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A comparison of students' errors in simple tenses

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze and compare errors made by students when using simple tenses in essay writing. The comparison was made after 6 months. The respondents of the study consisted of secondary school students from the Alpha and Beta classes and UiTM Kelantan groups which consisted of first and third diploma students from three different programmes. All respondents were asked to write an essay twice, with 6-month gap based on the same writing stimulus. In total, there were 107 essays written by respondents in each writing session, giving a grand total of 214 essays being analyzed. The results indicated an increase in errors amounting to 4.47% among students in the Alpha group but there is a reduction of 13.76% among the Beta group which was the weaker group. As for UiTM students, Diploma in Banking students showed an increase in the amount of errors by 8.2%. On contrary, Diploma in Business and Diploma in Information Management students showed a decrease in the amount by 23.79% and 3.4 %, respectively. The results of the study also indicated that there were some similarities in the types of errors made by the students.

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Introduction

In the process of teaching and learning, it is inevitable that learners make errors. These errors should not be ignored since they provide valuable input about learners' progress in their learning process. In analyzing learners' errors, it is important to make distinction between errors and mistakes. Brown (2000: 217) defines errors as "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker [which] reflects the competence of the learner". According to Richards (1985), "errors" refers to the use of a linguistic item in a way in which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning. A mistake, on the other hand, "refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a 'slip', in that it is failure to utilize a known system correctly" (Brown 2000: 217).

Corder (1981) takes a different perspective on this issue. He differentiates between "mistakes" and "errors" by referring the former refers as "errors of performance" and the latter as "errors of competence". "Mistakes", according to Corder (1981) are characteristically unsystematic while "errors" are systematic. Another scholar, James (1998), distinguishes the meaning between "errors" and "mistakes" based on the criterion of self-correctibility. They contend that an "error" cannot be self-corrected because of the learner's insufficient knowledge in the target language, but a "mistake" can be self-corrected.

Despite the above distinction, for the purpose of this research paper, the term "errors" will be used to refer to any wrong usage of verbs involving simple tenses whether or not the respondents were able to make correction on their own. The analyzed items, however, were restricted to some predetermined parameters outlined by the researchers. More about this is explained in the Methodology section.

Tracing back on the issue of learners making language errors, the scenario was once viewed as a sign of not having adequately acquired a learned item. For this reason, many

scholars were of the opinion that errors should be avoided. This, according to Lengo (1995) cited in Erdogan (2005) was caused by "the teacher's false impression that output should be an authentic representation of input".

The above view however changed when the society started to move away from structuralist views of language and behaviourist views of human learning. Linguists began to look at learners' language errors in a new way, leading to a suggestion that learners' errors are, in fact, very important since it provides insight into how far a learner has progressed in acquiring a language, and showing how much more the learner needs to learn (Bartlett, 2002). Adding to this view, Wenfren (2010) highlighted that learners' errors, to a large degree, are not caused by the influenced of their first language. Instead, their errors reflect some common learning strategies.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that errors play two important functions. First, they revealed the true state of second language learners' proficiency of the new language they are learning at a particular point in time. Second, they also revealed what the second language learners do not know and what they have internalized of the new language system (Siti Hamin Stapa and Mohd Mustafa Izahar, 2010).

Due to the new perception towards errors, errors analysis has received considerable attention from many researchers. It is believed that studying the English language proficiency levels of the students with the aim of identifying, analyzing, and classifying their errors will reveal the most frequent errors and areas of linguistic difficulties. When a comparison is made between the two essays written by the same students, valuable information about their performance could be obtained.

With this justification, this study aims to compare students' performance in using simple tenses and verb structure in their essays after 6-month gap. This study particularly focuses on the use of simple tenses since it was found that many students make

errors in the usage of these tenses although exposure to both the simple present tense and past tense is given at a very early stage in the teaching of English language at schools in this country. Although simple tenses include the simple present, the simple past and the simple future, only the simple present and the simple past tenses were analyzed in the current study. This is because, the stimuli given for the students to write essays in this study was narrative in nature which required the students to use more of the simple past and simple present tenses than the simple future.

The simple present form takes place when references are made to the “timeless” states, events and actions or temporary states which include the present moment. It is also used to express habitual action and to make future reference in which it is said to have overtones of “definiteness” such as in timetable announcements (Jackson, 1990). The simple past tense, on the other hand, will occur when the states, events and actions in the past are viewed as having no connection with the present but are located at a definite time in past time. According to Jackson (1990), it is usually used to narrate the sequence of actions or events.

In order to achieve the objective of this study, the researchers studied the essays written by the students with the focus being given on the simple tenses and verb structure. The students were asked to write two essays with a gap of 6 months based on the same stimulus. The respondents involved in this study consisted of two groups; secondary school students and UiTM Kelantan students. The first group were form three and form five school students from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Salor, Kota Bharu, Kelantan. They were from the Alpha and Beta classes with the former being a better class than the latter. The second group was UiTM Kelantan group which consisted of first semester diploma students of Banking Studies (BM 112), and the third semester diploma students in Business Studies (BM 111) and Information Management (IS 110).

Methodology

The data for this study were collected in two stages. Among the school students, the first data collection was done during the third month of the school year. As for UiTM students, it was at the end of the semester. The second stage of data collection was done 6 months later. At this time, the school students were continuing their studies in the same forms while UiTM students moved on to the following semesters. Since this study involved analyzing students’ progress, it is important that same respondents were retained in both sessions of essay writing. The sampling technique used in this study was a cluster sampling technique mainly because it was the most convenient technique to the researchers.

As shown in the above table, there were 7 groups of respondents involved in this study. These were Form 3 Alpha, Form 3 Beta, Form 5 Alpha, Form 5 Beta, first semester Diploma in Banking student (BM 112), and third semester Diploma in Business Studies (BM 111) and Information Management (IS111) students.

The source of data used in the study was taken from the essays written by the respondents based on the writing stimulus taken from Form 1 exercise book (Khoo and Lim, 1999: 83) (see Appendix A) which contains an essay picture. From the researchers’ point of view, this exercise is suitable for all respondents to handle “as there was little language support involved thereby requiring the respondents to demonstrate their

true ability and proficiency in the language” (Arshad Abd. Samad et al., 2002).

Data Analysis

In determining the correct use of the simple tenses for the purpose of this study, general parameters were used as a guideline. The researchers determined the correct use of simple tenses by restricting themselves to the following conditions of use:

1. Only the correct and wrong use of the simple tenses in active sentences with reference to context level (not sentence level) was considered.
2. Only Subject-Verb concord in the correct tense was considered and not other sentence structures.
3. Only action verb was included (e.g. He *looked* at me). “Be” verb (e.g. She *was* scared) and auxiliary verbs (e.g. Who *is* coming?) were excluded.
4. Action verbs in statements involving adjectivals passive voice, infinitives, modal auxiliaries, the base word after “made”, “make” and “let”, sentences with missing “be” verb, imperatives in which the base word is used and conditional sentences were excluded.

Apart from the above, incomprehensible sentences and those where both the simple present and simple past tenses might be used were excluded from the analysis. Besides, the use of inappropriate lexical choice was not considered as wrong unless it hinders comprehension which results in the sentence being excluded from the analysis. In the case where the phrase *Do/Did/Does + Verb* is used in the writing, the verb must appear in the base form in order for the sentence to be considered as correct. Finally, any misspelled verbs were regarded as wrong answers. In general, incorrect use of the tense occurs when the following rules are broken:

1. Use of the simple present instead of the simple past
2. Use of the simple past instead of the simple present
3. Use of the simple present instead of other tenses, except for the simple past
4. Use of the simple past instead of other tenses except for the simple present
5. Use of the simple present instead of gerunds
1. Use of the simple past instead of gerunds

Based on the above parameters, the researchers identified the errors made by the students.

The identified errors were then categorized accordingly. The total amount of the errors for each category was then divided by the total number of attempts to use simple tenses before the amount was converted into percentages. This calculation was done for both the first and second student essays.

Results and Discussion

Table 3 below shows the amount and categories of errors obtained from this study. The difference in percentage between essay 1 and essay 2 provides information on whether the students’ performance improved or otherwise.

The above table indicates the amount of errors and the differences in the amount after 6 months. The results show that students from Form 3 Alpha and Form 5 Alpha demonstrated deterioration in their ability to use simple tenses and verb structure in their essays. The amount of errors increased by 9.76% and 2.97% respectively. The Beta group, which was the weaker groups, however, recorded a decrease in their number of errors. Form 3 Beta students showed a decrease of 16.53% in errors while Form 5 Beta recorded a decrease of 7.33%. As for

UiTM students, BM112 students showed an increase in the amount of errors by 8.2%. On contrary, the students of BM111 and IS110 showed a decrease in the amount by 23.79% and 3.4 %, respectively.

Aside from the above findings, the results also indicate that category 1 errors (using the simple present instead of the simple past) is the largest type of errors made by the students. The occurrence of category 1 errors as the largest type of errors could be greatly influenced by the way the students write an essay in Bahasa Malaysia. In the Malay language, students do not have to worry about differentiating the use of the simple present and the simple past since the correct use of tenses is not indicated through inflections in the Malay language.

Students' difficulty to use the correct tenses as indicated in the result of this study is also reflected in the results of a research carried out by Maharjan (2009). She analyzed the various grammatical errors made by the Nepali students and gained perceptions of the native English teachers, Nepali English teachers and non-Nepali English teachers (other than England, America, Australia, New Zealand and Canada) on these errors. The results of her study revealed that tense holds the highest level of difficulty for the students where they have committed errors at 25.16%, that was the largest portion of grammatical errors made by the respondents of her study. The result obtained by Rosli and Edwin (1989) from a study conducted 20 years before Maharjan's showed that this scenario seemed to be prevalent for many years. Rosli and Edwin (1989) studied the errors made by Form Four students in their English compositions. They found that the highest percentage of errors is in the use of verb forms.

While the findings from the current study helped to explain the situation pertaining to the student's ability to use the simple tenses in their writing, this study was conducted with two main limitations. First, the area of analysis was limited to the parameters determined earlier by the researchers. Should the scope of analysis be extended, different results might be obtained. Secondly, this study did not distinguish between errors and mistakes since the issue of whether or not the respondents were able to make correction is beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusion

The study concluded that Form 3 Alpha students experienced an increase in the amount of errors by 9.76%. An increment is also experienced by Form 5 Alpha students amounting to 2.97%. In comparison, Form 3 Beta students showed some improvement with a decrease of 16.53% in errors made by the students. An encouraging remark is also noted among Form 5 Beta students who showed a decrease of 7.33% of errors. One possible explanation to this relates to the amount of reinforcement on the teaching items given by the teachers. Since the Beta group students were weaker in their academic performance as compared to the Alpha group students, there is a great possibility that more reinforcement of the teaching items was given to the Beta groups to ensure that they are not left behind in the learning process.

As for UiTM students, BM112 students showed an increased number of errors with 37.69% errors in their first essays as compared to 45.89% in their second essays. Both groups of BM111 and IS110 students, however, experienced a decrease in errors, amounting to 23.79% and 3.46%, respectively. The decreasing number of errors by BM 112 and IS111 students who were initially in their third semester before

moving to their fourth semester could provide an indicator of the effectiveness of the current teaching approach at UiTM. Since the medium of instruction at UiTM is the English language, the students gained greater exposure of English as they took up more courses in their studies. They also needed to use the language to do assignments for their various courses. This "real-life" practice has definitely helped to improve the students' proficiency in the language.

From the results, it was also noted that there are some similarities in the types of errors that occur among the school students and UiTM students. It was found that the largest type of error made by all students in each group was category 1 errors whereby the simple present tense is used in a past context. The second common type of errors is category 8 errors, representing the various kinds of errors made by the students which cannot be placed under categories 1-7.

The scenario whereby the simple tenses are used wrongly by the students should be given serious attention as most of our students are still struggling in using these two tenses. The position of category 1 errors which appear as the largest type of errors provides some support, to what is claimed by Wyatt (1973) who reported that "the commonest tense error is the use of the present simple in a past context or of the past simple in a present context". As the simple tenses are reiterated in our English lesson from primary to secondary school levels, it is expected that the frequency of these errors be reduced. However, the types of errors that the students made might remain the same. One possible explanation to this could relate to intralingual and developmental errors which reflect "the learners competence at a particular stage, and illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition" (Richards, 1974). This result in some similarities in the order of the first two most frequent types of errors in all respondents of this study, as shown in the results obtained.

Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

As the implications of this study, it is important to note the following. First, teachers should realize that good students need guidance and help as much as the weak ones. This can be seen from the results in the first part of the study which indicate that although the Alpha group students performed better than the Beta group students, they tend to show poorer performance after some time compared to the latter. The Beta groups showed an improvement after perhaps, being given greater attention by the teachers.

Second, based on the conclusion that category 1 errors is the most common type of errors, language teachers should always emphasize the teaching of the simple present and simple past tenses since they are the basic and extremely important tenses in the English language. When new grammatical items are taught to students, the exercises to reinforce the understanding of these items should be done in an integrated manner to emphasize these two simple tenses. This does not only encourage students to notice the target form, but also the high frequency in the use of the simple tenses will help to draw learner's attention to the target form.

The results from the study also suggest that real life usage of grammar items can help them improve their language proficiency as shown by the third semester students of BM111 and IS110. Although these students did not take up any more English classes, they need to use the language in completing their assignments for other courses. This can be seen as a form of reinforcement in the students' English language learning

process. Thus, it is strongly recommended that English curriculum includes more real life practice and usage to make the students better aware of the correct usage of English grammar. It is hoped that with the greater awareness of the correct use of English grammar, our second language learners will become not only fluent, but also accurate when using the language.

Suggestions for Further Research

While this study was limited to some predetermined parameters, future research could be extended by incorporating other aspects of English grammar which were not included in this study. Similarly, this study could be repeated using more essay samples and using the students of other higher learning institutions from various programmes. Future research could also be conducted to investigate further into teachers' amount of emphasis given to students of different proficiency levels which can provide support to justify the results that the weaker students in the Beta groups performed better in their second essay writing compared to the better students in the Alpha groups.

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Table 1: Distribution of the number of essay scripts written by the respondents

Students' levels	Name of School/Inst.	No. of scripts (First data collection)	No. of scripts (Second data collection)
Form 3 Alpha	SMK Salor	21	21
Form 3 Beta	SMK Salor	19	19
Form 5 Alpha	SMK Salor	22	22
Form 5 Beta	SMK Salor	8	8
Dip. in Banking (BM112)	<u>UiTM Machang, Kel.</u>	15	15
Dip. in Bus. Studies (BM111)	<u>UiTM Machang, Kel.</u>	7	7
Dip. in Info. Mgmt. (IS110)	<u>UiTM Machang, Kel.</u>	15	15
TOTAL		107	107

