

Examining Verb Tense Errors in Bruneian L2 Learners

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ABSTRACT: This study replicates an original investigation into common grammatical errors made by Bruneian English language learners. Building on Hazirah's (2023) research, the current study aims to validate her findings by analysing errors from a different participant group. Ten participants from a local government school (five from Year 7 and five from Year 10) were included, and their picture compositions were examined, focusing specifically on verb tense errors, which were identified as the most prevalent grammatical issues in the original study. This replication study categorizes verb tense errors into types such as omission, addition, misinformation, misordering, and blends. Results demonstrate consistency with the original study, with omission being the most common error type, presumably due to possible L1 influence. Despite minor variations, the replication reaffirms the original study's conclusions, emphasizing the importance of reassessing ESL/EFL teaching methods.

KEYWORDS: L2 learners, error analysis, ESL/EFL

I. INTRODUCTION

The field of English language pedagogy is closely linked to the analysis of common grammatical errors made by learners, as Error Analysis (EA) has proven to be a critical tool for informing and improving teaching methods (Ting et al., 2010). In English language teaching, identifying and understanding these recurring mistakes is essential for enhancing instructional approaches. This is where EA plays a pivotal role. According to Ting et al. (2010), analysing learners' errors offers valuable insights that can guide the development of more effective teaching methodologies.

Hazirah's (2023) study explored this area by investigating the grammatical errors of Bruneian L2 learners of English, with a particular focus on verb tense, subject-verb agreement, quantifier-noun agreement, and pronoun usage. Her research shed light on the most frequent errors and their implications for English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) pedagogy. Notably, Hazirah found that verb tense errors were the most frequent among the four categories, suggesting a potential influence of L1 (Malay) transfer. These findings underscore the need to reassess and refine ESL/EFL teaching strategies in Brunei to better support learners' language acquisition.

However, to ensure the robustness and generalizability of her findings, replication studies are essential. The current study aims to replicate Hazirah's research to validate and extend her findings. By examining a different participant group, this replication study seeks to confirm the consistency of Hazirah's results. Furthermore, this replication will contribute to filling the research gap on EA in the Bruneian context, a need highlighted by Hazirah (2023, p. 1).

While Hazirah's original investigation encompassed multiple grammatical categories, including subject-verb agreement, quantifier-noun agreement, and pronouns, the decision to concentrate on verb tense errors in this study is based on their prevalence in Hazirah's (2023) study as well as other related error analysis studies, including those by Burhanuddin (2020), Halipah and Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan (2020), and Mehat and Ismail (2021). This replication study narrows its focus to this specific error type in order to provide a more targeted exploration, allowing for a deeper understanding of this recurring issue among Bruneian L2 learners.

As such, the main objective of the study is to answer the following research questions:

- 1 What are the prevalent types of verb tense errors among Bruneian L2 learners?
- 2 How do the findings of this replication study compare with those of Hazirah's original investigation?

II. METHODOLOGY

The conventional approach to analysing errors in learners' written work involves identifying all errors present, tabulating them, and then conducting a detailed analysis (Hazirah, 2023, p. 22). This study adopts a similar methodology but focuses exclusively on identifying verb tense errors.

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A total of ten compositions were collected first and then analysed. These are written by five secondary students from Year 7 (lower-level) and ten students from Year 10 (higher-level), all of whom are from a public school in Brunei Darussalam, which is different from the original study. It is important to highlight that the number of participants involved is the only aspect that has been modified for this study, so the replication can be done on a smaller scale for a start.

Students were instructed to write a short story of 250 to 300 words, based on a picture composition provided in the original study (refer to Appendix). The compositions were completed within 20 to 30 minutes.

The verb tense errors were then categorized using the framework established by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), which classifies errors into five subcategories: *omission*, *addition*, *misinformation*, *misordering*, and *blends*. Table 1 summarizes the information about these subcategories for verb tense specifically, which are extracted from the original study, along with examples of each for reference.

Table 1. Overview of Subcategories (adapted from Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 61)

Types of Error	Description of error for verb tense marking	Example
Omission	Supposed marking for the tense is not used	<i>They <u>go</u> the Mall yesterday</i>
Addition	Unnecessary marking for the tense is added	<i>They <u>wented</u> to the Mall yesterday</i>
Misinformation	An incorrect marking for the tense is used	<i>They <u>are eating</u> lunch at the restaurant yesterday.</i>
Misordering	Markings are in the wrong location within the verb	<i>They <u>gone had</u> to the Mall yesterday</i>
Blend	Different forms of tense markings are merged	<i>They <u>wents</u> to the Mall yesterday</i>

The methodology utilized in this replication study closely parallels that of the original investigation, with deliberate adherence to its procedural structure to maintain methodological consistency. In turn, a direct comparison between the outcomes of this study and those of the original research can be made. By doing so, any potential differences in results can be examined independently, with any disparities attributed solely to participant characteristics or contextual influences rather than methodological inconsistencies. This approach enhances the reliability and validity of the replication study, enabling a robust evaluation of the original findings' replicability.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A total of 178 errors were identified, and each subcategory of verb tense error was noted. These values were then converted into percentages, rounded to one decimal place, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Overall Subcategory of Verb Tense Errors Made by Years 7 and 10 Combined

No	Types of Error	Errors Found	%
1	Omission	143	80.3
2	Addition	10	5.6
3	Misinformation	24	13.5
4	Misordering	0	0.0
5	Blend	1	0.6
	TOTAL	178	100.0

The data in Table 2 indicates that the most frequent type of verb tense error was *omission*, accounting for 80.3% (143 counts) of the total, followed by *misinformation* at 13.5% (24 counts). This finding answers the first research question: What are the prevalent types of verb tense errors among Bruneian L2 learners? Tables 3 and 4 present a comparison of errors between the current study and Hazirah's original research, respectively. While the number of participants in this replication study is lower, resulting in fewer overall errors, the use of percentages allows for a meaningful comparison.

Table 3. Overall Subcategory of Verb Tense Errors Made According to Class Level

No	Types of Error	Year 7		Year 10	
		Errors Found	%	Errors Found	%
1	Omission	91	83.5	52	75.4

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2	Addition	3	2.8	7	10.1
3	Misinformation	15	13.8	9	13.0
4	Misordering	0	0.0	0	0.0
5	Blend	0	0.0	1	1.4
	TOTAL	109	100.0	69	100.0

Table 4. Overall Subcategory of Verb Tense Errors Made According to Class Level in Original Study

		Year 7		Year 10	
No	Types of Error	Errors Found	%	Errors Found	%
1	Omission	209	74.4	233	83.4
2	Addition	2	0.7	0	0.0
3	Misinformation	67	23.8	43	15.4
4	Misordering	2	0.7	0	0.0
5	Blend	1	0.4	3	1.1
	TOTAL	281	100.0	279	100.0

Further analysis reveals that fewer errors were made by the higher-level learners (69 errors) compared to the lower-level learners (109 errors), which mirrors the trend observed in Hazirah's (2023) study. This reduction in errors among higher-level learners aligns with established second language acquisition theory, which suggests that learners typically make fewer errors as their proficiency increases when they internalize more of the target language's grammatical rules (Hazirah, 2023). However, the discrepancy in omission errors between the two studies requires further scrutiny. In this replication study, omission errors decrease from lower to higher levels, whereas Hazirah's research found an increase in omission errors among higher-level learners.

One possible explanation for this inconsistency could be tied to the smaller sample size of the current study, which may not fully capture the range of errors made by learners at different proficiency levels. Additionally, it is possible that higher-level learners in Hazirah's study were over-relying on their developing interlanguage, leading to more omission errors as they became more comfortable with the target language's structure but had yet to fully master its intricacies, a characteristic of intralingual error rather than interlingual error (Zobl, 1980). Conversely, learners in the current study may have received more targeted instruction on verb tenses, reducing the occurrence of omission errors among advanced learners.

The prevalence of addition and blend errors in this study, particularly among higher-level learners, may again point to the developmental nature of intralingual errors. Zobl (1980) explains that intralingual errors often result from learners overgeneralizing rules they have learned in one context to other, inappropriate contexts. For instance, learners might apply a verb tense rule they have encountered frequently to cases where it does not apply, leading to the addition of unnecessary tense markers or the blending of incorrect tense forms. This could be viewed as a sign of progress, as learners begin to experiment with more complex language structures, refining their understanding of the target language.

In fact, this shift in error types—from more rudimentary omission errors to addition and blend errors—might suggest that learners are progressing in their interlanguage development. As they become more comfortable with English, they may start to make more sophisticated mistakes, which are often characteristic of L2 learners nearing proficiency. Such errors are also common among native speakers in certain contexts, indicating that learners are moving closer to native-like usage, even if they have not yet fully mastered the language. This highlights the developmental nature of language learning, where making errors is an integral part of the learning process.

IV. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Hazirah (2023) recommended using the learners' first language (L1), Malay, as a comparative tool to highlight differences and similarities between English and Malay verb tense systems. This strategy aligns with contrastive analysis, where educators explicitly teach the distinctions between the structures of L1 and the target language (L2). In the case of Malay, the absence of verb conjugation based on temporal references is a significant difference from English, where tense plays a crucial role in verb formation. In a classroom setting, teachers can develop lessons that systematically compare the verb systems of Malay and English. For instance, a teacher could present sentences in both languages, showing how Malay verbs remain static regardless of time markers (e.g., "*saya makan*" [I eat/I ate/I will eat]), while English verbs change depending on tense (e.g., "I eat," "I ate," "I will eat"). Visual aids, such as verb tense charts that juxtapose the two languages like the examples shown, can enhance understanding. Teachers can then engage students in activities where they translate sentences between the two languages, focusing on the tense-related changes in English. This approach helps students identify the specific areas where their L1 may interfere with their acquisition of English tense rules,

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allowing them to become more aware of their errors. The cognitive benefit of this strategy lies in its metalinguistic awareness, where learners become conscious of the structural features of both languages. By using their L1 as a scaffold, learners can make connections and better grasp the complexities of English grammar. (Ashby & Maddox, 2005; Silver, 2010). This strategy can also help address the most frequent error type—omission—since learners often omit tense markers due to the influence of their L1. Explicit contrast between the two languages could lead to improved accuracy in tense usage as students become more mindful of the grammatical demands of English.

Another potential strategy involves allowing the use of L1 in the classroom, particularly when students are struggling with new concepts. This method challenges the traditional notion that L1 should be excluded from second language instruction, a practice still observed in local classrooms, as noted by Hazirah (2023, p.11) and one that other educators also discourage (Macaro, 2005). Widdowson (2003) and Cook (2001) argue that allowing L1 use can reduce anxiety and aid comprehension, especially in the early stages of learning when students are still developing confidence in the target language. This strategy could be applied through a bilingual approach, where teachers allow students to ask questions and discuss challenging grammatical concepts in their L1. For example, during a lesson on verb tenses, after an initial explanation in English, the teacher might invite students to articulate their understanding or confusion in Malay. The teacher can then clarify these concepts in Malay before transitioning back to English for practice. Additionally, teachers could use bilingual glossaries or provide translation exercises, where students explain tense rules or sentence structures in both languages. The use of L1 in the classroom helps reduce the cognitive load on learners. Instead of struggling to comprehend both the language and the concept being taught, students can focus on grasping the grammatical rule with the help of their L1. This lowers anxiety levels, fostering a more supportive learning environment. By validating L1 use, educators acknowledge the importance of a learner's linguistic background, helping them build confidence as they gradually increase their use of the L2. For learners in Brunei, where Malay is the dominant language, the ability to express misunderstandings in their native language can facilitate faster and deeper comprehension of English verb tenses. This learning environment fosters more inclusivity, where learners feel that their L1 is a legitimate part of their learning process rather than something to be "unlearned."

Another strategy that can complement the above approaches is the grammar-translation method, where L1 is used explicitly to explain grammar rules and translate L2 texts. Although this method has fallen out of favour in modern communicative language teaching, it can be effective in situations where learners need a clearer understanding of structural differences between their L1 and L2. Teachers can use this method when introducing complex grammar topics like verb tenses by presenting rules in the L1 first, followed by translation exercises where students translate sentences between Malay and English. This method allows learners to see how verb tenses are used differently in each language, providing a structured approach to learning tense rules (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). While not the most dynamic teaching method, the grammar-translation approach can be particularly useful for learners who struggle with abstract grammatical concepts. For some Bruneian learners who need such support, it provides a systematic way to understand verb tense usage, building a strong grammatical foundation before transitioning to more communicative approaches.

These strategies, whether used individually or in combination, offer a more nuanced approach to teaching verb tenses to ESL/EFL learners. It is essential to note that these approaches should complement, rather than replace, existing teaching methods. Using L1 or code-switching to a certain extent in a classroom setting does prove to have its benefits as it can be an effective tool when used judiciously, helping learners make connections between the L1 and L2 without becoming overly reliant on their native language (Macaro, 2005; Garcia & Wei, 2014). Experimentation with these approaches could offer valuable insights into how best to integrate L1 into second language instruction, particularly in contexts where learners' L1 and L2 share significant linguistic differences, as is the case with Malay and English.

It is essential to acknowledge that while the results of this study suggest the presence of intralingual errors, the predominance of omission errors indicates the potential for interlingual errors as well. Nevertheless, the recommendations for alternative pedagogical strategies remain relevant. Additionally, replication studies with larger participant groups and longitudinal designs could offer more robust data on how learner proficiency and context influence error types and frequency.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this replication study are consistent with those of the original research, emphasizing the prominence of omission errors in verb tense and reflecting the influence of the learners' L1. This influence is particularly notable given that Malay verbs do not change form to indicate time reference, remaining in their base forms irrespective of tense, in contrast to English. Furthermore, the study reinforces the necessity for a re-evaluation and modification of teaching methods for ESL learners, a conclusion that aligns with those reached in the original study.

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