

Students' Perceptions of Teacher-Centered Grammar Instruction in Learning the Simple Past Tense: A Study of Grade IX Students at a Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

This study explored Grade IX students' perceptions of teacher-centered grammar instruction in learning the Simple Past Tense at a junior high school in Karawang, West Java, Indonesia. The study was conducted because previous research has more frequently examined grammar instruction and students' perceptions in general EFL contexts, while limited attention has been given to junior high school students' perceptions of teacher-centered instruction for learning a specific grammatical topic. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the study examined students' experiences of the instructional approach used during grammar lessons. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured online-chat interviews with four purposively selected students. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Three themes emerged: instructional clarity, student engagement, and preference for interactive learning. The participants perceived teacher-centered instruction as helpful when explanations were clear and understandable; however, extended teacher-led explanations were associated with boredom and reduced attention. The students also preferred games, group work, and practical activities to complement teacher explanations. The findings indicate that teacher-centered grammar instruction can support grammatical understanding when combined with interactive activities that sustain student participation and engagement.

Keywords: *Teacher-Centered Instruction, Grammar Instruction, Simple Past Tense, Students' Perceptions.*

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INTRODUCTION

Grammar is widely recognized as one of the fundamental components of English language learning because it enables learners to communicate meaning accurately and effectively. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, grammatical competence supports the development of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Larsen-Freeman (2014) argues that grammar should not merely be viewed as a collection of rules but also as a resource that helps learners express meaning appropriately in communication. Similarly, Ellis (1994) emphasizes that grammar instruction plays a significant role in second language acquisition because it facilitates learners' understanding of language forms and their communicative functions. Therefore, grammar remains an essential component of English language teaching, particularly in EFL contexts where learners often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

Despite its importance, grammar is frequently perceived as one of the most challenging aspects of language learning. Learners often experience difficulties in understanding grammatical structures and applying them appropriately in communication. Mustakim et al. (2025) identified grammatical complexity and limited opportunities for practice as common challenges in grammar learning among EFL students. Similarly, Komara & Tiarsiwi (2021) reported that learners' perceptions and attitudes toward grammar learning were closely associated with both the difficulties they encountered and the instructional approaches

implemented by teachers. These findings suggest that successful grammar learning depends not only on learners' abilities but also on the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

One of the grammar topics commonly taught in junior high schools is the Simple Past Tense. This tense is important because it enables learners to describe past actions, experiences, and events. In addition, mastery of the Simple Past Tense supports students in producing narrative and recount texts, which are commonly taught in secondary school English curricula. However, many students continue to experience difficulties in understanding verb changes, sentence structures, and the contextual use of grammatical forms. These challenges reflect broader issues in grammar learning identified by Mustakim et al. (2025). Such difficulties highlight the importance of instructional approaches that can facilitate learners' understanding of grammatical concepts effectively.

One instructional approach that continues to be widely implemented in language classrooms is teacher-centered instruction. According to Richards & Rodgers (2014), teacher-centered instruction is characterized by the dominant role of the teacher in directing classroom activities, delivering knowledge, and controlling the learning process. In this approach, teachers function as the primary source of information, while students are generally expected to receive, process, and respond to the instruction provided. The approach emphasizes teacher authority, structured learning procedures, and direct transmission of knowledge from teacher to learners. Consequently, classroom learning is largely organized and guided by the teacher.

Teacher-centered instruction is commonly associated with direct instruction and explicit teaching practices. Richards & Rodgers (2014) explain that teacher-centered classrooms typically involve teacher explanations, demonstrations, guided practice, and teacher-led learning activities. Because learning objectives, instructional content, and classroom interactions are largely determined by the teacher, this approach enables instructional materials to be delivered systematically and efficiently. Emaliana (2017) further argues that teacher-centered learning remains prevalent in many educational settings because it allows teachers to manage classrooms effectively and ensure that learning objectives are achieved within limited instructional time.

The implementation of teacher-centered instruction is particularly evident in grammar teaching. Larsen-Freeman (2014) states that grammar learning frequently involves explicit explanations of grammatical forms, sentence structures, and language rules that help learners understand how language works. Likewise, Ellis (1994) argues that explicit grammar instruction facilitates learners' awareness of target language forms and contributes to second language acquisition. Therefore, teacher explanations continue to play an important role in grammar classrooms, especially when students are introduced to unfamiliar grammatical concepts such as English tenses. Through teacher-centered instruction, grammatical rules can be presented systematically before learners apply them through classroom exercises and learning activities.

Despite its instructional advantages, teacher-centered instruction has also been associated with several limitations. Richards & Rodgers (2014) note that teacher-centered classrooms may provide fewer opportunities for active learner participation because classroom interaction is often dominated by teacher explanations. Similarly, Emaliana (2017) argues that excessive reliance on teacher-centered learning may reduce learner autonomy and limit opportunities for collaborative learning experiences. These concerns suggest that while teacher-centered instruction may support the delivery of knowledge, it may also influence students' engagement and participation during classroom learning.

Students' perceptions are important in evaluating instructional approaches because they reflect learners' experiences, interpretations, and responses to classroom practices. Positive perceptions may increase learners' motivation, engagement, and willingness to participate in learning activities, whereas negative perceptions may reduce interest and involvement in classroom learning. According to Supriyanto (2023), students' perceptions are closely related to the teaching strategies implemented by teachers. Similarly, Sakina (2023) emphasized that understanding students' perceptions can provide valuable insights for

improving grammar teaching and learning processes. Therefore, investigating students' perceptions can help teachers identify both the strengths and limitations of instructional practices used in grammar classrooms.

Several previous studies have examined teacher-centered grammar instruction in EFL contexts. Teacher-centered grammar instruction is generally characterized by explicit explanations, demonstrations, guided practice, and structured teacher support. Zohrabi et al. (2012) compared teacher-centered and student-centered approaches in English language learning and reported that teacher-centered instruction could support learners' grammatical knowledge and understanding. Similarly, Holandiyah et al. (2021) found that grammar instruction was perceived as an essential component of language learning because teacher explanations helped learners understand grammatical structures more effectively. Izza & Kuswardani (2023) also reported positive perceptions of explicit grammar instruction when explanations were clear and systematic. In addition, Afrizal et al. (2021) found that students perceived effective grammar teaching as instruction that provided clear guidance, support, and opportunities to understand grammatical concepts.

In contrast, student-centered grammar instruction emphasizes learners' active participation, interaction, collaboration, and opportunities to apply grammatical knowledge through learning activities. This approach may involve group work, games, peer discussion, practical exercises, and tasks that encourage students to participate actively in the learning process. Zohrabi et al. (2012) indicated that student-centered instruction can provide greater opportunities for learner participation, although teacher guidance remains important when students encounter complex grammatical forms. Larsson (2024) likewise reported that interactive learning experiences can promote learner engagement in grammar learning. In Indonesian EFL contexts, Komara & Tiarsiwi (2021) found that learners' attitudes toward grammar learning were associated with instructional approaches and classroom experiences. Supriyanto (2023) similarly reported that students' perceptions were influenced by the teaching strategies implemented by teachers, while Sakina (2023) emphasized the importance of meaningful student engagement in grammar teaching.

Taken together, previous studies suggest that teacher-centered and student-centered grammar instruction may serve complementary functions. Teacher-centered instruction can provide the explicit explanation and structured guidance needed to introduce grammatical forms, whereas student-centered activities can provide opportunities for learners to participate, interact, and apply grammatical knowledge. However, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, many previous studies have examined grammar instruction, explicit grammar teaching, or instructional strategies in general rather than focusing on a specific grammatical topic. Second, studies comparing teacher-centered and student-centered instruction have primarily investigated learning outcomes, instructional effectiveness, or grammar learning in broader educational contexts. Third, limited research has explored junior high school students' perceptions of teacher-centered grammar instruction when learning the Simple Past Tense, particularly in Indonesian EFL classrooms. As a result, little is known about how students perceive teacher-centered instruction in relation to instructional clarity, classroom engagement, and preferred learning activities when learning a specific grammatical structure. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring Grade IX students' perceptions of teacher-centered grammar instruction in learning the Simple Past Tense at a junior high school.

Based on these gaps, the present study aims to explore Grade IX students' perceptions of teacher-centered grammar instruction in learning the Simple Past Tense at a junior high school. Specifically, the study seeks to identify students' views regarding instructional clarity, classroom engagement, and preferred learning activities during grammar lessons. The findings are expected to contribute to English language teaching practices by providing insights into students' learning experiences and offering recommendations for improving grammar instruction in EFL classrooms.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore students' perceptions of teacher-centered grammar instruction in learning the Simple Past Tense at a junior high school. Qualitative descriptive research aims to provide a comprehensive summary of participants' experiences and perceptions using everyday language while remaining close to the data (Sandelowski, 2000). This approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, opinions, and interpretations regarding the instructional practices used in the classroom. In addition, qualitative descriptive studies are particularly suitable for exploring participants' perspectives and describing phenomena as they naturally occur (Kim et al., 2017).

The study was conducted at a junior high school in Karawang, West Java, Indonesia, during the researcher's teaching practicum in August 2025. The research was carried out in a Grade IX English classroom consisting of approximately 40 students who were learning the Simple Past Tense. The practicum lasted for 30 days, during which classroom observations were conducted twice a week. The observed lessons employed teacher-centered grammar instruction in which the teacher explained grammatical rules and sentence patterns, provided examples, guided students through exercises, and led classroom activities. The observations documented the instructional procedures, students' participation, and classroom interactions, and were used to provide contextual support for the interview findings.

Four Grade IX students were purposively selected as interview participants and are identified as S01, S02, S03, and S04 to protect their anonymity. The participants consisted of two male students and two female students. The selection criteria were: (1) they were enrolled in the observed Grade IX class; (2) they had attended the observed Simple Past Tense lessons delivered through teacher-centered instruction; (3) they demonstrated active participation during classroom activities, such as responding to the teacher's questions, completing exercises, or taking part in classroom discussions; and (4) they were willing to participate in an individual online-chat interview and share their learning experiences. These criteria were used to select students who had direct experience of the instructional approach and could provide relevant information about their perceptions. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), purposive sampling enables researchers to select participants who can provide rich and relevant information regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Before the interviews were conducted, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their identities were kept confidential in the reporting of the findings.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually through online chat. Creswell & Creswell (2018) explain that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore participants' experiences and perspectives while maintaining flexibility in questioning. The interview questions focused on students' perceptions of instructional clarity, classroom engagement, motivation, and preferred learning activities during grammar lessons.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase framework, namely familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The themes were developed inductively from recurring patterns identified in participants' responses. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic procedure for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing interview responses with classroom observation findings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize that triangulation can strengthen the credibility of qualitative research by utilizing multiple sources of evidence. Furthermore, the researcher repeatedly reviewed the interview data to ensure consistency and accuracy in interpreting participants' perceptions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Consistent with Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, recurring patterns identified across participants' responses were organized into codes, categories, and themes. The analysis resulted in three major themes related to students' perceptions of teacher-centered grammar instruction in learning the Simple Past Tense: (1) Instructional Clarity, (2) Student Engagement, and (3) Preference for Interactive Learning. Table 1 presents the translation of participants' statements, while Table 2 summarizes the coding process and theme development.

Table 1. Translation of Participants' Statements

Student Number	Original Statement	Translated Statement
S01	"ngejelasin nya ya udah singkat dan padat"	"The explanation was brief and concise."
S02	"bosenn"	"I felt bored."
S03	"awal-awal miss maria ngejelasin nya kurang buat dipahami"	"At first, the teacher's explanation was difficult to understand."
S03	"bikin bosen & bikin ngantuk"	"It made me feel bored and sleepy."
S04	"untuk ngejelasin nya tuh menurut aku kurang"	"In my opinion, the explanation was insufficient."
S01	"lebih suka game kelompok"	"I prefer group games."
S02	"games siie"	"I prefer learning through games."
S03	"lebih ke praktek & di campur games"	"I prefer practical activities combined with games."
S04	"di sela-sela waktu belajar ada game"	"I would like games to be included during the lesson."

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Analysis

Participant Statement	Initial Code	Category	Theme
"ngejelasin nya ya udah singkat dan padat"	explanation perceived as too brief	instructional delivery	Instructional Clarity
"awal-awal guru ngejelasin nya kurang buat dipahami"	difficulty understanding teacher explanation	instructional delivery	Instructional Clarity
"bosenn"	feeling bored during lesson	emotional response	Student Engagement
"bikin bosen & bikin ngantuk"	reduced attention and motivation	emotional response	Student Engagement
"lebih suka game kelompok"	preference for collaborative games	learning preferences	Preference for Interactive Learning
"lebih ke praktek & di campur games"	preference for practical and game-based learning	learning preferences	Preference for Interactive Learning

Instructional Clarity

The first theme concerns students' perceptions of the clarity of explanations provided during teacher-centered grammar instruction. Several participants acknowledged that teacher explanations helped them understand the basic concepts of the Simple Past Tense. However, some students also reported that the explanations were occasionally too brief and required further clarification.

S01 stated:

"The explanation was brief and concise."

This response suggests that S01 considered the explanation clear but limited in detail. However, S03 stated:

"At first, the teacher's explanation was difficult to understand,"

This response indicates that the initial explanation did not fully support the student's understanding. A similar concern was expressed by S04:

"In my opinion, the explanation was insufficient."

Taken together, these quotations indicate that although students generally appreciated teacher explanations, they expected clearer and more detailed guidance to support their understanding of grammatical concepts.

Although S01, S03, and S04 similarly indicated that the explanation required improvement, their perceptions differed in intensity. S01 described the explanation as “brief and concise,” suggesting that it was understandable but lacked sufficient detail. In contrast, S03 found the initial explanation difficult to understand, while S04 considered it insufficient. These differences show that students did not experience the same level of instructional clarity, even though they shared a need for more detailed teacher guidance.

This finding highlights the importance of instructional clarity in teacher-centered grammar classrooms. According to Richards & Rodgers (2014), teacher-centered instruction positions the teacher as the primary source of knowledge responsible for organizing and delivering learning materials. As a result, the effectiveness of learning largely depends on how clearly instructional content is communicated to students. In grammar learning, clarity becomes particularly important because learners are required to understand grammatical forms, sentence structures, and language rules that may not be immediately obvious.

The importance of clear explanations is also supported by Larsen-Freeman (2014), who argues that grammar instruction should help learners understand not only grammatical forms but also how those forms function in communication. Similarly, Ellis (1994) emphasizes that explicit grammar instruction facilitates learners’ awareness of target language forms and contributes to second language acquisition. From this perspective, teacher explanations serve as an essential instructional tool that enables learners to develop grammatical understanding and apply language forms appropriately.

The present finding is consistent with previous studies conducted in EFL contexts. Holandiyah et al. (2021) reported that learners relied heavily on teacher explanations to understand grammatical structures and language forms. Likewise, Izza & Kuswardani (2023) found that students generally responded positively to explicit grammar instruction when explanations were delivered clearly and systematically. Similarly, Afrizal et al. (2021) revealed that students perceived effective grammar teaching as instruction that provided clear guidance, support, and opportunities to understand grammatical concepts.

Taken together, these findings suggest that instructional clarity represents one of the main strengths of teacher-centered grammar instruction. Although some participants perceived the explanations as too brief, they nevertheless acknowledged the importance of teacher guidance in understanding the Simple Past Tense. Therefore, teacher-centered instruction may remain effective for introducing grammatical concepts when explanations are sufficiently detailed, comprehensible, and responsive to students’ learning needs.

Student Engagement

The second theme relates to students’ engagement during teacher-centered grammar instruction. Although participants recognized the usefulness of teacher explanations, several students reported feelings of boredom and reduced attention during classroom learning.

S02 stated:

“I felt bored.”

This quotation shows that S02 experienced boredom during the grammar lesson. Similarly, S03 stated:

“It made me feel bored and sleepy.”

This response indicates that the teacher-centered lesson affected S03’s attention and motivation. Taken together, these direct quotations suggest that prolonged teacher explanations may reduce students’ engagement and make it more difficult for them to maintain attention during grammar lessons.

S02 and S03 shared a similar perception of boredom during teacher-centered grammar instruction. However, their responses also differed in degree: S02 simply stated, “I felt bored,” whereas S03 reported feeling both “bored and sleepy.” This difference suggests that prolonged

teacher-led explanations affected participants' engagement in different ways, ranging from boredom to a stronger reduction in attention and alertness.

The finding reflects one of the commonly discussed limitations of teacher-centered instruction. Richards & Rodgers (2014) argue that teacher-centered classrooms often involve a dominant teacher role in which classroom interaction is largely controlled by the teacher. Although such an approach enables efficient delivery of instructional content, it may reduce opportunities for active learner participation. Similarly, Emaliana (2017) notes that excessive reliance on teacher-centered learning can limit students' autonomy and participation because learners are primarily positioned as recipients of information rather than active contributors to the learning process.

The participants' responses in the present study appear to support these arguments. While students appreciated receiving explanations from the teacher, they also indicated that extended teacher-led instruction could reduce their interest and concentration. This finding suggests that students do not necessarily reject teacher-centered instruction itself; rather, they may experience difficulties maintaining engagement when instructional activities rely too heavily on explanation without sufficient opportunities for participation.

The finding is also supported by previous research. Komara & Tiarsiwi (2021) reported that learners' attitudes toward grammar learning were influenced by instructional approaches and classroom learning experiences. Likewise, Supriyanto (2023) found that students' perceptions of grammar learning were closely associated with the teaching strategies implemented by teachers. More recently, Larsson (2024) reported that although teacher-centered approaches may effectively facilitate grammar learning, student engagement remains an important factor influencing learning experiences and classroom participation.

Therefore, the issue identified in this theme should not be interpreted as evidence that teacher-centered instruction is ineffective. Instead, the finding suggests that teachers may need to balance direct instruction with opportunities for participation, interaction, and classroom involvement. Such a balance may help maintain students' attention while preserving the instructional benefits associated with explicit grammar teaching.

Preference for Interactive Learning

The third theme highlights students' preference for interactive learning activities to complement teacher-centered instruction. All participants expressed a desire for learning activities that were more engaging and participatory.

S01 stated:

"I prefer group games."

This response indicates a preference for collaborative learning activities. Similarly, S02 stated:

"I prefer learning through games."

This quotation shows that games were perceived as a more enjoyable way to learn grammar.

S03 also stated:

"I prefer practical activities combined with games."

This response suggests that S03 valued opportunities to apply grammatical knowledge through practical and interactive activities. Finally, S04 stated:

"I would like games to be included during the lesson."

Taken together, these direct quotations show that all participants valued learning activities that enabled them to participate actively rather than solely listening to teacher explanations. Games, group work, and practical exercises were perceived as enjoyable activities that could support grammar learning.

All four participants similarly preferred interactive learning activities, but they differed in the type of activity they considered most helpful. S01 emphasized group games, S02 preferred games in general, S03 preferred practical activities combined with games, and S04 wanted games to be included during the lesson. These differences indicate that, although students shared a preference for active participation, they had varied expectations regarding how interactive activities should be incorporated into grammar instruction.

The finding demonstrates that students' positive perceptions of teacher-centered instruction do not necessarily imply a preference for entirely teacher-dominated learning environments. Rather, students appeared to appreciate teacher explanations while simultaneously expressing a desire for opportunities to engage actively in classroom activities. This observation supports Emaliana's (2017) argument that effective learning may require a balance between teacher guidance and student participation. Similarly, Richards & Rodgers (2014) suggest that learning environments become more meaningful when students are given opportunities to interact with learning materials and participate in classroom activities.

The preference for interactive learning observed in this study is also consistent with several previous studies. Sakina, (2023) emphasized the importance of meaningful student engagement in grammar instruction and highlighted the need to create learning experiences that encourage participation. Likewise, Afrizal et al. (2021) reported that students valued instructional practices that facilitated understanding while promoting active involvement in learning. Zohrabi et al. (2012) similarly found that although teacher-centered approaches can support language learning, students often benefit from instructional practices that encourage greater participation and interaction. Furthermore, Larsson (2024) reported that interactive learning experiences contribute positively to learner engagement and classroom motivation.

These findings suggest that teacher-centered grammar instruction may be most effective when combined with interactive learning activities. Teacher explanations remain valuable for introducing grammatical concepts, while games, collaborative activities, and practical exercises can provide opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in more engaging ways. Consequently, integrating interactive activities into teacher-centered grammar lessons may help improve both students' understanding and their engagement in the learning process.

Overall, the findings indicate that students generally perceived teacher-centered grammar instruction as beneficial for understanding the Simple Past Tense. However, students also highlighted the importance of instructional clarity, active engagement, and opportunities for interaction. Therefore, while teacher-centered instruction remains useful for introducing grammatical concepts, its effectiveness may be enhanced through the integration of interactive learning activities that support student participation and sustained engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored students' perceptions of teacher-centered grammar instruction in learning the Simple Past Tense at a junior high school. The findings identified three major themes: instructional clarity, student engagement, and preference for interactive learning. Students generally perceived teacher-centered instruction as beneficial because clear and systematic explanations helped them understand grammatical rules and sentence structures more effectively. These findings indicate that teacher-centered instruction remains a valuable approach for introducing grammar concepts in EFL classrooms. However, participants also reported that prolonged teacher-led instruction reduced their engagement and sometimes caused boredom. They expressed a preference for interactive learning activities, such as games, group work, and practical exercises, which encouraged greater participation and interest in grammar lessons. The study suggests that teacher-centered instruction is most effective when combined with interactive activities that reinforce learning and sustain student engagement. Pedagogically, English teachers are encouraged to use direct instruction to explain grammar concepts clearly while incorporating collaborative and practice-based activities to promote active participation, strengthen understanding, and create a more engaging and balanced grammar learning environment.

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