



DISMANTLING AND ANALYSING MULTI-PARAGRAPHS TO IMPROVE THE USE OF PRESENT AND PAST TENSES IN WRITING AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract:

Grammar is the backbone of language, providing a set of rules and principles that govern the structure, formation, and usage of words and sentences. This study aims to “dismantle” paragraphs from non-fiction material, learn the usage of present and past tenses in these sentence structures, and apply this knowledge in writing sentences containing present and past tenses. A pretest-post-test control group design was employed. The participants of this study would consist of 20 college students who were randomly assigned to a treatment and a control group. Both groups were exposed to the same classroom conditions except for the intervention. Only the treatment group was given intervention. The respondents’ scores were measured at two points, pre-test and post-test. This was followed by a semi-structured interview in which three participants from the treatment group were interviewed. The findings revealed improved participants’ use of present and past-tense writing based on the difference between the pretest and the post-test results. The interview data also revealed that the participants were able to construct more accurate sentences using these tenses. Interestingly, the study respondents said that this activity had made them pay close attention to sentence structures when they read materials in the English language. Exposing students to different genres and studying sentence structure thoroughly can help improve students’ grammar, specifically present and past tense, in their writing.

Keywords: grammar, present and past tenses, sentence structure, genres, dismantle

1. Introduction

Tenses play a significant role in writing, as they establish the timeline of events, actions, and states of being within a text. They allow writers to indicate when something happens,

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and this provides clarity and coherence to the narrative. The present and the past tense are the two only tenses that are considered as being “real” tenses in the English language since these are verb forms that have a specific inflection: the present, I survive, and the past I survived (Estling Vannestål, 2015, p. 194) as cited in Sabar (2020). Undoubtedly, the correct use of tenses helps to maintain consistency in writing. The accurate choice of tense can set the tone and mood of the text, guiding the reader through the sequence of events smoothly. Although English uses an elaborate system of tenses, simple past and simple present are the most common tenses in research papers, as Joshi (2013) mentions.

Mastering the use of past and present tenses allows writers to manipulate time within their work, creating a more engaging and effective narrative. It ensures that the reader is guided smoothly through the text, with a clear understanding of when events occur, ultimately enhancing the overall readability and impact of the writing.

2. Literature Review

Celce-Murcia (2002) emphasizes teaching grammar in context, arguing against its isolation from actual language use. This approach enables learners to grasp how grammatical structures function in real-life communication, facilitating the internalization of these rules. In writing, this contextual understanding of grammar empowers writers to select appropriate sentence structures that align with their intended message, thereby enhancing their work's overall readability and effectiveness. As Bennett and Robertson (2015), as cited in Thongtum & Intasena (2023), assert, mastering sentence formation equips students with essential skills that offer far-reaching benefits in their academic pursuits, personal lives, and future careers.

Tenses, as a key aspect of grammar, play a significant role in writing by situating actions and events within a specific timeframe. The correct use of tenses ensures that the reader can follow the sequence of events and understand the temporal relationships between different actions. According to Gupta, 2023, tenses in scientific writing, for example, serve as valuable tools to indicate the time frame in which specific actions or ideas occur. Jufrizal (2014), as cited in Listia, Rina, Febriyanti and Emma (2020), stated that tenses are an essential part that needs to be mastered by EFL learners. Since grammar is related to the construction of correct sentences, the learners must be able to express the sentences in the right form of tenses. Which correct tense should the learners use in the sentence, and shows their proficiency in the language?

The past tense is predominantly used to describe events that have already occurred. It is particularly common in narrative writing, where it helps to create a sense of history and progression. According to Biber and Conrad (2009), the past tense is essential for recounting experiences, developing characters, and providing a chronological account of events. By using the past tense, writers can guide readers through a narrative, ensuring that the sequence of events is clear and easy to follow.

The interaction between past and present tenses is a crucial aspect of effective writing. Writers often need to shift between tenses to accurately reflect the timeline of

events and the relationship between different actions. However, it is essential that these shifts are done intentionally and consistently to avoid confusing the reader.

To avoid such confusion, Swales and Feak (2012) recommend maintaining tense consistency within a single section of writing unless there is a specific reason to change tenses. For example, a writer might use the past tense to describe events that occurred in a study but switch to the present tense to discuss the current implications of those findings. This deliberate use of tense shifts helps to create a coherent and logically structured narrative that is easy for the reader to follow.

3. Aim of the Study

This study aims to “dismantle” paragraphs from non-fiction material, learn the usage of present and past tenses in these sentence structures, and apply this knowledge in writing sentences containing present and past tenses.

3.1 Research Question

- Does dissecting different non-fiction paragraphs that contain present and past tenses and studying their usage of tenses help students improve their accuracy in using present and past tenses in writing?

3.2 Research Hypothesis

- There is a significant difference in the accuracy of using present and past tense in writing between students exposed to dissecting different non-fiction paragraphs and those who were not.

4. Methodology

The study participants consisted of 20 college students who were randomly selected from both genders (male and female). These students were assigned to a treatment and a control group. Both groups were exposed to the same classroom conditions except for the intervention, in which only the treatment group was involved.

The treatment consisted of “dismantling” paragraphs from non-fiction materials. Each paragraph was dissected to learn the grammar elements through their sentence structures. The focus is on sentences with present and past tenses. The acquired grammar knowledge is then applied in sentences containing present and past tense.

The instruments used for this study were a pre-test, a post-test, and a semi-structured interview. All participants were involved in the pretest and post-test. However, only three students from the treatment group were interviewed.

The writing at the pretest and post-test consists of constructing five present-tense sentences and five past-tense sentences based on the subjects and nouns given to them. The sentence must include a verb.

For example, if they are given she (subject) + window (noun), they can come up with a sentence that contains a verb. Each sentence with the correct use of present tense or past tense verbs will be allotted 1 mark. Therefore, for a sentence:

He wipes the window every Sunday. (1 mark)

She wiped the window yesterday. (1 mark)

5. Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows the number of students in the treatment group and control group. Both the treatment and control groups had ten students each. An equal number of students from both genders were chosen to avoid any issues related to gender.

Table 1: Number of Students in Treatment and Control Groups

Gender	Male (n)	Female (n)	Total
Treatment Group	5	5	10
Control Group	5	5	10
Total	10	10	20

5.1 Findings from the Pretest and Post-test

Table 2: Pretest and Posttest Results of Treatment and Control Groups

Participants	Treatment Group			Control Group		
	Pretest	Posttest	Gain in %	Pretest	Posttest	Gain in %
1	4	8	4 (40%)	4	4	0(0%)
2	4	8	4 (40%)	3	4	1(10%)
3	3	7	4 (40%)	4	5	1(10%)
4	4	7	3 (30%)	4	4	0(0%)
5	5	8	3 (30%)	5	5	0(0%)
6	4	7	3 (30%)	5	5	0(0%)
7	5	7	2 (20%)	4	4	0(0%)
8	5	8	3 (30%)	5	6	1(10%)
9	5	7	2 (20%)	4	5	1(10%)
10	5	9	4 (40%)	5	5	0(0%)
Total	44	76	32(32%)	43	47	4(4%)

Table 2 shows that all respondents from the treatment group showed improvement in their present and past-tense sentence construction. The treatment group pretest scores range from 3 to 5, with a total of 44; meanwhile, the post-test scores range from 7 to 9, with a total of 76. Thus, the percentage gain is from 20%-40%, with a total gain of 32 points, which is a 32% improvement overall. On the other hand, for the control group, the pretest scores range from 3 to 5 with a total of 43, which is just one point difference compared to the treatment group. However, the post-test score ranges from 4 to 6, totalling 47 points. The gain scores range from 0 to 1 point. There is only a 4%

improvement overall from this group. The treatment group shows a higher percentage gain (32%) than the control group (4%).

Based on these results, it can be concluded that the treatment applied to the treatment group led to a statistically significant improvement in scores compared to the control group. These results show that the treatment effectively enhanced participant performance in writing correct sentences using present and past tense.

Table 3: Pre-test and Post-test Results of Treatment and Control Groups

	Number	Mean	S.Dev	SEM	df	t-value
Treatment Group	10	4.40	0.70	0.22	18	0.3254
Control Group	10	4.30	0.67	0.21		

Note: No significance at .05 level.

Table 3 shows that, at the pretest level, the t-value is 0.3254, and the p-value is .3743. This is very much below the .05 level of significance. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the mean score (4.40) of the treatment group and the mean score (4.30) of the control group. This also implies that the treatment group and the control groups are academically equal in the grammar test at the pretest level.

Table 4: T-test Analyses of Post-test Scores of Treatments and Control Groups

	Number	Mean	S.Dev	SEM	df	t-value
Treatment Group	10	7.60	0.70	0.22	18	9.43648
Control Group	10	4.80	0.63	0.20		

Note: *Significance at .05 level.

However, at the post-test level, as shown in Table 4, the t-value is 9.43648. The p-value is < .00001. The result is significant at $p < .05$. Therefore, the hypothesis that there is a significant difference in the ability to use present and past tense in writing between students exposed to dissecting different paragraphs to learn these tenses and those not exposed is accepted.

Table 5: T-test Analyses of Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Treatment Group

	Number	Mean	S.Dev	SEM	df	t-value
Pre-test	10	4.30	0.82	0.26	9	12.67
Post-test	10	7.60	0.70	0.33		

Note: *Significance at .05 level.

Table 5 above shows a t-test analysis of the pre-test and post-test scores of the treatment group. There is a significant difference between the mean of the pretest and the post-test. The two-tailed P-value is less than 0.0001; therefore, by conventional criteria, this difference is statistically significant.

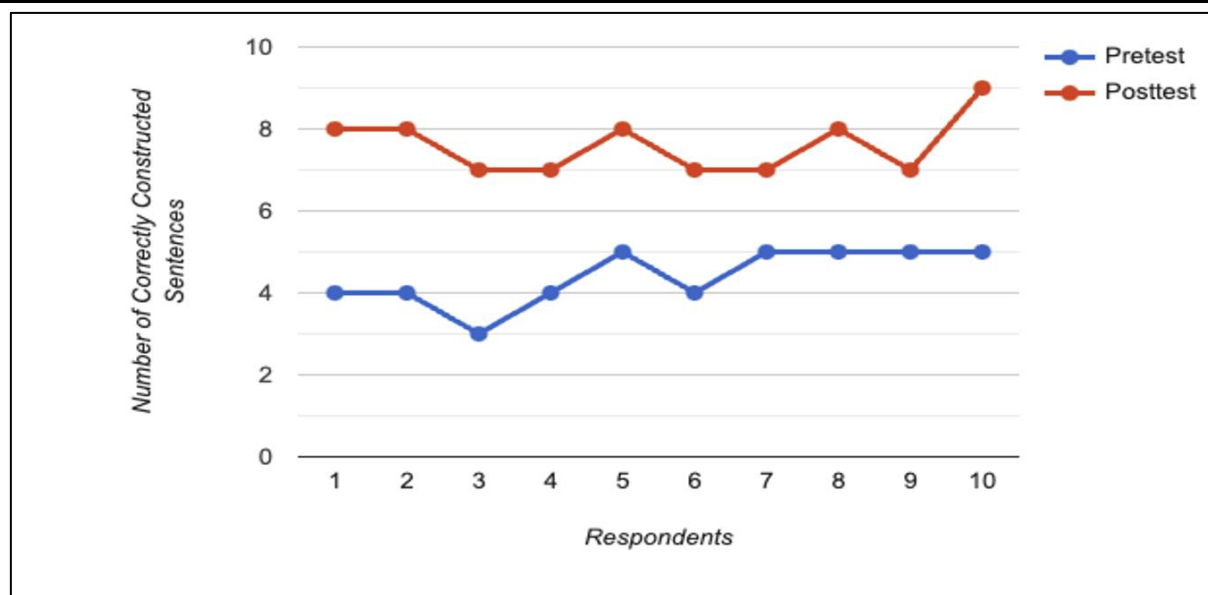


Figure 1: Comparing Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Treatment Group

Figure 1 above shows the pre-test and post-test scores of the treatment group. The scores indicate a significant improvement for all the respondents in this group.

5.2 Findings from the Interview Data

The interview responses reflect the participants' positive experiences with the intervention. The key themes of the interview data analysis are:

- Improve understanding of tenses,
- Focused attention on sentence structure, and
- Engagement with learning.

a. Improve Understanding of Tenses

All participants mentioned that the process of “breaking” paragraphs helped them better understand how to use and construct sentences in both present and past tenses.

“The “breaking up” of the paragraphs to understand present and past tenses helps me to understand how to write sentences better using these tenses. I like how different paragraphs are dismantled, and seeing how sentences are constructed helps me understand the use of present and past tenses. I think this is a great way to learn tenses” (Participant 1)

b. Focused Attention on Sentence Structure

Participant 2 commented on how this activity encourages attention to sentence structure and how sentences connect within a paragraph:

“I think looking at different paragraphs and seeing how the sentences are connected is very helpful, and I can understand the use of present and past tenses in these paragraphs. This activity also made me pay close attention to the sentences and how the sentences are formed.” (Participant 2)

Participant 3 similarly notes that he is paying more attention to sentences when reading, implying an improved grammatical awareness:

“Interesting way to learn tense. I understand better how present tense and past tense sentences are constructed. I also learn to pay more attention to the sentences when I read”.
(Participant 3)

c. Engagement with Learning

The intervention seems to be engaging and interesting for the participants. Participant 3 calls it *“an interesting way to learn tenses”*. At the same time, Participant 1 expressed enthusiasm by saying that he *“like”* the dismantling of paragraphs, which can contribute to a more positive learning experience.

These responses provide qualitative evidence that the intervention is an effective learning strategy. It encourages cognitive engagement and skill transfer. Therefore, the findings from the interview suggest that the intervention positively impacts learners’ understanding and application of present and past tenses.

6. Conclusion

Understanding how to use present and past tenses correctly and consistently is crucial for maintaining the clarity and coherence of a text. By mastering the interaction between past and present tenses, writers can create more engaging, logical, and impactful writing that effectively communicates their intended message. This study indicated that employing *“dismantling paragraphs”* activities from non-fiction materials helped students to understand the use of present and past tenses in sentence construction. It also created an awareness among students to pay close attention to sentence structure when reading.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Dr. Chandra Mohan Vasudeva Panicker is currently an Assistant Professor and a Coordinator for the PhD in Education program at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities at Lincoln University. He has a PhD in Education (TESL), a master’s degree in education (TESL), a Bachelor of Arts degree and a post-graduate certificate in Training of Trainers from Mark and John University, Plymouth, United Kingdom. He has more than 25 years of experience as an English language teacher and lecturer and 25 years of experience as a Head of the Language Department in an Institute of Teacher Education. He has published several articles in international journals and wrote a book on higher-order thinking skills. He has also presented papers at international conferences. His

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