

INVESTIGATING ESL STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN TENSES

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ABSTRACT

The present study intends to assess the ESL students' performance in tenses at secondary school level. Grade 10 students were the target population of the study. A sample of 396 students (255 male and 141 female) was selected through convenience sampling technique from the District of Bahawalnagar, Pakistan. A test focusing on five different types of tenses namely present indefinite tense, future indefinite tense, past perfect tense, present perfect tense, and past indefinite tense was developed carefully. SPSS version XX was used to analyze the data. Students' overall performance was computed. T-value was calculated to compare the mean scores of male and female, public and private, and urban and rural students. The findings of the study revealed that the overall mean score of the students was relatively better in present indefinite tense, future indefinite tense, and past indefinite tense as compared to the mean scores of past perfect tense, and present perfect tense. The analysis, based on t-value, revealed a significant difference between the mean scores of male and female students and public and private school students. Contrarily, no significant difference between the mean scores of rural and urban school students was found. The students were recommended improving their competence in weaker areas.

Keywords: Secondary School Students, Tenses, Gender and Demographic Based Comparison, Public and Private Students.

INTRODUCTION

A 'tense' is a form of verb that demonstrates the time, state, action or event. Any lexical or auxiliary verb used in a sentence agrees with its subject and predicate and expresses an action or state (Wren and Martin, 2005). According to Declerck and Cappelle (2006), 'tense' is a linguistic concept that indicates the relation between the time of the situation and the time of the speech. 'Tense' can also be defined as morphological expressing of any event or activity to a temporal domain. According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2012:590), "Tense describes the relationship between the form of the verb and the time of the action".

Many linguistics believe that only two tenses such as present and past are functioning in the English language (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). On the other hand, Wren and Martin (2005) stated that the basic system of the tenses in the English language consists of three main formal categories of tenses such as past tense, present tense, and future

tense. These categories yield further sub-types of tenses such as present indefinite, present continuous, present perfect, and present perfect continuous under the category of present tense. Past indefinite, past continuous, past perfect, past perfect continuous are considered in the category of past tense whereas, future indefinite, future continuous, future perfect, and future perfect continuous fall in the category of future tense based on the aspect, voice, and mood. These tenses are essential for ESL students to show their worth in the examination and for getting higher education.

No similar research regarding evaluating students' performance on gender, density and ownership bases at secondary school level in Pakistan could be found. The present study intends to fill this gap. With regard to the present study, it is an effort to assess the ESL students' performance in five tenses namely present indefinite tense, future indefinite tense, past perfect tense, present perfect tense, and past indefinite tense. The key point as the great

deal of attention is that the present study is a piece of writing in the arena of the English language that will facilitate the ESL students to boost up their knowledge regarding tenses.

The English language, akin to any other language, requires multifarious grammatical rules and regulations that is the natural language learning phenomenon. The tense is one of them. Without the proper use of a tense, the communication remains ineffective and the reader or the listener entangles into confusion with the least comprehension rate. Likewise, high rate of tense error generates misunderstanding and conflict about the key concept of the text. Contrary to this, if the students' knowledge and awareness are better in using the proper tense during communication, the rate of comprehension might increase. Tenses provide an excellent mode for comprehension tasks (Abusch, 1994; Von Stechow, 1995) tones, syntaxes and semantics in different contexts (Stowell, 1995). Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, and Williams, (1983) stated that the learning grammatical structures assist the ESL students to enhance their exposure. Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Jacobs, (1983) stressed that five aspects such as, content, vocabulary, organization, language use, and mechanics are essential to language learning. The use of proper tense is included in the aspect of language use.

The basic system of tense in the English language consists of three major tenses such as past, present and future. Comrie (1985) defined and elaborated three tenses as follows;

"... The utterance time, the event time, and the reference time coincide in the present tense. Sometimes, the present tense expresses simultaneous events and actions. As the past tense is concerned, the event time lies in the past, but the reference time coincides with the utterance time, and lastly, the future tense, it is pure in the sense of being concerned only with location in time."

According to Chomsky (1999, 2002), tense is not only a grammatical expression but it is considered as a lexical expression also that assists to find out an event or situation in time. The following phrase-structure rules and formulas for the use of tenses in the English language are universally

used in the English Language (Chomsky (1999). Here is a brief description of the predefined rules and regulations for each tense.

1. Present indefinite tense

Subject + MainVerb [1st form(s or es with 3rd person singular)] + Object
 He write letter

2. Present continuous tense

Subject + Auxiliary Verb (is/am/are) + MainVerb 1stform+ing + Object
 He is writing letter

3. Present perfect tense

Subject + Auxiliary Verb (has/have) + MainVerb 3rd form + Object
 He has written letter

4. Present perfect continuous tense

Subject + Auxiliary Verb (h) s/have) + been + MainVerb 1stform+ing + Object + Since/For + Time
 He has been writing letter for twenty minutes

5. Past indefinite tense

Subject + MainVerb 2nd form + Object
 He wrote letter

6. Past continuous tense

Subject + Auxiliary Verb (was/were) + MainVerb 1stform+ing + Object
 He was writing letter

7. Past perfect tense

Subject + Auxiliary Verb (had) + MainVerb 3rdform + Object
 He had written letter

8. Past perfect continuous tense

Subject + Auxiliary Verb (had) + been + MainVerb 1stform+ing + Object + Since/For + Time
 He had been writing letter for twenty minutes

9. Future indefinite tense

Subject + ModalVerb (will/shall) + MainVerb 1st form + Object
 He will write letter

10. Future continuous tense

Subject + ModalVerb (will/shall) + be + MainVerb 1stform+ing + Object
 He will be writing letter

11. Future perfect tense

Subject + ModalVerb (will/shall) + have + MainVerb 3rdform + Object
 He will have written letter

12. Future perfect continuous tense

Subject+Mo (alVerb(wi) /shall)+have+been+MainVerb 1stform+ing+Object+Since/For+Time
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓
 He will have been writing letter for twenty minutes

As regards the present study, only five tenses such as present indefinite tense, future indefinite tense, past perfect tense, present perfect tense, and, past indefinite tense are considered. The students' performance in tenses can be traced in the previous studies to some extent. A research conducted by Englis (2008), revealed that the students mean score in past tenses was 62.4 that indicates their 'good' performance. Another research conducted by Hidayah (2007) carried out on eleventh year students, indicated that 52.5 % of the students have their mastery of past tense.

The research purpose: The present study intended four major objectives such as to i) investigate the secondary school students' performance in five types of tenses, ii) compare the performance of male and female students, iii) make comparison between the performance of public and private school students and iii) compare the performance of urban and rural school students.

Method and Materials

Participants

The target population for the present study was the ESL students of secondary schools of the District Bahawalnagar, Pakistan. A sample comprising of 396 ESL students through a convenience sampling technique was taken. Two hundred and fifty-five (64%) of the participants were male students whereas, one hundred and forty-one (36%) were female students. The respondents from the public and private schools of urban and rural areas were taken. The age of the respondents ranged between 13-18 years with a mean of 15.4 years.

Research tool

A test consisting of 50 MCQs focusing on five different types of tenses namely present indefinite tense, future indefinite tense, past perfect tense, present perfect tense, and past indefinite tense was developed. The MCQs were selected from the textbook of grade 10 followed by three to four options for each item. Each tense comprised of 10 items and 10 marks each. The content validity of the test was

examined by the ESL experts. They examined the difficulty level, and vocabulary used in the questions. Changes were made in the light of the comments of the ESL experts accordingly. The reliability of the test was established at 0.821 Cronbach Alpha that is indicating very high reliability of the tool.

Procedure

The data were collected by using a test consisting of 50 MCQs regarding five major types of tenses. The students were given proper guidelines before administering the test. The time given to the respondents was one hour.

The data were analyzed on the principle of 1 item 1 mark. Mark 1 was awarded to correct response whereas mark 0 was given to incorrect answer. As the test comprised of 50 questions, each respondent could obtain mark(s) ranging from 0 to 50. The SPSS version XX was applied to analyze the data. The mean score and standard deviation were calculated for each type of tense. For item analysis, mean score, minimum score, maximum score range, and variance were also calculated. T-values were calculated to investigate significant differences at $p < 0.05$ for male and, female students, public and private school students and urban and rural school students. Grading Formula e.g. (i) 80% and above = excellent, 70-79% = very good (iii) 60-69% = good (iv) 50-59% = satisfactory (v) 40-49% = unsatisfactory and (vi) 39% and below = poor (Fail) was followed. Here is the description of the results of the study.

Results

Figure 1 (bar graph) indicates the overall performance of the students in all types of tenses. The students' mean scores were 5.56 (55.68%), 5.53 (54.32%), 5.36 (53.63%), 6.4 (64.1%), and 5.88 (58.86%) in present indefinite tense, present perfect tense, past perfect tense, future indefinite tense, and past indefinite tense respectively. All the students got more than 50% marks, therefore, it can be concluded that the students' performance was 'satisfactory' except past perfect tense. The students' performance was 'good' in this tense according to the grading formula.

Table 1 illustrated the item analysis. According to Table 1, the students' mean score in each item was 0.505. Their minimum score was 0.401 whereas a maximum score was 0.538 in each item with the range of 0.131 score. The

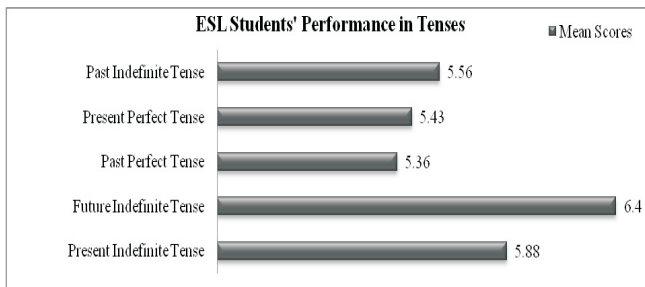


Figure 1. Students' scores in all types of tenses

Item	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Range	Maximum / Minimum	Variance	No of Items
Means	.509	.406	.538	.131	1.323	.001	50

Table 1. Students' scores:summary item statistics

variance was .001.

According to Table 2, the male students' mean score was 6.04, 6.86, 5.95, 5.50, and 5.50 in present indefinite tense, future indefinite tense, past perfect tense, present perfect tense, and past indefinite tense respectively. On the other side, female students' mean scores in present indefinite tense, future indefinite tense, past perfect tense, present perfect tense, and past indefinite tense were 5.72, 5.95, 4.77, 5.36, and 5.59 respectively. The established value of Cronbach Alpha was 0.836 that indicates high reliability.

Two hypotheses (H_0 and H_1) were made to make a comparison of male and female students' scores. Following were the hypotheses:

H_0 : There is no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female students in tenses.

H_1 : There is a significant difference between the mean

Type of Tense	Scores per type of Tense	Male Students		Female Students		t-value
		Mean Score	SD	Mean Score	SD	
Present Indefinite Tense	10	6.04	0.48987	5.72	0.49006	
Future Indefinite Tense	10	6.86	0.46435	5.95	0.46503	0.05481
Past Perfect Tense	10	5.95	0.49176	4.77	0.49192	
Present Perfect Tense	10	5.5	0.49859	5.36	0.49863	
Past Indefinite Tense	10	5.5	0.4981	5.59	0.49815	

Table 2. Comparison of male and female students' mean scores in all types of tenses

scores of male and female students in tenses.

The results indicated that, there was a statistical significant difference between the performance of male and female students in tenses. The t-value (0.0548109) was significant at $p < 0.05$ level of significance. The calculated t-value does not fall in the accepted region; therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected. Hence, it can be concluded that there was a significant difference between the performance of male and female students in tenses. The standard deviation values are also presented in Table 2.

Table 3 revealed that all the public and private school students' mean scores were ranging from 5.13 to 6.63 in all types of tenses. 5.13 was the minimum score of private school students whereas the maximum score was 6.63. On the other hand, public school students' minimum score was 5.18. According to the Grading Formula, the overall performance of the students fall into two categories namely 'satisfactory' and 'good'. The Cronbach Alpha value was established at 0.924 that indicates very high reliability. The results, based on t-value, indicated that, there was a no statistical significant difference between the performance of public and private students in tenses. The t-value (0.37797) was not significant at $p < 0.05$ level of significance. The calculated t-value falls in the accepted region; therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0) was accepted. Hence, it can be concluded that there was not a significant difference between the mean scores of public and private school students in tenses.

According to Table 4, the minimum mean score of urban school students was 6.13 whereas their maximum mean score was 6.90. Contrary to this, rural school students'

Type of Tense	Scores per type of Tense	Public School Students		Private School Students		t-value
		Mean Score	SD	Mean Score	SD	
Present Indefinite Tense	10	6.22	0.492978	5.55	0.492345	
Future Indefinite Tense	10	6.18	0.423456	6.63	0.466573	
Past Perfect Tense	10	5.59	0.489654	5.13	0.484982	0.37797
Present Perfect Tense	10	5.18	0.478721	5.68	0.487632	
Past Indefinite Tense	10	5.22	0.493451	5.86	0.498123	

Table 3: Comparison of public and private school students' mean scores in all types of tenses

Type of Tense	Scores per type of Tense	Urban School Students		Rural School Students		t-value
		Mean Score	SD	Mean Score	SD	
Present Indefinite Tense	10	6.31	0.489876	5.45	0.486537	
Future Indefinite Tense	10	6.9	0.48453	5.9	0.470987	
Past Perfect Tense	10	6	0.477654	4.72	0.47654	0.00231
Present Perfect Tense	10	6.5	0.464636	4.36	0.487653	
Past Indefinite Tense	10	6.13	0.459876	4.95	0.468765	

Table 4. Comparison of urban and rural school students' scores in all types of tenses

minimum mean score was 4.36 and 5.90 was their maximum score. The calculated Cronbach Alpha value was 0.816 that indicates high reliability. The results indicated that, there is a statistical significant difference between the performance of public and private school students in tenses. The t-value (0.00231) was significant at $p < 0.05$ level of significance. The calculated t-value does not fall in the accepted region; therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected. Hence, it can be concluded that there was a significant difference between the performance of urban and rural school students in tenses.

Discussion and Conclusion

Tenses are considered the base for enhancing the expertise in the English language learning. The students with the dearth of knowledge, are considered handicapped in respect of communicating with others, especially the ESL students at secondary school level who are supposed to develop their foundations at this stage for higher studies. Based on the findings of the present study, the ESL students' performance was good only in some tenses such as present indefinite tense, present perfect tense, future indefinite tense, and past indefinite tense. The majority of the students showed better performance except 'past perfect tense, and present perfect tense. It can be concluded that, the results of this study support Smith's (1993) findings relatively, whereas the results of a research conducted by Javed, Juan and Nazli (2013) were different. As regards the gender based performance, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of males and females whereas a study conducted by Shakil and Calderin (2010) revealed that the performance of male female students was same. Based on

the t-value, a significant difference between the performance of urban and rural school students in tenses was also found. Contrary to this, mean scores of the public and the private school students was rather different. There was no significant difference between the performance of public and private school students in tenses.

Recommendations

The tenses play a key role in developing ESL students' expertise and skills in English language. Therefore, based on the results of the study, the students should focus on learning all types of tenses especially 'present perfect tense, and past perfect tense' in which they showed poor performance. Furthermore, female hailing from rural areas should emphasize their attention for learning tenses. Lastly, similar research focusing on other types of tenses such as present continuous, present perfect continuous, past continuous, future continuous, future perfect, and future perfect continuous tense at secondary school level should be conducted. A similar research on tenses should also be conducted at elementary and primary levels.

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