

# The Indonesian Grammar Test: What Foreigners Need to Know

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## ABSTRACT

Indonesian has a linguistic structure that can easily be understood due to its alphabetical use of the Latin script. Indonesian also has a linguistic structure that includes regularly updates to spelling. This study is intended (1) to map the grammatical materials that must be understood systematically by foreign learners of the language, and (2) to estimate the ability of foreign speakers to successfully complete Indonesian-language grammar tests. This is a mixed methods study, combining qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative approaches were used for needs assessment, material construction, and in-depth interviews regarding foreigners' perspectives, while quantitative approaches were used for item mapping and estimating testees' abilities. Data were verified in accordance with the characteristics of their sources. Based on the competence of foreign speakers, six tiers of foreign speakers' grammar competence were identified. Furthermore, this study identifies specific characteristics of Indonesian, develops materials for testing foreign speakers' grammatical abilities, and maps grammar competencies from the perspective of foreign speakers.

## Keywords:

grammar test, language for foreigners

Article Received: 18 October 2020, Revised: 3 November 2020, Accepted: 24 December 2020

## Introduction

The Indonesian language is not the mother tongue of all of Indonesia's people. Instead, local languages are commonly Indonesians' mother tongues. This is evidenced by the massive number of local languages in the country; Indonesia has 652 languages, which are used by its various ethnic groups and spread throughout its territory. All of these local languages have indirectly contributed to the development of the Indonesian language (Long, 1983). The character and linguistic structure of Indonesian cannot be easily mapped, as shown by its affixes, morphological processes, sentence structures, vocabularies, registers, and its semantic and paragraph structures. One factor that contributes to non-standard grammar and language use is the influence of other languages. Indonesian has been influenced in its development by both foreign and local languages, and as such it has been difficult to agree upon a standard grammar.

Foreign languages have influenced Indonesian as a result of acculturation during the

colonial era. At various times, parts of Indonesia have been under the control of the Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, French, English, and Japanese. Similarly, the historical development of Indonesia has been influenced by the spread of Islam from Arabic-speaking countries (Mahayana, 2018). The grammatical structure of Indonesian has thus been indirectly influenced by these foreign languages. Benefits of acculturation have included, (1) shared linguistic structures, including a flexibility that eases semantic and syntactic understanding; (2) use of specific linguistic characteristics (pronunciations, intonations, and tones) resembling those internationally; (3) standards for written Indonesian resemble international ones, including in academia, where many institutions prefer the APA Style.

The main problem that has hindered the development of the Indonesian language is non-compliance with its grammatical standards. At the same time, Indonesian has a number of linguistic structures that differ from those of foreign languages (Radford & Salimans, 2018).

		Similarities		Differences	
Indonesian–	Using	prepositions	for	Sentence structure is fixed in Indonesian,	

Japanese	auxiliary words, causality, marking actors.	but flexible in Japanese (element 1+element 2+...+P)
	Function and construction of prepositions.	Elements of noun phrases are sequential in Indonesian, while in Japanese they are determined by particles.
	Use of comparative adjectives	Verb forms in Japanese are determined situationally, while in Indonesian they are limited
	Use of reference markers	No conjugation of adjectives in Indonesian, while adjective forms vary in Japanese.
Indonesian– English	Words ordered specifically in simple sentences.	Verbs are not conjugated in Indonesian, whereas in English the situation (time) determines the verb form (16 different tenses).
	Different structures for active and passive sentences.	The plural is marked by reduplication and determiner particles in Indonesian, while in English there are regular (using –s or –es) and irregular plurals.
		Passive verbs are rarely used in English.

Table 1 Differences and similarities Indonesian language

The Indonesian people, as native speakers of Indonesian, still have difficulty using correct grammar. Indonesian, as both a spoken and written language, has structured and systematic rules for its usage (Castro & Halliday, 2006). However, many speakers of Indonesian experience difficulty, as they more frequently speak a local language. Another factor that hinders speakers' use of correct Indonesian is the different prescriptions for spoken and written Indonesian (Peter & Chomsky, 2007).

Some basic elements that should be recognized include: (1) use of formal word forms and orders. Many sentences use sequences similar to those of English (i.e. Subject + Predicate + Object). However, there are exceptions, such as personal pronouns: [/buku kamu/, literally /book you/ not /your book/]. (2) Reference to future events: Indonesian does not have tenses; that something will happen in the future is indicated simply with the words /mau/ [want] or /akan/ [will]. Meanwhile, in English there are four future tenses: future, future continuous, future perfect, and future perfect continuous.

The linguistic system of Indonesian contains many aspects. In his *Kamus Linguistik* (1979), Kridalaksana identifies grammar as having two definitions: (1) a subsystem within a language in which units of meaning combine to form larger units; in this sense, grammar includes morphology and syntax, but excludes phonology, semantics, and lexicon; (2) the entire system within language that determines the construction of sentences; in this sense, grammar also includes phonology and semantics.

Errors in language use are natural and found in both written and spoken language. Markhamah, Ngalim, Muinudinillah Basri, & Sabardila (2017) identify four types of errors: phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic. Iverson (2003) provides several examples of language mistakes, including ineffective sentence structure, inappropriate diction, mistaken use of affixes, incomplete sentences, mistaken use of prepositions, reversal of word order, use of passive constructs, mistaken use of conjunctions, inappropriate use of conjunctions, and mistaken formation of plurals. Meanwhile, (Endah

Ariningsih & Saddhono, 2012) define linguistic errors as errors in spelling, diction, and sentence/paragraph construction, with spelling mistakes being the most common. Similarly, (Kundharu Saddhono, 2012) identifies linguistic errors as including spelling, morphological, semantic, and syntactic errors, with spelling mistakes being the most common.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Characteristics of the Indonesian Language**

Pronouns are words that function to replace nouns that are not mentioned explicitly. These words have several characteristics, including: (a) pronouns usually occupy the position of subject or object, but may be found in the predicate position; (b) pronouns do not always refer to the same noun referent; their referent changes; (c) pronouns adapt to the context of the sentence (Alwi, Dardjowidjojo, Lapolowa, 1998).

There are several categories of pronoun. Personal pronouns are pronouns used to replace personal

nouns. There are six types of personal pronouns: first person singular, first person plural, second person singular, second person plural, third person singular, and third person plural. Meanwhile, interrogative pronouns are pronouns used to inquire about a specific place, time, person, or situation. As such, interrogative pronouns are used to collect information (Antunes & Biala, 2012). Next, possessive pronouns are used to replace nouns and signify ownership. In Indonesian, these pronouns are /-ku/, /-mu/, /-nya/, /kami/, /mereka/, all of which are positioned after the noun that is possessed. Relative pronouns are words that bring together dependent and independent clauses. This includes, for example, the word /yang/. These pronouns are often found in compound sentences. Finally, there are pronouns that indicate location or processes. These may be categorized as determiners, demonstratives, and deixis.

Determiners:	ini, itu
Demonstratives:	sana, sini, situ, ke sana, ke sini, ke situ, di sana, di sini, di situ.
Deixis:	begini, beginu

Table 1 Categorized of pronouns

Verbs are used to refer to actions, events, situations, or attitudes. They refer to an action done by someone or something. In form, two types of verbs are recognized: root verbs and affixed verbs. Root verbs take their basic form, and do not experience affixation. Meanwhile, affixed verbs are those which have experienced affixation, and as such include one or more prefix, suffix, or infix.

Variations in Indonesian sentences may be categorized based on three different bases: (1) initial positioning of adjectival phrases, nouns, verbs, and conjunctions, (2) positioning of the subject, predicate, and object, (3) sentence type (question, complex, compound, equivalent, parallel, assertive, accurate, cohesive).

Sentences may be categorized as active and passive, depending on the relationship between

the subject and object. Active sentences are sentences in which the action is undertaken by the subject; in Indonesian, such sentences are usually marked by predicates that use the prefixes *me-* or *ber-*. Passive sentences, meanwhile, are sentences in which the subject experiences an action; in Indonesian, such sentences are usually marked by predicates that use the prefixes *ter-* or *di-*.

#### **Rules of the Indonesian Language**

A command of correct and contextual Indonesian is necessary not only in spoken language, but also in written language. To obtain a command of correct and contextual Indonesian, one must at minimum understand the grammar of the language. Without a mastery of grammar, one may produce sentences that convey different information than what one desires to convey,

creating ambiguity (Murphy, 2004). Errors can also occur owing to inappropriate or uncommon diction/word choice (Saddhono, 2012).

The larger one's vocabulary, the greater one's mastery of ideas and ability to express them. Persons with a larger vocabulary can more easily communicate with others (Maher & Davies, 2006). Three terms are common in discussing incorrect language use, namely (a) lapses: language errors caused by the language user changing his/her way of saying/writing something; these are more commonly known as slips of the tongue (for spoken language) or slips of the pen (for written language); (b) errors: incorrect language use caused by the language user's breaches of code; and (c) mistakes: incorrect language use caused by the inappropriate selection of words for a certain situation. Such mistakes can be identified, for example, through analysis of written language.

The incorrect use of the Indonesian language can also be seen in (a) morphological errors, namely the incorrect formation of words using affixes; these may include mistakes in verb conjugation as well as declination of nouns, adjectives, and pronouns, (b) syntactic errors, namely the creation of sentences using an incorrect structure. These include errors in word placement, rection (determination of the form of one word by the presence of another word), and congruence (accordance of the subject with the predicate in a sentence), and (c) lexical errors, namely incorrect word choice.

Indonesian grammar includes a range of linguistic rules, including pronunciation, verb usage, adjective usage, adverb use, pronoun use, numeral use, sentence formation, and discourse formation (Alwi, Dardjowidjojo, Lapolika, 1998). According to Langacker (1987), linguistic errors highlight the surface characteristics of language. In general, errors in language use include: (a) omission; (b) addition; (c) miss-formation; and (d) miss-ordering. Omission occurs when a required linguistic element is not present in an utterance. Addition, meanwhile, occurs when an unnecessary element is included in an utterance (Kuzar, 2003).

Misformation happens when the incorrect morphemes or structures are used, while misordering occurs when morphemes or groups of morphemes are incorrectly ordered in an utterance (Saddhono & Sulaksono, 2018).

Also involved in grammar are the use of letters, writing of words, use of punctuation, and writing of loan elements. These are described below. 1. Letters include: vowels, consonants, diphthongs, clusters, ellipsis, capitalization, italics, and bold. 2. Writing of words include: root words, derived words, reduplicated words, syllables, articles, particles, abbreviations, acronyms, numbers, and pronouns such as *ku-*, *kau-*, *-ku*, *-mu*, and *-nya*. 3. Punctuation includes periods (.), commas (,), colons (:), hyphens (-), question marks (?), exclamation marks (!), quotation marks ("..."), and slashes. 4. Loan elements include linguistic elements that have entered Indonesian from local languages as well as foreign languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese, and English.

Affixes are linguistic forms that are used with words, but are not words themselves. They do not have lexical meaning in and of themselves; rather, they influence the meaning of the words to which they are appended (Rimmer, 2006). Take, for example, the affix *-nya*, which does not have the linguistic meaning of "third person singular" found in the clitic *-nya*. In words such as *rupanya* and *agaknya*, *-nya* functions as an affix, as it has no lexical meaning. Affixes can change the meaning, type, and function of a root word, making new words that may or may not have different functions than their roots.

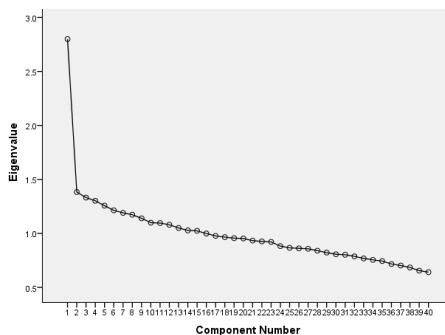
Semantics is the study of the meaning of linguistic units, including words, phrases, and sentences. Among the things studied by semantics are ambiguity, redundancy, and deviance (Vicari, 2010). Ambiguity refers to a duality of meaning within the linguistic unit, which is often caused by the use of unclear grammatical structures that enable multiple interpretations (Saddhono, 2015). Redundancy is the use of excessive linguistic units within the sentence. Meanwhile, deviance refers

to the use of linguistic units in incorrect or ungrammatical ways.

Ambiguity, redundancy, and deviance in sentences result in ineffectiveness. Ineffective sentences not only disturb communication, but are also structurally detrimental. To communicate well, language users must ensure the effectiveness of their sentences. Effective sentences in spoken communication are different than effective sentences in written communication; in other words, at times sentences that are effective in written communication are not effective in oral communication, and vice versa. Sentences are effective when they can successfully convey the intended message, idea, emotion, or information. To ensure effectiveness, a sentence must meet several criteria. It must, for example, have a correct structure, use appropriate direction, have logical connections between its elements, and use proper spelling.

## Method

This study applies mixed methods research, combining a quantitative and qualitative approach. Qualitative approaches were used for needs assessment, material construction, and in-depth interviews regarding foreigners' perspectives, while quantitative approaches were used for item mapping and estimating testees' abilities (Elder & McNamara, 2015). The Indonesian language, as the object of this research, includes (1) reading materials, (2) procedure texts, (3) sequence texts, and (4) sentence complexity. Data for this study were taken from Indonesian-language tests for foreign speakers. The instrument consisted of 30 items, intended to measure the responses of foreign testees in Indonesia. This instrument has been analyzed through factor analysis to produce a unidimensional test.



Picture 1 Unidimensional of grammar test

Data were validated through theoretical and practical expert judgment, triangulation, and source triangulation (Mardapi & Kartowagiran, 2019). Data were collected through, (1) item mapping (Rasch Model Analysis of the test responses), (2) item description, and (3) collection of foreigners' qualitative responses regarding the grammar test instrument. The test indicators were developed through material test constructs, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. Data

analysis involved item mapping, content analysis, structural analysis, and constant comparative analysis (Manoppo, Yance; Mardapi, 2008).

## Results and Discussion

### Item Mapping

Testees' ability to answer questions correctly is evaluated to ascertain their understanding of Indonesian grammar. Analysis was conducted using the Rasch Model, as shown below:

$$Pni = \left( Xni = \frac{1}{\beta n}, \delta i \right) = \frac{e^{\beta n - \delta i}}{1 + e^{\beta n - \delta i}}$$

Pni : probability of respondent n to answer item number I correctly

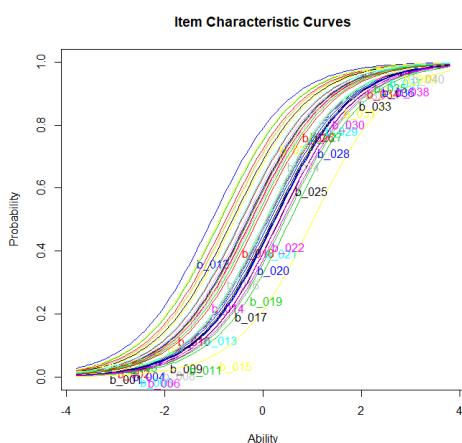
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(xni=1)  
 $\beta n$  : testee ability  
 $\delta i$  : item difficulty

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Under the Rasch model, the likelihood that a testee will correctly answer a question can be understood as the testee's linguistic abilities minus the difficulty of the item. After determining the difficulty of each item, the items were ordered

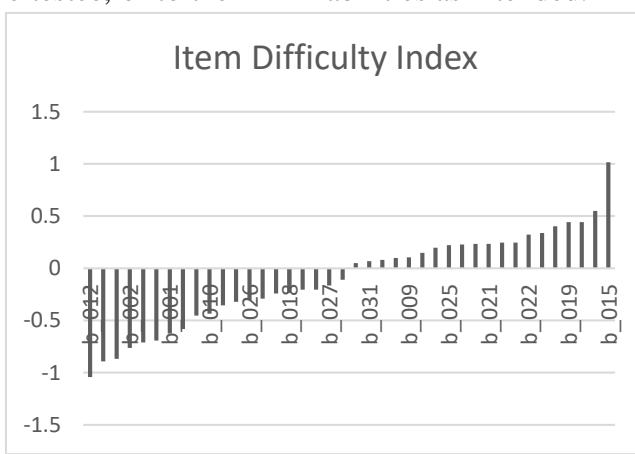
based on their level of difficulty. This was intended to ease analysis, provide explanation, and ascertain individual testees' abilities. The following figures show the characteristics of the items on the grammar test for foreigner speakers of Indonesian.



Picture 2 Item characteristic curve

A test instrument is an instrument used to ascertain the abilities of testees. A good test instrument should have minimal and non-systematic errors. Systematic errors may be attributed to the instrument, to the testee, or to the

tester (Djemari, 2012). A good instrument, certainly, should be based on valid and accurate data. The validity of an instrument can be determined based on its ability to measure testees' abilities as intended.



Picture 3 Item difficulty index

The validity of a test instrument can be ascertained based on the materials included, the forms of items, the weighting of items, and the scoring technique (Retnawati, 2017). Ideally, items should measure testees' understandings of the materials taught to them. As such, certain elements must be considered: (1) essential

materials, (2) materials used in other lessons, (3) applicable materials, and (4) sustainability (Djemari, 2012). The fundamental concept behind the selection of materials during the learning process also contributes to the process. In standardized tests with a large scale, such as national examinations and university entrance

tests, the material requires a high level of agreement between scorers.

Generally, materials for testing language skills are written and spoken discourses. Both types of materials may be conveyed through receptive tests

### **Material Development**

Very Easy	simple sentences affix <i>ber-</i> negation: /bukan/ and /tidak/
Easy	Expressions Adjectives indicating level of pleasure Question and response sentences Prepositions and classifiers Imperative verbs Sequential conjunctions Conjunctions /ambil/, /sementara/ and /sedangkan/
Minimal Standard	Use of affixes <i>me-</i> , <i>ber-</i> , <i>ter-</i> , <i>ke-an</i> Active/passive sentences Reduplicated words Expansion of active sentences Compound sentences Time signifiers
Standard	Complex sentences Inverted sentences
Difficult	Complex sentences, chronological sequence Comparative sentences Causal sentences Target–goal sentences Conditional sentences Particles ( <i>deh</i> , <i>dong</i> , <i>kok</i> , and <i>sih</i> ) Keyword exposition
Very difficult	Multilevel compound sentences Classes of adjectives Instruction/prohibition sentences Classes of nouns and their uses Direct and indirect sentences

Table 2 Materials development

### **Word Formation**

Root words, also known as bases, are words in their simplest form, as they lack any affixes. Words may also be categorized as having simple and complex forms, but the distinction is not discussed here. Affixes are bound forms (sets of

and productive tests. Grammar tests examine the applied skills of the testees, and as such ensuring a good understanding of grammar requires the development of other receptive skills (Halliday, 2013).

letters) that, when added to a root, transform the meaning of said root and create a new word. Affixes cannot stand on their own; they must be attached to another linguistic unit, such as a root. Affixes include prefixes, suffixes, and infixes. Prefixes are affixes that are attached to the

beginning of a root to create new words with different meanings. Suffixes are affixes that are attached to the end of a root to create new words with different meanings. Finally, prefixes (also known as circumfixes/simulfixes) are affixes that

are simultaneously attached to the beginning and end of a root. Words that are created through affixation are known as derivatives. Word families are created through the affixation of different affixes to the same root.

ber-	a. Creates meaning: to have b. Creates meaning: subject experiences
me-	The affix /me-/ is transformed morphologically based on the first letter of the root verb; the affix is used to create active verbs
meng-	[/me/ + L M N R W Y] [/meng/+A E G H I O U] [/mem/+B F]
menge-	[/men/+C D J Z] [/me(n)/ + K P S T]
meny-	Note: [/menge/+monosyllabic root]
mem-	
di-	passive action
pe-	Person/thing that does something
ter-	a. +adjective: extreme or most b. +non-adjective: spontaneous/completed
-an	Noun: product
-i	Verb: repetition
-kan	Verb: cause, process, or incident
ke-an	a. Forms nouns; indicates the results of specific actions or situations related to the generally understood elements of the root b. Forms nouns; indicates location or origin c. Forms adjectives; indicates excess d. Forms verbs; indicates coincidence
Pe-an	Nouns; indicates duration of process specified by verb
-nya	Third-person pronoun
-ku	First-person pronoun
-mu	Second-person pronoun

Table 3 Word families

### Sentence Structure

In Indonesian, sentences must contain a subject and predicate. Non-necessary structural elements include auxiliary verbs: [/harus/ [must], /boleh/ [may], /sudah/ [already], /akan/ [will]] and adjuncts (place, time, means, etc.). Indonesian does not recognize dual subjects or conjunctions within simple sentences; similarly, predicates are not preceded by the word /yang/. Declarative sentences are sentences that convey something to a listener/reader. Meanwhile, imperative sentences are usually produced through active or passive transitive and intransitive sentences. Sentences that have an adjective as their predicate may also

have an imperative form, depending on the adjective used.

Compound sentences are sentences that combine two simple sentences. These sentences consist of two or more simple sentences that, if written without a coordinating conjunction, could stand independently. The coordinating conjunctions used with compound sentences in Indonesian include /dan/ [and], /serta/ [as well], /tetapi/ [but], /lalu/ [then], /kemudian/ [then], and /atau/ [or]; a comma may also be used.

Complex sentences have both a dependent and independent clause. Independent clauses are those clauses that can stand on their own, without a dependent clause. Conjunctions used in complex

sentences include /ketika/ [when], /sejak/ [since], /karena/ [because], /oleh sebab itu/ [as such], /hingga/ [until], /sehingga/ [until], /maka/ [then], /jika/ [if], /asalkan/ [as long as], /apabila/ [if], /meskipun/ [even though], /walaupun/ [although], /andai kata/ [if], /seandainya/ [if], /agar supaya/

[so that], /seperti/ [like], /kecuali/ [except], and /dengan/ [with].

Indonesian has a number of words that indicate the relationship between dependent and independent clauses.

causality	Menyebabkan Sehingga Oleh karena itu
reinforcement	Selain itu Di samping itu Lagi pula Tidak hanya . . . tetapi juga
opposition	Tetapi Namun Padahal Sebaliknya
sequencing	Selanjutnya Kemudian
comparison	Berbeda dengan Seperti Tidak seperti Lebih Kurang Paling
equivalence	Sama halnya Demikian pula Sama dengan
conclusion	Dengan demikian Dengan kata lain

Table 4 Relationship clauses

### Foreigners' Perspective

The main goal of Indonesian is to facilitate and increase the quality of communication between Indonesia's more than 300 ethnic groups. Because none of these ethnic groups' languages is used by more than 40% of Indonesians (including Javanese), Indonesians require both their own mother tongues as well as a lingua franca. Foreign

speakers, thus, should recognize the diversity of the Indonesian language (Ellis, 2010).

Unfortunately, people dissatisfied with Indonesian have plenty of options. There are hundreds of regional languages and dialects, sometimes spoken intact, sometimes blended with Indonesian.

Correct positioning of words

- a. In Indonesian, the phrase /Buku Saya/ [My Book] is written following the pattern [Book My]
- b. Indonesian does not use question words for

	<p>sentences that are not questions. One example /Manusia mengetahui apa yang ingin diketahui/ [People know what they want to know].</p>
Future, present, and past events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Verbs are not conjugated when referring to future events</li> <li>b. Future events are indicated using time signifiers: /besok/ [tomorrow], /usa/ [in two days], /nanti/ [later], or with certain words, such as /rencananya/ [it is planned].</li> <li>c. Past events are indicated using time signifiers: /kemarin/ [yesterday]</li> <li>d. Present events are indicated using time signifiers, /saat ini/ [at this moment], /sekarang/ [now], or with the word /ini/ [this] and a time signifier (i.e. /senin ini/ [this Monday])</li> </ul>
Time and date	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Indonesian marks time using the words /pukul/ [o'clock] and /jam/ [hour]</li> <li>b. Formally, time is written using the 24-hour format. For example, the time 05:00 PM is written 17:00</li> <li>c. Dates are written /Senin–Sabtu/</li> </ul>
Use of prefixes, suffixes, and infixes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Indonesian uses prefixes, suffixes, and infixes.</li> <li>b. Prefixes and suffixes can transform the meaning of a word in a sentence. For example, /tulis/ [write] may become /tulisan/ [result of writing/text] or /penulisan/ [writing process].</li> </ul>
Plural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. In Indonesian, words are made plural through reduplication. For instance, the word /buku/ [book] is singular; the plural is /buku-buku/ [Books]</li> <li>b. Words may also be made plural through plural determiners (/banyak/ [many], /beberapa/ [a few], /sebagian/ [some], etc.)</li> <li>c. The reduplication of the word /anak-anak/ [children] produces /kekanak/</li> </ul>
Agreement and rejection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>d. Agreement can be shown through words or phrases that indicate approval and acceptance, including: /Saya rasa pendapat Anda sesuai dengan pendapat saya/ [I feel that your opinion is the same as my opinion], /Saya setuju dengan pendapat Anda/ [I agree with your opinion].</li> <li>e. Agreement is to be conveyed through the use of correct language, and supported with evidence or clear and logical explanation. One must not provide excessive commentary when stating one's</li> </ul>

agreement.

Table 5 Indonesian characteristic using

Indonesian may not be generalized as an easily understood language. At the same time, however, it is not as difficult to understand as some other languages. Indonesian has specific characteristics that follow the rules set through legislation and by language institutions.

## Conclusion

The use of Indonesian is dictated by a structured and systematic grammar. Nonetheless, the application of this grammar in everyday life is difficult given Indonesians tendency to communicate in regional languages in their everyday lives. Pronouns are words that function to refer to specific persons or things that are not referred to directly. Verbs are used to indicate an action, event, incident, or attitude. Indonesian sentences may be categorized based on three different bases: (1) initial positioning of adjectival phrases, nouns, verbs, and conjunctions, (2) positioning of the subject, predicate, and object, (3) sentence type (question, complex, compound, equivalent, parallel, assertive, accurate, cohesive).

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