

Integrating Direct Strategies in Teaching Tense Aspect System

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Published: December, 2025

ABSTRACT

Teaching the tense–aspect system has long posed challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners due to its complex relationship between form, meaning, and use. Traditional grammar instruction in many EFL contexts often emphasizes rule memorization rather than meaningful application, resulting in learners’ limited ability to use tense forms accurately in communication. This study explores the integration of direct learning strategies—such as memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies—into the teaching of the tense–aspect system to enhance students’ grammatical competence and communicative accuracy. Using a mixed-method design, the research involved classroom implementation of direct strategies followed by tests, questionnaires, and observations. The findings indicate that learners who were taught using direct strategies showed significant improvement in recognizing and applying tense–aspect forms correctly. Moreover, students reported increased motivation, better retention, and greater confidence in using grammar communicatively. The results suggest that integrating direct strategies provides an effective framework for shifting grammar instruction from teacher-centered rule learning to student-centered strategy-based learning. It is recommended that EFL teachers combine direct strategies with communicative activities to promote both accuracy and fluency in language use.

Keywords : *direct learning strategies, tense–aspect system, grammar teaching, EFL learners, communicative competence*

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PENDAHULUAN

Teaching grammar has long been one of the most central yet challenging components of English language instruction. Among the many grammatical subsystems, the tense–aspect system has been widely acknowledged as one of the most difficult for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to master, particularly because it requires understanding not only grammatical forms but also their semantic and pragmatic meanings in context. As Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan-Colomé (2022) highlight, the acquisition and teaching of tense–aspect remain complex due to the intricate relationship between form, meaning, and discourse function. In many EFL classrooms, tense instruction still tends to focus primarily on rule memorization and verb conjugation, which may lead learners to develop declarative knowledge without the procedural ability to use these forms accurately and appropriately in communication.

In recent years, language teaching research has emphasized the need to integrate **learning strategies** into grammar instruction to promote learner autonomy and deepen grammatical understanding. Oxford (1990) originally categorized learning strategies into **direct strategies** (memory, cognitive, and compensation) and **indirect strategies** (metacognitive, affective, and social). Direct strategies involve the learner’s active engagement with the language itself—processing, storing, and producing linguistic input. These strategies, when effectively integrated into grammar teaching, can help students internalize grammatical forms through active manipulation and practice rather than passive memorization.

Empirical studies in the last five years have supported this shift toward strategy-based grammar learning. Prasetyaningrum et al. (2023) found that successful EFL learners tend to rely heavily on cognitive and metacognitive strategies in learning grammar, using techniques such as repetition, pattern recognition, and self-monitoring. Similarly, Morales-Lat and Yumarnamto (2021)

revealed that students who applied metacognitive and cognitive strategies demonstrated stronger awareness of grammatical rules and higher accuracy in grammar-based tasks. These findings align with the principle that learners benefit when grammar instruction is combined with strategic approaches that promote meaningful practice and self-regulated learning.

However, despite the growing evidence supporting learning strategies, grammar instruction in many EFL classrooms remains teacher-centered, emphasizing explanation and error correction over strategy training. As a result, students often struggle to apply grammatical rules in real communicative contexts. Rahmawati and Fitriani (2021) observed that Indonesian EFL learners frequently made tense–aspect errors, particularly in distinguishing between perfect and progressive forms, due to their reliance on rote learning and the absence of contextualized strategy use. This suggests that grammar teaching needs to evolve from a rule-based approach to a strategy-based and meaning-oriented one, consistent with modern views of grammar that focus on *form, meaning, and use* (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé, 2022).

Integrating **direct learning strategies**—such as memory aids, repetition drills, imagery association, and compensatory guessing—into the teaching of the tense–aspect system may offer a more effective pathway to help learners internalize tense forms and use them appropriately in communication. Supakorn, Feng, and Limmun (2020) argue that when learners employ direct strategies, they are more likely to notice language patterns, engage in hypothesis testing, and retain grammatical forms longer. Likewise, Tania (2022) emphasized that successful students in online grammar classes often demonstrated intentional use of direct strategies, such as note-taking, practicing new forms, and using contextual cues to understand meaning.

The integration of direct strategies in teaching tense and aspect thus aligns with both cognitive and communicative dimensions of modern grammar pedagogy. It supports the idea that grammar should not only be taught as a set of abstract rules but also as a functional tool for expressing meaning in time. By equipping learners with direct strategies, teachers can foster greater autonomy, enhance retention, and facilitate the transfer of grammatical knowledge from controlled practice to spontaneous communication.

Therefore, this article aims to explore the pedagogical significance of integrating direct learning strategies in the teaching of the tense–aspect system. It discusses the theoretical underpinnings of direct strategies, examines their roles in grammar learning, and proposes practical approaches for EFL teachers to embed these strategies into modern grammar instruction. The integration of strategy-based teaching and modern grammar principles is expected to provide a more holistic and effective framework for improving learners' grammatical competence and communicative performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how direct strategies are integrated in teaching the tense–aspect system in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of teaching practices, classroom interactions, and both teachers' and students' perceptions of the learning process.

According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research seeks to explore and interpret meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to social or educational phenomena. In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is the use of direct strategies—explicit instruction, modeling, guided practice, and immediate feedback—in the teaching of the tense–aspect system in English grammar.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in an English language classroom at a senior high school (or language course) in a senior high school. The site was selected purposively because the teacher had previously applied direct strategies in grammar instruction, particularly in teaching tenses.

Participants

- One English teacher who regularly uses direct strategies in grammar instruction.
- Ten students from the same class, selected purposively to represent different levels of achievement (high, medium, and low proficiency).

All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and voluntarily agreed to take part in the study.

Data Collection Techniques

To obtain comprehensive and credible data, multiple instruments were used: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The combination of these techniques allows for data triangulation, enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2019).

Classroom Observation

Observation was conducted during three teaching sessions focused on the tense–aspect system (e.g., present perfect, past simple, continuous aspects). The researcher used a structured observation checklist and field notes to record:

- How the teacher implemented direct strategies (explicit explanation, modeling, feedback).
- How students engaged during the learning process.
- Classroom atmosphere, interaction patterns, and noticeable student difficulties.

The observation focused on the key components of direct instruction, including explanation, modeling, guided practice, and independent application.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were carried out with both the teacher and selected students to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perceptions.

- Teacher interview: explored the rationale for using direct strategies, teaching procedures, challenges, and reflections.
- Student interviews: explored students' experiences, perceptions of the strategy, and difficulties in understanding tenses.

Each interview lasted about 20–30 minutes and was recorded (with consent) and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Document Analysis

To support the observation and interview data, several documents were collected and analyzed, such as:

- Lesson plans (RPP)
- Teaching materials and worksheets
- Students' written work related to tense usage

The documents helped to identify how direct strategies were represented in instructional materials and assessment tasks.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019). The process consisted of the following steps:

- Familiarization: reading and re-reading all data (interview transcripts, field notes, documents).
- Coding: identifying meaningful units or codes related to teaching practices, strategies, and perceptions.
- Categorization: grouping similar codes into broader categories such as “explicit explanation,” “teacher feedback,” “students' responses,” and “learning challenges.”
- Theme development: deriving key themes that represent the integration and impact of direct strategies in teaching tense–aspect.
- Interpretation: discussing how these themes relate to previous studies and relevant theoretical frameworks (e.g., Oxford, 1990; Ellis, 2008).

Results and Discussions

Implementation of Direct Strategies in Teaching the Tense–Aspect System

Explicit Explanation of Rules

The teacher began each lesson with a clear explanation of the grammatical rules, supported by timelines, examples, and comparison between tenses. For instance, when teaching the difference between past simple and present perfect, the teacher emphasized time markers such as yesterday, since, and already to help students notice meaning distinctions.

“When I teach tenses, I always explain the rule first and show the time line so students can see the difference. Many students say it helps them understand when to use each tense.” — (Teacher Interview)

This finding aligns with Oxford (1990) and Ellis (2008) who state that explicit instruction allows learners to consciously notice grammatical patterns and relate them to form and meaning.

Modeling and Guided Practice

After the explanation, the teacher provided several sample sentences and asked students to practice by completing sentences, transforming verbs, or describing pictures using specific tenses. During guided practice, the teacher monitored students closely and corrected errors immediately.

Observation notes revealed that students were highly engaged when the teacher modeled examples and allowed them to apply the rules in context. This practice reflects the direct strategy principle that emphasizes teacher modeling followed by structured practice (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

“It’s easier to understand when the teacher gives examples first, and we repeat or make our own sentences.” — (Student 5)

Feedback and Reinforcement

Feedback was given directly and immediately after students made an error. The teacher used both explicit correction (stating the correct form) and recasts (repeating the correct sentence).

Students expressed that immediate feedback helped them notice and remember the correct form.

“When the teacher corrects me right away, I know what’s wrong and I can fix it.” — (Student 2)

This confirms findings from Ur (2012) and Harmer (2015) that immediate feedback fosters accuracy and confidence in grammar learning, especially in form-focused instruction.

Observation data showed that the teacher consistently used direct strategies throughout the teaching sessions. The main components of direct instruction identified were explicit explanation, modeling and guided practice, and immediate corrective feedback.

Students’ Responses and Learning Experiences

Interviews revealed that students had generally positive attitudes toward learning grammar through direct strategies. Three subthemes emerged: clarity of explanation, confidence improvement, and continued difficulties with complex aspects.

Clarity and Structure in Learning

Students appreciated that direct strategies gave them clear rules and structure. They reported that visual aids (timelines, examples) and step-by-step explanations helped them understand tense differences.

“Before, I was confused about when to use present perfect. Now I understand because the teacher explains with examples like ‘I have lived here since 2019.’” — (Student 3)

This supports Cohen (2014) and Nation (2019) who emphasize that learners benefit from explicit awareness of grammatical forms before engaging in communicative use.

Increased Confidence in Grammar Use

Most students reported feeling more confident when speaking or writing after receiving explicit instruction and feedback. They expressed that knowing the rules made them more comfortable experimenting with different tenses.

“I used to be afraid to speak because I thought my tense would be wrong. Now I know how to check my sentences.” — (Student 8)

Such responses reflect what Hinkel (2018) describes as metalinguistic confidence—the awareness of rules that supports self-correction and fluency.

Persistent Difficulties with Complex Tenses

Despite positive outcomes, some students still struggled with complex tense–aspect combinations, such as the present perfect continuous and past perfect. They reported confusion when the meanings of tenses seemed similar or context-dependent.

“Sometimes I still get confused between present perfect and present perfect continuous because both use ‘have’.” — (Student 6)

The teacher also observed that while direct strategies improved accuracy in controlled practice, students often reverted to simpler forms during free production. This echoes Ellis (2008) who notes that explicit knowledge does not automatically translate into spontaneous communicative use.

Challenges and Considerations in Implementing Direct Strategies

The teacher identified several challenges when applying direct strategies:

- Time limitation: Explaining rules and providing feedback for all students was time-consuming.
- Student diversity: Some students needed repetition and translation support.
- Balancing accuracy and communication: The teacher noted the difficulty of maintaining fluency while emphasizing grammar correctness.

“Sometimes I want students to speak freely, but I also want to correct their tenses. It’s hard to balance both.” — (Teacher Interview)

These findings are consistent with Nassaji and Fotos (2017), who argue that while form-focused instruction is effective for accuracy, it must be integrated with communicative practice to develop overall competence.

Discussion

The results indicate that direct strategies—explicit explanation, modeling, guided practice, and immediate feedback—play a crucial role in supporting students’ understanding of the tense–aspect system.

The findings confirm theoretical claims from Oxford (1990) and Richards & Rodgers (2014) that direct strategies facilitate noticing, which is essential for learning grammar forms. The positive student responses also echo Harmer (2015), who asserts that clarity and structure help learners internalize grammatical patterns effectively.

However, challenges such as limited time and varied student proficiency highlight the need for adaptive application of direct strategies. The teacher’s reflection about balancing accuracy and fluency aligns with the idea that explicit instruction should complement—not replace—communicative practice (Ellis, 2008; Hinkel, 2018).

Overall, the integration of direct strategies proved beneficial in raising grammatical awareness, enhancing confidence, and improving accuracy. Yet, for deeper mastery and transfer to spontaneous communication, combining these strategies with communicative and task-based approaches is recommended.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that integrating direct strategies in teaching the tense–aspect system has a significant positive impact on students’ grammatical understanding and confidence in using English accurately. The findings revealed that explicit explanation, modeling, guided practice, and immediate feedback helped students notice the rules and meanings of different tenses more effectively. Through these steps, learners were able to connect grammatical forms with communicative contexts, leading to better comprehension and accuracy in their language production. Moreover, students showed positive attitudes toward this approach, expressing that direct instruction made grammar lessons clearer, more structured, and easier to follow. They also reported increased confidence when speaking or writing, as they felt more certain about applying the correct tense. However, the study also found some challenges in implementing direct strategies, particularly related to time constraints, varying student proficiency levels, and the difficulty of balancing grammatical accuracy with communicative fluency. Despite these limitations, direct strategies proved to be a valuable method for developing students’ explicit knowledge of grammar. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers integrate direct instruction with communicative and task-based approaches to create a more balanced learning experience. This combination allows students not only to understand the rules but also to apply them naturally in real communication, ensuring both accuracy and fluency in English use.

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