

TENSE ERRORS IN PAKISTANI INTERMEDIATE ESL LEARNERS' WRITING: A CORPUS-ASSISTED STUDY

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Abstract

This study investigates the frequency and nature of tense errors in the English writing of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners. Drawing on a corpus of 100 writing samples collected from second-year college students, the research employs a descriptive quantitative methodology using Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) surface strategy taxonomy. The errors were analyzed and frequencies calculated by using corpus tool Antconc. The findings indicate that tense errors are the most prevalent grammatical error type, with the majority of students struggling to appropriately select and apply English tenses in context. The data highlight a high occurrence of misformation and omission errors in tense usage. The study attributes these errors to both developmental factors and first language interference. It concludes that focused instruction, corrective feedback, and grammar reinforcement are essential for improving learners' control over English tense forms. These findings hold significant implications for language teaching practices in Pakistani ESL classrooms.

Keywords: *Tense errors, grammatical mistakes, ESL learners, English writing proficiency, Pakistani students, error analysis, surface strategy taxonomy*

Introduction

English tenses are essential for expressing time, sequence, and the logical flow of ideas in written communication. For learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), tense usage remains one of the most persistent challenges in acquiring grammatical accuracy. In the context of Pakistan, where English serves as a second language and is often taught in academic settings, errors in tense usage are not only common but also significantly affect the clarity and effectiveness of students' writing. Despite years of formal English instruction, many Pakistani college students continue to exhibit consistent patterns of tense-related errors in their academic writing. These include incorrect verb forms, inconsistent tense usage within the same text, and the omission or misuse of auxiliary verbs. Such errors hinder the overall coherence of written expression and may affect academic performance, especially in disciplines that rely heavily on written reports, essays, and research.

The problem is further complicated by the differences between English and Urdu tense systems. Urdu does not always require auxiliary verbs or clear tense markers, which can lead to confusion and direct negative transfer when learners attempt to construct English sentences. As a result, learners may overgeneralize certain tense rules or avoid complex structures altogether.

Moreover, instructional approaches in many Pakistani institutions tend to emphasize rote memorization and rule-based grammar exercises rather than meaningful writing practice. This lack of contextualized learning contributes to learners' inability to apply tenses appropriately in real-life writing tasks. Teachers often overlook the importance of process writing and revision, both of which are essential for developing grammatical awareness.

This study aims to explore the prevalence and types of tense errors made by Pakistani ESL learners and to understand the underlying causes contributing to these errors. By drawing on

theoretical perspectives from second language acquisition and applying error analysis frameworks, this research highlights areas where targeted instructional support is most needed. The insights gained will be valuable for teachers, curriculum developers, and linguists aiming to improve grammar instruction in ESL contexts. Furthermore, this study underscores the urgent need for integrating communicative and functional grammar teaching strategies in the Pakistani ESL curriculum.

Research Objective

To identify the types, frequency, and underlying causes of tense errors in the English writing of Pakistani ESL learners of intermediate and suggest pedagogical strategies for improvement.

Research Question

What are the most common types and causes of tense errors in the English writing scripts of Pakistani ESL learners?

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant value for both theoretical and practical domains of second language acquisition. By focusing on tense errors—a critical component of grammatical accuracy—it contributes to a deeper understanding of the specific linguistic challenges faced by Pakistani ESL learners. The findings will assist language instructors in designing targeted grammar instruction and feedback strategies to address the most persistent issues. Moreover, curriculum developers can use these insights to integrate more contextualized and communicative approaches to teaching tenses in ESL classrooms. Ultimately, the study aims to enhance the overall proficiency and confidence of students in using accurate English verb forms, thereby improving the quality of academic writing in the Pakistani context.

Literature Review

Tense errors have long been recognized as a persistent challenge for ESL learners across different linguistic and cultural contexts. According to Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), surface strategy taxonomy provides a useful framework for identifying the types of grammatical errors learners make, including misformation, omission, addition, and misordering. Their classification has since been widely used in error analysis studies to understand how learners acquire and apply grammatical rules. Ellis (2008) notes that tense errors are particularly resistant to correction because they are deeply rooted in interlanguage development and are influenced by both cognitive and linguistic factors. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) further emphasize the importance of corrective feedback in helping learners internalize proper tense usage, suggesting that written corrective feedback is more effective when it is focused and consistent.

Research conducted by Abbas and Sadeghi (2016) on Iranian ESL learners revealed that past tense forms are the most commonly misused due to their irregular structures. Similarly, Farooq, Hasan, and Wahid (2012) examined Pakistani learners and found that present tense errors were predominant, often stemming from confusion between simple present and present continuous forms. Mahmood, Asif, and Mahmood (2018) reinforced these findings by identifying auxiliary verb omission as a key contributor to tense errors among Pakistani undergraduates.

The role of L1 interference cannot be ignored. Corder (1974) introduced the concept of error significance, arguing that learners' errors are not mere mistakes but systematic reflections of their current stage of interlanguage development. Urdu, being the first language of many Pakistani learners, lacks certain tense markers present in English, which leads to structural errors in sentence formation (Rahman, 2010).

Lightbown and Spada (2013) argue that explicit grammar instruction combined with meaningful communicative practice produces better outcomes in tense accuracy. In contrast, traditional grammar drills often fail to yield long-term improvement in learner output. This aligns with Richards and Schmidt (2010), who claim that a learner-centered approach with

immediate feedback is essential for correcting tense errors effectively.

Recent studies also emphasize the integration of tense teaching into broader writing instruction. As Hyland (2003) suggests, teaching grammar in isolation does not ensure effective application unless learners are guided to use tenses purposefully in writing tasks. Nawaz and Rasool (2020) advocate for contextualized instruction, encouraging learners to write paragraphs and essays that naturally require accurate tense use.

In addition, studies like Leki (1991), Ferris (2006), and Truscott (1996) discuss the controversies and effectiveness of corrective feedback strategies in second language writing. These works emphasize the varying outcomes of direct versus indirect feedback on learners' grammatical development and long-term accuracy in tense usage. Moreover, Larsen-Freeman (2001) discusses the importance of grammar as a dynamic system rather than a set of prescriptive rules, supporting the view that teaching tenses should be fluid and adaptive to learners' evolving interlanguage.

In sum, the literature consistently underscores the complexity of tense acquisition in ESL contexts. It highlights the need for a balanced instructional model that combines rule awareness, real-time feedback, and practical application. By synthesizing these perspectives, the current study positions itself within a well-established academic discourse while contributing localized insights specific to the Pakistani ESL context.

Research Methodology

This study employed a corpus assisted descriptive quantitative research design to investigate the types and frequency of tense errors in the written work of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners. The methodology was chosen for its suitability in identifying, classifying, and quantifying error patterns systematically. A total of 100 writing samples were collected from second-year students enrolled in English language courses at public sector colleges in Pakistan. The participants represented a diverse mix of male and female students, all of whom had studied English as a compulsory subject for at least 10 years. The writing samples were gathered as part of regular classroom activities, such as essay writing and paragraph composition tasks and the errors were analyzed and the frequencies were calculated by using corpus tool Antconc. Students were not informed in advance that their work would be analyzed for research, ensuring the authenticity of the data. Tense errors were identified and categorized using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy developed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), which includes omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Each error was tagged and coded to determine frequency and distribution across different tense categories. The data were tabulated and analyzed using percentage calculations to identify which tense errors were most common. Emphasis was placed on analyzing the types of errors (e.g., omission of auxiliary verbs, incorrect tense formation) and their possible causes (e.g., L1 interference, lack of practice). Participants' anonymity was maintained throughout the research process. No identifying information was included in the analysis, and the data were used solely for academic purposes. This methodology provided a clear structure for understanding the scope and nature of tense errors among Pakistani ESL learners and laid the groundwork for the subsequent analysis and pedagogical recommendations.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: *Frequency and Type of Tense Errors from each group*

Language	Tense Related Errors	Frequency
Urdu	97	20
Punjabi	177	68

Pushto	220	51
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This table summarizes the overall distribution of tense errors among the 100 student writing samples. Misformation was the most frequent type, indicating a lack of understanding of verb structures and forms. Omission errors followed closely, showing learners' struggle with auxiliary verbs and necessary tense markers. Addition and misordering errors were relatively less frequent but still significant.

Table 2: *A tabulation of comparison of errors in total recorded and their percentage*

Error Type	Number of Errors	Percentage
Omission	315	36.20
Addition	170	19.55
Misformation	332	38.17
Misordering	53	6.09
Total	870	100

Here, table 2 illustrates the distribution of errors across the four categories outlined in the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). The data reveals that misformation errors (38.17%) represent the highest proportion, followed closely by omission errors (36.20%). Together, these two error types account for nearly three-quarters of the total, demonstrating that learners' primary difficulties lie in either selecting inappropriate grammatical forms or failing to supply obligatory elements. This dominance highlights the instability of learners' interlanguage systems, where the application of tense and morphological markers remains inconsistent and incomplete.

The addition errors (19.55%) indicate that students often inserted unnecessary linguistic items, which can be attributed to overgeneralization or interlingual interference from their first language. These errors, while less frequent than omission and misformation, are nevertheless significant because they reflect an over-application of partially internalized grammatical rules. Finally, misordering errors (6.09%) appear least frequently, suggesting that learners faced comparatively fewer challenges in word order, possibly due to similarities between English syntax and their native languages or the explicit teaching of sentence patterns in formal instruction.

Findings

Based on the results presented in Tables 4.5 and 2, several key findings can be drawn:

Misformation and omission errors are the most dominant categories, together comprising more than 70% of the total errors.

- Across all linguistic groups (Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto), tense-related misformations and omissions remain consistently high, signaling a universal challenge in morpho-syntactic accuracy.
- Addition errors occur at a moderate level, primarily due to learners' overgeneralization of partially acquired rules.
- Misordering errors are least frequent, suggesting that word order is comparatively less problematic than tense formation.
- The uniformity of error patterns across groups suggests that these difficulties are not merely first language-specific but reflect developmental stages of interlanguage acquisition.
- Pedagogically, these findings highlight the necessity of focused feedback and remedial instruction targeting tense morphology, particularly omissions and misformations, to improve learners' overall writing proficiency.

These findings corroborate the position of Dulay et al. (1982), who emphasized that omission and misformation are the most pervasive error categories among second language learners. Furthermore, as Ellis (2008) argues, such errors are developmental in nature, reflecting predictable stages of interlanguage growth rather than mere random mistakes. From a pedagogical perspective, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) underscore the importance of providing focused corrective feedback on such morpho-syntactic errors, particularly tense-related misformations and omissions, to accelerate learners' accuracy and fluency in academic writing.

Conclusion

The present study has identified significant patterns and causes of tense errors in the English writing of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners. The findings confirm that misformation and omission are the two most dominant error types, signaling that learners struggle with the structural application of English tenses. These challenges are primarily rooted in interlanguage development and influenced heavily by the learners' first language (L1), such as Urdu, Punjabi, and Saraiki. The consistency of errors across different lingual backgrounds further emphasizes the systemic nature of the issue, which is less about regional differences and more about instructional limitations.

It is evident that traditional teaching methodologies, which often rely on mechanical drills and rule memorization, fail to provide students with the contextual understanding necessary to use tenses accurately. The study underscores the importance of shifting towards learner-centered, communicative, and task-based approaches to grammar instruction. Such methods promote meaningful use of language, thereby increasing learners' ability to internalize and correctly apply tense rules in real-life writing tasks.

Suggestions

Instead of teaching tenses in isolation, instructors should embed grammar instruction within writing tasks to enhance practical application. Teachers should offer explicit and timely feedback on tense errors, highlighting both the nature of the error and the correct usage. Class-based discussions on common error patterns identified in students' writing can help raise grammatical awareness. Instructional content should be sensitive to L1 influences and tailored to address the specific difficulties of Urdu, Punjabi, and Saraiki speakers. Structured peer feedback sessions and multiple drafting opportunities can improve grammatical accuracy over time. Teachers should be trained in second language acquisition theories and pedagogical strategies for addressing tense errors. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions in Pakistan can significantly enhance the grammatical competence of ESL learners, ultimately improving their overall writing proficiency and academic success.

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