

## A Case Study of Using Common and Proper Noun for Civil Engineering Students in University of Asahan

Harry Sambayu<sup>1</sup>, Derliana Hasibuan<sup>2\*</sup>, Lisa Fitri Meidipa<sup>3</sup>

English Education Department Universitas Asahan, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

Informatics Engineering Universitas Asahan, Indonesia<sup>2</sup>

English Education Department Universitas Graha Nusantara, Indonesia<sup>3</sup>

\* Corresponding Author's Email: [derlianahasibuan1989@gmail.com](mailto:derlianahasibuan1989@gmail.com)

### Sejarah Artikel:

Received 05 23, 2025  
Accepted 05 24, 2025  
Published 05 26, 2025

### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the competence of second-semester students at Asahan University in distinguishing and using common nouns and proper nouns effectively. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, interviews were conducted with 20 students from the Civil Engineering Department to assess their grammatical understanding. The findings indicate that 10 students demonstrated moderate proficiency, achieving an average score of 75, while the remaining students encountered difficulties in capitalization rules and contextual application. These results highlight the need for enhanced instructional strategies that integrate practical exercises and real-world applications to improve students' mastery of noun usage. This research contributes to broader discussions on English grammar education and its role in strengthening language proficiency among learners.*

**Keywords:** Common Noun; Proper Noun; Civil Engineering Students; Using

### How To Cite:

Harry Sambayu, Derliana Hasibuan & Lisa Fitri Meidipa. (2025). A Case Study of Using Common and Proper Noun for Civil Engineering Students in University of Asahan. Jejak Digital: Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin, 1(3), 524-530. <https://doi.org/10.63822/2pf0wj13>

## INTRODUCTION

Nouns form a fundamental cornerstone of English grammar, providing the primary means through which speakers and writers identify people, places, objects, and abstract ideas. Without a solid understanding of nouns, constructing coherent and meaningful sentences becomes challenging. Among the various types of nouns, the distinction between common nouns and proper nouns is particularly important, especially for non-native speakers learning English as a second language. Mastering these distinctions is crucial not only for grammatical accuracy but also for effective communication in both academic and professional contexts.

According to Altenberg and Vago (2010), common nouns refer to general categories or classes of people, places, things, or concepts—examples include “student,” “university,” and “building.” These nouns are not capitalized unless they begin a sentence. In contrast, proper nouns designate specific and unique entities, such as “John,” “Asahan University,” or “Eiffel Tower,” and are always capitalized to signal their specificity (Altenberg & Vago, 2010). This distinction is essential because it affects both the grammatical correctness and clarity of written and spoken language.

As Dykes (2007) points out, the proper identification and use of common and proper nouns significantly impact sentence structure and overall communication. For instance, failure to capitalize proper nouns can lead to misunderstandings and reduce the perceived proficiency of the writer or speaker. Moreover, students learning English often encounter challenges in distinguishing these noun types because of differing conventions in their native languages, particularly concerning capitalization and naming systems (Crystal, 2003).

Huddleston and Pullum (2005) argue that mastering noun categories enhances not only grammatical accuracy but also students’ broader linguistic competence. They note that a clear understanding of how nouns function within sentences helps learners to construct more precise and varied sentence patterns, thereby improving both their writing and speaking skills. Furthermore, Leech and Svartvik (2002) emphasize that teaching the distinction between common and proper nouns early in the learning process lays a critical foundation for more advanced grammatical concepts, such as noun phrases and subject-verb agreement.

In the context of Indonesian learners, these challenges are particularly pronounced. Indonesian does not consistently capitalize proper nouns in the same way as English, and the language’s flexible structure may not always emphasize distinctions between noun categories (Sneddon et al., 2010). This linguistic gap can lead to persistent errors among students, especially in formal writing tasks required in higher education settings. Therefore, targeted instructional strategies that explicitly address these differences are necessary.

Furthermore, recent research highlights the benefits of integrating real-world applications into grammar instruction. Ellis (2008) advocates for the inclusion of contextualized grammar exercises that allow learners to practice distinguishing and using nouns in meaningful contexts, such as project reports, presentations, and field-specific documents. This approach not only reinforces grammatical concepts but also aligns with students’ academic and professional needs, making the learning process more relevant and engaging.

Given these considerations, the present study investigates the competence of second-semester Civil Engineering students at Asahan University in identifying and using common and proper nouns correctly. By examining their understanding through interviews and practical assessments, this research aims to identify specific areas of difficulty and propose effective pedagogical interventions. Ultimately, the study

contributes to the broader discourse on English grammar education and offers insights into best practices for teaching essential grammatical concepts to non-native speakers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The differentiation between common nouns and proper nouns has been a focal point in numerous linguistic and pedagogical studies, underscoring its essential role in grammatical education and language acquisition. Huddleston and Pullum (2005) define common nouns as words that refer to general categories of objects, ideas, or entities, such as “bridge,” “student,” or “university.” In contrast, proper nouns identify specific names of people, places, organizations, or events, such as “Toba Lake,” “John Smith,” or “Asahan University,” and they require capitalization to denote their uniqueness and significance. This foundational distinction is critical for sentence construction and functional clarity, particularly in formal and academic contexts.

Leech and Svartvik (2002) further elaborate on the communicative roles of these noun types, asserting that while common nouns provide linguistic flexibility by allowing for generalization, proper nouns are indispensable for conveying specificity and contextual detail. For instance, stating “the engineer visited a site” is fundamentally different in clarity and precision from “Mr. Ahmad visited the Medan construction site.” Such precision is particularly vital in technical fields like civil engineering, where exactness in communication can impact understanding and execution of projects.

Dykes (2007) highlights that nouns are universal linguistic elements present in every language system. Whether denoting abstract concepts like “freedom” or specific entities like “Jakarta,” nouns function as pivotal building blocks of language. The mastery of nouns, especially their classification and correct application, is thus indispensable for learners aiming to achieve fluency and accuracy in English. This assertion is echoed by Crystal (2003), who emphasizes that noun usage is closely tied to broader grammatical competence, influencing elements such as subject-verb agreement, article use, and sentence clarity.

Pedagogical challenges associated with teaching nouns, particularly the correct use of capitalization with proper nouns, have been extensively documented. Altenberg and Vago (2010) note that learners often struggle with identifying proper nouns in context, especially when they encounter unfamiliar place names, brand names, or culturally specific terms. These difficulties are compounded for students whose first languages do not emphasize capitalization in the same way as English. Sneddon et al. (2010), for example, point out that Indonesian has different orthographic conventions, which can lead to systematic errors among Indonesian learners of English.

To address these challenges, Eastwood (2002) advocates for practical, context-based teaching methods that engage students in meaningful activities. By incorporating real-world examples, such as news articles, technical reports, and interactive exercises like role-playing or project-based learning, educators can make grammar instruction more relevant and memorable. This approach aligns with Ellis’s (2008) recommendation to contextualize grammar within authentic communication tasks, thereby promoting deeper understanding and retention.

In the Indonesian context, research by Sari and Putra (2018) highlights that many university students face persistent challenges in distinguishing between common and proper nouns due to limited exposure to authentic English materials and insufficient focus on capitalization rules in secondary education. Similarly, a study by Lestari (2020) conducted at a polytechnic in Medan reported that over 60% of students made

recurrent errors in capitalizing proper nouns, especially with geographical names and institutional titles. These findings emphasize the importance of culturally responsive teaching strategies that bridge gaps between students' native linguistic frameworks and English grammar norms.

Moreover, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) emphasize the importance of integrating form, meaning, and use in grammar instruction. They argue that teaching nouns in isolation is less effective than embedding them in communicative contexts where learners must actively apply their knowledge. For example, asking civil engineering students to draft mock project proposals or site reports using precise noun classifications can reinforce their grammatical skills while simultaneously developing their professional language competencies.

In sum, the literature underscores the critical importance of understanding and correctly applying common and proper nouns as part of a broader strategy to enhance English language proficiency. The pedagogical consensus points to the need for interactive, context-rich teaching methods to overcome learners' challenges, particularly in ESL contexts like Indonesia. These insights form the theoretical backbone of the present study, which seeks to examine and improve noun usage among civil engineering students at Asahan University.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative approach to assess students' abilities in distinguishing between *common nouns* and *proper nouns*. Following the suggestions of Huddleston and Pullum (2005), this method was chosen to capture the intricate details of linguistic comprehension. The research was conducted at Asahan University, targeting 20 second-semester students in the Civil Engineering Department. These participants were selected to represent varying levels of linguistic capability, ensuring a diverse range of data.

The primary data collection tool was an interview consisting of structured questions. These questions were designed to evaluate students' ability to identify, define, and apply *common nouns* and *proper nouns* across different contexts. Examples included tasks such as correcting improper capitalization in sentences like "i went to paris with john" and distinguishing noun types in phrases like "book" versus "Harry Potter." This approach aligns with the guidelines provided by Huddleston and Pullum (2005), which emphasize the role of qualitative methods in obtaining detailed insights.

Scoring was carried out based on Arikunto's (2006) system, where students earned twenty points for each correct answer, up to a total of 100 points. Data analysis involved calculating the percentage of correct answers to classify student performance. The findings showed that 10 students scored an average of 75, which falls into the medium competence range, while the other 10 students demonstrated difficulties in understanding and applying grammatical rules.

## Findings

The analysis revealed that half of the participants displayed moderate competence in recognizing and using *common nouns* and *proper nouns*, with an average score of 75. These students were able to answer interview questions correctly, showcasing their ability to apply capitalization rules and distinguish between noun types effectively. However, the other half faced significant challenges, particularly in tasks requiring proper capitalization and contextual understanding.

For example, tasks such as rewriting the sentence "i went to paris with john to visit the louvre museum" highlighted students' struggles with capitalization norms. Interviews, as recommended by Huddleston and Pullum (2005), proved effective in identifying specific areas of difficulty. The results are consistent with previous research by Dykes (2007), which emphasizes the foundational role of nouns in language and the frequent errors learners make in this area.

Leech and Svartvik (2002) suggest that integrating real-world scenarios into teaching can improve students' understanding of grammatical rules. This aligns with the findings, which indicate that targeted instructional strategies are necessary to address the observed gaps in students' competence.

Here is a list of interview!

1. **Can you explain what capitalization is and why it is important in English grammar?** *Tujuan:* Mengukur pemahaman dasar siswa tentang konsep kapitalisasi.
2. **What is the rule for capitalizing proper nouns? Could you give three examples?** *Tujuan:* Mengevaluasi pemahaman aturan kapitalisasi pada *proper nouns*
3. **In this sentence, 'i went to medan with nana,' what needs to be corrected? Why?** *Tujuan:* Melatih siswa mengidentifikasi kesalahan kapitalisasi dalam konteks kalimat.
4. **What is the difference between 'book' and 'Ayat-Ayat Cinta' in terms of noun type and capitalization?** *Tujuan:* Menguji kemampuan siswa membedakan *common nouns* dan *proper nouns* secara kontekstual.
5. **Can you rewrite the following sentence correctly: 'my favorite book is the lord of the rings by j.r.r. tolkien'?** *Tujuan:* Mengevaluasi kemampuan siswa dalam menerapkan kapitalisasi pada nama buku dan nama penulis

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the competence of second-semester Civil Engineering students at Asahan University in identifying and correctly using common nouns and proper nouns. The findings revealed a clear division in student performance: approximately 50% of the participants demonstrated medium competence, successfully identifying and applying these noun categories with moderate accuracy, while the remaining 50% struggled significantly, particularly with capitalization rules and contextual application of proper nouns. These results indicate that, despite some familiarity with basic grammatical principles, there remains a substantial gap in students' mastery of this fundamental aspect of English grammar.

These findings align closely with Huddleston and Pullum's (2005) assertion that understanding and mastering noun categories is foundational yet often challenging for language learners. Their work emphasizes that recognizing the distinction between common and proper nouns is essential not only for grammatical correctness but also for maintaining clarity and precision in communication. This is especially important in technical fields like civil engineering, where specificity in language can directly affect comprehension and project outcomes.

Dykes (2007) reinforces this perspective by highlighting grammar as the key to effective communication. Without a solid grasp of grammatical structures, including the correct use of nouns, students risk producing unclear or incorrect language that can lead to misunderstandings. This is particularly true when distinguishing between general terms (e.g., "bridge") and specific identifiers (e.g., "Suramadu Bridge"), which is crucial in professional and academic contexts.

Altenberg and Vago (2010) also noted the frequent difficulties learners face in correctly applying capitalization rules, particularly for proper nouns. The challenges observed in this study echo their findings, underscoring the ongoing struggle students experience when working within English grammar norms that differ significantly from those of their native language, such as Indonesian. This supports the notion, emphasized by Sneddon et al. (2010), that Indonesian students often make consistent errors in capitalization because their first language does not enforce similar rules.

The results of this study highlight an urgent need for more targeted and effective instructional methods to address these gaps. Leech and Svartvik (2002) advocate for incorporating practical, engaging lessons that contextualize grammar learning, rather than relying solely on rote memorization or decontextualized drills. Their approach suggests that students are more likely to internalize grammatical concepts when they see their practical applications, such as in writing technical reports, drafting emails, or preparing presentations relevant to their field.

Eastwood (2002) and Ellis (2008) further emphasize the benefits of using real-world tasks and interactive learning activities to reinforce grammar instruction. By embedding grammar into authentic communicative tasks, educators can create more meaningful learning experiences that not only enhance grammatical accuracy but also build students' confidence and motivation to use English in practical settings.

Future research should aim to evaluate the effectiveness of such contextualized teaching strategies. For instance, experimental studies could assess whether integrating grammar lessons into subject-specific content—such as civil engineering project documentation—leads to measurable improvements in students' grammatical proficiency. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track students' progress over time to determine the long-term impact of these interventions.

In conclusion, while this study sheds light on the current state of students' competence in using common and proper nouns, it also points to broader pedagogical implications. Improving grammar instruction by making it more engaging, contextual, and relevant to students' academic and professional needs is crucial. Such enhancements not only support students' academic success but also equip them with essential communication skills for their future careers.

## REFERENCES

- Altenberg, E., & Vago, R. (2010). *English grammar: Understanding the basics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course* (2nd ed.). Heinle & Heinle.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Dykes, B. (2007). *Grammar for everyone: Practical tools for learning and teaching grammar*. ACER Press.
- Eastwood, J. (2002). *Oxford guide to English grammar*. Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. K. (2005). *A student's introduction to English grammar*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (2002). *A communicative grammar of English* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

- Lestari, N. (2020). Error analysis on capitalization of proper nouns among Indonesian EFL students. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics*, 5(2), 214-226.
- Sari, M., & Putra, A. (2018). The difficulties of EFL students in using proper nouns: A case study in Indonesian university students. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8(1), 134-142.
- Sneddon, J. N., Adelaar, A., Djenar, D. N., & Ewing, M. C. (2010). *Indonesian: A comprehensive grammar* (2nd ed.). Routledge.