

The Paradox of Grammatical Awareness: Interfacing Explicit Knowledge and Grammmaring in English Tense Proficiency: A Case of Pre-Service Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Grammar is an important aspect of learning a language because it conveys the full meaning of sentences and how readers or listeners understand them, whereas mastery of English grammar is currently seen as a dynamic process called grammaring. In this process, learners must possess explicit knowledge of rules. They are also required to stay aware of how to integrate three dimensions of language: form, meaning, and use. Many studies have focused on analyzing students' writing errors. Meanwhile, this study aims to examine students' grammatical awareness when identifying and explaining the use of English tenses in a given context. The research involved first-year students in the English Education Department in the 2025/2026 academic year. A descriptive quantitative method was employed to analyze and describe students' current grammatical proficiency, using data from their written responses to a final examination in the Basic Grammar course. The findings showed that students performed better at identifying tenses (54.17%) rather than at explaining their use (43.33%). A paradoxical trend also emerged: whereas the Simple Present produced strong identification but poor explanation accuracy (70% vs 30%), the Past Continuous showed the opposite pattern (30% vs 56.7%). These findings suggest that students have disjointed explicit knowledge, frequently depending on intuitive recognition or memorization instead of a cohesive comprehension of Form, Meaning, and Use

Keywords:

Grammatical awareness, Metalinguistic Awareness, Explicit Knowledge, Tense, students.



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INTRODUCTIONS

Grammar is essential for learning English as a foreign language (Wang, 2010 & Rossiter (2021). It helps students understand how sentences are constructed and how meanings are conveyed through different grammatical structures (Martin & Rothery (2014). In the context of learning English, mastering grammar will support overall language proficiency.

One crucial aspect of English grammar is the use of tenses, which indicate the time when an event occurs. In learning tenses, there are 16 tenses that are usually learned by students, of which some of the most frequently used are usually taught in the first year of university, such as the simple present tense, the present continuous tense, and others Wahyuningtyas & Bram (2018). The objectives of learning these tenses are not only to recognize the form, but also to use them appropriately in different contexts (Widdowson, 1978; Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Sevinch (2026). However, many students experience

difficulties in this case, sometimes they know the form, but they do not know why a particular tense is used in that context. This condition indicates that students' understanding of tense may still be limited to form recognition rather than functional comprehension.

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the grammatical competence of students is often viewed as having multiple dimensions. Larsen-Freeman (2003) stated that learning grammar means understanding the form of language (morphosyntactic), the meaning (semantics), and how language is used in context (pragmatics), or it is known as 'Grammaring. This indicates that students have to develop their knowledge of how grammatical structure works in communication rather than merely memorizing the formula. In addition, without a solid understanding of grammar, students may produce unclear utterances or structurally weak sentences that may confuse readers (Swan (2016).

Moreover in language learning, Ellis (2009) distinguishes between implicit knowledge and explicit knowledge or in other terms, declarative and procedural knowledge (DeKeyser, 1998; Dixon, 2012; Ko 2022). Implicit knowledge refers to unconscious knowledge that enables students to produce language automatically without being able to explain why they use the form. In contrast, explicit knowledge refers to conscious knowledge that allows students to think about what and why the thing happened or awareness of what, how and why the set of language structures choices in specific context used. In the context of this study, where students learn English, the ability to explain grammatical rules reflects students' explicit knowledge, which will be the focus of this study, that is metalinguistic awareness/ conscious knowledge/ explicit knowledge (Ke et al., 2023).

Grammaring by Freeman and Explicit Knowledge by Ellis support each other in how students develop their English skills. Ellis explains why the dimensions in Meaning and Use at Freeman's framework frequently show a lower level. Students may know the form explicitly (Form), but not yet internalized to be 'Grammaring', so that students can explain the function of Meaning and Use.

Many studies on the topic of grammar and metalinguistics awareness have been conducted. For example, students' grammatical mistakes through error analysis at Aminah et al. (2025) found that, in students' narrative writing, the most common grammatical error was tense, along with subject-agreement and preposition errors. Similarly, Humairah et al. (2025) found that verb tense errors were among the most frequently occurring mistakes. The result of those studies triggered the researcher to investigate grammatical awareness or metalinguistic awareness of the students. Murniati (2021) investigated the relation between implicit knowledge and explicit knowledge of university students in their grammatical awareness, which appeared in students' production (writing and speaking).

However, most previous studies in Indonesia, for instance, Lestari & Wahyuni (2020), Aminah et al. (2025), Murniati (2021) have focused on students' grammatical errors in writing (production) rather than on students' understanding of grammatical form and usage explicitly. Despite the importance of these abilities, limited studies have examined students' capacity to both identify and explain tenses usage. Understanding these abilities is important because they reflect students' explicit grammatical knowledge and their level of grammatical awareness. When students know the form and the usage well, their language production, whether in writing or speaking, will be in accordance with the grammatical rules. It is also important because the participants in this study are pre-service teachers who must consciously understand and explain grammatical structures as a professional necessity. As cited by Andrews (2007) teacher language awareness involves a bridge between the teacher's knowledge of the language and their ability to make that knowledge accessible to learners.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate pre-service English teachers' ability to identify English tenses and to explain their usage in sentences and paragraphs that are given in the final examination. As a result, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of their grammatical ability and shows the potential gap between explicit knowledge and its practical use.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-quantitative research design with a qualitative component to investigate the explicit grammatical knowledge of the students. Quantitative data, in the form of scores from students' responses to grammar test items in the final examination, were used to determine students' accuracy in identifying and explaining tenses. This data was then organized, calculated, and used to interpret students' explicit knowledge about tenses through qualitative explanation. This design is selected to provide a comprehensive profile of the students' metalinguistic awareness to explore the depth of their theoretical understanding. This design is consistent with descriptive research, which aims to describe and interpret phenomena based on systematically collected data (Creswell, J.W., 2017).

Participants of the Study

The participants in this study were first-year students enrolled in the English Education program, which the researcher taught at IAI Al-Manan NU Lombok Timur in academic year 2025/2026. The students had completed a class of Basic grammar, and had taken a final examination that included questions on Tense identification and explanation.

Instruments

In this study, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, particularly in interpreting the qualitative data, supported by a battery of tests. The test used in this study consisted of a set of questions from a final examination in the Grammar I (Basic Grammar) course. It provides two reading passages, each followed by two types of tasks: identification and explanation.

Identification requires students to identify two target verbs in each number, and each passage provides three identification questions, totaling 12 target words. Meanwhile, there are three questions for explanation, providing reasons for the use of specific tenses, for a total of 2 items. The tenses included in the test were six types based on the Lesson Plan of the course; simple present, simple past, present continuous, past continuous, future tense, and present perfect. This instrument assesses the students' explicit knowledge through their ability to verbalize linguistic rules and their ability in 'Grammaring' English.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through a dual-scoring system following the framework of Ellis (2003). The identification section is scored dichotomously (0-1) based on accuracy, where 0 was for an incorrect answer and 1 for a correct answer. In contrast, the explanation section is evaluated using a rubric (0-3) to capture the quality of the students' verbalization, ranging from non-technical intuition to formal linguistic description. Score 3 for complete and accurate verbalization, score 2 for correct but incomplete explanation, score 1 for non-systematic verbalization, score 0 for incorrect explanation.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The primary data obtained from the battery of tests were analyzed to determine the students' proficiency in two areas: grammatical identification and metalinguistic explanation. To allow for a direct comparison between the two tasks, the raw scores were converted into percentages and will be displayed in two tables.

Students' Overall Performance

The analysis revealed that students generally performed better at identifying grammatical forms than at explaining the underlying rules. Table 1 summarizes the overall achievement of the participants:

Table 1
Comparison of Mean Scores between Identification and Explanation Tasks

Task Category	Total Raw Score	Maximum Possible Score	Mean Percentage
Grammatical Identification	65	120	54.17%
Metalinguistic Explanation	26	60	43.33%

As shown in Table 1 above, the mean percentage for grammatical identification (54.17%) is 10.84% higher than the percentage for metalinguistic explanation (43.33%). This data describes that while students recognize Form more than 50% of the target verbs in the given context, they have limited ability to verbalize why the particular tenses are used in that context (Meaning and Use).

Proficiency Across Different Tenses

A more detailed breakdown of the data shows varying proficiency levels across tenses. Table 2 presents the accuracy scores across tense categories.

Table 2
Distribution of Accuracy Scores across Tense Categories

Tense Category	Total ID Score (Max: 20)	ID Accuracy (%)	Total Exp Score (Max: 30)	Exp Accuracy (%)
Simple Present (SPr)	14	70%	9	30%
Present Continuous (PrC)	13	65%	-	-
Future (F)	11	55%	-	-
Simple Past (SPst)	13	65%	-	-
Past Continuous (PstC)	6	30%	17	56.70%
Present Perfect (PrP)	8	40%	-	-
Total / Average	65	54.20%	26	43.30%

Based on Table 2, four of the six tenses show more than 50% identification accuracy: Simple Present, Present Continuous, Simple Future, and Simple Past, with percentages of 70%, 65%, 55%, and 65%, respectively. While two left-tense types show low accuracy under 50%, they are Past continuous Tense (30%) and Present Perfect Tense (40%).

There are interesting findings of this study. The Simple Present Tense shows the highest identification accuracy (70%), but the lowest explanation accuracy (30%). In contrast, the Past Continuous presents the lowest identification accuracy (30%) but achieved the highest explanation accuracy (56.7%). These findings highlight the contradiction between the ability to recognize a tense and the ability to express its rules.

Discussion

The results of this study show that the first-year students are able to identify the tense usage in the context, as evidenced by their accuracy in identifying the verb tenses in the passage (54.17%), but they lack in reasoning why particular tense use in that context. Moreover, the data revealed an inconsistent description of the students' explicit knowledge across different tenses.

The Paradox of Recognition and Verbalization

Based on the data displayed in Tables 1 and 2, there is a paradoxical relationship in grammatical proficiency between the ability to identify and explain the tenses. This phenomenon can be analyzed through the theory of explicit knowledge by Ellis (2009) and the three-dimensional framework of grammar by Larsen-Freeman (2003).

According to Ellis, explicit knowledge refers to the analyzed knowledge that students possess. For example, when they learn something new, they know what it is, how it functions, why it exists, or they consciously know the state of that thing. When students learn English, they learn grammar to make their language production appropriate with the rules of English. A consciousness in learning a particular language is important to control the production. Ellis argues that explicit knowledge can be sensitized. Sensitizer means that the consciousness can help the brain to notice the rules of language and process its rules so that the production can be grammatically correct.

In the present study, the explicit knowledge of the students shows the ability to identify verbs (grammatical form) in different tense types, such as which verb is identified as a verb in Simple Present Tense, or which verb is in Simple Past Tense. Their consciousness in verb form can be seen in the table is more than 50%. The highest score is shown by their ability to identify the Simple Present Tense (70%). Unfortunately, they lack the ability to explain why a particular tense is used in that passage (verbalized knowledge). When they were asked why the simple present was used in that context, they could not clearly state in a formal linguistic description, which shows the lowest rate (30%). This suggests that students often rely on formulaic knowledge, in which they know the form intuitively but lack the analyzed metalinguistic awareness necessary to explain the specific functions of tense, such as expressing general truth or habitual actions.

In contrast, students had trouble in identifying the Past Continuous, characterized by low identification rates (30%), but they knew the reason why that type of tense was used in the context, evidenced by relatively high explanation accuracy (56.7%). This finding confirms that being able to explain a rule does not automatically mean a student can actually find it in text.

What is stated above about the paradox of the finding aligns with Ellis's argument that explicit knowledge is often fragmented and inconsistently applied by the students, or there is a disconnect between students' formal knowledge of grammar and practical recognition. Consequently, they may be good at memorizing the form, but find it difficult to apply it in communication, or they know what types of tense they should use in the specific context, but they do not know the grammatical form.

Furthermore, Ellis has a view regarding explicit knowledge. Ellis said that continuous practice can serve as a bridge, or Weak Interface, and can contribute to implicit knowledge, though not instantly. By continuously practicing a grammatical structure, students are actually training their brains to recognize it. This continuous practice increases the brain's sensitivity to producing grammatically correct language. As language is always practiced according to grammar, the grammatical knowledge shifts from monitoring to correction: initially, explicit knowledge is used to correct errors; with continuous practice, this correction becomes more automatic until the rules are integrated and only need monitoring.

The Failure of "Grammaring"

Larsen-Freeman (2003) argues that mastering grammar is a dynamic process, or in Freeman's terms, which named 'Grammaring'. Grammaring requires simultaneous integration among Form, Meaning, and Use. Freeman frequently employs the example of bicycling to demonstrate this concept: Form is knowing how the brakes and pedals operate; Meaning is knowing that pedaling advances; and Use is modifying speed according to the terrain. If someone has never ridden a bicycle but only understands its physical design and operation, they cannot be considered capable of cycling. It requires three dimensions in order to utilize the word "cycling." Similarly, these three dimensions must be integrated simultaneously in English.

In this study, a significant imbalance was found between the three-dimensional framework by Larsen-Freeman, with a gap 10.84% between identification (Form) and explanation (Meaning & Use), or only 43.30%. Students still view grammar as a product (something static/memorized), rather than a process, as Larsen-Freeman defines learning grammar in terms of grammaring. Students recognize the "face" of the tense (Form), but they don't yet understand the "soul" or reason why that particular tense appears or is used in the paragraph (Meaning & Use). In Grammaring, this is referred to as a failure of integration among dimensions.

In the case of high identification scores in Simple Present Tense but low in its expansion (70% and 30%, respectively), the fulfilled dimension is only the Form, but it has not reached the Meaning and Use dimensions indicated by the low explanation score. This could happen because students may be very familiar with the physical characteristics of the Simple Present Tense, where this type of tense was first learned in junior high school and is often repeated in English lessons, but they do not have Metalinguistic Awareness to explain that this tense was chosen because of the habitual actions or general truth (Meaning) aspect. They know it is Simple Present, but do not know why the specific tense is used in that context.

On the other hand, in the Past Continuous Tense, the dimensions that were met were Meaning and Use, with 56.70% and 30% in identification (Form). Students may be confused by the grammar formula because they have to adjust was/were + V-ing (Form). However, they have a strong instinct or understanding of the concept of 'an event that took place in the past' (Meaning) because the paragraph in the given test also includes a model of the simple past tense and the use of was/were. This imbalance supports Larsen-Freeman's framework, which holds that these three dimensions do not always develop simultaneously. These findings indicate that learning grammar involves more than just mastering the form; it also requires comprehending its context and purpose.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the present study suggest that education at the university level needs to go beyond simple identification. In accordance with the pedagogical implications of both Ellis and Larsen-Freeman's frameworks, lecturers should ensure students are able to employ grammatical structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately, so that when they read different texts or produce English in written or spoken form, they not only know the rule, but also understand that rule in context as well as verbalize the reason. Students are expected to improve their metalinguistic awareness, which allows them to advance from intuitive learning to analytical language use, as required in higher education.

CONCLUSION

This research study concludes that there is a significant difference between the first-year students' ability in grammatical identification and metalinguistic awareness. The findings show that students generally perform better at recognizing grammatical forms (54.17%) than at explaining linguistic rules (43.33%). This 10.84% gap indicates that students' explicit knowledge is still at an emergent and fragmented stage, where they often rely on intuitive recognition rather than a deep, analyzed understanding of grammar. The most notable finding is the inconsistent nature of this knowledge across different tenses. A high identification level was found in Simple Present, but a low in the explanation level. In contrast, the high explanation but low identification was found for Past Continuous. These results demonstrate that the students have not yet achieved "grammaring," the integrated mastery of Form, Meaning, and Use. Based on these findings, it is recommended that university lecturers consider their teaching strategy from rote memorization to activities that engage students in context and metalinguistic awareness, such as in planning the contextual curriculum for class, arranging the comprehensive test which ensures eliciting students' understanding, and providing counselling for students who find difficulty in their studies. Future research with a larger longitudinal sample is suggested to explore how this metalinguistic awareness evolves throughout the students' academic journey. Moreover, the future research recommends to test that are more representative of their abilities, including the number of tests given and the types of tests used.

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