Navigating English Tense Challenges: A Gap Analysis for Non-English Major Students' Language Acquisition

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Abstract. *This study comprehensively investigated the gap in English tense mastery among non-English students. Data were collected using a qualitative case study methodology from seven purposively selected informants through in-depth interviews and direct observation. Key findings reveal persistent challenges, including significant anxiety around using complex tenses, the widespread influence of mother tongue interference (given the absence of explicit tense conjugations in Indonesian), and the limited effectiveness of traditional non-contextual grammar teaching. The observations also highlight a critical gap: although students use digital devices extensively, their engagement with English content is minimal, directly contributing to lower writing and speaking practice assessment scores. Instead, the unexpected finding was the student's remarkable ability to internalize the 16th pattern of the English tenses through memorization in just thirty minutes. These insights underscore the urgent need for innovative, contextual, and confidence-building pedagogical strategies to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application, enhancing language acquisition and professional communication skills.*

Keywords: English Tenses Challenge, Gap Analysis, Non-English Language Students, Language Acquisition, Pedagogical Strategies, Indonesian Context.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Mastering English tenses is crucial, particularly for students who are not English majors in technical fields. In the broader context, the importance of English proficiency cannot be overstated, especially in a globalized world where English serves as a lingua franca in many professional domains. For students in Health Administration and Information Systems Technology, articulating ideas clearly in English is essential for collaboration, project presentations, and future employment opportunities. Collaboration and effective presentation skills are crucial for students to succeed in their careers, as they must complement technical knowledge with strong communication abilities (Baker & Jack, 2019).

Many students find it challenging to construct sentences using basic English tenses. This difficulty hampers their ability to communicate clearly and profoundly impacts their overall academic performance. Moreover, the challenges these students encounter in mastering fundamental English grammar considerably impede their communication skills in professional settings, where effective and precise language use is crucial for success. The inability to construct grammatically correct sentences can result in misunderstandings and diminish confidence in academic and professional interactions, especially at Mbojo Bima University. This challenge is exacerbated among students who are not exposed to English daily, leading to a substantial gap in their language proficiency (Kaloeti, 2024; Ali et al., 2021; Tambunsaribu,

2022). Given the global prominence of English as a lingua franca, the ability to articulate ideas clearly in English is indispensable for students aspiring to excel in collaborative projects and future employment scenarios (Kaloeti, 2024; Listia & Febriyanti, 2020).

Numerous studies identify various factors contributing to the difficulties experienced by non-English major students in mastering English tenses. Traditional teaching methods often fail to engage students effectively, which results in a disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical application of language skills (Ali et al., 2021; Tambunsaribu, 2022; Tuấn & Hoai, 2023). For instance, students may rely on rote memorization rather than contextual learning, hindering their ability to use tenses correctly in real-world scenarios (Kaloeti, 2024; Listia & Febriyanti, 2020; Kong, 2022). Additionally, limited exposure to English outside classroom settings restricts the opportunities for practical use and reinforcement of the learned material, posing a significant barrier to language acquisition (Tuấn & Hoai, 2023; Rangkuti et al., 2024).

This issue is particularly pronounced among non-English major students, who may not have had extensive exposure to the English language prior to their university studies. As a result, they struggle to apply the correct tenses in both written and spoken communication, which can hinder their academic performance and professional development. For instance, students may frequently confuse the simple present tense with the present continuous tense. A common mistake might be seen in a sentence like, *"I am study for my exams,"* instead of the correct form, *"I am studying for my exams."* This error reflects a lack of understanding of verb conjugation and affects the clarity of their communication. Such mistakes can lead to misunderstandings in group projects or presentations, where precise language is crucial for conveying technical information.

Current educational practices may not adequately address the specific needs of non-English major students. Research indicates that methods often remain too generalized and do not account for the unique challenges faced by students in technical fields (Man & Mot, 2023; Tambunsaribu, 2022; et al., 2022). For instance, studies suggest the efficacy of incorporating cognitive and metacognitive strategies into teaching methods to enhance the understanding and application of English tenses (Ali et al., 2021; Tambunsaribu, 2022; Yang, 2023). However, a notable gap remains concerning focused research that specifically investigates the challenges that Public Health and Information Systems Technology students face in their engagement with English language materials (Tuấn & Hoai, 2023; Rusdin, 2022).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to address the proficiency gap in English tense usage among non-English major students, specifically focusing on seven informants from two study programs at Universitas Mbojo Bima. The researchers employ purposive sampling to select these informants, as this technique allows for the intentional selection of participants who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research question. By choosing informants who have encountered challenges in learning English tenses, the researchers aim to gather rich, detailed insights into their experiences.

In-depth interviews and observations are utilized to collect data on the informants' experiences and challenges in learning English tenses (Kaloeti, 2024; Ali et al., 2021; Huiling & Ismail, 2022). This methodology not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the contextual factors influencing language acquisition but also identifies how existing curricular structures can be better aligned with the needs of these learners (Hendren et al., 2022). For instance, a qualitative exploration of the difficulties faced by EFL learners in acquiring grammatical tenses provides a pathway for developing targeted instructional strategies (Uršič & Pižorn, 2021).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Observations revealed a significant discrepancy between non-English major students' pervasive use of gadgets and their limited engagement with English language content, despite the critical role of tense mastery in professional communication. This underutilization of digital resources for English exposure directly contributes to a proficiency gap, evidenced by consistently lower scores in writing and speaking practical assessments. This highlights a missed opportunity for students to leverage readily available technology for language acquisition, ultimately hindering their development of essential English tense skills crucial for future professional success. Conversely, a notable observation was their readiness to engage in rote learning, enabling them to internalize the structures of the 16 English tenses within a concise thirty-minute period.

The first interviews with four Health Administration students reveal significant insights into their challenges in mastering English tenses. Each student's perspective highlights unique difficulties that stem from linguistic and psychological factors and the influence of their native language, Indonesian. The following are various results from the depth of the interviews.

Student 1: AY

Perspective: *"I struggle most with irregular verbs in past tense when writing reports."*

Example:

"Last month, I write about patient data trends for class'

Student 1, AY, articulates a significant challenge related to using irregular verbs in the past tense, particularly when writing reports. AY expresses frustration over a recent experience where they wrote, "Last month, I write about patient data trends for class," only to be corrected by their lecturer who pointed out that it should be "wrote." This difficulty in memorizing irregular verb conjugations, such as "write/wrote" and "go/went," is especially pronounced in formal report writing, where accurate past tense usage is critical.

The struggle to recall these forms undermines AY's writing proficiency and adversely impacts their academic performance, as precise language is essential for effectively conveying information in health administration. Therefore, addressing this challenge through targeted practice and contextual learning is imperative, which can significantly enhance students' grammatical competence and boost their confidence in their writing. To effectively tackle AY's challenges, the implementation of targeted practice strategies is crucial. Interactive verb drills tailored to include healthcare-related vocabulary can facilitate students' internalization of these forms in a contextually relevant and engaging manner (Wondim et al., 2023; Gebremariam, 2024).

AY emphasizes her struggle with irregular verbs in the past tense, a common issue among learners of English. The frustration she expresses regarding the memorization of these forms indicates a pedagogical gap in the current curriculum. The suggestion for interactive verb drills tailored to healthcare vocabulary points to a need for more engaging and relevant learning materials to help students internalize these forms in a context that resonates with their field of study.

Student 2: NL

Perspective: *"Present perfect tense confuses me in case studies."*

Example:

'The hospital has implement new policies,'

NL illustrates the confusion surrounding the present perfect tense, which is often challenging for learners due to its nuanced usage. His preference for simpler tenses reflects a broader trend among students who may feel overwhelmed by the complexities of English grammar. The call for real-life examples from hospital documents suggests that students would benefit from practical applications of tense usage, which could enhance their understanding and retention of grammatical structures. The nuanced usage of this tense often creates

difficulties in understanding for students who may find the complexities of English grammar overwhelming (Yusof et al., 2023)(Jubran & Khrais, 2023).

This challenge underscores a tension between accuracy and confidence, as students often opt for grammatical simplicity to avoid mistakes; however, this habit impedes their mastery of more complex, contextually appropriate tense usage. To address this issue, targeted practice must illustrate how the present perfect tense enhances clarity in professional communication, such as distinguishing between *"The hospital has implemented new protocols"* and *"The hospital implemented new protocols,"* with the former emphasizing current relevance. Suggested interventions include contrastive exercises highlighting the differences between the present perfect and simple past tenses in real-world healthcare scenarios, such as policy updates and patient case progress, and low-stakes peer feedback sessions to normalize experimentation with tenses.

Student 3: RN

Perspective: *"Future tenses make me anxious during presentations."*

Example:

"Sometimes, I said, 'We will improving patient records.'

Student 3, RN, articulates a common challenge related to anxiety over future tenses, particularly during presentations. RN recalls a specific moment during their internship pitch when they mistakenly said, "We will improve patient records," prompting a frown from the director who corrected it to "will improve." This experience highlighted RN's struggle with the correct future tense construction and led to a detrimental avoidance strategy; now, RN opts to use vague phrases like "maybe later" instead of confidently employing future tenses. This avoidance reflects a broader issue many students face, where the fear of making errors in future tense usage undermines their confidence and effectiveness in professional communication. Addressing this anxiety through supportive practice and feedback is essential for helping students like RN regain confidence and articulate their ideas clearly in future-oriented discussions.

RN expresses her apprehension about using future tenses in high-stakes situations, such as presentations, which can hinder her ability to communicate effectively in professional settings. Her desire for mock presentations with instant feedback underscores the necessity of fostering a supportive learning environment where students can practice and refine their skills without the fear of judgment. Implementing such an approach could significantly enhance their confidence and competence in future tenses, ultimately preparing them for successful career communication. Incorporating peer feedback and collaborative exercises into presentations has

been demonstrated to bolster learner confidence and proficiency in grammar, thereby positively affecting students' readiness to engage with complex structures, such as future tenses (Refat et al., 2020).

Student 4: AV

Perspective: *"I mix tenses when describing processes."*

Example:

'The nurse takes vital signs and recorded them.'

Student 4, AV, highlights a significant challenge stemming from native language interference, particularly due to the lack of tense conjugation in Indonesian, which complicates their ability to maintain consistency in English when describing processes. AV recalls a specific instance in an assignment where they wrote, "The nurse takes vital signs and recorded them," only to have their lecturer circle the sentence, pointing out that both verbs must be in the present tense. This feedback illustrates the struggle many students face in aligning their understanding of English grammar with the structural norms of their native language. The confusion over tense usage not only affects their writing accuracy but also underscores the need for targeted instruction that addresses these linguistic differences, helping students develop a clearer grasp of how to convey sequential actions effectively in English.

The analysis reveals several key gaps and opportunities in teaching English tenses to Health Administration students. Firstly, there is a pedagogical gap due to the absence of healthcare-specific examples in grammar exercises, which limits the relevance of the learning material (Syahraini et al., 2024). Secondly, a psychological barrier exists, as students' fear of making errors discourages them from experimenting with different tenses (Svalberg, 2019). Additionally, cultural factors play a role, as the tense structures in English differ significantly from those in Indonesian, complicating the learning process (Romain & Divjak, 2024). To address these issues, designing contextual exercises, such as having students rewrite hospital policy drafts with the correct tenses, is recommended to enhance their understanding and application of English grammar in a relevant context. *(Interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and translated for clarity.)*

The second interview with three Information Systems Technology students provides crucial insights into their challenges with English tense mastery. Technical degree students demonstrate unique struggles that differ from those in health administration programs. Several students have been interviewed, and the results are as follows.

Student 1: MW

Perspective: "I have a hard time using the right tenses in my reports."
Example:

"Last week, I talk about database security issues for my project report. "

Student 1, MW, faces a significant challenge in mastering the correct use of English tenses in their reports. This difficulty is particularly evident in their written communication, where errors such as using the present tense ("talk") instead of the past tense ("talked") can lead to misunderstandings about the timeline of events. Such mistakes not only affect the clarity of the report but also undermine the professionalism of the work, as MW noted that these small errors can make their writing appear unprofessional. This challenge is compounded by the technical nature of the subject matter, where precise language is essential for conveying complex ideas effectively. It is essential to address MA's grammatical challenges, particularly those related to tense usage. Research demonstrates that focused grammatical instruction can markedly enhance learners' accuracy and self-assurance in their writing (Sanosi, 2022; Rahimi, 2019; Wondim et al., 2023).

MW's struggle with tense usage highlights a broader issue faced by many students in technical fields, where the pressure to produce accurate and professional reports can lead to anxiety over grammatical correctness. The incorrect use of tenses can confuse readers about when specific actions occurred, which is critical in technical writing that often relies on clear timelines and sequences. For instance, stating "Last week, I talk about database security issues" implies that the discussion is ongoing, rather than completed, which can mislead the audience regarding the project's status. This confusion can hinder effective communication and collaboration within teams. To address this challenge, MW would benefit from targeted practice in tense usage, particularly in the context of technical writing, to build confidence and improve the overall quality of their reports.

Student2 : MF

Perspective: "I get really nervous about using future tenses in my project. *Now I try to avoid using complex sentences because I'm afraid of making mistakes."*
proposals."

Example:

I said, 'The app will reducing server load.'

Student 2, MF, faces a dual challenge in mastering future tense usage for technical proposals, exemplified by errors like "will reducing" instead of "will reduce." This tense-related anxiety triggers a counterproductive avoidance strategy where MF intentionally

simplifies language, ultimately compromising the precision and professionalism required in Information Systems communication. Cojocaru (2022) stresses the importance of integrating professional communication skills into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs, indicating that mastery of these skills is vital for successful professional practice in technical fields. For students in Information Systems, clear communication is critical for articulating complex technical solutions effectively.

The immediate correction MF received during a high-stakes presentation ("The app will reducing server load") created a damaging psychological association between future tense usage and fear of public failure. Consequently, MF now self-censors complex grammatical structures, despite their necessity for articulating technical solutions effectively. The same study points out that immediate feedback can unintentionally heighten anxiety instead of promoting constructive development in language skills. This aligns with M.F.'s experience, where the corrections made during presentations created a reluctance to use future tense structures, adversely affecting overall communication (He & Wang, 2024). This avoidance behavior perpetuates a negative cycle: imperfect tense mastery leads to anxiety about errors, which reduces practice opportunities, further entrenching the linguistic weakness.

The situation reflects both a specific gap in grammatical competence and a broader issue of communicative confidence in professional computing contexts, where accurate future tense usage is crucial for proposing system improvements, projecting timelines, and convincing stakeholders. Addressing this challenge requires targeted interventions that strengthen grammatical understanding and rebuild MF's confidence through scaffolded, low-risk speaking opportunities within technical scenarios.

Student 3: NS

Perspective: "Sometimes my first language makes it hard to use English tenses correctly."

Example: *'The algorithm processes data and generated results.'*

Student 3, NS, encounters significant difficulties in using English tenses correctly due to the influence of their first language, Indonesian. This linguistic interference is evident in their writing, as demonstrated by the error in the sentence "The algorithm processes data and generated results," where the mixing of present and past tenses creates confusion about the timing of actions. Such errors can obscure the intended meaning and disrupt the flow of technical documentation, which relies on precise language to convey complex processes.

Non-native students frequently face obstacles in academic writing, leading to a disparity between their language skills and the high standards required in their academic work (Alfehaid & Alkhatib, 2023). NS's struggle highlights a common challenge that non-native English

speakers face: structural differences between languages can lead to tense misuse. In Indonesian, verb tenses are often indicated through context rather than explicit conjugation, which can confuse when applying English tense rules requiring strict grammatical adherence.

This challenge is particularly pronounced in technical fields like Information Systems, where clarity and accuracy are paramount for effectively communicating algorithms and data processing. Trenkic and Warmington (2018) highlight the significance of recognizing the varied language and literacy abilities that both domestic and international students contribute to the academic setting. The mixing of tenses affects the readability of NS's reports and risks misinterpretation by peers and instructors, potentially undermining their credibility. To address this issue, NS would benefit from targeted instruction focused on the nuances of English tense usage, particularly in technical writing, to enhance both their grammatical accuracy and overall confidence in communication.

The findings of this study could lead to several recommendations for educators and curriculum developers at Mbojo Bima University. Tailoring teaching strategies to incorporate more interactive and engaging tasks, such as using digital tools or applying Bloom's Taxonomy in classroom activities, may significantly enhance students' grasp of English tenses (Tuấn & Hoai, 2023; Langsford et al., 2025). Furthermore, providing students with more opportunities for practical application of language skills, such as group discussions and collaborative projects, could aid in contextualizing their learning (Listia & Febriyanti, 2020; Liu, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

This study critically examines students' ongoing challenges in mastering English tenses. The findings reveal a complex interaction among various factors, including anxiety, interference from students' native languages, and limited teaching methods. Although students are willing to memorize rules, there is a significant gap in their ability to apply these tense rules in real-world communication. The differences in language proficiency are evident in the practical assessment scores and the limited engagement with English-language content among students. In response to this issue, this research calls for a fundamental change in the approach to English language instruction for non-English majors. Addressing these gaps will equip students with essential English proficiency for academic success and enhanced professional communication in a globalized environment.

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