

**Teaching English Language Journal**

ISSN: 2538-5488 – E-ISSN: 2538-547X – <http://tel.journal.org>

© 2024 – Published by Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran



Please cite this paper as follows:

Chiang, J. (2024). English grammar proficiency predictability in the prospect of present simple and present continuous tenses: A case from China. *Teaching English Language*, 18(1), 177-210. <https://doi.org/10.22132/tel.2024.450876.1587>

**Research Paper**

# **English Grammar Proficiency Predictability in the Prospect of Present Simple and Present Continuous Tenses: A Case from China**

**Juiching Chiang<sup>1</sup>**

*Jiaying University, China*

## **Abstract**

English proficiency refers to fluency of the language usage. It maintains four skills application, as well as sentence structures, and parts of speech. Morpheme is the smallest unit of a word, whereas verbs and nouns are the first two important parts of speech. They share some forms of words that could make the fluency better. Known as verbs, present simple tense is the foundation of grammar learning, and the continuous tense is the other. In this study, present simple tense and present continuous tense were taken as a tool to predict English grammar proficiency and a predictable exam was developed. As a result, the developed 67-item Tense Test is highly correlated with GPT and has significant differences in predicting English grammar proficiency as a whole. Suggestions are focusing more on the two crucial grammar tenses in English class in practice and introducing more pedagogical teaching materials into classroom on the distinguishments between the two grammar tenses and the others. The implications, limitations, and future research plans are presented in this paper.

**Keywords:** English grammar, Verb Tense, GPT, Grammar Proficiency

*Received: February 7, 2023*

*Accepted: May 10, 2024*



---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [jillian.chiang@gmail.com](mailto:jillian.chiang@gmail.com)

## **1. Introduction**

English verb tense learning is a significant focus of attention and concern regarding English as a second language. This is because tenses evolve into varying forms according to contextual differences. Among them, the present simple and present continuous tenses are the most widely used voices. They are also the two tenses that beginners in English language learning are most likely to confuse (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985). How to make the confusion and most of the barriers in processing English proficiency becomes more and more handy. Furthermore, adding the suffixes "-s" and "-ing" is a skill when using these tenses because the verb conjugation characteristics are diverse, particularly while learning when to add the suffix "-s(-es)" for countable nouns. This also relates to using the gerund "V-ing" and the verb suffix "-ing" in these tenses. Based on these universal rules of English grammar, this study aims to quickly and accurately help learners acquire English as a foreign language by using practical approaches. This can help learners become more fluent in English and have more free time to pursue a better life.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 English grammar proficiency**

Theoretical frameworks in second language acquisition, such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis, offer valuable insight regarding how learners internalize grammatical structures. Krashen (1982) posited that exposure to "comprehensible input" is crucial for language acquisition, suggesting that understanding grammar comes from engaging with language beyond one's current level of competence. On the other hand, Swain (1985) emphasized the importance of "comprehensible output," arguing that producing language forces learners to process and apply grammatical rules more actively.

Chiang

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) found that the present simple and present continuous, fundamental to expressing time and aspect, is often the first window through which learners glimpse the vast landscape of English grammar. In addition, flexible using, higher-level grammatical concepts, nuances of language, and fluent presentation not only reflect learners' English grammar proficiency, but also demonstrate their learning behaviors with merits as active learning, self-reflection, and perception (Weir, 2005)

## **2.2 Common barriers to verb tense learning**

The influence of English tenses on one's grammatical proficiency represents a pivotal dimension of linguistic competence. Tense is not only a grammatical rule, but also a key element that expresses the relationship between time and action. Pranoto and Levinli (2023) indicated that all the English tenses are explained through the concept of the two distinct tenses which are present and past. Navigating the complexities of English verb tenses, especially the present simple and present continuous, is a formidable challenge for English language learners, with first year students facing significant challenges. Mastering these tenses transcends the mere memorization of grammatical rules, requiring a deep understanding of their contextual application, often leading to confusion or error (Smith & Conti, 2021).

Jones and Carter (2019) claimed that language transfer poses a significant barrier to tense mastery. Learners often inadvertently apply grammatical rules from their native language to English, leading to systematic errors in tense usage, especially defaulting to the present pimple tense, even in contexts that call for the continuous aspect, obscuring meaning and hindering effective communication.

Nguyen and Kellogg (2020) proposed the challenge of distinguishing between tenses, where learners whose first languages do not make similar distinctions can lead to incorrect tense selection and communication breakdown.

Harris and Graham (2021) found that the ability to master these tenses is further complicated by the need to navigate contextual cues that dictate tense usage.

### **2.3 The relationship between English grammar proficiency and verb tense learning**

In an academic context, command over English verb tenses is pivotal, impacting academic writing, reading comprehension, and participation in discussion. A solid grasp of verb tenses enables learners to articulate thoughts precisely while engaging more effectively with academic texts (Smith & Conti, 2021).

Mastering verb tenses, mainly the present simple and present continuous, is crucial for English grammar proficiency. This relationship is symbiotic, with proficiency in these tenses enhancing a learner's ability to express time-related concepts accurately, a cornerstone of effective communication (Lee & Huang, 2021).

Furthermore, accurately using the present simple and present continuous tenses lays the foundation for mastering more advanced grammatical structures, facilitating a smoother transition to higher levels of language proficiency (Chen & Zhang, 2019).

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Participants**

This study recruited 67 English major freshmen from a university in China. They were currently taking grammar class. During the class, they

were not allowed to use any materials when taking all the tests used in this study.

### 3.2 Research tools

The first research tool was a proficiency test called Grammar Proficiency Test (GPT), which is an achievement test for university students to evaluate their grammar proficiency developed by Rau (1999). There are 50 questions with good reliability (Cronbach's Alpha=0.69) and validity (CR=0.73) (Chien, 2004). The second research tool was a test for evaluating English grammar ability called Tense Test, which is self-developed. The principle of developing question banks shown in Table 1 is based on the bidirectional breakdown retrieved from Chien (2004) and the considerations from Bachman (1990). To develop the Tense Test, there were 8 university English teachers who were invited to construct 4 different exam sheets with 216 exam questions in total in the beginning stage of this study. The teachers were equally divided into 4 groups and each group of teachers is responsible for 1 exam sheet development with 54 exam questions. After collecting each exam sheet from the 4 groups, the author checked them out and asked the teachers to revise to fit the principles shown in Table 1 if needed.

**Table 1.**

*Content of Tense Test question Development*

No.		contents	amount	total
1-7	present simple	subject-verb agreement (V-s or V-es)	7	27
8-13		adverbs of frequency	6	
14-27		conjunction/use present simple tense to substitute future tense	14	
28-35	present	adverb of time (e.g., now)	8	27
36-43	continuous	verbs representing arrive, departure, come, go etc. to substitute future tense	8	
44-54		sense verbs, mental stative verbs, feeling stative verbs only have present simple tense, no present continuous tense	11	

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson bivariate correlation and standard multiple linear regression.

## 4. Major findings

### 4.1 Descriptive statistics

The averages shown in Table 2 were not converted to percentage (%).

**Table 2.**

*Descriptive Statistics of original GPT and Tense Test*

	items	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Median	SD	Coefficient of Internal Consistency
GPT	50	39.42	22.00	47.00	45.00	4.37	0.6846
Tense Test 1	54	48.03	30	54	52	4.69	0.80
Tense Test 2	54	45.27	30	52	46	4.22	0.73
Tense Test 3	54	51.15	7	54	54	6.14	0.95
Tense Test 4	54	48.87	37	53	50	2.95	0.71

Known as item discrimination index, D is between -1 and 1, where  $D = 0$  means no discrimination. That  $D = 0.25$  is the minimum level for a good item, the items fail to reach the line of  $D = 0.25$  need to dispose. All the selected 18 items of Tense Test and 67 items of Tense Test were chosen by the criteria of  $D > 0.25$ .

Table 2 represents the number of GPT and Tense Test that there are 18 items for Tense Test and 67 items for Tense Test, after item discrimination.

### 4.2 Reliability

#### 4.2.1 GPT

Table 3 indicates that after item discrimination for GPT, the 18-item GPT's Cronbach's alpha is 0.671 which is under the standard of 0.7 so that the reliability is not good initially. To make it standardized, item number 2, 5, 15, and 17 in the 18-item GPT were found that if item deleted, Cronbach's alpha is higher, saying 0.703. So, these 4 items were removed for another reliability examination resulting in .703 of Cronbach's alpha.

**Table 3.**  
*Reliability for GPT with 18 items and 14 items*

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.671	0.686	18
0.703	0.715	14

#### 4.2.2 Tense test

Table 4 illustrates that after item discrimination for Tense Test, the 67-item Tense Test's Cronbach's alpha is 0.906, which is over the standard. After a careful checkout, all the 67 items in each version are met the content requirements in Table 4.

**Table 4.**  
*Reliability for Tense Test*

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.906	0.919	67

### 4.3 Correlation analysis

#### *The relationship between GPT and Tense Test*

In Table 5, it shows that the correlation between GPT and Tense Test is significant, meaning the null hypothesis (H0) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H1) was accepted.

**Table 5.**  
*The Correlation of GPT and Tense Test*

	GPT with 14 items	Tense Test with 67 items
GPT	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.459**
	N	67
Tense Test	Pearson Correlation	0.459**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	67

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

According to the above results, the developed 14-item Tense Test meets the requirement of item discrimination with good reliability and validity, as

well as the 14-item GPT. Additionally, there exists a significant relationship ( $r=0.459$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) between 67-item Tense Test and 14-item GPT is positive and significant.

#### 4.4 Regression analysis

Table 6 indicates the regression result ( $F = 17.322$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) of GPT is significant and illustrated by Table 4.8, Tense Test has a significant influence on GPT ( $t=4.162$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). The regression equation is  $GPT=28.140 + 0.607*Tense\ Test$ . This can be interpreted that the increase of 1 unit of Tense Test may incur the raise of 0.607 units in GPT.

**Table 6.**  
*F Value of the Regression*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4772.686	1	4772.686	<b>17.322</b>	<b>.000<sup>b</sup></b>
	Residual	17909.344	65	275.528		
	Total	22682.030	66			

a. Dependent Variable: GPT

b. Predictors: (Constant), Tense Test

**Table 7.**  
*t Value of the Regression*

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B			
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
								1	(Constant)
	tense 67	.537	.127	.465	4.240	<b>.000</b>	.284	.790	

a. Dependent Variable: GPT\_all

As said above, the 67-item Tense Test has a significant impact ( $t=4.162$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) on the 14-item GPT which obtained the item discrimination ( $D > 0.25$ ) and good reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.703$ ). In other word, it could be said that the 67-item developed Tense Test is suitable for predicting the grammar proficiency of an individual in English.



## 5. Discussions

The findings in this study can prove meaningful for university students undertaking English language proficiency through learning the two basic grammar tenses. In other words, the two crucial tenses are reflected in the correctness of language expression. They also involve the clarity and richness of context, which are imperative to establishing excellent English expressive ability. In light of this, Negahi et al. (2022) concluded that error correction of grammatical tests could improve learners' ability of explicit knowledge. A positive note is that simple present tense is typically the first lesson for learning English grammar. By acquiring this skill well, learners can continue learning English grammar. It is a kind of stepping stone to developing good English grammar proficiency. Consistent with Niyazi and Khoshshima (2022), that teachers use techniques and plan relevant learning activities can motivate learners in mastering certain linguistic skill.

The findings support the reason why the developed 67-item Tense Test that obtained all the elements of grammar tense principles from Table 3.1 can predict learners' English grammar proficiency: Present simple tense is used to express routines and habits, as well as to understand the changes of third-person singular verbs (e.g., he/she/it), to add "-s" or "-es" appropriately. This leads to a deeper understanding of other grammatical rules so that learners can easily transfer these rules to understand the concept of nouns, such as countable and non-countable nouns. Furthermore, the present continuous tense expresses current activities and temporary states. It also involves skillfully mastering the pattern of "be" verbs associated with the form of "V-ing" to avoid confusing temporary states with regular habits. Learners can also transfer the same grammar rules to understand the notion of infinitives while extending the learning scope to comparing gerunds and infinitives, etc.

Additionally, Table 1 shows that learners know how to catalyze verbs in different situations if they can use the two tenses well. For example, sense verbs are not used in present continuous to describe one's present feelings. Therefore, learners know there must be an adjective after a verb of perception (e.g., I feel wonderful) to avoid sentence fragments. As such, learners can also understand the notion of adjectives. Another example is learning how to use adverbs correctly. The timing of using adverbs and their correct forms is critical for English language learners. Learners must be aware of "be" verbs and "main" verbs. Adverbs are usually put after a "be" verb but placed before or after a "main" verb, depending on the semantics. Furthermore, some adverbs can be transformed from adjectives, such as nice (adjective) and nicely (adverb). Additionally, some words with "-ly" can be used as adjectives, such as friendly (adjective). Therefore, using adverbs properly is similar to learning other grammar points.

The 14-item GPT includes 14 grammar rules, including when to use passive voice, objects, possessives, relative clauses, conjunctions, etc. The variety of grammar points indicates the systemic and holistic approach to English grammar proficiency. Although the number of items (14) may be questionable for teachers and instructors, it is an effective and efficient test to examine learners' English grammar proficiency based on the above findings of this study. The limitations of this study are as follows. The number of participants (67) was insufficient due to workforce and time. English grammar proficiency tests are rare, so GPT was used as a research tool in this study. We suggest that future studies develop an English grammar proficiency test.

## **6. Conclusions and Suggestions**

From the above findings and results, the developed 67-item Tense Test was fairly extracted from four different exams which were created by 6

Chiang

regulations of making grammar questions of present simple and present continuous tenses. To investigate the predictability for English grammar proficiency, Pearson bivariate correlation and standard multiple linear regression were used and the two tests were highly correlated and the developed Tense Test has significant impact on English grammar proficiency. therefore, the developed 67-item Tense Test could predict English grammar proficiency. Two suggestions are made based on the conclusion. (1) Focus more on the two crucial grammar tenses in English class. It is suggested to have eyes on the two mentioned grammar tenses to enhance English learners' grammar proficiency that learners are more likely to understand the whole English grammar from them. (2) introducing more pedagogical teaching materials into classroom on the distinguishments between the two grammar tenses and the others. Students learn English grammar in classroom from the textbook is the typical scenario that teachers use tests to know how they learn and why they fail to use the grammar rule they have learned. It is considerable to change the way how teachers teach English grammar in a classroom setting. Given that the present simple tense is the first tense students start to learn grammar, teachers and instructors need to use more authentic materials focusing on the social contexts to build solid foundation and make it a steppingstone. Next, known as the two crucial tenses in English grammar proficiency, teachers and instructors could offer more examples based on transfer of learning. Thus, students can focus on solving unknow grammar problems from the database they have built to optimize their English ability.

### References

- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford University Press.
- Chen, M., & Zhang, L. (2019). Advanced grammatical structures and academic writing: A study of ELLs' writing challenges. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 48*, 100-112.

- Chien, H.W. (2004). The Development of a Computerized Diagnostic Test for Freshman English Tenses [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Tzu Chi University. <https://hdl.handle.net/11296/edx27>.
- Harris, D., & Graham, S. (2021). Contextual cues in language learning: Strategies for ELLs. *TESOL Quarterly*, 55(2), 435-459.
- Jones, L., & Carter, R. (2019). Language transfer and tense acquisition in ELLs. *Language Learning Journal*, 47(3), 346-365.
- Lee, J., & Huang, W. (2021). Verb tense proficiency and its correlation with academic success among ELLs. *Applied Linguistics*, 42(4), 678-695.
- Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How Languages Are Learned*. Oxford University Press.
- Negahi, M., Shooshtari, Z. G. and Vahdat, S. (2022). Exploring the Impact of Unfocused Indirect and Direct Written Feedback on Iranian EFL Students' Implicit and Explicit Knowledge of Grammar. *Teaching English Language*, 16 (1), 89-117.
- Nguyen, H., & Kellogg, D. (2020). Aspectual distinctions in English language teaching: A study on ELLs' comprehension. *ELT Journal*, 74(1), 56-64.
- Niyazi, M. P. and Khoshsima, H. (2022). Depth of Vocabulary, Morphology, and Inference Making as Predictors of EFLs Pragmatic Knowledge. *Teaching English Language*, 16 (2), 139-168.
- Pranoto, Y. H. and Levinli, V. F. (2023). Two Tenses for All Sixteen Tenses: A Constructivist Approach. *Tarling*, 7 (1), 17-36.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman.
- Rau, D. V. (1999). Validity and reliability of grammar proficiency test and evaluation of the effectiveness of freshman English composition class. *Journal of Humanities*, Liberal Arts College of Providence University. 11: 155-184.
- Smith, J., & Conti, G. (2021). Overcoming barriers in English tense learning: Pedagogical strategies. *English Language Teaching*, 14(2), 22-34.
- Weir, C. J. (2005). *Language Testing and Validation: An Evidence-Based Approach*. Palgrave-Macmillan.

