Writing Journal to Improve Past Tense Usage in English (As a Second Language)

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Abstract
This action research came to light with the primary focus to improve, particularly, the usage of past tense among grade X students of Gelephu Middle Secondary School, Bhutan. The focus was on finding out the usefulness of JW (journal writing) on understanding and learning of PT (past tense) in English Language. PT usage in both modes of communication (verbal and written) in English is crucial, and its incompetency has always been a hindrance. In total, samples of 19 students were studied from the same grade in a pre-test, followed by intervention measures, and juxtaposition with post-test samples after intervention. Intervention measures period lasted for six weeks; JW and weekly classes of 20 minutes on usage of PT (simple past, past progressive, past perfect, and past perfect progressive). The difference between the writings conducted before the intervention measures and after it, was standing; learners' performance was better than expected (the usage of all types of PT improved). Along with improvement errors in usage of other constituents of PT surfaced; spelling and subject - verb agreement.
Keywords: Journal writing, past tense, simple past, past progressive, past perfect, past perfect progressive, expression.

INTRODUCTION

Equally important as an idea are the tenses and structures that impart the idea. Tenses are an integral part of a language learning and acquisition. So are tenses a part of English language curriculum and are introduced as early as in grade III. Yet, at grade X, learners are found struggling to express correctly in the tense that a situation requires. Incompetency of PT usage is a feature that pervades across all grades. Its incompetency is found to impede proficiency in expression, from spoken to written; a feature pertinent to getting ideas across to listeners and readers. It has also been observed impeding students' performance in other subjects too.

Therefore, it's time a research was conducted to find ways to help students learn PT better and enhance their English language competency and performance. This research was thus brought forth with the objective to help students understand PT better, and enhance the level of language competency in English.

This research is intended to benefit ESL (English as a second language) learners of grade IV to X. It explores the benefits of JW in learning and improving PT usage. It looks into various ways that JW could be employed to help learners extract the optimum of benefits; understand PT better and be able to effectively use it in their communication, and develop competency and proficiency in English language, as the learners of even grade X aren't confident about their usage of PT. Owing to this incompetency, a marked inability in communicating messages in reported form is noted; incompetency in communication points to the inefficiency of the strategies practiced thus far. Perhaps, learners aren't motivated enough, when "motivation is considered as a key feature in the success of language learning and has great effect on the efficiency and productivity of English language teaching" (Jin, 2014).

Improving learners' correct usage of PT of all 4 types through JW is what this research focused on, with the conviction that JW would provide the right platform for improving written expressions in PT.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning of any language requires not just listening and speaking, but reading and writing too; writing of just any kind, and journaling is one of them. Writing is not just an expression but an art in itself; and tenses are the vehicles that veer along expressions into different time periods.

"Literature" can "help to stimulate the imagination" (Lazar, 1993). So would journaling weigh equal importance in generating of stimuli for learning of tenses. "Writing journals provides good writing practice and helps to improve the students' general writing skills," and "allow students to express feelings more freely than they might do in public, in class" (Harmer, 2007). Besides, journaling is as exciting as it is personal; the more you write the more comfort zone you develop for yourself. Additionally, Keleny (2016), through her research finding revealed that after keeping of dialogue journal "all students demonstrated an improvement in using simple past tense on their posttests." In light of this finding, JW ought to improve past progressive, past perfect, and past perfect progressive too.

Similarly, Murray, Hourigan, & Jeanneau (2007), through their study of blog writing integration for academic language learning purposes, came across "individuals reporting on how the blog gave them confidence in relation to their status as learners." JW would not be very far from blogging in its capacity in helping learners improve their expressions in various tenses in a second language.

Furthermore, the review of Fitria's study (2020) revealed "that the errors of the students in Simple Past Tense writing composition consist of grammar, punctuation, and spelling." Grammar, punctuation and spelling are constituents of all types of tenses. Oxford (2003) stated that "it is foolhardy to think that a single L2 methodology could possibly fit an entire class filled with students who have a range of stylistic and strategic preferences." Moreover, Johnson (1999) thinks that "second languages are learned in natural communicative contexts." Indeed, natural communicative contexts are just the right avenue journaling offers.

(Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005), in their study of the effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing, came across a revelation that "the combination of full, explicit written feedback and one-to-one conference feedback enabled them to use the past simple tense and the definite article with significantly greater accuracy in new pieces of writing." Similarly, Liu (2008) stated that "morphological errors were easier to correct in that students could choose the right morphological form for different situations, such as the past tense and subject-predicate agreement, as long as they knew the rules." In both of these studies, PT remained a part and parcel of the study. PT indeed is an imperative part of a language learning.

In the analysis of students' ability in using language features, a revelation was that a certain number of the students "were very poor in using language features" which Jayanti (2019) supposes, "in general it might be caused by a factor which the students do not know the basic structure of simple present tense itself." Relevant finding has been made by Indriani (2019) that "the most dominant error made by the students is omission" in using the simple present tense. The same would obviously imply when it comes to PT too. Supportive of this finding is the claim put forth by Brown (2007) that "all people make mistakes, in both native and second language situations." That "mistakes, when attention is called to them, can be self-corrected." Going by this, mistakes and errors are inclusive of tenses as well in L2 learning. Perhaps, writing and speaking in the same tense over and again might call learners' attention to their own mistakes. Similarly, Fitria (2018), in her study of students' error in writing composition of simple future tense, "the result analysis shows that the students' error in writing composition of simple future tense consists of three aspects of writing. First, in grammar, punctuation and spelling."

However, "the use of the two-tense approach to teaching tense in English is a viable alternative for educators to apply when teaching English grammar tense" (Stephens, & Sanderson, 2021). Exploring all types of a particular tense seems equally inviting.

Bram (2012) has indeed rightly pointed out that "writing is a process and product requiring energy." In this regard, JW does require a lot of energy, thinking and reflecting in getting one's thoughts into words; words in past form and participle of base verbs is what journaling demands.

ACTION RESEARCH QUESTIONS
1. How would journal writing help students improve their past tense usage?
2. To what extent would journal writings foster past tense learning?
3. Does motivation play a role in learning of tenses?

METHODS
Research Design
This action research employed a mixed method approach as "in many studies, using a mixed method approach provides the best opportunity for addressing research questions" (Malina, Norreklit, & Selto, 2011). It involved a pre- test and a post – test, one – on - one semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and was intended to be of exploratory in nature and, employed within-subjects design.
Research participants
19 grade X students (13 females, 6 males) of Gelephu Middle Secondary School participated in this study on voluntary basis for a period of six weeks. Written parental consent was also sought for all the participants.
Research instrument
Pre-test, post-test, one – on – one semi – structured interviews and focus group interviews were the instruments used to collect data.
Data collection
Data collection for this research was carried out through both qualitative as well as quantitative methods; qualitative especially because "the data collected qualitatively can also be analyzed quantitatively" (Nassaji, 2015). Participants sat for two tests: pre and post, in the school after the instructional hours; they were required to write a narrative essay of 300- 350 words in 30 and 40 minutes respectively because, in the pre-test participants had to be assigned extra 10 minutes. The topics were different though. Intervention classes were

carried out over a period of six weeks; classes on PT were conducted every Monday during the lunch hour for four weeks (for four PT types), followed by subsequent writing of journals for 4 days a week which lasted for six weeks, requiring them to apply the rules of PT learnt in the said classes in JW. Frequent feedbacks were provided.

Similarly, focus group discussions were carried out in three cohorts: one group with 7 members and the rest two with 6 each, which were audio recorded. It was also conducted after the instructional hours. One – on- one interviews were conducted during the lunch break for a duration of approximately two weeks and were audio recorded too.

Descriptive analysis was utilized to describe and explain the pre-test and post-test scores using frequencies, mean, percentage, and standard deviation. Interview scripts were analyzed using thematic analysis; transcribing scripts and analyzing through segmenting and axial coding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Figure 1: Pretest-Posttest Score Frequency
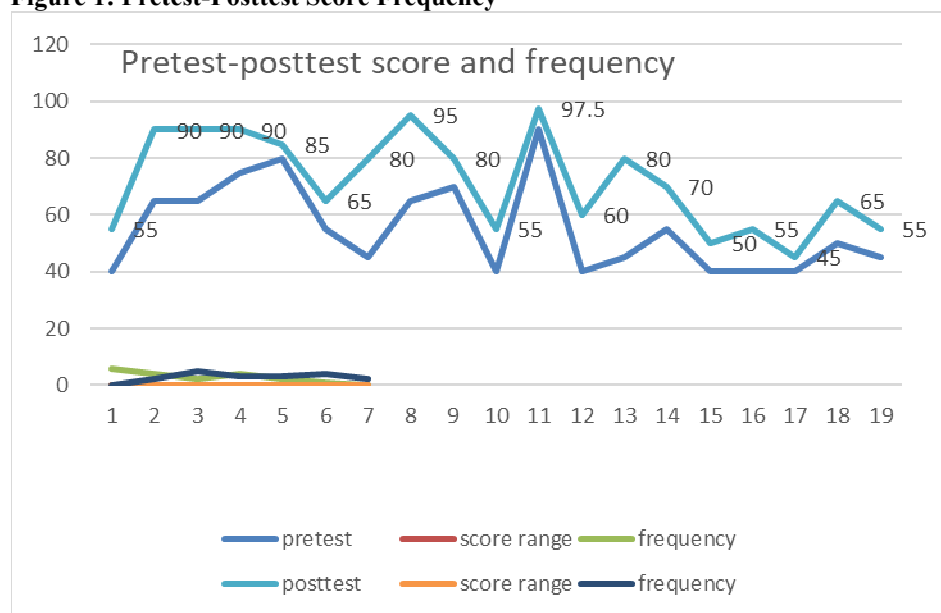
The marks scored in pre-test ranged from 40 to 90 which is in stark contrast to the marks scored in post – test that ranged from 55 to 97.5. In fact, all the scores increased in post- test comparatively; a few was negligible though. The presence of this insignificant number was caused by various factors such as participants' inability to manage time to write journal regularly, journaling not being a part of assessed writing, irregularity in journal entries, and school homework workload which left participants with little time to write, and most importantly, the differences in their learning preference.

Simple past flooded pre-test writing (mostly helping verbs), with a little of past progressive, countable past perfect and almost negligible past perfect progressive as shown by the mean for the number of usage of different types of PT (table 1). Even after intervention, PT usage still remained confined to simple past with the least use of past progressive, and weren't without errors.

Table 1: Usage Mean of PT Types in Pretest-Posttest

PT Type	Pre-test	Post-test	Mean
	Usage Mean	Usage Mean	Difference
SP (1)	17.6	40.26	22.66
PP (2)	2.53	3.53	1.0
PP (3)	3.45	3.63	0.18
PPP (4)	0.42	1.11	0.69

For instance, where an expresion required the usage of past perfect, two verbs in PT were used instead of had/hadn't + past participle.
Example:
1. Didn't (error) wanted.
2. Hadn't (correct) wanted.
Similarly, there were errors of spellings and PT usages too.
Example:
1. Diying (spelling error)

    2.   Dying (correct)

Example:

    1.   We digged (PT error) indicating ignorance about the past tense of the base verb, dig.

    2.   We dug (correct).

Spellings posed a constraint even in cases where knowledge of PT of a verb was present, as in the examples above. There were instances of errors of subject- verb agreement as well.

Example:

    1.   We was (error) wasting.

    2.   We were (correct) wasting.

Thus, spelling and subject – verb agreement were revealed as components that need to be taken care of in learning of PT.

Worth noting is the presence of usage of past perfect progressive (table1), which was almost non-existent in the pre-test, was devoid of errors.

Errors aforementioned were present in journal entries too, to which feedbacks were provided and participants expressed that it provided them with a clear picture of what had gone wrong with their sentence structure(s). Thus, the importance of knowing the grammatical rules of a language is what the situation speaks of.

Figure 2: Pretest – Posttest Mean
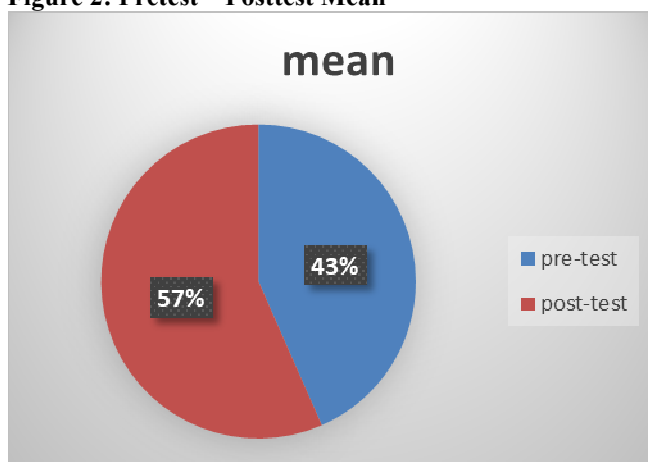
The 14% increase in the mean depicted in figure 2 is indicative of an improved performance in writing requiring expression in PT, pointing to the effectiveness of JW in learning of PT, similar to finding of Keleny (2016); "improvement in using simple past tense" after keeping of "dialogue journal."

Figure 3: Pretest – Posttest Standard Deviation
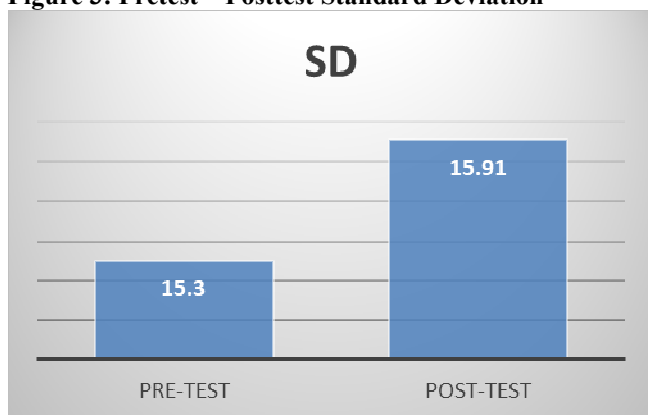
The notable difference in the standard deviation of pre and post- test points to the achievement of a variable distribution of the marks, and effectiveness of the intervention measures; JW, especially.

Table 2: Thematic Data of One-On-One Interviews

Theme	Sub-Theme	Excerpts from interview
Feelings generated by journaling	• Satisfaction • surprise • amusement	✓ "It really helped my English." ✓ "My grammar improved." ✓ "I can learn more by writing journal." ✓ "It was improving my writing skills." ✓ "My sentence structure is improving day by day." ✓ "I enjoy learning this." ✓ "Nowadays I'm getting immerse into it." ✓ "It's kind of fun."
Benefits of Journaling with prompts	• Fosters imagination • Indulgent • Confidence • Guidance • Fosters Creativity • Social interaction • Regulates emotions	✓ "These prompts helped me imagine more." ✓ "Improved critical thinking." ✓ "I get instant idea reading the prompt question." ✓ "Did not run out of ideas." ✓ "While writing I forgot about other activities." ✓ "I can write with any type of question." ✓ "I knew exactly what I should write." ✓ "I think it got me on track." ✓ "Prompt taught me how to make the word interesting." ✓ "We practised together, we wrote journal together." ✓ "We do not need someone to share our feelings, we can write it in the book and express through the words."
Barriers of Journaling	• Ignorance about past participle and PT rules • Time management	✓ structures and the past tense where I had to apply." ✓ "past participle." ✓ "while writing PT my structure went wrong." ✓ "I had to use only the simple PT, it hard." ✓ "I was not able to put the past participle." ✓ "while making sentence couldn't make out whether it was past tense or others." ✓ "Most difficulty while writing the journal was time management." ✓ "I don't get time."
Barriers of activity worksheet	• Ignorance about verbs in PT • Ignorance about past participles and PT rules	✓ "Was difficult for me to use correct terms." ✓ "It was really difficult for me to find my mistakes." ✓ "I didn't know which word to use which tenses." ✓ "It was the rules." ✓ "It was little difficult to put those past participle words." ✓ "I got confuse how to use language." ✓ "I was able to put the word in the blank sheet but not able to write sentence." ✓ "Whatever I thought not able to write in paper."
Feelings generated by Activity worksheet	• confusion	✓ "Sometimes hard to understand." ✓ "Didn't know when to use 'had' and 'had been'." ✓ "Little bit confused - -little bit nervous." ✓ "After reading many times only I wrote." ✓ "Didn't know which word to use in which tense."

The data in table 2 portrays a comprehensive view of the barriers, benefits, and the feelings evoked by JW and its accompanying prompts, and the activity worksheets on PT.

Prompts provided in the form of questions were more effective than situational (ineffective, and participants shared their feeling of being at a loss for what to write) ones alone.

Example:

You visited your old ailing grandmother at her old house in the village. (situation)

    i.   When was the last time you visited her? (simple past)

    ii.   When you reached her place what was she doing? (past progressive)

    iii.   In what ways had she changed since you last saw her? (past perfect)

    iv.   How had she been surviving on her own? (past perfect progressive)

    The above questions are in the PT types that participants were required to answer in. This is what helped them understand PT types better. The prompts helped especially those who didn't have the information on rules

of PT at their fingertips, guiding them with sentence structures and expressions. The tendency to frequently fall back on using simple past even with expressions that demanded the use of past perfect, lessened.

Prompts were really helpful. There was a comparative progress from no use of a particular form of PT (especially type 2 and 3) to an extensive use of it. Whereas participants' earlier journal entries indicated their struggle with derivation of progressive form of a base verb.

Even though JW posed barriers of time management (many couldn't update their journal entries), in the long run it proved beneficial to the extent of fostering imagination and promoting better expression. On one hand, though participants had struggled with spellings and expressions, on the other, it brought them joy and confidence as their understanding of usage of PT had deepened with practice. It had also helped them remain indulged. Besides, JW is found to bring about satisfaction in the learning process and, participants were even surprised to find improvement in their capacity to express in PT, with repeated writings. Most remarkable was that it generated social interaction and helped regulate emotions too; features notable of social and emotional development. Some sort of motivation seems to have been at play, probably the kind that Jin (2014) "considered as a key feature in the success of language learning." Indeed, these are what raised the score frequency bar, with participants having acquired better grasp on the usage of PT. Furthermore, JW had even helped a few in responding correctly in PT to questions in History (subject) in the class.

Whereas, with activity worksheet, comprehending the sentences in the given PT type was voiced as a major concern, having left participants confused.

Table 3: Thematic Data of Focus Group Interviews

Theme	Sub-Theme	Excerpts from interview
Effortless learning	• Simple past • Past progressive (PP) • Past perfect progressive (PPP)	✓ "I didn't have to use V3." ✓ "I have to add only 'ing'." ✓ "I just had to add 'had' + 'ing'."
Approach for help	• Community • Internet • Classroom learning	✓ "Ask help from friends." ✓ "Ask help from my sister." ✓ "Asked my older brother." ✓ "I googled." ✓ "Revisited notes." ✓ "Went through last year's note"
Feelings generated (regular and irregular writing)	• Comfort • Proud • Anxiety • Inadequacy	✓ "I feel relieved." ✓ "I feel a sense of accomplishment." ✓ "burdened." ✓ "I feel fear." ✓ "I felt I was lacking something."
Adaptation	• Scheduled writing	✓ "When I'm free." ✓ "At night after homework." ✓ "Alone time." ✓ "Any time." ✓ "Early in the morning." ✓ "10 – 10:30 p.m." ✓ "09 – 10 p.m." ✓ "After homework."

The table above is a display of thematic data of focus group interviews. Past perfect progressive was found as the most difficult to be learnt through JW, the reason primarily being participants' ignorance about PT and past participle of a base verb compared to other types. In contrast, structuring sentences in type 2 (PP)and type 3 (PPP) was found to be easier as all that it demanded was adding "ing" and "had + 'ing'," respectively to the base verb. Difficulties aside, participants' competency in this regard had generated in them feelings of comfort and pride when they were regular with journaling; feelings of anxiety and inadequacy were what developed when they weren't. In fact, the tight schedule noticed in order to fit journaling into their daily routine seems to have been the root of the cause.
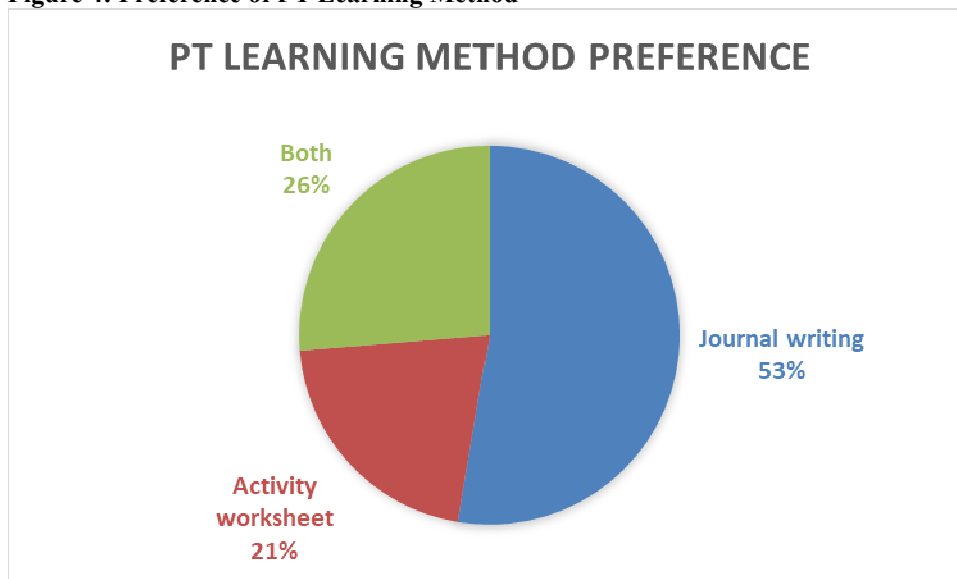
Figure 4: Preference of PT Learning Method

Figure 4 depicts the preference of learners over the methods of learning PT. Of 19 participants, 53 % were of the view that journaling provided them the independence of imagination and expression in PT. That writing over and again had fostered in them the comfort zone of expressing in PT.

However, learning through activity worksheet was looked at as challenging though helpful, because in the classroom they could not refer the internet for tenses. The only help available was the rules of tenses; sometimes, peer help too. Whereas 26 % saw the need to learn through both the ways, as the rules and examples learnt in the classroom could be easily and meaningfully applied in writing journal.

CONCLUSION

Journal writing is just one tool with which learners of second language can master in their usage of PT to a certain extent because there are many factors that pose obstruction to its implementation and diminish its effectiveness in a certain group of learners; those lacking in time management and resilience, especially.

Things to consider in employing JW are to lessen the burden of daily homework workload, make JW a part of writing assessment, so that learners keep their entries updated (inability to keep up to date with JW was one factor that brought forth the insignificant number who showed little progress in their post –test performance). Equally effective would be to go online which would render instant providing of feedback feasible and productive.

Besides, learners of English language really need to have the list of base verbs, past tense and past participles at their disposal. JW would then be of immense help.

JW is recommended, for it not only provides platform for usage of PT, it also helps learners understand it better, and, above all, it evokes motivation in learners to write, thus learn. All in all, it is found to foster cerebral, social and emotional development.

Whatever ways we employ, reading still remains the most important and the basis for effective means to improving on a second language and, fostering precise and profound expressions.

RECOMMENDATION

As a means to improving PT usage, JW would be equally effective for learners of grade four as for ten, limiting its implementation to simple past and past progressive for grades four to six if need be.

Question prompt is advised for clarity and to help learners remain on track within the context of the prompt situation, and to guide them with the use of PT type that a prompt would call for.

Conversely, the amount of homework assigned remains a big concern as it was found to deprive learners of free time for writing journal. Therefore, the suggestion is to assign JW only on weekends.

Present and future tenses too can be learnt through JW with similar prompts as in learning of PT. PT competency would be of immense help in learning of reported speech.

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