

# Enhancing University Learners' Mastery of Present and Past Tenses through the Focused Divided Verb Teaching Method

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Keywords	Abstract
Verb Teaching Tense Accuracy ESP Grammar Verb Distinction	This study examines the effectiveness of the Focused Divided Verb Teaching Method in improving first-year university students' proficiency in using present and past tenses accurately. The research was conducted with 80 students at Ganja State University, Ganja City, Azerbaijan, employing a combination of pre-tests, targeted instruction, and post-tests to assess grammatical development. Results indicated substantial progress, with 28 students achieving over 70% accuracy in verb usage by the conclusion of the study. Participants reported that this method offered clearer and more effective guidance than traditional teaching techniques, particularly in distinguishing between main and helping verbs. Furthermore, significant enhancements were observed in both speaking and writing abilities, linked to a deeper understanding of tense application. The findings highlight the method's potential to advance English grammar competence, providing valuable insights for pedagogical strategies in higher education, especially within English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs.

## Introduction

In Azerbaijan, English is widely taught as a foreign language at the tertiary level, with a particular emphasis on English for Specific Purposes (ESP). As students advance in their academic careers, proficiency in general English becomes a fundamental prerequisite for mastering ESP, especially in disciplines requiring specialized knowledge and communication skills, such as law, medicine, and engineering. While students are expected to discuss topics related to their fields of study, they also face the challenge of achieving high scores on internationally recognized English proficiency exams, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). A strong command of grammar, particularly tenses, is essential for success in both academic communication and language proficiency tests.

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However, a significant number of students continue to struggle with key grammatical structures, especially the use of present and past tenses. This gap in grammatical understanding hinders their ability to participate effectively in academic discussions, produce coherent written texts, and achieve desired proficiency exam scores. Therefore, enhancing learners' grammatical proficiency is crucial for their academic success and future career prospects. This study aims to explore the role of effective pedagogical strategies in addressing these challenges and improving students' grammatical competence. By implementing targeted instructional approaches, educators can help learners overcome grammatical weaknesses and attain the necessary language skills to succeed in both their studies and international examinations.

Furthermore, there are notable differences between Azerbaijani and English grammatical structures. Azerbaijani grammar expresses tenses through verb conjugations by adding suffixes directly to the verb. In contrast, English tense is indicated in the predicate and often requires auxiliary verbs such as *am*, *is*, *was*, or *will*. Consequently, many students find it difficult to understand and construct correct sentences involving tense alterations in English, especially in speaking and writing.

A fundamental aspect of English grammar is the correct use of present and past tenses, which play a crucial role in constructing accurate sentences in both speech and writing. Students who grasp the grammatical structures of these tenses and can modify verb forms accordingly are better equipped to construct correct sentences. In Azerbaijani, tense is marked primarily through verb endings rather than auxiliary verbs. Although time adverbs like *yesterday* and *tomorrow* may indicate when an action occurs, tense is conveyed by changing the verb form itself. Unlike English, where auxiliary verbs signal tense in the predicate, Azerbaijani relies on verb conjugation endings. Failure to correctly modify verbs in Azerbaijani can result in grammatical errors, which adds to students' challenges in learning English tense forms.

***This study addresses two key research questions:***

1. How does the teaching method improve students' understanding of the present and past tenses?
2. How does the teaching method enhance students' speaking and writing abilities?

## **2. Literature Review**

Research on grammar development emphasizes the crucial role of grammatical knowledge in enhancing students' English proficiency. A solid grasp of grammar supports both productive and receptive language skills. In academic English, mastering standard written grammar and complex sentence structures is essential, and instruction should align with students' interests and needs (Harmer, 2007, p. 92). The communicative language teaching (CLT) approach highlights linguistic competence as key to language production, encouraging practical language use (Ellis, 2008, p. 134).

Fluency in speaking is vital for English learners, particularly given globalization's demand for proficiency in various fields (Brown, 2007, p. 66). Teachers must therefore select effective methods to improve speaking skills. Effective grammar instruction positively influences language learning and supports speaking development.

Common errors in second language writing—such as issues with tenses, prepositions, and subject-verb agreement—often stem from the influence of learners' first languages (Darus & Ching, 2009, p. 11). Writing is one of the most complex English skills to master but is essential for effective communication (Darus & Ching, 2009, p. 12). Errors can be external, caused by first language interference, or internal, arising from



the target language itself. External errors occur when learners transfer features from their first language, especially early in acquisition when target language rules are unfamiliar (Cook, 2010, p. 85). Positive transfer happens if the first language structures align with the target language; otherwise, interference may occur.

Errors may also be intra-lingual or developmental. Intra-lingual errors arise from misapplication of English grammar rules, while developmental errors reflect learners' stage-specific understanding of the language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 89). These errors, influenced by inadequate learning, target language complexity, and teaching methods, offer insight into learner progress. Positive transfer reduces errors, while negative transfer increases them (Ellis, 2008, p. 141). Developmental errors also relate to learners' comprehension and academic vocabulary (Rasulov, 2011, p. 47).

Grammar knowledge supports students' academic needs and enhances overall English skills. Because language skills are interconnected, grammar is essential for understanding syntactic structures, especially in reading texts that involve both lexical and grammatical features (Mustafayeva, 2015, p. 55). Effective grammar teaching fosters complex academic interactions beyond basic phrase repetition (Mammadova, 2014, p. 62). Therefore, grammar instruction is critical and strongly correlated with overall language competence.

Various teaching methods have evolved over time, each with strengths and limitations (Harmer, 2007, p. 80). In foreign language contexts where English is rarely used outside the classroom, effective grammar teaching methods are vital. Historically, the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods have been dominant. While some critics argue that excessive grammar focus can limit critical thinking, others stress its importance for language mastery and fluent communication (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 98). Ultimately, fluency remains the main goal of language learning, making grammar knowledge indispensable.

English learners often struggle particularly with tense usage, despite recognizing differences between tenses (Brown, 2007, p. 70). Learners understand that verbs must align with tenses but often have difficulty applying this consistently. Grammar instruction aims to improve learners' abilities and confidence. While many teachers prefer implicit methods, explicit grammar instruction—based on memorization and rule practice—has been shown to improve grammatical accuracy significantly (Madarina et al., 2015, p. 110).

Explicit instruction leads to better comprehension and increased confidence compared to implicit methods (Ellis, 2008, p. 149). Implicit knowledge is automatic and intuitive, enabling fluent spontaneous communication, whereas explicit knowledge is conscious, rule-based, and requires controlled processing. Research demonstrates that explicit teaching helps students understand grammar better, facilitating more automatic language use in real-world contexts (Ellis, 2008, p. 151).

## 2.1. Divided Verbs: Main Verb and Helping Verb

In English grammar, verbs are classified into main verbs and helping verbs. The main verb expresses the action or state of the subject and can be categorized as either action verbs (e.g., eat, go, write), which denote dynamic actions, or state verbs (e.g., look, resemble), which describe static conditions. Helping verbs, in contrast, serve a grammatical function by indicating tense, aspect, mood, or voice. They do not carry the full semantic meaning of the sentence but provide essential structural support. Key helping verbs include the forms of *to be* (is, am, are, was, were), *do* (do, does, did), *have* (have, has, had), and modal verbs such as *may*, *might*, *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should*, *can*, *could*, *must*, and *ought to*. These helping verbs play a crucial role in forming simple and compound tenses, enabling accurate expression of time and aspect in English (Harmer, 2007, p. 92).



## 2.2. What Needs to Be Taught?

According to Hinkel (2016), given limitations in instructional time and the need for effective teaching, it is impractical for English teachers to cover all verb tenses. Since not all tenses are widely used in contemporary English, educators should concentrate on the present and past tenses, which are fundamental for both spoken and written communication. Mastery of these tenses is especially critical for academic writing at advanced levels, where students must demonstrate competence in standard written English and complex sentence constructions. Hinkel recommends emphasizing practical applications of key verb tenses, including the simple present and past forms, as well as passive voice structures, which are prevalent in academic texts and serve important contextual purposes (Hinkel, 2016, p. 134).

## 3. Research Method

This study is classroom-based and utilizes an explicit teaching approach. The teaching process is divided into three cycles, spanning a total of nine sessions. The first cycle begins with a pre-test during the first meeting, followed by the implementation of the teaching method from the second to the seventh meeting. The third cycle consists of a post-test conducted in the eighth meeting. Data is collected through four stages.

First, data is gathered from the pre-test results before the teaching method is applied. The second step involves collecting data from the students' written work during the implementation of the teaching method. The third stage consists of analyzing the post-test results after the teaching method is applied. Finally, a semi-structured interview is conducted with 15 students. The interviews consist of open-ended questions and are held after the teaching method has been applied.

The data is analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The interview questions are as follows:

1. Did you understand how to construct correct sentences in the present and past tenses during high school?
2. How did you learn about the present and past tenses?
3. Were you aware that verb forms can be divided into main verbs and helping verbs?
4. What are your thoughts on dividing verbs into main verbs and helping verbs?
5. Did you find it easier to learn the present and past tenses after understanding the division of verbs?
6. How has understanding the division of verbs in the present and past tenses impacted your ability in writing and speaking?

### 3.1. Participants

This study involved 80 first-year students from the Faculty of Law at Ganja State University, a public institution in Ganja City, Azerbaijan. Although the participants were first-year law students, most had previously studied English from secondary school through high school.

### 3.2. Focused Divided Verb Teaching Method



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The teaching method was applied once a week across nine sessions, with each session lasting ninety minutes. The instruction was structured into three cycles, each designed to progressively build students' understanding and mastery of present and past tenses through the Focused Divided Verb approach.

#### A. First Cycle

The first cycle began with a pre-test conducted during the initial session. Students were instructed to write a paragraph of at least ten sentences about their daily activities using the simple present tense. Additionally, they wrote a separate paragraph, also consisting of at least ten sentences, describing their past weekend using the simple past tense. This pre-test aimed to evaluate students' baseline proficiency with present and past tenses prior to the introduction of the teaching method.

#### B. Second Cycle

In the second cycle, students were introduced to the Focused Divided Verb Teaching Method. This approach emphasized helping students distinguish between main verbs and helping verbs in both the present and past tenses. Instructional tasks were designed to engage students in writing sentences that correctly applied main and helping verbs. The cycle was divided into three phases:

##### 1. Phase One: Helping Verb Focus

In this phase, students were instructed to write sentences using only helping verbs (e.g., *is*, *am*, *are* for present tense; *was*, *were* for past tense) without including any main verbs. The purpose was to strengthen students' understanding of how helping verbs signal tense. Topics for sentence construction included describing favorite vegetables or family members. For example, in the present tense, students wrote sentences such as "What is your favorite vegetable?" and "Who is she?" (referring to their mother). In the past tense, they described favorite foods or family members from a past perspective.

##### 2. Phase Two: Main Verb Focus

Students then progressed to writing sentences that combined both main verbs and helping verbs (e.g., *do/does* for present tense, *did* for past tense). This phase aimed to clarify how main and helping verbs work together to indicate tense in affirmative and negative sentences. For instance, students answered questions like "What do you do with your favorite vegetable?" in the present tense or "What did your mother do last weekend?" in the past tense. The goal was to deepen comprehension of tense shifts in sentence formation.

##### 3. Phase Three: Present Tense vs. Past Tense

In this final phase, students were shown pictures depicting actions in both present and past contexts. They were tasked with writing 10 sentences in the present tense—five using helping verbs and five using main verbs—and then repeating the exercise for the past tense. Each task was timed for 20 minutes, after which students read their sentences aloud for syntactical analysis. This phase focused on reinforcing the differences between present and past tense usage and improving accurate tense application.

#### C. Third Cycle

The third cycle took place during the eighth and ninth sessions and involved a post-test to assess students' mastery of present and past tense usage after the teaching intervention. The post-test was conducted in three parts:

##### 1. First Session



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Students were shown various pictures featuring objects such as fish, fruits, and food. They were asked to write 10 sentences in the present tense, including 5 sentences using helping verbs and 5 using main verbs. This task aimed to evaluate their ability to accurately apply both verb types in the present tense.

## 2. Second Session

In this session, students viewed pictures depicting both present and past scenarios. They were instructed to write sentences in the past tense, correctly using helping verbs and main verbs to describe the actions and times shown.

## 3. Third Session

Students received their worksheets back and were given 10 minutes to revise their work. This revision phase was critical for encouraging reflection on errors, reinforcing understanding of tense changes, and improving their grasp of divided verbs. Feedback allowed students to identify mistakes and enhance their overall comprehension of present and past tense usage.

During the post-test, students were allowed to use only manual dictionaries to support vocabulary. The teacher evaluated the work by randomly selecting examples for class review, with some students asked to read their sentences aloud. This interactive process facilitated error correction and reinforced the students' understanding of tense application and the distinction between main and helping verbs.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Does the Focused Divided Verb Teaching Method Improve Students' Understanding of Present and Past Tenses?

The pre-test results revealed that many students had limited knowledge of present and past tenses, especially in distinguishing between main verbs and helping verbs. Numerous grammatical errors were observed, primarily related to incorrectly shifting verbs between tenses, which compromised sentence structure.

During the second cycle, confusion persisted regarding the correct use of verb forms in present and past tenses. Students struggled to differentiate the roles of main verbs and helping verbs in tense alteration. Frequent errors involved the helping verb *to be* (is, am, are, was, were) and auxiliary verbs (do, does, did), particularly in negative and interrogative sentences.

This difficulty in selecting the appropriate verb forms often stemmed from misunderstandings of time aspects within sentence predicates. Intra-lingual errors—where incorrect tense rules were applied despite awareness of tense differences—were common.

Despite these challenges, the second cycle was pivotal. Through consistent practice, revision, and teacher feedback, students began to recognize and correct their mistakes. This process enabled a clearer understanding and improved application of tense-related verb forms.

The post-test results further demonstrate the method's effectiveness. Out of 80 students who completed the post-test, 28 students achieved over 70% accuracy in using appropriate verb forms for present and past tenses, whether helping or main verbs. This shows a significant improvement in their ability to correctly express different tenses in sentences.





The table below illustrates the occurrence of grammatical errors in a sample of written tasks from the pretest.

<i>Error Classification</i>	<i>Error Samples of Sentences</i>	<i>Correction of Sentences</i>
<b>Helping Verb Mistakes</b>	1. I don't goes to the market.	1. I don't go to the market. (Use the base form of the verb after "do.")
	2. She was not going to the party last night.	2. She did not go to the party last night. (Use auxiliary "did" for past tense in negative.)
	3. Was they arrive early?	3. Did they arrive early? (Use "did" for past tense in the question form.)
<b>Main Verb Mistakes</b>	1. He always eat breakfast before school.	1. He always eats breakfast before school. (Use "eats" for subject-verb agreement.)
	2. After I finished my homework, I go to bed.	2. After I finish my homework, I go to bed. (Use present tense for habitual action.)
	3. What you do after school?	3. What do you do after school? (Correct auxiliary verb placement for question form.)
	4. They doesn't like to play soccer.	4. They don't like to play soccer. (Use "don't" for plural subjects.)
	5. I is going to the store later.	5. I am going to the store later. (Use "am" for the first-person subject.)

The study demonstrates significant improvement in students' understanding of present and past tenses following the implementation of the Focused Divided Verb Teaching Method. Initially, most of the 80 students struggled to write correct sentences in both tenses during the pre-test. However, after the intervention, students were able to accurately construct sentences in over 70% of cases during the post-test.

Interviews with 15 students revealed diverse backgrounds and learning experiences. For example, one student from an Islamic boarding school—unlike typical high schools—had previously been taught the difference between modal verbs and forms of "to be," but found the Focused Divided Verb Method clearer and more accessible. Many other students admitted that they had never been explicitly taught to distinguish between main and helping verbs; instead, they had been exposed mainly to memorization-based methods, which left them confused about the correct use of verb forms across tenses.

Three students reported that they already understood present and past tenses prior to the new method but found this approach easier and clearer. It not only helped them grasp tense changes more effectively but also improved their understanding of continuous tenses.

Overall, the findings indicate that the Focused Divided Verb Method significantly enhanced students' ability to differentiate main and helping verbs in sentences. By providing ample practice opportunities, the method improved students' mastery of present and past tenses, including their use in negative and interrogative forms. Students found this method more effective and user-friendly than traditional memorization, and it also aided their comprehension of other tenses, such as continuous and future tenses.

#### 4.2. Improvement in Students' Writing and Speaking Skills

The study found that the Focused Divided Verb Teaching Method significantly improved students' writing and speaking skills. Students became capable of constructing simple sentences and describing topics



accurately using present and past tenses, correctly applying both main and helping verbs. Many reported that the method clarified the differences between these verb types. One student noted, “The divided teaching method helped me understand the use of helping and main verbs better in sentence structure.”

As students improved in identifying the correct tense within sentences, grammatical errors decreased in both written and spoken work. The method’s emphasis on repetition and practice helped students internalize grammatical rules, recognize mistakes, and self-correct. This led to clearer expression of ideas and feelings.

Students with a strong grasp of basic grammar showed greater fluency and accuracy, confidently discussing everyday topics with proper tense usage. Overall, the method boosted students’ confidence and precision in spoken English, which is vital for effective academic communication.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Focused Divided Verb Teaching Method has significantly improved students’ understanding and use of present and past tenses. Students can now accurately construct sentences on simple topics, effectively distinguishing between helping and main verbs in line with the ANA (Adjective, Noun, and Adverb) structure. This approach encourages repetition and practice, strengthening students’ implicit grammatical knowledge and leading to greater fluency and accuracy in both speaking and writing.

Despite its effectiveness, the study faced time constraints, with students expressing a preference for more frequent sessions, ideally twice weekly, to deepen their learning. The findings offer valuable guidance for English educators, highlighting the importance of refining grammar instruction, especially for junior and senior high school learners. Additionally, the results support the adaptation of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum within higher education, emphasizing the need for a solid foundation in general English.

The study’s primary limitation lies in its restricted timeframe and focus on a single faculty, addressing only present and past tenses. Future research should explore the application of this method to other tenses, such as continuous and perfect forms, to further advance students’ overall mastery of English grammar.

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