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Using Verb Form Awareness to Improve Narrative Writing Among ESL Learners

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Abstract

The research paper is a quasi-experimental study that explores the efficacy of explicit verb form awareness teaching on the improvement of performance in narrative writing among intermediate English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Sixty learners were randomly divided into an experimental group (n = 30) and a control group (n = 30), with a similar level of proficiency in terms of both groups. The experimental group underwent a four-week intervention with a well-rounded and explicit teaching approach that focused on the main grammatical aspects, such as tense, aspect, subjectverb agreement, and irregular use of verbs. These aspects were incorporated into the contextualized learning by incorporating them into significant narrative writing activities. Conversely, the control group practiced traditional writing which focused more on development of content rather than on a particular emphasis on grammatical structure.

An analytic rubric based on grammatical accuracy, tense consistency, verb variety, and overall narrative coherence was used to evaluate pre- and post-test narrative compositions. Paired and independent samples t-tests showed that the experimental group gained much more ($p < .01$) than the control group. Interestingly, tense consistency and proper use of past perfect constructions showed the biggest gains, as they are usually thought to be very difficult among intermediate learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). This result is comparable to prior studies that explicit instructions help to learn less salient grammatical features (Ellis, 2008).



On the whole, the findings are solid empirical evidence to the introduction of form-oriented teaching into the framework of communicative writing. The research adds to the existing discussions in the field of second language learning (SLA), especially the role of explicit grammar teaching in the development of linguistic accuracy and discourse level competence (Schmidt, 1990; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2014).

Keywords: verb form awareness, narrative writing, ESL, tense-aspect system, form-focused instruction, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

Narrative writing is one of the basic genres in second language learning and it presupposes that learners should organize events in a chronological sequence and encode the relation of time with the help of proper verb forms. The command of verb tense and aspect is crucial to the construction of coherent narratives, but ESL students have a lot of problems with consistency of tenses, aspectual differences, and irregular verbs.

Such challenges usually lead to disjointed stories and diminished understandability. Studies have indicated that students utilize lexical clues, instead of grammatical morphology to communicate temporality (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). Nevertheless, in most ESL classrooms, writing instruction still focuses on generation and organization of content and not linguistic accuracy.

This research fills this gap by considering whether explicit teaching of verb forms based on form-based pedagogy can play a big role in enhancing the performance of learners in narrative writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Tense and Aspect in Second Language Acquisition

Tense and aspect acquisition has been a topic of research in SLA. Bardovi-Harlig (2000) suggests that learners develop a temporal expression gradually and they tend to build meaning rather than form. In the same light Ellis (2008) observes that learners can learn grammatical forms in a receptive manner but not in a productive manner.

In narrative discourse, there is a need to have the systematic control of:

- Simple past (main events)
- Background actions (past continuous).
- Past simple (actions in the past)



A lack of proper implementation of the latter results in ambiguity and lack of clarity in the narrative.

2.2 Form-Focused Instruction and Consciousness-Raising

This study is theoretically based on the Noticing Hypothesis of Schmidt (1990) that states that one has to consciously attend to linguistic forms in order to acquire them. Before learners can internalize the features of grammar, they must observe grammatical features in the input.

Form-focused instruction (FFI) is a method that combines the focus on the linguistic components in communicative situations. Ellis (2008) states that explicit instruction works especially well with:

- low-salience forms
- complex grammatical structures
- things that cannot be easily learned by exposure.

Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) also claim that teaching grammar as an element of writing activities is more effective than teaching it on a stand-alone basis.

2.3 Narrative Writing in ESL Contexts

Narrative writing demands the linguistic competence and discourse competence (Hyland, 2003). Learners must:

- sequence events logically
- maintain temporal consistency
- use different verb forms.

Nonetheless, creativity is usually given more priority in pedagogical practices than grammatical accuracy. This imbalance leads to the continued verbal-related mistakes in ESL writing.

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Questions

1. Does explicit verb form awareness instruction significantly improve grammatical accuracy in ESL narrative writing?
2. Does such instruction enhance tense consistency and narrative coherence?
3. Which verb form categories show the greatest improvement?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

Sixty intermediate ESL learners (ages 15–18) from a private language institute participated. All learners had comparable proficiency levels based on standardized placement testing.



Group	Number of Participants	Age Range	Proficiency Level
Experimental	30	15–18	Intermediate
Control	30	15–18	Intermediate

4.2 Research Design

A **quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design** was used. The intervention lasted four weeks.

4.3 Instruments

Narrative Writing Task

Participants wrote 200–250 word narratives based on standardized prompts.

Verb Form Awareness Module

Seven sessions covering:

- Simple past vs. past continuous
- Past perfect usage
- Subject–verb agreement
- Irregular verbs
- Progressive and perfect aspects

Analytic Rubric

Criterion	Description
Grammatical Accuracy	Correct use of verb forms
Tense Consistency	Logical maintenance of tense
Verb Variety	Range of verb forms used
Narrative Coherence	Logical flow and clarity

Inter-rater reliability: **Cohen's κ = 0.87**, indicating strong agreement.

4.4 Procedure

1. Pre-test administered
2. Experimental group received explicit instruction
3. Control group followed standard curriculum
4. Post-test administered
5. Data analyzed using **t-tests**

5. Results

5.1 Overall Writing Performance



Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Gain	Significance
Experimental	68.5	83.2	+14.7	p < .01
Control	69.1	73.3	+4.2	p > .05

The experimental group showed statistically significant improvement.

5.2 Improvement by Verb Category

Category	Pre (%)	Post (%)	Gain
Past Perfect	35	74	+39
Tense Consistency	54	85	+31
Agreement	58	87	+29
Irregular Verbs	52	81	+29

Past perfect usage showed the greatest improvement.

5.3 Statistical Interpretation

The experimental group has a large gain implying the strong effect size. The absence of a great improvement in the control group shows that general practice in writing is not enough to achieve grammatical accuracy..

6. Discussion

The results support the claim that explicit teaching of verb forms can greatly improve ESL learners narrative writing. The consistency in tenses also led to an increase in the levels of narrative coherence, which corroborates the claim by Hyland (2003) that linguistic control is the basis of successful writing.

The findings are in agreement with:

Schmidt’s (1990) Noticing Hypothesis

Ellis (2008) on explicit instruction.

The radical change observed in past simple in the usage of past perfect is an indication that structured teaching is effective with low frequency and high complexity structures.

6.1 Pedagogical Implications

Teachers should:

- Integrate grammar instruction into writing tasks
- Use timelines to illustrate temporal relationships
- Incorporate peer-editing focused on verb forms
- Provide corrective feedback on tense errors

7. Limitations



- Short duration (4 weeks)
- Limited sample size
- Single institutional context

Future research should explore:

- longitudinal effects
- digital grammar tools
- diverse proficiency levels

8. Conclusion

This research shows that the explicit instruction of verb forms awareness plays a huge role in improving grammatical accuracy, consistency in tenses, and general story quality among ESL students. Integrating form-instructional teaching in purposeful writing activities is both quantifiably helpful and enhances the skill of students to create coherent narratives.

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