and thematic analysis is utilized. [5] define thematic analysis as a systematic approach to identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning, or themes, within a dataset. Thematic analysis is a widely adopted qualitative method in education, prized for its flexibility in capturing rich, context-specific patterns in learners' experiences [6, 10]. Its iterative stages, from familiarization, coding, theme development, and reporting, support both inductive exploration and theory-informed analysis. In recent second language education research, thematic analysis has been instrumental in examining reflective narratives, including learner perceptions of feedback, learning challenges, and self-regulated learning practices [31, 35]. Such reflections offer nuanced insights into how learners plan, monitor, and reflect on their grammar learning which are the dimensions central to SRL theory [37]. When integrated with SRL theory, thematic analysis enables researchers to map student narratives

onto distinct self-regulatory phases. Learners' accounts of grammatical challenges reflect the forethought phase, while reported strategies such as exercises, digital tools, and peer support illustrate the performance phase. Self-evaluative statements, in turn, demonstrate engagement with the self-reflection phase. Empirical evidence from [35] demonstrates that thematic analysis can also reveal emotional, technological, and socio-economic influences on learning, thereby extending its relevance beyond individual cognition. Thus, combining thematic analysis with SRL provides a powerful lens for examining both the regulatory processes and contextual factors that shape contemporary language learning experiences.

Additionally, despite growing interest in grammar instruction, self-regulated learning (SRL), and reflective practices in ESL contexts, gaps remain that warrant further scholarly attention. First, although SRL strategies have been theorized and applied in grammar learning, empirical examinations that specifically embed reflective practices within grammar instruction, particularly at the tertiary ESL level in Malaysia, are limited. While studies have explored SRL in flipped or blended classrooms and its influence on grammar acquisition in broader EFL contexts [22], systematic insights into how reflective narrative prompts enable SRL in grammar learning remain underexplored. Second, much of the existing research on reflective practice has concentrated on teacher development, engagement, or agency, with a focus on pre-service or in-service educators rather than students' own reflective insights [8, 34]. In the Malaysian ESL context, reflective practices have been primarily examined in early-childhood or primary-level education, leaving a gap in understanding how tertiary-level learners engage in reflection about grammar learning and how this shapes their learner identity. Given these gaps, the present study addresses a pressing need to explore how Malaysian tertiary ESL learners reflect upon and regulate their grammar learning across a sustained instructional period. By employing thematic analysis within Zimmerman's SRL framework, the research provides insights into learner narratives that highlight metacognitive engagement, evolving self-awareness and identity formation. Thus, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of grammar learning as a reflective and socially mediated process. This study also highlights the pedagogical value of integrating reflective practices into grammar instruction. Such practices are essential for fostering learner autonomy, sustaining motivation, and supporting identity growth in the ESL classroom.

3 Methodology

This research followed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate how learners developed their personal and academic knowledge of their habits, strategies and dispositions to learning through reflection in a grammar course. This method was selected to give learners a voice and enable them to describe the situation in their own words, which could be organized into themes that take on meaning. A total of 37 second-semester Diploma learners pursuing their studies at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in Melaka, who were enrolled in the Grammar 2 course, participated in the study. They were in the age range of 18 to 19, both male and female, with intermediate language proficiency. The learners had first finished Grammar 1 and thus received basic grammatical knowledge before learning the more advanced structures taught in Grammar 2. The Grammar 2 class was taught over 12 weeks, covering topics such as noun phrases, adjective phrases, verb phrases, prepositional phrases, adverbial phrases, phrasal verbs, noun clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, conditional clauses, participle clauses, sentence types, and direct and indirect speech. Data were collected at the end of a 12-week grammar course. Learners were asked to complete a reflection form containing five open-ended questions. These questions consisted of learning experience, identifying challenges, and articulating their personal and academic growth. The data were then analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, coding key ideas, grouping codes into themes, and interpreting these themes to answer the research question.

4 Findings

4.1 Students' perception on their learning progress and challenges

This section will report the findings in response to the research question: How do ESL learners perceive their learning progress and challenges following a 12-week grammar instruction course. Through thematic analysis, four themes were identified: (1) Enhanced grammatical accuracy, (2) Growth in confidence and fluency, (3) Transfer of grammar learning, and (4) Persistent challenges.

Table 1. Thematic grouping of students' perceptions on their learning progress

Theme	Example
Enhanced Grammatical Accuracy	<p>"...my grammar has gotten... I make fewer grammar mistakes and I can express my ideas better." (R27)</p> <p>"...structure and punctuation, which has helped me write more clearly and correctly." (R32)</p> <p>"...understanding of sentence structures and subject-verb agreement has improved a lot." (R4)</p>

Growth in Confidence and Fluency

“...my grammar has gotten... I make fewer grammar mistakes and I can express my ideas better.” (R27)

“...structure and punctuation, which has helped me write more clearly and correctly.” (R32)

“...understanding of sentence structures and subject-verb agreement has improved a lot.” (R4)

Transfer of grammar learning

“...understanding about this subject has significantly improved...have gained confidence to speak publicly in English...” (R22)

“...a bit more understanding throughout the course...confident and fluent in writing and not that afraid to make mistakes anymore.” (R14)

“Throughout the course, my understanding of grammar has improved. For example, I now feel much more confident in using noun clauses to express my opinion or ideas in both writing and speaking. In speaking, I also use adverbial clauses to give more details, which helps make my communication clearer.” (R7)

“My grammar usage in writing improves better than I expected. And I now can write confidently without fearing any (grammar) mistakes in my writing.” (R25)

Persistent difficulties

“I can write and speak with more confidence although I am (still) a bit confused about the tenses.” (R6)

“I would say yes, my use of grammar definitely improved throughout this course but I do think I still need more exercise as I get confused a lot.” (R34)

“I have difficulties to speak in English just because I’m worried if my grammar is always grammatical incorrect. I have an idea, but I don’t (know) how to sprinkle those ideas to the audience. By improving my grammar skills, it helps me a lot to improve my other skills, especially speaking and telling stories. For example, I need to be able to identify which type of tense and improve my skills on using types of phrases to express excitement while telling stories. For now, I’m surely not confident 100%, but I still love to sharpen my mind to understand better on grammar in my daily life.” (R30)

Based on Table 1, the first theme; Enhanced Grammatical Accuracy, can be deduced. The majority of students reported improved understanding and use of grammatical

structures particularly in academic tasks as can be seen in the extract from the reflection of R27. For example, one student described moving from instinctive usage to intentional application. Similarly, other respondents reflected on how conceptual understanding of grammar supported their academic tasks as can be seen in the responses by R32 and R4. Similar reflections are found among the respondents, where learners highlighted being able to write more varied and accurate sentences compared to before attending the course. Learners also indicated that accuracy in grammar rules led to increased confidence in speaking due to reduced fear of making mistakes. These reflections show clear progress in grammatical accuracy, enabling students to perform more confidently and effectively in an academic setting.

Secondly, another theme; Growth in Confidence and Fluency, was derived from the reflections as improved grammatical knowledge was also reportedly linked to students' increased confidence in using English. Many expressed reduced hesitation and greater fluency following the grammar course. This can be seen by the extract from R22. Similar expressions can also be seen in R14. Additionally, some respondents highlighted specific grammar items from the course that have promoted clearer communication as can be seen from R7. Grammar learning was also attributed to making fewer mistakes, which in turn improved learners' confidence and fluency in completing tasks. This can be seen from R25's response. These demonstrate that grammar instruction not only improved accuracy but also fostered self-assurance and fluency among ESL learners.

Another key finding was that learners transferred their grammar learning into other courses and real-life contexts with the theme of Transfer of Grammar Learning. Several mentioned applying grammar in assignments from other subjects as can be seen from R8, R17 and R33. Some participants described a social application such as conversations with friends and lecturers, for example, R17. Some learners mentioned how grammar practice extended into their experiences with technology and social media (R33)

Despite generally positive reflections, some respondents felt that their progress was limited and certain difficulties remained and can be categorized under the theme of Persistent Challenges. R6 expressed the increase in confidence but was still confused. Some learners reflected modest progress as can be seen with R34. One learner (R30) described ongoing struggles with grammar and confidence but remained positive in learning further. These responses indicate that despite overall gains, some learners still reported enduring challenges beyond the completion of the course.

For the challenges, the findings are separated into a few themes corresponding to the respondents' insights on which topic they found the most challenging.

Table 2. Thematic grouping of challenging grammar topics among tertiary ESL learners, interpreted through the lens of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)

Theme	Specific Areas Identified	Examples
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Sentence Structures	Types of sentences (Compound, Complex, Compound-Complex sentences)	<p>“One of the topics in Grammar 2 I found the most difficult is probably complex and compound sentences.” (R3)</p> <p>“Over the past 12 weeks, I think the most challenging topic for me was relative clauses, as well as compound and compound-complex sentences.” (R20)</p> <p>“What I found most challenging was the clauses and the sentences, but I tried to overcome them by analysing the biggest difference between each of them so I can identify each of the topics more easily.” (R36)</p>
Clauses	Noun, relative, participle, adverbial clauses; types of clauses; clauses in general	<p>“I find it challenging to differentiate clauses and phrases...” (R2)</p> <p>“In my opinion, I find that the hardest topic for me to understand are mostly the clauses especially participle clauses. This is because I often got confused of which word I have to omit in order to make the sentence as simple as possible.” (R18)</p> <p>“The grammar topic I found most difficult was noun clauses because I always got confused about how to identify and use them in a sentence. It made me feel unsure when writing or answering questions.” (R27)</p>
Verb Tenses & Direct/Indirect Speech	Past perfect, future perfect, direct and indirect speech	<p>“I found verb tenses, especially past perfect and future perfect, the most confusing. I often mixed them up in writing.” (R4)</p> <p>“Complex sentence structures and direct and indirect speech were the hardest grammar topics for me because the rules were hard to understand and there were a lot of variations.” (R21)</p>

Phrases	Participle, prepositional, adjective, adverb phrases	<p>“The most difficult topic for me is direct and indirect speech. I find it very confusing and very hard to master.” (R22)</p> <p>“I find participle phrases the most confusing as I am often confused between them and other normal adjective and adverb phrases. I also have difficulty distinguishing between participle adverbs or adjective phrases.” (R1)</p> <p>“Adverbial phrase. I plan to read and do some notes to increase my understanding for this topic.” (R25)</p>
Other	Phrasal verbs, reference to tree diagrams	<p>“One of the most challenging topics is the participle phrase, adjective phrase, noun clause, relative clause, and phrasal verb.” (R24)</p> <p>“Based on my opinion, the grammar topic that I found most challenging is the tree diagram topic.” (R37)</p>

The analysis of respondents’ feedback in their reflections, as presented in Table 1, highlights that the most significant challenges were concentrated around sentence structures and clauses, followed by verb tenses, phrases, and other isolated grammar points.

The most frequently reported theme was sentence structures, with 19 respondents noting difficulties in this area. Students specifically identified problems with compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences. Respondents such as R14 and R36 further indicated confusion regarding types of sentences, reinforcing the idea that distinguishing among different sentence forms is particularly demanding. The wide distribution of responses under this theme indicates that managing multiple clauses within a single sentence remains one of the most persistent obstacles for learners.

Closely following this were challenges with clauses, reported by 17 respondents. Within this category, students mentioned difficulties with noun clauses, relative clauses, and participle clauses. Others, such as R2, R14, R16, R17, R30, and R36, described clauses in more general terms, reflecting uncertainty in identifying and differentiating between clause types. Importantly, the overlap between clauses and sentence structures illustrates how difficulties with clause-level understanding directly impact learners’ ability to form more advanced sentence constructions.

A smaller number of respondents (six) pointed to verb tenses and direct/indirect speech as problematic. R4 highlighted the past perfect and future perfect, while R21 and R22 found direct and indirect speech especially challenging. The inclusion of R6 and R30 under this theme reflects the interconnectedness of tense control with broader

sentence structure challenges, as tense choice often determines the accuracy of meaning in complex constructions.

Similarly, phrases were cited by six respondents as areas of difficulty. These included participle phrases (R1, R24), prepositional phrases (R13), adjective phrases (R24), and adverb phrases (R25). R37 indirectly touched upon phrase-level analysis through reference to tree diagrams, suggesting that phrase-level awareness was present but not necessarily fully mastered.

Finally, a small subset of responses fell into the other category. R24 mentioned phrasal verbs, which are often challenging due to their idiomatic nature, while R37's remark about tree diagrams reflected a classroom experience rather than a grammatical difficulty.

Taken together, Table 1 demonstrates that learners' greatest struggles lie in understanding and applying clauses and sentence structures, while verb tenses, phrases, and other grammar points constitute secondary yet meaningful challenges. The strong clustering of responses under sentence structures and clauses highlights the need for pedagogical emphasis on scaffolding clause recognition and guiding students toward the accurate construction of compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences.

As they were able to identify the challenging topics, the strategies to overcome them were also asked of the respondents. Several themes can be identified on their strategies to overcome the challenges as illustrated below.

Table 3. Strategies employed by learners to address grammar challenges, categorized according to the phases of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)

Theme	Specific Strategies Identified	Examples
Practice and Exercises	Doing grammar exercises, worksheets, online quizzes, sentence-writing practice	"...and i overcome those by doing a lot of exercise and memorizing the technique." (R5) "I just did a lot of exercises on the topic and paid a lot of attention in class." (R8) "To improve, I watched videos on YouTube and did some quiz or exercises online, which kinda helped me to understand it better." (R27)
Independent Study and Note-taking	Creating/reviewing notes, re-reading materials, using examples, focusing more on difficult topics	"I can't seem to differentiate them so I'll study and focus more on those topics before the exam to maintain my good CGPA." (R3) "I plan to overcome this difficulties by finding more exercises to do and re-read some of the notes." (R11) "To overcome this, I reviewed the FANBOYS rule (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So), did more sentence-combining exercises, and asked my lecturer for feed-

		back. I also practiced rewriting simple sentences into compound sentences to get more confident.” (R32)
Use of Online Resources and Tools	Watching YouTube videos, searching explanations, using Grammarly, ChatGPT, or social media	“To overcome this, I watched YouTube tutorials, used grammar apps like Grammarly, and practiced writing short stories using different tenses.” (R4) “I also used online exercises and watched videos to help me understand the structure better. I plan to keep practicing by writing my own examples and checking them with grammar tools to improve further.” (R19)
Collaborative Learning and Support	Asking lecturer for help, seeking clarification, discussing with friends, peer learning	“I overcame the difficulties by asking the lecturer and reviewing the notes.” (R6) “Also, I’m planning on studying about this topic with my friends to discuss and help me understand this topic better.” (R12)
No Clear Strategy Provided	Did not share any strategy or gave vague responses	“I wouldn’t say I have overcome this challenge though I hope to before the day of examination.” (R33)

As presented in Table 3, respondents employed a variety of strategies to overcome their grammatical challenges, with practice and exercises emerging as the most frequently reported approach. A total of 21 respondents planned to engage in further exercises, worksheets, online quizzes, or sentence-writing practice to strengthen their grasp of difficult grammar points. This reflects a traditional yet effective learning orientation, as repeated exposure and active practice are essential to consolidating grammatical knowledge.

The second most common strategy was independent study and note-taking, reported by 17 respondents. Students described methods such as creating personal notes, reviewing materials, rereading explanations, and focusing more intensively on difficult topics. The overlap between this theme and practice suggests that learners relied on a combination of structured exercises and independent reinforcement to address their weaknesses.

A notable number of students (14 respondents) highlighted the use of online resources and digital tools. This included watching YouTube tutorials, searching for additional explanations, and making use of tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT. The integration of technology into their learning demonstrates learners’ willingness to engage with multimodal resources that offer immediate feedback and accessible explanations. Such approaches may complement traditional study methods by providing diverse examples and interactive learning opportunities.

In addition, collaborative learning and support were reported by eight respondents, who sought help from lecturers, peers, or discussions. While less frequent than individual strategies, this indicates that some learners value clarification through interpersonal interaction, reflecting the role of social support in overcoming learning difficulties.

Finally, three respondents did not articulate clear strategies for improvement, either leaving the question unanswered or giving vague responses. This suggests that while the majority demonstrated agency in addressing their challenges, a minority may require more explicit guidance and encouragement to develop effective strategies.

Overall, Table 3 shows that students most often rely on practice-based approaches and independent study, supported using online resources and, to a lesser extent, collaborative learning. The combination of traditional methods with digital tools highlights an adaptive approach to grammar learning, although the small number of students without strategies underscores the need for targeted instructional support.

4.2 Learning strategies, classroom practices, or teaching materials that learners identified as effective or ineffective in their grammar learning journey

This section will report the findings in response to the research question; What learning strategies, classroom practices, or teaching materials do learners identify as effective or ineffective in their grammar learning journey. Through thematic analysis, six themes were identified: (1) Identification of Learning Styles, (2) Preferences for Practice and Application, (3) Areas of Growth, (4) Confidence and Self-Efficacy, (5) Collaborative and Independent Learning, and (6) Identification of Useful Study Strategies.

Table 4. Students' discovery of themselves as learners in grammar class

Themes	Specific Discoveries Identified	Examples
Identification of Learning Styles	Many students discovered or confirmed their preferred learning styles, ranging from Visual to Auditory.	<p>"...my learning style it change to visual because... with this lesson that I refer to slide, it makes me a visual learner." (R5)</p> <p>"...I am an auditory learning style person. I need to learn attentively to lecturer's lesson so that I can focus more and enhancing my grammar" (R6)</p>
Preferences for Practice and Application	Many realised and declared they learn best through practice, exercises, quizzes, repetitions and applying grammar rules in real sentences.	<p>"Just reading the rules isn't enough for me...I need to see how they're used in real sentences." (R15).</p> <p>"... but this class made me realise that I actually need to do the work to improve." (R27).</p>

Areas of growth	Students reflected on challenging attributes which weigh them down throughout the lessons, such as procrastination, inconsistency and lack of focus.	<p>“Reading the grammar rules doesn’t work best for me... we do not know how the rules work.” (R35)</p> <p>“I’m the type of person to do work at the last minute... I do try to improve the bad habits.” (R14)</p> <p>“... I do everything at the very last minute.” (R16)</p>
Confidence and Self-Efficacy	Several students noticed growth in confidence, while some still struggle with self-doubt.	<p>“I need to improve my focus in class.” (R9)</p> <p>“Sometimes my answers are not wrong but I don’t feel confident...” (R12)</p> <p>“... I tend to overthink and doubt my answers.” (R7)</p>
Collaborative and independent Learning	Some learners thrive in a group discussion and with peer support, while others prefer isolation to focus better.	<p>“I can be more confident in English if I keep practising and not be afraid to make mistakes.” (R15)</p> <p>“I prefer sitting alone ... to focus entirely.” (R2)</p> <p>“When I didn’t understand a topic, my friend would explain it to me, and that made things easier.” (R20)</p>
Identification of useful study strategies	Students discovered useful study strategies that worked best for them individually, such as colourful notes and quizzes.	<p>“When I learn grammar it convinces me to do colourful notes... I want to make a portfolio which is so much fun.” (R17)</p> <p>“To understand a certain topic, I would watch YouTube videos and search for quiz online.” (R22)</p>

Table 4 depicts the key themes that emerged from students when asked what they discovered about themselves as learners during the Grammar class. The most dominant theme was the identification of learning styles. A total of 14 respondents highlighted

that, at the end of the semester, they either realised or confirmed their learning styles. Some discovered they were more of a visual learner, as reported by R5 while R6 identified as an auditory learner. Multiple teaching methods executed in class have allowed room for most respondents to identify their learning styles.

The second most prominent theme was preferences for practice and application. A total of 13 students recognised that active engagement through exercises, repetition, and application of rules facilitated deeper understanding compared to passive reading. As reported by R5 who discovered improvement was not seen merely by reading the grammar rules, instead how those grammar rules take form in a real sentence had to be incorporated to foster comprehension.

A further theme highlighted was areas of growth. A total of 13 students critically acknowledged persistent challenges in relation to their personal attributes in a learning environment. Procrastination, inconsistency and lack of focus were a few reported by R8, R9, R14 and R16. This discovery was made together with a unanimous agreement that these attributes require rectification.

Several students (seven) reflected on whether they learn better independently or collaboratively. Some students perceive that being in a group discussion or having peer support helps them thrive academically; however, on the other hand some students prefer independent learning, which champions solitude to enhance focus in learning.

Identifying helpful study strategies was the final theme identified where students were able to unearth useful study strategies that best aid students such as the use of colourful notes and quizzes. As a conclusion, there were a handful of discoveries made by students at the end of the lesson which will aid them academically.

Table 5. Students' Reflections on Activities, Methods, Materials and Suggestions in Grammar Learning

Theme	Specific Discoveries Identified	Examples
Collaborative Learning Enhances Understanding	Students found that working in groups, discussing answers, and peer-reviewing work improved their understanding of grammar concepts	<p>"Discussing the answers worked best for me. First we answer, then we compare in groups." (R1)</p> <p>"I enjoyed group activities and peer reviews that helped me see my mistakes." (R4)</p>
Importance of Teacher Feedback and Guidance	Learners emphasized the value of lecturer's explanations, guidance, and timely feedback in supporting their learning progress.	<p>"It is definitely when the lecturer gives us time to answer and then explains the correct usage." (R2)</p> <p>"The feedback from the lecturer increased my confidence in using the grammar rules." (R5)</p>

Engaging and Interactive Approaches Aid Motivation	Interactive activities such as games, exercises, and peer review made grammar learning more enjoyable and encouraged active participation.	<p>“The method that helped me the most was how Madam introduced fun activities that made grammar less boring.”(R3)</p> <p>“The activities kept me focused and helped me practise grammar in class.” (R6)</p>
Resources as Anchors of Grammar Learning	Students relied on notes, slides, handouts, and exercises for consolidation and self-study beyond classroom instruction.	<p>“The materials that helped me the best is by using the notes and slides provided.” (R5)</p> <p>“The exercises and notes given were helpful and easy to review after class.” (R8)</p>
Constructive Suggestions for Improvement	Students offered feedback to improve future classes, requesting more interactive activities, practical examples, and less theory-heavy lessons.	<p>“I suggest more group activities and less focus on too many theories.” (R10)</p> <p>“More examples and practice would help future students understand better.” (R7)</p>

According to Table 5, the thematic analysis of students’ reflections revealed five main themes which are collaborative learning enhances understanding, importance of teacher feedback and guidance, engaging and interactive approaches aid motivation, resources as anchors of grammar learning and constructive suggestions for improvement. These themes illuminate the key elements that shaped students’ grammar learning experiences in the classroom.

A prominent theme was the importance of peer collaboration and group-based activities. Students frequently noted that working with peers enhanced their understanding of grammar rules and fostered active learning. For example, one student explained, “*Discussing the answers worked best for me. First we answer, then we compare in groups*” (R1). Others reported that peer review and group discussions encouraged them to reflect on mistakes and deepen their understanding. This finding highlights the importance of social interaction in fostering understanding and aligns with learner-centred pedagogies that view grammar acquisition as a collaborative process.

Another central theme was the crucial role of lecturer feedback and support. Students emphasized that clear explanations, guidance, and opportunities to ask questions helped them grasp complex grammar points. As one participant reflected, “*It is definitely when the lecturer gives us time to answer and then explains the correct usage*” (R2). Such reflections highlight that teacher scaffolding not only provides clarity but also builds learner confidence. This theme suggests that consistent, constructive feedback is integral to supporting student progress in grammar learning.

Students also emphasized the importance of interactive and engaging methods, such as games, exercises, and peer activities, which made grammar more interesting. One student commented, *“The method that helped me the most was how Madam introduced fun activities that made grammar less boring”* (R3). Others described how active participation in classroom exercises helped maintain their focus and improve retention. These responses suggest that a dynamic, participatory classroom environment enhances motivation and supports long-term learning of grammar concepts.

Many students identified course materials, including notes, slides, handouts, and exercises, as essential supports for both classroom learning and self-study. One student stated, *“The materials that helped me the best is by using the notes and slides provided”* (R5), while another emphasized that consistent use of exercises and notes helped them revise independently. These reflections show that accessible, well-structured resources serve as anchors for consolidation and revision, reinforcing knowledge gained during interactive lessons.

Finally, students provided practical suggestions for enhancing the course, such as increasing the number of interactive tasks, offering more examples, and reducing the amount of heavy theoretical explanations. A representative comment was, *“I suggest more group activities and less focus on too many theories”* (R10). These suggestions demonstrate students’ growing metacognitive awareness of the learning strategies and conditions that best support their development.

Overall, students’ reflections portray grammar learning as both a social and reflective process. They attributed their progress to interactive peer and teacher support, engaging classroom activities, and accessible learning resources. At the same time, their constructive feedback reveals an active interest in shaping more effective and motivating learning environments. The results highlight the importance of embedding collaborative tasks, providing continuous feedback, utilizing interactive methods, and ensuring the use of reliable materials in grammar instruction. Such practices can enhance learner motivation, deepen understanding, and foster autonomy in grammar learning.

4.3 Personal and Academic Insights in Learners’ Reflections

The findings below are based on research question 3; *What personal and academic insights do students gain about themselves as learners through reflective practices in a grammar-focused course?*

Table 6. Students' Reflections on Personal and Academic Insights Students Gain About Themselves as Learners in Grammar Learning

Themes	Specific Discoveries Identified	Examples
Time Management & Avoiding Procrastination	Managing time wisely	<p>"Please past me study every week, if you wait until the last semester to cramp all this grammar lessons you will be stressed and don't have enough time to study all of it properly." (R1)</p> <p>"One advice I would give myself is totally not to procrastinate the grammar e-portfolio... which often makes me feel overwhelmed." (R4)</p> <p>"Don't do work last minute and do a lot of exercise about grammar topic." (R6)</p>
Consistent Practice & Daily Learning	Consistent practice	<p>"I would probably do exercises right after the class ends at my room... I would eventually forget what I've learned and had to re-learn everything back from scratch." (R13)</p> <p>"Practice grammar daily, ask questions whenever confused, use extra resources early, and memorize every grammar topic early as it will aid me during the final assessment." (R20)</p> <p>"Do at least one grammar quiz every day... better than waiting until the last minute." (R28)</p>
Active Participation & Asking Questions	More actively by asking questions	<p>"Sit alone literally. Focus and do my work better." (R2)</p> <p>"Focus. And when I say focus, I mean really focus. Take notes immediately after learning and understanding each topic." (R25)</p> <p>"Pay attention better and don't overthink about the rules in grammar because... I will feel overwhelmed and confused." (R29)</p>
Focus & Concentration in Class	Concentration	<p>"I would tell myself to ask more questions early on and not be afraid to make mistakes." (R5)</p> <p>"Always ask questions in class and participate more, even if I feel unsure." (R9)</p> <p>"Ask more questions whenever I'm unsure... not to be afraid of making mistakes, because that's part of learning." (R15)</p>
Positive Mindset & Motivation	Role of motivation and mindset in their learning	<p>"Don't ever think of yourself as the weakest one; keep going and prove to the world that you can be a better person." (R7)</p>

Study Techniques & Strategies	Effective study techniques	<p>“Grammar is not as bad as you think... you can overcome it by defeating your own weakness.” (R17)</p> <p>“Appreciate every moment I have to learn grammar because learning grammar really helps me in my daily life.” (R22)</p> <p>“Study the topic first before the lecture starts just so that I will have an idea of what the topic... is going to be about.” (R19)</p> <p>“Keep a grammar notebook to write down common mistakes and corrections.” (R36)</p> <p>“Study smarter instead of harder... focus on the topics I lack at.” (R24)</p>
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Overall, students’ reflections revealed six interconnected themes that shaped their grammar learning experience. They acknowledged the importance of managing time effectively and avoiding procrastination to reduce stress and enhance comprehension, while also recognising that consistent practice and daily revision were more effective than last-minute cramming. Many admitted that active participation and asking questions in class were crucial for building confidence and clarifying complex concepts, which required them to stay focused and minimise distractions during lessons. At the same time, they highlighted the need for a positive mindset, noting that motivation and self-belief helped them overcome challenges and view grammar as a meaningful skill rather than a burden. Finally, they identified effective study techniques such as pre-reading, keeping notes, peer collaboration, and concentrating on weak areas as practical strategies that supported deeper understanding. Together, these insights show how reflective practices helped students become more self-aware, disciplined, and proactive learners.

5 Discussion

5.1 How do ESL learners perceive their learning progress and challenges following a 12-week grammar instruction course?

The findings provide insights into how ESL students perceive their learning progress and challenges following 12 weeks of grammar instruction. Overall, students reported enhanced grammatical accuracy, which supports the observation of [4], further suggesting that explicit instruction strengthens learners' ability to produce more accurate sentences. Beyond supporting precision in language use, students also noted a growth in confidence and fluency, indicating that grammar knowledge contributed not only to correctness but also to smoother and more assured communication. This finding expands [18] previous work which emphasizes tailoring language teaching in universities to academic contexts, equipping learners with skills that support participation in their communities of practice. This finding shows how grammar instructions promote growing confidence and fluency which are central to making such active participation possible. Importantly, several participants highlighted the transfer of grammar learning to other academic tasks and subjects, suggesting that grammar instruction supports broader academic literacy which aligns with previous studies [34] [17, 28]. This finding also adds nuances to the work of [25] about academic vocabulary, because grammar is the structure that provides meanings to vocabulary. Our findings reinforce the need for language teaching in preparing learners to perform in various subjects and academic demands in their field. Notably, students also reported the ability to apply grammar knowledge across domains, including socializing, media, and technology use. This reflects broader gains of communicative competence that align with students' lived realities. Although progress is evident, persistent challenges remain, particularly in applying complex structures and sustaining accuracy. This finding reflects that grammar development is gradual.

In addition, the analysis showed that learners most often struggled with clauses, sentence structures, and tense usage (Table 2). These findings parallel [26]'s study, which reported similar difficulties with syntactic complexity and verb tense accuracy among EFL learners, highlighting the persistence of these challenges across contexts. Within the framework of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), this reflects the forethought phase, where learners recognize and plan around areas of difficulty [37]. In response, students employed strategies such as practice, digital tools, peer collaboration, and reflective monitoring (Table 3). Exercises and note-taking mirror [26] observation that structured practice enhances grammar retention. The use of Grammarly, YouTube, and online quizzes aligns with evidence that digital tools improve accuracy and foster learner autonomy [11, 16]. These actions represent the performance phase of SRL, where learners actively regulate their progress. Peer and lecturer support further illustrate socially mediated regulation, while reflective practices correspond to the self-reflection phase, reinforcing [16]'s findings on feedback-driven awareness.

Overall, learners' experiences map clearly onto SRL's cyclical model, showing that grammar learning is regulated through forethought, strategy use, and reflection. These results confirm both the persistence of grammar challenges and the growing role of digital and reflective practices in supporting learner agency.

5.2 What learning strategies, classroom practices, or teaching materials do learners identify as effective or ineffective in their grammar learning journey?

The present study argues that Malaysian tertiary ESL learners perceive collaborative learning opportunities, timely teacher feedback, interactive classroom practices, and accessible learning resources as the most effective supports for grammar development, while regarding overly theoretical instruction as less effective. This finding underscores the importance of a balanced, student-centred approach to grammar instruction.

Learners emphasized that peer collaboration, such as discussing answers in groups and engaging in peer-review activities, promoted a deeper understanding of grammar rules and encouraged reflection on errors. This result supports the view of [2], who found that collaborative learning interventions in EFL classrooms enhanced learners' grammar performance and fostered metalinguistic awareness by enabling them to co-construct knowledge.

Equally important was the role of teacher feedback and guidance. Students reported that clear explanations, constructive feedback, and opportunities to ask questions increased their confidence and accuracy. This finding aligns with [27] who emphasizes that sustained, dialogic feedback strengthens learners' self-monitoring processes and contributes to long-term grammar development.

In addition, learners highlighted the value of interactive and engaging classroom practices, including games, peer-review activities, and in-class exercises, which they found motivating and effective in sustaining focus. This observation is consistent with [3, 7], who demonstrate that gamified tasks and game-based learning promote persistence, motivation, and accuracy in grammar learning.

5.3 How do the reflective practices in the grammar-focused course manifest learners' personal and academic insights?

Students who engage in reflective practices in a grammar-focused course gain a range of personal and academic insights about themselves as learners, primarily centred on developing self-regulation, metacognition, and a growth mindset. The findings from Research Question 3 highlight six key themes that demonstrate how students' reflective practices reveal their strengths and weaknesses as learners. For time management and procrastination, students realized that last-minute work and poor time management hindered their ability to learn grammar properly. This insight shows a developing sense of self-discipline and the importance of a structured study approach [39]. Students could also practice consistently, as they discovered that consistent, daily practice was far more effective in retaining grammar concepts. This realization highlights the understanding of learning as a continuous process rather than a one-time event [15]. Students also actively participated in the class. Students acknowledged the need to overcome their reluctance and become more active participants by asking questions and engaging with instructors. This reflects a shift toward ownership of their learning [32].

At the same time, students could focus and concentrate in class. The reflections revealed that students recognized the need to improve their concentration and minimize distractions during class to maximize their learning [29]. Students were also able to have a positive mindset, as many students found that adopting a positive attitude and believing in their ability to improve helped them overcome challenges and stay motivated. This demonstrates the cultivation of a growth mindset [12].

Finally, they were able to adapt effective study techniques, and students gained insight into what study methods worked best for them, such as preparing for lectures in advance and creating their own notes. This highlights the development of personalized and effective study strategies [15]. In short, the research shows that through reflective practices, students in a grammar course don't just learn grammar rules; they become more self-aware, self-regulated, and strategic learners. These insights into their own behaviours, mindsets, and effective strategies are crucial for academic success in any subject.

Overall, strategies, challenges and reflections are interconnected in grammar learning as grammar learning is not only about accuracy but also involves the learners' identity, motivation and self-regulated growth which can be illustrated as the diagram below.

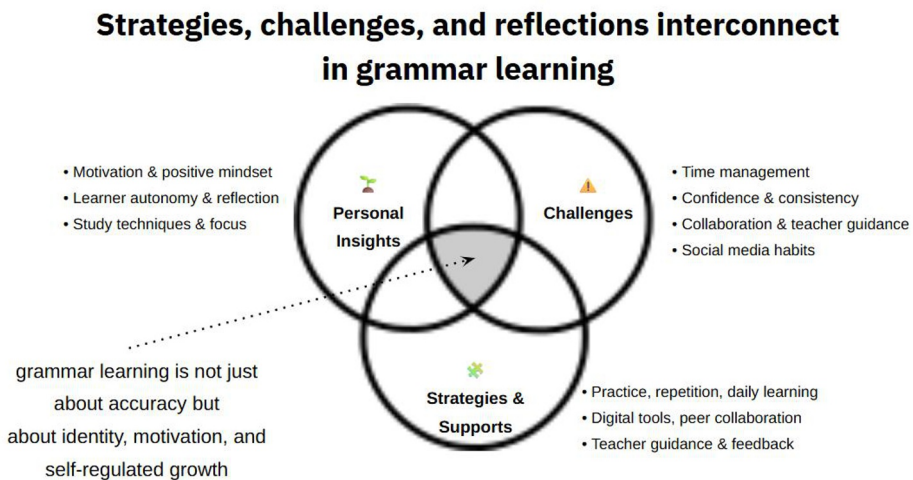


Fig. 1. Interconnectedness in Grammar Learning

6 Conclusion

This study explored how Malaysian tertiary ESL students reflected on their grammar learning experiences in a 12-week course. Through thematic analysis, it uncovered themes related to awareness, challenges, strategies, and learner identity. Findings emphasize the importance of integrating reflective tools into grammar pedagogy, guided by experiential, sociocultural, and self-regulated learning theories. The study contributes to learner-centred grammar instruction literature by validating reflection as a tool for grammar learning, providing insights into Malaysian ESL learners' cognitive and emotional journeys and highlighting the interplay of theory and practice in grammar education.

This study relied on self-reported reflections from one institution and may not represent broader ESL populations. Future research could triangulate data with classroom observations or longitudinal designs to explore sustained impacts of reflection on gram-

mar proficiency. The findings call for educators to adopt reflective and socially mediated approaches to grammar teaching that empower learners not only to master grammatical rules but to grow as autonomous, self-aware individuals in their language learning journeys.

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