EXPLORING THE USE OF CANVA-BASED VISUAL MEDIA IN TEACHING SIMPLE PAST TENSE TO ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study explores the use of Canva-based visual media in teaching the simple past tense to sixth-grade elementary students. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the research investigates how visual materials designed by the teacher using Canva can enhance student engagement, facilitate the recognition of verb forms, and support sentence construction. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study was conducted across three sessions: one conventional lesson and two sessions integrating Canva-based visuals. Data were collected through classroom observations, student work samples, and teacher reflections. The findings reveal that visual media increased students' participation, helped them identify regular and irregular past tense forms more accurately, and encouraged them to construct more complete and grammatically correct sentences. Furthermore, the contextual and personalized nature of the visuals supported students in internalizing grammar rules that were previously difficult to grasp. These results suggest that Canva, when used as a scaffolded visual tool, can serve as an effective medium to support grammar instruction for young EFL learners.

Keywords: Canva, Visual Media, Simple Past Tense, Elementary Students, Grammar Instruction

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English grammar to young learners remains a fundamental yet challenging aspect of language education. Among various grammatical structures, the simple past tense is often difficult for elementary students to grasp, particularly due to the need to distinguish between regular and irregular verb forms and to connect those forms to meaningful time expressions. Traditional teaching methods—such as rote memorization, textbook exercises, and verbal drills—often fail to accommodate the diverse learning styles of young learners, who may require more contextual and visual forms of input to understand abstract grammar rules.

In recent years, the integration of digital media in the classroom has offered new possibilities for enhancing grammar instruction. Visual platforms such as Canva provide opportunities for teachers to design engaging and personalized learning materials that can visually represent actions, timelines, and sentence structures. These types of media not only increase students' motivation and attention but also serve as cognitive scaffolds that support the internalization of grammatical patterns (Delfiana et al., 2023).

This study is grounded in the sociocultural theory of learning proposed by Vygotsky (1978), which emphasizes the role of tools and social interaction in the development of higher-order thinking. According to Vygotsky, learning is most effective when mediated by meaningful artifacts—such as visual aids—that bridge the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with support, known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this context, Canva-based visual media function as mediating tools that help young learners access and internalize grammatical structures that might otherwise

remain abstract or inaccessible through text-based instruction alone.

Previous studies have highlighted the effectiveness of visual and multimodal tools in facilitating grammar learning among EFL students. For instance, Sanjaya and Aminatun (2024) showed that digital comics significantly improved students' understanding of grammar forms through visual storytelling. Similarly, Biria and Boshrabadi (2014) found that multimodal texts in textbooks helped bridge students' comprehension by combining verbal and non-verbal elements. However, there remains limited research on how teacher-designed visual materials—particularly those created using Canva—can be effectively utilized in Indonesian elementary classrooms to support the teaching of simple past tense.

This study aims to explore the use of Canva-based visual media in teaching simple past tense to sixth-grade elementary students. Specifically, it investigates how such media affect student engagement, recognition of verb forms, and the ability to construct sentences accurately. By documenting the teaching and learning process across multiple sessions, this research seeks to provide a descriptive account of how visual tools can enhance grammar instruction in a real classroom context.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the use of Canva-based visual media in teaching the simple past tense to elementary students. The primary aim was to understand how teacher-designed visual materials using Canva influenced students' grammar comprehension and sentence construction, particularly in relation to regular and irregular verb forms. Rather than measuring learning outcomes numerically, the study focused on observing patterns of behavior, engagement, and language use throughout the learning process.

The research was conducted over the course of three teaching sessions. The first session utilized conventional teaching methods, such as explanation, textbook reading, and grammar drills, without the use of visual media. This session served as a baseline for comparison in understanding how students typically engaged with grammar instruction. The second and third sessions introduced Canva-based visual materials, including posters, flashcards, and contextual worksheets designed by the teacher using the Canva platform.

The participants were 22 sixth-grade elementary students, aged 11–12 years, selected through purposive sampling. These students were part of a regular English class and had been previously introduced to basic grammar concepts, including verb usage. The selection was based on their active participation in the class where the teacher agreed to integrate Canva-based materials.

The researcher functioned as a non-participant observer, documenting classroom interactions, teacher strategies, and student responses during each session. Data were collected through several sources: structured observation sheets to record engagement and participation, samples of student work to analyze grammatical development, teacher-made learning materials, and informal reflective notes from the teacher regarding the teaching process.

By observing the differences in student engagement, verb recognition, and sentence construction between the conventional and visual-media-based sessions, the researcher was able to identify meaningful patterns and describe the ways in which Canva visuals supported students' grammar learning. The approach remained qualitative in nature, as it emphasized description and interpretation rather than measurement or hypothesis testing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Increased Student Engagement through Visual Media

Observations throughout the teaching sessions indicated a noticeable increase in student engagement when Canva-based visual media was introduced into the grammar lessons. During the first session, which utilized conventional teaching methods such as explanation and drilling using a textbook,

several students appeared less attentive. Some students looked around, avoided eye contact, or passively copied answers without asking questions or seeking clarification. In contrast, during the second and third sessions where Canva visuals were integrated, students showed a clear shift in behavior. They became more animated, attentive, and eager to participate in class activities.

The Canva-based materials consisted of bright, colorful illustrations depicting daily actions, designed in pairs to contrast "Today" and "Yesterday" events. When these visuals were displayed using a projector, students immediately engaged by pointing, reacting verbally, and laughing as they recognized the characters and activities shown. For instance, during a matching activity, a student enthusiastically pointed to a picture and said, *"Yesterday he played football!"* without being prompted. This spontaneous utterance showed not only enthusiasm but also an emerging understanding of the grammatical structure being taught.

The teacher also noted that students who typically remained passive during previous lessons began to raise their hands, respond to prompts, and even volunteer to come to the front of the class to match images with past tense sentences. One student, who rarely participated, confidently stated, *"She cooked noodles yesterday,"* after observing an image of a girl in a kitchen. This suggests that the visual media provided an accessible entry point into language use, especially for learners who may struggle with abstract grammatical explanations.

These findings are in line with Hussain and Khan (2022), who emphasized that young learners are more responsive to visual stimuli than to verbal instruction alone. Similarly, Dash (2022) reported that digital tools with rich visual content increase classroom interaction and reduce student anxiety, especially in grammar-related tasks. In this study, the Canva visuals appeared to serve not only as instructional aids but also as affective supports, reducing the perceived difficulty of learning English grammar.

Compared to prior lessons that relied solely on printed text, the Canva-based approach offered a more engaging multimodal experience. While textbooks typically presented rules and example sentences in linear form, the visuals from Canva allowed students to build associations between images and verb forms. This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of mediated learning, which asserts that tools such as visual media can scaffold learners' cognitive processes and extend their zone of proximal development.

However, it is worth noting that the novelty of the visuals may also have contributed to the heightened engagement. As this was the students' first time encountering media designed with Canva, part of their enthusiasm may have stemmed from the newness of the experience. This aligns with the findings of Sandika and Novita (2021), who suggested that novelty effects often play a role in early digital media implementation, though sustained engagement depends on how well the media are integrated into the curriculum over time.

In conclusion, the use of Canva-based visual media in grammar instruction positively influenced student engagement, especially among those who previously showed low participation. The visuals provided context, stimulated interest, and encouraged interaction, thereby supporting a more dynamic and inclusive classroom environment.

Improved Recognition of Verb Forms in Context

One of the most notable outcomes observed during the implementation of Canva-based visual media was the improvement in students' recognition of verb forms, especially in understanding the transformation from base verbs to their simple past tense forms. Prior to the intervention, many students exhibited confusion when asked to use past tense verbs in context. During informal assessments and early observation, students frequently used present tense verbs even when time markers

such as "yesterday" or "last week" were explicitly stated in the sentences.

After the introduction of Canva visuals—especially those that paired everyday actions with time-based illustrations—the students showed improved accuracy in identifying and using appropriate past tense forms. For example, one visual worksheet displayed two side-by-side scenes: the left panel showed *"Today: She eats rice,"* and the right panel *"Yesterday: She ___ rice."* Students were asked to fill in the blanks with the correct past tense form, and most successfully responded with "ate," demonstrating their ability to relate the time expression with the correct verb form.

The teacher noted that previously challenging verbs such as go → went, eat → ate, and run → ran became easier for students to recall when accompanied by images. This supports what Castillo and Beltrán (2022) found in their study using digital comics for grammar teaching: that visual context significantly aids the retention and retrieval of grammatical forms in young EFL learners. Similarly, Fitriana and Wirza (2021) emphasized that multimodal materials help students recognize patterns in verb changes more effectively than traditional textual explanations.

Beyond recognition, some students also began to self-correct their mistakes during class activities. In one instance, a student said, *"He run yesterday,"* then paused and corrected herself with, *"He ran yesterday."* This spontaneous revision indicates an internalization process in progress, possibly triggered by repeated visual exposure and contextual learning. The visuals provided by Canva were not only engaging but also served as semiotic support for students to connect action, time, and verb form in an integrated manner.

Additionally, students demonstrated improvement in identifying irregular verbs. During a review session, the teacher displayed a Canva-made digital poster featuring verbs in two columns: present and past. When asked to match them, most students successfully connected pairs like go → went, have → had, and see → saw, indicating a growing familiarity with irregular patterns, which are typically more difficult to memorize without context.

These findings align with the sociocultural theory by Vygotsky (1978), which highlights the importance of mediated learning through tools that support the learner's cognitive development. The Canva visuals acted as a form of mediation that helped bridge the gap between abstract grammar rules and real-world understanding for the students.

In conclusion, the use of Canva-based visual materials effectively improved students' recognition of verb forms in the simple past tense. The combination of time markers, illustrations, and contextual tasks allowed students to engage with grammar in a more meaningful and memorable way. It demonstrated that when learners are provided with visual context, especially in early stages of language acquisition, they are more likely to notice, recall, and apply grammatical forms correctly.

Constructing Sentences with Canva Support

The final theme emerging from the observations and documentation was the development of students' ability to construct simple past tense sentences with the aid of Canva-based visual materials. After several sessions using teacher-made visuals—such as flashcards, posters, and fill-in-the-blank tasks—students demonstrated an increasing ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences using the correct past tense verb forms.

During the first visual production task, students were given worksheets featuring images of familiar daily activities, such as eating, running, going to school, or playing football. Each image was accompanied by a sentence stem like *"Yesterday, I _____"*. In earlier attempts, many students wrote incomplete or incorrect sentences (e.g., "I go to school yesterday", "I eated rice"). However,

by the third session, a shift in output quality was evident. Most students successfully applied the correct verb forms and structured their sentences more accurately, writing responses such as *"I went to school yesterday"* and *"I ate rice with my mom."*

The improvement was particularly noticeable among students who had previously shown difficulty in constructing sentences independently. One such student, when asked to describe a picture of a boy riding a bicycle, confidently wrote, *"He rode his bike yesterday with his brother,"* showing not only correct verb usage but also the development of more complex sentence structure. The teacher attributed this progress to the consistent exposure to verbs in context and the repetitive use of visual cues that anchored the students' understanding.

This finding is in line with Eitel et al. (2013), who argue that images serve as scaffolds that support language learners in moving from recognition to production. When students are presented with visual prompts that clearly represent actions, they are more likely to internalize the linguistic forms associated with those actions. Similarly, Kim (2020) noted that students benefit from structured visual input when tasked with language production, especially in contexts where grammar rules might otherwise seem abstract or decontextualized.

What distinguishes the Canva-based materials from traditional flashcards or textbook illustrations is the ability of the teacher to customize the content. The visuals were tailored to the students' actual experiences and vocabulary level, making the sentence construction task feel personally relevant. For example, one worksheet showed a picture of the schoolyard from their actual school with the caption *"Yesterday, we _____ in the schoolyard."* Students enthusiastically completed the sentence with responses like "played," "ran," and "had a flag ceremony," drawing from both memory and contextual cues.

In addition to improved grammatical accuracy, students began to demonstrate creativity in sentence construction. Some added time expressions and additional details: *"I played football with my cousin yesterday at 5 PM,"* indicating that the visual cues had not only supported grammar learning but also encouraged students to expand their language use.

These results reflect Vygotsky's (1978) notion that meaningful tools such as visual aids can mediate students' cognitive development, particularly when they bridge the gap between instruction and independent performance. Canva-based visuals, when used consistently and purposefully, became such tools in the classroom, helping students move from guided modeling to independent sentence production.

In summary, the integration of Canva-based visual materials supported students' ability to construct simple past tense sentences with increasing accuracy and fluency. The combination of contextualized images and sentence stems served as effective scaffolds, allowing students to transfer their passive recognition of verb forms into active, meaningful language production.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the integration of Canva-based visual media in teaching the simple past tense can enhance elementary students' engagement, improve their recognition of verb forms, and support their ability to construct grammatically correct sentences. Visuals designed with Canva served not only as instructional tools but also as cognitive and affective scaffolds that helped students connect grammatical structures with meaningful contexts. Compared to conventional methods, the use of visual media stimulated greater participation, encouraged self-correction, and enabled students to internalize abstract grammar rules more effectively. These findings suggest that carefully designed visual materials, when aligned with students' language levels and daily experiences, can significantly support grammar learning in young EFL learners.

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