



AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING TENSES AT SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL

Atrianus Toni

Universitas Kapuas Sintang, Indonesia

Article info	ABSTRACT
<p>Corresponding Author:</p> <p>Atrianus Toni atrianustoni3@gmail.com Universitas Kapuas Sintang, Indonesia</p>	<p>Mastery of English tenses is a fundamental component in achieving proficiency in English grammar. However, many senior high school students continue to face persistent challenges in understanding and using tenses correctly. This study aims to analyze the types and causes of students' difficulties in learning English tenses at the senior high school level. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through classroom observations, student questionnaires, and interviews with English teachers. The findings reveal that the major difficulties encountered by students include confusion in differentiating tense functions, limited vocabulary, lack of practice, and interference from their first language. Moreover, instructional approaches that do not emphasize contextual usage also contribute to students' misunderstanding. Based on the results, the study suggests that teachers adopt more communicative and contextualized strategies in teaching tenses, such as integrating grammar with speaking and writing activities. This research provides insights into improving grammar instruction to support better learning outcomes in EFL classrooms.</p> <p>Keywords: <i>English tenses, students' difficulties, grammar learning, senior high school, EFL</i></p>
<p>This article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)</p>	

INTRODUCTION

English is widely regarded as a global language and plays a crucial role in international communication, education, science, and technology. As a lingua franca, English facilitates cross-cultural dialogue and access to global knowledge (Crystal, 2019). In Indonesia, English is a compulsory subject in the national curriculum, particularly at the senior high school level, and is considered vital for students' academic and professional advancement (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020).

Among the core components of English grammar, tenses serve as a fundamental aspect that indicates the time of an action or state. Mastery of tenses is essential for students to construct meaningful and grammatically correct sentences in both spoken and written communication. As Richards and Schmidt (2015) note, tenses form the backbone of sentence

structure in English, allowing speakers to locate events in time and express complex temporal relationships.

However, learning tenses poses a significant challenge for many senior high school students. The complexity of English verb forms, the differences between Indonesian and English grammatical structures, and the abstract nature of time representation contribute to students' difficulties in understanding and applying tenses accurately. Indonesian students often experience "negative language transfer," where their native language interferes with second language acquisition (Odlin, 2021). Numerous students struggle to distinguish between various tenses, choose the appropriate tense for a given context, and produce error-free sentences. These difficulties often lead to poor performance in grammar assessments and hinder their overall language proficiency.

Previous studies have highlighted that factors such as ineffective teaching methods, limited exposure to authentic language use, and insufficient practice can exacerbate students' problems in learning grammar. For instance, Nasution and Sari (2022) found that many grammar lessons in Indonesian classrooms are delivered using rote memorization without contextual engagement, resulting in passive learning and low retention. Similarly, Putri and Wahyuni (2021) observed that students often lack opportunities for meaningful use of English outside the classroom, limiting their ability to internalize grammar rules.

Despite these findings, there remains a need for deeper exploration into the specific types of difficulties students face when learning tenses, especially in the context of Indonesian senior high schools. As noted by Yunita and Tiarina (2023), studies focusing on learner-specific challenges in mastering English grammar are still limited and require further empirical investigation.

Understanding these challenges is essential for developing effective instructional strategies that can support students in overcoming their learning barriers. This study aims to analyze the types and causes of students' difficulties in learning English tenses at the senior high school level. By identifying the specific areas where students struggle and examining the underlying factors, this research seeks to provide insights that can inform English teachers, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers in improving grammar instruction and enhancing students' learning outcomes.

This study aims to analyze the types and causes of students' difficulties in learning English tenses at the senior high school level. By identifying the specific areas where students struggle and examining the underlying factors, this research seeks to provide insights that can inform English teachers, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers in improving grammar instruction and enhancing students' learning outcomes.

Literature Review

Definition of Tenses:

Tense refers to the grammatical category that locates a situation in time. English has twelve tenses, which are categorized into present, past, and future, each with four aspects: simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous (Azar, 2002). These tenses enable speakers to express temporal relations clearly and accurately. According to Comrie (2017), tense systems

help construct a coherent narrative by indicating the sequence, duration, and completion of actions.

Importance of Tenses in Language Learning:

Mastery of tenses is crucial for learners to communicate accurately and fluently. Errors in tenses may lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding, particularly in academic or professional settings. Tenses also reflect the learner's grammatical competence and fluency in using the language (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2016). As noted by Thornbury (2019), the ability to use tenses appropriately is a key marker of language proficiency and a predictor of success in language exams and real-life communication.

Furthermore, tense mastery is closely linked to cognitive development in second language acquisition. Ellis (2020) suggests that learners who develop a strong conceptual understanding of time and aspect are better able to transfer grammatical knowledge across different contexts.

Previous Studies:

Prior research by Mukminatien (2011) and Suryati (2017) highlights that most Indonesian students find tenses difficult due to their structural complexity and differences from the Indonesian language system. The morphological simplicity of Bahasa Indonesia, which lacks inflectional tense markers, contrasts sharply with the conjugation patterns required in English (Setiawan, 2021). Moreover, the influence of the mother tongue and the lack of communicative practice have also been identified as contributing factors.

More recently, Harahap and Siregar (2023) emphasized that limited feedback and lack of personalized grammar instruction often hinder students' improvement. In a study involving 120 Indonesian high school students, they found that only 37% could correctly use the present perfect tense in context, citing confusion with its form and function as a major barrier. In addition, Supriyadi and Mulyani (2022) pointed out that English tenses are frequently taught in isolation, which impairs students' ability to apply them in integrated language tasks.

These findings underline the importance of contextualized grammar teaching and increased opportunities for meaningful practice. As the challenges are multifaceted ranging from pedagogical approaches to linguistic transfer, comprehensive intervention is necessary to address students' difficulties effectively.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. The goal was to describe the phenomena of students' difficulties in learning tenses based on their experiences and perceptions. Participants included 30 students from grade XI SK of senior high school of Panca Setya Sintang in Indonesia. The instruments used were: A questionnaire consisting of 20 close-ended and open-ended questions; Semi-structured interviews with both teachers and selected students; Classroom observations to confirm and support findings. Data was collected over a period of two months through classroom visits, online interviews, and

distribution of questionnaires both digitally and manually. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were categorized based on recurrent themes such as conceptual understanding, practice opportunities, and teaching methods.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Student Questionnaire Findings

Out of 30 students:

- a. 83% found past perfect tense to be the most difficult
- b. 75% admitted to often confusing simple past and present perfect
- c. 65% said they lacked enough practice using tenses in real contexts

Interview with Teachers

Teachers reported that:

- a. Students often memorize rules without understanding the concept
- b. Many students translate directly from Indonesian, leading to errors
- c. Lack of exposure to authentic English materials hinders their learning

Classroom Observation

Observations indicated that:

- a. Teaching was largely grammar-focused, with limited contextual application
- b. Students were passive learners, few opportunities for communicative use
- c. Teachers often focused on rule explanation rather than application

Discussion

Conceptual Understanding

One major cause of difficulty is that students learn tenses as isolated rules rather than seeing them in context. For example, the past perfect tense is often taught without linking it to narrative or storytelling contexts.

Mother Tongue Interference

The Indonesian language does not use tenses in the same way as English. Therefore, students find it hard to understand the need to distinguish between “I went” and “I have gone.”

Lack of Practice

Students reported limited practice outside the classroom. They rely mostly on textbooks and exercises rather than speaking or writing activities that require real-time tense use.

Teaching Methods

Traditional methods focusing on grammar drills are ineffective. Interactive and student-centered methods such as role-plays, games, and storytelling are rarely implemented.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that senior high school students in Indonesia face multiple difficulties in mastering English tense. These include a lack of conceptual understanding, interference from the native language, insufficient communicative practice, and traditional teaching methods that emphasize rote learning over application. Some suggestion could be taken forwards such as:

- a. Teachers should adopt more interactive methods such as task-based learning, role-playing, and contextualized grammar instruction.
- b. Students should be encouraged to use English in everyday communication and practice grammar in speaking and writing.
- c. Curriculum designers should integrate contextual grammar lessons rather than isolated rule memorization.
- d. Schools should support language exposure through English clubs, online communication, and multimedia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Azar, B. S. (2002). *Understanding and using English grammar* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (2016). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course* (3rd ed.). Heinle ELT.
- Comrie, B. (2017). *Tense* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2019). *English as a global language* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2020). *Understanding second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Harahap, A., & Siregar, M. (2023). Indonesian learners' difficulties in mastering English perfect tenses. *Journal of Language and Education Research*, 9(1), 12–24.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Longman.
- Ministry of Education and Culture. (2020). *Kurikulum 2013: Pedoman pelaksanaan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris*. Kemendikbud.
- Mukminatien, N. (2011). The problems of teaching English grammar in Indonesian high schools. *TEFLIN Journal*, 22(2), 135–150.
- Nasution, N., & Sari, I. A. (2022). Teaching grammar through contextual approach: An alternative for Indonesian EFL students. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 7(1), 89–104.
- Odlin, T. (2021). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Putri, R. M., & Wahyuni, D. (2021). The role of exposure and practice in grammar acquisition among Indonesian learners. *ELT Journal Indonesia*, 9(3), 207–219.

- Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. (2015). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics* (5th ed.). Routledge.
- Setiawan, A. (2021). Grammatical interference of Indonesian EFL learners in tense usage. *Linguistics and Education Journal*, 5(2), 101–114.
- Supriyadi, T., & Mulyani, N. (2022). The effectiveness of integrated grammar instruction for Indonesian high school students. *International Journal of Language Teaching and Education*, 6(2), 58–70.
- Suryati, N. (2017). Tense mastery among Indonesian senior high school students: A case study. *Bahasa dan Seni*, 45(1), 75–84.
- Thornbury, S. (2019). *How to teach grammar*. Pearson Education.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yunita, R., & Tiarina, Y. (2023). Investigating learners' struggles with English tenses in Indonesian classrooms. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra*, 11(2), 221–230.
- Tussakdiah, N. H. (2021). Kualitas Pelayanan dan Potongan Harga Terhadap Kepuasan Konsumen di Giant Extra Alaya Samarinda. *Psikoborneo: Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi*, 9(2), 250. <https://doi.org/10.30872/psikoborneo.v9i2.5961>