Strategies for Mastery of Time and Sequence in English For Esl Learners

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Abstract: This article examines the challenges ESL learners face in mastering temporal expressions such as before, after, and while. These difficulties often stem from cross-linguistic interference, cognitive load, and limited exposure. The paper highlights common learner errors and presents effective teaching strategies, including storytelling, task-based learning, visual aids, grammar exercises, and feedback. By integrating cognitive and pedagogical approaches, the article offers practical solutions for improving learners' accuracy and fluency in using temporal language.

Introduction: Mastering temporal language is crucial for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners as it enables them to communicate ideas clearly, describe sequences of events, and participate effectively in both spoken and written communication. Temporal expressions such as before, after, while, during, and then serve to organize discourse logically and coherently.

Despite their importance, temporal expressions pose persistent challenges for ESL learners due to the abstract nature of time concepts, differences in grammatical structure between languages, and the cognitive demands associated with sequencing. For instance, learners whose first languages (e.g., Uzbek) rely less on explicit temporal markers or allow more flexible word order may struggle with English's more rigid syntactic patterns.

Understanding the linguistic, cognitive, and cross-linguistic factors that impact the acquisition of temporal expressions is essential for educators and researchers. This paper explores common learner difficulties and proposes practical, evidence-based strategies for teaching temporal expressions in the ESL classroom.

METHODS

This article draws on a theoretical-practical framework by synthesizing:

- Classroom-based observation of common learner errors.

Contrastive linguistic analysis (particularly English vs. Uzbek temporal structures).

- Instructional strategy review, including: Contextualized practice through storytelling, Task-Based Learning (TBL), timelines, Grammar-focused exercises, Feedback and peer review techniques.

- Teaching strategies are illustrated through classroom activity designs aimed at reinforcing temporal sequencing, clarifying connector usage, and improving grammatical accuracy.

RESULTS

- Common Challenges Identified

Misuse or Overuse of Connectors: Learners often confuse similar temporal words (e.g., before vs. after, while vs. during) or overuse basic ones like then.

Omission of Temporal Markers: Influenced by L1 (e.g., Uzbek), students may skip connectors, producing disjointed sequences: "I woke up. I ate. I went to school."

Word Order Errors: Transferring SOV structure from

Uzbek to SVO in English leads to misordered sentences: "After school I homework did."

Tense-Aspect Confusion: Learners misuse tenses with temporal adverbs, e.g., "I am reading a book before I go to bed." (instead of future simple).

- Effective Teaching Techniques

Storytelling Activities: Engaging learners in recounting personal experiences using structured temporal connectors.

Task-Based Sequencing: Describing processes (e.g., making tea) using first, next, then, finally.

Visual Aids: Timelines and story maps to illustrate chronological relationships.

Grammar Exercises: Gap-fills and sentence reordering with temporal focus.

Feedback & Peer Review: Error correction and discussion of alternative connector choices.

DISCUSSION

According to Halliday and Hasan, conjunctions serve as a key mechanism of cohesion in English by "marking relations between clauses or sections of text," including temporal relations such as sequence, simultaneity, and duration. Temporal connectors like before, after, while, and then are critical in maintaining the logical flow of ideas, particularly in narrative or procedural discourse. [2]

For ESL learners, mastering these cohesive devices is essential for constructing clear and coherent narratives. As Halliday and Hasan emphasize, "the presence or absence of cohesive ties… can make the difference between a coherent text and a mere sequence of sentences". Therefore, teaching strategies should focus not only on grammatical correctness but also on how temporal expressions contribute to overall text cohesion and comprehensibility.

One of the most common difficulties that ESL learners face is the misuse or overuse of temporal connectors (e.g., before, after, while). Learners may incorrectly use connectors that are semantically similar in their first language, but not always interchangeable in English, or they may struggle to choose the correct connector based on the context.

An Uzbek learner might say, "I will do my homework before I go to bed" when the intended meaning is "After I go to bed, I will do my homework." This error could stem from the learner's overreliance on L1 structures and misunderstanding the nuanced use of temporal adverbials in English. Explicit practice with contrasting temporal connectors through targeted exercises, such as matching sentences with the correct connectors or gap-fill exercises. Use contextual

examples to highlight how different temporal words convey distinct meanings, and ensure learners understand the sequencing logic behind their use.

Some ESL learners may omit temporal connectors altogether, either due to unfamiliarity with their use or because their L1 does not rely heavily on explicit connectors. In languages like Uzbek, the absence of multiple linking words may lead learners to construct sentences without the temporal markers that are crucial in English. A learner may say, "I woke up, ate breakfast, went to school" without any connectors to indicate the sequence of events. Modeling is crucial - teachers can model correct sentences and emphasize the importance of connectors when recounting stories or personal experiences. Encourage students to practice sequencing activities (e.g., telling a story, summarizing a process) using explicit temporal markers to reinforce their understanding of event order.

Learners often confuse similar temporal expressions such as before vs. until, while vs. during, and after vs. later. These words have overlapping meanings, but they cannot always be used interchangeably, leading to confusion. A learner might say, "I will study while I finish my lunch" instead of "I will study during my lunch," due to a misunderstanding of when to use each term. In this case, while suggests simultaneity, while during refers to a longer period of time in which something happens. Clarification and comparison are important in such situations. Teachers should use real-world examples to distinguish the subtle differences between temporal words. Visual aids like Venn diagrams or charts can also help learners visualize the overlapping meanings. Provide practice exercises where learners have to choose the correct temporal word based on contextual clues.

As mentioned earlier, learners from languages with flexible word order (such as Uzbek) may struggle with English's rigid Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure when using temporal words. They might place temporal connectors at the wrong point in the sentence or fail to maintain the correct sequence of events. An Uzbek learner might say, "After I finished my work, I home went" instead of "After I finished my work, I went home." Teachers can provide sentence strips, word order exercises or guided writing prompts that emphasize proper word order when temporal expressions are used. Reinforce the SVO structure in English, especially when learners are constructing sentences with both temporal adverbs and verb phrases. The correct use of tense (past, present, future) and aspect (simple, progressive, perfect) in temporal language can be especially challenging. Learners may misuse the present perfect or the future progressive, or fail to match tense with temporal adverbs correctly. A

learner might say, "I am reading a book before I go to bed," where the intended meaning is "I will read a book before I go to bed." Here, there's confusion between present continuous (indicating an ongoing action) and future simple (indicating an action to be completed in the future). Teachers should focus on tense-aspect rules in conjunction with temporal words. For example, practice the difference between actions that are ongoing (using the progressive aspect) and those that are complete (using the simple tense or perfect aspect). Provide contextual practice, using clear time markers such as before, after, when, and by the time to practice the appropriate tense in different scenarios.

Below we wrote different teaching methods and technics that can be used during the lesson to teach temporal words. One of the most effective ways to teach temporal language is through contextualized practice, where learners are exposed to temporal expressions in real-world situations. Using storytelling as a teaching tool provides learners with a natural, engaging context for practicing the sequencing of events. Encourage learners to tell their personal stories or narrate events from their daily lives, focusing on the use of temporal markers like before, after, during, next, and finally. Teachers can model storytelling by recounting their own experiences and highlighting the use of temporal connectors. [1]

Example Activity:

Step 1: Ask students to recount a memorable event in their life, such as a recent holiday, a birthday party or a trip. As the students speak, prompt them to use temporal expressions to describe the sequence of events.

"First, I woke up early. Then, I had breakfast. After that, I went to the beach."

Step 2: After the storytelling session, provide students with feedback on their use of temporal words and offer suggestions for improving their sequencing. This approach helps learners practice temporal words in context, improving both fluency and understanding.

Task-based learning (TBL) involves using real-life tasks that require learners to apply language in meaningful ways. By completing tasks that involve sequencing events or actions, learners naturally encounter and practice temporal expressions. Design tasks where learners must describe a process or sequence of events, such as explaining how to make a sandwich, describing a routine, or sequencing steps in a science experiment. These tasks can be performed both individually and in groups, allowing for collaborative learning and exchange. [4]

Example Activity:

Step 1: Present learners with a task that involves sequencing steps in a process, such as "How to make a cup of tea." Have learners work in pairs or groups to list the steps in the correct order, ensuring they use appropriate temporal connectors (e.g., first, next, after, then).

"First, boil the water. Then, put the tea bag in the cup. After that, pour the hot water into the cup."

Step 2: Once students have completed their task, ask them to present their process to the class using complete sentences. This approach helps learners practice temporal sequencing while engaging in a meaningful and practical language use activity.

Visual aids, such as timelines, charts, and graphic organizers, can significantly help learners understand the sequence of events and the relationships between them. Timelines visually represent the chronological order of events, making abstract temporal concepts more concrete. Teachers can use graphic organizers (e.g., story maps or sequencing diagrams) to help learners organize events in a logical order.

Example Activity:

Step 1: Provide students with a timeline showing key events in a story, such as the plot of a short film or a historical event.

Step 2: Ask students to place temporal markers (e.g., before, after, during) at the appropriate points on the timeline.

Step 3: Have learners describe the events using the temporal connectors they identified on the timeline:

"First, the king made a decree. Then, the people gathered in the town square. After that, they began to protest."

By using visual aids, learners can see the relationships between events, which helps them understand the structure of temporal language.

To deepen learners` understanding of temporal language, targeted grammar exercises can be useful. These exercises should focus on the correct use of temporal adverbials and their placement within complex sentences. Provide learners with structured grammar exercises where they must choose the correct temporal word or phrase for each sentence.

Practice sentence construction and paraphrasing to help learners understand how to create grammatically accurate sentences with temporal expressions.

Example Activity:

Step 1: Provide students with a set of incomplete sentences that are missing temporal words. Ask them to choose the appropriate temporal connector to complete the sentence correctly (e.g., before vs. after).

"_____ I went to the store, I called my friend."

"I went to the store _____ I called my friend."

Step 2: Have students rewrite the sentences in different forms, ensuring the correct use of temporal structures:

"Before I went to the store, I called my friend."

"After I called my friend, I went to the store."

By completing these grammar exercises, learners gain practice with using temporal words in various contexts. [5]

Providing timely and constructive feedback is key to helping learners improve their use of temporal language. When learners make errors, especially in complex sentence construction, teachers should offer specific, actionable feedback. Correct errors related to temporal word use gently, ensuring that learners understand both the correct form and the meaning behind it. Provide peer correction opportunities, where learners can work together to identify and correct temporal errors in each other's writing or speaking.

Example Activity:

After completing a task like storytelling or task-based learning, ask learners to peer-review each other's work, specifically looking for correct use of temporal connectors. Encourage learners to provide feedback by asking questions such as:

"Why did you choose before instead of after?"

"Does the sentence make sense if we swap then for next?"

This helps reinforce correct usage and encourages active learning from both peers and teachers.

CONCLUSION

Mastering temporal language is a vital component of second language acquisition, particularly for ESL learners who must navigate the complexities of time, sequence, and event relationships in English. Temporal words such as before, after, while, during, and next serve as essential tools for constructing clear and coherent communication. To effectively teach temporal language, educators must adopt a range of teaching strategies that engage learners and provide them with opportunities for strategies such as contextualized practice through storytelling, task-based learning, the use of visual aids like timelines, and focused grammar exercises are essential in helping learners overcome the difficulties associated with temporal expressions. Additionally, providing constructive feedback and encouraging peer collaboration can further reinforce the correct usage of temporal connectors in both spoken and written English.

Ultimately, the ability to use temporal expressions accurately is fundamental to mastering the sequencing of events, whether in conversation, writing, or academic discourse. By focusing on these core aspects of language learning, educators can help shape more confident and competent English speakers.

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