Research Article

Investigating EFL Students' Struggles with Tense Mastery in Recount Text Writing

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A B S T R A C T

Numerous scholars globally have conducted research on English writing skills, focusing on identifying optimal strategies or methods for writing. However, investigations into the challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students when employing English tenses in textual recounts remain scarce. Consequently, this study seeks to explore the obstacles confronted by students in utilizing tenses within text recount compositions. The this study was applied in qualitative descriptive method. The data collection was done by requiring a total of 20 EFL students of English Department, who are in the third semester, participated in this research. They were asked to write a recount text on the topic "The Past Life in Senior High School" in a minimum-200-word text. The technique of data analysis was employed by using qualitative content analysis. That is the data were analyzed and categorized into certain types of errors. Then after the text was analyzed, the results of the study shows that EFL students faced difficulties in determining the choice of tenses that were in accordance with the time context of the writing. Errors in the sentences used were also found. Later, it was also found that students faced difficulties in understanding the selection of tenses that were relevant to the time context of events in the text recount writing. The competence of students in tense mastery is also an obstacle to produce error-free English writing. Good understanding and use of English tenses and practice of using tenses in writing should lead to better improvement in the EFL students' writing skills.

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INTRODUCTION

For students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), writing in English is often a significant challenge. There are several reasons why this could be a problem for them (Abahussain, 2020). First, differences in the structure of English with students' home language can make it difficult for them to understand grammar, vocabulary, and idioms in the right context. Grammatical errors and improper use of vocabulary often occur. Secondly, cultural aspects also play an important role in writing English. EFL students may struggle in conveying meanings appropriate to the cultural context of the English language, such as humor, nuance, and social conventions. In addition, lack of practice and opportunities to interact in English outside of the classroom can also affect the writing skills of EFL students (Fauzan et al., 2020; Karimian Shirejini & Derakhshan, 2020). Inconfidence in conveying their

thoughts in a language they don't fully understand can also hinder their writing skills (Nair & Hui, 2018).

As mentioned above, lessons on tenses in English are often an obstacle for EFL students. Tenses introduce the concept of time and circumstances in English, which can be problematic for students unfamiliar with different grammatical structures. As cited above, lessons on tenses in English are often an obstacle for EFL students (Fadilah, 2019; Fitria, 2018). Tenses introduce the concept of time and circumstances in English, which can be delicate for students unfamiliar with different grammatical structures. Encounter

Some impediments that EFL students may have difficulty in understanding the differences between different tenses, such as present, past, and future tense, as well as more complex variations such as continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous tense. They may also face challenges in recognizing when to use the right tense in certain contexts. Additional obstacles arise when students have to convert verbs into forms that correspond to a given tense, including the use of auxiliary verbs and the formation of negative or interrogative sentences (Perlin et al., 2020).

Knowledge of tenses has significant benefits in improving writing skills in English (Mathew Nalliveettil & Mahasneh, 2017). Knowledge of tenses helps the writer maintain time consistency in his writing. By using the right tense, readers can follow the storyline or argument clearly without confusion (Nair & Hui, 2018). For example, in a narrative, the writer must choose a consistent tense, whether it is the present tense to describe the action in progress, the past tense for the action that has already occurred, or the future tense for the action to come.

In addition, tenses help writers describe the sequence of events or ideas clearly (Alhaysony & Alhaisoni, 2017). By choosing the appropriate tense, the writer can convey the time sequence precisely, allowing the reader to understand the chronology of the story or idea well. Tenses help writers build proper sentence structure. By understanding the role of subjects, predicates, and objects in the context of the tense used, writers can construct sentences clearly and effectively. In the skill of writing recount text, knowledge of tenses in English is very important. Recount text is a type of text that retells or records past events or experiences. Therefore, in writing recount text, proper use of tense can help convey the chronology of events clearly and describe an accurate time sequence (Agustina, 2015).

Usually, recount text uses past tense because it focuses on experiences that have occurred in the past (Sitorus & Sipayung, 2018). The use of past tense helps the writer convey the story or experience consistently and gives the impression that the event has been completed. In addition to past tense, the use of other tenses such as present tense

or present perfect tense can also be applied depending on the context of the experience being told. For example, present tense is used to describe a common custom or truth in a story, while present perfect tense can be used to convey events that occurred in the past and still have relevance to the present time. That is to say by understanding the different functions and uses of various tenses, recount text writers can convey their experiences clearly, maintain chronological consistency, and allow readers to better engage in the story.

Several studies have been addressed by scholars in identifying the difficulties in English writing. Mathew Nalliveettil & Mahasneh (2017) addressed the issues of academic writing of university students in Saudi Arabia. This study exposed that the students still encounter challenges in developing ideas in academic writing. The same research topic was also studied by Amiri & Putch (2017). The study disclosed that the predominant errors in English language usage among the participants encompassed sentence structure, articles, punctuation, and capitalization. This study also shed light on the manner in which students assumed the rules of English to that of their native language. In line with the topic, Karim et al., (2018) investigated both the errors made by learners and their attitudes towards error correction. Consistent with prior findings, this study concurs that prevalent errors include those pertaining to grammar, misinformation, misordering, and overgeneralization. In addition, Kharmilah & Narius (2019) and Pasaribu, 2021) corroborate the findings of preceding research on errors encountered in academic writing. Both investigations indicate that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students continue to encounter significant challenges in mastering the grammatical structure during the writing process. All previuos studies discussed confirm that EFL students still struggle in the use of English grammar in writing.

Several studies within the domain of English academic writing have discerned grammatical errors among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, particularly in their utilization of English tenses. Mohammed et al. (2015) examined the grammatical errors present in the written output of 15 Iraqi students enrolled in the Faculty of Information System at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The findings indicated that these students exhibited diverse errors in their writing, notably concerning the usage of English tenses. Moreover, Alhaysony & Alhaisoni (2017) investigated grammatical challenges encountered by Saudi university students proficient in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as well as from the viewpoint of university instructors. The findings revealed varying degrees of difficulty among different English grammar aspects. Among the most challenging grammatical features encountered by EFL students was the application of tenses in writing.

In line with the findings above, Normawati & Tidar (2023) seek to investigate the perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regarding grammar. Findings indicate that EFL learners consider grammar to be of paramount importance in writing, leading them to prioritize grammatical accuracy in their written compositions. Conversely, in spoken discourse, a segment of learners recognize the significance of grammar and consciously attend to its usage when speaking, whereas others perceive it as less critical and consequently do not emphasize its application in either spoken or written communication. Furthermore, it revealed that a challenging aspect of English writing pertained to the proficiency in English tenses and their application in written expression. The issue of applying English tenses in English academic writing was also identified in the research conducted by Swasti (2016), Pardosi et al., (2019) Ernawati et al. (2019), Rohmana & Jianggimahastu (2019); Pratiwi et al. (2019) and Swasti (2016). All the studies concurred that a primary concern in English academic writing revolved around the insufficient comprehension and application of grammatical rules, particularly in relation to English tenses.

Nevertheless, research focusing specifically on the challenges associated with the utilization of English tenses by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students remains limited in quantity. One of the studies pertaining to tense usage was conducted by Fadilah. He (2019) investigated the errors of simple past tense that is made by students in 42 State SMK in Jakarta in writing narrative composition. This study revealed that the the students made 60% of errors in using simple past in the narrative writing. This study, unfortunately still limited to the number of errors in terms of verb forms and high school students. Thus, this article intends to shed some more light on the use of tenses in writing recount text at higher education, and what the underlying factors are contributing to the errors observed within the framework of this research.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used descriptive qualitative method. It attempts to identify the problems faced by Indonesia EFL university students in the use of tenses in writing recount text. The focuses of the study were to examine the choice of tenses, the errors of the verbal forms, and other errors in grammatical features related to the tense construction.

A total of 20 third-semester students, English Department, were participated in this study. The students were taking academic writing classes by the time of the research conducted. The dataset for this study comprises written recount texts authored by students, who were instructed to compose narratives on the subject of 'The Past Life in

Senior High School', with a minimum word count of 200. Furthermore, interviews were conducted to explore the challenges encountered by students in employing appropriate tenses while composing recount texts.

Data analysis entailed a thorough examination of student writing, focusing particularly on tense selection and sentence construction errors. The analytical framework employed in this research draws upon the methodologies outlined by Coders (1967) in Error Analysis. Given the foundational inquiries of this study, there is a clear imperative for further exploratory investigation aimed at elucidating the grammatical errors prevalent among Indonesian EFL students in their recount text compositions, as well as uncovering the underlying causes of these errors within the study's context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study attempts to identify the difficulties EFL faces when using tenses in writing recount text. The use of tenses is focused on how students choose the right English tenses and students' mistakes in using tenses when they write recount text. Then, students were asked to explain the difficulties they faced when writing the recount text. After the data analysis was carried out, the following results were found.

The Wrong Choice of Tenses

The selection of the right tenses in writing in English is very important to convey the message clearly and accurately. In other words, if the selection of tenses does not match the context of the time of the event, the reader of the writing will become confused with the meaning conveyed in the text (Lestari, 2020). Here are some research data that represent problems in the selection of tenses that are in accordance with the time context in text recount writing.

1. I work hard to find money for my school.
2. The teacher explains the lesson very well.
3. My father tell me to study hard for my dreams.
4. I will help my mother in the ricefield.
5. My father has worked very hard.
6. They are smart and diligent students.

The first sentence uses simple present tense. Meanwhile, the events in the sentence are in the past. Therefore, the sentence should be expressed in the simple past tense "I worked hard to earn money for my schoool." Then in the second sentence the tense used is also simple present tense. This choice of tense is also considered inappropriate because the context of events in the sentence occurred in the past. It is better to state the sentence in the simple past as well "The teacher explained very well." In the third sentence there is also a similar case where the sentence should be stated in the simple past, namely: "My father told

me to study hard for my dreams." In sentence 4 the tense used is simple future tense. This sentence should have been written in the past future tense "I would help my mother in the ricefield.". Then in sentence 5, the tense used should be past perfect tense. Therefore, the sentence became "My father had worked very hard." Then finally, the sixth sentence uses tobe in the simple present tense. The right choice of tense should be simple past tense. So the sentence should be "They were smart and diligent students."

From these results, an understanding was obtained that the students still experienced enormous obstacles in choosing tenses that were in accordance with the context of the time of the incident. Students should also understand that recount text has a tendency to use past tenses, such as: simple past tense, past continuous, past perfect, past perfect continuous, and past future tenses. With this understanding, it is hoped that students will focus more on using choices from the tenses mentioned above. So it will not give the possibility to use present tenses or future tenses.

The Errors in Sentence Structures

EFL students often make mistakes in sentence structure due to differences in grammar between English and Indonesian (Mathew Nalliveettil & Mahasneh, 2017; Kumala et al., 2018; Toba et al., 2019). Some errors in writing English that are often done by EFL students are subject-verb agreement. For example, the inverse order of subject and predicate, or errors in verb conjugation, such as using singular verbs with plural subjects, and vice versa. Other errors that are often encountered regarding errors are errors in using tobe, preposition, articles, and modifiers. Here are some of the research data as a representation of errors in sentence structures.

1. Most students was given appreciation to the teacher.
2. I belive with study hard can get your dream.
3. I have a dream that one day I want to go to abroad.
4. When I was in senior high school, I wanted to be the pilot
5. Roy was enough smart to be my competitors.

The first sentence of the data above shows an error in the suitability of the subject to the predicate. Where the subject is in plural form while the verb (tobe) is in singular form. The sentence should be written as follows: "Most students were giving appreciations to the teacher." Or "Most students gave appreciations to the teacher. Then in sentence 2 there are also errors related to the use of the preposition "with". The verb "belive" is always followed by the preposition "in". In the third sentence, there is also an error in the use of the preposition "to" in the phrase "go to abroad". In the fourth sentence, an error occurs in the use of artile in the phrase "I wanted to be the pilot". Since the

word "pilot" is mentioned for the first time in the text, the article "a" should be more appropriate in front of the word "pilot" so that it becomes "I wanted to be a pilot". In the fifth sentence, there are two errors. The first error is the use of the word "enough" should be written after the word "smart". Then the word "competitors" is not in plural form but singgular "competitor" because it refers to the subject "Roy".

The Difficulties in Using Tenses

English has a different grammatical structure to the student's native language (Karim et al., 2018). The concept of tenses, including the use of auxiliary and participle verbs, can be very different and confusing for them. In addition, the concept of tenses in English can be complex, especially when it involves tenses that do not exist in the student's native language. For example, understanding the difference between present perfect and past perfect can be tricky for them.

To identify students' difficulties in using tenses when writing recount text, interviews were used to find out (1) why they chose inappropriate tense in their writing, (2) why they made errors in sentence structure in their writing. From the results of the interview, it was found that some students in choosing tenses used in writing recount text often do not pay attention to the context of the time of the event so that there is still the use of simple present tense in recount text written by students. Then some students who are still unable at understanding of formulas and the use of English tenses result in grammatical errors in the sentences they write. The different linguistic features between English and Indonesian have contributed to the errors of the students' writing (Mathew Nalliveettil & Mahasneh, 2017; Kumala et al., 2018.)

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the challenges encountered by EFL students in using English tenses within recount text writing. The research identified significant difficulties students face in selecting the appropriate tenses for recount texts. Additionally, grammatical errors were prevalent in their sentences. Interviews with students confirmed that most lack a comprehensive understanding of the forms and uses of English tenses. The findings of this study have significant implications for teaching English writing, particularly in recount text composition. Educators should assess students' proficiency in English tenses to offer targeted explanations of tense forms and functions before writing practice sessions.

This research has limitations, particularly in its in-depth identification of difficulties related to tense usage in a broader range of writing genres. Consequently, future studies on this topic, encompassing a larger participant

pool and more diverse writing genres, will yield more comprehensive insights into the challenges EFL students encounter with tense usage in their writing.

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