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MORPHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH INFLECTION MORPHEMES ACQUISITION AMONG INDONESIAN EFL LEARNER: A DESCRIPTIVE QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the difficulties experienced by eleventh-grade students at MAN 2 Kota Palu in using English inflectional morphemes and the factors influencing those difficulties. The study employed a descriptive quantitative design involving 217 students selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected through a grammar test and a questionnaire. The questionnaire was validated and tested for reliability using SPSS, while the data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies and percentages. The findings showed that the progressive form (-ing) was the most successfully answered morpheme (30%), whereas the third-person singular form (-s) was the most difficult (11%), followed by the past participle form (-ed/-en) (13%). The questionnaire revealed that students' difficulties were mainly influenced by first-language interference and phonological reduction or low salience (68%), followed by limited exposure and practice (67%) and instructional factors (58%). These findings indicate that students' difficulties stem from both linguistic and instructional factors rather than grammatical knowledge alone. The findings suggest that English teachers should provide more focused instruction on difficult inflectional morphemes through explicit explanation, contextualized practice, and increased opportunities for meaningful language use.

Keywords: EFL Learners, Inflectional Morphemes, Morphological Difficulties, Phonological Salience, Third-Person Singular

INTRODUCTION

Language is a central medium through which people express ideas, exchange information, build social relationships, and participate in academic communication. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, the ability to use language accurately is not only determined by vocabulary mastery but also by learners' control of grammatical forms. Grammar provides the structural foundation that enables learners to produce meaningful and acceptable sentences. One linguistic area that contributes strongly to grammatical accuracy is morphology, which deals with the internal structure of words and the processes through which words are formed. Morphological knowledge is important for EFL learners because it helps them recognize how word forms carry grammatical information, such as tense, number, aspect, possession, comparison, and agreement (Aronoff & Fudeman, 2011;

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Bauer & Nation, 2020; Yule, 2020). Without sufficient morphological knowledge, learners may understand the meaning of individual words but still fail to produce grammatically accurate sentences.

Morphology is closely related to morphemes, the smallest meaningful units in a language. Morphemes are generally classified into derivational and inflectional morphemes. Derivational morphemes create new words or change word classes, while inflectional morphemes modify grammatical functions without changing the basic meaning or word class of the base word (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2018; Haspelmath & Sims, 2013). In English, inflectional morphemes include plural -s, possessive -'s, third-person singular -s, past tense -ed, past participle -ed/-en, progressive -ing, comparative -er, and superlative -est. Although these forms are often introduced as basic grammar, they are essential because they signal grammatical relationships within sentences. For example, the difference between "She walks to school" and "She walked to school" depends on inflectional markers that indicate agreement and tense. Therefore, students' ability to use inflectional morphemes reflects their understanding of how English grammar operates at the word and sentence levels.

In EFL contexts, inflectional morphemes often become problematic because learners must notice, understand, and apply grammatical endings that may not exist in their first language. Previous studies have shown that morphological awareness supports vocabulary development, reading comprehension, academic writing, and grammatical accuracy (Amirjalili & Jabbari, 2018; Badawi, 2019; Masrai, 2016; Qasem et al., 2021; Wardana, 2023). However, knowing grammatical rules does not always guarantee accurate use. Learners may be able to explain a rule explicitly but still omit or misuse the form when producing sentences. This condition is common in the acquisition of English inflectional morphology because many inflectional endings are short, phonologically weak, and semantically less noticeable than content words (Ellis, 2022). As a result, learners may focus more on lexical meaning than on grammatical marking.

Recent studies in Indonesian EFL contexts also show that students' difficulties with morphology are closely related to their actual language production. Artika et al., (2025) found that EFL students still experienced difficulties in using inflectional morphemes in sentences, indicating that students' morphological problems appear not only in theory but also in sentence construction. Madanun et al., (2025) also reported that EFL students faced challenges in using verb inflections in sentences, especially when they had to apply correct verb forms in grammatical contexts. In relation to students' writing, Gayo & Widodo (2018) found that Indonesian students made morphological and syntactical errors in English writing, and those errors were influenced by interlingual factors, such as first language interference, and intralingual factors related to learners' incomplete understanding of English rules. Similarly, Zuhri et al., (2022) found that students' writing involved various morphological processes, showing that students' ability to use morphemes is closely connected to their writing performance. These studies strengthen the argument that inflectional morphemes need to be examined not only as isolated grammar items but also as grammatical forms that influence students' sentence and text production.

The difficulty becomes more visible among Indonesian EFL learners because Indonesian and English have different morphological systems. English relies on inflectional

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endings to mark tense, number, aspect, and subject-verb agreement. In contrast, Indonesian does not require verbs to change according to tense, person, or number. For example, the Indonesian verb "pergi" can be used with different subjects and time references without morphological changes, while English requires different forms such as go, goes, went, and gone. This structural difference may cause Indonesian learners to transfer Indonesian grammatical patterns into English and omit obligatory endings such as third-person singular -s and past tense -ed (Budiharto et al., 2021; Darwis, 2023). Consequently, sentences such as "She go to school every day" or "He play football yesterday" may occur because learners rely on the base verb form and do not consistently apply English inflectional rules.

Several recent studies have reported that English inflectional morphemes remain difficult for EFL and ESL learners across different contexts. Alotaibi (2016) found that Kuwaiti EFL learners still experienced difficulties in using English inflectional morphemes accurately, while Abbasi et al., (2023) reported that young Sindhi ESL learners encountered problems in acquiring English grammatical morphemes even after exposure to English instruction. Dogar et al., (2024) also showed that the frequency and use of inflectional morphemes vary across learner corpora, suggesting that learners' morphological production is influenced by linguistic background, exposure, and learning context. More recent studies further confirm that English grammatical morphemes are acquired unevenly by EFL learners. Tewarat et al., (2025) found that Indonesian EFL students showed varied accuracy in using English inflectional morphemes, Madanun et al., (2025) reported that EFL students experienced challenges in using verb inflections such as -ed, -s, -ing, and -en, and Alsuhayl & Alharbi (2025) found that young EFL learners acquired English grammatical morphemes gradually and unevenly.

More specifically, three previous studies are closely related to the present research. Ismani & Simamora (2021) investigated students' difficulties in using participles and found that past participle was the most difficult form, which is relevant because past participle is one of the verb-related inflectional forms examined in this study. Dong & Nguyen (2024) examined Vietnamese EFL learners' use of plural -s and third-person singular -s in opinion essays and found that plural -s was used more accurately than third-person singular -s, while omission became the most frequent error. This finding is important because both plural -s and third-person singular -s are included in the present grammar test. Pradana & Fauzan (2021) also reported that Indonesian students made errors in plural markers, third-person singular forms, possessive forms, past participles, and superlative forms in descriptive writing, showing that Indonesian EFL learners still face problems in applying inflectional morphemes in written production.

Other recent studies also strengthen this issue. Amuntyastuti et al., (2024) found that Indonesian EFL students still misapplied several inflectional forms because of limited tense understanding and low morphological awareness, while Fajriati et al., (2024) showed that inflectional forms are closely related to how grammatical meaning is constructed in authentic texts. These findings support the argument that students need to understand inflectional morphemes not only as isolated suffixes but also as grammatical markers that function within sentence and text contexts. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that English inflectional morphemes remain one of the most persistent grammatical challenges

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for EFL learners across different educational contexts. Although the studies consistently report learners' difficulties in using English inflectional morphemes, they differ in terms of their research focus, participants, and assessment methods. While some studies emphasize learners' written production and error patterns, others investigate specific inflectional categories or broader morphological competence. Despite these valuable contributions, limited research has comprehensively examined students' mastery across multiple English inflectional morphemes while simultaneously investigating the factors underlying their difficulties, particularly in the Indonesian senior high school context. This synthesis highlights the need for further research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of learners' morphological competence and to inform more effective grammar instruction.

Although previous studies have examined English inflectional morphemes, several gaps remain. First, some studies focused only on specific forms, such as participles or the morpheme -s, rather than comparing several types of inflectional morphemes within the same group of learners. Second, many studies used students' writing as the main data source. This tendency is also reflected in error-analysis studies, which commonly use writing data to identify students' grammatical problems. Karim et al., (2018), for example, examined errors in EFL writing classrooms and showed that students' written production can reveal recurring grammatical difficulties. However, writing-based analysis depends on the grammatical forms that naturally appear in students' texts. Consequently, certain inflectional morphemes may not be produced, not because students have mastered them, but because the writing task does not require their use. Therefore, a structured grammar test is needed to examine students' ability to recognize and produce specific inflectional morphemes under controlled conditions. As a result, certain inflectional morphemes may not appear, not because students have mastered them, but because the writing task does not require students to use those forms. Third, the factors influencing students' difficulties have not always been examined systematically, especially at the senior high school level. Students' errors may be influenced not only by grammatical knowledge but also by first language interference, low salience of English endings, limited exposure and practice, and instructional factors (Budiharto et al., 2021; Darwis, 2023; Mustakim et al., 2025).

The issue is also relevant in the senior high school context. In Indonesia, English grammar instruction is introduced from earlier stages of schooling and continues in senior high school through various text types and language functions. The 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum emphasize students' ability to use appropriate grammatical forms in communication, including singular and plural nouns, present-tense verbs, past-tense forms, and other sentence structures relevant to spoken and written texts (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2016; Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah, 2025). Therefore, eleventh-grade students are expected not only to recognize basic grammatical rules but also to apply them accurately in sentence contexts. At this level, students should have moved beyond initial exposure and entered a stage of grammatical consolidation. However, preliminary observation at MAN 2 Kota Palu indicated that many students still had problems using English inflectional morphemes. They tended to omit third-person singular -s, misuse past forms, and confuse past tense and past participle forms. This condition shows a gap between curricular expectations and students' actual grammatical performance.

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Based on these gaps, the present study investigates the difficulties faced by eleventh-grade students at MAN 2 Kota Palu in using English inflectional morphemes. Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on specific grammatical forms, error analysis, or written production, this study examines five categories of English inflectional morphemes through a structured grammar test and investigates the factors underlying students' difficulties through questionnaire data. This integrated approach addresses the identified research gap by providing a more comprehensive description of morphological difficulties among Indonesian senior high school students. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What types of English inflectional morphemes do the eleventh-grade students find difficult to use? and (2) What factors influence the students' difficulties in using English inflectional morphemes?

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design. This design was used because the study aimed to identify the types of English inflectional morphemes that were difficult for students and to find out the factors influencing those difficulties. A descriptive quantitative design is appropriate for research that describes a phenomenon through numerical data and percentage-based interpretation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Therefore, this study focused on describing students' test performance and questionnaire responses without applying any treatment or comparing groups.

The study was conducted at MAN 2 Kota Palu. The population consisted of 522 eleventh-grade students distributed across fifteen classes. The sample consisted of 217 students. The sample size was determined based on the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) sampling table. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure that each class was proportionally represented. After the number of students from each class was determined, the respondents were selected randomly through a lottery system.

Table 1. Sample distribution

No	Class	Population	Sample
1.	XI A	32	13
2.	XI B	33	14
3.	XI C	32	13
4.	XI D	36	15
5.	XI E	36	15
6.	XI F	36	15
7.	XI G	36	15
8.	XI H	36	15
9.	XI I	36	15
10.	XI J	35	14
11.	XI K	33	14
12.	XI L	35	15
13.	XI M	36	15
14.	XI N	36	15
15.	XI O	34	14
	Total	522	217

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The instruments used in this study were a grammar test and a questionnaire. The grammar test was used to identify the types of English inflectional morphemes that were difficult for the students. The test consisted of 25 items divided into multiple-choice and sentence-completion questions. The multiple-choice section consisted of 15 items, while the sentence-completion section consisted of 10 items. These two forms of test items were used to measure students' ability to recognize and produce correct inflectional forms in sentence contexts.

The grammar test covered five types of English inflectional morphemes: plural form (-s), third-person singular form (-s), past form (-ed), past participle form (-ed/-en), and progressive form (-ing). Each type of inflectional morpheme was represented by five items, resulting in 25 items in total. The items were presented in a mixed order rather than being grouped according to inflectional morpheme type. This equal distribution of items across the five categories allowed the researcher to identify and compare the frequency of errors for each type of inflectional morpheme.

The grammar test was not used to assign treatment scores or to calculate students' mean achievement score. A higher frequency of correct responses indicated that students were more successful in using the corresponding inflectional form, whereas a lower frequency of correct responses indicated greater difficulty. Thus, the category with the lowest frequency of correct responses was interpreted as the most difficult inflectional morpheme, while the category with the highest frequency represented the form that students answered most successfully.

Before being administered to the main participants, the grammar test underwent content validation through expert judgment. The validation involved two experts, consisting of one lecturer with expertise in linguistics and one lecturer with expertise in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The experts reviewed the test items to determine whether they were relevant to the study objectives and appropriately represented the five types of English inflectional morphemes. The experts also examined the clarity of the items, the appropriateness of the grammatical contexts, and the suitability of the items for the eleventh-grade students. The test items were revised based on the experts' suggestions before the final version was used for data collection. This expert judgment was conducted to ensure that the grammar test adequately measured the intended aspects of students' knowledge and use of English inflectional morphemes.

The questionnaire was used to identify the factors influencing students' difficulties in using English inflectional morphemes. It initially consisted of 40 close-ended statements using a Likert scale. The response options consisted of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The questionnaire covered four main factors: first language interference, phonological reduction and low salience, limited exposure and practice, and instructional or pedagogical factors. These factors were adapted from previous studies discussing Indonesian EFL learners' difficulties in using English grammar and inflectional forms (Budiharto et al., 2021; Darwis, 2023; Mustakim et al., 2025).

Before the questionnaire was used in the main data collection, a try-out was conducted involving 50 students. The try-out was conducted to examine the quality of the questionnaire items in terms of validity and reliability. The validity of the questionnaire items was tested

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using Pearson Product Moment correlation through SPSS. An item was considered valid when the significance value was lower than 0.05. Based on the validity test, 37 out of 40 items were declared valid, while three items were invalid. The invalid items were Q20, Q31, and Q35; therefore, they were excluded from the final questionnaire.

The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. The result showed that the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.935. This value was higher than the minimum reliability standard of 0.60, indicating that the questionnaire had a high level of internal consistency and was reliable for the main data collection. Cronbach's Alpha was used because it is commonly applied to measure the internal consistency of questionnaire items in educational research (Taber, 2018) .

The data collection was conducted in two stages. First, the researcher administered the grammar test to the selected students to measure their ability in using English inflectional morphemes. The students were asked to answer all test items based on the instructions provided. Second, the researcher distributed the questionnaire to the same respondents to obtain information about the factors that might contribute to their difficulties. The grammar test and questionnaire were administered to the same sample so that the results could describe both students' performance and the possible causes of their difficulties.

The grammar test data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies and percentages to identify students' performance across the five categories of English inflectional morphemes. The frequency of correct responses for each morpheme category was calculated to determine the relative level of difficulty. The morpheme type with the lowest frequency of correct responses was interpreted as the most difficult, whereas the highest frequency indicated the form that students mastered more successfully.

The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS to calculate the frequency and percentage of students' responses. The responses were grouped based on the four factors: first language interference, phonological reduction and low salience, limited exposure and practice, and instructional or pedagogical factors. The results were then interpreted descriptively to identify the dominant factors influencing students' difficulties in using English inflectional morphemes.

Ethical considerations were observed during the research process. The researcher obtained permission from the school before collecting the data. The students were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Their identities were kept confidential, and the data were presented in aggregate form for research purposes only.

RESULTS

The results of this study are presented based on the two research questions. The first result concerns the types of English inflectional morphemes that were difficult for students. The second result concerns the factors that influenced students' difficulties in using English inflectional morphemes.

Students' Difficulties in Using English Inflectional Morphemes

The grammar test was used to identify students' difficulties in using five types of English inflectional morphemes: plural form (-s), third-person singular form (-s), past form

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(-ed), past participle form (-ed), and progressive form (-ing). The students' correct answers were calculated to identify which forms were easier and which forms were more difficult for them.

Table 2. Frequency of students' correct answers in using inflectional morphemes

Inflectional Morphemes	Frequency	Percentage
Plural Form (-s)	635	24%
Third-person Singular Form (-s)	284	11%
Past Form (-ed)	571	22%
Past Participle Form (-ed)	353	13%
Progressive Form (-ing)	781	30%
Total	2624	100%

As shown in Table 2, students demonstrated varying levels of mastery across the five categories of English inflectional morphemes. Overall, the progressive form (-ing) was the easiest category for the participants, whereas the third-person singular form (-s) emerged as the most challenging. Students also performed relatively well on plural and past forms, while the past participle form showed lower accuracy. These patterns suggest that learners experienced greater difficulty with verb-related inflectional forms that require more complex grammatical processing, particularly subject–verb agreement and participle formation.

Factors Influencing Students' Difficulties in Using Inflectional Morphemes

The questionnaire was used to identify the factors influencing students' difficulties in using English inflectional morphemes. The questionnaire items were grouped into four factors: first language interference, phonological reduction and low salience, limited exposure and practice, and instructional or pedagogical factors. The students' responses were analyzed using frequency and percentage to determine the dominant factors.

Table 3. Students' agreement on factors influencing their difficulties

Factors	Total Agreement
First Language Interference	68%
Phonological Reduction and Low Salience	68%
Limited Exposure and Practice	67%
Instructional or Pedagogical Factors	58%

Table 3 shows that the students' difficulties were influenced by several factors. As presented in Table 2, first language interference was one of the dominant factors influencing students' difficulties. This finding suggests that differences between Indonesian and English morphological systems continue to affect learners' ability to apply English inflectional endings accurately. Because Indonesian verbs do not inflect for tense or subject–verb

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agreement, students may rely on first-language grammatical patterns when producing English sentences, resulting in the omission or misuse of inflectional morphemes.

The second factor was phonological reduction and low salience. The finding indicates that many English inflectional endings are not sufficiently noticeable in spoken language because they are typically short and unstressed. Consequently, students may fail to perceive these endings consistently, even though they carry important grammatical information.

The third factor was limited exposure and practice. This finding suggests that students have relatively few opportunities to encounter and use English grammatical forms beyond classroom activities. As a result, although some students may understand the grammatical rules, insufficient exposure and limited practice may prevent them from applying inflectional morphemes accurately in authentic communication.

The fourth factor was instructional or pedagogical factors. Instructional or pedagogical factors also contributed to students' difficulties, although they appeared to have a relatively smaller influence than the other three factors. This finding indicates that classroom instruction may not always provide sufficient opportunities for students to develop their understanding and use of English inflectional morphemes. More explicit explanations, contextualized learning activities, continuous practice, and corrective feedback may help students apply grammatical forms more accurately in both spoken and written communication.

Based on the questionnaire results, first language interference and phonological reduction or low salience were the strongest factors influencing students' difficulties, with each reaching 68% agreement. Limited exposure and practice followed with 67% agreement, while instructional or pedagogical factors reached 58% agreement. These results show that students' difficulties in using English inflectional morphemes were not caused by one single factor. Instead, the difficulties were related to the interaction of language transfer, pronunciation features, limited practice, and classroom instruction.

Overall, the questionnaire findings indicate that students' difficulties in using English inflectional morphemes cannot be attributed to a single factor. Instead, they appear to result from the interaction of first language interference, phonological reduction and low salience, limited exposure and practice, and instructional or pedagogical factors. Among these, first language interference and phonological reduction emerged as the most influential factors, suggesting that both linguistic differences and the perceptual characteristics of English inflectional endings play a significant role in shaping students' grammatical performance.

DISCUSSION

Students' Difficulties in Using English Inflectional Morphemes

The findings indicate that students experienced different levels of difficulty across the five English inflectional morphemes examined. The third-person singular form (-s) was the most difficult, followed by the past participle form (-ed/-en), whereas the progressive form (-ing) was answered more successfully. The findings also indicate that students' difficulties were influenced by linguistic, experiential, and instructional factors rather than by grammatical knowledge alone.

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The most important finding of this study is that the third-person singular form (-s) emerged as the most difficult inflectional morpheme for the students. Unlike Indonesian, English requires verbs to take the suffix -s or -es when the subject is third-person singular (e.g., he, she, or it). This structural difference may explain why students tended to omit the third-person singular marker when answering the grammar test, as they are likely to transfer Indonesian grammatical patterns into English.

This finding is consistent with Budiharto *et al*., (2021), who found that Indonesian EFL learners experienced difficulty using the third-person singular -s because this grammatical feature has no direct equivalent in Indonesian. Darwis (2023) similarly reported that grammatical interference from Indonesian can affect students' English accuracy. These findings support the present result and indicate that third-person singular -s remains a persistent difficulty for Indonesian EFL learners. This interpretation is also supported by Murakami & Alexopoulou (2016), who found that learners' first language influences the accuracy and acquisition order of English grammatical morphemes. Their findings provide further support for the role of first-language influence in the present students' difficulty with third-person singular -s.

The difficulty with third-person singular -s may also involve grammatical processing. Subject-verb agreement requires learners to connect the subject with the appropriate verb form while processing sentence meaning. Sagarra & Rodriguez (2022) explain that subject-verb agreement involves processing grammatical number and verb morphology simultaneously. Gardner *et al*., (2021) similarly found that learners' first-language background can influence their production of English inflectional morphology. These findings suggest that the present difficulty may involve both structural differences between Indonesian and English and the processing demands of subject-verb agreement.

The present finding is also consistent with Dong & Nguyen (2024), who found that Vietnamese EFL learners used plural -s more accurately than third-person singular -s, with omission being the most frequent error. This similarity suggests that difficulties with third-person singular -s are not unique to Indonesian learners but may also occur among EFL learners whose first languages do not mark verbal agreement in the same way as English. Although they employed essay writing while the present study used a structured grammar test, both studies identified third-person singular -s as one of the most challenging English inflectional morphemes.

The past participle form (-ed/-en) was the second most difficult category. This difficulty may be related to the variation between regular and irregular past participle forms and the need to distinguish them from simple past forms. Past participles also occur in different grammatical constructions, including perfect and passive structures, which may increase the processing demands for learners.

This finding is consistent with Ismani & Simamora (2021), who found that students experienced greater difficulty with past participle forms than with other participles. Ellis (2022) argues that successful morphological acquisition requires learners to notice and consistently process grammatical forms. The present finding therefore suggests that students may recognize past participles but still struggle to select and apply the appropriate form in grammatical contexts.

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The difficulty with past participles also indicates that morphological knowledge is closely related to students' understanding of grammatical structure. Unlike simple past forms, past participles usually occur with auxiliary verbs in perfect and passive constructions. Therefore, students need to understand not only the verb form itself but also the grammatical context in which it is used. This may explain why past participles remained more difficult than regular past tense forms.

This finding is supported by Dogar *et al*., (2024), who argue that the frequency of grammatical forms in language input influences learners' mastery. Similarly, Alsuhayl & Alharbi (2025) found that progressive -ing and plural -s were acquired more accurately than several other grammatical morphemes. These findings suggest that frequent, visually salient, and explicitly practiced forms tend to be acquired more easily than forms requiring subject–verb agreement or complex verb distinctions.

The relatively high performance on plural -s indicates that students experienced fewer difficulties with noun plurality than with subject–verb agreement. Although both forms share the suffix -s, they serve different grammatical functions. This finding is consistent with Dong & Nguyen (2024), who likewise reported that plural -s was used more accurately than third-person singular -s. Therefore, the difficulty appears to lie not in the suffix itself but in the grammatical function it represents.

Students performed better on the past tense (-ed) than on past participle forms, suggesting that regular past tense marking is more familiar because it is introduced earlier and practiced more frequently in English classrooms. Nevertheless, students still experienced difficulties applying past tense accurately, indicating that tense marking remains a challenge for many EFL learners. This finding is consistent with Alotaibi (2016), who also reported persistent difficulties with English tense-related inflectional morphemes.

The variation in students' performance across the five inflectional morphemes supports the view that grammatical morphemes are not acquired with equal accuracy. Madanun *et al*., (2025) and Tewarat *et al*., (2025) likewise found that EFL learners demonstrated different levels of mastery across English inflectional forms. Consistent with those studies, the present findings suggest that forms with greater frequency, clearer meanings, and higher perceptual salience are generally acquired more successfully than forms requiring subject-verb agreement or more complex grammatical processing.

Factors Influencing Students' Difficulties in Using English Inflectional Morphemes

The questionnaire findings provide a broader explanation of why students experienced these difficulties. First language interference and phonological reduction or low salience were the strongest factors, each reaching 68% agreement. These findings indicate that students' problems were not only related to lack of rule knowledge. The influence of Indonesian grammar and the weak perceptual salience of English endings shaped the way students noticed and applied inflectional morphemes.

Phonological reduction and low salience were particularly associated with the difficulty of third-person singular -s and past tense -ed. Because English inflectional endings are often short and weakly pronounced in connected speech, students may fail to notice them even though they carry important grammatical information. This finding supports Mustakim

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et al., (2025), who argue that grammar learning difficulties are influenced by limited awareness, insufficient practice, and instructional factors. The present study therefore suggests that students' difficulties involve both perception and production of grammatical endings.

Limited exposure and practice also contributed to students' difficulties, with 67% agreement. Although students may understand grammatical rules theoretically, limited opportunities to encounter and use English outside the classroom reduce their ability to apply inflectional morphemes automatically. This finding suggests that repeated exposure to meaningful language input and communicative practice is essential for developing both morphological awareness and grammatical accuracy.

Instructional or pedagogical factors also contributed to students' difficulties, although to a lesser extent than the other factors. This finding suggests that grammar instruction should extend beyond rule explanation by incorporating contextualized practice, varied learning activities, and corrective feedback. Previous studies (Amirjalili & Jabbari, 2018; Badawi, 2019; Qasem et al., 2021; Wardana, 2023) likewise emphasize that morphological awareness supports learners' grammatical development across different language skills.

Recent instructional studies further support this interpretation. Sulistyawati et al., (2021) emphasized that morphology instruction can improve learners' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, whereas Usama et al., (2024) and Kanwal (2024) demonstrated that structured instructional approaches can reduce inflectional morpheme errors and improve grammatical accuracy. Collectively, these studies suggest that effective grammar instruction should combine explicit explanation with guided practice and meaningful language use.

The findings have several pedagogical implications. First, teachers should provide greater attention to third-person singular -s and past participle forms because these remained the most difficult categories for students. Rather than assuming that these forms have been mastered after their initial introduction, teachers should revisit them through contextualized sentence- and text-level activities while explicitly highlighting the differences between Indonesian and English grammatical systems to reduce first-language transfer.

Second, instruction should increase students' awareness of English inflectional endings through pronunciation practice, noticing activities, sentence correction tasks, guided production, and corrective feedback. As demonstrated by Usama et al., (2024), systematic instructional approaches can reduce inflectional morpheme errors. Therefore, grammar teaching should integrate explicit explanation with repeated opportunities for meaningful language use to promote more accurate application of English inflectional morphemes.

Theoretically, the findings support the view that EFL learners' acquisition of inflectional morphology is shaped by multiple factors. The results show that morphological difficulty cannot be reduced to one cause. The students' errors were related to L1 transfer, low salience, limited exposure, and instructional practice. This supports a multidimensional understanding of grammar learning, in which form, meaning, input, and learning context interact. The study also strengthens the argument that morphological awareness is important for EFL learners because it helps them understand how word forms contribute to sentence meaning and grammatical accuracy.

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The contextual contribution of this study lies in its focus on senior high school students at MAN 2 Kota Palu. Previous studies have examined inflectional morphemes in different contexts, including university students, writing tasks, and specific morpheme types. This study adds evidence from a controlled grammar test and questionnaire involving eleventh-grade students. The results show that even after several years of English instruction, students still experience difficulty with basic inflectional morphemes, especially those involving subject-verb agreement and verb-form distinction. This finding is important because it suggests that grammar instruction at the senior high school level still needs reinforcement, especially for forms that are structurally different from Indonesian.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the study was limited to eleventh-grade students at MAN 2 Kota Palu, so the findings should not be generalized to all Indonesian EFL learners. Second, the study focused only on five types of English inflectional morphemes: plural -s, third-person singular -s, past form -ed, past participle -ed/-en, and progressive -ing. Other inflectional forms, such as possessive -'s, comparative -er, and superlative -est, were not included in the final analysis. Third, the study used a grammar test and questionnaire, but it did not include interviews, classroom observation, or students' writing samples. Therefore, the findings describe students' test performance and perceived influencing factors but do not fully capture how students use inflectional morphemes in spontaneous communication.

Future research should involve participants from different schools and educational levels to improve the generalizability of the findings. Researchers may also combine grammar tests with writing tasks, oral production, interviews, and classroom observations to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of learners' morphological competence. In addition, future studies should examine the effectiveness of instructional strategies designed to improve students' mastery of difficult English inflectional morphemes.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the difficulties experienced by eleventh-grade students at MAN 2 Kota Palu in using English inflectional morphemes and the factors influencing those difficulties. The findings showed that students experienced varying levels of difficulty across the five inflectional morphemes examined. Third-person singular -s emerged as the most challenging form, followed by the past participle, whereas the progressive form (-ing) was the easiest. The questionnaire further revealed that students' difficulties were mainly influenced by first-language interference, phonological reduction or low salience, limited exposure and practice, and instructional factors. These findings indicate that students' difficulties stem from both linguistic and instructional factors rather than from limited grammatical knowledge alone.

This study contributes to a better understanding of morphological difficulties among Indonesian EFL learners, particularly in the senior high school context, by combining a structured grammar test with questionnaire data to examine both students' performance and the factors underlying their difficulties. The findings suggest that grammar instruction should place greater emphasis on difficult inflectional morphemes through explicit

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explanation, contextualized practice, pronunciation-focused activities, and regular corrective feedback to promote more accurate use of English grammatical forms.

This study was limited to eleventh-grade students at MAN 2 Kota Palu and examined only five English inflectional morphemes. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within this context. Future research is encouraged to involve more diverse participants, investigate additional inflectional forms, and employ multiple data collection methods, such as interviews, classroom observations, writing analysis, and oral production tasks, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of learners' morphological competence.

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