

# An Investigation into University Students' Errors in Tenses in their Written Production

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## Abstract

The study aimed to investigate university student's errors in English tenses, in their written production. The researcher used the descriptive analytical method and the Statistical Program for Data Analysis. Results of the study indicated that university students who were chosen for this study, we found to be facing a real problem, when writing English tenses. This problem affected their performance. The study showed also that the greatest numbers of errors were found to be due to omission of verbs and verbs to be. Moreover, the results revealed that the reason behind the student's errors was a linguistic cause related to the interference of first language, and the target language. The researcher recommended that further research should be carried out, in the areas of tenses, as the data of the analysis indicated that.

**Keywords:** Error analysis, Contrastive analysis, Interlingual, Intralingual.

## مستخلص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى بحث الأخطاء التي يرتكبها الطلاب في الصياغة عند كتابة أفعال اللغة الإنجليزية. استخدم الباحث في الدراسة أسلوب البحث التحليلي برنامج التحليل الإحصائي للبيانات. أشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن العينة التي خضعت للدراسة من طلاب الجامعات يعانون مشكلة حقيقية في صياغة كتابة أفعال اللغة الانجليزية، و كان لهذه المشكلة تأثيراً في مستوى أدائهم و دراستهم للغة الانجليزية. بالإضافة أوضحت الدراسة أيضاً أن الجزء الأكبر من هذه الأخطاء ناتج عن حذف الأفعال الرئيسة و الأفعال المساعدة، و الي أسباب لغوية أخرى لها علاقة بتدخل و تأثير اللغة الأولى واللغة المستهدفة. أوصي الباحث بضرورة إجراء المزيد من البحوث والدراسات في مجال صياغة وكتابة أفعال اللغة الانجليزية، إذ أشار تحليل المعلومات والبيانات التي تم استخدامها في الدراسة إلى أهمية ذلك.

## Introduction

Error analysis is a branch, of applied linguistics. It is concerned with the compilation study and analysis of errors made by second and foreign language learners. Error analysis plays an important role in second and foreign language teaching as well. It helps teachers in understanding the new ways of teaching by giving the feedback on the errors made by learners. Due to the researcher's experience as a lecturer in the University, the researcher observed that the majority of students studying English language commit many errors in their written production. Therefore, the researcher decided to conduct an error analysis study, which was highlighted by Corder [1]. According to him, it is possible to determine the different areas which need reinforcement in the teaching, after analyzing the errors systematically.

The present study attempts to investigate and analyze the errors made by university students; who are specialized in English language as a

major subject, when using English language tenses in their written production. The investigation of these errors is the main concern of this study. Moreover, the study will try to find out the causes of errors, so as to be avoided and suggests suitable solutions.

The focal objective of this study is to investigate and analyze English language learners' errors, and, suggest solutions to the problem according to the nature of these errors. Moreover, the study will provide positive feedback to the teachers and students as well.

## The significance of the study

English language now, is one of the main international languages of communication in the large commercial and industrial organizations of the world. It is clear that a good command of English language as a second language is a passport for social and economic advancements. The present study tries to provide a contribution to stimulate more research in English

tenses and highlights the root causes behind such errors. Furthermore, the study will increase the students' knowledge and awareness about the causes of errors, and how to reduce committing such errors in their written production.

### **Questions of the study**

In order to clarify the stated problem, the researcher has formulated the following questions.

1. What kind of errors do students make in English language tenses?
2. What are the main possible causes of the students' errors in tenses?

### **Methodology of the study**

The study aims to investigate students' errors in using tenses. The researcher adopted the descriptive analytical method (case study). Such a task was handled before by Macmillan [2] who stated the necessity of using the descriptive analytical method so as to help in revealing and classifying the problems which face those students. Statistical Program for Data Analysis was also used in this study.

The population of the study consists

of Sudanese University students studying at the third level, majoring in English language. They are studying at faculties of education, in the Universities of the Red Sea, Kassala and Al-Gadaref. Their number was 113 students. The subjects of the study had studied English language for ten years; four at the basic level, three at secondary level and three at the university.

### **The tools of the study**

The researcher designed a test as the main tool for this study. The test consisted of three parts covering different areas of English language tenses. The first part consisted of ten questions of multiple-choice type. The second part was also consisted of ten questions and the students were asked to put the verb between brackets in its correct tense. The third part was about writing a composition, which was entitled "The Difficulties of Learning English Language". The main aim of the test is to judge their thoughts, and ideas using different tenses.

### Validity and reliability of the study tool

The test was validated by being reviewed by a group of experts, who suggested some valuable remarks, about the test, and the researcher responded to that. In calculating the internal consistency of the test, the researcher applied Cronbach [3] concept which stated “it is how well a set of variance or items measures a single, construct”. It is defined as

$$a = \frac{n - c^U}{V^U - (n - 1)c^U}$$

When the above formula was applied the test reliability was found to be 73.6 and this indicates that reliability of the test is acceptable. The validity is the square root of reliability coefficient

$$\text{validity} = \sqrt{\text{reliability}}$$

The validity of the test is 0.86 and both the reliability and the validity are adequate enough.

### Literature review

Many linguists present various definitions of error analysis (EA). Basically these definitions contain

the same meaning, but the difference lies in the way they formulated them. James [4] stated that EA was first introduced by Fries [5], and Lado [6], who stated that foreign learners or second language learners could be predicated on the basis related to differences between the learners' native language (NL) and the target language (TL). They suggested that when the aspects of the TL are similar to those of the learners NL, learning would be easier; otherwise, it will be difficult, and FL learners will be expected to commit errors. Ellis [7] defined EA as a particular procedure, which researchers and teachers tend to use. Among this procedure, there is a collection of samples of language learners', their identification of errors, their classification according to their hypothesized cause and finally, the evaluation process. EA is an activity, used to reveal errors committed by learners. Richards [8] indicates that “EA is the study made by the second and foreign learners. As concerns the above definitions, we can say that EA

is an activity to identify, describe, interpret, evaluate and prevent errors which learners usually commit. Before the emergence of EA in the 1960s, contrastive analysis (CA) was dominated by the field of teaching languages. Which was coined by Whorf in [9] as stated by James in [4] and Crystal [10] who defined CA as “the systematic comparison of  $L_1$  (first language) and  $L_2$  (second language) in order to predict areas of difficulty”. It is clear that, the CA was formed for the understanding of the errors committed by the learners in relation to the rules of both languages, based on the similarities of the rules of these two languages, when there is a positive constrictive effect on the learning process. It was considered that the positive transfer, and on the basis of differences of rules, when there was resistance in language learning, it was considered negative transfer. However CA could not define all the causes of errors. And it was realized that the process is not as simple as elaborated by CA. Rather there are various underlined

processes that are working behind the language learning. This short coming of contrastive analysis has inspired the appearance of error analysis which was pioneered by Corder 1960s. Many scholars in the field of EA focused their attention on the significance of the second language error analysis, Corder [1] remarks that errors are significant in three ways. The first, being the teacher when he undertakes a systematic analysis, and how far towards the goal the learner has progressed. The second is that the errors provide evidence to the researcher about the strategies or procedures which the learners should apply in the discovery of language errors. The third item and the most important aspects related to learners' errors that they are indispensable, because they can be regarded as a device for the learners to use. EA attempts are always used to state the different causes of errors. However, sophisticated investigations of errors aim to determine the possible causes of errors committed by

foreign learners. James [11] states that, “there is a general agreement over the main sources of errors that a learner commits, when learning a new language”. These causes of errors are mainly “interlingual errors”, and this term is used to refer to errors committed as the result of mother tongue interference i.e. learners’ first language system interference which is to some extent the result of acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language. Selinker [12] refers to interlingual as “separateness of second language learners’ system –a system that has structurally intermediate status between the native and the target language”. Some linguists believe that the mother tongue language interference is the only or main source of errors. Others suggest that other causes of errors are prevalent and believe that, such as; intralingual and developmental errors, which refers to errors result from factors other than the interference of the mother tongue.

Observations such as those made

by Duskova [13], Buteaur [14], and Richarads [8] initiated numerous investigations into sources of errors other than MT interference. Such sources of those errors are discovered within the structures of the TL itself, and some of them were found to be result from teaching techniques. Richards [15] states “ intralingual interference refers to items produced by the learners which reflects not the structures of the MT but a generalization based partially on the exposure to the target language”, and consequently intralingual as an effect caused by the influence of a target language upon another. Richards and Schmiat [16] identified and classified different types of errors like the follows: (i) overgeneralization errors, which are errors caused by extension of target language rules to an inappropriate context, (ii) simplification errors; which are errors resulting from learners producing simple linguistic rules that those found in the target language, (iii) development errors reflect natural stage of development,

(iv) communication errors which are errors resulting from the use of communication strategies, (v) induced errors, resulting from the transfer of training methods, (vi) errors due to avoidance which is caused by failure to use target language structures, since they are thought to be difficult to use and that overproduction errors are structure errors, as the result much frequent use. Many studies have been conducted to identify the problems of English language as a foreign language (EFL) and English language as a second language (ESL) when English language learners' start to write texts in English. The findings of these studies have indicated that the main cause of the students' errors can be attributed to their first language ( $L_1$ ). Lakkis and Malak [17] who focused on the transfer of Arabic prepositional knowledge into English by Arab students'. Both positive and negative transfers were examined. They concluded that "an instructor of English language, whose native language is Arabic, can use

the students' language for structures that use equivalent prepositions in both languages". On the other hand, when there is no equivalent in one of the languages, the instructor should point out these differences to the students. Kharma and Hajjaj [18] indicated that some of the errors committed by Arab learners learning English as a foreign language were due to Arabic language interference. Al-Khrsheb [19] investigated the interference of  $L_1$  (Arabic) syntactic structures with  $L_2$  (English) syntactic structures amongst Jordanian learners. The study focused on word order in simple sentence structures. The study explored that the errors committed were the result of the transfer from Arabic into English. Noor [20] eventually found that, the most frequent errors, in her study were syntactic errors made by EFL language learners, and the main source of errors was the influence of the native language when processing English language structures. Habash [21] identified that common error in the use of English language

prepositions in the written texts work of students at the end of a preparatory course in Jerusalem area. She found that more errors were attributed to interference of Arabic language and other learning problems. She also pointed out that, students always resort to literal translation before they form English patterns. Finally, she concluded that a learner brings with him one source of errors; which is his mother tongue. According to earlier studies, the results showed that, the majority of learners, when faced with a difficulty, they tend to transfer from their first language ( $L_1$ ) to the target language. On the whole, there is much evidence that the mother tongue interference is the main cause of learners' errors. A significant study was carried out by Abismara [22], and the sample of her study was 10 students, in grade nine. They have written essays. After the analysis of the essays, she found that those students had committed grammatical, syntactic, lexical and semantic errors. The study concluded that the cause of

such errors was not only negative  $L_1$  interference but, also intralingual interference. Gharab [23] aimed to investigate the performance errors made by first year Iraqi University students' in their written English essays. He focused on lexical and syntactic errors. His findings showed that learners committed lexical and syntactic errors in their writing, due to interlingual and intralingual sources. Hourani [24] main purpose of his study was to explain the common types of grammatical errors made by Emirati secondary male students, when writing their English essay. The main findings of the study were that students made different types of errors as a result of intralingual transfer. Furthermore, the study showed also that the writing skills need more reinforcement and development. Various researchers have concentrated on tenses' errors, which demonstrated that tense verb is the most problematic area. Fang [25] highlighted the teaching of English language verb tense to prevent Taiwanese EFL students

from misusing English tense due the linguistic difference. He concluded that English language tenses could be one of the most difficult areas, as there is not equivalent syntactic item like the one in the English system. Kambal [26] investigated three main types of errors in the verb phrase: verb formation, tense and subject-verb agreement. He discusses the errors committed when writing in tenses under five categories which were: the tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion and confusion of present perfect. The study showed that the third person singular marker used redundantly and incorrect form of verb to be are the most frequent errors. Abbasi and Karimnio [27] investigated grammatical errors committed by Iranian junior and senior students in their translation. The findings of the study revealed that the errors were due to the use of typical Persian structures. Errors in the tenses and articles were the most frequent errors respectively, committed by both Junior and senior students. Muftah and Galea [28]

analyzed errors of the present simple tense among adult Arab English language learners. The findings suggested that the learners seemed to have difficulty mastering the use of third person singular present tense due to interference. The most frequent types of errors were found to be omission and substitution. This study is in line with the one of the main findings of our present study. Al-Hazaymeh [29] performed an analytical study on the errors made by secondary students learning English verb tense. The study found that the errors made by the students were mainly due to interference of their mother tongue, overgeneralization, the complex structures of the English verb tense and lack of awareness of grammatical rules.

### **Results and discussion**

The data of the test was analyzed according to some categories given by Corder [30] addition, omission, selection and ordering. The study shows that the students have committed a lot of errors in the different types of tenses. Moreover,

the study also indicates that the students have a problem in writing, as they lack the required skills, and cognitive abilities. The analysis and

results shown in Table (1) reveal that those Sudanese University students' make different types of tenses' errors.

**Table 1. The frequency distribution of tenses' errors**

| No. | Type of errors               | Number of errors | Percentage (%) |
|-----|------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1   | Omission of verbs and copula | 61               | 32.6           |
| 2   | Word - order                 | 48               | 25.6           |
| 3   | Copula redundancy            | 41               | 21.9           |
| 4   | Wrong - choice form          | 37               | 19.9           |
| 5   | Total                        | 187              | 100            |

The most relevant errors are those related to omission of the main verbs, and verbs to be or auxiliary verbs, which form a high percentage (32.6 %) of the total number of errors. There are three representative samples of the students' work showing the different types of errors, the causes of these errors, and also describes how the mother tongue language affects the students' performance, like the following examples:

- 1) a. I have been learn English to improve my standard.
- b. It wasn't rain when we went out.
- c. They listen to the program.

In the first sentence, some learners

omit the suffix "ing" which is an indicator to the progressive tense that have no equivalents in Arabic language. In sentence (1.b) some learners omit the verb to be 'is'. The reason for the errors in the two sentences might be due to the interference of the Arabic language. In sentence (1.c) some learners omit "ed" marker of the past simple regular verb, which is required. Copula omission is found to be one of the most frequent errors that University students' make when writing English language tenses.

One of the most frequent errors is the word order, which constitutes

about (25.6%) of the university students' answers. The following are two selected examples.

2) a. They acquired from teachers some information.

b. English is a language difficult. In the first example (2a), the error is related to a prepositional phrase, which precedes the object, in the correct sentence. The error can be identified as inadequate knowledge, when constructing sentences, and is classified as intralingual error. In the second example (2b) some learners place the noun before adjective, as it can be used in the first language. This error can be attributed to interference of the mother tongue language. This category of errors validate question (2) of this study; so what are the main possible causes of tenses errors?

Errors in copula redundancy are classified as third type errors; which constitute (21.9%) of the types of errors. They refer to the existence of unnecessary items, with the use of redundant markers. The following two examples show these types of errors.

3) a. They didn't went to school

yesterday.

b. They learns English everyday.

The examples above showed that some learners use double markers. In example (3.a) there is a negation sentence, instead of using the basic form of the verb "go". This might be attributed to inadequate knowledge about the target language. In the second example (3.b) some learners, add "s" of the third person singular this making it an overgeneralization of the rule of the third person singular. The source of the error is an intralingual source.

Finally, the wrong-choice form; with a percentage of (19.9 %) of the total errors. The following two examples illustrate the type of error.

4) a. We like more time to learn English.

b. I am trying to process this difficulty.

The learners commit such errors in constructing the mentioned examples when using unsuitable words to express what is needed.

In the first example (4.a) and (4.b) some learners use (like and process)

instead of (need and overcome) respectively. These types of errors might be due to lack of knowledge of the second language and the cause of errors could be attributed to the negative effect of the mother tongue language. Since, the student when encounters such difficulties choose to use literal translation to avoid such problems, when trying to express their ideas. This result is in line with the third question of the study which is as follows: To what extent are students' errors attributing to their first language?

Likewise, Bahram [32] in his study tries to investigate, why Pakistani ESL and Iranian EFL learners fail to produce grammatically correct sentences when writing English language texts? The writing assignments of the university students' as well as the intermediate English language learners were analyzed for the purpose of errors analysis. Results of the study suggested that students lack grammatical accuracy in their writings. The study concluded that

they were highly influenced by the rules of their first language ( $L_1$ ). Mohammed [33] carried out also a study on interlingual interference in learning and using English vocabulary. His results revealed that Jordanian learners made a large number of syntactic errors in regard to word order, within the basic sentence structures. He concluded that such errors were due to adoption of first language habits, which were deeply rooted in the students' minds and thinking.

### **Summary of the results and the recommendations**

The researcher summarizes the main results of the study based on the findings of the search study as follows: The analysis of the study results indicate that the learners' of the universities who were tested, are found to be facing a real problem in writing correct English language tenses, which affects their performance. The results show also that, the greatest numbers of errors are to be found as the result of omission of verbs or verbs to

be. Moreover, the results indicate that the reason behind the students' errors is a linguistic subject, relates to their native language and the target language. The researcher recommends that, the learners should be trained on how to think and how to organize their ideas and thoughts

logically, when writing. Moreover, further research should be carried out in the area of tenses, as the data analysis indicated that English language tenses are difficult to study. Therefore, English language tenses need to be investigated and studied in depth.

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