

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Background of the Study

English is one of the fundamental competencies that junior high school students must master, especially since English language skills, including active communication skills, are a key requirement in the national curriculum and the 2025 Graduate Competency Standards (SKL). The curriculum emphasizes the importance of students having the ability to convey ideas effectively, confidently, and relevantly in the context of authentic communication as part of 21st-century competencies Kemendikbusristek (2025).

Based on the Phase D Learning Outcomes stipulated in Minister of Education Regulation No. 46 of 2025, at the end of Phase D, students are expected to have integrated English language competencies covering receptive and productive skills. In the aspects of listening and speaking, students are able to understand the flow of information comprehensively, identify the main ideas and detailed information from oral texts related to everyday topics or their interests, and use English to express ideas and experiences orally in various types of texts using simple and compound sentences, both in formal and informal contexts.

Furthermore, in terms of reading and viewing, students are expected to be able to understand the explicit and implicit information from various written and multimodal texts and respond appropriately according to the context. Meanwhile, in the aspect of writing and presenting, students are able to communicate ideas and experiences in writing or through multimodal texts with appropriate text structures and linguistic elements, as well as begin to express opinions and defend arguments related to issues relevant to everyday topics or their interests.

These achievements show that English language learning in Phase D does not only focus on mastering language structures, but also on developing meaningful and contextual communication skills in accordance with the requirements of the National Curriculum. Therefore, English language learning is directed at building students' communicative competence through the use of high-frequency vocabulary, simple and compound sentences, and an understanding of situational and cultural contexts.

In line with the Phase D Learning Outcomes of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, English language learning is implemented through a deep learning approach and genre-based pedagogy, which enables students to understand and produce various types of oral, written, visual, and multimodal texts in stages. The success of learning is demonstrated by students' ability to understand the main ideas and detailed information from oral and written texts, express ideas and experiences orally and in writing with appropriate linguistic structures and elements, maintain communication interactions despite pauses, and show active participation and a positive attitude in the learning process. Thus, English language learning at the junior high school level is expected to equip students with communication skills as life skills that are relevant to academic, social, and global contexts.

In the context of language learning, linguistic factors are one of the main foundations that influence speaking ability. One of the most crucial linguistic components is grammar, which functions as the basic structure for forming meaning in speech Ellis (2006). Conceptually, grammar provides a framework for students to construct clear and meaningful sentences. However, in practice, students often view grammar as a complex and rule-bound aspect, making it difficult to use spontaneously when speaking. This complexity is even more apparent in junior high school learners, especially seventh graders who are beginner learners, where they must understand the rules of tenses, compound sentence structures, and specific grammatical patterns before being able to express their ideas orally in English.

In descriptive qualitative research, grammatical complexity is understood as the level of grammatical difficulty experienced by students when using English in oral communication. Larsen-Freeman (2015) explains that grammar should be analyzed through the use of students' actual language because grammar develops through speaking practice, not just through written tests. Furthermore, Ellis (2006) states that grammatical difficulty can be identified from patterns of frequent errors, sentence simplification, and students' tendency to avoid certain structures when speaking. The relationship between grammatical complexity and willingness to communicate (WTC) is explained by Macintyre dkk. (1998), who mentions that students' willingness to speak is greatly influenced by their perception of their own grammatical ability. Therefore, the data for this study was obtained from students' speaking test results to examine their use of grammar in formal situations, as well as in-depth classroom observations to observe students' communication responses, such as long pauses, hesitations, or reluctance to speak, which, according to Dörnyei (2014), reflect a low willingness to communicate due to language difficulties and language anxiety.

Based on preliminary data obtained from the daily tests of seventh-grade students in class VII-1 in the 2025 academic year, the English teacher in that class conducted an oral proficiency test to measure the students' speaking skills. The test consisted of questions based on five key points: first, conversation; second, spelling; third, storytelling; fourth, structure; and finally, translation. The results of the speaking test were then used by the researcher as preliminary research data. The summary of the students' speaking scores during the test showed significant variation in results. Of the total 33 students, only 2 students (6.06%) obtained scores in the range of 95–100 and were classified into category A (very good). This shows that only a small number of students have a very high level of speaking proficiency. Furthermore, 6 students (18.18%) scored between 85–94 and were classified into category B (good), indicating that these students were generally able to communicate effectively, although some minor weaknesses were still found.

The largest group of students, 14 students (42.42%), scored 75–84 and fell into the C (average) category. This result implies that most students possess a moderate level of speaking ability but still require improvement, particularly in terms of fluency and grammatical accuracy. In addition, 12 students (36.36%) Received a score of less than 75, placing them in category D (not good), indicating that a substantial number of students continue to face difficulties in speaking English. Overall, this score distribution suggests that the majority of students have not yet reached an optimal level of speaking proficiency and therefore need more focused instructional support.

The results of this preliminary data show that this grammatical barrier appears to be a real and consistent phenomenon. Field data shows that most seventh-grade students tend to be passive during speaking activities, even though some of them are able to understand reading materials or written exercises. Students often express fear of using grammar incorrectly, especially in relation to the use of tenses and sentence structure. Even when teachers ask simple questions, many students prefer to remain silent or answer in a very soft voice because they feel that the sentence structure they have constructed is not correct. Subject teachers also acknowledge that grammar is the most difficult aspect for students and is the main cause of their declining confidence. These initial findings indicate a mismatch between the curriculum's expectations of active communication skills and the reality of learning, which shows a low willingness to communicate (WTC) due to the complexity of grammar.

To ensure the suitability of the theory with the grammatical complexity issues that form hidden barriers to students' willingness to communicate in grade 7 at SMPN 17 Medan, the researcher will conduct further and collect data in the form of speaking test results of grade VII-1 students at SMPN 17 Medan. The researcher will interview English teachers about students' willingness to communicate in English in class and ask about the grammatical complexity of seventh-grade students at SMPN 17 Medan.

Viewed theoretically in the teaching module in the English Learning Outcomes section, which refers to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) and focuses on strengthening English language skills in six elements, one of the most important elements being speaking, in terms of speaking, students are expected to be able to reach CEFR level A2. Specifically, students are expected to be able to understand spoken messages, appreciate their conversation partners, interact fluently, spontaneously, and systematically, communicate verbally, and convey ideas, thoughts, and feelings verbally in social interactions.

Theoretically, this phenomenon exists in the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) developed by MacIntyre et al. Macintyre dkk. (1998). This theory asserts that a person's willingness to speak in a second language is influenced by various factors, including self-confidence, anxiety, linguistic ability, and self-perception of language competence. However, previous studies in Indonesia have predominantly highlighted affective factors such as speaking anxiety, low motivation, or fear of making mistakes Liu & Jackson (2008), while studies highlighting grammar as a linguistic barrier to WTC are still limited. In fact, the data obtained by researchers shows that grammar is actually the main reason that makes students reluctant to speak, even more significant than other affective factors.

This condition emphasizes the importance of research on the relationship between grammar complexity and WTC, especially at the junior high school level, which is the early stage of formal English language learning. The urgency of this research is further strengthened by the fact that English language learning at SMPN 17 Medan has been using a communicative approach, but in practice, students remain passive. This shows a contradiction between the communicative approach, which focuses on fluency, and the reality of classrooms dominated by fear of grammatical accuracy. In other words, students feel they must be “grammatically perfect”

before daring to speak, so grammar becomes a “hidden barrier” that inhibits their courage to engage in oral communication.

This study offers a new perspective by placing the complexity of grammar as a hidden linguistic barrier to the WTC of seventh grade students. This approach differs from previous studies that have placed more emphasis on psychological or affective factors as the cause of low WTC. This study is also relevant to the current context of English language learning, where teachers are required to improve students' overall communication skills, not just their understanding of language theory. By understanding the aspects of grammar that most hinder students' confidence, teachers can design grammar learning strategies that are more communicative, intuitive, and less stressful for students, so that grammar learning is no longer considered a “burden” but rather a support for communication.

Therefore, this research will further investigate solutions that will encourage students to have the willingness to speak English and will determine effective ways of teaching grammar so that it will become easier for students to understand. This research will be important in providing a comprehensive understanding of how the complexity of grammar will affect the willingness to communicate of seventh-grade students at SMPN 17 Medan, as well as how the gap between curriculum expectations and actual learning conditions will bridge through a more appropriate teaching approach. This research will provide scientific and practical contributions that will help teachers create effective grammar learning strategies and will support students' courage in communicating, so that the English learning objectives in accordance with the 2025 SKL will reach an optimal level.

1.2 The Problems of The Study

1. What components of grammatical complexity hinder students' willingness to communicate among seventh-grade students?

2. Why does grammatical complexity become a hidden barrier that shapes students' willingness to communicate in English?

1.3 The Objectives of The Study

This research aims to:

1. Understanding what components of grammatical complexity hinder students' willingness to communicate among seventh-grade students.
2. Understanding why grammatical complexity become a hidden barrier that shapes students' willingness to communicate in English.

1.4 The Scope of the Study

This study focuses on how grammatical complexity can act as a hidden barrier that shapes students' willingness to communicate in English among seventh-grade students (VII-1) at SMPN 17 Medan. The study is limited to identifying and analyzing the components of grammar that often cause difficulties, namely tense usage, subject–verb agreement, sentence structure, and word order, which can affect students' readiness, confidence, and motivation in oral communication. The research is conducted within the context of classroom interactions in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, with an emphasis on oral communication, while other linguistic aspects such as vocabulary, pronunciation, or discourse competence are only considered when directly related to grammatical complexity. Psychological aspects, including speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and self-confidence, are analyzed in relation to the influence of grammatical complexity on WTC. This study focuses on seventh-grade students because their developing language proficiency makes them more vulnerable to grammatical difficulties that can become communication barriers. Therefore, the scope of this research covers the cognitive, linguistic, and affective dimensions of grammatical complexity and its impact on students' willingness to communicate in English, aiming to provide deeper insights to support more effective teaching strategies.

1.5 The Significance of the Study

1. Theoretical Significance

This study is expected to provide several theoretical contributions to the field of English language learning. It contributes to the development of studies on Willingness to Communicate (WTC) by expanding the focus of research on linguistic factors, particularly grammar complexity, which has received relatively limited attention in previous studies. In addition, this research offers a broader perspective that grammar should not only be viewed as a structural component of language learning, but also as a psycholinguistic factor that may influence students' willingness to communicate. Furthermore, this study is expected to enrich the body of academic literature on English language learning at the junior high school level, especially in the Indonesian context, where discussions concerning the relationship between grammar and students' willingness to communicate remain relatively limited.

2. Practical Significance

Practically, this research is expected to provide benefits for several parties. For English teachers, this study may provide a deeper understanding of the aspects of grammar that often become the main obstacles for students in speaking, as well as serve as a reference for designing more communicative grammar teaching approaches that do not hinder students' confidence to speak. For students, this research may increase their awareness that grammatical errors are a natural part of the language learning process and help them build greater confidence in communicating in English without excessive fear of making mistakes. For schools, the findings of this study may serve as evaluation material for developing English language learning programs that are more aligned with the 2025 National Competency Standards and support the improvement of learning quality through teaching strategies that emphasize students' willingness to communicate. For other researchers, this study may provide a useful reference for further research on the relationship between linguistic

competence and Willingness to Communicate in various educational contexts and levels, as well as offer empirical data that can support the development of qualitative studies in the field of language learning.



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