



Syntactic Challenges and Pedagogical Remedies in Libyan EFL Higher Education: A Mixed-Methods Study at Sebha University

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Abstract

Mastering English syntactic structures remains a persistent hurdle for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduates in Arab academic contexts. This study investigates the primary syntactic difficulties encountered by Libyan EFL university students, explores the underlying linguistic and pedagogical causes of these obstacles, and proposes practical instructional remedies. Employing a convergent mixed-methods design, data were gathered at the Faculty of Education (Al-Ghurifa), University of Sebha, from a randomly selected sample of 30 undergraduate EFL students and 5 experienced faculty members. Quantitative data were collected via a 20-item five-point Likert scale questionnaire and analyzed using IBM SPSS to compute means and standard deviations, whereas qualitative insights were obtained through semi-structured interviews with instructors and examined using thematic analysis. Quantitative findings revealed high levels of student agreement across four core dimensions: sentence structure comprehension ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.12$), grammatical application ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.13$), confusion regarding sentence types and constituent elements ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.13$), and causal factors ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.15$). Specifically, learners exhibited pronounced struggles in differentiating between complex and compound structures ($M = 4.20$), mastering preposition placement ($M = 4.20$), maintaining subject-verb agreement ($M = 4.20$), and distinguishing noun phrases from prepositional phrases ($M = 4.10$). These difficulties were primarily attributed to insufficient practice with complex constructions ($M = 4.20$), low self-confidence ($M = 4.20$), first-language (Arabic VSO vs. English SVO) structural interference ($M = 3.90$), and limited authentic exposure ($M = 3.90$). Qualitative findings indicated that combining explicit rule instruction, contextualized authentic texts, interactive multimedia, collaborative peer editing, and explanatory error analysis effectively mitigates syntactic deficits. The study concludes with targeted pedagogical recommendations for curriculum designers and EFL instructors.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics, EFL Learners, Error Analysis, L1 Interference, Pedagogical Strategies, Syntactic Structures.

ملخص البحث

يمثل إتقان التراكيب النحوية وبناء الجملة (Syntax) في اللغة الإنجليزية تحدياً مستمراً لطلبة المرحلة الجامعية الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في البيئات الأكاديمية العربية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقصي أبرز الصعوبات النحوية التي تواجه طلبة قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة سبها، والكشف عن الأسباب اللغوية والتربوية الكامنة وراءها، وصولاً إلى اقتراح معالجات تدريسية فعالة لتعزيز الكفاءة النحوية لديهم. اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج المختلط (الكمي والنوعي)، حيث طبقت بكلية التربية (الغريفة) بجامعة سبها على عينة عشوائية قوامها (30) طالباً وطالبة، و(5) من أعضاء هيئة التدريس بالقسم. جُمعت البيانات الكمية عبر استبانة مغلقة مكونة من (20) فقرة وفق مقياس ليكرت الخماسي وحُللت إحصائياً باستخدام برنامج (SPSS)، بينما جُمعت البيانات النوعية عبر مقابلات شبه مقننة مع

الأستاذة وحُللت باستخدام التحليل الموضوعي (Thematic Analysis). أظهرت النتائج الكمية درجة موافقة مرتفعة حول وجود تحديات جوهرية في أربعة أبعاد رئيسية: صعوبات فهم بنية الجملة بمتوسط كلي (3.81)، وصعوبات التطبيق القواعدي بمتوسط (3.82)، والخلط بين أنواع الجمل وعناصرها بمتوسط (3.91)، والأسباب المؤدية لهذه الصعوبات بمتوسط (4.03). وتجسدت أبرز المشكلات في التمييز بين الجمل المركبة والمعقدة (4.20)، وتحديد مواقع حروف الجر (4.20)، وتحقيق التوافق بين الفاعل والفعل (4.20)، والتفريق بين العبارة الاسمية وشبه الجملة الجارة (4.10). وعزت النتائج هذه الإخفاقات إلى ضعف الممارسة العملية لبناء الجمل المعقدة (4.20)، وتدني الثقة اللغوية (4.20)، والتداخل اللغوي الناتج عن اختلاف رتبة الجملة بين العربية والإنجليزية (3.90). وفي المقابل، كشفت النتائج النوعية أن دمج التدريس الصريح للقواعد بالأمثلة السياقية، وتوظيف النصوص الأصيلة والوسائط التفاعلية، وتطبيق تصحيح الأقران وتحليل الأخطاء التفسيري يمثل مداخل علاجية ناجعة لتطوير الأداء النحوي للطلبة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللسانيات التطبيقية، طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، التراكيب النحوية، التداخل اللغوي، الاستراتيجيات التدريسية.

1. Introduction

Linguistics, as the systematic and scientific inquiry into human language, investigates the intricate dimensions of linguistic structure, functional usage, and historical evolution (Akhmanova & Mikaeljan, 2021). Among its core sub-disciplines—phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics, and pragmatics—syntax holds a central architectural role by governing how words are combined, ordered, and hierarchically organized into phrases, clauses, and sentences (Tallerman, 2019; Wang, 2010). Mastering syntactic principles equips language learners with the cognitive tools necessary to generate coherent propositions and decode complex written and spoken discourse (Linzen & Baroni, 2021; Wang, 2010). Without a firm grasp of syntactic configurations, lexical knowledge remains fragmented, rendering communication ambiguous and susceptible to misinterpretation (Lamb, 2000).

In the Libyan higher education landscape, English Language Teaching (ELT) programs place substantial emphasis on developing undergraduate students' syntactic competence. University curricula routinely introduce foundational syntactic constructs, including parts of speech, canonical word order patterns, phrase structure rules, and clause subordination (Sari, 2020). However, theoretical familiarity with isolated grammatical rules does not automatically translate into accurate syntactic production. Constructing grammatically sound English sentences requires learners to synthesize multiple linguistic constraints—such as word order, tense, aspect, and concord—simultaneously and cohesively (Miller, 2016; Sari, 2020). Even when Libyan EFL students can successfully define nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions in isolation, they frequently struggle to assemble these constituents into well-formed English structures.

At the heart of syntactic organization lie two indispensable building blocks: phrases and clauses. A phrase functions as a unified syntactic constituent built around a lexical head element—such as a noun in a Noun Phrase (NP) or a verb in a Verb Phrase (VP)—which projects its grammatical properties onto the entire construction (Lohndal, 2014; Tahang, 2019). Clauses, conversely, represent higher-level syntactic units comprising a subject and a predicate that express a proposition (Smith & Aboh, 2009). Syntactic theory distinguishes primarily between independent (main) clauses, which encapsulate complete thoughts capable of standing alone as grammatical sentences, and subordinate (dependent) clauses, which rely on a matrix clause for contextual and structural completeness (Brown & Miller, 2020; Morley, 2000). Achieving fluency in academic writing requires EFL learners to manipulate these phrasal and clausal hierarchies effortlessly, particularly when adhering to English Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) patterns (Mahayani et al., 2018).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Because syntax serves as the structural backbone of linguistic comprehension and written expression, deficiencies in syntactic mastery severely compromise EFL students' academic trajectory. Empirical observations within Libyan universities reveal that undergraduate English majors experience persistent difficulties in internalizing and applying English syntactic rules. Traditional, teacher-centered grammar instruction, coupled with scarce opportunities for authentic communicative practice, leaves many learners unable to transition from basic sentence formation to advanced academic writing.

Specifically, despite years of prior English instruction at the secondary and tertiary levels, Libyan EFL undergraduates continue to exhibit high error rates when constructing compound and complex sentences, positioning prepositions, maintaining subject-verb concord, and distinguishing between phrasal categories. As coursework demands increase in advanced semesters, these unresolved syntactic deficits manifest in fragmented essays, structural ambiguity, and heightened writing anxiety. Consequently, conducting a rigorous diagnostic investigation into the specific syntactic obstacles faced by Libyan EFL students, their root causes, and instructor-validated remedies is imperative for reforming grammar pedagogy.

1.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Derived directly from the statement of the problem, this investigation addresses one overarching research question and two subsidiary questions:

1. **Main Question:** What are the primary difficulties encountered by Libyan EFL undergraduate students in learning English syntax?
2. **Sub-Question 1:** What are the underlying linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical reasons behind these syntactic difficulties?
3. **Sub-Question 2:** What instructional strategies, resources, and feedback mechanisms can effectively improve EFL students' syntactic knowledge?

Based on these questions, the study tests two foundational hypotheses:

- **H1:** Libyan EFL undergraduate students encounter statistically significant difficulties across structural, grammatical, and constituent dimensions of English syntax.
- **H2:** A primary driver of these syntactic difficulties is students' persistent confusion in differentiating between various types of phrases, clauses, and sentence structures due to cross-linguistic and pedagogical factors.

1.3 Objectives and Significance of the Study

This study aims to: (a) systematically identify and categorize the syntactic difficulties experienced by EFL undergraduates at the University of Sebha; (b) uncover the causal factors contributing to these learning barriers; and (c) formulate practical, evidence-based pedagogical solutions to enhance syntactic instruction.

The significance of this research is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it enriches the body of Arab applied linguistics literature by linking generative syntactic frameworks (X-bar theory and Transformational Generative Grammar) to empirical error patterns among Libyan learners. Practically, the findings provide EFL university instructors and curriculum developers with actionable diagnostic data to redesign syntax syllabi, integrate multimodal teaching resources, and implement constructive error-feedback protocols that bolster student confidence and writing proficiency.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Syntax in Linguistic Theory

Within modern linguistics, syntax is conceptualized as the formal system of rules, principles, and

parameters that govern how words are combined into phrases and how phrases are integrated into grammatically well-formed sentences (Akhmanova & Mikaeljan, 2021; Van Valin et al., 1997). Heuer et al. (2010) characterize syntax as the structural mechanism responsible for regulating linear word order, morphosyntactic agreement, and clausal subordination. Extending this perspective, Miller (2016) and Von Stechow (2012) emphasize that syntactic rules do not operate in a vacuum; rather, they govern the relational interplay among grammatical categories—such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions—to encode precise semantic and pragmatic meanings (Hartsuiker & Bernolet, 2017).

To illustrate how syntactic organization directly dictates semantic interpretation, Hartsuiker and Bernolet (2017) point to thematic role assignment in transitive constructions: the sentence *"John gave Mary a book"* utilizes identical lexical items as *"Mary gave John a book,"* yet the syntactic positioning of the arguments completely reverses the agent and recipient roles. Similarly, violating canonical word order—such as producing *"The cat the mouse chased"* instead of *"The cat chased the mouse"*—disrupts cognitive parsing and breaks down communication (Lamb, 2000). Furthermore, cross-linguistic typological research demonstrates that while all human languages rely on systematic syntactic rules, they diverge in their surface parameter settings, such as English adhering to a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order while Japanese utilizes Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) and Arabic frequently employs Verb-Subject-Object (VSO) (Clark, 2017; Finney, 2005).

2.2 Generative Syntactic Frameworks: TGG and X-Bar Theory

The formal analysis of sentence structure has been revolutionized by Noam Chomsky's generative enterprise, complemented by data-driven perspectives on linguistic universals (Legendre, 2001). Two interrelated theoretical models—Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) and X-bar Theory—provide the analytical foundation for understanding syntactic complexity in EFL contexts (Chomsky, 2009, 2014; Koster, 2011; Saleh, 2002).

2.2.1 Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG)

Introduced by Chomsky in the 1950s and refined in subsequent decades, TGG posits that human linguistic competence stems from an innate biological endowment termed Universal Grammar (UG) (Chomsky, 2009, 2014). UG equips speakers with a finite system of computational rules capable of generating an infinite array of novel, grammatically accurate sentences. A cornerstone of TGG is the bifurcation of syntactic representation into two distinct levels (Stuurman, 2019):

1. **Deep Structure:** The abstract, underlying syntactic-semantic representation where core thematic relations are established.
2. **Surface Structure:** The final phonological or orthographic form of the sentence as actually spoken or written.

Bridging these two levels are transformational rules—formal operations involving constituent movement, insertion, and deletion (Lohndal, 2017). For instance, through transformational operations, a declarative active kernel sentence (*"The dog chased the cat"*) can be systematically converted into an interrogative construction (*"Did the dog chase the cat?"*) via auxiliary movement, or into a passive construction (*"The cat was chased by the dog"*) via argument advancement. For Libyan EFL learners, understanding transformational mechanics is vital for mastering question formation, negation, passivization, and relative clause embedding (Saleh, 2002).

2.2.2 X-Bar Theory

Developed by Chomsky in the late 1970s and expanded by syntacticians such as Koster (2011) and Haegeman (2006), X-bar Theory establishes a universal, hierarchical template for internal phrase structure across all natural languages. Rather than treating phrases as flat strings of words,

X-bar theory posits that every phrase is an endocentric projection of a lexical head (X)—where X represents a variable standing for Noun (N), Verb (V), Adjective (A), Adverb (Adv), or Preposition (P) (Ahmed et al., 2023; Isaac et al., 2024). As detailed by Isaac et al. (2024), phrasal architecture unfolds across three universal hierarchical tiers:

- **The Head Level (X):** The core lexical item that determines the grammatical category and semantic nature of the phrase.
- **The Intermediate Projection (X'):** The structural level formed by merging the head (X) with its subcategorized complements (elements required to complete the head's meaning).
- **The Maximal Projection (X'' or XP):** The highest phrasal node, formed by combining the intermediate projection (X') with optional specifiers (such as determiners or degree words) and modifiers.

By capturing the underlying structural symmetry across diverse phrase types, X-bar theory provides EFL educators with a powerful visual and analytical tool (tree diagrams) to demonstrate how complex sentences are hierarchically assembled (Ahmed et al., 2023; Haegeman, 2006).

2.3 Taxonomy of English Syntactic Constituents

Within the hierarchical framework of English syntax, functional categories—such as Determiners (Det), Auxiliaries (Aux), Coordinators (Coord), and Complementizers (Comp)—do not project independent content phrases on their own, but rather operate as structural glue within five major phrasal projections (Van Valin et al., 1997):

1. **Noun Phrase (NP):** Constructed around a head noun (N) accompanied by optional determiners, pre-modifying adjectives, and post-modifying prepositional phrases or relative clauses (e.g., *"The moon"* or *"the big brown dog"*). NPs function primarily as subjects, direct/indirect objects, or prepositional complements, serving as the primary referential anchors in discourse (Dryer, 2007; Schwarzschild, 2006).
2. **Verb Phrase (VP):** Headed by a lexical main verb (V) and potentially expanded by auxiliary verbs encoding tense, aspect, and modality, alongside NP complements and adverbial modifiers (e.g., *"Meet a friend"* or *"will have been running"*). VPs form the predicative core of the clause, expressing actions, processes, or states of being (Grady, 2017; Zagona, 2012).
3. **Adjective Phrase (AdjP):** Built around a head adjective (Adj) modified by degree specifiers (Deg) or complements (e.g., *"Very good"* or *"extremely happy"*). AdjPs function attributively within NPs or predicatively following copular verbs to enrich descriptive precision (Alexiadou, 2014; Stoian, 2023).
4. **Adverb Phrase (AdvP):** Centered on a head adverb (Adv) preceded by degree modifiers (e.g., *"very quickly"*). AdvPs modify verbs, adjectives, or entire clauses to specify temporal, spatial, manner, or frequency parameters (Demirdache & Uribe-Etxebarria, 2004; Ernst, 2014).
5. **Prepositional Phrase (PP):** Comprising a head preposition (P) merged with an obligatory Noun Phrase complement (e.g., *"On the table"*). PPs establish crucial spatial, temporal, directional, and possessive relationships across sentence constituents (Bayer & Bader, 2007; Suppes, 2005).

2.4 Cognitive, Linguistic, and Affective Barriers in Learning Syntax

Acquiring L2 syntactic competence is widely recognized as an arduous, time-intensive process fraught with cognitive and structural obstacles (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Stanford & Delage, 2020). Literature identifies four primary sources of syntactic difficulty for EFL learners:

- **Cross-Linguistic Interference (L1 Transfer):** Learners habitually rely on their native

language (L1) grammatical architecture when attempting to construct or translate L2 sentences (Sunarto, 2012; Wu & Garza, 2014). For Arab EFL learners, typological divergence is particularly acute: whereas Arabic naturally permits Verb-Subject-Object (VSO) ordering and nominal verbless sentences, English mandates a strict Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) sequence ("*The boy ate the apple*") with an overt finite verb (Finney, 2005). Furthermore, differences in definiteness marking and preposition usage trigger persistent syntactic errors.

- **Working Memory Constraints:** Constructing multi-clause sentences requires learners to hold and process numerous morphosyntactic dependencies simultaneously—including subject-verb concord, tense sequences, and subordinator constraints (Du & Yang, 2019; Stanford & Delage, 2020). When cognitive load exceeds working memory capacity, grammatical accuracy breaks down (Wahyuningtyas & Bram, 2018).
- **Syntactic Ambiguity:** Structural ambiguity arises when a single linear sequence of words can be parsed into multiple hierarchical tree structures yielding distinct interpretations (Kuperberg, 2007). For example, in the classic ambiguous construction "*Amir saw a man with a telescope*," the prepositional phrase ("*with a telescope*") can attach either to the VP (indicating the instrument Amir used) or to the NP (indicating a characteristic of the man) (Ismahani et al., 2024). Navigating such attachment ambiguities severely challenges EFL learners.
- **Abstractness and Low Perceived Relevance:** Because syntax deals with abstract structural formulas rather than concrete lexical meanings, many EFL students perceive grammar rules as tedious and less important than vocabulary acquisition, leading to diminished motivation (Alhaysony & Alhaisoni, 2017; Ismahani et al., 2024).

2.5 Pedagogical Strategies and Empirical Precedents

To counteract these barriers, applied linguistics scholarship advocates a multifaceted instructional model combining five core strategies:

1. **Exposure to Authentic Language Input:** Immersing learners in natural spoken and written discourse enables implicit internalization of sentence rhythms and word-order patterns (Kaçani & Mangelli, 2013).
2. **Explicit Syntactic Instruction:** Providing systematic, transparent explanations of phrase structures, clause types, and transformational rules helps learners demystify complex grammatical patterns (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Shiu, 2011).
3. **Deliberate Practice and Constructive Feedback:** Engaging students in regular parsing drills, sentence-combining tasks, and error-identification exercises consolidates mental syntactic representations (Buditama, 2017; Nawaz et al., 2024), especially when paired with explanatory teacher feedback (Burgess & Etherington, 2002).
4. **Technological and Multimedia Integration:** Leveraging interactive grammar apps, digital quizzes, audio-visual clips, and drag-and-drop sentence builders provides immediate personalized feedback and heightens learner engagement (Malova, 2016; Shemuda, 2016; Syarif, 2017).
5. **Collaborative Learning and Peer Editing:** Structuring group sentence-editing workshops and peer-review circles reduces affective anxiety and fosters collective syntactic problem-solving (Oshima, 1991; Tosin et al., 2023).

Empirical studies across diverse EFL contexts reinforce these theoretical insights. Tahang (2019) investigated fifth-semester EFL students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sorong using pre-observations and semi-structured interviews (N = 6), revealing that emotional barriers (fear of

error, shame, sensitivity), motivational deficits (procrastination, unsupportive environments), and writing anxieties significantly impeded syntax acquisition. Similarly, Sari (2020) examined fifth-semester English majors at IAIN Metro Lampung via qualitative interviews and documentation, finding that students struggled to identify adjectival functions within complex sentences due to limited vocabulary depth, sentence length complexity, and rote memorization habits.

More recently, Ismahani et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative inquiry across Indonesian learners and educators, demonstrating that L1-L2 syntactic divergence heavily obstructed comprehension of complex English clauses, tenses, and idioms, while highlighting the efficacy of digital tools and immersive input in relation to Chomsky's UG and Krashen's Input Hypothesis. Furthermore, Tsutada (2015) implemented a semester-long authentic English news grammar intervention among 45 Japanese university students (TOEIC 550–700), documenting statistically significant gains in grammatical knowledge that transferred directly into enhanced reading and writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Finally, Mahayani et al. (2018) and Tosin et al. (2023) conducted multi-cycle Classroom Action Research (CAR) projects utilizing Lesson Study-based learning management at Pakuan University and STKIP PGRI Sidoarjo, respectively. Both investigations proved that collaborative lesson planning, contextualized media, and peer interaction significantly elevated undergraduate students' syntax achievement scores across consecutive instructional cycles.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Setting

To achieve a rigorous, multi-dimensional understanding of the research problem, this study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano, 2017). As established by Fraenkel et al. (2018), integrating quantitative survey metrics with qualitative interview narratives capitalizes on the complementary strengths of both paradigms, enabling statistical generalization alongside deep contextual interpretation. The empirical fieldwork was executed during the 2023/2024 academic year at the Department of English, Faculty of Education (Al-Ghurifa), University of Sebha, located in southern Libya. This institution was purposively selected due to its established history of EFL instruction and the researcher's direct academic familiarity with the syntactic challenges prevalent within its undergraduate cohorts.

3.2 Target Population and Participant Demographics

The target population encompassed all undergraduate EFL students and faculty members within the English Department at the Faculty of Education, Al-Ghurifa (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Using random sampling procedures to ensure representativeness and eliminate selection bias (Casteel & Bridier, 2021), a total operational sample of 35 participants (N = 30 undergraduate students and N = 5 EFL instructors) was recruited. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of both participant groups as processed via Microsoft Excel 365.

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Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participating EFL Undergraduate Students (N = 30) and Faculty Members (N = 5)

Cohort	Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Undergraduate Students (N = 30)	Gender	Male	5	17.0%
	Undergraduate Students (N = 30) Gender	Female	25	83.0%
Undergraduate Students (N = 30)	Academic Semester	Fourth Semester	2	7.0%
	Undergraduate Students (N = 30) Academic Semester	Fifth Semester	4	13.0%
	Undergraduate Students (N = 30) Academic Semester	Sixth Semester	7	23.0%
	Undergraduate Students (N = 30) Academic Semester	Seventh Semester	9	30.0%
	Undergraduate Students (N = 30) Academic Semester	Eighth Semester	8	27.0%
EFL Faculty Members (N = 5)	Gender	Male	4	80.0%
	EFL Faculty Members (N = 5) Gender	Female	1	20.0%
EFL Faculty Members (N = 5)	Age Group	30 – 40 Years	1	20.0%
	EFL Faculty Members (N = 5) Age Group	41 – 50 Years	2	40.0%
	EFL Faculty Members (N = 5) Age Group	51 Years and Above	2	40.0%
EFL Faculty Members (N = 5)	Academic Qualification	Master's Degree (MA)	4	80.0%
	EFL Faculty Members (N = 5) Academic Qualification	Doctorate Degree (PhD)	1	20.0%
EFL Faculty Members (N = 5)	Teaching Experience	10 – 15 Years	1	20.0%
	EFL Faculty Members (N = 5) Teaching Experience	15 – 20 Years	3	60.0%
	EFL Faculty Members (N = 5) Teaching Experience	21 Years and Above	1	20.0%

As shown in Table 1, the student sample was predominantly female (83.0%) and concentrated in advanced undergraduate levels—specifically the 6th, 7th, and 8th semesters, which collectively accounted for 80.0% (n = 24) of respondents—ensuring that participants had substantial prior exposure to university syntax courses. Furthermore, 80.0% of the interviewed faculty members possessed over 15 years of university ELT experience, lending high credibility to their pedagogical

evaluations.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Two primary research instruments were systematically developed and validated through expert supervisory review to ensure content validity and clarity (Sukmawati, 2023):

1. **Students' Closed-Ended Questionnaire:** Designed to quantify learner difficulties and causal factors (Mathers et al., 2007; Reja et al., 2003), the instrument comprised two sections: a demographic sheet and 20 structured diagnostic statements distributed across four domains: *Difficulty in Understanding Sentence Structure* (Items 1–6), *Difficulties with Grammar* (Items 7–10), *Confusion with Sentence Types and Elements* (Items 11–15), and *Reasons Behind Difficulties in Learning Syntax* (Items 16–20). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert continuum: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1).
2. **Teachers' Semi-Structured Interview Guide:** Constructed to elicit rich qualitative insights (Adams, 2015; Fontana & Frey, 2005), the protocol included demographic questions followed by three open-ended core inquiries examining: (a) current classroom strategies used to teach syntactic concepts, (b) effective instructional materials and resources, and (c) error-correction and feedback mechanisms.

Following official institutional approval from the University of Sebha, questionnaires were administered in person with informed consent, while individual audio-recorded interviews were conducted with the five instructors in a private academic setting. Quantitative questionnaire data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics to extract Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) (Bhatia, 2017), whereas qualitative interview transcripts underwent systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participant anonymity and data confidentiality were strictly protected throughout the investigation.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Quantitative Results: Students' Syntactic Difficulties and Causal Factors

To address the first research question regarding the specific obstacles encountered by Libyan EFL students in learning syntax, the quantitative outcomes from the questionnaire domains are analyzed below.

4.1.1 Category 1: Difficulty in Understanding Sentence Structure

Table 2 displays the frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations for the six items assessing students' comprehension of overall sentence architecture.

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Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Difficulty in Understanding Sentence Structure (N = 30)

No.	Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean (M)	SD	Degree of Agreement
1	I have difficulty distinguishing between phrase, clause, and sentence.	8	9	6	4	3	3.50	0.08	Agree
2	I neglect the order of words which should be followed in an English sentence.	10	8	7	5	0	3.80	0.11	Agree
3	I cannot form complex sentences very well.	12	10	5	2	1	4.00	0.14	Agree
4	I cannot join the sentences together to form compound sentences.	9	8	8	4	1	3.70	0.10	Agree
5	I have difficulty in distinguishing between complex and compound sentences.	14	9	6	1	0	4.20	0.17	Strongly Agree
6	I use the same element of sentences in different structures of a sentence.	11	9	7	3	0	3.90	0.13	Agree
Total Domain Score							3.81	0.12	Agree

The statistical data in Table 2 reveal a pronounced overall agreement ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.12$) that undergraduate learners struggle to comprehend English sentence structure. The most critical

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obstacle within this domain is students' inability to differentiate between complex and compound sentences (Item 5), which registered the highest mean score of 4.20 (SD = 0.17), with 23 out of 30 students (76.7%) expressing agreement or strong agreement. Closely following is learners' inability to construct complex sentences effectively (Item 3, M = 4.00, SD = 0.14), endorsed by 73.3% of respondents. Furthermore, students reported significant tendencies to misuse identical sentence elements across varying syntactic structures (Item 6, M = 3.90, SD = 0.13) and to neglect canonical English word order (Item 2, M = 3.80, SD = 0.11). Joining independent clauses to form compound sentences (Item 4, M = 3.70) and distinguishing foundational hierarchical units—phrase, clause, and sentence (Item 1, M = 3.50)—also demonstrated clear agreement.

4.1.2 Category 2: Difficulties with Grammatical Rules in Syntax

Table 3 details the empirical findings regarding students' struggles with specific morphosyntactic and grammatical rules during sentence construction.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Difficulties with Grammatical Mechanics in Syntax (N = 30)

No.	Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean (M)	SD	Degree of Agreement
7	I have difficulty in determining the position of prepositions in forming sentences.	14	10	5	0	1	4.20	0.18	Strongly Agree
8	I face difficulties in using subject-verb agreement in forming a sentence.	10	13	4	2	1	4.20	0.15	Strongly Agree
9	I have difficulty in distinguishing between definite clauses and indefinite clauses.	9	8	6	3	4	3.50	0.08	Agree
10	I do not master the use of definite and indefinite articles.	8	7	10	0	5	3.40	0.11	Neutral
Total Domain Score							3.82	0.13	Agree

As evidenced in Table 3, the grammatical mechanics domain yielded a high aggregate mean of 3.82 (SD = 0.13). Two specific morphosyntactic operations tied for the highest difficulty rating (M = 4.20): determining the accurate syntactic position of prepositions within sentences (Item 7, SD = 0.18, with 80.0% agreement) and maintaining proper subject-verb agreement (concord) during clause formation (Item 8, SD = 0.15, with 76.7% agreement). Learners also acknowledged moderate difficulty in distinguishing between finite (definite) and non-finite (indefinite) clauses (Item 9, M = 3.50, SD = 0.08), whereas mastery of definite and indefinite articles registered a comparatively neutral mean score (Item 10, M = 3.40, SD = 0.11).

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4.1.3 Category 3: Confusion with Sentence Types and Constituent Elements

Table 4 examines learners' confusion regarding functional sentence classifications and internal phrasal boundaries.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Confusion with Sentence Types and Constituent Elements (N = 30)

No.	Statement	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean (M)	SD	Degree of Agreement
11	I have difficulty in distinguishing declarative and exclamatory sentences.	11	7	8	3	1	3.80	0.12	Agree
12	I find syntax difficult when I am asked to structure words to be a clause.	13	9	6	1	1	4.10	0.15	Agree
13	I do not master the use of prepositions in the prepositional phrase.	10	7	7	5	1	3.70	0.10	Agree
14	I find Prepositional Phrases ambiguous and quite difficult to differentiate between NP and PP.	12	11	5	2	0	4.10	0.16	Agree
15	I find difficulty in forming sentences, clauses, and phrases because there is a big difference between English and Arabic.	12	8	5	5	0	3.90	0.13	Agree
Total Domain Score							3.91	0.13	Agree

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Among the three diagnostic difficulty domains, Category 3 recorded the highest overall mean ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.13$). Specifically, students reported severe challenges when required to assemble isolated lexical items into a coherent clause (Item 12, $M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.15$) and when attempting to resolve structural ambiguity between Noun Phrases (NP) and Prepositional Phrases (PP) (Item 14, $M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.16$, endorsed by 76.7% of participants). Moreover, respondents strongly affirmed that structural divergences between Arabic and English impede their ability to form phrases, clauses, and sentences accurately (Item 15, $M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.13$). Differentiating declarative from exclamatory sentence patterns (Item 11, $M = 3.80$) and selecting appropriate prepositions within PPs (Item 13, $M = 3.70$) also constituted notable areas of confusion.

4.1.4 Category 4: Reasons Behind Difficulties in Learning Syntax

To answer the first subsidiary research question concerning the underlying causes of syntactic struggles, Table 5 presents the statistical analysis of Items 16 through 20.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Underlying Reasons Behind Syntactic Learning Difficulties (N = 30)

No.	Statement (Causal Factors)	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean (M)	SD	Degree of Agreement
16	Lack of exposure to English sentence structure in daily conversations and media.	13	7	6	3	1	3.90	0.14	Agree
17	Limited practice with forming complex sentences in English.	15	7	7	0	1	4.20	0.18	Strongly Agree
18	Differences in sentence structure between English and native language.	12	8	5	5	0	3.90	0.13	Agree
19	Lack of confidence in constructing sentences correctly.	13	10	6	1	0	4.20	0.17	Strongly Agree
20	Struggling to understand the function of different parts of a sentence.	14	6	6	4	0	4.00	0.15	Agree
Total Domain Score							4.03	0.15	Agree

Table 5 demonstrates that the causal factors domain achieved the highest overall consensus across

the entire questionnaire ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.15$). Two primary explanatory variables emerged at the forefront ($M = 4.20$): limited practical training in constructing complex English sentences (Item 17, $SD = 0.18$, where 50.0% strongly agreed and 23.3% agreed) and psychological lack of self-confidence when building sentences (Item 19, $SD = 0.17$, endorsed by 76.7% of learners). Closely behind, students identified their inability to grasp the grammatical functions of distinct sentence constituents as a major impediment (Item 20, $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.15$). Finally, insufficient exposure to authentic English sentence patterns in everyday life and media (Item 16, $M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.14$) and cross-linguistic interference stemming from Arabic-English structural differences (Item 18, $M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.13$) were robustly validated as core causal drivers.

4.2 Qualitative Results: Thematic Analysis of Faculty Interviews

To address the second subsidiary research question regarding effective pedagogical remedies, the qualitative data obtained from the five semi-structured faculty interviews were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The findings are organized below according to the three core interview questions, followed by a synthesized thematic matrix.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Classroom Instructional Strategies for Teaching Syntax

When asked about the pedagogical strategies currently employed to teach syntactic concepts, each of the five instructors highlighted a distinct, complementary instructional approach:

- **Explicit Rule Decomposition (Teacher 1):** Teacher 1 emphasized direct, systematic instruction aimed at reducing cognitive load: *"I believe in providing direct instruction on grammar rules and structures to EFL students. By breaking down complex syntactic concepts into smaller, more manageable parts, students can better understand and apply these rules in their writing and speaking."*
- **Contextualized Real-Life Application (Teacher 2):** Moving beyond abstract formulas, Teacher 2 advocated situating syntactic structures within everyday communicative contexts: *"I find that using contextualized examples and practice exercises is effective in helping EFL students grasp syntactic concepts. By relating grammar rules to real-life situations or everyday language use, students can see the practical applications of these concepts."*
- **Iterative Error Correction and Feedback (Teacher 3):** Teacher 3 focused on continuous diagnostic intervention during classroom practice: *"I often use error correction and provide constructive feedback to EFL students when they make syntactic mistakes. This helps them learn from their errors and improve their understanding of grammar rules over time."*
- **Interactive Gamification (Teacher 4):** To combat student demotivation and anxiety, Teacher 4 integrated play-based syntactic tasks: *"I incorporate interactive activities and games into my lessons to make learning syntactic concepts more engaging and fun for EFL students. By turning grammar practice into a game, students are more motivated to participate and learn."*
- **Collaborative Work and Peer Editing (Teacher 5):** Teacher 5 leveraged social constructivist principles by pairing learners together: *"I encourage collaborative work and peer editing among EFL students to help them practice syntactic concepts in a supportive and collaborative environment. By working together with their peers, students can learn from each other and improve their grammar skills together."*

4.2.2 Theme 2: Effective Instructional Resources and Materials

Regarding the teaching materials deemed most effective for developing syntactic competence, faculty responses converged around five multimodal resources:

- **Structured Grammar Textbooks and Workbooks (Teacher 1):** *"I find that using textbooks and workbooks specifically designed for teaching English grammar is helpful in*

providing a structured approach to teaching syntactic knowledge. These resources often contain clear explanations, examples, and practice exercises that aid students in understanding grammar rules."

- **Interactive Online Platforms and Websites (Teacher 2):** *"I often use online resources and interactive websites to supplement my lessons on syntactic knowledge. These resources offer interactive activities, quizzes, and videos that engage students and allow them to practice grammar concepts in a more dynamic way."*
- **Authentic Texts and Literary Readings (Teacher 3):** *"I incorporate authentic texts and readings, such as newspaper articles, short stories, and essays, into my lessons to expose EFL students to real-world examples of syntactic structures. Analyzing these texts helps students understand how grammar is used in context."*
- **Audio-Visual Multimedia Tools (Teacher 4):** *"I utilize multimedia resources, such as podcasts, videos, and songs, to teach syntactic knowledge in a more engaging and audio-visual way. These resources help students develop their listening and comprehension skills while also reinforcing grammar concepts."*
- **Interactive Whiteboards and Visual Syntactic Aids (Teacher 5):** *"I make use of interactive whiteboards and visual aids, such as charts, diagrams, and infographics, to visually represent syntactic structures and grammar rules. These visual tools enhance students' understanding of complex grammar concepts."*

4.2.3 Theme 3: Error Feedback Mechanisms and Learner Encouragement

In response to the third interview inquiry concerning how instructors remediate syntactic errors and foster self-correction, five targeted feedback mechanisms were identified:

- **Direct Correction with Metalinguistic Explanation (Teacher 1):** *"I provide direct correction to EFL students when they make syntactic errors, along with an explanation of why the correction is necessary. This helps students understand the mistake and learn how to correct it in the future."*
- **Reflective Student Error Analysis (Teacher 2):** *"I involve EFL students in analyzing their own errors and encourage them to discuss why they think the error occurred. This reflective practice helps students take ownership of their mistakes and understand how to avoid them in the future."*
- **Peer Feedback Circles (Teacher 3):** *"I promote peer feedback among EFL students, where they can review each other's work and provide suggestions for improvement. This not only helps students correct their syntactic errors but also fosters a collaborative learning environment."*
- **Customized Remedial Drills (Teacher 4):** *"I design targeted exercises and practice activities specifically focusing on the syntactic errors commonly made by EFL students. This personalized approach helps students address their individual weaknesses and improve their syntactic knowledge."*
- **Positive Reinforcement and Affective Support (Teacher 5):** *"I believe in providing positive reinforcement and encouragement to EFL students when they correct their syntactic errors. Celebrating their progress and efforts motivates students to continue working on improving their grammar skills."*

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Table 6: Integrated Thematic Synthesis of Faculty Pedagogical Solutions (N = 5)

Core Pedagogical Dimension	Identified Sub-Themes	Primary Pedagogical Function	Theoretical Alignment in Literature
1. Instructional Strategies	Explicit Rule Decomposition; Contextualized Examples; Constructive Error Remediation; Interactive Gamification; Collaborative Peer Editing	Scaffolds hierarchical complexity, connects abstract rules to real-world usage, and lowers classroom anxiety.	Shiu (2011); Nawaz et al. (2024); Burgess & Etherington (2002); Buditama (2017); Tosin et al. (2023)
2. Instructional Resources	Grammar Textbooks/Workbooks; Online Interactive Websites; Authentic Texts (News/Essays); Audio-Visual Multimedia; Visual Diagrams/Whiteboards	Provides multimodal input, visualizes abstract phrase boundaries (NP/VP/PP), and exposes learners to natural discourse.	Sari (2020); Syarif (2017); Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam (2011); Shemuda (2016); Malova (2016)
3. Feedback Mechanisms	Direct Explanatory Correction; Reflective Error Analysis; Collaborative Peer Review; Targeted Remedial Exercises; Positive Reinforcement	Builds metalinguistic awareness, promotes learner autonomy, remediates fossilized errors, and boosts self-confidence.	Ismahani et al. (2024); Tsutada (2015); Mahayani et al. (2018); Sari (2020); Oshima (1991)

5. Discussion of the Findings

5.1 Discussing Students' Syntactic Difficulties and Causal Drivers

The quantitative results establish that Libyan EFL undergraduates experience substantial obstacles across all three structural domains: sentence structure comprehension ($M = 3.81$), grammatical application ($M = 3.82$), and constituent/sentence-type differentiation ($M = 3.91$). Specifically, learners' pronounced inability to distinguish between compound and complex sentences ($M = 4.20$), construct complex subordinate clauses ($M = 4.00$), and assemble lexical items into clauses ($M = 4.10$) reveals a fundamental deficit in hierarchical syntactic processing. Viewed through the lens of Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) and X-bar Theory (Chomsky, 2009, 2014; Isaac et al., 2024), these students understand basic lexical categories at the head level (X) but struggle to execute complex clausal embedding and coordination at the maximal projection (XP) level.

Furthermore, the acute confusion between Noun Phrases (NP) and Prepositional Phrases (PP) ($M = 4.10$) alongside preposition placement errors ($M = 4.20$) directly reflects the challenge of syntactic attachment ambiguity highlighted by Kuperberg (2007) and Ismahani et al. (2024). Because Prepositional Phrases frequently function as post-modifiers embedded inside Noun Phrases, students with weak phrase-structure awareness fail to identify where the NP boundary ends and the PP constituent begins (Bayer & Bader, 2007; Sari, 2020).

Crucially, the study's fourth quantitative domain ($M = 4.03$) explains why these structural deficits persist. First, cross-linguistic L1 interference ($M = 3.90$) plays a decisive role, corroborating Finney (2005), Sunarto (2012), and Wu and Garza (2014). When Libyan students—whose native

Arabic utilizes flexible VSO word order, distinct prepositional idiomaticity, and rich inflectional morphology—attempt to produce English sentences, negative transfer leads to neglected SVO word order ($M = 3.80$) and subject-verb agreement breakdowns ($M = 4.20$) (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Wahyuningtyas & Bram, 2018). Second, pedagogical and affective factors—specifically insufficient practice with complex sentence construction ($M = 4.20$), limited daily exposure to English syntax ($M = 3.90$), and low self-confidence ($M = 4.20$)—compound these linguistic hurdles. This aligns closely with Tahang (2019) and Alhaysony and Alhaisoni (2017), confirming that when learners lack sufficient communicative drilling, fear of committing grammatical errors induces syntactic avoidance and fossilization.

5.2 Discussing Pedagogical Remedies and Instructional Alignment

The qualitative insights derived from the faculty interviews provide direct pedagogical counter-measures to the quantitative problems identified by students. To address learners' confusion regarding constituent functions ($M = 4.00$) and NP/PP boundaries ($M = 4.10$), instructors emphasized combining explicit rule decomposition (Teacher 1) with visual aids, tree diagrams, and interactive whiteboards (Teacher 5). This corroborates Shiu (2011), Al-Mekhlafi and Nagarathnam (2011), and Malova (2016), demonstrating that visually mapping X-bar phrase hierarchies makes abstract syntactic boundaries concrete and accessible for EFL learners.

To remediate students' lack of exposure ($M = 3.90$) and limited complex-sentence practice ($M = 4.20$), teachers advocated integrating contextualized examples (Teacher 2), authentic texts such as news articles and essays (Teacher 3), and online interactive platforms and audio-visual multimedia (Teachers 2 and 4). These findings mirror the empirical results of Tsutada (2015), Shemuda (2016), and Syarif (2017), who established that analyzing authentic discourse and engaging with digital multimedia bridges the gap between theoretical grammar rules and real-world written fluency.

Finally, to overcome learners' psychological lack of confidence ($M = 4.20$), the interviewed faculty endorsed a supportive feedback ecosystem combining direct explanatory correction (Teacher 1), reflective self-error analysis (Teacher 2), collaborative peer editing (Teachers 3 and 5), and positive reinforcement (Teacher 5). This holistic approach aligns directly with the Lesson Study collaborative models validated by Mahayani et al. (2018) and Tosin et al. (2023), as well as the feedback frameworks of Burgess and Etherington (2002) and Oshima (1991). When students actively analyze the root causes of their own syntactic mistakes alongside peers in a non-threatening environment, grammatical anxiety diminishes and syntactic accuracy flourishes.

6. Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

6.1 Summary of Main Conclusions

This mixed-methods investigation examined the syntactic difficulties encountered by Libyan EFL undergraduate students at the University of Sebha, their underlying causes, and pedagogical solutions. Empirical evidence revealed that students struggle most acutely with differentiating compound from complex sentences, constructing subordinate clauses, maintaining subject-verb agreement, positioning prepositions accurately, and resolving structural ambiguity between Noun Phrases and Prepositional Phrases. These deficits are driven by an interplay of insufficient practice with complex sentence patterns, low learner confidence, limited authentic exposure to English outside the classroom, and negative cross-linguistic transfer from Arabic (VSO) to English (SVO). Qualitative findings confirmed that overcoming these barriers requires an integrated instructional framework uniting explicit rule visualization, authentic discourse analysis, interactive digital media, collaborative peer editing, and explanatory error feedback.

6.2 Pedagogical Implications

The findings yield four critical implications for EFL higher education in Libya:

1. **Diagnostic Tailoring of Syntax Instruction:** University instructors must move beyond generic grammar lectures and tailor their syllabus design to target high-risk syntactic areas—specifically complex clause subordination, NP/PP attachment boundaries, and Arabic-English contrastive word order.
2. **Multimodal Resource Integration:** Relying solely on traditional grammar textbooks is insufficient; educators must blend structured workbooks with authentic texts, tree-diagram visualizations, and interactive online platforms to accommodate diverse cognitive learning styles.
3. **Reflective and Explanatory Error Remediation:** Correcting student writing merely by marking errors in red ink fails to build syntactic competence; feedback must combine metalinguistic explanation with guided student self-reflection and targeted remedial drills.
4. **Cultivating Collaborative Classroom Environments:** Transforming syntax classes from passive lectures into collaborative peer-editing workshops reduces affective anxiety and empowers students to experiment confidently with complex sentence construction.

6.3 Practical Recommendations

For EFL University Teachers:

1. Utilize explicit contrastive linguistics in the classroom to highlight structural differences between Arabic (VSO) and English (SVO), directly addressing negative L1 transfer.
2. Employ visual syntactic parsing tools (such as X-bar tree diagrams and color-coded constituent charts) to help students differentiate between Noun Phrases, Verb Phrases, and Prepositional Phrases.
3. Incorporate weekly sentence-combining workshops using authentic newspaper articles and academic essays to train students in constructing compound and complex sentences.

For EFL Undergraduate Students:

1. Actively engage in peer-review circles and collaborative writing tasks to practice identifying and correcting syntactic errors in a supportive setting.
2. Expand daily exposure to authentic English sentence patterns outside the university by reading English articles, listening to academic podcasts, and utilizing interactive grammar applications.

6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers valuable empirical insights, its scope was confined to a sample of 30 undergraduate students and 5 instructors at the Faculty of Education (Al-Ghurifa), University of Sebha, which may limit broad statistical generalization across all Libyan universities. Future researchers are encouraged to: (a) conduct quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test studies evaluating the impact of technology-integrated syntax instruction or Lesson Study frameworks on Libyan EFL students' writing accuracy; and (b) investigate the specific correlation between working memory capacity, language anxiety, and complex clause production across larger multi-university cohorts.

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