

Two Tenses: An Alternative to Teaching English Grammar Tense

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate the effectiveness of teaching English grammar tense based on the concept of two English grammar tenses, *past* and *present*. The focus group is EFL/ESL learners of English. Prior research in the area of EFL/ESL teaching reveals that a number of teachers, linguists, and publishers of EFL/ESL texts claim that there can be anywhere from two to 16 tenses in English. However, in the sphere of traditional grammar teaching, a number of educators and linguists argue conversely that there are just two tenses, past and present, which work in conjunction with two other grammar concepts, aspect and mood. To investigate the effectiveness of teaching two tenses, third-year EFL/ESL undergraduate students from an international university in Thailand were observed during a real-time course. Ahead of comprehensive instruction and practice, the participants were given a pretest to evaluate their pre-existing knowledge of tense, aspect, and mood. Initial data showed that a majority of the participants had knowledge of 12 tenses with the “future tense” being among them. Initial results also showed that aspect and mood were relatively unfamiliar to the majority of the participants. At the end of the course, the participants were given a posttest which was identical to the pretest. The difference in data between the pretest and posttest showed that the majority of the participants now had a firm grasp of the idea behind two grammar tenses and how aspect and mood can be looked at as separate entities from tense. The overall results indicate that teaching English grammar tense based on two tenses is a viable alternative that could lead students to have a clearer understanding of English grammar tense and how it is interconnected yet separate from both aspect and mood.

Keywords: tense, aspect, mood, form, two-tense approach, twelve-tense approach

Introduction

The teaching of English language tense has been a contentious issue for many teachers of the English language. Regardless of whether they are native speakers of English or non-native speakers of English, teachers often harbor an adverse feeling for teaching tense for various reasons. In a study regarding teacher anxiety, İpek (2016) pointed out that there were occurrences of apprehension in teachers who felt they were deficient in their comprehension of grammar. Could one of the reasons for this anxiety or reluctance among teachers be the complex nature of the way tense is often taught to students? The approach to using multiple tenses in English is derived from the idea that English should be described the same way as earlier Latin and Greek descriptions of grammar; however, when carried over into English, it is problematic because unlike Latin and Greek, English has only two inflections for verbs, past and present (Jacobs, 1995). In the early 1900s, grammarians introduced a framework consisting of twelve tenses, now one of the most common formulas for teaching English grammar tense, which incorporated the perfect and progressive aspects (Jacobs, 1995). The tenses to which Jacobs (1995, p. 189) refers are:

simple present tense, present progressive tense, simple past tense, past progressive tense, simple future tense, future progressive tense, present perfect tense, present perfect progressive tense, past perfect tense, past perfect progressive tense, future perfect tense, future perfect progressive tense.

Another common approach is the use of sixteen English grammar tenses in total. Here is a list proposed by Ferikoğlu (2018, p. 125):

simple present tense, simple past tense, simple future tense, simple future past tense, present continuous tense, past continuous tense, future continuous tense, future continuous past tense, present perfect tense, past perfect tense, future perfect tense, future perfect past tense, present perfect continuous tense, past perfect continuous tense, future perfect continuous tense, future perfect continuous past tense.

Rather than elaborating on the entire list presented above, we feel it is necessary to focus only on the following examples by Ferikoğlu (2018):

Continuous in the Past Tense S11 (Example sentence): *The following midnight I would be writing a letter.* Here *the moment of speaking* is the primary reference; secondary reference is *the following midnight* according to the tertiary reference, which is not expressed but impliedly [*sic*] one week before the moment of writing. That is, the moment of writing is past according to the primary reference, continuous according to the secondary reference and future according to the tertiary reference. (p. 125)

With this analysis, Ferikoğlu (2018) seems to suggest that a sentence with mood in the past form and with progressive aspect has a meaning that is projected into the future.

Having presented the argument for there being either twelve or sixteen tenses, we will now focus on an alternative for describing and teaching English grammar tense: the idea that there are only two tenses, each with its own form: a present form and a past form. Yule (2009) points out clear examples that also support the argument for a distinct two-tense approach to teaching English grammar. Depraetere and Salkie (2015) advocate the two-tense concept by claiming that the auxiliary verbs “will” and “have” are not part of tense and that English tenses can be distinguished simply as either past or present. This approach has been, for the most part, relegated to the domain of linguists and academics who advocate, in many cases, the use of prescriptive grammar. This alternative approach to describing English grammar tense, the two-tense approach, is the basis for the research presented here. In this paper, we do not wish to compare the different methods nor propose that one is better than the others, but rather we are presenting research showing that teaching English grammar tense using a two-tense approach with just past and present is a viable alternative that could significantly simplify the teaching and learning of English grammar tense for both teachers and learners.

Tense, Aspect, Mood: How They Differ and Why There Is Confusion

There is debate concerning English grammar tense involving two other concepts often associated with grammar tense: aspect and mood. Tense is often associated with the form of the verb and its connection to time. On other occasions, tense is not associated with time. Song and Lee (2007) address the abstract nature of the relationship between tense and time by suggesting that English is multiplex in its relationship with time, so time cannot be dealt with as a single entity since it is also associated with other notions such as space, occurrence, and movement. Aspect is often associated with whether an action or state connected with an event is finished or ongoing. Mood is often associated with the attitude or intention of the speaker or writer as expressed in the utterance. As shown in the following examples applying the twelve-tense approach, one of the designated twelve tenses, *present progressive tense*, can be expressed by a speaker in a sentence such as, *I am playing football with Tom*. The breakdown is as follows: present = *am* and the progressive aspect = *ing* (the inflectional morpheme marking progressive or continuous). In another slightly more complex sentence, *I have been playing football with Tom*., we have a representation of the designated *present perfect progressive tense*. The breakdown is as follows: present = *am*, *have* = perfect aspect, and the progressive aspect = *ing* (the inflectional morpheme marking progressive or continuous). In a final example, the sentence, *I played football with Tom*., shows the past simple tense with no aspect occurring. For each of the twelve tenses, a sentence can be created. This is valuable to a learner of English because the learner can see that an

idea connected to time can be categorized into one of the twelve units. For the most part, the twelve-tense approach works relatively well until another concept is introduced: mood. The following sentence continues with the theme above, football: *I should play football with Tom tomorrow*. Here lies the confusion. The verb *should* is a modal verb. Modal verbs are often classified as tense-less verbs; they are not tied to a finite time. In the above sentence, no real action has occurred. The sentence is merely the speaker or writer expressing a hypothetical obligation towards *Tom*. In addition, the adverb *tomorrow* expresses a connection to future time. It then becomes difficult to fit the sentence into the framework for the twelve units for twelve tenses. This is due to *should* being a verb that is in the *past form*. The sentence cannot be past tense because there is no action occurring in the past. The utterance of the speaker is in the present. Yule (2009), whom we will turn to shortly, calls this moment of utterance the “speaker’s now” (p. 61). Lastly, the intent of the speaker’s message, or mood, is projected towards the future with the adverb ‘*tomorrow*’. So, for many speakers of English, whether beginners or advanced, this presents confusion as to what ‘tense’ this sentence has or what ‘tense’ this sentence is in. In order to alleviate some of the confusion, Jacobs (1995) points out that:

English does not have three tenses corresponding directly to past, present, and future. It uses two tenses as part a complex system for making time reference. In fact, relatively few languages have three-tense systems. Far more common are two-way splits – past versus non-past, or future versus non-future – similar to the system in English. (p. 194)

Perhaps the problem with present perfect progressive is not the choice of tense, but the choice of aspect. A similar situation can be seen with the use of present progressive, with 94.44% of errors corresponding to wrong choice of aspect (Jacobs, 1995). English uses tense in ways that do not consistently match tense and meaning in association with time. In English, it is perfectly acceptable to say: *My flight leaves tomorrow morning at 8:30 a.m.* A native speaker of English, perhaps, possesses the sociolinguistic background knowledge needed to readily understand that this use of the present form refers to an event projected into the future. We should not, however, propose that this sentence is the future tense. It is simply *present* with a future meaning. Likewise, the sentence: *I would prefer not to go with you tomorrow*. has a modal verb *would*, the past form of *will*, but the meaning expressed by the speaker is referring to a future hypothetical event. A simple alternative description of this formation would be *past conditional* with a future meaning. Using the term ‘tense’ in either one of these examples would be inaccurate because neither sentence has a one-to-one match with real time. We will now go into further detail about aspect and mood to highlight the idea of separating the two from tense.

Aspect and Its Connection to Tense and Time

The two main grammatical aspects covered here are the *progressive aspect* and the *perfect aspect*. The progressive aspect is marked by an auxiliary verb form of BE and a main verb with the inflectional morpheme ‘*ing*’. The perfect aspect is marked by an auxiliary verb HAVE and a main verb in the past participle form.

The function of the progressive aspect is to express an action or a state that is in progress at or near a present time or a past time. The following two sentences show progressive aspect: *Susan is reading the book now. Susan was reading the book last night.* Both sentences show that the actions, occurring in the present and in the past respectively, are not and were not complete at the time of utterance. Both are connected to fairly specific times: now and last night). A study by Garrido and Rosado Romero (2012) indicates that the use of present tense only, or the use of present tense combined with progressive aspect, does not present major issues for learners.

The function of the perfect aspect is to express an action or a state that is complete near the present at an unspecified time or a completed action in the past before another past action. The following two sentences show perfect aspect: *Susan has read the book. Susan had read the book by the time I arrived.* Both sentences show that the actions are near the present, but in the past, respectively, and were complete at the time of utterance. Both are connected to unspecified times near the present and in the past. In the same study by Garrido and Rosado Romero (2012), the authors’ analysis showed that the highest rate of overt errors occurred with tense, both present and past combined with perfect aspect. Present perfect errors were at 28.73% and past perfect errors were at 21.83%. In contrast, their data showed that the present progressive was the only tense with zero errors of this type (p. 289). This data indicates that the use of present tense combined with perfect aspect does present major issues for learners. In a study conducted by Listia and Febriyant (2020) with Indonesian learners of English, similar results appear with present tense (no aspect) the lowest at 28.2%, present continuous tense 37.5%, present perfect tense 33.8%, present perfect continuous tense 51.4%, simple past tense (no aspect) 39%, past continuous tense 54.5%, past perfect tense 62.2%, and the highest rate of errors with past perfect progressive at 62.25% (p. 89). Again, this follows a pattern within several studies regarding grammar tense that the perfect aspect causes issues with learners of English. It should be noted from the above information that the authors, Listia and Febriyant (2020), choose to use the term “tense” in combination with aspects in their listings which follows with the conventional 12-tense approach to teaching tense.

Mood and Tense Form: Advocating the Conditional

Although the perfect and the progressive aspects present challenges for learners of English, both of them have fairly distinctive connections to time; the event in its connection to time is either completed or ongoing respectively. Mood, however, can have an indistinctive connection to time. In the same study by Listia and Febriyant (2020), the results showed a rate of errors using what those authors designate as the future continuous tense at 51.05%, the future perfect tense at 58.65%, and the future perfect continuous tense at 68% (p. 90). These rates of error (higher than the rates for aspect) indicate that mood presents a significant issue for learners. In addition (as shown above), the rates of error presented in the Listia and Febriyant (2020) study do not take into consideration the past forms of modal verbs which arguably could add higher levels of complexity.

It is important to take note that, like all verbs, the modal auxiliary verbs have a *present form* and a *past form*. Table 1 shows the present forms and past forms of all the pure modal verbs:

Table 1

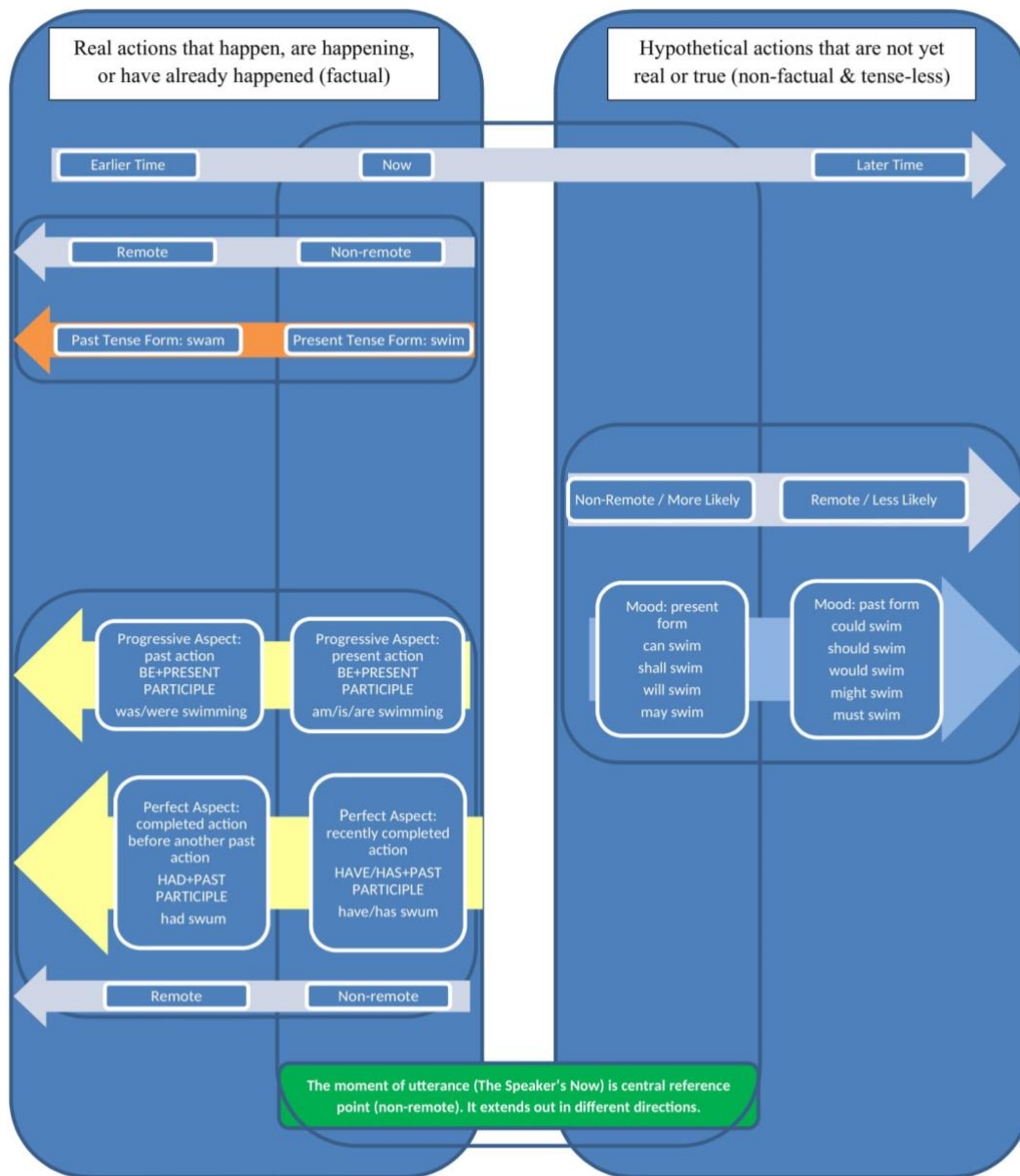
Modal Verb Forms

| Present Form Modal Verbs | Past Form Modal Verbs |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| can | could |
| shall | should |
| will | would |
| may | might |
| -- | must |

For each modal verb in the column on the left of Table 1, there is a corresponding past form in the column on the right. It should be noted that the modal verb *must* is the exception which is designated as past form based on historical implications (Morenburg, 1991) but occurs as present form in other literature (Yule, 2009). This brings us back to the idea of a “speaker’s now”. The “speaker’s now” as defined by Yule is a central reference point in time of a speaker’s utterance about situations envisioned which extend in different directions from the current situation of the speaker. As seen in Figure 1 below, Yule defines this by using the terms “remote” and “non-remote” with past verb *forms* being remote as they are distant from the “speaker’s now”, and present verb *forms* being “non-remote” because they are closer to the “speaker’s now” (p. 61).

Figure 1

Tense, Aspect, Mood, and the Speaker's Now



Note. Illustration based on *Explaining English Grammar* by G. Yule, 2009, pp. 53-62.

Let us take a simple sentence as an example: *I will see her tomorrow*. The modal verb *will* projects a future meaning, but the *form* of the verb *will*, in the *present form*, has a more immediate distance to the speaker, or non-remote status. In addition, the action being expressed is hypothetical; it has not occurred. In this case, a logical alternative to describe the sentence is *present conditional* rather than the *future tense*. Another example sentence is: *I would see her tomorrow*. The modal verb *will*, in

its past form *would*, has a sense of distance projected away from, or remote from, the speaker into the past. Once again, the action being expressed is hypothetical; it has not occurred. In this case, a logical alternative to describe the sentence is *past conditional* rather than something like “*simple future in the past tense*” which Ferikoğlu (2018) proposes.

A third example is: *I might see her tomorrow*. The modal *may*, in its past form *might* (+*adverbial tomorrow*), projects a future meaning, but the form of the verb *might* is the *past form* which has a sense of remoteness, or distance, from the speaker. Once again, the action being expressed is hypothetical; it has not occurred. In this case, a logical alternative to describe the sentence is *past conditional* rather than something like “*simple future in the past tense*” which Ferikoğlu (2018) is suggesting. If we examine the following sentence: “*The following midnight I would be writing a letter.*” from Ferikoğlu, the description for the sentence is “*Future Continuous in the Past Tense*” (p. 126) which does indeed describe the sentence. However, the term *Past Tense* seems contradictory when coupled with the term *Future*. It may be simpler to separate tense, aspect, and mood into three distinct areas to show the state of the verb rather than trying to combine them and labeling the sentence with a particular tense (Morenburg, 1991). An alternative description for the sentence could be: *Past Progressive Conditional*. The past derived from the past form of *would*, progressive derived from the verb BE (AUX) + *writing* with its ‘*ing*’ suffix, and finally conditional derived the modality of the modal verb *would*. If one changes the tense form in the same sentence to ‘*The following midnight I will be writing a letter*’, the description becomes simplified as *present progressive conditional*.

Depraetere and Salkie (2015) point out that in a sentence containing *will*, for example, *It will snow tonight*, there is a distinct reference to the future. However, a significant number of grammarians consider *will* as a modal rather than a future tense. This coincides with the concept that modal verbs are not a part of tense and therefore could be separated from a group or category such as future tense. Modal verbs, do indeed, however, have either a present *form* or a past *form*, and thus could be treated alternatively as being either present conditional or past conditional only, but carrying no tense.

By simplifying the tenses down to just two forms and stressing that the form of the first verb in the predicate is either *past* or *present*, learners can see where tense is derived. They can see that tense is not derived from, or a part of, the aspect or the mood in sentences, but rather aspect and mood are affected by the tense form of the verb. Learners are then able to include or exclude modal verbs in the appropriate form of either past or present and become aware of the term *conditional* to understand the hypothetical nature of sentences using modal verbs. In these cases, the learners would most likely be able to discern the semantic meanings and time projections of the sentences from the context with adverbials such as yesterday, every morning, this evening, tomorrow, and the following midnight. Declerck (2006) claims that “The use of a tense is wholly determined by its semantics (= temporal

structure), which has to fit in with the temporal information given by the time-specifying adverbial or by the context” (p. 599). Ureel (2011) points out that Declerck (2006) separates tense into two distinct time-spheres: present and past. Ureel (2011) offers the following example: “(1.1) *The student told the teacher that he had handed in the wrong paper and that he would hand in the right paper on Tuesday*” (p. 22). The sentence, with its additional clauses, contains past tense, perfect aspect, and the conditional mood, but every verb in the sentence is in the past *form* (told, had, would) regardless of its semantic meaning with time references connected with past time and future time. With a sentence such as this, a teacher might be hard-pressed to give an adequate explanation for which ‘tense’ the sentence is in.

A Manageable Schematic for Teaching and Using the Two-Tense Approach

Wahyuningtyas and Bram (2018), who conducted a study with Indonesian students, point out that the main obstacle students face while learning English grammar tenses was remembering a formula for each of the tenses. In their study, the authors examined what they designate as four basic tenses: present tense, present continuous tense, present perfect tense, and present perfect continuous tense. A study by Sriphrom and Ratitamkul (2014) presents a historical review regarding Thai learners of English and their constant struggle to acquire sufficient knowledge regarding the complexities of using multiple tenses in English. Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) also point out how English verb tense, subject-verb agreement, and modals create difficulties for Thai EFL/ESL learners due to the interference of their native language (L1). One could conclude that remembering twelve or sixteen “tenses” probably results in considerable effort taken by learners. If this is the case, further research on alternatives to teaching tense in a simpler, more effective way is required. If learners were presented with the concept that there are just two tense forms that can be arranged along with perfect aspect, progressive aspect, and condition, it may simplify the learning of tenses that students are faced with.

Morenberg (1991) presents an eight-item schematic that shows the possible combinations for constructing sentences using a verb in either the past form or the present form for all eight items and then combinations for all possible inclusions of aspect and mood (p. 37). In Table 2, a description and example sentences have been added to each item to illustrate the combinations.

Table 2

Possible Combinations for Constructing Sentences

| | |
|--|--|
| 1. Tense + Verb | present / past (<i>They drive. / They drove.</i>) |
| 2. Tense + Modal + Verb | present conditional / past conditional (<i>They will drive. / They would drive.</i>) |
| 3. Tense + Perfective + Verb | present perfect / past perfect (<i>They have driven. / They had driven.</i>) |
| 4. Tense + Progressive + Verb | present progressive / past progressive (<i>They are driving. / They were driving.</i>) |
| 5. Tense + Modal + Perfective + Verb | present perfect conditional / past perfect conditional (<i>They may have driven. / They might have driven.</i>) |
| 6. Tense + Modal + Progressive + Verb | present progressive conditional / past progressive conditional (<i>They will be driving. / They should be driving.</i>) |
| 7. Tense + Perfective + Progressive + Verb | present perfect progressive / past perfect progressive (<i>They have been driving. / They had been driving.</i>) |
| 8. Tense + Modal + Perfective + Progressive + Verb | present perfect progressive conditional / past perfect progressive conditional (<i>They will have been driving. / They should have been driving.</i>) |

Note. Adapted from *Doing Grammar* by M. Morenberg, 1991, p. 37.

By presenting the two-tense approach in this manner, teachers and learners can see that two fundamental factors are occurring: there is always tense form, either past or present, on the first verb in the sentence of each of the eight items, and there is always a main verb. Nowhere in Morenberg's (1991) literature does he suggest that this schematic represents eight tenses. The schematic is only showing that with this use of two-tense forms and the eight constructions, any grammatically correct English sentence can be realized. As Morenberg points out, a modal auxiliary always shows conditional mood (p. 28), so

by using the term *conditional*, there is also an elimination of the contradictory terminology of *future* and *past* being part of the same description.

Research Question

Is teaching English grammar tense based on the concept of two tenses, past and present, a viable alternative to teaching English grammar tense based on the concept of multiple tenses (three or more tenses)?

Methods

The course in which the experiment was conducted is titled *The Structure of English* and coded IEL2101. The course focuses on the mechanical structure of the English language. At the start of the course, participants were given a grammar test, labeled as *Grammar Pretest*. The Pretest was completed before any instruction using the course material was given to the participants. The Grammar Pretest was handed out to evaluate each student's pre-existing knowledge of grammar tense, aspect, and mood. The maximum points achievable in the Grammar Pretest totaled 33. Test items on tense accounted for 13 points maximum (39.4% of the total available points), test items on aspect accounted for 10 points maximum (30.3% of the total available points), and test items on mood accounted for 10 points maximum (30.3% of the total available points). The time allowed for the test was 45 minutes. The participants were asked to read lists of sentences in separate sections of the test and write what tense is occurring in each sentence, what aspect is occurring in each sentence, and write either *Yes* or *No* to indicate whether or not mood is occurring in each sentence, in those respective parts (See Appendix A).

During the course, the participants were given extensive written practice exercises mainly sourced from two textbooks (Yule, 2009; Morenberg, 1991). The exercises from the Yule text are sequenced to show how present tense and past tense each have specific forms. Subsequent exercises showed how modals verbs also possess tense form, past or present only. Exercises incorporating perfect and progressive aspects as separate entities from tense and mood concluded the first half of the course. The second half of the course included extensive practice from the Morenberg (1991) text for the students in the construction of syntax tree diagramming, which complemented the theory and practice from the first half of the course. The participants were given a mid-course examination on the material covered half-way through the course.

At the end of the regular course lecture on the last day of the course, the Grammar Pretest, but this time labeled as *Grammar Posttest*, was given to the participants to complete ahead of their main final exam. The questions were exactly the same on both tests in order to produce a reliable result. The time allowed for the Grammar Posttest was 45 minutes. Only participants who completed the Grammar

Pretest were allowed to complete the Grammar Posttest. This gave a matching set of a Grammar Pretest and a Grammar Posttest for each participant.

Both the Grammar Pretest and the Grammar Posttest were created by a former course instructor who holds a Ph.D. in core linguistics. The former instructor did not take part in the course instruction on this occasion. The previous course instructor created the tests based solely on the same material presented in the texts used by the current instructor and the students during this subsequent course. The co-author for this experiment, who holds a BA (Hons) in English and an MBA, independently marked the Grammar Pretests and Posttests. Attention was paid to verify that the Pretest and Posttests were identical, and the appropriateness of the questions was checked to ensure that the test material adequately covered the material used in the course. The students' opinions as to whether the course instruction adequately covered the areas that were shown in the Grammar Pretest and the Grammar Posttest was also scrutinized (See item 2 below and the related result in Table 4). The final Pretest and Posttest scores were then calculated and appear in Table 3.

In addition to the Grammar Pretest and Grammar Posttest, each student was given a separate survey to complete at the end of the course. The survey asked each student for his or her feedback on a number of salient points as follows: 1. *Before taking the course IEL2101, I thought my pre-existing knowledge of English grammar was adequate (good enough).* 2. *The course instruction for IEL2101 adequately covered the areas that were shown in the Grammar Pretest and the Grammar Posttest.* 3. *I feel that I have been able to complete the Grammar Posttest with more confidence than the Grammar Pretest.* 4. *The course IEL2101 covered some concepts of English grammar that I had never been exposed to before taking the course.* 5. *I feel that some or all of the concepts covered in the course IEL2101 could be applied or used in practical ways in other university courses or in occupations after graduation.* 6. *I have now realized after taking the course IEL2101 that my pre-existing knowledge of English grammar was not adequate before I took the course.* 7. *Overall, I think that my knowledge of English grammar is more in-depth after taking the course IEL2101.* In this end-of-course survey, a Likert scale was used for each item as follows: Number 1 is strongly disagree, 2 is disagree, 3 is not sure, 4 is agree, and 5 is strongly agree (See Appendix B).

Population and Sampling

There were a total of 68 participants assessed in the study. They were undergraduate students at a university in Bangkok, Thailand. They were enrolled in a third-year English grammar course of an international program in the academic years of 2019-2020. The course, as previously noted, is titled *The Structure of English* (IEL2101). There were two batches for the same course. The first course batch totaled 45 participants and the next course batch totaled 23 participants. Each of the two courses totaled

48 hours, and each course was taught by the same instructor using the same textbooks and the same methodology. The participants assessed were a mixture of Thai and foreign EFL/ESL students from Asia and Europe. The skill levels of the participants ranged from intermediate to low-advanced. The university where the students attend requires a 5.0 IELTS based on the Common European Framework (British Council, 2021), or equivalent to enroll. The numbers of participants who were assessed for all nationalities are as follows: Thai=55, Philippines=3, Korean=2, Chinese=2, Myanmar=2, Italian=2, Indonesian=1, Japanese=1. There were six L1 native speakers of English enrolled in the courses; however, we omitted the Pretests and the Posttests of these six participants to keep the results as consistent as possible to maintain the focus of the study on L2 (EFL/ESL) learners of English only. There were 43 course lecture/practice hours with two hours for a mid-course examination and three hours for a final examination. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 25 years.

Results

The data collection from the Grammar Pretest showed the class average for identifying tense in sentences correctly was 25.68%, the class average for identifying aspect in sentences correctly was 10.74%, and the class average for correctly identifying whether or not mood was occurring in sentences was 54.56%. Overall, the class average for all three item types was 29.90%. It was notable that the participants were the least proficient at recognizing which aspect was occurring in sentences (10.74%). They performed better at recognizing which tense was occurring (25.68%), and their best performance was in identifying whether or not mood was occurring in sentences (54.56%).

The data collection from the Grammar Posttest showed the class average for identifying tense in sentences correctly had risen to 75.23%, which is a total increase of 49.55%. This represents an increase in proficiency of 192.95%. The class average for identifying aspect in sentences correctly had risen to 68.09%, which is a total increase of 57.35%. This represents an increase in proficiency of 534.25%. The class average for correctly identifying whether or not mood was occurring in sentences had risen to 94.41%, which is a total increase of 39.85%. This represents an increase in proficiency of 73.05%. Overall, the class average for all three item types had risen to 78.88%, which is a total increase of 48.98%. The overall increase in proficiency across all three test items was 163.79%.

Table 3

Pretest and Posttest Scores

| Pretest and Posttest Scores: Based on 68 sets of tests | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| | Number of Students | Points Possible Per Student | Total Points Possible | Total Pre-test Points | Ave. Points Scored | Ave. % out of 100 | Total Post-test Points | Ave. Points Scored | Ave. % out of 100 | Total Increase % | Proficiency Increase % |
| Tense | 68 | 13 | 884 | 227 | 3.34 | 25.68 | 665 | 9.78 | 75.23 | 49.55 | 192.95 |
| Aspect | 68 | 10 | 680 | 73 | 1.07 | 10.74 | 463 | 6.81 | 68.09 | 57.35 | 534.25 |
| Mood | 68 | 10 | 680 | 371 | 5.46 | 54.56 | 642 | 9.44 | 94.41 | 39.85 | 73.05 |
| Total | 68 | 33 | 2244 | 671 | 9.87 | 29.90 | 1770 | 26.03 | 78.88 | 48.98 | 163.79 |

In addition to the Pretest and Posttest scores, the overall results of the End-of-Course Survey are shown in Table 4. The table shows the survey items, total number of responses, total points, and class average on the Likert scale for each point.

Table 4

End-of-Course Survey Results

| Survey Item | Question | Number of Responses | Total Points | Average Score |
|-------------|--|---------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1 | Before taking the course IEL2101, I thought my pre-existing knowledge of English grammar was adequate. | 68 | 198 | 2.9 |
| 2 | The course instruction for IEL2101 adequately covered the areas that were shown in the Grammar Pretest and the Grammar Posttest. | 68 | 292 | 4.3 |
| 3 | I feel that I have been able to complete the Grammar Posttest with more confidence than the Grammar Pretest. | 68 | 266 | 3.9 |
| 4 | The course IEL2101 covered some concepts of English grammar that I had never been exposed to before taking the course. | 68 | 279 | 4.1 |
| 5 | I feel that some or all of the concepts covered in the course IEL2101 could be applied or used in practical ways in other university courses or in occupations after graduation. | 68 | 250 | 3.7 |
| 6 | I have now realized after taking the course IEL2101 that my pre-existing knowledge of English grammar was not adequate before I took the course. | 68 | 259 | 3.8 |
| 7 | Overall, I think that my knowledge of English grammar is more in-depth after taking the course IEL2101. | 68 | 275 | 4.0 |

Discussion

The data from the Grammar Pretest show that the majority of the participants answered test items based on the concept of there being twelve tenses with the “future tense” being among them. The two areas where participants had relatively low levels of understanding were in tense (25.68%), and especially the case for aspect (10.74%). Mood had the highest score in the Pretest (54.56%). Other research studies show considerably higher rates of errors in learners’ understanding of conditionals, or modal verbs, and what is commonly referred to as “future tense” with the modal verb “will” (Listia & Febriyant, 2020, p. 90). Therefore, the high rates for correct use of mood in both the Pretest and the Posttest of this study need further investigation.

The data from the Grammar Posttest reveal a significant increase (25.68% accuracy to 75.23% accuracy) in the ability of the students to correctly identify tense in sentences. This indicates an increase in proficiency on this element of the test of 192.95%. In other words, the likelihood of correct tense identification by the students rose from approximately 2.6 in 10 to approximately 7.5 in 10. The ability of the students to correctly identify aspect in sentences rose from 10.74% accuracy to 68.09% accuracy. This represents an increase in proficiency on this element of the test of 534.25%. In other words, the likelihood of correct aspect identification by the students rose from approximately 1.1 in 10 to approximately 6.8 in 10. The ability of the students to correctly identify whether or not mood was occurring in sentences rose from 54.56% accuracy to 94.41% accuracy. This represents an increase in proficiency on this element of the test of 73.05%. In other words, the likelihood of correctly identifying whether or not mood was occurring in sentences rose from approximately 5.5 in 10 to approximately 9.4 in 10.

The area in which the students demonstrated the most significant increase in proficiency was in their ability to accurately identify aspect in sentences. Part of this increase could be because the term “aspect”, at least in the context of English grammar, was new to the students prior to the instruction and practice given during the course. The results of the End-of-Course Survey Item 4, which asks: *“The course covered some concepts of English grammar that I had never been exposed to before taking the course”*, returned an average score of 4.1 (agree) which appears to support this argument. The question of any pre-understood grammatical knowledge of the term “aspect”, or for that matter, “mood” does form part of our recommendations for future research.

Overall, the data from the Grammar Posttest show that following adequate instruction using the two-tense approach most of the participants subsequently grasped the idea behind the concept of two grammar tenses and were able to distinguish among tense, mood, and aspect far more adequately. The results of the study support the argument made by Yule (2009) and later by Depraetere and Salkie (2015) that a mode of instruction involving only the use of two grammar tenses with an emphasis on form, past

and present, along with mood and aspect as being separate from tense is a viable alternative to the more commonly used alternatives such as the twelve-tense approach.

The data from the End-of-Course Survey also appears to provide support on a number of other items for the two-tense approach to teaching English grammar (See Table 4). For example, Item 3, which asks, *“I feel that I have been able to complete the Grammar Posttest with more confidence than the Grammar Pretest”*, returned an average score of 3.9 on a scale where 4.0 = agree, Item 5, which asks, *“I feel that some or all of the concepts covered in the course IEL2101 could be applied or used in practical ways in other university courses or in occupations after graduation”*, returned an average score of 3.7 on a scale where 4.0 = agree, and Item 6, which asks, *“I have now realized after taking the course IEL2101 that my pre-existing knowledge of English grammar was not adequate before I took the course”*, returned an average score of 3.8 on a scale where 4.0 = agree.

As previously stated, the objective of this study is not to discount or to dismiss the idea of teaching English grammar tense using multiple tenses. We are, however, proposing that by limiting the number of tenses to just two forms during instruction and practice, EFL/ESL learners of English could apply two-tense forms and incorporate mood and aspect to potentially produce a wide range of more accurately written sentences or spoken utterances. This view is supported by the End-of-Course Survey, Item 7, which concludes the survey by asking: *“Overall, I think that my knowledge of English grammar is more in-depth after taking the course IEL2101”*. The survey returned an average score of 4.0 (agree).

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that the complexity of using multiple tenses in English poses a distinct challenge for many EFL/ESL learners. Evidence of this can be found throughout the literature and in classroom practice. Thus, teachers of English who work with second language learners should be willing to research and apply different teaching approaches to help students in their acquisition of English tense and its accurate use.

The results from this research support the argument that the use of the two-tense approach to teaching tense in English is a viable alternative for educators to apply when teaching English grammar tense. Using either one of the labels, *past* or *present*, and emphasizing that each has a present or past form, along with optional aspect and optional conditional (for mood) would suffice.

Applying the two-tense approach could help eliminate some of the confusion among learners that surrounds the multiple-tense approach. In addition, the two-tense approach, along with the concepts of aspect and mood could simplify the task for teachers and enable them to give learners a much simpler structure that learners can use to construct an infinite number English sentences that contain a more accurate use of tense.

With regards to recommendations for future research, the authors note that the identification of mood was relatively high compared to tense and aspect in the Grammar Pretest. As a proposal for further studies, we suggest that the format of the test for mood could be improved. By simply asking the students to either write “Yes” or No” to indicate the presence of mood or not, may have resulted in students making random guesses in this one section. Even though a notable increase in proficiency in the Grammar Posttest is still evident and supportive of the two-tense approach, we feel that a more accurate alternative would have been to ask the students to state whether the sentence is in the ‘present conditional’, ‘past conditional’, or ‘no conditional’.

We also recommend that a further study that directly *compares* the two-tense approach to the twelve-tense approach would be beneficial so that the strengths and weaknesses of each method can be fully assessed. The results of this research, however, do at least support the proposal that the two-tense approach is an effective and viable alternative to teaching English tense.

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Appendix A: Grammar Test: Pretest (33.0)

Answer the following items based on your existing knowledge of English grammar. This test is not graded as a part of this course, but you will receive extra credit (10.0 points) for partaking in the test. You have 45 minutes to complete the test.

I. State the grammar tense that is occurring in each sentence. Type the name of the tense in the blank space following the sentence.

1. He gives donations to the church sometimes. _____
2. I am thinking about my house. _____
3. James will call you tomorrow. _____
4. I would like to hear from James. _____

5. Did you see the new X-Man movie? _____
6. Henry has not seen the new X-Man movie. _____
7. The children are looking for their mother in the mall. _____
8. The boys were clearing away the leaves yesterday. _____
9. I should do the laundry tomorrow. _____
10. He catches his flight tomorrow morning at 5:00 a.m. _____
11. I will have been teaching at IIS twelve years by this December. _____
12. Tom loves to chase Jerry around the living room. _____
13. He's been chasing him all morning. _____

II. State the grammar aspect that is occurring in each sentence. Type the name of the aspect in the blank space following the sentence. If the sentence has more than one aspect, then type the name of both aspects. If there is no aspect, then write the word NO.

1. We are taking this silly test right now. _____
2. He has been to the USA. _____
3. I like dogs, but I do not like cats. _____
4. The boys were racing their cars around the neighborhood. _____
5. You should have taken her to a Thai restaurant. _____
6. I did take her to a Thai restaurant. _____
7. My brother has been waiting for over an hour. _____
8. I do not appreciate his aloof attitude towards the situation. _____
9. I know a bit about English grammar, but I hope to learn more. _____
10. The company will have had three directors by this August. _____

III. State whether each sentence below has mood. If the sentence has mood, type the word YES. If the sentence does not have mood, then type the word NO.

1. We should be in class right now. _____
2. He has taken IEN2002 already. _____
3. I will see what I can do for her. _____
4. The copy machines were put in the back of the room. _____
5. Are you available tomorrow? _____
6. Yes, I will be available tomorrow. _____
7. I might go to Vietnam this summer. _____
8. I do appreciate your hard work and good attitude. _____

9. May I go to the toilet? _____

10. The company has had three directors since its opening. _____

Appendix B: Survey of IEL2101 Structure of English

Please circle only one number.

Number 1 is strongly disagree, 2 is disagree, 3 is not sure, 4 is agree, and 5 is strongly agree.

1. Before taking the course IEL2101, I thought my pre-existing knowledge of English grammar was adequate (good enough).

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

2. The course instruction for IEL2101 adequately covered the areas that were shown in the Grammar Pretest and the Grammar Posttest.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

3. I feel that I have been able to complete the Grammar Posttest with more confidence than the Grammar Pretest.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

4. The course IEL2101 covered some concepts of English grammar that I had never been exposed to before taking the course.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

5. I feel that some or all of the concepts covered in the course IEL2101 could be applied or used in practical ways in other university courses or in occupations after graduation.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

6. I have now realized after taking the course IEL2101 that my pre-existing knowledge of English grammar was not adequate before I took the course.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

7. Overall, I think that my knowledge of English grammar is more in-depth after taking the course IEL2101.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|