

STUDENTS' PROFICIENCY IN IDENTIFYING PRONOUNS IN ENGLISH SENTENCES: A STUDY OF SMA SWASTA CERDAS BANGSA

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Abstract

Many students struggle to identify pronouns in sentences, a critical aspect of English grammar necessary for constructing clear and coherent communication. Pronouns play a vital role in sentence structure by replacing nouns to avoid redundancy, yet their correct usage poses challenges for learners. This study investigates the proficiency of tenth-grade students at SMA Swasta Cerdas Bangsa in identifying pronouns in English sentences and explores the specific difficulties they face. The research aimed to evaluate students' ability to recognize different types of pronouns and pinpoint areas requiring instructional support. Adopting a case study methodology, the study collected data from 30 students in class X.1 through a 30-item test consisting of multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions. Results showed that only 41% of the students correctly identified pronouns, with common challenges including confusion in pronoun selection and insufficient understanding of pronoun usage. These findings highlight the need for targeted teaching strategies, such as explicit grammar instruction and contextualized exercises, to enhance students' grammatical competence and overall language proficiency.

Keywords: *ability; difficulty; pronoun; proficiency; students*

1. Introduction

Language reflects a person's identity, revealing their character, mindset, and intellectual abilities (Rosida, 2024). It serves as a vital tool for daily communication, enabling humans to convey thoughts, emotions, and information effectively. Beyond mastering their mother tongue, individuals must acquire foreign languages to navigate academic, professional, and social contexts (Efrizah et al., 2024). Among these, English has emerged as a global language, functioning as a medium for international communication and providing access to diverse opportunities in education, careers, and cultural exchange (Hornby, 2005; Li & Akram, 2024). For students, English proficiency is essential not only for academic success but also for career readiness, as highlighted by Efrizah et al. (2024).

Developing English proficiency requires mastery of various language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These are classified into receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing), both of which are critical for effective communication (Efrizah et al., 2024). Among these skills, speaking is particularly important

for students' future careers. However, achieving fluency and accuracy in English speaking is challenging, as many students struggle with grammar and sentence construction (Fadly, 2019).

Grammar, as the foundation of language, governs sentence structure and ensures clarity in communication (Gerot & Wignell, 1994). Understanding grammar enables students to construct sentences correctly and communicate effectively. Within grammar, pronouns play a crucial role by replacing nouns and maintaining sentence cohesion. However, non-native speakers, especially English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, often face challenges in using pronouns accurately, including linking pronouns to their antecedents and differentiating between pronoun types (Li & Akram, 2024). Misuse of pronouns can lead to redundancy or confusion in sentences, underscoring the importance of mastering this grammatical element. As Guigan (2011) in Suryani & Hidayatullah (2017) notes, pronouns streamline writing and speech by minimizing unnecessary repetition.

Despite their significance, students frequently struggle to identify and use pronouns correctly. Prior studies, such as Herman et al. (2020), found that students encounter challenges with personal pronouns, including possessive adjectives (42%), personal pronouns as subjects (34%), and personal pronouns as objects (24%). Similarly, Nokas (2021) identified difficulties caused by first-language interference among Indonesian students, affecting their ability to use personal pronouns correctly. These findings suggest persistent gaps in students' understanding of pronouns.

Building on previous research, this study investigates the proficiency of tenth-grade students at SMA Swasta Cerdas Bangsa in identifying pronouns in English sentences. It also explores the specific challenges they face in mastering pronoun usage. By addressing these issues, the study aims to contribute to the development of targeted instructional strategies that enhance students' grammatical competence and overall language proficiency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pronouns

Pronouns are a fundamental part of speech that serves to replace nouns or noun phrases, thus ensuring sentence cohesion and avoiding redundancy (Payne, 2011). While pronouns may seem straightforward, using them accurately can pose challenges, particularly for non-native English speakers. As noted by Sobirjonovna and Qizi (2023), pronouns extend beyond their conventional use, encompassing adjectives, numbers, and phrases. Their proper usage is crucial in both written and spoken communication, as they streamline language by minimizing repetitive expressions (Verspoor & Sauter, 2000).

2.2 Types of Pronouns

Mastery of pronouns requires understanding their various types and functions. Izzan (2007) categorizes pronouns into eight types: personal, possessive, reflexive, reciprocal, demonstrative, interrogative, relative, and indefinite. Each type serves a distinct purpose, contributing to clarity and precision in language. For example, personal pronouns (e.g., *I, you, they*) substitute for specific people or things, while possessive pronouns (e.g., *mine, yours*) indicate ownership (Alsagoff, 2008). Despite their utility, learners often confuse similar forms, such as distinguishing between possessive adjectives (*my*) and possessive pronouns (*mine*), highlighting the need for targeted instruction (Sobirjonovna & Qizi, 2023). Errors in pronoun usage are frequently attributed to language interference and insufficient grammatical knowledge. Herman et al. (2020) identified common difficulties among students

in differentiating possessive adjectives, personal pronouns as subjects, and personal pronouns as objects, with error rates of 42%, 34%, and 24%, respectively. Similarly, Nokas (2021) observed that Indonesian learners struggle to use personal pronouns due to the influence of their first language. These findings underscore the need for systematic teaching approaches that address specific challenges in pronoun usage.

2.3 Previous Studies on Pronoun Identification

Research on pronoun usage often focuses on students' ability to use pronouns in context. Herman et al. (2020) examined the use of personal pronouns in recount texts, revealing that most errors stemmed from a lack of understanding of grammatical rules. Meanwhile, Nokas (2021) found that learners' average ability to use personal pronouns was adequate, but interference from their native language affected their accuracy. These studies primarily analyze pronoun usage in writing, leaving a gap in research on pronoun identification in isolated sentences.

Building on these studies, the current research diverges by focusing on pronoun identification rather than contextual usage. It evaluates the ability of tenth-grade students at SMA Swasta Cerdas Bangsa to correctly identify pronouns in English sentences, offering insights into their comprehension and common challenges. This approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of pronoun mastery and informs instructional strategies for enhancing grammatical proficiency.

2.4 Ability and Sentence Construction

Ability in language learning encompasses both competence and performance, as described by Stenberg and Grigorenko (2013). In the context of grammar, ability refers to a learner's capacity to understand and apply grammatical rules accurately. Students' ability to identify pronouns depends on their understanding of sentence construction, which is governed by the interplay of syntax and grammar (Verspoor & Sauter, 2000). A sentence, as a complete unit of meaning, requires proper grammatical components to convey ideas effectively. Misidentification of pronouns can disrupt sentence cohesion and hinder communication.

2.5 Research Gap

While existing studies highlight common errors in pronoun usage, few have addressed the ability to identify pronouns as isolated grammatical elements. This research fills that gap by examining students' proficiency in identifying various pronoun types and the specific difficulties they encounter. By focusing on identification rather than contextual usage, the study provides actionable insights for designing targeted grammar interventions, contributing to improved language learning outcomes.

3. Research Method

This study employed a case study approach to examine the ability of tenth-grade students at SMA Swasta Cerdas Bangsa to identify pronouns in English sentences. A case study approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of a specific group within a bounded system, providing detailed insights into their performance and challenges (Creswell, 2007). This method is particularly appropriate for understanding individual or group experiences in educational contexts (Christensen, 2001).

3.1 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at SMA Swasta Cerdas, located at Jl. Ps. IV No.30, Gedung Johor, Kecamatan Medan Johor, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara. Data collection took place on Wednesday, 26 June 2024, involving 30 students from class X.1.

The sample size of 30 students represents the entire population of the class, which is less than 100, making it feasible to include all students in the research (Saleh, 2012). Although the sample is small, it provides a manageable yet meaningful representation for exploring students' specific challenges in pronoun identification. This group was selected to ensure a focused analysis of their grammatical proficiency within a controlled setting.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Written consent was obtained from the school administration, teachers, and participating students. Participants were informed about the research objectives and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Personal identifiers were excluded from the dataset to protect student privacy.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

This study utilized a test as the primary instrument for data collection, supplemented by classroom observation. The test was designed to measure students' ability to identify various pronoun types and consisted of 30 questions:

Question types:

1. Multiple-choice questions, requiring students to select the correct pronoun for a given sentence.
2. Fill-in-the-blank questions, where students inserted appropriate pronouns into sentence gaps.

The questions were sourced from validated grammar textbooks to ensure reliability and alignment with curriculum standards. Sample items included:

- *Identify the correct pronoun: "This is my book, and that one is _____. " (a) mine (b) me (c) my (d) myself.*
- *Fill in the blank: "Each student helped _____ with the project."*

The test was administered in a one-hour session. Students' responses were evaluated using an answer key to ensure objectivity. Observation notes were taken to document student engagement and potential issues during the test.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis involved systematically organizing and interpreting the results to identify patterns, themes, and challenges. The following steps were applied:

1. Scoring: Student responses were scored based on a pre-defined answer key.
2. Classification: Scores were categorized according to the value range used by Politeknik MBP Medan (see Table 1).
3. Pattern Identification: Common errors and challenges, such as confusion between possessive adjectives and pronouns, were noted.
4. Conclusion Drawing: Findings were synthesized to draw meaningful conclusions about students' proficiency and areas of difficulty.

Range	Score	Categorization
A	86–100	Able
A-	80–85	Able
B+	75–79	Able
B	70–74	Able
B-	65–69	Able
C+	60–64	Able
C	55–59	Able
D	50–54	Unable
E	0–49	Unable

Table 1. Score Ranges

This method ensured a comprehensive understanding of students’ pronoun identification skills by identifying specific areas of strength and weakness, analyzing common patterns of errors, and exploring the underlying causes of these challenges. Additionally, it provided valuable insights into students’ grasp of grammatical rules and their application in sentence construction. These findings served as a foundation for developing targeted recommendations for instructional improvement, including tailored teaching strategies, focused grammar exercises, and contextualized practice activities to address identified gaps and enhance students’ overall language proficiency.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Students' Ability to Identify Pronouns in English Sentences

The results derived from the data collected and meticulously analyzed by the researchers provide a detailed account of students’ performance and challenges in identifying pronouns. These findings not only highlight specific patterns in their grammatical understanding but also offer insights into the areas where students excel and the difficulties they encounter, laying the groundwork for targeted instructional strategies.

No.	Name	Score	Reach	Explanation
1	Student 1	68	B-	Able
2	Student 2	87	A	Able
3	Student 3	87	A	Able
4	Student 4	78	B+	Able
5	Student 5	65	B-	Able
6	Student 6	45	E	Unable
7	Student 7	10	E	Unable
8	Student 8	38	E	Unable
9	Student 9	30	E	Unable
10	Student 10	38	E	Unable
11	Student 11	86	A	Able

12	Student 12	43	E	Unable
13	Student 13	87	A	Able
14	Student 14	37	E	Unable
15	Student 15	15	E	Unable
16	Student 16	30	E	Unable
17	Student 17	20	E	Unable
18	Student 18	75	B+	Able
19	Student 19	85	A-	Able
20	Student 20	37	E	Unable
21	Student 21	15	E	Unable
22	Student 22	30	E	Unable
23	Student 23	20	E	Unable
24	Student 24	75	B+	Able
25	Student 25	85	A-	Able
26	Student 26	30	E	Unable
27	Student 27	50	D	Unable
28	Student 28	55	D	Unable
29	Student 29	45	E	Unable
30	Student 30	85	A-	Able

Table 2. Students' Written Test Scores

From the data presented in the table above, it can be concluded that 12 students demonstrated the ability to identify pronouns in English sentences, while 18 students struggled to do so. This division highlights the significant challenges faced by a majority of the participants in mastering this foundational grammatical skill. To systematically categorize the students based on their ability to identify pronouns, the researcher applied the following formula to calculate the respective percentages, ensuring an accurate representation of the students' performance levels:

$$\text{Able} = \frac{\text{The number of Students who can identify pronouns}}{\text{The total students of class X1}} \times 100\%$$

$$= \frac{12}{30} \times 100\% = 41\%$$

Criteria	Number of Students	Percentage
Able Students	12	41%
Unable Students	18	59%
Total	30	100%

Table 3. Students' Ability to Identify Pronouns in English Sentences

The data presented in Table 3 reveal that a significant portion of class X.1 students at SMA Swasta Cerdas Bangsa struggle with identifying pronouns in English sentences. Specifically, 59% of the students (18 out of 30) were unable to identify pronouns correctly, while only 41% (12 students) demonstrated proficiency. This disparity highlights a clear gap in the students' understanding of this crucial aspect of grammar.

The inability of the majority of students to accurately distinguish or apply pronouns suggests fundamental challenges in their grammatical comprehension. Such difficulties may stem from confusion between pronoun types or a lack of practice in recognizing and using pronouns appropriately in context. These findings underscore the need for targeted instructional strategies to address these challenges. Educators should consider implementing focused lessons on the different types of pronouns, offering ample practice exercises, and using contextual examples to help students solidify their understanding. Additionally, more interactive methods could be incorporated to engage students in active learning, thereby enhancing their grammatical competence and overall language proficiency.

4.1.2 Students' Difficulty in Identifying Pronouns in English Sentences

This research discovered that students in class X.1 faced difficulties identifying pronouns in English sentences. The problems identified are:

1. **Insufficient Understanding of Pronoun Agreement:** Students may struggle to align pronouns with their antecedents, particularly regarding gender and number. For instance, they might struggle to select the correct pronoun for singular or plural nouns.
2. **Limited Vocabulary Knowledge:** Students with a limited vocabulary may struggle to identify less common or more formal pronouns like "one" or "whom." This issue also arises when they are unfamiliar with various pronoun forms, such as subject, object, or possessive.
3. **Weak Grammar Comprehension:** Struggles with grammar rules, such as when to use "he" versus "him" or "they" versus "them," can cause students to misidentify or choose incorrect pronouns.

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the proficiency and challenges faced by class X.1 students at SMA Swasta Cerdas Bangsa in identifying pronouns in English sentences. The results reveal that only 12 students (41%) successfully identified pronouns, indicating a limited understanding of this fundamental grammatical element. Among the students who performed well, they demonstrated the ability to distinguish between personal pronouns as subjects (*he, she, they*) and objects (*him, her, them*), as well as the difference between possessive adjectives (*my, your*) and possessive pronouns (*mine, yours*). The highest score achieved was 87, recorded by three students, reflecting strong mastery among this small group.

However, the majority of students, 18 individuals (59%), struggled to identify pronouns accurately. A prevalent issue was their inability to differentiate between similar pronoun forms. For instance, many students could not distinguish between *it* as a subject and *it* as an object. Additionally, there was widespread confusion regarding possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns. A common error was assuming that *my* is a possessive pronoun, whereas it is actually a possessive adjective, with *mine* being the correct possessive pronoun.

These findings underscore the need for targeted teaching strategies to address specific misconceptions, particularly in distinguishing between pronoun types and understanding their correct usage in sentences. By focusing on these areas, educators can enhance students' grammatical competence and overall proficiency in English.

5. Conclusion

Based on the research results, it is evident that 41% of the class X.1 students at SMA Swasta Cerdas Bangsa are able to identify pronouns in English sentences, while 59% struggle with this task. The findings highlight significant challenges in students' understanding of pronoun usage, including difficulties with pronoun agreement, distinguishing between personal pronouns as subjects and objects, and recognizing the difference between possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns. These challenges suggest that students have limited vocabulary knowledge and weak grammar comprehension, which hinder their ability to accurately identify and use pronouns. Given these findings, it is recommended that teachers incorporate targeted instruction on pronoun usage, focusing on the distinctions between pronoun types. Curriculum developers should design lessons that include exercises to help students practice pronoun identification in various sentence structures. Additionally, using visual aids, interactive activities, and real-life examples could make learning more engaging and effective.

This study is not without limitations, including its small sample size and focus on a single class. Future research could explore a larger sample across different grade levels to determine whether these challenges are consistent among other students. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the impact of targeted teaching interventions on improving students' pronoun identification skills over time. Further studies could also examine how first-language interference influences pronoun comprehension and usage in English.

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