STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS THE DIFFICULTY OF GRAMMATICAL FEATURES AT UIN ALAUDDIN MAKASSAR

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Abstract

This study explores students' perceptions of the difficulty level of various English grammatical features, based on the Semester Learning Plan (RPS) for a grammar course. Using a quantitative approach and survey methodology, data was collected from a purposive sample of 70 students. A Likert scale measured students' perceptions of twelve grammatical features, from "very easy" to "very difficult." The results indicate diverse perceptions, highlighting the complexities involved in grammar acquisition. Specifically, parts of speech, modals, WH-questions, question tags, gerunds, direct and indirect speech, degrees of comparison, and passive voice were generally perceived as less difficult, while tenses, causatives, infinitives, and conditional sentences were seen as more challenging. These findings underscore the need for tailored teaching strategies to accommodate varying levels of difficulty perceived by students. By examining grammatical difficulty from a learner's perspective, this study contributes to language education, offering insights for educators to adapt their teaching methods, thereby enhancing students' grammar mastery and communication skills in both academic and real-world settings.

Keywords: Grammatical Features, Learner' perception, students' difficulty, grammar course

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is a lifelong process, and it is often considered to be a challenging experience for second and foreign-language learners (Devici, 2022). Furthermore, he stated that English is the most frequently taught language to second and foreign learners in the world. In fact, all aspects of language, including vocabulary and grammar, play vital roles in learning a language. Thus, in order to be fluent and accurate in a particular language, grammar cannot be neglected, even though vocabulary may play a more important role.

According to Zhang (2019), grammar and vocabulary form the infrastructure of the English language. Zhang (2019) stated, "It is a fact that grammar should be in the foreground of foreign language teaching because knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is the key to mastery of the English language." However, in the light of students' perceptions express that learning grammar is more difficult than learning vocabulary (Amelani, 2019). In addition,

Dehgani et al. (2018) claimed that, in the EFL context, as learners are not in a natural environment, the process of grammar learning is more difficult. They added that many EFL learners depend on grammar books, guided activities, and exercises to increase their knowledge due to the importance of learning grammar in both receptive and productive skills.

Hence, grammar is an important component for language learners to master. Mastering grammar is the foundation of proficiency in a language. The central part of a language is grammar (Chiou, 2019; Hoque, 2018; Palmer, 1972). Grammar plays a significant role in English skills, as it provides information that is beneficial to foreign language learners (Zuhriyah, 2018). Grammar is key in foreign language acquisition, which helps learners construct meaningful sentences (Thomakin, 2020; Mart, 2018). Therefore, grammar should be of vital interest to any intelligent, educated person. Moreover, according to Dekeyser (2019), the selection of target grammar features for foreign language instruction is a matter of special importance for foreign teachers and researchers. Furthermore, Shiu (2011) claimed that it might be helpful if teachers knew what language features are possibly more difficult for their students as this may provide useful information for teachers when deciding what and how to teach them.

By identifying the grammar materials that are difficult based on students' perceptions, teachers can develop a more effective approach and supporting teaching strategies to help students overcome their difficulties. Ameliani (2019) state that some of the students are able to speak English, but they have difficulty arranging the words they want to speak according to the grammar rules. Moreover, the students often have difficulties in forming sentences with correct tenses. Sometimes, they use the wrong tenses so that the sentence becomes wrong. Not only that. Indonesian students are confused by the difference between the Indonesian sentence form and the English sentence form, so sometimes they use the Indonesian sentence form when making English sentences (Ameliani, 2019).

Difficulties are also mentioned in the Al-Qur'an, specifically at surah Al-Inshirah, verse 5-6 as, as follows:

فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا (5) إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا(6)

Meaning: 5. For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease. 6. Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease.

As-Shawi in Al Inshawi (2011) said that the word "ma'a" in verse 6 means ba'da or after. It is said so because it indicates that ease will come not too long after hardship as if

accompanying it as a form of comfort and encouragement. The verse reassures us that every difficulty comes with ease. In the context of learning a language, this can be interpreted to mean that the challenges faced while trying to grasp a new language will eventually lead to fluency and understanding, which brings ease and satisfaction.

Students of EED at UIN Alauddin Makassar are required to take three grammar classes, namely Basic English Grammar, Intermediate English Grammar, and Advanced English Grammar. The classes are taken in different semesters, from semester 1 to semester 3. Therefore, after learning grammar for three semesters, it is expected that the students will have good grammar knowledge. In this case, the students are expected to understand most, if not all, of the grammatical features of the target language. It is crucial that the students comprehend all of the grammatical features in order to be competent in all the English skills because improper use or lack of grammar understanding might obstruct communication either in speaking, writing, listening, or reading.

Moreover, grammar knowledge also plays an important role in the process of acquisition. In the effort to study a foreign language, students usually find grammatical challenges either in practicing the language or in understanding theories that go along with it. As a result, addressing this issue with university students led the current researcher to identify the grammatical features that are considered difficult for students to learn when learning English as a foreign language. Research on grammatical difficulty from the students' perspective is still limited. Therefore, understanding how students perceive the grammatical difficulty of some grammatical features is a useful addition to foreign language pedagogy.

METHODS

This research was a quantitative approach. Mills and Gay (2019) stated that quantitative research is collecting and analysing numerical data to describe, explain, predict, or control phenomena of interest. In this research, the researcher employed a survey research methodology. Survey research involves collecting data to test hypotheses or to answer questions about people's opinions on some problem or issue (Mills & Gay, 2019). Moreover, Mills & Gay (2019) said that a survey is an instrument to collect data describing a specific population's characteristics. Survey research can gather information about a group's beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and demographic composition.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample. With purposive sampling, a representative sample from a population can be generalized to a population. The criteria specified by the researcher were students who are thoughtful, informative, and surely experienced with the research problem and setting, so they must be the ones who are active,

always follow the process of the teaching-learning process, and students' GPA (Grade Point Average). The participants of this research were the fourth-semester fourth-semester students at the EED of UIN Alauddin Makassar who met the criteria. The fourth-semester students were chosen because they had experience learning grammar through three semesters (Basic et al., intermediate English Grammar, and Advanced English Grammar) at the university level, so they could feel the differences between these three grammar classes. The population of the fourth-semester students of UIN Alauddin Makassar is 86 students, including PBI A (29), PBI B (27), and PBI C (30). Therefore, to measure the number of samples in this research, the researcher used the Krejcie and Morgan Table. So, the sample of this research was 70 students.

This research used a questionnaire to collect data. A questionnaire is a written collection of self-report questions to be answered by a selected group of research participants (Mills & Gay, 2019). The questionnaire was given to the participants to answer the research question, "How do the students perceive the difficulty of grammatical features?" The researcher used a questionnaire adapted by Shiu (2011) in this research. The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section 1 asks for the participants' biographical information, including sex, age, prior EFL learning experience, informal exposure to English, and English proficiency test scores. Section 2 comprises 12 closed-ended questions, each of which represents a different grammatical feature. The grammar features were selected based on material that the subject had learned in semesters one, two, and three. Eventually, the following features were selected: Part of Speech, Tenses, Modals, WH-Question, Question Tag, Causative, Gerund, Infinitive, Direct and Indirect Speech, Degrees of comparison, Conditional sentence, and Passive Voice.

In Section 2, the participants were asked to indicate the degree of difficulty using a four-point Likert scale, with 1 standing for "very easy" and 4 for "Very difficult." "Very easy" indicates that the student had learned the structure quickly after a short explanation and some practice. "Very difficult" indicates that the student does not expect to understand the structure fully, even with extensive explanation and practice. The participants were asked to base their rating on their prior grammar learning experience.

Table 1 Assessment Instrument Answer Scores

Alternative Answers	Assessment Score
Very Difficult	4
Difficult	3
Easy	2

Very Easy	1

The data analysis technique used in this research is the percentage descriptive analysis. Percentage descriptive analysis is applied to know the percentage of every factor based on the respondents' assessment score with the formula as follows:

$$DP = n/N \times 100\%$$ (Ali: 1994)

Where: DP: Percentage Description
                 n : Total of Respondent Value
                 N : Total of the Scores

Before determining the percentage description, four categories must be defined as follows:

1. The highest percentage (%t)   = (4/4) x 100% = 100%

2. The lowest percentage (%r)   = (1/4) x 100% = 25%

3. Distant (%t - %r)   = 100% - 25%   = 75%

4. Criteria Interval   = 75% : 4   = 18,75%

Thus, the classification of each difficulty level in a percentage to categorize the students' perception towards the difficulty of grammatical features is as follows:

Table 3.3. Interval and Category

DP Interval	Category
81.26 – 100	Very Difficult
62.51 – 81.25	Difficult
43.76 – 62.50	Easy
25 – 43.75	Very Easy

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

a. *Background Information*

Table 3.1.1. Background Profiles of the 70 Students

Grade	Female	Male

A	51	6
A-	8	5
Total= 70 Students	59 Female	11 Male

As the table above shows, 59 of the participants were female, and 11 were male. 51 female students received an A, while only 6 male students received the same grade. On the other hand, for the A- grade, 8 female students and 5 male students received the grade. Furthermore, the Level of frequency in the learning grammar section was described in the table below:

Table 3.1.2. Level of Frequency in Learning

English Classes	**Level of frequency in learning grammar**				**Total**
	Very often	**Often**	**Sometimes**	**Seldom**	
At elementary school	2	2	18	48	70
At junior high school	8	21	32	9	70
At senior high school	8	33	25	4	70
At university	35	19	14	2	70
Percentage	-	60%	40%	-	100%

Grammatical Features

1. *Part of Speech*

Table 3.2.1. Part of Speech

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	**Frequency**				**Total**
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Part of Speech	23	44	3	0	70
Percentage	33%	63%	4%	0%	100%

Based on the table, it appears that the majority of the students in the study perceived the parts of speech to be relatively easy, with 63% reporting that they were "easy". A smaller percentage, 33%, reported that the parts of speech were "very not all difficult", indicating that they found the parts of speech to be very easy. Only a small percentage of students, 4%, reported that the parts of speech were "difficult", while none of the students reported that they were "very difficult".

Parts of speech are considered to be one of the foundational concepts in grammar, and may be relatively easy to learn and understand. Additionally, the way that parts of speech are typically taught in language learning contexts may also contribute to students' perceptions of ease or difficulty. For example, parts of speech are often presented in a clear and structured manner, with examples and practice exercises, which may help students to internalize the concepts more easily.

2. Tenses

Table 3.2.2. Tenses

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Tenses	6	28	32	4	70
Percentage	8%	40%	46%	6%	100%

The findings from the table indicate that tenses are perceived differently among the students. A significant portion of the respondents (40%) find dealing with tenses not to be difficult at all, which suggests that a considerable number of students have a relatively good grasp of this grammatical feature. On the other hand, 46% of students consider tenses to be difficult. This suggests that a considerable portion of the student population faces challenges when working with tenses in English. It's interesting to note that a small percentage of students (8%) find tenses very easy, while a smaller percentage (6%) find them very difficult. This suggests a polarization of perceptions, with some students feeling very confident and others struggling significantly.

The variation in perceptions about the difficulty of tenses could be attributed to various factors. These might include prior exposure to tenses in the students' native languages, the effectiveness of teaching methods used in grammar classes, individual learning preferences, and the overall language proficiency level of the students. Johnson (2019) said that students' perceptions of tense difficulty were influenced by their previous language learning experiences, the teaching methods used, and the availability of resources for practice.

3. Modals

Table 3.2.3. Modals

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Modals	19	35	14	2	70

| **Percentage** | 27% | 50% | 20% | 3% | 100% |

Based on the students' perspective, the percentage of difficulty level in learning modals is as follows: very not all difficult = 27%, easy = 50%, difficult = 20%, and very difficult = 3%. Learning modals can be challenging for some students, according to this data, the majority of students do not find modals to be very difficult. Modals are a unique category of verbs in English that express ability, permission, obligation, and possibility, among other meanings. The challenge in learning modals lies in their usage, as different modals can have different meanings depending on the context. According to Wesche and Li Li (2019) found that although some students may find modals challenging, the majority of students do not perceive them to be very difficult. This because modals are a common and important aspect of English grammar, and are often encountered in daily communication. Additionally, they said that many students already familiar with modal verbs in their native language, which can help facilitate their learning in English. The authors also suggest that effective instruction and practice can further support students in learning modals.

4. WH-Question

Table 3.2.4. WH-Question

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	**Frequency**				**Total**
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
WH-Question	31	35	4	0	70
Percentage	44%	50%	6%	0%	100%

Based on the table, it seems that the majority of students do not perceive the learning of WH-questions to be difficult. The majority of students (44% and 50%) do not find learning about WH-questions to be difficult, while a small percentage (6%) perceives them as difficult. None of the students find them very difficult.

Learning about WH-questions is a fundamental aspect of English language grammar and is essential for effective communication. The reason why the majority of students do not find it difficult could be because they are exposed to these types of questions in their daily lives and in different contexts, such as in conversations and media. Additionally, the structure of WH-questions is fairly straightforward and can be easily understood through practice and repetition.

5. Question Tag

Table 3.2.5. Question Tag

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Question Tag	10	47	12	1	70
Percentage	14%	67%	17%	2%	100%

According to the perspective of students, learning question tags is perceived as not all difficult by the majority of students (67%), while some students find it difficult (17%) and only a small percentage find it very not all difficult (14%) or very difficult (1%).

Zakaria (2019) found that the students faced several challenges in learning question tag, including the understanding of the form and meaning of question tags, identifying the appropriate auxiliary verbs, and using the correct intonation. Zakaria (2019) suggests that teachers should use various teaching techniques and strategies, such as explicit instruction and practice, to enhance students' understanding and mastery of question tags.

6. Causative

Table 3.2.6. Causative

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Causative	2	17	46	5	70
Percentage	3%	24%	66%	7%	100%

According to the students' perspective, the causative is considered a difficult topic. The majority of the students (66%) found it difficult, while 7% found it very difficult. Only 3% found it very easy, and 24% found it easy. Alghamdi (2018) said that the majority of EFL learners find causative verbs to be difficult. Furthermore he said that students struggled with understanding the different meanings of causative verbs, using the appropriate verb forms, and producing correct sentences with causative verbs. He suggests that effective teaching methods and strategies, such as providing explicit instruction and meaningful practice, can help students overcome these difficulties.

7. Gerund

Table 3.2.7. Gerund

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Gerund	10	32	27	1	70

Percentage	14%	46%	39%	1%	100%

Based on the table above, it seems that a relatively large proportion of students find gerunds to be difficult, with 39% reporting difficulty and 14% finding them very difficult. However, the majority of students (46%) did not find gerunds to be difficult at all.

Gerunds are a type of verb form that end in -ing and function as a noun in a sentence. They can be used as subjects, objects, or complements, among other functions. Some common examples of gerunds are "swimming," "singing," and "dancing." According Trabelsi (2018) Learners had challenges in identifying and using gerunds and infinitives correctly in different contexts. Some of the specific difficulties identified in the study include errors in using gerunds and infinitives as subjects or objects, selecting the appropriate verb patterns, and understanding the differences in the usage of gerunds and infinitives in different contexts. However, Trabelsi (2018) also suggests that providing students with explicit instruction and practice can help them overcome these difficulties.

8. *Infinitive*

Table 3.2.8. Infinitive

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Infinitive	10	23	36	1	70
Percentage	14%	33%	52%	1%	100%

Based on the table, the students' perceptions of the difficulty level of infinitives are as follows: 33% find them easy, 52% find them difficult, 14% find them very not all difficult, and 1% find them very difficult.

Infinitives, as the base form of a verb typically preceded by the word "to," can present challenges for language learners. Difficulties may arise from knowing when to use infinitives, understanding their various functions in sentences, and differentiating between infinitives and other verb forms. According to Hashimova (2021) common difficulties faced by students such as choosing between infinitives and gerunds, using infinitives as subjects or objects, and understanding the correct placement of adverbs. Hashimova (2021) suggests that explicit instruction, contextualized practice, and exposure to authentic language use can support learners in overcoming these challenges.

9. *Direct & Indirect Speech*

Table 3.2.9. Direct & Indirect Speech

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Direct & Indirect Speech	7	31	29	3	70
Percentage	10%	44%	42%	4%	100%

The findings from the table demonstrate that students' perceptions of the difficulty of direct and indirect speech are diverse. Almost half of the respondents (44%) perceive direct and indirect speech as easy, indicating a significant proportion of students who have a good grasp of this grammatical feature. On the other hand, 42% of students find direct and indirect speech difficult, suggesting that a substantial portion of the student population faces challenges when working with this aspect of grammar. It's noteworthy that a smaller percentage of students (10%) find direct and indirect speech very easy, while an even smaller percentage (4%) find it very difficult. This indicates a range of perspectives, with some students feeling very comfortable and others struggling significantly with the concept.

The variation in perceptions of the difficulty of direct and indirect speech may arise from multiple factors, including the complexity of the topic itself, the teaching methods employed, students' prior exposure to these concepts, and their overall language proficiency.

10. Degrees of Comparison

Table 3.2.10. Degrees of Comparison

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Degrees of Comparison	16	34	17	3	70
Percentage	23%	49%	24%	4%	100%

Approximately 49% of the students perceive the concept of degrees of comparison as "Easy." This suggests that a significant portion of students have a solid understanding of this grammatical feature, potentially due to effective teaching methods or prior exposure to the topic. These students might be able to easily differentiate between positive, comparative, and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs. Around 24% of students find degrees of comparison "Difficult." This indicates that a notable proportion of students are facing challenges when working with this aspect of grammar. The complexities in forming comparative and superlative forms, including irregular forms and exceptions, might contribute to their perceived difficulty. Interestingly, 23% of students find degrees of comparison "Very

Easy." This suggests a group of students who are highly confident and proficient in applying the rules of degrees of comparison, indicating that they have mastered this aspect of grammar. A smaller percentage of students (4%) find degrees of comparison "Very Difficult." This might indicate a subset of learners who are struggling significantly with understanding and applying the rules related to comparing adjectives and adverbs.

In conclusion, the diverse perceptions among students regarding the difficulty of degrees of comparison highlight the complexity of language acquisition. While a substantial portion of students find the concept manageable, a notable percentage faces challenges. These findings emphasize the importance of tailored teaching strategies and additional support for those who perceive the concept as difficult.

11. Conditional Sentences

Table 3.2.11. Conditional Sentence

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Conditional Sentence	6	27	29	8	70
Percentage	8%	39%	42%	11%	100%

Around 39% of students perceive the concept of conditional sentences as "Easy." This suggests that a considerable proportion of students have a solid grasp of this grammatical feature. They might have a good understanding of the different types of conditional sentences (e.g., zero, first, second, third conditionals) and can effectively construct sentences that express hypothetical situations and their possible outcomes. Approximately 42% of students find conditional sentences "Difficult." This indicates that a significant portion of the student population encounters challenges when dealing with this aspect of grammar. The complexity of different conditional forms, the nuances of usage, and the intricacies of mixing tenses in conditional clauses might contribute to their perceived difficulty. Around 11% of students find conditional sentences "Very Difficult." This suggests a smaller subgroup of students who are struggling significantly with understanding and applying the rules related to conditional sentences. The challenges they face could involve properly identifying the appropriate conditional form to use in different contexts and mastering the intricacies of hypothetical situations. Notably, 8% of students find conditional sentences "Very Easy." This indicates a group of students who are highly confident and proficient in using conditional sentences. Their

level of ease with this grammatical feature suggests a mastery of constructing sentences that express hypothetical conditions and their potential outcomes.
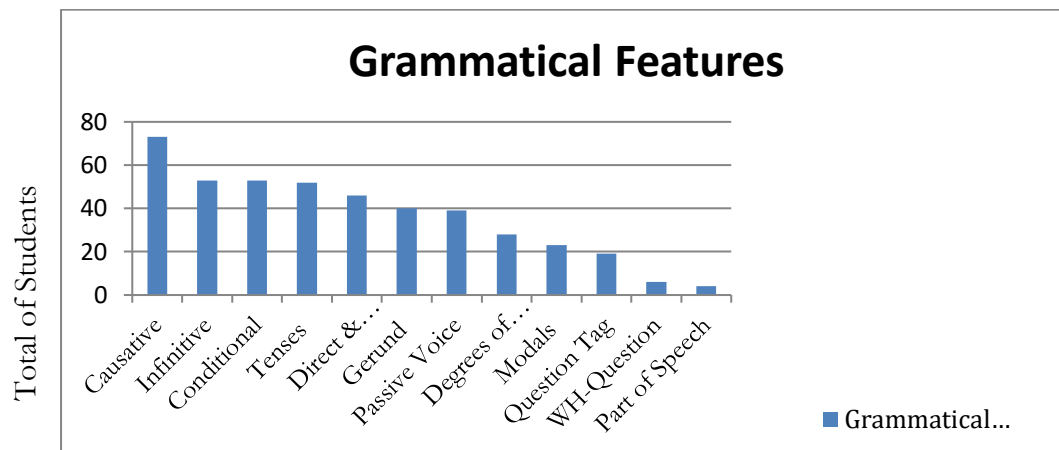
12. Passive Voice

Table 3.2.12. Passive Voice

Difficulty of Grammatical Feature	Frequency				Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Passive Voice	12	31	22	5	70
Percentage	17%	44%	32%	7%	100%

Approximately 44% of the students perceive the passive voice as "Easy." This indicates that a substantial portion of students find the concept of passive voice relatively easy to grasp. They may have a good understanding of how passive voice constructions are formed and when to use them. Around 32% of students find the passive voice "Difficult." This suggests that a notable proportion of students face challenges when working with this aspect of grammar. The passive voice can be complex, especially when considering variations in tense and voice, and this group of students may struggle with its application. About 17% of students find the passive voice "Very Easy." This indicates a smaller but significant portion of students who feel very confident and proficient in using passive voice constructions. They likely have a strong grasp of passive voice rules and usage. A smaller percentage of students (7%) find the passive voice "Very Difficult." This might indicate a subset of learners who are struggling significantly with understanding and applying passive voice rules and structures.

Students' perceptions of the difficulty of passive voice in grammar are ranging from finding it very easy to very difficult. These perceptions reflect the varying levels of proficiency and understanding among learners. According to Zhang (2021) language instructors should consider these diverse perceptions when designing their curriculum and teaching methods. Zhang (2021) also said that addressing the needs of students who find passive voice difficult is crucial to ensuring comprehensive language learning. Providing additional resources, targeted exercises, and individualized support can help bridge the gap for these learners.

Figure 1. Ranking of the difficulty of the grammatical features

Grammatical Features

Total of Students

Causative, Infinitive, Conditional, Tenses, Direct &…, Gerund, Passive Voice, Degrees of…, Modals, Question Tag, WH-Question, Part of Speech

■ Grammatical…

Based on students' perceptions, here is the ranking of the difficulty of the grammatical features from the most difficult to the easiest:

1. **Causative:** Perceived as the most difficult, with 66% of students finding it difficult and 7% of students find it very difficult.

2. **Infinitive and Conditional:** The second most difficult. For infinitive, 52% of students find it difficult and 1% of students find it very difficult. While conditional sentences, 42% of students finding it difficult and 11% of students find it very difficult.

3. **Tenses:** The third most challenging, with 46% of students finding it difficult and 6% of students find it very difficult.

4. **Direct & Indirect Speech:** The fourth most challenging, with 42% of students finding it difficult and 4% of students find it very difficult.

5. **Gerund:** The fifth most challenging, with 39% of students finding it difficult and 1% of students find it very difficult.

6. **Passive:** The sixth most challenging, with 32% of students finding it difficult and 7% of students find it very difficult.

7. **Degrees of Comparison:** The seventh most challenging, with 24% of students finding it difficult and 4% of students find it very difficult.

8. **Modals:** The eighth most challenging, with 20% of students finding it difficult and 3% of students find it very difficult.

9. **Question Tag:** The ninth most challenging, with 17% of students finding it difficult and 2% of students find it very difficult.

10. **WH. Question:** The tenth most challenging, with 6% of students finding it difficult.

11. **Part of Speech:** Perceived as the easiest, with 4% of students finding it difficult.

CONCLUSION

The research aimed to investigate how students perceive the difficulty of various grammatical features in English grammar. The research findings revealed diverse perceptions among students regarding the difficulty of different grammatical features. Here are the kemmy conclusions based on the analysis of each grammatical feature: Part of speech, modals, WH-Question, question tag, gerund, direct and indirect, degrees of comparison, and passive voice were perceived as not all difficult. Tenses, causative, infinitives, and conditional sentence were perceived as difficult.

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