

Increasing Third Grade's Mastery of Simple Present Tense Using Flashcards

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Abstract

Mastering the simple present tense can be very difficult for EFL young learners because tenses contain abstract concepts that do not exist in the first language of EFL learners. The third graders at Permai Elementary School, North Jakarta, also encountered problems in mastering the tense when they are taught using the lecture method. To solve the problem, action research was conducted by using flashcards. The action research was carried out in two cycles in August to October 2019. Involving 30 third graders, quantitative and qualitative data were collected employing tests, observation, and questionnaires. The findings revealed that flashcards use managed to increase the students' achievement in learning the simple present tense. The mean scores of the three tests administered during the action research increased from 36.69 to 65.73 and to 75.00. The use of flashcards also changed the students' attitude from mainly negative to mainly positive. The mean of the positive responses increased from 20.4% in the pre-action survey to 83.89% in the post-action survey.

Keywords: EFL, flashcards, simple present tense, young learners

INTRODUCTION

Despite the continuing debate on the status of grammar instruction in the field of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) teaching and learning, various studies indicate that EFL learners find explicit grammar instruction helpful. Since the number of communicative input and the real-world required to activate the target language communicative functions are limited, most EFL teachers tend to use grammar-based as the norm (Male, 2011). In line with this, Cakir (2011) stated that systematic and purposeful teaching of grammar is viewed vital to master the target language so that grammar, either directly or indirectly, is taught in almost all levels of education.

To activate the communicative function in every language, the speaker should acquire the four language skills. To realize it, he or she should master the language components, i.e. vocabulary and pronunciation and the system of operating these skills and components, i.e. grammar. Without grammar mastery, it will be difficult to use the language appropriately in appropriate situations.

One of the most important elements of English grammar to master by EFL learners is tenses. However, most EFL learners, whose mother tongue does not belong to the Indo-European family, find tenses difficult. The major reason is that the languages not included in the Indo-European family, particularly in the Germanic groups have only the concept of time but not tenses, while English has both time and tenses. Muhsin (2016) stated that “Indonesian students find tenses to be most difficult to learn.” *The following misused sentences commonly produced by Indonesian students illustrate this phenomenon: *I live in Medan two years ago, *We have finished the project yesterday, *I am know where she put the book.* The absence of tenses concept in their first language makes it hard for EFL students to master and use the rules of tenses. Therefore, they frequently commit errors.

While teaching the third graders of Permai Elementary School, North Jakarta, I found that the students continuously committed errors in using the simple present tense. Most of them seemed to misunderstand why some sentences must use auxiliaries, is, am, and are instead of auxiliaries do and does. I always encountered erroneous sentences they produced like **My father is work in the office, *We are not study in the classroom, and *He sweep the floor every morning.* Many of them were also confused in determining which subjects of sentences should use auxiliaries do and which ones should use does. What is more, my trials to enable them to avoid such errors by explicitly explaining related rules and analyzing the errors they committed seem fruitless.

Based on the pre-observations I conducted concerning the problems, I found that the explicit grammatical rules instruction does not work well for students at their level of education. Understanding the connection in the form of the verb and their concept of time seemed very difficult for them to achieve merely by learning the rules. The results of my ideas sharing with colleagues revealed that at the age of third graders, the students are naturally curious and enthusiastic to discover the world around them to acquire new experiences, including learning a new language. However, they can learn more effectively through visual media.

After consulting some relevant literature, I found that one of the most effective visual means for teaching tenses to young EFL learners is flashcards. Flashcards are cards on which words or phrases or sentences are printed with or without pictures. Cross (1991) defined a flashcard as a simple picture on a piece of paper or card, which is probably the most widely visual aids in language teaching. To make them have higher positive effects on students' visual learning process, the words and the pictures in flashcards need to be printed clear and colorful. They can be used for any subjects, and for many students using flashcards is a fun way to learn new vocabulary and grammar (Gelfgren, 2012). Some previous studies (Widyarini, 2008; Nadziroh, 2010) revealed that flashcards are effective to develop students' vocabulary. Another study (Hartono, 2018) revealed that flashcards improve students' achievement in learning the present continuous tense. Realizing the effectiveness of using flashcards to enhance students' learning, including tenses, I finally decided to conduct an action research by using the learning media to help my students improve their mastery of the simple present tense.

Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions: (1) Does the use of flashcards improve the third graders' mastery of the simple present tense at Permai Elementary School, Jakarta? (2) How does the use of flashcards improve the third graders at Permai Elementary School, Jakarta? This action research can hopefully shed light on the way and the benefits of using flashcards in young learners' EFL classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Simple Present Tense

The simple present expresses habitual or everyday activities, events or situations. The events or situations exist now, have existed in the past, and probably will exist in the future (Azar, 2002). Specifically, the simple present is a verb tense with four main uses. First, it is used to express repeated or regular actions in the present time, e.g. *She takes Bus 22 to her office* and *The train leaves every 20 minutes*. Second, it is used to reveal facts, e.g., *A cat has four legs* and *The earth is a planet*. Third, it is used to express habits. E.g., *I wake up at 5.00 every morning* and *They visit their country house every weekend*. Fourth, it is used to express things that are always true. E.g., *They use English in the classroom* and *Indonesia consists of more than 17,000 islands*.

To master the simple present tense, it is essential to be familiar with three elements: verb conjugation, verb form, and verb function. These three elements can be very challenging for most EFL learners, especially if they still have limited knowledge about language structure. Therefore, the teaching tenses to primary school students might not be the same as teaching them to adults. EFL primary school students have less proficiency and knowledge about English tenses. Therefore, teachers have to be more creative in teaching them. There are many ways to improve students' mastery in the simple present tense, and one of them is by using flashcards. Male (2018) stated that the use of flashcards as a media can be effectively used in teaching grammar. Also, if used appropriately, flashcards are a powerful memory tool (Edwards, 2006).

Flashcards

A flashcard is a paper or cardboard containing words, phrases or sentences with or without pictures. Kasihani (2007) defined flashcard as cards measure A4 papers amount to 30 to 50 cards and every card contains a picture and name of the picture. Additionally, Halliwell (1992) defined flashcards as a kind of card contains pictures, words, instructions that are arranged in various combinations.

Flashcards are easy to make, and they can be used for any subjects. In language teaching, using flashcards can be a fun way to learn vocabulary, vocabulary, and grammar. They can also be used to facilitate reading, discussion, role play, and quiz (Gelfgren, 2012). Thus, these media can effectively help English teachers to present learning materials in various ways of learning and teaching activities. They also help students to understand their teachers' explanations in interesting ways. Eslahcar (2012: 137) stated, "Flashcards are useful for drilling new letters, syllables, words, and other information. ... Flashcards can bear vocabulary, historical dates, formulas or any subject matter that can be learned via a question and answer format."

The inclusion of pictures on flashcards is valuable because appropriate pictures bring the image of reality into the abstract concepts encountered in language learning. Joklova (2009) posited that "The picture is used in a more meaningful and "real-life communicative" way than being just displayed for students to say what they can see. This will probably have a greater impact on the retention of a piece of vocabulary again and

also subsequently on the ability to use it in communication” (p. 19). Pictures do not only bring images of reality but also present fun element in the class (Hill, 1990).

Flashcards' effectiveness could increase if text and pictures are colorful because young learners are interested in something unique and colorful. That's why the use of visual aids such as pictures, charts, and flashcards is highly recommended in the teaching-learning process. The study of Cuban (2001) indicated that 1% of what is learned is from the sense of taste, 1.5% of what is learned is from the sense of touch, 3.5% of what is learned is from the logic of smell, 11% of what is educated is from the logic of hearing and 83% of what is learned is from the sense of sight. Studying with visual media is effective, enjoyable and interesting to young learners.

METHOD

This study is an action research design which is defined by Pardede (2016) as “a principled way of observing one's teaching, reflecting upon it, and trying to analyze its weaknesses and increase its strengths. ... through which educators can help themselves and their students overcome the specific problems they encounter in the learning and teaching process” (p.143). In this study, the investigated teaching context or the action implemented is the teaching of the simple present tense by using flashcards.

The action research was implemented in the the four-stage cyclical process, i.e. plan, action, observe, and reflect. In details, the 14 steps described by Pardede (2019) were followed in the implementation. During the implementation, quantitative and qualitative data were collected to see whether flashcards could increase third-grade students' mastery of simple present tense and how the process takes place. The quantitative data was the students' pre-test and post-test scores, and the qualitative data were collected through observation and a questionnaire.

This study was carried out in two cycles in August to October 2019. Each cycle was held in four sessions, and each session was held in 40 minutes). The participants were the students 30 third-graders, 16 females and 14 males, of Permai Elementary School located in North Jakarta.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was undertaken by following four steps, i.e., planning, action, observation, and reflection. In the planning step, I designed the lesson plan, flashcards, pretest, posttest, observation sheet, and question items for the questionnaire. The action step referred to the application of the entire planned activities. To guarantee its effectiveness, the observation assisted by the teacher-collaborator was conducted. The data obtained through the tests, observation, and a questionnaire were then evaluated in the reflection phase. With the teacher-collaborator, the results of the reflection have done to trace the effectiveness and success of the action implemented. The effectiveness consisted of the strengths and weakness of the flashcards and the students' mastery of the simple present tense as measured by the tests and percentage of the achieved success criterion.

Initial Students Attitude and Mastery of the Simple Present Tense

Before the research was conducted, the students seemed to have no enthusiasm in learning English and their mastery of the simple present tense is low. As shown by Table 1, 76% of them got a low score category, and the rest 23.33% got a fair score category. The mean score of the class pretest is 36.93. It is very far below the Standard Minimum Criteria (SMC), i.e., 75 points.

Table 1
Students' Pre-test Scores

Category	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Very Good	85-100	0	0%
Good	65-84	0	0%
Fair	45-64	7	23.33%
Low	0-44	23	76.67%
Total		30	100%

Mean score: 36.93

The students' attitude towards English in general and the simple present tense before the action research is shown in Table 2. The table, which recapitulates the students' responses to the questionnaire administered soon after they took the pretest, shows that the majority of them disliked learning English and thought the simple present tense was uninteresting. They also thought the learning activity, i.e. listening to the teacher's lecture did not help them master the tense.

Table 2
The Result of the Pre-Action Questionnaire

No	Statements	YES		NO	
		f	%	f	%
1	I like learning English.	10	33.33	20	66.67
2	Learning the Simple Present is interesting.	6	20.00	24	80.00
3	The Simple Present is easy to learn	5	16.67	25	83.33
4	Learning activities help me understand the simple present tense	2	6.67	28	93.33
5	The exercises on the Simple Present Tense are easy to do	7	23.33	23	76.67
	Total	30	102	120	399
	Mean	6	20.4	24	79.6

Report of Cycle 1

This cycle was conducted on 5 August to 2 September 2019. In the first session, the pretest and survey using the pre-action questionnaire were administered. The second to the fifth sessions were employed to teach the verb conjugation and spelling in the positive sentences of the simple present tenses. During the action implementation, a collaborator was asked to make an observation.

1. Planning

This step was carried out to plan the topics most important to solve identified through the analysis made on the pre-test results. Based on the analysis results, the flashcards needed during the four sessions were made. The size of each flashcard I used was half of the legal-size paper (about 11X18 cm). In each flashcard, I printed a simple present tense sentence and a picture that is closely connected to the sentence context.

2. Acting

In the first meeting which was held on Monday, 12 August 2019, all students were present. After greeting and checking the student's presence, the learning activities began by showing the students the flashcards revealing some sentences related to "My daily

Activities" The first session was not very conducive yet, because some students seemed uninterested in the flashcards. According to the observer, the students sitting in the back rows could not clearly see the words and pictures on the flashcards. She suggested the researcher prepare flashcards containing bigger fonts and pictures in the following sessions. Based on this suggestion, the flashcards I used in the next sessions were about 21X29.7 cms, i.e. by using A4 paper. In the second, third and fourth sessions, the students tended to become more interesting and more involved in the learning activities. The cycle was ended by asking the students to do the posttest of cycle 1.

3. Observing

As described in the acting step above, the observation result of the first session recommended the researcher to prepare flashcards containing bigger fonts and pictures in the following sessions. This managed to increase the students' interest and make them more involved in learning activities. The results of the posttest of cycle 1 were also analyzed in this step. As shown in Table 3, 66,67% of the students got a good category, while the rest 33,33% got a low score category. The mean score of the class is 65.73.

Table 3

Students' Cycle 1 Posttest Scores

Category	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Very Good	85-100	0	0%
Good	65-84	20	66.67%
Fair	45-64	0	0%
Low	0-44	10	33.33%
Total		30	100%

Mean score: 65.73

4. Reflecting

This step was conducted to analyze the whole information and experience obtained in Cycle 1 and reflect them to make a better plan for the next cycle. In terms of learning media, the importance of making flashcards with big fonts and pictures was put into priority. Two other important points were drawn from the reflection on the flashcards. First, to make the flashcards more attractive for the students, they need to be printed in colorful fonts and pictures. Second, the exemplary sentences printed in the flashcards should be about events, facts, conditions or facts that are very close to the students' daily life. This would put the examples into contexts that are familiar to the students so that they can be understood easily.

By comparing the results of the pretest and posttest of Cycle 1, it was found that the learning activities in Cycle 1 managed to improve students' achievement quite significantly. The mean score increased from 39.6 to 65.73. However, since the mean score in the posttest of Cycle 1 (65.73) had not reached the Standard Minimum Criteria (75 points) the action should proceed to Cycle 2. Therefore, learning materials, activities, and media for Cycle 2 were prepared.

Report of Cycle 2

This cycle was conducted in for sessions. It began two weeks after the end of Cycle 1, i.e. on Monday 16 September 2019. The actions were not conducted on 9 September 2019 because the researcher needed about 10 days to prepare the action plan and flashcards to be used in cycle 2.

1. Planning

This step was carried out to plan the topics most important to solve identified through the analysis made on the results of the posttest of Cycle 2. In this step, I also prepared the flashcards with readable and colorful fonts and pictures, and the sentence printed in each flashcard was suited to the events, facts, actions, and situations that were familiar to the students.

2. Acting

Based on the action plan, four sessions of teaching using flashcards were implemented. The procedure employed was similar to the one used in the first cycle. The same collaborator was asked to observe the learning process. After the four sessions were completed, a post-test and a survey using a questionnaire which gauges the students' perception of learning English in general and the present tense, in particular, were administered.

3. Observing

The observation was conducted in two ways. First, the same collaborator was asked to observe the learning process in every session. Second, data were collected through the cycle posttest and the post-action questionnaire. The questionnaire employed was the same as the pre-action questionnaire, but the items concerning the teacher's lecturing were replaced by the use of flashcards in the learning process.

As shown in Table 4, the scores obtained by the students in the posttest of Cycle 2 were much higher than the scores in the posttest of Cycle 1. Only 13.3% of the students got the score with a very good category, one-third (66,67%) got a good category, and the rest 20% still got low category. The mean score of the class was now 75. Since the mean score had reached the Standard Minimum Criteria (75 points), the action can be ended. Therefore the post-action survey was administered.

Table 4

Students' Cycle 2 Posttest Scores

Category	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Very Good	85-100	4	13.33%
Good	65-84	20	66.67%
Fair	45-64	0	0%
Low	0-44	6	20.00%
Total		30	100%

Mean score: 75

The results of the post-action survey revealed that the two cycles implemented changed the students' attitude to English and the simple present tense and the learning activities. As shown in Table 5, more than 75% of the students responded positively (selected "Yes") to every statement in the questionnaire. Before learning with flashcards, only 33.33% of the students liked learning English (Table 2). Now 76.67% liked learning English. Before using flashcards, only 20% viewed the simple present tense interesting, but after learning with flashcards 83.33% viewed it interesting. Overall, the use of flashcards to teach the simple present tense turned the students' negative attitude into a positive attitude. The mean score of students' positive response percentage to the statements in the pre-action survey is 20.4 (Table 2). In the post-action survey, the mean score of the positive response percentage increased to 83.89% (Table 5).

Table 5
The Result of Post-Action Questionnaire

No	Statement	Yes		No	
		f	%	f	%
1	I like learning English.	23	76.67	7	23.33
2	Learning the Simple Present is interesting.	25	83.33	5	16.67
3	The Simple Present is easy to learn	22	73.33	8	26.67
4	Learning with flashcards help me understand the simple present tense	29	96.67	1	3.33
5	The exercises on the Simple Present Tense are easy to do	26	86.67	4	13.33
6	I like learning with flashcards	26	86.67	4	13.33
Total		151	503.54	29	96.65
Mean		25.17	83.89	4.83	16.11

4. Reflection

In this step, the whole information and experience obtained in Cycle 2 were analyzed. The observer stated that the learning process in Cycle 2 was much more conducive than in Cycle 1. The majority of the students were now engaged and actively participated. The increasing mean scores of the pretest to posttest Cycle 1 and posttest Cycle 2 (Figure 1) indicated that using flashcards is effective to improve the third graders' mastery of the simple present tense.

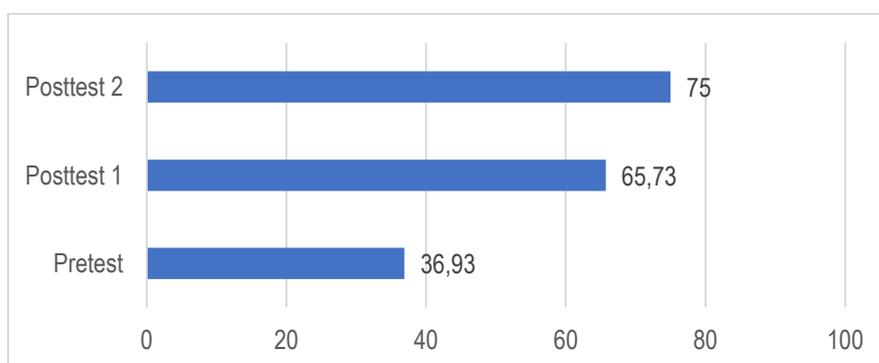


Figure 1. Mean Scores of Pretest, Posttest 1 and Posttest 2

The findings above reveal that flashcards were effective to improve the third graders' mastery of the simple present tense at Permai Elementary School Jakarta. This answers the first research question, "Does the use of the use of flashcards improve the third graders' mastery of the simple present tense at Permai Elementary School, Jakarta?" Compared to their learning achievement when they were taught by listening to the teacher's lecture, learning the simple present tense using flashcards enabled them to achieve higher learning results.

The answer to the second research question, "How does the use of flashcards improve the third graders at Permai Elementary School, Jakarta?" can be related to the effectiveness of using the flashcards to improve the students' learning achievement. The major contributor to the higher achievement was that flashcards are a great tool for young

learners. The third graders involved in this study are young learners. They learn through visual means. Since flashcards are bright, illustrative and colorful, they can have a positive impact on the visual learning process of the students. Being young learners, they are also imaginative and flashcards permit them to make associations. When they were shown the sentence She wakes up at 5.00 every morning with a picture in a flashcard, the students were facilitated to associate the sentence with the picture. They were also allowed to relate the English sentence to their own experience. Showing the students a flashcard with the sentence She does not wake up at 5.00 every morning and another flashcard with the sentence Does she wake up at 5.00 every morning? The students could compare the differences of positive, negative and interrogative sentences using the third singular subject in the simple present tense. Accompanied by the teacher's guidance, such association and comparison assisted the students to grasp the abstract concept of the simple present tense.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion above, it can be concluded that flashcards use managed to increase the achievement of the third graders at Permai Elementary School in learning the simple present tense. As shown by the increase of the mean score of the tests successively administered before the action research implementation, at the end of Cycle 1 and the end of Cycle 2. The mean score of these tests were 36.69, 65.73, and 75.00 respectively. Besides the increasing mastery, the use of flashcards also changed the students' attitudes from mainly negative to mainly positive. The mean score of the students' positive response to the statements in the pre-action survey is 20.4% (See Table 2). In the post-action survey, the mean score of the positive response increased to 83.89% (See Table 5).

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