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Effects of teacher–students negotiated interaction on EFL students' competence in past tense forms

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the effects of teacher-student negotiated interaction on EFL students' competence in past tense forms. Teacher–students negotiated interaction was compared with the conventional (teacher–led) instruction for teaching grammar. While prior research has established the benefits of interaction in SLA, this study introduces new empirical evidence on the role of implicit feedback and task-based negotiation in grammar learning. A total of 83 Ethiopian Grade 10 EFL students, 42 as the experimental group and 41 as the comparison group, participated in the study. Picture-based storytelling and information–gap tasks were used to teach grammar for the experimental group through classroom negotiation for 12 weeks. The classroom teacher was trained on encouraging students' utterance, self-correction, and implicit feedback. The comparison group received the conventional (teacher–led) grammar instruction with explicit feedback. Pre– and post–tests were used to collect the data. Independent samples t–test and one–way repeated measures ANOVA were used to analyze the data. The findings of this study suggested that TSNI significantly improved the learners' grammatical competence ($p < 0.05$) in grammaticality judgement, writing, and completion tasks but not in gap–filling tasks, suggesting that explicit instruction may still be required in gap–filling grammar tasks. The findings of the study showed that implicit feedback, task–based negotiation, and cognitive engagement enhanced grammar acquisition by promoting noticing, modified output, and meaningful practice.

Keywords: Negotiated interaction, task–based learning, interactional feedback, cognitive engagement, past tense acquisition, EFL grammar instruction

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Introduction

Language–teaching professionals have become increasingly aware that teaching approaches that put the primary focus on meaning with no attention to grammatical forms are inadequate. Long (2015) proposed a focus on form approach that emphasizes the integration of form-focused and meaning-focused instructions for teaching language. As for him, this approach is mainly effective for teaching grammar since it combines attention to linguistic form with meaningful communication. Negotiated (conversational) interaction, which puts emphasis on grammar learning through solving communication breakdowns, plays a pivotal role in making grammatical input comprehensible through conversational and linguistic modifications. Benati (2017) suggested that negotiated interaction is beneficial for acquiring target linguistic elements better through engaging in meaningful communication in a natural-like environment.

Classroom negotiation creates an opportunity, especially for EFL learners who have no external exposure to communicate with the target grammar elements, to negotiate with their teacher on the target language (Abbuhl et al., 2018; Champakaew & Pencingkam, 2001). Teachers may play a vital role in filling the linguistic gaps of students in the form of interactional feedback in classroom conversation (Fujii & MacKey, 2009). Through negotiation, a teacher may push students to produce grammatically correct, appropriate, and coherent language, prompting them to shift from semantic processing to syntactic processing (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). This process not only enriches students' competence in grammatical forms but also enhances their motivation and self-confidence.

Classroom negotiation also provides learners with interactionally modified input and timely corrective feedback, helping them notice the gap between what they said and the target grammar elements (Lyster, 1998). In addition, students are exposed to repeated, rephrased, and reorganized grammatical input during negotiation, and this facilitates their noticing of the target grammar elements easily. Furthermore, the use of oral input enhancement techniques, such as stress, intonation, and pronunciation by the teacher draws the students' attention to the target grammar features (Schmidt, 1990).

Teacher–students negotiated interaction offers a valuable alternative to naturalistic language use, particularly for EFL learners lacking opportunities to practice the target grammar elements outside the classroom (Shehadeh, 2001). Conversely, the traditional teacher–led approach, which is prevalent in countries like Ethiopia, has inherent

weaknesses in developing EFL students' grammar competence. This can be attributed to the approaches' inclination to often prioritize memorization of rules over practical application, which results in the occurrence of superficial knowledge and limited communicative competence (Dalili, 2011). Learners often struggle to apply theoretical knowledge to real-life contexts due to isolated and context–limited grammar instructions. Hence, more interactive and conversational teaching approaches, particularly for EFL learners lacking external exposure to use the language for communication, are needed to fill the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application of grammar elements.

Considering these problems, the current study seeks to investigate the following question: What are the effects of teacher–students negotiated interaction on EFL students' grammar competence (past tense forms in focus)?

Review of Related Literature

The roles of interaction, input, and output in grammar classes

Language acquisition thrives through interaction, where learners participate in imitating, repeating, recasting, and reproducing the sound of the language they hear people speaking around them (Long, 2015). In the EFL context, teachers play a vital role by initiating classroom interaction through real-life tasks, questioning and oral input enhancement techniques like stress, intonation, and pronunciation (Hall, 2010). Abbuhl et al., (2018) state that classroom interaction is a source for interactionally modified input and output for learners (Ellis, 2007; Loewen & Sato, 2018).

Though comprehensible input is vital for language learning (Benati, 2017; Dalili, 2011). Long (2015) contends that interactionally modified input is more effective than pre-modified or non-interactive input to learn grammar. Negotiated interaction improves input processing through linguistic and conversational modifications involving both teachers and students (Ellis, 2007; Dalili, 2011). Loewen and Sato (2018) however, emphasizes that simplified (comprehensible) input alone is inadequate for native-like grammar competence; modified output is also equally essential. Swain and Lapkin (1998) state that output pushes learners to process linguistic forms, test hypotheses, receive feedback, and develop automaticity, shifting from meaning-based to grammar-based processing.

Noticing grammar through interactional feedback

Corrective feedback holds a substantial place both in research and classroom situations, especially within negotiated interaction to grammar teaching (Ellis, 2007). Interactional corrective feedback is essential in directing students' attention (noticing) to specific grammatical elements (Adams et al., 2011). It plays a great role in supporting students' grammar acquisition without discouraging their classroom participation (Long and Porter, 1985).

Corrective feedback can be classified as explicit or implicit, input-providing or output-promoting, and negative or positive. Input-providing feedback, such as recasts or direct corrections, provides learners with accurate models of the target grammar elements. On the contrary, output-promoting feedback, like clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks, elicits students to produce the linguistic elements (Loewen & Sato, 2018). In terms of explicit-implicit distinction, implicit feedback, unlike explicit feedback, neither discourages students' classroom participation nor interrupts the flow of communication in grammar classes (Mitchell et al., 2013). The implicit feedback could be given by the teacher as a response to students' linguistically problematic utterances, although the meaning of the utterance might be clear. This type of feedback is more likely to help encourage students to modify their incorrect interlanguage form (Long and Porter, 1985).

Long (2015) highlights cognitive processes such as attention, awareness, and noticing, which are fundamental to the interactional grammar learning process. Schmidt (1990) suggests the importance of attention, arguing that the acquisition of target grammar elements is difficult without attention to the grammar elements. Attention (noticing) encompasses bringing target language elements into learners' focal awareness, which is particularly beneficial in conversational language teaching (Ellis, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2013). Attention to form arises in the course of dealing with the negotiation of meaning to learn linguistic elements in the classroom.

Teaching grammar interactively

The definition of grammar, as stated in (Abbuhl et al., 2018), is a set of principles that govern the arrangement and connection of words in sentences or larger texts. Grammatical competence is highly recommended for effective communication, enabling clear expression, coherent writing, and better professionalism. Indeed, grammatical competence is the knowledge and skills needed to construct and

understand sentences, identify errors, and judge linguistic accuracy in academic life (Millrood, 2014). However, the place of grammar in second or foreign language learning has been controversial (Benati, 2017; Pawlak, 2021). One of the points of argument is whether grammar should be taught implicitly, through exposure and self–discovery of rules, or explicitly, via direct instruction (Philp & Iwashita, 2013). The debate also includes how to integrate implicit and explicit instruction in conversational grammar teaching (Dalili, 2011; Hall, 2010).

Inspired by Long's (2015) and Long and Porter (1985) focus on form method, recent language teaching approaches underline grammar teaching by integrating form and meaning. Indeed, the interactional approach is a crucial component of this method, which encourages students to practice grammatical forms in communicative contexts from the beginning (Ellis, 2007; Pawlak, 2021). By connecting grammar to everyday speech, this method encourages inherent motivation and is reinforced by TSNI, which guides learning (Benati, 2017; Hoque, 2016; Ortega-Auquilla et al., 2019). EFL students can access target grammar elements contextually by using real-life tasks in TSNI, which is helpful to promote both accuracy and fluency. This approach employs effective grammatical tasks that could improve communicative competence through making it easier to notice, analyze, and comprehend form–meaning connections.

Negotiated interaction in EFL classroom

Long (2015) asserted that grammar is acquired better when learners participate in negotiated interaction. EFL learners, who have limited exposure to using the target language for communication, are more beneficial in TSNI since it offers substantial assistance by enabling them to practice and internalize linguistic elements through communication (Ellis, 2007; Fujii & Mackey, 2009). Hence, communication in a foreign language can be viewed not only as an end in itself, but also as a means of acquiring target linguistic elements (Ortega-Auquilla et al., 2019).

Using techniques of negotiation such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, repetitions, and recasts helps to facilitate students' involvement in the grammar learning process (Fujii & MacKey, 2009; Loewen & Sato, 2018; Myles & Mitchell, 2020). These techniques can create an opportunity for EFL learners to use target grammar elements and develop their linguistic competence (Champakaew & Pencingkam, 2001). Linguistic input arises from TSNI in a natural-like environment, not something provided by a teacher or another student

(Abbuhl et al., 2018; Hall, 2010). Modified interaction as a result of negotiation provides language learners with four vital elements of grammar learning: comprehensible input, comprehensible output, interactional feedback, and noticing (Champakaew & Pencingkam, 2001).

In TSNI, the teacher provides opportunities for students to use grammar elements for communication, facilitates the process of learning by making learning easier for students, and solves conversational or linguistic problems through negotiation with them. Thus, a teacher and students construct a common body of linguistic knowledge through negotiated interaction in the classroom.

Empirical Studies on Interaction and SLA

The researchers of the current study believe that authentic classroom research is needed to know the connection between classroom interaction and language learning. However, previous studies about the relationship between conversational interaction and language will be reviewed before the research question and prediction are stated for the current study.

Researchers examined how different types of interactional corrective feedback affect learner uptake and grammar learning (Abbuhl et al., 2018; Loewen & Sato, 2018). The findings indicated that although recasts were ineffective at eliciting student–generated repair, teachers were interested in using them frequently. Most of the interactional corrective feedback types improved learners' immediate, verbal response (uptake). In addition, the studies showed that elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, and repetition enhance learners' grammar competence, engagement and negotiation of form. Similarly, Lyster (1998) conducted a study on the relationship between learners' classroom negotiated interaction and the type of erroneous linguistic production. This correlational study was conducted in four French immersion classrooms at the elementary level. The findings show that lexical errors encouraged negotiation of form, whereas grammatical and phonological errors encouraged negotiation of meaning with different impacts on learner repair.

Mackey (1999) made a correlational study to examine the relationship between different types of conversational interaction and SLA. She focused on question formation with ESL learners from a private school in Sydney, Australia. The results of her study supported the link between interaction and grammatical development and highlighted the importance of active participation in the interaction. Mackey (2006) also explored the connection between interactional feedbacks and learners'

noticing of grammatical forms. The findings showed that there is a complex and positive relationship between interactional feedback in the classroom, learners' noticing of L2 forms, and their L2 development. Another study by Gurzynski-weiss (2014) examined the relationship between the type of modified output and accurate noticing in response to interactionally driven input. The result from this study revealed that partial modified output was the strongest indicator of accurately noticed feedback types.

Wang and Castro (2010) investigated the effects of classroom interaction between students and students and students and teachers on EFL students' learning. Their focus was on how L1 Chinese adult learners of English as a foreign language learned English passivation during the language input and output treatments. The results of the study suggested that classroom interaction and language output help students recognize the target form and enhance their foreign language acquisition. Abdollahifam (2014) considered the effects of teachers' interactional feedback on the learners' learning, motivation, and feelings. The findings of the study showed that teachers' interactional feedback increased learners' accuracy, motivation and the rapport between teachers and learners.

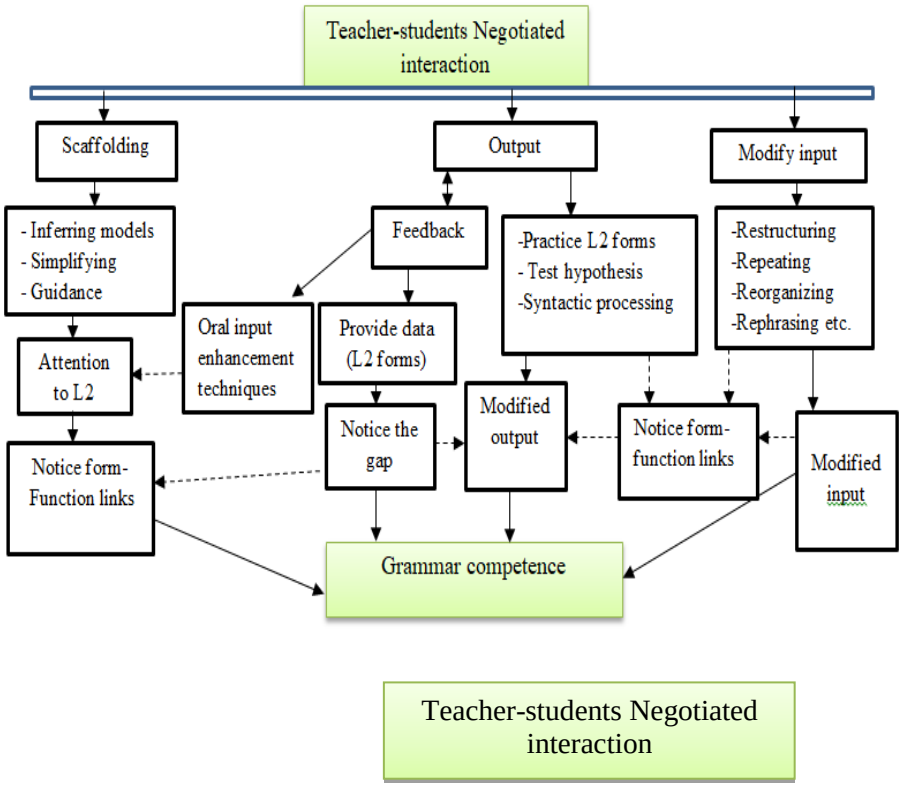
The paper that investigated the ordering effect of input and interaction as separate entities and in combination on students' grammar and vocabulary learning was conducted by Gass et al. (2005). Hence, in grammar learning, learners who received interaction followed by input displayed greater improvement than learners who received only input. Philp and Iwashita (2013) examined the effects of the process of interacting in L2 versus observing others' interaction on learners' awareness of language. The findings suggested that active interaction and output in L2 push students to think about how to express meaning in the target language, and this develops students' explicit knowledge.

A qualitative study by Hoque (2016) aimed to assess the effect of teacher-students interaction on EFL pedagogy. The study focused on assessing the opportunities for students' involvement and negotiation that teachers provide in the unfolding interaction in an EFL setting. The findings of the study revealed that teachers exposed their identity in different ways for different roles and asked students different questions for their participation. However, students did not respond willingly to the questions and did not participate in the classroom. Based on this, the findings of the study further suggest that teachers should be aware of the socio-economic and context– sensitive aspects of their interaction with learners.

Del et al. (2000) conducted an observational study on how learning needs are addressed in L2 interaction in a foreign language setting. To address the issue, seven dyads of EFL learners were compared with another seven dyads of EFL learners and native English speakers on two communicative tasks. Results of the research revealed that EFL learners' interaction can provide as much modified input, feedback, and output as interaction between the EFL learners and native speakers does. In addition, the result supported the EFL environment as an environment to learn the English language communicatively. Gurzynski-Weiss and Andrea (2012) also explored an observational study on teacher–student interactional feedback patterns during naturally occurring classroom interaction about three task-related factors. The analyses revealed that task factors affected the amount and type of teacher feedback as well as the number of opportunities for and incidence of learner-modified output.

Although some aspects of the roles of the interactional approach in language learning have been explored in the studies reviewed above, the main claim of the updated version of the interactional hypothesis, the role of negotiated interaction in the classroom for language learning, has not been adequately tested empirically yet, especially in EFL context. The researchers of this study believe that more authentic classroom research is needed to understand the connection between negotiated interaction in classrooms and language learning. Therefore, the current study aims to test that claim. Thus, the following research question was addressed. Does teacher-students negotiated interaction facilitate EFL students' competence in past tense form? This question led to the central prediction that teacher-students negotiated interaction facilitates EFL students' competence in the past tense forms than those students who learn the same grammar elements in the conventional (teacher–led) approach.

The process (conceptual framework) that shows how negotiated-interaction facilitates grammar competence



(Source: Adapted from Abbuhl et al., 2018)

The above figure shows how teacher-students negotiated interaction helps EFL students develop their grammar competence in several ways. First, the input can be modified to meet the communicative demands of the students. In other words, students can ask for help by using a clarification request (e.g., could you repeat that?) or a comprehension check (e.g., did you say…?) if they are having trouble understanding a certain grammatical form. When a teacher notices a comprehension problem in the students, he/she tries to simplify the information by repeating or rephrasing sentences, changing words, or rearranging the grammar. Each of these dialogue modifications, often referred to as the negotiation of meaning and forms, has the capacity to make the desired grammar elements easier for students to understand, which could help improve their grammar competence.

Additionally, interaction gives students the chance to modify their output. As part of the interaction method, Swain and Lapkin (1998) state that output can have a positive effect on L2 development by giving

learners the opportunity to practice L2 forms and verify their language-related beliefs. Learners also process the target language through output syntactically rather than merely semantically, since they must take into account the structure of the language to generate understandable speech.

The importance of interaction in language learning can also be explained by sociocognitive and sociocultural theories. According to these approaches, communicating with a more adept interlocutor gives the students aid or scaffolding in the form of models, simplifications, and general advice.

Methods

In this study, a quasi–experiment was designed and conducted to investigate the difference between teaching grammar with TSNI and the conventional (teacher–led) approach. The study employed quantitative research method that used classroom tests and questionnaires as data–gathering tools. Story writing, grammaticality judgment, gap filling, and completion tasks were used to assess learners' past tense competence.

Learners' implicit knowledge of identifying correct/incorrect past tense forms without explicit rule application was measured by grammaticality judgment tasks. Rule–based accuracy in decontextualized sentences was assessed by gap–filling tasks, revealing limitations of implicit feedback for explicit knowledge. On the other hand, completion tasks assessed applied competence in semi–contextualized dialogues. Finally, but most importantly, students' competence in using past tense forms in meaningful communication was assessed by writing tasks. In the writing task, students were asked to write a short narrative text on one of the topics provided to them. Each task was rated out of 25%, and totally out of 100%. In the scoring process, students were not awarded when they omitted past tense forms, used incorrect forms of past tense forms or did not use the actual verb in the tests.

Eighty–three EFL Grade 10 students in one government school from two intact classes in Debre Berhan, Ethiopia participated in the study. There were a total of 402 students in Grade 10 in the school. To select participants for the study, a proficiency test was administered to the population. Thus, 83 students (from two sections) who had scored within a similar range were selected as participants in the study. Then the two sections were assigned as the experimental and comparison groups. Of the total participants, 43 were female and 40 were male. 42 students were taken as an experimental group, whereas 41 students were taken as a

comparison group. All participants were from the same L1 background. Their ages ranged from 17 to 19 years. Almost all participants were from a low socioeconomic background. They had no external exposure to use English Language apart from classroom instruction.

To evaluate the participants' competence in past tense forms both before and after treatment, four written testing measures were used in the pretest and posttests. The pretest and posttests had similar formats and involved tasks on story writing, grammaticality judgment, gap filling, and completion, which aimed to test students' understanding and use of past tense forms.

The course was presented by the same teacher (experimenter) who has 17 years of teaching experience with a master's degree in TEFL. He was trained on how to use the intervention material, especially to enhance input orally, encourage students' language production and self-correction, and provide implicit corrective feedback for the students. But for the comparison group, the experimenter used a textbook as teaching material and taught with traditional teacher-led instruction.

Instruments and analysis techniques

Tests and questionnaire were used as data gathering instruments. Two types of tests were given to students, i.e., a pretest and posttests. A pretest was administered before the intervention and posttests right after the intervention. Hence, to identify the effect of the intervention, the researcher compared participants' pretest and posttest results. Independent samples t–test and one way repeated measure ANOVA were used to analyze test results. Questionnaire was used to collect data about the participants' changes in affective factors. Mixed ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was used to analyze changes in affective factors (interest, confidence, autonomy, and engagement) in both the experimental (TSNI) and comparison (traditional instruction) groups after the pre– and post–intervention.

Procedure of the Intervention

The intervention of the study was started after the researcher obtained the necessary permissions and approval from the school administration. But before that, the researcher developed intervention material for the experimental group based on the notions of teacher-students negotiated interaction in teaching grammar. However, the comparison group students were taught with grade ten text books. Before starting to conduct the research, the researcher obtained consent from

participants to participate in the study and collected data about students' academic performance by giving pre-intervention tests.

Then the researcher started giving an intervention by clearly defining the objectives of the course for both experimental and comparison groups according to the materials of each group. Hence, the experimental group participants were taught past tenses and passive voice via teacher-student negotiated interaction, and the comparison group students were taught the same grammatical elements through the conventional (teacher-led) method. The intervention was given for 12 weeks (36 hours). Hence, the experimental group's learning was driven by task-based negotiation, where the teacher provided oral input enhancements (e.g., stress, intonation) to draw attention to the target grammatical forms without interrupting communication. But the comparison group students received explicit rule–based instruction.

The intervention was focused on repeated exposure, restructuring, and meaningful practice of past tense verbs (both regular and irregular) in contextualized and real–life scenarios. For instance, students were encouraged to describe sequenced picture stories, respond to the teacher's prompts (e.g., what happened next?) and give attention to implicit corrective feedback given by the teacher (e.g., recasting 'The boy eated?' as 'The boy ate?'). Thus, this approach aligned with Long's (2015) Interaction Hypothesis, which emphasizes comprehensible input, modified output, and noticing gaps in learners' interlanguage. However, the comparison group (n=41) received explicit grammar explanations, rote memorization of rules, and decontextualized exercises. After the intervention, participants' grammar competence was measured via grammaticality judgment, completion, writing, and gap–filling tasks. The experimental group (TSNI) showed significant gains ($p< 0.05$) in all tasks except gap–filling, which suggests that rule-based tasks may still require explicit instruction. Finally the participants' perception towards learning grammar through TSNI was assessed through questionnaire.

Task design

Picture–based storytelling and information-gap tasks, which are key components of Interaction Hypothesis, were used for this study. The tasks create a realistic communication setting where students need to use past tense forms to share information, which helps them think more deeply and practice the target grammar more often. The use of picture–based storytelling and information–gap tasks in the study facilitated grammar learning because the former facilitates contextualized practice, while the

latter necessitates negotiation, prompting students to notice gaps in their interlanguage and modify output. The tasks used in this study were produced and used in many research projects, like Gass et al. (2005), Gurzynski-Weiss (2014), Wang and Castro (2010)) for both tests and an intervention. These tasks were also chosen because they align with the study's focus on implicit learning through interaction, contrasting with traditional rule–based instruction, and have been validated in prior research (Gass et al., 2005; Wang & Castro, 2010)) for their effectiveness in grammar acquisition.

Picture-based storytelling and information–gap tasks were designed with key modifications to promote noticing, hypothesis testing and cognitive engagement of learners. These tasks improved understanding by helping learners clarify past events in a series of images; this in turn encouraged them to notice corrections like changing ''The boy eated?'' to ''The boy ate?''. While information-gap tasks were used to promote learners' hypothesis testing by obliging them to request and supply missing past-tense details, oral input enhancements (stress, intonation) drew attention to form-function mappings. The adaptation of the tasks created opportunities for pushed output, where learners had to self-correct and restructure their interlanguage, aligning with Swain and Lapkin (1998) output hypothesis.

In this study, picture–based storytelling and information–gap tasks were piloted by adapting them to local cultural and educational realities. For picture storytelling, the experimenter used culturally relevant images like market scenes and traditional ceremonies to prompt past–tense narratives, encouraging negotiations through implicit feedback like recasts (e.g., correcting ''He go'' to ''He went?'' with rising intonation). Likewise, information-gap tasks were designed to incorporate local issues (like sharing details about local festivals or historical events) where students could exchange missing past–tense information, fostering noticing and hypothesis testing.

Implicit feedback types like recasts (e.g., reformulating students' erroneous utterances like ''The boy eated?'' as ''The boy ate?'' with rising intonation), clarification requests (e.g., ''What did you say?''), and confirmation checks (e.g., repeating students' utterances with stress on the target form) were employed in this study to avoid disrupting communication. Using such implicit feedback subtly drew learners' attention to grammatical errors and allowed the flow of meaningful interaction, along with promoting noticing and self-correction. While giving feedback within natural conversation, the teacher maintained the

focus on task completion and meaning, aligning with Long's (2015) Interaction Hypothesis, which emphasizes the integration of form-focused feedback within communicative contexts to enhance learning without hindering engagement.

Reliability and validity of the Tests

Inter-rater reliability was used to measure the reliability of the tests in this study. Two raters were provided clear guidelines to ensure shared understandings of the rating criteria. Rubrics for grammaticality judgment, gap–filling, completion, and writing tasks were explained for the raters, emphasizing accuracy in past tense usage. Raters independently scored sample responses from a pilot study, followed by discussion and correction to align interpretations of the rubric.

In doing so, the pretest and posttests were administered to four groups of students, each with 20 students who were not part of the main study. Although there were different contents, there were similar instructions in each test. The Cronbach's alpha test of inter–rater reliability result (for the pretest, $\alpha = .901$; for the posttest, $\alpha = .898$; and for delayed posttest 1, $\alpha = .888$; for delayed posttest 2, $\alpha = .867$) indicated that the tests were reliable. To confirm the validity of the tests, an effort was made to present the tests to experienced English language teachers for comments, and there were some modifications based on the comments given. In addition, the correlation coefficient was used to find out how strongly the pretest, the immediate posttest and the two delayed posttests were correlated. The following correlation table displays the results.

Table 1

Correlation of tests on past tense forms

	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
Test 1	1			
Test 2	0.84**	1		
Test 3	0.822**	0.855**	1	
Test 4	0.912**	0.863**	0.887**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The results presented in Table 1 demonstrate that there was a significant ($p < 0.01$) relationship between the tests for each grammatical item. In other words, because of their strong correlation, the four tests were regarded as having equal difficulty levels.

Results

Pretest results

Students' pretest result scores on past tense forms in four tasks were compared using an independent samples t–test; the findings are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Pretest results statistical analysis of the independent samples T-test

Grammar	Question	Group	N	Mean	SD	T	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
Past Tense forms	Grammaticality Judgment	Experimental	42	11.6905	2.67316	0.506	81	0.614
		Comparison	41	11.4146	2.26909			
	Gap filling	Experimental	42	9.0000	2.43951	-0.882	81	0.381
		Comparison	41	9.4634	2.34625			
	Completion	Experimental	42	8.7619	2.05782	0.920	81	0.360
		Comparison	41	8.3659	1.85413			
	Writing	Experimental	42	7.4048	2.08431	0.597	81	0.552
		Comparison	41	7.1463	1.85150			

The data in Table 2 show the participants' pretest results on grammaticality judgment (intuitive decision on whether a sentence is well–formed and acceptable), gap filling, completion, and writing test items. Hence, the pretest result in the four test items shows that there was no significant difference between the experimental and comparison groups' mean score, and therefore, the two groups were comparable before the intervention was made. Although the experimental group's pretest result was a little bit higher than the comparison group's result in the three test items: grammaticality judgment, completion, and writing, the difference was insignificant. On the other hand, the comparison group scored a little bit higher than the experimental group in gap-filling. The overall pretest result shows that there was no statistically significant difference in grammaticality judgment and gap-filling ($t = 0.506$, $df = 81$, $P > 0.05$ and $t = -0.882$, $df = 81$, $P > 0.05$, respectively) and completion and writing ($t = 0.920$, $df = 81$, $P > 0.05$ and $t = 0.597$, $df = 81$, $P > 0.05$, respectively) between the two groups.

Table 2 also shows that the pretest results of students were below average in each task. Although each test item was scored out of 25, the students' results were below the average (12.5) in each task. This

indicated that the students had very little competence in the target grammar elements before the intervention.

Posttest result

After the intervention was completed, posttests were administered to students to compare the mean scores of the experimental and comparison groups for each task by performing an independent samples t-test. The findings are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Posttest results statistical analysis of the independent samples T-test

Grammar	Question	Group	N	Mean	SD	T	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
Past Tense forms	Grammaticality Judgment	Experimental	42	19.8571	2.39483	11.533	81	0.000
		Comparison	41	14.6341	1.65463			
	Gap-filling	Experimental	42	15.6429	2.17325	.649	81	.518
		Comparison	41	15.3415	2.05681			
	Completion	Experimental	42	15.1667	1.69528	10.288	81	0.000
		Comparison	41	11.6829	1.36819			
	Writing	Experimental	42	14.2143	2.31154	6.504	81	0.000
		Comparison	41	11.4878	1.38061			

As it can be seen from Table 3, the mean scores of the experimental group were higher than the mean scores of the comparison group in students' competence in past tense forms after eight weeks of treatment. The experimental groups' posttest results in the three tasks: grammaticality judgment (19.8571), completion (15.1667), and writing (14.2143) were significantly higher than the comparison groups' posttest results; but there was no significant difference between the experimental and comparison groups' posttest mean score in the gap–filling task. Based on the results, the experimental group significantly exceeded the comparison group in each test item ($P < 0.05$), except in gap-filling test. There was no statistically significant difference between the two groups on gap-filling tasks ($P > 0.05$), even though the experimental group's mean score (15.6429) is a little bit higher than the comparison group's mean score (15.3415). To sum up, the findings of the posttest results indicated that TSNI was more effective than the conventional (teacher–led) method of grammar instruction in carrying out positive changes in students' competence in past tense forms.

One way repeated measures ANOVA was also applied to find out the consistency of experimental groups' competence in past tense forms. Hence, multiple pairwise comparisons of means were used to identify which test scores are different with each other and which ones are similar. Multiple comparisons of means were also beneficial to determine whether the test scores of the experimental group are consistent over time. Pairwise comparisons of the experimental group's mean scores on the four repeated past tenses are shown in the table below.

Table 4
Pairwise Comparisons

(I) Test	(J) Test	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval For Difference[b]	
					Lower bond	Upper bond
1	2	-27.857*	1.264	.000	-30.410	-25.304
	3	-27.190*	1.260	.000	-29.735	-24.646
	4	-26.333*	1.261	.000	-28.880	-23.787
2	1	27.857*	1.264	.000	25.304	30.410
	3	.667	.789	.403	-.928	2.261
	4	1.524	.992	.132	-.480	3.527
3	1	27.190	1.260	.000	24.646	29.735
	2	-.667	.789	.403	-2.26	.928
	4	.557	.739	.253	-.636	2.350
4	1	26.333	1.261	.000	23.787	28.880
	2	1.524	.992	.132	-3.527	.980
	3	-.857	.739	.253	-2.350	.636

Based on estimated marginal means
* The mean difference is significant at the 0.5 level
b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments)

The results of the one–way repeated measures ANOVA, as indicated in Table 4, show that the participants' mean score in each posttest was significantly higher than their mean score in test one or pre-test ($P < 0.05$). Furthermore, pairwise comparison analysis was made in a post–hoc test to determine the relationship between pairs of posttests. Based on that, the analysis indicated that the mean score differences between test 2 and 3 (.1999), 2 and 4 (.089), and 4 and 3 (.655) were not significant ($P > 0.05$). Therefore, it was proved that an increase in students' competence was not

an immediate effect, and TSNI could bring consistent past tense forms competence across time.

Discussion

This study was motivated by the question of whether teacher–students negotiated interaction (TSNI) affects EFL students' acquisition of past tense forms, comparing it with traditional teacher–led instruction. The findings of this study revealed that the students' competence in grammaticality judgment, completion, and writing was improved, though not in gap–filling tasks. Hence, the findings of this study suggested that though explicit instruction may still be necessary for rule–based tasks, negotiated interaction enhances implicit knowledge and communicative application. Ellis (2007) stated that explicit instruction is required for gap–filling tasks and tasks that need metalinguistic awareness, as they typically involve applying grammatical rules in isolated sentences without meaningful context. We discuss the theoretical implications, pedagogical innovations, and future research directions below.

The outcomes of the current study are supported by Long (2015), which confirms that negotiated interaction facilitates grammar acquisition by promoting noticing, modified output, modified input, and cognitive engagement. Mackey (1999) also showed that classroom interaction facilitates the grammatical development of students. Furthermore, Gass et al. (2005) support the finding of the current study by stating the role of negotiated interaction to enhance learners' grammar acquisition by integrating form and meaning and ultimately to identify form, meaning, and function relationships of linguistic elements. However, purely implicit feedback may not suffice for all grammatical learning contexts, as the insignificant effect of TSNI on gap–filling tasks suggests. This is supported by Ellis (2007), who argues for the importance of both implicit and explicit knowledge for full grammatical competence.

This study has a key theoretical contribution by its empirical validation of task–based negotiation in an EFL setting where traditional instruction dominates. Previous studies, like Loewen and Sato (2018) and Mackey (2006), primarily examined corrective feedback types. Unlike those studies, the present study demonstrated how implicit feedback within meaningful tasks (picture storytelling, information–gap activities) fosters grammatical restructuring without disrupting communication in EFL classrooms. The findings of this study are reinforced by Output

Hypothesis, as learners were pushed to self-correction and refining of their interlanguage through interaction.

As pedagogical innovation, this study showed how to integrate meaning and form practically for EFL teachers, particularly in contexts like Ethiopia, where grammar instruction remains largely rule-based and decontextualized. The findings of this study may also have significant implications in enhancing grammatical competence for other EFL contexts, particularly in Asia and Latin American settings, where traditional teacher–led instruction (lack of opportunities for authentic interaction) often dominates. The success of TSNI suggests three main issues. First, using implicit feedback like recasts, clarification requests, and confirmation checks (used in this study) subtly draws attention to form without interrupting meaning. Likewise, oral input enhancement (e.g., stress and intonation on past tense verbs) helped learners notice errors naturally. Second, picture-based storytelling provided contextualized input, while information-gap tasks necessitated negotiation of meaning, reinforcing past tense usage. Third, explicit instruction might still be needed for metalinguistic awareness because gap–filling (rule–based) performance did not offer significant change between the two groups.

This study has some limitations, and further research is needed to address these limitations. The first limitation is that TSNI may not represent other types of interactions, like learner–learner or learner–native speaker interactions. Therefore, it needs further research to see the effects of these types of interactions on students' grammar competence. The other limitation is that all participants of this study were from the same L1 background and culture. Therefore, it may lack the generalizability of the findings to other settings and cultures. Future studies should explore diverse EFL contexts (e.g., varying proficiency levels, L1 backgrounds, or cultural contexts) could test the generalizability of TSNI's efficacy, particularly in settings where traditional instruction dominates. Furthermore, future research can investigate the sustained impacts of TSNI on implicit vs. explicit knowledge through longitudinal designs. Finally, future research might also clarify how learners process implicit feedback during negotiation via mixed–method approaches (e.g., combining classroom interaction analysis with stimulated recalls).

Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of teacher-student negotiated interaction (TSNI) on Ethiopian EFL students' competence by comparing

it with traditional teacher–led instruction. The findings of the study showed that TSNI significantly improved the learners' grammatical competence in grammaticality judgment, writing, and completion tasks ($p < 0.05$. As the findings of the current study revealed, implicit feedback, task–based negotiation, and cognitive engagement enhanced grammar acquisition by promoting noticing, modified output, and meaningful practice. However, insignificant improvements in gap–filling tasks imply that explicit instruction may still be necessary for rule–based grammar tasks.

This study offers pedagogically valuable insights for EFL contexts where grammar instruction is dominated by a traditional teacher–led approach. Furthermore, the use of TSNI shows the benefits of integrating form–focused and meaning-focused instruction through interactive tasks such as picture-based storytelling and information-gap activities. Hence, it is possible to enhance grammatical competence by employing implicit feedback (e.g., recasts, clarification requests) and oral input enhancement techniques (e.g., stress, intonation) to draw learners' attention to form without disrupting communication. Furthermore, the experimental groups' improved motivation and engagement ($M = 4.1$) suggest that negotiated interaction fosters intrinsic motivation and self-regulation, making grammar learning more dynamic and learner–centered.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All the named authors have agreed to the publication of this manuscript and confirm that they have no their conflict of interest to declare.

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