

## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

Navaz, A.M.M.<sup>1</sup>, Sasni Sero, A<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of ELT, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

**ABSTRACT:** This study explores the role of form-focused instruction in ESL classrooms, with particular emphasis on textual enhancement techniques among secondary-level students. The research aims to assess the impact of textual enhancement techniques on grammar learning and examine learners' attitudes and beliefs toward grammar instruction. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. The primary instruments for data collection included a pretest–posttest design for two groups, a questionnaire, and a focus group discussion. Data were analyzed using a paired-sample t-test and one-way ANOVA in SPSS. The findings revealed that textual enhancement techniques had a significant positive effect on grammar learning outcomes. The p-value for the experimental group was lower than the alpha level, confirming the effectiveness of the intervention. Additionally, data from the questionnaire indicated that students held positive attitudes toward grammar learning, recognizing the importance of grammar, its relevance for future communication, and the challenges they face in grammar lessons. Students also expressed a preference for grammar instruction supported by textual enhancement techniques. The study concludes that textual enhancement techniques are effective in improving grammar learning and fostering positive learner attitudes. It recommends that future research should further investigate other input enhancement techniques within the Sri Lankan ESL context.

**KEYWORDS:** form-focused instruction, input enhancement, textual enhancement techniques, students' attitudes, Sri Lankan context

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning is one of the most captivating aspects of human development, as it reflects how humans perceive and comprehend linguistic systems. The acquisition of a first language among children follows remarkably similar developmental sequences across cultures. For effective language learning to occur, learners must receive meaningful and comprehensible input. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), language acquisition takes place when learners are exposed to comprehensible input that slightly exceeds their current level of competence. As Krashen (1991) further asserted, the greater the exposure to comprehensible input, the higher the level of language proficiency achieved.

Constructive language learning depends greatly on the reliability and clarity of the input. Accurate output, effective error correction, and skill development all require lucid input. Within this framework, the Focus on Form Approach emphasizes drawing learners' attention to specific linguistic features through various implicit or explicit techniques. To achieve successful grammar instruction, it is essential that learners clearly notice and understand the forms they are learning. Consequently, input enhancement becomes a crucial pedagogical strategy.

Sharwood Smith (1993) introduced Input Enhancement (IE) as a form-focused technique designed to make linguistic forms more salient to learners. Input enhancement can be applied through both aural and written modes. When applied to written input, it is often achieved through Textual Enhancement Techniques (TET) such as bolding, color-coding, underlining, capitalization, or italicizing to visually highlight target forms and facilitate noticing (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

In the Sri Lankan context, the effectiveness of English Language Teaching (ELT) has been influenced by a range of factors, including classroom-related challenges, political constraints, and socio-economic conditions. Several studies have identified key reasons for the persistent weaknesses in ELT within Sri Lankan schools. These include the mandatory use of prescribed textbooks, the lack of emphasis on English results in the G.C.E. (O/L) examination for advancement to the Advanced Level, and generally outdated or inadequate teaching methodologies (Aloysius, 2015).

Solangaarachchi (2023) noted that the teaching methods and instructional materials used in many schools are insufficient to improve students' language performance. A majority of students (65%) in the Gampaha District reported difficulties with grammar and vocabulary. According to the Department of Examinations (2023), 29% of students failed the English subject, while 28% received

## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

only an ordinary pass. These statistics indicate that, despite learning English from Grade 3 onward, many students are unable to achieve satisfactory outcomes in public examinations.

Furthermore, comparative data from 2010 to 2020 reveal that the English language pass rate in the G.C.E. (O/L) examination consistently lags behind other core subjects such as Mathematics, Science, and First Languages (Tamil and Sinhala). This situation underscores a concerning trend: even after completing secondary education and entering higher education, many students continue to struggle with fundamental grammar concepts.

Solangaarachchi (2023) emphasized the need for new pedagogical improvements in the Sri Lankan subject curriculum. A solid understanding of grammar is fundamental to students' academic success and linguistic accuracy. In Sri Lanka, language learning is closely associated with the mastery of linguistic forms, particularly grammar. In recent years, with the growing recognition of the importance of English, school instruction has increasingly prioritized reading and writing skills. Most students, however, are instrumentally motivated to learn English, with their primary objective being to achieve high examination results.

Since most examination questions in Sri Lanka are grammar-based, ESL classrooms have become predominantly focused on form-focused instruction (FFI). Consequently, there is a pressing need to identify effective approaches to teaching grammar within this framework. This study investigates the impact of TET as an instructional strategy within form-focused instruction, recognizing its potential significance in the Sri Lankan school context.

The research focuses on examining how TET can enhance students' grammatical performance. While this technique has been explored in various contexts globally, the present study was conducted in a government school located in the Ampara District of the Eastern Province, representing a typical Sri Lankan ESL classroom setting. By evaluating the impact of TET in form-focused instruction and exploring students' perceptions of grammar learning and TET, this study seeks to contribute to improving grammar pedagogy in Sri Lankan schools.

To achieve these objectives, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. RQ1: What are the learners' attitudes toward learning grammar?
2. RQ2: What impact does the Textual Enhancement Technique have on learning grammar?
3. RQ3: How do learners perceive the Textual Enhancement Technique in grammar learning?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Teaching Grammar

Zhang (2009) describes grammar knowledge as an integral component of communicative competence. Grammar involves two major aspects: *process* and *product*. The *process* refers to how grammar is learned, while the *product* represents the outcome of that learning. These two dimensions are distinct but interconnected. The results of grammar learning can be observed in real-life communication; therefore, grammar instruction should reflect practical usage. Similarly, Ur (2012) asserts that grammar, along with syntax and vocabulary, contributes to conveying specific meanings in communicative situations. The concept of "teaching grammar" typically emphasizes a focus on form, which is associated with accuracy in language use.

Ju (2010) reported that task-based language learning was introduced into the Chinese curriculum in 2001, giving significant attention to grammar teaching at the junior secondary level. The prescribed textbooks integrate both deductive and inductive approaches. Ju further noted that Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) activities are absent from the textbooks; instead, the "*read and write*" exercises are the most common examples of deductive tasks. However, he also highlighted that GTM still persists in many English teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, revealing its deep-rooted presence in pedagogical thinking.

Marzban and Mokheri (2012) examined the status of grammar teaching in Norwegian schools. According to their findings, teachers do not strictly use explicit grammar instruction throughout the syllabus. Instead, they combine implicit and explicit teaching strategies. Teachers who favor the implicit approach emphasize communication as the primary goal of language learning, aligning their practice with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The study also revealed that Norwegian teachers do not adhere to a systematic method; however, the two dominant approaches in current practice are the traditional approach and CLT. Most teachers reportedly prefer the CLT approach as it prioritizes communication over rule memorization.

In the Sri Lankan context, Navaz and Sama (2017) conducted a study to explore teachers' and students' perspectives on grammar teaching and learning in Ampara. The findings indicated that most students learned grammar through examples, demonstrating a preference for the inductive approach. However, students lacked awareness of how grammar learning relates to other language skills. Teachers reported employing different models in grammar instruction, including the PPP model (Presentation, Practice, and Production) and the 5E Model (Engage, Explore, Explain, Extend, and Evaluate). Nonetheless, the study revealed that many teachers possessed limited understanding of the inductive and deductive methods. Consequently, they primarily depended on textbooks as their main teaching resource.

CBA (Content-Based Approach) and PPP (Presentation, Practice, and Production) models are commonly used in teaching grammar in Sri Lanka. However, teachers tend to prefer the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach when teaching grammar. Most teachers adopt more than one approach depending on learners' needs, intelligence, current language competency, and the

## **Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students**

expected learning outcomes. Although teachers often spend a considerable amount of time on the presentation stage, explicit grammar instruction continues to dominate grammar teaching practices in Sri Lankan schools. Furthermore, when considering deductive and inductive methods of grammar instruction, combining both approaches is generally regarded as the most effective strategy (Gunawardena, 2011).

Conversely, Navaz and Khathoon (2020) conducted a comparative study on inductive and deductive methods in universities and schools and found that most school teachers in Sri Lanka are not familiar with these approaches. They observed that the PPP model is generally implemented in a deductive manner, and many school students are unaware of the underlying principles of these methods. Moreover, school students perceive explicit grammar learning as more effective and believe that greater emphasis should be placed on linguistic forms. However, both teachers and students at the school and university levels demonstrate some understanding of the deductive and inductive approaches. Despite this, both groups tend to favor teaching and learning grammar in a communicative context, which reflects a preference for the inductive approach.

### **2.2 Explicit and Implicit Ways of Form-Focused Instruction**

Takala (2016) describes explicit grammar teaching as a process in which teachers directly explain grammatical rules, often using suggestive questions followed by examples and practice activities. The Grammar Translation Method (GTM) serves as one of the best examples of a deductive, or explicit, teaching approach. Memorization and translation are the major techniques used in GTM, and the explicit explanation of grammar rules forms its core element. Similarly, the Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) model is one of the most widely used grammar-based approaches in many L2 classrooms. This model comprises three stages: the presentation stage, where the grammar rule is introduced; the practice stage, where learners engage in various exercises and are given opportunities to apply the new grammatical forms; and the production stage, where learners use the rules in communicative contexts. However, this model has been criticized for being time-consuming, particularly during the presentation phase (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

Mahjoob (2015) points out that in implicit grammar instruction, teachers guide learners to discover grammatical rules through examples and student-centered tasks. In this approach, learners notice linguistic forms through exposure and active engagement—a process often referred to as the noticing strategy. This approach contrasts with explicit or deductive instruction and is known as the inductive approach. Empirical research conducted by Saadi and Saeidi (2018) provides evidence that a systematic procedure of implicit form-focused instruction (FFI) can effectively support learners in acquiring grammar.

Furthermore, interviews conducted with students of Misurata University revealed differing perceptions regarding grammar teaching and learning. While most students acknowledged the importance of grammar, there was variation in their preferred mode of instruction. Those who favored implicit instruction believed that grammatical forms could be learned effectively through meaningful communicative activities, as opposed to the traditional, rule-based explicit instruction, which they considered less applicable to real-life communication. Conversely, some students expressed a preference for explicit grammar instruction, suggesting that both approaches have their own advantages depending on learner needs and contexts.

### **2.3 Textual Enhancement Techniques**

Nassaji and Fotos (2011) describe textual enhancement (TE) as one of the input enhancement (IE) techniques. TE involves making specific linguistic forms more noticeable in input through typographical highlighting, such as italicizing, bolding, underlining, color coding, or a combination of these methods. TE is considered a form of external manipulation that aims to draw learners' attention to language forms visually, without explicit explanation. The teacher emphasizes correct forms implicitly and subtly, rather than directly explaining the targeted grammar.

Torkabad and Fazilaftar (2014) conducted a study comparing textual enhancement and input processing techniques with traditional instruction in an Iranian school. The findings indicated that IE techniques, including textual enhancement and input processing, were superior for improving learners' production of present and past simple tense. Similarly, Nahavardani and Mukundan (2013) investigated the effect of textual enhancement and explicit rule presentation on the intake of the simple past tense. Involving 93 Iranian EFL learners divided into three groups (a control group, a textual input enhancement group, and a TET plus explicit instruction group), the study revealed that the third group outperformed the other two in learning outcomes.

Birjandi et al. (2015) examined the effects of unenhanced, enhanced, and elaborated input on the acquisition of English phrasal verbs. Thirty-five Iranian EFL learners were given six different texts representing these three types of input. The study found that typographically enhanced input was more effective than unenhanced input in facilitating learning.

Another study conducted at an Iranian language institute by Ayiewbey (2013) involved 53 male students to investigate the impact of TET on learners' ability to discriminate specific linguistic forms. Before the treatment, students' language proficiency was assessed, followed by treatment sessions using TET. The posttest results demonstrated a positive effect of TET on learners' performance.

However, TE does not always guarantee positive outcomes. Some studies highlight limitations in its effectiveness. Meguro (2017) examined TET in the context of learning tag questions and reading comprehension. While TET proved effective in improving

## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

reading comprehension, it was less successful in enhancing auxiliary tag questions. Despite this, pre- and post-test results showed gradual improvement in learners' acquisition of do-tag questions, suggesting that TET's effectiveness may vary depending on the linguistic form targeted.

This study tries to find a unique way of focusing on grammar. Also this study bridged the gap in discovering the clear association of students' performance and TET at school level, highlighting these significant gaps this study can be found the effectiveness of this particular technique in local educational settings.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Mixed Methods Approach (MMA), incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, following a triangulation mixed methods design. The sample for the study was selected using convenience sampling. According to Denscombe (2010), convenience sampling involves choosing participants when resources or time are limited, selecting those who are readily accessible to the researcher. Bryman (2008) further notes that this method is simple and practical, allowing assessment based on the researcher's availability. Based on these considerations, convenience sampling was deemed appropriate for this study.

The participants were drawn from a school located in the Ampara District, Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, under the Akkaraipattu Zonal Education Division. The school is categorized as a 1AB school, and the study involved two Ordinary-Level classes, comprising a total of 61 students. All 61 students were included for data collection through a questionnaire, focus group discussion, and intervention. While data from all 61 students were analyzed for the questionnaire and focus group discussion, only 58 students' pretest and posttest scores were analyzed. All participants shared Tamil as their first language.

Data were collected through an experiment, a questionnaire, and a focused group discussion. Quantitative data were gathered using the experiment, which involved two classes: one served as the experimental group and the other as the control group. Initially, a pretest was conducted for both classes. Following this, ten intervention classes were conducted only for the experimental group, using ten selected textually enhanced reading comprehension texts.

Both questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to collect qualitative data. Additionally, the pretest and posttest scores were used for statistical analysis. Three textual enhancement techniques (TETs) were employed: bolding, italicizing, and underlining, alongside the students' regular English classes. Meanwhile, the control group continued with their regular English lessons. After the intervention, a posttest was administered to both groups, and the significance of the TETs was evaluated by comparing the results of the two groups.

Questionnaires are tools designed to gather data depending on the research purpose and sample size. They allow researchers to ask direct questions, which helps collect clear and unambiguous data (Denscombe, 2010). Two questionnaires were designed for this study. The first targeted Research Question 1, which aimed to investigate learners' attitudes and beliefs toward learning grammar, including their general feelings during grammar lessons, major challenges they face, the existing teaching approaches, and the methods they prefer for studying grammar. This questionnaire consisted of 27 questions, logically organized into closed and open-ended formats. It was divided into four sections: demographic information, constructs rated on a scale, options reflecting learners' preferences, and open-ended questions. For Research Question 3, another questionnaire was developed to examine learners' attitudes toward TETs. It focused on their overall experience in reading comprehension classes, their ratings of the three TETs used, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of these techniques. This questionnaire consisted of three parts: participant information, opinion-based questions with options, and open-ended questions. The second and third sections included a total of 12 questions.

Focused group discussion (FGD) is used to gain deeper insight into participants' opinions and to explore the reasons behind their thoughts—answering questions such as *Why do people feel that way?* Through discussion, a variety of perspectives and alternative responses can be elicited, which may differ from one individual to another. The exchange of opinions and arguments during the discussion can help generate more accurate and nuanced findings (Bryman, 2008).

To corroborate the findings of the first and third research questions, two focused group discussions were conducted to collect qualitative data. The first discussion involved all 61 participants from both classes and aimed to explore their beliefs and attitudes toward learning grammar. This session consisted of six structured questions. The second discussion was conducted solely with the experimental group, comprising 32 participants, to examine their attention to form while using Textually Enhanced Texts (TET). Key findings from the discussions were recorded on the spot.

Before the intervention sessions, a pretest was administered to both the experimental and control groups to assess their existing proficiency in the simple past tense and to confirm the homogeneity of the groups. The intervention, which utilized TET, was applied only to the experimental group. Following the intervention, a post-test was conducted for both groups to determine whether the use of TET had a positive effect on their learning outcomes.

The test papers designed by the researcher were verified to ensure they matched the students' proficiency levels. This was done by comparing the students' recent second-term English scores with the pretest results. The Control group had a mean score of 53.41 in the second term and 53.76 in the pretest, while the Experimental group had a mean score of 54.17 in the second term and 53.06 in



## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

the pretest. These results indicate that the mean scores of both groups were nearly identical across the two assessments, suggesting that the pretest was appropriately designed to match the students' level.

The pretest included familiar question types such as fill-in-the-blanks and multiple-choice questions. The posttest followed the same structure, using 10 selected texts from past G.C.E. (O/L) papers, with the comprehension questions unchanged. The only modification was the highlighting of the targeted linguistic forms using bolding, underlining, and italicizing to facilitate textual enhancement.

This experimental study employed a Mixed Methods Research (MMR) methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in a sequential design. The study procedures were as follows:

1. **Pretest:** Conducted for both the experimental and control groups to assess baseline performance.
2. **Intervention:** Ten targeted sessions were conducted only for the experimental group alongside regular English classes. The control group attended only regular English classes.
3. **Questionnaire 1:** Administered to all 61 participants to investigate learners' beliefs and attitudes (Research Question 1).
4. **Focused Group Discussion 1:** Conducted with all 61 participants in both groups to supplement the questionnaire data.
5. **Questionnaire 2:** Distributed to the 32 participants in the experimental group to explore learners' perceptions of Textual Enhancement Techniques (TET) (Research Question 3).
6. **Focused Group Discussion 2:** Conducted with the 32 experimental group students to gain further insights regarding TET.
7. **Posttest:** Administered to both groups to measure the effect of the intervention.
8. **Data Analysis:** All quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

## FINDINGS

### RQ 1: What are the learners' attitudes toward learning grammar?

Construct	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel grammar is more challenging than the other topics.		9.8%	23%	49.2%	18%
I was never frustrated with grammar lessons.	6.6%	23%	47.5%	21.3%	1.6%
I enjoy learning grammar in school.		13.1%	26.2%	59%	1.6%
I believe that focusing more on grammar is important in writing.	3.3%	4.9%	8.2%	29.5%	54.1%
I think learning grammar is helpful for effective communication.	3.3%	6.6%	29.5%	39.3%	21.3%
If I am good in grammar, I will get better grades in my exams.	1.6%		11.5%	39.3%	47.5%
When I hear the term grammar, I get nervous.	3.3%	16.4%	19.7%	55.7%	4.9%
Although grammar is boring, it is useful for my grade.		4.9%	8.2%	59%	27.9%
I am confident in applying grammar in writing.	6.6%	31.1%	36.1%	23%	3.3%
The teacher mostly uses the traditional method to teach grammar.		4.9%	3.3%	23%	66.9%
I think being good at grammar will help me in my future career.		1.6%	9.8%	34.4%	54.7%
I feel happy when I construct a grammatically correct sentence.		1.6%	8.2%	27.9%	62.3%
Enjoy grammar classes more than the other sessions.	1.6%	29.5%	32.8%	34.4%	1.6%
I often practice grammar outside of my regular class activities.	18%	42.6%	29.5%	6.6%	3.3%
I like to learn grammar on my own.	6.6%	24.6%	18%	29.5%	21.3%
My English language skills will be improved if I focus more on grammar.		4.9%	6.6%	42.6%	45.9%
I believe that directly explaining the grammar is more understandable.	14.8%	29.5%	27.9%	13.1%	14.8%
There should be more grammar classes than the other sessions.	1.6%	8.2%	13.1%	44.3%	32.8%
I think that explaining grammar through activities is more interesting.		4.9%	16.4%	36.1%	42.6%

## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

To investigate learners' beliefs and attitudes toward grammar learning, data were collected through a questionnaire and a focused group discussion. The quantitative results indicate that a majority of students do not enjoy grammar classes: 59.02% of students agreed, and 3.28% strongly agreed with the statement that they do not enjoy grammar lessons. Only a small proportion of students expressed enjoyment in learning grammar.

Qualitative data from the focused group discussion provided insights into the reasons behind this negative attitude. The students (ST) reported the following:

- "Less explanation and less time to clarify the doubts with the teacher."
- "I don't understand anything when the teacher explains the grammar rule."
- "The teacher just comes into the class, writes the rule of a particular grammar point, assigns exercises, and asks us to complete them."
- "Every English class is the same. Other sessions and grammar lessons are both the same. The teacher just follows the textbook and repeats the same exercises."

These responses suggest that students' negative attitudes toward grammar learning are largely due to insufficient explanation, lack of interactive teaching, and repetitive instructional methods.

A small number of students (6%) strongly disagreed, a significant proportion (23%) disagreed, and a considerable number (48%) responded as "neutral" to the statement, "I am never frustrated with grammar lessons." This indicates that an overwhelming majority of students (77%) experience frustration with grammar lessons.

Regarding students' perceptions of the importance of grammar for exams, four response options were provided: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. Out of 61 students, 17 strongly agreed with the statement, while 36 agreed that learning grammar is important for achieving a good score. In total, 53 out of 61 students indicated that they are instrumentally motivated to focus on grammar.

Furthermore, in most schools, writing skills receive more emphasis than other skills, and exams are also predominantly based on writing. The students' responses to the statement, "I am confident in applying grammar in writing." Only 6.7% of students strongly agreed, and a moderate number (31%) agreed. Altogether, 23 students indicated that they are not confident in applying grammar in writing. Overall, 26.3% agreed, while 36.1% expressed a neutral or uncertain opinion.

Students were also asked about the importance of grammar in writing. The majority (54.1%) strongly agreed, and a considerable number (29.5%) agreed, indicating that most students recognize the importance of correct grammar in writing.

Finally, students' perceptions of the importance of grammar in speaking were investigated. The results were similar to writing: 21.3% strongly agreed, and 39.3% agreed that grammar is helpful in communication. Only a small proportion of students (9.9%) disagreed with this statement.

When students were asked, "Which aspects of grammar do you find difficult?", a notable proportion (49.18%), almost half of the respondents, indicated that they face the most difficulty with tenses. A significant number of students (18.03%) mentioned challenges with sentence structure and articles. This analysis shows that tenses are the most challenging aspect of grammar, highlighting the need for greater instructional focus on these elements.

An open-ended question was also asked regarding students' challenges while learning grammar. Several key difficulties were identified, including: boring activities, struggles in applying grammar rules while writing, difficulty remembering rules, challenges in exams, unclear teacher explanations, difficulty applying grammar in speaking, remembering tense structures, recalling verb types, monotonous explanations, fast-paced lessons that are hard to follow, struggles in constructing sentences, and overall difficult tasks. This question was further explored through a focused group discussion, and the following student responses were recorded:

- "The tasks we do are so boring."
- "The teacher's explanation is not clear."
- "The teacher always comes, asks us to open the book, explains the rule, and gives the same activities."
- "Usually, the teacher writes on the board and explains, then gives us activities like fill-in-the-blanks or sentence transformation. There is little time to ask our doubts."
- "Grammar questions in the exams are difficult."
- "Applying grammar in essay writing is hard for me."
- "Remembering what we studied in the previous class is tough, so I couldn't understand what we are studying at present."

*(Translated from L1)*

Moreover, 31 out of 61 students (50.8%) indicated a preference for studying grammar through hands-on activities, such as games and other communicative exercises. This suggests that students favor diverse, interactive learning methods rather than the traditional teaching approach. An open-ended question was included to explore how students expect grammar instruction to be made more engaging and effective. The students proposed several strategies, including: engaging in more group tasks, discussing various past paper questions in groups, using worksheets instead of direct writing exercises, providing more examples, incorporating

## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

communicative tasks, emphasizing grammar rules with visuals, creating more interesting activities, conducting various exercises for each grammar topic, teaching grammar rules through games and examples rather than direct explanation, placing greater visual emphasis, discussing papers more extensively, increasing practice on specific grammar points, and revising previously taught grammar in the following class. These student recommendations could be implemented as much as possible to enhance learning.

### RQ 2: What impact do textual enhancement techniques have on learning grammar?

One of the objectives of this study was to examine the impact of Textual Enhancement Techniques (TET) on students' grammar learning. To achieve this, two ordinary-level classes were selected, each comprising 29 students—one designated as the experimental group and the other as the control group.

Initially, a pretest was administered to both groups to assess their baseline grammar proficiency. Following this, the experimental group participated in 10 intervention sessions in which grammar instruction was delivered using textually enhanced reading materials designed to highlight grammatical structures. The control group, in contrast, received traditional grammar instruction without any textual enhancement.

After that intervention, a posttest was administered to both groups to measure any changes in their grammar performance. The comparison of pretest and posttest results between the experimental and control groups provided insights into the effectiveness of TET in improving grammar learning.

Table 4.1 presents the complete statistics from the questionnaire.

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Posttest Control group - Pretest Control group	.414	8.922	1.657	-2.980	3.808	.250	28	.805
Pair 2	Posttest Experimental group - Pretest Experimental group	8.172	7.792	1.447	5.208	11.136	5.648	28	.000

Initially, a pretest on the simple past tense was administered to both the experimental and control groups. The primary purpose of this pretest was to evaluate students' existing proficiency in the simple past tense and to verify the homogeneity of the two groups. The pretest scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics, a paired sample t-test, and one-way ANOVA. Key measures such as maximum score, minimum score, mean, and standard deviation were calculated. Descriptive analysis showed that both groups had an equal number of students (29 each). The mean score of the experimental group was 56.66, while that of the control group was 53.76. The maximum score for the experimental group was 96, compared to 94 for the control group, and the minimum scores were 23 and 15, respectively. The small difference in mean scores, along with the nearly identical maximum and minimum scores, indicates that the two groups were largely uniform in their initial proficiency.

Further analysis using one-way ANOVA confirmed this homogeneity. The F value between the groups was 0.200, and the corresponding p value was 0.656. A low F value combined with a high p value suggests that there was no significant difference between the groups prior to the intervention. This indicates that the pretest scores were comparable, and any subsequent differences in posttest results could be attributed to the effect of the intervention rather than pre-existing disparities.

After conducting the pretest and confirming the homogeneity of the experimental and control groups based on their knowledge of the simple past tense, 10 intervention classes were conducted for the experimental group in addition to their regular English classes. As noted in the previous chapter, three TETs—bolding, underlining, and italicizing—were employed. Ten comprehension passages were selected from G.C.E. (O/L) past papers and textually enhanced using the aforementioned techniques. All passages were written in the past tense, and simple past tense verbs were highlighted using these typographic devices. No explicit grammatical explanation about the simple past tense was provided; the classes were conducted as normal reading comprehension sessions. Only the passages and the associated comprehension questions were discussed.

## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

Meanwhile, the control group did not receive any reading comprehension sessions and continued with their typical English lessons. After the intervention, the mean score of the control group was 54.17, while the mean score of the experimental group was 64.79. The standard deviation for the control group was 27.605, and for the experimental group, it was 21.281. The higher mean score of the experimental group suggests that the intervention may have had a positive effect on the students' performance.

A deeper analysis of statistical significance is warranted. The posttest scores clearly show a notable difference between the two groups. The mean score of the control group was 54.97, compared to 64.79 for the experimental group. Regarding the confidence intervals, the upper bound of the control group (64.50) is slightly above the lower bound of the experimental group (56.95). However, the lower bound of the experimental group (56.95) is still higher than the upper bound of the control group (64.50), indicating an overlap between the intervals. Overall, this demonstrates a substantial difference in posttest performance between the experimental and control groups, suggesting the intervention positively influenced the experimental group.

Table 4.1 presents the p-values for the control group (Posttest–Pretest) and the experimental group (Posttest–Pretest). The mean score of the control group was 0.414, indicating a slight improvement between the pretest and posttest. However, this improvement was not statistically significant, as reflected by the control group's p-value of 0.805, which is substantially higher than the alpha value (0.05). This suggests that there was no meaningful change in the students' performance within the control group.

In contrast, the experimental group showed a marked improvement, with a mean score increase of 8.138 from pretest to posttest. The p-value for the experimental group was 0.000, which is below the alpha threshold of 0.05, indicating that the improvement was statistically significant. These results demonstrate that the intervention had a positive and significant effect on students' performance in the simple past tense.

### RQ 3. What do learners feel about textual enhancement techniques?

When students were asked about their feelings toward the reading comprehension sessions in general, a considerable proportion (46.9%) reported that the intervention sessions were "very interesting" or "interesting." However, a significant minority (40.6%) responded as "neutral," indicating that they did not have a strong opinion and neither liked nor disliked the sessions. In summary, nearly half of the students found the sessions interesting, while the other half were indifferent.

This question was explored further during the focused group discussion. Some of the students' responses were as follows:

- "It was interesting because we didn't have to write anything."
- "The texts were interesting, and we didn't have to write the questions. So all the questions could be discussed during class time."
- "Every day, new worksheets were given, and in each text, some verbs were highlighted using different methods. It was interesting to learn every day"
- "Printed texts were provided, so we had more time to read the text and complete the tasks in class carefully"

*(Translated from L1)*

Although the main objective of the intervention was not to make reading comprehension more enjoyable, a considerable number of students actively engaged in the sessions.

A remarkable majority of students (94%) reported noticing the highlighted linguistic forms in the comprehension passages, whereas only a small number indicated that they did not. To further investigate what students specifically observed, an open-ended question was posed: "Did you notice anything in the reading texts? If yes, what was that?" The following representative responses were recorded:

- "Tense."
- "Simple past tense."
- "I noticed past tense verbs."

From these responses, it can be inferred that bolding was perceived as the most impactful TET, followed by underlining, while italicizing appeared less effective. The perceived effectiveness of the techniques, from the students' perspective, can be summarized as: bolding > underlining > italicizing.

To understand the rationale behind this ranking, a focused group discussion was conducted. Students' responses are presented below:

- "Bold was more helpful in recognizing the highlighted words quickly."
- "All the bolded words could be noticed at first glance."
- "Bolding clearly differentiates the words from the others."
- "Underlining is also clear for me because the underlined words could be distinguished from the others."
- "Bolding and underlining were both more striking than italicizing."
- "It was hard to recognize the italicized words because the non-emphasized words and italicized words looked the same."
- "Italicized words and others looked similar, so it was necessary to pay extra attention to notice the stressed words."
- "All the words looked the same in the italicized text."



## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

These findings indicate that students found bolding to be the most effective technique for drawing attention to grammatical forms, followed by underlining, with italicizing being the least noticeable.

The statistics on students' confidence in using the simple past tense clearly show that the majority (56.1%) felt confident when taking the posttest, while a smaller proportion (12.5%) reported feeling very confident. Overall, more than two-thirds of the class (68.6%) expressed confidence in completing a test on the simple past tense after the intervention. Moreover, as revealed in Research Question 2, the experimental group's performance increased significantly.

In the questionnaire, students were further asked to evaluate their own knowledge of the simple past tense. A substantial number (40.6%) indicated that they had noticed a moderate improvement. While the students did not report dramatic changes, they observed positive progress. Additionally, 28.1% of students reported a significant improvement, which represents a considerable portion of the class.

Regarding Research Question 1, the main difficulty identified by students in learning grammar was remembering the correct forms or rules. After applying TETs, students were asked about the effectiveness of TET in helping them remember tense forms. Of the 32 students, 12 (37.5%) strongly agreed that TET helped them remember the forms, while another notable portion (43.8%) partially agreed, indicating moderate effectiveness.

Finally, students were asked about their overall experience learning the simple past tense through reading comprehension texts rather than direct grammar instruction. The majority (60%) rated the sessions as good, and a considerable number (28%) rated them as excellent. In total, 88% of students reported that their overall experience with TET was positive.

The students' experiences with TET were further explored through a focused group discussion. Several responses highlighted their perceptions of the sessions:

- "I never felt that I was learning grammar."
- "It felt like a typical reading comprehension class. Normally, I find grammar classes boring, but I never realized I was learning the simple past."
- "I didn't feel like I was learning any tense, but while doing the test, I was able to remember certain highlighted verbs, for instance, *said*, *told*."

These responses (translated from L1) suggest that the students were able to learn the simple past tense indirectly through reading comprehension, without perceiving it as formal grammar instruction.

## DISCUSSION

Statistical analysis revealed that a significant portion of students (62.3%) do not enjoy their grammar lessons in school. Qualitative data interpretation highlighted several key reasons for this lack of engagement.

Firstly, the traditional method of grammar instruction, commonly used in schools, was cited as a major factor. Teachers typically follow the prescribed textbooks according to the competency level of students. Lessons often involve writing rules on the board, with explanations delivered through the "chalk and talk" method. Students reported that this approach feels monotonous and fails to capture their interest.

Another contributing factor was the material used to teach grammar. School teachers generally rely on textbooks provided by higher authorities, which limits flexibility in selecting or modifying teaching resources. While practical constraints exist in changing these prescribed materials, discussions among teachers suggested that supplementing the curriculum with additional resources or employing alternative methods of grammar instruction could enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

Numerical analysis revealed that nearly half of the students (49.2%) face difficulties in dealing with tenses. While students can understand the instructions provided by the teacher to some extent, the main challenge lies in remembering and applying the rules correctly. This indicates a need for the targeted grammatical forms to be made more noticeable and emphasized, as focused attention on the form aids retention and practical application in both writing and speaking. Another practical challenge reported by students relates to examinations. Many students stated that during exams, the various tenses and grammar rules they had studied often become confusing. In particular, applying grammatical forms in writing tasks, such as essay composition, was highlighted as one of the most difficult aspects of exams.

Current learning practices, dominated by traditional methods, were also found to contribute to student disengagement. Questionnaire data indicated that a majority of students (50.8%) prefer learning grammar through hands-on, interactive activities rather than conventional methods. Despite these challenges, most students recognize the importance of learning grammar. Quantitative analysis revealed that 57% of students agree that grammar is essential for writing, reflecting their concern for accuracy in written communication. Furthermore, students highlighted the relevance of grammar for their future careers, citing better job prospects, the ability to conduct presentations, and pursuing higher studies abroad as primary motivations. A considerable number of students also emphasized the role of grammar in effective communication.

## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

Further interpretive analysis uncovered additional perceived benefits of grammar learning. Students reported that a strong grasp of grammar enables them to speak confidently, gain social respect, achieve better exam scores, and improve overall writing skills. The majority indicated that their core motivation for learning grammar is the “desire to write better,” with accuracy in writing serving as a key stimulus. For a smaller portion of students (13%), motivation to learn grammar stems from the need to communicate in English effectively.

A limited number of students (13%) reported that communicating in English motivates them to learn grammar. The statistical analysis revealed a positive impact of TETs on learners’ focus on form. The study involved a pretest for both experimental and control groups, followed by 10 intervention sessions conducted only for the experimental group, and concluded with a posttest for both groups. Comparison of pretest and posttest scores showed that the experimental group had a P-value of 0.000, which is less than the alpha level ( $0.000 < 0.05$ ), indicating a statistically significant improvement. In contrast, the control group’s P-value was 0.805, exceeding the alpha level ( $0.805 > 0.05$ ), suggesting no significant change.

Therefore, the second research objective—examining the impact of TET on grammar learning—was achieved through quantitative analysis. In conclusion, TET was found to have a positive effect on learning grammar. Additionally, learners’ perceptions regarding the overall reading comprehension sessions, their attention to highlighted forms, awareness of targeted grammatical forms, ratings of the techniques, confidence in tests, and self-evaluation were also discussed.

Most students expressed that the reading comprehension sessions were interesting. Regarding familiarity with TETs, the majority of them were not aware of the technique beforehand. The effectiveness of TET in the intervention was then assessed from the students’ viewpoint. Most students reported a positive experience with the use of TET to focus on form. The report also revealed that their confidence levels during the pretest and posttest improved, particularly in using the simple past tense, and this increase in confidence was supported by statistical evidence. Furthermore, self-assessment of improvement showed that the majority of students felt they had achieved a moderate improvement after TET was integrated into reading comprehension tasks in the simple past tense. Although students generally had a positive perception of TET, their ratings of individual techniques varied. The bolding technique was considered very clear for noticing the target forms, the underlining technique was regarded as clear, and the italicizing technique was perceived as less clear in highlighting the words. Despite these differences, the overall perspective of students toward TET was positive.

### CONCLUSION

Focusing on form is a crucial aspect of second language learning. This study investigated the impact of TETs in promoting a focus on form through an experimental approach. Pretest and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups were compared to evaluate the effectiveness of TET. In addition, students’ attitudes and beliefs toward learning grammar, both before and after the intervention, were examined.

The questionnaire revealed that the majority of students predominantly use traditional grammar instruction methods. To explore their preferences further, an open-ended question and a focused group discussion were conducted, which indicated that students generally prefer interactive activities over traditional methods for learning grammar. The experimental results demonstrated a positive effect of TET on grammar learning.

Even though TET proved effective in drawing attention to grammatical forms, students’ perceptions of TET were further assessed through questionnaires and focus group discussions. Overall, students’ responses indicated a high level of awareness, with 94% reporting that they noticed the highlighted forms in the texts. This highlights the effectiveness of TET in facilitating noticing, suggesting that its application could be developed further in future studies.

This study was conducted at the school level, and future research could extend to the university context. Furthermore, while this study focused on TET as a technique for focusing on form, there are several other techniques available, including dictogloss, input flood, negotiation, text reconstruction, consciousness-raising, recast, and more. Future research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) could explore the effectiveness of these techniques in various contexts to deepen our understanding of Focus on Form Instruction (FFI) in ESL classrooms.

### REFERENCES

- 1) Aloysius, M. (2015). *Problems of English teaching in Sri Lanka: how they affect teaching*
- 2) *efficacy* [Doctoral thesis, University of Bedfordshire].
- 3) Ayiewbey, S. (2013). The effects of textual enhancement on learning English past tense. *World Applied Sciences Journal*. [http://www.idosi.org/wasj/wasj27\(8\)13/15.pdf](http://www.idosi.org/wasj/wasj27(8)13/15.pdf)
- 4) Birjandi, P., Alavi, S. M., & Karimi, S. N. (2014). Effects of unenhanced, enhanced, and elaborated input on learning English phrasal verbs. *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrsl.2014.772>
- 5) Bryman, A. (2008). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press.
- 6) Denscombe, M. (2010). *The good research guide: For small-scale social research projects*. Open University Press.

## Form-Focused Instruction in ESL Classes with Emphasis on Textual Enhancement Techniques: A Study Among Secondary Level Students

- 7) Gunawardena, M. (2011a). *An inquiry into grammar pedagogy: perspectives from Sri Lankan secondary school teachers and students* [Master dissertation, University of Canberra]. <https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/files/33684494/file>
- 8) Ju, Yao. (2010). *A Study of the Teaching and Learning of English Grammar in the Chinese Junior Secondary School* [Doctoral thesis, University of Oslo]
- 9) Krashen, S. D. (1991a). Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics (GURT) 1991. *The Input Hypothesis: An Update*, 409–431.
- 10) Krashen, S. D. (1991b). How much comprehensible input did Heinrich Schliemann get? *System*, 19(3), 189–190. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251x\(91\)90043-o](https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251x(91)90043-o)
- 11) Mahjoob, E. (2015b). The effect of deductive vs. inductive grammar instruction on Iranian EFL learners' spoken accuracy and fluency. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.1p.8>
- 12) *Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.1p.8>
- 13) Marzban, A., & Mokheri, M. (2012). The effect of focus on form instruction on intermediate EFL learners' grammar learning in task-based language teaching. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 5340–5344. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.435>
- 14) Meguro, Y. (2017). Textual enhancement, grammar learning, reading comprehension, and tag questions. *Language Teaching Research*, 23(1), 58–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168817714277>
- 15) Nahavandi, N., & Mukundan, J. (2012). The impact of textual input enhancement and explicit rule presentation on Iranian elementary EFL learners' intake of simple past tense. *English Language Teaching*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n1p92>
- 16) Nassaji, H., & Fotos, S. S. (2011). Teaching grammar in second language classrooms. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203850961>
- 17) Navaz, A., & Khaathoon, M. H. (2020). Teaching grammar: a comparison between Schools and University. *KALAM-International Research Journal*, 13(4). <http://ir.lib.seu.ac.lk/handle/123456789/5667>
- 18) Navaz, A., & Sama, A. (2017). Teaching grammar in the English language classroom: Perceptions and practices of students and teachers in the Ampara district. *Proceedings of 7th International Symposium, SEUSL, 7th & 8th December, 2107*. <http://ir.lib.seu.ac.lk/handle/123456789/3051>
- 19) Saadi, S. B., & Saeidi, M. (2018b). The effect of Input-based and output-based focus on form instruction on learning grammar by Iranian EFL learners. *The Journal of English Language Pedagogy and Practice*, 11(22), 74–90.
- 20) Schmidt, R. W. (1995). *Attention and awareness in foreign language learning*. Univ. of Hawai'i at Manoa. <https://books.google.lk/books?id=P2gGD0HnjcYC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- 21) Solangarachchi, S. (2023). Factors influencing English Language proficiency of ordinary level students (with special reference to selected schools in Gampaha district). *1st International Conference on Social Sciences and Languages (ICSSL-2023)*, 401–407.
- 22) Takala, A. (2016). *Grammar Teaching Methods in EFL lessons: Factors to consider when making instructional decisions* [Doctoral thesis, University of Morocco].
- 23) Torkabad, M. G., & Fazilatfar, A. M. (2014). Textual enhancement and input processing effects on the intake of present and past simple tenses. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 562–571. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.452>
- 24) Ur, P. (2012). *A course in English language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- 25) Zhang, J. (2009). Necessity of grammar teaching. *International Education Studies*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v2n2p184>



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.