

# A Comparative Study on Sri Lankan University Students' Ability to Learn Tenses of English Language

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**Abstract:-** English language has turned out to be such a crucial aspect of higher education, as it has become a global language to teach numerous subjects at the university level. It could understandably have a major impact on the education in a country like Sri Lanka, which includes very few native speakers of English. However, one of the issues faced by university students in Sri Lanka is not being able to understand English tenses. Hence, this study attempts to investigate student's ability to learn English tenses. A case study was put in place to analyze the data collected through cluster sampling from three government universities of Sri Lanka, and it was discovered that most of the students struggle to understand the past tense while they tend to produce reasonably better sentences in present and future tense. Another notable finding was the students' lack of knowledge on verb forms, which is instrumental in mastering past tense. Students also seem to find ways to produce accurate future tense sentences using the helping verbs 'will' or 'would' along with the base form of verbs. The study has provided sufficient evidence to conclude that it is necessary to focus more on the past tense in comparison to present tense and future tense in order to improve the English writing skills of university students in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** English Tenses, Present Tense, Past Tense, Future Tense, University Students of Sri Lanka

## I. INTRODUCTION

A proper understanding of tenses is the key to mastering any language. Hence, the tenses have become a major component in English language learning and that is one of the reasons why tenses have been given a considerable attention at school. Usually, the best students from schools enter the university and after 13 years of learning English, they are expected to be fluent in this language, which has unfortunately not been the case. The lack of English knowledge within university students has been a major issue in most of the government universities. The manner in which the university students use English during spoken activities in particular indicates how they are struggling with the tenses, but the performance during a spoken activity could be influenced by factors such as anxiety, poor presentation skills and lack of communication skills in addition to knowledge in tenses. However, it is very clear that during a written activity there is virtually no chance of presentation skills and communication skills influencing the outcome, so it is thought

that writing tasks could be considered as the best method of evaluating student's competency in tenses. Therefore, the prime objective of this study was to investigate the Sri Lankan university students' ability to learn tenses in English language.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

An error analysis carried out by Cristina Rosado Romero and Carmen Gloria Garrido in the Universidad San Sebastián in Chile on the students' understanding of the twelve aspects of English language through a translation method has revealed that present perfect progressive has seen the highest frequency of errors. "A group of forty-eight native speakers of Spanish studying to become EFL teachers at Universidad San Sebastián participated in this study. All participants were first year students who had studied English tenses and aspects for a year in their English and Grammar. A translation into English of the letter written in Spanish was prepared and those sentences containing tenses studied in class which differed from the reconstructed version were identified."

The research has indicated that the "wrong choice of aspect is the main type of covert error. Present perfect progressive and present progressive show a high frequency of this type of error. From a pedagogical perspective, these results suggest that it would be helpful to implement remedial tasks to raise students' awareness of the importance of aspect to convey meaning. Utterances containing past perfect and simple future also showed a high frequency of covert errors, but the problem was not the wrong choice of aspect but the wrong choice of tense. To overcome problems using past perfect, we suggest that teachers use exercises that contrast the use of present perfect and past perfect since students seemed to over generalize the use of present perfect. Finally, some contrastive analysis between English and Spanish could help students internalize the use of simple future in English".

Dorothy V. M. Bishop in a research conducted in 2013 based on the problems faced by children when learning tenses, has revealed that "past two decades confirms that tense marking is often an area of particular difficulty."

## III. METHODOLOGY

As the study attempted to explore the Sri Lankan university students' ability to understand tenses in English language, it

was thought that the qualitative approach would be the ideal method to carry out the research through a case study. Since this study looked to provide a conclusion on the knowledge of English tenses of ‘university students in Sri Lanka,’ and it was not feasible to conduct simple random sampling at all the universities in Sri Lanka, thirty students were selected using cluster sampling. Ten first-year students each from the Medicine Faculty – Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Faculty of Technology – University of Ruhuna and Open University – Gampaha Regional Centre were selected. All the 30 students were first asked to write a brief paragraph about ‘University life’ using present tense (Dunsmore, 2019). Secondly, they were told to write another paragraph on ‘How I spent my previous week’ in past tense and finally, they were instructed to write a paragraph on ‘Life in 2050’ using future tense. In order to analyze the data, the performance of the students in terms of their understanding of tenses was graded. It must be stated that other characteristics such as appropriate use of articles and punctuations marks, which is generally given considerable significance when evaluating a writing task, were completely neglected during this study, as the main and only focus of this research was the students’ understanding of tenses. The students’ performance were graded based on the mistakes appeared on the tasks completed by them and paragraphs with ‘zero’ mistakes were graded as ‘A’ while paragraphs consisting ‘one to three’ mistakes’ considered as ‘B’ and paragraphs containing ‘more than three’ mistakes graded as ‘C.’

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results indicated that out of the 30 students 12 students had obtained A’s for their writing task on present tense while 14 students ended up with B’s and four students got C’s. The past tense writing task saw only four students getting A’s while 12 B’s and 14 C’s were recorded. Ten students had earned A’s for future tense while 16 students collected B’s and four students got C’s. The results suggest that a total of 26 students either had a very good knowledge or basic knowledge in present tense while four students had a poor

understanding of this particular tense. In complete contrast past tense writing activity has seen 14 students having serious problems in writing past tense sentences while only four students obtained A’s which is a worrying sign and is clear indication where the student really need to improve. Future tense as a whole produced the best outcome with majority of students obtaining A’s or B’s while four students had poor understanding of that tense. It was also seen how certain students had used present tense sentences to describe matters that had taken place in the past such as ‘Last week, I am coming to university.’

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results and discussions, it is quite clear that students really struggle to understand past tense and construct sentences or paragraphs using that particular tense therefore it is very important that the teachers and lecturers focus on this matter. In most of the universities, the students barely get an opportunity to learn English after the orientation program and the study indicates why the students should be continuously given the opportunity to engage in activities connected to the past tense. In addition to that, the lectures and teachers must be given a clear insight on the importance of past tense through workshops or seminars.

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