



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH  
(Scholarly Peer Review Publishing System)

# SIMPLE PAST TENSE ERRORS BASED ON SURFACE STRUCTURE TAXONOMY IN ESL MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES WRITING

**Dr. Mahendran Maniam & Punethawathi Rajagopal**

University of Education Sultan Idris,  
Malaysia

[mahendran.maniam@yahoo.com](mailto:mahendran.maniam@yahoo.com), [nitha.jasmine@yahoo.com](mailto:nitha.jasmine@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate simple past tense errors according to surface structure taxonomy by analyzing the document analysis of students. This study also aims to investigate the sources of simple past tense errors. To achieve this, 30 respondents were chosen from a random sampling. The research design chosen is survey design. This design is suitable for collection of quantitative data from document analysis and questionnaire. The information gathered from the instruments was further analyzed to report the types and sources of simple past tense errors based on the surface structure taxonomy. The findings from this study indicate that the types of simple past tense errors are omission, addition and misinformation. The findings also indicate that the sources of simple past tense errors are mother tongue interference, application of translation, ignorance of rule application and overgeneralization of grammar rules. This research is significant as it provides insights to educators and practitioners a better understanding of the conceptualization of theories and grammar teaching methodology in the ESL context.

**Keywords:** surface structure taxonomy, mother tongue interference and rule application.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Errors in the second language acquisition are mainly due to native language interference while some researchers were convinced that errors produced during the acquisition of L2 were result of the creation of rules and hypothesis testing. Errors of competence are also known as systematic errors that reveal the learners knowledge and application of the language (Corder, 2000). Krashen (1987) cites research that both L1 and L2 learners tend to acquire grammatical elements in a fairly predictable order. Dulay and Burt (1982), addresses that learners studying English as a second language showed a natural order of acquisition no matter what their native language. Grammar is taught using inductive and deductive approaches and by integration in the lessons implicitly. The absence of a well-defined guidelines as to whether grammar should be taught explicitly or implicitly is influenced by emerging language theories about the roles of grammar in the Communicative approach (Ellis, 2006). The simple past tense is a problem



commonly faced by most ESL learners in learning grammar. This is significantly caused by the learners being confused with the simple past tense verb formation. There are three categories of simple past tense to be mastered by ESL learners namely, regular verbs, irregular verbs and stative verbs. The usual formation of past tense verb is by adding 'ed' to the verbs but some verbs needs to change the alphabets. This confusion makes the learners often to commit errors especially in the formation of simple past tense.

This study aims to investigate the simple past tense errors according to the surface structure taxonomy among ESL students writing. Surface structure taxonomy highlights the ways the structures are altered in specific and systematic ways (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982). Considering the significance of this problem for ESL learners, this study also seeks to identify the types of errors in their writing. This study also seeks to analyze the frequency of occurrence of surface structure errors among ESL learners.

This research is significant as it assists educators and teachers to formulate a guideline to apply the pedagogical methodology to teach grammar in the ESL classroom (Musa, Lie, & Azman, 2012). A methodology based on behaviorist theory would be appropriate to promote activities which encompass repetition and habit formation (Mitchel & Myles, 2004). It can also contribute to the introduction of a inductive approach of grammar in particular reference to issues in pedagogical principle (Ellis, 2006).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The researcher does not aim to make generalization but to provide contextual findings of a phenomenon therefore the adoption of a survey design was appropriate. The quantitative data was collected from two instruments comprising of document analysis and questionnaire. The quantitative data was analyzed to investigate the research objectives. The study aims to investigate the simple past tense errors according to surface structure taxonomy and to explore the sources of simple past tense errors in ESL students writing.

The following instrument was designed considering the aims of the study;

- a) Two written texts comprising of an essay and an informal letter. The word limit for each type of text was not more than 350 words. Moreover, the participants were given a time limit of an hour to write each text type. Ellis (2008) stated that to carry out L2 critical analysis it is appropriate to collect L2 written documents. Therefore this study used this approach to analyze the raw data which followed the six step phase to collect data, analyze data, classify according to categories, explain, evaluate and record.
- b) A questionnaire was administered to gather data to analyze the sources of simple past tense errors. The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section gathers demographic details of the participants. Section two consists of questions which aim to gather information of participant's usage of English to determine the sources of errors.

A sample of 30 participants was chosen from a random population of 137 ESL undergraduate students. A total of 7 males and 23 females were chosen. The subjects were selected regardless of their English language proficiency.

**Table 1: Data Collection Procedure**

No.	Research Questions	Data Collection Procedures
1	What are the types of simple past tense errors according to surface structure taxonomy in the students writing?	Document analysis
2	What are the sources of the simple past tense errors?	Questionnaire

## Types of Errors

Learner's errors need to be identified in order to help overcome learning problems. According to Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982), the three types of simple past tense errors of surface structure taxonomy are omission, misinformation and addition.

### 2.1 Omission

These types of errors are characterized by the absence of an item that must appear in a well formed utterance. This includes noun and verb inflections for example the 's' in books and 's' in Ali's and -'ed' in climbed, the -'ing' in singing. Learners usually omit



grammatical morphemes much more frequently than content words. In this study the focus is on omission of simple past tense verb forms. According to Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982), such omissions may be due to limitations of the learner's capacity in acquiring the rules of the target language.

## **2.2 Addition**

This type of errors are in contrast of omission type of errors. They are characterized by the presence of an item which must not appear in a well-formed utterance. This usually result from the all-too-faithful use of certain rules. Some examples are learners adding 'ed' to the verb 'putted' to indicate the past tense form of the verbs. According to Brown (1999), these types of errors usually occur in the third stage of the development of negative and interrogatives of the English language. These errors indicate that some basic rules have been acquired with no additional refinement.

## **2.3 Misinformation**

According to Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1984) this is characterized by the use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure. Usually in misinformation errors, the learners supply some incorrect utterances. For example, learners form the past tense form of 'fall' and write as 'falled'. These are not randomly committed.

## **2.4 Sources of errors**

The sources of errors are overgeneralization and ignorance of rule restriction. These result from intralingual factors. The interlingual factors result from mother tongue interference and translation (Littlewood, 1982).

## **2.5 Overgeneralization**

Learners sometimes make errors by overgeneralizing the rules and thus make the wrong prediction. According to Littlewood (1982), there are two underlying reasons for learners to overgeneralize the rules. Firstly due to the item belonging to a different category which is covered by another rules. Secondly, the rule does not apply to a particular item when though the learners allotted the item into the appropriate category.

## **2.6 Ignorance of rule restriction**

Learners may have the knowledge of the rules but do not understand the rules completely because certain rules have exceptions. Usually when learners do not understand the exception to the general rule are bound to commit errors.

## **2.7 Mother tongue interference**

According to behaviourists theory, learning a language is basically learning a set of habits. When learners learn a new language te native language knowledge will interfere with the new language utterances (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). This form of intervention is known as mother tongue interference. This is an unconscious process. When the learners learn a new language, the rules and the structure of their native language influence them.

## **2.8 Translation**

Unlike L1 interference, translation is a conscious process. Translation invlves a word-for-word rendition. This occurs when learners translate the words of the target language into first language. Usually learners fall back on their mother tongue to help create their language system (Odlin, 2001). Translation can benefit learners as it is a strategy which helps learners to understand and produce the target language.

Data collected from the 30 subjects were analyzed and all the simple past tense errors based on surface structure taxonomy were extracted from the essay and letter. Then the simple past tense errors were categorized according to surface structure taxonomy of omission, addition and misinformation. The questionnaire is analyzed to investigate the sources of errors namely ignorance of rule restriction and generalization followed by mother tongue interference and translation .



### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Research Question 1: What are the surface structure taxonomy of simple past tense errors in students writing?

The simple past tense errors extracted in students writing are omission, misinformation and addition.

**Table 2: Distribution of Surface Structure Taxonomy of Errors**

Types of errors	Frequency		Percentage	
	Letter	Essay	Letter	Essay
Omission	56	75	29	30.5
Misinformation	123	159	63.7	64.6
Addition	14	12	7.3	4.9
Total	193	246	100	100

The first research question deals with the simple present tense based on surface structure taxonomy made by 30 subjects in their writing. Two types of writing consisting of a narrative and an informal letter were collected to analyze the occurrence of errors. The data gathered were classified under categories of omission, misinformation and addition.

The table above shows that the most frequent occurrence of simple past tense errors were misinformation. It demonstrates 63.7% in letter and 64.6% in essay. This was followed by omission which showed 29% in letter and 30.5% in essay. The least type of error in forming simple past tense was addition. This was recorded as 7.3% in letter and 4.9% in essay. It was gathered that the most number of errors committed are misinformation. One of the reasons for this type of error is because the learners lack knowledge of grammar rules and application of rules. The learners overgeneralized the rules therefore use inappropriate tenses to the particular condition.

To conclude this study found that there are three types of errors made, namely misinformation, addition and omission. The highest rate of errors is under the misinformation type followed by omission and few addition. The misinformation error was due to overgeneralization of the grammar rules especially in the context of transforming the irregular verb to the past tense form of the verb. In this aspect learners overgeneralize the rules and form their own hypotheses. Omission is due to the limitation knowledge in the acquisition of rules and in this context the causes of simple past tense errors. It was concluded that most of the errors by ESL learners are the result of their hypothesis formation and testing (Yule, 2006). The irregular past tense verb formation is the second stage of language development. As a result, ESL learners memorize the irregular form of the verbs (O'Grady, 2005).

#### 3.2 Research Question 2: What are the sources of simple past tense errors in students writing?

The second research question deals with the sources of simple past tense errors. A questionnaire was analyzed and it was found that the sources of simple past tense errors in students writing are mother tongue interference, translation, restricted rule application and overgeneralization.

##### 3.2.1 Mother tongue interference

**Table 3: Distribution of the Language used by the participants at home**

	Bahasa Malaysia	Mandarin/Chinese	Tamil	English
Percentage	27%	40%	27%	6%



The table above shows the languages used by participants at home as their mother tongue. These languages are Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin/Cantonese, Tamil and English. Only 6% use English as their mother tongue. All the languages are different from English language in aspects of structures and grammar rules. It is obvious that English is the least used language as mother tongue at home. From the data, it can be concluded that mother tongue is an important factor that has an influence in learning English. This would indirectly reflect on the nature of occurrence of errors especially the simple past tense form. One of the sources of simple past tense errors is due to interference of mother tongue which is reflected in the writing.

### 3.2.2 Translation

**Table 4: Distribution of the translation methods used**

	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Total
Percentage	10%	36.7%	53.3%	100%

All the respondents used translation method to learn English language especially when they found the structures difficult. However, majority of the participants agreed using translation method in their writing. Translation was also used during speaking and reading with 36.7% and 10% respectively. During reading less translation was used since reading does not involve a lot of thinking skills. Among the three skills, reading was stated as the easiest to understand. This demonstrates that learners fall back on their mother tongue and too much reliance on mother tongue will cause them to commit errors especially in the writing. Moreover, their mother tongue is different from English language grammar rules. It is not a surprise to notice that the participants make many simple past tense errors in their writing.

### 3.2.3 Ignorance of rule application

**Table 5: Distributing of the difficult of using simple past tense**

No	Difficulty in forming simple past tense	Percentage
1	Changing the verb form	20
2	Lack understanding of rule application	30
3	Absence of this tense in my native language	3
4	The rules are confusing	15
5	Uncertain in the usage	32

Based on the questionnaire, it was found that 32% of the participants were uncertain in usage of simple past tense forms of the verbs. Another 30% responded that they do not understand the grammar rule application. Besides, 20% agreed that they were uncertain in changing the verb form. Only 3% responded to the absence of simple past tense in their native language. The participants reflected the lack of understanding of the English grammar rules especially the simple past tense. It is proven that learners' lack of knowledge in grammar rules as the source of simple past tense errors in their writing.

### 3.2.4 Overgeneralization

The main source of simple past tense errors were due to overgeneralization of the grammar rules. The most frequent occurrence of simple past tense errors caused by overgeneralization is misinformation. This is proven when there were 63.7% of misinformation errors in letter and 64.6% in essay. It was obvious that participants committed more misinformation errors in forming simple past tense form of the verbs.

It is clear that the main sources of simple past tense errors are mother tongue interference, translation, ignorance of rule application and overgeneralization. It can be concluded that misinformation type of error was due to overgeneralization while the omission is due to ignorance of rule application. It is obvious that the three sources of simple past tense errors consisting of mother tongue interference, ignorance of rule application and overgeneralization are interrelated. The ESL learners are confused with the language since it differs from their mother tongue in aspects of grammar. As a result, learners over generalize the rules which results in errors and in this study the context is evidence in the occurrence of simple past tense errors. To conclude, this study discovered that the



**GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH**  
(Scholarly Peer Review Publishing System)

main source of error is due to ESL learner's lack of knowledge of English language. ESL learners also make simple past tense errors due to interference of L1 when using the target language. When learners have more than one language at their disposal, they tend to transfer the rules and information from L1 to target language. Odlin(1989) stated that errors are due to language transfer of items and rules from L1 to target language.

The findings provide ample contemporary data for the investigation on the simple past tense errors based on surface structure taxonomy which consisted of omission, misinformation and addition type of errors. From the investigation based on the findings from the questionnaire, it was proven that among the sources of simple past tense errors are mother tongue interference, translation, ignorance of rule application and overgeneralization.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Although the findings were based on a sample collected from an institution it led the researcher to arrive to a conclusion that the errors of simple past tense are from omission, misinformation and addition. Significantly the sources of simple past tense errors are mother tongue interference due to application of translation application, ignorance of rule application and overgeneralization of grammar rules. This study also concludes that grammar rules should be taught implicitly and that when translation strategies were applied incorrectly, the tendency to form inaccurate sentence structures were prevalent as indicated in this study (Bennui, 2008). This is even more crucial among learners who have more than one language at their disposal therefore have the tendency to switch from one language to another which results in interference of languages (Odlin,2001).There are two processes in language learning (Abler, 2006). Through conscious process, learners are able to apply the learning strategies in writing (Madhumathi, P. , Ramani, N. and Prema, 2014). Consequently through unconscious process, learners formulate aspects of generalization, transfer and omission (Khansir, 2012). According to Corder (2000), errors in the second language acquisition are mainly due to native language interference. Ellis (2008) stated that errors produced during L2 acquisition resulted from the creation of rules and hypothesis testing.

#### 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study noted that majority of the simple past tense errors resulted from misinformation. It was obvious that learners had internalized the rules in English but lack the knowledge of application of rules. It was also concluded that second language learners were influenced by their mother tongue when they learn the second language. However, since second language learning is a developmental process as stated by Krashen (1987), therefore there is concern that learners will be able to master second language proficiently in progression. The concern is regarding the appropriate grammar teaching methodology especially for ESL learners. Past researchers and studies have indicated that ESL teachers employed personal teaching methodologies to teach grammar in classrooms. Teachers create their own personal ideologies to teach grammar in an ESL classroom (Ke, 2008). Therefore this study would recommend a defined methodology to teach grammar based on the findings recorded. Learners especially in the ESL context, need to be equipped with the learning and teaching of grammar rules.

#### 6. REFERENCES

- [1] Abler, W. L. (2006). The nature of language. Science Progress, 89 PART 1, 61–70. <http://doi.org/10.3184/003685006783238362>
- [2] Bennui, P. (2008). A Study of L1 Intereference in the Writing of Thai EFL Students. Malaysian Journal of ELT Research, 4, 72–104.
- [3] Brown,H.D. (1999). Principles of language learning and teaching. NY: Longman.
- [4] Corder, S.P(2000). Error Analysis and Interlanguage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Dulay, H.Burt, M. and Krashen,S.( 1982). Language Two. New York:Oxford. UP.
- [6] El-dali, H. M. (2012). L 1 and Second Language Learning : A Non-Stop Debate, 1(2), 8–32.
- [7] Ellis, R.(2006). Current Issues In The Teaching of Grammar. An SLA perspective. TESOL Quarterly (40)1
- [8] Ellis, R.(2008). The Study of Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Erarslan, A., & Hol, D. (2014). Language Interference on English : Transfer on the Vocabulary , Tense and Preposition Use of Freshmen Turkish EFL Learners. ELTA Journal, 2(2), 4–22.
- [10] Ke, Z. (2008). An Inductive Approach to English Grammar Teaching. HKBU Papers in Applied Language Studies, 12, 1–18.
- [11] Khansir, A. A. (2012). Error Analysis and Second Language Acquisition. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 2(5),



**GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH**  
(Scholarly Peer Review Publishing System)

- 1027–1032. <http://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.5.1027-1032>
- [12] Krashen, S.(2003). Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use. Porstmouth.NH: Heinemann.
- [13] Littlewood,W.( 1982). Foreign and Second Language Learning. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Lightbrown,P.M. and Spada,N.(1999). How Languages are learnt? Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [15] Madhumathi, P. , Ramani, N. and Prema, M. (2014). SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES Language Learning Strategy Use and English Proficiency of below Average Indian ESL Students. *Pertanika Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, 22(2), 455–472.
- [16] Mitchel,R. & Myles,M.(2004). Second Language Learning Theories. NY: Hodd Arnold.
- [17] Odlin,T.(1989). Language Transfer: Cross linguistic influence in language learning. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [18] O Grady, W.(2005). How Children Learn Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [19] Sinha, A., & Banerjee, N. (2009). Interference of first language in the acquisition of second language. *Journal of Psychology* ..., 1(7), 117–122. Retrieved from [http://www.academicjournals.org/Ijpc/PDF/Pdf2009/Sept/Sinha et al.pdf](http://www.academicjournals.org/Ijpc/PDF/Pdf2009/Sept/Sinha%20et%20al.pdf)
- [20] Yule,G.( 2006). The Study Of Language. New York.Cambridge.