DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING THE RULES OF TENSES FACED BY NON-MAJORED ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Abstract

There is no denying the fact that grammar is a vital part of English language. It enhances the understanding of learners with respect to the English language. Tenses are one of the important parts of grammar in English language. In order to have command over English language, learners are required to understand the structure and applications of the tenses. Although, in the context of Vietnam, much research exists on how to teach language effectively, little attention has been given to the issues faced by students during learning of tenses. This paper explores difficulties in learning the structure of English tenses. Data were collected from non-majored English students of the first and second year by using a structured questionnaire in Phu Yen University. The results of the study showed that the non-majored English students face problems in the use of third person singular pronoun in regard to simple present tense, learning some unusual spellings of present participle, the use of have/has in present perfect tense and so on. The study suggests that while teaching tenses, teachers should be focused on structure besides applications of tenses and should accordingly choose and adjust the method in order to accomplish the best possible results. Teachers should be properly trained in teaching the structure/rules of tenses as well as be made well informed on all teaching methodologies, their merits and demerits so that they are of capable of using the merits of a particular method for making their teaching of tenses more effective.

Keywords: Challenges, non-majored English students, Tenses, Structure/Rules, Phu Yen University

1. Introduction

English language in Phu Yen University up to B1 level is taught as a subject only. Due to this, students face difficulties with regard to learning English tenses at this level. Even teachers also face difficulties while teaching tenses to the students. Too much focus on the development of communicative competence enables the students to perform spontaneously but it always puts at stake the linguistic accuracy of the students. Gokhale (2010) is of the view that the teaching of grammar should be both form based and meaning based but the fact is that our teachers are not properly trained in teaching grammar (tenses). Teachers should neither ignore rules nor applications of these rules as students need both communicative competence and linguistic accuracy. Chomsky (1959) while talking about the importance of learning rules says that native speakers have grammar somewhere in their mind which they can use to make sentences. He adds that linguistic activity is a unique activity experienced by human beings and learning a language involves mental processes, however, with foreign language learners the situation seems to be a bit different taking into consideration that they already know a language in the form of their mother tongue and they have to build a new one on it. So if a student would like to be close to the competence of a native speaker, s/he should have the ability to distinguish grammatical from ungrammatical sentences.

According to study by Khansir (2008) in the context of South Asia undergraduate learners “out of 1678 errors were made in the use of sentences, 648 (39%) were observed in tenses and 476 (28%) were observed in Active and Passive voice.” Naseem (2007) also found in her study that the second highest category of errors made by Matric students in Pakistan was in regard to using the correct form
of verb. Language learning primarily involves learning the appropriate usage of various verb forms of the language (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014). Language learners will inevitably make mistakes if they are unable to have a command over the verb forms of the target language (Liu, 2012). Likewise, the tense system in English is a difficult area for Arab English as a foreign language (EFL) learners as shown by many research studies (Abdul Haq, 1982; Farrokh, 2011; Kambal, 1980; Mattar, 2001). Kambal (1980) conducted a research on first year students at universities of Sudan with respect to analyzing errors in verb form and concluded that many of the errors were in regard to tenses including order of tenses, tense changeover, tense indicator, omission, and confusion regarding perfect tenses. According to Mattar (2001) EFL Arab students make regular mistakes by confusing present perfect tense with simple past tense. The researcher adds that the reason for the aforementioned mistake is the unawareness of the students about the corresponding association between tense and its meaning.

According to Brians (2003) ESL learners find difficulties in mastering some unusual spellings of present participle forms of verb. Hence dieing and lieing are used instead of dying and lying. He further adds that ESL learners often confuse the complex helping verb of the tense. Westwood (2006) talking about the difficulties faced by ESL learners in regard to the structure of present progressive tense says that ESL learners as usual make mistakes in –wh interrogative sentences by misplacing the helping verb as is shown in the following examples: Why you are leaving instead of Why are you leaving? And What he is doing here instead of What is he doing here?

Ramachandran (2010) summing up the difficulties faced by ESL learners with regard to the structure of present perfect tense says that past participle (third form) in case of irregular verbs is always a nuisance for ESL learners. Hence they would say I have held the glass in my hand for I have held the glass in my hand. He further adds that those verbs which have the same three forms also confuse ESL learners while using past and past participle forms. So ESL learners would say I have cut my fingers with a knife instead of I have cut my fingers with a knife. Similarly, according to Mittwoch (1988) ESL learners have problems with the long helping verb of present perfect progressive tense. He adds that this problem specially becomes visible when ESL learners are supposed to produce negative and interrogative sentences where the long helping verb is to be split into two parts. Thus the learners would say He has been not playing football for He has not been playing football. Has been Ali waiting for me instead of Has Ali been waiting for me (ibid). Moreover, according to Mittwoch (2008) ESL learners confuse the use of since and for in regard to hours and o’clock. Thus they produce He has been studying since two hours instead of He has been studying since two o’clock. He has been studying for two o’clock for He has been studying since two o’clock.

In regard to the use of How long, ESL learners frequently commit mistakes, as they would say Since/For how long has been waiting instead of How long has been waiting? (Chandler, 2003). According to Paradis, Gavruseva, and Haznedar (2008) the structure of past progressive is very simple but still ESL learners find difficulties in the use of was and were. Tenses can be divided into two sub-categories with regard to its learning; learning the rules/structure tenses and learning their applications. It has already been discussed above that the students face problems related to understanding the structure of tenses in English language. This is one of the major issues of English language learning in Phu Yen University classrooms.

2. Method

The students of first year and second year of Phu Yen University, Vietnam, fall in the purview of the population of this research study. The number of the students in the first year was 40 whereas the number of the students in the second year was 35. As such the whole number of the respondents of this study was 75. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling technique. Moreover, the students were non majored English students. These students had English grammar as a part of their syllabus, which included parts of speech, the use of prepositions and tenses. Tenses were taught to them in the beginning of first year and other parts of grammar after tenses. Consequently, the students of both first year and second year had had the experience of how to learn English tense at the time of
this study. A Likert scale questionnaire was distributed among the respondents and the responses of the learners were analyzed.

Objectives of the study

The main objectives of this study were:
- To find out the difficulties related to learning the structure of tenses faced by the non-majoried English students at Phu Yen University
- To know how to address the problems faced by non-majoried English students at Phu Yen University in learning the rules of tenses

Research Question

Following is the main research question to be answered by this research study:
- What are the difficulties faced by the non-majoried English students at Phu Yen University?

3. Results and Discussion

This section illustrates the results of the study. The analysis of the data was done using simple percentage method as the aim of the paper was to see the extent to which the participants agreed or disagreed with the items exploring the difficulties faced by the students while learning structure of tenses. The results are presented in tables and frequency form.

Table 1: Students face difficulty in learning third person singular pronoun in regard to simple present tense.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>04%</td>
<td>02%</td>
<td>01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that majority students (67%) show that most of the students strongly agree to the point that they face problems in learning third person singular pronoun.

Table 2: Students struggle with the use of do/does in negative and interrogative sentences of simple present tense.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>03%</td>
<td>02%</td>
<td>01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 points out that most of the (62%+ 32%) students hold the view that EFL learners struggle with the use of do/does in the negative and interrogative sentences of simple present tense.

Table 3: Students learn some unusual spelling of present participle form of verbs with great difficulty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>02%</td>
<td>01%</td>
<td>00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 informs that most of the students (67%+30%) confirm the statement that they take much time to learn the spelling of these unusual present participles.

Table 4: Students are confused by the use of has/have in present perfect tense.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>06%</td>
<td>05%</td>
<td>02%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that the majority of the respondents (65%+21%) fall in with the view that they are troubled by has/have in present perfect tense.

Table 5: Students often make mistakes in regard to the past participle form of irregular verbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>04%</td>
<td>05%</td>
<td>02%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 relates the fact that 89% of the respondents consented to the statement that they cannot easily learn past participle form of irregular verbs.

Table 6: Students face difficulties in the use of “did/didn’t” in negative and interrogative sentences of past indefinite tense.
Table 6 states that maximum of the students (50%) agree to the fact that EFL learners struggle with the use of *did/didn’t* in the negative and interrogative sentences of past indefinite tense.

**Table 7:** Students are frequently mistaken with respect to the use of long helping verb in present and past perfect continuous tenses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>03%</td>
<td>01%</td>
<td>01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 shows that majority of students either agree or strongly agree to the statement.

**Table 8:** Students are often confused in the use of *since/for* in present and perfect progressive tenses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>04%</td>
<td>03%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 shows that most of the students (70%+23%) uphold the statement that they encounter problems in the use of *since/for* in regard to perfect and perfect progressive tenses.

**Table 9:** Students find it hard to make the correct use of helping verb in negative sentences of future progressive tense.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>03%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 shows that majority of students strongly agree to the opinion that EFL learners face problems in the use of helping verb in regard to negative sentences of future indefinite tense.

**Table 10:** Students struggle with long helping verbs of future perfect and future perfect progressive tenses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>03%</td>
<td>07%</td>
<td>03%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 indicates that large number of students (64%) strongly supports the statement that they are students are often mistaken in the use of long helping verbs of future perfect and future perfect progressive tenses.

**Table 11:** Students find difficulty in learning the *wh interrogative* sentences of all tenses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>03%</td>
<td>07%</td>
<td>03%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11 show that 66% of the respondents strongly agree to the fact that EFL learners are troubled by *wh interrogative* sentences.

### 4. Discussion, Conclusion & Recommendations

#### Discussion

The study was conducted to find out the difficulties faced by the non-majored English students at Phu Yen University in learning the rules of the tenses. The issue was first probed into theoretically in the light of previous related literature and was then examined through a questionnaire in this study. Both the literature review and the results of the data show that these students face many difficulties in learning the rules of the tenses. The study impliedly demands that there shall be focus on both the development of communicative competence and linguistic competence. Neither shall be developed at the cost of the other. Though in the context of Phu yen University (as shown by this study), it is only the
linguistic competence that the teachers are focusing on by using GTM; hence, the causes of the difficulties faced by these students can be explored in some other factors. Nevertheless, the equilibrium shall be held on to, in regard to the development of both types of competences (Gokhle, 2010). Furthermore, learners should be taught how to get a command over verb forms. They should be made aware of the trick of the irregular verb forms. If they do not develop understanding of the verb forms (As in the case of this study), they are bound to make mistakes and confuse one tense with another (Liu, 2012). The study also indicates that students commit mistakes in the spellings of some unusual present participle (die, lie etc.). They actually generalize the rules of normal present participles to these ones and hence commit frequent mistakes (Brians, 2003). The study further indicates that the students encounter problems in placing the helping verbs in the right position in the wh interrogative sentences (Westwood, 2006). The study shows as if these students do not know the difference between a statement and a wh questions. Which is why they make statement instead of wh questions. Likewise, the verb form in the third person singular pronoun is nuisance for all the ESL students (Wang, Zhao, & Shi, 2015). This study also confirms that the students find it difficult to learn and master the right form of verb in third person singular pronoun.

Conclusion

On the basis of above analysis it can be concluded that students face difficulties in learning third person singular pronoun in regard to simple present tense. Students struggle with the use of do/does in negative and interrogative sentences of simple present tense. The paper also concluded that students find difficulties in learning some unusual spellings of present participle (i.e. lie, die etc.). Most of the students are confused by the use of have/has in present perfect tense. A majority of the students make mistakes in the past participle form of irregular verbs. Most of the students face problems in the use of did/did not in negative and interrogative sentences of simple past tense. Students encounter difficulties in regard to the use of long helping verb of perfect and perfect progressive tenses. Learners frequently confuse since and for in perfect and perfect progressive tenses. Majority of the students find it difficult to learn wh interrogative sentences of all tenses.

Recommendations

On the basis of the analysis and conclusion, this paper forwards the following recommendations:

- While teaching tenses, teachers should be focused on rules besides the uses of tenses and should accordingly choose and adjust his/her method in order to accomplish the best possible results.
- Teachers should be made well informed on all the teaching methodologies: their merits and demerits and they should be enabled to use the merits of a particular method for making their teaching more effective
- Teachers should be properly trained in teaching tenses

6. References


