

Research Article

Investigating the Challenges Faced by Semester Six Students in Learning English Syntax: A Case Study at Ibn Tofail University, Morocco

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Received : March 19, 2026

Revised : April 15, 2026

Accepted : May 13, 2026

Available online : June 09, 2026

How to Cite: Rachida M'chaar, Abderrazak El Kemma, & Bendaoud Nadif. (2026). Investigating the Challenges Faced by Semester Six Students in Learning English Syntax: A Case Study at Ibn Tofail University, Morocco. *Amandemen: Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Studies*, 4(1), 60–76. <https://doi.org/10.61166/amd.v4i1.116>

Abstract. This study examines the challenges faced by sixth-semester students at Moroccan Public University in learning English syntax. Syntax, as a key area of linguistics, is crucial for understanding sentence structure and grammatical accuracy. Despite its importance, students often struggle due to

the abstract concepts, specialized terminology, and fast instructional pace. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach with questionnaires and open-ended questions, the study involved 104 students from the English department. The findings reveal significant obstacles such as weak foundational knowledge, limited practical exercises, and the complexity of syntactic theories. In particular, mastering X-bar theory is challenging; common errors include confusing complements, adjuncts, and specifiers when assigning roles within the hierarchical tree structure. Additionally, students find it difficult to comprehend how auxiliaries move within the tree and how transformations like T-to-C movement function derivationally. The cognitive load increases as learners navigate layered projections (X, X', XP) and distinguish between constituents, especially when movement disrupts the expected linear order. These results highlight the need for learner-centered teaching strategies that simplify and actively engage students with complex syntactic topics such as X-bar theory and syntactic movement, aiming to improve learning outcomes in syntax.

Keywords: English syntax learning ; X-bar theory; Challenges in syntax education ; Syntactic movement; Public University

INTRODUCTION

Linguistics is the scientific discipline that explores human language in all its aspects. One of its core branches is syntax, which focuses on the rules and principles governing the structure of sentences in any given language (Wang, 2010). Understanding syntax plays a crucial role in linguistics, as it enables students to grasp how words combine to form larger and more meaningful linguistic units. Although mastering syntax is essential for students in English language education programs, many learners still struggle with it.

Scientific research is widely regarded as a fundamental driver of knowledge development and social progress (Klaina, 2024). In educational contexts, research plays a crucial role in identifying learning challenges and proposing effective strategies to enhance students' academic performance. Within this framework, investigating the difficulties students encounter in learning English syntax is not merely a theoretical endeavor, but a practical contribution to improving language education. By addressing these challenges, such research supports the development of learners' linguistic competence, which is essential for effective communication and active participation in academic and social life.

This issue is not limited to a specific context. In various Chinese universities, for instance, syntax is considered one of the most essential yet challenging parts of introductory linguistics courses for junior English majors (Wang, 2010).

Wei and Zang (2013) examined the challenges faced by learners in oral English instruction in China. Their findings highlighted several key barriers, including a lack of autonomous learning skills, negative transfer from the first language, and difficulty in selecting appropriate vocabulary. Similarly, Nugroho (2016) identified internal and external obstacles in physical education learning, with internal

challenges such as physical and psychological factors playing a larger role than external ones like teaching and resources.

Syntax examines the way in which words are arranged to form phrases, clauses, and complete sentences (Tahang, 2019). It explores the structural rules and principles that govern sentence formation, enabling speakers to construct grammatically sound and meaningful expressions (Ada & Chukwuokoro, 2024). Through the study of syntax, learners gain insights into sentence components and the interconnections among them, reflecting the complexity and richness of language (Djalolovna, 2024). As such, mastering syntax is crucial for students of English linguistics, as it forms the backbone of grammatical understanding and language proficiency.

One of the most useful tools for grasping syntactic structures is the tree diagram. According to Radford (2009), tree diagrams offer a visual breakdown of sentence components, illustrating how words and phrases are organized hierarchically in accordance with syntactic rules. These diagrams present a clear depiction of the relationships between sentence elements based on phrase structure grammar (Nuriyanti, 2022). When used in instruction, tree diagrams enhance comprehension by helping students analyze both simple and complex sentence structures, making it easier to detect constituent parts and understand syntactic derivation (Ali, 2023).

In light of such findings, this current study seeks to explore An Investigation into the Challenges of Studying English Syntax Among Semester Six Students Public University, aiming to provide practical insights that may support more effective learning strategies for syntax acquisition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Syntax plays a crucial role in shaping sentence structure in the English language. It enables both the construction and comprehension of meaningful sentences by applying specific rules and grammatical patterns. Although understanding the rules and parts of speech core elements in English syntax can provide a strong foundation, this does not always guarantee accurate sentence formation. Many learners still face difficulties in applying these rules effectively.

Several scholars have conducted research exploring various aspects of syntax. For example, Dharmawan (2014) analyzed sentence structures through three syntactic approaches: traditional grammar, immediate constituent (IC) analysis, and X-bar theory, offering different perspectives on sentence analysis. Another study by Kusumawardhani (2017), titled *The Analysis of Conjunctions in Writing an English Narrative Composition: A Syntax Perspective*, examined the use of conjunctions in narrative writing. She emphasized that while grammar is vital, other elements such as organization, word choice, audience awareness, and content, are equally

important for effective writing. Focusing solely on grammar without attention to these aspects could hinder the quality of written compositions.

Additionally, Syarif (2011) conducted a study on students' errors in using adjective clauses, highlighting the need for teachers to adapt their teaching methods to address learners' difficulties and enhance motivation and interest.

Teaching English syntax in Morocco encounters various pedagogical challenges rooted in both institutional frameworks and classroom realities. A significant problem is the absence of well-structured and effectively implemented curricula, which results in insufficient emphasis on syntactic structures within educational programs, as emphasized by Boukanouf, Biddou, and Al Ghadi (2022). Furthermore, the quality of syntax instruction is heavily affected by the level of teacher training and systemic issues such as overcrowded classrooms and diverse student proficiency levels. These factors limit the practical use of differentiated instruction, as highlighted by El Khdar (2024).

Such conditions complicate students' ability to comprehend complex syntactic theories like X-bar theory and sentence transformation rules. Even with the introduction of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in some Moroccan universities, students continue to face difficulties in developing syntactic competence due to inadequate pedagogical support, as reported by Elimadi (2024). Additionally, research shows that many Moroccan EFL teachers predominantly use traditional grammar teaching approaches, rarely incorporating visual aids such as tree diagrams or interactive syntax exercises. This often leads students to memorize grammatical rules mechanically, without truly understanding how to apply them in sentence construction. Addressing these pedagogical challenges requires curriculum reform, enhanced teacher training, and the integration of more practical and visual methods of syntax instruction.

While these studies have provided valuable insights into specific syntactic issues, the current research differs in focus. It aims to investigate the broader challenges faced by semester six students at Public University in learning syntax, providing a more comprehensive understanding of students' struggles in mastering this linguistic component.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research adopts an exploratory design that integrates both qualitative and quantitative data. This study adopts an exploratory mixed-methods design to investigate the challenges faced by sixth-semester students in learning English syntax at Public University. The quantitative component consists of 10 close-ended questions, which aim to measure students' understanding, confidence, and exposure to syntactic concepts. The qualitative component includes 6 open-ended questions, intended to explore students' personal reflections, difficulties, and suggestions. The

qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns and deeper insights from the students' responses.

Participants and collecting procedure

The study involved 104 Moroccan students, all enrolled in the sixth semester of the English Studies Department at the Faculty of Languages, Letters & Arts, Public University . While the sample is limited to one academic level, it provides a focused perspective on learners at an advanced stage of syntax study. Data were collected using a Google Forms questionnaire, which included 10 close-ended and 6 open-ended questions. The form was distributed via student academic groups on social media platforms to ensure accessibility and encourage voluntary participation. This method increased the response rate and offered valuable quantitative and qualitative insights into the students' experiences and difficulties with English syntax.

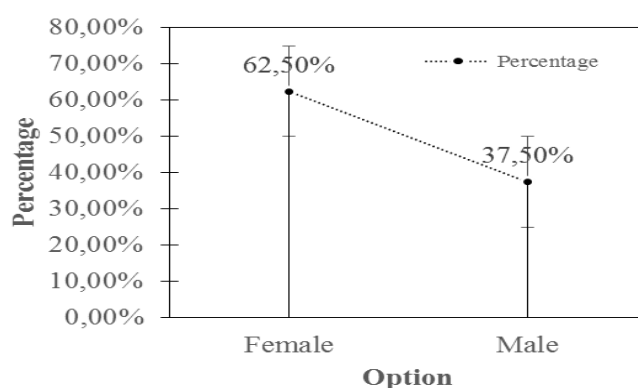
FINDINGS

Analysis of Quantitative Results

Initially, the findings were obtained from a questionnaire comprising ten closed-ended questions. Concerning age, the chart below illustrates the data gathered from the participants' responses.

Figure 1 illustrates the gender distribution among the study participants. Females constitute the majority at 62.5%, whereas males account for 37.5% of the sample. This gender imbalance suggests that female participants are more represented than males. Such a disparity could potentially influence the study's outcomes, particularly if there are gender-related differences in perspectives or challenges concerning the study of English syntax.

Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Study Participants



Secondly, the chart below illustrates how students evaluate their overall understanding of English syntax. Almost half of the respondents (46.20%) rated their comprehension as "Good," while 37.50% considered it "Average." A smaller group,

10.60%, described their grasp as "Excellent," and only 5.80% assessed their understanding as "Poor."

These results suggest that while most students feel reasonably confident in their syntax knowledge, only a minority perceive themselves as highly skilled. This highlights the potential need for targeted teaching strategies to support students in progressing from an average to an advanced level of understanding

Figure 2. Students' Self-Assessment of Their Understanding of English Syntax

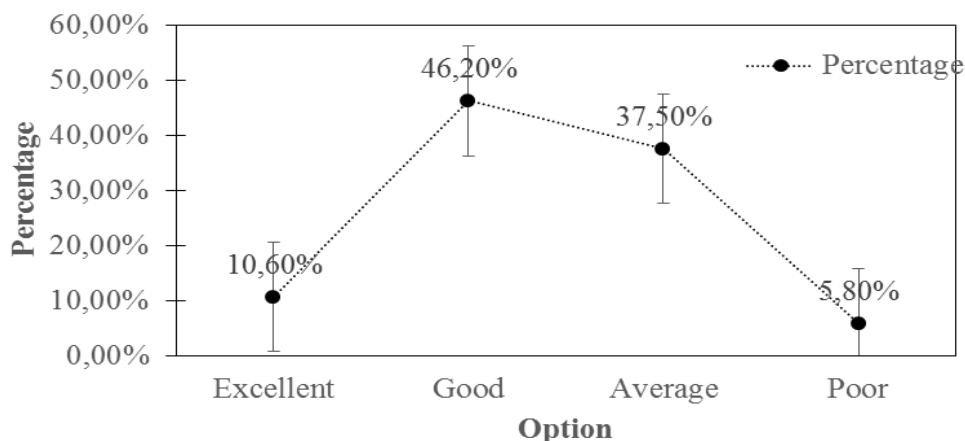


Figure 3 illustrates how semester six students perceive the difficulty of various English syntax topics. X-bar Theory is identified as the most challenging area, with 31.7% of students reporting difficulty, followed by Movement at 24%, indicating these topics pose significant challenges. In contrast, Binding Theory is considered the least difficult, with only 4.8% of students finding it problematic. Structural Relations and Theta Theory received moderate difficulty ratings of 8.7% and 13.5%, respectively. These findings highlight the need for enhanced teaching approaches and additional support, particularly for X-bar Theory and Movement, to help improve students' comprehension and academic performance.

Figure 3. Percentage of Difficulty Across English Syntax Topics Among Semester Six Students at Public University

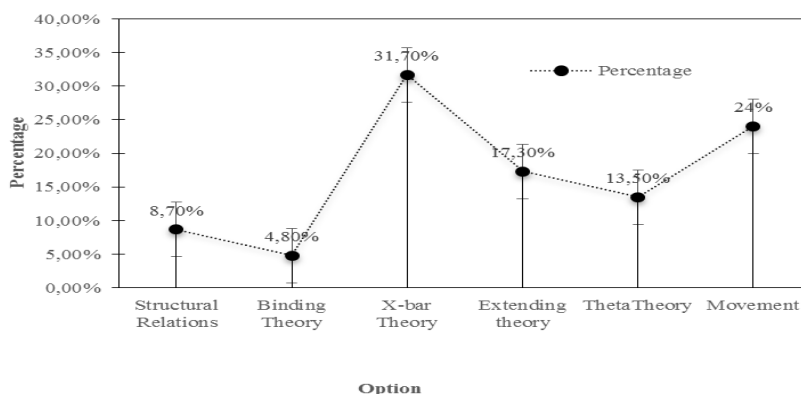


Figure 4 illustrates the number of times students have had to retake the Syntax module. Over half of the participants (55.80%) reported that they have never repeated the course, whereas 22.10% have repeated it once. Interestingly, the same percentage (22.10%) indicated that they have repeated the module two or more times.

This pattern indicates that although most students succeed in passing the module on their first try, a significant minority face difficulties that require them to retake the course, sometimes multiple times. This situation may reflect challenges related to instructional approaches, the complexity of the curriculum, or the level of student preparedness.

Figure 4. Repetition of the Syntax Module Among Students

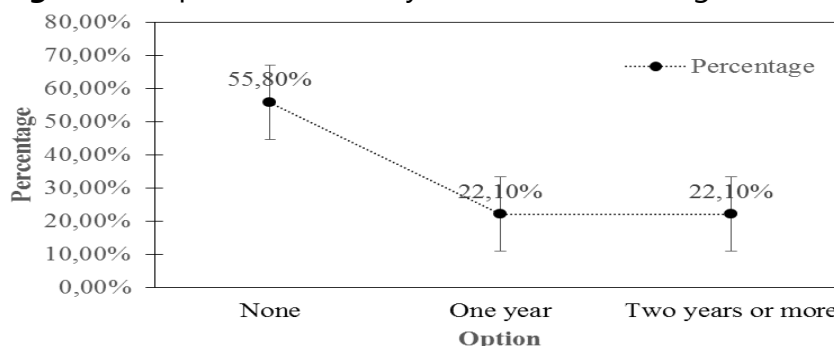


Figure 5 shows the proportion of students who passed the Syntax module either during the initial (normal) exam session or in the retake session. A larger share of students, 59.6%, succeeded only after taking the retake exam, while 40.4% managed to pass in the first attempt.

This indicates that many students find it challenging to pass Syntax on their first try, which could point to the subject's difficulty or highlight the need for enhanced teaching strategies and additional student support.

Figure 5. Students' Success Rate in Syntax: Normal vs. Retake Session

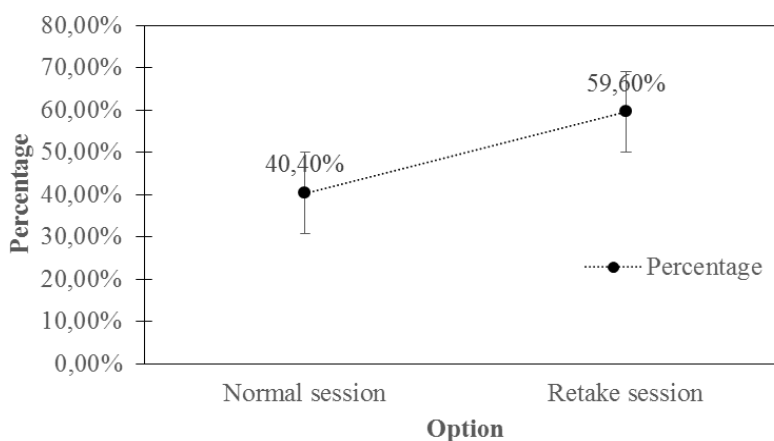


Figure 6 presents students' views on the adequacy of the current approach to teaching syntax. More than half of the respondents (52.9%) feel that the method requires improvement, indicating a clear demand for enhanced teaching techniques. Meanwhile, 29.8% consider the existing method adequate, and only 17.3% express outright dissatisfaction.

These findings reveal considerable concern among students about how effectively syntax is taught and underscore the necessity for pedagogical.

Figure 6. Students' Opinions on the Effectiveness of the Current Method of Teaching Syntax

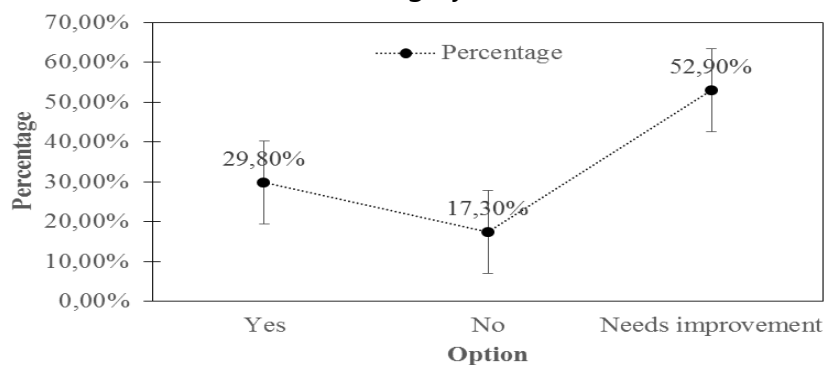


Figure 7 illustrates students' thoughts regarding the use of trees and rules in teaching syntax. A clear majority of students (62.5%) have questioned why this approach is employed, while 37.5% have not.

This indicates that many students may lack a clear understanding of the purpose behind these methods or find them confusing. Therefore, it highlights the importance for instructors to better clarify the reasoning behind these teaching techniques to improve student comprehension and engagement.

Figure 7. Students' Curiosity About the Use of Trees and Rules in Teaching Syntax

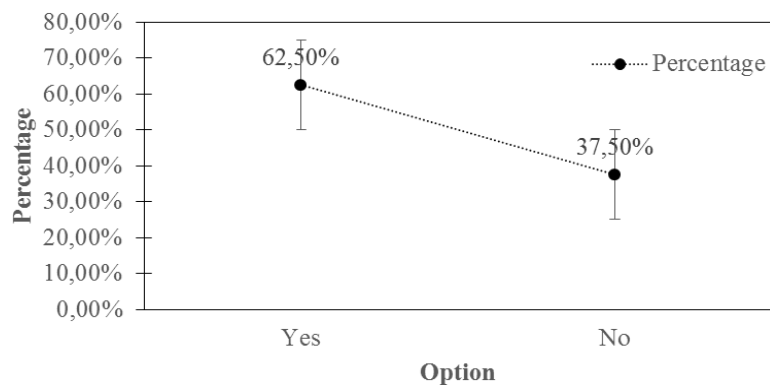


Figure 8 presents students' views on whether they regard syntax as a scientific

discipline. A significant portion (63.5%) answered affirmatively, showing that the majority consider syntax to be an organized field governed by rules. Meanwhile, 25% expressed uncertainty, indicating some confusion or lack of clear understanding about syntax's scientific status. Only 11.5% disagreed, implying that a small minority do not see syntax as scientific. Overall, the findings suggest that most students perceive syntax as a formal science, though additional explanation might benefit those who remain unsure.

Figure 8. Students' Perceptions of Syntax as a Scientific Subject

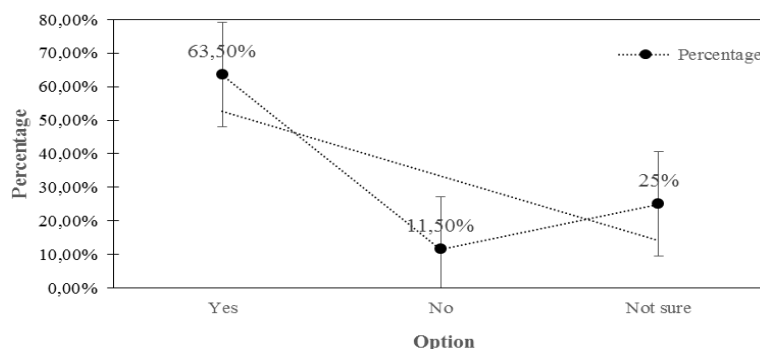


Figure 9 depicts students' favored teaching approaches for grasping syntax. More than half (51.9%) identified practice exercises as the most effective, emphasizing the value of experiential learning. Following this, teacher's explanations were preferred by 25% of students. Meanwhile, online resources (8.7%) and slides & visual aids (7.7%) were chosen less frequently. The least popular option was peer/group work, selected by only 6.7%. These findings indicate that students tend to learn better through active participation and clear instruction rather than through passive or group-based method.

Figure 9. Preferred Teaching Methods for Understanding Syntax

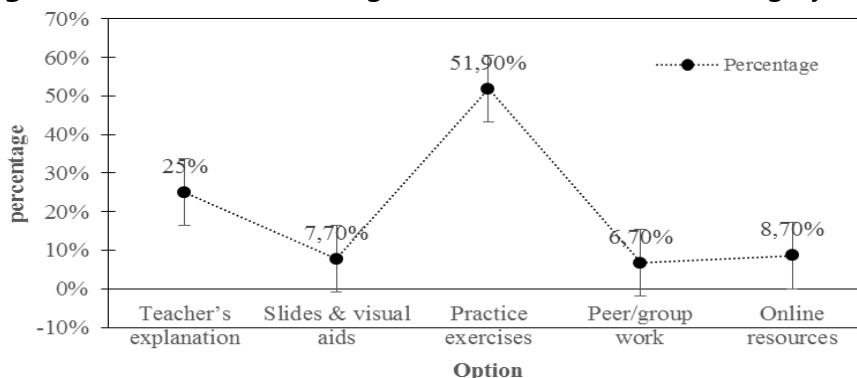
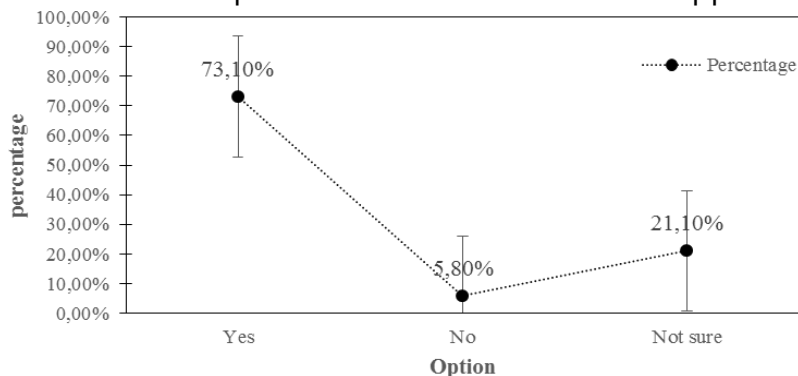


Figure 10 reflects students' opinions on whether additional tutorials or support materials are needed for learning syntax. A significant majority (73.1%)

agreed that extra assistance is necessary. In contrast, only 5.8% felt that no further support was required, while 21.1% were uncertain.

These findings suggest that most students consider syntax sufficiently difficult to justify the provision of supplementary teaching resources and assistance.

Figure 10. Students' Opinions on the Need for Extra Support in Syntax



Analysis of Qualitative Feedback

To complement the quantitative data, participants' answers to the open-ended questions were examined through thematic analysis, revealing several key themes.

1. Challenges Perceived in Learning Syntax

Students often find syntax to be a difficult subject for a variety of interconnected reasons. First, syntax is an abstract and technical field that demands complex analytical thinking. It involves unfamiliar terminology, formalized rules, and abstract concepts such as tree diagrams and phrase structure rules, which can initially feel overwhelming. Many students struggle to understand these abstract representations and the underlying logic, especially when they differ greatly from the grammar of their native language. Second, the sheer volume and complexity of the material add to the challenge. Syntax encompasses numerous rules and theories, like X-bar theory, binding theory, and theta theory, that may evolve over time, requiring students to continuously update their knowledge. The interconnected nature of the lessons means that missing foundational grammar concepts can make advanced topics confusing and difficult to follow. Third, instructional methods and limited time also impact learning. Students frequently report that the course moves too quickly, leaving insufficient time to practice and internalize the rules. Inadequate explanations, a lack of exercises, and limited face-to-face interaction further hinder comprehension. Many believe that more practice opportunities and clearer, more engaging teaching strategies would improve their understanding. Lastly, motivation and attendance play a crucial role. Some students face difficulties because they do not

take grammar lessons seriously or miss classes, resulting in gaps in their knowledge. Mastering syntax requires consistent effort and focus, and without regular practice and guidance, students find it hard to succeed. In summary, the difficulty in studying syntax stems from its abstract nature, the complexity and breadth of its content, evolving theories, limited instructional time, and sometimes ineffective teaching methods. Addressing these issues through stronger foundational support, increased practice, and improved teaching approaches could make syntax more accessible and less intimidating for learners.

2. Student Experience with the Syntax professor

Students' experiences with the syntax professor this semester varied, though many described them as positive to excellent. Numerous students appreciated the professor's clear explanations and supportive approach. The professor made significant efforts to simplify complex concepts, often using helpful examples and visual aids like tree diagrams to clarify abstract ideas. Students also noted that the professor was approachable and willing to answer questions, which enhanced their understanding of the material. However, some students felt that the pace of instruction was sometimes too fast, especially when moving from basic topics to more advanced ones or when introducing new technical terms and theories. This rapid pace made it difficult for some students to keep up. Additionally, a few students suggested that the teaching methods could be updated and that more practical exercises would help reinforce learning.

Attendance was a challenge for some students due to work or personal commitments, which negatively affected their experience with the course. On the other hand, students who actively reviewed the material independently and used additional resources, such as online video tutorials, reported better comprehension assets.

Overall, the majority of students had a positive experience with the syntax professor despite some challenges related to the speed of instruction and the need for more practice opportunities. This feedback highlights the importance of balancing theoretical explanations with practical exercises to improve students' mastery of syntax.

3. Suggestions to Improve the Teaching of Syntax

Drawing from student feedback, a primary recommendation for enhancing syntax instruction is to increase the use of practice exercises. Many students stressed that engaging in a variety of step-by-step activities, such as drawing tree diagrams, greatly aids in grasping abstract concepts. They proposed that these exercises be regularly incorporated into lessons and reviewed in class to offer immediate feedback.

Students also pointed out the value of incorporating more real-world examples and interactive tasks to make syntax more accessible and interesting. Activities like group work, sentence construction games, and examples drawn from

everyday language can help bridge the gap between theory and practical application. Additionally, visual tools such as diagrams, videos, and digital devices connected to projectors were suggested to better clarify complex ideas and reduce the subject's abstract nature.

Another frequent recommendation was to slow down the teaching pace, particularly when presenting new or challenging material, giving students ample time to absorb and revisit the content. Providing summaries, review sessions, and brief quizzes after each topic were also viewed as effective ways to reinforce learning.

Some students emphasized the need for clearer explanations that focus on fundamental concepts and the reasoning behind each step, rather than merely presenting rules or drawing trees in a mechanical way. They also recommended supplementing classroom instruction with online resources and tutorials, especially considering the limited time available during lectures. In conclusion, students believe that syntax teaching can be improved by combining more hands-on practice, clearer and more deliberate explanations, interactive real-life examples, and the use of visual and digital aids. These strategies would help make the subject less abstract, more engaging, and easier to comprehend.

4. Personal Experiences and Moments in Learning Syntax

Students recounted a variety of experiences while studying syntax, frequently noting initial challenges with complex topics such as tree diagrams and X-bar theory. Many found these concepts confusing at first, but through steady practice, classroom exercises, and the use of supplementary materials like educational videos and online tools, several students experienced moments of insight that increased their confidence. For instance, one student shared the satisfaction they felt after successfully completing a detailed tree diagram for a complex sentence, which helped them grasp how different parts of a sentence connect.

Interactive classroom activities and supportive teaching methods were also appreciated for making syntax more engaging and easier to comprehend. Students stressed the importance of consistent attendance and practicing outside of class to keep pace with the material and prevent confusion.

On the other hand, some students expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the multiple methods of drawing trees or disappointment with exam outcomes despite their preparation. These experiences underscore the demanding nature of syntax, which requires dedication, focus, and effective study techniques.

The moments of clarity and understanding that come through practice and quality instruction serve as motivation for students to persist in their studies.

5. Helpful resources and Tools for understanding syntax

Many students reported that visual aids and online videos were the most effective resources for learning syntax. YouTube, in particular, was frequently mentioned as a valuable platform offering both theoretical explanations and

practical demonstrations, such as step-by-step tree diagram drawings. These videos helped clarify abstract concepts and made the material more accessible. Additionally, students found practicing exercises, especially drawing syntax trees by hand, crucial for solidifying their understanding. Class notes, course slides, and textbooks complemented these resources by providing structured content and examples. Several students also highlighted the usefulness of interactive tools like ChatGPT for detailed explanations and instant answers to their questions. Group work and discussions with peers were noted to enhance comprehension by allowing students to explain concepts to each other. The explanations and slides provided by Professors were also frequently praised as valuable learning aids. Overall, a combination of visual materials, consistent practice, supportive teaching, and supplementary online tools contributed significantly to students' grasp of syntax.

6. Challenges and Strategies in Teaching X-Bar Theory and Syntactic Movement in English Syntax

X-bar theory, initially introduced by Chomsky in 1970 and further developed in Jackendoff's seminal work *X-bar Syntax* (1977), remains a cornerstone of syntactic analysis. Radford's 1988 introductory textbook offers a comprehensive explanation of this theory. Tree diagrams are essential tools that help students visually grasp hierarchical sentence structures and systematically identify errors. However, many learners struggle with constructing these diagrams, particularly when dealing with abstract concepts such as syntactic categories, phrase structure rules, and derived constituents. Achieving proficiency requires blending theoretical knowledge with hands-on practice to strengthen both analytical and applied skills.

Research by Culicover (2017) highlights that student difficulties often arise from weak foundational knowledge, including challenges in correctly identifying parts of speech and applying phrase structure rules, which leads to frequent mistakes like mislabeling nodes or misunderstanding syntactic relations. These errors impede comprehension and negatively impact students' ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences. A notable challenge is accurately classifying words into parts of speech and assigning them to the correct X-bar level; whether specifier, adjunct, or complement; within the tree structure. The abstract, symbolic, and recursive nature of X-bar theory can feel disconnected from everyday language, causing anxiety and reluctance among learners.

Common errors include confusing complements, adjuncts, and specifiers when determining a word's role in the hierarchical tree. Additionally, understanding how auxiliaries move within the tree and how transformations such as T-to-C movement function derivationally presents significant difficulties. The cognitive demand intensifies as students navigate layered projections (X, X', XP) and differentiate between constituents, especially when movement alters the expected linear order.

These insights underscore the critical need for targeted support when

teaching syntactic movement, one of the most challenging aspects of syntax. Without a solid understanding of constituency and hierarchical structure, students find it hard to follow how sentence elements shift positions. To improve comprehension, instructors should employ clear explanations, visual aids like tree diagrams, and concrete examples illustrating different types of movement (e.g., wh-movement, subject-auxiliary inversion). Breaking down complex transformations into manageable parts and providing guided practice can significantly enhance students' understanding and accurate application of these syntactic principles.

DISCUSSION

Relationship Between Quantitative and Qualitative Findings on Learning Syntax

The quantitative data and qualitative feedback in this study strongly complement and reinforce each other, providing a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences with English syntax.

1. Difficulty of Topics:

Quantitatively, X-bar Theory and Movement are identified as the most challenging topics, with 31.7% and 24% of students respectively reporting difficulty. This aligns closely with the qualitative analysis, which highlights the abstract and complex nature of these topics, students' struggles with hierarchical structures, syntactic categories, and transformations, and the need for targeted instructional support and clearer explanations. The qualitative insights deepen the understanding of why these topics are difficult, emphasizing cognitive demands and common errors in applying theory [[4.2.6]].

2. Module Repetition and Success Rates:

The quantitative findings show that a significant minority of students must retake the syntax module, and many only pass after retakes (59.6%). This reflects the qualitative theme of students feeling overwhelmed by the pace and complexity of the course, as well as gaps in foundational knowledge and motivation issues. The qualitative data suggest that limited practice opportunities and fast instruction contribute to these difficulties, which may explain the high retake rates [[4.2.1, 4.2.2]].

3. Teaching Methods and Student Support:

More than half of the students quantitatively express that current teaching methods need improvement, and a large majority request additional tutorials or support materials. Qualitative feedback echoes this, with students recommending more practice exercises, slower pacing, clearer explanations, and the use of visual and interactive tools to make syntax less abstract and more engaging [[4.2.3, 4.2.5]]. The preference for practice exercises and teacher explanations in the quantitative data (Figure 9) also matches the qualitative emphasis on hands-on learning and supportive instruction.

4. Understanding of Teaching Tools:

The quantitative data reveal that many students question the use of trees and rules in teaching syntax, indicating confusion or lack of clarity. This corresponds with qualitative findings that students often struggle with abstract representations and desire clearer reasoning behind teaching methods [[4.2.1, 4.2.3]].

The qualitative themes provide rich explanations for the patterns observed quantitatively, such as why certain topics are difficult, why students struggle to pass on the first attempt, and what improvements they believe would help. This integrated perspective underscores the importance of addressing both content complexity and instructional strategies to enhance student learning outcomes in syntax. By explicitly linking these findings, the study offers a robust, multi-dimensional view of the challenges in teaching and learning syntax, supporting targeted pedagogical improvements.

The study's results emphasize the need to adopt interactive, student-centered teaching strategies, such as practical exercises, visual tools like tree diagrams, and continuous feedback to enhance comprehension. It is also recommended to slow down the teaching pace and use real-life examples to clarify abstract syntactic concepts, especially those related to X-bar theory and syntactic movements. These recommendations support the development of essential language skills for students, enhancing their academic and professional success.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified the key difficulties faced by sixth-semester students at Public University in mastering English syntax. Despite syntax being a fundamental aspect of linguistic competence, many students encounter challenges due to its abstract concepts, rapid teaching pace, and limited opportunities for practice. A particular area of struggle is the X-bar theory and syntactic movement, where students find it hard to understand hierarchical structures, the roles of specifiers, complements, and adjuncts, as well as complex transformations like T-to-C movement. The findings indicate that adopting more interactive, student-focused teaching strategies, such as hands-on exercises, visual aids like tree diagrams, and consistent feedback can significantly improve comprehension.

This research offers important guidance for educators and curriculum developers seeking to enhance syntax instruction. It is advised that instructors slow down the pace of teaching, incorporate relatable examples, and use visual tools to clarify abstract syntactic concepts, especially those related to X-bar theory and movement. Future research could build on these insights by examining similar challenges across different universities or academic levels. Ultimately, overcoming these obstacles is essential to equip students with the linguistic skills necessary for success in both academic and professional contexts.

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