
AN ERROR ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH TENSE USAGE AMONG INDONESIAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

By

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Abstract: Errors are an inevitable part of second language acquisition, particularly in the learning of grammatical features such as tense. This study aims to analyse the types and frequency of tense-related errors made by first-semester students of the Communication Science program at Amikom University Yogyakarta. Adopting a descriptive qualitative research design, data were collected from students' short-answer tests focusing on five English tenses: simple present, present continuous, present perfect, simple past, and simple future. A total of 660 sentences produced by 33 students were analysed using error analysis procedures, including error identification, classification, and interpretation. The findings reveal that omission was the most frequent error type, accounting for 50% of the total errors, followed by misinformation (32%) and overgeneralization (18%). In terms of tense usage, errors in the simple past tense occurred most frequently (38%), followed by the simple present tense (27%), present perfect tense (27%), present continuous tense (5%), and simple future tense (3%). These results indicate that students experience significant difficulties in applying tense forms accurately, particularly those involving verb inflection and auxiliary usage. The study highlights the importance of targeted grammar instruction and suggests that systematic, error-focused teaching and remedial support may help reduce persistent tense errors and enhance learners' grammatical accuracy.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English functions as a primary medium of international communication across various fields, including education, science, technology, and intercultural interaction. Consequently, English proficiency has become a fundamental requirement for learners in non-English-speaking countries such as Indonesia. Within the Indonesian educational context, English is positioned as a compulsory subject at secondary

and tertiary levels, with instructional goals encompassing the development of four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—as well as linguistic components such as grammar and vocabulary (Harmer, 2019).

Grammar plays a crucial role in language learning as it governs how linguistic forms are structured and interpreted. According to Ur (2022), grammatical competence enables learners to produce language that conforms to socially accepted norms, thus enhancing both accuracy and clarity in communication. Similarly, Harmer (2019) defines grammar as the system that describes how words are formed and combined to construct meaningful sentences. Swan (2020) further emphasizes that grammar provides rules that allow speakers to encode and interpret meaning through changes in word forms and sentence structures.

Among grammatical elements, tense remains one of the most challenging aspects for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Tense is used to indicate the time reference of actions or events and is essential for accurate communication. However, learners whose first language does not inflect verbs for time, such as Indonesian, often encounter difficulties in mastering English tense forms. In Indonesian, temporal information is generally expressed through adverbials rather than verb inflection, which contrasts sharply with English tense morphology. This structural difference frequently results in negative transfer and tense-related errors among Indonesian EFL learners (Damis et al., 2024).

Recent studies confirm that tense errors persist across different educational levels. Hasan and Liza (2022) found that students commonly made omission and misinformation errors in the use of the simple present tense when writing descriptive texts. Similarly, Astri et al. (2023) reported that learners struggled with subject-verb agreement and auxiliary usage, indicating incomplete mastery of tense rules. Research focusing on the simple past tense has also revealed that learners frequently misuse regular and irregular verb forms, particularly in written production tasks (Rahma et al., 2024).

Further evidence suggests that learners' difficulties with tense are influenced not only by first-language interference but also by limited exposure, insufficient practice, and incomplete grammatical understanding. Kuncoro and Fitriah (2024) argue that students' conceptual misunderstanding of tense distinctions contributes significantly to persistent grammatical errors. Likewise, Silaban and Manurung (2025) note that students often rely on memorization rather than functional understanding of tense usage, which hinders accurate application in real communicative contexts.

Despite these challenges, errors should not be viewed solely as indicators of failure. From a second language acquisition perspective, errors are an inevitable and even necessary part of the learning process. Norrish (1983) asserts that learner errors reflect developing language systems and provide valuable insights into learners' interlanguage development. In this sense, error analysis serves as a useful tool for identifying learning difficulties and improving instructional practices.

Based on these considerations, the study focuses on analysing students' errors in using the simple present tense, simple present continuous tense, and simple past tense because those tenses are commonly used, however; students usually face difficulties in applying those English tense rules accurately in both spoken and written tasks.

METHOD

This research adopted a **descriptive qualitative** approach to examine recurring errors made by students in the use of English tenses. The participants were first-semester students enrolled in the Communication Science program at Amikom University Yogyakarta. The study was conducted through a series of systematically organized research procedures.

First, data were collected through students' test results to identify instances of tense-related errors. Second, the students' errors in using simple present tense, simple present continuous tense, present perfect tense, simple future tense and simple past tense were identified. Third, the identified errors were classified into specific categories, namely omission, misinformation, and overgeneralization.

Subsequently, the errors were analysed and explained by examining their characteristics and determining possible sources. The final stage involved evaluating the errors after their description in order to clarify why the errors occurred and to provide an overall interpretation of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Errors are an inherent and unavoidable component of second language learning. Unlike first language acquisition, which develops naturally through exposure and interaction, second language learning requires learners to consciously engage with a new linguistic system that often differs substantially from their first language in terms of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation. As learners attempt to internalize and apply these unfamiliar linguistic features, errors are likely to occur, even when significant effort has been made to use the target language accurately. Thus, the production of errors in both spoken and written language should be understood as a natural consequence of the learning process rather than as an indication of failure (Ellis, 2020).

From the perspective of error analysis, learner errors provide valuable insights into the development of linguistic competence. Dulay et al. (1982) define errors as deviations in learners' spoken or written language that differ from the norms of proficient language use. Such deviations may appear in oral communication as well as in written compositions, reflecting areas in which learners have not yet fully mastered the target language system. In a similar vein, Brown (2020) characterizes errors as noticeable departures from native-speaker grammar that represent learners' interlanguage competence, emphasizing that errors are systematic and indicative of ongoing language development.

Errors may also be classified based on their effect on communication. According to this classification, errors are divided into global errors and local errors. Global errors significantly disrupt communication by preventing listeners or readers from understanding the intended message, often resulting in sentences that are difficult to comprehend. In contrast, local errors affect only specific elements of a sentence and do not substantially interfere with overall meaning, allowing communication to remain intelligible despite grammatical inaccuracies (Brown, 2020; Ellis, 2020). This distinction underscores the importance of evaluating errors not only by their grammatical form but also by their communicative impact.

Harse, Woodward and Burke (2000) eloquently express the view that errors are inherent in the process of language learning itself: "the openness of language leads to both creativity and error. That the process which leads to creativity is also the process which leads

to error is something we must accept; but clearly, since we cannot have one without the other, then we cannot ignore, confine or fail to appreciate or to encourage this process.”

Error analysis will find out person’s ability about language and obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, especially in English teaching and learning processes. Brown (1987) suggests that it is important to make a distinction of errors and mistakes in order to achieve a proper analysis of L2 learner’s errors.

Gustilo and Magno (2012) classify that the steps of analysing the errors, they are:

a. Identifying Errors

In this step, we have to compare the error sentence (the researcher mentions it as “original sentence”) with what seem to be normal or “correct sentence” in target language which correspond with them (the researcher mentions it as “reconstruction”)

b. Describing Errors

This next step, the errors are described and classified into kinds. This step can be done by several ways. According to Rod Ellis, the way to classify errors is:

1. Omission

Omission is the error of leaving out an item that is required for an utterance to be considered grammatical.

For example:

Rudy read a novel (original)

Rudy reads a novel (reconstruction)

These sentences leave out an item that is required to be considered grammatical. In order to get correct sentence, it should be ...*Rudy reads a novel...* because ...*Rudy...* is third singular subject that must be followed by the verb which is added by inflectional –s or –es.

2. Misinformation

Misinformation is the error of using one grammatical form.

For example:

I call Lucy last night (original)

I called Lucy last night (reconstructed)

These sentences contain misinformation in using the verb.

3. Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization is the error of using over grammatical form.

For example:

I readed the novel two days ago (original)

I read the two days ago (reconstruction)

The type of the test was short answer question. It was focused on simple present tense, simple present continuous tense, simple past tense, simple future tense, and present perfect tense. 20 short answer question tests were constructed which divided into 5 numbers of simple present tense, 3 number of simple present continuous tense, 5 numbers of simple past tense, 3 numbers of simple future tense, and 4 numbers of present perfect tense.

Table 1. Test Item

No	Tenses		Item Number	Total
1	simple present tense	Using verb in the positive sentence	6, 11, 16	5
		Using verb in the negative sentence	9	
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	10	
2	simple present continuous tense	Using verb in the positive sentence	8, 14	3
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	19	
3	simple past tense	Using regular/irregular verb in the sentence	3, 12	5
		Using verb in the negative sentence	4, 19	
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	17	
4	simple future tense	Using verb in the interrogative sentence	1, 13	3
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	18	
5	present perfect tense	Using verb in the positive sentence	20, 2	4
		Using verb in the negative sentence	7	
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	5	
			Total	20

The total of data sources was 660 of five tenses was taken from 33 participants. From the 660 sentences which are being analysed, there were correct and incorrect sentences. There were 320 incorrect sentences becoming data which must be analysed.

Table 2. The Data

No	Tenses		Incorrect Sentences
1	simple present tense	Using verb in the positive sentence	22
		Using verb in the negative sentence	40
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	25
2	simple present continuous tense	Using verb in the positive sentence	12
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	5
3	simple past tense	Using regular/irregular verb in the sentence	40

		Using verb in the negative sentence	48
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	34
4	simple future tense	Using verb in the interrogative sentence	5
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	4
5	present perfect tense	Using verb in the positive sentence	36
		Using verb in the negative sentence	27
		Using verb in the interrogative sentence	22
		Total	320

After analysing the errors sentences, the researcher identifies the percentage of errors made by the students. To identify the errors, the researcher used Bungin’s theory (2005),
 Note:

$$N = \frac{F_x}{N} \times 100\%$$

F_x : The amount of each kind of errors

N : The total amount of errors

A. Kinds of Errors in Using Tenses

1. Errors of Using Simple Present Tense

Table 3. Omission

No	Original	Reconstruction
1	Donita usually do her homework in the evening	Donita usually does her homework in the evening
2	We not use gadgets during group discussions in class.	We do not use gadgets during group discussions in class.
3	They practice their speaking regularly outside the class?	Do they practice their speaking regularly outside the class?

We can see that students do not use inflectional -es in the verb ...do... in the first sentence because ..Donita... is singular subject, the verb must be added by inflectional -s or -es and in the second and third sentences, the students do not use auxiliary verb ...do... Those kinds of errors are called omission.

Table 4. Misinformation

No	Original	Reconstruction
1	Donita usually doing her homework in the evening	Donita usually does her homework in the evening
2	We not use gadgets during group discussions in class.	We do not use gadgets during group discussions in class.
3	They practicing their speaking regularly outside the class?	Do they practice their speaking regularly outside the class?

The table shows that there are misinformation made by students. First, students use the incorrect verb of V-ing...doing... instead of using verb 1. They cannot recognize the correct verb form that refers to simple present tense; ...usually... shows the habitual activity; therefore, the verb must be in simple present tense ...does... . Meanwhile, the second and the third are incorrect because the students do not consider the use of auxiliary verb in the negative and yes-no question tense. The auxiliary ...do... has to be used in sentence no 2 for negative and no 3 for yes-no question.

Table 5. Overgeneralization

No	Original	Reconstruction
1	We do not uses gadgets during group discussions in class.	We do not use gadgets during group discussions in class.
2	We do not using gadgets during group discussions in class	
3	We does not using gadgets during group discussions in class	

The sentences in table 5. are incorrect because the students overgeneralize all negative forms of simple present tense always use auxiliary verbs by adding ...do...or...does... without considering the subject of the sentence. Normally, ...do... is used for plural subject and ...does... is for singular subject. Those sentences shows that the overgeneralization happens when students do not master the grammar correctly.

2. Errors of Using Simple Present Continuous Tense

Table 6. Omission and Misinformation

No	Original	Reconstruction
1	Now, Tom and Jerry study together.	Now, Tom and Jerry are studying together.
2	Now, Tom and Jerry studying together	
3	She makes a storyboard for her project at the moment.	She is making a storyboard for her project at the moment.
4	She making a storyboard for her project at the moment.	
5	The students not using the recording studio right now.	The students are not using the recording studio right now.

In the table above, it can be identified that omission and misinformation done by students when completing the present continuous tense. The second, fourth, and fifth sentences shows that the students omit ...to be...that is needed for present continuous tense. For the second and fifth sentences, to be ...are... must be used and for the second sentence, to be ...is... must be used. Misinformation can be found in the first and fourth sentences. The students have missed to use the correct of the verb formation instead they used verbs that does not refer to the present continuous such as ...study...and ...studying....

3. Errors of Using Present Perfect Tense

Table 7. Omission and Misinformation

No	Original	Reconstruction
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1	you have submit the final assignment yet?	Have you submitted the final assignment yet?
2	I have not meet my classmates since the last workshop.	I have not met my classmates since the last workshop.
3	They have did the film project.	They have done the film project.

The sentences in table 7. show that students have difficulty in forming the present perfect tense. The omission happens and it can be seen in the first sentence where the verb ...submit...is incorrect because the -ed is not used to form Verb 3 ..submitted.... The second and third sentences do not used the Verb 3 and misinformation appears in those sentences. In the second sentences the Verb 3...met... must be used and in the third sentences the Verb 3 ...done... is the correct form.

4. Errors of Using Simple Past Tense

Table 8. Omission and Misinformation

No	Original	Reconstruction
1	Two days ago, the students goes to the library	Two days ago, the students went to the library
2	I not cancel my reservation last night.	I did not cancel my reservation last night.
3	Andy was get the highest score in the grammar test last semester.	Andy got the highest score in the grammar test last semester.
4	She were go to Paris a few years ago.	She went to Paris a few years ago.
5	The study club members do their final project together last night.	The study club members did their final project together last night.

Omission and misinformation can be found in the use of simple past tense. It can be seen in table 8. The second sentence shows the omission because the auxiliary verb ...did... is not used. The first, third, fourth, and fifth sentences show the misinformation because they use incorrect verb forms that caused by the students' ability to understand the simple past tense. the verb ...does. and .do.... in the first and fifth sentence show simple present tense. Therefore, the verb 2 ...went... and ... did... must be used to express simple past tense. The third and fourth sentences also shows misinformation caused by ...was... and ...were... that are used to express simple past tense.

5. Errors of Using Simple Future Tense

Table 9. Omission and Overgeneralization

No	Original	Reconstruction
1	Don't worry, I fixing it.	Don't worry, I will fix it.
2	John will attending the seminar next month.	John will attend the seminar next month.
3	We take some videos for our presentation next weekend.	We will take some videos for our presentation next weekend.
4	The Communication Manager will not signing the contract.	The Communication Manager will not sign the contract.

Table 9. shows that in simple future tense omission and overgeneralization occur. The omission can be found in the first and third sentences because those sentences lack of the future marker ...will... The overgeneralization can be seen in the second and fourth sentences

where the students use ...will... to indicate simple future tense but neglecting the correct grammar rule. The second sentence verb form ...will attending... must be ...will attend... and in the fourth sentence, the verb form ...will not signing... must be ...will not sign....

B. The percentage of Errors

Table 10. Percentage of Errors

No	Tense	Error	
		Frequency	Percentage
1	Simple Present Tense	87	27%
2	Present Continuous Tense	17	5%
3	Present Perfect Tense	85	27%
4	Simple Past Tense	122	38%
5	Simple Future Tense	9	3%

Table 10. presents data on the rate of frequency errors made by first semester students of Communication Science. The frequency of errors in using simple past tense is considerably higher than the other tenses. So, we can conclude that the students have difficulties in using tenses especially simple past tense.

Table 11. Kinds of Errors

No	Kinds of error	Frequency	Percentage
1	Omission	161	50%
2	Misinformation	102	32%
3	Overgeneralization	57	18%

Table 11. shows that omission is the most common error made by the students where 50% of the error is omission. It seems that students tend to use incomplete form of tenses by missing out the correct tense elements.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis presented, this study concludes that omission errors were the most prevalent type of tense-related errors made by first-year students of the Communication Science program, accounting for 50% of all identified errors. Notably, errors related to the simple past tense occurred most frequently (38%), followed by errors in the simple present tense (27%), present perfect tense (27%), present continuous tense (5%) and simple future tense (3%). These findings indicate that learners experience substantial difficulty in applying basic tense forms accurately, particularly those required for routine academic and communicative contexts.

The results underscore the critical role of tense mastery in grammatical competence. Inaccurate tense usage may lead to ambiguity and misinterpretation, especially in written discourse where contextual clarification is limited. Therefore, improving students' understanding and application of tense forms is essential for enhancing overall language accuracy and communicative effectiveness.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest the need for a more integrated and systematic approach to grammar instruction. Lecturers are encouraged to implement targeted error-focused instruction by selectively identifying recurrent error patterns and addressing them through explicit explanation, contextualized practice, and formative feedback. Additionally, providing structured remedial support for students who demonstrate

persistent difficulties may contribute to more effective grammar acquisition and reduce recurring errors in tense usage.

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