



The International Journal of Language Studies

ISSN: 3078-2244 (Online)

2026, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 216–233

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60087/ijls.v3.n2.013>

Journal homepage: <https://ijlangstudies.org>



Discourse-Based Grammar Instruction and Written Communicative Competence Among Intermediate EFL Learners: An Action Research Study in a Vietnamese Private Tutoring Context

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Abstract

This qualitative action research study investigated how discourse-based grammar instruction (DBGI) influenced the written communicative competence of a small group of intermediate English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners in Vietnam. The study was conducted over twelve weeks with five high-school students attending a private tutoring class in Dong Nai City. The instructional intervention consisted of ten DBGI sessions organized around five stages: Encounter, Noticing, Concept Mapping, Discrimination, and Production. Authentic or adapted texts, guided noticing, form–meaning mapping, collaborative analysis, contextualized grammar practice, and guided writing were used to help learners move beyond sentence-level rule memorization toward purposeful language use in discourse. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention writing assessments, an open-ended learner questionnaire, and classroom observation. Learners' writing was evaluated in relation to grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic dimensions of communicative competence. Descriptive results showed that all five learners improved after the intervention. The mean score increased from 5.35 on the pre-test to 7.90 on the post-test, representing a mean gain of 2.55 points. Individual gains ranged from 1.50 to 3.50 points. A descriptive paired-samples effect size was very large, $d_z = 3.05$, although this figure cannot be generalized because of the small sample. Qualitative findings indicated improved grammatical accuracy, more appropriate grammatical choices, clearer organization, stronger cohesion, reduced anxiety, increased confidence, and a shift from rule-based knowledge to contextualized understanding. The study suggests that DBGI can function as a practical bridge between systemic functional linguistics, communicative language teaching, and writing pedagogy. However, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific evidence rather than proof of causal effectiveness.

Keywords: *discourse-based grammar instruction, written communicative competence, EFL writing, action research, systemic functional linguistics, Vietnam*

Article information: Received: 07/04/2026;

Accepted: 08/06/2026;

Published: 25/06/2026

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1. Introduction

Grammar has traditionally occupied a central position in English language teaching. In many educational settings, learners are expected to memorize grammatical rules, complete controlled exercises, and demonstrate accuracy in sentence-level tests. This orientation can provide learners with an organized foundation, particularly when they are preparing for examinations. Nevertheless, knowledge of isolated rules does not automatically enable learners to use grammar effectively in extended written communication. Learners may correctly identify a tense or complete a sentence-level exercise while still having difficulty organizing ideas, selecting an appropriate register, expressing interpersonal meanings, or connecting sentences into a coherent text.

This problem is especially relevant in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) contexts, where learners often receive limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom. In Vietnam, English education has increasingly emphasized communicative competence and practical language use. At the same time, classroom practice continues to be influenced by examination requirements, teacher-fronted instruction, explicit rule explanation, and mechanical exercises. The result is a persistent gap between policy-oriented goals and classroom experiences. Learners may be encouraged to communicate, but grammar instruction and assessment often remain centered on decontextualized forms.

The gap is also visible in writing instruction. Writing requires more than the production of grammatically correct sentences. Writers must organize information, establish relationships with readers, construct a suitable tone, express degrees of certainty or obligation, and use cohesive resources to guide readers through a text. These abilities involve grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic dimensions of communicative competence. When grammar is taught separately from writing and discourse, learners may struggle to transfer their declarative knowledge into meaningful written production.

A discourse-based view of grammar offers a possible response to this problem. From this perspective, grammar is not merely a collection of rules governing sentence formation. It is a resource for making meaning in a particular social and communicative context. Grammatical choices help writers represent experiences, express attitudes, negotiate relationships, organize information, and achieve purposes. This view is compatible with systemic functional linguistics, which treats language as a semiotic resource for meaning-making, and with communicative language teaching, which defines successful language learning in terms of effective use in context.

Discourse-based grammar instruction (DBGI) is particularly relevant because it brings these theoretical principles into classroom practice. Instead of presenting a grammatical structure first and then asking learners to apply it in unrelated sentences, DBGI begins with a text or communicative situation. Learners first consider the purpose, audience, and organization of the text. They then notice recurring grammatical patterns, connect form with meaning and use, compare alternative choices, and produce their own written texts. In this process, grammar remains explicit, but explicit explanation is integrated into meaningful discourse rather than detached from communication.

The present study investigates DBGI in a small-group tutoring context in Dong Nai City, Vietnam. The study focuses on five intermediate-level high-school learners who had previously

experienced mainly rule-based grammar instruction. The intervention lasted twelve weeks and included ten instructional sessions. The course focused on grammatical structures that have substantial discourse and pragmatic value, especially modal verbs and conditional sentences. These structures were selected because their interpretation depends strongly on context. Modal verbs may express possibility, certainty, advice, obligation, or politeness, while conditional clauses may express prediction, hypothetical meaning, regret, cause-and-effect relationships, and degrees of certainty.

The study addresses two research questions:

In what ways does DBGI influence learners' written communicative competence in the Vietnamese EFL context?

What are learners' attitudes and perceptions toward the use of DBGI in grammar learning?

The study has three main objectives. First, it examines changes in learners' written performance before and after the intervention. Second, it explores learners' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to discourse-based grammar learning. Third, it considers how an action research cycle can support the refinement of DBGI procedures in a small-group classroom.

The study is significant for several reasons. Theoretically, it connects functional views of grammar with communicative competence and writing development. Methodologically, it uses multiple sources of evidence, including writing assessments, learner reflections, and classroom observation. Pedagogically, it presents a five-stage lesson framework that can be adapted by teachers working with intermediate EFL learners. Contextually, it contributes evidence from a private tutoring setting, which has received less attention than formal school and university classrooms.

The study does not claim that DBGI is universally superior to other approaches. It is a small-scale action research project with five participants, no control group, and a short intervention period. Its purpose is therefore not statistical generalization but close examination of how a discourse-based approach functioned in a particular learning environment. The findings provide an evidence-informed account of learner development, instructional adjustment, and perceived learning experiences.

2.1. Grammar as a Meaning-Making Resource

Grammar can be defined from several perspectives. A traditional view treats grammar as a system of rules that determines how words are combined into sentences. This view is useful for describing formal patterns, but it tends to separate grammar from the social purposes for which language is used. More recent perspectives have conceptualized grammar as a multidimensional resource that includes form, meaning, and use (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2016).

The form dimension concerns the visible or structural characteristics of language, including morphology, syntax, word order, and grammatical patterns. The meaning dimension concerns the semantic interpretation associated with a form. The use dimension concerns the relationship between a grammatical choice and the context in which it occurs. A single grammatical structure may therefore have different pragmatic effects depending on the audience, communicative purpose, genre, and relationship between participants.

A functional view of grammar is particularly relevant to writing. Writers do not select grammatical forms randomly. They choose forms to represent experiences, establish relationships with readers, and organize information. Halliday's functional perspective

describes these functions as ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational function allows language users to represent events, people, ideas, and circumstances. The interpersonal function allows them to express attitudes, degrees of certainty, authority, politeness, and social relationships. The textual function enables them to organize information into coherent and cohesive messages.

These functions are visible in the use of modal verbs and conditional sentences. For example, the expressions *You might need to revise the paragraph*, *You should revise the paragraph*, and *You must revise the paragraph* share a related propositional content but differ in interpersonal force. The first expresses possibility or tentative advice, the second expresses stronger advice, and the third expresses obligation. Choosing among them requires more than grammatical knowledge. It requires an understanding of audience, purpose, and relationship.

Similarly, conditional sentences are not merely formulas such as *if + present tense, will + verb*. They can express predictions, hypothetical situations, warnings, regrets, and logical relationships. In writing, the selection of a conditional structure contributes to the interpretation of time, certainty, responsibility, and consequence. Therefore, teaching conditionals through discourse may help learners understand why different forms are chosen rather than only how those forms are constructed.

A functional perspective does not reject accuracy. Instead, it places accuracy within a broader model of communicative effectiveness. A grammatically accurate sentence may still be inappropriate for a particular audience or ineffective in a larger text. Conversely, a writer may communicate a general meaning despite minor grammatical errors if the text is coherent and contextually appropriate. Effective instruction must therefore address accuracy, meaning, and contextual use together.

2.2. Communicative Competence and Writing

The concept of communicative competence emerged partly as a response to narrow definitions of language ability. Hymes (1972) argued that knowing a language involves more than knowing whether a sentence is grammatically possible. Language users must also know when, where, and to whom a form can appropriately be used. Canale and Swain (1980) subsequently proposed a model of communicative competence involving grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

Grammatical competence includes knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and sentence-level semantics. In the present study, this dimension concerns learners' ability to use modal verbs, conditional structures, tense forms, and related grammatical resources accurately. However, grammatical competence is not evaluated through isolated items alone. Learners are asked to use target forms within written tasks.

Sociolinguistic competence concerns the ability to use language appropriately in relation to social context. In writing, this includes register, tone, politeness, audience awareness, and genre conventions. An email to a friend may use informal expressions, while an email to a lecturer or institution requires a more formal and mitigated style. Modal verbs are especially relevant to sociolinguistic competence because they allow writers to express suggestions, requests, uncertainty, and obligation with different levels of interpersonal force.

Discourse competence concerns the ability to organize grammatical forms and meanings into coherent and cohesive texts. It involves the management of topics, information flow, reference,

conjunction, paragraph structure, and logical relationships. For writing learners, discourse competence is visible in how effectively they connect ideas and guide readers through an email, explanation, complaint, apology, or argument.

Strategic competence includes the verbal and non-verbal strategies used to compensate for gaps in linguistic or sociolinguistic knowledge. In writing, strategic competence may involve paraphrasing, choosing a simpler expression, reorganizing a message, using contextual clues, or revising a sentence when the intended meaning is unclear. It may also include the ability to monitor and repair one's own text.

Bachman (1990) expanded communicative language ability by emphasizing the interaction between language knowledge, contextual knowledge, and the ability to use language in performance. This perspective is important because writing is a situated activity. A text cannot be evaluated only by counting grammatical errors; it must also be considered in relation to its task, intended reader, purpose, and genre.

In the present study, written communicative competence is therefore treated as a multidimensional construct. Learners' writing is examined in relation to grammatical control, contextual appropriateness, organization, cohesion, clarity, and the ability to express meaning. This framework is suitable for evaluating DBGI because DBGI explicitly aims to connect grammatical form with communicative purpose.

2.3. Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Form–Meaning–Use Framework

Systemic functional linguistics provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how grammar functions in discourse. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) describe language as a system of choices through which speakers and writers create meaning in social contexts. Language choices are shaped by the context of situation, including field, tenor, and mode.

Field concerns what is happening and what the text is about. Tenor concerns the participants, their relationships, and the social roles they occupy. Mode concerns the role of language and the channel through which communication occurs. These variables influence the grammatical and lexical choices made in a text. For example, an apology email to a teacher may use more formal vocabulary, indirect expressions, and modal verbs of mitigation than a message to a close friend.

SFL also explains language through three metafunctions. The ideational metafunction is concerned with the representation of experience. The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with social relationships, attitudes, judgment, certainty, and obligation. The textual metafunction is concerned with how information is organized into a coherent message. In writing instruction, these metafunctions provide a way to explain why grammatical forms matter beyond sentence-level correctness.

The present study also draws on Larsen-Freeman's form–meaning–use framework. The framework proposes that grammar should be understood through the interaction of three dimensions. Form refers to the structure of a linguistic expression. Meaning refers to what the expression conveys. Use refers to the contexts and communicative purposes in which the expression is appropriate. These dimensions are interconnected rather than independent.

For example, the form *might* can express possibility, but its meaning and pragmatic effect depend on context. In the sentence *It might rain tomorrow*, it expresses uncertainty about a future event. In *You might want to revise this section*, it functions as a relatively indirect

suggestion. The same form therefore contributes to different interpersonal meanings depending on the discourse context.

This framework has important pedagogical implications. Learners should not be asked only to identify a grammatical structure or memorize its rule. They should also examine how it operates in a text, what meaning it contributes, and why it is appropriate in a particular communicative situation. This process can help learners develop a more flexible understanding of grammar and reduce dependence on mechanical rules.

2.4. Discourse-Based Grammar Instruction

Discourse-based grammar instruction shifts the focus from isolated sentences to extended language use. In sentence-based instruction, grammar is often presented through individual examples that illustrate a rule. Learners may then complete exercises involving gap-filling, transformation, or error correction. These activities can support initial accuracy, but they may not show how grammatical choices contribute to a complete message.

In DBGI, grammar is introduced through texts, genres, or communicative situations. Learners examine how forms occur across clauses and paragraphs. They consider the relationship between grammar and topic development, cohesion, audience, tone, and purpose. The approach does not eliminate explicit teaching. Rather, it embeds explicit explanation within discourse and asks learners to apply grammatical knowledge in meaningful production.

Several principles characterize DBGI. First, meaning precedes form. Learners begin by considering the overall message, purpose, and context before analyzing specific grammatical structures. Second, instruction uses authentic or realistic texts. These may include emails, notices, reports, messages, newsletters, explanations, and opinion paragraphs. Third, learning involves both top-down and bottom-up processing. Learners first interpret the text as a whole and then attend to grammatical and lexical details. Fourth, learners are encouraged to compare alternative forms and explain the effects of their choices. Fifth, production involves writing for a communicative purpose rather than completing only controlled exercises.

A DBGI lesson can follow five stages. The first stage, Encounter, exposes learners to a text or communicative situation containing the target forms. The second stage, Noticing, guides learners to identify recurring forms and patterns. The third stage, Concept Mapping, helps learners connect form with meaning, function, and context. The fourth stage, Discrimination, asks learners to compare alternatives and select appropriate forms for different situations. The fifth stage, Production, requires learners to create their own written text.

This sequence is consistent with the idea that learners need to notice forms in input and connect them with meaning and use. It also reflects action-oriented language learning because learners use grammar to complete communicative tasks. In the present study, the five-stage framework was used to teach grammar through emails, advice texts, complaint messages, reports, and other writing tasks.

DBGI may offer several benefits. It can help learners understand grammar as a resource for communication, improve their awareness of text organization, and provide more meaningful writing practice. It may also promote engagement because learners analyze language in relation to topics and situations that resemble real communication. Collaborative noticing and peer discussion can create opportunities for learners to articulate their reasoning and learn from one another.

However, DBGI also presents challenges. Discourse-level analysis can be cognitively demanding, particularly for intermediate learners who have limited vocabulary or limited experience with extended writing. Authentic texts may contain forms that are difficult, rare, culturally unfamiliar, or unrelated to the immediate learning objective. Teachers must therefore select or adapt texts carefully. Scaffolding is also necessary. Without guided questions, examples, and feedback, learners may focus on content while missing important grammatical patterns.

Another challenge concerns the relationship between communicative instruction and accuracy. If instruction emphasizes meaning without sufficient attention to form, learners may develop fluency while continuing to produce persistent errors. DBGI must therefore maintain a balance between contextualized communication and explicit guidance. The five-stage model used in this study was designed to provide this balance.

2.5. Previous Research and Research Gap

Previous research has increasingly examined grammar instruction that integrates form, meaning, context, and communication. Studies of focus-on-form have suggested that learners benefit when attention to grammar occurs within meaningful interaction rather than through isolated forms alone. Research on processing instruction and input enhancement has also indicated that the nature of input and the way learners attend to grammar can influence both sentence-level and discourse-level performance.

Studies specifically related to DBGI have reported positive learner perceptions and improved awareness of grammar in context. Panahi (2020), for example, found that learners viewed contextualized grammar instruction positively and reported greater confidence in using grammatical forms. Other research has associated discourse-based activities with stronger awareness of audience, text structure, and communicative purpose.

Research on communicative competence has also shown that grammatical competence and discourse competence are related to productive language performance. Learners who can control grammatical forms are better positioned to express ideas clearly, while discourse competence supports the organization of those forms into meaningful texts. Nevertheless, many studies measure grammar through discrete-item tests or focus primarily on learner perceptions. Fewer studies examine how grammar instruction influences the combined dimensions of written communicative competence.

In Vietnam, research has documented barriers to communicative language teaching, including examination pressure, limited resources, large classes, teacher beliefs, anxiety, and insufficient opportunities for authentic language use. Studies have also indicated growing teacher awareness of discourse, genre, audience, and writing organization. However, existing research has often relied on surveys or teacher perspectives. There remains limited classroom-based evidence from small-group tutoring contexts showing how learners' writing changes when DBGI is implemented over an instructional cycle.

The present study addresses four gaps. First, it examines written communicative competence rather than grammatical accuracy alone. Second, it combines writing performance data with learner perceptions and classroom observations. Third, it focuses on a small private tutoring class, a context that can provide close observation of individual learning processes. Fourth, it

uses action research to examine not only learner outcomes but also how instruction can be adjusted in response to classroom evidence.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study employed a qualitative action research design. Action research is appropriate when a teacher-researcher seeks to investigate a classroom problem while simultaneously improving instructional practice. It follows a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Burns (2010) similarly describes action research as a systematic form of practitioner inquiry in which classroom evidence informs pedagogical decisions.

The study was conducted over twelve weeks. Week 1 was used for the pre-intervention assessment, Weeks 2–11 included ten instructional sessions, and Week 12 was used for the post-intervention assessment and learner questionnaire. The intervention was organized into two cycles. Cycle 1 introduced discourse-based activities and allowed the researcher to identify difficulties in learners' noticing and analysis of grammatical patterns. Cycle 2 incorporated additional scaffolding and collaborative tasks based on reflection from Cycle 1.

The researcher was also the course teacher. This dual role allowed close observation of learning processes but created a potential risk of interpretive bias. To address this risk, the study used a structured observation checklist, transparent thematic coding, participant codes instead of names, and triangulation across writing assessments, questionnaire responses, and observations.

3.2. Context and Participants

The study took place in a private English tutoring center in Dong Nai City, Vietnam. The participants were five high-school learners at an intermediate level, approximately corresponding to B1 proficiency. They were between 16 and 17 years old. Three participants were female and two were male. Four learners had studied English for more than seven years, while one had studied English for approximately five to seven years. All participants reported having a Cambridge English certificate.

All five learners studied English at public schools. Some also attended private classes or engaged in self-study. Their main reason for learning English was preparation for school examinations. Before the intervention, all participants had experienced a predominantly rule-based approach in which teachers explained grammar rules and then assigned exercises. Their previous experience of writing emails and paragraphs was limited.

Purposive sampling was used because the participants met the characteristics required for the study: they were intermediate EFL learners, were studying in the selected tutoring context, and were available for the complete intervention. The small sample was appropriate for an action research case focused on detailed observation rather than statistical generalization.

Participation was voluntary. Learners were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study. Their data were coded as S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5. Personal information was not included in the reporting of findings. The collected data were used only for research purposes.

3.3. Instructional Intervention

The instructional program consisted of ten 90-minute sessions. The content focused on grammar structures that were useful for writing and that required contextual interpretation.

These included future forms, modal verbs, conditionals, stance expressions, cohesive devices, reference chains, argument markers, concession structures, and related forms.

The course followed five instructional stages.

Encounter. Learners were exposed to a model text, such as an email, advice message, complaint email, newsletter, or apology. The teacher first established the situation, audience, purpose, and topic.

Noticing. Learners identified target grammatical forms in the text. They underlined modal verbs, conditional clauses, cohesive devices, or stance expressions. At this stage, the teacher used guiding questions rather than immediately explaining every rule.

Concept Mapping. Learners discussed the relationship between form, meaning, and use. They considered questions such as: What does this form mean here? Why did the writer choose it? What would change if another form were used? Is the expression appropriate for the reader?

Discrimination. Learners compared grammatical alternatives in different contexts. For example, they distinguished between *might*, *should*, and *must* according to degrees of possibility, advice, and obligation. They also compared informal and formal choices and considered differences in tone.

Production. Learners wrote their own texts. Production tasks required them to apply target structures in realistic situations. They drafted, received feedback, revised, and produced a final version.

The intervention was cyclical. During Cycle 1, learners had difficulty identifying grammatical patterns independently in longer texts. In response, Cycle 2 used shorter model texts, more focused guiding questions, color coding, collaborative noticing, and additional peer discussion. This adjustment illustrates the relationship between classroom observation and instructional reflection in action research.

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

Three main instruments were used.

3.4.1. Pre-test and Post-test

The pre-test and post-test assessed written communicative competence through three tasks. Task 1 required learners to write an email using modal verbs and a conditional sentence. Task 2 required them to identify and correct errors in a text. Task 3 required them to select grammatical forms appropriate to particular meanings and situations.

The post-test used comparable but not identical tasks. It included a more complex interpersonal and discourse context. Learners had to write an email to a group member who was ill, express possibility and certainty, give advice, and use an if-clause. Other tasks required them to revise an email for logic, politeness, coherence, and cohesion and to interpret modal and conditional meanings.

The writing component was scored according to grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse criteria. Grammatical competence concerned the accurate use of target structures. Sociolinguistic competence concerned register, tone, audience awareness, and politeness. Discourse competence concerned organization, cohesion, coherence, and the development of ideas. The assessment scale produced a total score of 10 points.

Because the study involved only five participants, the pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed descriptively. Individual gain scores were calculated using:

$$\text{Gain score} = \text{Post} - \text{test score} - \text{Pre} - \text{test score}$$

A paired-samples effect size was also calculated descriptively:

$$d_z = \frac{M_{\text{gain}}}{SD_{\text{gain}}}$$

These calculations were not used for inferential statistical testing or population-level claims.

3.4.2. Learner Questionnaire

After the intervention, learners completed a ten-question open-ended questionnaire. The questions addressed affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of their experience. Learners were asked whether DBGI affected their anxiety, confidence, understanding of grammar, ability to connect grammar with meaning, writing organization, participation, and independence.

The open-ended format allowed learners to explain their experiences in their own words. Responses were analyzed thematically following the general stages of familiarization, initial coding, grouping of related codes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and interpreting patterns.

3.4.3. Classroom Observation Checklist

The teacher-researcher used a checklist throughout the instructional sessions. The checklist focused on learners' participation, interaction with texts, ability to identify grammatical forms, ability to explain form–meaning relationships, selection of forms according to context, engagement in peer discussion, response to feedback, and independence during revision.

Observation was particularly important because learners' perceptions could not be treated as the only evidence of engagement. The checklist provided information about what learners did during classroom activities and helped identify changes across the two action research cycles.

3.5. Data Analysis

The quantitative component involved comparison of individual and group-level pre-test and post-test scores. Means, standard deviations, and gain scores were calculated. The results were interpreted cautiously because the sample was very small and there was no comparison group. The questionnaire responses and observation notes were analyzed qualitatively. The researcher first read all responses repeatedly and identified meaningful statements. Initial codes included reduced fear of errors, increased confidence, contextualized grammatical understanding, awareness of communicative purpose, improved organization, peer support, and growing independence. Related codes were then grouped into broader themes.

Triangulation was achieved by comparing three data sources: writing assessments, learner questionnaires, and observation records. For example, an observed increase in independent revision was considered alongside learners' reports that they had become less dependent on teacher correction and the evidence of improved organization in post-test writing.

4. Results

4.1. Participant Background and Initial Perceptions

The five participants had substantial experience studying English, but their previous learning was strongly associated with school examinations and rule-based instruction. All participants reported having learned grammar through teacher explanation followed by exercises. Their experience writing emails or paragraphs was limited.

Before the intervention, three participants described grammar learning as boring or boring but useful. One participant described it as interesting, while another reported no strong feeling. Three learners preferred grammar exercises, fill-in-the-blank activities, and rules. Two preferred communication activities involving writing and discussion. All five participants considered grammar and writing equally difficult.

Self-rated writing ability ranged from 2 to 4 on a five-point scale. Learners identified grammar accuracy, organization of ideas, and vocabulary choice as their main writing difficulties. These responses indicated that the participants entered the course with both formal and discourse-related needs.

4.2. Pre-test and Post-test Performance

All five participants achieved higher scores on the post-test. The mean score increased from 5.35 on the pre-test to 7.90 on the post-test. The mean gain was 2.55 points. The pre-test standard deviation was 1.07, while the post-test standard deviation was 0.80. The standard deviation of the gain scores was approximately 0.84.

Table 1. Pre-test, post-test, and gain scores

Participant	Pre-test	Post-test	Gain
S1	4.75	7.25	2.50
S2	5.75	7.25	1.50
S3	7.00	9.00	2.00
S4	4.25	7.50	3.25
S5	5.00	8.50	3.50
Mean	5.35	7.90	2.55
SD	1.07	0.80	0.84

S5 demonstrated the largest improvement, with a gain of 3.50 points, followed by S4 with a gain of 3.25 points. S2 showed the smallest improvement, but the gain was still positive at 1.50 points. S3 began with the highest pre-test score and achieved the highest post-test score of 9.00. No participant showed a decline.

The descriptive paired-samples effect size was:

$$d_z = \frac{2.55}{0.84} \approx 3.05$$

This is a very large observed effect within the group. However, it should not be interpreted as evidence that DBGI would produce the same result with other learners. The value is based on five participants and may be influenced by the absence of a control group, the researcher's role as teacher and assessor, and the possibility of practice effects.

4.3. Changes in Grammatical Competence

The post-test responses indicated greater accuracy in modal verbs and conditional structures. In the pre-test, learners produced errors such as *We can to go*, *If it will rain*, and *I waits outside the shopping mall*. These errors involved modal complementation, conditional structure, and subject-verb agreement.

After the intervention, learners generally showed better control of target structures. They were more successful in using modal verbs to express possibility, certainty, advice, and obligation. They also demonstrated improved control of conditional clauses in contexts involving prediction and hypothetical meaning.

The improvement was not complete. Minor errors remained, including errors involving verb complementation and fixed expressions. Nevertheless, the overall pattern suggested that learners were increasingly able to select and construct grammatical forms in relation to the communicative task rather than simply reproduce memorized examples.

Task-level results showed that all participants improved in Task 1. S4 increased from 3.00 to 4.50, while S5 increased from 3.50 to 5.75. S5's gain of 2.25 points was the largest improvement in this task. Task 2 showed a less uniform pattern. S1, S4, and S5 improved, while S2 and S3 remained at the same scores. Task 3 showed improvement for all five participants. These results suggest that grammatical development was not uniform across task types. Learners showed stronger improvement in tasks requiring application of grammar in a communicative situation than in some error-analysis items. This may indicate that DBGI particularly supported learners' ability to use grammar in context, while metalinguistic analysis remained more difficult for some participants.

4.4. Changes in Sociolinguistic Competence

The post-test writing also showed development in register and tone. In the pre-test, some learners used expressions that were grammatically possible but inappropriate for the relationship between writer and reader. For example, expressions such as *Everybody must come* and *Thank you for your cooperation* could sound overly strong or overly formal in a message to friends.

In the post-test, learners more often used supportive, polite, and contextually appropriate expressions. Examples included *I hope you'll feel better soon* and *Please let me know if you need any help*. These expressions demonstrate an improved understanding of how grammatical choices interact with interpersonal meaning.

Modal verbs appeared to be particularly useful for this development. Learners used forms such as *might*, *should*, and *must* not only for grammatical completion but also to express different degrees of certainty, advice, and obligation. The results suggest that DBGI helped learners consider the intended relationship with the reader when making grammatical choices.

4.5. Changes in Discourse Competence

The most important improvement was observed at the discourse level. Pre-intervention writing often contained disconnected ideas, limited cohesion, and a reliance on short, simple sentences. Post-intervention writing showed clearer organization and progression.

Learners increasingly produced texts with recognizable openings, bodies, and closings. They used cohesive devices more purposefully and developed ideas in a more logical order. S2 reported that her writing had become longer and more organized and that she used a wider range of sentence patterns instead of relying on many short sentences. S1 reported that her ideas had previously been disconnected but that she had learned to organize them more effectively. S3, S4, and S5 also described their writing as more logical, clear, natural, and easier to follow.

These changes are consistent with the textual function of grammar. Learners appeared to understand that grammar contributes not only to sentence accuracy but also to the organization

of information across a text. Conditional clauses, stance expressions, reference chains, and argument markers were used to establish relationships among ideas.

4.6. Learner Attitudes and Perceptions

Thematic analysis of questionnaire responses resulted in five themes:

Greater confidence and reduced anxiety.

A shift from rule-based knowledge to contextualized understanding.

Improved awareness of writing organization and meaning-making.

Increasing independence and active engagement.

Preference for continued contextualized practice.

Greater confidence and reduced anxiety

All five learners reported more positive feelings toward grammar after the intervention. S1 stated that she was “not as afraid as before.” S2 reported that she no longer worried as much about making mistakes and could focus first on expressing her ideas. S5 explained that she felt more confident because she knew how to check and improve her writing.

Learners also described DBGI as less stressful and more interesting than isolated grammar exercises. They valued working with complete texts because the texts provided a reason for learning the grammar. However, the change was not immediate. S4 initially found the approach difficult because she was accustomed to learning the rule before analyzing examples.

A shift toward contextualized understanding

Learners repeatedly contrasted their previous focus on rules and correct answers with their new attention to meaning, context, and communicative purpose. S1 explained that grammar was not only about producing correct answers but also about making writing easier for readers to understand. S2 reported that DBGI helped her understand why writers choose different grammatical forms. S3 said that she had begun to consider what a writer intended to communicate and why a particular structure was selected. S4 recognized a stronger connection between grammar and meaning. S5 described grammar as part of communication rather than something to memorize.

These responses indicate a conceptual shift from grammar as an independent system of rules toward grammar as contextualized language choice.

Improved awareness of writing organization

Learners perceived improvements in organization, cohesion, and clarity. They reported that their paragraphs were longer, more logical, and easier to follow. These perceptions were consistent with the post-test writing, which showed clearer sequencing and more purposeful use of cohesive devices.

The findings suggest that discourse-based grammar activities helped learners notice the relationship between grammatical resources and text structure. Grammar became a means of connecting ideas and managing information rather than only a way to avoid errors.

Increasing independence and engagement

Learners gradually became less dependent on teacher correction. S1 reported that she initially wanted the teacher to explain every grammar rule because identifying forms independently was unfamiliar. S4 similarly needed substantial teacher support at the beginning but later reported that she no longer waited for the teacher to check every sentence before continuing to write.

Peer discussion was also valuable. S1 appreciated discussing model texts with classmates. S2 reported that group discussion helped learners notice forms that they might otherwise miss. S4 preferred working with a partner when identifying grammar. These responses suggest that collaborative analysis helped learners participate actively in the learning process.

4.7. Classroom Observation

Observations during Cycle 1 showed that learners had difficulty identifying grammatical patterns independently. They often waited for teacher explanation and needed substantial support to connect forms with meanings. Based on this evidence, the teacher-researcher modified Cycle 2 by using shorter texts, clearer guiding questions, color coding, collaborative noticing, and more opportunities for peer discussion.

During Cycle 2, learners became more willing to identify grammatical forms, explain their functions, and revise their own writing. S1, S2, S3, and S5 demonstrated increased independence in grammar identification and revision. S4 also improved, although she continued to need more scaffolding.

Observation data indicated four broad developments: greater participation, increased attention to form–meaning relationships, improved writing organization, and growing learner autonomy. These observations complemented the questionnaire findings and the improvement shown in the pre-test and post-test scores.

5. Discussion

The first research question asked in what ways DBGI influenced learners' written communicative competence. The findings suggest that DBGI supported development in three interconnected areas: grammatical accuracy, sociolinguistic appropriateness, and discourse organization.

The improvement in grammatical accuracy is important because a discourse-based approach should not be interpreted as ignoring form. Learners became more accurate in using modal verbs and conditional structures after repeated exposure, guided noticing, comparison, and writing practice. This finding supports a balanced view of grammar instruction in which attention to form is integrated into meaningful communication. Learners were not simply asked to infer grammar independently from texts; they received explicit support when needed.

The findings also show that grammatical improvement was related to communicative purpose. Learners increasingly used modal verbs to express different degrees of possibility, certainty, advice, and obligation. This development reflects the form–meaning–use framework. Learners were not only learning that a form was grammatically possible; they were learning what the form meant in a particular context and why it was appropriate for a particular reader.

The development of sociolinguistic competence is especially significant. Traditional grammar instruction may treat *must*, *should*, and *might* as items in a rule system. DBGI encouraged learners to consider the relationship between writer and reader. An expression such as *You must finish this today* may be appropriate in one institutional context but too strong in an informal relationship. Through model texts and contextual comparison, learners began to use modal verbs and polite expressions with greater sensitivity to audience and purpose.

The development of discourse competence was the most notable finding. Learners' writing became more organized, cohesive, and readable. They used grammatical structures to connect

ideas and manage information across sentences. This result is consistent with the functional view of grammar, particularly the textual metafunction. It also supports the argument that writing development should not be assessed solely through sentence-level accuracy.

The findings are broadly consistent with previous research that has linked discourse competence to productive language performance. They also extend earlier work by showing how a structured DBGI intervention may contribute to changes in actual writing, not only positive learner perceptions. The use of authentic or realistic texts provided learners with examples of how grammatical resources operate in complete messages. Guided analysis then helped them transfer these observations into their own writing.

The second research question concerned learners' attitudes and perceptions. The results were predominantly positive. Learners reported reduced anxiety, increased confidence, greater interest, and a stronger understanding of grammar in context. These findings may be explained by the relationship between DBGI tasks and meaningful purposes. Instead of learning forms without a clear communicative reason, learners could see how grammar helped them write an email, give advice, apologize, make a request, or explain a situation.

Nevertheless, the intervention was initially challenging for some learners. This difficulty is understandable because all participants had previously experienced teacher-led rule explanation. DBGI required them to notice patterns, interpret context, discuss alternatives, and make decisions. These activities placed greater cognitive demands on learners. The action research cycle was therefore important because it allowed the teacher to adapt the instructional materials and procedures.

The development of learner independence is another important finding. At the beginning, some learners expected the teacher to identify and explain every grammatical pattern. Over time, they became more willing to examine texts, discuss choices, and revise their own writing. This movement from rule dependence toward strategic engagement is consistent with the broader goals of communicative and learner-centered pedagogy.

The study also has implications for teacher education. DBGI requires teachers to understand grammar functionally and to design tasks that connect form, meaning, use, audience, and genre. Teachers need to select texts carefully, anticipate possible difficulties, and provide enough scaffolding. DBGI should not be implemented as an unstructured invitation for learners to "discover" grammar. Effective implementation requires clear learning objectives, guiding questions, explicit explanation when necessary, and opportunities for controlled and free production.

The five-stage lesson framework provides a practical structure. The Encounter stage establishes context. Noticing directs attention to form. Concept Mapping connects form with meaning and use. Discrimination develops contextual choice. Production provides opportunities for meaningful written output. The stages can be repeated and adapted according to learner needs. The findings also suggest that DBGI may be particularly appropriate for small-group settings. A small class allows teachers to observe learners' reasoning, respond to individual difficulties, and provide immediate feedback. Peer discussion is also more manageable. However, the approach may be more difficult to implement in large classes without adaptation. Teachers may need group-based noticing worksheets, shared texts, peer review procedures, and carefully designed rubrics.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted of only five learners from one tutoring center. The findings cannot be generalized to Vietnamese EFL learners as a whole. Second, the study did not include a control group. Therefore, improvement may have been influenced by general classroom learning, repeated testing, increased familiarity with writing tasks, or teacher feedback rather than DBGI alone. Third, the researcher served as teacher, observer, and assessor. Although a checklist, thematic coding, and triangulation were used, researcher bias remains possible. Fourth, the intervention lasted twelve weeks, so the study cannot establish whether the improvements were sustained over time. Fifth, the pre-test and post-test were not identical in task content and differed in contextual complexity. This was pedagogically intentional, but it complicates direct comparison. Finally, the descriptive effect size should not be interpreted as a causal estimate because of the small sample and the absence of experimental controls.

Future studies should involve larger samples, multiple classes, delayed post-tests, and comparison groups. Mixed-methods research could combine writing scores with interviews, stimulated recall, learner portfolios, and teacher reflection. Future research could also investigate how DBGI functions with different proficiency levels, genres, digital writing tasks, and intercultural content.

6. Conclusion

This action research study examined the application of discourse-based grammar instruction with five intermediate EFL learners in a private tutoring context in Dong Nai City, Vietnam. The findings indicate that a twelve-week DBGI intervention was associated with improvement in written communicative competence. All five learners achieved higher post-test scores, with a mean increase from 5.35 to 7.90 and an average gain of 2.55 points.

The improvement was not limited to grammatical accuracy. Learners demonstrated more appropriate use of modal verbs and conditional structures, greater sensitivity to register and politeness, clearer organization, stronger cohesion, and more effective development of ideas. Their questionnaire responses and classroom behavior also suggested reduced anxiety, increased confidence, greater engagement, and a shift from rule-based grammar knowledge toward contextualized understanding.

The study's principal contribution is its integration of systemic functional linguistics, the form–meaning–use framework, communicative competence, and action research into a practical DBGI model. The five instructional stages—Encounter, Noticing, Concept Mapping, Discrimination, and Production—provided a structured way to connect grammar with discourse and writing. The action research cycle also demonstrated the importance of adapting scaffolding to learners' observed needs.

The findings should be interpreted as context-specific evidence rather than general proof of DBGI effectiveness. Nevertheless, they suggest that discourse-based grammar instruction can provide a productive bridge between grammatical accuracy and communicative language use. For intermediate EFL learners who have primarily experienced rule-based instruction, carefully scaffolded discourse-based activities may help them understand grammar as a resource for constructing meaning in writing.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the participants and the host institution for their cooperation throughout this study. Special thanks are extended to the academic supervisors for their invaluable guidance and constructive feedback. The author also wishes to thank family, friends, and colleagues for their unwavering support during the completion of this research.

Funding

This research received no external funding support.

Author Contributions

Author 1: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft.

Author 2: Validation, Review & Editing, Supervision., Supervision.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be constructed as a potential conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for educational research. All participants provided informed consent, and their identities were protected through anonymization; data were used solely for research purposes reported in the study.

Informed Consent Statement

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school administration. The participating students and their parents or legal guardians were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and participation was voluntary.

Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by authors, without undue reservation.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The author declares that generative AI and AI-assisted technologies were used solely for language editing, grammar checking, and refinement of expression in this manuscript. All research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and substantive writing were conducted independently by the author. The ideas, arguments, and conclusions presented in this article are entirely the author's own and do not reflect the output of any AI system. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work.

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