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ERRORS IN USING PAST TENSE FORMS IN WRITING ESSAYS AMONG KURDISH UNIVERSITY LEARNERS OF ENGLISH



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UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this thesis is own except for quotation and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

Date 15/ 05/2013

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to the soul of my dear father, who could not see my effort and graduation. May Allah bless his soul.

I dedicate this study to my dear family, who supported me in all my life and gave me the opportunity to study in Malaysia.

I dedicate this study to all my friends in Kurdistan.





ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to identify the common errors in the use of past tense forms made by Kurdish learners of the English language when writing essays and to investigate the factors that influenced these errors and how the Kurdish first language affect the process of learning the English language. The participants in this study were from the English Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Duhok. A total of 29 students participated in this study. All the errors were identified and classified into various categories. The results of the study showed seven most common errors in the use of past tense form committed by the participants. These errors were simple past, past progressive, past perfect, past passive, future in the past, irregular verbs and regular verbs. The findings also showed that the errors committed were influenced by the use of the participants' first language and intralingual factors. On the basis of these findings, the researcher discussed some pedagogical implications and provided suggestions for teachers and future researchers.





ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan bagi mengenalpasti kesalahan-kesalahan umum dalam penggunaan kata lampau dalam Bahasa Inggeris yang dilakukan oleh pelajar Kurdish apabila menulis esei dan untuk menyiasat faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kesalahan-kesalahan tersebut serta bagaimana bahasa ibunda Kurdish mempengaruhi proses pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan pelajarnya. Peserta kajian adalah dari Jabatan Bahasa Inggeris, Fakulti Kemanusiaan, Universiti Duhok. Seramai 29 orang pelajar mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. Semua kesalahan tersebut telah dikenalpasti dan diklasifikasikan kepada pelbagai kategori. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan tujuh kesalahan umum yang sering dilakukan oleh pelajar iaitu *simple past*, *past progressive*, *past perfect*, *past passive*, *future in the past*, *irregular verbs* dan *regular verbs*. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa kesalahan yang dilakukan dipengaruhi oleh penggunaan bahasa ibunda dan faktor *intralingual* di kalangan pelajar. Berdasarkan kepada dapatan-dapatan tersebut pengkaji turut membincangkan beberapa implikasi pedagogi dan mengemukakan cadangan untuk para guru dan pengkaji masa hadapan.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



1.1 Introduction

In the current globalization period, English has become an international language and widely taught all over the world as either second or foreign language. Nonetheless, a standardized proficiency of those L2 learners is still unseen. In Kurdistan, since English is not the official language, it is taught as a foreign language in both schools and universities. In order to examine such linguistic phenomenon, many researches have been done on the English proficiency of Kurdish students. It is interesting that results from several researches indicate that tense is the most difficult element for Kurdish students to acquire. (Wahbi, 2001)





The English Language has become an international language nowadays and it is used in various fields of life. It is the international language of politics, science, economic, technology, etc. In using the English Language, the learners should use the rules of English grammar and especially rules of tenses to show the speech whether it is in present tense, past tense or future tense.

Writing is difficult even in the first language. It is more difficult to write in a foreign language because the first language affects the learners to commit errors in their writings. The influence of the first language in committing errors in using tenses in their writings is that the learners of EFL ‘English as a Foreign Language’ think in the first language and write in the foreign language and both languages have their own rules so they make mistakes (Zoble, 1980a; 1980b).



In the speech or writing of a second or foreign language, error is the use of a linguistic item ‘e.g. a word, grammatical item, speech act, etc.’ in a way which fluent or native speaker of the language regards as faulty or incomplete (Mahdi Abbas and Amin Karimani, 2011).

Writing an essay or paragraph in the English language is very difficult work for Kurdish students to do because their mother tongue is Kurdish and the second language is Arabic; so the English language is a foreign language in Kurdistan and English is not used in Kurdistan any more. The problem arise from here that the English language is a foreign language in Kurdistan of Iraq.





In the past, the English language was studied in Iraq in general and especially in Kurdistan and started from the fifth grade in schools as one subject called the English language. Nowadays, the English language is also studied as one subject in the schools in Kurdistan, but it starts from the first grade. Studying the English language during university levels is different because there are some colleges that offer the English language as one subject and some others like the college of medicine, the college of Engineering and the college of science where all their curriculums are in the English language, since English is the language of science. For master and doctoral students, they are obliged to take a TOEFL or ILETS test in order for them to apply for the respective study programs.

Even though the English language became more common in schools and colleges and it became the language of business after the invasion of Iraq by the United States of America in 2003, the problem still existed. The problem still persists in schools and colleges in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, where students make many mistakes in speaking and writing English even those who are professional in the English language because they do not emphasize about tenses and they do not think that the meaning of the sentence changes if they make mistakes in using tenses.





1.2 The Need for the Study

According to Akhmad Subkhi Ramdani (2009:43), “the ability to use English in the era of globalization is much needed. If we want to be able to use English, we have to master the English grammar”. The Simple Past Tense is one of the important tenses in grammar and commonly used in English. Irregular verbs in the English grammar are very complicated and cause many difficulties for students.

The study about English tenses is very important and especially Past Tense because most students tend to make mistakes in using this tense. When English tenses are used in a wrong way, the meaning of the sentence changes, so it will be difficult for someone to understand the meaning of the sentence without mentioning the correct tense. For example, sometimes some students write an essay in English language about some true stories that happened in the past and they should write in Past Tense but they cannot differentiate between the tenses and will use many tenses in one paragraph. The reader who wants to read that essay will face difficulty in understanding the meaning of the content of the paragraph.

There is a need to conduct the present study to get feedback on which errors are mostly made in using past tense by the students in writing and why they made such errors in their writing, whether the first language or ‘mother tongue’ affects them to make these mistakes or how not knowing the rules of using English tenses affect them.





There is a need to compare the errors in using English tenses committed by students in Kurdish language and English language from the same level of education. In this way, the researcher can know their possible main errors which have not been remedied during the year of the study in the university. When quantitative analysis of the distribution and the occurrences of the errors from different students of the same level of education are studied, the researcher can find out errors operating in tenses and by comparing errors committed by students from the same level of education, the researcher can identify the possible main errors which have not been corrected.

There is also a need to have coherence in tenses in students' writing. The students use so many tense forms in a particular paragraph so that the meaning of the paragraph changes and it causes difficulties for the reader to understand the idea of that piece of writing. Finally, there is a need for this study because the students who participate in this study are going to be teachers after they graduate from their department, so it is important for them to know in which areas they tend to commit errors and how to correct these errors.



1.3 Purpose of the Study

This research focused on grammatical errors, especially errors in using past tense made by Kurdish learners from the English Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Duhok. This research was conducted to identify the common errors in the use of past tense made by the Kurdish learners when writing essays and to investigate the factors of making errors in using past tense form by them and how the Kurdish first language affect their process of learning English language.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Past Tense is one of the most important tenses in grammar and commonly used in the English language. The Simple Past Tense is normally used to talk about events, actions or situations which occurred in the past and are now finished.

The English Language has taken by Kurdish students since they were in primary school. It was found that irregular verbs are more complicated and cause many difficulties for learners of English language, and many learners are still poor in understanding irregular verb forms even for the students in universities (James, 1998:142).

Past Continuous Tense is an important tense in English. However, there is a tendency for students to incorrectly use 'was' and 'were' with pronouns 'I, he, she, it, they, we and you' and the 'verb+ing' to make it continuous and they always forget to





use 'was' and 'were' correctly when they change the main verb to 'ing' form. (Murphy, 1994).

Past Perfect Tense is the most difficult tense for learners when they use it in writing. The students encounter two problems when they use this tense; first they forget to put 'had' before the verb, secondly they do not know how to change the verb from base form to past participle especially when they have irregular verbs in the sentence, they always add '-ed' to the verb. In using Past Perfect Continuous Tense, learners face difficulties in differentiating between present perfect continuous and past perfect continuous (Murphy, 1994).

Due to the causes that were mentioned above, that Kurdish learners of English language committed errors in using past tense, the problem existed. Making a grammatically correct sentence is a big problem for the students. The learners are not able to differentiate between tenses in general and specifically between one tense and its aspects. The students do not know how to change one sentence, for instance from past continuous to past perfect or from past perfect to simple past because they do not know the rules of using English tenses.

The study about errors in using English tenses in writing is necessary because many Kurdish students commit these errors and most of them think that using correct tenses are not important for learning a language. Learning another language is a very difficult process, especially for those who have acquired their first language 'mother tongue', followed by the second language and they want to learn another language, which is a foreign language for them. Thus, it is very important for them to learn the





grammatical rules about that language and be able to use them well because the ability to master a language without committing errors is very important for learners to become proficient and competent in the language.

1.5 Research Questions

In this study, the researcher tried to find out the answers for the following questions:

- 1- What are the common errors in the use of the English past tense forms that were made by Kurdish learners in writing essays?
- 2- How does the Kurdish learners' L1 influence the errors made in the use of the past tense forms in writing English essays?
- 3- What are the other factors that contribute to the errors made by Kurdish learners in using the past tense forms in writing English essays?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will benefit researchers and teachers of the English language. Students who are learning English in Kurdistan tend to make many errors in their writings and the teachers know that they make mistakes or errors but they do not know the cause of these errors. So, the teachers will be interested in this study and it will help them to identify the causes of these errors and they will know how to correct





such errors made by their students by using correct rules in writing by giving exercises, such as an English essay.

Students of the second and foreign language programs will be interested in this study because although the English language has become more widely used in the world and it has become an important language in the world nowadays, Kurdish students still make mistakes in their writings and they do not know why they make such mistakes and they do not know how to avoid such mistakes in their writings. Students in the second or foreign language programs in general and specifically those who are studying in Kurdistan will gain benefits from this study. Norrish (1983: 6) suggested that 'the error itself may be a necessary part of learning a language.' i.e. sometimes learners commit mistakes then they learn from their mistakes. Students will benefit from the nature of the error after the teacher shows the students their errors, they will know they have problem or they do mistakes in which part or which mistakes mostly they do.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will be of importance to those who are interested in the study of the English language. The study can also be of value to those who are responsible for preparing English text-books for Kurdish schools. It is hoped that it can clarify areas of difficulties in the use of English tenses unknown to both the teachers and the students.





1.7 Definition of Terms

1.7.1 English Tenses

Tenses are forms of a verb that show the time, continuance or completion of an action or a state that is expressed in connection with the moment at which a statement is made. The tenses that are commonly used in the English language include the present tense, past tense and future tense. Each of these tenses can be further divided into several categories. For example, Present tense can be divided into simple present tense, present continuous tense, present perfect tense and present perfect continuous tense. So do Past tense and Future tense. (Larsen-Freeman, 1999)



1.7.2 Past Tense

According to Baker (2002), the usage of past tense can be pointed out as having some fixed point in time before now. The past tense is used for a completed activity. It is used to describe actions or events that took place in the past. The Past Tense is used in narration about past actions in general, without specifying their possible connection to the present. English verbs are divided into two groups depending on their form in the Past Tense. The majority of English verbs are the so-called regular verbs. They form their Past Tense by addition of the suffix ‘-ed’ or ‘-d’ to the main verb form for all persons: ‘to use’ I, you, he/she/it, we, they used; ‘to like’ he liked; ‘to work’ it worked; ‘to want’ she wanted. Many useful English verbs form the Past Tense not in the standard way. These are the so-called irregular verbs. In the Past Tense they





change their stem in different ways: ‘to speak’ I, you, he/she/it, we, they spoke; ‘to go’ they went; ‘to do’ we did.

1.7.3 English Grammar

Grammar is defined as “A central term in linguistics, but one which covers a wide range of phenomena” (David Crystal, 1997: 174). Grammar is the study of the way words and their component parts combined to form sentences or in other words it is the rule of combining words into sentences. English Grammar is the art of speaking, and writing the English language with propriety.



1.7.4 Grammatical Errors

Lisa Anderson (2008) in her study defined grammatical error in writing as “may involve significant consequences, for example, the message can be misinterpreted or the writer will not be taken seriously. The reason why correctly used grammar is important in writing is mainly that the writer does not have the opportunity to correct the error” (Hedström, 2001:76). According to James (1988) the most common and frequent type of errors which are committed by learners in writing are in tenses, prepositions and the lack of vocabularies. Since errors are now revealed as inevitable part of learning, errors are also regarded as an essential part of language learning. Norrish (1983: 6) suggested that “the error itself may be a necessary part of learning a language.” i.e. sometimes learners commit mistakes then they learn from their





mistakes. Many researchers (Lado, 1957; Corder, 1967, Dulay et.al, 1982; Norrish, 1983) agreed that learners systematically make errors during their process of second language learning.

According to Ellis (2008:17), ‘errors reflect gaps in a learner’s knowledge; they materialize since a learner is not aware of the correct rules or structure. Mistakes, on the other hand, reflect occasional slips in performance; they materialize as a result of fatigue or inattention’. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991:59), claim that an error cannot be self-corrected since ‘it is product reflective of his and her correct stage of L2 development, or underlying competence,’ at the same time a mistake can be easily self-corrected.



1.8 Summary

This chapter presented the problem statement, the research questions, the need for the study, the significance of the study and the definition of terms. As it was mentioned before in the purpose of the study, the focus of this study was identifying the errors that the learners made in using past tense, investigate the factors of making these errors and to show the Kurdish first language effect on the process of learning English language. The mentioned students had problems, concerning the use of tenses their writing, thus the intention of this chapter was to introduce how serious these problems were.

