

Building Strong Foundations: Weekly Grammar and Basic Mathematics Mentoring Among Papuan Pre-Service English Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of Papuan pre-service English teachers participating in a weekly academic mentoring program at STKIP Kristen Wamena. Employing a qualitative research design, the study involved 12 participants consisting of seven academic advising students and five dormitory students who voluntarily joined the program. Mentoring sessions were conducted every Monday and Friday evening, focusing on English grammar (simple present tense) and basic mathematics (multiplication and division). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and analyzed using thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged. First, all participants reported limited prior knowledge of English grammar and basic mathematics, which negatively affected their classroom participation and academic performance. Second, 11 participants stated that the mentoring program increased their motivation and confidence, while 10 reported improved understanding of subject-verb agreement, plural forms, prepositions, and sentence construction. Third, five participants successfully passed previously repeated English courses, and nine believed their academic performance had improved. The findings suggest that structured academic mentoring strengthens foundational competencies, enhances learning motivation, builds confidence, and supports the professional preparation of Papuan pre-service English teachers.

Keywords: academic mentoring; pre-service English teachers; grammar learning; learning motivation; Papua Pegunungan

INTRODUCTION

Preparing competent English teachers requires more than developing language proficiency alone. Contemporary teacher education is expected to equip pre-service teachers with strong disciplinary knowledge, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and the confidence to facilitate meaningful learning experiences in increasingly diverse educational contexts. These competencies are particularly important in English language teacher education because future teachers are expected not only to communicate effectively in English but also to explain linguistic concepts accurately, assess students' learning, interpret educational data, and make pedagogical decisions based on evidence. International reports have consistently emphasized that strengthening foundational academic competencies remains a priority for higher education institutions seeking to improve teacher quality and educational outcomes (Darling-Hammond (2023); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023); and UNESCO (2023)).

Among these foundational competencies, grammatical competence continues to occupy a central position despite the growing emphasis on communicative language teaching. A solid understanding of grammar enables future English teachers to produce accurate language, provide explicit explanations of language structures, identify learners' errors, and design effective

instructional activities. Recent scholarship argues that communicative competence and grammatical competence should not be viewed as competing goals but rather as complementary dimensions of language proficiency, particularly in teacher education programs where future educators are expected to teach language explicitly (Ellis (2022) and Nassaji, H., & Fotos, (2021)). Nevertheless, many English language learners continue to struggle with basic grammatical structures such as the simple present tense, resulting in recurring errors in both spoken and written communication and reducing their confidence to participate actively during classroom learning.

In addition to linguistic competence, basic numeracy represents another essential yet frequently overlooked component of teacher preparation. Although mathematics is not the primary focus of English education programs, pre-service English teachers routinely employ mathematical skills in professional contexts, including calculating assessment scores, analyzing research data, managing classroom records, organizing schedules, and conducting educational research. Numeracy also supports logical reasoning, analytical thinking, and problem-solving, competencies that are increasingly recognized as transferable skills across academic disciplines (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023) and UNESCO (2022)) Consequently, inadequate mathematical proficiency may limit students' academic performance beyond mathematics itself and affect their readiness to perform professional responsibilities as future educators.

Academic competence, however, cannot be separated from students' motivation to learn. Self-Determination Theory suggests that learners are more likely to demonstrate persistence, engagement, and academic achievement when they experience competence, autonomy, and supportive interpersonal relationships (Deci, E. L., & Ryan, 2021). Conversely, students who repeatedly experience academic failure often develop low self-confidence, reduced participation, avoidance of challenging learning tasks, and diminished intrinsic motivation. These negative experiences may gradually create a cycle in which poor academic performance decreases motivation, while declining motivation further limits opportunities for academic improvement (Bandura, A., & Schunk, 2021). Breaking this cycle requires learning environments that provide consistent encouragement, individualized support, and opportunities for students to experience small but meaningful academic success.

Academic mentoring has emerged as one promising strategy for addressing these challenges. Unlike conventional classroom instruction, mentoring emphasizes sustained interpersonal relationships, individualized guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous academic support that respond to students' specific learning needs. Recent studies have demonstrated that mentoring contributes positively to students' academic engagement, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, persistence, and overall learning achievement, particularly among students from underserved educational backgrounds ((Crisp, G., Baker, V. L., Griffin, K. A., Lunsford, L. G., & Pifer, 2022) and Gershenfeld, S., Hood, D. W., & Zhan, 2022). By creating a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable asking questions, making mistakes, and receiving immediate feedback, mentoring enables learners to strengthen both cognitive competencies and affective dimensions of learning.

The relevance of academic mentoring becomes particularly significant in geographically remote and educationally underserved regions such as Papua Pegunungan, Indonesia. Higher education institutions in remote contexts frequently encounter disparities in students' prior educational experiences, unequal access to quality learning resources, shortages of academic support services, and diverse levels of academic preparedness (UNESCO (2023) and World Economic Forum (2022)). These contextual realities require teacher educators to adopt responsive instructional approaches that extend beyond regular classroom teaching and address students' individual academic needs. Within such settings, mentoring functions not merely as remedial instruction but as an educational partnership that nurtures students' academic resilience, confidence, and professional identity.

These challenges were evident among several pre-service English teachers in the English Education Department at STKIP Kristen Wamena, Papua Pegunungan. Through regular classroom teaching and academic advising, the researcher observed that many students demonstrated persistent difficulties in accurately using the simple present tense despite repeated classroom instruction. Similar difficulties were found in performing basic mathematical calculations required for classroom assessments, academic assignments, and educational research. Classroom observations further revealed that these academic weaknesses were accompanied by low learning motivation, limited classroom participation, reluctance to ask questions, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence when communicating in English. Informal discussions with students suggested that these difficulties were associated with diverse educational backgrounds, limited opportunities for continuous practice before entering university, and previous learning experiences that emphasized memorization rather than conceptual understanding. These conditions collectively reduced students' engagement in learning activities and contributed to relatively low academic performance.

Recognizing these challenges, the researcher initiated a voluntary academic mentoring program involving twelve advising students. Conducted twice a week outside regular class hours, the mentoring sessions focused on strengthening students' understanding of the simple present tense and improving their basic mathematical skills through repeated practice, individualized guidance, collaborative learning, and continuous encouragement. Rather than functioning as remedial lessons, the mentoring program sought to establish a supportive learning community in which students could gradually rebuild their confidence, improve their academic competence, and develop more positive attitudes toward learning. Exploring students' experiences during this mentoring process is particularly valuable because it provides deeper insights into how sustained academic support contributes not only to cognitive improvement but also to motivation, confidence, and professional development among pre-service English teachers in remote educational contexts.

Despite growing interest in mentoring within higher education, recent studies have primarily examined mentoring during teaching practicums, induction programs, or professional development, while relatively little attention has been given to sustained academic mentoring that simultaneously addresses foundational competencies such as grammar, numeracy, and learning motivation among pre-service English teachers in remote Indonesian contexts. This gap is particularly evident in Papua Pegunungan, where empirical evidence regarding contextually

responsive mentoring remains limited. Therefore, this qualitative study seeks to explore the lived experiences of Papuan pre-service English teachers participating in weekly grammar and basic mathematics mentoring at STKIP Kristen Wamena. Specifically, the study aims to understand how students perceived the mentoring process, how they described their academic challenges prior to participation, and how regular mentoring influenced their academic competence, learning motivation, confidence, and readiness to become future English teachers.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of Papuan pre-service English teachers participating in a weekly academic mentoring program at STKIP Kristen Wamena, Papua Pegunungan, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions, experiences, and reflections regarding the mentoring program rather than to measure its effectiveness through statistical analysis. By focusing on students' lived experiences, this study sought to understand how weekly mentoring influenced their academic competence, learning motivation, confidence, and readiness to participate in classroom learning and prepare for their future profession as English teachers.

The participants consisted of twelve Papuan pre-service English teachers enrolled in the English Education Department at STKIP Kristen Wamena. Seven participants were the researcher's academic advising students, while the remaining five participants were students living in the campus dormitory who voluntarily joined the mentoring program because they needed additional academic support in English and basic mathematics. Purposive sampling was employed because all participants had direct experience participating in the mentoring sessions and were therefore able to provide rich and relevant information related to the objectives of the study.

The mentoring program was conducted twice a week outside regular classroom hours throughout the research period. Sessions were held every Monday and Friday evening from 8:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at STKIP Kristen Wamena. Each meeting focused on a different academic area. Monday sessions were dedicated to English grammar, particularly the simple present tense, emphasizing the construction of both simple and compound sentences through guided explanation, examples, collaborative exercises, and individual practice. Friday sessions focused on strengthening students' basic mathematical skills, particularly multiplication and division, through repeated practice, problem-solving activities, and individualized guidance. The mentoring sessions were designed to provide a supportive learning environment where students could ask questions freely, receive immediate feedback, and strengthen academic skills that they perceived as challenging during their regular classes.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. This interview format allowed participants to describe their experiences, opinions, and reflections in their own words while enabling the researcher to probe further when clarification was needed. The interview questions explored five major areas: (1) students' academic performance and learning difficulties encountered during regular classroom instruction,

particularly in English grammar and basic mathematics; (2) students' perceptions of the challenges they experienced before participating in the mentoring program; (3) changes in students' learning motivation after regularly attending the Monday and Friday evening mentoring sessions; (4) students' perceptions of their academic performance, confidence, classroom participation, and readiness to learn following their participation in the mentoring program; and (5) students' recommendations for English lecturers in the English Education Department at STKIP Kristen Wamena regarding strategies that could improve classroom teaching and better support students' academic development. Each interview was conducted individually to encourage honest responses and to provide participants with sufficient opportunity to share their personal experiences without influence from other students.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun, V., & Clarke (2006). Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated to identify meaningful units related to students' academic challenges, learning motivation, confidence, classroom participation, perceptions of the mentoring program, and suggestions for improving teaching practices. Similar codes were subsequently organized into broader themes that represented recurring patterns across participants' experiences. The themes were continuously reviewed, refined, and interpreted to ensure that they accurately reflected participants' perspectives and addressed the research objectives.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher employed several strategies commonly used in qualitative research. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants during the mentoring program and by conducting individual interviews that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences. Member checking was conducted by providing participants with opportunities to review the summaries of their interview responses to ensure the accuracy of interpretation. In addition, reflective field notes recorded throughout the mentoring sessions were used to support data interpretation and provide contextual understanding of students' learning experiences.

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the research at any time without academic consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews were conducted. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and research reports, and all interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and used solely for academic research purposes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Students' Limited Academic Foundation Prior to the Mentoring Program

The first theme that emerged from the interviews concerned students' limited academic foundation before participating in the weekly mentoring program. All twelve participants consistently reported that they entered university with inadequate knowledge of basic English

grammar, particularly the simple present tense. Most students explained that they had experienced limited exposure to English during their primary and secondary education, resulting in difficulties understanding fundamental grammatical concepts that are expected at the university level. Consequently, they frequently struggled to construct grammatically correct sentences and experienced uncertainty when communicating in English during classroom activities.

The findings also revealed that students' grammatical difficulties were not limited to memorizing language rules but extended to applying those rules in authentic communication. Many participants indicated that they were unable to distinguish between singular and plural nouns, identify appropriate subject-verb agreement, or determine the correct verb forms when producing simple present tense sentences. These weaknesses frequently resulted in errors during speaking and writing activities and affected their participation in English courses. Students therefore perceived grammar as one of the most challenging components of their academic learning. These findings align with recent empirical studies on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in rural or under-resourced regions, which demonstrate that foundational linguistic gaps—especially intense usage and subject-verb agreement—significantly impede academic writing and verbal communication among first-year university students (Ahmadi, D., & Abdullah (2021) and Utami, W., Rahayu, S., & Setiawan (2024)).

Another important issue identified during the interviews was the diversity of students' educational backgrounds. Several participants acknowledged that they had not received systematic English instruction before entering university. In many cases, English learning had emphasized memorizing vocabulary or translating isolated sentences rather than developing conceptual understanding of grammar. As a result, students lacked the foundational knowledge necessary to understand more advanced language concepts introduced in higher education. This situation created a substantial gap between curriculum expectations and students' actual academic readiness.

The interviews further demonstrated that inadequate grammatical knowledge influenced students' classroom behavior. Participants described feelings of hesitation, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes whenever lecturers asked questions or invited students to participate in discussions. Rather than contributing actively, many students preferred to remain silent because they lacked confidence in constructing accurate English sentences. These experiences gradually affected not only their language learning but also their willingness to engage in collaborative classroom activities. Research on foreign language anxiety confirms that a fragile structural foundation directly drives learner reticence and classroom apprehension, forming a barrier to communicative confidence (MacIntyre, P. D., & Gregersen (2022) & Sari, D. P., & Kurniawan (2023)).

Students also reported experiencing similar challenges in basic mathematics. Although mathematics is not a core subject within the English Education Department, participants admitted that they experienced difficulties performing multiplication and division accurately. These weaknesses occasionally influenced their ability to calculate assignment scores, understand numerical information, and complete academic tasks requiring logical reasoning. The

findings therefore suggest that students' academic difficulties extended beyond language learning and reflected broader challenges in foundational academic competence.

Taken together, these findings indicate that students' low academic performance was strongly associated with limited prior educational opportunities and insufficient mastery of foundational knowledge before entering university. Rather than interpreting these weaknesses as indicators of low ability, the present findings suggest that students required structured academic support that addressed fundamental learning needs. Understanding students' educational backgrounds was therefore essential for designing mentoring activities that were responsive to their academic conditions and capable of supporting their long-term development as future English teachers.

Weekly Mentoring as a Source of Learning Motivation and Academic Confidence

The second theme identified from the interviews concerned the influence of the weekly mentoring program on students' learning motivation and academic confidence. Eleven of the twelve participants stated that attending the Monday and Friday evening mentoring sessions significantly increased their enthusiasm for learning. Students explained that the mentoring environment differed substantially from regular classroom instruction because they experienced less pressure, received immediate guidance, and were encouraged to ask questions without fear of criticism. This supportive atmosphere enabled students to participate more actively and gradually develop greater confidence in their own abilities.

Students consistently described the mentoring sessions as opportunities to strengthen their understanding through repeated practice. Monday evening sessions focusing on English grammar allowed participants to review the simple present tense in greater depth, while Friday sessions provided additional practice in basic mathematical operations. Because the mentoring groups were relatively small, students received individualized explanations whenever they encountered difficulties. This personalized approach enabled them to learn at their own pace and revisit concepts that they had not fully understood during regular classroom instruction. Small-group mentoring and tailored scaffolding have been widely documented to lower affective filters and foster self-efficacy in higher education contexts (Bandura, A., & Schunk (2021) and Kitchin, R., Thomas, G., & Hughes (2023).

A particularly noteworthy finding was the improvement in students' confidence when using English. Ten participants reported that they could now distinguish between subject-verb agreement, singular and plural forms, appropriate prepositions, and the construction of simple and compound sentences using the simple present tense. Although students acknowledged that they were still learning, they perceived substantial progress compared with their abilities before joining the mentoring program. Increased understanding of these grammatical concepts encouraged students to participate more confidently during English classes.

The mentoring program also appeared to influence students' attitudes toward learning. Prior to participating in the program, many students described themselves as passive learners who tended to avoid asking questions or participating in discussions. Following regular

participation in the mentoring sessions, students reported becoming more active during classroom learning because they possessed greater confidence in their understanding of the lesson. The supportive relationship established during mentoring reduced anxiety and encouraged students to view mistakes as opportunities for learning rather than sources of embarrassment. This shift from passive avoidance to active engagement supports the socio-cultural perspective on language acquisition, where non-judgmental community-of-practice frameworks encourage low-anxiety interactions (Lave, J., & Wenger (2020) and Mercer, S., & Dörnyei (2020)).

Another important outcome involved students' perceptions of the lecturer's role. Participants appreciated the consistency of the mentoring schedule, the opportunity to receive additional explanations outside regular classes, and the individualized attention provided during each session. Students believed that continuous guidance contributed significantly to maintaining their motivation because they felt that someone genuinely cared about their academic progress. This perception strengthened students' commitment to continue practicing English and mathematics even beyond the scheduled mentoring sessions.

Overall, the findings suggest that the mentoring program contributed not only to academic learning but also to important affective dimensions of education. Increased motivation, greater confidence, improved classroom participation, and more positive attitudes toward learning collectively demonstrate that supportive academic mentoring can influence students' learning experiences beyond content mastery alone. For pre-service English teachers, these changes are particularly meaningful because confidence and willingness to communicate represent essential characteristics of effective future educators ((Dewaele, J.-M., Witney, J., & Saito, 2022)

Perceived Improvement in Academic Achievement Following the Mentoring Program

The third theme emerging from the interviews concerned students' perceptions of improved academic achievement following their participation in the mentoring program. Five participants reported successfully passing English courses that they had previously failed and were required to repeat, particularly Vocabulary and Speaking courses. Students regarded this achievement as one of the most meaningful outcomes of the mentoring experience because these courses had previously represented significant academic challenges. Their success increased their confidence in completing subsequent coursework within the English Education program.

Nine participants also believed that their cumulative academic performance had improved after regularly attending the mentoring sessions. Although students acknowledged that grade improvement could not be attributed solely to the mentoring program, they perceived that stronger understanding of grammar and greater confidence in classroom participation positively influenced their overall academic achievement. Several participants explained that they became more willing to complete assignments independently, participate in classroom discussions, and prepare for examinations because they possessed stronger foundational knowledge. These findings align with recent research showing that targeted developmental interventions in higher education directly promote academic resilience and higher retention rates among historically

underserved student cohorts (Giaino-Ballard, C., & Spencer, 2020 and Nguyen, T. H., & Larson, 2022)

Students further emphasized that improved grammatical competence enabled them to perform more effectively in other English-related courses. Understanding the simple present tense facilitated comprehension of reading materials, supported writing assignments, and enhanced oral communication during classroom presentations. Consequently, participants perceived grammar not as an isolated subject but as a foundational competency that contributed to success across multiple areas of language learning. This finding highlights the interconnected nature of language skills within teacher education programs (Ellis, R., & Shintani, 2020).

Another important finding concerned students' readiness for future professional responsibilities. Participants explained that improved understanding of grammar increased their confidence in becoming future English teachers because they believed they would eventually need to explain similar concepts to their own students. Likewise, improved basic mathematical skills enhanced students' confidence in handling classroom administration, calculating assessment scores, and conducting simple educational research. Students therefore viewed the mentoring program as preparation not only for university learning but also for their future careers as educators.

Participants also offered recommendations for lecturers within the English Education Department at STKIP Kristen Wamena. Most students suggested that lecturers should provide additional opportunities for guided practice, encourage active classroom participation, and create learning environments where students feel comfortable asking questions. Students believed that regular academic support, constructive feedback, and patient explanations would help future cohorts overcome similar academic difficulties. These recommendations indicate that students valued instructional approaches emphasizing continuous support rather than one-time explanations.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that the weekly mentoring program was perceived as contributing positively to students' academic achievement, confidence, and professional readiness. Although the purpose of this qualitative study was not to measure effectiveness through statistical evidence, students consistently described meaningful improvements in their academic experiences following regular participation in the mentoring sessions. Collectively, these findings suggest that structured academic mentoring may represent a valuable strategy for strengthening foundational competencies among Papuan pre-service English teachers while simultaneously fostering motivation, confidence, and readiness to become future educators in Papua Pegunungan.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study explored the experiences of twelve Papuan pre-service English teachers who participated in a weekly academic mentoring program at STKIP Kristen Wamena. The findings revealed that the participants entered university with limited foundational knowledge of English grammar, particularly the simple present tense, as well as difficulties in basic mathematical

skills. These academic challenges were closely associated with limited previous learning experiences and contributed to low confidence, reduced classroom participation, and unsatisfactory academic performance.

The mentoring program conducted every Monday and Friday evening provided students with consistent opportunities to review fundamental concepts through individualized guidance and repeated practice. The findings showed that the mentoring sessions enhanced students' learning motivation, strengthened their confidence in using English, and improved their understanding of essential grammatical concepts such as subject-verb agreement, plural forms, prepositions, and sentence construction. The supportive learning environment also encouraged students to participate more actively during regular classroom instruction.

The study further indicated that the mentoring program contributed positively to students' perceived academic achievement. Several participants successfully passed English courses that they had previously repeated, while most believed that their overall academic performance had improved after consistently attending the mentoring sessions. Beyond improving academic competence, the program also increased students' confidence and readiness to become future English teachers capable of serving schools in Papua Pegunungan.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that teacher education institutions, particularly STKIP Kristen Wamena, consider incorporating structured academic mentoring as a complementary learning support program for students experiencing foundational academic difficulties. Regular mentoring, tutorial sessions, and small-group learning activities may strengthen students' academic competence while simultaneously fostering motivation, confidence, and classroom engagement.

Future research should involve larger and more diverse participant groups across teacher education institutions in Papua and other remote regions of Indonesia to obtain broader perspectives on academic mentoring. Researchers may also employ longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to examine the long-term influence of mentoring on students' academic achievement, professional identity, teaching competence, and career readiness.

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