

# 10

## Teaching Grammar in Writing Classes: Tenses and Cohesion

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### INTRODUCTION

Grammar instruction in many English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms includes deductive teaching and learning, when the teacher presents grammar rules followed by various forms of practice. Student practice can take the form of cloze exercises, a translation of an English text into the learners' native language, or oral training (read alouds, dialogues, or small-group activities) (Ellis, this volume). In most cases, such exercises draw the learners' attention to verb forms in sentence-level contexts that are created by textbook authors, teachers, or students themselves. This learning practice largely addresses the skills associated with identification of time adverbials and the manipulation of verbal inflections and tense-related forms of auxiliaries. Other approaches to grammar teaching focus on contextualized uses of grammatical structures to promote applications of grammar knowledge to particular situations when students are involved in meaningful or meaning-related communications (e.g., games, problem-solving activities, and role-plays).

In part, because a good deal of linguistic research separates the analysis of rhetorical discourse conventions (such as topic sentences, sentence transitions, and rhetorical development) and the grammatical structures of language, the teaching of writing and the teaching of grammar tend to occupy somewhat distinct domains in second language (L2) pedagogy as well. This separation of grammar teaching from L2 writing instruction

may also come from the expectation that if learners acquire L2 grammar through exposure to and interaction with L2, they may also apply their grammar knowledge and skills to writing. On the other hand, L2 writing instruction often has the goal of developing learners' rhetorical, organization, and text-based skills (Leki, 1995; Raimes, 1995; Reid, 1993) and addresses their grammar skills as largely secondary. In particular, Grabe & Kaplan (1996, p. 29) point out that "L2 writing research strongly follows English L1 [first language] writing research," which does not include syntactic and linguistic analyses. The authors further point out that in L2 writing pedagogy and, in general, in L2 writing research, the benefits of adhering to L1 writing research are not always clear.

Research has demonstrated that in evaluations of nonnative speaker (NNS) writing, grammatical accuracy plays an important role. The presence of grammar errors has a negative impact on the native speaker (NS) perceptions of the quality of L2 writing (Johns, 1997; Johnson & Roen, 1989). Some studies report that to attain advanced proficiency in L2 writing, learners need to attend to grammar in their writing, and that L2 pedagogy genuinely concerned about learner proficiency in writing needs to include the teaching of relevant L2 grammar (Hammerly, 1991). Specifically, Fathman and Whalley (1990) found that attention to and feedback on grammar in the writing of NNSs significantly improves grammatical accuracy and the overall quality of writing. Ellis (1997) pointed out that many L2 linguistic features, such as verb inflections and uses of tenses, are so complex that they are often difficult to learn in the process of communication. He also noted that because of the complexity of these L2 grammar features, they need to become instructional foci within a syllabus that also promotes communication.

The contextualized uses of English tenses have been noted as one of the more difficult aspects of L2 grammar because inappropriate uses of tenses may obscure the meaning of text in writing (Hinkel, 1992, 1997). Vaughn (1991) pointed out that in holistic assessment of essays, incorrectly used tenses occupy a prominent place among the factors that lead to low ratings of L2 writing. She also commented that, in general, raters believe that errors in phrase-level grammar (tenses, morphology, and word form) are more detrimental to the overall quality of text than, for example, flawed clause structure. Based on the study of Hamp-Lyons (1991), who reviewed the rating scales and evaluation guides of L2 writing developed by the British Council and used with the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery, tense errors are often seen as rather grievous.

Many writing and composition textbooks for ESL students published in the United States include units that specifically address the teaching of tenses (Holten & Marasco, 1998; Leki, 1995; Ruetten, 1997). However, because such texts usually see their goals as developing learners' writing fluency and rhetorical skills, they often rely only on lists of adverbial time

markers and brief guides to the teaching of tenses. In their detailed textbook for NNS graduate students, Swales and Feak (1994) indicate that in academic writing, the uses of past and present tenses need to be explicitly taught because in the context of academic writing, the occurrence of particular tenses is highly conventionalized. For example, in abstracts, data descriptions, summaries, purpose statements, and generalizations the present tense is usually expected, and the use of the past tense is discouraged. On the other hand, in descriptions of particular experiments, study findings, case studies, or past-time events uses of the past tense may be requisite (Hinkel, 1997). Overall, however, although the teaching of tenses is the staple of all grammar teaching books in EFL and ESL pedagogy, it is not always directly connected to tense uses in actual writing and writing instruction.

Because the teaching of L2 tenses is often carried out under the umbrella of the grammar curriculum, learners often do not establish an effective connection between the knowledge gained in grammar classes and their writing. In most cases, the teaching of grammar has not changed a great deal despite the research published in applied linguistics and text analysis (Ellis, chapters 2 and 9). Traditional approaches to grammar pedagogy largely consist of training in the inflectional forms of English verb tenses with the teacher's explanations of when particular forms of tenses are used, followed by cloze exercises in sentence-long contexts. The sentences for the practice of tense uses and contexts are usually supplied by the material writer and include explicit contextual markers and adverbs (e.g., *yesterday*, *five years ago*, *next summer*) that require learners to identify the time frame for the sentence and use a particular verb form, congruent with the time markers, such as:

*The traffic situation* \_\_\_\_\_ (*get*) *worse every year.*

*Martha's birthday* \_\_\_\_\_ (*be*) *Friday, so we'd better buy her a gift.*  
(Thewlis, 1997, pp. 212, 238, respectively)

Although many L2 learners become quite skilled in identifying the adverbs supplied in practically all exercise sentences, they often do not associate their explicit and/or implicit knowledge of tense uses attained in grammar classes with other language production tasks, such as writing (Hinkel, 1997). For example, the following excerpt in (1) was written by a nonnative speaker who had received seven years of ESL training in the United States and was one year away from graduating from a university:

- (1) In my culture, young people *have* to learn how to respect older people. We *had* to listen to whatever they say and we *don't* have the right to talk back even when we *know* what the older person said *was* wrong. We *were* considered to be rude if we *talk* back. All we *needed* to do *was* to sit there and listen to them.

In this paragraph, the tenses shift from the present to the past and then back to the present seemingly at random without a discernable cause or time markers to explain the changes in the frame of the narrative. Even within this short excerpt, the shifting tenses create a text that lacks cohesion and seems temporally disjointed.

Similarly, in the following example the tense shifts can actually obscure the meaning in a paper on the socioeconomic influence on demographics, written by a graduating senior:

(2) Early marriage *is* very common in Russia. With the collapse of communism, young couples *got* married in their twenties, and this *is* time when they *are* still in universities. The assumption *was* that parents always *help* their children after marriage. It *is* common for a young married couple to live at their parents' house after they *got* married, or if parents *are* wealthy enough, they *buy* an apartment for their children.

In this excerpt it may be difficult to tell whether the NNS author discusses the situation as it existed just before "the collapse of communism" or as it exists now, following the political change. In the case of the former, the writer's use of the past tense is justified, but the use of the present tense is erroneous. On the other hand, if she describes the current situation, then the shifts to the past tense seem to be unwarranted.

ESL and EFL teachers and researchers have long noted that in NNS writing, the use of appropriate tenses often appears to be a pervasive problem that can result in confusing text and narrative structure (Guiora, 1983; Riddle, 1986). However, McCarthy (1991) and Lewis (1986) argue that the uses and meaning of English tenses in writing are conventionalized to a great extent. Specifically, they point out that the uses of tenses in written text are not so much determined by the objective time in which the events take place, but more so by the discourse framework shared by the reader and the writer within the given context. It appears, however, that even advanced learners (as the authors of the two excerpts already given) are not always able to identify the contextual frame that calls for the use of a particular tense and may undervalue the importance of the meanings that the shifting tenses can impart to written text.

In the teaching of tense uses in written text, a variety of approaches can be used, ranging from analyses of sentences to examinations of larger excerpts from texts. As Celce-Murcia (chap. 7, this volume) points out, rudiments of discourse analysis can be employed for teaching various grammar structures and developing teaching materials and examples based on authentic language use in both spoken and written English. A similar pedagogical technique can be beneficial in the teaching of the conventionalized tense structures in expository and academic writing.

This chapter presents an approach to the teaching of tenses that centers on analyses of authentic texts to help learners develop familiarity with the notion of a contextual frame and its conventions in L2 writing. The method for teaching English tenses and cohesive time frames presented here helps to establish a direct connection between contextualized instruction and the production of L2 writing and, hence, the concurrent development of both L2 fluency and accuracy. The suggested teaching method, based on grammar discovery tasks (Ellis, 1997; also chaps. 2 and 9, this volume), allows learners to examine how tenses are used in time frames in real language and increase their implicit and explicit knowledge of grammar. In addition, because these discovery tasks rely on authentic language, the teacher can create his or her materials to suit diverse proficiency levels of students and/or instructional goals. Based on text analysis, the pedagogical goal of learners' noticing the context in which particular uses of tenses occur is to enhance learner awareness and understanding of how cohesive text can be situated and maintained in a temporal contextual frame.

Although tense use in newspaper articles and academic writing has differences, there are pedagogically useful similarities, for example, the tense use in spot news resembles that in humanities and social sciences, and the temporal frames in scientific reporting are similar to those in technical and natural science disciplines (geology, meteorology, and biology) (Biber, 1988, 1995). The advantage of employing newspaper articles in the teaching of tenses and time frames is that usually discourse in newspapers is lexically, syntactically, and conceptually less complex than that in academic prose. All of the following examples were extracted from local and student papers. Both types of publications represent sources of authentic written discourse, accessible in EFL and ESL settings alike. Because newspaper reports of events, scientific findings, business analyses, and reviews of books and movies are easy to obtain (for example, from the Internet), they may represent an almost inexhaustible supply of materials that can be made relevant and interesting for students. Although it is unlikely that examples of all the tenses can be found in most newspaper texts, examples of the past and present tenses abound, and these tenses are common in academic writing (Biber, 1988; Swales, 1990).

#### IDENTIFYING COMMON TIME FRAMES IN AUTHENTIC WRITING

Many practicing EFL/ESL teachers know that adverbial markers (or time adverbs) are usually employed to establish the time frame in written discourse. The time frame in a text does not necessarily refer to objective time. For example, the past tense can be used to refer to events that take

place both in the present and the past, but only the past time of the event is relevant to the discourse frame:

- (3) Nearly 71 percent of women [college students] *were* at least somewhat concerned about financing their college education, compared with 58.5 percent of men. . . . About 38 percent of women *reported* they frequently "felt overwhelmed," compared with 7.3 percent of men. (*Seattle Times*, January 25, 1999)

In this example, it is important to note that the use of the past tense verb markers does not imply that the information in the text is not applicable to the present time. Rather, the written discourse convention requires that the tense use is consistent throughout the contextual frame. It is not known whether the differences between men and women apply to the present time because the text is framed for the past time; hence, the past tense of the verbs is used.

Learners are commonly taught that in most cases, the tenses within the contextual frame rarely shift until another adverbial marker is employed to warrant the shift and reframe the discourse flow. In teaching, a good analogy may be to compare these markers to movie flashbacks when the story line switches from the present to the past (or leaps several years forward). Examples for changing time frames are common in written discourse and can serve as points of departure for text analysis and models for composition.

In written discourse, time frames are usually marked by means of past-time adverbials or past tense verbal inflections. For example, in the following excerpt, time adverbials clearly delineate the past time frame and the frame shifts from the past to the present:

- (4) *Last Monday*, Café Paradiso *closed* shop forever—soon to be replaced by Café Vita, a local Seattle coffee chain. . . . Café Paradiso *was* the place where you *went* for coffee on that first awkward college first date. Café Paradiso *was* the place where you *took* your out-of-town friends when they *wanted* to see a "real Seattle coffehouse." . . . Café Paradiso *was* the place where you *tried* your first cigarette or *got* hooked on caffeine. . . . *Now* only the sign *remains*. (*The Spectator*, December 3, 1998)

In this excerpt, the past time marker [*Last Monday*] determines the use of the past tense in the first sentence. Then the story moves to more remote, general past, until the present time marker [*now*] shifts the time frame and the tense to the present. Both the past and the present tenses need to remain consistent throughout the framed portions of the discourse.

However, it appears that in authentic texts the time frame markers are not always overt but can also be implicit. In such cases, the tenses can shift between the past and the present as the discourse necessitates. For example,

in the excerpt below the time frames move between the past and the present, mostly without explicit adverbial markers:

- (5) A national panel of scientists *yesterday warned* of the hazards of teenage employment, saying that young people who *work* more than 20 hours a week, regardless of their economic background, *are* less likely to finish high school. . . . The panel also *warned* that work *can* be dangerous: Young people *are* injured at work at twice the rate of adults, and 100,000 *show up* in hospital emergency rooms *each year* for job-related injuries they *receive*. A committee of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine *portrayed* a generation of young people eager to enter the work force. . . . The panel, which *reviewed* years of research from leading scientists in the field, *acknowledged* that work *can* have positive effects, from teaching punctuality to money management and how to work effectively with other people. . . . One study cited by researchers *found* that for every additional hour worked, they *saw* an . . . increase in the likelihood that a child *would* drop out of school. (*Seattle Times*, November 12, 1998)

The portion of discourse exemplified in Example 5 illustrates that in writing, reporting verbs (in main clauses) are often used in the past tense to refer to the past event of presenting information to the reader. The past time marker *yesterday* refers to the past event of information reporting and, thus, all reporting verbs in this context are used in the past tense. The change in the frame from the act of reporting, expressed in the past tense (*warned*, *portrayed*, *reviewed*, *acknowledged*, and *found*) to the reported information, conveyed in the present tense, can also allow the teacher to bring students' attention to the variety of reporting verbs and their usefulness in academic, and business writing, as well as narration and exposition.

Based on her corpus analysis of academic texts in several disciplines (such as economics, law, and linguistics), Tadros (1994) found that reporting verbs are very common in academic writing, when writers need to demonstrate their knowledge of material and convey propositions expressed in subordinate clauses. Following almost all reporting verbs (e.g., *argue*, *believe*, *claim*, *consider*, *define*, *discuss*, *develop*, *find*, *notice*, *point out*, *realize*, *recognize*), the past tense generally shifts to the present in *that*-clauses, as, for example, in the first sentence in this paragraph. Because these verbs are very frequent in academic texts and because they often account for tense shifts within sentences, it may be beneficial to familiarize students with their uses and discourse functions. For example, Leech and Svartvik (1994) point out that in reported statements, modal verbs (*must*, *could*, *might*, and *should*) do not take the past tense (although *must* can be reported as *had to*). They also note when "the idea expressed in the reported statement" (p. 134) applies to both the past and the present, the use of the past tense depends on the context (as in Example 4). Swan (1995, p. 482) also comments that with reporting verbs the choice of the present or the past

tense in the reported statement depends specifically on whether reporters "agree" with the information in the reported statement and/or consider it to be applicable to both the past and the present. Hence, since the reporter of the information in Example 4 seems to believe it to be generally applicable to the current time, the use of the present tense in reported statements accurately reflects this view.

Although in Example 4 all verbs carry the past tense following the time marker *last Monday* until the frame is changed to the present by means of the adverb *now*, in Example 5, the information that is reported and included in the subordinate clause can be narrated in the present tense (as with the verbs *work, are, and can*). In this case, the reported information refers to events that are *generally* (or occasionally) applicable to the situation discussed in the context. Because adverbs of frequency (*often, usually, generally, sometimes*) are ordinarily used with verbs that express general truths, habits, and routines (Byrd, 1992), they are typically used in the simple present tense.

To test whether the information can be narrated in the present tense, students may find it helpful to insert a "litmus" frequency adverb into a sentence (or several adjacent sentences) to see whether the meaning of the discourse excerpt can be retained. Such adverbs can be *usually, generally, almost always, often, frequently, sometimes, occasionally, or rarely*, depending on the context. Students usually find this litmus test easy to apply in identifying the time frame when writing information reports or editing. For example,

(6) A national panel of scientists yesterday *warned* of the hazards of teenage employment, saying that young people who [*usually/frequently/normally*] *work* more than 20 hours a week, regardless of their economic background, *are* [*generally/typically/occasionally*] less likely to finish high school . . . The panel also *warned* that work can be dangerous: Young people *are* [*frequently/usually*] injured at work at twice the rate of adults . . .

A simple rule of thumb that can be applied to such structures is that if the inserted adverb of frequency does not conflict with the overall meaning of the clause, then the simple present tense can be used following the past tense reporting verb. Conversely, if the adverb does not seem to be congruent with the sentence meaning, the present tense cannot be used. For example, in Example 7, an insertion of frequency adverbs, such as *usually, generally, or frequently* results in an obscure structure with conflicting temporal meanings that even intermediate-level learners can readily identify.

(7) *On Friday night*, police and fire dispatchers throughout the area *reported* that scores of accidents [*usually/generally*] *occurred* on King County roads and that traffic on the I-5 *slowed* to a crawl.

It is important to note that the verb tense does not always shift in *that*-clauses following reporting verbs (as in Example 7). However, maintaining the past tense in *that*-clauses may change the meaning of a text to imply that the reported information has somehow changed and does not apply to present (or general) situations discussed in the text (Swales & Feak, 1994). To exemplify this change in the text meaning, a productive exercise can be to ask students to switch the verb tenses from the present to the past and see whether they can identify how the meaning of the entire discourse excerpt alters. In most cases, intermediate and advanced language learners can easily detect the changes in the text meanings when asked to replace the verbs in the present tense with those in the past.

### DISCOURSE CONVENTIONS AND TENSE COHESION IN AUTHENTIC WRITING

Lewis (1986) observed that in written discourse, actions and events are not necessarily presented in their objective time. Rather, they represent manifestations of textual discourse reality and contextualized time frames. As McCarthy (1991) notes, the uses of tenses in writing are highly conventionalized and, in particular, academic discourse can follow rules of convention more rigidly than other types of writing (such as fiction, newspaper editorials, or letters). The conventionalization of tense uses in writing needs to be exemplified and discussed to illustrate that in writing, tenses are not always used to reflect the time of events objectively (and factually accurately). In fact, their contextual meanings can convey factually inaccurate implications and may even appear to be counterintuitive.

In many languages other than English, little distinction is made between the real time of events and the use of tenses in discourse (Hinkel, 1997). Although they can be the same, often they are not. For example, the sentence \**Two years ago, I applied to some universities in the U.S. because I want to study here* describes a real past-time event (*applied*) framed by the adverbial *two years ago*. On the other hand, the use of the present tense verb *want* appears to be incongruous with the conventions of the English-language academic discourse that requires the time frame and tense use to remain consistent until a different time marker is encountered and, thus, the contextual frame is established. The use of the present tense with the verb *want* shifts the time frame to a situation that is generally (or currently) true. However, the use of the present with *want* does not refer to the past time, as the written discourse convention dictates. Simply correcting the tense from the present to the past may create an implication that the student no longer desires to study in the United States (or that it is not known if he or she does). In this case, the resulting sentence *Two years ago, I applied to some*

*universities in the U.S. because I wanted to study here* may appear to be factually inaccurate and even untruthful to the student.

An important feature of written academic discourse in English is that within the past time frame, events and actions expressed by the verbs are expected to be used in the past tense because for the purposes of writing, it may be irrelevant whether the event and/or the action is current at the present time. In a piece of writing framed for the past (or future) tense, the use of verb tenses needs to be consistent throughout the framed context to provide for textual cohesion, even if the event or the action is currently relevant and not completed in the objective time (Hinkel, 1997). In the sentence, *\*I applied to some universities in the U.S. because I want to study here*, the use of the present tense is not appropriate even if the individual still desires to study in the United States at the present time because the discourse frame of the past time restricts the relevance of events and actions only to the past.

In the following example of authentic language use, the tenses are employed to reflect written discourse conventions, possibly at the expense of factual accuracy.

- (8) When the Essential Baking Co. *reached* its 10-year goal for growth just 18 months after it *was* founded in 1994, general manager . . . Teal *knew* that a move to a bigger facility *was* in order. But the business *prided* itself on being a part of the community, and a move *would* be challenging. . . . (*Pacific Northwest, Supplement to Seattle Times*, December 20, 1998)

This text is framed for the contextualized past tense by means of the past time marker in 1994. The tense of the first verb in a piece of discourse (*reached*) can also be used to frame a discourse excerpt for a particular time. However, in an objective analysis of the isolated clause *the business prided itself on being a part of the community*, the use of the past tense with the verb *prided* may imply that at the present time, the business no longer prides itself on being a part of the community (the use of the past tense may also imply the completedness of an action or event). It is important to emphasize that written discourse conventions, much more than spoken, have the goal of developing textual and contextual cohesion by means of a conventionalized tense structure throughout a discourse frame. For this reason, a piece of writing does not always adhere to the factual reality of events and situations, and in advanced writing in English, the issues of text cohesion take precedence. In this case, the choices of appropriate tenses may be limited by the conventions of written discourse, combined with the meanings of pastness or completion.

The verbs that learners often have difficulty situating in contextual time frames usually belong in several large classes. They are commonly associated

with durative (*work, study, live, attend, wait, expect*), emotive (*love, like, suffer, hurt*), and mental activities (*think, believe, know, understand*); modal meanings of ability and obligation (*can, may, should, need to, and have to*) (Hinkel, 1995); as well as pseudo-modals (*want to, hope to, plan to, and expect to*). For example, *\*When my uncle gave me the money, he knew that I can succeed in America*. To help learners produce cohesive pieces of writing, the teacher may specially bring their attention to such verbs and the contexts in which they occur, such as personal narratives, short stories, and accounts of newsworthy developments or historical events.

### FLUID TIME FRAMES AND COHESION IN AUTHENTIC WRITING

When learners write, they often encounter contexts in which time frames (and hence, uses of tenses) need to change frequently. For example, expanded answers to exam questions, lab reports, and business or engineering projects may necessitate changes of tenses in relatively short texts. Regardless of text length, however, written discourse conventions require cohesion that, among many other important considerations, includes appropriate (or conventionalized) uses of tenses (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; McCarthy, 1991; Swales, 1990).

Example 9 presents two time frames and the attendant tense shift in a very short context of two adjacent sentences.

- (9) *Last year, Americans consumed an estimated 3.4 billion-gallons of bottled water—12.7 gallons per person. That is expected to increase in 1998 by nearly 10 percent.* (*Seattle Times*, November 5, 1998)

In this short text, adverbials explicitly mark a change in the time frame, even if it occurs only within a context of two sentences. The cohesion conventions in written discourse often require that tense shifts be anchored to the textual time frames.

Example 10 presents a longer piece of writing with multiple tense shifts, some of which are marked explicitly by means of time markers, and others implicitly by using regularities of English grammar. A text excerpt such as this reveals many systematic features of English syntax. Although the pertinent information can be found in many traditional EFL/ESL grammar texts, an example text analysis appropriate for an intermediate to advanced level class is also presented below. For example, texts such as the following can also serve as a basis for constructing teacher- or student-generated materials for practicing contextualized tense meanings and implications. (Suggestions for materials development are presented later in this chapter.)

(10) *A year ago*, scientists from around the world *decided* the Great Smokies census was a job worth doing. *This week* the same 100 researchers *have been meeting* outside the park to map out a strategy. The research *is expected* to start *in March*. If they *succeed* in the Smokies, scientists *hope* to use strategies developed there to poke around every park and schoolyard in the nation. The simple spider illustrates how mammoth the Smokies job *will be*. Fred Coyle, a Western Carolina University researcher, *got an early start* looking for spiders in the park. *Over three years*, he *has collected* 180,000 spiders. He *found* 456 species—38 of them never identified before. It *will take* Coyle and a dozen graduate students *five more years* . . . to finish the study. (*Seattle Times*, December 18, 1998)

In this excerpt, the initial time frame, [*a*] *year ago*, is established for the past tense in the first sentence. In the second, however, the adverbial marker [*t*] *this week* shifts the tense to the present perfect. The perfective aspect of present tense verbs often occurs in time frames marked by adverbials that include (*in, over, during*) *this +, the past +, and the last + (time marker)*, as in *this year, in the past decade, and during the last month* (see Celce-Murcia, this volume, for additional information). In addition, the progressive aspect of verbs is commonly employed to show that the action expressed by the verb is continuing at the moment of speech—and in this case, at the time when the text is published (see Byrd, 1992, and Ruetten, 1997, for techniques in the teaching of progressive tenses). The use of the present simple tense (*is expected*) with future time markers (*in March*) is also very common in English (e.g., *I leave for Chicago tomorrow* or *The store closes in an hour*). The clause [*if*] *they succeed* is used in the present tense because clauses of time and condition (marked by *if, whether, or when*) rarely take the future tense in written discourse (although they sometimes do in speaking). For example, in writing, *\*If the sales will improve, we will have to hire additional staff* would be considered ungrammatical, and in such clauses, the use of the present tense is appropriate.

However, the future time marker *in March* determines the use of the future tense in *The simple spider illustrates how mammoth the Smokies job will be*. A reference to Fred Coyle's background is made by the past time marker *an early start* that explains the use of the past tense *got*. The perfective aspect in the verb phrase *has collected* is framed by the adverbial *over three years*—because the implication of the present perfect tense use is that the result of his three-year work is available at the present or that his work on the project is not quite finished. The past tense in *found* can be also changed to *has found*, and both tenses would be appropriate in this context. The future marker *in five more years* clearly marks the verb *will take* for the future tense.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR USING AUTHENTIC TEXTS IN THE CLASSROOM

In general terms, bringing the learners' attention to particular contextualized tense uses and discourse frames represents a key factor in bringing the discourse conventions and regularities to the level of effective production in writing. Schmidt (1995) points out that "noticing" and paying attention to the focal points of language and its linguistic features greatly enhances students' performance with complex syntactic structures and vocabulary. The suggestions for information gathering and communicative activities in the following discussion have the goal of advancing students' overall language proficiency with a particular focus on writing. Specifically, they concentrate on promoting students' discourse-level skills and lead to knowledge-building and the production of written texts that adhere to the conventions of writing in English.

Depending on the students' proficiency level, an occasional advanced vocabulary item may be replaced or simply omitted (e.g., in a compound noun phrase or attributive adjective and adverb phrase). Complex names of relatively unknown individuals (as in . . . *Teal* in Example 8 above) or unfamiliar geographical locations (e.g., *the Great Smokies*) can be replaced with generic synonyms (such as *John Smith* or *the Great Mountain Range* in Example 10). However, the advanced vocabulary items in original texts gradually can be retained to promote the learners' exposure to real-life and idiomatic language use. If needed, long text excerpts can be shortened by omitting whole sentences or portions of sentences (as in Examples 3, 4, and 9) without loss of the lesson content when authentic time markers and tense shifts are maintained. Once students are familiar with this type of frame analysis, they, perhaps with the guidance of the teacher, can examine their own writing for tense cohesion.

Several suggestions for teacher- or student-generated materials and practice are presented below. All of these activities and projects have been used in teaching for several years and can provide various benefits for learners because they represent integrated and fluency-based venues for exposure to real-life language and fluency development.

### Suggestion 1: Recognizing and Anticipating Adverbials of Time

Students can be asked to mark adverbials of time, shifts in time frames, and tense-related inflections and/or verb phrases in selected texts. If students work in small groups, each group can be assigned a different text to work

with, and when their search for adverbials and verb inflections is completed, groups can present their findings to one another. Anticipating the appropriate tense markers in contexts framed for a particular time frame can be productive and interesting for learners at the intermediate (and/or high intermediate) level of proficiency. For example, an authentic text with explicit time markers but omitted verbal inflections can be used effectively. Because students at intermediate levels of proficiency may have a limited vocabulary range, authentic texts for this exercise can be found among advertisements from newspapers and magazines with sufficient amounts of text, juvenile periodicals and books, book cover copies, or brief news reports from adapted or authentic news media and the Internet.

To make this exercise enjoyable, groups of students can compete for accuracy to see which group can complete the task with the greatest number of correct tense inflections in a specified amount of time.

#### **Suggestion 2: Reporting Verbs and *That*-Clauses**

Students can be assigned to read a text (a story, a chapter from a textbook, or a news article) and recast the information in writing. If possible, the story or the article should include several personages who "speak" or provide information (as in Example 4). These are very common in most U.S. newspapers and can be found in the science, business, automotive, travel, and entertainment sections. Alternatively, the teacher can read a short story to the class or show a movie clip with a dialogue to describe, as well as a portion of a videotaped TV program or a news report (easily obtained in many ESL and/or EFL settings) that they need to recast in writing and focus on information provided by various speakers.

A project for practicing reporting verbs can also center around short skits or student-developed role-plays that groups present to the entire class (or other small groups). An additional benefit of this technique lies in the fact that it works to promote diverse language skills in context.

#### **Suggestion 3: Authentic Language and Information Reports: Interviews**

In ESL settings, students can be assigned to interview two to four individuals or obtain information from employees in school or university administrative offices, a library, a car rental agency, a museum, cellular phone or computer stores, or car dealerships. Their interview questions can become the first step in their writing practice. It is often advisable that the teacher approve of the questions before the actual interview. Following the interview, as the next step the students can write a report about their findings and indicate what they learned during the interviews. This writing project

requires students to create texts that contain various time frames (and tense uses) within the conventions of English written discourse.

Students usually learn a great deal from such exposures because they foster contact with real language speakers outside the classroom. Although interviews can be carried out individually or in pairs, the actual writing can be done by students individually. The information collected during the interviews can become a springboard for another writing assignment (see the next section).

#### **Suggestion 4: Information Synthesis**

For high-intermediate or advanced students, synthesizing information obtained during interviews can become an excellent venue for a more sophisticated writing practice. Groups of two or three students can be asked to pool together (but certainly not merely rewrite or retype) the information for a broader, synthesis-like summary of their findings. This assignment often extends beyond the practice with reporting verbs because it requires learners to produce a longer piece of writing and report the information from several outside sources.

#### **Suggestion 5: Text Cohesion in Past Time Frames**

Students can be assigned reading logs or written book reports. Biographies and autobiographies of interesting people, such as sports figures, movie stars, popular singers, political figures, and scientists, are usually available for diverse audiences and language proficiency levels. They range from those published for school-age readers to highly advanced personality analyses for educated adults.

As an interim-length project, students can write their own autobiographies or histories of their families.

### **CONCLUSION**

Grammar instruction based on authentic or simplified discourse can provide fruitful opportunities for teaching tenses, clause structure, articles, and prepositions in context. The contextualized teaching of grammar can expose learners to ways in which language is used in real life and heighten their awareness of its conventions and complexities. When working with discourse analysis in the classroom, presenting authentic texts and explaining how real-life written texts are constructed can heighten learner awareness and provide for an understanding of written discourse conventions. On the other hand, presentations of models and explanations may not be

sufficient to improve the quality of writing production. For this reason, it is important to supplement the explanations with ample practice to allow learners to produce writing. Although theoretical models have identified language input as an essential component for second language learners, the crucial place of output in production has not received sufficient attention in research and literature. It would be difficult to develop communicative competence in speaking or writing based on input alone because to engage in a meaningful interaction or writing, one has to be understood, as well as be able to understand. As has been noted, the use of tenses and temporal cohesion occupy a prominent place in how written text is understood or evaluated.

Schmidt (1995) observed that through exposure to models and examples, learners can become aware of regularities in input and thus accurately judge the grammaticality of structures they have never before encountered. He also pointed out, however, that whether grammatical rules are presented inductively or deductively does not seem to have a great deal of impact on the learners' grammaticality judgments of structures. He commented that paying attention to particular aspects of input that one sets out to learn enhances learning. Hence, looking for clues in the input and becoming aware of discourse markers when producing writing also promotes effective learning; even if at various levels of proficiency, learners are unable to make accurate generalizations about a particular system or rules.

One of the reasons that many practicing EFL and ESL teachers often become disenchanted with grammar book learning is that pedagogical grammar rules are frequently simplistic and do not account for the large number of cases or examples that learners come across in real life. Another reason is that many students can "learn" grammar rules as they are presented in grammar textbooks but fail to apply them when it comes to output. Although the reasons for these learner behaviors are complex, it appears that instruction may help learners focus on particular features of language and organize learner attention (Ellis, 1994). In light of the research conducted in second language learning and acquisition, it appears that although overt instruction in grammar does not necessarily lead to direct improvement in language learning, it can serve as an indirect cognitive means of increasing learners' exposure to language and their ability to notice discourse and language features. From this perspective, classroom analyses of time frames and the attendant tense uses can also add to learners' awareness of language structures and systems and benefit the development of second language writing proficiency and fluency.

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