

COMMON ERRORS IN THE USE OF ENGLISH VERB FORMS

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Abstract. English has been taught as the first foreign language in the schools of Latvia for more than 10 years and is a compulsory subject from the age of nine, but university professors frequently observe that undergraduates who study English make verb errors when both formal and informal register is required. Therefore, the goal of the research was to find the common errors in the use of English finite verb forms and explain their causes. Research participants were first-year students who have studied English for at least ten years at school and now are majoring in language and business studies at a university in Latvia. A case study was used as a research method. Fifty students' tests on the use of English verb tense, aspect and voice forms were analysed. A questionnaire survey was applied to analyse the potential causes of the verb errors the students make. The analysis allows us to conclude that the most common errors are in the use of the verb aspect forms, followed by the use of the verb tense forms, and that they can be classified as intralingual errors. The most typical causes of these errors are simplifications, the fact that some students have not yet reached the required language level for advanced studies and the use of English, the students' misconceptions about their real knowledge of verb forms, lack of independent learning habits and also the metalanguage to deal with tertiary level tasks.

Key words: grammatical errors, finite verb forms, English as a foreign language, first-year, tertiary level, tense, aspect, voice

INTRODUCTION

Although English as the first foreign language (EFL1) has been taught at schools in Latvia from form 3 for at least 10 years, first-year undergraduates majoring in English and business studies encounter problems when choosing appropriate verb tense, aspect and voice forms in different contexts – social, professional and educational, which are important for future specialists of English to develop their communicative competence.

The use of verb forms by learners has been discussed by several researchers. Hinkel's study (2004: 24) on second language (L2) students' essays demonstrates that verb forms need special attention in teaching academic discourse at the tertiary level. When comparing academic essays written by non-native speakers (NNSs) and native speakers (NSs), Hinkel has noticed differences that refer to the conventionalized uses of English tenses, aspects and passive verb structures in academic writing, stating that NNSs use past tenses more frequently than NSs,

who prefer present tenses in narratives (ibid.: 23). Her research also demonstrates that NNSs ‘avoid using such complex verb phrase constructions as passive voice, the perfect aspect, or predictive/hypothetical *would*’ (ibid.). Hinkel considers that errors in the use of the passive voice occur because of its ‘complex lexical and pragmatic features’ in English (ibid.: 24).

Thomason and Ward (2010: 53-54) consider the differences between technical mastering of verb tense, aspect and voice forms, which can be checked by formal tests, and real understanding and use of these forms that can be reflected only in the appropriate contextual use. They indicate that experienced teachers can categorize errors into two types – obvious errors caused by the fact that the writer does not understand the subject/verb agreement or punctuation and errors that students have seen somewhere written (ibid.: 28). The latter may lead to an assumption that the verb errors used in, for example, advertisements and commercials for advertising purposes may stick in learners’ minds as correct forms and are then applied in other contexts.

Acquisition of verb forms has been analysed from different perspectives. Research by Ionin and Wexler (2002), Beyer and Hudson Kam (2009) on the use of English verb forms in L2 learning deals with the problems faced in language acquisition by children younger than seven. However, research on common errors in the use of verb forms at the tertiary level has been paid less attention. Oshita (2000) mentions differences between the native language (L1) and L2 as one of the reasons for verb form errors in language acquisition while Reid (2000: 283) considers that differences between L1 and L2 may cause miscommunication especially when verb tense errors appear in academic contexts. Authentic study materials (Swan, 1985) and the constraints set by the choice between possible or impossible structures and the constraints set by the discourse (Ariel, 2009) may be among other causes for errors.

The goal of the present research was to find the common errors in the use of English finite verb forms at the tertiary level and explain their causes. The following research questions were posed:

1. Which category of the verb – tense, aspect or voice – causes the greatest difficulty for the first-year students of English as a foreign language (EFL)?
2. What are the causes of these errors?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1 FOCUS ON GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

A low level of linguistic competence may cause problems, when students ‘need to communicate at a rather sophisticated level in English’ (Dickins and Woods, 1988: 623), as is required from language students at the tertiary level. Newby

considers that little attention has been paid to ‘communication-based, pedagogical grammar [...] by methodologist[s] and applied linguists’ (1998), which coincides with what Thomason and Ward (2010) have also observed. ‘Although in theory grammar could have been integrated into communicative teaching, in practice linguists and pedagogical grammarians failed to provide adequate theory to support a genuinely communicative approach to grammar and it therefore remained a problem area’ (Newby, 1998). Similarly, Chung (2005: 33) states that Communicative Language Teaching is frequently neglected in textbooks.

Modern descriptive grammar, also referred to as *Corpus grammar*, is based on English used in ‘real contexts’ (Bourke, 2005: 89). The main difference from traditional grammar is that it is interested in ‘what people actually say’ (ibid.), thus focusing on the frequency of the use of forms and their discourse functions, including such registers as ‘conversation, fiction, news, and academic’ (Bourke, 2005: 95). However, Bourke also considers that descriptive grammar has its disadvantages because of its attempt to describe everything about grammar and hence may be more appropriate for reference rather than for teaching purposes (ibid.: 96). Thus, he suggests using those grammar books which allow students to ‘uncover’ grammar ‘in various contexts of use’, for example, Murphy’s (1997) *Essential Grammar in Use* (ibid.). Referring to Thornbury (2001), Bourke supports the idea that grammar learning can be compared to the discovering process (ibid.: 91). He considers that grammar learning is not ‘linear’, that students need ‘to be sensitised to the process of passivisation and its functions in discourse’ as well as to the need to observe ‘how tense and aspect overlap and enable us to express a wide range of concepts, both temporal and non-temporal’ (ibid.). For example, corpus research has revealed that forms other than ‘will’ and ‘shall’ are used to refer to future time (Bourke, 2005: 89).

Wong and Barrea-Marlys point out that ‘communicative ability refers to the ability to comprehend meaning and to use forms appropriately’ (Wong and Barrea-Marlys, 2012: 62). They stress the role of grammar instruction in this task. Leech and Svartvik (2002: 4) suggest relating ‘grammatical structure systematically to meanings, uses and situations’.

When developing communicative competence, grammatical patterns should be mastered both at the utterance and discourse level (Roja, 1995: 173). As Roja states, communicative grammatical competence implies ‘the ability to use and understand a structure in a variety of situations spontaneously’ (ibid.). Pre-communicative activities help students to prepare for performing communicative tasks, ‘to practice [sic.] specific parts of discourse, not discourse as a whole’ (Roja, 1995: 178). Grammatical structures are practised in different contexts each time with ‘more complex variations’ (ibid.: 173). To develop communicative competence, the activities should be above sentence level and characteristic of academic and non-academic real-life situations (Roja, 1995: 175-176).

It is impossible to separate the form of verb phrases from their meaning when doing tasks above the sentence level. In such cases, students need to be aware of cohesion, coherence, register, variants of English and other constraints. Communicative grammar involves using authentic texts characteristic of real-life situations, thus developing students' ability to apply appropriate grammatical structure 'according to the context and the level of formality' (Roja, 1995: 180). Pre-communicative tasks help students understand the reasons for the choice of grammatical structures in formal and informal contexts. To develop communicative competence, it is essential to adapt authentic texts 'because an unmodified authentic piece of language does not present a varied range of uses of a particular grammatical pattern or vocabulary item; instead, it shows a great variety of grammatical and lexical items in a random way' (Roja, 1995: 182). When dealing with communicative grammar, the teacher focuses on grammatical forms used in different contexts to express the intended meanings. For this purpose, the teacher selects semi-authentic tasks (Newby, 1998).

If in formal or traditional grammar teaching the focus is on forms (e.g. tenses) in sentence-level tasks, without much interest in context and the purpose of communication, in the communicative approach grammatical competence means knowing the form and awareness of its use in real-life contexts (*ibid.*: 3-5). Applied linguists view grammatical competence as the ability to perform actions (Johnson, 1994 cited in Newby, 1998). Newby considers that development of discourse analysis 'has led to a broadening of our perspective of language from sentence level to text level, both spoken and written' (1998). As a result, it emerges that

there is a tendency for certain grammatical meanings to **co-occur** in discourse. For example, the present perfect meaning of what I call 'experience' is often followed by the past tense, as in the following short dialogue:

A: Have you been to Chile?

B: Yes, I have.

A: Did you like it?

B: Yes, it was brilliant!

Also, an area of grammar such as past simple vs. past progressive can only be properly understood by taking a discourse view of grammar and knowing how actions relate to each other, as in the following examples:

I didn't watch the film on television last night because I was doing my homework. I didn't do my homework last night because I was playing football. (Newby, 1998)

Newby (*ibid.*) uses the term *grammatical notions*, i.e. 'single meanings that are expressed through forms which I believe form the core of a speaker's grammatical competence'. He demonstrates how different meanings can be represented by the same form, for example, 'intention' is expressed by the form *going to*, and it can also express 'signs/evidence'. Thus, Newby suggests teaching 'speech

functions' (i.e. 'context categories') and 'discourse structures' or co-occurrence of grammatical forms in texts (i.e. 'discourse categories').

For the purposes of this paper the notion *metalanguage* is also very important. Purpura defines metalanguage as 'the language used to describe a language' (2004: 88). Studying grammar at the tertiary level in Latvia, students are supposed to demonstrate their metalinguistic knowledge and understand what language teachers say as they use metalanguage, as well as to describe the grammatical structures using appropriate terminology.

2 THE NOTION OF ERROR IN GRAMMAR

Grammar used for pedagogical purposes 'can be conveniently packaged under the headings NP (Noun Phrase) and VP (Verb Phrase)' (Bourke, 2005: 89). Verb phrases can be 'tensed' or 'non-tensed' (Carter and McCarthy, 2006: 305). It is generally accepted that there are two verb tenses in English, present and past, and that different structures are used to speak about future activities, including the modal *will*, which is usually used 'to fill the role of simple future' (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2002: 3). Thus, the present study will deal with tensed or finite forms of the verb, i.e. present, past and future as taught in schools of Latvia. The tensed verb phrases can indicate two aspects (progressive and perfect), as well as voice (active and passive) (Carter and McCarthy, 2006: 306-307). This study also considers simple and perfect progressive aspects as types of the aspect category; thus, when the aspects are added, we end up with twelve tense-aspect forms that will be discussed further below.

In teaching verb forms and their use in context, it is essential to distinguish between an error and a mistake. An *error* is defined as 'the use of a linguistic item (e.g. a word, a grammatical item, a speech act, etc.) in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning' while a *mistake* is 'caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspect of performance' (Richards and Schmidt, 2010: 201).

According to Richards and Schmidt, there are two large groups of errors: intralingual and interlingual. Intralingual errors may have different causes, such as 'overgeneralization, simplifications, developmental, communication-based (from the strategies of communication), induced (from transfer of training), errors of avoidance, errors of overproduction (used too frequently)' (Richards and Schmidt, 2010: 201-202). If intralingual errors result 'from faulty or partial learning', interlingual errors result from the influence of L1 (ibid.: 294). Causes of interlingual errors can be explained referring to the notion 'interlanguage' and its variability. According to Song, interlanguage can be referred to as a 'system based on the best attempt of learners to provide order and structure to the linguistic stimuli surrounding them' (Song, 2012: 778) and the non-systematic variability may explain why students make errors when they know all the grammar rules but cannot choose the contextually right form from among several similar structures (ibid.: 780-781).

METHOD

To find the common errors in the use of English finite verb forms and explain their causes, a case study was chosen as a research method. Data collection tools comprised a test on verb forms and a questionnaire survey.

1 PARTICIPANTS

The research participants were first-year students who have studied English for at least ten years at school and now are majoring in language and business studies at a university in Latvia. Paper-based tests of 50 students were analysed; the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) respondents were 74. There is a difference between the number of students whose tests were analysed and the number of survey respondents, because only those tests that were taken in class were considered. The other 24 students were either absent on the test day or took another variant of the test in electronic form on another day.

2 PROCEDURE

The participants in the research were taking the course *English Communicative Grammar I*, which is required for all undergraduates majoring in a modern language and business studies programme at a university in Latvia. The course outcomes include students' ability to recognize and use grammatical structures (e.g. verb phrases) in different contexts and situations and to self-assess the correctness of a text.

The course materials were designed so that the emphasis was placed on the contextual use of verb forms. Authentic texts, including authentic business articles, were used as much as possible for practising and also for the test, and thus the verb forms were taught and tested in co-occurrence (as suggested by Newby, 1998), considering not only the form, but also the meaning. To pass the test, the students needed to pay attention to cohesion, coherence, register and other constraints in the use of verb forms, which, of course, might also serve as causes for potential intralingual and interlingual errors.

Before the test, for six weeks (i.e. twelve face-to-face academic hours) the students revised verb forms and their functions in context both theoretically and practically through doing several tasks, paying attention also to register and differences between the use of verb tenses in British and US English. They did two self-tests on all verb tenses and aspects, one – on the use of the active voice, another – on the use of the active and the passive voice.

The in-class test analysed for the purposes of this research consisted of two variants. The students were asked to open the brackets and use the verb in the appropriate tense, aspect and voice form in the given context (see Appendix 2). There were twenty insertions to be made and both variants contained exercises from advanced level course books. The bench mark of the test was sixty-five percent.

The questionnaire survey was performed at the end of the semester assuming that the students will be able to self-assess their knowledge and skills better at that point.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1 ANALYSIS OF THE TEST

As the test analysed in this research was taken by 50 students, in total students had to make 1000 insertions. The total number of errors in the use of verb forms was 247 among these 1000 insertions. Errors other than in the use of verb tense, aspect and voice forms were not considered for the purposes of this research. The test is considered reliable because objective scoring techniques are applied (Purpura, 2004: 149), i.e. the test raters used the answer keys provided in the book.

We can state that the test results revealed that on average in almost 25 per cent of the cases the students made errors in the use of verb tense, aspect and/or voice forms. Analysing the errors, it can be observed (see Figure 1) that the most problematic areas for the students are the use of the appropriate aspect (48% of cases), tense (29%) or both tense and aspect (20%). For example, 15 students (out of 25) or 60 per cent made an aspect error in gap 2 – used the simple or continuous aspect ‘have/are having’ instead of the required perfect or perfect continuous aspect ‘/have had/have been having’), 14 students (56%) made an aspect error in gap 6 – used the continuous aspect ‘is/are holding’ instead of the simple aspect ‘holds’, 4 students (16%) made a tense error and 3 students (12%) made a tense and aspect error in gap 20 – used ‘are obviously enjoying/obviously enjoys’ instead of the past form ‘were obviously enjoying’.

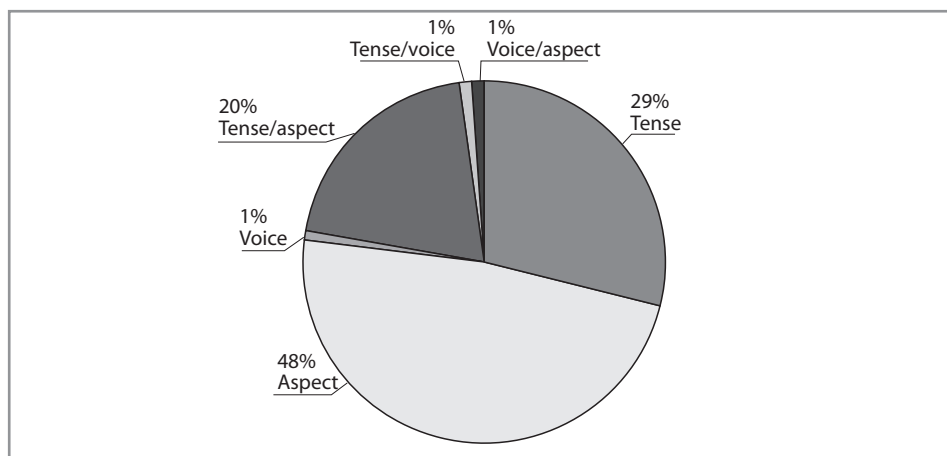


Figure 1 Types of errors in tests

The use of the appropriate voice form seemingly causes fewer problems, which might at least partly be explained by the fact that only the active voice was to be used in the given context. Still, there were 7 errors (1%) in the use of the voice form – ‘was turned up’ and ‘have been turned up’ were used instead of ‘have turned up’ in gap 7.

Analysing the use of particular tense forms, it can be observed (see Figure 2) that a comparatively similar number of errors occurs between the use of the present and the past tense (34% and 32% respectively or 85 and 80 errors in absolute numbers). A deeper analysis of the wrong tense form used confirms the research of Hinkel (2004) that NNSs have a tendency to use the past tense instead of the present (e.g. 3 students (12%) used ‘involved’ instead of ‘involves’ in gap 3), which can, in fact, point to these being both intralingual and interlingual errors. Although 80 errors are observed in the use of the past tense (for example 3 students (12%) used ‘involve’ instead of ‘involved’ in gap 3, 7 students (28%) used ‘stay’ instead of ‘stayed’ in gap 14), the problem can be attributed to the students’ assumption that the use of the present tense is ‘simple and easy’. Thus, it can be considered an intralingual error.

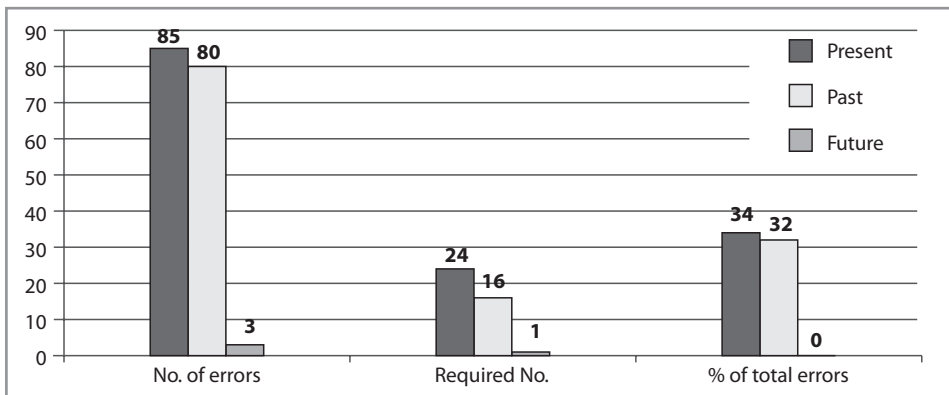


Figure 2 Number of errors in the use of verb tenses

When referring to the aspectual category of the verb, in the analysis of our empirical research we will use the term *continuous* instead of *progressive* because the students are more familiar with this word in their metalanguage since it is the preferred term at schools. Analysing the use of particular aspect forms, it can be observed (see Figure 3) that 42 per cent of errors occur when the students use perfect, continuous or perfect continuous aspect when none of them is required, for example, ‘have known’ instead of ‘know’ in gap 1, ‘is holding’ instead of ‘holds’ in gap 3 and ‘have been running’ instead of ‘run’ in gap 18. The other most common errors are in the use of perfect aspect (30% of total errors), for example, ‘turned up’ instead of ‘have turned up’ in gap 7, ‘is hearing’ instead of ‘has heard’ in gap 12, and continuous aspect (24% of errors), ‘passed’ instead of ‘was passing’

in gap 8, 'obviously enjoyed' instead of 'obviously enjoying' in gap 20, leaving the perfect continuous aspect with 13% of total errors. As the continuous aspect does not exist in the students' native language (Latvian or Russian), these errors cannot be called interlingual, they are intralingual.

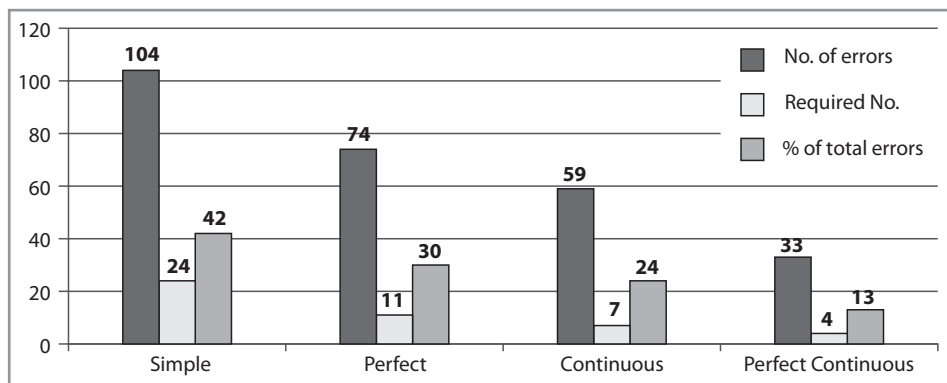


Figure 3 Number and percentage of errors in the use of verbal aspect

2 ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY

According to Richards and Schmidt's (2010) classification of intralingual errors, it can be assumed that the observed errors are those of avoidance (when complex structures, e.g. the perfect continuous aspect, are avoided), simplifications, developmental errors, communication-based. They might have arisen because the students were convinced about their knowledge of the language. However, to discuss the potential causes of errors, a questionnaire survey was used to test our assumptions on the reasons for these errors. The students were asked to give their opinion on the use of whichever of the verb forms they considered most problematic. The results demonstrate that 49 out of 74 respondents or almost 66 per cent admit that the use of verb tense forms is the easiest to distinguish (see Figure 4).

It points to a contradiction between what the students consider to be the case and what the common errors in fact are, since pure errors in verb tense forms accounted for 29 per cent of the most typical errors in the test (or 49 per cent if the tense and aspect errors group is also added). 31 respondents admitted that it was easy to distinguish between the simple and the continuous aspect and 29 respondents saw few problems in distinguishing between the active and the passive voice forms. The choice between the simple and the perfect aspect seemed easy only to 16 respondents, and the choice between the continuous and the perfect continuous aspect forms was the most difficult (only 5 respondents found it easy). If the latter also corresponds to the most common verb form errors found in the analysis of the test, then the choice between the simple and the

continuous aspect falls into the group that exhibited the most common errors. All the above considerations lead to the conclusion that the students have a serious misconception about what they know and have mastered, which allows us to state that the errors demonstrated in the test are intralingual.

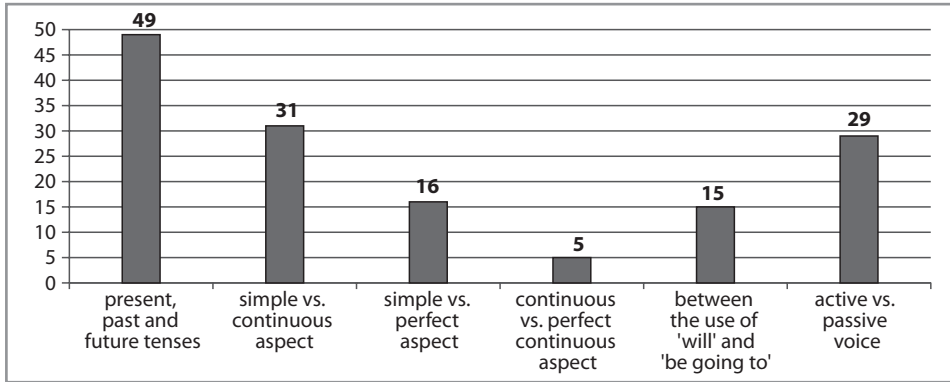


Figure 4 Students' perception of the most difficult tense-aspect forms of verbs

To check the above statements, the students were also asked to disclose their learning habits when preparing for the grammar tests. The results indicate (see Figure 5) that a large number of the students 'read the theory before the test', 'and then did self-assessment tasks' or 'read the theory while doing the tasks' (50, 44 and 31 respondents respectively), but only 23 respondents analysed the mistakes in the class and homework assignments in order to find the respective grammar rules and only 19 respondents redid the same tasks (done in class or at home already) as a test preparation.

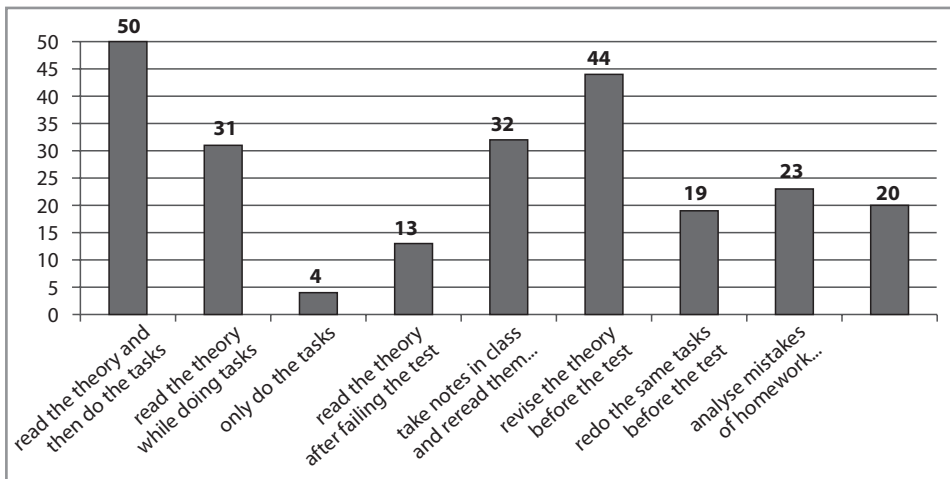


Figure 5 The activities students use to prepare for grammar tests

This indicates that the students have not completely developed their independent learning skills and that they lack the metalanguage to understand and apply the grammar rules to tasks where verb forms have to be used in context.

CONCLUSIONS

After the analysis of the fifty students' test on the use of verb tense, aspect and voice forms in context and the survey, we may conclude that:

1. The most common errors of the research participants are the use of the verb aspect (48%), the verb tense (29%) and the verb tense and aspect (20%), with a clear indication that the use of the verb aspect is more problematic than the use of other forms.
2. The test results demonstrate that the choice between the use of the present and the past tense, as well as the choice of the aspect – simple, perfect, continuous or perfect continuous are the most problematic areas for the students.
3. The most common type of errors is intralingual errors, which are either simplifications, errors of avoidance (trying to avoid 'complex' structures), communication-based (what the student has been accustomed to use because of the 'knowing the language' assumption) or developmental errors.
4. The students have misconceptions about what they know regarding English verb tense, aspect and voice and what they can actually present when using them.
5. The first-year EFL undergraduates lack independent learning habits and are not used to learning, namely, reading the theory independently, despite the fact that most of them admit doing it to prepare for the test, analyzing and synthesizing to apply this theory to practice.

Although the present research has a limitation in that the test task did not require the use of the passive voice – a requirement which might have changed the results – it can be stated that the research questions have been answered. However, the present case study has opened a number of new questions for further research, such as the impact of the way and type of grammar explanation in class on the test results and the development of the students' independent learning skills.

In conclusion, our opinion is that the most significant implication of this case study for university professors teaching grammar is that in order to develop the students' independent learning habits needed for grammar classes, professors need to help develop skills relevant to reading and analysing the theory and applying it in practice and to help develop skills in distinguishing between verb form choices in different contexts.

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APPENDIX 1

SURVEY SAMPLE

Dear Students

To help us better understand where and why the current problems with the use of verb tenses and aspects originate please fill in the questionnaire. The survey is anonymous and the results will be used only in a summarised form.

1. To your mind, which of these is easy to distinguish?
 - a. present, past and future tenses
 - b. simple vs. continuous aspect
 - c. simple vs. perfect aspect
 - d. continuous vs. perfect continuous aspect
 - e. between the use of 'will' and 'be going to'
 - f. active vs. passive voice

2. How do you prepare for *English Communicative Grammar I* test? (*circle all answers that apply*)
 - a. read the theory and then do the tasks
 - b. read the theory while doing tasks
 - c. only do the tasks
 - d. read the theory after failing the test
 - e. take notes in class and reread them before the test
 - f. revise the theory before the test
 - g. redo the same tasks before the test
 - h. analyse mistakes of homework assignments and find the respective grammar rule
 - i. analyse the mistakes in the test and find the respective grammar rule

Thank you for the support!

APPENDIX 2

TEST SAMPLE

Reporter Philip Taggart visits a farm where the sheep are super fit. Use the verbs in brackets in a suitable form. (20 points)

Farmers, as you may (1) ... (know), (2) ... (have) a hard time in Britain lately, and (3) ... (turn) to new ways of earning income. This (4) ... (involve) sheep racing. Yes, you (5) ... (hear) me correctly! A farmer in the west of England now (6) ... (hold) sheep races, and during the past year over 100,000 people (7) ... (turn up) to watch the proceedings.

'I (8) ... (pass) the farm on my way to the sea,' one man told me, 'and I (9) ... (think) I'd have a look. I (10) ... (not/believe) it was serious.' According to a regular visitor, betting on sheep is more interesting than betting on horses. 'At proper horse races everyone (11) ... (already/study) the form of the horses in advance. But nobody (12) ... (hear) anything about these sheep! Most people (13) ... (find) it difficult to tell one from another in any case. I (14) ... (stay) to watch the races, and I must admit that I (15) ... (find) it quite exciting. In a typical race, half a dozen sheep (16) ... (race) downhill over a course of about half a mile. Food (17) ... (wait) for them at the other end of the track. The sheep (18) ... (run) surprisingly fast, although presumably they (19) ... (not/eat) for a while just to give them some motivation. Judging by the happy faces, the crowd around me (20) ... (obviously/enjoy) their day out at the races.' (Vince, 1994: 25)

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