

Linguistic Knowledge Types and Past-Time Inflectional Output of Malay Users of English¹

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Abstract

Acquiring the tense-aspect morphological system of English is challenging to second language learners due to the multifaceted nature of temporal markers. Acquisitional complexities may also be caused by the absence of parallel indicators in the mother tongue and the types of linguistic knowledge that users have. This paper highlights Malay-English differences in temporal markers and reports an investigation on language learners' production of past-time inflections [-en] and [-ed] and their relationship with linguistic knowledge. Seventy-two Malay English majors who use English as a second language participated in the study. Data were collated using three instruments namely the Grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT), the Metalinguistic Knowledge Test (MKT) and the Written Production Test (WPT). Correlational evidence between explicit and implicit knowledge and target item output was found. Qualitative analysis of written data indicates consistent usage of [-ed] inflection but not [-en]. The findings of the study will enhance theoretical understanding of the role of linguistic knowledge on the development of learners' inflectional morphology and can encourage sound instructional practices in the classroom.

Keywords

Malay users of English, inflectional morphology, explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge, past-time form, tense-aspect marker

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Introduction

Second language learners of English can have a good grasp of grammatical knowledge of the language but they may endure many difficulties in approximating native-like performance of certain forms in their production. This is especially true in the use of tenses (Abdullah 10). Specifically, Malay speakers of the language who know metalingual rules may have erroneous inflectional markings or forms in their oral and written production. Muftah and Wong assert that the inflections can be persistently difficult for second language (L2) learners, who exhibit variability in their use of the relevant morphemes (1).

Two constructs in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) that are pertinent in discussing this problem are implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge. It is possible that learners have metalinguistic knowledge of the morphological forms but fail to consistently produce them accurately in their verbal and written communication. Inflectional markings are known to be challenging even though instructed learners have received explicit training of the forms and their use. It is claimed that while implicit knowledge plays the main role in language production, especially verbal production, explicit knowledge is more applicable to classroom activities, for example, while doing grammatical exercises (O'Grady 17). Findings in studies such as those by Roehr (173), Tokunaga (141), Correa (39), Akakura (9) and Gutiérrez (20) indicate that explicit knowledge does have a significant role in L2 performance and production.

This study presents an interface between linguistic knowledge and past-time inflectional output of Malay speakers of English in a setting where English is used as the medium of instruction at the tertiary level.

Literature Review

Malay is an Austronesian language and unlike English and other languages of Indo-European roots, morphological indicators for time in Malay are not as widely used as in its parallel lexical forms. The Malay language verb system is not largely marked for tenses in that inflectional marking by way of prefixes or suffixes does not commonly exist for verbs (Prentice 920). In general, adverbials, of which *belum* (not yet) is an example, and temporal prepositions, including *dalam* (in) and *mulai* (from), are used in Malay and these carry temporal implications. Specifically, as the use of morphological structures as indicators of past-time forms in Malay is not as salient as in the English language system, adverbials such as *masih* (in the state of), *sedang* (in the process of), *sudah* (has completed), *tengah* (in the middle of), *telah* (has finished) and *selepas* (after) provide information relating to past-time (Karim 31; Omar 25). It can be concluded that there is a great difference in the use of morphological structures between Malay and English and this could be an important reason for the

perpetual difficulty for Malay learners of English to acquire the knowledge of English past-time inflectional markers.

The term “past-time” refers to the simple and perfective aspectual forms of English and in particular, concerns the simple past, the present perfect and the past perfect temporal forms. Simple past refers to events that are conceptualised as complete wholes without any possibility of development. Specifically, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman define simple past by stating that it is used when the speaker conceptualises a complete event factually but is remote in some way (112). The sense of remoteness can be in time or with the feeling that the event is over and done and can be due to the conditional, hypothetical nature of a statement. Six notions of completeness and remoteness are illustrated as follows: A definite single completed event/action in the past; habitual or repeated action/event in the past; an event with duration that applied in the past with the implication that it no longer applies in the present; with states in the past; imaginative conditional in the subordinate clause; and social distancing (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 112).

On the other hand, present perfect is used to indicate an action that happened at an unspecified time before now and might be continued up to the present. According to Binnick, present perfect may represent a result of a past action which is still operative at the present time (264). The phrase “is still operative at the present time” differentiates simple past, which indicates completeness of the event, from present perfect. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s five notions of the present perfect are: a situation that began at a prior point in time and continues into the present; an action occurring or not occurring at an unspecified prior time that has current relevance; a very recently completed action (often with *just*); an action that occurred over a prior time period and that is completed at the moment of speaking; and with verbs in subordinate clauses of time or condition (116).

Past perfect is best understood as a past event that happened in the past. It is, according to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, an action completed in the past prior to some other past event or time as in “*He had already left before I could offer him a lift.*” It could also be an imaginative conditional in a subordinate clause which refers to past time as in “*If Şhaḡ had studied harder, she would have passed the exam*” (116). In other words, past perfect indicates pastness with respect to the past (Michealis 140).

Discussing tenses necessitates a deliberation on the inflectional morphemes that are involved. Inflectional verb morphology in English concerns both regular and irregular forms. The majority of English verbs form their past tense by adding the regular suffix *-ed*, a process that does not affect the stem (Tyler, Mornay-Davies, Anokhina, Longworth, Randall and Marslen-Wilson 79). Past-time forms are structured this way except for approximately 160 verbs that take some other inflectional forms which are usually

idiosyncratic. The current study also concerns perfective aspects thus making the inflectional *-en* another target item.

Apart from past-time inflectional forms, this study is also an investigation of the relationship between the use of those forms and linguistic knowledge. The latter is categorised into two: implicit and explicit. Implicit knowledge refers to unconscious knowledge used during the spontaneous language comprehension or production process. Bowles describes implicit knowledge as intuitive, procedural, automatic, variable in a limited and systematic way, and available in fluent, spontaneous language use (249). However, this type of knowledge cannot be verbalised. The description is comparable to Akakura's who states that implicit knowledge refers to knowledge of a language that may be accessed instantaneously during spontaneous comprehension or production (10). Explicit knowledge, according to Ellis (151), refers to knowledge that is analysed, abstract and explanatory, and involves awareness, unlike implicit knowledge. The learner, therefore, has the ability to correct, describe and explain what he/she knows. Similarly, Bowles describes explicit knowledge as conscious, declarative, highly variable, only accessible through controlled processing, and potentially verbalisable (248).

Seven criteria of explicit-implicit knowledge differentiation have been illuminated by Ellis (151). Three are relevant to this study in terms of theoretical underpinning and instrument design. The first is "available time" which concerns whether learners are pressured to perform a task or whether they can plan their responses carefully. Operationally, this involves distinguishing tasks that make significant demands on learners' short-term memories and those that lie comfortably within their L2 processing capacity. Next is "systematicity" which requires examination of whether learners are consistent or varied in their response to a task. Learners should be more consistent in a task that taps their implicit knowledge than in a task that elicits explicit knowledge. The third is "metalinguage" which focuses on the relationship between metalinguage and explicit knowledge. Learners' knowledge of metalingual terms is related to their explicit (analysed) knowledge but not to their implicit knowledge.

Despite having learnt the grammatical functions of the L2, and in this instance its inflectional morphemes, learners tend to exhibit optionality in their use of inflectional morpheme and overuse default forms in their L2 production. A hypothesis that is related to the phenomenon is the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) by Prévost and White (103). The MSIH proposes that L2 learners have knowledge of functional categories and features of tense and agreement, but have problems in the realisation of surface morphology. This suggests that the omission of verbal inflections is caused by the problems, but not due to the impairment of the features. The MSIH also proposes that finite forms will occur only in finite positions whereas non-finite forms will occur in either non-finite or finite positions. This results in learners displaying

the verbal inflections optionally; thus L2 learners sometimes use non-finite forms to replace finite forms (Hsieh 45). This is a possible reason for L2 learners' inconsistent omission and usage of verbal inflections. In other words, failure to produce inflected verbs indicates not a defective grammatical representation but rather, L2 learners' failure to consistently link this feature to its particular form in English. Thus, when L2 production exhibits missing or incorrect functional morphology, for example in the use of past-time inflections or the plural indicators, the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis is supported (Muftah and Wong 91).

A number of empirical studies on knowledge types are primarily investigations on the impact of explicit knowledge on language acquisition and proficiency (Akakura 9; Correa 39; Gutiérrez 20; Roehr 173; Tokunaga 141). These involve correlational investigations on possessing explicit knowledge, language accuracy as well as language achievement. Roehr, for example, investigated the relationship between L1 English speakers' explicit knowledge of L2 German and proficiency in the language by using a combined grammar and vocabulary test in a study that involved 60 participants (173). It was found that explicit knowledge and L2 grammar and vocabulary are strongly and significantly correlated. Similarly, Tokunaga (140) examined the correlation between English proficiency and explicit knowledge among low proficiency students. A test was given to 195 native Japanese undergraduates from nine classes of different years and proficiency levels. A significant correlation between students' proficiency test scores and explicit knowledge was revealed. The study also found that students with low explicit knowledge had difficulty in identifying parts of speech in English.

In another study, the relationship between explicit knowledge and subjunctive accuracy of 232 learners from thirteen 2nd, 3rd and 4th year Spanish classes in an American university was investigated (Correa 39). The instruments for this study were, first, a test of general explicit knowledge in Spanish and English, second, a test of grammatical competence in the subjunctive, and third, a background questionnaire to identify native speakers of Spanish. A positive correlation between explicit knowledge and accuracy in the use of the subjunctive was found. This supports the notion that explicit knowledge is related to the state of users being aware, conscious and alert in language production.

Akakura examined the effects of explicit instruction on the acquisition of English generic and non-generic articles (9). The experimental group was exposed to instruction delivered through CALL activities while the control group did not receive any instructional treatment. Implicit knowledge was measured using an elicited imitation task and an oral production task while explicit knowledge was measured using the Grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT) and the Metalinguistic Knowledge Test (MKT). The primary focus was

on form and there were no time constraints. The results show that explicit instruction has an effect on implicit knowledge. However, the beneficial effects of explicit instruction are limited to ungrammatical stimuli only.

Gutiérrez conducted a study on 53 L2 Spanish speakers who were of two groups: high and low proficiency levels (23). The participants completed a language background questionnaire, a timed GJT, an untimed GJT, and an MKT, as well as oral and written proficiency tests to examine the nature of the knowledge representations developed by these groups of students with different levels of proficiency, as well as the relationship between these knowledge representations and the learners' achievement in the L2. The results show that the two groups differed with respect to their implicit and explicit knowledge of Spanish and also with regard to the relationship between measures of those representations and measures of L2 achievement used with each group. It should be noted however, that low proficiency participants performed poorly on all measures of explicit knowledge despite extensive explicit instruction. Higher proficiency participants performed better than lower proficiency ones in all measures of implicit and explicit knowledge.

In sum, the abovementioned studies investigating the relationship between types of knowledge and L2 performance and achievement rather consistently indicate that explicit knowledge has a significant effect on language production (Roehr 173; Tokunaga 141; Correa, 39; Akakura, 9; Gutiérrez 20). This supports Ellis' view that explicit knowledge is the end product of acquisition. There are limited studies on implicit knowledge though those that have been reviewed indicate that there is a positive relationship between knowledge and instruction. The reviewed literature led to the current exploration of both types of knowledge and an examination of possible correlation to past-time inflectional output in the Malaysian setting. In addition, this study is underpinned by Ellis' (151) constructs of explicit and implicit knowledge mentioned above.

This study aims to ascertain the level of implicit and explicit knowledge of past-time inflections of Malay users of English. It is also an exploration of the learners' performance in the written production of past-time inflections. The main objective of this study is to investigate the correlation between types of knowledge, namely implicit and explicit, and output of the target inflectional temporal forms, which are the *-ed* and *-en* morphemes of the English language, by Malay users.

Methodology

This study employed a correlational design involving 72 Malay first year English majors who, through an institutionalised placement test, were considered minimally high intermediate users of English. Scores from three instruments – the Grammaticality Judgement Test (GJT), the Metalinguistic Knowledge Test

(MKT) and the Writing Production Test (WPT) – were used to ascertain relationships between variables.

The GJT measured the participants' implicit knowledge of past-time inflectional forms. Based on Ellis' constructs, the test had 18 items of which nine were grammatical sentences while the other nine were ungrammatical. Availability of processing time determines whether a learner has access to implicit or explicit linguistic knowledge (Ellis 11), so 5 minutes were allocated for the completion of the GJT. Responses were scored as either correct (1 point) or incorrect (0 points). The MKT that measured the participants' explicit knowledge of inflectional forms consisted of nine items; each item was a sentence containing a past-time inflectional error that had to be corrected. The test also required participants to complete the rule-stating section by providing written metalingual explanations for the ungrammatical past-time inflectional forms. As opposed to the GJT, the participants were given ample time (up to 30 minutes) to complete the task. Responses were also rated either correct or incorrect. The final data collection instrument, the WPT, was administered to examine written usage of target forms. It required the participants to write an essay and the essays were scored by two scorers using a rubric adapted from Ferris and Hedgcock (235) and Mohammad Lotfie (132). The rubric focuses on the accuracy of past-time inflectional form usage and ranges from 0 to 10. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .82 was obtained for inter-rater reliability.

Scores from GJT, MKT and WPT were firstly analysed descriptively in frequencies and percentages. Spearman's *rho* correlational index was next calculated in identifying the extent to which the variables were correlated to one another. Table 1 summarises the research procedure.

Table 1: Research Procedure

	Research Questions	Data Collection Methods	Data Analysis Methods
1.	What is the Malay ESL learners' level of implicit knowledge of past-time inflections?	Grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT)	Descriptive analysis - frequencies and percentages
2.	What is the Malay ESL learners' level of explicit knowledge of past-time inflections?	Metalinguistic Knowledge Test (MKT)	
3.	What is the Malay ESL learners' performance in the written production of past-time inflections?	Written Production Task (WPT)	Descriptive analysis of students' essays, mean score,

			content analysis
4.	Is there a correlation between implicit knowledge and ESL learners' output of past-time inflections?	GJT and WPT	Spearman's <i>rho</i>
5.	Is there a correlation between explicit knowledge and ESL learners' output of past-time inflections?	MKT and WPT	

Results and Discussion

Malay ESL Learners' Implicit Knowledge of Past-time Inflections

The constructs of past-time forms, the sentences that test the accuracy of each construct and the responses of the participants to the GJT items are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Responses to Grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT)

Aspects	Construct/meaning	Item no.	Sentences	Accurate responses
Past Perfect	An action completed prior to some other past event/time	4	Before he fought in the war, he had worked as a bank manager.	67 (93.1%)
		16	*She had complete her thesis when she moved to Kuala Lumpur.	67 (93.1%)
	Imaginative conditional in the subordinate clause	18	If Sally had studied harder, she would have passed the exam.	64 (88.9%)
		2	*If she has finish the test, she would have passed.	68 (94.4%)
Subtotal				266 (92.3%)
Simple Past	Definite state	10	I shared a house with friends in Johor Baru when I was working in Singapore.	70 (97.2%)
		9	*My grandmother	50

			looks after me until I had to go to a boarding school.	(69.4%)
	Definite event	11	He arrived from his hometown last Sunday.	70 (97.2%)
		8	*I return the books two days ago.	69 (95.8%)
	Definite habit	13	He used to be very healthy. He cycled everywhere during his college days.	68 (94.4%)
		6	*She walks to school in those days when she had to arrive at school before 7.30 am.	47 (65.3%)
Subtotal				374 (86.57%)
Present Perfect	State up to present	1	He will not believe those lies people told about me. We have been friends for a long time.	69 (95.8%)
		17	*The two friends trust each other completely. They live together for many years.	23 (31.9%)
	Indefinite events	3	I have eaten better chicken rice.	63 (87.5%)
		14	The film is not so good after all. I watched better ones.	40 (55.6%)
	Habit up to present	5	She has counseled her for two semesters.	54 (75%)
		15	*He is now healthier because he takes the nutritious supplement for ten years.	37 (51.4%)
	With present result	7	His father is angry with him. He has crashed the car.	47 (65.3%)
		12	*He cannot retrieve	37

		his work because he drops the diskette.	(51.4%)
	Subtotal		370 (64.25%)
	TOTAL		1010 (77.93%)

The learners' level of implicit knowledge of past-time inflections is indicated by the accurate answers they provided. The participants had high level of implicit knowledge at 77.93%. Specifically, the level of implicit knowledge for past perfect was very high at 92.36%, high for simple past at 86.57% and somewhat high for present perfect at 64.25%. It can also be observed that the participants were generally more successful in indicating their grasp of implicit knowledge when the items were grammatical rather than ungrammatical.

In particular, the participants were able to make accurate judgment of simple past (-*ed*) and present perfect (-*en*) aspects when the sentences were grammatical. On the contrary, several items showed the tendency to obtain a low percentage of accuracy when the sentence was ungrammatical. For example, Item 9 of simple past "My grandmother **looks after** me until I had to go to a boarding school" showed that the inflectional -*ed* was missing in the verb "look" and instead was marked with the third person singular -*s* indicator. Some participants may have indicated that as correct because the -*s* seemed to agree with the subject "my grandmother."

This is similar for present perfect, where it was observed that the students obtained inaccurate answers for ungrammatical sentences whenever the Subject Verb Agreement of the sentences appeared to be correct, without taking into consideration that the sentences were supposed to be in past-time form. Abdullah states that, where mastering the English language is concerned, learners face many difficulties in the use of English tenses (10). It can be said that the participants in this study had not achieved native-like competence in the present perfect aspect as they did not perform equally well in the ungrammatical items. Wong notes that for learners to be seen as having achieved native-like competence in a particular L2 property, they would have to have accurate intuition of both grammatical and ungrammatical items in a task (6). This suggests that in order to reach native-like levels of implicit knowledge, the participants must score equally well for both grammatical and ungrammatical items.

The frequency of accuracy is high for both grammatical and ungrammatical items for past perfect. This indicates that the participants' score on past-time inflectional morphemes was high for the structure and signifies a high level of implicit knowledge on that aspect. One of the reasons that could have influenced the relatively high percentage of accuracy is that all items had

two clauses and one of the clauses indicated the past-time form of the verb. This might have provided a clue to the participants to relate the sentences to the past-time inflection *-ed*. One example is Item 4, “Before he *fought* in the war, he **had worked** as a bank manager.”

There is an indication that implicit knowledge involves unconscious judgment of items where the participants could have made correct judgments of items without justifying why. This illustrates that the knowledge with which the participants processed the items was without much awareness or was based on intuition (Ellis 151). Zhang also states that little effort is required to execute an automatic process which involves the learners carrying out the task without awareness or attention as it has become routinised and automatised. It requires little thought and less time (98). This could be the explanation for the participants’ tendency to answer the grammatical items accurately compared to the answers given to the ungrammatical items. In sum, the learners’ level of implicit knowledge of past-time inflections was relatively high for past perfect and simple past. As for present perfect, accuracy was high for the grammatical items.

Malay ESL Learners’ Explicit Knowledge of Past-time Inflections

Table 3 shows the frequencies and percentages of accuracy for the 9-itemed MKT. These items were classified into aspects and constructs they represent. The overall level of explicit knowledge of the participants was rather low at 45.83%. However, results by each category of past-time construct reflect participants’ different levels of explicit knowledge. It can be seen that 93.98% of them answered simple past Items 2, 7 and 5 accurately. This shows that the level of explicit knowledge of the Malay ESL learners on past-time inflectional form *-ed* was high. As for past perfect aspect, a low percentage (34.03%) of accurate answers from the participants can be seen in Table 3. In other words, the level of explicit knowledge of Malay ESL learners on past-time inflectional form *-ed* was low for past perfect. Table 3 shows that present perfect obtained the lowest percentage compared to the other two aspects where only 15.63% of the participants provided accurate answers to Items 3, 9, 6, and 4. This shows that the level of explicit knowledge of Malay ESL learners on past-time inflectional form *-ed* and *-en* was very low for present perfect aspect.

Table 3: Responses to Metalinguistic Knowledge Test (MKT)

Aspects	Construct/meaning	Item no.	Sentences	Accurate responses
Simple Past	Definite habit	2	I stay in a hostel during my secondary school years.	69 (95.8%)
	Definite state	7	I use 10 reams of	68

			paper for my assignments when I was a student.	(94.4%)
	Definite event	5	I visit the museum two days ago.	66 (91.7%)
Subtotal				203 93.98%
Past Perfect	An action completed prior to some other past event/time	1	The well-known politician had live in the same village for 30 years before he moved to Kuala Lumpur.	27 (37.5%)
	Imaginative conditional in the subordinate clause	8	If they had help each other, they would have survived the flood.	22 (30.6%)
Subtotal				49 (34.03%)
Present Perfect	State up to present	3	My mom trusts Nestlé brand wholeheartedly. She has consume their products until now.	19 (26.4%)
	With present result	9	His friends ignore him because he has steal their books.	10 (13.9%)
	Habit up to present	6	She works in that company for 20 years.	10 (13.9%)
	Indefinite events	4	This is not her best essay. She wrote better ones.	6 (8.3%)
Subtotal				45 (15.63%)
TOTAL				297 45.83%

The level of explicit knowledge of Malay ESL learners on past-time inflectional forms *-ed* and *-en* differed across all aspects. Even though simple past, past perfect and present perfect (Items 3 and 6) were similarly marked (*-ed*), a high level of explicit knowledge was only evident for the simple past aspect compared to the other two aspects. A low level of accuracy of past-time inflectional *-en* was reported for the present perfect aspect (Items 9 and 4). The result shows the participants' overall scores for simple past signifies a high level

of explicit knowledge on the past-time inflectional *-ed* that the simple past aspect carries. This is probably because the simple past aspect is the least complex structure compared to present perfect and past perfect aspects in that its rule is easier to follow, i.e. adding *-ed* past-time indicator to regular verbs to indicate past events. Ellis mentions that explicit knowledge is operationalised as the ability of the learners to explain a specific linguistic feature (152). The definition by Roehr (173) on explicit knowledge as learners' ability to correct, describe and explain L2 errors also confirms that the students have explicit knowledge on past-time inflectional *-ed* for simple past aspect.

Secondly, the finding reveals that the level of explicit knowledge of past perfect was low. Some participants managed to correct the errors accurately by attaching the exact inflection but failed to explain metalingually. However, it should be borne in mind that the finding of RQ 1 is that the frequency of accuracy for past perfect aspect was high for both grammatical and ungrammatical items; this indicates that the students had internalised the knowledge of past perfect, as suggested by the fact that they knew the accurate form but could not provide the metalingual explanation. This implies that the students had implicit knowledge of the past perfect aspect.

It is found that the participants' explicit knowledge about the present perfect was extremely low. They appeared to have mistakenly changed the main verb into simple past form after the auxiliary "has" or "have" instead of using the past participle form which carries the inflectional *-en* and *-ed*. For example, Item 9 "His friends ignore him because he **has steal** their books" was corrected as "has *stealed" instead of "has stolen." As for Item 4, "This is not her best essay. She **wrote** better ones" was corrected as "has *wrote" instead of "has written." This could be an indication that the students had overgeneralised the English past-time rules. Inflectional *-ed* was used widely as a simple past marker. Negative language transfer could have occurred because the (Malay) participants' L1 does not possess temporal inflectional markers for past-time references (Omar, 25; Karim viii). This corresponds to Usadiati who noticed that one of the reasons students use a verb form without considering other possibilities is because they do not have similar tense indicators in their vernacular (179). Therefore, they could not see any implication in using other inflections.

In sum, the Malay ESL learners' level of explicit knowledge of past-time inflections varies according to the aspects. The findings show that the learners' level of explicit knowledge of past-time inflections was high for simple past, but low for past perfect. It can also be seen that explicit knowledge of the present perfect aspect appeared to be the lowest among all.

Learners' Performance in the Written Production of Past-time Inflections

As shown in Table 4, five descriptors (very good, good, average, poor and very poor) were used to indicate performance. The learners' performance scores were classified according to descriptors and converted into percentages.

Table 4: Learners' Performance in the Written Production of Past time Inflectional Forms

Scores	Descriptors	Number of Students	Percentage
8.5-10	Very good	4	5.6%
6.5-8	Good	51	70.8%
4.5-6	Average	17	23.6%
2.5-4	Poor	-	-
0-2	Very poor	-	-

Table 4 indicates that the majority of the participants (70.8% - 51) had shown good performance in the written production of past-time inflectional forms while 23.6% (17) of them were classified as having an average performance. Only 5.6% (4) of the participants were categorised as having very good performance in the written production test (WPT). None was classified as having poor or very poor performance. These results were confirmed with the calculation of the mean score of the WPT.

Table 5: Mean score of Written Production Test (WPT)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
WPT	72	7.0	0.9

The mean score ($M = 7.0$, $SD = 0.9$) indicates that the learners' performance in the written production of past-time inflectional forms was good.

The findings reveal that the majority of the participants managed to use past-time inflections of *-ed* and *-en* accurately with minimal errors. Nevertheless, two common errors were detected in their written output. First, the omission of inflectional *-ed* to mark the simple past aspect; the students had substituted the inflection with simple present inflectional marker. For instance:

Student 23: ... *I *manage to win my father's heart back with a good result of SPM.*

Student 30: *I was bleeding a lot and that *makes my mother worried.*

Student 14: ... *I quite often *presents my school in storytelling...*

Second, participants omitted the inflections *-ed* and *-en* after the auxiliary *have/had* that should mark present perfect and past perfect aspects. For instance:

Student 16: ... *I have *wrote...*

Student 27: *But I have *stop involving in sports activity...*

Student 29: *All that I had ever *love being in the school was eating...*

As shown above, the participants used simple present when they were actually writing about past events. This might be due to linguistic interference in which the participants transferred knowledge from their native language, Malay, to the second language, English. Ellis refers to this as interference errors; the result of using elements from one language while speaking or writing in another (302). This finding supports O'Grady who said that the nature of a learner's first language can influence the rate and success of L2 inflectional development (11). In other words, Malay ESL learners face some difficulties in internalising past-time inflections *-ed* and *-en* since the Malay language does not have any overt past-time markers (Omar 25; Karim viii). Meanwhile, the students failed to attach *-ed* and *-en* after the auxiliary *have* and *had* because in Malay, *have* and *had* impose the meaning of *sudah* or the colloquial *dah* which is equivalent to "already" to mark the past events. Therefore, inflectional markers are not needed to mark pastness.

In addition, one of the possible causes for the omission of past-time inflections is the environment in which language acquisition occurs. Considering that Malay students tend to speak Malaysian English, the possibility that the way they speak is reflected in their writings should not be rejected. The Malay language does not have final clusters, resulting in the possibility of Malay speakers of English simplifying any clusters in English: for example /wɔ:kt/ is pronounced as */wɔ:k/, resulting in grammatical consequences. Rajadurai's observation that simplifications may lead to the omission of participle forms in speaking and writing supports the findings of the current study. It is also observed that some of the students produced inconsistent use of past-time inflections (9), sometimes accurately and sometimes not so accurately. These occurrences can be related to the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis proposed by Prévost and White that suggests that L2 learners possess the knowledge of functional categories and features of tenses, but have problems in realising it at the morphological level (103). This results in the users displaying the verbal inflections optionally (Hsieh 46).

In a nutshell, the learners' performance in the written production of past-time inflections was good. Common errors, especially inflectional omissions, were detected in some output. This may be due to language interference as Malay does not have inflectional indicators of past or completed events.

Linguistic Knowledge Types and Learners' Past-Time Inflection Output

Table 6 shows the correlational results, which indicate a significant positive correlation between implicit knowledge and ESL learners' output of past-time

inflections ($r_{ho} = .39, p < .01$). It can be deduced that the two variables were moderately associated.

Table 6: Spearman's Rho Correlation Coefficient of Linguistic Knowledge Types and ESL Learners' Output of Past-time Inflections

	WPT	GJT	MKT
WPT	1.00	.39**	.29*
GJT	.39**	1.00	.20
MKT	.29*	.20	1.00

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

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Additionally, Table 6 shows that there is a significant positive correlation between explicit knowledge and ESL learners' output of past-time inflections ($r_{ho} = .29, p < .05$). The correlation between the variables, however, is weak.

The present study shows that implicit knowledge does have a relationship with learners' output of past-time inflections. As previously mentioned, implicit knowledge is knowledge that can be accessed automatically in fluent performance. In other words, language is automated without the user knowing or needing to metalingually explain grammatical rules. This is illustrated when the participants were able to correct the errors in MKT but were unable to explain the governing rules. This could be caused by the extensive usage of English in the daily interactions of the participants who were English majors. The regular use of English might cause the participants to rely on implicit knowledge over explicit knowledge in their output. As Zhang claims, automatization involves a learned response that has been built up through the consistent mapping of the same input to the same pattern of activation over many trials. This means that consistent and successful practice of grammar results in the automatic processing of output (98). Even though the correlation was medium, it has indicated that implicit knowledge is significant to language output. This observation parallels with that of Ellis who agreed that second language competence primarily consists of implicit knowledge on how to use it (143). This suggests that implicit knowledge is the principal source of L2 speech production and comprehension and in the case of the study, the accurate use of past-time inflectional forms.

This study finds evidence that there is a relationship between explicit knowledge and ESL learners' output of past-time inflections. Studies by Roehr, Milasi and Pishghadam, Tokunaga, Correa, Akakura and Gutiérrez consistently show that explicit knowledge has a strong and significant relationship with learners' production (173; 33; 141; 39; 9; 20). However, the correlation between explicit knowledge and the learners' output of past-time inflections in this study is rather weak. This finding suggests that explicit knowledge is not an exclusive

factor to good performance in the output of past-time inflections. This weak relationship provides evidence that the students' performance in past-time inflectional output cannot be fully associated with students' mastery of a certain level of explicit knowledge; rather, it could be complementary to implicit knowledge. These findings thus support Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis which claims that explicit knowledge is not significant in adding to one's knowledge of certain grammatical rules. It acts somewhat like a monitor to help learners notice or correct errors in their output (79). Similarly, Ellis notes that explicit knowledge of the L2 plays an important role in linguistic problem-solving in which, when automatic capabilities fail, an additional collaborative consciousness provides support. He explains further that implicit and explicit knowledge do interact at the performance level since L2 learners often resort to both types of representations in L2 production (306). This is illustrated in this study's findings where the majority of the participants scored well in their written production. This could be an indication that they used both linguistic knowledge types to automatically produce as well as consciously correct errors.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that ESL learners have high levels of implicit knowledge and in particular they possess implicit knowledge of the syncretic past perfect and past simple *-ed* inflection. The study also indicates that students' level of explicit knowledge of simple past (also *-ed*) is high compared to present and past perfect. It has been highlighted further that there is a relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge and the past-time inflectional output. In other words, both types of knowledge are significant to the output of past-time inflections; they complement each other in that both play their own roles in producing output. This supports the weak interface position which claims that explicit knowledge contributes indirectly to the acquisition of implicit knowledge and serves as auto-input to the learners' implicit learning mechanisms (Ellis 144). The study also highlights the fact that Malay has exceptionally little usage of inflections to indicate past-time forms. Nevertheless, certain English inflectional forms, the *-ed* in particular, are acquired successfully by the learners even though Malay does not have parallel features. Apart from an extension on the understanding of the theoretical knowledge of knowledge types and ESL inflectional output, the findings of this study should also help ESL instructors to make informed pedagogical choices which include the implicitness or explicitness of instruction and relevant instructional materials.

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