



Analyzing College Students' Errors with respect to Using 'Tenses and Aspect' in their Free Writing: Causes and Suggestions

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Abstract:

English grammar plays an essential role in language learning. Grammar is a series of rules and guidelines that have ensured the correct and standard use of the English language. Through grammar, the accuracy of the language can be maintained. The main aim of this research is to clarify the various errors committed by college students in using different types and forms of verb tenses in order to diagnose their problems in using them and provide suitable solutions to avoid doing them in the future. Besides, most students do not make a distinction between 'tense and aspect' dichotomy, and thus they keep on using them interchangeably without realizing the different forms used to express them or the differences in meaning resulting. To attain the aims of the study, firstly, a test was conducted to 25 third-year college students in the English department/ College of Education in the academic year 2023-2024 to pinpoint the difficulties faced by students in relation to this topic, secondly, the writing examination papers for the same group of students were obtained to find out if they have the same or different problems in the uses of the different verb tenses in their writings as those diagnosed in the test given to them. The method applied when analyzing students' answers is descriptive: identifying, classifying, and analyzing the errors diagnosed to identify aspects of weaknesses in their answers. The study is divided into three sections: The first section presents a general overview, that is an introduction to the topic. The second section is devoted only to presenting and discussing the theoretical aspects of this study briefly, it presents some theoretical issues related to time, tense and aspect. The third section is concerned with analyzing and discussing the errors made by students in relation to the uses of different verb tenses committed in their free writings and in the test which had been applied to assess their knowledge in relation to these important categories. The results of the study have shown that there are a variety of errors committed by students in using different tenses. Most of the errors are related to the use of one tense instead of another, as well as using tense instead of aspect, incomplete verb forms, generalizing rules related to using verb forms, and many other cases especially in their free writing. It has also been noted that one of the most prominent reasons leading students to commit such errors is generalization, that is, they generalize rules in English as a result of inadequate knowledge or ignorance of basic rules. Besides, they keep on composing their ideas in Arabic first and then translate them



into English and this led them to commit errors not only in the tenses of the verbs used but also in sentence structures as a whole which, in turn, differ significantly in both languages.

Key Words: Tense, aspect, writing, errors, analysis, college students, difficulties, suggestions.

تحليل أخطاء طلبة الجامعات في استخدام الأزمنة والحالة في كتاباتهم الحرة: الأسباب والمقترحات

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المستخلص:

تلعب قواعد اللغة الانكليزية دورا اساسيا في تعلم اللغة. وهي عبارة عن سلسلة من القواعد والتوجيهات التي تضمن الاستخدام الصحيح والمعياري للغة الانكليزية. فمن خلال نحو اللغة، يمكن الحفاظ على دقة اللغة. الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو توضيح الأخطاء المختلفة التي يقوم بها طلبة الكليات في استخدام الأنواع والاشكال المختلفة لأزمنة الأفعال من اجل تشخيص مشاكلهم في استخدامها وتوفير الحلول المناسبة لتجنب عملها مستقبلا. علاوة على هذا، لا يميز معظم الطلبة بين مصطلحي الزمن والحالة، وهكذا يستمرون في استخدامهما بالتبادل دون أن يدركوا الصيغ المختلفة المستخدمة للتعبير عنهما أو الفروق في المعنى الناتجة عن ذلك. لتحقيق اهداف الدراسة، أولا، تم اجراء اختبار لخمس وعشرين طالبة من طالبات المرحلة الثالثة في قسم اللغة الانكليزية في كلية التربية للسنة الدراسية 2023-2024. للتعرف على الصعوبات التي يواجهونها فيما يتعلق بهذا الموضوع، وثانيا تم الحصول على أوراق امتحانات مادة الكتابة لنفس المجموعة من الطالبات للتحقق مما إذا كانوا يواجهون نفس المشكلات التي تم تشخيصها في الاختبار المُنْطَهِ لهم أو مشكلات مختلفة في استخدام صيغ الأفعال وازمنتها. تم اتباع المنهج الوصفي في وصف وتحليل إجابات الطالبات لتحديد جوانب الضعف في اجاباتهم. تتألف الدراسة من ثلاث أجزاء: يقدم الجزء الأول مقدمة عامة عن الموضوع، اما الجزء الثاني خصص لعرض ومناقشة الجوانب النظرية لموضوع هذه الدراسة وبشكل مختصر حيث يستعرض المفاهيم العامة لموضوع الدراسة كالزمن والحالة. يهتم الجزء الثالث من الدراسة بتحليل ومناقشة الأخطاء التي قام بها الطلبة في كتاباتهم المختارة والاختبار الذي اجري لهم لتقييم مدى معرفتهم بجوانب الموضوع تحت الدراسة. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة ان هناك العديد من الأخطاء التي قام بها الطلبة في استخدامهم للأزمنة المختلفة. معظم هذه الأخطاء تتعلق باستخدام أحد الأزمنة بدلا من الآخر، كذلك ما يتعلق باستخدام الزمن والحالة، اشكال الأفعال، تعميم القواعد الخاصة باستخدام اشكال الأفعال المختلفة وغيرها من الأخطاء وخاصة في كتاباتهم الحرة. تم ملاحظة ان أحد الأسباب المهمة التي أدت الطلبة الى القيام بمثل هذه الأخطاء هو التعميم حيث يقوم معظم الطلبة بتعميم استخدام قواعد اللغة الانكليزية اما بسبب عدم معرفتهم التامة بموضوع الزمن والحالة وكيفية التمييز بينهما او جهلهم بالقواعد الأساسية للموضوع. علاوة على هذا، عند البدا بالكتابة يقوم الطلبة بتشكيل أفكارهم باللغة العربية أولا وبعد ذلك ترجمتها للغة الانكليزية وتدوينها وهذا يؤدي الى تأثير قواعد اللغة الام على قواعد اللغة الانكليزية وبالتالي سيقومون بأخطاء ليس فقط بأزمنة الفعل واشكاله لكن أيضا بتركييب الجمل بشكل عام والتي تختلف بشكل كبير في اللغتين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الزمن، الحالة، الكتابة، طلبة الجامعة، الأخطاء، الصعوبات، الحلول.



Section One Introduction

1.1 Introductory Remarks:

1.1. Introduction:

Almost all countries of the world use the English language to interact. English is quite important today for global development, so it has been an essential part of the curriculum at schools and universities. The English language is taught in written and spoken forms. We must not only have good vocabulary but also have correct and good grammar rules, and one of the basic rules is how to use verb tenses correctly. Learning the English language is not simple because there is a set of rules that must be learned, which have an important role in understanding and mastering the language. Many students face a lot of problems in recognizing and using different tenses and they are even unable to distinguish between the differences between the tense and aspect categories. As tense represents a form of verb, it can be used to show the time in which the action occurs or occurred or will occur or the state it expresses. There are many tenses which have different uses, forms and structures, and thus students encounter many problems in using them. Aspect, on the other hand, expresses the state of an action whether it is completed or not, perfective or progressive. This study will address the following questions:

1. What is meant by 'tense' and 'aspect' categories?
2. What are the differences between "tense" and "aspect"?
3. What types of errors do students commit when using different verb forms?
4. What types of problems do students have when using them?

1.2 The Problem of the Study:

Tense and aspect constitute a difficult aspect of the English language for students at different levels. It causes problems for students because of their different forms, uses and meanings. Students have problems in choosing and using the correct forms of tense and aspect when writing, besides they are actually unaware of the important distinction between these two concepts as for them the concept 'tense' includes everything related to the form of the verbs used (present, past, future, progressive...) and this, in fact, is what they learn from their teachers at schools.

1.3 Aims of the Study

The study aims at attaining the following:

1. Illustrating the distinction between 'tense' and 'aspect' categories.
2. Presenting the different types of errors committed by college students in relation to using tense and aspect.
3. Analyzing students' errors in relation to using tense and aspect in both their writings and a test which has been designed for this purpose.



4. Identifying their problems and presenting some suggestions for better teaching of verb tense which may constitute a good plan for presenting lessons dedicated for this topic.

1.4 Hypotheses:

It is hypothesized that students face different types of problems related to distinguishing and using tense and aspect as important grammatical categories necessary to learn English language. It is also hypothesized that students misuse the different forms and uses of tense and aspect, as well as misunderstand the distinction between them.

1.5 Procedures of the Study:

The following procedures will be adopted:

1. Surveying the main notions related to the categories: 'tense' and 'aspect'.
2. Conducting a test to find out if students have any difficulties in using 'tense' and 'aspect'.
4. Analyzing students' answers in the test, as well as their errors in the chosen pieces of free writings to find out their problems in relation to using 'tense' and 'aspect' and sentence structure as a whole.
5. Suggesting solutions to the problems students face.

1.6 Limits of the Study:

The present study is limited to investigating errors committed by college students in the English department in their free writings. 25 college students from the English department were submitted to a test to find out their proficiency in using tense and aspect and their ability to distinguish between these two categories. To verify the results of our study, the writing examination papers of the same group of students were obtained.

1.7 Significance of the Study :

- 1- It is hoped that this study is of value for students because it helps them know valuable information about the most frequent errors committed by students in relation to this aspect.
- 2- It is also useful for teachers because it helps them know the points of difficulties that face their students as well as the appropriate methods that they may use to make their students avoid doing them in the future.
- 3- It is also significant for researchers as the errors diagnosed could be used as an additional source of information concerning this topic.



Section two

Literature Overview

2.1 Introduction

In language learning, grammar is an essential component as it enables learners to communicate effectively and accurately. There has been a wide range of topics covering English grammar, and one of these topics is the use of 'tense and aspect' categories as well as the distinction between them. Since verbs are among the most important elements of sentences, their different verb forms are of the utmost importance. It has been observed that many learners have a large number of errors in using tense and aspect, so this study aims to explore these errors and find suitable solutions for them. In this section, a theoretical overview will be presented to survey these two categories, tense and aspect, in terms of their forms, uses and distinctions.

2.2 Grammar and Writing:

Grammar refers to the set of rules that govern the structure and use of language. It encompasses everything from the way we form sentences to the correct use of punctuation marks. Without a good understanding of grammar, learners may struggle to express themselves and may be misunderstood by others. Every language has its own grammar, and the grammar of the language is so important. A foreign language learner needs to know grammar more than native speakers. This is because such a learner needs to make a lot of efforts to know grammar (Verghese, 1989:41). Many teachers and students think that we study grammar just to avoid errors, but we also need grammar to express our thoughts and to avoid common errors. Learners cannot correct their common mistakes if they do not know what thing is the wrong from the first place (Hinkel, 2016: 64-64). Grammar gives strength to every language. It is not just to prevent errors in sentence, but it can also help to make one a good writer and speaker. So, it is important in improving one's writing and communication.

Writing, on the other hand, is a means of communication that enables individuals to express their thoughts and ideas in a structured and coherent manner. It is a complex cognitive skill that involves various processes such as planning, organizing, revising, and editing. In order to teach writing effectively, it is important to provide students with a supportive and structured learning environment that facilitates the development of their writing skills. This can be achieved through a variety of strategies, such as modeling, scaffolding, and explicit instruction. One effective approach to teaching writing is the process approach,



which emphasizes the stages of writing and the importance of planning, drafting, revising, and editing. According to Flower and Hayes (1981:369), the process approach "focuses on the writer's composing processes and how these processes can be developed and improved". By providing students with explicit instruction on each stage of the writing process, teachers can help students develop their writing skills and improve the quality of their written work.

Knowing grammar helps one make a piece of writing effectively. The reader will also understand what one writes, and this piece of writing will catch his understanding and attention. When one knows grammar, he knows how to turn words into meaningful sentences, and into meaningful paragraphs. Punctuation is also an element of grammar, so if one knows how to punctuate his writing, he can help the reader to understand the context. The lack of punctuation will create confusion to the reader. It shows to the reader where to pause and when to give stress. Grammar plays a very important role in writing as using proper grammar in writing keeps readers engaged. Readers will be more interested and engaged when an appropriate grammar is used. When there are a lot of mistakes in writing, readers may try to avoid reading (Elbow, 1998 :186).

2.3 Tense and Aspect:

It is important to distinguish between "tense" and "time" with caution. Time is a global, non-linguistic concept that is divided into three parts: the past, present, and future. It is the measured or measurable period during which an action, process, or condition exists or continues (Quirk et. al., 1973:40). A non-native English language student has numerous challenges related to vocabulary and grammar. In particular, correctly using the verb phrase involves an extremely challenging issue that requires in-depth analysis. It includes the grammatical categories of aspect, mood, and voice in addition to the tense category. The location of an event or condition in time is expressed using tense. It can be separated into three tenses: past, present, and future. On the other hand, "aspect" describes how one experiences an action or a state. It conveys the verb's meaning in connection to time. It so indicates if the action has been completed or is still ongoing. The perfective, progressive, and perfect-progressive aspects are all included in the English verb system. (Schwesinger, 2012:3).

2.3.1. Tense:

Tense can be defined as "the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time" (ibid:40). It refers to a verb form that is marked for time, and also for other grammatical categories like mood and person. According to Declerck (2006:22), tense "denotes the form taken by the verb to locate the situation referred



to in time, i. e. to express the temporal relation between the time of the situation in question and an 'orientation time' which may be either the 'temporal zero-point' (which is usually the time of speech ...) or another orientation time that is temporally related to the temporal zero-point". Tenses convey a relationship between two or more times. Since the time of speaking is the "known time" in the default case, the past tense typically (though not always) refers to the past "in relation to now.". Tense can, also, be defined as a grammatical category which is used to identify when a situation occurs by placing it in time: past, present, and future. Declerck (ibid: 22-23) points out that the traditional names for the tenses in English are: present tense, past tense, future tense, present perfect, past perfect, conditional tense and the conditional perfect. He adds that there are three points that should be taken into consideration when discussing tenses: "first, only indicative forms are tensed.... Second, all tenses have nonprogressive and progressive forms.... Thirdly, when the verb form is a complex form involving one or more auxiliaries, it is the first auxiliary ...that is marked for tense, not the main verb". Declerck's view is almost the same as that given by Quirk et. al. (1973) who consider tenses and aspect under three times: present, past and future.

Declerck (2006:24) points out that many people believe that there are only two tenses in English: the present and the past, this is because of verb endings which distinguish the two forms. Concerning the other tense forms other than the present and past are all considered as complex tense forms in which the first auxiliary is morphologically in the present or past. The first auxiliary in these forms can be either *will* or *have* which may occur in their present or past tense forms depending on the time expressed. Thus, there are the perfect aspect tenses (present and past), and the future tense forms.

Because they indicate the duration of an activity, tenses are important in the English language. They are essential for effective communication and help to communicate when an event happened or will happen. Clear and accurate communication in writing and speaking depends on knowing and using tenses effectively. Additionally, tenses are crucial for conveying varying degrees of certainty and likelihood as well as for creating a coherent and consistent narrative in writing and storytelling. Tenses are especially important to understand when studying English as a foreign language because English is known for having a complicated tenses system. In general, mastering tenses is essential to becoming competent in English.

The present tense is a language form that refers to the location of a situation at a specific time, but it is rare for a situation to coincide exactly with the present



moment. Habitual meaning in a language refers to a characteristic situation that holds at all times, not just at the present moment. (Cook and Suter, 1983:49).

The past tense in English refers to the location of a situation prior to the present moment, without specifying whether it occurs at a single point or an extended time period. In other words, the simple past is used to talk about activities or situations that began and ended in the past.

The future tense is a situation located at a time subsequent to the present moment, similar to past tense. The future tense is criticized for its symmetrical time line diagram, suggesting it to be similar to the past but in the opposite direction. The future is more speculative, influenced by intervening events and our own conscious actions, making it immutable. The concept of tense and mood in linguistic theory suggests past and future time references are distinct but similar in other aspects. The question of whether future time reference is subsumed under tense or mood is an empirical question that can only be answered by investigating grammatical expressions of future time reference across various languages) Comrie, 2000).

2.3.2. Aspect:

Aspect, refers to the state of an action, that is, whether it is finished or not. It is a grammatical category that expresses the internal temporal structure of an action or state. According to Quirk et al. (1973) aspect 'concerns the manner in which the verbal action is experienced or regarded' (for example as completed or in progress). Thus, it focuses on how the action is viewed with respect to time. In English, aspect is often indicated by verb forms (or auxiliary verbs) to show the nature of an action. It interacts with tense but is separate from it, as tense refers to when an action occurs (past, present, future), aspect indicates how the action is experienced. Aspect consists of two forms: progressive and perfective. Quirk et al. (ibid: 40) argue that these categories, in addition to mood, "impinge on each other: in particular, the expression of time present and past cannot be considered separately from aspect...". Accordingly, they discuss the different tenses and aspect forms under three times: present, past and future to show how they are interrelated and used to indicate verb actions and states. As such tense and aspect are interrelated, but distinguishable and thus required to be identified and explained thoroughly.

Speaking about actions that are presently taking place requires the use of the present continuous or present progressive aspect. Examples include performative sentences, simultaneous reports of ongoing events, and situations that occupy a longer period but still include the present moment. The present progressive is used to describe states and processes that hold at the present moment but began before and may continue beyond it. It is not necessary to modify the definition to address



situations that do not coincide with the present moment. It can also be used to refer to future-oriented activities or occurrences that are not unquestionably set in time. The term "present continuous" comes from the way the present participle forms the continuous forms of verbs. So, this aspect emphasizes an action that is ongoing or in progress at a specific point in time.

The present perfect aspect is often used to talk about experience from the past, to talk about a change or new information, to talk about a continuing situation. This is a state or an action that started in the past and continues in the present (and will probably continue into the future: perfect progressive). The past perfect, on the other hand, expresses the idea that something happened before another event in the past. It can also demonstrate that an event occurred prior to a given point in the past (Herring, 2016:678).

The present perfect progressive and the present perfect aspects have very similar meanings. To discern when and how the present perfect progressive is preferred, there are a few important distinctions to be aware of. When discussing something that started in the past and is still happening in the present, we typically employ the present perfect progressive; this puts more emphasis on ongoing events than on things that happened (completed) in the past. The present perfect progressive can also be used to highlight how much time has passed while something is happening or that it is only momentary. We can also use it to discuss something that has just recently concluded or that has been going on for a while (ibid:660-661).

The present study focuses on students' problems in the use of the different forms of verb tenses with reference to the distinction existing between the use of 'tense and aspect' categories to find out if students are aware of such a distinction and if they are able to use the different verb tenses correctly in their writing to be able to diagnose their difficulties. Thus, the study is an attempt to present suitable suggestions to be taken into consideration when teaching such a topic, hoping that they will be part of a solution that may help solving this eternal problem.

Section Three

Methodology and Analysis

3.1 Introduction

Tense and aspect categories are the most important parts of the English grammar system and one cannot deny that they are also the most difficult part of it. It has been found that students have problems selecting appropriate tenses when writing. Although they can comfortably use all tenses, they in some situations are not confident in choosing.



This section consists of two types of data that were used for the analysis presented. The first is a test in the form of fill-in blanks with the correct forms of verbs given between brackets and students were told to complete the sentences with the appropriate verb forms to see if they were able to use and know the correct verb form in terms of the appropriate tense or aspect. As for the other type of data, paragraphs written by the students themselves were accessed to find out if they manage to use the correct verb forms in free writing. The test and paragraphs were good tools for diagnosing a variety of errors related to the uses of different verb forms.

3.2 Data Description

Firstly, a test consisting of seven items was applied to third year students in the English Department/ College of Education for Women. These items incorporate most English verb tenses (and aspects) to find out students' knowledge concerning their uses. In each sentence, the main verb was given between brackets and students were asked to use the correct verb form to complete the sentence, taking into consideration that in each sentence there is a marker indicating the use of the appropriate verb form. Most students failed to use the correct forms of the verbs given and thus different types of errors have been recognized as will be illustrated.

Secondly, the writing examination papers for the same group of students who conducted the test were selected for the analysis to obtain more accurate evidence about their shortcomings and problems in relation to using tenses and aspects. The papers provided the researcher with an excellent tool to diagnose students' problems in actual use of language, that is writing. Students' papers had revealed a variety of errors not only related to the use of verb forms but also to the status of the verb itself within the sentences produced and their structures.

3.3 Population

Twenty- five students in their third year of study in the department of English in the academic year 2023-2024 conducted the tests to find out errors in relation to the uses of tense and aspect. The writing examination papers for the same group of students had been accessed to diagnose their difficulties in actual use of language and to verify the results got by analyzing the test which they conducted.

3.4 Data Analysis:

As mentioned previously, the practical part of the study includes two types of data used to reveal students' problems: a test and examination papers. In the following sections, the errors diagnosed in each part will be stated so that it will be possible later on to find out if students commit the same types of errors in individual



sentences (the items of the test) and in paragraphs (their examination papers) to be able to specify the main areas where they err more and the reasons behind their committing them. A section will be devoted for each with the types of errors diagnosed:

3.4.1 The Analysis of the Test:

After conducting the test and collecting the samples, the main types of errors were specified, documented, categorized and then described. The errors diagnosed have been classified and arranged into many types depending on their frequency, forms and occurrence as follows:

1-Using one tense instead of another tense:

It has been noted that one of the most frequent errors committed by students is using one tense instead of another: the present tense, for example, instead of the past, the past instead of the present, the future instead of the present, the present instead of the future and so on without any real justification. As will be noticed, they did not only use the incorrect tense form but also the incorrect verb forms. The following samples taken from their answers illustrate this case:

a- Present instead of Past and Past instead of Present

-My mom tells me that my best friend got married last weekend. I am angry because they don't invite me to their wedding.

-She is never late for school, but this morning she oversleeps and comes to school too late. Her teacher hopes she does not oversleep ever again.

-Brad will fly to London next week. He meets his brother there.

-Why do you cry?..... (present simple instead of the progressive)

-She was never late for school, but this morning she overslept and came to school too late. Her teacher hopes she did not over sleep ever again.

-My mom is very good at sewing. She made all my clothes.

- The sick child is not sleep for three hours. (incorrect tense and verb form)

- I lended you as much as need.

b -Future instead of Present and Present instead of Future

-She will never be late for school, but this morning she overslept and came to school too late. Her teacher hopes she does not oversleep ever again.



- Hurry up! The bus leave (present progressive) at 10 and its already 9.40! We miss it!!

- Don't worry. I lend you as much as you need.

c-Future instead of Past and Past instead of Future

-Brad will fly to London next week. He met his brother there. They do not see each other very often, maybe once or twice a year. They will meet for their mother's birthday five months ago.

-Brad flew to London next week. He met his brother there. They do not see each other very often, maybe once or twice a year.

-At the moment, she is making a beautiful silk dress. I wore it to my brother's wedding

Other types of errors related to using the wrong verb forms, for instance regular instead of irregular verb forms, errors in using singular or plural verb forms, incomplete verb forms and many other cases are illustrated below:

2-Using wrong verb forms which includes the omission of certain required auxiliaries or the addition of unnecessary ones. Sometimes, different incorrect answers are given simultaneously, as shown below:

a-Errors in using regular and irregular verb forms: this is a common problem among students which indicates that they often generalize rules when learning.

-She is never late for school, but this morning she overslepped and came to school too late.....

-Do not worry. I lended you as much as need.

b-Errors in using the progressive aspect:

-A: Why do you cry? B: Because this morning someone stole all my money while I (are shop /am shop/were shoping/shoping), now I can't pay the bills.

- At the moment she is makes a beautiful silk dress.....

- Why do you cry? B: Because this morning someone stole all my money while I shopping,

c-Errors in using auxiliaries:

- My mom told me that my best friend got married last weekend. I (am be/ am was / am are angry because they did not invited me to their wedding.



-She (**is never be/is never being**) late for school, but this morning she overslept and came to

- because they **were not invite** me to their wedding.

3-Tense instead of Aspect and Aspect instead of Tense

One serious problem related to using different verb forms is that most students ignore the distinction between the two categories 'tense and aspect'. The concept 'aspect' is not taken into consideration as it is regarded among the tenses used in English. Students learning English as a foreign language need to know such a distinction. Not only that, some students also have errors in using aspect itself, as some did not distinguish when to use the perfect and when to use the progressive. These errors can be summarized as follows:

-My mom told me that my best friend got married last weekend. I (**am being / will being/had been**) angry because they did (were not invite) me to their wedding.

Though the correct form of the verb should be in the simple present tense, some students put it in the past progressive, future progressive, and past perfect instead of the present tense.

- Why **do you cry**? B: Because this morning someone (**is stealing/stolen/has stolen**) all my money while I was shopping, now I can't pay the bills. ...

- Why **do you cry**? B: Because this morning someone stole all my money while I (**will shop/shops**),

-My mom is very good at sewing. She makes all my clothes. At the moment, she (**makes/made**) a beautiful silk dress...

Though the correct verb form in this sentence is the present progressive, the simple present and past simple were used instead.

-The sick child **sleeps** for three hours.

In this sentence, the correct verb form is the present perfect (progressive), but the present simple was used instead.

Students commit many errors in the forms of verbs used which indicate that they have not mastered verb forms accurately and that they are unable to use them correctly to express the appropriate time or aspect needed. In the following section, their errors in their writings will be diagnosed and analyzed to decide if they commit the same types of errors or different types so as to identify their actual weaknesses and problems.



3.4.2 The Analysis of Students' Errors Found in their Examination Papers:

The writing examination papers for the same group of students had been selected to find out if students' problems related to the use of the correct verb forms can be attributed to the same causes making them commit the same types of mistakes in the test they were subjected to. They were asked to write about one of two given topics: 'education' or 'plagiarism'. It has been noted that students commit a variety of mistakes in their free writing, mistakes related not only to the forms of the verbs used and their time but also related to sentence structures and the types of elements used in forming sentences, spelling, punctuation marks, arrangement of sentence elements and many other issues related to sentences forming and relations. It was really difficult to classify students' errors in their free writings under specific well-defined topics as, will be noticed, different types of errors within the same verb phrase were intermingled in a way one cannot identify what goes with what. It is really free writing as they are free to commit whatever comes to one's mind. Thus, students' errors which were taken from their examination papers are given with reference to the most frequent errors found and thus they are stated below in terms of their occurrence and sometimes a sequence of sentences and complete paragraphs are given from their examination papers as it was difficult to identify the limits of a specific sentence. Note the following:

-...when the vaeros of korona **come** in 2020, the education **come** to be online
(**incorrect verb tense**)

- but the education **will be stay** very important....(**incorrect verb form**)

-... some person **to be** the education **is** very important ... (**multiple verbs**)

- Are get/Its make/Its not help (**unnecessary auxiliaries added**)

-it is make them to safe...and didn't make them life dangerous...

-That make the learn/It make (**no concord**)

-Education **its** most important thing **can** to a person **learn** and **look** of it...(random use of multiple verbs)

-the education of devlombe of years and the online education, very important and of school (**no verb used**)

- ... in education **can used** a process (**no subject and incorrect verb form**) and online education that **can be is** important (**more than a verb form**)...the education traditional education **can that using** in general of the life **can improve** of the yourself and that **using** in school and college **may be can using** one



advantage...and the disadvantage *cannot be using* in the proses of learning.
(incorrect verb forms)

It has been noticed that students neglect using any form of 'be' as a main verb especially when they do not need to use any other lexical verb:

-plagiarism *its mean taken* work of otherand *its* countable as a crime in ...

- A process education it useful for student (no verb used)

- education in Iraq very difficult... (no verb used)

- a process very traditional and little model (no verb used)

- because the life not be easily and simple for everyone...one disadvantage of online study subject. (no verb used)

- Are not getting /Its making /Its taking (aspect is used unnecessarily)

-the education online **is recently appear** (incorrect verb form)... The learning (during covid) **depend** (incorrect tense) on online study...after that the world **still depend** on the online study... the two way now **became its** very important and **depend** on it... the getting for information **became is** easily, ... but disadvantage for online study **its hurts** from eyes and we **became used** over the technology...however the online study and the traditional study **is** very important now.

-So, we *must be avoided* because *it's not help* we development us *work* and *it's so easily know* by computer... and we *must avoided* because *not mention* and *don't knowldgment* for authors.

It is quite evident that student have serious errors when writing, errors which hinder them to express themselves correctly and accurately. It seems that their problems are not only related to the uses of verb forms in relation to tense and aspect, but related to forming and constructing sentences as a whole. Some of them are unable to produce a complete and grammatical sentence. They write down whatever they have in mind on papers without thinking of word order, verbs used, their valency, or their forms, time necessary to express what they have, punctuation marks and many other things. All these are neglected and ignored. In the following section, some of the reasons lying behind such errors will be illustrated.

3.5 Results and Discussion

When students write, they usually commit many types of mistakes, and among these are mistakes in using the correct forms of verbs and their tenses. It has been noted that college students commit a variety of errors which are not supposed to be



committed by college students at this stage of study. These errors may be attributed to:

1-Mixing Tenses: One of the common errors committed by students is the use of one tense instead of another, that is mixing tenses. It is quite well-known that students mix tenses in a sentence or a paragraph, leading to confusion about the time frame. For example, using the present instead of the past, the past instead of the present, the future instead of the present, or the present instead of the future, etc. This may be due to several possible reasons which include lack or ignorance of knowledge requiring them distinguish between verb uses and their correct forms.

2-Overgeneralization: Students sometimes use the rules of one tense for another, like using the forms of *be* (present forms) in front of a main verb to express the present tense or its past forms to express the past time of a given verb as they think that the present forms of *be* are used to express the present tense and the past forms are used to express the past tense. Moreover, sometimes they generalize the rule of forming the past form of certain irregular verbs by adding -ed, and thus, as noted in their mistakes, the past form of *lend* is *lended*.

3- Confusion with Time Reference:

Students sometimes are unable to understand the differences between different tenses like the past, present, and future time references, especially when the tense forms are somehow similar in reference like the present perfect vs. past simple or the future continuous vs. the simple future. So, students need to know such distinctions to be able to use them correctly.

4- Understanding the Subtle Differences in Meaning:

-Using different tenses require students make a distinction between them in terms of their uses and the meanings associated with their uses, such as the difference between the present progressive aspect and the present simple tense, for example the difference between *I work* and *I am working*, or the difference between *she lived* and *she has lived*, which is, in most cases, difficult for students to understand. The concept of aspect (perfect and progressive) (e.g. present perfect, past perfect, present progressive or past progressive etc.) is often neglected by students. Students may find it hard to understand how these forms relate to the present moment or the completion or incompleteness of actions. Students need to know the distinction between the uses and forms of different tenses and aspects so that they will be able to use them appropriately and correctly. As such, they frequently appeal to using the simple tenses instead of the perfective or the progressive aspects.



5- Inconsistent Use of Auxiliary Verbs:

Tenses and aspects (to a great extent) require auxiliary verbs (like *have*, *be*, or *will*), and students often forget to use them or use them incorrectly, especially in more complex tenses (e.g., future perfect or perfect progressive).

6- Overusing Simple Present Tense:

Students might overuse simple tenses (like the present or past simple) because they feel more accustomed to using one more than another tense, for example they keep using the present simple tense for habitual actions, neglecting other tenses that might be more appropriate, and this case constitutes the main area where they err more.

7- Translating Directly from Native Language:

Students usually think using their native language to construct sentences before expressing their thoughts in English. This may lead to tense errors as different languages have different tense systems and accordingly different verb forms and uses, and this is one of the serious problems students have as most of them think in Arabic and write down their ideas in Arabic, then translate them into English and this causes them problems not only in using tenses but also in sentence structures as a whole. So students have to be encouraged to think and write directly in English to avoid committing different types errors in composing a sentence or a sequence of sentences.

3.6 Suggestions:

The problem of using different tenses and mastering their forms in both the written and spoken forms of language is an eternal problem which has been the prime interests of many researchers who tried consistently to find solutions to such a serious problem which hinders students' mastery of the foreign language. Researchers presented some suggestions and solutions to overcome this problem but it seems that such suggestions have not been taken seriously or applied as students keep on committing crucial errors in relation not only to using tenses but also to using other sentence elements. Here are some suggestions hoped to be taken into consideration in the future for more effective grammar teaching, with special emphasis on verb tenses, during the different academic stages dedicated to learning English as a foreign language.

1- Teaching Methods:

To make grammar teaching more effective and engaging, a communicative approach can be adopted, where learners are taught grammar in the context of real-



life communication situations (Richards & Rodgers, 2001:166). This approach emphasizes the use of language in real-life situations and focuses on the development of communication skills rather than just the acquisition of grammatical knowledge. By integrating grammar instruction into communicative language teaching, learners can see the practical use of grammar in everyday communication, making it more meaningful and relevant to them.

In the English departments, in our colleges, what is usually taught is grammar without contexts. Grammar rules are taught to be memorized and applied to separate sentences and this is due to the nature of the textbooks used in teaching them, for example the first year grammar book ‘*Grammar in Use*’ by Raymond Murphy, all tense forms and aspects are explained in separate chapters with exercises just to make students master the forms used without relating the verb which is the core of the sentence to other sentence elements to know how sentences are formed and elements connected to each other to give well-formed sentences. Tense is not everything, it is part of many other things working together to give meaningful and well-formed sentences. So, it is the teacher’s role to adopt such a mission and try to present what s/he finds appropriate for improving students’ abilities and knowledge related to different sentence elements and using them in real contexts.

Although students are taught almost everything related to tenses, aspects and verb forms, they still make errors when constructing well-formed sentences. This may be due to the method used in teaching. Some teachers just teach a lot of grammar without taking into consideration its use in real life situations whether spoken or written. Grammar is important because it makes our speech and writing comprehensible and understandable, so one needs to know how to teach it perfectly and appropriately.

2- Classroom Management:

The classes in the English departments are usually characterized by the large number of students which exceeds fifty students in each class and this is considered one of the basic obstacles that hinder learning in general. Thus, because of their size, the teacher’s duty is to make sure that his teaching is appropriate to his class, that is organized systematically, and that it is exciting. Yet a teacher who uses appropriate and well-organized materials usually has little difficulty in generating enthusiasm in his class. On the other hand, some teachers present their lessons regardless of such an obstacle or its serious negative results,



what is important for them is just pouring information without making sure if their teaching achieves its required goals or not, and, in fact, those constitute a vast majority.

3- Appropriacy of the Material Presented:

There are two stages in producing appropriate teaching, first in the preparation and selection of materials, (course books, exercises, visuals, etc.) and second in classroom organization while the lesson is in progress. Materials used may, of course, be selected by the ministry of higher education and thus be to some extent beyond the control of the classroom teacher, but someone needs to make the decisions. It is the duty of the teacher to adapt the material to the needs of his individual class as far as he can. If any part of the material is unsatisfactory, the teacher will need to make a decision, either to change the material and find something more suitable, or to organize his class activities so as to make the work appropriate by means of teaching techniques. All the time in the class, the teacher will have to decide how to introduce his material, how much time to spend on each stage, and so on. The more experienced the teacher becomes, the more likely he is to be able to anticipate the requirements of his class, particularly when he knows them well, but no teacher can anticipate everything, and all good teaching demands thinking on one's feet: the good teacher will always be sensitive to whether the class is alert or sleepy, whether discussion is appropriate or irrelevant, whether he is being ignored or listened to (Broughton, et.al. 1980:175-176).

4- Contextualize Grammar:

The basic solution is that grammar should not be taught alone. It should be taught in contexts; for example, through reading and writing. We can link the study of grammar with reading or writing instead of giving them isolated grammar. Here are some suggestions for better tense teaching since it is the main focus of the study:

- **Instead of starting with dry definitions**, use examples of real-life scenarios to demonstrate when a certain tense is used. For instance, use everyday activities like *I'm eating lunch* vs. *I ate lunch*. It is also possible to tell short stories or anecdotes that naturally incorporate different tenses and ask students to identify the tenses used, or ask students to write short stories or dialogues focusing on certain tenses. Thus, a teacher helps students master two aspects of language: learn some new grammatical rules and know how to use them contextually especially if they are asked to write paragraphs including what has been taught.



-Teach student how they can distinguish between using certain similar tenses and why they are used in specific contexts, for example, help students understand the difference between *I have lived in London* and *I lived in London*.

-Use interactive practice: give sentences with missing verbs and have students fill in the blanks, using the correct tense. Present students with sentences and ask them to transform them into different tenses. And in the textbooks dedicated to teaching grammar in our department, there are varieties of such practice that really help mastering some points.

-Pinpoint students' mistakes when they write and ask them to explain why a certain tense is incorrect in a given context, or why certain items are incorrectly used and how to fix the incorrect ones. A teacher may identify and underline students' errors and ask them to correct them. This will definitely help them realize their errors and avoid doing them in the future.

- Review each tense many times, a teacher must ensure that students have opportunities to revisit and reinforce their understanding over time though most of them are considered as at an advanced level of learning the language. Though time consuming, repetition is a good tool that enhances learning and leads to good results.

In brief, a teacher may use the following steps when he plans to present a lesson concerning the presentation of the different forms, types and meanings of any required tense:

1. Introduction to the tense (overview, including form and structure).
2. Explanation (use real-life examples, timelines).
3. Practice (students work through examples and apply the tense).
4. Review (discuss mistakes and reinforce key points).

The main point is to make teaching tenses engaging and contextual by practice and repetition. The focus on context will help students not only memorize tenses but also feel comfortable using them in real conversations and free writing, and this is what the researcher adopts as a plan to teach not only verb forms and tenses but all types of rules required to make well-formed grammatical sentences.

3.7 Conclusions:

Tenses are crucial in English because they represent the timeframe of an action, aid in effective communication, and are essential for writing and speaking clearly. They also create narratives that make sense and express levels of trust.



Understanding tenses is crucial to mastering English as a foreign language. It was noted that students had many errors when using tenses which are attributed to a variety of reasons. Teaching tenses is a complex and challenging process that requires careful planning, effective teaching strategies, and a thorough understanding of the students' needs and abilities.

The research has clarified that several factors contribute to the problems that students encounter when learning tenses, including lack of knowledge, limited language proficiency, and inadequate teaching resources. However, there are numerous effective approaches that teachers can employ to overcome these challenges and foster successful language learning outcomes for their students. By focusing on creating a positive learning environment, incorporating engaging and interactive activities, and providing appropriate support and guidance, English language teachers can help their students develop their language skills and achieve academic success. Understanding and mastering tenses requires time, practice, and lots of exposure to real-world language use whether written or spoken.

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Appendix:

The test

**Use the correct form of the verbs in brackets present simple |continuous
|perfect· past simple |continuous |perfect and will future· Going to future.**

1-My mom(tell) me that my best
friend.....(get) married last weekend
.I.....(be) angry because
they.....(not /invite) me to their wedding.

2-A: Why (you· cry)?

B: Because this morning someone (steal)all my money
while I (shop).....now I can't pay the bills.

A: Don't worry. I (lend)you as much as you need .

3- She (never· be) late for school but this morning she
(oversleep)and she (come)to
school too late. Her teacher hopes she (not / oversleep)
.....ever again.

4-Brad (fly)to London next week. He (meet)
.....his brother there. They (not/see)
.....each other very often· may be once or twice a year. They
last (meet)for their mothers birthday five months ago.

5-My mum is very good at sewing. She (make) all my
clothes. At the moment she (make) a beautiful silk
dress. I (wear)it for my brothers' wedding.

6- Hurry up! The bus (leave)at 10 and its already 9.40!
we(miss)it!

7-The sick child (not /sleep).....for three hours.