

ISRG Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISRGJAHSS)



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

ISSN: 2583-7672 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss>

Volume – II Issue-IV (July – August) 2024

Frequency: Bimonthly



Explicit instruction and learning: A focus on learners' metacognitive grammar awareness and knowledge of English tenses

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| **Received:** 10.07.2024 | **Accepted:** 15.07.2024 | **Published:** 17.07.2024

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Abstract

This study explores how undergraduate English language learners develop their metacognitive grammar awareness and knowledge and how they perceive their progress. The sample included 53 first-year English-language female undergraduates from a public university in Saudi Arabia. A consciousness-raising approach was adopted, and tests, questionnaires, blackboard discussions and classroom activities were used to study developmental change. A set of three tests on learners' knowledge of English grammar tenses were administered over a period of 12 weeks. The results revealed an improvement in their grammar awareness of the targeted 12 English tenses. Additionally, a reflective questionnaire was administered to elicit the participants' attitudes towards their consciousness learning as well as the consciousness-raising approach. Their attitudes were mainly positive. Their online and classroom engagement differed giving favour to the latter. These findings highlight learners' need for an L2 explicit and implicit grammar awareness approach that fosters their learning preference.

Keywords: explicit instruction; English tenses; EFL; grammar awareness; metacognitive knowledge

1. Introduction

Metalinguistic awareness is a cognitive process that allows a person to be aware and in control of his/her language usage. This mental cognitive process encourages mental awareness as well as learner autonomy (Hofer & Jessner, 2019, pp. 45-46). Few studies have investigated second language learners' metacognitive grammar awareness and knowledge of English tenses. It has been

acknowledged that learners' awareness and knowledge of L2 grammar is a slowly developing academic skill. A handful of research has explored raising learners' awareness of the importance of L2 grammar through an explicit grammar approach (Al-Ahdal & Almarshedi, 2022; Moore, 2021). As argued by Svalberg (2012)

explicit learner awareness can guide learners through their learning and cognitive development.

2. Literature Review

Grammar education is frequently overemphasized in circumstances where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). The emphasis on grammar instruction is driven by the backwash effect of the evaluation system. Grammar knowledge is an important factor that affects a student's overall performance, particularly in discrete item proficiency examinations and writing assessments. Given that learner ideas on their optimal learning methods have a substantial impact on their learning process, it is crucial to examine their beliefs concerning grammar learning in grammar training. Moreover, the current patterns in education indicate a growing prevalence of blended and online educational settings, where student needs and beliefs are given paramount importance.

This study arose from the concern of examining the optimal method of grammar instruction for second language learners. There have been sceptical views on explicit grammar instruction (Andrews, 2010; Graham & Perin, 2007; Mulroy, 2003). Extensive research on L2 metacognitive grammar knowledge throughout the past decade has revealed the pivotal role of explicit knowledge in academic learning (e.g., Moore, 2021). Learning through consciousness-raising activities requires active metacognitive processing (e.g., Svalberg, 2016). As indicated in early studies, the use of instruction in grammar courses is emerging (Blaauw-Hara, 2006; Devet, 2002) and has shown the efficacy in higher education (Inoue, 2015). Recent research trends have raised the following issues: the link between learners' metacognition and their English tense development, their engagement in class and online as well as their perceptions. The current research attempts to join between explicit grammar instruction followed by meaning-focused instruction (MFI), and consciousness-raising activities to foster learners' metacognitive knowledge, the following literature review presents this emergence.

2.1. Grammar Instruction

Learning English grammar remains a widely debated controversial area in second language learning due to its complex and archaic rules (Ellis, 2018). Hence, there is a need to teach English grammar effectively to develop L2 learners' linguistic skills sustainably and structurally (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Learners' grammar skills have a great degree in affecting learners' advancement in the language skills. Research studies have argued that intensive grammar input can enhance English learners' awareness and knowledge (Ellis, 2002; Pagcaliwagan, 2016; Svalberg, 2012; Svalberg & Askham, 2020). Although the long-lasting debate on an optimal grammar teaching method continues to intrigue researchers, most teachers are divided into teaching grammar by implicitly or explicitly (Ellis et al., 2019; Svalberg, 2020).

The explicit approach is a teacher centred classroom presenting learners with grammar rules explicitly and then following up the presentation with practice. On the other hand, the implicit approach involves learners to discover the language system using extensive practice to notice the grammar rules. However, there has been a favour to combine these two approaches in empirical research to benefit for the advantages of both approaches (Altun & Dinçer, 2020; DeKeyser, 1994, 2003; Rahman & Rashid, 2017; VanPatten & Smith, 2022).

The role of grammar instruction has been a subject of extensive dispute in the research and practice of EFL. Hence, eliciting learners' perceptions on the most effective methods for language acquisition are crucial in the instructional process (Daloglu, 2020; Izza & Kuswardani, 2023; Sarandi, 2024; Truong et al., 2022). Daloglu (2020) study examines the beliefs of learners regarding their optimal approach to learning grammar, with a specific focus on four pairings of constructs: meaning-focused (MFI) versus form-focused instruction (FFI), focus on form (FonF) versus focus on forms (FonFs), explicit versus implicit instruction, and inductive versus deductive grammar instruction. A survey was conducted to collect data from 927 preparatory year and undergraduate students at an English-medium institution in an EFL context. The results indicated that students, regardless of their year of study, expressed a preference for including grammar in their lessons and course books. Although focus on form was reported as the least preferred method of instruction, when given the option between implicit and explicit grammar instruction, all groups preferred explicit instruction. The findings can assist English teachers in adapting their teaching method and approaches to optimize students' grammar attainment and improve their effective grammar learning strategies for ongoing advantages.

The role of grammar instruction has been a contentious issue in EFL education research and practice. An ongoing argument in this context revolves around the focus of instruction, namely form-focused instruction (FFI) versus meaning-focused instruction (MFI). MFI views second-language learning as comparable to first-language acquisition, with the goal of communicating meaning being the fundamental instructional method. MFI asserts that language learning requires the supply of easily understandable material and a low emotional barrier. It considers explicit focus on linguistic structures as insignificant and corrective feedback as unproductive (e.g., Krashen, 1985). Advocates of MFI discourage providing specific grammar instruction or emphasizing individual linguistic elements, as they are not believed to be beneficial for the development of learner language (Ellis et al., 2002).

Form-focused instruction, as opposed to meaning-focused instruction, includes any deliberate activity designed to direct language learners' attention to the structure and components of language (Ellis, 2002, p. 1). Ellis (2015) categorizes FFI into two main types: deliberate interventions aimed at influencing interlanguage development for intentional language learning, and activities during instruction that indirectly draw learner attention to language forms for incidental acquisition Long (1991a); (Long & Robinson, 1998). Long (1991a) has categorized these two variants of FFI as 'focus on form (FonF)' and 'focus on forms (FonFs)'. FonFs, or Form-focused instruction, is a method of teaching grammar that follows a structured syllabus. In this approach, grammatical items are defined separately and taught in chronological order. Instruction is planned to use the presentation-practice-production (PPP) approach, which aims to give learners sufficient exposure to the target structure (Long & Robinson, 1998). FonF, however, alludes to an instructional approach that prioritizes the use of language for meaningful interactions, with grammar being addressed only when necessary. According to Long (1991b, pp. 45-46), "Focusing on form explicitly directs students' attention to linguistic elements as they occur." Ellis (2015) states that FonF is temporary, maybe purposefully observed, and occurs incidentally during speech that is predominantly focused on meaning.

Lightbown and Spada (2013) primarily examine the distinction between isolated and integrated FFI in their discussion. In the isolated version, the emphasis is on the structure of language, independent from its practical application in communication. On the other hand, with integrated FFI, learners are prompted to pay attention to the structure of language while using it for communication. The study conducted by Valeo and Spada (2016) examined the differences between EFL instruction in Brazil and ESL instruction in Canada. The findings revealed that both teachers and learners in both contexts displayed a clear bias towards integrated FFI, while simultaneously recognizing the significance of isolated FFI. The results are consistent with the findings of Spada and Lima (2015), who determined that both EFL and ESL learners and teachers had a preference for integrated FFI over isolated FFI.

Khaleghi et al. (2024) study aims to investigate the possibility of a connection between the development of writing skills among adult EFL learners and the provision of specific grammar instruction. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach opposes the explicit teaching of grammar at all levels. This is due to the fact that the approach's theoretical principle is that students are capable of acquiring grammar implicitly. It has been noticed that adult EFL learners who are taught English using CLT as a method make grammatical mistakes in their writing, even though they have made improvement in their spoken English. In a qualitative study that was carried out with premedical students at a university in Saudi Arabia, the researchers concluded that in order to improve learners' writing skills, it is necessary to provide them with explicit instruction on a few grammatical rules that are difficult to understand. This is because academic writing demands an advanced knowledge of grammar. A comparison study of the writing samples of learners and the transcriptions of their spoken English revealed that learners produced many grammatical errors in their written work. The findings of the research indicate that concerned EFL teachers should make accommodations for grammar within the communicative approach to explain certain grammar points explicitly, particularly to adult learners, to take care of their English learning skills and develop their communicative skills.

Daloglu (2020) investigated student perceptions on the efficacy of implicit and explicit grammar instruction in acquiring both basic and intricate grammatical structures. Most students held the belief that implicit education was more effective for teaching simple structures, whereas explicit instruction was more effective for teaching complicated structures. The students' use of English outside the classroom was the primary element that had the greatest impact on forming these beliefs. The survey also identified variations in beliefs according to the students' academic year. A survey was conducted among 927 students to collect the data, and the findings were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests. The study proposes the need for additional investigation to examine the elements that influence student attitudes and to compare the beliefs of students and teachers regarding grammar teaching.

Elbashir and Hamza (2022) examined how virtual technologies affect EFL learners' grammar classroom performance during the COVID-19 epidemic. This experiment compared a group of students who took a grammar course remotely via Blackboard

during the COVID-19 epidemic to a control group that took the identical course in person before the pandemic. All 30 participants in each group underwent the identical test. Results show higher test grades in the experimental group compared to the control group. Research indicates that teaching grammar remotely improves EFL learners' performance compared to face-to-face instruction, which has a weaker impact. Researchers would recommend a mix of virtual and face-to-face teaching. The researchers propose a combination of virtual and face-to-face instruction. More research on the causes of poor grades in face-to-face classrooms and techniques to enhance learners' English language grammar proficiency. The following section explores the concept of metacognitive knowledge in relation to EFL grammar learning.

2.2. Metacognitive Research

Metacognitive research has started in the early 1970s in the work of Flavell (1979). He simply defined metacognition as any knowledge or cognitive activity that facilitates and regulates any cognitive activity. This early definition focused on the learners' knowledge processing skills and cognitive engagement. However, metacognition is a multifaceted notion that includes an individual's knowledge of self and others and the cognitive processes and strategic skills that include planning, presenting and assessing one's own cognitive activity (Teng, 2022). Myhill and Jones (2015) examined prominent metalinguistics across research studies (e.g., Gombert, 1992; Jakobson, 1963) however, they adopted Myhill (2011, p. 250) metalinguistic definition as "the explicit bringing into consciousness of an attention to language as an artifact, and the conscious monitoring and manipulation of language to create desired meanings grounded in socially shared understandings". This definition involves both awareness and the usage of language similar to Kuo and Anderson (2008) view that metalinguistics include both aspects. Metalinguistic awareness is implicitly tied to language usage (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002); however, many studies assess learners' awareness through their discourse production.

There may be variations in the specific definitions of metalinguistic awareness, they all share the notion that it entails a concentration on the structure of language that goes beyond its intended significance. According to Thomas (1992, p. 531) metalinguistic awareness refers to an individual's capacity to direct their attention towards language as an independent entity, to contemplate language, and to assess it. Similarly, Jessner (2014, p. 176) defines it as the ability to concentrate on the structure of language and to shift attention between structure and meaning. In other words, the language speaker can redirect their focus from the content and meaning of language to its structure, allowing for analysis.

Metacognition knowledge reflects a high level of language learning. Sato (2022) argued that there are two sides of metacognition development as seen in language learners either as a trait or a state. The difference between these two states can be seen in the language learner's awareness of learning, rate of progress, recall ability and her quality of cognitive engagement.

The present study focuses on learners' metacognitive knowledge of English grammar tenses, as seen in the broader definition of metacognition. Additionally, metacognitive activity is conceptualized as learners' declarative knowledge and their engagement during consciousness-raising tasks. Schraw (1994)

described three dimensions learners adopt to facilitate their cognitive activity and internalize their metacognition knowledge. The first-dimension learners possess their personal knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses in their own cognitive activity. The second dimension includes task knowledge which is seen in the learners' ability to complete a task successfully whereas the third dimension is strategy knowledge, which is the learners' strategies to complete the tasks successfully. Brown (1987) proposed three sides of metacognition knowledge: declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge. Declarative knowledge is a factor that influences learners' performance, procedural knowledge manifests one's own knowledge in applying procedural skills whereas conditional knowledge is knowledge affected by the time and condition that promotes cognitive activity.

Metacognitive knowledge reflects what learners know, either formally or informally, as explicit or implicit (Teng, 2022). There is a need to provoke this knowledge and make learners conscious of their knowledge so they can easily retrieve their metacognitive knowledge and reveal their awareness. Investigating metacognitive knowledge is reflected in learners of all ages however the scope of this research is on university students (Cotterall & Murray, 2009). Few studies have explored young learners' development of metacognitive knowledge (e.g., Annevirta et al., 2007; Annevirta & Vauras, 2001; Flavell, 1979; Marulis et al., 2016; Schneider, 2008; Schneider & Sodian, 1991; Teng & Zhang, 2021). The results mainly showed that children build low levels of metacognitive knowledge over a long period of time. They also, varied individually according to task opportunities, age and early knowledge of declarative and procedural metacognition. On the other hand, older secondary children have more command of their metacognitive knowledge while learning and reflect higher metacognitive knowledge (Edossa et al., 2019) whereas Schneider et al. (2017) reported that their learners were more aware in lower secondary grades and that their metacognitive knowledge decreased. Watson et al. (2021) collected data from 17 lessons of approximately one hour each, with 10–11-year-old students in their final year of primary school. Through audio capture and transcription of the lessons, the researchers coded the conversations for evidence of declarative knowledge (mentioning or discussing grammar) and procedural knowledge (putting grammar into practice through oral composition of text). The study found that there was very limited evidence of students using terminology to explore writing choices.

Several studies have explored undergraduates' metacognitive knowledge. For example, Teng (2020) investigated how EFL learner metacognition relates to writing performance among 882 Chinese students at eight universities. The study found that the students' scores on six different aspects of metacognition were positively correlated with their writing performance, and that scores on procedural knowledge, planning, monitoring, and evaluating were particularly important for writing success. Additionally, metacognitive regulation was found to be a unique predictor of writing proficiency beyond the influence of metacognitive knowledge. Therefore, the study suggests that it is crucial to improve metacognitive regulation skills to enhance university EFL learners' writing abilities.

Son (2022) analysis of Swedish and Vietnamese learners' declarative and procedural knowledge revealed different profiles. The Swedish learners performed better on the procedural tasks,

with 21 of them (62%) using third-person singular present -s on at least on two occasions with different verbs. For Vietnamese learners, only sixteen learners (36%) scored high on the procedural task.

Hassan et al. (2022) study explored the metalinguistic reflective beliefs and teachers' beliefs on grammar content knowledge of Saudi EFL teachers. A cross-sectional survey was conducted to assess the reflective beliefs and content knowledge of the teachers using three elements: reflective thinking in the context of grammar instruction, teachers' attitudes about conceptual knowledge, and instructors' satisfaction with the textbook they were using. The results showed that Saudi EFL teachers have a positive view of their metalinguistic reflective beliefs and teachers' beliefs on grammar content knowledge, and that there is a positive relationship between the two variables. The implications of this study will strengthen the language teaching skills of teachers to strengthen the grammar curriculum of the Saudi context. More research is needed to explore the development of metacognitive knowledge and to test the developmental assumptions if such issues in particular domains such as second language grammar, to ideally lead to conscious language learners.

3. Methodology

Previous research has provided some insight into second language learners' metacognitive development; however, little is known about learners' dynamics between metacognitive knowledge and their L2 grammar awareness. Hence, empirical data are needed to support the investigation between metacognitive knowledge and grammar awareness in adult learners. The hypothesis that learners possess greater metacognitive knowledge may have a better awareness of L2 grammar has led to this investigation and the following three research questions have been outlined:

1. Did the learners' metacognitive knowledge of English tenses develop?
2. What are learners' perceptions of their English language tense learning?
3. How did the learners engage in class and online?

This study was designed to examine the development of undergraduate English language learners' metacognitive knowledge of grammar tenses along with their perceptions. The three tests were identical across all periods, shedding light on the 12 English language tenses. The participants were first-year English-language female undergraduates from a public university in Saudi Arabia. Their English instruction began in primary school grade 4; however, many participants reported that they started to learn basic English during their early years in kindergarten. Participants were given a briefing about the aim of the study and attended on a voluntary basis. They signed a consent sheet agreeing to participate in the current study. The names used in the current study are pseudonymous. The study started with 60 participants and ended with 53 participants attending the study. Students who did not attend the entire study were excluded from the data analysis.

The current study illustrated learners' grammar awareness through three tests: pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest. Additionally, online and in-class activities were given to the learners to promote such awareness and knowledge. The online activities are from *games to learn English* on the English tenses; on the other hand the class activities are from *understanding and using English grammar*

by Azar et al. (2009). These activities aimed at raising learners' awareness of English language tenses and how to use them appropriately in oral and written form as second language learners. The activities were receptive and productive, such as filling in the blank and choosing and using the following tense to write on a specific topic.

The experiment also utilized a blackboard discussion forum where every week the instructor and the participants would discuss an English tense, for example, if it was the present tense, we will give examples that correct each other's examples and discuss how can we use this tense efficiently in the second language. Moreover, online English tense games were given to the students where each tense, they would be an illustration with a sentence, and they must choose the correct answer and they would receive immediate feedback while playing this online game they could do it unlimited times. The examples were derived from Hashemi and Murphy (2004).

The questionnaire was handed at the end of the experiment to illustrate their metacognitive knowledge and to elicit learners' perceptions towards this intervention. The following is a presentation of the learners' results in the tests, questionnaire and class and online engagements.

4. Results

The current study focused on English tenses; tests, questionnaires, and class and online engagement with the consciousness-raising activities.

4.1. Tests

The grammar awareness test investigated learners' knowledge of their cognitive processes, specifically their ability to remember and understand the use of English language tenses. The test was 40 items, and the following is an example of some of the items included in the test:

1. *Our team the football game tomorrow.*
 - a) *Won*
 - b) *will win*
 - c) *win*
 - d) *was winning*

The tests included the 12 English language tenses that were presented in the experiment, such as the present, past, future progressive, past progressive, and present perfect progressive and so on. The test was of receptive to a receptive test prompting learners to remember and understand the usage of English tenses. The duration of the investigation was three months. The pretest was administered at the beginning of the experiment, the posttest was administered on week 10, and the delayed posttest was administered on week 12; hence, 2 weeks after the experiment was over. Table 1 shows the participants' mean and standard deviation in the pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest:

Table 1. Grammar awareness test results (N = 53)

Test	Mean ± Standard deviation
Pre-test	16.13 ± 3.79
Post-test	32.25 ± 6.58
Delayed post-test	30.75 ± 6.79

Mauchly's test of sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, $\chi^2(2) = 6.881, p = .032$, and therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correlation was used ($\epsilon = .594$). The repeated measures ANOVA test indicated that there was a significant difference in the three tests, $F(1.19, 8.32) = 14.92, p = .004$, with a mean of 16.13 for pretest, 32.25 for posttest, 30.75 for delayed. The post hoc paired t-test test using a Bonferroni corrected $\alpha = .017$ indicated that the means of the following pairs were significantly different. Since the $p\text{-value} < \alpha$, H_0 the $p\text{-value}$ equals 0.003545, ($P(x \leq 14.9236) = 0.9965$). The observed effect size η^2 is large, 0.2. This indicates that the magnitude of the difference between the averages is large. The assumption was checked based on the Shapiro-Wilk test ($\alpha = 0.05$). It is assumed that the residuals do follow the normal distribution ($p\text{-value}$ is 0.7881), or more accurately, you can't reject the normality assumption. In general, there was a significant difference in the participants' awareness of English grammar tenses between the pretest, posttest and delayed posttest.

4.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire aimed at eliciting learners' perceptions of their engagement with English tenses. It taps on learners' perceptions towards the intervention, activities and their cognitive and social engagement with English tense online and in-class activities and test. Forty-seven students have completed the questionnaire. The variety in these questions aims first to meet the research objectives and to collect all the necessary data that can support the discussion, results and recommendations in the research. Table 2 illustrates questionnaire items and learners' attitudes towards the grammar awareness approach.

Table 2. Learners' attitudes towards the grammar awareness approach

No.	Item	Agreements, n (%)	Mean
1	It's important to know English language tenses.	39 (87.17)	4.35
2	I prefer the instructor to explain English language tenses.	40 (89.73)	4.48
3	I prefer to memorise English language tenses.	33 (76.91)	3.84
4	It is important to use English language tenses in writing and speech correctly.	41 (94.86)	4.74
5	Knowing English language tenses helps me with reading and writing.	39 (87.17)	4.35
6	Because of the activities I am aware of English language tenses.	38 (84.60)	4.23
7	I understand how to do the activities in class.	38 (84.60)	4.23
8	I believe that I learned English tenses through the activities.	39 (87.17)	4.35
9	It is easy to learn English language tenses.	31 (69.22)	3.46
10	English language tenses are easy, but it is difficult to apply the rule in the activities.	22 (53.84)	2.69

11	The activities helped me notice English tenses in other courses.	41 (94.86)	4.74
12	Including English tenses in other courses can develop my English language learning.	40 (92.30)	4.61
13	Online English tenses activities helped me learn English tenses.	40 (92.30)	4.61
14	It was difficult to do the first English tense exam.	24 (51.28)	2.56
15	It was difficult to do the second English tense exam.	19 (41.02)	2.05
16	The activities helped me do the second English tense exam better.	39 (87.17)	4.35
17	I prefer to do the English tenses activities by myself.	25 (58.97)	2.94
18	I prefer to do the English tenses activities as a group.	33 (76.92)	3.84
19	I will continue to learn English language tenses.	39 (87.17)	4.35
20	I like to participate in class.	35 (82.04)	4.10
21	I like to ask questions and discuss the activities in class.	31 (69.22)	3.46
22	I like to participate in the online forum and ask questions.	33 (76.91)	3.84
23	I prefer to listen to my peers without participating.	19 (41.02)	2.05
24	The English tenses figures helped me learn and use English tenses.	40 (89.74)	4.48
	Total average	35 (77.34)	3.86

The participants highly agreed on the importance of using English language tenses in writing and speech correctly (4.74), the consciousness-raising activities helped them notice English tenses in other courses (4.74), the inclusion of English tenses in other courses can develop their English language learning (4.61), the online English tenses activities helped them learn English tenses (4.61), and English tenses figures helped me learn and use English tenses (4.48). On the other hand, the highly disagreed that English language tenses are easy, but it is difficult to apply the rule in the activities (2.69). It was difficult to do the second English tense exam (2.05), and they prefer to listen to my peers without participating (2.05).

The participants had a positive attitude towards the importance of learning English tenses and applying them with the four English skills (3.86). They also had a positive attitude towards the activities that were in class and that the activities helped them learn English tenses better. They also started noticing English tenses in other courses due to the activities. The participants had a very positive

view of English tense online games on Blackboard. They also liked participating in the online discussion board on English tenses as well as the English tense figures. The activities also raised their awareness of English tenses and helped them do better on the post-test. They also preferred to perform the activities as a group rather than doing them by themselves. They had a positive attitude towards participating in class as well as having the will to continue learning and using English tenses. This can indicate that the participants' perceptions of the awareness intervention that is applied to English tenses are positive.

On the other hand, they disagreed concerning some aspects such as passively listening to their peers, and it was difficult to perform the pre-test. Hence, the questionnaire elicited their views on the grammar awareness approach which was mainly positive.

4.3. Class and Online Engagements

The layout of the classroom gave them the opportunity to engage with other peers. They were put into groups of four or five according to their own preferences and were all mixed proficiency. The treatment consisted of activities of the first five chapters derived from *Understanding and Using English Grammar* by Azar et al. (2009). The five chapters helped the researcher present English verb tenses explicitly to the participants. The first chapter presented an overview of all the 12 English verb tenses and then the second chapter addressed the present and past (simple and progressive) verbs. The third focused on the perfect and progressive tenses and the fourth presented the future tenses. The fifth chapter also presented a review of all the verb tenses. The consciousness-raising tasks were derived from the book. The activities engaged the learners in inductively noticing the 12 targeted English verb tenses patterns. They were also given online English tense games to engage with. Moreover, the instructor constructed some new activities, especially focusing on forming sentences using these tenses but in relation to their experiences and how they would use them in daily life. This was done in the online forum where students would use the targeted verb tense in sentences and post them online. Then the instructor and peers' comment as threads and give feedback. These activities helped the learners recognize how to use the verb tenses in contexts related to them. Table 3 presents an example of how the participants engaged with the instructor using the online forum:

Table 3. Example of the participants online engagement

Instructor: Dr Maha Abdullah "Present Simple" Dear Students, This week we will write examples using the present simple tense.
98097890- Samiya Nabil she speaks English so well
Instructor: Dr Maha Abdullah Good job Samiya but don't forget to capitalize "She" and put a full stop.
67806789- Reem Muath I goes to the university everyday. She plays horseback riding.

23400234- Hana Sultan

I like your sentences Reem!

My sister tidies her room before she studies.

Do they enjoy the party?

We meet every Thursday.

Instructor: Dr Maha Abdullah

Good job Reem but “I go to the university every day” you don’t need “-es” with “I”.

67806789- Reem Muath

Do you want me to rewrite it now?

Instructor: Dr Maha Abdullah

No, it is all right but be careful next time.

The participants engaged actively in the online forum. The instructor monitored their interaction which was very productive. Each week they would write sentences and give feedback on their peers’ sentences concerning the targeted English verb tense.

5. Discussion

The learner’s metacognitive development is demonstrated through their cognitive activity, which facilitates their awareness of English language verb tenses. The metacognition notion can be perceived in the learner’s knowledge of themselves during one’s own cognitive activity as well as their engagement with others through various strategic skills such as planning, presenting and engaging in cognitive activity (Teng, 2022). The study’s findings indicate that the learners’ awareness of their learning process, their recall ability and cognitive engagement have improved, similar to Sato (2022) and Khaleghi et al. (2024).

As previously stated, experiences that integrate explicit learning and implicit learning can facilitate learning in several ways. Explicit and implicit learning foster cognitive engagement that complement one another. Therefore, these two approaches of learning are not mutually incompatible. Both approaches are essential to enhance student learning. The intervention had opportunities for both explicit and implicit learning. The initial part of the intervention focused on explicit learning, while the latter half focused on implicit learning. The lesson design began by incorporating a sequence of exercises that direct students’ awareness towards structures and rules of the 12 English grammar tenses to facilitate their explicit acquisition of these structures. Then the intervention offered students indirect learning chances to utilize these grammatical structures in order to raise their metacognitive knowledge of the grammar tenses, such as the consciousness-raising activities and the class and online engagements. Through their interaction with these resources, students develop an innate understanding of the grammar tenses and are able to apply it in a broader context, extending beyond the initial exercises that were specifically designed for explicit learning. Through integrating explicit and implicit learning opportunities, students were actively engaged in discussions or express their opinions through writing, enabling them to share their reactions. Nevertheless, the explicit approach was directed and focused, whereas the implicit approach is predominantly unorganized.

This study preliminarily focuses on learners’ metacognitive knowledge, which is viewed within the broader definition of

metacognition. Additionally, metacognitive activity is conceptualized as learners’ declarative knowledge and their involvement in consciousness-raising tasks as described by Schraw (1994) and Brown (1987). Learners have facilitated their cognitive activities and internalized their metacognition knowledge by being aware of their own cognitive activity, employing effective learning strategies to successfully complete the task. Their declarative knowledge is evident in their performance, while their procedural knowledge is evident in their ability to apply procedural skills during class consciousness-raising activities, online forums, and games.

The objective of the intervention is to stimulate learners’ awareness and make them conscious of their learning so they can easily retrieve their metacognitive knowledge and demonstrate their awareness (Teng, 2022). The scope of this research focused on undergraduate learners’ command of their metacognitive knowledge while learning, with a particular emphasis on higher-level engagement with metacognitive knowledge (Edossa et al., 2019; Schneider et al., 2017).

The current study aligns with several studies that explored undergraduates’ metacognitive knowledge, such as Teng (2020) investigation of EFL learners’ positive metacognition correlation with their writing performance. Furthermore, the Son (2022) study revealed different results according to different L1 backgrounds which was not the case in the current research.

Eliciting learners’ perceptions on the most effective approach is crucial in the grammar instructional process (Daloglu, 2020; Hassan et al., 2022; Izza & Kuswardani, 2023; Sarandi, 2024; Truong et al., 2022). The current study explored learners’ beliefs on grammar content and the results revealed that the learners have a positive view of their metalinguistic reflective beliefs on grammar content knowledge. Similarly, the present study showed the participants’ agreement of the importance of using proper English verb tense in discourse. They enjoyed engaging in consciousness-raising activities, online forums and activities. However, they noted that they preferred class engagement more than the online discussion forum which contradicts with Elbashir and Hamza (2022).

The study suggests that it is crucial to improve metacognitive regulation skills to enhance university EFL learners’ English tense knowledge and usage. Further research is needed to explore the developmental factors of metacognitive knowledge and to determine the potential developmental factors in specific domains such as second language grammar to ideally foster conscious language learners. The results can assist English educators in adapting their instructional methods and strategies to optimize students’ understanding of grammar and improve their grammar learning methodologies for long-lasting advantages. This study enhances the existing body of research on the attitudes of EFL Asian students studying towards grammar learning and their utilization of strategies for learning grammar.

6. Concluding Remarks

The results of this study show a strong relationship between the learners’ metacognitive knowledge and their engagement in tasks. It is concluded that the participants have developed their metacognitive knowledge of English language tenses and manifested proficiency in the 12 tenses. They also had a favourable

performance in the online games and blackboard discussions. The tests showed a positive correlation between the students' proficiency in English tenses and their metacognitive awareness, as a result of students developing metacognitive awareness has shown in their developed achievement.

The analysis of learner engagement in conscious-raising activities raises several limitations for future research. As noted, we did not measure the length of these engagements, and it effects positively or negatively affects learners' awareness of English tenses. Also, the current study did not compare the class and online activities, which had the greatest effect on the learners. Moreover, a larger student population is needed to understand pedagogies that foster more about grammar metacognition and awareness. This reasonable study size suggests that the explicit consciousness-raising approach offers teachers and students potential space to build metalinguistic awareness. As students engage in metalanguage, they support Myhill and Newman (2016, p. 178) conclusion that "classroom talk can be the cultural tool which supports the construction of shared declarative metalinguistic knowledge". It has been noted that engaging with language features can enhance learners' explicit knowledge of the language, and current work in cognitive linguistics Evans (2019) might also provide avenues of research.

Additionally, developing language teachers' pedagogical skills through professional training initiatives can cater to second language learners' needs. Another factor to consider when integrating explicit and implicit learning possibilities is the preferences and learning styles of the learners. Certain learners may have a greater inclination towards explicit learning, while others may lean more towards implicit learning. By acknowledging and addressing these distinctions during class, you can acquaint students with aspects of second language acquisition (SLA) and clarify the collaborative role of explicit and implicit learning in facilitating their learning process. Having this knowledge can increase students' inclination to actively participate in both sorts of learning opportunities.

On the basis of the conclusion of the current study, the following are educational implications. Unquestionably, a collective theoretical framework for developing grammar awareness will involve input from various disciplinary approaches and willingness to work across disciplinary lines and can enhance language instructors' pedagogical skills. There is a need to sustain learners' language awareness and performance by motivating self-learning skills as well as online learning programs. Also, universities should focus on developing undergraduate language learners' metacognitive awareness of language features through online language games. Saudi Vision 2030 has been successful in attracting a significant number of English language speakers to visit and work in the country. As a result, there has been an increase in interactions with native English speakers. Therefore, it is crucial for second language users to develop proper interaction skills when communicating with them.

List of Abbreviations

SLA	Second language acquisition
EFL	English as a foreign language
ESL	English as a second language
L2	Second language
FFI	Form-focused instruction

MFI	Meaning-focused instruction
FonF	Focus on form
FonFs	Focus of forms
CLT	Communicative language teaching

Declarations

Availability of Data and Materials

Most of the data analysed are presented in the current study. It is possible to provide the datasets upon request.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

Funding

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Acknowledgements

Not Applicable

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Ethical Approval

The current study abided by the rules and regulations of ethical research by the Deanship of Scientific Research at the University of Tabuk.

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