

## EFL Learners' Language-Specific Time Attitudes

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### Abstract

The present study investigated the time attitudes (TAs) of EFL learners and their willingness and preference to share their TAs with peers and EFL instructors. Limited research has explored willingness and preference to share their TAs—a distinct and meaningful part of their temporal perspective that encompasses their positive and negative feelings about the past, present, and future experiences of English language learning. Participants were 229 students of technical and administrative diploma programmes at a Saudi industrial college in the western region of the country. Data were collected through questionnaires. Findings indicated that (1) students' responses differed mostly on feelings about the past; (2) participants are more willing to share their feelings with peers than with instructors; (3) students are more willing to share with both peers and instructors their combined past, present, and future experiences; (4) students prefer to share their feelings about their present experiences with peers and instructors compared to their past or future experiences; (5) students prefer to share with peers both negative and positive feelings about their past, present, and future experiences; and (6) students prefer to share only negative feelings with instructors.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language, foreign language education temporal perspective, language learning motivation, language-specific time attitudes

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## Introduction

Every individual has a unique and personal sense of psychological time. This perception of time is referred to as a person's temporal perspective (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Individuals' temporal perspective (TP) influences their decision-making and actions in the present. TP encompasses three temporal periods—the past, present, and future—that originate in individuals' thoughts and lead them to make decisions and engage in specific behaviours (Mello & Worrell, 2015). Individuals demonstrate different feelings toward each of the past, present, and future as being either more or less significant to their “temporal life space” (Lens, Paixão, Herrera, & Grobler, 2012, p. 322). According to Zimbardo and Boyd (1999), TP is shaped or created depending on an individual's memory, concentration, and emotion, and individuals acquire a large part of their TP in childhood. During adolescence, people mature, develop their identities, and think about time in novel ways compared to their childhoods (Mello & Worrell 2015; Dörnyei, Muir, & Ibrahim, 2014). Therefore, the literature suggests that temporal understandings of people's subjective lives that do not recognize this particular feature of an individual's TP may inaccurately assume that individuals experience and view time in the same or similar ways. This argument shows the importance of capturing and analysing data on the development of children's TP, and suggests that such work should try to encompass multiple understandings or framings of TPs

Language learning has been considered a temporal craft due to its time-tied nature (Oxford, 2017). However, the literature on TP has indicated that most studies of TP focus on language learners' future TP. This focus is related to the dominance of some models of motivation in the literature, such as Dörnyei's (2005) the L2 motivational self-system, which emphasizes the future dimension in measuring EFL learners' academic achievement and educational attainment. Indeed, much of the literature does not examine EFL learners' TPs explicitly, and little has been reported about EFL learners' TPs. Furthermore, with some exceptions (e.g., Begić & Mercer, 2017), no study explicitly takes a domain-specific approach to explore EFL learners' feelings towards the past, the present, and the future. This may be because time tends to be relatively unmarked, backgrounded through the use of substantives and is often not commented upon explicitly (Feryok & Mercer, 2017). In addition, to the best of my knowledge, no study has been conducted to investigate EFL learners' willingness and preferences to share language-specific TAs with peers and instructors. Therefore, the present study seeks to contribute to the wider literature on the psychological construct of TP by examining language-specific TAs — a distinct and meaningful part of their TP that encompasses their positive and negative feelings towards the past, the present, and the future (Mello & Worrell, 2015)— that is separate and distinct from their general TA.

The present study aims to build on previous research and to investigate the TAs of EFL learners and their willingness and preference to share their TAs with peers and EFL instructors. Therefore, this study attempts to draw implications for ELT professionals, in particular, language teachers teaching EFL. It specifically aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1 What are EFL learners' language-specific TAs?
- 2 To what extent are learners willing to share their language-specific TAs with peers and instructors?
- 3 What are learners' preferences for sharing their language-specific TAs with peers and instructors?

## Literature Review

Temporal perspective refers to the way individuals see themselves in relation to the past, the future and other people, and determines the way they act in the present (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). "Time perspective is a central aspect of human daily psychological functioning, with a pronounced impact on human thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (Burzynska & Stolarski, 2020, p. 1). TP as a concept was first used by Lawrence K. Frank in 1939 (Begić & Mercer, 2017). The concept was then expanded by Lewin (1942) to include three temporal periods: the past, the present and the future; for example, Lewin stated that, "the behavior of an individual does not depend entirely on his present situation. His mood is deeply affected by his hopes and wishes and by his views of his own past" (p. 104). Therefore, an individual's behaviour may be closely tied to that individual's perspective towards a particular time period (Mello & Worrell, 2015). Also, "the more balanced an individual's TP, the more closely that individual might approach realizing their human potential" (Waller, Franklin, & Parcher, 2020, p. 263)

People who are present-oriented 'live in the moment' more and are less likely to believe that planning will be rewarded. They focus only on the immediate present, often without thinking about consequences, and they are far less likely than other individuals to consider the past and future temporal periods. Future-oriented people are influenced by past or present temporal periods in the service of fulfilling their sense of self in the future. Finally, past-oriented individuals focus on their previous experiences and make decisions based on these memories of similar situations; however, all three periods of time for individuals with different orientations must be considered, each of which can be differentiated according to specific dimensions such as orientation and scope. Orientation refers to a person's focus on the past, the present or the future, while scope implies the distance in which one thinks into the future (e.g., days, weeks, or months). 'Time scope' was first referred to by Lewin (1942) as dividing the past and the future into distant (distal) and near-time (proximal) zones. In this respect, these long and short perceptions of time can also vary intrapersonally, as they are potentially interpreted differently by an individual across different situations. For example, a day can be perceived as being long or short in scope depending on a person's perception of time at that particular point.

TP can be conceptualized as a "multidimensional and developmental" construct that varies among individuals (Mello & Worrell, 2015, p. 126). According to Mello and Worrell (2015), this conceptualization is based on the following three premises. First, a TP can originate within an individual's thoughts (cognitive) and lead that individual to make particular decisions and engage in specific behaviors (motivational). Second, TP differs as a result of learning and experiences in various contexts. For example, adolescents' expectations for the future may vary according their socioeconomic status. Third, TP is multidimensional. It may be conceptualized in terms of people's feelings toward the past, present, and future (that is, their TA); their focus on the past, present, and/or future (time orientation dimension); their perceptions of the relationships between the present, the past, and the future (time relation dimension); the frequency with which they think about the past, present, and future (time frequency dimension); and how they define the past, present, and future (time meaning dimension) (Mello & Worrell, 2015). Together, these multiple dimensions represent the underlying complexity of an individual's TP .

To my best knowledge , there appears to be only one study, by Begić and Mercer (2017), that explicitly takes a domain-specific approach to examine whether adolescent EFL learners

have a dominant TP in the language-learning domain that is separate and distinct from their general TP in terms of TA. As argued by the researchers such investigations would be necessary for theoretical and practical purposes, especially regarding motivation. Begić and Mercer (2017) used an online questionnaire consisting of multi-item scales divided into two sections: general and language-specific TA. Participants included 235 EFL learners: 202 from schools in three cities in Croatia, and the remaining 33 from Austria. They ranged in age from 13 to 18 years old. The researchers reported that general and language-specific TAs might be seen as two separate constructs. In addition, the study argued that such investigations would be important for theoretical and practical purposes, especially in regard to motivation. According to the researchers, EFL learners' TAs may have "a profound impact on how they engage with present learning experiences, interpret their past experiences, and set future goals, all aspects of their language learning lives central to their motivation" (p. 270).

While these studies have highlighted the crucial role the temporal perspective plays in individuals' lives, as it affects their behavior and motivation, what is missing from this growing body of research on language-specific TAs—a distinct and meaningful part of their temporal perspective that encompasses their positive and negative feelings about the past, present, and future experiences of English language learning is an examination of EFL students' willingness and preference to share their TAs with peers and EFL instructors. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by investigating the TAs of EFL students of technical and administrative diploma programs at a Saudi industrial college and their willingness and preference to share their TAs with peers and EFL instructors. In doing so, this study attempts to draw some pedagogical implications based on the study's findings.

## Methods

### *Participants and Research Instruments*

Participants were 229 students of technical and administrative diploma programmes at a Saudi industrial college in the western region of the country. There were all students (six sections, with approximately 38 students in each section) enrolled in an English academic writing course, the final required three-credit course in the fourth semester of the three-year technical and administrative diploma programmes. In the previous semester, the students had three two-credit English language courses. They have more English language learning experiences and relations with peers and instructors than other students in other English language courses.

This study used a questionnaire adapted from Mello and Worrell's (2007) Adolescent Time Perspective Inventory and Begić and Mercer's (2017) questionnaire, both of which are measures of learners' TAs. They were adapted, simplified, and translated for the purpose of this study. The adapted questionnaire consisted of twelve five-point Likert-scale items (four items per period: two positive and two negative) (see Appendix One). Additional questions that pertained to the participants' willingness and preference to share their language-specific TAs with peers and instructors were also included. The internal consistency of the subscales in the questionnaire was checked; all subscales demonstrated acceptable internal consistencies (with Cronbach's alphas of 0.71, 0.70, and 0.72 for the language-specific past TA, present TA, and future TA subscales, respectively).

The translated questionnaire was given to two Arabic language instructors to check the accuracy of the Arabic phrasing and to two bilingual instructors to check the accuracy of the translation overall. To establish trust, the questionnaire included a statement describing the purpose and aims of the study and assured study participants of their data confidentiality.

### **Research Procedures**

The study procedures were in accordance with the ethical guidelines for research with human participants and were approved by the Scientific Committee at the College. Language teachers were contacted by the researcher through the programs coordinators. They were asked to distribute questionnaires to their students, who were informed that their responses would be anonymous and that they would not be required to provide personal information. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no teacher made it compulsory for their students to complete the questionnaire; participation in this study was voluntary. The students completed the questionnaire in their own time and returned it to a designated college teacher.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyse the students' attitudes, descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were calculated based on the participants' responses. All negatively keyed items were reverse-scored to make them consistent with other items; a score of five was recorded as one, a score of four was recorded as two, and a score of three was left unchanged. Pearson's *r* test was used to determine the strength of the relationship between the participants' general and language-specific TAs. As a five-point Likert-type scale was used in this study, the mean scores were divided into five ranges, which were used to obtain a definite interpretation of the means (see Table one).

Table 1. *Mean score interpretation*

M	Interpretation
1.00-1.80	Very Low
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.40	Neutral
3.41-4.20	High
4.21-5.00	Very High

### **Findings**

#### **Language-specific TAs**

Table two shows the descriptive statistics of the raw scores of the three subscales. The language-specific present TA ( $M = 3.43$ ) had the highest mean and the lowest standard deviation ( $SD = 0.62$ ). Further, the language-specific future TA had the lowest mean ( $M = 2.53$ ), while the language-specific past TA had the highest standard deviation ( $SD = 1.58$ ). This indicates that responses differed mostly on feelings about the past; some participants agreed strongly with the items in the subscale, while others disagreed on the same items.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics for the time attitude variables*

Time attitude variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Interpretation
Past	2.62	1.58	Neutral
Present	3.43	0.62	High
Future	2.53	0.92	Low

***Willingness to Share Language-specific TAs***

The study found a statistically significant difference at  $p < .01$  in the students' willingness to share their feelings about English language learning experiences with peers and with instructors for learning support ( $t[228] = 6.9051$ ,  $p = 0.00001$ ,  $d = 0.65$ ). In response to a willingness to share feelings with instructors for learning support, six students responded 'willing', 25 responded 'somewhat willing', 20 responded 'undecided', 121 responded 'somewhat not willing', and 57 responded 'not willing' ( $M = 2.14$ ;  $SD = 1.00$ , interpreted as 'low'). In response to a willingness to share feelings with peers for learning support, three students responded 'willing', four responded 'somewhat willing', 13 responded 'undecided', 77 responded 'somewhat not willing', and 132 responded 'not willing' ( $M = 1.55$ ;  $SD = 0.79$ , interpreted as 'very low').

In addition, the study also found a statistically significant difference at  $p < .01$  in the students' willingness to share their feelings about English language learning experiences with peers and with instructors for emotional support ( $t[228] = 17.06859$ ,  $p = 0.00001$ ,  $d = 1.598$ ). In response to willingness to share feelings with peers for emotional support, 75 students responded 'willing', 113 responded 'somewhat willing', 14 responded 'undecided', 17 responded 'somewhat not willing', and 10 responded 'not willing' ( $M = 3.99$ ;  $SD = 1.04$ , interpreted as 'high'). In response to willingness to share feelings with instructors for emotional support, 13 students responded 'willing', 23 responded 'somewhat willing', 27 responded 'undecided', 127 responded 'somewhat not willing', and 39 responded 'not willing' ( $M = 2.32$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ , interpreted as 'low').

Furthermore, the students attempted to share their feelings about English language learning experiences more with peers than with instructors when expecting support. This is significant at  $p < .01$  ( $t[228] = 10.60814$ ,  $p = .00001$ ,  $d = 0.99$ ). When expecting support, the students attempted to share their feelings with peers at a high level; 111 students responded 'always', 41 responded 'often', 55 responded 'sometimes', and 22 responded 'rarely' ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). In contrast, when expecting support, the students attempted to share their feelings with instructors at a neutral level; 20 students responded 'always', 61 responded 'often', 61 responded 'sometimes', 66 responded 'rarely', and 21 responded 'never' ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

***Preferences for Sharing Language-Specific TAs***

A total of 149 students (65 percent) preferred to share their feelings with peers, 48 (21 percent) preferred instructors, and 32 (14 percent) preferred both instructors and peers. However, in response to the purpose of sharing feelings with peers, 176 students (77 percent) responded emotional support, 24 (10 percent) responded learning support, and 29 (13 percent) responded both emotional and learning support. In contrast, in response to the purpose of sharing feelings with instructors, 181 students (79 percent) preferred to share for learning support, 21 (nine percent) preferred to share for emotional support, and 27 (12 percent) preferred to share for both emotional and learning support.

The students' preferences for sharing language-specific TAs with peers are detailed in Table 3. A total of 96 students (42 percent) preferred to share all TAs (past, present, and future) with peers. For the other attitude variables, the participants generally preferred to share a combination of two temporal periods with peers. However, only 12 students (five percent)

preferred to share with peers their feelings about the future compared to 18 (eight percent) who were more inclined to share their feelings about the past and 21 (nine percent) who tended to share their feelings about the present. In addition, the participants were less willing to share with peers their feelings about the combination of past and future ( $n = 20$ ) compared to the combinations of past and present ( $n = 35$ ) and present and future ( $n = 27$ ) (Figure one).

Table 3. Preferences for sharing language-specific time attitudes with peers

Time attitude variables	Frequency	Percent
Past	18	8%
Present	21	9%
Future	12	5%
Past and Present	35	15%
Past and Future	20	9%
Present and Future	27	12%
Past, Present, and Future	96	42%
Total	229	100%

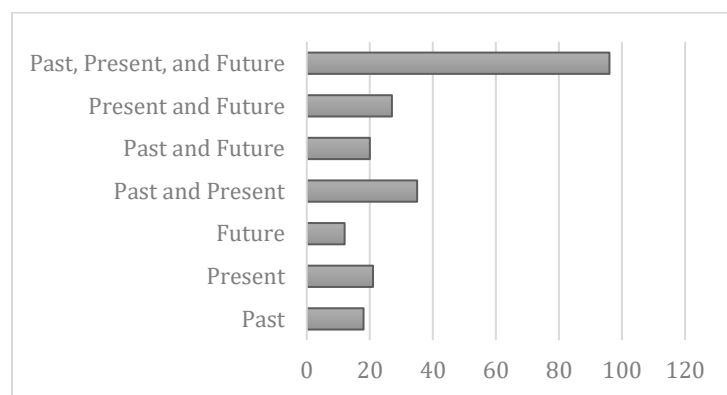


Figure 1. Preferences for sharing language-specific time attitudes with peers

The students' preferences for sharing language-specific TAs with instructors are detailed in Table four. A total of 89 students (39 percent) preferred to share all TAs (past, present, and future) with instructors. Regarding the other attitude variables, the participants generally preferred to share a combination of two temporal periods with instructors. However, they had a lower tendency to share with instructors their feelings about the past ( $n = 14$ ) compared to those about the present ( $n = 20$ ) and future ( $n = 19$ ). In addition, the participants had a lower preference to share with instructors their feelings about the combination of past and future ( $n = 24$ ) compared to the combinations of past and present ( $n = 30$ ) and present and future ( $n = 33$ ) (Figure two).

Table 4. Preferences for sharing language-specific time attitudes with instructors

Time attitude variables	Frequency	Percent
Past	14	6%
Present	20	9%
Future	19	8%
Past and Present	30	13%

Past and Future	24	11%
Present and Future	33	14%
Past, Present, and Future	89	39%
Total	229	100%

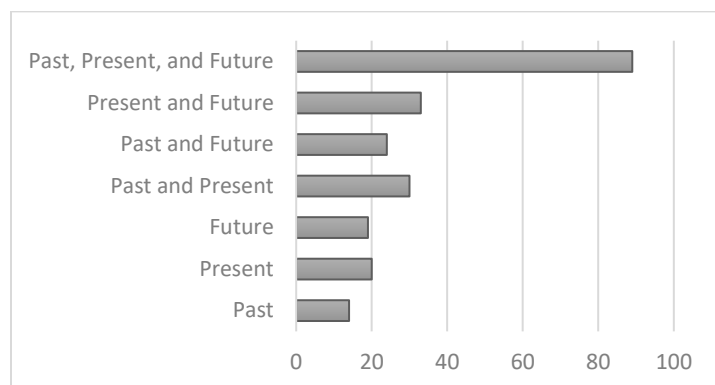


Figure 2. Preferences for sharing language-specific time attitudes with instructors

Regarding the purpose of sharing with peers, most students ( $n = 176$ ) preferred to share for emotional support, while 23 preferred to do it for learning support, and 30 preferred to do it for both emotional and learning support. In contrast, regarding the purpose of sharing with instructors, most students ( $n = 187$ ) preferred to share for learning support, while 20 preferred to do it for emotional support, and 22 preferred to do it for both emotional and learning support.

Lastly, the study also found that most students ( $n = 146$ ) preferred to share with peers both positive and negative feelings, while 43 preferred to share only positive feelings, and 40 preferred to share only negative feelings. In contrast, regarding sharing with instructors, most students ( $n = 136$ ) preferred to share only negative feelings, while 56 preferred to share both negative and positive feelings, and 37 preferred to share only positive feelings.

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate that EFL learners highly appreciate their peers' feelings about their past, present, and future experiences of English language learning. They also feel appreciated by both peers and instructors for their feelings about their English language learning experiences. However, to seek emotional support, they are more willing to share their feelings about such experiences with peers than with instructors. Most of them frequently interact with their peers and prefer to share their feelings with them only for emotional support. These findings may be attributed to the emotional effects of peer relationships, which are highly influential in adolescence (Berk, 2001). In contrast, to seek learning support, most EFL learners are more willing to share their feelings about English language learning experiences with instructors than with peers. Further, they prefer to share such feelings with them only for learning support. This may be attributed to the traditional view of the role of the teacher as a transmitter of knowledge whose only function is to instruct'.

Moreover, the present results also suggest that most learners are more willing to share with both peers and instructors their combined past, present, and future experiences of English



language learning. This finding is in line with previous results indicating that older adolescents focus on all three periods in the language domain (Begić & Mercer, 2017). However, learners are less willing to share their feelings about the combination of past and future experiences with peers or instructors compared to the combinations of past and present or present and future. This may be attributed to the argument that adolescents are more aligned with the present (Bowles, 1999; Mello & Worrell, 2006). More learners prefer to share their feelings about their present English language learning experiences with peers and instructors compared to their past or future experiences. In addition, regarding sharing their past and future English language learning experiences, learners are more willing to share their feelings about future experiences with instructors than with peers, with whom they are more willing to share their feelings about past experiences. This may be attributed to learners' tendency to share their feelings about their past English language learning experiences with peers for emotional support and to share their feelings about future experiences with instructors for future learning support.

Furthermore, the study suggests that most learners prefer to share with peers both negative and positive feelings about their past, present, and future English language learning experiences. As argued above, this may be attributed to strong peer relationships. However, most learners prefer to share only negative feelings with instructors. In other words, in their relationship with instructors, learners mainly capitalize on their negative feelings about their English language learning experiences. This may be due to their less balanced and supportive relationship with instructors (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

The present findings have potentially important implications for English language teaching and learning. Emotional support from peers represents acceptance, approval, and esteem (Sica, Crocetti, Ragozini, Sestito, & Serafini 2016). However, efforts should be made to encourage students to capitalize on their strong personal connections with peers to improve their English language learning. In other words, emotionally high-level peer relationships can draw students into English language learning and promote their desire to learn (assuming appropriate guidance from the instructor) (López & Aguilar, 2013). Further, more efforts should be made to raise both students' and teachers' awareness regarding the benefits of sharing language-specific TAs and to provide more opportunities for students to share not only negative feelings but also positive feelings with instructors. Such efforts can open students to new language learning possibilities, making them feel more capable of learning and developing their skills. This can help build strong personal student–teacher relationships, which can lead to better student performance on learning tasks and tests. Students who have close, positive, and supportive relationships with their instructors are more likely to trust their instructors, feel motivated by their praise, engage in learning, participate in class, and achieve at higher levels academically compared to those students with less personal and frequent contact with their instructors (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

## Conclusions

To conclude, the present study investigated the TAs of EFL learners and their willingness and preference to share their TAs with peers and EFL instructors. Limited research has explored willingness and preference to share their TAs—a distinct and meaningful part of their temporal perspective that encompasses their positive and negative feelings about the past, present, and future experiences of English language learning.

Significant differences were found in this regard. The findings suggest that all three time periods are of equal importance, which needs to be more consciously considered in EFL instruction, especially with regard to motivation. Efforts should be made to raise both EFL instructors' and learners' awareness of sharing language-specific TAs to help learners develop a more balanced and supportive relationship with peers and instructors, which could play a significant role in the domain of English language learning and teaching.

This study has some limitations. As the participants were from a single college in Saudi Arabia, the results may not be generalizable to other contexts. Future studies could overcome this limitation by surveying a more diverse sample of EFL learners, which would help researchers explore possible differences across contexts. In addition, test–retest analyses could help researchers determine the stability and reliability of EFL learners' self-perceptions and self-reported responses. Further, this study may encourage other researchers to investigate whether students' willingness and preference to share language-specific TAs with peers and instructors are related to different variables such as academic achievement/English proficiency level, age, and gender. Furthermore, this study used the questionnaire as the main and only tool for collecting data. Future studies should use both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Lastly, this study was limited to ascertaining EFL learners' perspectives. More research is needed to further investigate the sharing of language-specific TAs from the perspective of instructors.

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### Appendix One: Likert Scale Items of Language-Specific Time Attitudes

1. My previous experiences of learning English make me sad.
2. I feel excited to think about my past use of English.
3. I had negative experiences in the English language classroom.
4. My past experiences of learning English make me excited.
5. I am satisfied with my present knowledge of English.
6. I am not satisfied with my present use of English.
7. I feel excited about my present use of English.
8. I doubt I can use English right now.
9. I feel excited about my practice of English in the future.
10. I doubt I will use English fluently.
11. I feel happy when I think about my future use of English.
12. I feel nervous when I think I will use English in the future.