Teaching the English Tense System through Systemic Theoretical Instruction and Cognitive Grammar: Investigating Students' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The English tense system poses substantial challenges to second and foreign language learners in both morphological and semantic respects, and traditional grammar pedagogy conceptualizing grammar as rules of thumb fails to provide learners with comprehensive, accurate, or systematic knowledge about the English tense system. The present classroom-based study aims at investigating the application of an alternative pedagogical grammar method that integrates the pedagogical framework of systemic theoretical instruction grounded upon sociocultural theory with the linguistic framework of cognitive grammar, which is a hyponym of cognitive linguistics, for teaching the English tense system. Four instructional sessions were conducted in an English language classroom in a Hong Kong secondary school, and students' perceptions of the learning experience were examined by means of questionnaires and focus group interviews. While the students appreciated the novelty of the learning experience, they expressed concerns about complexity of the concepts taught, as well as the linkage between these concepts and examinations. The students felt mostly positive toward the learning experience and found it disparate from their previous experience of learning tenses, yet some held a negative attitude toward the learning experience and expressed their discontent over an inappropriate level of difficulty. Several factors ought to be taken into consideration when applying this pedagogy to second language grammar instruction.

Keywords: Systemic theoretical instruction, cognitive grammar, English tenses

Introduction

Drawing upon Halliday's (1978, 1985) systemic functional linguistics (SFL), Larsen-Freeman (2003, 2015) incorporated the dimensions of form, meaning, and use into her pedagogical framework for describing grammar and coined the term "grammaring," which denotes the ability to capitalize upon linguistic forms to convey meanings in appropriate social contexts, in order to challenge the conventional conceptualization of grammar as a static system with a finite set of rules of thumb.

In Hong Kong, the *English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide* (Curriculum Development Council, 2017) suggests that English language teachers facilitate grammar instruction in meaningful contexts. The pedagogical methods prevalently employed by second language educators for grammar instruction (i.e., processing instruction, collaborative output tasks, and discourse-based grammar instruction) conceptualize grammar as rules of thumb dissociating syntax from semantics and segregating language use from human cognition. Such pedagogy is thereby inadequate at providing learners with comprehensive, accurate, or systematic grammatical knowledge, let alone genuinely equipping them with grammaring skills (Negueruela, 2008; Tyler, 2012). Therefore, pedagogical alternatives that provide learners with a precise conceptual understanding of grammar are warranted.

A combination of systemic theoretical instruction grounded upon sociocultural theory with cognitive grammar, which is a hyponym of cognitive linguistics, is capable of advancing students' conceptual development by means of introducing the semantic concepts underlying the structures of the target language. Therefore, this combination offers an alternative for instruction that complements the inadequacy of the three aforementioned pedagogical approaches. However, empirical support for such an alternative appears limited. The present study is an exploratory work that aimed at investigating the application of this alternative pedagogical approach to teaching the English tense system in the context of a Hong Kong secondary school.

Literature Review

The rationale for proposing a pedagogical alternative that integrates systemic theoretical instruction with cognitive grammar lies in the inadequacy of the existing pedagogy with regard to addressing second language learners' difficulties acquiring the English tense system.

Second Language Learners' Difficulties in Acquiring English Tenses

Defined as the "grammaticalized expression of location in time" (Comrie 1985, p. 9), tense is conceived by descriptive grammarians to be a "deictic category" closely correlated with time in descriptive grammar (de Haan 2013, p. 446). The English tense system poses substantial challenges to second language (L2) learners.

Morphologically, morphological variability entails the variable absence of verb inflections realizing tenses and is prevalent in learners' language production (Haznedar & Schwartz, 1997; Ionin & Wexler, 2002; Lardiere, 1998a, b; Law, 2005; McArthur, 2002). Generative linguists

have put forward the missing surface inflection hypothesis, which contends that learners' failure to supply tense markers in obligatory contexts is attributable to their failure to map the abstract morphosyntactic feature of tense onto surface inflectional morphology (Prevost & White, 2000a, 2000b; White, 2003). Approaching learners' pitfalls from a processing-based perspective, VanPatten (1996, 2015) put forward the input processing theory, which asserts that learners possess a tendency to take heed of more salient lexical items in lieu of semantically redundant morphological inflections with regard to language processing.

Semantically, even though some advanced L2 learners exhibit high formal accuracy in their production of English tenses using accurate morphological markings of the present and past tenses of verbs, their appropriate use of tenses lags behind formal accuracy in that learners fail to produce correct tenses in appropriate contexts (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Bardovi-Harlig & Bofman, 1989).

From a developmental perspective, L2 learners' acquisition of English tenses could be intralingual. Both Brown's (1973) morpheme study and Pienemann's (1998, 2003) processability theory suggest that developmental sequences occur in language learners' language development. Functional linguists also comply with developmental sequences and contend that typical L2 learners' learning is contingent upon pragmatic and lexical devices for expressing the concept of time before learners can eventually master the usage of verb morphology to denote tense (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). Andersen and Shirai's (1994, 1996) aspect hypothesis further postulates the acquisition of tense and aspect markers to be heavily influenced by verbs' inherent lexical aspects.

Cross-linguistic influences have also been found to be influential in L2 learners' difficulty in acquiring the English tense system. Drawing upon von Humboldt (1988) and Whorf's (1956) study on linguistic relativity, which conceives language and thought as inseparable from one another, Odlin (1989, 2005) contended that knowledge of the first language perhaps adversely influences learners' acquisition of an L2, especially when the two languages are significantly disparate from each other. Examining such cross-linguistic influences with respect to the English tense system, Collins (2007), Hong (2008), and Tickoo (2001), as well as Yang and Huang (2004), suggested that the lack of tense markings in certain languages such as Cantonese plausibly effectuates the difficulties of first language speakers of these languages with acquiring both the morphology and semantics of English tenses.

Instruction on the English Tense System

A number of methods are commonly exploited by second language educators for grammar instruction, yet they fail to address the aforementioned second language learners' difficulties with acquiring the English tense system.

First and foremost, by targeting learners' language processing pitfalls that result from their input processing strategies, processing instruction aims at assisting learners in processing target forms correctly for meaning by means of structured input activities (VanPatten 1996, 2004). For instance, when teaching the English past tense, temporal adverbs are removed to

hook learners' attention to the past tense suffixes of verbs in order to comprehend the meaning of the past tense as an indication of completed events (Benati, 2005). Processing instruction is confirmed to be efficacious in improving learners' performances at both interpreting and producing English past tense; however, such positive findings are confined merely to the usage of the past tense for describing completed events.

Collaborative output tasks (e.g., dictogloss tasks) are meaning-based communicative tasks intended to promote learning of target structures by providing primary language data and eliciting pushed output from learners (Wajnryb, 1990). For instance, when teaching the English past tense, the teacher reads a passage with abundant instances of past tense usage to students, who are subsequently required to reconstruct the passage and compare the reconstructed and original versions to notice the difference (Qin, 2008). Akin to processing instruction, collaborative output tasks manage to improve learners' production of the English past tense, but only one particular usage of the past tense (Benati, 2005).

By merging discourse analysis and grammar instruction, form-focused discourse hooks learners' attention to grammar usage in authentic language at a discourse level (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2001). When teaching English verb tenses, the teacher presents specific usages of the present and past tenses (e.g., present tense for generalizations, past tense for specific examples) to learners using authentic texts such as academic writings in order to hook their attention to the actual contextual use of the language (Celce-Murcia & Yoo, 2014).

The one-to-one mapping of form and meaning as embraced by the three aforementioned instructional methods fails to reflect the polysemous nature of form-meaning mapping in the English tense system, where one form is mapped to multiple meanings, or the complexity of human cognition, where tense is used to convey not only time but also the relative immediacy of depicted situations. The proposed pedagogical approach enables students to integrate their knowledge of the English present and past tenses by using theoretical concepts to elucidate why one verb form (i.e., present simple or past simple) can be used to convey particular meanings.

Pedagogical Framework

Systemic theoretical instruction (STI) is a pedagogical model developed by Gal'perin (1969, 1979, 1989, 1992) and possesses four tenets: concepts as minimal units of instruction, materialization of concepts, verbalization of concepts, and interconnection among the categories of meaning (Negueruela, 2003, 2008). The pedagogical procedures Gal'perin (1969) proposed and Haenen (1996) outlined for STI are delineated below.

Following the motivational stage, where learners are motivated to learn target language structures by means of providing examples primary language data comprising instances of target structures, are the orienting and material(ized) stages (Haenen, 1996). In these stages, semantic and pragmatic concepts underlying target structures are presented through the schema of a complete orienting basis of an action (SCOBA), which provides learners with a holistic cognitive map to mediate their minds, and teachers assist learners in studying SCOBA and

comprehending the concepts that are involved (Gal'perin, 1989, 1992; Haenen, 1996; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Negueruela, 2008). Once students comprehend the semantic and pragmatic concepts underlying the target structures materialized in SCOBA, they proceed to stages of overt speech and covert speech, where they are provided with primary language data with instances of target language structures and respectively explicate their understanding of target forms in these examples to their peers and themselves in relation to learned concepts (Gal'perin, 1969; Haenen, 1996; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Once they have gained mastery of the concepts underlying the target language structures in the two stages of verbal action, students eventually reach the final stage of STI, the mental stage, where overt and covert speeches have been transformed into inner speech.

Linguistic Framework

The English tense system is conceived by cognitive grammar (CG) using an epistemic model (see Figure 1). English's present and past tenses are exploited to delineate reality (R), which is metaphorically compared to an expanding cylinder with growth occurring continuously at its leading face, representing current reality, and the human as the conceptualizer (C; Langacker, 2008). The portion of current reality the conceptualizer accepts to be real is known as immediate reality (IR), while the remaining portion of reality the conceptualizer accepts as real is known as conceived reality (R_c) or non-immediate reality. At any moment, a conceptualizer directs their attention to one particular situation, be it a state or an event, and that particular situation is known as the profiled occurrence (PO; Langacker, 2011). PO necessarily exists within the conceptualizer's immediate scope (IS), which is metaphorically conceived as an onstage region of the conceptualizer's attention within the maximal scope (MS), which comprises the overall content.

Figure 1. An epistemic model (Source: Langacker, 2008, p. 301)
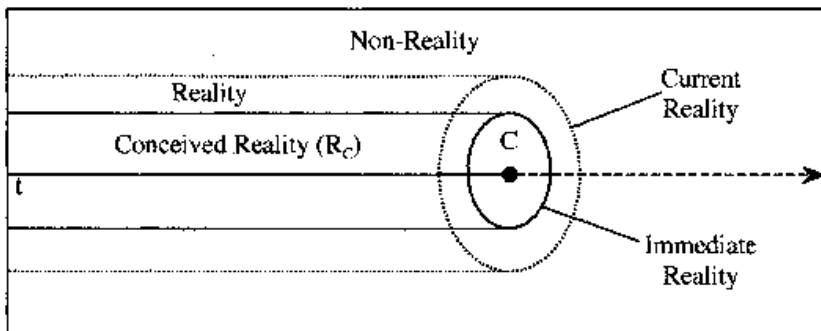
The present and past tenses delineate profiled occurrences within immediate reality and non-immediate reality, respectively (Langacker, 2011). Apart from temporally not delineating profiled occurrences within immediate reality and non-immediate reality, the peripheral usages of the present tense (i.e., timeless truths and scheduled future) and those of the past tense

(i.e., imaginative conditionals and social distancing) are respectively applied when profiled occurrences virtually enter conceptualizers' immediate reality and non-immediate reality. The English present and past tenses can thereby be explicated using the semantic concept of epistemic reality, under which all usages of the present and past tenses are subsumed.

Integrating the Pedagogical and Linguistic Frameworks

Both STI and CG are meaning-focused and favor explicit instruction as well as graphical representation of language in that STI zeros in on instruction regarding the meaningful semantic concepts underlying language forms as well as the materialization of abstract concepts by means of concrete visual images whereas CG possesses a primacy of meaning over form and delineates language through meaning-based schematic patterns (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Masuda & Arnett, 2015); thus, integrating STI with CG in L2 grammar instruction is regarded as desirable and feasible, with the former providing a pedagogical framework organizing development and the latter providing a linguistic framework supporting the design of instructional materials.

Despite the huge potential for integrating STI and CG, only two studies to date have looked into implementing a blend of the two in authentic L2 classrooms. By structuring STI-based instruction and utilizing CG to inform the design of instructional materials, both Lee (2012) and White (2012) implemented this type of pedagogical method for instructing English verb + participle constructions, which are usually acquired by learners via rote learning, in university-level L2 classrooms. The learners were presented with a systematic picture of schematic patterns underlying the target particles and engaged in verbalization activities for internalizing the concepts. Both studies collected quantitative data comprised of the scores from multiple-choice tests assessing learners' usage accuracy of the target structures and qualitative data comprised of learners' responses to explanatory tasks requiring them to account for the usages of target structures in the given language data, as well as their feedback on the entirety of the instruction. Not only was the combination of STI and CL discovered to assist learners in producing verb + participle constructions more accurately in their language usage, but this combination also managed to advance their conceptual understanding of the target particles. More importantly, instructional procedures and materials were found to be valued and appreciated by the majority of participants (Lee, 2012; White, 2012).

Due to the limited number of empirical studies that have been conducted to date, more classroom-based research ought to be conducted, especially in classrooms in non-tertiary settings for the sake of further assessing the pedagogical efficacy of instruction integrating STI with CG. Both antecedent studies targeted English verb + particle constructions; thus, studies involving other target structures can be carried out to widen the scope of the literature. Moreover, the preceding studies were solely conducted from the perspective of educational providers by focusing on the pedagogical impacts on students' language performance. With reference to Cheng (1998)'s di-polarity of education, conducting studies from the perspective of educational recipients by focusing on students' perceptions of the pedagogy is in fact worthwhile.

Present Study

The present paper is a segment of a larger study exploring the application of a pedagogical method integrating STI with CG to instructing the English present and past tenses in an L2 classroom of a Hong Kong secondary school. Integrating the two assists learners in mapping one language form (i.e., the English present or past tense) to multiple meanings and aims to address learners' failure in order to map the forms and meanings of the English tense system.

Due to little being known about integrating STI and CG in L2 grammar instruction, the present study possesses an exploratory nature and aims at illuminating the strengths and weaknesses of such a pedagogical intervention, as well as what can be done to optimize its operation in L2 classrooms. The impacts of the pedagogical grammar method integrating STI with CG regarding learners' grammatical performance are presented in Ng (2020, 2022).

This paper focuses on the pedagogy from the educand's perspective. As motivation is a determinant of learning performance and L2 learning outcomes, it is worth studying learners' perceptions of the instructional experience with the hope of evaluating whether the pedagogy was able to heighten their learning motivation, which would positively impact their learning (Gardner, 2001; Gottfried, 1990). The current paper intends to address the following research question: "What are students' perceptions of instruction that integrates STI with CG?"

Methodology

The study employs an exploratory mixed-method design with quantification of qualitative data to analyze the impacts of instruction on students' conceptual development of the English present and past tenses.
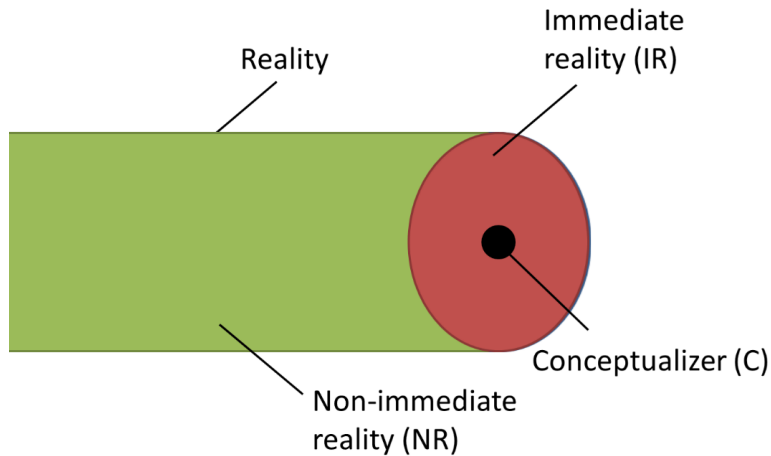
Participants

Due to being exploratory in nature, the study used the convenience sampling to recruit the participants. The study was conducted in a 9th-grade L2 classroom in a Hong Kong secondary school, where the researcher conducted his 7-week English language teaching practice. The participants were taught the English tense system at a junior secondary level and mastered the overwhelming majority of its usages; thus, the goal of the instruction was to build upon their prior knowledge by means of introducing the semantic concepts underlying the English tense system with regard to grammar instruction. The study recruited 29 ninth-grade students, of whom 10 are male and 19 are female.

Instructional Instruments

The instructional instruments employed in the teaching sessions comprised a collection of SCOBAs and verbalization tasks. SCOBAs of the study were designed on the basis of Langacker's (2008) epistemic model and adapted from materials developed by Langacker (2011). The SCOBAs comprised three segments: (1) a simplified epistemic model (see Figure

2) for introducing the concept of epistemic reality, (2) three didactic charts presenting the four semantic concepts underlying the English tense system and mapping various usages of the two tenses onto the four concepts (see Figure 3), and (3) four diagrams elucidating the four semantic concepts in depth (see Figure 4). In-class verbalization tasks (see Table 1) and after-class written verbalization tasks (see Table 2) required the participants to explicate their understanding of verb tenses in the primary language data in relation to the four learned concepts. A complete set of tasks developed for the study can be found in Ng (2020).

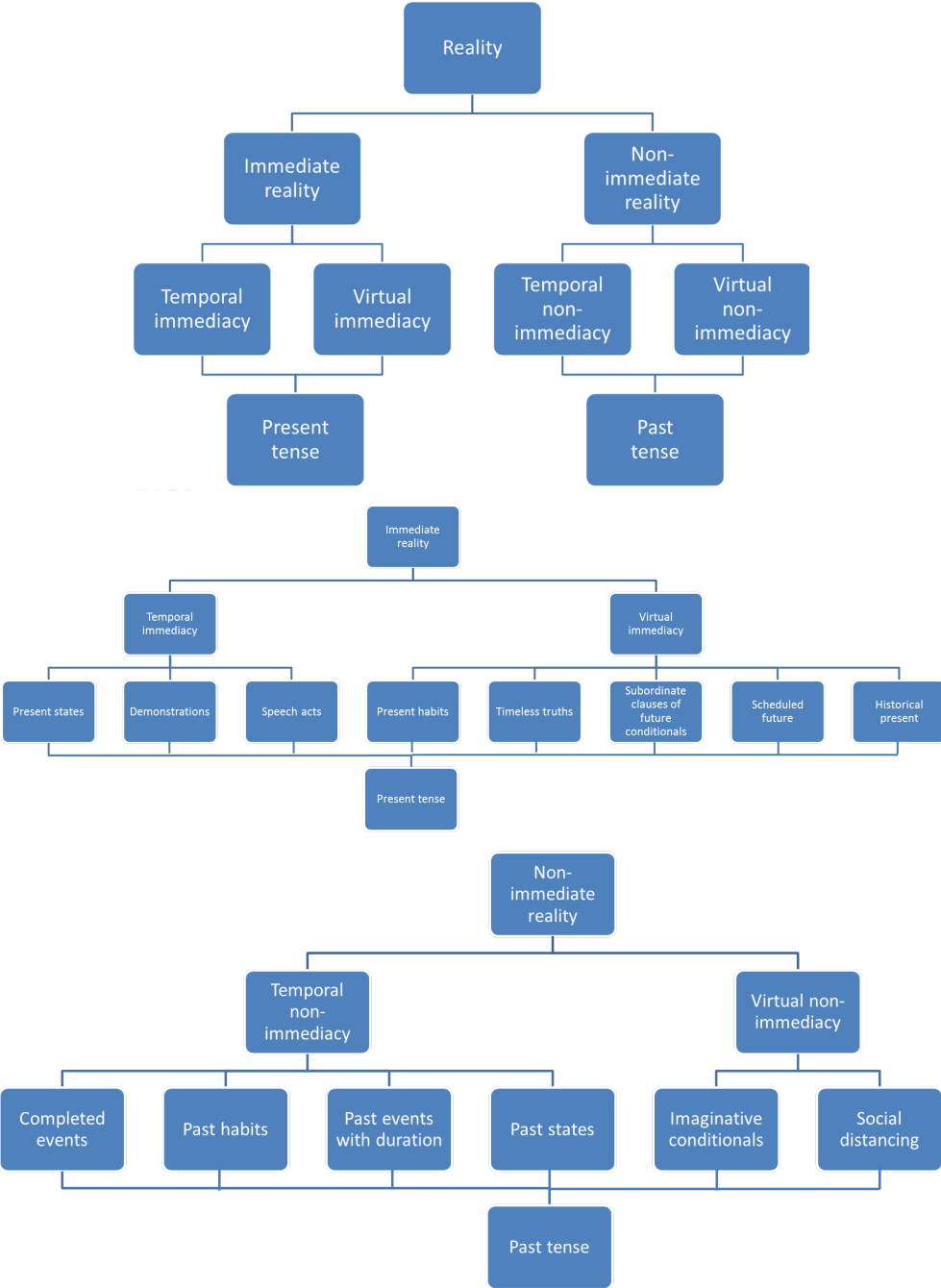**Figure 2.** A simplified epistemic model
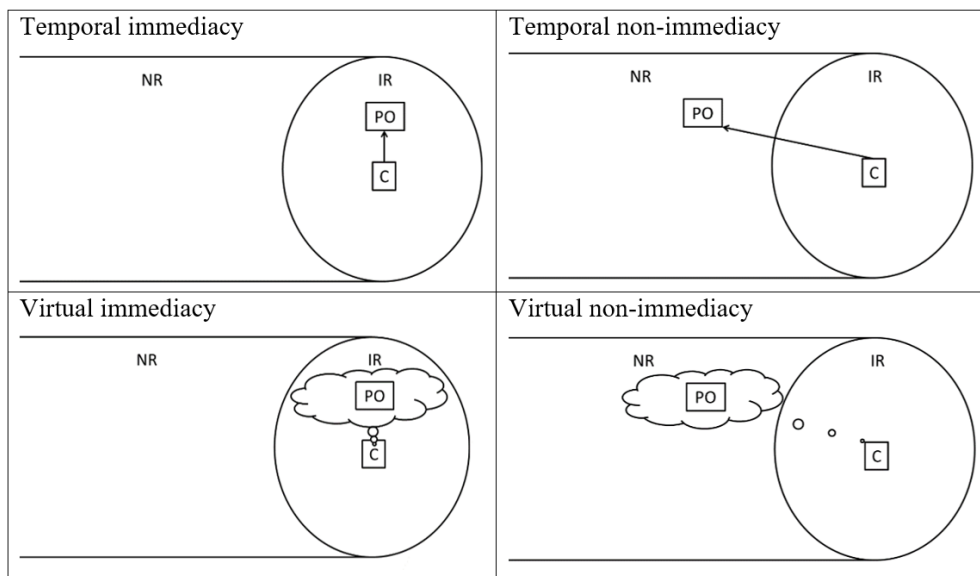
Figure 3. Three didactic charts

Temporal immediacy	Temporal non-immediacy
NR IR PO ↑ C	NR IR PO ↖ C
Virtual immediacy	Virtual non-immediacy
NR IR (PO) C	NR IR (PO) ○ ○ C

Figure 4. Four diagrams

Table 1. A Sample In-Class Verbalization Task
Explain the tense of the underlined verb in each sentence to your partner using the given charts and diagrams. There <u>is</u> a large house on the corner. Source of sentence: Huddleston (2002)

Table 2. A Sample After-Class Written Verbalization Task
Explain the tense of the underlined verb in each sentence. You may use diagrams if necessary. The car <u>belongs</u> to Bill. Source of sentence: Huddleston (2002)

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected via an exit questionnaire and exit focus group interviews. The questionnaires managed to garner a considerable amount of data expeditiously and the interviews helped elaborate upon the participants' responses, thus the two instruments complemented each other to generate a thorough picture of the students' perceptions (Dornyei, 2010; Mackey & Gass, 2016).

The questionnaire comprised 10 rating scale questions adapted from Dornyei (2010) and Lee (2012) and designed on the basis of a five-point Likert-type scale, plus one short answer question about the learning experiences (Dornyei, 2010). The 10 questions covered four areas of the participants' perceptions of the learning experience: enjoyment of the instruction,

perceived usefulness of distinct stages of instruction, comparison between the instruction and previous learning experience, and perceived confidence regarding grammatical performance.

The study adopted an interview protocol with 11 predetermined questions based on Lee's (2012) study opining standardized open-ended semi-structured interviews to enhance the comparability of responses and to facilitate data analysis (Patton, 1980). Notwithstanding the existence of a list of questions, the researcher remained flexible and asked follow-up questions when necessary during interviews. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the students' first language, in order to eliminate the detrimental impacts of the learners' English proficiency levels on the quality and quantity of the provided data (Mackey & Gass, 2016).

The answers to the rating scale questions from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively, while the short answer question from the questionnaires and interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, in which the interviews were transcribed, translated, pre-coded, and coded (Dornyei, 2007). Responses to the short answer question on the questionnaires and the contents from the interviews were interpreted and reported by identifying the recurring themes and extracting the quotes that provide evidence for each theme (Krippendorp, 2004). Validity and reliability checks were conducted by means of respondent feedback to ensure validity and reliability of the data (Dornyei, 2007).

Procedures

The entirety of the study lasted seven weeks. Instructional sessions were held on a weekly basis from the second week to the fifth week, with each session focusing on one of the four semantic concepts underlying the English tense system. As an exploratory study, the study only involved four instructional sessions of 100 minutes in total focusing on the concepts of temporal immediacy, virtual immediacy, temporal non-immediacy, and virtual non-immediacy. Each instructional session lasted 25 minutes and followed the pedagogical procedures of STI presented above.

Each instructional session began with a 5-minute lead-in stage, where primary language data were presented to students to inform them about the target tense. After the lead-in stage, a 10-minute materialization stage occurred where the target semantic concept of each instructional session was presented and elucidated upon to the students with the assistance of SCOBAs. After the materialization stage, a 10-minute verbalization stage occurred where students were required to explicate verb tenses in the primary language data in relation to the learned concept to their peers. Written verbalization tasks were also provided for completion after class as homework for students to verbalize on their own through covert speech. Both the in-class verbalization tasks and the after-class written verbalization tasks paved way for internalizing the concepts in the mental stage. An equal number of sentences was presented to students in each instructional session to ensure that the students were provided the same amount of input regarding the four concepts for a fair comparison.

Exit questionnaires and focus group interviews, both of which elicited students' perceptions of the instruction, were completed by the participants immediately after all instructional sessions; these were respectively conducted in the last two weeks of the research period.
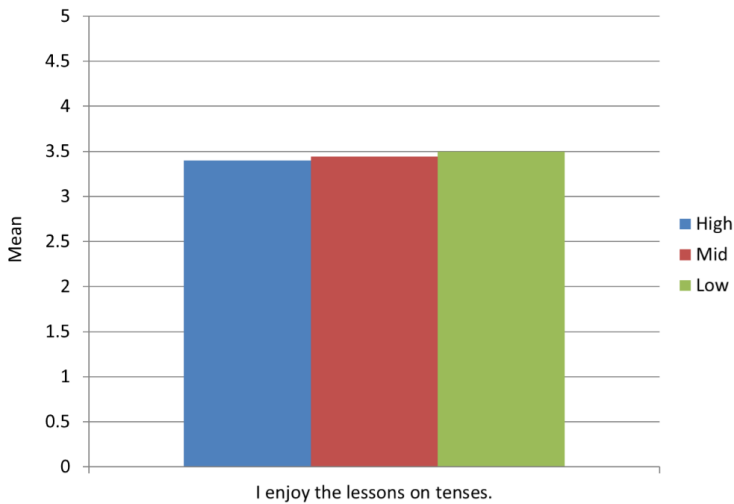
Results

The exit questionnaire and focus group interviews were used to look into four areas of the participants' perceptions toward the learning experience. Their perceptions were also analyzed at distinct levels of English proficiency by dividing the participants into three groups of high, middle, and low levels of English proficiency based on their scores from the daily writing assignments.

Enjoyment of the instruction

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the participants' enjoyment of the instruction in terms of the three proficiency groups. Descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 3 and 4 and Figure 5.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Enjoyment of Instruction							
Statement	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis	BCa bootstrapped 95% CI of mean
I enjoy the lessons on tenses.	3	4	3.46	.51	.15	-2.14	[3.29, 3.64]

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Enjoyment of Instruction at Distinct Levels of English Proficiency			
Statement	Means (*SD*) for different levels of language proficiency		
	High (*n* = 10)	Mid (*n* = 9)	Low (*n* = 10)
I enjoy the lessons on tenses.	3.40 (.52)	3.44 (.53)	3.50 (.53)

Figure 5. Descriptive statistics for the participants' enjoyment of the instruction at distinct levels of English proficiency.

The results from the one-way ANOVA ($F_2 = .12$, $p = .89$, $f = .10$) exhibit no statistical difference regarding participants' enjoyment of the instruction in terms of distinct levels of English proficiency.

Interpreted along with an inclination of mean scores toward positivity, such findings irrefutably possess a disposition to suggest that the participants felt positive toward the learning experience on the whole, irrespective of their level of English proficiency, chiefly due to its uniqueness and novelty, as expressed in the exit questionnaires and focus group interviews. Such sentiments have been discovered to be strongly correlated with intrinsic learning motivation (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

> *That was [a] unique experience and I enjoyed it.* (Exit Questionnaire, Student 2, Mid-Level)
> *An interesting learning experience on tenses!* (Exit Questionnaire, Student 25, Low-Level)
> *In general, this instructional approach is good because… [it] is more comprehensive.* (Focus Group 2, Student 1, Mid-Level)

All the same, some participants had negative attitudes toward the learning experience and expressed their discontent over an inappropriate level of difficulty. The instruction appears to have failed to target an appropriate level of L2 competence for some learners, and this might have triggered them to turn on their affective filter and react to the instruction pejoratively (Krashen, 1985).

> *A little bit difficult to follow as this method is not very easy for me [to] follow up.* (Exit Questionnaire, Student 15, Low-Level)

... more difficult [tenses] can be chosen ... there are some difficult [tenses] which [we] do not know how to use when seeing. (Focus Group 1, Student 1, Low-Level)

Perceived Usefulness of the Distinct Stages of Instruction

Four one-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare the perceived usefulness of the four stages of instruction among the participants in the three proficiency groups. Descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 5 and 6 and Figure 6.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Perceived Usefulness of Distinct Stages of Instruction

Statement	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis	BCa bootstrapped 95% CI of mean
The flow chart and diagrams helped me learn tenses.	1	4	3.00	.82	-0.44	-0.24	[2.68, 3.25]
The teacher's explanation helped me learn tenses.	2	5	3.54	.74	-0.13	-0.08	[3.25, 3.79]
Explaining the usage of tenses to my classmates orally in class helped me learn tenses.	2	5	3.43	.69	.64	.28	[3.18, 3.69]
The homework requiring me to explain the usage of tenses helped me learn tenses.	2	4	3.29	.54	.19	-0.42	[3.07, 3.46]

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Perceived Usefulness of the Distinct Stages of Instruction of Participants in Terms of Their English Proficiency Levels

Statement	Mean (*SD*) of different levels of language proficiency		
	High (*n* = 10)	Mid (*n* = 9)	Low (*n* = 10)
The flow chart and diagrams helped me learn tenses.	3.30 (.68)	3.00 (.71)	2.70 (.95)
The teacher's explanation helped me learn tenses.	3.80 (.63)	3.56 (.53)	3.30 (.95)
Explaining the usage of tenses to my classmates orally in class helped me learn tenses.	3.70 (.82)	3.22 (.44)	3.30 (.68)
The homework requiring me to explain the usage of tenses helped me learn tenses.	3.50 (.53)	3.33 (.50)	3.10 (.57)
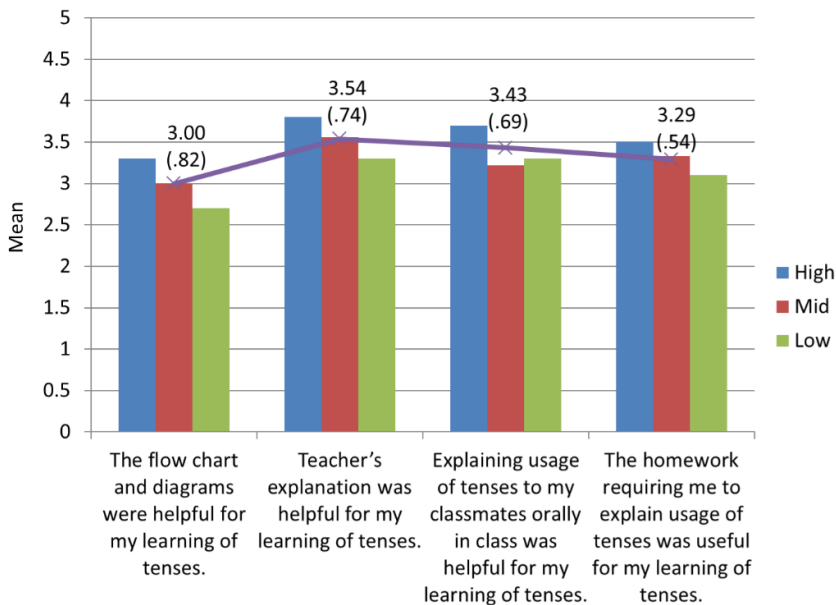
Figure 6. Descriptive statistics of perceived usefulness of distinct stages of instruction of participants at distinct levels of English proficiency

Table 7. One-Way ANOVA of the Participants' Perceived Usefulness of the Distinct Stages of Instruction in Terms of Their Distinct Levels of English Proficiency			
Statement	F	p	f
The flow chart and diagrams helped me learn tenses.	1.39	.27	.37
The teacher's explanation helped me learn tenses.	1.15	.33	.34
Explaining the usage of tenses to my classmates orally in class helped me learn tenses.	1.24	.31	.38
The homework requiring me to explain the usage of tenses helped me learn tenses.	1.48	.25	.38
Note: *p < .05. **f > .4			

The results from the one-way ANOVA in Table 7 reveal no statistical difference in the participants' perceived usefulness regarding the distinct stages of instruction in terms of their English proficiency levels. Among the four stages of instruction, the participants appear to favor most the material(ized) stage, where students listened to teacher's explanation. The interaction pattern in this stage is predominated by the teacher talking. This is the type of interaction pattern ubiquitously observed across English language classrooms in Hong Kong and mainland China and so is probably more familiar to students in Hong Kong, who are under the influence of the Confucius Heritage Culture (CHC; Hu, 2002; Tsui, 1985). Furthermore,

as a type of expert scaffolding, the teacher's explication of concepts at the material(ized) stage obviously helped the participants comprehend the target concepts and so was probably embraced by the participants who found comprehending the abstract concepts difficult on their own (Poehner & Infante, 2017).

> *The teacher gave a clear explanation, but some tenses may be hard.* (Exit Questionnaire, Student 1, High-Level)
> *... when encountering something new, such as the diagram, I may not really understand but need somebody to help by providing examples.* (Focus Group 2, Student 1, Mid-Level)

In contrast, the participants appeared to dislike the most the orienting stage, where students were presented with the SCOBA. This could be attributable to their difficulty in comprehending abstractness in learning. Having just reached the formal operational period of cognitive development, the participants might not have gotten used to abstraction in learning and found comprehending the abstract SCOBA presented to them in the orienting stage to be hard, in particular the simplified epistemic model and diagrams (Piaget, 1970).

> *I think the flow chart is useful, but I did not really understand the diagram.* (Focus Group 1, Student 2, High-Level)
> *I think [the concepts] are not that useful ... Therefore, if we can find the usage, we will not find the concept.* (Focus Group 3, Student 1, Mid-Level)

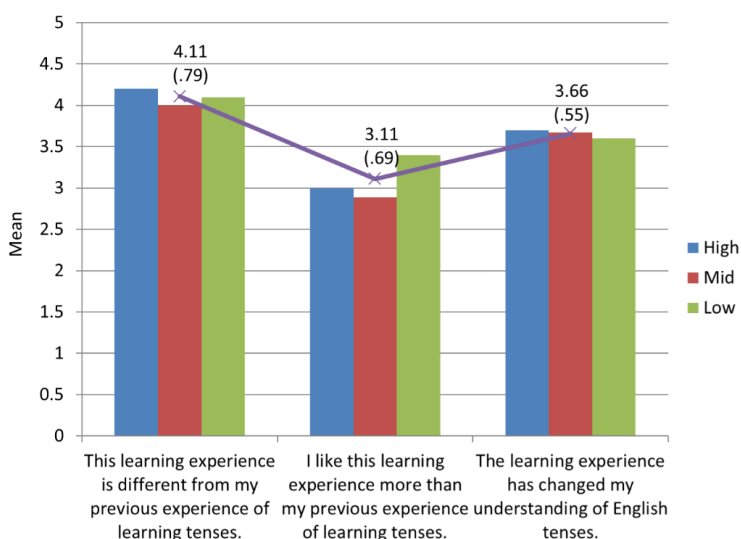### Comparing the Instruction with Previous Learning Experiences

The three one-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare the instruction with the participants' previous learning experiences in terms of the three proficiency groups. Descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 8 and 9 and Figure 7.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics for the Participants' Comparison of the Instruction with Their Previous Learning Experiences							
Statement	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis	BCa bootstrapped 95% CI of mean
This learning experience is different from my previous experience of learning tenses.	3	5	4.11	.79	-0.20	-1.32	[3.82, 4.39]
I like this learning experience more than my previous experience of learning tenses.	1	5	3.11	.69	-0.14	4.32	[2.86, 3.32]
The learning experience has changed my understanding of English tenses.	3	5	3.66	.55	.01	-0.72	[3.45, 3.86]

Table 9. Descriptive Statistics for the Comparison of the Instruction with the Participants' Previous Learning Experiences in Terms of Their Distinct Levels of English Proficiency

Statement	Mean (*SD*) of different levels of language proficiency		
	High (*n* = 10)	Mid (*n* = 9)	Low (*n* = 10)
This learning experience is different from my previous experience of learning tenses.	4.20 (.92)	4.00 (.76)	4.10 (.74)
I like this learning experience more than my previous experience of learning tenses.	3.00 (.47)	2.89 (.78)	3.40 (.70)
The learning experience has changed my understanding of English tenses.	3.70 (.48)	3.67 (.50)	3.60 (.70)

Figure 7. Descriptive statistics for comparing the instruction with the participants' previous learning experiences in terms of their distinct levels of English proficiency

Table 10. One-Way ANOVA of the Comparison between the Instruction and the Participants' Previous Learning Experiences in Terms of Their Distinct Levels of English Proficiency

Statement	F	P	f
This learning experience is different from my previous experience of learning tenses.	.14	.87	.12
I like this learning experience more than my previous experience of learning tenses.	1.56	.23	.40**
The learning experience has changed my understanding of English tenses.	.08	.92	.09
Note: *p < .05. **f > .4			

The results from the one-way ANOVA in Table 10 demonstrate that no statistical difference in perceived usefulness of distinct stages of instruction occurred among the participants in terms of their distinct levels of English proficiency. The vast majority of participants agreed that the instruction integrating STI with CG was different from their previous experience of learning tenses, as the mean score from this statement was the highest among the mean scores for all the statements in the exit questionnaire. In the entry questionnaires and focus group interviews, the participants expressed how English verb tenses had predominantly been previously taught using traditional grammar pedagogy, such as by rules of thumb (e.g. Negueruela, 2008; Tyler, 2012), where fixed rules were presented deductively or inductively followed by drills; by the introduction of temporal adverbials (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 2000), where students were told that certain adverbials always go with certain tenses; and by rehearsal strategies (e.g. Ormrod, 2014), where irregular verbs are memorized. The integration of STI and CG thereby indisputably deviated substantially from participants' previous experience of learning the English tense system.

> *For example, type one [conditionals] must be like that.* (Focus Group 1, Student 4, Low-Level)
> *Doing grammar exercises.* (Entry Questionnaire, Student 4, Mid-Level)
> *In the past, teachers taught us to identify some key words. For example, the past tense has to be used for words such as yesterday.* (Focus Group 1, Student 3, High-Level)
> *Memorizing the verb table.* (Entry Questionnaire, Student 16, Mid-Level)

Despite finding the learning experience distinct from their previous ones, the participants seldom expressed any clear preference for the instruction integrating STI with CG, with the participants in the low English proficiency group expressing a slightly stronger preference for it than their counterparts. This could be accounted for by failure of the instruction to meet participants' educational aims. The students having been educated against a backdrop of CHC appears to have been rather instrumental in their education, in that their educational aims are more instrumental than intrinsic. As such, they value how pedagogy primes them for achieving instrumental aims such as examinations (Peters, 1973; Tang, 2009). Some participants did not recognizE any relationship between the conceptual knowledge acquired in the instruction and their performance on the examinations and were thus reserved about the pedagogy.

> *I think it is better to cope with the aim first. Then, if more time is available, more can be taught.* (Focus Group 1, Student 1, Low-Level)
> *It actually depends on whether you would like to learn how to use [tenses] or these two concepts.* (Focus Group 1, Student 5, Mid-Level)
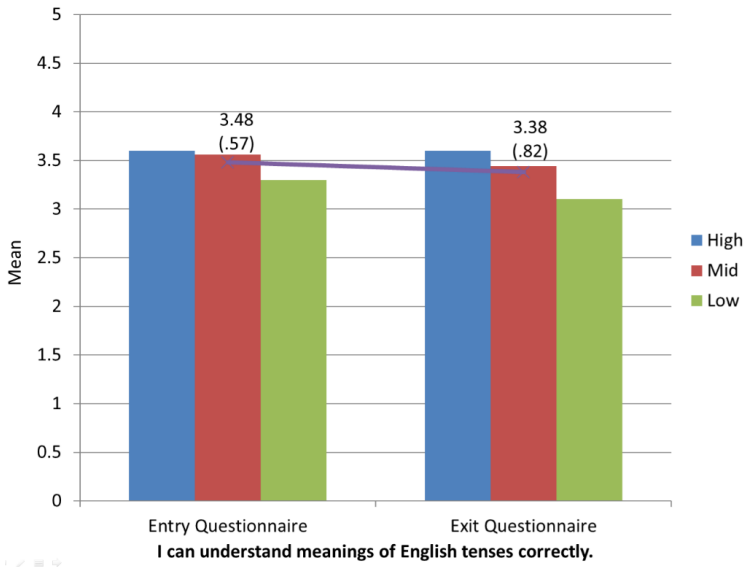
Perceived Confidence in Grammatical Performance

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the participants' perceived confidence in grammatical performance, which embodies grammatical comprehension and grammatical

production, before and after the instruction. Descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 11 and 12 and in Figures 8 and 9. The results from the t-tests regarding the participants' distinct levels of English proficiency are displayed in Table 13.

Table 11. Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Perceived Confidence in Grammatical Performance								
	n	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis	BCa bootstrapped 95% CI of mean
I can understand the meanings of English tenses correctly.								
Entry questionnaire	29	2	4	3.48	.57	-0.54	.43	[3.28, 3.66]
Exit questionnaire	29	2	5	3.38	.82	.42	.43	[3.10, 3.69]
I can use tenses correctly in my English writing and speaking.								
Entry questionnaire	29	2	5	3.24	.74	.14	-0.08	[2.97, 3.48]
Exit questionnaire	29	2	5	3.38	.73	.45	.23	[3.14, 3.66]

Table 12. Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Perceived Confidence Toward Their Grammatical Performance in Terms of Their Distinct Levels of English Proficiency		Mean (*SD*) of different levels of language proficiency		
Statement		High (n = 10)	Mid (n = 9)	Low (n = 10)
I can understand the meanings of English tenses correctly.	Entry questionnaire	3.60 (.70)	3.56 (.53)	3.30 (.48)
	Exit questionnaire	3.60 (.84)	3.44 (.73)	3.10 (.88)
I can use tenses correctly in my English writing and speaking.	Entry questionnaire	3.60 (.84)	3.33 (.50)	2.80 (.63)
	Exit questionnaire	3.70 (.82)	3.22 (.67)	3.20 (.63)

Figure 8. Descriptive statistics for the participants' perceived confidence regarding their grammatical comprehension in terms of their distinct levels of English proficiency
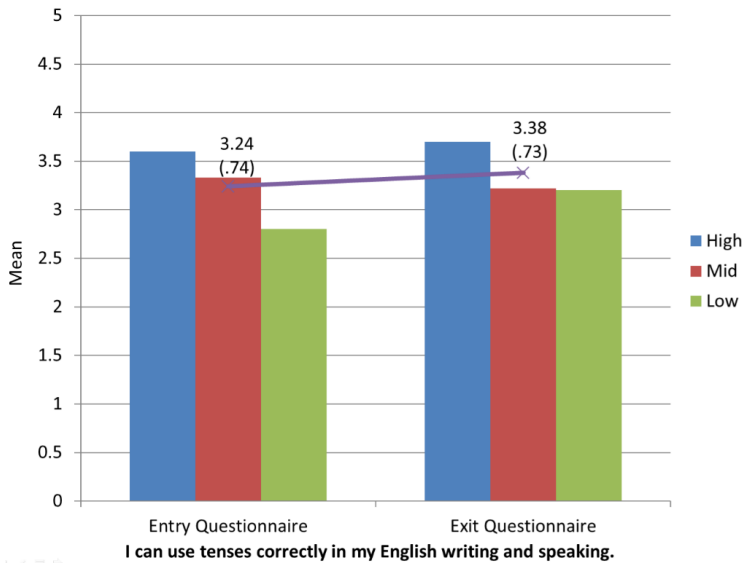
Figure 9. Descriptive statistics of the participants' perceived confidence toward their grammatical production in terms of their distinct levels of English proficiency

Table 13. *Paired-Samples t-Tests for the Participants' Perceived Confidence of Their Grammatical Performance in Terms of Their Distinct Levels of English Proficiency*

Statement	Level of English proficiency	Mean difference	t	p	95% BCa CI	d
I can understand the meanings of English tenses correctly.	High	.00	.00	1.00	[-0.46, .56]	.00
	Mid	-0.11	-0.43	.68	[-0.60, .40]	.42
	Low	-0.20	-0.61	.56	[-0.74, .50]	.35
I can use tenses correctly in my English writing and speaking.	High	.10	.43	.68	[-0.33, .60]	.16
	Mid	-0.11	-0.43	.68	[-0.63, .43]	.46
	Low	.40	1.31	.22	[-0.17, 1.00]	141.42**

Note: *p < .05. **d > .8

As for the participants' perceived confidence toward their grammatical comprehension, the results from the t-test (t_{28} = -0.65, p = .52, 95% BCa CI = [-0.41, .26], d = .28) manifested no statistical difference for this between the entry questionnaire and the exit questionnaire. Such findings apparently possess the propensity to suggest that the instruction had failed to beef up students' perceived confidence regarding their grammatical comprehension of the English tense system.

> *If there are no words such as "yesterday" or "now," [this teaching method] is helpful [in helping me understand] whether the event is happening now, is a habit, a fact, or something that happened in the past.* (Focus Group 1, Student 3, High-Level)
> *For example, if there are things such as "If I were you" in [reading] comprehension, I might think that it was related to the past before learning about it. It is actually imaginative conditionals.* (Focus Group 3, Student 1, Mid-Level)

As regards participants' perceived confidence in their grammatical production, the results from the t-test (t_{28} = .14, p = .38, 95% BCa CI = [-0.15, .52], d = 9.90) indicate no statistical difference in participants' perceived confidence in their grammatical production between the entry questionnaire and the exit questionnaire. Such findings are apt to suggest that the instruction is capable of beefing up students' confidence regarding their grammatical production of the English tense system. In particular, a frightfully large effect size was observed among students at a lower level of English proficiency. Participants in the focus group interviews expressed that the more comprehensive conceptual knowledge about English tenses that had been acquired in the instruction benefited their free production of English when they could no longer be dependent upon explicit cues.

> *This [teaching method] is more helpful for compositions.* (Focus Group 1, Student 4, Low-Level)
> *That is because no key term such as 'now or 'today' is provided in compositions, and the*

whole piece of paper is blank in compositions. Therefore, you have to comprehend whether to use the past tense, the present tense, the present perfect, or something else in individual sentences.(Focus Group 1, Student 3, High-Level)

Discussion

Teachers may lay more emphasis on the cognitive aspect of learning (i.e., pedagogical efficacy), whereas students may take more heed of the affective aspect of learning (i.e., motivation and affection). When examining a pedagogical method, students are chiefly concerned about factors pertaining to motivation; in other words, they yearn for pedagogy that is both motivating inasmuch as motivation energizes, directs, and sustains behaviors (Ormrod, 2014). Even though intrinsic motivation, which is inherent to the tasks performed, has been found to be more profitable than extrinsic motivation, which originates from factors external to the tasks performed, both types of motivation ought to be taken into consideration in lesson planning in a bid to motivate learners both extrinsically and intrinsically and eventually effectuate an ameliorated learning performance (Gottfried, 1990; Ormrod, 2014). The findings regarding the students' perceptions of instructing with STI and CG will thereby be elucidated upon with reference to the concept of motivation.

The overarching source of extrinsic motivation in secondary school students in Hong Kong is a need to cope with the examinations that are omnipresent in Hong Kong and the CHC context. Value being influential in motivation, learners are extrinsically motivated to perform tasks they conceive to be vital or possess utility. People view the examinations molded by the CHC culture as being vital, and students in Hong Kong possess highly instrumental educational aims and value achievements in examinations. Therefore, learning activities that prime them for excelling in examinations and shunning underachievement incontrovertibly have high value and are extrinsically motivating to them (Peters, 1973; Tang, 2009). For all their confessing that the instruction integrating STI with CG had enriched their knowledge about the English tense system and introduced a new perspective for conceptualizing the system, some students perceived that the instruction had little useful value to them. On one hand, having been exposed to the English present and past tenses since primary school, students saw no point devoting four instructional sessions to revising or reconceptualizing such learned knowledge when abundant new language items could be taught. Such a sentiment might also be attributable to their ignorance of Vygotsky's (1997) conceptualization of the developmental nature of education. On the other hand, the students saw no need to acquire the advanced conceptual knowledge that is not assessed in examinations, instead preferring to resort to traditional grammar pedagogy, which is less complicated and cognitively less demanding, in particular when they failed to recognize how such abstract conceptual knowledge could facilitate their language development and be profitable for their grammatical performance in examinations. Due to not being extrinsically motivating, some students did not favor instruction integrating STI and CG.

In regard to intrinsic motivation, one all-important factor was plainly interest. When instructional activities that pique students' interests, such as those that are novel, unexpected, and inherently interesting, and that are intrinsically motivating to students (Hidi & Renninger, 2006) are situational, interest is sustained for merely a short period of time. Only when situational interest is converted into personal interest by means of triggering students' interest in instructional content or subject in lieu of individual instructional activities can it remain stable. Despite finding the instructional approach itself novel and fascinating, the students appeared to be reserved about the abstract concepts that were presented. Therefore, instruction integrating STI with CG can hardly be expected to motivate students intrinsically in the long run. Having been exposed to novelty in terms of both instructional materials such as the SCOBA and instructional activities such as verbalization and written verbalization tasks, the students enjoyed the learning experience. However, such interest was largely considered situational. Having found the target concepts that were presented to be excessively abstract and beyond their level of language proficiency, students might have turned on their affective filter in L2 learning and even acquired a feeling of self-helplessness psychologically, without gaining a sense of personal interest (Krashen, 1985). Therefore, even though some students favored the learning experience, the instruction's level of difficulty ought to be refined and targeted at students' level of language proficiency for the sake of genuinely sustaining their learning interest and enhancing their intrinsic motivation.

Following the elucidation of findings regarding the students' perceptions of instructing with STI and CG in terms of the notions of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, a comparison was made on the questionnaires between students' perceived confidence in their grammatical performance and their actual grammatical performance on tests. In accordance with the self-fulfilling prophecies put forward by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), self-belief exerts far-reaching impacts on performance. Therefore, their perceived confidence in grammatical performance ought to influence their actual grammatical performance. In contrast with Lee's (2012) study where learners possessed higher perceived confidence in grammatical instruction after receiving instruction integrating STI with CG, the present study has identified no statistical difference in students' perceived confidence regarding their grammatical performance after the instruction. This is akin to a lack of statistical difference regarding the students' actual grammatical performance. The large effect size the instruction had on students' perceived confidence in grammatical production also matched that regarding the instruction's impact on their actual grammatical performance. The interrelation between perceived confidence toward grammatical performance and actual grammatical performance thereby appears to be substantiated. In light of the correlation between the two, having L2 educators take heed of students' confidence in the course of instruction and attempting to beef up students' confidence by convincing them that the pedagogical approach is capable of facilitating language learning and promoting language development are vital.

Conclusion

By and large, the present paper has aimed at investigating students' perceptions of instruction integrating STI with CG in an attempt to expand the body of literature on applying STI and CG to authentic L2 classrooms and illuminate future development of the L2 grammar pedagogy on English tenses. Overall, while appreciating the novelty of the learning experience, the students expressed concerns about the complexity of the taught concepts, as well as the linkage between such concepts and examinations. However, such findings are tentative in view of the exploratory nature of the study.

The study has illuminated the appropriateness of STI and CG in L2 grammar instruction. The study possesses no intention to argue whether instruction integrating STI with CG should or should not be adopted in L2 classrooms. Instead, the study has identified several factors to be taken into consideration prior to implementing such a pedagogy. For instance, not all target structures are suitable to be taught using such a pedagogy. Accentuating interconnectedness among the concepts and generalization of language structures, STI and CG respectively favor language structures possessing a complex system (e.g., modality) and a polysemous nature (e.g., prepositions), for only when a language structure is inherently complex will students realize a need and possess extrinsic motivation to draw upon abstract concepts for comprehension and production (Yule, 1998). Level of input difficulty is another factor to contemplate in that learners will only be intrinsically motivated when instructional materials are comprehensible yet not too easy. For this reason, L2 educators are expected to evaluate the comprehensibility of input (i.e., SCOBA) presented to learners against their proficiency as well as age levels, with less abstract concepts needing to be utilized for younger learners. Finally, the limited instructional time detracts from the pedagogical efficacy of the pedagogy as a result of insufficient opportunities for mediation. Thus being able to devote sufficient time to instructing on one target structure is a premise for the successful implementation of the pedagogy in any L2 classroom. More studies integrating STI as a pedagogical framework with CG as a linguistic framework are hoped to be able to be conducted in the future so that the possibilities for integrating the two theories can be better illuminated, for then such an integration can also be promoted in the field of L2 grammar instruction.

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