

## A Cognitive Framework in Learning English Progressive Tense

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v4i2.924>

**APA Citation:** Aajami, R. F. (2022). A Cognitive Framework in Learning English Progressive Tense. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 4(3).100-111. <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v4i2.924>

### **Received:**

24/04/2022

### **Accepted:**

30/05/2022

### **Keywords:**

*cognitive grammar, present continuous, Iraqi students, teaching English .*

### **Abstract**

*Dealing with the English language and the skills of using it is still the focus of interest for many researchers, teachers and workers in the field of education. Cognitive grammar theory founded by Langacker (1987) is one of the prominent theories in this field. Iraqi students face a problem in mastering and understanding the use of the English language tenses. There are a lot of researches that have been conducted in the Iraqi context to improve the level of Iraqi students and to benefit from cognitive theory such as analysing the polysemy of English preposition. This research is an empirical study in which 85 students from the College of Education for Women at the University of Baghdad, English department participated in this experiment. The data were collected through two tests, pre and post, and the SPSS statistical editor was used to measure the extent of improvement in the participants' performance, in addition to a focus group discussion and questionnaire before and after the experiment. The results showed an improvement in the students' achievement. This indicates that the cognitive grammar theory has positive contributions in improving the understanding, assimilation and use of tenses in the English as a foreign language.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In order to master a language, grammar must be learned because it is one of the basics of the language. Because the rules regulate the order of words to get a meaningful sentence, it is necessary to have a correct linguistic pattern. Thornbury (2002) called grammar a "sentence-making machine" because, without a good mastery of grammar, a learner cannot arrange those vocabularies into good sentences even though they have a sufficient number of them. Similarly, Ur (2006) said, if one did not know how these words should be placed, one would not be able to use them.

Cognitive grammar can provide a more detailed description of the explanatory aspects involved in presenting English tenses such as the profile and the norm, as well as problems often encountered in pedagogical grammar while referring to the uses of one of the English tenses - the number of cases in which the tense is used and how they are defined and the level of planning at which the description should be made (Drożdż, 2011). Consequently, it can help Iraqi EFL students to treat English tenses in a proficient method. Aajami (2020), and (2019)

implemented two cognitive analysis studies about using the used based approach and the preposition “in” to enhance the learning process of Iraqi learners.

The researcher focuses on studying the present continuous tense among a group of tenses in the English language because it is one of the least diverse tenses in use. Moreover, at the same time, the present continuous tense is difficult for Iraqi students at the undergraduate level. As long as the four uses of the present continuous are overlapping, it is difficult for learners to distinguish between them sometimes and they are unable to draw a timeline that can clarify the use of the correct tense in describing the sentence.

The first-year students were chosen to participate in this experiment because during the previous stages, they had learned the English language in a traditional way based on memorization. Also, during the secondary stage, and especially in the third year of secondary school, students try to obtain the highest possible grades in order to be able to enter the university branch of their choice. In the English language, the focus is only on getting the marks without a real and deep understanding of the content. These reasons prompted the researcher to target first-year students without others in this study.

As long as English tenses are many and varied, the concentration of this research paper is on the present continuous tense. The research tries to inscribe a definite framework of present continuous tense in the participant’s minds.

### **1.1. Objectives of the Study**

This study aims at examining to what extent the Cognitive Grammar (CG) approach can help the Iraqi EFL learners to increase their proficiency in treating English tenses.

### **1.2. Problem of the Study**

Iraqi students learn the English tenses through traditional method. They learn the form of the tense, its adverbs, and situation in which it occurs. This leads to committing mistakes and errors when using English tenses by those learners.

### **1.3. Significance of the Study**

Analyzing the present continuous tense in light of the cognitive grammar theory and its principles to enable Iraqi learners understand and possess the merits of this tense. This study can open the door for more studies regarding English tenses through using the CG approach.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. An overview of Cognitive Grammar Theory**

Cognitive grammar is based on conceptual semantics that relies on people's interactions and experiences and our ability to interpret circumstances in other methods and methods of thoughts and rational creation. Rather than being a separate formal system, concept semantics makes possible the computation of rules that are inherently meaningful. All grammatical elements have meaning because syntax formulae a range with the lexicon, exist in groups of figurative constructions, i.e., pairs of theoretical constructions and representing phonemic erections. Cognitive grammar deals with the main problems that grammar theory have to deal with through syntactic layers, constructs, the affiliation between grammar and vocabulary, capture of regularity, and the nuisance of appropriate constraints. Cognitive grammar also shows how the framework fits into language structures and its central domains: nominal

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structure, deixis, substructure, and complex sentences. Also, through cognitive grammar, cognitive processes, and the construction of our mental world, attention to discourse and the temporal dimension of rules are revealed (Langacker, 2008).

In CG, grammar consists of an inventory of units that represent pairs of typical meanings such as morphemes, words, and grammatical structures and has a symbolic or structural perception of language. Therefore, no differences have been detected between grammar and lexicon in the GC. The formal models have a normative view that the language is a system of 'words and grammar'. According to them, the language consists of a lexicon, a grammatical component that contains rules operating on lexical units and other components that govern the sound and meaning of the sentence (Evans & Green, 2006).

In cognitive grammar, the use of language stimulates the derivation of the units that make up grammar. There are two main processes, abstraction and schematization. The process in which structure emerges as a result of generalizing patterns across language use cases is called abstraction. For example, a speaker acquires English because of the frequent use of words, phrases, and sentences that are repeated in speech, along with the range of meanings associated with these units. Schematization is a special kind of abstraction; schemas produce actual utterances that are less detailed than the schemas which give rise to them. This is achieved by preserving the common points and disqualifying the different points between the actual structures. In the following set of examples, the different meanings resulting from the preposition *in*:

- a. The bird is **in** the cage.
- b. The fish is **in** the aquarium.
- c. The crack is **in** the aquarium.

The three distinct examples contain the same lexical element and show slightly different meanings associated with them. These distinct meanings arise from the context and established abstract concept of the preposition "in" from the context. These varieties among the three examples create the schema for "in". Respectively, the preposition "in" indicates imprisonment, protection, and description in the previous examples. CG proposes two dues: First, general cognitive methods are important to grammar. Secondly, the use of language helps in the development of grammar as a structure of linguistic acquaintance. (Evans & Green, 2006).

There are different forms of construal that emerge from language. Therefore, cognitive grammar adopts the view that language contains schematic grammatical elements, specific lexis, and multi-word units. The four elements of construal are focusing, prominence, specificity, and perspective. First, focusing it is via using passive voice where we can give focus on the targeted part of the sentence; for example, *a robber steals the bank*; or using passive as in *the bank is stolen*. Second, prominence refers to the degree to which something stands for something else. There are two essential concepts in cognitive grammar related to prominence. They are profiling and trajectory or landmark. For example, the dog is chasing the cat. Third, specificity ranges from a quiet schematic to a very specific one. For example, "*the plan*" => *the Turkish plan* => *the Turkish red plan*. Fourth, perspective can be seen as the

viewing arrangement of an expression. The default viewing arrangement is when the speaker and the hearer are in the same place describing the scenes around them. For example, *we are going to celebrate our wedding party* (Bennett, 2014).

## **2.2.Previous Studies**

Kermer (2020) took up a study to show a fruitful model in which the L2 acquisition process can be scrutinized by means of grammatical grammar and cognitive linguistics theory. The goal is to define and study the benefits of using the concepts developed in the CG and CL framework to study multilingual influence, especially conceptual transfer, in multiple languages. This study demonstrates the potential contribution of CL to SLA through interpretation. Specifically, the concepts developed in epistemological theory can be useful tools for analyzing and comparing patterns of event perception: giving rise to transmission effects stemming from the interpretation and perception of events performed by the person. The results show that using a cognitive framework to analyze and explain the manifestations of conceptual transfer in learners' use of Language 2 can add a new perspective on why CL effects occur in learners' expression and interpretation of temporal relationships in the language learning process and language use in multiple languages. Also, there is evidence that shows how second language learners rely on concept patterns and concepts well established in their first language.

Hidarto (2018) conducted a study about teaching past perfect and past simple in the light of the cognitive grammar approach for EFL learners in Indonesia. The researcher in this paper attempts to verify whether this approach is actually beneficial for learners, especially in learning English for EFL learners. Therefore, the aim in the current study is to study the relative impact of CG education on the proficiency of Indonesian EFL learners of the past, past simple and past perfect tenses. These tenses were chosen as instructional objectives because the more common traditional interpretation does not help learners distinguish between them and use them in their context. In this research, twenty-seven learners of English as a foreign language attending a secondary school in Jakarta participated in this quasi-experimental study. They were assigned to one experimental group receiving an educational plan for two weeks. Statistical analyzes indicated that the group performed significantly better after this experiment, particularly in the speech-related test sections. The results confirm the effectiveness of CG, which can provide support for EFL learners through its principles.

Druzhinin, Pesina, and Rahmani (2017) addressed the English present and progressive verb forms and their difficulties for EFL through cognitive grammar. Scholars provide a topic-oriented epistemological perspective on language and its acquisition with an emphasis on grammar. By mapping out the cognitive mechanisms of language "conceptual complexes" or mental categories through grammatical means, the authors seek to identify and formulate their semantic representations. The proposed approach and the specific technique are presented through the verb forms of the present simple and present progressive, whose epistemological core and explanatory models are described and analyzed in fine detail. The research showed three main recommendations for the use of epistemological rules in teaching English grammar: First, it reflects the guiding effect of the grammatical forms and structures used in the process of production speech as a coordination of its own interactions; Secondly, the interpretation of the purposeful content and the mental representation associated with the subject's mind in this

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or that grammatical form; third cognitive grammar is a technique that helps in understanding and explaining English grammar for various teaching and learning purposes.

Tian (2015) conducted a study in China about the cognitive framework in teaching English tenses. This research is experimental in which two classes of Chinese high school students were selected. They were given a 45-minute review lesson on the uses of the present simple in the English language. Teaching for the experimental class was based on Langacker's Cognitive Grammar analysis that highlighted the common motive that links the different uses, while following the traditional teaching method of the control class. The results showed that the learners in the cognitive grammar approach did not perform significantly better than the control group in both the grammatical rule and the error correction task, while in the fill-in-the-blank task, it was found that the cognitive grammar approach improved students' performance significantly.

De Wit and Brisard (2014) propose a unified description of current progressive English semantics in the form of a semantic network, drawing on the theoretical principles and analytical tools provided by epistemological theory, as developed by Langacker (1987, 1991). They claim that the primary meaning of Present Progressive English is to refer to an EPISTEMIC emergency in the utterer's instant certainty. Thus, it is dissimilar with the present simple, which is related with circumstances that are interpreted as structurally belonging to reality. It turns out that each of these uses can be derived from this fundamental meaning of contingency in immediate reality via a set of conceptual branching principles, and the interaction with items in context. In this paper and according to a unified analysis of progressive present semantics in contemporary English, accordingly the primary meaning of this polysemous construct is essentially MODAL. The usage of the simple present specifies that the described condition is a physical part of the utterer's perception of reality while the present continuous refers to non-structural conditional circumstances, the realization of which could not be predicted at the time of speaking.

Bielak and Pawlak (2011) conducted a study on teaching English tenses with the help of cognitive grammar. The study aimed at comparing cognitive grammar principles with the traditional pedagogical grammar descriptions. They conducted an experiment of 50 participants divided into two groups experimental and control. The results showed that it does not support unconditional enthusiasm for employing descriptions of epistemological rules in teaching grammar, nor rejecting it as a reliable alternative to traditional descriptions. It turns out knowledge-inspired instructions may be at least moderately effective in promoting the use of target forms based on mostly explicit knowledge. It was also shown that the effects of epistemological bases are comparable to those achieved through the use of traditional descriptors. Since cognitive bases provide some evidence that this type of instruction may be effective, it appears that more research is required to come up with a more comprehensive picture of the strengths and responsibilities of this type of instruction.

Drożdż (2011) led a study about the tools of cognitive grammar in teaching tenses specially the present perfect tense. This study examines in the field of foreign language pedagogy, one of the psychological mechanisms that exist in language. The research consists of two parts: In the first part, the article deals with two main issues: a more detailed description of the

explanatory aspects involved such as the profile and the norm, as well as the problems associated with pedagogical grammar while referring to the uses of one of the English tenses - the present perfect: the number of its uses, the way it is defined and the level of planning to be described. The second part includes an analysis of the uses of the Present Perfect using the presented cognitive grammar tools. The results showed that the analytical tools, profile, and base are fully applicable to tense analysis because they adequately introduce the nuances that one can encounter in tense analysis. The schematic level where the uses of tense are described must be addressed, accommodates both accuracy and completeness.

### 1. The Uses of Present Continuous Tense- a cognitive grammar perspective

In this section the researcher presents the way in which the uses of the present continuous can be described and presented through epistemological bases in two aspects of interpretation: the subject and the base. First, it must be recognized that all usages of Present Continuous can be described as stemming from the same schematic time scene. There are four main uses of the present continuous tense. Now, for long-term actions, near future, repetition, judgment, and irritation. Within this scene we must distinguish three main points on the timeline.

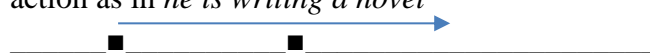
- A. Current ongoing: the following example illustrates the typical meaning of the temporal aspect of progressive meaning: it indicates a perfect and careful match among the speaking period and a demonstrative part of an imperfect condition, the limitations of which are included in the background of the general concept. The present continuity is a "neutral" category compared to the others: there is no need to add more qualifications in particular sequential or formal structures of the given situation. present continuous is used to describe events at the time of speaking; for example, *the family is eating the lunch*



Figure (1) the family is eating the lunch (This figure is set by the researcher)

In figure (1), the family starts eating lunch and does not finish yet. They are in the middle of doing something. Present continuous describes a concise action, as in *look; someone is trying to open your car*. The action is happening at the time of speaking, and the mental images in the readers will be of a family sitting around a table, and the amount of food on the table decreases over time.

- b. Now long-term actions: present continuous is used to describe unfinished long-term action as in *he is writing a novel*



The point of start writing                      now                      the point of finishing is not determined

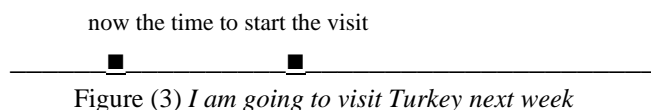
Figure (2) he is writing a novel

(This figure is set by the researcher)

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In figure (2), the writer starts writing at some point in the past, but he has not finished yet. At the moment of speaking, the writer maybe is watching T.V or doing sport. The schema of this sentence shows that the sentence implicates a very long time might take more than one year.

- c. Futurate present continuous (near future): representing a state as part of instant certainty while, in reality, it has not yet occurred shows a high level of inevitability in the speakers regarding the future occurrence of that situation. Present continuous is used to describe future actions and planned actions; for example, *I will visit Turkey next week*.



(This figure is set by the researcher)

In figure (3), the speaker talks about something that will happen shortly. He is planning to do something in the future, but maybe this planned action may be canceled for some reason. The mental image is that the speaker is talking someone else or informing him that he will visit Turkey.

- d. Repetition, judgment, and irritation: present continuous is used to describe a repetitive bad behavior as in *he is always interrupting me*



(This figure is set by the researcher)

The meaning in figure (4) indicates that the speaker is being interrupted. Figure (4) shows the recurrence of the action in the speaker's and listeners' minds.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

All data collection was performed at the College of Education for Women at Baghdad University. About 85 first-year students participated in this pilot study. Teaching and testing took place between the beginning of January till the end of February 2022. A pre-test was conducted for the participants, a questionnaire before and after the experiment, and four group discussions during the semester. Two sessions per week and, in total, 16 sessions were held to explain the uses of the present continuous in light of the principles of cognitive grammar, and the students took a post-test immediately after the treatment session. The post-test was conducted 15 days after the beginning of the present continuous tense treatment sessions according to the principles of cognitive grammar. The plan was as the following:

- Introduction: in the introduction, the researcher explained the reasons for choosing the present continuous tense and the reason for using the theory of cognitive grammar to contribute to the interpretation of the uses of time. The researcher also presented the

theory of cognitive grammar, its principles, and how it works, in addition to the background information for the theory, its founder, and developers.

- First stage: At the beginning of this phase, the researcher conducted a preliminary test to determine the students' ability to use the present continuous, as well as their abilities to distinguish between the present continuous and its interventions with other tenses, especially the simple present.
- The second stage is the stage of diving deep into the experience and determining the uses of the present continuous tense and how to know these uses in light of the theory of cognitive grammar rules. At this stage, the participants realize that grammar does not just rule, but rather it has a cognitive basis in the human brain. Our perception of events and the progression of the timeline is the primary contributor to creating these rules.
- In the third and final stage, the researcher conducted the post-test, questionnaire, and focused group discussions on collecting the necessary data to determine the research results.

### **3.1. Participants**

85 students in first-year at the College of Education for Women from Baghdad University participated in the experiment. The necessary information about learning the present continuous tense in English as a foreign language was delivered. The participants' demographic information was recorded, in addition to their knowledge of the present continuous and textbooks in which they study the present continuous.

60% of the students are 18 years old; the rest are 19 years old. All participants were girls. 90% of them learned English for 10 years, starting in the fifth grade at school. For more than 85% of them, the motivation to learn English was because English was a subject taught in schools, and English was a compulsory course in high school. The series of textbooks they used included a series of textbooks approved by the Iraqi Ministry of Education.

They all know the English present continuous tense, and they think that they matter it and can use it appropriately.

### **3.2. Limitation of the Study**

This study is limited to first-year students of the English department/ college of Education for Women/ University of Baghdad/ Iraq. This experiment will be conducted during the academic year 2021/2022. 85 students participate voluntarily in this experiment.

### **3.3. Procedures**

The author designed four 45-minute lessons to review the Present Continuous in the English language. The first session was based on the principles of cognitive grammar and Langacker analysis. The second session compares the traditional teaching method with cognitive grammar principles. The third session discussed the mental schemas for the meanings of sentences in the present continuous. The fourth session was an open discussion and a review of the principles of cognitive grammar. The same model sentences were used, and all model sentences were taken from Langacker (2008). The lectures were delivered in English, which is the foreign language that seeks to be learned by the participants. The instruction objectives of the sessions



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were to empower participants to master four main uses of the present continuous: now for long-term actions, planned future, and disruptive repetition.

#### 4. DATA COLLECTION

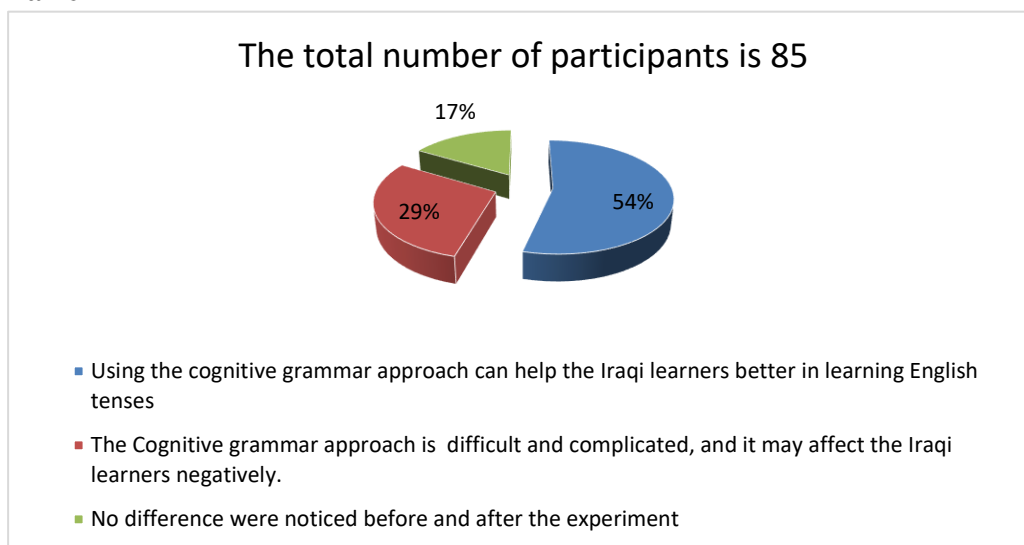
The data was collected in two separate tests: First, before starting, the participants received information about the cognitive bases in the educational plan, which consisted of four lessons of 45 minutes each over two consecutive weeks. Second, it was conducted after conducting the experiment on the participants. The same form of questions was used, which is a set of sentences and pictures that require the intervention of the participants, either to describe the work with it or to create a mental and temporal diagram in it. In each test, 85 marks were collected from the students. The SPSS statistical analysis program analyzed these results, and the results showed a sample progression since the computed t-value (3.066) is higher than the tabulated t-value (1.99) at level of sig. 0.05 and degree of freedom 84, see table 1.

**Table (1) Mean, std. deviation, and value of paired samples t-test**

Tests	Number Of participants	Mean	std deviation	df	T-values		Sig. 0.05
					Tabulated	Computed	
Pre-test	85	15.3	3.555	84	1.99	3.066	Sig.
Post-test	85	16.2	2.798				

Therefore, the result of the two tests indicates an improvement in the participants' level of processing English tenses, especially the present continuous. The participants were able to provide a description of the pictures presented in the present continuous, as well as provide an illustrative schema of the intended time line in the pictures and sentences that were used in the test. The difference between the two tests was not significant, but it is important in this experiment.

#### 5. Questionnaire



The results of the questionnaire appear to be significant and consistent with the results of the tests analyzed in the previous paragraph. The survey clearly shows that 54% of the students representing 46 out of 85 of the total number of participants believe that using the cognitive grammar approach is effective in teaching English tenses. 29 % representing 25 students out of the total number are puzzled by this experience and believe that cognitive grammar can have a negative impact on Iraqi learners. 17% represented by 14 students, do not perceive a valuable difference in their ability to deal with nuance details of the present continuous.

#### **6. Focus group discussion (FGD)**

Opinions and answers varied in the focused group discussions, held four times, each time with a different group of participants. The results of these dialogue sessions with the participants were close to what was observed in the previous two tools of data collection, the two tests, and the questionnaire. The bulk of the students saw a positive change in dealing with the present continuous tense in light of the cognitive grammar theory. They said that the congruence of the meanings of the sentences with the temporal scheme that they represent clears up a lot of ambiguity that we had when using the present continuous tense in times of overlapping and difficulty, that is, when they face difficulty in determining the time. It also gave us a chance to think more deeply about dealing not only with times but with the formation of meanings in the brain as well.

An essential part of the participants believes that there is a difficulty understanding the mental scheme of the meanings of the sentences. They have difficulty understanding the theory and its details because they are foreign learners of English. In addition to the accuracy of this theory in drawing the time diagrams of the sentences, they need to understand the meanings of the use of some sentences and understand the meanings of the vocabulary used in building up some sentences. As for the last part, which is the smallest part of the participants, they did not notice a significant change in the use of the theory or its non-use in this experiment.

#### **7. RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

This study showed several results: First, the principles of knowledge of grammar are helpful in teaching English tenses to international students. Second, the use of temporal and mental diagrams is essential in broadening the participants' awareness of the intended meaning of the sentences. Third, the participants knew the difference between the knowledge bases and the instructional methods they received in schools. Fourth, the traditional method of dealing with and learning tenses is okay, and learning the basic principles of cognitive rules increases the participants' ability to understand the present continuous and other tenses in the English language. The results of other studies ranged from demonstrating the effectiveness of cognitive theory in learning and using the target language, the extent to which this theory supports students in learning the target language, and the indicative effect of formulas and grammatical structures used in the speech production process as coordination of its interactions.

#### **8. CONCLUSION**

Meaning plays a significant role in determining the form of grammatical structures. According to cognitive grammar, what we want to communicate to the listener motivates how speech is formulated, so grammar arises from the language used first. Focusing on knowledge bases can help Iraqi students learn English as a foreign language and enable them to gain greater

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understanding and insight into expressing themselves. Through this research, the researcher deliberately reviewed the participants' information for the present continuous tense through the cognitive grammar approach, which presented the participants with the systematic relationship between the semantic and coherent basis underlying the different and similar uses of the present continuous. Also, it turned out that the improvement was simple but important in working to develop the level of Iraqi students and raise their level of perceptual understanding of the meanings to be mastered in English as a foreign language.

### **9. Recommendation**

At the end of this research, the researcher believes that there are some important recommendations that contribute to enhancing the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language in the Iraqi context. The research in cognitive language theories and the use of its methods contributes to overcoming the difficulties that Iraqi students face during their journey in learning the English language. Cognitive Grammar theory contributes to building the grammatical capacities of Iraqi students as foreign learners. The results of this study encourage other studies on other tenses of the English language, especially the simple present tense.

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