

EFL COLLEGE STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF NOUNS, VERBS, AND ADJECTIVES: EXAMINING WORD CLASS AWARENESS IN WRITING

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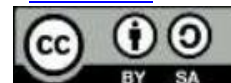
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ABSTRACT

This study examines EFL college students' understanding and use of nouns, verbs, and adjectives in writing, with a focus on word class awareness. A mixed-methods design was employed involving 63 second-semester students from STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya. Data were collected through a 15-item grammar test, a writing task (sentence construction and paragraph writing), and open-ended awareness questions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results showed that students demonstrated a high level of understanding of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, with correct responses ranging from 82.8% to 100%. Noun and verb items showed slightly higher accuracy, while adjective-related items were relatively more challenging. In the writing task, most students were able to apply word class knowledge effectively in sentence and paragraph writing, although one student showed low performance. The awareness data indicated that all students understood the differences among word classes; however, adjectives were perceived as the most difficult category due to confusion with adverbs, adjective order, and limited vocabulary. Overall, the findings suggest that although students possess strong grammatical knowledge, adjective usage remains the most challenging area in both understanding and application. This highlights the need for integrating explicit grammar instruction with contextual writing practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Grammatical competence is an important aspect of academic writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts because it enables students to produce meaningful, accurate, and coherent texts. Among the fundamental elements of grammar, nouns, verbs, and adjectives serve as the building blocks of sentence construction and meaning-making. Understanding these word classes is therefore required for students to communicate ideas effectively in academic writing.

Even though grammatical competency is crucial, prior research has shown that EFL students still struggle to comprehend and use grammatical forms correctly. According to research,

students frequently misidentify parts of speech and have trouble using their grammatical knowledge when completing writing assignments (Asdar et al., 2023; Arisman, 2023). Additionally, it has been discovered that writing quality is greatly influenced by grammatical competence, emphasizing the significance of having a strong understanding of fundamental grammatical categories (Octasary et al., 2025).

Student awareness has been identified as a key element of language learning in addition to grammatical knowledge. Grammar points of view have an impact on students' engagement with writing assignments, confidence, and learning strategies (Arif et al., 2024; Borg, 2015). Thus, knowing how aware students are of grammatical principles might provide important information about how they approach learning grammar and using language.

Despite earlier research has contributed to our knowledge of grammatical competence, the majority of these studies have focused on learner awareness, writing performance, or grammatical knowledge independently. While some studies have examined students' opinions of grammar or examined grammatical mistakes in writing, others have concentrated on using grammar tests to evaluate student' understanding of grammatical forms. As a result, there is still limited understanding of how these three aspects interact during the learning process. More precisely, there hasn't been much focus on examining students' comprehension of word classes, their ability to use them in writing, and their awareness of grammatical knowledge within a single framework.

This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive investigation of grammatical competence that examines students' knowledge and use of word classes while also considering their awareness of grammatical learning. Therefore, this study aims to examine EFL college students' understanding of nouns, verbs, and adjectives and analyze their ability to use these word classes accurately in writing. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: (1) How well do EFL college students understand nouns, verbs, and adjectives as word classes? and (2) How accurately do EFL college students use nouns, verbs, and adjectives in writing? The novelty of this study lies in its integrated mixed-methods approach, which examines grammatical knowledge, writing performance, and students' awareness simultaneously within a single framework among EFL college students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grammatical competence is widely recognized as a fundamental component of second and foreign language proficiency, particularly in academic writing. Grammar offers the fundamental structure that allows students to create texts that are accurate, cohesive, and meaningful in EFL contexts. Without adequate grammatical competence, students may experience difficulties in organizing ideas and communicating them effectively in written form. Consequently, grammar remains an essential aspect of language learning and writing development.

Among the different word classes, nouns, verbs, and adjectives are particularly important because they form the basic components of sentence construction and are frequently used in academic writing. Liu and Li (2016) found that noun phrase complexity, particularly involving adjectives and modifiers, plays a significant role in the quality of academic writing in EFL contexts. Nouns typically refer to people, places, things, or ideas, verbs express actions, processes, or states, and adjectives describe or modify nouns (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). These three-word classes are fundamental because they form the core components of sentence structure and contribute directly to the clarity and accuracy of written communication.

Therefore, a sound understanding of nouns, verbs, and adjectives is essential for successful academic writing.

Previous studies have consistently shown that EFL learners encounter difficulties in mastering word classes. Asdar et al. (2023) found that students frequently misclassify parts of speech, indicating weaknesses in their grammatical awareness. Similarly, Arisman (2023) reported that grammatical errors in students' writing often involve the incorrect use of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, which can reduce the clarity and effectiveness of written texts. These findings suggest that even university-level learners may continue to experience challenges in understanding and using basic grammatical categories accurately.

In addition to understanding grammatical categories, learners must also be able to apply grammatical knowledge in meaningful communication. Octasary et al. (2025) emphasize that grammatical competence involves not only recognizing grammatical forms but also using them appropriately in context. This perspective is supported by research in second language acquisition (SLA), which distinguishes between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge (Ellis, 2008; DeKeyser, 2020). Declarative knowledge refers to learners' explicit understanding of grammatical rules and concepts, whereas procedural knowledge refers to their ability to apply this knowledge in authentic language use. Effective writing requires both forms of knowledge because learners must not only know grammatical rules but also use them accurately and appropriately when expressing ideas.

The importance of grammatical performance in writing has been highlighted by numerous studies. Bitchener and Ferris (2012) note that errors involving noun forms, verb usage, and adjective placement are among the most common grammatical problems in learner writing. Similarly, Hyland (2019) argues that grammatical accuracy remains a significant factor in the quality of academic writing. In addition, Kim and Crossley (2023) further describes that grammatical development contributes to the complexity and quality of EFL academic writing, particularly in the use of clauses and sentence structures. Thus, Octasary et al. (2025) also highlight that grammatical competence is closely related to learners' ability to apply grammatical forms accurately in writing tasks. These studies suggest that grammatical knowledge alone may not be sufficient to ensure successful writing performance.

Another important aspect of grammatical competence is learner awareness. Metalinguistic awareness refers to learners' conscious understanding of language structures and their ability to reflect on language use. Research has shown that learner awareness can influence language learning outcomes, writing confidence, and engagement with grammar instruction. For example, Arif et al. (2024) found that students' perceptions of grammar affect their learning strategies and confidence in writing. Similarly, Borg (2015) argues that learners' beliefs about language learning shape how they engage with grammatical instruction and language practice. Therefore, learner awareness may provide valuable insights into how students perceive and apply grammatical knowledge.

Recent scholars have also called for more integrated approaches to grammar instruction and assessment. Jung (2022) emphasizes the importance of designing grammar assessments that reflect learners' actual language use rather than focusing solely on isolated grammatical knowledge. Likewise, Larsen-Freeman (2014) proposes viewing grammar as a dynamic skill involving the interaction of form, meaning, and use. From this perspective, grammar should not be treated merely as a collection of rules but as a resource for communication. Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) similarly advocate for instructional approaches that combine grammatical knowledge with meaningful language practice, enabling learners to apply grammatical forms in authentic contexts.

Drawing on the literature, grammatical competence may be understood through three interconnected dimensions: grammatical knowledge, grammatical performance, and metalinguistic awareness. Grammatical knowledge refers to learners' understanding of grammatical categories and rules, grammatical performance refers to the ability to use this knowledge in communication and writing, and metalinguistic awareness refers to learners' conscious understanding of language structures and functions. Examining these dimensions together can provide a more comprehensive understanding of learners' grammatical development.

Despite the contributions of previous research, grammatical knowledge, writing performance, and learner awareness have often been investigated separately. Some studies have focused primarily on grammatical knowledge through tests, while others have examined writing errors or explored learners' perceptions of grammar. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how grammatical knowledge, writing performance, and learner awareness interact in relation to learners' understanding and use of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Therefore, the present study investigates EFL college students' understanding of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, their ability to use these word classes in writing, and their awareness of grammatical knowledge within a single analytical framework.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design to examine EFL college students' understanding and use of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The quantitative component consisted of a grammar test and a writing task used to assess students' understanding and application of word classes. The qualitative component involved open-ended awareness questions designed to explore students' perceptions and difficulties regarding the use of nouns, verbs, and adjectives in writing. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the study aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' grammatical competence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants

The participants were second-semester students enrolled in the Vocabulary course at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya during the 2025/2026 academic year. A total sampling technique was employed, whereby all students in the class participated in the study. A total of 63 students participated in the research.

Research Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study:

1. Grammar Test

A 15-item multiple-choice test was administered to measure students' understanding of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The test included items on word-class identification, sentence-level recognition, and appropriate grammatical usage. The instrument was adapted from previous studies on grammatical competence and part-of-speech classification (Asdar et al., 2023).

2. Writing Task

Students completed two writing activities to assess their ability to use nouns, verbs, and adjectives in context. In the first activity, students wrote three sentences containing at least

one noun, one verb, and one adjective in each sentence. In the second activity, students wrote a short paragraph (5–7 sentences) about “My Daily Activities,” integrating various words at least five nouns, five verbs, and five adjectives. The task was adapted from writing-based grammar assessment studies (Arisman, 2023).

3. Awareness Questions

Open-ended questions were used to explore students’ awareness, perceptions, and difficulties regarding nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The questions focused on students’ understanding of word classes, the grammatical category they found most challenging, and their confidence in using these word classes in writing. The instrument was adapted from studies on learners’ beliefs and grammatical awareness (Arif et al., 2024).

Data Collection

Data were collected during regular classroom sessions. Students first completed the grammar test, followed by the writing task and the awareness questions. All participants completed the three instruments during the same data-collection period.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the grammar test and writing task were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. The grammar test results were used to determine students’ understanding of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, while the writing task scores were used to assess their ability to use these word classes in context. The qualitative data collected from the awareness questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), students’ responses were coded and categorized to identify recurring themes related to their awareness of word classes and the difficulties they experienced when using nouns, verbs, and adjectives in writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students’ Understanding of Nouns, Verbs, and Adjectives

The grammar-test results revealed that the students demonstrated a high level of understanding of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Across the 15 test items, the percentage of correct responses ranged from 82,8% to 100%. As shown in Table 1, noun-related items obtained correct-response rates ranging from 85,5% to 100%, verb-related items ranged from 92.2% to 100%, and adjective-related items ranged from 82,8% to 100%.

Table 1. Students’ Performance on the Grammar Test

Category	N	Range of Correct Responses (%)
Noun	63	85.5–100.0
Verb	63	92.2–100.0
Adjective	63	82.8–100.0

Overall, the findings indicate that students possessed strong knowledge of the three- word classes. Most items were answered correctly by more than 90% of the participants. However, several items revealed minor difficulties. In Item 4, which required students to identify the noun in the sentence “She reads a book every day,” one student selected “reads,” five students selected “every,” and three students selected “day” instead of the correct answer “book.”

Similarly, in Item 6, “He has a big house”, one student chose “has” and three students chose “house” rather than the adjective “big.”

The lowest score was found in Item 11 (82,8%), which assessed students’ ability to identify the correct use of an adjective. Five students selected “He runs quick,” while six students selected “He runs quickly.” These responses suggest that some students experienced difficulty distinguishing adjectives from adverbs and recognizing their grammatical functions within sentences.

The awareness responses further supported these findings. All participants reported that they understood the differences among nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Nevertheless, 34 students identified adjectives as the most difficult word class, compared to eight students who identified verbs and two students who identified nouns. Students explained that adjectives were challenging because they were often confused with adverbs, involved complex adjective order, required a wider range of vocabulary, and sometimes appeared similar to nouns or verbs depending on the context. These findings suggest that although students generally understood word classes, adjectives remained the most challenging category.

Students’ Perceptions and Difficulties Regarding Word Classes

To further explore students’ awareness of word classes, participants were asked to identify which word class they found most difficult and explain their reasons. As shown in Table 3, adjectives were reported as the most challenging word class by 34 students, followed by verbs ($n = 8$) and nouns ($n = 2$). Nineteen students indicated that they did not experience significant difficulties and reported understanding the differences among nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

Thematic analysis of the responses revealed several reasons why adjectives were perceived as challenging. The most frequently reported difficulties included confusion between adjectives and adverbs, uncertainty regarding adjective order, limited vocabulary knowledge, difficulties selecting appropriate descriptive words, and confusion about words that can function as more than one part of speech. Students who identified verbs as the most difficult primarily referred to challenges related to tense usage, verb forms, and subject–verb agreement. Only a small number of students reported difficulties with nouns.

Table 2. Students’ Perceived Difficulties in Learning Word Classes

Word Class Reported as Most Difficult	Frequency (n)	Main Reasons Identified
Adjective	34	Confusion between adjectives and adverbs; difficulty selecting appropriate adjectives; uncertainty about adjective order; limited vocabulary; confusion regarding words that function as multiple parts of speech
Verb	8	Difficulties with tense usage, verb forms, and subject–verb agreement
Noun	2	Confusion between nouns and other word classes
No significant Difficult	19	Students reported understanding the differences among nouns, verbs, and adjectives

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that EFL college students generally possess a strong understanding of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The grammar-test results showed high levels of accuracy across all fifteen items, with correct responses ranging from 82.8% to 100%. These results indicate that most students were able to recognize and distinguish among the three-word classes. Such findings suggest that the participants had acquired the fundamental grammatical knowledge necessary for effective writing.

The high performance on items assessing basic word-class identification further supports this conclusion. For example, almost all students correctly identified nouns, verbs, and adjectives in isolated-word questions such as “happiness” (noun), “speak” (verb), and “beautiful” (adjective). Similarly, students demonstrated strong performance on contextual identification tasks, including recognizing “book” as a noun in the sentence “She reads a book every day” and identifying “play” as the verb in “They play football.” These findings suggest that students were not only familiar with grammatical terminology but were also able to recognize word classes within sentence contexts.

The writing-task results reinforce the grammar-test findings. Most students successfully constructed sentences and short paragraphs containing nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Their ability to apply grammatical knowledge in writing suggests that understanding of word classes was not limited to recognition tasks. This finding supports Octasary et al. (2025), who argue that grammatical competence contributes significantly to writing performance. Students who understand grammatical structures are generally better equipped to communicate ideas effectively in written texts.

Although the overall results were positive, adjective-related items appeared to be more challenging than noun- and verb-related items. The lowest score in the grammar test was recorded for Item 11, which required students to distinguish between the adjective “quick” and the adverb “quickly.” While most students answered correctly, this item obtained a lower percentage than the others. This finding is noteworthy because it corresponds closely with the awareness responses, in which many students reported confusion between adjectives and adverbs. The consistency between the test results and students’ perceptions suggests that adjective-related concepts remain an area of difficulty despite students’ generally high grammatical competence.

The awareness findings provide additional insight into these challenges. Although all participants reported understanding the differences among nouns, verbs, and adjectives, more than half identified adjectives as the most difficult word class. Students explained that they often struggled with adjective order, adjective forms, vocabulary selection, and the distinction between adjectives and adverbs. For example, several participants mentioned confusion between words such as “interesting” and “interested,” while others reported uncertainty about the correct order of multiple adjectives in a phrase, such as “big red car.” These responses indicate that adjective use involves more than identifying a word class; it requires understanding how adjectives function within meaningful communication.

This finding is consistent with Larsen-Freeman’s (2014) view that grammar should be understood as a dynamic skill involving form, meaning, and use. While students may be able to recognize adjectives in a test, using them accurately requires additional knowledge of vocabulary, context, and sentence structure. Therefore, adjective use may place greater cognitive demands on learners than the use of nouns and verbs.

The findings also support the distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge proposed by Ellis (2008) and DeKeyser (2020). The participants demonstrated strong declarative knowledge by correctly identifying nouns, verbs, and adjectives in the grammar test. However, their reported difficulties with adjective usage suggest that procedural knowledge, or the ability to apply grammatical knowledge in authentic communication, may require further development. Nevertheless, unlike previous studies that reported substantial gaps between grammatical knowledge and writing performance, the present study found that most students were able to transfer their grammatical knowledge into writing successfully.

Another important contribution of this study concerns grammatical awareness. All participants reported that they understood the differences among nouns, verbs, and adjectives, suggesting a relatively high level of metalinguistic awareness. This finding supports Arif et al. (2024), who argue that learners' awareness of grammar influences their learning processes and writing development. Similarly, Borg (2015) emphasizes the role of learner beliefs and perceptions in shaping language learning experiences. The students' awareness of their strengths and difficulties may therefore contribute positively to their ongoing grammatical development.

Overall, the findings suggest that EFL college students possess strong knowledge and use of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. However, adjectives remain the most challenging word class due to their complexity, contextual variation, and close relationship with other grammatical categories such as adverbs. These results highlight the importance of integrating explicit grammar instruction with meaningful writing practice to help students develop both grammatical accuracy and confidence in academic writing.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that EFL college students generally possess a strong understanding of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, as shown by high performance in the grammar test and their ability to apply these word classes in writing tasks. However, adjectives were consistently identified as the most challenging word class due to difficulties related to adjective–adverb confusion, adjective order, and limited vocabulary knowledge. The awareness data further confirmed that while students understood the basic differences among word classes, their challenges in using adjectives indicate a gap between grammatical knowledge and practical application. Overall, the findings underline the importance of integrating explicit grammar instruction with contextualized writing activities to strengthen students' ability to use word classes accurately in writing.

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