

Proficiency-Level Differences in the Use of Temporal Adverbials by Albanian Learners of English

Arta Këpuska

Department of English Language-Translation and Interpretation, Faculty of Philology, University “Fehmi Agani”,
Gjakovë, Kosovo

Mejreme Ymeri*

Department of English Language-Translation and Interpretation, Faculty of Philology, University “Fehmi Agani”,
Gjakovë, Kosovo

Abstract—This study investigates how Albanian university students at different proficiency levels (first, second, and third year) express temporal reference in English writing, examining whether lower-proficiency learners rely more heavily on explicit temporal adjuncts (e.g., yesterday, last week) while more proficient learners shift toward accurate tense-aspect verb morphology. A cross-sectional design was employed with 36 Albanian ESL university students divided into three proficiency groups (n=12 per year). Participants completed three written narrative tasks targeting past, present, and future temporal reference. A total of 684 sentences were analyzed for temporal adjunct type and frequency, as well as verb tense and aspect distribution across proficiency levels. Temporal adjunct usage followed an unexpected non-linear, inverted-U pattern, peaking at the intermediate level (70.7% in Year 2) before declining in Year 3 (65.4%). Despite advancing proficiency, all groups maintained 75%–80% reliance on simple tenses, with progressive aspect usage remaining low (5.7%–7.6%) and perfect aspect emerging only in Year 3 (7.2%), driven primarily by past perfect acquisition. These findings challenge linear acquisition models, suggesting that temporal expression development in Albanian ESL learners involves dynamic interaction between lexical and morphological systems rather than simple substitution. The persistent reliance on simple tenses across all levels points to enduring L1 transfer effects from Albanian's implicit aspectual system, with Year 2 representing a critical reorganization phase in temporal expression development.

Index Terms—tenses, temporality development, temporal adjuncts, Albanian (L1), English (L2)

I. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of temporal reference systems represents one of the most complicated areas of second language development, which involves the complexity of the interplay of morphological tense-aspect markings and lexical temporal expressions. Temporal expression acquisition involves all linguistic means of reference to time, with research showing that adult learners express temporality through various developmental stages (Dietrich et al., 1995). For Albanian learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), this complexity is amplified by fundamental structural differences between the two languages' temporal systems.

Based on Bardovi-Harlig (1992), temporal adjuncts play a crucial role in the development of temporal expression, often representing mechanisms that morphological systems are still developing. While extensive research has focused on morphological tense-aspect acquisition, the functional roles of temporal adjuncts in second language learners' encoding of temporality remain underexplored, particularly across different proficiency levels (Götz et al., 2019).

Albanian presents a particular case for temporal acquisition research due to its complex aspectual system. Albanian distinguishes aspect implicitly (without any morphological marker), creating a more implicitly nuanced temporal framework than English. This richness may influence how Albanian learners approach English temporal expression, potentially leading to strategies involving the usage of explicit temporal adjuncts. Recent studies of Albanian ESL learners reveal systematic difficulties with English verb tenses, with errors being particularly prominent in Past and Present Simple tenses (Këpuska & Toçi, 2024). However, the developmental relationship between temporal adjunct use and morphological tense marking across proficiency levels remains unexplored.

This study explores how Albanian university students across different academic years express temporal spheres, past, present, and future, in written narratives, with particular focus on their reliance on explicit temporal adjuncts versus morphological tense-aspect markings. The research examines whether lower proficiency learners demonstrate greater dependency on temporal adjuncts to establish time reference due to developing control over English tense-aspect morphology, while advanced learners show more sophisticated temporal morphological encoding with reduced reliance

* Corresponding Author. Email: mejreme.ymeri@uni-gjk.org

on explicit temporal adjuncts. Consequently, the hypotheses guiding this research are as follows:

H1. First-year students will display greater reliance on temporal adjuncts to establish time references due to developing control over tense-aspect morphology.

H2. Third-year students will more accurately and naturally use tense and aspect marking on verbs, with a reduced dependency on adjuncts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The acquisition of temporal reference systems represents a complex development process involving the interplay between morphological tense-aspect marking and lexical temporal expressions. Klein (1994) established a foundational framework distinguishing between external temporal features (tense, grammatical aspect, temporal adjuncts) and internal temporal characteristics (lexical aspect). Adult L2 learners progress through three developmental modes: the pragmatic mode (early stage, relying on discourse sequencing), the lexical mode (explicit use of temporal adjuncts), and the morphological mode (consistent tense-aspect inflection) (Klein & Perdue, 1997; Dietrich et al., 1995). Importantly, learners do not abandon their earlier strategies; rather, the ratio of lexical to morphological marking shifts as proficiency increases (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992).

A. Morphological Expression and Lexical Temporal Adjuncts

English employs an explicit tense-aspect system combining tense inflections with aspectual distinctions markers through constructions like *be + -ing* (progressive) and *have + past participle* (perfect). The Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen & Shirai, 1994, 1996) posits that learners initially associate perfective past marking with telic predicates (achievements, accomplishments), while progressive aspect emerges predominantly with atelic activity verbs. This hypothesis receives substantial empirical support, suggesting universal principles underlying temporal acquisition (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé, 2020). However, advanced learners eventually extend morphological marking across all lexical aspectual classes, achieving target-like distribution (Robison, 1995). A recent scientometric synthesis of four decades of research confirms that the Aspect Hypothesis remains the most frequently tested framework in L2 tense-aspect morphology studies, while also noting a gradual shift from form-focused approaches toward meaning-oriented and usage-based perspectives (Almakrob & Alduais, 2025).

At the same time, temporal adjuncts serve crucial scaffolding functions during early and intermediate development. Bardovi-Harlig (1992) demonstrates that lower proficiency learners exhibit high reliance on explicit temporal adjuncts (e.g., *yesterday*, *last week*) to compensate for underdeveloped morphological control. Critically, at lower proficiency, temporal adjuncts correlate with lower rates of past tense markings on verbs, suggesting lexical markers substitute for morphological marking; however, at higher proficiency, this pattern reverses (Yang & Huang, 2004). While absolute adverbial frequency remains stable across proficiency levels, the adverb-to-adverb ratio decreases as learners develop morphological competence, reflecting reduced dependency on explicit temporal adjuncts (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992, 2000). Additionally, types of adjuncts evolve: beginners favor deictic expressions (*yesterday*, *tomorrow*), while advanced learners employ complex temporal constructions (subordinate clauses expressing simultaneity, anteriority).

B. Albanian Learners and L1 Transfer

Albanian presents a particular case for temporal acquisition research due to its implicit aspectual system. Unlike English's explicit aspect marking, Albanian distinguishes aspect implicitly through form alternations without any dedicated morphological markers, creating a more nuanced temporal framework (Pinari, 2014). The Albanian system includes multiple past tense forms, *e shkuar* (past simple), *e kryer* (present perfect), and *më se e kryer* (past perfect), expressing aspectual distinctions through form variations and lexical connotations rather than aspect morphemes, contrasting sharply with English's explicit marking.

Recent studies reveal systematic patterns in Albanian ESL learners' temporal expression. Këpuska and Toçi (2024) documented high error rates in English tense usage, particularly in Past Simple and Present Simple. Similarly, Këpuska's (2024) investigation through the Aspect Hypothesis lens revealed that while learners' past tense usage largely aligns with predictions (marking achievements and accomplishments), their development exhibits greater variability than native patterns. Notably, Albanian learners overextend the *-ing* marker to stative verbs while demonstrating limited application to achievement and accomplishments, deviating from typical predictions. Errors stem from structural differences: Albanian's implicit system leads learners to rely on simple aspect forms for meanings English encodes through continuous aspect, resulting in underuse of progressive constructions and confusion with perfect aspects (Këpuska, 2024).

C. Research Gap and Study Rationale

While extensive research examines morphological tense-aspect acquisition and the Aspect Hypothesis across diverse L1-L2 combinations, a significant gap remains regarding the developmental relationship between the use of temporal adjuncts and morphological acquisition across proficiency levels for Albanian ESL learners. Although Bardovi-Harlig (1992, 2000) established that temporal adjuncts serve crucial scaffolding roles, Ellis and Sagarra (2010) demonstrated that lexical cues can block morphological acquisition; few studies systematically examine how explicit temporal adjuncts' reliance evolves as morphological competence develops across all three temporal spheres (past, present, and future).

Furthermore, recent work examining learners with typologically diverse L1 backgrounds, including languages with morphologically rich aspectual systems, demonstrates that L1 aspectual categories significantly shape the route of tense-aspect acquisition in ways not fully accounted for by universal models (Alekseyeva & Mikhaylova, 2023; Ayoun, 2025).

For Albanian learners specifically, no research has investigated whether their implicit L1 Aspectual system influences the strategic use of temporal adjuncts versus morphological marking across proficiency levels. Given that Albanian encodes aspect implicitly while English marks it explicitly, Albanian learners may demonstrate unique developmental patterns. This present study addresses this gap by examining how Albanian university students at different proficiency levels express temporal spheres in written narratives, testing whether lower proficiency learners demonstrated greater dependency on temporal adjuncts (H1), while advanced learners show more accurate morphological marking with reduced adverbial reliance (H2). This investigation contributes to understanding universal L2 temporal acquisition principles and Albanian-specific developmental patterns.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional design to investigate the development of temporal sphere expressions among Albanian ESL learners at different proficiency levels. Written narrative tasks were used to elicit natural language production across three temporal domains (past, present, and future), allowing for systematic analysis of tense-aspect morphology and temporal adjunct usage.

A. Participants

In total, thirty-six Albanian ESL students from a university English program participated in this study. Participants were grouped by year of study in order to represent various proficiency levels. First-year students (n=12, lower-intermediate), second-year students (n=12, intermediate), and third-year students (n=12, upper-intermediate/advanced). Gender was not considered a relevant variable for this study. All participants have studied English for approximately 8-12 years in formal classroom settings. None had lived in an English-speaking country or used English as their primary means of communication outside the educational context.

B. Data Collection

Data collection took place in faculty settings during regular class hours over approximately 40-minute sessions. Participants completed three written narrative tasks designed to elicit temporal sphere expression. The first task required participants to describe a past event from their personal experience. For the second task, students wrote about their current self-perception and present circumstances. The final task asked participants to describe future academic career plans. This sequence systematically targeted past, present, and future temporal references to capture natural usage patterns across all three temporal spheres.

Participants were informed that their narratives would be used for research purposes and that results would remain anonymous. No identifying information was collected except the year of study, and the participation was voluntary. Students were encouraged to ask questions during the session for any clarification.

C. Data Analysis

The collected narratives underwent systematic linguistic analysis to examine temporal expression patterns across proficiency levels. Each narrative was first segmented into individual sentences, which served as the primary unit of analysis. Within each sentence, all verb phrases were identified and categorized according to their tense usage and accompanying temporal adjuncts.

The analysis focused specifically on the presence and type of temporal adjuncts when explicitly stated. Four distinct temporal expression categories were examined: frequency markers (such as *always*, *often*, *sometimes*), duration indicators (such as *for two hours*, *all day*), point-in-time references (like *yesterday*, *at 3 PM*, *last week*), and sequence markers (such as *then*, *after that*, *before*). Through this categorization system, a comprehensive mapping of how students express different relationships across different proficiency levels has been elicited.

Each identified verb phrase, tense form, and temporal adjunct was systematically coded and quantified by category. The coding process captured both the morphological complexity of verb forms and the reliance on explicit temporal adjuncts. Raw frequencies were calculated for each temporal category and converted to percentages to enable meaningful comparison across the three proficiency groups. This quantitative approach provides the foundation for examining developmental patterns in temporal sphere expression, with results presented in both numerical and percentage formats to highlight trends across beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners.

IV. RESULTS

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of temporal adjunct usage patterns among Albanian learners of ESL across three proficiency levels. The analysis examines 684 sentences produced by 36 participants (12 per year group) completing three temporally-distinct writing tasks: recounting a past event, describing a present situation, and outlining future plans. The data reveal both quantitative changes in temporal adjunct frequency and qualitative shifts in the types and complexity of temporal expressions as learners progress through university studies. Each year, the group's

performance is analyzed separately before presenting a cross-sectional comparison that shows the development trajectory of temporal reference acquisition.

A. Year 1 Analysis

The first-year group represents learners at the initial stages of university-level English study, providing a baseline for understanding temporal expression development in this population. Their writing demonstrates fundamental temporal marking abilities while revealing areas of ongoing development.

(a). Overall Temporal Adjunct Use

The analysis of Year 1 data comprised 192 sentences produced by 12 first-year undergraduate students across three writing tasks. The distribution of temporal marking in these texts reveals that the majority of sentences contained some form of temporal reference with varying degrees of explicitness. Table 1 presents the detailed distribution of temporal adjunct usage.

TABLE 1
TEMPORAL ADJUNCT USAGE IN YEAR 1 TEXTS

Measure	n	%
Sentences with explicit temporal adjuncts	127	66.15%
Sentences with implied temporal reference	21	10.94%
Sentences without temporal adjuncts	44	22.92%
Total sentences	192	100.00%

The findings that two-thirds of sentences (66.1%) contain explicit temporal adjuncts indicate that even at the earliest university level, learners demonstrate a consistent need for temporal grounding in their writing. The additional 10.9% of sentences with implied temporal references suggests that learners sometimes rely on contextual or sequential interpretation rather than explicit marking. Notably, less than one-quarter of sentences (22.9%) lacked any temporal marking, indicating relatively strong temporal awareness. Overall, Year 1 was characterized by substantial heterogeneity, with individual differences spanning in all the measured dimensions. Productions ranged from just 3 sentences to 24 sentences, with a mean of 16 sentences per student. A total of 200 temporal adjuncts were identified across all texts, indicating that some sentences contained multiple temporal adjuncts.

(b). Temporal Adjunct Types

From the elicited learners' interlanguage, various temporal adjuncts have been identified. There is a noticeable preference in type distribution, with point-in-time markers dominating.

TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF TEMPORAL ADJUNCT TYPES

Adjunct Type	Count	%	Examples from learners' interlanguage
Point in time	84	42%	"last summer", "in 2022", "yesterday", "at noon", "right now"
Sequence	46	23%	"then", "after that", "first", "finally", "before"
Frequency	40	20%	"always", "every day", "usually", "never", "sometimes"
Duration	30	15%	"for 2 years", "all day", "for hours", "a week"
Total	200	100%	

The dominance of point-in-time adjuncts (42%) reflects learners' preference for concrete temporal anchoring. These markers appeared across all three tasks but were particularly concentrated in Task 1 (past events), where students needed to establish specific temporal settings for their narratives. Sequence markers (23%) played a crucial role in narrative organization, while frequency adjuncts (20%) were primarily used in Task 2 to describe habitual present activities. Duration adjuncts were the least common (15%), suggesting that expressing temporal extent remains challenging for Year 1 learners.

(c). Verb Tense Distribution

Overall, Year 1 students produced 467 finite verb phrases across their texts, demonstrating clear patterns in tense selection. However, there is an overwhelming reliance on the use of simple tenses.

TABLE 3
VERB TENSE DISTRIBUTION IN YEAR 1

Tense/Aspect	Count	%	Primary task association
Simple present	196	41.79%	Task 2 (present), Task 3 (future plans)
Simple past	158	33.69%	Task 1 (past events)
Future (will)	55	11.73%	Task 3 (future plans)
Modal verbs	23	4.90%	Task 3 (possibility/ability)
Present progressive	19	4.05%	Task 2 (present/ongoing events)
Past progressive	8	1.71%	Task 1 (past events/background events)
Present perfect	6	1.28%	Cross-task (experience/relevance)
Future progressive	2	0.43%	Task 3 (future plans/future ongoing)
Past perfect	2	0.43%	Task 1 (anteriority)
Total	469	100.00%	

The huge reliance on simple tenses (74% combined simple present and past) indicates Year 1 learners primarily employ basic temporal expression strategies. Progressive aspect accounts for only 5.75% of verb phrases, while perfect aspects represent 1.72%, implying a limited mastery of aspectual distinctions.

B. Year 2 Analysis

The second-year group represents learners at an intermediate stage of development. Their production reveals both quantitative increases in temporal marking and qualitative shifts in expression strategies that suggest growing metalinguistic awareness of English temporal systems.

(a). Overall Temporal Adjunct Use

The analysis of Year 2 data comprised 205 sentences produced by 12 second-year undergraduate students across three writing tasks. The distribution of temporal marking in these texts reveals an increased temporal marking compared to Year 1. As shown in Table 4, the distribution of temporal adjuncts usage demonstrates increased explicitness in temporal expressions.

TABLE 4
TEMPORAL ADJUNCT USAGE IN YEAR 2 TEXTS

Measure	n	%
Sentences with explicit temporal adjuncts	145	70.7%
Sentences with implied temporal reference	11	5.3%
Sentences without temporal adjuncts	49	24%
Total sentences	205	100.00%

The increase to 70.7% explicit temporal adjunct usage represents a substantial 4.6% rise from Year 1's 66.1%, suggesting that learners at this intermediate level have developed heightened awareness of the importance of temporal specification in their writing. Another shift is noticed in the dramatic decrease in implied temporal reference, falling from 10.9% in Year 1 to 5.3% in Year 2. This shift toward explicitness indicates that Year 2 learners actively favor overt temporal marking over contextual inference.

(b). Temporal Adjunct Types

In Year 2, learners' interlanguage, 213 temporal adjuncts revealed evolving preferences in how learners conceptualize and express temporal relationships. While point-in-time markers continued to dominate, the distribution of adjunct types shows notable shifts that suggest developing temporal expression strategies.

TABLE 5
DISTRIBUTION OF TEMPORAL ADJUNCT TYPES

Adjunct Type	Count	%	Examples from learners' interlanguage
Point in time	87	40.8%	"last year", "during the summer season", "at the moment", "right not"
Frequency	54	25.4%	"Constantly", "regularly", "sometimes", "each time"
Sequence	41	19.2%	"then", "after that", "before creating", "as soon as"
Duration	31	14.6%	"for hours", "during the month", "for a while", "several days"
Total	213	100%	

The most striking change from Year 1 is an increase in the frequency of adjuncts from 20% to 25.4%, suggesting that Year 2 learners have developed greater facility with expressing habitual actions and iterative events. This increase coincides with more sophisticated frequency markers such as "constantly" and "regularly" replacing the simpler "always"

and “*sometimes*” predominant in Year 1. The slight decrease in point-in-time adjuncts (from 42% to 40%) and sequence markers (from 23% to 19%) suggests a realignment of temporal expression strategies rather than the simple addition of new forms. Duration adjuncts remained stable at 14.6%, even though the examples show more precise duration specifications (“for several days”) compared to Year 1’s vague temporal extents (“for a while”).

(c). *Verb Tense Distribution*

Overall, Year 2 students produced 384 finite verb phrases, fewer than Year 1’s 469, despite producing more sentences overall, suggesting more complex sentence structures with greater subordination. The distribution of tenses reveals changes in morphological development in comparison with Year 1 and Year 2.

TABLE 6
VERB TENSE DISTRIBUTION IN YEAR 2

Tense/Aspect	Count	%	Primary task association
Simple present	154	40.00%	Task 2 (present), Task 3 (future plans)
Simple past	152	39.60%	Task 1 (past events)
Present progressive	24	6.30%	Task 2 (present/ongoing events)
Future (will)	21	5.50%	Task 3 (future plans)
Modal verbs	20	5.20%	Task 3 (possibility/ability)
Past perfect	7	1.80%	Task 1 (anteriority)
Past progressive	4	1.00%	Task 1 (past events/background events)
Present perfect	1	0.30%	Cross-task (experience/relevance)
Future progressive	1	0.30%	Task 3 (future plans/future ongoing)
Total	384	100.00%	

While simple tenses continue to dominate at 79.6% (combined simple present and past), Year 2 shows modest increases in aspectual variety. Progressive aspects increased to 7.6% from Year 1’s 5.75%, with present progressive usage nearly doubling (from 4.05% to 6.3%), suggesting growing awareness of the need to explicitly mark ongoing actions. However, perfect aspects remain severely limited at 2.1%, with present perfect nearly disappearing (0.3%), while past perfect shows a slight increase (1.8%). This pattern suggests that Year 2 learners are beginning to grasp the progressive-simple distinction but continue struggling with the semantic complexity of perfect aspects. The stability in modal verb usage (5.2%) indicates that expressions of possibility and obligation have plateaued at this level.

C. *Year 3 Analysis*

The third-year group represents learners at the final stage, nearing the completion of their undergraduate English studies. Their production reveals unexpected patterns that challenge linear models of development, suggesting a consolidation phase.

(a). *Overall Temporal Adjunct Use*

The analysis of Year 3 data comprised 234 sentences produced by 12 third-year undergraduate students, the highest production level across all groups. However, the distribution of temporal marking shows an unexpected reversal from Year 2’s peak, revealing a complex development dynamic in advanced learners’ temporal expressions.

TABLE 7
TEMPORAL ADJUNCT USAGE IN YEAR 3 TEXTS

Measure	n	%
Sentences with explicit temporal adjuncts	153	65%
Sentences with implied temporal reference	16	7%
Sentences without temporal adjuncts	65	28%
Total sentences	234	100.00%

The decrease in explicit temporal adjunct usage to 65% from Year 2’s 70.7% initially appears counterintuitive for advanced learners. However, this 5.3% point decline, bringing usage closer to Year 1 levels (66.1%), may reflect a more sophisticated understanding of when temporal marking is communicatively necessary versus redundant. The slight increase in both implied temporal reference (6.8% from 5.4%) and sentences with temporal markings (27.8% from 23.9%) suggests that Year 3 learners are making more nuanced decisions about temporal expression, moving away from the hypermarking observed in Year 2 toward a more naturalistic, context-dependent usage pattern.

(b). *Temporal Adjunct Types*

The 236 temporal adjuncts in Year 3 texts reveal a return to certain Year 1 patterns while maintaining some Year 2 innovation, creating a complex picture of advanced temporal expression.

TABLE 8
DISTRIBUTION OF TEMPORAL ADJUNCT TYPES

Adjunct Type	Count	%	Examples from learners' interlanguage
Point in time	107	46%	"two years ago", "currently", "in the future", "at this very moment"
Sequence	50	21%	"after", "when", "before", "looking back"
Frequency	45	19%	"always", "often", "every", "never", "constantly"
Duration	34	14%	"for a while", "for many years", "throughout", "for seven years"
Total	236	100%	

The reappearance of point-in-time adjuncts to 45.3%, the highest proportion across all years, suggests that advanced learners employ these markers for different functions than beginners. While Year 1 students used basic deictic markers ("yesterday", "last week"), Year 3 students demonstrate more sophisticated temporal positioning ("currently", "at this very moment", "in the longer term"), using point-in-time references for rhetorical emphasis and text structuring rather than simple anchoring. The decrease in frequency of adjuncts from Year 2's peak of 25.4% to 19.1% coincides with increased morphological sophistication, suggesting that some habitual meanings previously expressed lexically are now encoded through verbal morphology. Sequence markers stabilized at 21.2%, similar to Year 1 levels, while duration adjuncts remained the most challenging category at 14.4%, though examples show more precise and varied duration expressions than earlier years.

(c). Verb Tense Distribution

Overall, Year 3 students produced 473 finite verb phrases across their texts, demonstrating the most complex tense-aspect pattern across all three groups, particularly across perfect aspect usages.

TABLE 9
VERB TENSE DISTRIBUTION IN YEAR 3

Tense/Aspect	Count	%	Primary task association
Simple present	200	42.30%	Task 2 (present), Task 3 (future plans)
Simple past	174	36.80%	Task 1 (past events)
Past perfect	31	6.60%	Task 1 (anteriority, background)
Future (will)	18	3.80%	Task 3 (future plans)
Modal verbs	18	3.80%	Cross-task (possibility/necessity)
Present progressive	16	3.40%	Task 2 (ongoing events)
Past progressive	11	2.30%	Task 1 (interrupted actions)
Present perfect	3	0.60%	Task 2 (current relevance)
Future progressive	2	0.40%	Task 3 (future ongoing)
Total	473	100.00%	

While simple tenses maintain dominance at 79.1% (simple present and simple past), which are nearly identical to Year 2's 79.6%, the distribution within complex aspects shows dramatic shifts. Most notably, past perfect usage increased to 6.6% from Year 2's 1.8%, suggesting that advanced learners have begun to master the expression of temporal anteriority and background information in narratives. This development is mostly noticed with past perfect usage and patterns, as present perfect remains minimal (0.6%). Progressive aspects decreased slightly to 6.1% from Year 2's 7.6%, possibly indicating more selective, appropriate use rather than overgeneralization. The stability in modal verb usage (3.8%) and the decrease in future will (3.8% from Year 2's 5.5%) suggest that advanced learners employ more diverse future expression strategies, including the present tense for scheduled events and modal constructions for tentative plans.

The emergence of past perfect in Year 3 represents the most significant morphological development across the three-year span. This complex pattern challenges linear development models and suggests that advanced proficiency involves not simply more temporal marking but more strategic, context-appropriate deployment of available temporal resources.

D. Cross-Sectional Comparison

This section synthesizes findings across all three proficiency levels to better understand the development trajectory of temporal expression among Albanian ESL learners. This cross-sectional analysis reveals patterns that challenge linear acquisition models and suggest more complex interactions between lexical and morphological temporal marking systems.

(a). Temporal Adjunct Usage Trajectory

The analysis reveals a non-linear progression in temporal adjunct usage across proficiency levels.

TABLE 10
TEMPORAL ADJUNCT USAGE ACROSS PROFICIENCY LEVELS

Measure	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Total sentences	192	205	234
Explicit temporal adjuncts (%)	66.1	70.7	65.4
Implied temporal reference (%)	10.9	5.4	6.8
Sentences without temporal adjuncts (%)	22.9	23.9	27.8
Mean sentence per student	16	17.1	19.5

The data show that explicit temporal adjunct usage peaks in Year 2 (70.07%) rather than decreasing linearly as hypothesised. This inverted-U pattern suggests complex development processes.

(b). *Temporal Adjunct Type Evolution*

Different types of temporal adjuncts show distinct developmental patterns.

TABLE 11
TEMPORAL ADJUNCT TYPE DISTRIBUTION ACROSS YEARS (%)

Adjunct Type	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Pattern
Point in time	42	40.8	45.3	U-shaped
Frequency	20	25.4	19.1	Inverted-U
Sequence	23	19.2	21.2	Stable
Duration	15	14.6	14.4	Stable

Frequency adjuncts show the most notable variation, peaking in Year 2 at 25.4%, while point-in-time adjuncts demonstrated a U-shaped pattern with the highest usage in Year 3. On the other hand, the sequence and duration adjuncts have shown stable and unchanging usage patterns across the three years.

(c). *Verb Tense Development*

The usage of verb tenses across proficiency levels reveals both persistent challenges and a gradual sophistication in morphological temporal expression.

TABLE 12
VERB TENSE INDICATORS ACROSS YEARS (%)

Indicator	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Trend
Simple tenses (Present, Past, Future)	75.5	79.7	79.1	Stable
Progressive aspect (Present, Past, Future)	5.7	7.6	6.1	Variable
Perfect aspect (Present, Past, Future)	1.7	2.1	7.2	Increasing
Modal verbs	4.9	5.2	3.8	Stable

The persistent dominance of simple tenses (75%–80% across all years) represents the most striking finding, suggesting fundamental challenges in acquiring English's explicit aspectual system for learners from Albanian's implicit system. This stability may reveal different qualitative changes, while Year 1 students use simple tenses as defaults due to limited alternatives, Year 3 students' continued reliance may reflect strategic choices or deeply entrenched L1 transfer patterns resistant to change. The progressive aspect trajectory, increasing from 5.7% to 7.6% in Year 2 before declining to 6.1% in Year 3, suggests a phase in which intermediate learners overgeneralize progressive marking before achieving more target-like selective usage. This pattern aligns with the frequency adjunct peak in Year 2, indicating a general phase of heightened attention to aspectual distinctions.

On the other hand, the dramatic usage of the perfect aspect shows minimal changes between Year 1 and Year 2 (1.7%–2.1%) before jumping to 7.2% in Year 3, probably driven primarily by past perfect acquisition (6.6% in total of Year 3). This late emergence suggests that perfect aspects, encoding complex temporal relationships like current relevance or anteriority, require advanced proficiency to master. This specific development of past perfect over present perfect may reflect task effects (narrative past events) or indicate that anteriority in past contexts is more conceptually accessible than present relevance for Albanian learners.

(d). *Task-Based Performance*

The analysis of temporal adjunct usage across different writing tasks reveals consistent task sensitivity at all proficiency levels, though with evolving patterns of task differentiation.

TABLE 13
TEMPORAL ADJUNCT USAGE BY TASK ACROSS YEARS (%)

Task	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Mean	Task Characteristics
Task 1: Past Event	68.2	71.8	69.5	69.8	Narrative requiring sequencing
Task 2: Present Situation	58.9	65.4	63.2	62.5	Description of current state
Task 3: Future Plan	63.1	70.7	68.6	67.5	Projection and planning
Range (high-low)	9.3	6.4	6.3	-	Decreasing variation

Past events narratives consistently elicit the highest temporal adjunct usage across all years (mean 69.8%), reflecting the genre's inherent need for temporal sequencing and anchoring. The peak in Year 2 (71.8%) aligns with the general Year 2 pattern of temporal hypermarking, while the slight decrease in Year 3 (69.5%) suggests more efficient narrative construction with less redundant temporal specification.

Present situation descriptions exhibit the lowest temporal adjunct usage in Year 1 (58.9%), with a substantial increase in Years 2 and 3 (65.4% and 63.2%). This increase may reflect growing awareness that present states also require temporal contextualization, particularly for habitual actions and ongoing situations. The 6.5 percentage point increase from Year 1 to Year 2 represents the largest specific change, suggesting that intermediate instruction may emphasize present-tense temporal expression.

Future planning tasks show interesting progression, with Year 2 again showing peak usage (70.7%). The high temporal marking in the future context across all years challenges assumptions that future time reference relies primarily on morphological marking (will + verb), indicating that learners consistently feel the need for lexical temporal specification when projecting future scenarios.

Particularly, the range between the highest and the lowest task performance decreases across years (9.3% → 6.4% → 6.3%), suggesting that advanced learners develop more consistent temporal marking strategies across discourse contexts, rather than showing extreme variation based on task demands.

E. Summary of Results

The cross-sectional analysis reveals that temporal expression development in Albanian ESL learners follows a complex, non-linear trajectory that challenges existing acquisition models:

1. *Non-linear progression:* Temporal adjunct usage peaks in Year 2 (70.7%) rather than decreasing linearly, creating an inverted-U pattern (*Year 1: 66.1%, Year 2: 70.7%, Year 3: 65.4%*). This suggests that intermediate language learners experience heightened temporal awareness before achieving naturalistic balance.
2. *Persistent morphological simplicity:* All proficiency levels maintain 75%–80% reliance on simple tenses despite advancing proficiency, indicating resistant L1 transfer from Albanian's implicit aspectual system.
3. *Differential adjunct development:* Temporal adjunct types follow distinct trajectories, where frequency adjuncts peak in Year 2 (25.4%), point-in-time adjuncts show U-shaped development with the highest usage in Year 3 (45.3%), while sequence and duration markers remain stable.
4. *Late aspectual emergence:* Perfect aspect usage remains minimal (1.7%–2.1%) until Year 3's sharp increase to 7.2%, driven primarily by past perfect acquisition, suggesting complex aspectual relationships require advanced proficiency.
5. *Task sensitivity:* All groups appropriately adjust temporal marking by discourse context, with past narratives consistently eliciting the highest usage (70%) across proficiency levels, while the range between tasks decreases with proficiency (9.3% → 6.4% → 6.3%), indicating the development of unified strategies.

The findings indicate that Albanian ESL learners' temporal expression development involves multidimensional reorganization rather than simple lexical-to-morphological progression, with Year 2 representing a critical developmental phase.

V. DISCUSSION

The present study investigated temporal expression development among Albanian ESL learners, revealing an unexpected non-linear trajectory that challenges established models of second language temporal acquisition. Rather than the predicted steady decrease in temporal adjunct usage from Year 1 to Year 3, an inverted-U pattern emerged, rising from 66.1% in Year 1 to 70.7% in Year 2 before declining to 65.4% in Year 3. These findings do not fully support either H1 or H2, which predicted linear relationships. Instead, the data suggest more complex developmental processes that warrant careful interpretation.

The Year 2 peak phenomenon represents a particularly intriguing finding that may reflect a critical reorganization phase in temporal expression development. This pattern is tentatively consistent with McLaughlin's (1990) restructuring hypothesis, which proposes that L2 development involves periodic reorganization rather than linear accumulation. However, it is important to acknowledge that the cross-sectional design of this study limits our ability to confirm whether this peak represents a universal developmental stage, cohort-specific variation, or effects of other factors such as curriculum changes or increased metalinguistic instruction at the second-year level. The decrease in implied temporal references from 10.9% to 5.4% between Year 1 and Year 2 is consistent with this interpretation, suggesting that learners

at this stage may consciously monitor their temporal expressions, deliberately avoiding ambiguity through explicit marking. The specific increase in frequency adjuncts from 20% to 25.4% similarly suggests that Year 2 learners may actively compensate for aspectual distinctions that Albanian encodes implicitly, though alternative explanations are possible.

This pattern may also be understood through Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis, where conscious attention to L1-L2 differences can trigger temporary overcompensation before more balanced expression emerges. The relatively heightened temporal awareness in Year 2 could reflect learners' emerging metalinguistic understanding of the gap between their L1 and L2 systems, though without detailed instructional data or learner interviews, we cannot determine the precise mechanisms underlying this pattern.

The subsequent decline in Year 3 should not be interpreted as regression but may reflect proceduralization (DeKeyser, 2007), the transition from controlled to automatic processing. This interpretation is supported by qualitative changes such as point-in-time adjuncts serving more sophisticated discourse functions ("currently," "at this very moment") rather than basic temporal anchoring ("yesterday," "last week"). These more advanced forms suggest functional evolution in how learners use temporal expressions. However, longitudinal data would be needed to confirm whether this pattern represents genuine proceduralization or reflects other developmental processes.

Equally striking is the persistent reliance on simple tenses, remaining at 75%–80% across all proficiency levels. This pattern is consistent with persistent L1 transfer effects from Albanian's implicit aspectual system, potentially extending Hawkins and Liszka's (2003) aspectual deficit hypothesis to a new population. The minimal use of progressive aspects (5.7%–7.6%) may reflect what Slobin (1996) terms "thinking for speaking" patterns—deeply ingrained conceptualizations of how temporal information is encoded. Since Albanian expresses ongoing actions through simple forms plus contextual cues, learners may not perceive a strong communicative need to mark progressivity morphologically, even after years of English instruction. This explanation aligns with Jarvis and Pavlenko's (2008) conceptual transfer hypothesis, suggesting that L1 conceptual categories continue to influence L2 production well into advanced stages. However, without comparative data from learners of other L1 backgrounds, we cannot definitively attribute this pattern to L1 influence rather than other factors.

Similarly, the late emergence of perfect aspects provides further evidence of substantial acquisition challenges in this domain. Perfect aspect usage remained minimal (1.7%–2.1%) in Years 1 and 2, increasing sharply to 7.2% only in Year 3, driven primarily by past perfect acquisition (6.6%). This pattern is consistent with Slabakova's (2016) bottleneck hypothesis, which identifies features absent in the L1 as showing the greatest acquisitional difficulty. The specific difficulty with the present perfect, which remains below 1% across all years, may reflect what Lardiere (2009) terms "feature reassembly" problems, where learners must reconfigure their understanding of how temporal relationships are encoded. However, without analyzing accuracy or error patterns, we cannot definitively determine whether low present perfect frequency reflects incomplete acquisition, learner avoidance, or strategic simplification. This represents an important limitation of the current study. The preferential development of past perfect over present perfect may reflect task effects, since Task 1 emphasized narrative past events, or may indicate that anteriority in past contexts is more conceptually accessible than present relevance for Albanian learners. Alternatively, the low frequency of the present perfect could reflect the reduced need for this structure in learners' communicative contexts. These competing explanations underscore the need for more detailed analysis in future research. Ayoun (2025) similarly demonstrates that even advanced L2 learners of English exhibit persistent difficulties with tense-aspect-modality features absent in their L1, supporting the view that feature reassembly challenges are a broad acquisitional phenomenon not limited to Albanian learners.

Notably, this late emergence contrasts sharply with studies of learners from languages with explicit aspectual systems, who typically demonstrate earlier acquisition of perfect forms (Ayoun & Salaberry, 2008). This difference supports the contention that typological differences between L1 and L2 systems significantly constrain acquisition trajectories, though comparative studies would be needed to confirm this pattern across diverse learner populations. This concern is further underscored by Minnillo et al. (2024), who found that task modality is a significant predictor of accuracy in L2 past tense-aspect production, confirming that written narrative tasks, as used in the present study, systematically influence learners' tense-aspect choices in ways that must be considered when interpreting cross-sectional frequency data.

The varied developmental trajectories of different adjunct types further complicate the picture and challenge unitary models of temporal expression acquisition. While frequency adjuncts show an inverted-U pattern peaking in Year 2 at 25.4%, point-in-time adjuncts follow a U-shaped curve (42% → 40.8% → 45.3%), and sequence and duration markers remain relatively stable across years. These differential patterns are consistent with emergentist approaches (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006) that view language development as non-linear and multidimensional. The Year 2 peak in frequency adjuncts appears directly linked to strategies for expressing habituality, a concept that Albanian handles through context rather than explicit morphological marking. Meanwhile, the resurgence of point-in-time adjuncts in Year 3 with more sophisticated forms (e.g., "currently," "at this very moment") suggests functional evolution rather than simple frequency increase, consistent with Bardovi-Harlig's (2000) observation that advanced learners repurpose temporal adjuncts for discourse coherence and rhetorical emphasis rather than basic temporal grounding.

While these patterns are intriguing, it is important to emphasize that the cross-sectional design limits causal claims about temporal development. The relationship between lexical and morphological temporal marking suggests they exist

in dynamic interaction rather than in a substitutional relationship. Rather than viewing these systems as competing, the data suggest that both lexical and morphological systems may strengthen during intermediate proficiency before achieving a more balanced and target-like distribution. However, the mechanisms driving this dynamic interaction remain unclear and warrant further investigation.

The Year 2 peak may represent what Larsen-Freeman (2006) identifies as a "phase shift" in complex dynamic systems—a reorganization point where the system temporarily destabilizes before settling into a new state. However, recent critical appraisals of dynamical systems theory as applied to SLA caution that phase shift interpretations must be grounded in empirically testable hypotheses rather than metaphorical description alone (Pienemann et al., 2024), a limitation that applies to the present study's cross-sectional data and that longitudinal research designs would be better positioned to address. If this interpretation is correct, it would suggest that intermediate proficiency may represent a period where multiple systems (lexical, morphological, and conceptual) compete and interact before stabilizing into more naturalistic patterns. However, confirming this interpretation would require longitudinal data tracking individual learners over time.

It should be noted that alternative explanations for the Year 2 peak exist and cannot be entirely ruled out with the current design. The peak could potentially reflect increased metalinguistic instruction specific to this cohort, greater task familiarity as students progress, or other institutional factors that cannot be separated from genuine developmental processes in a cross-sectional study. Additionally, the relative recency of Year 2 instruction (students at a more recent point in their studies) may create different instructional contexts than Year 1 or Year 3. These confounding factors underscore the importance of longitudinal and comparative studies to isolate developmental mechanisms from external influences.

The findings demonstrate that learners whose L1 features implicit temporal-aspectual systems may follow qualitatively different developmental paths than those assumed by current models based primarily on learners from languages with explicit systems. The non-linear trajectory observed here suggests that temporal expression development involves multidimensional reorganization rather than simple lexical-to-morphological progression. However, determining whether these patterns represent universal developmental principles or are specific to Albanian learners requires comparative research with learners from other L1 backgrounds.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined temporal expression development among 36 Albanian ESL learners across three university proficiency levels, investigating whether temporal adjunct usage would decrease linearly as morphological competence increased. The findings fundamentally challenge this prediction, revealing instead an unexpected non-linear trajectory that provides new insights into how learners from languages with implicit temporal-actual systems navigate the acquisition of English's explicit marking system. The most striking finding is the inverted-U pattern in temporal adjunct usage with a peak at intermediate proficiency (70.7% in Year 2), which is not consistent with predictions of linear decrease. This non-linear trajectory suggests that temporal expression development involves distinct phases: initial establishment of basic temporal marking (Year 1: 66.1%), heightened metalinguistic awareness leading to hypervigilance (Year 2: 70.7%), and eventual strategic consolidation (Year 3: 65.4%). The Year 2 peak may represent a critical reorganization phase where learners' growing awareness of the fundamental differences between Albanian's implicit and English's explicit system could trigger compensatory strategies that temporarily intensify explicit temporal marking.

Equally revealing is the persistent reliance on simple tenses (75%–80%) across all proficiency levels, combined with minimal progressive aspect usage (5.7%–7.6%) and late emerging perfect aspect (7.2% in Year 3). These patterns suggest that typological differences between L1 and L2 temporal systems may create significant acquisition challenges. The findings are consistent with the hypothesis that Albanian learners' implicit L1 aspectual system may create conceptual transfer effects that persist even at advanced levels, a finding that aligns with research emphasising the role of L1 conceptual categories in shaping L2 acquisition trajectories, though comparative studies would be needed to confirm this. This interpretation is consistent with the broader direction of recent scholarship, which increasingly emphasises the role of L1-specific aspectual features and typological distance in shaping individual acquisition routes beyond what universal models predict (Almakrob & Alduais, 2025; Ayoun, 2025).

Similarly, the differential development of temporal adjunct types, with frequency adjuncts peaking in Year 2, point-in-time adjuncts showing U-shaped development, and sequence/duration markers remaining stable, further challenges unitary models of temporal acquisition. This multidimensional pattern indicates that temporal expression involves multiple, partially independent systems following distinct developmental trajectories rather than a single, unified progression. The qualitative evolution in adjunct usage, particularly the shift from basic temporal anchoring to sophisticated discourse functions in Year 3, suggests that advanced learners may not simply abandon temporal adjuncts but may repurpose them for more complex communicative needs.

Theoretically, these findings suggest that the relationship between lexical and morphological temporal marking may not be substitutional but rather dynamically interactive. The Year 2 peak is consistent with the possibility of developmental reorganization phases that may not be captured in current linear models, and it suggests that intermediate proficiency may represent a period where heightened awareness temporarily affects performance before more balanced

expressions emerge. This aligns with complex dynamic system approaches to SLA, which view development as characterized by periods of variability and phase shifts rather than steady progression.

Study Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several methodological constraints. First, the cross-sectional research design does not allow for definitive conclusions regarding developmental progression; therefore, it remains uncertain whether the observed peak in Year 2 represents a universal developmental stage or is specific to the cohort under investigation. Furthermore, the relatively small sample size ($n = 36$), drawn from a single institution, limits the generalizability of the results to wider learner populations.

In addition, the analysis is based exclusively on written data, leaving learners' spoken discourse patterns unexplored. Finally, the absence of an accuracy-based analysis makes it difficult to distinguish between genuine tense errors and instances of strategic simplification, which may mask learners' underlying competence.

Further Research Recommendations

Several research directions could extend and validate the present findings. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in tracking individual developmental trajectories over time and in clarifying whether the observed patterns reflect stable stages of acquisition. Including learners from other first-language backgrounds with implicit aspectual systems would also help determine whether the results are typologically driven or language-specific. Moreover, future research should combine frequency-based measures with accuracy analyses to provide a more comprehensive account of tense–aspect development. Finally, incorporating both spoken and written production data would offer a fuller understanding of how temporal and aspectual features are realized across different modes of language use.

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Arta Këpuska is a lecturer at the Department of English Language, Translation and Interpretation Studies, Faculty of Philology, University of Gjakova “Fehmi Agani.” She holds a PhD in English Language and Literature from South East European University. She teaches CAT, Translation and Technology, Stylistics, and English for ESP. Her research interests include linguistics, first and second language acquisition, and translation studies. Contact: artakepuska@gmail.com / arta.kepuska@uni-gjk.org

Mejreme Ymeri is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English Language, Translation and Interpretation Studies, Faculty of Philology, University of Gjakova “Fehmi Agani.” She holds a PhD in English Language from South East European University. She teaches Technical Translation, Interpreting, and Oral Communication Skills. Her research interests include linguistics, language acquisition, translation, and interpreting. Contact: mejreme.ymeri@uni-gjk.org