

## AN ERROR ANALYSIS OF GRAMMAR IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AMONG USM UNDERGRADUATES

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### ABSTRACT

A stable foundation in grammar is important for the continuation of understanding and usage of the English language. This is especially important for students studying in the tertiary level as they will be using the knowledge they've learned by utilising the English language as a mode of communication. An error analysis has been done to find out the pressing issues in the English language grammar usage. The objective of this research is to find out whether student's ability gained from previous learned knowledge in school concerning the present tense, present continuous tense and past tense are in the red and can it be improved when reinforced during the time they're attending English language lessons in the university. This is a qualitative study that included 38 first year students from the arts and science stream. There seem to be a mixed result of repetitive error that came up in the pre-test like a confused usage of assorted tenses and irrelevant word usage that isn't even a part of the tense aspect and it was still happening in the post-test even after reinforced lessons were done. Continuous efforts of identifying grammar errors must be done to identify the improvements that must be made aware of and possibly fixed so that actions can be taken to overcome this issue.

*Key words: Error analysis, grammar, reinforcement lessons.*

### 1. Introduction

The ability to write grammatically correct sentences is important in expressing ideas efficiently and effectively. To be able to do this, students must first have a strong hold on basic grammar usage (Fowzul Kareema et. al, 2021). Establishing strong a grammatical base is important in communicating either in a professional circumstance or regular everyday communication. This was mentioned by Finegan (2012) that communicative competence is important in the capacity of using appropriate language. Therefore, strengthening the base of grammar ability is very important for future job prospects and other aspects of communication in life.

Various characteristics of tenses should be considered when forming sentences either in writing or speaking (Lilik Yuliawati, 2023). Thus, having grammatical structure basic ability is a must in establishing the ability to communicate verbally or in transcription. The understanding of a target language is made harder when the grammar of the target language is not mastered (Adriani Jihad, 2021). This is when grammar understanding problem occurs.

Grammar teaching is a must in language classrooms and adopting the most appropriate way to do it based on student profile is an important issue (Fadilla Taslim, 2016). Therefore, this action research was done among first year students of University Science Malaysia from the arts and science stream to assess students' capability in using the basic grammar structure which are the present tense, present continuous tense and past tense.

The present tense is used to describe habits or routines, make general statements of facts or to express opinions (Werner & Nelson,1996). It is what's used in current times to show what is happening at present. Gaudart et. al (2019) pointed out these examples of mistakes that happen for present tense which are Charles **drives** a taxi. (Mistake: Charles **is drive** a taxi.); Jamil's shop **doesn't sell** books. (Mistake: Jamil's shop **don't sell** books); and Do you **like** fast food? (Mistake: Do you **liking** fast food?).

Present continuous tense is used to show something in progress at the time of speaking and is usually used with time expressions like now and presently. (Koh & Tan, 2003). Gaudart et. al (2019) pointed out these examples of mistakes that happen for present continuous tense which are Where **are** you **going** now? (Mistake: Where **do** you **go** now?); Swee Ping **is working** in the study now. (Mistake: Swee Ping **working** in the study now); and That man **is riding** his bicycle very recklessly. (Mistake: That man **is ride** his bicycle very recklessly.)

Usually, the past tense is used to talk about things that happened in the past. Typically, it talks of actions or situations that have are ended, past state verbs and telling stories (Gaudart et. al, 2019). These next common mistakes for past tense were also pointed out in ‘Johan **saw** your cousin yesterday.’ and the verb **saw** was mistakenly replaced by ‘**is saw** or **was see** or **has seeing**’. Other than that, the issues involved misspelling of the conjugated verbs may also happen.

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used in this study whereby 38 first year students with a background of MUET from bands 2 to 3.5 from the arts (24 students) and science (14 students) stream were tested.

A pre-test was done to assess student’s basic knowledge based on the knowledge they’ve obtained during their compulsory school lessons. Repetitive mistakes can still be identified even though they have relatively about 10 to 12 years of formal learning of the English language during their schooling years beginning from the primary until the end of their secondary school level.

Clear and direct instructions and examples were included to assist and gauge students’ memory in answering the test questions given.

Refresher lessons were then provided using clear written notes, explanative lessons and exercises were given to prepare the students for the upcoming post-test.

A post-test was then done to assess whether there are improvements on their understanding of the involved tenses and/or are there more problems that needed to be given attention to. Clear instructions were given to assess students’ improvements. No examples were given this time around to assist students in the post-test.

## 3. Discussion

Even with very direct and clear instructions concerning the involved tenses given, the mistakes listed below are the existing issues that needs to be given attention to:

1. Students were unable to identify whether the tense to be used is in the present tense, present continuous tense, past tense or other tenses not being discussed in this research paper.
2. Students were unable to identify whether the tense that needs to be used is for singular or plural nouns.
3. Students used a mixture of different verbs that do not match any tense, mistakenly use incomplete verb form and using words that’s not even used in any tenses or the target language.
4. Students do not know how to correctly use the negative form. (assessed only in post-test)

5. Students do not know the correct conjugation of verbs according to the tenses they were required to answer to or using irrelevant words to the verb tense being used.

There are overlapping attributes in the issues presented that it's difficult to identify one issue independently and thus they are explained as below.

### 3.1 Pre-test

#### a. Present Tense

In the pre-test, a very clear and direct instructions on which tense they're supposed to be using was given. They were also given a sentence example as a hint on how to answer the questions given. Even then, referring to Table 1 below, most mistake here happen concerning issues involving being unable to identify whether the tense to be used is the present tense or present continuous tense. Some also made mistakes involving being unable to identify whether the tense to be used is for singular or plural nouns. Students also mistakenly used the 'verb-ing' independently without using a 'verb-to-be' (auxiliary verb) before it. Other than that, students were unable to identify whether the tense to be used is the present tense or past tense or past continuous tense. Some others would mix different verbs that do not match any tense. Finally, in rare occasions, some words that's not even used in any tenses were also used. Overall, as can be seen below, some overlapping mistakes do also happen.

**Table 1: Pre-test sample questions and answers for present tense**

No.	Sentence	Mistakes
1	I <u>eat</u> (eat) dinner at 6 pm.	ate, am eating, eating, eats, am eat, <b>aet</b>
2	Lutfi <u>enjoys</u> (enjoy) fixing things especially electrical appliances.	enjoy, enjoying, is enjoying, was enjoying
3	Maria always <u>listens</u> (listen) to music when she feels stressed.	listen, listening, is listening
4	The bus <u>comes</u> (come) to my house on time.	come, came, is coming, will coming
5	We <u>sleep</u> (sleep) at 9 pm.	slept, sleeping, sleeps, are sleeping, are sleep, <b>sleping</b>
6	My parents <u>travel</u> (travel) to Scotland to visit my sister twice a year.	travels, travelling, is travelling, are travelling, will travelling, was travel, always travel

#### b. Present Continuous Tense

Even when the instruction given was clearly for students to answer the question in present continuous tense in the pre-test, looking at table 2, mistakes that happen shows issues involving being unable to identify whether the tense to be used is the present tense or present continuous tense. Other than that, there's also mistake concerning issues in using and understanding the auxiliary verb 'verb-to-be' plus the usage of its 'verb-ing'.

**Table 2: Pre-test sample questions and answers for present continuous tense**

No.	Sentence	Mistakes
1	I <b>am visiting</b> (visit) France this summer with my family members.	visit, am visit, am visited, will visiting, visiting, am visited, will visits
2	I <b>am taking</b> (take) two classes this semester.	takes, taking, will taking, <b>am tooking</b>
3	Her husband is always <b>complaining</b> (complain) about his health.	complain, complains, complaining, complained, <b>complaining</b>
4	Amyra and Ayra <b>are going</b> (go) to the birthday party tonight.	go, going, is going.
5	The team members <b>are staying</b> (stay) late tonight to finish the assignment.	stay, staying, is staying, will stay, were stayed, will stay.

### c. Past Tense

Even when the instruction given was clear for students to answer the question in past tense in the pre-test, the mistakes that happen here were about issues in using, understanding and conjugating the irregular verbs. There's also a mixture of different verbs that do not match any tenses. Some students even used words that isn't used in any tenses. All these can be referred to in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Pre-test sample questions and answers for past tense**

No.	Sentence	Mistakes
1	He <b>was</b> (be) late because his car broke down this morning.	be, will be, been, <b>has/had been, being, became, went, would be</b>
2	Tom <b>took</b> (take) some photos during the last convocation.	Taken, <b>taked, toke</b>
3	The girl <b>lost</b> (lose) her purse while she was playing on the field.	lose, loose, loses, <b>losed, loset</b>
4	Last Saturday, we <b>went</b> (go) to our grandparents' house because they were celebrating their 50 <sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.	goes, going, does not go, <b>gone</b>
5	My friends <b>flew</b> (fly) to New Delhi via Mumbai a week ago.	fly, flies, flying, <b>flied, flow flyed, flies</b>

### 3.2 Reinforcements

A focused set of notes were given and explained to these students who were involved to this study. Example and exercises were also provided to familiarized students with what's coming in the post-test.

The lesson firstly focused on the pronoun used which are classified into the main three category:

- i. I
- ii. He/she/it (singular)
- iii. We/they (plural)

The then the explanations were thus simplified below.

### a. Present Tense

The reinforcements included on the rule for using the present tense verb with a singular pronoun (he/she/it) by adding ‘s’ at its end and for the proverb I and other plural proverb (we/they) maintains its original form without adding ‘s’ at its end.

Students were also informed on the usage of auxiliary verbs with other regular verbs.

### b. Present Continuous Tense

The rule for using the present tense verb with a singular pronoun (he/she/it) was emphasized by putting the chosen verb with the present form of verb-to-be which is ‘is’ plus the verb-ing and for the proverb I and other plural proverb (we/they) is by putting the chosen verb with the present form of verb-to-be which is ‘are’ plus the verb-ing.

### c. Past Tense

Students were re-introduced to the regular and irregular verb rules, usage and their conjugation.

## 3.3 Post-test

### a. Present Tense

In the post-test, a very clear and direct instructions on which tense they’re supposed to be using was given. Even after doing the lesson reinforcement sessions, referring to Table 4, the mistake that happen here are concerning issues involving being unable to identify whether the tense to be used is the present tense or present continuous tense. Students were also unable to identify whether the tense to be used is for singular or plural nouns.

**Table 4: Post-test sample questions and answers for present tense**

No.	Sentence	Mistakes
1	I <b>plan</b> (plan) to travel sometime this year too, but I haven’t decided where to go.	planned, am planning, plans, am plan
2	Do you usually <b>feel</b> (feel) more energetic after your aerobics class? I usually have lots of energy after mine.	feels, feeling, is feel, felt
3	Does Amir <b>prefer</b> (prefer) vegetables or fruits?	prefers, preferred, is preferring
4	She studies hard every night because she <b>wishes</b> (wish) to do well in her finals.	is wishing, wish, wishing, <b>wishes</b>
5	In some countries, the sun only <b>shines</b> (shine) for a few hours each day during winter.	shine, shining
6	When we are in public places, we <b>meet</b> a lot of people, so we might get infected.	met

### b. Present Continuous Tense

In the Table 5 post-test below, the mistakes that happen were concerning issues involving being unable to identify whether the tense to be used is the present tense or present continuous tense. Students also have some issues in using and understanding the auxiliary verb ‘be’ plus the usage of

its ‘verb-ing’. The wrong usage and understanding of the auxiliary verb ‘be’ and ‘do’ in the present continuous tense plus the usage of the negative ‘not’ plus verb in its root form also occur here.

**Table 5: Post-test sample questions and answers for present continuous tense**

No.	Sentence	Mistakes
1	I <b>am not talking</b> (not, talk) to her until she apologises.	not talk, am not talk, do not/don't talk, not talking, talks not, did not/didn't talk, not talks, isn't talking
2	What <b>are</b> you <b>trying</b> (be, try) to do to my baby? Stay away from him or I will call the cops.	are ... try, do ... try, had ... are trying, were ... trying, is ... trying, was ... trying, has been ... trying, would ... tried, be ... trying, being ... try, be ... trying
3	Matthew <b>does not have/doesn't have</b> (not, have) many friends at school.	not has, do not/don't have, not having, not have, does not has, is not having, did not have doesn't had
4	“Anna looks sad! I bet she <b>is thinking</b> (think) about her dog. It died of a heart attack last night.	thinks, thinking, was thinking, was think, <b>though</b>
5	This situation <b>is causing</b> stress and anxiety among the public.	were causing
6	Yes, we <b>are having</b> (be/have) a fantastic time here in Maldives!	have, had, were having, is having, are have
7	My boyfriend bought me a dress and a handbag for my birthday but they <b>do not suit/ don't suit</b> (not, suit) me at all.	not suit, are not suit, does not suit, not suited, is not suit, not suits, are not/aren't suiting

### c. Past Tense

In the post-test Table 6 below, the mistakes here happen concerning issues in using, understanding and conjugating the irregular verbs. Students also have issues in using, understanding and conjugating verbs in the negatives. There's also problem in using and understanding the auxiliary verb ‘do’ in the past tense plus the usage of the negative ‘not’ plus verb in its root form.

**Table 6: Post-test sample questions and answers for past tense**

No.	Sentence	Mistakes
1	I heard he <b>found</b> (find) a new job.	find, finds, <b>finded, was finded</b>
2	<b>Did</b> you <b>receive</b> (do/receive) Mila's gift?	do ... receive, did ... received, do ... received, do ... receives
3	My uncle <b>bought</b> (buy) a new computer last month but he does not know how to use it.	<b>was buyyed, buies, buyed</b>
4	The old woman <b>shouted</b> (shout) for help when her kitchen caught fire last night.	shouts

5	The cat <b>jumped</b> (jump) over the fence and went into the neighbour's car.	is jumping, jump, were jumping
6	We <b>studied</b> (study) Arabic when we were at school.	study, are studying, were studying, studies
7	The scientists <b>claimed</b> that it will take some time to develop a vaccine.	claiming

#### 4. Conclusion

Concerning these three basic tenses, constant observation must be done to assess its condition that exist amongst students, detect mistakes that occurs and weaknesses that needs to be fixed as they're the most basic tenses that's very important in everyday usage. More exercises should be given to improve and strengthen student's grammar understanding and practice.

Herawati et. al. mentioned that academic students must have full understanding of tenses as without it, miscommunications are the expected result that comes from English sentence meaning errors. Therefore, students are also encouraged to come up with their own initiative in improving and familiarize themselves with important grammatical structure from basic to advanced structure and its usage via other language activities like reading alternative materials like books, magazines, newspapers and journals. This is especially crucial as the language used in their field of study will give a big impact on the success or error of the job project involving their knowledge in practice while being used.

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