Students' Difficulties in Learning Tenses at Sdit Andalusia

Deby Agustin[1], Nur Habibah[2], Renda Lestari[3]

[1]*Universitas Muhammadiyah Muara Bungo, Muara Bungo, Indonesia*
debyagustin637@gmail.com
[2]*Universitas Muhammadiyah Muara Bungo, Muara Bungo, Indonesia*
nhabibah.siman01@gmail.com
[3]*Universitas Muhammadiyah Muara Bungo, Muara Bungo, Indonesia*
renda_nofriza@yahoo.com

Abstract – This study aims to describe the difficulties faced by students at SDIT Andalusia in learning English tenses and how they overcome these challenges. English, introduced from the early grades through the Merdeka Curriculum, is an essential subject that provides a foundation for global communication and academic success. However, many students still struggle to master tense usage, making it an important issue to explore. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach, using purposive sampling to select six students for in-depth interviews. Data were collected through interviews focusing on students' learning difficulties and the strategies they used to overcome them. The analysis followed three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification. The findings revealed that students faced major challenges in subject–verb agreement in the simple present (adding –s/–es), distinguishing regular and irregular verbs in the past tense, and using to be and will correctly in future constructions. Conversely, most students mastered negatives (do/does not, did not + V1) and articles (a/an). To address these difficulties, students applied various strategies such as memorizing verbs, reviewing notes, independent practice, and using technological aids like YouTube. These results highlight students' struggles yet demonstrate their adaptability and resourcefulness in learning tenses.

Keywords – Students Difficulties, Learning Tenses, SDIT

I. Introduction

Education has a very im-portant role in shaping intellectu-als, social, and cultural develop-ment. In Indonesia, English has become a key subject in primary education, serving as a founda-tion for global communication and academic competitiveness (Minis-try of Education and Culture, 2019). Its inclusion in the Merdeka Curriculum reflects a national commitment to develop-ing students' communicative competence from an early age. Research has demonstrated that early exposure to a second lan-guage enhances linguistic acqui-sition and cognitive flexibility, en-abling learners to internalize structures such as tenses more effectively (Spada, 2018)

Grammar is the structural backbone of language learning, and tenses are its most funda-mental component. Mastery of tenses allows learners to express temporal relations accurately, en-abling them to communicate ac-tions, events, and plans in an or-ganized manner (Swan & Walter, 2019). Hence, Sari and Hartanto (2016) argue that tense mastery is essential for preventing mis-communication and improving writing accuracy. Richards (2016) notes that understanding tense systems enhances learners' abil-ity to comprehend narratives, while Nunan (2019) highlights its importance for organizing dis-course in both spoken and written contexts.

Despite structured expo-sure to English through the na-tional curriculum, Indonesian learners face persistent challeng-es in mastering tenses. Bahasa Indonesia lacks verb inflections for tense, relying instead on tem-poral adverbs, which creates cross-linguistic interference (Tan, 2015). As a result, students often omit third-person singular –s in the simple present, overgeneral-ize regular verb forms in the past tense, and misuse auxiliary verbs such as *do*, *does*, and *will* (Lai & Chu, 2020)

The Merdeka Curriculum introduces English gradually through phases: Phase A focuses on vocabulary and simple struc-tures, Phase B expands sentence patterns, and Phase C integrates grammar, including tenses (Kar-takusumah et al., 2022). While this framework is progressive, implementation challenges re-main due to limited teacher train-ing and heavy reliance on lecture-based instruction, which reduces opportunities for meaningful prac-tice (Manik et al., 2021). This gap

between curriculum design and classroom reality affects students' ability to internalize grammar rules

SDIT Andalusia was cho-sen for this study because it con-sistently applies the Merdeka Curriculum and emphasizes ho-listic student development. Eng-lish is introduced from Grade 1, with more advanced grammar topics taught in Phase C (Grades 5–6). However, assessment data from Package 1 English books indicate that students' perfor-mance often falls below expected standards, highlighting difficulties in transferring grammatical knowledge into practical use.

Classroom observation and teacher interviews reveal that students' difficulties are concen-trated in three main areas: sub-ject–verb agreement in the simple present, differentiating regular and irregular verbs in the simple past, and proper use of *to be* and *will* in future tense constructions. These findings align with global research showing that tense us-age is one of the most common sources of grammatical error among EFL learners (Alqahtani, 2017).

Beyond linguistic chal-lenges, psychological factors such as low confidence, test anx-iety, and fear of making mistakes contribute to students' struggles. Environmental challenges, includ-ing overcrowded classrooms, in-sufficient resources, and lack of parental support, also hinder learning (Suryani, 2021). These factors collectively discourage participation and reduce motiva-tion, creating a cycle of disen-gagement.

Addressing these barriers requires a shift from teacher-centered approaches to interac-tive, communicative methods. Harmer (2015) emphasizes that task-based learning, role-play, and real-life simulations engage students actively, facilitating bet-ter understanding and retention. Husein and Dewi (2019) similarly recommend using contextualized practice to help learners bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world appli-cation.

Previous research has consistently shown that EFL learners worldwide struggle with tense acquisition. Alqahtani (2017) reported significant confu-sion among Saudi learners re-garding the present perfect tense, while Hassan and Yusoff (2016) documented widespread misuse of future tense markers among Malaysian students. Lai and Chu (2020) found that first language interference was a major source of error, leading to incorrect tense selection in narrative tasks. These studies underscore the universality of tense-related chal-lenges but also highlight the need for localized investigations.

While several studies have explored tense difficulties among secondary school and adult learners, there is limited research on primary-level learners in rural Indonesian settings. Furthermore, few studies have examined how students themselves attempt to overcome these difficulties, leav-ing a gap in understanding the effectiveness of learner-driven strategies (Rahmawati & Anugrah, 2021).

Based on the issues identi-fied, this study aims to describe the difficulties faced by students at SDIT Andalusia in learning English tenses and explore the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. By investigat-ing both the problems and solu-tions, the research intends to provide a comprehensive picture of tense learning at the primary level and inform future curriculum and teacher training efforts.

This research are ex-pected to contribute to pedagogi-cal improvement by recommend-ing scaffolding techniques, differ-entiated instruction, and formative feedback mechanisms. These practices have been shown to boost learner confidence and promote long-term retention (Nguyen & Boers, 2017). By aligning teaching strategies with student learning preferences, ed-ucators can close the gap be-tween curriculum objectives and actual outcomes.

II.   Methodology Section

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the difficulties faced by students in learning English tens-es and to describe the strategies they used to overcome these dif-ficulties. A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because it allows for a detailed and holistic understanding of participants' ex-periences (Miles & Huberman, 2015). This design does not ma-nipulate variables but instead fo-cuses on describing phenomena as they occur naturally, making it suitable for educational research where the goal is to capture au-thentic classroom and learner ex-periences.

The research was con-ducted at SDIT Andalusia, locat-ed in BTN Siginjai Sari, Sungai Mengkuang, Rimbo Tengah Dis-trict, Bungo Regency, Jambi Province. SDIT Andalusia was chosen because of its consistent implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and its emphasis on English language instruction from early grades. 2024–2025 academic year, spe-cifically between March and April 2025, to ensure that students had been exposed to sufficient gram-mar instruction to provide mean-ingful data.

The population of this study consisted of all students in Phase C (Grades 5 and 6) at SDIT Andalusia who were learn-ing English tenses as part of their curriculum. Purposive sampling was employed to select partici-pants who demonstrated noticea-ble challenges with tense usage. The selection was based on three main criteria;

students' academic performance in English, particu-larly their scores on grammar-related assessments, teacher recommendations identifying stu-dents struggling with tenses, and evidence from classroom obser-vations showing difficulty applying tenses in oral and written tasks. Based on these criteria, six sam-ple were selected three students from Grade 5 and three students from Grade 6.

The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (2015) interactive model of quali-tative data analysis, which con-sists of three steps:

1. Data Reduction: Selecting, simplifying, and focusing on relevant information from interview transcripts and documentation. This process involved transcrib-ing interviews, highlighting statements that revealed students' difficulties and

strategies, and filtering students' written work (tests, assignments) that specifically contained tense-related errors. The goal of this step was to narrow the data so that on-ly material aligned with the research objectives was retained for analysis.

2. Data Display: Organizing the reduced data into de-scriptive narratives and categorized tables to clear-ly present patterns of stu-dents' tense errors and the strategies they reported using. Data displays in-cluded examples of com-mon subject–verb agree-ment errors, incorrect past tense forms, and future tense constructions, as well as summary tables of the strategies used such as memorization, note re-view, and use of techno-logical resources.

3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Interpreting the organized data to iden-tify dominant types of tense difficulties and the most common coping strategies. Verification was carried out through trian-gulation between interview results and documentation to ensure consistency and reliability of the findings. This iterative process strengthened the validity of the conclusions drawn from the data.

III.   Results

The study was carried out at SDIT Andalusia and focused on Phase C students (fifth and sixth grades). Data collection was conducted during a defined field period in July–August 2025. Interviews with selected students and documentation from student exercise books were the primary data sources.

The main data collection instruments were semi-structured interviews (conducted in Bahasa Indonesia) and documentation (students' exercise books, teachers' notes, and relevant learning materials). Interview transcripts and the selected documents were used together to produce the dataset for analysis.

Data preparation included audio recording of interviews, transcription, selection of relevant excerpts, and selection of students' written tasks (exercises and test items) that specifically target simple present, simple future, and simple past tense use. These prepared materials formed the corpus for subsequent reduction and display.

Analysis of interview transcripts and exercise-book documentation showed that students experienced multiple, recurring difficulties across the three target tenses (simple present, simple future, simple past). The difficulties involved form (morphology), sentence construction (syntax), and some mechanical aspects (punctuation).

### Students' Difficulties in Learning Tenses

The most frequently reported and documented difficulty in the simple present was subject–verb agreement (uncertainty about when to add –s / –es for third-person singular). Several students explicitly reported confusion about when to add the ending and sometimes removed en-tirely.

Students also had difficulties forming complete subject-verb-object (S-V-O) sentences in the present tense; documentation contained examples of incomplete clauses and missing main verbs.

Confusion between verbal and nominal sentence types (i.e., when a sentence requires a lexical verb versus a copula *to be*) appeared in both interview comments and written work; some students used nominal structures where a verb form was required, or misused *is / am / are*.

The results section describes the obtained findings gathered from your research. Provide appropriate figures and tables to effectively illustrate your results. Figures are used to present data trends or other visual information while tables are particularly useful when the exact values are important.

Although negatives using *do / does not* and interrogative forms (with *do/does*) were generally better handled than other areas, occasional errors in forming negatives and questions in the present tense were still recorded in students' exercises.
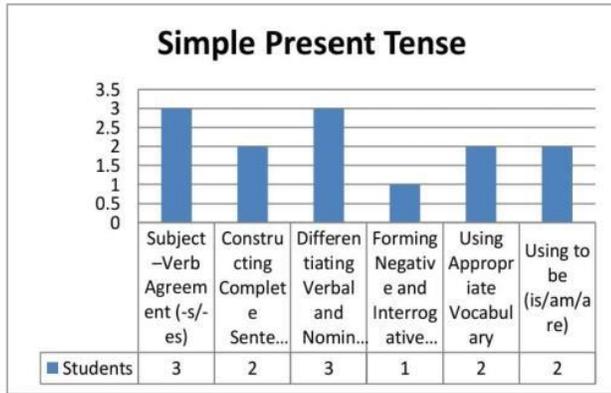
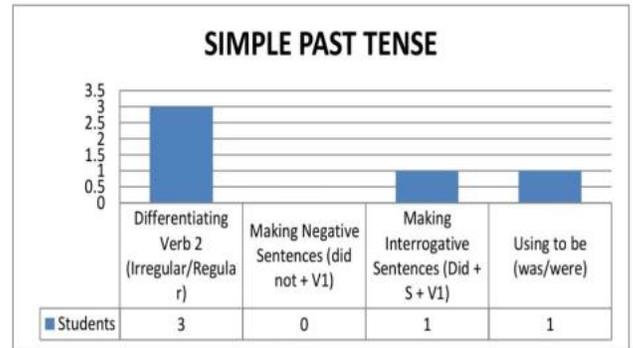Graphics 1.1 Diagram of Simple Present Tense Difficulties

In the simple future, students showed difficulty producing accurate positive, negative, and interrogative sentences using *will* (including omission or incorrect placement of *will*). Documentation contained examples where *will* was omitted, misplaced, or not used consistently.

Errors related to negative forms (confusion between *will not* and contracted *won't*) and choice of modal expression were recorded in students' written responses and noted in interview statements. Use of articles (*a / an*) in future-tense contexts was also occasionally incorrect.
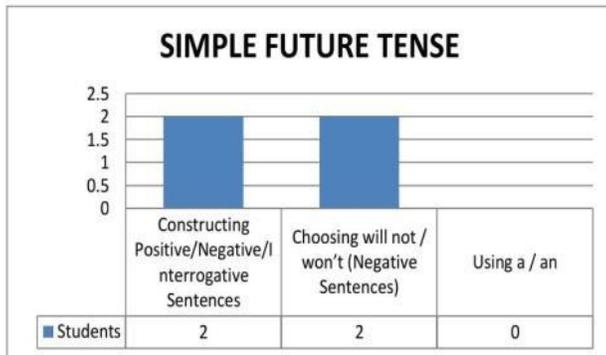
Graphics 1.2 Diagram of Simple Fu-ture Tense

The simple past presented frequent errors in verb morphology: students struggled to distinguish between regular and irregular verb forms and to apply the correct past-form morphology in written tasks. Many exercise-book items showed regularization errors (applying –ed to irregular verbs) and incorrect past forms for common verbs. Errors in forming negatives and interrogatives in the past (incorrect construction of *did not + V1* and *Did + subject + V1*) were documented; some students incorrectly used past-form verbs after *did*.

Graphics 1.3 Diagram of Simple Past Tense

Across present, future, and past tasks, the dataset included instances of incomplete sentence construction, limited vocabulary (leading to simplified or inaccurate lexical choices), and mechanical errors (e.g., omission of punctuation such as question marks in interrogatives). These issues appeared repeatedly in student exercise books and were remarked upon in interviews.

The frequency and distribution of these errors varied by student and by task type (oral vs written), as shown in the documentation excerpts and summarized in the data display tables and diagrams used by the researcher.

How Students Overcome Difficulties in Learning Tenses

Interview data and documentation indicate that students used a mixture of personalized or practice-based strategies, and tech-nology-based review to man-age their tense-related difficul-ties. These strategies were reported in student interviews and evidenced by records of extra practice in exercise books.

The most commonly reported approach was mem-orization (learning verb forms by heart), particularly irregular past forms; students said they practiced lists of verbs and re-read notes. Documentation frequently showed repeated verb lists and self-initiated ex-ercises.

Some students report-ed using YouTube videos and online tutorials to review tense rules and to watch example sentences; interview excerpts name YouTube as a frequent-ly used resource for visual and auditory reinforcement. The documentation corrobo-rates this by showing follow-up practice after students consulted online materials.

In the sample, four out of six students reported rely-ing primarily on personalized (memorization/revision) strat-egies, while two students re-ported greater reliance on technology (YouTube and similar online materials) for review and practice. These counts were derived from in-terview responses and were recorded in the researcher's recapitulation table.

Students' choice of strategies was affected by contextual constraints record-ed in the data: overcrowded or noisy classrooms and fast lesson pacing led some students to prefer independent note review or family assistance; others turned to online videos where teacher time was limited. These contextual observations were document-ed in field notes and student interviews.

IV. Discussion

The findings of this study directly address the re-search problem by revealing the specific tense-related difficulties faced by students at SDIT Andalusia and demon-strating the strategies they used to overcome them. The challenges identified—subject–verb agreement in the simple present, confusion with regular and irregular past tense verbs, and the misuse of *to be* and *will* in future con-structions—align with earlier studies showing that EFL learners often transfer L1 grammar patterns into Eng-lish, resulting in errors (Tan, 2015; Lai & Chu, 2020). By documenting these challeng-es, the research confirms that tense acquisition remains a persistent obstacle at the pri-mary level and requires tar-geted intervention.

Identifying specific er-rors is crucial because it al-lows teachers to design in-structional interventions that directly address problem are-as. For example, recognizing that students frequently omit the –s ending in the simple present supports the need for explicit drills and communica-tive tasks that reinforce sub-ject–verb agreement. As Kor-mos (2014) notes, awareness of error types enables educa-tors to adopt corrective feed-back strategies that are more effective and less disruptive to learner motivation.

One of the important find-ings of this study is the reliance on personalized learning strate-gies, such as memorizing verb forms, reviewing notes, and inde-pendent practice. Personalized learning is a learner-centered ap-proach that adapts content and pace to meet individual needs (Anderson & Johnson, 2015). By engaging in self-directed memori-zation and note review, students demonstrated autonomy and re-sponsibility for their learning, which research has shown to im-prove retention and confidence.

The results support con-structivist learning theory, which posits that students actively con-struct knowledge through interac-tion with content and self-regulated practice (Nunan, 2019). Memorization of verbs, when combined with meaningful appli-cation, helps build automaticity in tense usage. This finding is sig-nificant because it highlights that even in resource-limited environ-ments, students can achieve pro-gress by employing strategies that fit their learning preferences.

Another novel aspect of this research is the documenta-tion of students using technologi-cal tools, particularly YouTube, to review tense rules and examples. Technology-enhanced learning provides multimodal input (visual and auditory), which is known to improve comprehension and re-tention (Lee & Chen, 2022). The availability of online materials al-lows students to access explana-tions outside class hours, giving them flexibility to revisit difficult topics at their own pace.

The use of digital re-sources aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on inde-pendent and exploratory learning (Kartakusumah et al., 2022). En-couraging students to use tech-nology supports the national edu-cation goal of developing self-directed learners who can seek and apply knowledge autono-mously, a skill essential for life-long learning in the digital era.

The findings also revealed that peer support played a role in overcoming difficulties. This aligns with Vygotsky's social con-structivist theory, which empha-sizes that learning is mediated through social interaction. Col-laborative practice, as recom-mended by Harmer (2015), al-lows students to receive immedi-ate feedback and co-construct understanding of tense rules, re-ducing anxiety and fostering a supportive learning environment.

These findings imply that teachers should integrate more interactive and student-centered methods in teaching grammar. Task-based learning activities, role-playing, and group projects can provide authentic contexts for practicing tenses, thereby reduc-ing error frequency. Husein and Dewi (2019) emphasize that grammar instruction should move beyond rote learning to include meaningful practice that pro-motes internalization.

The results highlight a gap between the intended outcomes of the Merdeka Curriculum and the reality of classroom mastery. While the curriculum introduces tenses systematically, students still experience difficulties due to insufficient practice and limited feedback. Addressing this gap requires teachers to employ scaf-folding techniques and provide regular formative assessments to monitor and guide student pro-gress (Nguyen & Boers, 2017).

This research contributes to the existing literature by offer-ing localized insights from a rural Indonesian primary school con-text, which has been underrepre-sented in tense acquisition stud-ies. By examining not only the difficulties but also the coping strategies, this study provides a more comprehensive understand-ing of how learners navigate grammar learning challenges, of-fering

practical recommendations for both teachers and curriculum developers.

Overall, the study demon-strates that while tense mastery remains a challenge, students exhibit adaptability and resilience through personalized and tech-nology-assisted learning. These findings underscore the importance of encouraging self-directed strategies and leveraging technology to support grammar acquisition. By aligning instruc-tional approaches with students' strategies, educators can foster a more effective and engaging learning experience, ultimately helping students achieve greater accuracy and confidence in Eng-lish communication.

V. Conclusion

This study concludes that students at SDIT Andalusia face significant challenges in master-ing English tenses, particularly in subject–verb agreement in the simple present tense, distinguish-ing between regular and irregular verbs in the simple past tense, and correctly using *to be* and *will* in future constructions. These challenges reflect the linguistic distance between Bahasa Indo-nesia and English, as well as the need for more contextualized and consistent practice opportunities.

Despite these obstacles, the students demonstrated re-sourcefulness and adaptability by developing their own coping strategies, such as memorizing verb forms, reviewing notes, en-gaging in independent practice, and seeking peer and family sup-port. The integration of technolo-gy, especially YouTube tutorials, also played a role in supporting students' learning outside the classroom. These strategies con-tributed to gradual improvements in tense mastery, as evidenced by their later work and teacher evaluations.

The findings highlight the importance of aligning classroom instruction with students' learning strategies and the broader goals of the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers should incorporate more communicative, student-centered activities, provide con-tinuous feedback, and encourage the use of digital resources to en-hance grammar learning. By ac-knowledging students' efforts and supporting their self-directed learning, educators can help bridge the gap between curricu-lum expectations and actual learning outcomes, ultimately fos-tering greater confidence and competence in English communi-cation.

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