The Role of Visuals in Promoting Self-Learning of Grammatical Concepts

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Abstract

English is taught as a second language in almost all non-native countries across the world and from early childhood in many countries. By the time the learners reach the college level, they learn to communicate in English enough to make themselves intelligible and use English for functional purpose regarding all the four language skills. However, it is observed that their grammatical concepts are not very clear and they lack confidence especially regarding the use of tenses. Several methods and techniques of teaching tenses have been tried out till date and new ideas emerge constantly. This study explores the use of visuals for clarification of tenses and their uses. The subjects were fourth year Iraqi college students. Results showed that visuals are extremely useful for promoting the self-learning of the use of English tenses in case of college level students.

Keywords: *self-learning, grammatical concepts, use of tenses, visuals, time-lines*

1.0 Introduction and Background

Research regarding teaching English as a second language is in full-fledge in current times. The advent of technology and internet, the gap and radical change brought about by COVID-19 pandemic led to virtual methods and online teaching learning. Now corona is left behind but the footprints remain in the form of online teaching-learning, and most teachers and educationists continue to be engaged with technology. It is now time to find out new methods which can combine the online and offline modes or can be adapted to either of the two because offline mode is back in form. This study explores a method which can be used offline but can be enhanced by technology.

Learning English as a second language since early childhood is common in many countries in the world. Consequently, by the time students reach the college level, they do achieve a good level of proficiency in all the four language skills. Although they do not understand all the grammatical concepts, they do manage to make themselves intelligible enough to communicate in daily life. One cannot communicate without using verbs and appropriate tenses; second language learners commit several errors in the use of tenses. Sometimes, they are misunderstood but mostly, the listeners can make out the correct tenses and meanings from the context. Thus, communication takes place but even the users are not confident about the use of tenses.

This study tries to find out how far visuals can be used for clarifying the use of tenses. College students are old enough to learn on their own; rather, they would prefer to learn on their own something that they have not understood properly since childhood. The researcher thought that preparing special visuals to present tenses can help students to understand the concept through self-learning. Gould and Roffey-Barentsen (2018) contend that 83 percent of our learning is achieved through the sense of sight.

1.1. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Although second language learners achieve a certain level of proficiency in English by the time they reach the college level, it is observed that their grammatical concepts are not completely clear, especially regarding the use of tenses in English. They do manage to communicate intelligibly but often do not use tenses correctly and admit that they do not have confidence regarding use of tenses. Inductive and deductive methods have been tried out to teach the use of tenses, but with little success. Videos help to clarify tenses in a better way. Yet, if tenses are represented in the form of time-lines complemented by pictures, they can be understood at a glance. These visuals immediately make the meaning clear and there is no need for anyone to explain them to the learner. They are self-explanatory. At a stage when learners are fairly proficient in English and just need a quick clarification in the use of tenses; these visuals can be very helpful. A visual image can be remembered for a long time when they are exposed to it several times. It gets stored in the inner eye and can be brought back to memory whenever required. It is also necessary to suggest that teachers can apply visually-based grammar teaching based on the nature of grammatical rules

taught, learner ability, while taking into account pedagogical principles of particularity, practicality, and possibility (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

One may wonder why visuals should be used in this age of technology. It has already been mentioned that this is a time for combining the old and the new, the offline and online; the emphasis is on facilitating learning rather than teaching and the focus is on self-learning. College level students are matured enough to access material and learn on their own. Students may vary in their knowledge about the use of tenses. Hence, they can select only those visuals which help them to clarify unclear concepts. Moreover, the visuals can be prepared in soft or hard copy formats.

Considering all the above points, preparing visual material for teaching tenses to college level Iraqi students seems to be a worthwhile effort.

1.2 Objectives:

- To take a review about the confidence level of fourth year college level students regarding the use of tenses in English through a questionnaire.
- To prepare visuals in the form of time-lines and pictures for understanding the use of tenses in English.
- To implement the self-learning program and note the minimum duration required to complete the program.
- To record the results of the study based on statistical calculations and observations.

1.3 Sample

50 students from the fourth-year college level Iraqi were selected for the study. .

1.4 Method

The proficiency level and opinion of students prior to the experiment were gathered from a questionnaire distributed to 50 college students studying in the fourth year. The experimental method was used to find out the effectiveness of the program based on visuals for self-learning of English tenses. A hard copy of the visuals was provided in addition to a soft copy and students were given a choice to use any one of them. The results of the pre and post test were compared statistically.

SECTION 2 – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE
2. A. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
2. A.1. Tenses in English

The word 'tense' has been derived from the Latin word 'tempus' which means 'time'. While 'time' is a physical concept, 'tense' is a grammatical concept. Verbs are words that indicate action. Every action takes place at a specific time; it might be completed in the past, may be an ongoing action, may be taking place at the time of speaking or may take place in the future. Tense indicates the time of the action. Hence, the correct and appropriate use of tense is important while teaching and learning English. There are three basic tenses – the past tense, the present tense and the future tense.

2. A.2. The Importance of tenses in English

Tenses in English are the most important elements in English grammar. Knowledge of tenses enables second language learners to construct grammatically correct sentences and express the precise meaning that they want to convey. Tenses help to describe the time of actions that take place.

2. A.3. Visual aids in teaching-learning

Teaching aids are of three types – audio, visual and audio-visual. According to Rautrao (2012) the interest of students as well as teachers increases when visual aids are used. Visual aid is, as Stevick defined it, "anything visible which helps your student master the language more quickly or more accurately"...

Visual aids are stronger than audio aids. They include pictures, charts, diagrams, graphs, tables, sketches, films, and actual presentations. An image of a visual can remain on the mind's eye for a long time. Visual aids help learners to retain what is visualized. Visual information is more engaging. Ngonyani (2018) stated that teachers consider the use of real objects as important in teaching and learning process.

2. A.4. The characteristics and advantages of visual aids

Visual aids are of 3 types according to F. L. Billows (1968). Two-dimensional visuals aids are charts, pictures diagrams, figures etc. Three dimensional visuals aids include models, puppets, mimes, gestures of teachers and students etc. The third type of visual aids are any other aids that can be seen with the eyes like films, videos etc.

Visual aids help to clarify concepts. Abstract concepts can be made clear through visuals. Showing the picture of something that is beautiful or a beautiful artefact enables the learners to understand the abstract term 'beauty'.

Showing the picture of a railway station immediately enables a learner to imagine the crowd and commotion on a platform. Description in words would fail to create an exact picture and a very lengthy description would be necessary. Thus, visuals save a lot of time spent in description and explanation.

A concept like melting of ice can be easily understood from a demo rather than through description. Words, explanations, and descriptions are supplemented by visuals. Powerpoint slides prove to be more effective in classroom teaching since they can be enhanced by visuals like pictures, videos, graphs, photographs etc. Feleshi, (2014) also reported that planned and well-prepared slides motivate students and retain their attention because they elaborate the presented information. Time-lines enable understanding the use of tenses. Glancing at a timeline clarifies where and how a particular tense must be used. This article tries to prove the success of time-lines for enabling students to understand tenses by themselves.

"There are numerous benefits of visual arts in education for young children, ranging from sensory exploration to the exercising of the imagination. However, visual arts are not granted the high value and serious consideration that they deserve in the school curricula and are not fully appreciated by the community" (Buldu & Shaban, 2010 p.1).

A graphical representation of rainfall in 10 consecutive years becomes clear in a glance rather than through words. A timetable is another common visual that is convenient and time-saving. Such visuals can be indirect yet effective. They can be suggestive, mocking, or implicative. Icons are also visuals that can be interpreted even by those who cannot read and write. Icons are used on cell phones and other digital devices. Road signs are visuals that are understood universally. Thus, we find that visuals play an important role in daily life and can be effectively used for teaching learning purposes.

2. A.5. Self-Learning Material

Although teaching by teachers or instructors is the commonest method in education, self-learning material is preferred in many situations, especially when the students are employed full-time or part-time. Very often, taking admission in a college, travelling to a place far from the home town, staying in a hostel etc. is expensive and may not be feasible for several reasons. Hence, in modern times, distance learning has become popular. In the distance learning mode, students are provided with specially prepared material. They can read and learn on their own. Students can learn at their own pace and convenient time.

In a similar way, visual material can be used for self-learning. It does not require a mediator or intervention of any kind. Dr. Jayaram K. and Dorababu K. (2015) clearly state in their article that "SLMs include all the material prepared to stimulate independent study/learning. The learners in distance education have less contact with either the institution or the tutor, and depend heavily on these specially prepared learning materials (p 21929)."

Gbenoba and Dahunsi (2014) also note that "customised, self-instructional materials are at the heart of instructional delivery in Open and Distance Learning.

SECTION 3
Methodology and Procedure

This section will deal with the method used for carrying out the research and the detailed procedure for analysis of the data collected.

3.1 Method

The experimental method is used for collecting primary data. Qualitative data is gathered through a questionnaire. 50 students studying in the fourth-year college of Education in Iraq, Al Mansour University, were selected for the experiment. The sample was purposive. The single group pre-test/ post-test design was used.

3.2 Design and Procedure

Table-1 Single Group Pre-test / Post-test design

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Online pre-test	Implementation of self-learning course	Online post-test

The students had knowledge about the use of English tenses. A pre-test was conducted to test their knowledge and awareness about the correct use of English tenses. The test was conducted online. This was followed by the teaching programme using visuals for teaching the tenses.

A programme was prepared using visuals. It was divided into 4 parts, each part dealing with one form of the Present tense. The tense forms were presented through time-lines. In addition, an explanation of the use of each form was given in the form of notes along with sufficient examples. Two exercises were provided for the purpose of practice. Ideally, each programme would be completed within an hour. Each practice session would require maximum 30 minutes. However, the students were asked to complete the programme at their own convenient pace. The maximum duration given was one month.

All this material was self-explanatory and prepared as self-learning material. The material was given as both soft and hard copies and the students could choose any mode which they found convenient. Singh (2005) states that any device which by sight… increases the individual's experience beyond that acquired through reading is described as a visual aid." (p 78)

A questionnaire was distributed to the students to find out their opinion about the understanding and difficulties regarding tenses in English and their reactions to the visuals-based programme for teaching English tenses.

3.3 Questionnaire (the students responded whether they agreed, disagreed or partly agreed with the following statements)

1. English tenses are difficult to understand.
2. The use of each tense is best understood through examples.
3. I would prefer an explanation of the use of English tenses.
4. There is no need to teach tenses – they can be understood automatically through use of language.
5. It is essential and important to understand the use of tenses.
6. I am sure that I use correct tense forms while speaking and writing in English.
7. I don't care much about the tense that I use as long as I can convey my message unambiguously.
8. The visual method is interesting and useful.
9. The visual method is clear and easy to understand.
10. The visual method enables self-learning; hence it is convenient.

SECTION 4
Data Analysis

4.1 An online pre-test was conducted in order to assess the knowledge of the students regarding the use of the 4 forms of the Present Tense in English. The test consisted of 10 questions, each carrying 1 mark. Every correct answer was given one mark and every incorrect answer was given a zero. Only errors related to the use of the correct verb form were considered; other errors like spelling mistakes, capital letters, punctuation marks and other grammatical elements were ignored.

4.2 Statistical calculation
Table 3: Table showing Meana and SD in pre-test and post-test

Group	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	5.14	7.38
SD	1.20	1.26
SEM	0.17	0.18
N	50	50

Confidence level:
Difference between mean of pre-test and mean of post-test: - 2.24
t = 10. 1587
df = 49
Standard error difference = 0.221
P value and statistical significance
The P-value is less than 0.0001
This difference is statistically very significant
Hence, the visual based self-learning method proves to be highly effective compared to the traditional method.

Observations

Scores in the pre-test show that very few students scored more than 50 percent marks whereas in the post-test, very few students scored less than 50 percent marks. In the pre-test, not a single student scored 10 out of 10 marks while in the post-test, 3 students scored 100 percent marks. a statistical comparison of scores in the pre and post-tests shows significant difference, proving beyond doubt the success and effectiveness of the visual method for teaching tenses in English.

4.3 Observations

Table-4 Table showing Responses to the questionnaire

Question	Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
1. English tenses are difficult to understand.	33	10	7
2. The use of each tense is best understood through examples.	26	20	4
3. I would prefer an explanation of the use of English tenses.	12	6	32
4. There is no need to teach tenses – they can be understood automatically through use of language.	2	22	26
5. It is essential and important to understand the use of tenses.	41	5	4
6. I am sure that I use correct tense forms while speaking and writing in English.	5	33	12
7. I don't care much about the tense that I use as long as I can convey my message unambiguously.	20	16	14
8. The visual method is interesting and useful.	44	5	1
9. The visual method is clear and easy to understand.	38	7	5
10. The visual method enables self-learning; hence it is convenient.	28	7	5

Observations:

The number of students who agree, partly agree, or disagree with the statements in the questionnaire was tabulated and analysed. Maximum number of students agree that mere explanation of the use of tenses is not very helpful, that English tenses are difficult to understand and that examples are more helpful than explanation. Maximum students also show an inclination towards the use of visuals and self-learning through visuals. They find it more convenient. One of the reasons for favouring the self-learning method is, that at college level, students hesitate to admit that they are not confident about the use of tenses and thus hesitate to seek guidance or instructions. They prefer to take efforts, learn on their own and at their own pace and convenience.

SECTION 5 - CONCLUSION, MAJOR FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 MAJOR FINDINGS

- Visuals in the form of pictures and time-lines can be prepared and used as self-learning materials for understanding the use of English tenses.
- Students prefer learning on their own at the college level, something that they have been taught at school level but about which they lack confidence.
- It is a matter of clarifying doubts rather than learning, hence the self-learning mode is preferable.
- The visuals can be used on screen or in hard copy. They can be referred to at any time.
- Visuals save a great deal of time spent on explanation and examples.

5.3 CONCLUSION

A comparison of scores in the pre-test and post-test clearly shows that college level students can make use of self-explanatory visuals to understand, confirm or re-check their knowledge about the use of tenses. Sometimes, students have doubts regarding few tenses and not all. In this case, they can refer only to selected visuals and save time learning all tenses. Sometimes, they only want to make sure that their knowledge is correct so they can quickly refer to the necessary visuals. If they have little or no knowledge, yet, the self-explanatory visuals help them to understand verb tenses.

Hence, it can be concluded that visuals in the form of time-lines, complemented occasionally by pictures, can be extremely useful as self-learning material for college level students, whatever their status regarding the knowledge of tenses.

5.4 SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A similar study can be carried out by preparing customized visuals for all levels. For younger students, they must be prepared as teaching aids or teaching materials.

A plan for all the tenses can help teachers as well as students to teach and learn the use of correct verb tenses forms.

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