

ENHANCING EFL LEARNERS' MASTERY OF SIMPLE PRESENT AND PAST TENSE THROUGH THE MAKE A MATCH TECHNIQUE

Siti Nurhaliza¹, Eka Indah Nuraini^{2*}, Arifah Mardiningrum³, Dian Nashrul Munif⁴

^{1,2,4}Universitas Darussalam Gontor, Jl. Raya Siman, Demangan - Siman - Ponorogo, Jawa Timur, 63471, Indonesia

³Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Jl. Brawijaya, Geblangan, Tamantirto-Kasih-Bantul, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55184, Indonesia

²ekaindahnuraini@unida.gontor.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of the Make a Match technique in improving EFL students' mastery of simple present and simple past tense sentence structures. It employed a quasi-experimental design with a non-equivalent control group to test the impact of the technique on EFL students' grammar performance. The participants consisted of 64 fourth-grade students at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor for Girls Campus 3, divided into an experimental group and a control group. Data were collected using pre-tests and post-tests instruments which had been validated and demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha=0.897). Nonparametric statistical techniques, such as the Mann-Whitney U test and the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, were eventually used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that students in the experimental group improved far more than those in the control group. The effect size ($r = 0.41$) showed that the Make a Match method had a moderate to substantial impact on students' grammar competency. This study confirmed that the Make a Match method was practical relevance for EFL classrooms by greatly improving EFL students' grammatical accuracy and engagement of the simple present and simple past tenses. This work offers to the literature and has practical implications for teaching grammar in Islamic educational contexts through cooperative learning methodologies.

Keywords: Cooperative Learning, Grammar Mastery, Make A Match Technique, Simple Present Tense, Simple Past Tense

INTRODUCTION

Grammar plays a crucial role in EFL learning since it enables learners to construct accurate and meaningful sentences in both spoken and written communication (Nuraini et al., 2023; Nuraini, 2020). In particular, mastery of basic tenses such as simple present and simple past tense is essential for developing students' communicative competence at early stages of language acquisition (Andriani et al., 2021). However, many EFL learners still struggle to understand grammatical structures due to the abstract nature of grammar and the dominance of teacher-centered instructional practice (Nuraini et al., 2023; Nuraini, 2020). Traditional grammar teaching often emphasizes memorizing rules rather than meaningful usage, which frequently limits students' engagement and reduces their ability to apply grammatical knowledge in real-world communication. Recent studies have indicated that such an approach tends to result in low memory rates and minimal participation among learners (Andriani et al., 2021; Krisbiantoro, 2020). Consequently, grammar is generally perceived as difficult and monotonous, which negatively impacts

students' motivation and learning outcomes as well as reduces their motivation to actively engage in learning process.

To address these challenges, various interactive and student-centered approaches have been proposed, particularly within the framework of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning emphasizes collaboration, interaction, and active participation allowing students to construct knowledge through social engagement (Bigdeli et al., 2024; Johnson & Johnson, 2018). It provides a persuasive alternative to the limitations of standard grammar instruction by presenting students as active partners in meaning-making rather than passive recipients of rules. This method, which is based on social interdependence theory, encourages positive interdependence and personal responsibility, allowing students to build knowledge through organized interaction and teamwork (Johnson & Johnson, 2018; Gillies, 2016). Such engagement is especially beneficial in language courses because it supports deeper cognitive processing by encouraging students to negotiate meaning, clarify ideas, and improve their comprehension of linguistic forms (Loewen & Sato, 2018). Furthermore, cooperative learning also tackles affective barriers by fostering a supportive setting that lowers fear and boosts motivation, both of which are essential for successful language acquisition (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015). Additionally, organized cooperative activities can enhance higher-order thinking, engagement, and retention, particularly when combined with interactive or game-based components (Gillies, 2016).

Among these student-centered approaches, the Make a Match technique has gained attention as an interactive technique that involves matching related information, such as sentence structures or grammatical forms, through game-based activities in form of cards containing specific topics (Curran, 1994). Previous studies have reported that this technique effectively improve students' engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes, especially in vocabulary learning and general academic performance (Destika, 2022; Nikmah & Husein., 2018). In this study, the researchers adopted the Make a Match method to enhance students' comprehension of English tenses, focusing on both the present and past tenses. This cooperative learning approach fosters an environment of active participation, encouraging students to engage with one another and collaborate, thereby deepening their understanding of the material. Through the Make a Match activity, students are required to find and match pairs of related cards, such as verb forms or sentence patterns, which help them recognize the correct use of tenses in a fun and engaging way.

In addition, recent research highlights that cooperative and game-based learning strategies can enhance students' memory and participation by creating a more dynamic classroom environment (Hung & Yeh, 2023). The finding suggested that Make a Match has strong potential to support language learning through active and meaningful interaction. It is because the Make a Match creates an active and enjoyable learning atmosphere so that it captures students' attention more effectively. Besides, cooperative learning strategies such as Make a Match increase students' engagement and participation, which contributes to improved learning outcomes (Viyayanti & Dwikoranto, 2021).

Several previous studies related to the Make a Match technique have been conducted. Destika (2022) investigated gender disparities in learning outcomes and the

efficacy of the Make a Match method in enhancing students' vocabulary knowledge. However, the study only looked at vocabulary achievement and did not look into how it affected students' views, learning processes, or other language abilities. In a similar vein, Viyayanti & Dwikoranto (2021) discovered that within a cooperative learning framework, Make a Match improved teacher effectiveness, classroom activities, and student learning outcomes. However, their study did not really address learning English or look at how it affects specific language skills like grammar, vocabulary, reading, or writing. Similarly, Nikmah & Husein. (2018) verified the efficacy of Make a Match in vocabulary instruction; however, their study focused only on vocabulary acquisition and did not investigate broader language development, learner engagement, motivation, collaborative learning processes, or the pedagogical elements that underline its efficacy.

Reviewing those previous studies, most of them have focused primarily on vocabulary mastery or general learning outcomes, yet limited attention given to grammar instruction, particularly the teaching of fundamental tenses. Moreover, existing studies rarely explain how cooperative matching activities contribute to students' grammatical development from a cognitive and interactional perspective. This indicates a gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of Make a Match in enhancing grammar mastery, especially in relation to the simple present and simple past tense. Furthermore, only a small amount of research has been done in particular educational contexts, including Islamic boarding schools, which have unique learning features. Most studies have been done in general school situations. These drawbacks highlight how urgently more research is needed to offer contextual insights and empirical support for the use of cooperative learning in grammar education.

Based on these problems, this study provides a targeted contribution by investigating how well the Make a Match method works in an Islamic boarding school setting to enhance students' comprehension of the simple present and simple past tenses. In contrast to other research, this study used a quasi-experimental methodology to give more rigorous empirical data and focused on grammar-specific learning results. By showing how cooperative learning might promote a better comprehension of grammatical structures, the study aims to close the gap between interactive teaching methods and grammar acquisition. In light of these difficulties, this study intends to expand the use of the Make a Match method in grammar instruction, specifically in helping fourth-grade EFL students at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) for Girls Campus 3 learn the simple present and simple past tenses. Thus, the research question was formulated as follows: Is there a statistically significant difference in students' mastery of simple present and simple past tense between those taught using the Make a Match technique and those taught using conventional teaching instruction?

METHOD

Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental design with a non-equivalent control group. This design was selected to examine the causal effect of the Make a Match technique on students' grammar mastery by comparing learning outcomes between experimental and control groups. The quasi-experimental designs are widely used in educational research where random assignment is not feasible, yet

comparison between groups remains essential for determining treatment effectiveness. Recent studies underline that quasi-experimental approaches provide reliable evidence in classroom-based research, particularly in evaluating instructional strategies in authentic learning environment. In the context of language learning, such designs allow researchers to measure changes in students' performance before and after intervention while maintaining ecological validity. Moreover, cooperative learning interventions have frequently been investigated using quasi-experimental methods due to their suitability for intact classroom setting (Beigzadeh et al., 2024). Therefore, this design was appropriate for assessing the effectiveness of the Make a Match technique in increasing students' mastery of the simple present and simple past tense.

Samples/Participants

This research was conducted at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) for Girls Campus 3 during the even semester of the 2025–2026 academic year. The institution was selected due to its structured educational environment, which integrates discipline, collaborative learning, and active student engagement. Such environment was considered conducive to implementing cooperative learning strategies, as they support interaction and group-based activities. Previous studies suggested that cooperative learning tended to be more effective in educational contexts that promote collective values and peer collaboration (Beigzadeh et al., 2024). The population of this study consisted of 239 fourth-grade students, of which 64 students as research sample were selected using purposive sampling. Two intact classes were chosen, with one assigned as the experimental group (class 4E) and the other as the control group (class 4D), each consisting of 32 students. To ensure comparability, both groups were selected based on similar academic levels and learning backgrounds.

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was a grammar test consisting of 35 multiple-choice items focusing on the simple present and simple past tense. In EFL research, grammar tests are frequently used to evaluate students' comprehension of linguistic forms and their capacity to apply grammatical rules in context. The instrument's content validity, including its relevance to learning objectives, linguistic clarity, and appropriateness of difficulty level, was examined by an expert before it was administered. Additionally, the product-moment correlation technique was used to analyze item validity, which led to the selection of valid items for the exam. The analysis showed that 29 out of 35 items were valid, while 6 items were excluded. The reliability of the instrument was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding in a coefficient of 0.897, indicating a high level of internal consistency. High reliability was essential in experimental studies to ensure that the measurement accurately reflected students' actual performance. Furthermore, well-constructed grammar assessments were crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of instructional interventions in EFL contexts (Febriyanti, 2018).

Data Collection Techniques

The data were collected through a pre-test and post-test procedure administrated to both the experimental and control groups. The pre-test was conducted to measure students' initial grammar mastery before the implementation of the treatment, while the

post-test was used to assess their improvement after the intervention. The experimental group received instruction using the Make a Match technique, which involved interactive matching activities such as pairing sentences structure, identifying verb forms, and distinguishing between present and past tense usage. In contrast, the control group was taught using conventional teaching instruction that emphasized explanation and individual practice.

Table 1. Treatment Design in Experiment and Control Groups

Group	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
Experimental	O ₁	X ₁	O ₂
Control	O ₁	X ₂	O ₂

Notes:

O₁: Pre-test

O₂: Post-test

X₁: Treatment used Make a Match technique

X₂: Treatment used conventional teaching instruction

The treatment was conducted over six meetings, allowing sufficient exposure to the instructional technique. Research indicated that sustained cooperative learning interventions contributed to more stable improvements in language learning outcomes (Liu et al., 2024). Therefore, the use of pre-test and a post-test design enabled the study to capture both initial differences and learning gains resulting from the intervention.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using statistical procedures to determine the effectiveness of the treatment. The data distribution was analyzed to determine normality prior to hypothesis testing, which guided the choice of suitable statistical tests. Nonparametric statistical tests, such as the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for within-group comparison, were used since the data were not normally distributed. When data did not fit parametric assumptions and were appropriate for small sample size analysis, these statistical methods were frequently employed in educational research. The level of significance was set at 0.05 to determine whether the observed differences were statistically meaningful. Meanwhile the Mann-Whitney U Test was used to compare the post-test scores between the experimental and control groups. In addition, the effect size was calculated to determine the magnitude of the treatment effect, providing a more comprehensive interpretation of the results. The inclusion of effect size was strongly recommended in recent educational research, as it reflected the practical significance of instructional interventions beyond statistical significance (Liu et al., 2024). Therefore, this analytical approach ensured both statistical rigor and meaningful interpretations of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results of this study showed that the implementation of the Make a Match technique significantly improved students' mastery of the simple present and simple past tense. The descriptive statistics indicated that the experimental group (class 4E) achieved higher increase in mean scores from the pre-test (M=46.81) to the post-test (M=68.13), showing an improvement of 21.32 points. Meanwhile, the control group (class 4D) demonstrated a more modest increase from 42.75 to 52.56, indicating 9.81 improvement.

Table 2. Pre-test and Post-test Scores Comparison

Group	Pre-test Mean Score	Post-test Mean Score	Score Increase
Experimental (class 4E)	46.81	68.13	+21.32
Control (class 4D)	42.75	52.56	+9.81

The initial comparisons suggested that students exposed to cooperative Make a match activities benefited more after the treatment than those who experienced conventional teaching instruction. The observed improvement stressed that interactive and student-centered learning environment contributed better language learning outcomes. Furthermore, the greater gain in the experimental group underlined that the Make a Match technique may facilitate more effective internalization of grammatical structures. These descriptive findings provided preliminary evidence supporting the effectiveness of the intervention.

The inferential analysis further strengthened this conclusion by demonstrating statistically significant differences in students' performance. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed a significant improvement within the experimental group ($p < 0.05$), indicating that treatment had a measurable impact on students' grammar mastery. In addition, the Mann-Whitney U Test showed a significant difference between the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups ($p < 0.05$), confirming that the superiority of the Make a Match technique over conventional teaching instruction.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U Test Results

Test	Value
Mann-Whitney U	266.000
Wilcoxon	794.000
Z	-3.312
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.001

The results suggested that the observed improvements were not due to chance but were directly associated with the instructional intervention. Moreover, the use of nonparametric tests ensured that the findings remained robust despite the non-normal distribution of the data. Therefore, the inferential findings proved strong empirical support for the research hypothesis.

The Make a Match method had a moderate to high impact on students' grammar proficiency, according to the effect size analysis and statistical significance ($r = 0.41$). This result showed that the intervention had considerable practical effects in the classroom setting in addition to producing statistically significant results. Reporting effect size was essential for comprehending the true impact of educational interventions beyond p-values, according to new methodological suggestions. A moderate to large effect suggested that the technique substantially improved students' ability to understand and apply grammatical rules. This reinforced the argument that cooperative learning strategies through Make a Match technique could produce tangible learning benefits when implemented effectively. Furthermore, the magnitude of the effect highlighted the pedagogical value of integrating interactive activities into grammar instruction. Thus, the results demonstrated both statistical and practical significance of the Make a Match technique.

Discussions

This improvement indicated strong evidence that the Make a Match technique effectively improved students' mastery of the simple present and simple past tense sentence forms. The effectiveness could be explained through the perspective of cooperative learning and constructivism, which emphasized active engagement and social interaction as key factors in knowledge construction. Students were forced to actively process grammatical forms, identify patterns, and connect linguistic pieces through matching exercises, which encouraged deeper cognitive engagement. This procedure was in line with previous studies that demonstrate how active learning techniques greatly enhance language competency by promoting meaningful engagement with educational resources (Loewen & Sato, 2018). Additionally, because the method is collaborative, students can learn from their classmates, improving comprehension through group discussions and shared problem-solving. As a result, grammar instruction became more interactive and less reliant on rote memorization (Harmer, 2007). Therefore, the effectiveness of the Make a Match technique we able to be attributed to its alignment with contemporary learning theories.

From the perspective of second language acquisition, the effectiveness of this technique could also be interpreted through the interaction hypothesis and awareness hypothesis. The interaction hypothesis stated that language learning occurred through meaningful communication and negotiation of meaning, both of which were facilitated by cooperative activities (Krisbiantoro, 2020). The Make a Match method encouraged language development by having pupils participate in conversational interactions while recognizing proper grammar structures. The awareness hypothesis, on the other hand, maintained that in order for students to master linguistic forms, they must actively pay attention to them. Students' awareness of grammatical aspects increased as a result of the matching procedure, which forced them to pay attention to verb forms, sentence patterns, and time markers. Recent studies have confirmed that increased awareness leads to

improved grammatical accuracy in an EFL context (Sato & Ballinger, 2020). Consequently, the technique supported both interaction and awareness, which were crucial mechanism in grammar acquisition. This explained why students in the experimental group demonstrated significantly better performance.

The findings of this study were consistent with previous research highlighting the effectiveness of cooperative learning strategies in improving students learning outcomes. Several recent studies reported that a Make a Match technique enhanced students' engagement, motivation, and academic achievement across various subjects. However, most of them focused on vocabulary learning or general academic achievement rather than on teaching grammar. This study expanded the existing literature by providing empirical evidence that Make a Match technique was also effective in teaching grammatical structures, particularly basic verb forms. In this regard, this study contributed to filling the empirical gap identified in previous learning approaches were able to improve students' memory and understanding of linguistic forms (Hung & Yeh, 2023). As a result, this study not only confirmed previous findings but also expanded the scope of the Make a Match technique's implementation.

Another important aspect to consider was the role of the learning context in influencing the effectiveness of teaching strategies. This study was conducted in an Islamic boarding school setting, which emphasized discipline, collaboration, and structured learning routines. Such environment could enhance the effectiveness of cooperative learning strategies since students were able to already be accustomed to group-based activities and shared responsibility. This contextual factor likely contributed to the successful implementation of the Make a Match technique in this study. This study did, however, raise the possibility that these methods' efficacy might alter depending on the educational context. The success of instructional interventions was significantly influenced by contextual factors, according to recent research (Thomas & Rose, 2019). Therefore, even if the results were encouraging, the particular learning context must be taken into account when interpreting them. The application of this method in different educational contexts requires more investigation.

In order to provide a fairer assessment of its findings, it is important to highlight the limitations of this study, despite its substantial contribution. First, because the sample may not accurately reflect the larger population of EFL learners, the use of purposive sampling restricts the generalizability of the study's findings. Second, this study did not fully address the challenge of learning grammar because it only examined the basic present and simple past sentence forms. Third, the relatively short duration of the interview might not sufficient reflecting long-term learning outcomes and retention. These limitations aligned with challenges identified in recent classroom-based experimental studies, which often face related to time, context, and participant selection (Mackey & Gass, 2021). Hence, future research is advised to involve a larger and more diverse sample, extend the duration of the intervention, and explore additional grammatical structures. Additionally, incorporating qualitative data could provide deeper insights into students' learning experiences and their perceptions of the technique. By addressing these limitations, future studies can strengthen the evidence base for the use of cooperative learning strategies in grammar instruction.

CONCLUSION

This study conclusively demonstrated that the Make a Match technique improved students' mastery of the simple present and simple past tenses more effectively than conventional teaching instruction by promoting active engagement, interaction, and noticing during the learning process. Higher exam scores as well as improved pattern recognition, grammatical rule application, and active participation in the learning process were all indicators of this improvement. This suggested that interactive and collaborative learning activities, as opposed to passive memorizing, could be a more effective way to grasp grammar.

From a conceptual standpoint, the results supported the idea that students learned grammar best when they actively constructed their knowledge through interaction and repeated exposure to relevant material. The Make a Match technique facilitated the process by integrating cognitive engagement with social interaction, thereby enabling students to internalize grammatical structure more effectively. Thus, this study contributed to bridge the gap between form-focused instruction and communicative language use by demonstrating how cooperative learning strategies were able to enhance grammar mastery in practical classroom settings.

The results suggest a number of useful implications for teaching English. First, in order to boost students' interest and lessen grammar anxiety, teachers are urged to incorporate the Make a Match method into grammar classes. Second, by adjusting the matching activities to fit certain learning objectives, student levels, and instructional resources, teachers can customize this strategy to fit various classroom circumstances. Additionally, educational institutions are able to support the implementation of cooperative learning strategies by providing training and resources that enable teachers to design interactive, student-centered learning environment.

For future researchers, it is recommended to examine long-term effectiveness of the Make a Match technique and its impact on other aspects of language learning, such as writing and speaking skills. Further, studies could also explore its implementation in various educational contexts and students' characteristics to determine its broader applicability. By expanding the scope of investigation, future research can provide deeper insights into how cooperative learning strategies contribute to sustainable grammar development.

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