

## **Error Analysis on The Use of The Simple Tense and The Simple Past Tense in Writing Essays Among TESL College Students**

**Ahmad Taufik Hidayah bin Abdullah**

*Faculty of Languages and Linguistics*

*Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin*

*[taufikhidayah@unisza.edu.my](mailto:taufikhidayah@unisza.edu.my)*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

Errors committed by students learning English language can happen in any level. This research focuses on college students taking a diploma course in Teaching of English as a second language (TESL). **Objectives** of this study are to identify the areas where students commit most errors on the use of the simple present tense and the simple past tense, to find out some sources of errors and subsequently try finding ways to solve the errors. **Methodology** used is by using document analysis where error analysis procedures are applied. Instruments used in this research are by using essay writing questions. Research samples consisted of 53 students taking diploma in TESL. These students were selected randomly. Analysis of the data used Error Analysis Method. From **the findings**, it can be seen that many students committed errors involving grammatical items, such as subject-verb agreement, tenses, parts of speech and vocabularies. Types of errors committed by the students with regard to Error Analysis Method are due to omission, addition, misinformation and misordering. Some factors have been identified to contribute to the problem such as: lack of knowledge and competence of the English grammar, influence of the mother tongue, loan words and lack of exposure of the English language. Some **suggestions and recommendations** have been made to address this problem. They include giving ample exercises and practices to students, giving some teaching techniques to the teachers to be implemented in class. All these efforts are meant for remedies to solve the problem in writing English essays with respect to the use of correct simple present tense and simple past tense.

**Keywords:** *Error Analysis, Simple Present Tense, Simple Past Tense, , English*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English language has become an international medium of communication among the people on earth. The mastery of good English is deemed as having an edge and can bring a lot of advantages in many ways. This international language is not only used for communicational purposes but also in the fields of technology, commerce, education and many other aspects of life. Malaysia, that aims to be a developed country by the year of 2020, has long considered the importance of mastering this language. The government has planned and subsequently implemented many policies to ensure Malaysians master the English language starting from primary schools to tertiary levels of education.

In carrying out this study, the researcher has set some purposes to be achieved. Firstly, this study is to identify the areas where students commit most errors on the use of the simple present tense and the simple past tense as well as to find out the frequencies of errors committed. Secondly, it aims to find out some sources of errors committed by the students and thirdly, it aims to find effective ways to tackle or solve the errors.

The focus of this research is on errors committed by TESL college students, especially on the use of the simple present tense and the simple past tense. The students' errors are indicative both of the state of the learners' knowledge, and of the ways in which a second language is learned (Corder, 1967). The notion of errors is different from mistakes in the sense of how they happen. Mistakes are considered as non-systematic and they may be caused by memory lapses, physical states, such as tiredness and psychological conditions such as strong emotion. These phenomena do not reflect a defect in our knowledge of our own language. Errors, on the other hand, are deemed as systematic since the errors committed by the users of the language reveal their underlying knowledge or competence of the language.

Errors committed by the students learning English language can happen in any level, regardless of the schools, colleges and the fields of studies taken by them. In this research, focus is made to observe and analyze college students taking a diploma course in Teaching of English as a second language (TESL) where they are majoring in the English language.

Some research questions are posed in this research. They are: 1) What are common errors committed by TESL college students on the use of the simple present tense and the simple past tense? 2) What are the sources of errors committed by TESL college students on the use of the simple present tense and the simple past tense? and 3) What are the best ways to correct the students' errors with respect to the use of the simple present tense and the simple past tense?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Behaviorist learning theory advocates that old habits contribute in the way of learning new habits (Ellis, 1990). In the context of learning a second language, the grammar programmed into the mind as the first language will interfere with the smooth acquisition of the second language. The interference happens as the result of what is called as proactive inhibition where the way in which previous learning inhibits the learning of new habits. In second language acquisition, the first and second language share a meaning but express it in different ways, an error is likely to arise in the second language because the learner will transfer the realization device from his first language into the second (Ellis, 1990).

Grammar is the system of rules governing the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence (Brown, 2001). The grammar is not merely a collection of forms but rather

involves the three dimensions of what linguists refer to as morphosyntax, semantics and pragmatics (Murcia, 1999). Grammatical structure does not only have a morphosyntactic form and it deals with questions of *how is it formed?* (Accuracy), It is also used to express meaning (semantics) to answer question of *what does it mean?* (Meaningfulness) and in context-appropriate use to answer questions of *when/why is it used?* for appropriateness (Pragmatics). These three dimensions are often called as: form, meaning and use. They are interrelated where a change in one will involve a change in another.

### **Tense and Aspect**

Over the years, the important distinction between tense and aspect has become blurred. Instead of 3, English has been said to have 12 “tenses”. Tense actually relates to times, they are: present, past and future. On the other hand, Aspect has to do with the internal structure of the action occurring at any time. There are four aspects namely: simple (sometimes called zero aspect), perfect, progressive, and their combination, perfect progressive (Murcia, 1999). The illustrations of the tense-aspect combinations are given below with the irregular verb *write* and the regular verb *walk* (Murcia, 1999).

In 1974 SP. Corder spelled out and elaborated some procedures needed for Error Analysis. The complete procedures proposed by Corder are as follows: (1) *A corpus of language is selected*, (2) *The errors in the corpus are identified* (3) *The errors are classified* (4) *The errors are explained* and (5) *The errors are evaluated*.

### **Related Studies and Previous Researches on Error Analysis and Errors Made With Respect to The Use of Tenses.**

On their research titled *Error Analysis of Form Four English Compositions*, Rosli Talif and Malachi Edwin from Universiti Pertanian Malaysia found out that the highest percentage of errors in the combined data of rural and urban schools is in the use of verb forms. In the research, it is interesting to note that the simple present tense has the lowest percentage of errors (14%) and the simple past tense has the second lowest percentage of errors (36%).

In her research in 2002 titled *A Study of Error Analysis of the Most Common Grammatical Error in Constructing Sentences by Form 4 Malay Students At a Selected Schools in Klang*, Norhayati Haji Mohd Wahi from the Faculty of Languages, UPSI found some grammatical errors from 40 compositions scripts written by 40 Form 4 Malay students. The sequences of their errors were as follows: Verb-tenses (36.6 %), Subject-Verb Agreement (26.6 %), Articles (18.6 %), Pronouns (10.4 %), Preposition (5.8%) and Conjunction (2.0%).

A research carried out by Rohayu Ahmad from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in 2001 titled *The Students' Performance of Error in The Use of Past Tense: An Analysis in a Selected School* found out that the learners face many problems and a lot of difficulties to master the language. Most of the time, they had problems in English grammar, especially in the use of English tenses.

Chan (1988) in his study *An Error Analysis of English Compositions Written by Law Matriculation Students in UKM* (as cited in Rohayu Ahmad's *The Students' Performance of Error in The Use of Past Tense*) studied the errors found in 50 compositions made by 25 UKM Law students who had studied 4 semesters of matriculation course. The researcher found that the subjects made common errors in the use of past tense. Among the errors committed, the simple past tense

was the most frequent as it was wrongly used in place of present tense and present perfect tense forms.

Geraldine (1990) in her study *An Error Analysis of ESL Compositions Written by Mandarin-Speaking Students in Private Community College* (as cited in Rohayu Ahmad's *The Students' Performance of Error in The Use of Past Tense*) studied the errors made by male and female students whose age ranged from 17-20 years old. They were enrolled in the American university program and produced in 50 compositions when the study was carried out. The errors found were: tenses (30.4%), articles (23.1%), prepositions (12.1%), spelling (9.5%), wrong choice of words (6.7%), singular and plural forms (5.9%) and agreement (5.2%)

Lastly, LiewPui Yan in her study titled *A Study of Simple Past Tense Errors and Its Sources among Form 2 Students in Lower Secondary School* found that the respondents produced three types of errors, namely: addition, omission and misinformation. The findings of the study also showed that the main source of errors was the respondents' lack of knowledge in the simple past tense.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

In conducting this research, the researcher has identified all related and needed elements to make sure the research conducted can meet the purposes and needs of the study. A thorough and detailed procedure is made by tallying and synchronizing with the underlying theory used, which is derived from SP. Corder's *Error Analysis*.

#### Research Design

This is a descriptive research which involves a collection of techniques used to specify, delineate, or describe naturally occurring phenomena. This research uses data that are collected from a firsthand source that is KolejUgama Sultan ZainalAbidin's TESL students' written work. Document Analyses were conducted that focused on the *linguistic aspects* instead of the *content* or *context* of the language produced through written work. The notion of linguistic aspects here involves the use of English syntactic rules, especially in dealing with the simple present tense and the simple past tense.

This research is carried out to shed light on some errors committed by KolejUgama Sultan ZainalAbidin's TESL students in their English compositions. The students were required to write two essays on the given topics. The completed tasks were analyzed using error analysis method, thus the most common problems were expected to be revealed and subsequently remedial effort could be made to solve the problems.

#### Samples and Sampling Procedures

The research samples consisted of KolejUgama Sultan ZainalAbidin's TESL students. The researcher took 20 students from semester II, 24 students from semester IV and 9 students from semester VI to represent their class with a one third portion respectively. These students were selected randomly.

#### Instrumentation

Students were to write two essays comprising 300-350 words each on two topics given, namely "*An Ideal Partner that I should have in my life*" in the form of a Descriptive essay where

some criteria of an ideal partner are provided for the students to choose from. For examples, someone who is hardworking, pious, humble, likes to cook, likes children, etc. In this writing exercise, the emphasis was given on the use of the simple present tense. The second topic was “*The most memorable moment in my life*” in the form of a Narrative essay. In this writing exercise, the use of the simple past tense was given emphasis.

### Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected from the KolejUgama Sultan ZainalAbidin’s TESL students based on their written essays. Each student was required to write two essays. The students were given two days to complete the tasks and they submitted the tasks on the date assigned by the researcher.

### Data Analysis Procedures

Error Analysis is considered as a process. As a process, there must be a kind of procedures that must be followed as a guideline. This procedure consists of several stages. In this research, the procedure used in analyzing the data is derived from a procedure suggested by SP Corder in 1974 known as The Error Analysis Method.

The complete procedures are as follow: 1) choosing the language corpus, 2) identifying errors in the corpus, 3) classifying errors, 4) explaining errors and 5) evaluating errors.

### Surface Strategy Taxonomy

Besides the error analysis method mentioned above, this research also utilizes the surface strategy taxonomy that was proposed by Dulay, Burt and Krashen in 1982 (as cited in Tarigan, 1990) in analyzing the errors committed by the students. The Surface Strategy Taxonomy consists of four elements, which are: 1) omission, 2) addition, 3) misformation and 4) misordering.

Errors categorized as ‘omissions’ are sentences that do not contain some elements that must exist in the sentences. For example, the sentence ‘*My mother a teacher*’ instead of ‘*My mother is a teacher*’ that complies with the structure of good English grammar by having copula ‘is’

Error of addition is the opposite of the omission. This error happens due to the occurrence of element that does not need to exist. There are three types of errors on addition:

a) Addition due to double markings. For example: ‘*He didn’t went to Kuala Lumpur*’ and ‘*She doesn’t knows your name*’. b) Addition due to regularizations. For example: ‘*She putted the book on the table*’ and ‘*Those childs are my neighbour*’. c) Addition due to simple addition. For example: ‘*The birds doesn’t live in the water*’ and ‘*We stay in over there*’.

Error of misformation is marked by the use of wrong morphemes and structures where the user is using one grammatical form in place of another grammatical form. In this case, a learner provides a sentence which is grammatically incorrect in English. For example: ‘*The dog eated the chicken*’.

Misformation also has three types of errors, they are: regularizations: when a learner uses regular and irregular types of words in a wrong place. For example: ‘*runned*’ for ‘*run*’, ‘*gooses*’ for ‘*geese*’.

, b) archi-forms: The choice of a class form to represent or describe another class form in different situation. For example: ‘*that house is mine*’, ‘*that houses are theirs*’

, and c): alternating forms : In this case, the learner has mistakenly used some forms alternatively but it results in producing a wrong word. For example: ‘*Those dog*’, ‘*This cats*’, ‘the use of *he* instead of *him*’.

Error of misordering is marked by misordering for a morpheme or a group of morphemes in the sentence. For example: ‘*I don’t remember what is her name*’ instead of ‘*I don’t remember what her name is*’. Another example: ‘*What your mother is doing?*’ instead of ‘*What is your mother doing?*’

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

##### Errors on the Use of the Simple Present Tense

After a detailed and systematic analysis made on the errors on the uses of the simple present tense in the students’ essays titled “*An Ideal Partner that I Should Have in My Life*”, the researcher generated a table of general information to be elaborated into a more detailed discussion of every element involved.

**Table 1** Errors Committed in the Simple Present Tense

No	Elements	Types of Errors	Number of students committed errors ( Total : 53 students)	Percentage
1	Omission	-	37	69 %
2	Addition	Double marking	30	56 %
		Regularizations	-	0 %
		Simple Addition	2	3.7 %
3	Misinformation	Regularizations	51	96 %
		Archi-forms	4	7.5 %
		Alternating Forms	25	47 %
4	Misordering	-	3	5.6 %

A summary of errors committed by the students are shown in the following examples:

##### Omission

- a) *Someone who \_ expert in Islam* (student 1) It should read: *Someone who is expert in Islam* )  
 b) *We \_ still alive* (student 2) It should read: *We are still alive.*

##### Addition Due To Double Marking

- a) I am dislike to somebody who likes to over anger without reason (student 8). It should read : I *dislike* to somebody who likes to over anger without reason  
 b) I am really hope that he can teach and guide me (student 8). It should read: *I really hope that he can teach and guide me.*

### Addition Due To Regularizations

It was not surprising that none of the sentences contained an error categorized as *addition due to regularization* since, as explained earlier, this type of errors were more suitably categorized as errors due to *misinformation in terms of their regularizations*.

### Addition Due To Simple Addition

- a) *I really likes the children* (student 1). It should read: *I really like the children*.
- b) *I am the kind of person who speaks whenever I think I should to*(student 27). It should read: *I am the kind of person who speaks whenever I think I should (to does not need to be included)*

### Misinformation Due To Regularizations

The most number of errors found were in the use of incorrect subject-verb agreement. Some examples are given:

- a) *He have to give advice to me* (student 2) : It should read *He has to give advice to me*
- b) *People doesn't like a night full with candle light dinner* (student 5) *It should read: People don't like a night full with candle light dinner*

### Misinformation Due To Archi-forms.

The notion of archi forms refers the choice of a class form to represent or describe another class form in different situation.

- a) *A man who has this criteria* (student 6). It should read: *A man who has this criterion*.
- b) *Another criteria is she must be a well-educated person* (student 18). It should read: *Another criterion is she must be a well-educated person*.

### Misinformation Due To Alternating Forms

- a) *He can help me in managing the economi*. (student 1). It should read: *He can help me in managing the economy*.
- b) *It's important to get "restu" from my parents*. (student 4). It should read: *It's important to get permission/consent from my parents*.

### Misordering

- a) *But the language must I like*(student 19). It should read: *But I must like the language*.
- b) *The things that should he make and not should he make also he must think*. (student 19) . It should read: *The things that he should make and he should not make, he must think*.

### Errors on the Use of the Simple Past Tense

The researcher generated the figures of students who committed errors in their essay writing titled "The most memorable moment in my life" in a table as general information to be elaborated into a more detailed discussion of every element involved.

**Table 2** Errors Committed in the Simple Present Past Tense

No	Elements	Types of Errors	Number of students committed errors ( Total : 53 students)	Percentage
1	Omission	-	13	24 %
2	Addition	Double marking	24	45 %
		Regularizations	0	0 %
		Simple Addition	5	9.4 %
3	Misinformation	Regularizations	43	81 %
		Archi-forms	1	1.8 %
		Alternating Forms	18	40%
4	Misordering	-	2	3.7 %

**Omission**

- a) *He \_ pleased because his dad arranged all his property to right person.* (student 12) It should read: *He was pleased because his dad arranged all his property to right person.*
- b) *I \_ not asked it from her.* (student 19). It should read: *I did not ask it from her.*

**Addition Due To Double Marking**

- a) *We were never did homework* (student 3). It should read: *we never did homework.*
- b) *I didn't realized that the bottle contained the fluid.*(student 1). It should read: *I didn't realize that the bottle contained fluid.*
- c) *We can saw a lot of interesting place to visit* (student 14). It should read: *We could see a lot of interesting places to visit.*

**Addition Due To Regularizations**

Like in the analysis of the simple present tense, none of the sentences contained an error categorized as *addition due to regularization* since, as explained earlier, this type of errors were more suitably categorized as errors due to *misinformation in terms of their regularizations*.

**Addition Due To Simple Addition**

- a) *I need her and did not wantedshe gone forever.* (student 19). It should read: *I needed her and did not want her to go forever.*
- b) *On the Sunday.....* (student 44). It should read: *On Sunday.....*

**Misinformation Due To Regularizations**

- a) I tried to walk slowly because I don't want to wait alone. (student 2). It should read: I tried to walk slowly because I didn't want to wait alone.
- b) But nobody were there. (student 2). It should read: But nobody was there.
- c) The study would took two years. (student 26). It should read: The study would take two years.

**Misinformation Due To Archi-forms.**

- a) There was just a few days before the competition. (student 13). It should read: There were just a few days before the competition.

**Misinformation Due To Alternating Forms**

- a) I wanted to compete with all of them and became da best among them. ( student 3). It should read: I wanted to compete with all of them and became the best among them.
- b) Grandmother showed her loved for me (student 53). It should read: Grandmother showed her love for me.

**Misordering**

- a) They asked my mother how did she brought me up. (student 3). It should read: they asked my other how she brought (had brought) me up.
- b) Just imagine how suffer are us. (student 39). It should read: Just imagine how suffered we were.

**Evaluation of Errors**

The most common errors committed by the students are in the form of misinformation due to regularizations. In this case, the researcher thinks that the errors mostly involve the incompetence of the students in mastering the English grammar. Some grammatical aspects need to be given due attention and concern such as: Subject- Verb Agreement, Verb-To Be, Verb Forms, and Parts of Speech.

**Causes of the Errors**

In answering the second research question on “the sources of errors” committed by the TESL’s college students in the use of the simple present tense and the simple past tense, the researcher comes out with several answers based on the analysis of data:

- a) The results indicate that there is a lack of competence and knowledge of grammar among the students. There is an indication that they did not seem to master the grammar aspect well, thus resulting in errors committed in their English compositions.
- b) The influence of mother tongue is also obvious in this case where some students were influenced by the sentence structures or patterns of their mother tongue or first language. One example given is in the pattern of *although (walaupun) ..... but (tetapi)* which is deemed redundant and doesn’t sound natural in English.
- c) “Loan words” are the other factor that contributes to the errors committed by the students. Many local newspapers in this country are indiscriminately adopting English words into the vocabulary of the national language. Since the spelling follows the pronunciation, students would find it easier to remember the spelling of the “loan words”

rather than the spelling of the original English words. Some errors found in the analysis are: *economi*(for *economy*), *da best* (for *the best*).

- d) The other factor is because of the inherent difficulties of the English language. English is a rich, complex language. Certain features of the language are difficult for the learner. For example, in English grammar they have “preached” and “reached” as the simple past tense form of “preach” and “reach” respectively. But the students cannot say “teached” although the word “teach” rhymes with “preach” and “reach”. Another example is the use of bad and badly, tooth and teeth, child and children, etc.
- e) Overgeneralization is another factor contributing to the students’ errors where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language. For example, “He reached the school at 9 a.m”. Subsequently, the student may also produce another sentence: “He leaved the school at 10 a.m”.
- f) Another factor that contributes to the contributor of the errors is the inadequate exposure to the target language. It is admitted that many students do not have good access or conducive environment to practice their English, especially both in writing or speaking. When the students have limited exposure to the language learnt, there will be a big possibility for them to commit errors in their language.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

There are a few things that can be drawn as conclusions from the research conducted:

- a) The Error Analysis Method is an effective way to trace and identify the students’ errors especially with respect to the errors on the use of the simple present tense and the simple past tense. The method is very systematically arranged to enable the researcher to come to a conclusion based on the essays produced by the students.
- b) The Surface Strategy Taxonomy is also a good tool, especially in the process of describing and classifying errors by dividing the errors into elements of: omission, addition, misinformation and misordering. These guidelines have enabled the researcher to frame their work through the elements given and classify every error to the nearest element.
- c) The findings of the research indicate that errors from the element of misinformation due to regularizations are the most frequently made errors by the students. The data showed that almost 96 % of the students committed such errors related to the use of the simple present tense and 81 % committed such errors related to the use of the simple past tense.
- d) Students still do not master good grammar, especially in terms of: Subject-Verb Agreement, Tenses, Vocabularies and Parts of Speech.
- e) Some factors are known to contribute to the errors committed by the students such as: the influence of mother tongue, lack of knowledge and competence in English grammar, the influence of “loan words”, the inherent difficulties of learning English, overgeneralization and lack exposure to the English language.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following are recommendations for practice:

- a) Teachers as instructors at schools, colleges or universities must remind their students that if they write in English they must think in the target language so that they do not bring in any feature of their mother tongue or first language. In this case, the teacher should explain why certain constructions are not grammatical. In this respect, it would require the teachers to have a good command of English language as well as a good knowledge of the mother tongue or the first language of the students.
- b) Teachers must explain to students the exceptions to the rule in the English language regarding grammar, vocabularies and pronunciation.
- c) Teachers can discuss with their students on how to identify their errors and what the possible causes are. This would bring about a greater understanding of the pedagogical and psychological factors that contribute to the linguistic errors.
- d) A variety of techniques in teaching writing can be introduced. Some examples may include Self-Correction without indication of mistakes, Peer correction, Underlining Mistakes, Mistakes Underlined and Coded, and Search and Correct technique. However, it would be better if teachers can come out with their own authentic teaching materials.
- e) More emphasis should be given to written exercises and practice in the classroom.

**REFERENCES**

- Brown, HD. (2001) *Teaching by Principles*. New York: Longman
- Brown,JD.,Rodgers,TS. (2002) *Doing Second Language Research*. China: Oxford University Press
- Corder,S.P. (1974) *The Significance of Learner's Errors*. In Richards, JC (Ed)Error Analysis (pp. 19-27). Singapore: Longman
- Chitravelu,N., Sithamparam,S., Choon, TS. (1996). *ELT Methodologh:Principles And Practice*. Selangor: FajarBaktiSdn. Bhd
- Ellis,R. (1998) *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press
- Murcia,MC. 92001)*Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. US: Heinle&Heinle
- Norhayati M. Wahi. (2002) *A Study of Error Analysis of The Most Common Grammatical Error in Constructing Sentences by Form 4 Malay Students at A Selected School in Klang*. UniversitiPendidikan Sultan Idris
- Rohayu Ahmad (2001) *The Students' Performance of Error In The Use of Past Tense: An Analysis in A Selected School*. UniversitiPendidikan Sultan Idris.
- Talif.R, Edwin, M. (1989) *Error Analysis of Form Four Englis Compositions*. The English Teacher Vol XVIII