



RESEARCH ARTICLE

REAL EXPERIENCE OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN LEARNING GRAMMAR USING SYNTAX TREE

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Abstract: Grammar is often difficult for junior high school students because they struggle to understand sentence structure and the relationships between words in a sentence. Therefore, this study aimed to explore students' experiences of using tree diagram to analyze sentence structure in English grammar learning. This research employed a qualitative phenomenological design and selected one eighth-grade class consisting of 28 students. Data were collected through classroom observation, practice sessions, interviews, and documentation. The findings showed that students improved their understanding of sentence structure. They were able to identify basic sentence elements, such as subjects, predicates, and objects, and began to understand more advanced concepts, including noun phrases and verb phrases. However, some students still faced difficulties in labeling word classes and organizing diagram branches correctly. Overall, tree diagram helps students understand how words and phrases are connected within a sentence, supports students in understanding sentence structure, and develops their syntactic awareness.

Keywords: Tree Diagram; Sentence Structure; Grammar Learning; Students' Experience.

PENGALAMAN NYATA SISWA SEKOLAH MENENGAH PERTAMA DALAM BELAJAR GRAMMAR MENGGUNAKAN POHON SINTAKSIS

Abstrak: Grammar seringkali sulit dipahami oleh siswa sekolah menengah pertama karena mereka kesulitan memahami struktur kalimat dan hubungan antar kata dalam sebuah kalimat. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman siswa dalam menggunakan diagram pohon untuk menganalisis struktur kalimat dalam pembelajaran tata bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain fenomenologis kualitatif, dan memilih satu kelas kelas delapan yang terdiri dari 28 siswa. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, sesi latihan, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pemahaman siswa terhadap struktur kalimat meningkat. Mereka mampu mengidentifikasi unsur-unsur kalimat dasar, seperti subjek, predikat, dan objek, serta mulai memahami konsep-konsep yang lebih lanjut, termasuk frasa nomina dan frasa verba. Namun, beberapa siswa masih mengalami kesulitan dalam mengidentifikasi kelas kata dan menyusun cabang diagram dengan benar. Secara keseluruhan, diagram pohon membantu siswa memahami bagaimana kata dan frasa terhubung dalam sebuah kalimat, mendukung pemahaman mereka terhadap struktur kalimat, serta mengembangkan kesadaran sintaksis mereka.

Kata kunci: Diagram Pohon; Struktur Kalimat; Pembelajaran Tata Bahasa; Pengalaman Siswa.

INTRODUCTION

Comprehension of English grammar at the junior high school level is often a significant challenge for students due to the complexity of understanding sentence structure and the use of parts of speech. As Huang (2019) pointed out “The main problem lies in unclear learning objectives. Most students feel that learning English, especially grammar, has no significant meaning other than the need to pass exams”. Students experience a lot of grammar confusion and difficulty in understanding the relationships between elements in a sentence, which impacts their ability to write and understand English text structures (Ramzan, M., Mushtaq, A., & Ashraf., 2023). In fact, almost all students still struggle with grammar in basic sentences. If many students still have problems with basic sentence patterns and graduate with incomplete knowledge, they will be unprepared for more advanced learning. The learning of basic sentence patterns (Subject+Predicate+Object) must be instilled at the junior high school level and then refined at the next level. This aligns with Prihatini, C., Pratiwi, D. S., & Kamiliya, Z. (2024) “Grammar instruction plays a vital role in foreign language learning because it serves as the foundation for developing communicative competence in the language”.

As a result, a study by Aminah et al. (2025) revealed that students' knowledge of grammar stays at the level of rote memorization and has not yet developed into practical skills, meaning students can recall rules but cannot apply them accurately or automatically in real writing. The memorization of rules it is just given the understanding how the formulation of sentence rules, that is also important to learn in the next stage, but understanding of language structure, explain why the subject must be place next to the verb, because every subject must have something to do. This helps students understand why words must be in certain positions in a sentence. By using tree diagram, students can understand sentence structure so that they can logically identify subjects, predicates, objects, and modifiers.

Recent studies have shown that the application of the syntax tree theory-based approach can improve students' understanding of grammar. Bochari and Hastini (2025) confirmed the effectiveness of tree diagram analysis in resolving structural ambiguity in EFL classrooms. Earlier studies by Siregar (2016) and Huang (2019) similarly supported tree diagrams as tools for helping students identify sentence components such as subject, verb, object, and complement. However, studies at the secondary school level remain limited. Novitasari and Candraloka (2022) focused more on vocabulary mastery and student participation, while Tuti, Ilinawati, & Putri (2023) emphasized writing skills rather than sentence structure understanding. Therefore, there remains a research gap regarding how tree diagrams can help junior high school students better understand sentence structures.

Based on this gap, this study aims to explore junior high school students' experiences in applying tree diagrams as sentence analysis tools in learning English grammar. Specifically, this study seeks to reveal students' perceptions of the benefits, challenges, and meanings of using tree diagrams to analyze sentence structures. This study is important because it contributes to grammar learning approaches that emphasize understanding rather than memorization. Ellis (2016) argued that meaningful grammar learning should focus not only on language forms but also on developing syntactic awareness through reflection and understanding of language structure. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically by providing insights into more effective grammar-teaching methods for junior high school students.

To achieve these objectives, which are to explore junior high school students' experiences and reveal their perceptions regarding the benefits, challenges, and meanings of using tree diagrams, this study uses a qualitative approach with phenomenology. This approach is specifically designed to answer

the research questions concerning how students perceive and experience the implementation of tree diagrams in grammar learning. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research emphasizes understanding meaning through words, descriptions, and interpretations rather than numerical data. Moreover, phenomenology is considered suitable because it helps researchers understand participants' subjective learning experiences. This study is limited to junior high school students and focuses only on simple sentence structures using tree diagrams without extending to semantic or pragmatic analysis.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design. This approach was chosen because the study's main purpose was to explore the real experiences of junior high school students using tree diagrams to analyze English sentence structure. As Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, qualitative research focused on collecting and interpreting non-numerical data to understand human behavior, experiences, and perspectives more deeply. Similarly, Yilmaz (2013) explained that qualitative research allowed participants to express what they think, feel, and experience during a particular phenomenon. Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) argued that phenomenological research aimed to describe and understand the essence of human experiences related to a phenomenon through detailed and reflective analysis. Therefore, phenomenology was considered suitable, as this study focused on students' subjective experiences of learning grammar through tree diagrams.

The participants in this study were 28 eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Natar. This school was selected as the research site because the English teachers actively used English as the medium of instruction in the classroom, which was considered relevant to the research objectives. In phenomenological research, participants were selected based on their experience with the phenomenon being investigated. Therefore, purposive sampling was employed to identify students who: a) had learned basic English grammar, b) were willing to participate throughout the research process, c) actively engaged in classroom activities, and d) were able to express their opinions and learning experiences.

The research procedures were conducted systematically during one classroom session in an English lesson. The researcher acted as both researcher and the teacher. The data collection process consisted of five stages: observation, material presentation, practice session, interviews, and documentation. The process began with classroom observation to understand students' prior grammar learning conditions and classroom characteristics. The second stage involved the presentation of material, the researcher presented the learning material by introducing the basic concept of tree diagram and explaining how word classes could be organized into sentence components such as subject, predicate, and object. Simple example sentences like "A child eats an apple" were used to guide students step by step through the diagram.

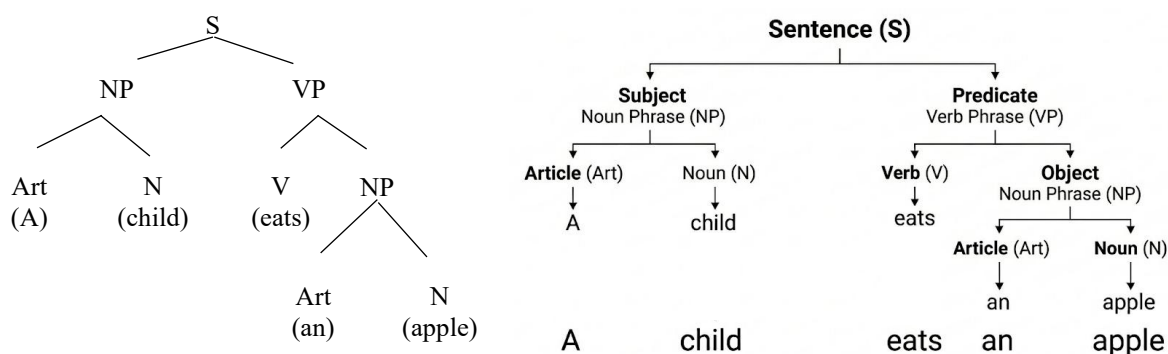


Figure 1
The Concept of Tree Diagram

As illustrated in Figure 1, the sentence analysis began with the whole structure labeled as S (Sentence). The noun phrase (NP) "A child" functioned as the subject, where the word "child" acted as the noun (N) or the head of the phrase, preceded by the article (Art) "A". Meanwhile, the verb phrase (VP) "eats an apple" served as the predicate or the action component of the sentence. This predicate was headed by the verb (V) "eats," which indicated a present tense action. Within this VP, the constituent "an apple" formed another noun phrase (NP) functioning as the object, where the noun (N) "apple" provided the information about what was being consumed. The third stage was a practice session. During this stage, students were given the sentence "Billy plays badminton" and were asked to analyze it independently using a tree diagram. Students were not required to produce perfect answers. Instead, they were encouraged to explore how words could be arranged into meaningful sentence through the diagram's structure. After the practice session, reflective interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions, feelings, challenges, and understanding of grammar learning through the use of tree diagrams. Finally, documentation such as observation notes, student worksheets, interview records, and classroom photographs was collected to support the research findings.

The collected data were analyzed using the qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) which consisted of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. As Creswell and Poth (2018) described, "qualitative data analysis involved organizing, interpreting, and understanding data such as interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents to develop a deeper understanding of a phenomenon." In the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and simplified important information from observation notes, interview transcripts, and students' work. Next, the data were displayed in descriptive narrative form to identify patterns related to students' experiences and difficulties. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified by rechecking findings, comparing data sources, and ensuring consistency.

The researcher coordinated with the school and the English teacher beforehand to obtain permission to carry out the research. Students participated willingly and were not required to produce correct answers during the practice session. This approach helped reduce pressure and created a comfortable learning environment. The researcher also realized of the possibility of bias in this study. Because the researcher played a role as the teacher during the learning process, the interpretation of interview data in phenomenological research was influenced by the researcher's subjectivity in understanding the participants' experiences. However, to minimize this bias, the researcher triangulated the data through observation, practice session results, documentation, and verification with grammar and syntax expert lecturers. Thus, the results of the research were expected to represent the real experience of students during their participation in grammar learning using tree diagrams.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the actual process, the researcher marked specific sections of the interview transcripts that contained important information about the students' experiences, such as statements related to student confusion, technical difficulties, or expressions of interest while attempting to analyze sentences using tree diagrams. This annotation process was then followed by a coding process, in which each data segment was assigned a thematic code or label, such as "Students' initial reactions," "difficulties encountered," "Students' understanding," and "Students' perceptions if the tree diagram concept were continued." Next, the reduced and coded data is organized into a data display. The themes emerging from the data reduction and coding processes are then described in detail in the form of structured descriptive paragraphs to provide a complete and comprehensive picture of the real-life experiences of junior high school students in learning grammar using syntactic trees. In this study, the main themes identified from the data include:

The Students' First Thought When Introduced to the Concept of a Tree Diagram

Interviews revealed that most students expressed confusion in the early stages of learning. However, this confusion did not lead to rejection of the material, but rather sparked curiosity and interest in learning more about the diagram's function. One of the student said:

"Pas pertama lihat diagram itu, saya pikir ini pelajaran apa, Miss. Ada cabang cabangnya. Bingung, tapi penasaran juga sebenarnya mau tahu itu maksudnya apa." (8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

Similarly, another student informant stated:

"Awalnya saya nggak ngerti sama sekali. Saya kira belajar bahasa Inggris itu cuma ngomong lancar seperti native speaker, tapi kok ini beda. Ada gambarnya, saya jadi pengen tahu lebih, Miss." (8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

Meanwhile, another student informant revealed:

"Saya bingung, Miss, tapi bukan bingung yang males dengar. Tapi lebih ke bingung yang bikin penasaran, jadi saya malah pengen lebih dengar penjelasannya." (8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

Based on the interview responses, it can be inferred that tree diagrams offer a new learning experience for students. Most students have never encountered grammar learning visualized using branched diagrams such as tree structures. Therefore, the appearance of confusion is a natural response in the early stages of learning. However, these findings show that the confusion experienced by students is constructive because it encourages their curiosity about the material. In the learning process, this curiosity becomes the initial capital that helps students be more involved during the learning session. Students become more focused on paying attention to the teacher's explanation because they want to understand the function of each branch in the diagram. These findings are in line with the opinion of Isik (2025) who states that emotional experiences in language learning, including curiosity, can be an important factor that drives student engagement and motivation to learn.

Subsection Students' Understanding Gained from Analyzing Sentences Using Tree Diagram

The second theme focuses on students' understanding after participating in the process of delivering material and practical sessions. In the learning process, students are invited to analyze the simple sentence "Billy plays badminton". Some students managed to identify the word "Billy" as a subject, "plays" as a verb, and "badminton" as an object in a sentence. However, some other students still have difficulty when they have to group the structure into phrases on a tree diagram. Students have not been able to identify that the word "Billy" belongs to the Noun Phrase (NP), while the verb "plays" and the object "badminton" are included in the Verb Phrase (VP). In the interview, one of the informants said that:

"Selama ini saya cuma tahu subjek itu orangnya, predikat itu kata kerjanya. Tapi pas lihat cabang diagramnya, saya baru tahu kalau ternyata ada pengelompokan phrase-nya, Miss." (8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

Another informant said that the use of tree diagrams made him understand the relationship between verbs and objects in a sentence:

"Yang bikin saya 'oh gitu' itu waktu Miss jelasin kalau VP itu isinya kata kerja sama objeknya sekaligus. Jadi 'plays badminton' itu satu bagian, bukan dua hal yang berbeda. Dari diagram itu kelihatan jelas." (8th grade student, May 11, 2026).

The answer shows that the tree diagram helps students see the relationship of functions between sentence elements in a more concrete way. Diagrams help students understand that words in sentences do not stand alone, but rather form sentence forms that have a unified meaning. Another informant also added:

"Saya suka belajar pakai diagram gini, Miss. Kalau cuma tulisan doang saya sering nggak fokus. Tapi ini ada gambarnya, saya jadi lebih gampang ngikutin alurnya dari atas ke bawah." (8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

Overall, these findings show that tree diagrams help students build syntactic awareness of

English sentence structure. Visualization of diagram branches makes it easier for students to understand the relationship between the elements of the word and the function of each part of a sentence. The results of this study support the opinion of Radford (2009) emphasizes that learning syntax through tree diagrams can help students understand the structure and organization of language more clearly. In addition, this finding is also in line with Huang (2019) who explains that the use of tree diagrams can help students reduce confusion in understanding the relationships between words and between phrases in English grammar

Challenges Faced by Students During Class Sessions

Although some students showed understanding during the learning process, the researchers also found some difficulties experienced by students when applying tree diagrams independently. First, students have difficulty in giving the right label to each node of the diagram, such as NP, VP, N, V, and so on. Second, students have difficulty correctly determining the direction and branching structure of the diagram. Third, students have difficulty distinguishing word classes as the basis for grouping phrases. This was strengthened through the results of interviews with informants. One of the students conveyed:

"Yang paling bikin bingung itu bagian ngasih labelnya, Miss. Saya nggak tahu ini harus ditulis NP atau VP. Terus cabangnya juga saya bingung, harusnya ke mana."

(8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

Another student informant revealed that he still had difficulty classifying the word class:

"Saya kurang bisa nentuin kata ini termasuk bagian kata apa, Miss."

(8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

In addition, there are students who feel that they understand the material during the explanation, but have difficulty when they have to work on the diagram independently:

"Pas Miss jelasin tadi sempat ngerti, tapi pas mau ngerjain sendiri saya bingung harus mulai dari mana dulu." (8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

These findings are in line with the research of Siregar (2016) which found that many students have difficulty in understanding word classes, and labeling phrase structures. In addition, Fajri et al. (2014) also stated that although students are able to analyze sentences at the surface level, they still have difficulties when analyzing at a more in-depth phrase level. The main challenge faced by students in applying tree diagrams lies not in their unwillingness or inability to learn as a whole, but in the gap between conceptual understanding and technical ability to execute analysis independently. Students still need more structured, gradual, and repetitive exercises so that students can be more accustomed to identifying phrase structure and parts of speech in sentences

The Students' Opinion, If in the Next Session We Use a Tree Diagram Again to Study Grammar

Based on the results of the interviews, most of the students responded positively to the use of tree diagrams in learning English grammar. One of the informants said:

"Dulu saya pikir grammar itu susah banget, Miss, banyak rumusnya. Tapi sekarang setelah dijelaskan diagram ini saya ngerasa lebih mudah memahami penggunaan kata noun dan kata verb dalam pembuatan kalimat. Saya jadi lebih pengen belajar Bahasa Inggris lagi, Miss." (8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

The statement suggests that tree diagrams help reduce students' negative perceptions of grammar. Learning grammar that is usually considered difficult is now easier to understand through tree diagrams, helping students understand sentence structure more clearly. Another student informant revealed that the tree diagram makes it easier to understand the position of words in a sentence:

"Saya mau banget kalau belajar grammar pakai diagram kayak gini lagi, Miss. Saya jadi lebih paham kalau ada soal titik pada kalimat, kalimat ini membutuhkan subjek, kata kerja atau objek, tapi masi bingung juga penggunaan kata akhiran -ing dan -ed miss."

(8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

In addition, there are students who feel more confident when they have to make English sentences:

“Saya sebelumnya takut kalau disuruh bikin kalimat Bahasa Inggris, miss, soalnya sering salah. Tapi habis belajar ini, saya ngerasa lebih berani nyoba. Soalnya saya udah tahu caranya ngecek, subjeknya di awal, dilanjut kata kerja, aksi yang dilakukan subjek.” (8th grade student, May 11, 2026)

However, the researcher also found that some students expressed reluctance to continue learning with this method, students admitted that they still felt confused and dizzy because they did not understand the part of speech well, did not have enough understanding of the basic concept that each word in a sentence has its own position and function. They feel that learning to use tree diagrams is quite difficult because it requires precision in understanding the function of each word in a sentence. This condition needs to be considered as part of the more complete student experience of this study.

The findings in this study provide reinforcement for the relevance of syntactic theory, especially the use of tree diagrams proposed by Chomsky (2002) and further developed by Radford (2009), in English language learning at the junior high school level. So far, syntax theory is often considered an abstract and complex study, so it is more applied to higher education. However, the results of this study show that with the simplification of the concept, the theory can still be applied at the junior high school level. Furthermore, the use of tree diagrams in this study proves that basic syntactic concepts such as phrase structure, relationships between sentence elements, and word class classification can be understood by students through the tree diagram approach. With the note that students have learned the concept of part of speech. This shows that tree diagrams have an important role in bridging abstract concepts into more concrete and easy to understand, making student learning in analyzing and making sentences clearer and easier to understand considering the findings of this research.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the entire research process, this study concludes that the use of tree diagrams provided a meaningful learning experience for eighth-grade students in understanding English sentence structures. Students were not expected to give perfect answers, but they were encouraged to explore how words can be arranged into meaningful sentences through the tree diagram. This approach allowed students to focus more on the learning process rather than only on achieving correct results. this study found that students' experiences with tree diagrams did not begin with immediate understanding but started with feelings of confusion. When the concept of tree diagrams was first introduced, most students had never seen grammar presented visually in this way before, so their first reaction was naturally confusion. However, this confusion did not lead students to reject the material. Instead, it created curiosity about the function and use of tree diagrams. These findings show that learning experiences do not always begin with direct understanding, but often start from a process of adapting to new learning methods. In this context, curiosity became an important factor that encouraged students to stay involved throughout the learning process.

After receiving explanations and participating in practice activities, students were not only able to identify basic sentence elements such as subjects, predicates, and objects, but they also started to understand deeper concepts, including phrase grouping such as noun phrases and verb phrases. Even so, students still faced several challenges, especially in technical aspects such as labeling diagram components, determining branching directions, and classifying word classes correctly. These findings indicate that although students had started to understand the concepts, they still needed more practice and continuous guidance to use tree diagrams. Overall, this study has answered the research questions related to students' experiences in applying tree diagrams in English grammar learning. The findings show that syntax tree help students understand how words and phrases are connected to create meaningful sentence structures. Therefore, tree diagram can be used as teaching materials to support grammar learning. Teachers are recommended to introduce simple and familiar sentence patterns first before gradually moving to more difficult structures to help students adapt more easily to this learning method.

However, this study also has several limitations. Since the research was conducted in only one meeting and involved only one class, the findings still reflect short-term experiences and cannot be generalized to all junior high school students. In addition, the researcher acknowledges the possibility of bias because of the dual role as both teacher and researcher. To reduce this possibility, data triangulation was conducted through observations, practice results, documentation, and verification with grammar and syntax experts. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more participants and longer learning periods to obtain more comprehensive findings regarding the use of tree diagrams in grammar learning.

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