

AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMMON PAST TENSE ERRORS COMMITTED IN WRITING BY KURDISH LEARNERS OF EFL

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ABSTRACT

Writing is a challenging skill even in the first language, and it is more difficult to write in a foreign language. That is why most of the EFL learners make errors in EFL writing. Error analysis is the method used to identify, classify, explain, and correct errors made by first-year college students in their essays. Errors are significant in three different ways. Firstly, they inform teachers areas that students need more learning. Secondly, they are good evidence for researchers on how language is acquired. Thirdly, they are significant to the learners themselves, because through these error learners can know in which aspects of the language, they lack enough knowledge. This study attempts to analyze past tense errors made by first-year students in order to see what is the most difficult aspect of past tense for the learners. Ten narrative essays composed by Duhok university students were collected and analyzed. Errors made by students were classified into different types and counted in order to see the most frequent error as far as the past tense is considered. Results have shown that the most frequent types of errors were regular verbs in the past, irregular verbs in the past, past perfect tense, past continuous tense, and passive voice in the past. The findings of the study show that past continuous is the most problematic area of the past tense for the participants of this study.

KEY WORDS: Error analysis, Grammatical errors, past tense.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The problem of the study

Writing is a necessary part of each language. It is one of the important skills that language learners generally and English learners particularly need to master. For learners to develop their writing in the target language, they should try to apply correct grammatical rules of the target language especially the rules of tenses. Participants of this paper face difficulties in applying past tense rules properly in their writings because there is a huge difference between the rules of past tense in Kurdish and English language. For example, the formula of past simple tense in English is "Subject + Verb (past form) + Complement/Object". While in Kurdish is "Subject + object + past stem + agreement morpheme". The current research is an attempt to see how students apply past tense rules of English language. Learners and teachers should have an idea of the past tense rules that are difficult to be applied by learners. Error analysis is used to identify learners' difficulties in applying these rules to their writings.

1.2 Aims of the study

This research aims to analyze the errors of

essays of learners of the first year of English department, college of languages, UOD. The research is an attempt to identify and classify the frequent past tense errors committed by learners.

1.3 Research Questions

This research will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Do Kurdish learners of English face difficulties in applying past tense rules when writing in English?
2. In which aspect of the past tense (past simple with regular verbs, past simple with irregular verbs, past continuous, past perfect, or passive voice in past) will the Kurdish learners do most frequent errors?

1.4 Hypothesis of the study

Since the rules of past tense in Kurdish are different from those of English. For example, in English the past verb precedes the complement/object, while in Kurdish the past verb follows the object. Due to this difference and other differences between the formula of past tense in both languages, the current study hypothesizes that Kurdish EFL learners face difficulties in applying the past tense rules of English properly in their writings.

1.5 Significance of the study

The study is significant for teachers at the English department, college of languages, UOD as it will help them to be familiar with students' difficulties in applying rules of past tense in writing in this department. In addition to that, the paper is valuable for students themselves as it is a way to clarify which area they need more practice in.

1.6 Limits of the study

The present study is limited to the first year Kurdish EFL in the English language department, college of languages, UOD. The study is also limited to the investigation of the past tense errors regardless to other grammatical errors or errors of writing skills, such as idea expression, organization, or cohesion. The paper is an attempt to identify the errors without clarifying the reasons of the errors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Error analysis

Error analysis (EA) is a branch of applied linguistics that studies and analyzes errors indicating learner's native language in not the only source of their errors but they also reflect some universal strategies (Khansir, 2012, p1). EA contradicts the contrastive analysis theory which sees language transfer as the main source of errors in the second language learning (Keshavarz, 1999). Supporters of EA criticized the contrastive analysis theory in that it only focuses on differences between L1 and L2 and ignored other factors that may affect second language acquisitions as learners learning and communication strategies, training- procedures, overgeneralization, etc. (Khansir, 2012, p1028). This means that the differences between L1 and L2 is not enough to give us evidence for the possibility of occurrence of errors, but other factors which are not related to the native language of the learner should be considered. Brown (2000) said "The fact that learners do make errors, and that these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner, led to a surge of study of learners' errors, called EA (227). So, Error analysis considers all the possible sources of learners' errors not only those produced by interference from L1 (Brown, 2000, p218).

2.2 Stages of Error analysis:

There are six steps in conducting EA, that include data selection, error identification, error classification, error explanation, error evaluation,

and error correction (Gass & Selinker, 1994, p 67; cited in Al Dubib, 2013, p 15).

2.2.1 Data selection

The first step of error analysis is deciding what sample of language learner to use for the analysis and how to collect the samples for your paper (Ellis, 1994, p 49). There are three broad types of error analysis according to the size of the sample, a massive sample requires collecting several samples of language use from a large number of students in order to have a various group of errors (Ellis, 1994, p 49). A specific sample include only one sample of language use taken from a small number of learners, while an incidental sample involves one sample of language use collected from one learner (Ellis, 1994, p 49).

2.2.2 Error identification

The second stage of EA is identification of errors. According to Corder (1981) this stage is done by comparing learners' utterances with the correct form in the target language (p 37). A well-formed utterance is not evidence that is correct, as this well-formed utterance should be used in the correct context (Corde, 1981, p 21). So overt errors are ungrammatical forms according to the rules of the target language, while covert errors are grammatically well-formed but used in appropriate context of situation (ibid).

2.2.3 Error classification

Concerning error classification, it refers to the stage in that errors which are committed by learners will be classified into error types (e.g. errors of agreement, articles, verb forms, etc.) (Sridhar, 1975, p 22). After that the relative frequency of error types should be detected (ibid).

2.2.4 Error explanation

At this stage, the causes these errors and their sources should be detected (Ellis, 1994, p 61). Corder (1975; cited in Keshavarz, 1999, p 101) determines three types of errors with respect to their sources; (a) interlingual errors which are caused by the inference of L1; (b) intralingual errors which by the learners' overgeneralizations of the L2 rules; (c) errors committed due to the faulty teaching techniques.

2.2.5 Error evaluation

This stage of EA is concerned with the seriousness of each error like some linguists think that grammatical errors are more serious than lexical errors and that serious errors need more attention by teachers (Ellis, 1994, p 63).

2.2.6 Error correction

In this stage of EA, learners' errors should be corrected as an attempt to help students learn the correct form (Ellis, 1994, p 584). The correction

provided by the teacher is based upon the standard language grammar (Corder, 1981, p 75).

2.3 Errors and Mistakes

It is important to make a distinction between errors and mistakes. "A mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a "slip," in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly" (Brown, 2000, p 226). All people do mistakes even native speakers. An error, on the other hand is "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflects the competence of the learner" ((Brown, 2000, p 226). This means in the case of errors; the speaker is unaware of the correct form. Corder (1981) pointed out that errors are significant for three reasons; (a) teachers can figure out the stage of development that the learner has reached; (b) these errors help researchers to know how language learning takes place; and (c) errors are important for learners themselves as they help learners be aware of the areas that he/she needs more practice (p 10-11).

2.4 Grammatical Errors

Grammatical errors, which makes the message less likely to be received, occur when the speakers or writers deviate from that structure and do not apply grammatical rules of the languages (James, 2001, p 142). "Grammatical errors consist in punctuation, spelling, tense, agreement, and voice errors, etc." (Sun & Shang, 2009, p 85). In this paper the focus will be on tense errors, especially past tense errors, that is why the researcher will list the past tense rules of English and Kurdish languages. An action in the past is seen as an action that has taken place in the past or over a period of time; the period may extend up to the present or finish in the past, and the action is seen either completed or not completed.

2.4.1 Past tense in English

The following are the rules of the past tense in English as mentioned by Murphy (1994):

Past simple:

Subject + Verb + Complement/Object

Very often the past simple ends in -ed (regular verbs), but many verbs are irregular, they do not end in -ed; in questions and negations *did/did not* + infinitive is used (Murphy, 1994, p 10).

(1) *The police stopped me on my way home last night.*

(2) *I went to the cinema three times last week.*

(3) *Did you go out last night?*

(4) *They did not invite her to the party, so she did not come.*

The past of (am, is, are) is *was/were* and *did* is not used with them in negations and question (Murphy, 1994, p 10).

(5) *I was angry because they were late.*

(6) *They were not able to come because they were so busy.*

Past continuous:

Subject + was/were + Verb -ing + Complement/Object

For negation, we add (not) to *was/were*, and for question we foreground *was/were*; we use past continuous to say that somebody was in the middle of an action in a certain time (Murphy, 1994, p 12).

(7) *He was playing football.*

(8) *He was not playing football.*

(9) *Was he playing football?*

Past perfect:

Subject + had + past participle form of the verb + Complement/Object

For negation (not) is added to *had* and for questions, *had* is fronted (Murphy, 1994, p 30).

(10) *I had finished my research.*

(11) *I had not finished my research.*

(12) *Had you finished your research?*

Past perfect continuous:

Subject + had + been + verb -ing + Complement/Object

For negation (not) is added to *had* and for questions *had* is fronted.

(13) *I had been working on my research for ages.*

(14) *I had not been working on my research.*

(15) *Had you been working on your research?*

Passive voice in past:

Object + was/were + past participle form of the verb

For negation, we add (not) to *was/were*, and for question we foreground *was/were*.

(16) *We were woken up by a loud noise last night.*

2.4.2 Past tense in Behdini-Kurdish

The following formula of the past tense in Behdini-Kurdish are stated by Ahmad (2002).

Past simple:

Subject + object + past stem + agreement morpheme

For the negative form, negation morpheme (ne) is added before the past stem (Ahmad, 2002, p 30).

(17) *Min şol kirin.*

(18) *Min şol ne kirin.*

Past continuous:

Subject + object + di + past stem + agreement morpheme

For the negative form, the negation morpheme (ne) is added before (di) (Ahmad, 2002, p 31).

(19) *Min şol dikirin.*

(20) *Min şol nedikrin.*

Past perfect:

Subject + object + past stem + past morpheme + bū + agreement morpheme

For the negative form, the negation morpheme is added before the past morpheme (Ahmad, 2002, p 31).

(21) *Min şol kirbûn.*

(22) *Min şol ne kirbûn.*

Passive voice:

Object + ezafe + hat + base form of the verb

(23) *Gul ya hatiye avdan.*

2.5 Previous studies

EA of grammatical errors has been studied by many researchers. Hourani (2008) investigated some English essays of Arab students and analyzed grammatical errors committed by Arab learners of English. Bayinah (2013) has done a study to investigate past tense errors committed by Arab learners of English. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies have tackled past tense errors of Kurdish learners' essays. This study is an attempt to fill in this gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The current research applies both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods in order to answer the research questions and approve or disapprove the hypothesis of the research. The qualitative approach is applied to discuss EA of grammatical errors, and past tense in Kurdish and English. The quantitative approach is applied to count errors committed by learners of first year of English department, college of languages, UOD in order to see what is the most troubleshooting area of past tense for Kurdish EFL learners.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this research are ten first year learners of English department, college of languages, UOD. Their age is averaged between 19 to 21 years. They have different English proficiency levels. All participants have been studying English as a school subject for more than 10 years. Behdini Kurdish is the mother tongue of all the participants.

3.3 Materials and data collection

All of the ten learners were asked by the researcher to write an essay about 150-200 words on this topic "an unforgettable day in your life". They were informed about the purpose behind their writings and they had about an hour to finish their essays.

3.4 Procedure and data analysis

The researcher collected all the ten essays and read each one carefully. All the grammatical errors that are concerned to the use of past tense are identified. Then the errors are classified according to types of errors as far as past tense is concerned. The number of each error is divided by the total number of words in the essays which are 1455 multiplied by 100. The Microsoft Word program is used to encode the data. Then the Microsoft Excel program is used to insert a chart in order to visualize the results.

RESULTS

In this chapter, the findings of the researcher are presented. Firstly, the errors made by the students are identified. Secondly, the errors are classified according to the types. Thirdly, the percentage of the frequency of each error is detected. Fourthly, the correct form of each type of error is given. The following errors were the most frequent errors found in learners' essays as far as past tense is concerned.

Past regular verbs:

Incorrect- They captured my mother, brother and kidnap the families and girls.

Correct- They captured my mother, brother and kidnaped the families and girls.

Past irregular verbs:

Incorrect- But that disaster day make me to learn a lot of things.

Correct- But that disaster day made me learn a lot of things.

Past perfect:

Incorrect- My friend had already celebrating my birthday.

Correct- My friend had already celebrated my birthday.

Past continuous:

Incorrect- The weather was cold and we were sleep without blankets or covers.

Correct- The weather was cold and we were sleeping without blankets or covers.

Passive voice in past:

Incorrect- Some of them had done by the students.

Correct- Some of them had been done by the students.

Table (1): shows the types, numbers, and percentages of past tense errors committed by the participants in their written work; and figure 1 visualizes the results.

Table (1): Number and frequency of participants past tense errors

Common past tense errors administrated by learners	The frequency of each error	The percentage of each error
Past regular verbs	2	0.13%
Past irregular verbs	8	0.54%
Past perfect	6	0.41%
Past continuous	13	0.89%
Passive voice in past	3	0.20%

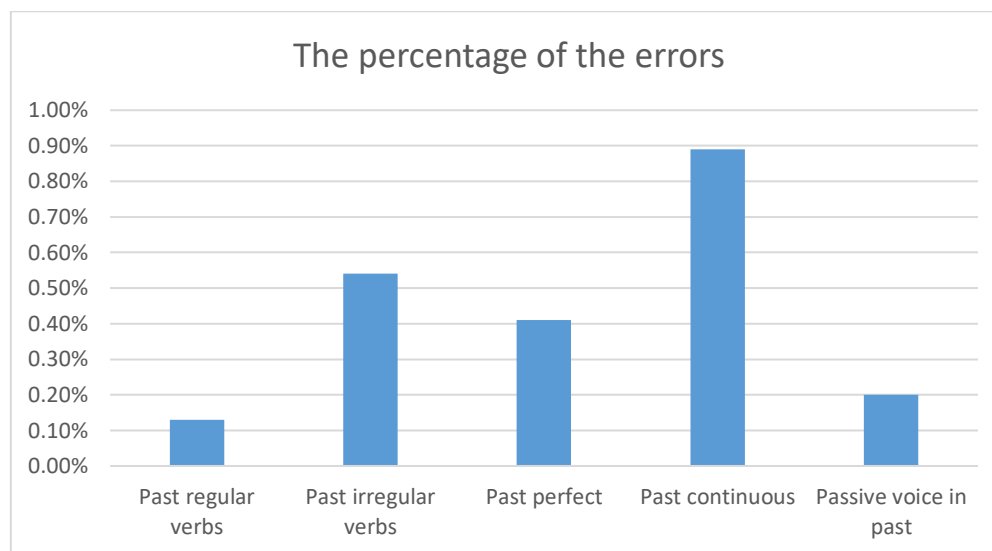
**Fig. (1):** The percentage of participants past tense errors

Figure 1 illustrates the common past tense errors committed by the participants. At the same time the frequency of each error is shown. Past continuous is the most troubleshooting area for students as it shows the highest frequency which is about (0.89%) among all other errors. Many students instead of putting the *ing* form of the verb after *was/were*, they put the base form of the verb. The second most frequent error committed by learners in their essays were the irregular past tense; the frequency of this error was about (0.54%). Students should memorize irregular verbs of English because there is no general rule that they can follow, each irregular verb has its own form of past. It is clear from learners writing that they lack enough knowledge concerning irregular verbs in the past. Past perfect is the third most frequent error committed by the participants in this study. Students misused the correct form of the verb after *had*. They sometimes put the *ing* form or the base form, especially with irregular verbs. However, there is a possibility that students have deliberately avoided using the past perfect form in their writings, and that is why the percentage of this error is low. Only a few participants used past perfect, and they need more knowledge and practice in this aspect of the past

tense. The fourth most frequent error committed by the participants is passive voice in past. There is the possibility that the type of compositions written by the students did not require the use of the passive voice, as participants were asked to write about one of their unforgettable days. That is why few of errors have been recorded as far as passive voice is concerned. The least frequent error committed by students was regular verbs in the past. Regular past verbs in English have a general rule that is adding *-ed* to the base form of the verb, and may be that is why students face very little difficulties in this area.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that Behdini-Kurdish learners of English face difficulties in producing an organized, neat and error-free piece of writing. The results support the hypothesis which indicates that Kurdish learners of English face difficulties in applying the past tense rules of English properly in their writings. Mostly all of the learners committed errors as far as past tense is concerned. However, this is not an unexpected thing; since the formula of past tense in English as can be seen in section 2.4.1 and 2.4.2 is very

different from Kurdish. The transfer of the native language of the learners whose native language is Kurdish influenced their performance in the target language. The results of this paper also indicate that the participants in this study need more practice and teaching as far as past tense is concerned, especially past continuous which shows a high percentage of errors committed by the participants. Because the results of this paper serve as evidence that the participants lack knowledge in this area, teachers of grammar should allocate more time for teaching them how to form correct past statements.

5. CONCLUSION

Participants in this study have started learning English from primary school, however, their English proficiency, especially writing, is still unsatisfied. They face difficulties in producing grammatically correct sentences in past tense. Error analysis has been used to identify areas of the past tense that learners face difficulties in performing correct forms in writing. Past simple with regular verbs, past simple with irregular verbs, past continuous, past perfect, or passive voice in past were the most frequent errors committed by the participants of this study. In addition to this, the most common past tense error committed by Kurdish learners of English is detected which is the past continuous tense. Most of the learners faced difficulties in applying the correct rule of the past continuous. They were usually using *was* instead of *were* and vice versa. The study concludes that the learners face difficulties in applying grammatical rules of English properly in writing which may be because the lack of knowledge of the rules of the target language and the transfer from their native language. As the rules of the past tense in Kurdish are very different from the rules of the past tense in English.

The research suggests some recommendations for teachers based on the findings. Teachers should focus more on the past continuous as educators faced difficulties applying the correct rules of the past continuous. As far as irregular verbs are considered, it will be useful if teachers motivate students to memorize them all. Since students were adding *ed* suffix to irregular verbs.

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