



Investigating English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners' Writing Skills through Open-source Software: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to investigate the feedback of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners on their writing skills, with a focus on exploring ESL students' progress in writing skills based on tenses through open-source software. The software is employed to assess each student's improvement. This research follows a qualitative method, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and the think-aloud protocol. The results are categorized into four main areas: (a) Feedback provided by students; (b) Students' perception of tenses and writing skills; (c) Students' views on teachers' teaching; and (d) practice through open-source software. The study revealed that ESL students had a positive perception of tenses, and their writing skills were enhanced by the semi-structured interviews conducted by ESL learners. The conclusion of the study highlighted that students themselves could recognize improvements in their syntax errors and sentence formation, with very few exceptions. It is advisable for teachers to incorporate a variety of proper grammatical topics in the future to assist students in improving their writing abilities.

KEYWORDS: Writing skills; open-source software; tenses; case study; ESL learners

1. Introduction

Writing constitutes one of the most critical language-formation abilities. In the context of the English language, widely employed for global information mediation, its significance amplifies [1–3]. The writer's academic background and personal interests serve as two illustrative examples of these aspects. Other influences encompass a range of psychological, linguistic, and cognitive phenomena [4, 5]. There exists a disconcerting lack of writing ability among pupils in Pakistan, falling below the national level. Conversely, the percentage of English speakers in Pakistan has surged from 2% in 1961 to 49% in 2003—a substantial increase [5]. However, many individuals continue to grapple with the English language, particularly in the realm of writing. Addressing writing problems becomes more effective when their underlying causes are accurately recognized. The purpose of this study is to explore issues in students' writing, the contributing variables, and, ultimately, the participants' ideas on enhancing the writing abilities of students learning English.

Previous studies have attempted to categorize these elements into general categories such as instructor incompetence [2, 6], student disinterest, and inappropriate methodology [7]. However, more research is warranted to investigate the origins and evolution of these components, delving into recurring writing problems in students' written discourses. The current study, complementing the perspectives of both educators and students, scrutinizes students' written works and opinions to identify challenges and contributing elements. Additionally, the study investigates and analyzes suggestions from respondents on enhancing the writing of ESL learners, unveiling underlying cognitive and psychological elements, thereby enabling further research and the development of suitable remedies. One of the most contentious issues in ESL education and theory revolves around responding to the writing produced by students. Is it beneficial for students to receive written comments and corrections from their professors on their writing? If so, what other forms of input are useful? How do students feel about receiving feedback from their teachers? Findings on the effects of feedback and error correction on the writing of students learning English as a foreign language and as a second language often appear ambiguous. This conclusion is drawn by Leki, Huntley, and Ihde based on their individual evaluations of literature on the subject matter [8]. There is substantial debate in the field of explicit mistake correction, specifically concerning whether such correction aids students in strengthening the precision and quality of their writing in second language or foreign language contexts [9, 10]. Studies [11–13] suggest that teachers of writing in both second language and foreign language contexts should offer comments on the content and organization of their students' work. However, research on pedagogy demonstrates that instructors' feedback often focuses on form rather than substance [14]. Additionally, research on the preferences and responses of students learning a second language (L2) to feedback from their teachers suggests these students desire feedback in the form of surface-level connection [15–20]. Limited research examining instructors' and students' perspectives on feedback and error correction has revealed significant differences in the opinions of these two groups [18, 19]. These differences are noteworthy as they may undoubtedly complicate the proper teaching and learning of multiple languages. In this research, the present study discusses the results of a case study that investigated how ESL learners respond to learning tenses to enhance their writing skills through Open-source Software. More precisely, the research sought to answer the following queries: First, how was their perception of tenses and the improvement in learning tenses? Second, does Open-source software help them enhance their sentence formation by providing enough practice? Third, were they able to place the correct form of tenses in their writing? Finally, how did ESL students feel about their improvement in writing skills?

1.1. Skills in writing.

In second language acquisition, writing poses the greatest challenge, relying on the intelligent and planned use of language for effective communication and structural correctness [1, 5]. Writing is a cognitive process that assesses one's memory, critical thinking ability, and verbal command to successfully express ideas [21]. Proficiency in writing is considered an indication of successful second language acquisition [22–24]. Over the past two decades, writing has gained increasing importance due to its effectiveness in communicating ideas and the extensive research conducted to address various problems faced by second language (L2) writers [5, 6].

At different learning levels, students encounter a variety of writing challenges, broadly categorized into linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and pedagogical areas [6]. Students often struggle with understanding the structural elements of the English language, as a poorly designed text can hinder comprehension, requiring readers to engage their mental faculties [25]. Both students and teachers are identified as root causes of poor writing abilities. Teachers, in particular, may struggle to inspire students and lack proper pedagogical techniques for teaching writing, as well as providing timely and constructive feedback. Students, on the other hand, face obstacles such as the impact of first language (L1) transfer, a lack of reading enthusiasm, and the need for consistent practice. Pakistani student writers, in particular, encounter challenges related to psychology, cognition, society, and language [3, 26, 27].

Literature has identified various aspects that impact students' writing, with a key factor being students' motivation, often hindered by a lack of understanding of the role writing plays in their L2 education. Negative influences, such as erratic instructor feedback, students' lack of analytical and evaluative mindset, and large class sizes, can impact the structural and communicative accuracy of students' papers [27]. Students often find it challenging to locate sufficient and relevant source material, summarize or paraphrase information, and write in an acceptable academic manner [28]. Outdated textbooks that fail to emphasize the importance of writing skills or provide opportunities for practice fall short in engaging readers [4]. Additionally, some criticize incompetent professors who, instead of fostering creative abilities, encourage students to focus on rote learning and language memorization for exams [2, 3, 7].

To address these challenges, students can be taught metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective skills to enhance their understanding and practice of the writing process [29]. Educators can also adapt their teaching strategies and collaborate to create assignments that allow students to choose topics of interest, thus inspiring and motivating them [25, 27]. Implementing such changes may lead to modifications in students' writing styles by requiring more practice and developing the mental and motor skills needed to present language and subject-specific information in a controlled manner [21]. Most importantly, there is a need for a shift in perspectives surrounding writing and the ways in which its difficulties are addressed. Educators should employ strategies to gather ideas from students to aid in their linguistic development and provide prompt and constructive feedback to boost their confidence [4].

1.2. Review on feedback.

In a recent study, the terms of an increase in accuracy or content—content feedback followed by form feedback—did not yield findings that were statistically different from previous patterns [28–30]. Furthermore, results showed that few students could have depended more on form input as opposed to content comments. However, these results are provisional due to a number of flaws in the study design, including a limited sample size, small treatment group sizes, and interrater reliability values for content scorers. The significance of recognizing the characteristics of the interlanguage constructs that appear in L2 texts is emphasized [31].

Despite the consensus among many subject matter experts that grammar and surface-level mistake correction in second language (SL) writing classes appear to be mostly ineffectual, disagreement persists. Based on different studies of the literature, some contend that surface-level error correction is often ineffectual [32]. Truscott goes so far as to say that this kind of adjustment ought to be dropped since it may be detrimental. However, these accusations are selective and unfounded, leading to an ongoing dispute [10]. Furthermore, the

view that attention should be given in line with the learner's stage of language enhancement is emphasized [33]. Determining the effectiveness of different forms of error correction and feedback requires considering the learner's developmental stage, discussions with other students, and the teacher.

Moreover, it is stated that the explanations of teachers' comments on students' writing should go beyond addressing form or content responses. Teachers' remarks can vary significantly based on the kind of writing evaluation, the time of the semester when the feedback is provided, and the skills and personalities of the students. This conclusion is drawn from the examination of feedback from more than 1,500 English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors on students' writing [34].

While the research data suggests that error correction may be pointless, studies investigating the preferences and attitudes of second language learners to feedback often imply that the kind of feedback these pupils want and expect is surface-level correction. ESL instructors may potentially lose their confidence among their students if they do not correct all surface faults [15]. The discovery that ESL students identify good writing in English with writing devoid of faults highlights their concern about correctness, expecting and desiring that any errors in their written work be fixed [35]. This result is based on separate surveys of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' opinions about feedback procedures. Teachers of writing in second languages are faced with the challenging decision of whether or not to correct the surface faults of their pupils, as students appear to anticipate receiving this form of correction, despite research data typically suggesting its ineffectiveness.

Finally, a study discovered that although foreign language (FL) students preferred an emphasis on form, there were some differences in instructors' attitudes, particularly when contrasting the opinions held by pupils and those held by instructors towards correction of errors and writing feedback [18]. A follow-up research found that, when comparing the 1996 data with the information gathered from students studying FL in Colombia and instructors, there were generally high levels of agreement across the student and teacher groups across cultural boundaries on the majority of the questions [19]. However, several differences in expectations and perspectives about feedback were discovered between students and teachers, as highlighted by Diab (in press) about the methods of error correction and paper marking in English as a foreign language. These variations can be a source of misunderstanding, leading to failed teaching and learning. Consequently, investigating this relatively unexplored field of study in first-language writing is crucial. The objectives of the study were to understand students' perception of tenses and writing skills and to analyze practice through Open-source Software.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research technique, a methodology widely employed across various academic fields to obtain optimal research outcomes. In this study, the researcher utilized writing skills through tenses to understand students' analyses of their improvement in writing skills. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ESL learners, and a qualitative approach was employed to analyze the gathered data. The utilization of case studies allowed for a comprehensive examination of each participant's experience with instruction in paraphrasing and applying guidelines [36].

2.1. Sample.

The participants in this study were ESL students from various states who came together to complete their undergraduate studies at a university, all under 18 years old. Each student hailed from a distinct culture and spoke a different mother tongue, including Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Hindi, and Urdu, and studied English as a second language. Participants were selected based on their intention to acquire ESL skills. Some participants were proficient in English, while others had simple grammatical errors in their works. The participants had no prior knowledge of the techniques used for instruction and assessment, and purposive sampling was employed for selection. Random sampling was performed among the entire population, and student comments were used to assess writing skills through a semi-structured interview with self-created questions to ensure a trustworthy study result.

2.2. Research procedure.

For the semi-structured interviews, students responded to a series of questions provided by the researcher. Most participants began by writing about how their writing had improved, focusing on tenses. They shared their thoughts using the think-aloud technique, recorded on audio, and transcribed. Additionally, a semi-structured interview follow-up was conducted, where the questions were relevant to the participant's interview. Finally, students participated in semi-structured interviews lasting around 40 minutes in class, discussing their opinions on receiving helpful feedback and how to write without making tense errors. The interview questions served as a guide, and recordings and transcriptions were made for each interview.

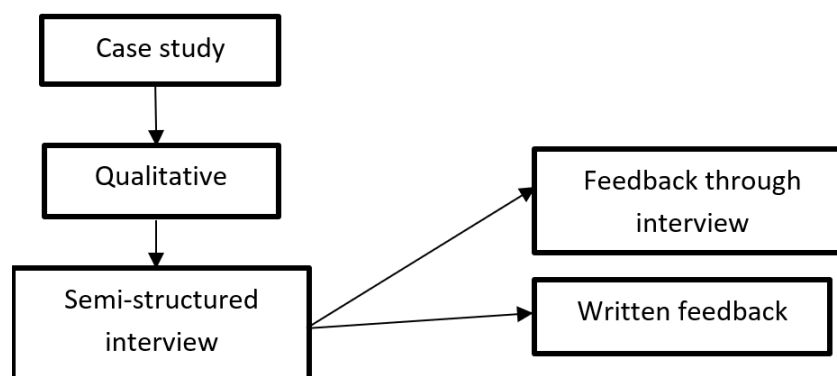


Figure 1. Theoretical framework on case study.

Using coding techniques and idea and category identification, the think-aloud procedures and interview transcripts underwent examination. The initial two coding categories created were (a) the writing sections that the instructor focused on when editing papers, and (b) the opinions that the instructor and students seemed to have regarding particular facets of teaching and learning writing, including viewpoints on different methods and approaches for providing feedback. After the creation of these two initial categories, the transcripts were re-examined in an attempt to find other categories or subcategories. The data were then analyzed, labeled, and a set of codes was created. One or more codes were assigned to each data unit, typically a paragraph but occasionally a single sentence.

3. Results and Discussion

According to the findings of the data analysis, there are four primary distinct types: (a) types of feedback that students emphasized; (b) Students' perception of tenses and writing skills; (c) Students' views on teachers' teaching, and (d) practice through Open-source Software. Each of these major categories is discussed below.

3.1. Feedback of the students' are emphasized.

According to the findings of the data analysis, four primary distinct types emerged: (a) types of feedback that students emphasized; (b) Students' perception of tenses and writing skills; (c) Students' views on teachers' teaching, and (d) practice through Open-source Software. Each of these major categories is discussed below.

“We were able to understand tenses in a better manner from your teaching, considering the tenses that we learned in our school.”

The researcher analyzed that, students had a good perception of tenses and they felt the same while using tenses in their writing skills.

“I could choose correct tenses while framing a sentence. I have learnt tenses in my school days, but this session gave me a chance to enhance my knowledge I tenses to fix the correct tense in a sentence,”

Similarly, the follow-up interviews with the students revealed that they were able to correct the tenses accurately in their sentences, resulting in an improvement in their sentence framing. Only a few students mentioned that;

“I am okay in framing a sentence but I am not sure to fix the tenses correctly in the sentence.”

“In some cases, it goes wrong in fixing the correct tense in the sentence.”

Some students are not thorough in learning tenses, leading to difficulties in placing the correct tense in sentences while framing. This struggle may arise from a lack of understanding, causing confusion in selecting the appropriate tense. For these students, a bit more practice is needed.

3.2. Feedback on open-source software.

The researcher employed Open-source software as a tool to offer practice opportunities for students to improve both their understanding of tenses and their writing skills. Self-made lessons were generated in Nearpod and made available for students to practice. This application proved to be user-friendly for both teachers and students.

“Nearpod has given the enough practice to understand the tenses and the lessons in Nearpod were quite helpful in improving my perception of tenses and writing skills. There wasn't any difficulty in using Nearpod. I think it has given a step-by-step process. So, it was helpful to improve my writing skills and knowledge in tenses”

The data from the think-aloud protocol were analyzed, revealing that students had a positive experience and enjoyed practicing tenses and framing sentences using Nearpod. The majority of students did not encounter any struggles in utilizing Nearpod.

“I feel Nearpod is very user-friendly and till now I haven’t faced any difficulty in it. It was very helpful in learning.”

Based on this review, the researcher analyzed that the majority of students found Nearpod to be a user-friendly tool for learning and practice. There were no difficulties in using and exploring it, both for lesson planning by teachers and for practice by students. Nearpod offers various built-in exercises for lesson framing, making it user-friendly for both students and teachers.

“I feel Nearpod is very user-friendly and till now I haven’t faced any difficulty in it. It is very helpful in learning tenses.”

“Due to network issues, I was not able to use Nearpod properly, therefore I had a lack off practicing.”

Some students encountered network issues, preventing them from practicing the lesson provided through Nearpod. Consequently, they faced challenges in fixing the correct tenses in sentences. Despite these challenges, Nearpod proved beneficial in fostering a good perception of tenses and enhancing writing skills. The majority of students, excluding a few who faced technical issues, did not encounter difficulties in using Nearpod and found it to be a user-friendly tool for learning and practice.

3.3. Feedback on improvised writing skills.

Writing practice was conducted through a step-by-step approach using Nearpod. Initially, the researcher instructed participants to create simple sentences using simple tenses in the present, future, and past. In the next step, participants were tasked with composing a brief paragraph utilizing simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous tenses for all three present, past, and future tenses. In this stage, learners were asked to frame three short paragraphs. The final stage involved students combining all 12 tenses to create their own two-page story, ensuring the incorporation of all tenses in the narrative.

“My understanding on tenses in writing was very much improved. And now I am glad that I was able to form a meaning full sentence with zero error in tenses.”

“My writing skill has improved. I can write sentences with correct grammar.”

“My writing skills improved, as I understood using tenses while framing sentences. And I clearly understood the importance of tenses. It enhanced my writing skills and by using Nearpod exercise my understanding level of tenses improved.”

“Compared to my past writing skills, I have improved my writing skill where I felt the session could extend to learn more on other grammar errors too.”

Therefore, the researcher identified that the majority of students felt they had improved their writing skills and understood that their knowledge of tenses contributed to this

improvement, thanks to the assistance of Nearpod. Students expressed confidence that their sentences were now error-free..

“My writing skills have improved compared to my past, but I feel I have to improve more in my writing skill.”

“I feel like it is a bit useful for my personal development, but my writing skills has to improve more than this.”

“I feel I am able to write more easily than I felt before. In the early times, I committed lots of grammar mistakes, and now I feel that I could write without grammar errors. Yet I have to improve my writing skills.”

The researcher analyzed that few students express the need for further improvement in their writing skills. Therefore, the researcher believes that some students grasp concepts quickly, while others take more time to understand and apply them. Consequently, students with lower grasping skills struggle to frame sentences without errors and may feel the need for more practice to see improvement in their writing skills. Students report that their understanding of tenses and writing skills improved through the use of Nearpod. Additionally, they were able to correct tenses in sentences successfully. Initially, students received tense practice, starting with simple sentences and progressing to short and then longer paragraphs without grammar errors. The following detailed discussion delves into the results regarding perceptions of tenses, the usage of Open-source Software, and improvements in ESL learners' writing skills, gathered through semi-structured interviews.

In the first stage, after a lecture on tenses, students were given a self-created lesson through Open-source Software to practice tenses. The researcher identified a lack of proficiency in tenses affecting sentence construction and focused on helping students enhance their writing skills in this aspect. From the semi-structured interviews, students reported an improvement in their understanding of tenses since their school days, attributing their enhanced writing skills to mastering tenses. Moving to the second stage, students enjoyed practicing tense lessons using Open-source Software. They found the software user-friendly, contributing to a positive learning experience and improved sentence formation for ESL learners. The researcher planned lessons step by step, finding Nearpod easy to use with built-in ideas that attracted and engaged learners.

The final stage concentrated on improving ESL learners' writing skills. Writing practice was divided into steps, starting with framing a single sentence using simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous tenses for all three time periods. The subsequent steps involved crafting small paragraphs for each period (Past, Future, and Present), incorporating various tenses. The final task required students to compose a two-page story incorporating all 12 tenses. The researcher observed improved writing skills, and in semi-structured interviews, students acknowledged their enhanced skills and reduced errors in tense usage. ESL learners attributed their progress to the use of tenses through Open-source Software.

4. Conclusion

The study has determined that students possess a solid understanding of tenses and sentence structure, successfully placing the correct tense in sentences. The lessons provided on Open-

source Software were perceived as user-friendly by ESL students, and their feedback indicated enjoyment in learning through Nearpod. ESL learners experienced a tangible improvement in their writing skills, successfully applying the appropriate tense in their sentences. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, utilizing both think-aloud protocols and written formats for student feedback. Upon analysis of the data, the researcher observed that the majority of students acquired a strong grasp of tenses, leading to noticeable improvements in their writing skills through the use of Open-source Software. However, a small percentage of ESL students faced challenges in comprehending tenses and sentence structure within a short period, and some encountered technical issues while practicing through Open-source Software, hindering their progress in writing skills. It is crucial to explore alternative Open-source Software options and develop diverse lessons for ESL learners to enhance various skills in their English language studies, ensuring more comprehensive and accurate outcomes.

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Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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