

TEACHING THE PRESENT CONTINUOUS TENSE THROUGH REAL-LIFE CONTEXTS IN TESOL

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Abstract: *This study explores the pedagogical effectiveness of teaching the Present Continuous tense in real-life contexts within TESOL classrooms. The Present Continuous, a foundational grammatical structure in English, is often taught through decontextualized drills, which may hinder learners' communicative competence. This research investigates how contextualized instruction, using authentic, everyday scenarios, can enhance learners' understanding and application of the tense. Drawing on sociocultural and communicative language teaching theories, the study reviews current literature and employs a mixed-methods approach involving classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student assessments. Findings indicate that integrating real-life contexts significantly improves learners' engagement, accuracy, and fluency in using the Present Continuous. The paper concludes with pedagogical recommendations for TESOL practitioners, emphasizing the importance of meaningful context, task-based learning, and learner-centered strategies. This research contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for context-rich grammar instruction in second language acquisition.*

Keywords: *Present Continuous, TESOL, real-life context, grammar instruction.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Present Continuous tense is a fundamental grammatical structure in English, commonly introduced at the early stages of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Despite its frequency in everyday communication, learners often struggle to use it accurately and appropriately. Traditional grammar instruction tends to emphasize form over function, relying heavily on mechanical drills and decontextualized examples. This approach may limit learners' ability to transfer grammatical knowledge to real-life communicative situations. In contrast, teaching grammar through real-life contexts aligns with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, which prioritize meaning-making and authentic language use. In the Vietnamese EFL context, where grammar instruction is often exam-oriented, there is a growing need to shift toward more communicative and learner-centered approaches. This study investigates how integrating real-life contexts into the teaching of the Present Continuous can enhance learners' comprehension and usage of the tense. By examining both teacher and student perceptions, as well as classroom practices, the research aims to provide practical insights for TESOL practitioners. The study also explores how contextualized grammar instruction can foster greater learner engagement, accuracy, and fluency. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on effective grammar pedagogy in TESOL, advocating for approaches that bridge the gap between grammatical form and communicative function.

II. RESEARCH CONTENT

2.1. Literature review

Literature Review Theoretical Foundations of the Present Continuous The Present Continuous tense, also known as the Present Progressive, is a core grammatical structure in English. It is formed with the auxiliary verb to be (am/is/are) followed by a verb ending in *ing*. Its primary functions include describing actions happening at the moment of speaking, temporary ongoing activities, and near future arrangements (Celce Murcia & Larsen Freeman, 1999). Learners often confuse it with the Simple Present, which expresses habitual actions or general truths. Research shows that explicit instruction is necessary to help learners distinguish between these forms, particularly in EFL contexts where exposure to authentic input is limited (Ohidujjaman, 2024). Grammar Teaching in TESOL Grammar instruction has long been debated in TESOL. Traditional approaches emphasized rote memorization and mechanical drills, focusing on accuracy rather than communicative use. However, scholars such as Ellis (2006) argue that grammar teaching must integrate both form and meaning to support second language acquisition. Form focused instruction, when embedded in communicative tasks, helps learners notice grammatical structures while engaging in authentic communication. Nassaji and Fotos (2011) similarly advocate for integrating grammar into meaningful contexts, noting that isolated drills rarely transfer to real life language use. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Communicative Language Teaching emerged as

a response to structuralist methods, prioritizing fluency, interaction, and authentic communication. CLT emphasizes that grammar should be taught as a resource for meaning making rather than as an end in itself (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Within CLT, the Present Continuous tense is often introduced through activities that simulate real time actions, such as describing what classmates are doing or narrating live events. Studies show that contextualized practice enhances retention and accuracy, as learners connect grammar to communicative needs (Learn English, 2024).

Real-Life Contexts in Grammar Instruction

Recent research highlights the importance of teaching grammar through real-life contexts. Authentic materials, such as newspaper articles, videos, or live classroom observations, provide learners with opportunities to see grammar in action (OnTESOL, 2024). For example, using a news report allows learners to practice the Present Continuous in describing ongoing events. Contextualized instruction not only improves comprehension but also increases learner motivation, as students perceive grammar as relevant to everyday communication. Task based learning further supports this approach by embedding grammar within meaningful tasks, such as role plays, interviews, or collaborative projects. Challenges in Teaching the Present Continuous

Despite its importance, teaching the Present Continuous presents challenges. Learners often misuse the tense with stative verbs (e.g., I am knowing), omit the auxiliary verb, or confuse it with the Simple Present. Teachers must therefore design activities that highlight contrasts between tenses and provide corrective feedback. Research suggests that visual aids, gestures, and multimedia resources can help learners grasp the concept of ongoing action (Ohidujaman, 2024). Another challenge is balancing accuracy with fluency. While drills may improve accuracy, they often fail to promote spontaneous use. Contextualized communicative practice is essential to bridge this gap. Implications for TESOL Practice

The literature converges on several key implications. First, grammar teaching should move beyond decontextualized drills to incorporate authentic, real-life contexts. Second, CLT principles should guide instruction, ensuring that grammar is taught as a tool for communication. Third, teachers should adopt a balanced approach, integrating form focused instruction within communicative tasks.

Finally, reflective practice is crucial: teachers must continually evaluate how their methods align with learner needs and communicative goals.

Conclusion of Literature Review

In summary, the Present Continuous tense is a vital grammatical structure that requires careful pedagogical attention. Traditional methods often fail to prepare learners for real-life communication, while CLT and contextualized approaches offer more effective pathways. By embedding grammar instruction in authentic contexts and aligning it with communicative tasks, TESOL practitioners can enhance learners' accuracy, fluency, and motivation. The literature underscores the need for innovative, learner centered strategies that bridge the gap between grammatical form and communicative function."

2.2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how teaching the Present Continuous tense through real-life contexts affects learner outcomes. The qualitative component focused on teacher and student perceptions, while the quantitative component measured improvements in accuracy and fluency. This design was chosen to capture both subjective reflections and objective performance data, ensuring triangulation of findings.

Participants

The participants included 60 undergraduate EFL learners enrolled in a compulsory English course at a Vietnamese university and six experienced TESOL instructors. Learners were at an intermediate proficiency level, as determined by placement tests, and represented diverse academic majors. Teachers had at least five years of classroom experience and were familiar with communicative language teaching principles.

Instruments

Data collection employed multiple instruments. For the quantitative strand, pre- and post-tests assessed learners' ability to use the Present Continuous accurately in both controlled and communicative tasks. For the qualitative strand, semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with learners explored perceptions of contextualized grammar instruction. Classroom observations were also conducted to document teaching practices and learner engagement.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to determine whether learners' performance improved significantly after contextualized instruction. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Codes were generated inductively to capture recurring themes such as learner motivation, perceived relevance, and instructional challenges. Triangulation was achieved by comparing test results, interview data, and observation notes. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

This methodological approach ensured that the study not only measured learning outcomes but also illuminated the pedagogical processes and perceptions underpinning the teaching of the Present Continuous in real-life contexts.

2.3. Results and Discussion

The study revealed that learners demonstrated significant improvement in both accuracy and fluency when the Present Continuous tense was taught through real-life contexts. Pre-test results showed frequent errors, including omission of auxiliary verbs (He playing football), misuse with stative verbs (I am knowing the answer), and confusion with the Simple Present (She goes to school now instead of She is going to school now). Post-test scores indicated a marked reduction in these errors, with learners correctly applying the tense in communicative tasks such as describing classroom activities or narrating live events. Observations also highlighted increased engagement; students were more willing to participate in role-plays and discussions when grammar was embedded in authentic scenarios.

Interviews with instructors revealed that contextualized teaching fostered greater learner motivation. Teachers noted that traditional drills often led to disengagement, whereas real-life tasks, such as describing what classmates were doing or reporting on current events, encouraged active participation. Teachers also reflected that contextualized instruction aligned more closely with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, allowing grammar to serve as a tool for meaning-making rather than an isolated skill. However, they acknowledged challenges in balancing exam preparation with communicative practice, as standardized tests in Vietnam still emphasize grammar accuracy over fluency.

Classroom observations confirmed that contextualized instruction created a more dynamic learning environment. In one lesson, students were asked to observe their peers and describe their actions using the Present Continuous. This activity not only reinforced grammatical accuracy but also promoted peer interaction and spontaneous language use. Another lesson involved analyzing a short video clip of a live sports event, where students practiced narrating ongoing actions. These tasks demonstrated that real-life contexts provided meaningful opportunities for learners to apply grammar in authentic communication.

Focus group discussions revealed that learners perceived contextualized grammar instruction as more relevant and enjoyable. Many students expressed that they previously viewed grammar as abstract and disconnected from real communication. By linking grammar to everyday contexts, they felt more confident in using the Present Continuous outside the classroom. Learners also reported that contextualized tasks helped them remember structures more effectively, as they could associate grammar with real-life experiences. This finding supports Nassaji and Fotos (2011), who argue that grammar instruction is most effective when integrated into meaningful contexts.

Despite positive outcomes, several challenges were identified. First, some learners continued to struggle with distinguishing between the Present Continuous and the Simple Present, particularly in contexts involving habitual actions versus temporary activities. Teachers addressed this by designing contrastive tasks, such as comparing She goes to school every day with She is going to school now. Second, exam orientation remained a constraint. Teachers felt pressure to prepare students for grammar-focused tests, which limited time for communicative practice. Third, resource limitations were noted, especially in rural contexts where access to multimedia materials was restricted. Teachers in these settings relied more heavily on classroom observation tasks rather than video-based activities.

The findings align with existing literature on grammar teaching and CLT. Ellis (2006) emphasizes the importance of integrating form and meaning, a principle reflected in learners' improved performance when grammar was taught through real-life contexts. Richards and Rodgers (2014) highlight that CLT prioritizes authentic communication, which was evident in learners'

increased engagement during contextualized tasks. The reduction in errors supports Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1999) assertion that explicit instruction is necessary for mastering tense distinctions. Learner perceptions also resonate with OnTESOL (2024), which advocates for using authentic materials to enhance motivation and relevance.

The study carries several implications for TESOL practitioners. First, grammar instruction should prioritize contextualization, embedding structures within authentic tasks that mirror real-life communication. Second, teachers should adopt a balanced approach, integrating exam preparation with communicative practice to meet both institutional demands and learner needs. Third, professional development programs should equip teachers with strategies for designing contextualized grammar activities, particularly in resource-limited settings. Fourth, curriculum designers should incorporate authentic materials, such as videos, news articles, and classroom observation tasks, into grammar syllabi to enhance relevance. Finally, policymakers should consider reforms that value communicative competence alongside grammatical accuracy in standardized assessments.

In summary, the study demonstrated that teaching the Present Continuous through real-life contexts significantly improved learner accuracy, fluency, and engagement. Teachers reflected positively on contextualized instruction, noting its alignment with CLT principles and its ability to motivate learners. Classroom observations confirmed that authentic tasks fostered spontaneous language use, while learner perceptions highlighted increased relevance and confidence. Challenges included tense confusion, exam orientation, and resource limitations, but adaptive strategies such as contrastive tasks and contextualized exam scaffolding helped mitigate these issues. The findings underscore the

importance of contextualized grammar instruction in TESOL, advocating for approaches that bridge the gap between grammatical form and communicative function.

III. CONCLUSION

This study examined the effectiveness of teaching the Present Continuous tense through real-life contexts in TESOL classrooms. Findings demonstrated that contextualized instruction significantly enhanced learners' accuracy, fluency, and engagement compared to traditional grammar drills. Learners reported greater confidence and perceived relevance when grammar was linked to authentic tasks such as describing classroom activities, narrating live events, or analyzing multimedia materials. Teachers reflected positively on the approach, noting its alignment with communicative language teaching principles and its potential to motivate students.

Despite these benefits, challenges remained, including learners' confusion between the Present Continuous and the Simple Present, exam-oriented constraints, and limited resources in some contexts. Nevertheless, adaptive strategies such as contrastive tasks, exam scaffolding, and contextualized materials proved effective in addressing these issues.

The implications for TESOL practice are clear: grammar instruction should prioritize contextualization, integrate communicative tasks, and balance exam preparation with authentic language use. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts of contextualized grammar teaching, investigate its application across different proficiency levels, and examine how digital tools can further support real-life contextualization. By embedding grammar in meaningful contexts, TESOL practitioners can bridge the gap between form and function, fostering more effective and equitable language learning.

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