

Action Research

Communicative Activities for Written and Spoken Production of Narrative Tenses in English

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Abstract: Grammatical forms like narrative tenses might be challenging for English language learners from diverse educational contexts. This study, therefore, proposes alternative communicative activities to embed narrative tenses into contextualized practice through creative writing and imaginative speaking scenarios. Employing a qualitative action research method, the researcher recommends two communicative grammar activities on narrative tenses. To test the effectiveness of these teaching activities, the researcher exploits a test of grammar, an open-ended survey, student artifacts, and observational notes. Findings indicate positive learner perceptions of incorporating such activities in teaching narrative tenses. They also reveal significant improvement in learners' grammatical accuracy. Accordingly, the two contextualized communicative activities for written and oral production that foster narrative tenses are presented. The preparation and procedures for these activities are explained. Possible adaptations to context, level, modality, and assessment are discussed. In addition to bridging the gap between controlled grammar practice and authentic language use, the teaching activities proposed in the current study intend to promote contextualized grammar practice, creative learner engagement, productive skills integration, and storytelling skills. The study's originality lies in reporting the findings of teacher-led classroom practice and proposes two contextualized teaching activities for the communicative practice of narrative tenses, an under-researched area.

Keywords: communicative grammar; English grammar; narrative tenses; speaking; writing

1. Introduction

1.1. A Concise Glimpse into Grammar within the CEFR

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), or commonly known as the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), is an internationally recognized reference tool for language proficiency. It provides a structured framework for learning, teaching, and assessing language skills across six levels, from A1-A2 (Basic User) and B1-B2 (Independent User) to C1-C2 (Proficient User). The CEFR highlights what learners can do in main (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and sub-skills (e.g., vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar), providing a comprehensive overview of language skills at each level to support global language education and assessment. In this regard, it serves as a guide for language learners, teachers, assessors, and researchers interested in descriptors of language skills, including grammar (as part of linguistic knowledge and competence) (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020).

Grammar refers to the knowledge of language users about linguistic units and rules (Fromkin et al., 2014). The CEFR defines it as “the set of principles governing the assembly of elements into meaningful labeled and bracketed strings (sentences)” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 112-113). Along with vocabulary, grammar is a fundamental constituent of language proficiency (Bannò & Matassoni, 2024; Richards, 2015). Proficient language learners should, therefore, be equipped with grammatical knowledge and competence (Council of Europe, 2001). This means that proficiency in a language requires not only knowing and understanding the relevant grammatical rules and structures but also the ability to utilize them effectively in spoken and written interactions.

Grammatical knowledge, by and large, refers to the overall understanding of the rules,

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structures, and forms in a specific language (Zheng et al., 2023). On the other hand, grammatical competence is “the ability to understand and express meaning by producing and recognizing well-formed phrases and sentences in accordance with these principles (as opposed to memorizing and reproducing them as fixed formulae)” (Council of Europe, p.113). It is central to communicative competence (Council of Europe, 2001) since language users utilize grammatical knowledge to establish meaningful interactions. The difference between the two can be likened to declarative and procedural knowledge (Salaberry, 2018). More precisely, the prior refers to the grammar knowledge language users have, while the latter concerns the same knowledge exercised in written or spoken performance.

In addition to grammatical knowledge and competence, it is crucial to maintain grammatical accuracy (Council of Europe, 2020). It refers to accurately using grammar rules, structures, and forms in speaking and writing (Van Moere, 2012). Grammatical accuracy (Figure 1) is operationalized into three groups: specific repertoire control (A1-B1), mistake prominence (B1-B2), and degree of control (B2-C2) (Council of Europe, 2020). However, grammatical accuracy decreases around the B1 level because of learners’ creative language

Grammatical accuracy	
C2	Maintains consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in forward planning, in monitoring others’ reactions).
C1	Consistently maintains a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare and difficult to spot.
B2	Good grammatical control; occasional “slips” or non-systematic errors and minor flaws in sentence structure may still occur, but they are rare and can often be corrected in retrospect.
	Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make mistakes which lead to misunderstanding. Has a good command of simple language structures and some complex grammatical forms, although they tend to use complex structures rigidly with some inaccuracy.
B1	Communicates with reasonable accuracy in familiar contexts; generally good control, though with noticeable mother-tongue influence. Errors occur, but it is clear what they are trying to express.
	Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used “routines” and patterns associated with more predictable situations.
A2	Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes; nevertheless, it is usually clear what they are trying to say.
A1	Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire.
Pre-A1	Can employ very simple principles of word/sign order in short statements.

use.

Figure 1. CEFR’s illustrative scale descriptors for grammatical accuracy.
Source: Council of Europe, 2020.

Specific skills and competencies are expected of proficient language users, according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001; 2020). For example, the general linguistic range of proficient language users covers “a broad range of complex grammatical structures appropriately and with considerable flexibility” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 130), such as receptive linguistic knowledge for oral communicative ability (Loewen et al., 2020). Proficient language users are also “skilled at using contextual, grammatical and lexical cues to infer attitude, mood and intentions and anticipate what will come next” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 60) in speaking and writing (Kim et al., 2022).

Additionally, the overall spoken interaction requires intermediate language users to “communicate spontaneously with good grammatical control without much sign of having to restrict what [they] want to say, adopting a level of formality appropriate to the circumstances” (Council of Europe, 2020, p.72). Equally, spoken fluency requires language users to “keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production” (Council of Europe, 2001, p.129). In addition, fluency is a key indicator of language proficiency (Peltonen, 2024).

Furthermore, language learners must “use their knowledge of contrasting grammatical structures and functional expressions of languages in their plurilingual repertoire in order to

support comprehension” (Council of Europe, 2020, p.126). Moreover, language users must correctly interpret perceived communication acts and their functions (Council of Europe, 2020). More specifically, proficient users can “distinguish between the use of body posture as a means of structuring the text (e.g., to separate arguments for and against) or as a grammatical device (e.g., for relative clauses)” (Council of Europe, 2020, p.48). Similarly, proficient language users are expected to exhibit great orthographic control, one of the components of linguistic competence that refers to “the ability to copy, spell, and use layout and punctuation” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 136).

1.2. The Relationship of Grammar with Other Skills

Grammar is closely connected with other language skills and subskills. Understanding grammar is crucial for effective spoken communication (Carter & Mearns, 2006). Proficiency in grammar, for example, allows speakers to construct clear, cohesive, and grammatically accurate sentences (Larsen-Freeman, 2009). It also facilitates the logical organization of thoughts, essential for effectively expressing ideas (Afroogh, 2019). A substantial grammatical understanding may make speaking language clearer or easier (Al-wossabi, 2014).

A good grasp of grammar also enables people to understand spoken sentences accurately (Cai & Min, 2024). Understanding sentence structure helps grasp complex concepts and differentiate between tenses and sentence types, improving comprehension during conversations or lectures (Cardinale, 2022; Richards, 2008). Additionally, grammar is essential for interpreting reading texts (Jung, 2009). It further enables readers to grasp the connections between words and phrases (Kaschak & Glenberg, 2000), vital for comprehending sentences (Myhill et al., 2012). Similarly, misunderstandings can occur without a good grasp of grammar, especially in lengthy and intricate sentences (Al Shyiab et al., 2023).

The significance of grammar is perhaps most noticeable in writing (Myhill, 2018). Clear, grammatically sound writing allows the writer to convey ideas logically and persuasively (Andrews et al., 2006). It also contributes to the readability of the text, ensuring that the audience can follow the writer’s arguments without confusion (Lapworth, 2019). Understanding grammar is also essential for using words effectively (Munir, 2016). Grammar dictates how words are used in sentences, and knowing different grammatical categories such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives helps people select and organize words correctly within a language (Crovitz & Devereaux, 2016; San-Mateo-Valdehita & Chacón-García, 2019).

Pronunciation is another skill closely linked to grammar, especially in spoken language (Jones, 2018). Pronunciation, particularly intonation, affects how grammatical structures, such as tenses or sentence types (e.g., questions and statements), are perceived (Gras & Elvira-Garcia, 2021). Spelling is the correct arrangement of letters in written words, intimately related to grammar, particularly in written communication (Swanenberg, 2021; Tonicic, 2022). Poor spelling can alter grammatical meaning or create ambiguity (Altamimi & Ab Rashid, 2019).

In summary, grammar is not an isolated skill but a system that closely interacts with other skills, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling. Combined, they improve language proficiency, making communication intelligible and understanding more profound. Proficiency in these subskills and grammar are essential for written and spoken language fluency. These connections are meaningful in academic and professional environments, where accuracy in language is crucial.

1.3. Types of Grammar and Instruction

Linguists have differentiated between two types of grammar: descriptive and prescriptive. As the name suggests, descriptive grammar describes language users’ basic linguistic knowledge and explains what forms or structures can be considered grammatical or ungrammatical (Fromkin et al., 2014). Influenced by 18th and 19th-century grammarians, prescriptive grammar dictates how language learners must use grammar (Fromkin et al., 2014). Literature also harbors the distinction between functional and pedagogical grammar. The first highlights the utilization of language to accomplish communicative objectives and centers on the roles of language in various situations and how grammatical forms fulfill particular intentions (Keizer, 2015). The latter is a specialized grammar form explicitly created for teaching and learning and aims to simplify complex grammatical rules and structures for non-native speakers and learners at various proficiency levels (Hinkel, 2024; Larsen-Freeman, 2009).

Concerning the approaches to grammar teaching, the deductive approach focuses on teaching formal grammar through specific rules, whereby students learn grammatical rules

and then use them in language exercises (Benitez-Correa et al., 2019). On the other hand, the inductive approach emphasizes students' discovery of grammatical rules through exposure to examples (Anani, 2017). Instead of directly teaching rules, learners deduce them by examining language patterns. Parallel to the distinction between inductive and deductive approaches, scholars have distinguished between implicit and explicit grammar instruction. Implicit grammar instruction involves acquiring grammar unconsciously through exposure to language in meaningful contexts, like reading, listening, or conversation (Nezakat-Alhossaini et al., 2014). On the other hand, explicit grammar instruction includes directly teaching grammatical rules and providing explanations, with the teacher clearly explaining grammar rules and structures, followed by targeted practice (Şahinkaya, 2024).

Understanding various grammar and teaching methods is crucial for effective language instruction. Whether using explicit rule-based teaching or implicit communicative approaches, grammar is essential for helping students build solid language skills. Teachers should choose the grammar type and teaching method that aligns with their students' needs, objectives, and learning environments. Additionally, teaching grammar is essential for nurturing practical communication skills, improving cognitive functions, and fostering success in academic and professional settings because grammar forms the basis for clear, logical, and coherent expression in both written and oral communication (Myhill, 2018). Educators teaching grammar empower students to articulate their thoughts more effectively while promoting critical thinking and cultural awareness.

1.4. Narrative Tenses: Description and Significance

Verb tenses are fundamental grammatical forms for language use (Liamkina & Ryshina-Pankova, 2012). They indicate temporal information about the events in statements, typically categorized into present, past, and future (Cioffi, 2024). The four past tenses are also called narrative tenses (Table 1). Narrative tenses describe past events, tell stories, and even narrate personal anecdotes (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992, 1994; Berman & Slobin, 1994). The past simple tense is suitable for describing actions that occurred and concluded in the past, such as a sequence of events in an individual's life (Muñoz, 2018). It is also commonly employed in narratives and conversations (Pretorius, 1994). The past progressive tense provides context and depicts a scene or situation that has been ongoing for some time (Stuart & van der Lely, 2015). The past simple and past continuous are commonly used together when one action is interrupted by another (Lenko-Szymánska, 2007). Ultimately, we use the past perfective progressive tense to portray an ongoing action occurring for an extended period (Fang, 2023).

Table 1. Narrative tenses in English.

Tense	Form	Meaning and Use
Simple	(+) V2	Happened at a particular point or over a period of time.
	(-) did not + V1	Ex. The boy <i>hurried</i> to catch the last bus.
	(?) Did + S + V1 + (O)?	
Perfective	(+) had + V3	
	(-) had not + V3	Started in past, completed in past, prior to something else taking place.
	(?) Had + S + V3 + (O)?	Ex. He <i>had seen</i> all the films of the Lord of the Rings trilogy.
Progressive	(+) was/were + Ving	Past continuous action, brief or now ended.
	(-) was/were not + Ving	Ex. They <i>were sunbathing</i> when the shark was stranded.
	(?) Was/Were + S + Ving + (O)?	
Perfective progressive	(+) had been + Ving	Started in past, ends in past, prior to some other occurrence.
	(-) had not been + Ving	Ex. We <i>had been waiting</i> for the singer before she appeared on stage.
	(?) Had + S + been + Ving + (O)?	

*The descriptions were adapted from Cioffi (2024, p.64). The sentences were formulated by the researcher.

Using narrative tenses, such as past simple, past continuous, and past perfect, assists learners in presenting a coherent timeline when telling a story and ensuring the accurate arrangement of events, which is beneficial for understanding the order of events,

simultaneous occurrences, and cause-and-effect relationships in narratives (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). In addition, using narrative tenses helps to create seamless shifts between different time frames in a story, enhancing overall coherence and readability (McCarthy & O’Keeffe, 2004). Understanding how to use narrative tenses also allows writers to create more complex and engaging stories effectively by manipulating time for dramatic impact, such as using flashbacks and foreshadowing (Thornbury, 2006). Native speakers often utilize different verb tenses when recounting stories, so mastering narrative tenses assists students in expressing themselves more fluently and genuinely in both speech and writing (Swan, 2005). Furthermore, understanding narrative tenses helps learners comprehend and analyze novels, short stories, and spoken anecdotes effectively, as they often involve shifting between past events and reflections (Ur, 2012). Encouraging learners to select the appropriate narrative tense further prompts them to consider the chronological relationships between events, leading to more deliberate language use (Jacobs, 2018).

However, research has indicated that narrative tenses could be problematic for EFL learners (Listia & Febrianti, 2020; Tilahun et al., 2022). From an emic perspective, the researcher has observed that these grammatical forms have also posed a problem for Turkish EFL learners. Given the discussion on the significance of grammar in general and narrative tenses in particular, the researcher evaluates the effectiveness of two communicative teaching activities to teach narrative tenses communicatively for written and oral communication by conducting classroom-based action research. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Do the proposed teaching activities impact learners’ grammatical accuracy on narrative tenses?
2. How do learners perceive the proposed teaching activities?
3. How can narrative tenses be integrated into contextualized writing practice?
4. How can narrative tenses be integrated into contextualized speaking practice?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

Classroom-Based Action Research (CBAR) involves teachers conducting classroom research to tackle teaching and learning challenges (Cain, 2011). The goal is to enhance educational methods through a continuous cycle of planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting (Mertler & Hartley, 2017). Teachers pinpoint an issue, carry out a strategy, evaluate its impact, and adapt their approach based on the results (Mertler, 2021). Table 2 displays the six aspects of CBAR addressed in this study. Accordingly, the teacher (researcher) covered narrative tenses (focus) in his classroom. To practice in both productive skills (scope), the teacher conducted the two activities with his B1 (in CEFR) (audience) students. The teacher also reflected and acted before, during, and after these processes (cyclical nature). Post-activity reflections of students (outcome) implied positive feedback.

Table 2. The aspects of CBAR used in the study.

Aspect	CBAR	Research Characteristics
Focus	specific to classroom settings; aimed at improving teaching and learning	narrative tenses
Researcher	typically the classroom teacher who directly interacts with students	teacher as a researcher
Scope	narrow, often focusing on a single classroom or specific pedagogical strategy	communicative teaching activities for writing and speaking
Audience	primarily intended for immediate use by the teacher and possibly colleagues	English language learners in general, Turkish EFL learners in particular
Cyclical nature	emphasis on iterative cycles of reflection and action	Teacher plans, acts, observes, and reflects
Outcome	focus on immediate, practical improvement in teaching strategies	Improved use of narrative tenses in a communicative task

2.2. Context and Participants

The study was conducted with 25 (17 females, eight males) Turkish EFL learners at B1 (in CEFR) level, aged 18 on average, studying in a preparatory school at a prominent state university in Ankara, Türkiye. The students were all non-native speakers of English. They took a proficiency test (B2 level) at the beginning of the academic year (2024-2025 Fall) but failed. They then took the placement test and were placed in a B1 class. They received 24 hours of general English at the B1 level. The class was shared by two lecturers (one of whom is the researcher). The primary course materials were MacMillan’s Skillful Third Edition Level 2 Reading & Writing (Rogers et al., 2023a) and Skillful 2 Listening & Speaking (Rogers et al., 2023b). Figure 2 shows the daily course schedule when the grammar point (e.g., narrative tenses) was covered. Teaching the target grammar structure took three sessions (80 + 50 min.). Conversely, the practice occurred the following week when the program was more convenient for in-class practice.

THURSDAY		
1 st and 2 nd Sessions (Block)	09:00 – 10:20 (80 mins)	SP QUIZ 2 – Skit Project Announcement GRAMMAR PACK (Simple Past & Past Cont. Tense)
3 rd Session	10:30 – 11:20 (50 mins)	RW 2 • Grammar (p.79-80) LS 2 • Grammar (p.79)
4 th and 5 th Sessions (Block)	11:30 – 12:50 (80 mins)	LS 2 • Speaking Model (p.78) • Speaking Skill (p.80) • Speaking Task (p.82) (Excluded) In-class Activity Folder – Speaking Task

Figure 2. The daily course schedule (adapted from the PMD unit of the teacher’s institution).

The narrative tenses were taught within the designated sessions (Figure 2). The teacher followed the materials provided by the institution’s materials and program unit. More precisely, the teaching materials comprised a grammar pack with three parts (simple past/past continuous tense, exercises for self-study, and communicative activities). However, the teacher only used the first part. This document includes grammar instruction through reading text and follow-up comprehension questions, gap-fill exercises, and tabulated grammar rules.

2.3. Procedures for Data Collection

Before data collection, all students gave informed consent to participate in the study. Students were assured that their participation or non-participation would not affect their grades, and all responses were anonymized to protect their identities. The researcher exploited various tools for data collection, including student artifacts (writing samples), observational notes, pre-/post-activity grammar tests, and student feedback through an open-ended survey. Diary entries (i.e., sample writings) were collected at the end of the activity. These were analyzed for grammatical accuracy.

During the activity, the teacher kept detailed observational notes on students’ engagement, participation in peer review, and overall responsiveness to the activity. A short test of grammar (ToG, $\alpha=.70$) (a cloze test with multiple options) comprising 20 questions about past simple and past continuous tenses was adapted from Pearson’s MyGrammarLab Intermediate B1/B2 (Foley & Hall, 2012). The test was administered before and after the activity to measure improvements in students’ grammatical accuracy. After completing the activity, students completed a brief open-ended questionnaire to share their reflections.

2.4. Procedures for Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis (Selvi, 2020) was administered to student artifacts, observational notes, and the open-ended survey through MAXQDA 24 software. The diary entries were analyzed to apply past simple and past continuous tenses correctly. A coding system was used to identify recurring errors or patterns in tense usage, and student feedback was categorized into emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Pre- and post-activity test scores were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive and inferential statistics through the IBM SPSS Statistics 25 program to evaluate improvement in grammar accuracy.

3. Results

3.1. Grammatical Accuracy

Since the participants' ToG scores were normally distributed (Kolmogorov-Smirnov, $df=25$, $p=.141$), a Paired-Samples T-test was administered to evaluate the impact of the communicative writing activity (i.e., Time Travel Diaries) on students' ToG scores. There was a statistically significant increase from Time 1 ($M=18.28$, $SD=.891$) to Time 2 ($M=12.96$, $SD=1.719$), $t(24) = 20.24$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed). The mean increase in ToG scores was 5.32, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 4.77 to 5.86. The eta squared statistic (.88) indicated a large effect size.

The student artifacts (i.e., writing samples) were also analyzed for grammatical accuracy. The correct and incorrect answers for past simple and past continuous tense were calculated and presented in percentage in Table 3. The participants used target grammar forms an average of 13 times. Their use of narrative tenses was 83% accurate on average, concurring with the ToG scores.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for students' writing samples.

Participant ID	Total Use (f)	Correct Use (f)	Incorrect Use (f)	Correct Use (%)	Incorrect Use (%)
1	12	10	2	83	17
2	14	12	2	86	14
3	11	9	2	82	18
4	15	13	2	87	13
5	10	8	2	80	20
6	13	11	2	85	15
7	16	14	2	88	13
8	10	9	1	90	10
9	17	15	2	88	12
10	14	11	3	79	21
11	12	10	2	83	17
12	13	12	1	92	8
13	11	8	3	73	27
14	10	8	2	80	20
15	15	13	2	87	13
16	12	9	3	75	25
17	14	11	3	79	21
18	13	10	3	77	23
19	10	9	1	90	10
20	12	11	1	92	8
21	14	12	2	86	14
22	15	12	3	80	20
23	11	9	2	82	18
24	16	13	3	81	19
25	12	10	2	83	17
M	13	11	2	83	17

3.2. Learners' Perceptions

An open-ended survey collected the students' reflections after both communicative grammar activities. The transcripts were transferred to MAXQDA 24 for qualitative content analysis. The analysis revealed five themes: creativity/originality, enjoyment/instructiveness, grammar support, disorganization, and relative impact. The participants collectively expressed the creativity and originality of both activities (i.e., Time Travel Diaries and The Alibi Game: Murder Mystery). They also added that they had fun while practicing and that both activities were instructive. The participants further reported improvement in their grammar use after these teaching activities. However, some noted that the speaking activity was chaotic/disorganized. Some others also mentioned that the speaking activity relatively contributed to their use of target grammar forms. Sample excerpts are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Sample FGI excerpts regarding participants' reflections.

Creativity/Originality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Writing was also a very creative idea. It was quite interesting. I was sleepy for the first hour. When I did the activity, it opened up. I liked it very much (P11)</i> • <i>It was very creative to write a text by making ourselves feel like we were in the past (P12)</i> • <i>...but I was happy that the writing exercise was in a storytelling format. The options and flexibility offered were also quite enough in terms of creativity (P15)</i> • <i>I think the activity of going back in time was creative (P16)</i> • <i>Besides that, solving mysteries is a very original and fun idea (P20)</i> • <i>I had a lot of fun because we used our own creativity (P22)</i>
Enjoyment/Instructiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I wish every day could be like this, having fun and learning (P1)</i> • <i>I think writing is instructive and practical (P4)</i> • <i>The activities we usually do in groups in class are great for us to talk more and not get bored. Yesterday was a lot of fun (P5)</i> • <i>I think the writing activity was enjoyable and instructive (P6)</i> • <i>Acting game was a very fun game. We look forward to more (P8)</i> • <i>We chose a detective as a group. The rest of the people acted as suspects, and one of us was the thief, but no one knew who the criminal was. So it was very fun (P9)</i> • <i>The plots were also interesting so I had fun while learning. As for the murder mystery activity, it was fun and we all had a good laugh (P10)</i> • <i>Also, the activity of finding the culprit was very fun (P12)</i> • <i>Writing was fun, but maybe it would have been more fun if we wrote in pairs or with you. I think speaking was a fun and useful activity (P14)</i>
Grammar Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Writing about journey past periods really helped as to revise past continuous and past simple (P8)</i> • <i>I really liked writing a story using simple past & past continuous. It helped me better understand where I need to use them (P10)</i> • <i>The activities we did with the past tense were very developmental (P12)</i> • <i>I think the writing activity was good for grammar (P13)</i> • <i>At the same time, since we were writing about the past, I practiced using the tenses we learned (P16)</i> • <i>I think both activities were good. It helped us a lot to reinforce what we have learned (P21)</i>
Disorganization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The only problem was that playing the killer game was a bit chaotic (P7)</i> • <i>Since it is in the hands of these student groups, there is also an aspect that can be suitable for "gabbing and slacking" so to speak (P15)</i> • <i>Secondly, I think the murder mystery was very fun but disorganized. The innocents (suspects) knew who the murderer was and the plot was hard to make (P19)</i>
Relative Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Speaking has little contribution to grammar. It is much more effective to practice on paper (P4)</i> • <i>I do not have much to say about it, to be honest. It is useful if done properly. If it is short, as our group did, I think it is useless (P15)</i> • <i>Only I could not use the tenses much in speaking, but I enjoyed both activities very much (P16)</i>

Overall, the students reported their satisfaction with both activities. They said it was very creative to use the target grammar forms in a storytelling format and mystery murder. In addition to their enjoyment, the participants also mentioned the perceived contribution of these activities to their grammar knowledge and development. However, a few students expressed negative remarks about the speaking activity, which could seem chaotic if not handled well, and minimally encouraged grammar use.

3.3. Integrating Narrative Tenses into Contextualized Writing Practice

Following the positive learner perceptions of Time Travel Diaries, teachers interested in implementing it in their classrooms might follow the subsequent steps. One week after teaching the narrative tenses, the teacher must explain the concept of Time Travel Diaries (Appendix A) on the activity day. In the meantime, the teacher must have blank diary pages ready or ask students to use their notebooks. This activity asks students to imagine they are time travelers who go back to a specific day in the past (e.g., the Renaissance, the 1500s in Florence). Since each student might be considered a unique writer with imaginative power, this activity had better be implemented individually.

The teacher tells students they will write diary entries using the target narrative tenses to describe what they did and what was happening then. The teacher explains that practicing both tenses using creative writing is the objective. After the students are familiar with the concept, the teacher gives them a list of historical prompts generated by a generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tool like ChatGPT. The teacher then asks students to select one and encourages them to brainstorm ideas about the period. Later, the teacher shows a short example of a diary entry (Table 5) on the board. After that, they analyze the sentences and how tenses are used altogether.

Table 5. A short example of a diary entry.

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- ▶ **Prompt:** You are visiting the Colosseum during a gladiator fight. Describe what you saw and what was happening around you.
 - ▶ **Example:** I watched as the gladiators fought bravely. While I was sitting in the crowd, people were cheering loudly.
-

Once the procedures for task performance are explained, the teacher hands out blank diary pages and asks the students to write their entries, imagining they had traveled back in time using their selected prompts. The students are also encouraged to use both tenses accurately while describing the events. After finishing the task, the teacher asks students to share their diaries by reading them aloud. They then reflect on their stories and how they have incorporated both tenses.

Possible adaptations are available for this activity. Teachers might require higher levels (B2 and above) to have higher word counts or incorporate more complex grammatical structures (e.g., past perfect tense and past perfect progressive tense). On the other hand, teachers might provide lower-level students with more structured sentence starters, shorten the length of diary entries, and ask them to focus on only past simple tense by gradually introducing past progressive tense. Teachers might conduct this as a collaborative writing activity in case of time constraints, asking students to work in pairs or small groups. Technology can also be integrated into this activity by using online platforms (e.g., StoryboardThat) or digital notebooks (e.g., Kami), where students turn their artifacts into digital stories using images, audio, and music.

3.4. Integrating Narrative Tenses into Contextualized Speaking Practice

The “Alibi Game: Murder Mystery” (Appendix B) is another teaching activity that teachers might use to help students practice the target narrative tenses meaningfully and contextualized through spoken interaction. In this game, one student plays the detective while the others act as suspects. The suspects must create an alibi using the past continuous (e.g., “I was watching TV when the crime happened”). The detective asks detailed questions, and suspects must respond using past tenses. The objective is to encourage spontaneous use of both tenses while creating consistent alibis. After explaining the game, the teacher might exploit GenAI tools like ChatGPT to create crime stories (see an example in Table 6), ranging from a stolen object to a more dramatic murder mystery.

Table 6. An example of a crime scenario

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- ▶ **Crime:** A priceless painting was stolen from the city’s art museum during a special exhibition.
 - ▶ **Details:** The robbery took place between 7:00 and 7:30 PM on Friday. The museum was closed to the public at that time, but there were a few people still inside for cleaning and preparation work.
 - ▶ **Possible Suspects:**
 - A museum curator
 - A janitor
 - A security guard
 - A visitor with special permission to view the painting
 - An art critic who left early
-

The teacher then provides the suspects with background information about their characters (e.g., occupations, personalities), which they might use when creating their alibis. The students are later told to form groups of four or five (which may vary by the number of suspects or equal distribution of students in the class) and choose one student to be the detective and the remaining group members to be the suspects in the crime. The suspects are reminded to come up with an alibi for what they were doing at the time of the crime (using past continuous) and any other significant events during that period (using past simple), for example, “I was cooking dinner (past continuous) when I heard a loud noise (past simple).” The detective’s job is to ask detailed follow-up questions to uncover inconsistencies or contradictions in the alibis. Some example questions are presented in Table 7. The suspects are told to continue answering in a way that maintains their alibi.

Table 7. Example questions for the detective.

-
- What were you doing exactly at 8:00 PM? (past continuous)
 - Did you see anyone suspicious while you were walking your dog? (past simple)
 - How long were you watching TV? (past continuous)
 - When did you leave your house? (past simple)
 - Were you alone, or was someone with you?
-

The detective must listen carefully for any inconsistencies between the suspects’ statements for suspects’ consistency checks. Suspects must also listen to each other’s alibis. If one suspect contradicts another, the detective might suspect a false alibi (e.g., *Suspect A claims to have seen Suspect B at a restaurant, but Suspect B says they were at home at the time*). After interrogating all the suspects, the detectives decide who they think is lying based on contradictions or vague details in their alibis. The suspect with the most inconsistent or suspicious alibi is “arrested.”

Like the communicative grammar practice for writing, the speaking activity that blends practicing narrative tenses might also be adapted to various learners and contexts. For larger classes, teachers might split the class into smaller groups with multiple detectives, ensuring that everyone can participate in both asking and answering questions. Weaker students might be provided with a list of possible alibis or example sentences that students can refer to during the activity. On the other hand, teachers might add a twist where the detective can make surprise accusations based on inconsistencies, encouraging suspects to stay sharp and flexible in their language use for more proficient students. Students who struggle with fluency might be asked to write their alibis before sharing them with the class.

4. Discussion

Using grammar communicatively in writing and speaking has been a central concern for many non-native speakers of English, including Turkish EFL students (Boylu et al., 2022; Gümüş, 2021; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). As a teacher-researcher who shares this concern in his teaching experience, the researcher has felt the need to conduct action research, where he has evaluated the effectiveness of two treatments: Time Travel Diaries for written interaction and The Alibi Game: Murder Mystery for spoken interaction. Employing various data collection tools, this study addressed four research questions.

The first research question intended to reveal whether there was a difference in students’ grammatical accuracy before and after the Time Travel Diaries. The ToG results indicated a considerable improvement in grammatical accuracy among Turkish EFL students. Likewise, the analysis of students’ diaries revealed an 83% grammatical accuracy, with an average of target grammatical forms occurring 13 times. Previous studies that explored grammar instruction through games or other teaching activities yielded similar findings. For example, Koksall et al. (2014) reported the effectiveness of grammar learning with games.

Similarly, Kufi (2023) found that grammar instruction could be scaffolded using communicative activities, resulting in more successful learner outputs. In another study, *Yildiz and Senel (2017)* indicated a rise in students’ grammar knowledge through task-based language learning activities. Equally, Başar (2020) demonstrated that language teachers are inclined to teach grammar communicatively, which might facilitate the adoption of the Time Travel Diaries. Positive learner and teacher perceptions of using communicative activities (Kaçar & Enginarlar, 2023) might further contribute to implementing such teaching activities for

teaching grammar.

The second research question addressed in the study sought to reveal learners' perceptions of the teaching activities used. Findings indicated that the communicative grammar activities were creative, original, engaging, instructive, and supportive. Earlier work also concurred with our findings (Bae, 2008; Bancolé-Minaflinou, 2018; Javadi & Tajik, 2019). However, some participants pointed to the potential chaos or disorganization that the communicative speaking activity might cause, concurring with previous studies (Floriasti & Permatasari, 2019; Puteri & Asfihana, 2024). Teachers might try smaller groups or conduct frequent inspections to mitigate the possible cases of noise or disorder. Some other participants reported no potential use of target grammar structures in the speaking activity, disagreeing with previous work (Setyowati, 2020; Tiana et al., 2023). This finding points to individual perceptions limited to the three participants in our study.

Concerning the third research question, positive learner feedback showed that Time Travel Diaries effectively engaged students with narrative tenses by combining creative writing with purposeful grammar practice, and imagining themselves as time travelers motivated them to apply grammar in meaningful contexts. Previous work showed that incorporating creative writing contributed to textual understanding and grammar improvement (Paesani et al., 2016). It was also demonstrated that practicing grammar in meaningful contexts motivated students (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Rifesser & Hazell, 2023), thus coinciding with our findings. The communicative writing activity's individualization and incorporation of past simple and past progressive tenses might promote a more natural use of language (Cioffi, 2024), making grammar practice more enjoyable (Crossley et al., 2016; Roscoe & McNamara, 2013). Digital tools such as StoryboardThat boost engagement by facilitating various forms of expression (Raslee, 2021; Read, 2022).

Regarding the fourth research question, "The Alibi Game: Mystery Murder" encouraged students to employ the past continuous and past simple tenses in authentic and spontaneous conversations, which supports research that favors teaching grammar in context (Ellis, 2009). The activity's collaborative aspect promoted strong engagement, allowing students to practice grammar while also working together to solve problems. Research indicated that interactive tasks enhanced language processing more profoundly (El Majidi et al., 2021; Zalbidea & Toth, 2024). Additionally, the competitive nature of spotting discrepancies in alibis might encourage students to engage in active and critical listening, enhancing their listening skills and capacity to formulate coherent answers (Parks et al., 2024; Worthington & Fitch-Hauser, 2018). Moreover, using GenAI tools, such as ChatGPT, to create crime stories introduces a digital aspect, allowing educators to design personalized and varied scenarios for different groups (Kim et al., 2022). AI use in language education has proven to enrich the linguistic environment for learners and offer a broader range of input (Huang et al., 2024; Zhai & Wibowo, 2023).

Overall, the findings highlighted the success of employing communicative activities such as Time Travel Diaries and The Alibi Game: Mystery Murder to enhance the grammatical accuracy of Turkish EFL students in both writing and speaking. These activities fostered meaningful and contextual language use, engaging students creatively while encouraging them to use target tenses spontaneously. Although there were perceived challenges like classroom management and inconsistent grammar usage during speaking, the positive feedback from students underscored the benefits of interactive grammar practice. Moreover, incorporating digital tools like AI further enriched the learning experience by providing customized, dynamic scenarios that effectively aid students' language development.

5. Conclusions

This article explored the impact of communicative grammar activities, specifically Time Travel Diaries and The Alibi Game: Murder Mystery, on Turkish EFL students' grammatical accuracy and engagement. The study's findings suggest that contextualized, interactive activities significantly improve both written and spoken grammar skills by fostering active participation and meaningful use of target structures. While most students found the activities engaging and effective, some challenges related to classroom dynamics and individual perceptions of grammar use in speaking tasks were identified. Integrating digital tools, including AI-generated scenarios, further enhanced the learning experience by providing diverse, adaptable content. Overall, this research underscores the value of combining creative, communicative activities with technology to make grammar instruction and practice more effective and enjoyable in EFL contexts.

However, the research also recognizes some limitations. First, this study employed a classroom-based action research design, hence the inability to generalize the findings. Thus, prospective researchers are recommended to exploit various research designs for generalizable outcomes. Second, the study reflected the perceptions of Turkish EFL students, which could vary with different EFL learners in other educational contexts. More research is therefore needed to corroborate the current study's findings. Third, the current research focused on communicative grammar practice, more precisely, two narrative tenses. Future research could include other narrative tenses with more advanced language learners. In addition, prospective researchers might explore the impact of the proposed teaching activities on psychological aspects like motivation and engagement.

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Appendix A

Possible Scenarios for the “Time Travel Diaries” Activity

Description: Students imagine they are time travellers who went back to a specific day in the past (e.g., ancient Rome or the 1960s). They write diary entries using both past simple and past continuous to describe what they did and what was happening at the time.

Materials: Blank “diary” pages or notebooks

Model Scenario: Ancient Rome (around 50 AD)

Prompt: You are visiting the Colosseum during a gladiator fight. Describe what you saw and what was happening around you.

Example: I watched as the gladiators fought bravely. While I was sitting in the crowd, people were cheering loudly.

Objectives:

- to develop students’ ability to use past simple and past continuous tenses correctly.
- to enhance creative writing and storytelling skills.
- to encourage engagement through imaginative contexts.
- to practice combining narrative writing with grammar usage.

Learning Outcomes:

- By the end of the activity, students will be able to:
- accurately use the past simple tense to describe completed actions.
- correctly use the past continuous tense to describe ongoing actions in the past.
- create short, coherent diary entries blending both tenses.
- expand vocabulary and sentence structure knowledge in a creative context.

Target Audience:

Level: B1 (intermediate) students (based on CEFR).

Age group: Preparatory school students

Class Size: Medium to large class (15-30 students).

Prerequisites: Students should already be familiar with the basic forms and uses of the past simple and past continuous tenses

Time	Prompt	Example
The Renaissance (Florence, 1500s)	You met Leonardo da Vinci while he was painting the Mona Lisa. Describe your conversation and what else was happening in his studio.	<i>I asked Leonardo about his painting techniques. While he was explaining, his assistant was preparing the paints.</i>
The 1960s (New York City)	You attended a famous music concert in Central Park. Describe what the atmosphere was like and what events took place.	<i>I danced to the music while the band was playing their biggest hits. People around me were singing along and waving their hands.</i>
The Wild West (1800s America)	You visited a small Western town during a showdown between two cowboys. Describe what you did and	<i>I stood by the saloon and watched as the cowboys drew their guns. Dust was blowing across the street while people were hiding behind barrels.</i>

	what the town looked like.	
Ancient Egypt (Time of the Pharaohs)	You saw the Great Pyramid being built. Describe the construction process and what you observed during your visit.	<i>I walked along the edge of the site and watched as workers were carrying huge blocks of stone. The sun was setting, and the air was filled with dust.</i>
World War II (London, 1940s)	You experienced an air raid during the Blitz in London. Describe what you were doing when it started and what happened afterward.	<i>I was walking down the street when the sirens started blaring. People were running to the shelters while I was looking for a safe place to hide.</i>
The Medieval Period (A Castle in 1300s Europe)	You attended a royal banquet in a medieval castle. Describe the feast and the activities going on during the event.	<i>I was eating roasted chicken when the musicians started playing. The knights were discussing their next battle while the king was giving orders.</i>
The First Moon Landing (1969)	You travelled to the moon with the Apollo 11 crew. Describe what it was like being on the moon and what the astronauts were doing.	<i>I stood on the moon's surface, feeling weightless. Neil Armstrong was taking his first steps while the other astronauts were collecting rocks.</i>

*The possible scenarios, their prompts, and examples were generated using OpenAI's ChatGPT.

Appendix B

Possible Scenarios for the “Murder Alibi” Activity

Description: One student is a detective, and the others are suspects in a crime. The suspects must create an alibi using the past continuous (e.g., “I was watching TV when the crime happened”). The detective asks detailed questions, and suspects have to respond using both past tenses.

Model Scenario:

Title: The Museum Heist

Crime: A priceless painting was stolen from the city's art museum during a special exhibition.

Details: The robbery took place between 7:00 and 7:30 PM on Friday. The museum was closed to the public at that time, but there were a few people still inside for cleaning and preparation work.

Possible Suspects: a museum curator, a janitor, a security guard, a visitor with special permission to view the painting, an art critic who left early

Materials:

- a fictional crime scenario (e.g., a stolen painting, a murder mystery, or a robbery)
- a brief description of the crime scene (including the time and place the crime took place)
- **Optional:** props or role-playing costumes to add to the atmosphere

Objective:

- to practice the past simple and past continuous tenses in a spontaneous and interactive context
- to use both tenses accurately while constructing consistent alibis for a fictional crime.
- to encourage creativity, critical thinking, and peer interaction in a dynamic setting

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the activity, students will be able to:

- practice using the past simple and past continuous in a meaningful and spontaneous context, with a focus on accuracy and fluency
- improve their ability to ask and respond to questions in real-time while maintaining grammatical accuracy
- to think on their feet, construct coherent stories, and pay attention to detail

Target Audience:

- **Level:** B1 (intermediate) students (based on CEFR).
- **Age group:** Preparatory school students
- **Class Size:** Medium to large class (15-30 students).
- **Prerequisites:** Students should already be familiar with the basic forms and uses of the past simple and past continuous tenses

Steps for Implementation:

1. Setting the scene
2. Assigning roles
3. Alibi creation
4. Interrogation
5. Cross-examination

6. Conclusion

Title	Crime	Details	Possible Suspects
The Jewellery Store Robbery	A diamond necklace was stolen from a high-end jewellery store downtown during broad daylight.	The crime occurred at 2:15 PM on Wednesday. The store was crowded with shoppers, but security cameras mysteriously malfunctioned for 10 minutes during the robbery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A regular customer who frequently visits • The store manager • An employee who was on their lunch break • A window cleaner working outside the shop • A delivery person dropping off packages
The Party Poisoning	A wealthy businessperson fell ill at a high-profile charity dinner and was later found to have been poisoned.	The poisoning occurred between 9:30 and 10:00 PM, after dessert had been served. There were several toasts, and many guests moved around the room during that time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A rival businessperson who was also at the party • The host of the dinner • A caterer who prepared the food • A close friend who stayed by the victim's side • A waiter serving drinks
The Park Vandalism	A famous statue in the city park was vandalized overnight, with graffiti sprayed all over it.	The vandalism took place between 1:00 and 3:00 AM, according to a witness who heard noise but didn't see anyone. There are no security cameras in the park.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A nearby resident who often complains about park noise • A street artist who was seen earlier in the day near the statue • A night jogger who runs through the park every evening • A park ranger who patrols the area late at night • A local teenager known for pranks
The Café Burglary	A popular café was broken into, and the cash register was emptied overnight.	The burglary happened sometime between 12:00 and 5:00 AM. The back door was found unlocked, though the security alarm did not go off.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A café employee who closed up late the night before • The delivery person who arrives early in the morning • A neighbour who often stops by the café in the morning • A local food blogger who featured the café recently • The café owner who needed money for a large payment
The Library Book Theft	A rare, first-edition book was stolen from the library's special collections room.	The theft occurred between 4:00 and 4:30 PM on Tuesday. The library was open, but access to the special collections room is	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A library volunteer • A visiting scholar who came to research rare books • A librarian working



		restricted to certain members. No alarms were triggered.	<p>in the special collections area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A student doing research for a paper • A courier who delivered some packages earlier that day
The Office Scandal	A confidential document went missing from the CEO's office at a major corporation.	The document was last seen on the CEO's desk around 6:00 PM. By the next morning, it had vanished. The office was locked, but several people had access to the keys.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CEO's assistant • A rival executive • The cleaning staff • An IT technician who was fixing the office computer • A courier who delivered documents that evening
The Sports Equipment Sabotage	Someone tampered with the equipment at a major sports event, causing a high-profile team to lose.	The sabotage took place just before the game started at 7:00 PM. Several people had access to the locker room where the equipment was stored.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A rival team member • A coach who had an argument with the team • The equipment manager • A sports journalist covering the event • A fan who had special backstage access
The Theatre Costume Theft	A lead actor's costume was stolen just before the opening night of a major play.	The theft happened between 5:00 and 6:00 PM on the day of the performance. The costume was in a locked dressing room, but someone must have gotten in without being noticed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A jealous understudy • The costume designer • A stagehand who had access to the dressing rooms • The director who was stressed about the production • A rival actor who didn't get the lead role
The Concert Instrument Theft	A valuable instrument was stolen from backstage during a major concert.	The theft occurred during the concert intermission, between 8:00 and 8:30 PM. Only a few people were allowed backstage during that time, but someone took the instrument unnoticed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fellow musician • A sound technician who was adjusting equipment • The concert hall manager • A stage manager responsible for overseeing the event • A fan with backstage access

*The possible scenarios, their prompts, and examples were generated using OpenAI's ChatGPT

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