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## **Beyond the Classroom: A Comparative Study of Basic Grammar Instruction in Classroom and Practical Settings for Pre-Departure English Training**

**Aisyah Nurdianingsih P.A.<sup>1\*</sup>, Deborah T.C. Pake Seko<sup>1</sup>, Hawa Asma UI Husna<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Kupang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Politeknik Negeri Media Kreatif, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author: [aisyah.nurdianingsih@staff.politanikoe.ac.id](mailto:aisyah.nurdianingsih@staff.politanikoe.ac.id)

### **Article History**

Received : April 07<sup>th</sup>, 2026

Revised : April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2026

Accepted : May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2026

**Abstract:** English proficiency has become an essential competency for vocational students participating in international academic and professional programs. In pre-departure training, English instruction should not only focus on classroom learning but also provide contextual experiences that support real-life communication skills. This study investigates the effectiveness of teaching basic English grammar beyond the traditional classroom through a pre-departure English training program for vocational students at Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Kupang who were preparing for a joint degree program at Jiangsu University. The study aimed to compare the effectiveness of classroom-based instruction and contextual learning in practical settings in improving students' grammar mastery and speaking ability. Using a quasi-experimental within-subject design, the study involved 14 second-semester students from the Animal Production and Animal Health programs with English proficiency levels ranging from CEFR A1 to B1. The program consisted of 15 meetings, including a pre-test, seven classroom-based grammar sessions, a post-test, six contextual grammar sessions conducted in practical environments such as animal clinics and livestock farms, and a final post-test. Data were collected through grammar tests and speaking assessments administered before instruction, after classroom learning, and after contextual learning. The findings revealed that students showed gradual improvement after classroom instruction and more significant gains after contextual learning, accompanied by higher engagement, confidence, and willingness to communicate. Overall, the study concludes that contextual and experiential learning approaches are more effective in enhancing grammar acquisition and speaking performance among vocational students preparing for international academic mobility.

**Keywords:** contextual learning; experiential learning; grammar acquisition; pre-departure training; speaking skills; vocational education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The increasing participation of students in international academic mobility programs has prompted higher education institutions to strengthen pre-departure preparation, particularly in English proficiency. Many students, especially from vocational institutions, face communication difficulties abroad due to limited exposure to English beyond the classroom, which can affect their academic performance and confidence (Anderson & Lawton, 2018). Therefore, pre-departure English training is essential to support successful academic experiences overseas.

Such programs aim not only to improve language skills but also to develop students' confidence and communicative competence in academic, social, and professional contexts.

Research shows that structured pre-departure programs enhance intercultural awareness, communication skills, and academic readiness, leading to improved confidence during overseas study (Jackson, 2017; Wang & Bai, 2020). Moreover, Husna (2021) states the closer the students to English on their daily life, the better their level of speaking English skill.

Despite the importance of communication skills, grammar remains fundamental, particularly for learners at CEFR A1–B1 levels, who rely on basic structures for clear expression. Grammar instruction helps improve accuracy and clarity, especially for learners with limited exposure to the language (Ellis, 2016; Nassaji, 2017). However, traditional classroom-based grammar teaching often emphasizes rules and exercises without sufficient real-life application, limiting

students' ability to use grammar effectively in authentic communication (Richards, 2017).

To overcome this limitation, contextual and experiential learning approaches have been increasingly adopted. These approaches emphasize learning through real-world tasks and active participation, which enhance engagement, motivation, and communication skills. Studies show that such methods significantly improve students' speaking confidence and grammar use in authentic contexts (Girvan et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2020).

Several previous studies have explored the effectiveness of contextual learning in English instruction. For example, Suryati and Emilia (2019) found that contextual teaching methods improved vocational students' motivation and English proficiency because learning activities were closely related to their professional fields. Another study conducted by Widodo (2018) demonstrated that integrating field-based learning activities enhanced students' communicative competence and grammar understanding. Additionally, research by Wu et al (2021) reported that experiential learning improved students' speaking fluency and grammar accuracy, particularly when learning activities were conducted in authentic environments.

A previous study by Nurdianingsih et al. (2025) examined the use of authentic materials and field practice to improve forestry students' ability in writing Forest Incident Reports at Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Kupang through classroom action research conducted in two cycles. The results showed significant improvement in students' writing skills, including structure, content, terminology, cohesion, and coherence, with average scores increasing from 76.4 to 87.2, alongside higher engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking. However, the study focused only on writing skills and did not compare classroom and field-based learning through a structured experimental design or address grammar as a foundational component for lower-level learners.

This present study is novel in three main aspects. First, it compares classroom-based and practical setting grammar instruction within a pre-departure English training program, which has rarely been explored in previous studies. Second, the study integrates authentic agricultural learning environments, such as animal clinics and livestock farms, into grammar instruction for vocational students. Third, the study employs a

three-stage assessment design to measure learning outcomes more comprehensively. These contributions provide new insights into contextual grammar learning and pre-departure English training for vocational education students.

## METHODS

This study employed a quasi-experimental research design using a within-subject repeated-measures approach to compare students' grammar learning outcomes in classroom-based and practical learning settings. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a quasi-experimental design is appropriate for educational research in situations where random assignment is not possible, while a repeated-measures design allows the same participants to be observed across multiple stages of treatment to identify changes in learning outcomes over time.

The study was conducted from February to April 2026 at Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Kupang as part of a pre-departure English training program for students preparing for an international joint degree program at Jiangsu University. Classroom instruction was conducted in the English classroom at Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Kupang, while the practical learning sessions were carried out in authentic learning environments, including animal clinics and livestock farm practice areas.

The population of this study consisted of second-semester students from the Animal Production and Animal Health study programs at Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Kupang. The sample comprised 14 students selected through purposive sampling based on their participation in the pre-departure English training program. The participants had English proficiency levels ranging from CEFR A1 to B1 and had limited experience using English in authentic communicative contexts, making them suitable participants for the study.

The research was conducted in 15 meetings consisting of one pre-test session, seven classroom-based grammar instruction sessions, one post-test after classroom instruction, six practical setting instruction sessions, and one final post-test. The classroom instruction phase focused on basic grammar topics such as tenses, modal verbs, and noun structures through guided explanation, discussions, speaking activities, and controlled practice exercises. The practical instruction phase was conducted in contextual

learning environments, such as animal clinics and livestock farms, where students applied grammar structures in authentic communicative tasks, including describing animals, explaining procedures, and giving instructions related to their vocational field.

Data were collected through grammar tests, speaking assessments, and semi-structured interviews. Grammar tests consisting of 20 items were administered at three stages: pre-test, post-test after classroom instruction, and post-test after practical instruction. Speaking assessments were conducted through short interviews evaluating grammar accuracy, fluency, vocabulary use, and comprehensibility. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the practical sessions to explore students' perceptions, confidence, motivation, and learning experiences during the contextual learning activities.

Quantitative data obtained from grammar tests and speaking assessments were analyzed descriptively using mean scores, gain scores, and percentage improvement to identify students' learning progress across the three stages. In addition, paired-sample t-tests were used to determine the significance of differences between pre-test and post-test scores. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d to measure the magnitude of the instructional impact. Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews were analyzed descriptively through thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to students' engagement, confidence, motivation, and learning challenges during the instructional process.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

The findings of this study are presented through descriptive statistics and comparative analysis across three stages: pre-test, post-test after classroom instruction, and post-test after practical setting instruction.

**Table 1.** Mean Scores of Grammar Test

Stage	Mean Score
Pre-test	63.86
Post-test 1 (Classroom)	68.57
Post-test 2 (Practical Setting)	83.43

As shown in Table 1, students' grammar scores increased progressively across the three stages. The mean score improved from 63.86 in the pre-test to 68.57 after classroom instruction,

and further increased to 83.43 after practical setting instruction. To determine the statistical significance of these improvements, paired-sample t-tests were conducted. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Paired Sample t-test Results and Effect Size

Comparison	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Pre-test vs Post-test 1	-2.46	0.0029	0.66
Post-test 1 vs Post-test 2	-12.79	<0.001	3.42
Pre-test vs Post-test 2	-7.40	<0.001	1.98

The results in Table 2 show that the improvement from pre-test to post-test after classroom instruction is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that classroom-based grammar instruction effectively improved students' performance. The effect size ( $d = 0.66$ ) suggests a moderate impact.

A much stronger effect is observed between post-test after classroom instruction and post-test after practical setting instruction. The difference is highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), with a very large effect size ( $d = 3.42$ ), indicating that practical setting instruction had a substantially greater impact on students' learning. Similarly, the comparison between pre-test and final post-test also shows a highly significant improvement ( $p < 0.001$ ) with a very large effect size ( $d = 1.98$ ), confirming strong overall learning gains.

In addition to quantitative data, qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews revealed that most students showed higher interest and motivation when learning took place in practical settings. Most students reported that they were more interested and motivated when learning was conducted in practical settings, particularly in environments such as livestock farms and animal facilities. They expressed that learning in the field created a more engaging and dynamic atmosphere compared to traditional classroom settings, which are often perceived as monotonous.

Students indicated that the practical environment reduced boredom and increased their enthusiasm to participate actively in learning activities. This positive learning atmosphere allowed them to focus better and facilitated a deeper understanding of the grammar materials being taught. Rather than passively receiving information, students were involved in meaningful tasks such as observing animals, describing real conditions, and discussing practical activities, which made the learning process more interactive and enjoyable.

Furthermore, students reported that the contextual nature of learning in the farm setting helped them grasp grammar concepts more easily. By directly applying grammar structures in real-life situations, they were able to connect abstract rules with concrete experiences. This connection enhanced their ability to remember and use the language more effectively. As a result, grammar learning became more meaningful, not only as a theoretical subject but as a practical communication tool relevant to their field of study.

In addition, several students mentioned that they felt more confident using English in practical settings because the focus shifted from grammatical accuracy to communication and task completion. This reduced anxiety and encouraged them to speak more freely, even when making mistakes. Such conditions are essential for developing communicative competence, as learners are given opportunities to experiment with language in authentic contexts.

## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that both classroom-based and practical setting instruction contribute to students' grammar learning; however, the magnitude of their impact differs significantly. The moderate improvement observed after classroom instruction confirms that explicit grammar teaching plays an important role in building foundational knowledge. Through structured explanation, guided practice, and controlled exercises, students were able to understand basic grammatical forms such as tenses, modal verbs, and noun structures. This finding aligns with the argument that explicit instruction supports accuracy and grammatical awareness, particularly for learners at lower proficiency levels (Nassaji, 2017; Ellis, 2017).

Despite this contribution, the results show that classroom instruction alone is not sufficient to produce substantial learning gains. The relatively smaller effect size indicates that while students may understand grammar conceptually, they often struggle to apply it in real communication. This gap between knowledge and use reflects a common limitation of traditional classroom-based instruction, which tends to emphasize form-focused learning rather than meaningful communication (Richards, 2017). As a result, students may perform well in controlled exercises but lack confidence and fluency in authentic language use.

In contrast, the significantly higher improvement observed after practical setting instruction highlights the effectiveness of contextual and experiential learning. The very large effect sizes found in this study indicate that learning in authentic environments has a strong impact on students' ability to internalize and apply grammar. When students engaged in real tasks such as describing animals, explaining procedures, and discussing farm activities, they were required to use language meaningfully, which promotes deeper cognitive processing and retention. This supports the principles of experiential learning, which emphasize that knowledge is constructed through direct experience and active engagement (Kolb, 2017; Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2017).

One key factor contributing to this improvement is the contextualization of grammar. In practical settings, grammar is no longer presented as isolated rules but as part of real communication. Students are able to observe how grammatical structures function in specific situations relevant to their field of study. This connection between language and context enhances comprehension and retention, as learners can link abstract concepts with concrete experiences. Contextual learning environments have been shown to significantly improve learners' ability to use language appropriately in real-life situations (Wu, Marek, & Yen, 2020).

Another important aspect is the role of active participation. Experiential learning environments require students to engage actively in tasks rather than passively receive information. This active involvement increases attention, motivation, and cognitive engagement, all of which contribute to more effective learning outcomes. In this study, students participated directly in observing, describing, and interacting within real environments, which created opportunities for authentic language use. Such conditions are essential for developing both grammatical competence and communicative competence (Richards, 2017).

The qualitative findings further reinforce this interpretation. Students reported that learning in practical settings was more interesting and enjoyable, which reduced boredom and increased their motivation. A positive and engaging learning atmosphere plays a crucial role in facilitating language acquisition, as it encourages learners to participate actively and sustain their effort. When students are motivated and interested, they are

more likely to absorb and retain new knowledge effectively (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2017).

In addition, students' increased confidence in using English is a significant outcome. In classroom settings, learners often experience anxiety due to the fear of making mistakes, which can limit participation. However, in practical environments, the focus shifts from grammatical accuracy to communication and task completion. This shift reduces anxiety and encourages students to use language more freely. Such conditions are essential for developing communicative competence, as learners are given opportunities to experiment with language in authentic contexts (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2019).

The improvement in fluency observed during practical sessions also reflects this change in learning conditions. Students were able to produce language more spontaneously and interact more naturally with peers. This suggests that practical setting instruction supports the development of automaticity in language use, where learners can access and apply grammatical knowledge more efficiently. Fluency development is closely linked to meaningful interaction and repeated exposure to authentic communication situations (Ellis & Shintani, 2017).

However, the findings also indicate that increased fluency does not always correspond with full grammatical accuracy. Some errors in sentence structure and tense usage were still observed during spontaneous communication. This suggests that while experiential learning enhances communication skills, it should be complemented by explicit grammar instruction to ensure accuracy. A balanced approach that integrates both form-focused and meaning-focused instruction is therefore necessary for optimal language development (Nassaji, 2017).

This complementary relationship highlights the importance of an integrated instructional model. By combining classroom-based grammar instruction with practical, contextual learning environments, educators can address both accuracy and fluency. Such an approach is particularly relevant in vocational education, where learning is closely connected to real-world applications and professional contexts.

Furthermore, the findings have important implications for pre-departure English training programs. Students preparing for international academic mobility require not only knowledge of

grammar but also the ability to communicate effectively in authentic situations. Traditional classroom instruction alone may not fully prepare them for these demands. Therefore, incorporating experiential learning components into pre-departure programs can enhance students' readiness for academic and professional communication abroad (Jackson, 2017; Wang & Bai, 2020).

Overall, this study highlights the importance of integrating contextual and experiential learning into grammar instruction. While classroom-based learning remains essential for building foundational knowledge, practical setting instruction plays a critical role in transforming that knowledge into effective communication skills. This integrated approach provides a more comprehensive and effective model for language learning, particularly in vocational higher education contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the effectiveness of grammar instruction delivered through two different learning environments—classroom-based and practical setting instruction—within a pre-departure English training program for vocational students. The findings demonstrate that while classroom instruction contributes to the development of foundational grammatical knowledge, it is the integration of practical, context-based learning that leads to more substantial improvement in students' grammar mastery and communicative ability.

The results show that students experienced gradual progress after classroom instruction, indicating the importance of explicit teaching in introducing grammatical structures and supporting accuracy. However, the significantly higher gains observed after practical setting instruction confirm that contextual and experiential learning environments are more effective in facilitating the application of grammar in real communication. This suggests that grammar learning becomes more meaningful and impactful when it is embedded in authentic tasks relevant to students' field of study.

The qualitative findings further reinforce this conclusion by highlighting the role of learning environment in shaping students' motivation, engagement, and confidence. Students reported that learning in practical

settings created a more dynamic and enjoyable atmosphere, reducing boredom and increasing their willingness to participate. As a result, they were able to understand and retain grammar more effectively, while also developing greater confidence in using English for communication.

Taken together, these findings indicate that an integrated instructional approach—combining classroom-based grammar instruction with experiential learning in real-world contexts—is the most effective model for vocational language education. Such an approach not only supports grammatical accuracy but also promotes fluency, confidence, and communicative competence, which are essential for students preparing for international academic mobility.

In terms of practical implications, this study suggests that pre-departure English training programs should incorporate contextual and field-based learning components to better prepare students for academic and professional communication in global settings. For vocational institutions, aligning language instruction with students' disciplinary contexts can enhance both relevance and learning outcomes.

Finally, this study opens opportunities for further research. Future studies may involve larger sample sizes, different vocational disciplines, or longer intervention periods to examine the sustainability of learning outcomes. In addition, further research could explore the integration of digital or blended learning environments with experiential approaches to expand the applicability of this model. Such developments would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of effective language instruction in vocational and international education contexts.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all parties who contributed to the completion of this study. Special appreciation is extended to the management and academic staff of Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Kupang for their support in facilitating the implementation of the pre-departure English training program. The authors are also deeply grateful to the students from the Animal Production and Animal Health Study Programs who participated actively and cooperatively throughout the research process. The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of colleagues and resource persons

who provided valuable insights, feedback, and assistance during the development and implementation of this study. Appreciation is also extended to the institutions and field units, including animal clinics and livestock practice facilities, which allowed the research activities to be conducted in authentic learning environments. Finally, the authors sincerely thank all individuals and parties who, directly or indirectly, supported this research and contributed to its successful completion.

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