

***Tangled Timelines:
A Qualitative Exploration of ESL Challenges in Acquiring the English Past Tense***

Ewana Mohamad Yusop, Maktab Duli Pengiran Muda Al-Muhtadee Billah,
Brunei Darussalam
Nur Qistin Mohd Harunthmarin, Maktab Duli Pengiran Muda Al-Muhtadee Billah,
Brunei Darussalam

The Asian Conference on Education 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper aims to discover and identify the challenges encountered by ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in their pursuit of mastering the English past tense. The acquisition of this grammatical aspect constitutes a crucial step in achieving language proficiency, yet it remains a challenge for many non-native speakers. Most ESL students in Brunei sit for the English Cambridge O Levels at the end of their secondary school education and to obtain the highest band in the Writing paper, students must demonstrate highly accurate use of complex spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Despite having been taught the past tense rule over their 12 years of studying English, some ESL students in Brunei still face difficulties in applying the past tense during assessments. Hence, the main objective of this research was to identify the underlying causes hindering students' application of this grammatical concept, especially during assessments. This exploratory case study uncovered twelve ESL students' challenges in applying the past tense through a self-reflective activity. The students' responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common, recurring themes and patterns. The themes derived from the data were: time limitations, confusion of irregular verb spelling, lack of practice, and translating of mother tongue to English. The findings have implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers, aiming to inform the development of targeted interventions that can empower ESL learners to navigate the complexities of the English past tense more effectively.

Keywords: ESL Learners, Grammar Past Tense, Qualitative Case Study

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

One of the assessment objectives of the Brunei-Cambridge English Language O-level is for students to be able to communicate successfully and show language competency. To obtain the highest band in the Cambridge O Level Paper 1 (the Writing paper), students are required to use highly accurate use of complex spelling, punctuation, and grammar. However, despite having been taught the past tense rule over their years of studying English, O-level students in Year 12 are still facing difficulties in applying the past tense during assessments. The main objective of this research was to identify the underlying causes hindering their application of this grammatical concept.

Background of Research

English language education in Brunei has undergone substantial development over the years. The context of ESL education in Brunei is unique due to the nation's bilingual status, with Malay as the official language and English as a second language. It is essential for Brunei's ESL students to achieve a high level of proficiency because this country's bilingual environment has made English a vital tool for communication, education, and economic development. For instance, in the field of education, most of the subjects learned in Bruneian schools are communicated in English, thus English as ESL proficiency is strongly encouraged in Bruneian primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

English language proficiency is not limited to these 12 years of education; in order to continue their education, students must obtain at least a Credit in English Language at O Level, further emphasizing the importance of English proficiency. The O Levels exam gives significant weight to evaluating students' language proficiency, including their mastery of intricate spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The highest band on the writing portion of the exam requires a high level of grammatical accuracy, which includes using the past tense correctly.

Indeed, the English Language in Brunei now plays the role of 'gatekeeper' whereby with a good grasp of the target language, one would almost be likely guaranteed a secure future. This 'gatekeeper' role largely explains the dire need for the Ministry of Education to find ways of heightening students' proficiency level in English. Without credit in their GCE English O-level examinations, students will find it almost impossible to obtain places to study at the local universities or any of the higher institutions. The past tense in English is particularly significant because it is important for communicating past actions and events. Understanding the past tense is crucial for clear communication and is frequently necessary for success in academics.

However, many ESL students in Brunei continue to have difficulty correctly applying this grammatical concept despite receiving rigorous instruction and exposure to it throughout their schooling years, particularly in high-stakes exams like the O Levels. These issues call for a deeper look because they are symptomatic of a larger problem with Brunei's ESL classrooms. Therefore, the main goal of this study is to investigate the root causes that make it difficult for Bruneian ESL students to use the past tense correctly, especially when it comes to assessment situations. To achieve this, an exploratory case study approach was employed, involving twelve ESL students. This study sought to learn more about the specific difficulties these learners have in correctly using the past tense through a self-reflective activity.

The results of this study will have important ramifications for many stakeholders involved in Brunei's ESL education system, such as teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers. Targeted interventions can be created to effectively address these issues by understanding the difficulties ESL students have learning the past tense. In the end, this study enhances ESL instruction in Brunei by giving students the skills and confidence they need to successfully negotiate the complexities of English grammar, particularly the past tense.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to uncover underlying factors and causes that contribute to ESL learners' challenges in effectively using the past tense, especially during assessments. The ultimate objective is to inform pedagogy implications such as effective interventions that empower ESL learners to overcome challenges of the English past tense with greater success and confidence.

Research Questions

Hence the following research question this paper seeks to answer:

RQ: What are the recurring themes that emerge from the self-reflective responses on ESL challenges with the English Past Tense?

Literature Review

The acquisition of grammatical aspects, such as verb tenses, is a fundamental component of language proficiency for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. Among these aspects, the English past tense plays a pivotal role in conveying actions and events that occurred in the past. However, mastering the past tense remains a formidable challenge for many non-native speakers, including ESL students in Brunei. Despite years of English language education, these learners continue to struggle with the accurate application of the past tense, especially during assessments. This literature review explores the challenges faced by ESL learners in mastering the English past tense, provides insights into the causes of these challenges, and highlights the implications for education in Brunei.

Significance of the English Past Tense

The English past tense is a cornerstone of effective communication and language proficiency. It enables learners to express actions and events in relation to time, allowing for the clear and accurate conveyance of narratives and descriptions. In academic settings, mastery of the past tense is essential for writing, comprehension, and overall language competence (Hinkel, 2002). Achieving precision in its usage is vital for ESL students aiming to excel in English language assessments, including the Cambridge O Levels.

Challenges Faced by ESL Learners

Studies into the challenges of the learning of English Past tense have been documented well in the literature. Common issues faced by ESL students in learning the concept are due to English verb inflections and irregularities. One prominent challenge lies in the inflection of regular and irregular verbs in the past tense. ESL learners often struggle with the diverse patterns of verb conjugation, particularly the irregular forms (Eckman, 2004). The inconsistent spelling and pronunciation of irregular verbs can lead to confusion and errors.

Studies conducted in similar contexts to Brunei, such as Malaysia, show ESL students are continuously facing difficulties in past tense, such as a study by Manokaran, Ramalingam & Adriana (2013), with students often making errors in tense shifts and misconceptions of the past tense of the auxiliary verb 'be'. Similarly, Jabeen, Kazemian and Shahbaz (2015) claim that incorrect usage of verb tenses are the most common errors found in Iranian ESL students.

The influence of a learner's native language on the acquisition of the past tense is a well-documented phenomenon (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Guo, Liu & Chen, 2014). Often due to the differences in language mechanics, there is an existence of negative transfer which will cause ESL learners to commit errors when they attempt to either speak or write sentences in the second language (Munchen. Arsad, & Razali, 2021). Furthermore, the frequency of negative language transfer occurs higher in low level language learners as they rely on their native language in terms of certain language rules and structures, for example they tend to over-generalise the target language rules during sentence constructions (Febriyanti & Sundari, 2016). This is the case in Brunei, whereby learners may transfer Malay language structures and tenses to English, resulting in incorrect usage (Deterding & Sharbawi, 2013; Deterding & Suhaimi, 2021).

Furthermore, effective language acquisition requires regular practice, especially in applying complex grammatical rules like the past tense. ESL students may not receive adequate opportunities to practice and reinforce their understanding of this aspect (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Finally, ESL learners often face time constraints when completing written tasks. This can add pressure and hinder their ability to accurately apply the past tense (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006), especially during high-stakes assessments like the Cambridge O Levels.

Significance of Study

As the status of the English Language continues to take hold, it becomes necessary to understand the needs of ESL learners in order to assist their learning and for teachers to better inform their teaching pedagogy. The contribution of this study to the body of knowledge of ESL teaching of English past tense is believed to be valuable. Understanding ESL challenges in acquiring the English past tense will allow for the following contributions:

- a. ESL educators in Brunei and ESL learners would be able to identify the challenges related to the English past tense and provide targeted instruction that addresses these difficulties.
- b. Curriculum designers would be able to incorporate more opportunities for ESL learners to practice and reinforce their understanding of the past tense, both in written and spoken contexts based on the findings of this study.
- c. Policymakers and educators could consider adaptations in assessment formats to promote accurate application of the past tense in assessments.

Hence, recognizing the challenges of ESL learners and the underlying causes of their inability to grasp the past tense is essential for improving language education in Brunei.

Method

This study utilizes an exploratory case study design. This research was conducted over a two-week period, involving a group of Year 12 ESL students, that consists of 7 boys and 5 girls. The study was constrained by the fact that the researchers had access to only one English O

Level class, and coincidentally it was one of the researchers' own classes, resulting in a limited pool of subjects available for the research.

Students' Task: Reflection Task

The reflection task was designed to help teachers understand the student's understanding of past tense and the difficulties they faced in applying it during tests and exams. The task involved asking students to write short paragraphs explaining their understanding of past tense and the challenges they faced using it. The Table 1 shows the questions asked:

Table 1: Self Reflective Questions

No	Self-reflective questions
1	What do you understand about past tense?
2	Why do you think it was difficult for you to grasp past tense before this, especially during tests?
3	What are the steps that you have learned to improve your knowledge in past tense?

Findings and Discussion

The students' responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common, recurring themes and patterns of students' challenges of learning and applying the English past tense. The constant comparative method was used in the data analysis and the refinement of open codes to axial codes and eventually into themes and sub-themes. The first step of this process is the reduction of data into manageable units and codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction involves the selection, simplification, abstraction, and transformation of the raw data. By the process of data reduction, pieces of information from the data can be combined into categories and themes.

The themes that were derived from the data were as follows:

- 1) Time limitations during examinations
Most students said they had a basic understanding of past tense but struggled to apply it correctly during tests and exams due to time constraints and feeling pressured to complete the tasks within the time limits. Students also mentioned due to time constraints they were not able to check and recheck their writing to spot for errors in their use of tenses.
- 2) Confusions of irregular verbs spelling
Students reported their confusion in terms of the spellings of irregular verbs such as 'buyed' and 'bought'. Regular verbs in English typically form their past tense by adding "-ed" to the base form (e.g, walk-walked), whereas irregular verbs change their base form entirely (e.g., go-went).
- 3) Lack of practice
Students admitted that they lacked writing or grammar practice and did not read widely to be more familiar with the English language grammar.
- 4) Translating Malay to English
Others stated that they needed time to translate from their mother tongue language when writing, which caused them to rush to finish their tasks and not have any remaining time to check their work.

To address the challenges faced by students as identified through the analysis, teachers can provide more targeted instructions to address time constraints and students' lack of practise. Interventions could be done to address confusion of irregular verbs spelling. Research on verb conjugation on second language acquisition has shown that distinguishing between regular and irregular verbs is a crucial step in learning the past tense (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). Additionally, classroom instruction should include contextual learning. Studies have emphasized the importance of using context, such as storytelling or dialogues to help learners understand the practical application of past tense forms (Nation & Chung, 2009).

Furthermore, fostering bilingualism by encouraging students to integrate their mother tongue, Malay, with English can substantially enhance language learning. It is important to change the perspective from viewing the native language as an interference to identifying its potential as a valuable educational tool. This approach aims to raise students' awareness of how they might transfer linguistic structures from Malay into English. By understanding these influences, students can make more knowledgeable language choices, avoid common errors, and ultimately become more proficient in both languages. This linguistic awareness represents the first step in overcoming language challenges, empowering students to navigate the complexities of language acquisition with greater confidence and effectiveness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research provided valuable insight into identifying the challenges, issues, and gaps of learning of second language learners, in particular Year 12 English O Level students in Brunei Darussalam, in grasping the concept of past tense. It is important to note that this research was conducted under a limited scope, thus, future studies are recommended to include a larger and more varied sample of ESL learners as participants. A greater and more diverse participant pool will provide a more wide-ranging understanding of the challenges associated with the English past tense in Brunei's educational context. Expanding the participant pool in future research will improve the generalizability of findings and allow for a deeper examination of the challenges related to the English past tense. This will contribute to the development of more effective strategies and interventions for ESL education in Brunei.

References

- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests*. Oxford University Press.
- Chen, W., & Liu, G. Q. (2021). Effectiveness of Corrective Feedback: Teachers' Perspectives. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 9(1), 23-42.
- Deterding, D., & Sharbawi, S. (2013). *Brunei English: A new variety in a multilingual society* (Vol. 4). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Deterding, D., & Suhaimi, A. (2021). Comparison of Malay and English Texts in Brunei. *Engaging Modern Brunei: Research on language, literature, and culture*, 35-47.
- Dulay, H., & Burt, M. K. (1974). Natural sequences in child second language acquisition. *Language Learning*, 24(1), 37-53.
- Eckman, F. R. (2004). Verb learning. In B. VanPatten (Ed.), *Processing instruction: Theory, research, and commentary* (pp. 251-272). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Febriyanti, R. H., & Sundari, H. (2016). Error analysis of english written essay of higher efl learners: a case study. *Journal of English Language Studies*, 1(2).
- Hamp-Lyons, L., & Heasley, B. (2006). TOEFL preparation courses: A study of washback. *Language Testing*, 23(4), 441-474.
- Hinkel, E. (2002). Teaching and learning English grammar: Research findings and future directions. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(4), 109-131.
- Jabeen, A., Kazemian, B., & Shahbaz, M. (2015). The Role of Error Analysis in Teaching and Learning of Second and Foreign Language. *Education and Linguistics Research*, 1 (2), 52-62.
- Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned*. Oxford University Press.
- Manokaran, J., Ramalingam, C., & Adriana, K. (2013). A Corpus-Based Study on the Use of Past Tense Auxiliary "Be" in Argumentative Essays of Malaysian ESL Learners. *English Language Teaching*, 6(10), 111-119.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Munchen, L., Razali, F., & Arsad, N. M. (2021). Influence of Language Learning Strategies on Willingness to Communicate in Chinese Among Students with High and Low Anxiety. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 17(4), 158-169.

Nation, P., & Chung, T. (2009). Teaching and testing vocabulary. *The handbook of language teaching*, 543-559.

Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Contact emails: ewana.yusop@teacher.maktabduli.edu.moe.bn
nur.harunthmarin@teacher.maktabduli.edu.moe.bn