Exploring The Experiences Of English Major Students In Learning Syntax

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ABSTRACT

Learning English syntax is crucial for language learning. This qualitative study explores the experiences of English major students in learning syntax. The study utilized a case study approach incorporating the Sharan B. Merriam technique and data triangulation method. Through the interviews with the twenty English major students enrolled in one of the private schools in Pagadian City, categorization was utilized to categorize and identify the sub-categories that emerge. The findings reveal that students engaged in activities such as sentence structure identification, sentence tree diagramming, board activities, assessment-based activities, and interactive activities. The primary challenges included difficulty with parts of speech identification, struggle in sentence structuring, challenge in syntax rule application, and problems with complex sentence structure. To cope, students relied on memorizing and familiarizing, studying independently, collaborating in groups, and seeking guidance from teachers. While students found syntax challenging and time-consuming, they acknowledged its importance in language proficiency. The study highlights the need for supportive instructional strategies to enhance student engagement and comprehension.

1. INTRODUCTION

English grammar, particularly syntax, is foundational for effective language acquisition and communication (Andriani et al., 2021; Wang, 2019). 1 Syntax, the rules governing sentence structure, dictates how words merge to form meaningful phrases and sentences (Matchin & Hickok, 2019). 2 For English major students, mastering syntax is crucial, as it directly impacts their ability to analyze, construct, and teach the language. However, students often find syntax challenging, perceiving it as tedious and overly formal, leading to disengagement (Wafi, 2019; Lucas-Oliva & Vizcaíno-Grau, 2023). 3 This challenge is compounded by traditional teaching methods that rely on rote learning, limiting students' practical application of syntactic knowledge (Garcia-Folgado, 2022).

Recent research has explored various pedagogical approaches to enhance syntax learning. Horváthová (2023) demonstrated the effectiveness of blended learning, integrating online resources and interactive assignments to improve students' language skills and engagement. Wafi (2019) suggested incorporating games to make learning more enjoyable and effective. Witkowska et al. (2022) investigated the complexities of syntax acquisition among English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, highlighting the importance of understanding

sentence structure development. Additionally, the study by Lanonte et al. (2025) highlights the challenges faced by the students in English studies, particularly those enrolled in the BSED English program who transitioned to other programs. Their research found that these students encountered significant difficulties with major subjects, especially syntax.

Furthermore, studies by Lucas-Oliva et al. (2022) and Willis (2021) emphasized the crucial role of student motivation in achieving academic success in language learning. Titilola and Sunday (2024) explored the comparative syntax of English and Idọma languages, highlighting the inherent complexities of syntactic patterns across different languages. However, these studies primarily focus on teaching methodologies, technological integration, or comparative linguistic analysis, often overlooking the students' lived experiences and perceptions.

Despite the advancements in teaching strategies and linguistic analyses, a significant gap remains in understanding the subjective experiences of English major students learning syntax. While research has examined effective teaching methods and the cognitive aspects of syntax acquisition, there is a dearth of qualitative studies that delve into the students' perspectives, challenges, coping mechanisms, and significant learnings. Understanding these experiences is crucial for developing student-centered teaching methods that address English majors' specific needs and challenges.

This research aims to close this gap by exploring the experiences of English major students in learning syntax. Specifically, it pursues to answer the following questions: (1) What classroom activities do English major students engage in when learning syntax? (2) What challenges do English major students face when learning syntax? (3) What are the coping strategies for the challenges encountered by English major students while learning syntax? This study offers a novel contribution by providing a comprehensive qualitative analysis of students' retrospective experiences, offering valuable insights that can inform pedagogical practices and enhance student engagement in syntax learning. By focusing on the students' perspectives, this research aims to help understand the reasons influencing their learning and academic success in syntax courses.

2. METHODS

This study used a qualitative research method, specifically a case study, to explore the experiences of English major students learning syntax. Qualitative research focuses on understanding people's experiences, beliefs, and opinions, which is important for gaining deep insights into how students learn—something that numbers alone can't capture (Crowe et al., 2011). A case study, as described by Merriam (1998), allows for a detailed look at a specific group of students in their real-life setting. This design helps us better understand these students' challenges while learning syntax.

The study occurred at a private school in Pagadian City, focusing on students in the Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) major in English. This setting was chosen because it was accessible and relevant to English education, making it a great place to investigate students' experiences with syntax. The researchers purposefully selected 20 English major students who had completed the syntax course, ensuring they had relevant experiences to share. The group

included students from different academic years (first through fourth year) to capture a variety of perspectives. Participants aged between 19 and 29 lived in Pagadian City and nearby areas. This variety added depth to the study.

To collect data, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews using a prepared set of questions designed to elicit detailed stories about the participants' experiences in classroom activities, challenges and coping strategies about syntax. The interview questions were developed based on the research goals and were checked by experts for clarity and relevance. Before the interviews, the researchers obtained informed consent from each participant and received ethical approval from the school's research office. Interviews were held in private locations to ensure confidentiality and an open ended discussions. With permission, interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The researchers maintained a neutral and supportive attitude to help participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts.

For data analysis, the researchers followed a structured process using Merriam's (1998) method. The researchers initially used open coding to find early codes in the interview transcripts. This involved looking for common codes and patterns in the data. The identified codes were grouped into distinct categories, and the research questions were collectively addressed. To ensure the study was credible, the researchers triangulate data with from English instructors.

Detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences were created, focusing on their sensory perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and actions. Interpretative reflection helped identify common themes, providing a deeper understanding of the student's experiences in learning syntax. This careful approach ensured the data analysis was thorough and the findings were rooted in the participants' experiences.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Classroom activities engaged by the English major students in learning syntax

Several subcategories that emerged based on the participants responses during the interview on the classroom activities they engaged in learning syntax. The subcategories that emerged from this category are *Sentence Structure Identification, Sentence Tree Diagramming, Board Activities, Assessment-Based Activities, and Interactive Activities.*

Sentence Structure Identification. This activity refers to recognizing and analyzing a sentence's structure by determining its key grammatical components, such as noun phrases (NP) and verb phrases (VP). Based on the participants' responses, this activity involves carefully examining sentences to classify their parts correctly.

> The activities we did were identifying the sentence to determine where the noun
>
> phrase and the verb phrase are and then classifying them. - EM1
>
> ... identify the phrases within a sentence. - EM2
>
> ... identify those parts of speech, like the adjectives. - EM13

One of the teachers interviewed stated that she was employed to teach syntax a lot of writing. This statement highlights the importance of hands-on exercises in helping students identify sentence elements such as subjects, predicates, phrases, and clauses.

Based on the participants responses, the teacher's instructional approach clearly emphasizes the structural analysis of language. Participants consistently report engaging in activities that require them to identify and classify grammatical elements such as noun phrases, verb phrases, nouns, and verbs within sentences. Kim and Phillips (2020) found that syntactic awareness significantly predicts reading comprehension across all grade levels, emphasizing the importance of activities that promote this skill. Myhill et al. (2020) explored the connection between explicit grammar instruction and writing development. They argue that explicit instruction, which includes activities like Sentence Identification, can significantly improve students' writing skills.

Sentence Tree Diagramming. This activity requires students to map out the structure of sentences using tree diagrams visually. This involves breaking sentences down into constituent parts, representing the hierarchical relationships between them.

> We did the diagramming, we did it individually in front of our instructor and classmates.- EM3
>
> The activities we had in our classroom regarding Syntax were dissecting sentences. - EM5
>
> The tree diagramming, just that. - EM6
>
> What I really remember is the tree diagramming. - EM7
>
> The activities that we had was structuring the sentence itself. - EM10

One teacher explained that diagramming is one thing they do with Syntax; they call it tree diagramming for the sentences. Additionally, the teacher shared that tree diagramming is the primary method used to teach Syntax, especially in Immediate Constituent (IC) Analysis.

The participants shared that their activities focused on breaking down sentences using diagramming, especially tree diagrams, to find subjects, verbs, predicates, and subject-verb agreement.
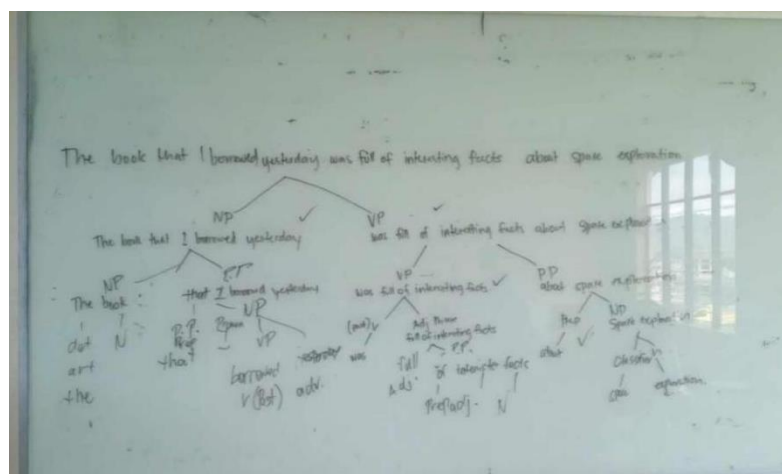

Figure 1. Sentence Tree Diagramming

Sentence tree diagramming is a valuable activity for English students that helps visualize sentence structures. By breaking sentences down into components like Noun Phrase, Verb Phrase, subjects, predicates, and modifiers, students gain a deeper understanding of grammar

and syntax. According to Saki (2019), based on Universal Sentence Structure, this aims to verify that English sentences are shaped and constrained by the space-time structure of the thought process, which may represent a universal sentence structure.

Board Activities. Refer to a classroom activity where students write or manipulate information on a visible board, such as a whiteboard or chalkboard. They involve analyzing sentences by dissecting them into their grammatical components, likely noun phrases and verb phrases.

...the classroom activities we encountered were mostly board activities. -EM12

The teacher explained that boardwork helps students understand Syntax better. In this activity, students present their Immediate Constituent (IC) analyses in front of the class.

Board activities, especially those done in groups, promote collaborative learning. Students work together to analyze sentences, share ideas, and negotiate meaning. Visual representation on the board allows for shared understanding and facilitates discussion. Group board activity is a clear example of cooperative learning (Gillies & Boyle, 2020).

According to Sweller (2020), board activities promote active engagement, which helps to optimize cognitive load. By actively manipulating sentence components on the board, students process information in a way that minimizes extraneous cognitive load.

Assessment-Based Activities. These instructional practices integrate formal or informal assessments directly into the learning process. They are designed to measure student understanding, provide feed back, and inform instructional decisions.

...she immediately give us a quiz to test if we really understood syntax. - EM8

We have this activity where we experience a trial and error, and so if we have a

big score then that's the time that we will have a proper and recorded activity. -

EM15

... the tests that was given by the teacher after the discussion. - EM16

The teacher shared that individual tasks are given to help students understand Syntax better. Additionally, the teacher emphasized the importance of individual improvement in learning syntax, explaining that it is a skill students must develop on their own.

The participants said their teacher used tests to ensure they understood Syntax before moving to the next lesson. EM8 shared that quizzes were given right after discussions, while EM15 said they had to keep trying until they got the correct answers before moving forward. However, EM16 said test.

This meta-analysis underscores the positive impact of formative assessment on student learning. The quick quizzes allow the teacher to form an understanding of the student's comprehension (Kingston & Nash, 2020). According to Andrade and Brookhart (2019), assessment for learning emphasizes using assessment to promote student self-regulation and metacognition.

Interactive Activities. Interactive activity involve active participation from students, where they engage with the material and the teacher. These activities go beyond passive listening or reading and require students to manipulate information, apply concepts, and engage in meaningful dialogue or problem-solving.

… I am called to break down a specific sentence into its structure. -EM4

Our teacher's classroom activities were always oral to engage our critical thinking more. - EM9

We had oral recitations online… - EM17

The classroom activities I engaged in while learning syntax included answering exercises on the board and writing them down on paper. - EM18

The classroom tasks in which I participated in learning syntax includes board work, where we identified phrases or verb phrases. - EM19

Well, during oral recitations, for instance, the teacher would display an activity on the board and call on students to answer. - EM20

The teacher stated that when doing board work this is one of the interactive activity that she does. "This instills pressure in them… though it instills fear, it forces them to learn because they don't know who I will call."

The participants said their teacher used various activities like breaking down sentences, oral recitations, board work, and written exercises to teach Syntax. This interactive method kept students engaged, encouraged critical thinking, and allowed them to apply their learning in different ways. Chi and Wylie (2020) emphasize the importance of interactive, constructive, and active learning. The activities described by the students, particularly the dissection of sentences, align with this. According to Golonka et al. (2020), gamification also discusses the importance of interactive feedback in language learning.

Difficulties Faced By The English Major Students In Learning Syntax

English major students face several difficulties when learning syntax that can hinder their grasp of sentence structure. The complexity of syntax rules, including word order, subject-verb agreement, and ambiguities in sentence meaning, can be particularly daunting. The subcategories that emerged from this category are: *Difficulty with parts of speech identification, Struggle in sentence structuring, Challenge in syntax rule application, Problem with complex sentence structure.*

Difficulty with parts of speech identification. The difficulty in identifying parts of speech presents a major difficulty in ensuring accuracy in classifying words within sentences according to their grammatical functions, such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, and auxiliaries.

My main difficulty in learning syntax was that I wasn't very familiar with some phrases, like noun phrases. Also, I did not know before that verbs have different types—for example, I was not aware that "is" and "are" were actually verbs. EM1

It was really hard to identify, especially if you're not that familiar with the parts of speech. - EM2

One of the biggest difficulties I encountered in learning syntax was that I wasn't very familiar with adjectives, nouns, and verbs. EM4

Identifying verbs and adverbs is one of my weaknesses because I get confused between them since they sometimes seem the same. EM9

he difficulties I've faced in learning syntax were the times where I have to figure some words like adjectives, adverbs, and auxiliary… EM15

In aligning and linking sentences, I believe you should base it on prepositions, nouns, or pronouns, where the verb and subject should be placed. - EM16

I am unfamiliar with the basics, such as adjectives and other concepts. EM17

...I found it very difficult to solve problems, structure sentences, and especially identify parts of speech. EM20

The teacher said that before students can learn Syntax, they must first understand the parts of speech. However, many students find it hard to recognize basic grammar elements like nouns, verbs, prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs.

One challenge in learning syntax is word identification and grammatical categorization. As one teacher stated that, students often struggle to distinguish basic grammatical terms, sometimes confusing even simple words like "verb."

A study conducted by Anggraini and Putri (2022) with second-year English department students at Universitas Negeri Padang found that these students often have difficulty accurately identifying parts of speech due to such contextual differences. The research showed that their ability to recognize parts of speech was rated as fair, with an average achievement score of 63.85, emphasizing the need for improved instructional strategies in this area. According to Asdar et al. (2023), students understand different parts of speech. The results showed that the students had a fair understanding, with only about 40% able to correctly identify words as belonging to the right parts of speech.

Struggle in sentence structuring. It refers to English major students struggling to understand sentence structure. They often struggle to combine words and phrases correctly while following grammar rules.

It is quite difficult because you might forget what they are and how they are used depending on the sentence or its context. EM3

determining whether a sentence is a predicate and where you should place the arrows. -EM6

It got confusing, and I didn't know what to place. It was difficult to find a way to figure it out. EM10

The difficulties I encountered while learning syntax were in structuring sentences, especially because syntax has different branches... EM11

I found it difficult to figure out where to cut the sentence when phrasing. That part was really challenging for me. EM12

One thing is that sometimes I struggle with identifying a phrase, which affects the way I dissect sentences. EM13

...I also had a hard time dissecting sentences. EM18

The teacher explained that if students do not fully understand the basic parts of speech, they will have a hard time analyzing sentence structures. This is especially true in Immediate Constituent (IC) Analysis, where breaking down sentences is important.

The participants shared that their main difficulty in learning syntax was identifying and breaking down different elements of a sentence, including noun phrases, verb phrases, and sentence structures. Many found it confusing to figure out where to divide a sentence, which

made it harder to structure it correctly. This shows the benefits of using interactive digital tools and real texts to help students understand sentence structure better (Garcia & Lee, 2023; Smith, 2024). For instance, Smith (2024) found that using digital exercises that relate to real situations helped students become better at spotting and analyzing complex sentences. Garcia and Lee (2023) showed that looking at real texts, like news articles and stories, helped students see how grammar works in everyday life, which improved their ability to write better sentences.

According to Smith and Lee (2024), language learners often struggle with complicated sentence structures, highlighting the importance of context and mental effort. Their findings support EM3's and EM11's concerns about how words change functions and the need to align grammar correctly. Additionally, Garcia and Chen (2023) explore how digital tools help understanding sentence structure.

Challenge in syntax rule application. This refers to the process of analyzing and structuring sentences according to grammatical principles, such as identifying parts of speech, sentence components, and word relationships.

Regarding the rules, there were some that were really difficult to identify, especially when we didn't have a copy. So, we really needed to check the rules first before we could answer the sentence. -EM8

You need to identify whether the word is a noun phrase or not because it is quite difficult to create a sentence or break down the branches if the words are not identified. -EM19

As the teacher explained, Syntax follows strict rules, and without correctly identifying words, students struggle to apply syntax rules effectively.

The researchers noticed that students often depend too much on outside materials to use grammar rules, showing that they haven't fully learned these rules. The study of Ilma et al. (2024) focuses on the challenges of using grammar rules, especially when it comes to building correct sentences. Even with early exposure to English, the learner struggles with certain grammar points, particularly using helping verbs and recognizing the difference between singular and plural nouns. Additionally, applying syntax rules means looking at and organizing sentences based on grammar rules. This includes figuring out parts of speech, sentence parts, and how words relate to each other (Sabrina et al., 2024).

Problem with complex sentence structure. Refers to the challenges students face when trying to understand complicated sentence patterns and grammar.

The specific challenge I faced was how complex Syntax is... - EM5

It was really hard to grasp everything at the same time, while the teacher was lecturing, you were still processing it and couldn't understand it right away.-EM7

it was really hard to remember all the previous lessons, which made it difficult for me to dissect sentences. EM14

The teacher explained that many students struggle to tell the difference between noun phrases and verb phrases. This happens because understanding these structures requires more than just recognizing individual words, it involves knowing how words work together in a sentence.

According to Jackie (2023), the main point is that our working memory can only hold a small amount of information at once, and not everything we sense gets stored in it; some information is ignored. Working memory acts like a filter, deciding what to keep for long-term memory and what to forget. Additionally, working memory plays a crucial role in managing information related to our mental representations and the acquisition of new knowledge. When learning English, students encounter a variety of materials and teaching methods that contribute to their skill development and understanding (Hornay, 2021).

Processing complex structure presents a significant challenge for many learners due to inherent differences in language structure. English often comprises more intricate sentence constructions, which can impede comprehension for those who are accustomed to shorter, simpler sentence formats. This examines how structural complexities impact comprehension, specifically exploring whether individuals with different linguistic backgrounds process English texts of varying complexity in distinct ways (Ding, 2022).

Ways in Overcoming the Challenges Faced by the English Majors

Studying for a degree in English comes with its own challenges, like understanding difficult texts and the need to write well. These issues can make students feel frustrated and unsure of themselves. However, by using good strategies and asking for help, English majors can overcome these challenges and do well in their studies. The subcategory that emerge from this category are: *Memorizing and Familiarizing, Studying Independently, Collaborating in Groups, and Seeking Guidance from Teachers.*

Memorizing and Familiarizing. Memorization and familiarization is the process of remembering information so that you can recall it later. It involves going over the material repeatedly, practicing, and reinforcing what you've learned to help you remember it better.

> I memorized and familiarized myself with them. Because you cannot just simply
> memorize, you also have to classify where a word belongs, whether it falls under
> an adverb or a noun...- EM1

The participant shared that EM1 put in a lot of effort to learn syntax by memorizing the different types and classifications of words. EM1 found that memorization helped him, but he also realized that simply memorizing was not enough.

According to Rousoulioti and Seferiadou (2023) the key strategies in memorization include reading aloud, linking new words to personal experiences, and using synonyms and antonyms, with similar usage rates in both educational formats. This indicates that the frequency of strategy use correlates with teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness. Additionally, in memorization and familiarization this showed that the most common way students remember new words or phrases is by thinking about where they are on the copy, pages or in board. This means that how English is taught can really affect how well it is learned (Khalifasati & Susanto, 2023).

Studying Independently. Independent study is an educational approach where students take responsibility for their own learning with minimal supervision.

> Just study properly so that when you face syntax again, you'll realize it is actually
> easy, and you were just overthinking it before. -EM2

...I studied alone at home. -EM4

if I had questions, I could always turn to the internet—I would search or watch videos to understand it better because syntax is really difficult. - EM7

By studying well, listening to discussions, and watching YouTube videos on how to dissect sentences, I was able to understand syntax better. - EM8

I study sometimes, but I'm not really a studious person—I usually study during exams. -EM12

By searching and watching the videos or reading the handouts provided, I was able to study. I also used a trial-and-error method, where I looked for sentences, tried to dissect them, and then checked my work. -EM13

I rely mostly on watching YouTube tutorials and videos that our teacher had sent us, and I had to watch it repeatedly... -EM14

I would often write some examples on each given rules and I would try construct a new sentence based on the examples that I have written—I depend mostly on self learning... -EM 15

I did this by conducting internet research and examining the assigned conversations and topics given by our teacher. -EM17

The strategies I used to overcome my challenges included trying and practicing sentence dissection. -EM18

I tried researching online, especially on Google. I looked for basic sentences and used them as exercises. I identified sentence structures, noun phrases, and verb phrases. -EM19

My approach at that time was watching YouTube tutorials because I found them very easy to comprehend. -EM2O

The teacher stated that students utilize personal resources like dictionary apps, Google, and class notes to aid their understanding and recall of words. Additionally, the teacher gives students practice activities before assessments to help them review and strengthen their understanding.

Allen (2022) emphasizes the importance of technology in promoting independent learning. This shows that digital tools and online resources enable students to take charge of their educational paths, fostering personalized learning experiences and enhancing critical thinking skills.

Independent study can enhance language learning. For instance, learners who focus on understanding context rather than seeking immediate clarity on every detail may develop a more sustainable and enjoyable learning habit (Lum, 2025).

Collaborating in Groups. Group collaboration is a learning strategy in which students work together to solve problems, share knowledge, and support each other's learning processes.

we did group studies before class, had discussions, and learned from each other.
-EM3

 It was like a collaboration, similar to Think-Pair-Share. - EM6

> One strategy that helped was communicating with my friends because it made things easier. -EM9
>
> During our groupings we reviewed the material that the teacher gave us. -EM10
>
> help each other with your friends, when you have questions, it's nice to ask them. -EM11

The teacher noticed that students learn better when they work together. Discussing their sentence analyses with classmates helps them understand syntax more clearly. Additionally, the teacher noted that although group work was not formally assigned, students naturally collaborated, seeking help from their peers as what the teacher observed.

Working together in groups helps students do better in school and get more involved in their learning. According to Johnson & Johnson (2019) found that learning cooperatively improves understanding, critical thinking, and knowledge. Additionally, according to Salma (2020), collaborative learning involves working together on a common task, allowing learners to support each other as they seek understanding.

Seeking Guidance from Teachers. Seeking guidance from teachers is an important strategy for students aiming to overcome academic challenges, particularly in complex subjects like syntax.

> I overcame this was by asking our teacher about the correct and incorrect ways of answering or identifying the elements of syntax. -EM1
>
> One strategy that helped was communicating with my teacher because it made things easier.- EM9
>
> ... asking questions from my teachers.-EM16

The teacher says that students primarily rely on teacher explanations for guidance, only seeking clarification when they feel uncertain. According to Yulianti et al. (2024), guidance and counseling play an important role in helping students deal with different learning challenges, like struggling with schoolwork, feeling unmotivated, or having conflicts with peers. Additionally, this includes making sure that these students are actively involved in class discussions and providing help with completing their tasks. Effective teacher guidance plays a key role in making this support successful, as it helps build a more inclusive environment where all students can thrive and feel valued (Blad, 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the summary of results, the researchers concluded that the varying factors influenced the research participants' experience in learning syntax, indicating that the challenges and coping strategies have a significant influence on students' learning journey. The researchers were able to determine the activities, challenges and coping strategies of English major students in syntax.

The study only focuses on the English major students within the specific context of learning syntax. Due to this limited scope, the findings undermine the generalizability of its conclusion which concerned about the study's being transferable to students in varying English programs or other language related fields. The exclusion of other related programs suggest

future researchers to explore the effectiveness of various instructional strategies in teaching syntax. Additionally, studying the impact of syntax proficiency on students' writing and communication skills would provide valuable insights for curriculum development.

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