

## Challenges in Teaching the English Tense System to Non-Native Learners

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**Abstract:** The English tense system is one of the most complex aspects of the language, presenting significant challenges for non-native learners. Its intricate structure, encompassing various tenses, aspects, and uses, often leads to confusion and errors. These difficulties are further compounded by learners' native language interference, differences in grammatical frameworks, and the abstract nature of certain tenses. Understanding and addressing these challenges is crucial for effective English language teaching, as mastery of tenses is essential for accurate communication in both spoken and written contexts. This study explores the key obstacles faced by non-native learners and suggests strategies for overcoming them. This article explores the difficulties faced by learners in mastering the tense system and discusses effective strategies to overcome these challenges.

**Key Words:** tenses, form and function, challenges in learning and also teaching English tenses, effective teaching strategies, the minor purpose of grammar, the importance of tense in learning English, teaching the English tense, being tricky of the tense.

Nowadays, English has become a worldwide language, allowing people from all over the world to connect with each other. The purpose of English has been emphasized as not being confined to international purposes, but also for local purposes. As a result, the importance of using English has spread throughout the world. It's possible because the impact of English as an international language has successfully moved the English role's dominance globally. Kachru (1992) pointed out that the role of English might be employed in non-English speaking nations for academic reasons, particularly in the process of learning English, based on the spread

of the role of English. Nonetheless, not all language acquisition techniques are always successful. Along the way, there are still some obstacles to overcome. Students who learn English as their second language often face some common difficulties. The potential hurdles of the English learning process may be greater in non-English speaking countries than in English-speaking countries when learning English. Some elements, such as learners' ability, motivation, environment, practices, and prior knowledge of learning foreign languages, influenced the problems (Thompson, 2014). Furthermore, linguistic distinctions, such as variances in phonology, word order, phrases, and verbal system, could be another element that contributed to the problem. Proper use of tense is one of them.

Tense, in grammar, expresses the time of an action. Whether an action has been done, or is being done or yet to be done, these expressions are expressed with the help of Tense. Hence, "Tense" is an important aspect that ESL learners have to be well aware of to be a skillful writer and a good speaker as well. However, most students face numerous problems in using tenses properly. Also, teachers find it difficult as well to help the students gain accuracy on this particular grammar item. According to Noam Chomsky for the native speaker, grammar is somewhere in their brains and they can use it to make sentences. Chomsky maintains that language activity is an activity unique to human beings' experience, so that learning a language involves mental processes. But for second language speakers it becomes slightly difficult to learn the grammar and tense is one of the major ones of them.

Learning English is about more than just vocabulary and grammar. For ESL students, the social components of language use can be even more difficult than the linguistic aspects. A communicative competency barrier also exists for students learning a second language. The students are unsure about the new language's functions and when it is suitable to use it in specific situations. This incapacity causes stress and dissatisfaction in the student, as well as a decrease in the desire to participate in the community; this is referred to as the affective filter (Dulay & Burt, 1974). Teachers can be frustrated by their students' incapacity to communicate. Dr Cho identifies a variety of reasons why overseas students studying in an English-speaking country face significant stress and challenges when completing coursework. After going through some research journals previously conducted by other scholars and data analysis, the following problems can be considered as the vital ones.

Different directions in the methodology of teaching foreign languages understood the role of grammar in different ways. With a communicative-cognitive approach, the importance of grammar is great. We learn grammar for communication. As it has already been mentioned that the importance of tense is much vital in learning English, therefore the problem regarding tense incompetency of the students need to be taken seriously. In many cases it is seen that ESL students are not being able to use the tenses properly. They end up using, let's say, present perfect tense in place of past indefinite and vice versa. Besides, students sometimes also make errors in the structure of the proper tense.

**Purpose of grammar:** The main purpose of studying grammar is the formation of grammatical skills as the main components of speech skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) so that people can communicate. This highlights the importance of grammar at all stages. Grammar can be understood as an adequate understanding and correct use of words in the act of communication, that is, infinite knowledge of the grammar of the language. By grammar, we also mean the system of language, the discovery, and description of the nature of the language itself. Grammatical habit is the most important component of conscious activity. By grammatical habit, we mean the ability to correctly use grammatical means in various contexts, situations of speech activity. A grammatical habit, once acquired, must be constantly improved. They should learn to use grammar, not grammar knowledge. The best way to learn grammar is through practice and communication.

**The method:** One of the most used methods to teach English as second language is Grammar Translation Method, also abbreviated as GTM. In this method teachers usually focus on the grammar rules. The grammar rules are taught deliberately and, in many schools, students have to memorize the rules. However, the applications of these rules are overlooked. Therefore, almost every ESL student know the structures of the tenses but they do not know when to use a particular tense. Therefore, while speaking they often end up using wrong tenses in wrong situation. Students need to have exposure where they can learn to use the tenses properly according to the context.

**Students' misconception:** Students often take English as a subject rather than taking it as a language. Their primary focus remains on getting a good grade instant of learning the language by developing the linguistic skills. So, they do not care much how much they are actually learning the language, they keep memorizing the

rules so that they can get good marks in the exam. When it finally comes to the act of using the grammars, they fail. Therefore, many students especially those who are from Indian subcontinent cannot use tenses properly while speaking and writing.

**Lack of practice:** A research conducted by Ismail Cakir shows that students do not just make errors in tenses, they also sometimes “slip”. They know the rules, they know the structures and their usages, still while speaking, they say in the wrong format. Ismail concludes that this is not actually an error but a slip. And this slipping actually happens due to lack of practice of the students. As the classes are held in the native languages, students do not get much exposure to the target language. And students themselves are often reluctant to practice the target language. Thus, when they are told to speak the language, they slip and make mistakes out of nervousness and fear.

**Tense being tricky:** It is not just the methods or the lack of practice, English Tense itself is kind of tricky. Most students struggle to distinguish the difference between past indefinite, past perfect and present perfect. To be able to use these tenses properly students need to have a proper idea about the aspects of tenses.

**Different backgrounds:** For starters, students may come from a variety of cultural backgrounds in which they are fully dependent on teachers. They have also not been taught to think critically, and because they are second language learners, they may have lower expectations than their teachers. Writing professors with high expectations may believe that students are qualified to produce correct pieces of writing, and they may give challenging topics that students may find difficult to write about (Al Murshidi, 2014). And as a result, they don't justify the beliefs of the teachers because of an unexperienced knowledge of the Tenses. It may also be hampered by a lack of linguistic skills.

**Simplification of the grammatical form** is the most common form of erroneous grammatical actions of students, manifested in the replacement of complex grammatical constructions with simpler ones - the replacement of a complex verb predicate with a simpler one. Incomplete application of the grammatical rule is demonstrated in cases when students who implement all the necessary changes do not completely change the form when structuring the utterance. Ignoring the restriction of the rule. Example: using an affirmative sentence as a question without changing its structure, or using a question without changing its structure, or using an infinitive with the particle "to" after modal verbs. Creative construction of

grammatical forms demonstrated in a creative erroneous form conducted by students. There will be a clear image of the most successful and efficient programs to be adapted in their curriculum once the learners' academic learning issues and demands have been identified. Teachers, of course, try their best and put in a lot of time and effort to help their students learn more. Unfortunately, in the vast majority of cases, the ultimate product falls short of expectations. As a result, the majority of instructors consider grammatical skills to be the most hardest to teach (Al Murshidi, 2014) [1]. Tenses are an integral part of mastering the English language, yet many students struggle to understand and apply tense concepts. The research uses a qualitative method with data collection techniques such as observation and interviews with students. The results indicate several factors that contribute to difficulties in learning tenses. These factors include differences in tense structures between the native language and English, limited use of tenses in daily life, and teaching methods that are less interactive and motivating for students. Additionally, difficulties in recognizing the appropriate time and events for each tense are also a major challenge, as well as many students finding tenses difficult due to their forms and distinguishing verb changes. Each student has different characteristics, so this research includes developing more interactive and applicable teaching strategies, increasing the application of tenses in real-life contexts, and providing more contextual tense learning. A deeper understanding of the differences in tense structures between students' native language and English is also needed [2].

The English tense system is one of the most complex aspects of the language, especially for non-native learners. Understanding the nuances of twelve tenses and their appropriate use can be challenging. The English tense system consists of three primary tenses: past, present, and future, each with four aspects: simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous. While native speakers acquire these structures naturally, non-native learners struggle due to differences in tense usage in their mother tongue. For instance, Uzbek learners often confuse the Present Perfect tense with the Past Simple, as Uzbek does not have a direct equivalent for the former. This study is based on an analysis of common errors made by intermediate-level English learners. Data were collected through grammar exercises, classroom observations, and student interviews. The findings highlight specific areas where learners face the most difficulty. One significant challenge is understanding the difference between form and function. Learners often memorize tense structures but

fail to use them correctly in context. For example, they may know how to form the Future Continuous tense but struggle to apply it in appropriate situations. Effective teaching strategies include:

1. Using visual aids such as tense timelines to illustrate time relationships.
2. Encouraging contextual practice through real-life scenarios.
3. Comparing English tenses with those in the learners' native language to clarify differences [3].

Teaching the English tense system requires a clear and systematic approach. Teachers should focus on contextualizing grammar rules and providing ample opportunities for practice. Future research could explore the role of technology, such as apps and interactive games, in improving tense acquisition among learners. All in all, teaching the English tense system to non-native learners presents notable challenges due to its complexity, including numerous forms, irregularities, and contextual usage variations. These difficulties are often compounded by differences between learners' native language structures and English. Effective teaching strategies, such as contextual learning, targeted practice, and technology integration, can help overcome these obstacles. By addressing these challenges with a tailored and learner-centered approach, educators can foster better understanding and application of English tenses, ultimately enhancing learners' communication skills.

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