

# Tense Error Analysis of Secondary Students in Brunei

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## Article History:

First Received:  
04/04/2023

Final Revision:  
30/05/2023

Available online:  
30/06/2023

**Abstract.** This study examines the errors in tenses made by 34 secondary students in Brunei who were asked to write a short story based on a picture composition, with the focus on testing Krashen's Natural Order Hypothesis (NOH) in L2 acquisition. The objective of the study is to test the theory in NOH that irregular past tense is acquired before regular past tense through the analysis of the errors made in the verbs. The collected data were analyzed based on the four steps of error analysis: identification, description, explanation, and evaluation. The findings suggest that irregular past tense for verbs such as "go," "is," "eat," and "buy" were the most commonly found errors, mainly due to inappropriate or incorrect tense markings. Contrary to the hypothesis, the study suggests that irregular verbs are not necessarily acquired before regular past tense, possibly due to the large number of irregular verbs that learners need to know. Thus, the article concludes that the study provides useful information for language pedagogy and emphasizes the importance of considering the learners' L1 and individual differences in language acquisition.

**Keywords:** *Tense markings, Krashen's Natural Order Hypothesis, Irregular verbs, Error analysis, Second language acquisition*

<http://jos.unsoed.ac.id/index.php/jes>

## INTRODUCTION

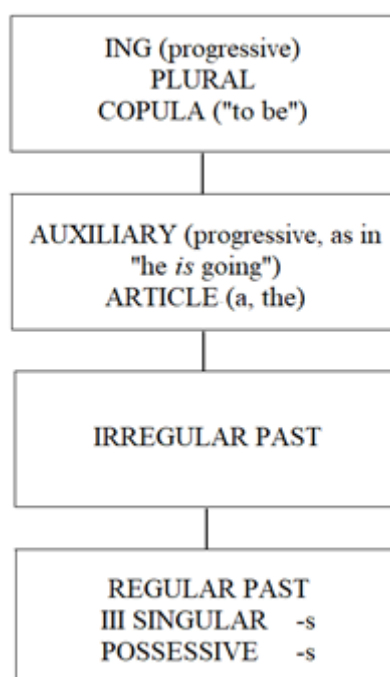
Learning a new language can be a challenging task, and making errors is an inevitable part of the process. Errors in language are defined as deviations from the norms of the native form (James, 2013). Similarly, Richards (1985) defines errors as language usage that a native speaker would consider faulty. However, using native speakers as the benchmark for language learning can be disadvantageous for second language (L2) learners. Errors made by L2 learners should not be accepted too easily

as a sign of failure in language acquisition. As a result, error analysis (EA) has become an important field of research, and many scholars believe that learners' errors can provide valuable insights into pedagogy (Ting et al., 2010).

L2 learners are known to have a different acquisition process compared to those learning their first language (L1), which is why errors are more prominent among them (Putri & Dewanti, 2014). L1 is typically learned from birth, making it easier to acquire than L2. However, for L2 learners, language is mostly introduced in their later years, making the acquisition process more difficult. It has been shown that the brain will lose "its elasticity and reorganisational capacities" that are necessary in learning new language (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). Therefore, L2 learners are at a disadvantage when compared to L1 learners.

According to Krashen's (1982) Natural Order Hypothesis (NOH), it is said that acquisition of English follows a specific sequence seen in Figure 1, regardless of the learners' status as L1 or L2. The first stage is comprised of -ing participle, plural -s and copula verbs, which are deemed as the simplest concepts of the language and are therefore the first to be acquired. The last stage comprised of regular past, third person singular, and possessive -s.

*Figure 1. The Sequence of L2 Acquisition According to the Natural Order Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982, p. 13)*



To investigate the acquisition of past tense forms among L2 learners, this EA study will test the hypothesis that irregular past tense is acquired before regular past tense, as proposed by NOH. Specifically, the study aims to compare the frequency of errors between irregular and regular verbs in past tense in written language among L2 learners. Therefore, the hypothesis of the study is that L2 learners will make fewer errors in the use of irregular past tense compared to regular past tense.

Most of previous EA studies found some evidence that give an initial insight to this hypothesis. Gök and Çetin (2018) analyzed 60 written texts made by Turkish English learners and found that there were more errors in irregular verbs compared to the regular ones. Another study was conducted with the aim to compare the use of regular and irregular verbs between 40 native and 40 non-native speakers of English where they had to complete tasks involving verb tense (Kim et al., 2014). They found that both native and non-native speakers of English tend to make more errors with irregular verbs than with regular ones, particularly with the past simple tense and the past participle form. Furthermore, non-native speakers demonstrated a higher frequency of errors compared to native speakers, which was to be expected since the former are considered L2 learners who tend to make errors due to the differing language acquisition process. It is also worth noting that other studies such as Hussein (2018) and Chen and Jin (2018) shared similar results to that of Kim et al. (2014) where, aside from the errors in irregular verbs are more frequent than regular ones, the common errors found were past simple and past participle forms as well among 60 Kurdish English learners and 60 advanced-level Chinese EFL learners respectively. Lastly, the study investigated by Izadi and Sadighi (2012) also found more errors with irregular verbs than regular verbs. However, the most common ones that they found turned out to be past simple and present perfect tenses. Nonetheless, this study along with all the aforementioned ones found that the use of irregular verbs tends to appear with more errors compared to their regular counterparts.

As such, this study aims to see if this also applies to Bruneian L2 learners of English. The main objective of the study is to test the hypothesis if the irregular past tense is acquired before regular past tense through the analysis of the errors made in the verbs.

## RESEARCH METHOD

To test the hypothesis of the study, a total of 34 compositions were analyzed, all of which were written by secondary students in Year 7 and Year 10 from a public school in Brunei Darussalam. This level was chosen because they are still in their developmental stage of learning English. A public school was chosen over a private school because the former is known to have students with Malay as their L1.

The students were asked to write a short story between 250 and 300 words based on a picture composition designed for the research (see Appendix A). This task was chosen because it was believed to be doable within the allotted time of 20-30 minutes by students at any level of secondary education. Furthermore, the format of the composition's instruction was similar to that of the English composition paper of the primary education's major graduation exam called *Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* (PSR), which most of the students would be familiar with. The composition also included a specific instruction that told the students to start their story with the word "Yesterday,...", which aimed to direct the students in using past tense in their main verbs.

After the compositions were collected, the errors were identified and described first according to the parameters set for the research. After they were described, they were then explained and evaluated further. These steps are commonly used in

EA studies, as identified by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), based on the list initially provided by Corder (1974).

For this study, the following parameters, based on the categories compiled by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p. 61), were used to describe the errors found: omission, addition, misinformation, misordering, and blend. In the context of verb tense markings, omission is when the marking is not used as expected, addition is when markings are added unnecessarily, misinformation is when an incorrect one is used, misordering is when it is in the wrong position, and blend is when two different forms of tenses are merged. These parameters are summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1. Overview of the parameters used to describe the errors found for verb tense marking (adapted from Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 61)*

No	Types of Error	Description of error for verb tense marking
1	Omission	Supposed marking for the tense is not used
2	Addition	Unnecessary marking for the tense is added
3	Misinformation	An incorrect marking for the tense is used
4	Misordering	Markings are in the wrong location within the verb
5	Blend	Different forms of tense markings are merged

Additionally, misspelled words were considered as errors and were classified to the categories. Incomprehensible sentences were considered as unintelligible and hence excluded from the analysis. Once the errors are described according to these categories, they are then explained and evaluated. The hypothesis was tested by analyzing the type of verb i.e., regular or irregular that were found to be the highest in frequency.

In this study, the reliability of the material used was assessed using a test-retest device. Before the actual study, a pilot study was conducted with six randomly selected students who were not included in the final study. They completed the same picture composition task mentioned earlier. The initial results obtained from the pilot study showed consistency with findings from previous error analysis studies, thus confirming the reliability of the material used.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Once the identified errors were categorized accordingly, the total amount of errors for each category was noted. They were then divided by the total number of errors found before the values were changed into percentages and rounded off to one decimal place, as seen in Table 2.

*Table 2. Tabulation of Errors Found in Each Category*

No	Types of Error	Errors Found	%
1	Omission	442	78.9
2	Addition	2	0.4
3	Misinformation	110	19.6
4	Misordering	2	0.4

<b>5</b>	Blend	4	0.7
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Majority of the errors found were omission and misinformation, whereas addition, misordering and blend were the least. A possible explanation for the latter is that the students are able to spot such errors since they are in secondary school where they should have a good foundation in their English Language. As for the former, a possible explanation could be related to the influence of their L1.

One possible explanation for omission being the most common error found could be due to the fact that Malay does not conjugate their verbs according to time whereas English does (Liaw, 2005, p. 84). This is also an observation made by Scott (2013). Malay shares the same feature as Chinese in that they both do not express tenses in their verbs. This does not mean that Malay does not have a tense system. The tense is simply not necessary to be incorporated into every sentence in Malay. How time is usually referred to in this language is by stating the specific time itself in the sentence rather than by changing the forms of the verbs. Therefore, this phenomenon can be considered as interlingual errors due to the students' habit of using the base forms of the verbs because of their L1 influence. The argument is further strengthened by the second highest errors found, i.e., misinformation.

As misinformation occurs when an incorrect marking for the tense is used, this finding is significant as it shows how tenses were still being used incorrectly. When the misinformation errors were further analysed, 86 of the supposedly past-tense-inflected verbs were found to be in present tense form instead, which accounts to more than 70% of the 110 errors found. It is worth considering alternative strategies when teaching this aspect of the language to L2 learners since the findings support the possibility of the existence of L1 influence in their errors.

The data were further expanded to show which verbs were frequently found as errors in an effort to test the main hypothesis of the research: L2 learners will make fewer errors in the use of irregular past tense compared to regular past tense. These can be seen with some examples shown below in Table 3 and 4. Considering that there more than 500 errors found in the data, the tables provided include only a limited number of selected errors to compare the ones involving irregular and regular verbs. The suggested corrections were determined based on the contextual information surrounding the sentences or sentence fragments.

*Table 3. Examples of Data from the Compositions Collected Showing Errors Involving Irregular Verb*

<b>No</b>	<b>Example of errors</b>	<b>Correction of errors</b>	<b>Type of error</b>
<b>1</b>	*...i <u>go</u> to mall and i <u>go</u> to ete in rastoren...	...I <u>went</u> to the mall and I <u>went</u> to eat at the restaurant...	Omission
<b>2</b>	*...then my mother <u>buy</u> a ticket to go in...	...then, my mother <u>bought</u> a ticket to go in...	Omission
<b>3</b>	* ...shasha and classmates got to foodcourt to <u>buys</u> deserts...	...Shasha and her classmates went to the food court to <u>buy</u> desserts...	Addition

<b>4</b>	* ...the total <u>is</u> \$10.90.	...the total was \$10.90.	Omission
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*Table 4. Examples of Data from the Compositions Collected Showing Errors involving Regular Verb*

<b>No</b>	<b>Example of errors</b>	<b>Correction of errors</b>	<b>Type of error</b>
<b>1</b>	*...because she <u>wants</u> to see a movie.....	...because she <u>wanted</u> to see a movie...	Misinformation
<b>2</b>	*...my friend <u>want</u> a chicken...	...my friend <u>wanted</u> chicken...	Omission
<b>3</b>	* Me and my friends <u>decide</u> to spend...	My friends and I <u>decided</u> to spend...	Omission
<b>4</b>	* ... and mimi <u>wait</u> for bus.	...and Mimi <u>waited</u> for the bus.	Omission

Based on the results shown in Table 5, the top three verbs were 'go', 'is', and a tie between 'eat' and 'buy', all of which are verbs with irregular past ('went', 'was', 'ate', 'bought' respectively). This debunks the hypothesis of this research.

*Table 5. Tabulation of the Top Five Verbs Found as Errors*

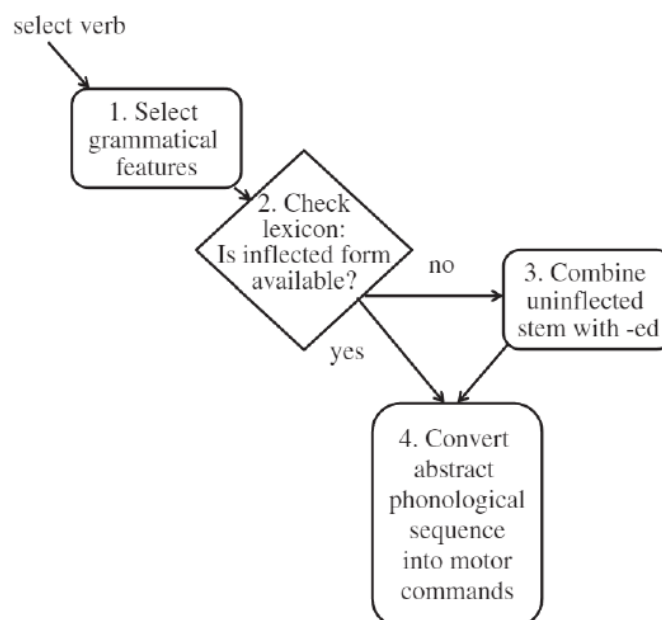
<b>No</b>	<b>Verbs</b>	<b>Errors Found</b>
<b>1</b>	Go	81
<b>2</b>	Is	32
<b>3</b>	Eat	27
<b>4</b>	Buy	27
<b>5</b>	Want	19
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>186</b>

A possible explanation behind this could be that these students are still in the phase of learning the concept of tenses, so they tend to mix them around. It could also be due to the sheer number of irregular verbs themselves that overwhelm the student. According to Wall Street English (2017), there are over 200 irregular verbs in English. However, not all of these 200 verbs are commonly used. Even so, the number is still overwhelming for learners to understand and remember since there is more than one way to inflect them: same base form, past simple and past participle; same past simple and past participle; same base form and past participle; different base form, past simple, and past participle.

According to Bishop (2014), there are two distinct systems used in past tense formation: one involves applying a rule to generate past tense from a base form, the other involves looking up an inflected form in the mental lexicon. A reason why tense is complex is due to the difficulty in deducing the tense inflection in the verb compared to others such as -s inflection in nouns for plural. Sometimes, the verbs do not need the inflection of past tense depending on the construction of the sentence we say such as 'I went there yesterday' instead of '\*I go there yesterday.' Another example would be 'I made him go there yesterday' instead of '\*I made him

went there yesterday.' Thus, mastering tenses require an understanding of the establishment of the relationship between "clauses in a multi-clause utterance and then relate these to small sub lexical units (inflections)" (p. 3). Bishop (2014) outlines the stages in producing a tense-inflected verb as shown in the following Figure 2.

*Figure 2. Stages in Production of Tense-Inflected Verbs*



*Note.* Reprinted from "Problems with tense marking in children with specific language impairment: not how but when", by Bishop, D. V. M., 2014, Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B 369, p. 3.

Grammatical errors need not be a sign of poor learning but rather an error was made in "computing a linguistic representation" (Bishop, 2014, p. 3) during one of these stages. The frequency of bare stem errors on irregular verbs could suggest that the issue lies in knowing when to apply tense marking rather than with how to apply them. Albeit Bishop's research was focused on SLI (specific language impairment) children, it could give some ideas as to the possible reasoning behind the bare stem errors found in this study among the secondary students in Brunei. This then ties back with how tenses are considered a complex feature of grammar. Failure to use the correct inflections involves problems in understanding the syntactic context that obligates tense marking, rather than knowing how to mark tenses (Bishop, 2014, p. 7). With this, along with the previously mentioned fact on how errors in verb tenses are due to the influence of their L1, they can strongly endorse the possibility to reassess and re-strategize the method used to teach tenses in verbs where L1 is utilized rather than ignoring them altogether in the learning of the English language.

## IMPLICATIONS ON PEDAGOGY

From the findings of this research, it seems worthwhile to change the strategy in teaching English as significant errors in tenses have been identified. One common

method used to teach English is the error correction technique, where teachers highlight students' errors and provide correct forms of lexis and grammar. However, studies such as Hendrickson's (1978, as cited in Oladejo, 1993, p. 72) have shown that this method does not significantly improve students' writing proficiency. Furthermore, based on current observations, it can be seen that English, particularly the concept of tenses, is taught in most schools using methods that Ellis (2015, p. 22) describes as "intensive drilling to ensure correct L2 habits". These methods primarily involve penalizing students when they speak Malay through various punishments, which, in turn, cause a sense of restriction and rigidity among students.

Scholars such as Bitchener and Knoch (2010), Ferris (2006), and Lyster and Ranta (1997) do provide evidence for the effectiveness of corrective feedback and error correction in improving the writing skills of L2 learners. However, it is important to highlight that they specifically suggest giving specific, focused, and understandable feedback, targeted towards the specific needs and goals of the students because these can be useful in promoting learner uptake and improving their writing skills. Hence, it is equally important to ensure that the feedback provided is clear and understandable to the students, rather than just providing correct answers or punishing them for giving the wrong ones.

An alternative method to consider is using students' L1 to assist their learning of English, including comparing the L1 and L2 or giving allowance to the class in using their L1, especially if they need to understand what they learned in the early stages. Some scholars even agree that the use of L1 can help with a learner's learning. Napitupulu (2017) states that errors are made because learners lean on their mother tongue to express their thoughts. Murtiana (2019) mentions how using their L1 becomes a habit for learners when they are processing their thoughts; Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) argue that learners can write in English better when they have made initial discussions using their L1, and Widdowson (2003) claims that L2 learning is optimized when the use of other languages is acknowledged and welcomed in ESL classrooms.

In the context of teaching the past tense, Tickoo (2005) outlines an effective instructional approach for the learners' proper mastery of this concept using some aspects of the aforementioned suggestions. Firstly, teachers guide students by comparing "narratives by skilled writers and those written by students who adopt the pattern of selective past tense marking that the learners themselves are using" (p. 375). This can help students recognize how the tenses should be correctly used. Then, students can correct a sample text to "help them practice putting into place a categorical marking of past tense" (p. 376). As a result of these initial preparation steps, when they write a narrative, students can strengthen and properly adopt the concept of past tense inflections. Putting these suggested methods to the test makes for an interesting topic to research further, where their effectiveness can be verified.



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study's findings challenge NOH's theory of L2 acquisition, which suggests that irregular past tense is learned before regular past tense. The results indicate that students encounter difficulties in mastering the concept of verb tenses, likely influenced by their L1. Hence, it is vital to explore alternative teaching methods to address this issue. Further research can investigate the effectiveness of different techniques and their potential impact on learners' proficiency in English tenses. Overall, the study highlights the need for a more subtle and adaptable approach to teaching English that considers learners' distinct linguistic backgrounds and challenges.

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## APPENDIX A

Write a story based on the sequence of pictures below in the space provided. Describe as many details as possible. Your story should be between 250 to 300 words only. Start your story with the following sentence: Yesterday was the last day of school holiday...

