



PAST TENSE IN WRITTEN EXPRESSIONS OF ADVANCED ESL STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The Simple Past Tense, a one-word verbal category has situational, anaphoric, cataphoric, event, state, habitual, attitudinal, hypothetical and backshift uses in communication. Using the structural grammar as a descriptive model, the study investigates the forms and imports of the Simple Past Tense in the written productions of some first-year students of University of Agriculture, Makurdi. The study is prompted by the paucity of such research on the students' written works which are not devoid of grammatical problems. Two hundred and eighty-six subjects, drawn from the study population, were given a test, made up of both objective test and essay task, at the close of the 2012/13 academic when they had had a two-semester use of English course termed *Communication in English*. The analysis of the data shows that the students are weak in the use of the Simple Past Tense in communication. For example, the Past Tense is used in wrong sentential contexts; the to-infinitive is inflected to indicate past time; present verb forms are used to articulate past events and states; there are numerous wrong inflections of irregular verbs such as *cutted, shaked, clinged*, etc. To improve the students' weak base in English grammar, Nigerian English language teachers should guide students to learn the forms, meanings and functions of past verb forms in communication; also, English language experts should develop self-study books on structural elements which have been established by research to be problematic to second language learners so to improve learners' communicative competence

Keywords: past tense, usage, Nigerian ESL students

1. Introduction

The English verb word is fundamental to communication. Its employment in utterance or sentence is mandatory; even where it is not visibly used; it is yet implied in the context. Verbs exhibit grammatical features such as tense, mood, modality, voice, transitivity and aspect in communication. Verbs inflect to show both present and past forms which yield the two classes of English tense, namely, the Present Tense and the Past Tense. The use of tense has been found to be problematic to second language learners (Huddleston, 1988); in Nigeria, in particular, where English is a second language; there are empirical facts that secondary and tertiary school

students are weak in tense usage (Inekwe, 2006; Ibbi, 2014). University students, too, are deficient in tense (Ofuokwu, 1982; Manjuk, 2009). Such research outcomes provide feedback which, if utilized, could culminate in significant improvements in the English language teaching and learning enterprise (Brown, 1987; Corder, 1973). However, there is no such research work on the written communication of undergraduates of University of Agriculture, Makurdi, the capital city of Benue state in central Nigeria. The purpose of the research, therefore, is to investigate the forms and imports of the Past Tense in the written expressions of first-year students of the university.

2. The Past Tense in Modern Usage

The structural grammar of the English language identifies two features of meaning involved in the common use of the Simple Past Tense (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 2007; Close, 1999; Hewing, 2003; Leech, 1989; Azar, 1999). One fundamental element of meaning is that the happening must have taken place in the past with a distinct gap between its completion and the present time. This implies that the present is wholly excluded:

1. *I used the car for ten years* (past, unconnected with the present).

The sentence makes it clear that I no longer use the car as opposed to:

2. *I have used the car for ten years* (past related to the present: meaning that *I still use it*)

Another basic element of meaning is that the speaker or writer must have a definite time in mind at which the event or state took place. Here the definite time in the past is characteristically identified by an adverbial expression accompanying the past tense verb.

3. *We visited Jos zoo last December.*

More specifically, there are at least six distinct common uses of the Past Tense in modern English communication (Quirk, et al, 2007; Leech, 1989; Thomson & Martinet, 1986). These are situational, anaphoric, cataphoric, event, state and habitual uses, which are explicated and exemplified here:

(A) The Past Tense is suitable for the expression of immediate past situation as illustrated by this sentence (Quirk, et al, 2007; Lester, 2008):

4. *Did you lock the back door?* (In domestic situation where it is a known security measure that the back door is locked before leaving the house).

(B) The anaphoric use of the Past Tense occurs where the past time referred to is already indicated by an earlier use of the Past Tense (Quirk, et al, 2007; Huddleston & Pullum, 2007) This is demonstrated below:

5. *NAFDAC closed down the bakery. It took us completely by surprise.*
6. *Last Saturday, we attended a musical concert.*

In (5), *took* is anaphoric, while in (6), the anaphoric reference is the adverbial of time, *last Saturday*.

The cataphoric use of the definite past occurs when the adverbial follows the Past Tense:

7. *We attended a musical concert last Saturday.*

(C) The use of the Past Tense in both main and subordinate clauses is permissible with temporal conjunctions such as *while, as soon as*, etc (Quirk, et al, 2007; Thomson and Martinet, 1986).

8. *John left as soon as the train arrived.*

The three other meanings of Past Tense can be simply identified as event past, state past and habitual past (Quirk et al., 2007).

(D) The event past refers to a single definite past in the past:

9. *A volcanic eruption burnt the arable land.*

The dynamic verb sense of *burnt* in (9) identifies a single event but the verb *was* refers to a state in (10); so it is an example of state past:

10. *Wrestling was a common sport in many Nigerian rural communities.*

(E) The habit past expresses events, even state of affairs, which persisted through a period in the past:

11. *In ancient times, the Olympic Games were held in southern Greece.*

The Past Tense is not solely confined to past reference. There are three meanings of the Past Tense with reference to present and future times (Quirk et al., 2007; Alternberg and Vago, 2010; Hashemi and Thomson, 2013; Nelson, 2001; Greenbaum, 1996; Berry, 2012). These are found in indirect speech, attitudinal and hypothetical expressions.

(F) In indirect speech, the backshift phenomenon (the tendency for past tense in reporting verb to make the verb of the subordinate clause past tense as well) can result in the use of the Past Tense for present time.

12. John: *Did you say you have had no money,*
Paul: *Yes, I'm completely broke.*

It is also possible to have a different kind of backshift when a sentence describing a speech in future contains a reported speech clause referring retrospectively to the present:

13. *My mother will be sorry that she missed seeing you (an uncle) this evening.*

(g) The attitudinal past, when used with verbs of volition or mental state, reflects the temporary attitude of the speaker rather than past time.

14. Daughter: *Did you want me?*

Mother: *Yes, I hoped you would give me a hand with the sewing.*

In the dialogue above, both the present and past tenses refer to a present state of mind but the past makes the request indirect and therefore more polite.

(h) The hypothetical past is used in certain subordinate clauses, particularly *if-clause*, to express what is not expected by the speaker (Leech, 1989):

15. *If the man really loved her, he wouldn't do such a thing.*

16. *Amina wishes she had a husband like Jummai's.*

17. *It's time the students took a holiday.*

The *hypothetical* past as in 15-17 implies the non- occurrence of some state or event in the present or future. For example, the implication of (15) is that the man does not love her. The form of the verb used with the Simple Past Tense is the past form (not the past participle):

18. *He wrote to me one week ago but I only answered the letter yesterday.*

The common uses reviewed above provide this study with basis for assessing the misuse of the Past Tense in the subjects' written expressions.

3. Methodology

This survey study was conducted among first-year students of 201/13 session of the University of Agriculture, Makurdi. Simple random sampling technique was used to draw 286 subjects from among the population. A Use of English Test, made up of ten objective test question items on Past Tense and five essay-writing tasks on experiences of youths, was administered to students when they had been exposed to a two-semester use of English course, called *Communication in English*. Frequency count and simple percentage were used to analyze the data. An objective test question item in which the students score less than 50% is construed as a problem. The discussion examines the students' problem with the failed items as well as their peculiar difficulties with the forms, meanings and functions of the Past Tense in their essays.

4. Results

Table 1: Simple Past Tense Errors in the Students' Responses to the Objective Test

Past Tense Test Items	Student' Performance		Rating
	X	%	
1. Jane has just <u>left/left</u> just a few minutes ago.	173	60	less problematic
2. I have <u>got/started</u> to get the pains three weeks ago.	155	54	less problematic
3. Scientists have <u>made/made</u> some fundamental discoveries in the 18 th centuries.	142	49	Problematic
4. The pharaohs have <u>ruled/ruled</u> Egypt for thousands for years.	191	67	less problematic
5. I have <u>stayed/stayed</u> with grandparents for six months.	189	66	less problematic
6. Chinese craftsmen <u>have invented/invented</u> both paper and printing.	180	62	less problematic
7. Timson <u>made/has made</u> 13 films before she was tragically killed in a car accident .	165	57	less problematic
8. I have <u>thrown/threw</u> away most of my books when I moved house.	205	71	less problematic
9. I <u>went/was</u> going past her house every day.	192	67	less problematic
10. Lee has <u>represented/represented</u> his country on many occasions, but was forced to retire after an injury.	122	42	Problematic

Table 2: Past Errors in the Students' Essays

Past Tense Test Items	Student' Performance		Rating
	X	%	
Simple Present	73	7	Less problematic
Simple Past	961	93	Problematic
Total	1034	100	

The inclusion of the Present Tense here, in comparison with the Past Tense, depicts the magnitude of the students' difficulties with the Past Tense.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Students' Problems with the Past Tense in the Objective Test

The research instrument has five multiple-choice questions which assess the students' on the immediate past, event past, state past and habitual past uses of the Past Tense. In Table I, items (1) and (2) examine immediate past situations; items (3), (4), (5), and (6), are on the state past; (7) and (8) assess event past while (9) and (10) evaluate habitual past uses. The students' responses reveal that they find items (8) and (10) problematic and the others less problematic. But basically they have problems with all items because of the relative high degrees of percentages of wrong responses (ranging from 40% to 5%). The unacceptable responses are:

- 1) Jane has just left a few minutes ago.
- 2) I have got the pains three weeks ago.
- 3) Scientists have made some fundamental discoveries in the 18th century.
- 4) The pharaohs have ruled Egypt for thousand years.
- 5) I have stayed with grandparent for six months.
- 6) Chinese craftsmen have invented both paper and printing.
- 7) Timson has made 13 films before she was tragically killed in a car accident.
- 8) I have thrown away most of my old books when I moved house.
- 9) I was going past her house every day.
- 10) Lee has represented his country on many occasions, but was forced to resign after an injury.

The semantic context of each sentence limits the happening to a definite past time with a distinct gap between its completion and the present time; so the use of the present perfective aspect in each context is incorrect. This implies that the students have not ingrained the various communicative functions of the Past Tense. The correct versions of the sentences are given below:

- 1) Jane has just left a few minutes ago.
- 2) I got the pains three weeks ago.
- 3) Scientists made some fundamental discoveries in the 18th century.
- 4) The pharaohs ruled Egypt for thousand years.
- 5) I stayed with grandparent for six months.
- 6) Chinese craftsmen invented both paper and printing.
- 7) Timson made 13 films before she was tragically killed in a car accident.
- 8) I threw away most of my old books when I moved house.
- 9) I went past her house every day.
- 10) Lee represented his country on many occasions, but was forced to resign after an injury.

Conclusively, the analysis of the students' responses to the objective test on the Past Tense shows that they have particular difficulties with the situational, event, state and habitual uses of the Past Tense.

5.2 The Students' Problems with the Past Tense in the Essays

The essays create imaginary communicative context that elicit the use of Past Tense so as unearth the students' difficulties, if any, with the Past Tense category. Some of the problems are presented here.

1. The *to-infinitive* forms of verbs are wrongly inflected to express past time.

*(i). The card took my interest then I decided to *stayed* and watch for sometime...

Correction:

(i). The card took my interest then I decided to *stay* and watch for some time...

There are several cases of such misuse:

*(a)... to go to school to *acquired* knowledge...;

*(b)... my father... a great politician of our time *to baled* me out of police custody;

*(c)... to go to bank the next day *to wildraved* the money;

*(d) She had no option than *to expelled* us from the school.

The corrected versions are given below:

(a)... to go to school *to acquire* knowledge...;

(b)... my father... a great politician of our time *bailed* me out of police custody;

(c)... to go to bank the next day *to withdraw* the money;

(d) She had no options than *to expel* us from the school.

2. There is the use of the Past Tense for the past progressive aspect and vice-versa

*(ii) In the year 2001, I started my jamb... I kept on *tried* till year 2012 to 2013 I finally made it.

*(iii) I *rejoicing the lord that make* everything possible.

The corrected versions are:

(ii). In the year 2001, I started my jamb...I kept on trying till year 2012 to 2013 when I finally made it.

(iii). I *rejoiced* that the Lord *had made* everything possible.

3. The Past Tense equivalents of the modal auxiliaries (*will, can, etc*) are not used in sentential contexts that require them:

*(iv). I vowed to God that if he *can* help me out of the unpleasant situation, I *will* serve him all the days of my life.

Correction:

(iv). I vowed to God that if he *could* help me out of the unpleasant situation, I *would* serve him all the days of my life.

4. There is failure to use past forms of verbs where the grammatical environments demand them.

*(v). ... I ate and at until I *confess* with my mouth that am satisfied.

Correction:

(v). ... I ate and at until I *confessed* with my mouth that *I was* satisfied.

5. Past forms are incorrectly used with modal auxiliaries

*(vi) I *didn't expected* what I saw

*(vii)... before I *could realized* what is going on. I discovered policeman was standing beside already.

Corrections:

(vi) I *didn't expect* what I saw.

(vii)... before I *could realize* what is going on. I discovered policeman was standing beside already.

6. Past forms are used as nouns and nouns as past forms:

*(viii). Corruption can *be viewed* as the *misused* of public power for private gained...

*(ix). Myself was encouraged and to be *commitment* unto God.

Corrections:

(viii). Corruption can *be viewed* as the *misuse* of public power for private gain...

(ix). I (for myself) was encouraged and to be *committed* unto God.

7. There are inflections of irregular verbs which all three parts (*V*, *V-ed₁*, and *V-ed*) are identical with no suffix or change of the base vowel (eg. *cut-cut-cut*):

*(x). I *cutted* the cake dedicating my life to God almighty.

Corrections:

(x). I *cut* the cake, dedicating my life to God Almighty.

8. In addition, wrong inflections of other classes of irregular verbs exist in their essays.

*(xi). I came out from my room and he *shaked* my hand...

*(xii). Then from there I *agreeded* with what he said.

*(xiii). John even *clinged* himself to a girl.

The correct sentences are:

(xi). I came out from my room and he *shook* my hand...

(xii). Then from there I *agreed* with what he said

(xiii). John even *clung* himself to a girl

Other wrong conjugations of irregular include *grinded*, *catched*, *graved*, *lefted*, *grainded*, *shoke*, *beated*, *gaved*, *wented*, *granded*, *grinded*, *splited* and others.

The correct past tense forms are: *ground*, *caught*, *gave*, *left*, *ground*, *shook*, *beat*, *went*, *ground*, *ground*, *ground*, *split*.

9. There are pronunciation-induced tense problems. The students, due to weak pronunciation of English verb words, generate wrong past forms of verbs:

*(xiv). ...so the police *cut* all of them and they *where* kept in prison.

*(xv). The uncle believed her because he never *shaw* her since she was small...

Corrections:

(xiv). ... so the police *caught* all of them and they *were* kept in prison.

(xv). The uncle believed her because he never *saw* her since she was small...

10. *to be*, a participle of the verb BE, is inflected, contrary to standard usage, as, *to been* and used as a main verb.

*(xvi). It was the first day of my life *to been* to the large city like Abuja.

Correction:

(xvi). It was the first day of my life *to be* in a large city like Abuja.

11. The students generate wrong structure for the passive form of the Past Tense.

*(xvii). Then food *was serve* around to those present.

*(xviii). I *thank* God I *was not been droven* from the school.

Corrections:

(xvii). Then food *was served* around to those present.

(xviii). I *thanked* God I *was not driven* from the school.

12. The passive form of the Simple Past is wrongly used for that of past progressive aspect

*(xix). We walked into the church smiling while beautiful songs *were played*.

Were played (simple past passive), incorrectly substituted for *were being played* (the passive form of past progressive aspect).

The correct version is:

(xix). We walked into the church smiling while beautiful songs *were being played*.

13. Past form equivalents of modals are unacceptably used with past forms of verbs:

*(xx). I ran as fast I could *got* a tax and *arrived* at home.

*(xxi). ...provided my parent did not *quarreled* me.

Corrections:

(xx). I ran fast I could *get* a tax and I *arrived* home.

(xxi)...provided my parent did not *quarrel* me.

Evidently the analysis of the students' responses to the objective test on the uses of the Past Tense and their written essays demonstrate their weaknesses in the uses and forms of the Past Tense.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study has proved that some advanced ESL students are still unable to use the Past Tense correctly in communication. For example, the undergraduates in this study use Past Tense in wrong sentential contexts. In addition, the *to-infinitive* is inflected to indicate past time. Also, present verb forms are used to indicate past events and states. The past tense equivalents of the modal auxiliaries (*will, can, shall, etc*) are not used in sentential environments that require them. There are numerous wrong inflections of irregular verbs (e.g: *cutted, shaked, clinged, etc*). Conclusively, the students demonstrate weakness in the uses and forms of the Past Tense. To improve the students' weak base in English grammar, teachers should drill students via multiple exercises on the various forms, meanings and uses of the Past Tense in communication. Also, experts should develop self-study books on structure elements which have been established by research to impede students' communication. On their part, students should cultivate the practice of reading texts written in Standard English as well as listen to learned users of the English language speak on radio and television programmes.

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