

INDONESIAN STUDENTS MISCONCEPTION IN USING PRESENT PERFECT TENSE TO WRITE COMPOSITION

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***Abstract:** This article describes a research on the error analysis in the uses of present perfect tense made by freshmen studying at English Department in Universitas Jenderal Soedirman (UNSOED). It investigates the students' mistakes in using the present perfect forms when writing composition. The result shows that most respondents still had difficulties in applying present perfect into sentences appropriately. This is mainly due to the respondents' lack of understanding on what the present perfect means. This suggests that students should improve their understanding on the present perfect given to its common use both in written and spoken English.*

***Key words:** Indonesian students, misconception, present perfect*

INTRODUCTION

Students in Indonesia often think that learning grammar is compulsory in learning English. There is even a myth that learning English means learning its grammar. Grammar should not only be considered as an isolated system in a language but also as an integral part of the language. In some ways, a person's knowledge and use of a language is essential because every language has different rules.

Due to the different aspects between English and Indonesian, Indonesian students frequently make sentences that are grammatically and idiomatically unacceptable. As a result, this can lead into different meaning of the sentences from the one that is intended. It is, of course, a normal process for students to make various mistakes when learning a foreign language. According to Larsen-Freeman (1986), this is considered a natural outcome of the development of communication skills.

One way to examine the error is by comparing the sentences with their first language equivalents. Harmer (2001) states that one problem of this comparative approach is caused by false translation. Another error is

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related to the interference from the first language on the overgeneralization of a rule in which Littlewood (1984) calls this as a negative transfer that becomes the cause of learning difficulties and errors. However, when the first language habits are helpful to acquiring foreign language habits, it is called a positive transfer.

From the differences that emerge between the first and foreign languages, Brown (1980) notes that similar aspects of the first language to the ones of the foreign language will be easier to learn. Equally, elements of the first language that are different from the foreign language will be difficult to learn. In addition to the function of the native language in learning a foreign language, Ellis (1985) points out that the first language can be used as resource knowledge for learners to help process the input of the target language.

Unlike Indonesian, English poses considerable problems because this language has complex structure of tenses. Meanwhile Indonesian employs time markers rather than tenses, expressing whether the action of the verb is future, past or present by using time markers such as today, last night, and next year. Consequently, tenses are likely to be problems encountered by Indonesian students when learning English.

As it is mentioned above, Indonesian students often find English tenses difficult to understand. For instance, the present perfect tense does not exist in Indonesian, but it does in English. Swan (1992) acknowledges that to use the present perfect tense correctly for a non-native speaker is not easy. This is because the differences between the present perfect and the past simple are complicated and difficult to understand. Meanwhile the present perfect tense is even commonly used in English.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research was aimed to investigate the students' mistakes in writing sentences using the present perfect tense. The respondents were first year students of English Diploma III Programme in UNSOED, Purwokerto. This research analysed the students' mistakes in terms of the meaning of the present perfect.

There were 77 respondents that are composed of 54 females and 23 males. It is difficult to have a balance gender distribution for this research. This is due to the fact that there are usually more female students than that of the male ones studying at English Diploma III Programme in UNSOED. The respondents were distributed into 2 parallel classes of 'Writing I' course.

Before commencing their study, new students of English Diploma III Programme in UNSOED had to take a placement test using C5 model developed by the language adviser of UNSOED from the British Council. The result indicated that 7% of the students were at Upper Intermediate level, 22% at Lower Intermediate level, 45% at Pre-Intermediate, and 21% at Elementary level. However, there were 5% of the new students who did not take the placement test because of some reasons. Therefore, it can be said that the majority of the respondents have Pre-Intermediate level of English.

The data were collected from the compositions written by the respondents who were assigned by the lecturer of 'Writing I' course to write a composition fortnightly. The respondents had to hand their compositions to be corrected by the lecturer. Before their compositions were corrected, they were photocopied to be analysed in the use of the present perfect tense in their sentences. Then, their compositions were corrected. After that, they had to be put in a folder. At the end of the class, their compositions were re-examined by the lecturer to see their progress in writing.

THE PRESENT PERFECT TENSE

Swan (1992) explains that the present perfect tense is constructed with the auxiliary verb *have* followed by the past participle. The present perfect is a verb construction that combines the present tense with the present aspect. This tense is distinguished from the past simple as referring to the 'past with relevance to the present' (Leech, 1992). For instance: *I have lived in Purwokerto since I was a child*. The words 'have lived' indicates a past state of affairs continuing up to the present, while the past simple (e.g., *was, lived*) indicates a state of affairs which existed at a definite time in the past, and which no longer exists now.

Present perfect tense is located in past time situations (Huddleston, 1991). The past time refers to a point or period that is exclusive of the present, while the present perfect involves a period that is inclusive of the present as well as the past. The present perfect refers to something taking place in a period leading up to the present moment (Leech, 1992). In other words, the situations begin from the past until now.

According to Collerson (1994) present perfect can be regarded as past with a continuing relevance in the present. Murphy (1996) adds that the present perfect is used for an action in the past with a result now. This is in

line with Eastwood (1992) who explains that present perfect shows a present result of a past action. This means that present perfect is used for a state that has gone up to the present or for actions in a period of time up to the present.

Present perfect is used when there is a connection with the present (Murphy, 1989). This tense is used to give new information or to announce a recent action. The present perfect can also mean that something has happened sooner than expected. It is essential to examine main uses of the present perfect. To commence with, it may be useful to use Leech's distinctions (1987) as a basis for the discussion.

Furthermore, Leech (1987) explains that there are two ways in relating past events to the present by means of the perfect. First, it may involve a time period lasting up to the present. Second, it may have results persisting at the present time. Principally, Leech (1987) differentiates four main uses of the present perfect. The explanation is as follows:

A. State up to the present

The use of state verbs indicates present involvement that extends over a period lasting up to the present moment. For instance, *We've lived in Jakarta since last January (i.e. 'Semarang is where we are living now')*. As well, John and Liz Soars (1993) emphasise that the main uses of the present perfect is to express an action or state which began in the past and continues to the present.

Moreover, Swan (1992) explains that the present perfect can be used for situations that began in the past and have continued up to the present moment (or just before). This tense is used to talk about a series of repeated actions that have happened up to the present. The period of the action extends up to the present moment.

Since the state verbs are undefined time-span, the state itself may extend into the future. Taking a similar view to Swan, Willis (1995) also explains that the present perfect can refer to time clauses to indicate that something will be done at some time in the future.

B. Indefinite past

The present perfect may refer to some indefinite actions in the past as Willis (1995) also observes. The indefinite meaning is reinforced adverbially, especially by *ever*, *never*, or *before* (now). The indefiniteness can be

interpreted as two things. Firstly, the number of events is unspecified; it may be one or more than one. Secondly, the time is also left unspecified. Therefore, it can be said that the event in the present perfect is 'at-least-once-before-now'. The number of events can be mentioned adverbially, like: *I've been to Bali three times*. However, when there is an adverbial of time to specify the exact time, the present perfect becomes inappropriate, and is normally replaced by the simple past.

C. Habit in a period leading up to the present

The present perfect can be used to indicate habitual events as illustrated by: *Ms Jackson has sung in the choir for seven years. I've always walked to work*. Since a habit is a series consisting of repeated events, this use closely resembles the 'state' use of the present perfect. The habit or state may continue through the present moment into the future. An adverbial of duration is usually required to refer to this event. The habit element is often emphasised by an adverbial of frequency: *The machine has been serviced every month since we bought it*.

D. Resultative past

The present perfect is also used in reference to a past event to imply that the result of that event is still operative at the present time. Willis (1995) explains that sometimes, the present effects are important because the events are very recent. Here are examples of the final (and present) state implied by the present perfect as indicated in brackets:

- i) The taxi has arrived (i.e. 'The taxi is now here').
- ii) Her doll has been broken ('The doll now is broken').
- iii) I've recovered from my illness ('I'm now well again').

According to John and Liz Soars' explanation (1993), the present perfect is also used to express an action in the past that relates to the experiences as part of someone's life. In relation to this, Swan (1992) explains that the present perfect can be used for past events that have some present importance.

Swan (1992) states some 'indefinite' time-adverbs like *never*, *ever*, *before*, *yet* and *already* that are used in the present perfect. Added to that, Leech (1991) summarizes the adverbial times used in each situation:

- i) Talking about something which began in the past and hasn't changed, (especially with FOR, SINCE)
- ii) Talking about general experience; e.g. what you have done in your life up to now (especially with EVER and NEVER)
- iii) Talking about recent events or states (especially with ALREADY, STILL and YET)
- iv) Talking about recent events (with JUST)

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Each respondent wrote 5 compositions during the data collection, so there were 385 compositions to be analysed. From these compositions, 689 sentences were in the form of present perfect tense. Therefore, it can be said that in average, each composition contained at least 2 present perfect sentences.

Surprisingly, only 67 sentences or 9.7% out of them were grammatically and idiomatically appropriate. The rest of the sentences, i.e. 622 or 90.3%, were considered unacceptable in English. This finding shows a quite significant number of errors in the use of present perfect tense.

As Leech (1987) already mentioned, there are four main uses of present perfect tense, namely: state up to the present; indefinite past; habit in a period leading up to the present; and resultative past. The results of the data analysis are as follows.

Respondents wrote 153 or 24.6% inappropriate sentences based on the first category. Examples of the sentences are: **His English has been fluent*, **I have been happy with my study*. Those sentences should be in the present simple forms because they express the present facts.

For the second category, there were 161 or 25.9% sentences written incorrectly. Sentences like, **He has married last year*; **They have visited me two days ago*, should be in the past simple because there is an adverbial of time to specify the exact time, i.e. *last year* and *two days ago*.

The third use of present perfect tense is habit in a period leading up to the present. Respondents wrote 138 or 22.2% incorrect sentences. For instance, *Nadia has been good at playing tennis*; and *My friends have been able to speak English* are unacceptable in English. These sentences should be in the simple forms: *Nadia is good at playing tennis*; and *My friends speak English*.

The last category of the present perfect uses is resultative past. Inappropriate sentences based on this category were 170 or 27.3%. Examples of the sentences are: **They have stayed in the hotel now; *The light has been on*. These sentences should be written as: *They are staying in the hotel now; The light is on*.

DISCUSSION

One of the learning strategies in a foreign language is by using a comparative approach as stated by Harmer (2001). A foreign language learner can use a new language item by directly grasping the meaning in a given situation. To greet someone in English, like '*Good morning / Good afternoon / Good evening*', a learner does not need to translate the sentence mentally first. He/she may refer to the first language to transfer the knowledge into an appropriate expression so that the comparison strategy may work well.

To understand the present perfect tense, a learner has to be careful in relying on the comparative approach. From the data, it revealed that most incorrect sentences produced by respondents had the equivalent meanings to the Indonesian words of '*sudah*', '*pernah*', '*baru saja*' for positive sentences, and '*belum*' and '*belum pernah*' in negative ones.

Actually, the comparative approach can be useful for some learners since it provides them with a quick way to learn some of the underlying implications of the present perfect (Littlewood, 1984). In many cases, the verbs and adjectives of present perfect match with the meaning of '*sudah*', '*pernah*', and '*baru saja*' in Indonesian such as, *I have been in Australia; She has discussed with her mother about the problem; or Have you paid the driver yet?*

Unfortunately, by using this concept, respondents often find it difficult to understand the real meaning of present perfect. It seems that respondents generalized the rules (Littlewood, 1984). Respondents will use the present perfect construction whenever they produce sentences that have '*sudah*', '*pernah*', and '*baru saja*' meanings. In fact, there are some exceptions for this as the uses of verbs or adjectives will be different.

CONCLUSION

It appears that the failure of respondents in using acceptable utterances in regard to the present perfect is mainly due to the overgeneralization of the application of the Indonesian equivalents of '*sudah*', '*pernah*', and '*baru*

saja ' words with the form of the present perfect construction rather than the meanings of verbs and adjectives.

One way to solve the problem is by explaining the students the word class in English. This is because the structures of sentences elements are consisted of units that can be referred as word class. Students have to be able to differentiate between the stative and dynamic verbs. Those verbs can be broken down into activity verbs, process verbs, relational verbs. This can help students to realize the importance of the classes to which English verbs belong so that they can understand more the uses of the present perfect tense.

To ease the understanding of perfective aspects, it may be useful to associate the present perfect tense with various time indicators, e.g. lately, since, for, so far. With this concept, Indonesian students can realize the limitations of the translation of '*sudah*', '*pernah*', and '*baru saja*' words in Indonesian into English using the present perfect tense construction.

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