

Analogy as a Tool for the Acquisition of English Verb Tenses among Low Proficiency L2 Learners

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Abstract

The teaching of English grammar to second language learners is usually a tedious, stressful and time consuming activity and even after all the effort, students have generally found these lessons boring and confusing. As such, innovative language instructors have been trying different approaches to the teaching of grammar in their classrooms. Using analogy as a tool for teaching is nothing new especially in science subjects such as Physics. In this comparative study however, analogy is used to teach English verb tenses to low proficiency L2 learners of English. The aim is to investigate the effects of using analogy as a tool for teaching English verb tenses. If using analogy is found to be effective, then it would be interesting to investigate to what extent it can be implemented in the low proficiency classroom. The analogy used has been creatively thought out and incorporated in the lesson with the help of innovative visual aids. A hundred and seventy-two pre-diploma students with low proficiency levels of English were selected for this experiment. They were given a pre and post-test task before and after the lesson on verb tenses in order to determine whether the use of analogy implemented during the lesson had a favourable impact to learning. The test scores of the pre and post tests were then compared to verify the feasibility of using analogy in the lesson.

Keywords: verb tense, analogy, low proficiency L2 learners, language acquisition

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Most language instructors are stressed by the prospect of teaching the rules of grammar especially to low proficiency students. The reason for this may be because the students themselves have a very negative view of the lesson contents. Furthermore, in a multilingual community like Malaysia, speakers are exposed to a variety of languages composed of different sets of parameters that could impede learning a second language. In view of this, learning a grammatical component like verb tense can pose a challenge to language instructors. Linguists generally agree that English verb tenses can be difficult to comprehend and use. Jacobs (1995) stated that verb tense and aspect are considered to be one of the most problematic areas in learning English. Muneera and Shameem (2013) further asserted that knowledge of grammar particularly tenses, is the most vital and complicated part for non-native speakers to master. Extensive research has been done in the area of acquisition of English verb tenses by second language (L2) learners (Muneera & Shameem, 2013; Kristiane, 2005; Legendre, Hagstrom, Todorova, & Vainikka, 2000; Jacobs, 1995). Yet the issue of why most second language learners of English struggle to use the correct verb tense forms when constructing sentences remains unresolved. As such, innovative teaching methods such as the use of analogy need to be aggressively used as learners easily become bored when chunks of rules of grammar are fed to them.

Ellis (2006) explained that the teaching of grammar can take on any instructional methods that attract learners' attention to specific grammatical forms either to understand or process or produce what they have internalized metalinguistically. In addressing the issues in grammar teaching, he provided a number of insights which include (1) meanings and not just forms should be emphasised when teaching grammar (2) grammatical structures that are problematic to learners should be given attention and (3) learners who are taught grammar should already have acquired some ability to use the language. Soo and Wong (2012) examined the acquisition of the grammar component of English pronouns by L2 speakers of English and found that among the reasons why acquisition was problematic was due to influence from the learners' mother tongue.

Reid (1995) stated that there are differences in teaching and learning styles and this could be influenced by the cultural background of learners. Visual learners for example, tend to better absorb materials taught in the form of pictures like mind maps, charts, tables and graphs. Pedagogical applications by instructors to these learners would then be skewed to preparing teaching tools that are adaptable to the learning styles of the students. Most learners are generally visual learners in contrast to auditory and kinesthetic learners. Larsen-Freeman (2001) asserted that the challenge lies in understanding meaning and use. While learners often know the correct tense-aspect of a verb, they may not know how to apply and use them in real-life situations. This defeats the purpose of learning. Language instructors therefore, have to prepare their lessons in such a way that learning becomes meaningful because establishing meaningful learning is the key to language acquisition. The present study thus intends to determine if analogy can be used as a tool to assist in this and to enable meaningful learning to be established.

According to Federici, Montemagni, and Pirrelli (1996), the importance of analogy in the acquisition of language has been sorely neglected. Gentner and Namy (2006) in examining the usefulness of analogy in language acquisition as a cognitive domain, found that comparison of two things can highlight commonalities or similarities which in turn promotes better understanding and learning. In relation to this, Gentner and Markman (1997) explained that such analogical processing dealt with relational commonalities. Gentner (2003) in explaining the structure-mapping theory with relations to analogy, stated that relational focus arises when comparisons are made based on implicit correspondence between their conceptual representations. Bartha (2013) correspondingly stated that analogy is the comparison of two objects or systems of objects that are thought to have similarity. Analogical argument on the other hand, is an explicit representation of analogical reasoning that cites accepted similarities between two systems to support a conclusion or deduction. This means that by means of using analogy, a student can be helped to understand the rules of grammar as the example or comparison used to explain the rule is common and accepted in the student's mindset.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

There is a twofold aspect to the present study which is (1) to investigate the effectiveness of using an analogy based teaching tool for acquisition of English verb tenses in the ESL classroom comprised of low proficiency L2 learners and (2) to examine the extent to which using analogy affect acquisition of English verb tenses by low proficiency L2 learners. Thus, the study will look at how effective using analogy is to the acquisition of English verb tenses by low proficiency L2 learners and if so, to what extend it is effective.

2. Linguistics Assumptions

It cannot be denied that languages are composed of different sets of parameters. In the present study, the learners are all L1 Malay speakers of L2 English. Therefore, L1 linguistic similarities and differences could affect their acquisition of the L2. The structure of the Malay Language is relatively simple compared to the English Language which has more complex structures thus posing considerable difficulty for Malay speakers to master. When speaking or writing, weaker students often resort to translating sentences from the Malay language thus committing errors due to interference. As mentioned by Corder (1981), errors can be "the result of the persistence of existing mother tongue habits in the new language."

2.1 Malay Verb Tenses

Unlike the English language, verbs in the Malay language do not explicitly indicate time. Verbs in Malay are accompanied by aspectual markers (*kata bantu aspek*) which help to explain the time aspect of an action. This can be further categorised into three parts which are *sudah* (past action), *sedang* (progressive action), or *belum dilakukan* (future action).

Table 1. The usage of aspectual markers in the Malay language

Aspectual Markers (Kata Bantu Aspek)		
Time Aspect	Aspectual Markers	Example of Usage
Past action (Sudah dilakukan)	Sudah	Kakak saya sudah membeli kereta. Sister my has buy car (My sister has bought a car.)
	Telah	Kakak saya telah membeli kereta. Sister my has buy car (My sister has bought a car.)
	Pernah	Kakak saya pernah membeli kereta. Sister my has buy car (My sister has bought a car.)
Progressive action (Sedang dilakukan)	Sedang	Kakak saya sedang membeli kereta. Sister my [prog] buy car (My sister is buying a car.)
	Masih	Kakak saya masih membeli kereta. Sister my still buy car (My sister is still buying a car.)
Future action (Belum dilakukan)	Belum	Kakak saya belum membeli kereta. Sister my not yet buy car (My sister has not bought a car yet.)
	Akan	Kakak saya akan membeli kereta. Sister my will buy car (My sister will buy a car.)

Adapted from Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2006).

Table 1 shows the different forms of aspectual markers in Malay and it can be seen that aspectual markers instead of verbs, have an important role in indicating time in the Malay language. The verb “*membeli*” as indicated in the examples in table 1 remain its form though it is used at different times.

2.2 English Verb Tenses

In English, verbs provide information of whether the actions or events they describe are happening which are marked by three main tenses: **present**, **past** or **future**.

Table 2. Verb tense forms in the English and Malay language

	English	Malay
Present Tense	Ali <i>walks</i> to school.	Ali <i>berjalan</i> ke sekolah.
	Ali and Amin <i>walk</i> to school.	Ali dan Amin <i>berjalan</i> ke sekolah
Past Tense	Ali <i>walked</i> to school yesterday.	Ali <i>berjalan</i> ke sekolah semalam.
	Ali and Amin <i>walked</i> to school yesterday.	Ali dan Amin <i>telah berjalan</i> ke sekolah semalam.
Future Tense	Ali <i>will walk</i> to school tomorrow.	Ali <i>akan berjalan</i> ke sekolah esok.
	Ali and Amin <i>will walk</i> to school tomorrow.	Ali dan Amin <i>akan berjalan</i> ke sekolah esok.

Table 2 shows that the English verbs change according to the time an action or event is happening. Thus, the uses of verbs are expressed by the tense indicators: walks (present), walked (past), and will walk (future). The English verb forms do not only change according to the tense indicators but it is also determined by singularity/plurality, number and time. All these conditions are not found in the Malay Language. Hence, L1 Malay learners may find it problematic in acquiring these tense forms because they are not found in Malay.

3. Method

This is an experimental research to test the effectiveness of using analogy to teach English verb tenses in a grammar classroom. In order to do this, a pre and post test is used before and after the lesson. The purpose is to determine if the use of analogy in the English verb tense lesson is effective and if so, to what extent.

3.1 Sampling Size

The sampling size collected for the study is based on the convenient sampling method as the participants selected for the research were conveniently all pre-diploma students who attended a language workshop at the university. There were 172 participants who were all L1 Malay speakers enrolled in the pre-diploma course. They were all low proficiency learners of English with grades of C and below for the Standard Malaysian High School Examination (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*) and they were all between the ages of 18 to 22.

3.2 Research Instrument

There were two instruments used for the study. The first instrument was a pre and post-test. The pre and post tests consisted of the same set of items. The test mainly consisted of 30 items on past tense, present tense and future tense. They were all multiple choice items with 4 choices each. This was to test the learners' ability to identify the use of different verb tenses in different sentence structures before and after being taught by means of using analogy to promote better understanding of verb tenses. A sample of an item from the test is as follows:

1) The boy rode on his bicycle to the park.

- a) Simple Past Tense
- b) Past Perfect Tense
- c) Simple Present Tense
- d) Past Continuous Tense

The second instrument is the analogy of reading time from a clock. According to Gentner (2003), analogy is the comparison of similarities between two corresponding relations to enhance learning. In the present study, a clock is used as a visual aid to assist in comprehension. Verb tenses like the clock, can help learners grasp time aspects in English. In order to create awareness of the different time aspects, the face of the clock was improvised and divided into three parts: (1) Past tense, (2) Present tense, and (3) Future tense. A clock normally has 12 parts to indicate hours and 60 subparts to indicate minutes. The improvised clock named the 'T-Chronometer' had 12 subparts besides the three main parts: (1) Simple Past Tense (2) Past Continuous Tense (3) Past Perfect Tense (4) Past Perfect Continuous Tense (5) Simple Present Tense (6) Present Continuous Tense (7) Present Perfect Tense (8) Present Perfect Continuous Tense (9) Simple Future Tense (10) Future Continuous Tense (11) Future Perfect Tense (12) Future Perfect Continuous Tense. While a clock has two hands to tell the time, the T-Chronometer only needed one hand, namely, the verb, to tell the time. Formulas were compiled from grammar textbooks and made into a chart to help explain usage.

3.3 Research Procedure

Prior to the verb tense lesson for the pre-diploma workshop, the 8 lecturers who agreed to take part, were all given briefings. Before the lesson began, all the students were requested to do the pre-test. They were then taught the English verb tenses using the analogy of a clock and introduced to the formulas involved. The learners were informed to memorise the formulas based on made up stories to help them remember the rules of grammar in a less stressful manner. For example, to explain the use of the verb in the simple present tense singular form, a made up story of "being single is lonely and therefore, a 'Sweet friend needs to be added to the verb for company so that the verb is not lonely" is used. The formula for the simple present tense in the singular therefore was explained as "verb+s" as in "Ali [singular form] walk+s to school." In the plural form of the simple present tense, Ali already has a friend and therefore, the formula for the simple present tense in the plural was explained as "verb-s" as in "Ali and his friend [plural form] walk to school." Interactive practice sessions ensued with the instructor throwing sentences and the students guessing the correct tenses of each sentence. The learners were then given a group task to recreate the T-Chronometer with the respective formulas using recycled materials to reinforce learning. After the lesson, they were required to sit for the post-test.

4. Results

The data collected from the pre and post tests were tabulated and compared to see if the use of analogy was effective in enhancing learning of English verb tenses among low proficiency learners. The general analysis of scores is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of the pre and post test results

Score (Marks)	Grade	Pre Test		Post Test	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
0-10	Weak	55	32%	23	13.4%
11-20	Average	98	57%	82	47.6%
21-30	Good	19	11%	67	39%
Total		172	100%	172	100%
Full Score		Nil		13	

Table 3 shows the overall scores for both the pre and post tests. For both the tests, the highest scores are in the average grade (11-20 marks). However, the overall scores of the post test were better than that of the pre test with 39% of students in the good grade (21-30 marks) category compared to 11% in the pre test. The number of full scores were 13 for the post test while for the pre test, there were no full scores recorded. This seems to indicate positively on the effectiveness of using analogy in learning verb tenses. Comparatively, the pre-test showed that 32% of the learners fell under the weak grade initially. The grades improved after implementing analogy and only 13.4% was recorded in the weak grade category of the post test. This again attests to the effectiveness of using analogy as a tool for enhancing the learning of verb tenses.

The data was also tabulated according to the three main tenses tested, namely, past tense, present tense and future tenses as shown in table 4.

Table 4. Average percentage scores according to the past, present and future tenses

	Past tense (%)	Present tense (%)	Future tense (%)
Pre test	54.36	43.46	46.22
Post test	60.90	64.97	61.68
% increase	6.54	21.51	15.46

Table 4 shows the average percentage scores of the past, present and future tenses for both the pre and post test. Overall, the learners performed better for all three tense types in the post test than in the pre test. Of the three tense types and their subparts tested, the highest increase was from the present tense (21.51%), followed by the future tense (15.46%) and the past tense (6.54%). In other words, the use of past tense may be most difficult for the students to acquire compared to the present and future tenses. The simple past tense formula include the regular forms which requires the adding of *-ed* to the verb tense (e.g. walk – walked) and the irregular forms which requires the changing of the verb tense forms (e.g. bring – brought). In the learners' L1 (Malay), the verb tenses do not change to indicate the different time aspects. Thus, the learners cannot borrow L1 parameters to use in their L2 and therefore this could have contributed to the poor improvement in past tense acquisition.

A paired sample t-test was run to see if there was a significant difference between the pre and post test. Table 5 shows that for all three tenses (past, present and future), the p value was $< .05$. In pair 1 (pre and post test for past tense), the p value is .018 ($p < .05$). In pair 2 (pre and post test for present tense) and in pair 3 (pre and post test for future tense), the p values are respectively .000 ($p < .05$). This means that there was significant difference in the pre and post tests for the past tense, present tense and future tense tested.

Table 5. The paired samples t-test results

Pair	Pre and Post Test	Sig (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Past Tense	.018
Pair 2	Present Tense	.000
Pair 3	Future Tense	.000

5. Conclusion

The results of the study have been positive in the usage of analogy to enhance understanding of the rules of grammar particularly, verb tenses. In the pre test it was found that the scores were low with none of the students having full scores for the multiple choice items on the different verb tenses tested. However, the grades improved after the lesson and the post test showed that 13 students had full scores. Although this is only a small percentage (7.55%), it showed that even low proficiency students have potential of improving their grades once learning becomes meaningful (Larsen-Freeman, 2001; Ellis, 2006). Further, Reid (1995) stated that learning styles of learners adapted to their learning abilities can enhance learning in a meaningful and useful manner.

Overall, the use of analogy seems effective as the results from this study were positive and the learners seem to have shown improvement. The extend of the effectiveness has also been discussed briefly with acquisition of present tense having the highest improvement followed by future tenses and past tenses. Differences in the learners L1 and L2 parameters could have attributed to this as indicated by previous studies (Soo & Wong, 2012; Corder, 1981). The fact that the past tense seemed most problematic and least effective for these L1 Malay speakers may not just be because of their low proficiency levels but other factors may also be involved such as influence from their mother tongue and fossilization due to their maturity. Further research in this area therefore is recommended. Also, as this study is only at the preliminary stage, more comprehensive research perhaps with comparisons of different proficiency level learners could also be done in future.

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