

An Assesment of Students' Mastery of English Pronouns: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study aims to assess the ability of Grade VIII-1 students at Al-Irsyad Junior High School, Ternate City, to use English pronouns during the 2025 academic year. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected from 42 purposively selected students through a test consisting of 10 multiple-choice and 20 essay questions. Results showed that only one student reached the excellent category, 45.23% were in the good category, 14.28% in the fair category, and 38.09% also classified as fair. The average score was 54.66, indicating a generally low level of proficiency, largely due to students' difficulty distinguishing between subjective and objective pronouns.

Keywords: *Personal Pronouns, Qualitative Descriptive Method, Students' Competence*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengukur kemampuan siswa SMP Al-Irsyad Kota Ternate tahun ajaran 2025, kelas VIII-1 dalam menggunakan kata ganti Bahasa Inggris. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari 42 siswa yang dipilih secara purposif melalui tes yang terdiri dari 10 soal pilihan ganda dan 20 soal esai. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hanya satu siswa yang mencapai kategori sangat baik, 45,23% berada dalam kategori baik, 14,28% dalam kategori cukup, dan 38,09% juga diklasifikasikan dalam kategori cukup. Nilai rata-rata siswa adalah 54,66, yang menunjukkan tingkat kemahiran yang umumnya rendah, terutama disebabkan oleh kesulitan siswa dalam membedakan antara kata ganti subjek dan objek.

Kata kunci: Kata Ganti Orang, Metode Deskriptif Kualitatif, Kompetensi Siswa

INTRODUCTION

Learning grammar is crucial when speaking a language like English. It aids students in comprehending and forming proper language. Students must be familiar with the word class and its proper usage in sentences to construct sentences. Nelson and Greenbaum (2015) define grammar as a collection of rules that enable speakers to form longer linguistic units out of their vocabulary. When speaking or writing, people always combine words into larger units while keeping to the rules

of grammar. When people disregard grammar rules, they will misinterpret them. Tenses, for instance, have a big impact on writing. A misunderstanding of the sentence will result if the writer fails to alter the verb into the proper form, leaving the reader perplexed as to when or what the writer intended. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) highlighted that grammar should not be seen merely as a set of rules to memorize but as a dynamic system intertwined with form, meaning, and use.

Grammar encompasses various components, including syntax, morphology, and the use of parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. Pronouns are essential grammatical components that preserve coherence and prevent redundancy. To avoid redundancy and make sentence building easier, pronouns are words that take the place of nouns. Their proper application shows how well a student understands grammatical principles, especially those pertaining to number, person, and case agreement.

A key category within pronouns is the personal pronoun, which refers to specific individuals or groups and changes form depending on the case (subjective, objective, or possessive), number (singular or plural), and person (first, second, or third). Yule (2010) stated that personal pronouns make conversation more efficient by allowing speakers to refer to someone or something without repeating the noun. In line with that, Octasary et al., (2023) stated the same thing that pronouns are words that take the place of nouns to prevent repetitious or confusing language and to clarify meaning. (Azar & Hagen, 2011) also implied that personal pronouns are words like *I, me, you, he, him, she, her, it, we, us, they, and them* that are used to take the place of nouns already mentioned or known.

Personal pronouns are divided into three cases:

- a. Subjective case: *I, you, he, she, it, we, they* – used as the subject of a sentence.
- b. Objective case: *me, you, him, her, it, us, them* – used as the object of a verb or preposition.
- c. Possessive case: *my/mine, your/yours, his, her/hers, its, our/ours, their/theirs* – used to show ownership.

Murphy (2019) implied that grammatical accuracy depends on the proper use of personal pronouns, which are among the most used word kinds in English. Correct usage of personal pronouns shows learners' comprehension of constructing sentence and building grammatical links. Particularly in the early and middle phases of language acquisition, personal pronouns are essential to sentence building. One of the most important markers of a student's grammatical proficiency

and capacity to create coherent, meaningful sentences in English is their knowledge of when and how to utilize personal pronouns.

Even though personal pronouns are uncomplicated in theory, many students struggle to use them appropriately, particularly in junior high school. These difficulties are frequently caused by a lack of exposure to real-world usage in context, interference from the student's native tongue, and a weak grasp of grammar. Despite their simple structure, personal pronouns often pose difficulties for language learners. According to Lightbown and Spada (2013), many second language (L2) learners struggle with pronoun cases because such distinctions were not found in their first language (L1). For instance, Indonesian students often find it difficult to distinguish between "I" and "me" due to the absence of case marking in Bahasa Indonesia. This phenomenon is referred to as negative language transfer, where the learners' L1 structures interfere with L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2006).

Students' incapacity to differentiate between subjective and objective pronouns is a prevalent problem. For example, instead of saying "I play football", the student commonly will say "Me play football". This error reflects a misunderstanding of sentence roles. (Thornbury, 1999) noted because they have not assimilated the syntactic structures related to subject and object locations, students frequently misunderstand the functions of pronouns in sentences. Another issue is the lack of sufficient practice and immediate feedback. Students often memorize pronouns without understanding their functional use in sentences. When grammar instruction is overly theoretical, students may struggle to apply it in real-life communication.

Alifah & Rohbiah, 2023 implied in their research that the most difficulties faced by students are on object pronouns, the percentage of students' difficulties in using personal pronouns as object pronouns in recount text is 56.10%, while in using personal pronouns as subject pronouns in recount text are 26.82%. The writer concluded that the reasons why students faced difficulties in using personal pronouns in recount text are internal factors and external factors such as the students' talent, interest, and motivation in learning English. In contrast, the external factors include teachers' teaching style. Ningsih and Rukmini (2019), in their study on students in Semarang, found that many students often confused subject and object pronouns, such as using "me" instead of "I" and "him" instead of "he." These errors were attributed largely to first language interference and limited teacher feedback in writing activities. Similarly, Kusumawati and Marlina (2018) investigated students' ability to use personal pronouns in narrative texts. They reported that more than 40% of the students exhibited confusion when using

subjective and objective pronouns in written contexts. Their findings underlined that grammar teaching in classrooms generally remained theoretical and teachers were still lacking in implementing communicative reinforcement. Hidayati (2017) conducted a grammatical error analysis in student recount texts and discovered that mistakes in using pronouns were among the top three most common error types, alongside with verb tense errors and article misuse.

Based on the problems that were found before, the researchers conducted research at SMP Al-Irsyad Junior High School to find out their competence in using pronouns, especially personal pronouns.

RESEARCH METHOD

The researchers used qualitative descriptive research methodologies in this study. Descriptive and analytically oriented qualitative research approaches were used. The study investigated what transpired, why it occurred, and how it occurred in a particular real-world setting. This proved that the concept of exploration through in-depth, case-oriented, many-cases, or single cases served as the cornerstone of qualitative research. To make sure that the primary findings of the study aligned with the actual situation in the field, the theoretical foundation acted as a guide.

A. Data Collection Technique

To determine students' competence in using pronouns, the researcher collected data from students through tests. The purpose of this test was to assess students' ability to understand the use of pronouns. The instrument, in the form of a test, was divided into three sections: the first section required students to fill in the blanks with the correct pronouns 10 number, the second section asked them to circle the correct check 10 number multiple choice answers for subjective and objective pronouns, and 10 number the last section instructed them to write simple sentences using subjective and objective pronouns.

B. Data Analysis Technique

The researcher collected data using quantitative research methods. In data collection techniques, the researcher went through the following procedures.

- a. Researchers distributed test instruments to students.
- b. Researchers explained the purpose of the research and described the steps of doing the test.
- c. Students were given some time to look at their test instruments

- d. Students were given 60 minutes to finish the test
- e. Then the researchers collected the test results that had been completed by the students.

Analysis of the data is carried out in several steps as follows based on Sudaryono (2016)

- a) Calculate the score

$$\text{Score} = \frac{\text{students' correct answer}}{\text{the number of items}} 100$$

- b) Tabulating the score

In this step, the student's score is classified into:

Table 1. Students' Grades and Qualifications

Qualification	Grades
Excellent	80-100
Good	60-79
Fair	50-59
Poor	0-49

- c) Computing the frequency and the rate percentage of the students' score

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100$$

Where:

P= percentage

F= frequency

N= the total of respondent

- d) Calculating the mean score of the students

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

Where:

($\bar{X}$) = mean score

$\sum X$ = the total score

N= the total of respondent

FINDINGS

This research was conducted from September 30 to October 01, 2024. The data results were obtained from 30 questions: 10 multiple-choice questions and 20 essay questions consisting of subjective and objective pronouns. This test was given to 42 students of class VIII-1 of Al-Irsyad Junior High School of Ternate City.

This section attempted to provide answers to the questions that remained after the research was finished. Written responses to the questions submitted by the researchers were thereafter subjected to statistical analysis. The researchers employed four components to calculate data to achieve student results: adding up student scores, qualifying student scores, figuring out frequencies and percentages, and computing the average value.

Assessing students' responses entails correcting their responses through multiple-choice exams and essays that have three components: fill in the blank with the appropriate pronoun, circle the appropriate pronoun in the bracket, and compose short sentences using subjective pronouns.

Table 2. Students Score in Using Personal Pronouns

No	Respondents	Students Correct Answers	Score	Grades
1	MR	24	80	Excellent
2	PS	23	76,6	Good
3	R	22	73,3	Good
4	NA	22	73,3	Good
5	SA	22	73,3	Good
6	FA	22	73,3	Good
7	FI	22	73,3	Good
8	MH	22	73,3	Good
9	NJ	20	66,6	Good
10	AS	20	66,6	Good
11	PS	19	63,3	Good
12	SH	19	63,3	Good
13	AB	19	63,3	Good
14	AU	19	63,3	Good
15	FS	19	63,3	Good
16	SS	18	60	Good
17	WS	18	60	Good
18	SL	18	60	Good
19	AT	18	60	Good
20	NI	18	60	Good
21	FB	17	56,6	Fair

22	R	16	53,3	Fair
23	AY	15	50	Fair
24	MR	15	50	Fair
25	NL	15	50	Fair
26	NS	14	46,6	Poor
27	AA	14	46,6	Poor
28	FI	14	46,6	Poor
29	AR	14	46,6	Poor
30	RF	14	46,6	Poor
31	NM	14	46,6	Poor
32	M	13	43,3	Poor
33	AL	13	43,3	Poor
34	AD	13	43,3	Poor
35	FA	13	43,3	Poor
36	AS	12	50	Poor
37	FI	12	40	Poor
38	SM	12	40	Poor
39	FR	9	30	Poor
40	NZ	8	26,6	Poor
41	AP	8	26,6	Poor
42	F	6	20	Poor
Total		N = 42	668	2.296

From the test result, the value of students using pronouns became evident through their classification results. Out of 42 students, only 1 student was classified as excellent, achieving a score of 80 and above. A total of 19 students received a classification of food, with scores ranging from 60 to 79. Additionally, 6 students were classified as Fair, scoring between 50 and 59. Lastly, 16 students were categorized as Poor, with scores below 49. These results highlighted the varying levels of understanding and the importance of mastering pronoun usage among the students.

Student Classification Level

After the researcher provides a classification of the student tests that have been analyzed, the researcher provides a percentage of the classification value that the researcher has given based on the data that has been studied.

It can be seen that of the 42 students who took the test, only 1 student received an Excellent classification of (23.80%), 19 students got a Good classification of (45.23%), 6 students got a fair classification of (14.28%) and 16 students got a fairly poor classification of (38.09%).

The following are the results of students' work in using pronouns, most of which have not been able to distinguish subjective and objective pronoun sentences:

1. Respondent (APB)

my brother and Like to play games

my brother and Me like to play games (incorrect answer)

my brother and I like to play games (correct answer)

2. Respondent (APB)

What are you doing?

(I/Me) am write a letter to my grandmother (incorrect answer)

(I/Me) am write a letter to my grandmother (correct answer)

The correct answer to the question above is the word I. while the existing the correct answer to the question above is the word I. while the student's answer is Me This is one of the reasons why students still make mistakes in using objective pronouns in sentences

3. Respondent (FA)

We saw.... (dia laki-laki) in the clas

We saw he's (dia laki-laki) in the clas (incorrect answer)

We saw/he (dia laki-laki) in the clas (correct answer)

In this question, some students answered the question incorrectly. The correct answer is the word he, but students answer with the word he's, while the use of "pronouns" while objective pronouns are used are You,Us,Her,Me,Them This proves that some students' understanding of objective pronouns still needs attention.

4. Respondent (F)

My techer gives some books....(kami)

My techer gives some books to My (kami) (incorrect answer)

My techer gives some books to Us (kami) (incorrect answer)

The correct answer to the question above is the word Us. This is one of the reasons why students still make mistakes in using sentence objective "pronouns"

5. Respondent (AS)

A: Do you remember Juju?

Of course! I still remember (She/her), she's an old friend of ours

A: Do you remember Juju?

Of course! I still remember (She/her), she's an old friend of ours (incorrect answer)

A: Do you remember Juju?

Of course! I still remember (She/her), she's an old friend of ours (correct answer)

The correct answer to the question above is her. This is one of the reasons why students still make mistakes in using sentence objective “pronouns”.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the majority of Grade VIII-1 students at Al-Irsyad Junior High School in Ternate struggle with the correct use of English personal pronouns, particularly in distinguishing between subjective and objective cases. Only one student achieved an excellent score, while a significant portion (38.09%) fell into the poor category, suggesting widespread issues in foundational grammar competence. These findings are consistent with Murphy (2019), who emphasized that accurate use of personal pronouns is a key marker of grammatical proficiency, especially in constructing coherent English sentences.

A closer examination of students' responses indicates recurring errors such as the use of "me" instead of "I" as a subject, and confusion between "he's" and "him." These patterns highlight a syntactic misunderstanding—a phenomenon well documented in second language acquisition (SLA) literature. Thornbury (1999) noted that learners often fail to internalize the syntactic structure distinguishing subjects from objects, particularly when their first language lacks such distinctions. This is evident in Bahasa Indonesia, which does not mark the case in pronouns, leading to negative language transfer (Ellis, 2006).

The results also reflect the broader trends reported in Indonesian EFL contexts. For instance, Ningsih and Rukmini (2019) found that students in Semarang frequently misused personal pronouns due to L1 interference and inadequate corrective feedback. Similarly, Kusumawati and Marlina (2018) observed that over 40% of junior high school students in their study exhibited confusion in distinguishing subject and object pronouns. These studies highlight the idea that grammatical challenges with pronouns are not isolated, but widespread across the national education context.

The data also aligns with research by Hidayati (2017), who found pronoun misuse to be one of the three most common grammatical errors in student writing. Furthermore, Putri and Pratama (2021) emphasized that students continued to make basic pronoun errors even after formal instruction, implying that current pedagogical approaches may not support a long lasting grammatical development.

From a pedagogical point of view, these findings call into question the dominant grammar instruction models used in classrooms. As Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) argue, grammar teaching should go beyond rote memorization and rule listing; it must integrate form, meaning, and use. Yet in practice, grammar is often presented in decontextualized ways that limit students' ability to apply it in actual communication. Lightbown and Spada (2013) stress that successful grammar acquisition depends on both comprehensible input and meaningful output. Without opportunities for students to produce language and receive metalinguistic feedback (Lyster & Saito, 2010), misconceptions—such as those seen in this study—persist.

These results suggest a pressing need for form-focused instruction (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011), where grammatical forms like pronouns are taught explicitly but within communicative and meaningful contexts. Teachers must scaffold learning through varied activities that combine explanation, modeling, practice, and feedback. Approaches such as structured input, sentence-building tasks, and contrastive analysis between English and Bahasa Indonesia can help bridge learners' understanding of pronoun function and position. Moreover, integrating personal pronouns into real-life speaking and writing tasks will provide the needed context for internalizing their proper use.

In sum, this study confirms that students' low proficiency in using personal pronouns stems from both linguistic and instructional factors. Theoretical frameworks and previous empirical studies affirm that learners require more than awareness—they need structured and meaningful interaction with grammar in use. Pronoun mastery, therefore, is not merely a technical skill, but a critical component of communicative competence that must be emphasized through well-informed teaching strategies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, grammar holds a fundamental role in shaping the accuracy, clarity, and coherence of language use. It serves as the foundation upon which all other language skills are built, including speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Among the many grammatical elements, pronouns—particularly personal pronouns—are essential for effective communication. They function as substitutes for nouns, enabling speakers and writers to avoid repetition and maintain cohesion in discourse. Personal pronouns also reflect important grammatical categories such

as person (first, second, third), number (singular or plural), and case (subjective, objective, possessive), which must be mastered to use them correctly.

In the context of junior high school education, personal pronouns are introduced at an early stage as part of basic English grammar. However, many students still encounter difficulties in their correct application. Common issues include confusion between subjective and objective cases, misuse of possessive forms, and overgeneralization. These problems are often compounded by first-language interference, limited exposure to authentic language input, and a lack of meaningful practice in contextualized settings.

To address these challenges, educators must adopt effective instructional strategies that go beyond rote memorization. Contextual learning approaches, such as incorporating pronouns into dialogues, stories, and real-life scenarios, can help students better understand their function and use. Additionally, the use of drills, sentence construction tasks, visual aids, and contrastive analysis can reinforce correct usage. Immediate and constructive feedback from teachers also plays a vital role in helping students identify and correct their errors, thereby facilitating long-term retention and understanding.

Ultimately, the proper use of personal pronouns is not only a marker of grammatical proficiency but also a critical component of communicative competence. As students progress in their language learning journey, their ability to use pronouns accurately will enhance their confidence, fluency, and overall effectiveness in English communication. Therefore, continued emphasis on both the teaching and assessment of personal pronouns remains a necessary aspect of English language instruction at the junior high school level.

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