

## **Difficulties in the Applications of Tenses Faced by ESL Learners**

\* Shaukat Ali, Assistant Professor (Corresponding Author)

\*\* Iftikhar Ali, MPhil Scholar

\*\*\* Saddam Hussain, Lecturer

### **Abstract**

*Tenses are one of the vital essentials of grammar. Command over the English language demands a thorough understanding of tenses. Although much research has been conducted on the teaching of the English language in the context of Pakistan, little has been dug out about the problems faced by students regarding the applications of tenses. This paper investigates the perceptions of both students and teachers of the difficulties in the applications of tenses facing ESL learners. Data were collected from 150 students and 30 teachers of government high schools through a structured questionnaire. The results of the study showed that the students are confronted with many difficulties in the application of tenses consisting of using future indefinite tense instead of the simple present tense regarding its use for scheduled future activities, using present continuous tense instead of a simple present for the permanent situation in the present, using future indefinite tense for planned future activities and so on. The results also indicated that the difficulties were caused by inappropriate teaching methodology, lack of speaking environment inside the classroom, translations from the mother tongue into English and vice versa, much focus on rules and teaching sentences and expressions as isolated units rather than an integral part of the discourse. In the light of the results, it is recommended that while teaching tenses, teachers should focus both on rules and applications of tenses. English should be taught more as a language than as a mere body of rules. Moreover, teachers should be properly trained in teaching tenses.*

**Keywords:** Challenges, Tenses, Applications, Discourse

### **Introduction**

Grammar is an important part of any language. Its importance increases while learning a second language. To learn and achieve mastery in a second language, it is vital to have a good grasp of its grammar. Like other languages, English too has a comprehensive system of grammar that has several sub-categories under it including tenses, voices, narrations, parts of speech, and so on. However, this study focuses on the difficulties in learning the applications of tenses faced by students of government schools in Pakistan. According to Shamim (2011), English is taught as a subject, not as a language in Pakistani schools. The focus is often on teaching the rules not the practical applications of these rules. The principal method of teaching English in schools is the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which is mainly based on a translation from the target language (English) into the native language (Urdu) and vice versa (Shamim, 2008). The focus of GTM is teaching (Freire, 2014) rules and structure of the target language. Students are taught translation skills and form of the language, which consequently enables the students to learn the rules (Rahman & Ab Rashid, 2017) but not the language. This practice enables the students to translate isolated sentences, as contrary to their use in the practical situations, from one language into the other, but they are unable to speak in a real-life situation (Behlol & Anwar, 2011; Diaz-Rico, 2004; Lubis, 2016). As mentioned above, the current study attempts to investigate the difficulties in the applications of tenses faced by students in Pakistani government schools, so the study has the following research objectives and research questions.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are as follows.

\* Department of English, University of Malakand, Pakistan Email: [shaukat1443all@gmail.com](mailto:shaukat1443all@gmail.com)

\*\* Qurtuba University of Science & Information Technology, Peshawar, Pakistan  
Email: [khan034319@gmail.com](mailto:khan034319@gmail.com)

\*\*\*Department of English, University of Malakand, Pakistan Email: [sadam.khan10022@gmail.com](mailto:sadam.khan10022@gmail.com)

1. To find know the perceptions of students and teachers about the difficulties facing ESL learners in learning the applications/uses of English tenses in the government high schools of Pakistan
2. To investigate the perceptions of the students and teachers about the causes, if any, of the difficulties facing ESL learners in learning the applications/uses of English tenses in the government high schools of Pakistan.

**Research Questions of the Study**

1. What are the perceptions of students and teachers about the difficulties facing ESL learners in learning the applications/uses of English tenses in the government high schools of Pakistan?
2. What are the perceptions of the students and teachers about the causes, if any, of the difficulties facing ESL learners in learning the applications/uses of English tenses in the government high schools of Pakistan?

**Literature Review**

English is taught as a subject not as a language in Pakistan up to matriculate level. This makes the student face many difficulties in developing language competency (Rahman, 2001)... Students encounter problems in the applications of grammar in particular. Tenses, which are a major part of grammar, pose serious problems for ESL learners (Nawaz et al., 2015). Method prevailing in Pakistani classrooms is the Grammar Translation Method which enables students to learn rules but not the usage of tenses (Muhammad, 2016). This research study is based on the researcher's observations of the phenomenon as a student and teacher of the English language motivating him into investigating the difficulties concerning the applications/uses of tenses at matriculating level in the government high schools of Pakistan. The researcher has observed that students encounter problems regarding the structure of certain tenses in general and uses of tenses in particular during English language learning (Ahmad, Ahmad, Bukhari & Bukhari, 2011). Communicative competence in L2/FL (second/foreign language) cannot be developed without having a thorough understanding of the language. It has been observed that teachers while teaching the English language focus on the rules of grammar. They do not give much attention to the applications of these rules (Ahmad & Rao, 2012).

Students of the government schools of Pakistan face difficulties in the use of tenses. Teachers in these schools are more focused on rules than on applications of these rules. The reason is that these teachers are not trained in teaching grammar (Nawab, 2012). On the other hand, little attention is given to teaching meaning (uses) of tenses which results in many difficulties for the learners to develop communicative competence. According to Stepanik (2020), teachers emphasize teaching grammar and the study of its rules which are later practiced through Urdu-to-English and English-to-Urdu translation or via fill in the blanks exercises. As a result, students learn some rules of the language but not their applications. Hence, this study investigates the perceptions of both students and teachers of the difficulties in learning the applications of tenses and the possible causes of these difficulties. The study probes into the following research questions.

**Methodology**

This is a cross-sectional quantitative study. The population of the study consists of all government high schools in Tehsil Takht-e-Bhai, District Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, which are, according to the District Mardan Survey Report (2011), thirty-five (35) in number including twelve (12) female and thirty-three (23) male schools. The total number of students in class 9<sup>th</sup> is 6500 (4550 male and 1950 female) whereas the strength of the students in class 10<sup>th</sup> is 4600 (3220 male and 1380 female), amounting to a total of 11100 students (7770 male students and 3330 female students).

The researcher applied a proportionate method within the stratified sequential sampling technique. Two strata comprising students of class 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> were made of the whole population of schools. Further, all the schools were placed in a table of five rows and seven columns. The researcher selected every third school in each row by applying the sequential sampling technique. As such, two out of seven schools in every row were selected, making ten (10) schools in all as shown in table 1. Moreover, the researcher took a hundred (100) respondents from 9<sup>th</sup>, and fifty (50) from 10<sup>th</sup> class from the target ten (10) schools. Applying the proportionate method randomly, the researcher, then, chose respondents from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> classes of each school as indicated in Tables 2 and 3 respectively.

1	2	○	4	5	○	7
8	9	○	11	12	○	14
15	16	○	18	19	○	21
22	23	○	25	26	○	28
29	30	○	32	33	○	35

Table. 2 Stratum of Students (9<sup>th</sup> class)

Schools	Target population (9 <sup>th</sup> class)	Sample size	Sampling techniques: Stratified random sampling (Proportionate method)
School3	300	18	
School 6	170	10	
School 10	180	11	
School 13	80	05	
School 17	200	12	
School 20	190	12	
School 24	175	12	
School 27	195	12	
School 31	70	04	
School 34	62	04	
TS: 10	TTP:1622	T.S.S: 100	

TS: total schools, TTP: Total Target Population, TSS: Total Sample Size

Table 3 Stratum of the Students (10<sup>th</sup> class)

Schools	Target population (10 <sup>th</sup> class)	Sample size	Sampling techniques: Stratified random sampling (Proportionate method)
School3	250	10	
School 6	200	08	
School 10	125	05	
School 13	70	03	
School 17	130	05	
School 20	115	05	
School 24	140	05	
School 27	145	06	
School 31	50	02	
School 34	35	01	
TS: 10	TTP: 1260	T.S. S: 50	

### Analysis and Results

This section informs about the results of the study. Descriptive statics was employed to analyze the responses of both the students and teachers. The responses of the students and teachers were gathered through a Likert scale questionnaire having the scale of strongly agree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The questionnaire for both the students and teachers was implicitly divided into two sections; one on the perceptions of the students and teachers of difficulties in learning tenses for the students, the other on the perceptions of the students and teachers of the possible causes of these difficulties. The results are presented in four tables in all; two for the students and two for the teachers. The tables along with analysis are presented as follows.

**Table 4. Difficulties perceived by students in learning tenses**

SNO	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	Students use future indefinite tense instead of simple present concerning its use for scheduled future activities.	150	1	5	4.44	.990

2.	Students often use present continuous tense instead of simple present tense for permanent situations in the present.	150	1	5	4.41	1.050
3.	Students often use future indefinite tense for planned future activities.	150	1	5	4.49	.918
3.	Students often use present continuous tense instead of present perfect continuous tense.	150	1	5	4.23	1.287
4.	Students frequently use the present perfect tense (with past time adverbs) instead of the past indefinite tense.	150	1	5	4.49	1.022
7.	Students often use <i>ing</i> with stative verbs (love, want, know, understand, etc.).	150	1	5	4.43	1.120
	Students often confuse perfect tenses with perfect progressive ones.	150	1	5	4.61	.955
	Difficulties	150	1.00	5.00	4.4457	1.01690
	Valid N (listwise)	150				

**Analysis**

The difficulties in learning tenses as perceived by students include using future indefinite tense instead of simple future tense for scheduled future activities, using present continuous tense instead of the present tense, using future indefinite tense instead of the present continuous for planned future activities, using present continuous tense instead of the present perfect tense, using present perfect tense with past time adverbs instead of past tense, using *ing* with stative verbs and confusing perfect tenses with perfect progressive tenses.

**Table 5. Causes of the difficulties in learning tenses as perceived by students**

SNO	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
8.	Our school language (language of instructions) is Urdu.	150	1	5	4.51	1.054
9.	Students first think in Urdu and then speak or write in English.	150	1	5	4.51	1.145
10.	There is no English-speaking environment in our classroom.	150	1	5	4.73	.851
11.	Our English teacher does not relate language to practical life experiences.	150	1	5	4.71	.797
12.	Our English teacher does not encourage students' participation in the classroom.	150	1	5	4.49	1.060
13.	Teachers encourage oral and written exercises for learning some unusual structures of the English language. (Irregular verb forms).	150	1	5	2.05	.954
14.	Teachers prepare students for examination (instrumentally motivated).	150	1	5	4.62	.880
15.	Most of the students come from uneducated families.	150	1	5	4.64	.929
16.	Teachers first teach rules and then give examples.	150	1	5	4.72	.852
17.	Teachers teach tenses at (isolated) sentence level.	150	1	5	4.75	.845
18.	Teachers do not undergo any training for English language teaching.	150	1	5	3.21	1.115
	Causes	150	1.00	5.00	4.2679	.85616
	Valid N (listwise)	150				

**Analysis**

The bulk of the students ascribe the difficulties encountered by them in learning tenses to school language (Urdu) interference, first thinking in Urdu and then translating it into English, students' reluctance to speaking English inside the classroom, students' lack of interest in the classroom participation, teachers hardly make the students practice learning the irregular verbs, teachers focus only on preparing for the examination thereby leading only to instrumental motivation among the students, uneducated family background of the students, deductive method of teaching tenses and lack of training on the part of teachers for teaching tenses.

**Table. 6 Difficulties perceived by teachers in teaching students tenses**

SNO	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	Students use future indefinite tense instead of simple present regarding its use for scheduled future activities.	30	1	5	3.93	1.388
2.	Students often use present continuous tense instead of simple present tense for the permanent situation in the present.	30	1	5	4.17	1.234
3.	Students often use future indefinite tense for planned future activities	28	1	5	4.29	1.182
4.	Students often use present continuous tense instead of present perfect continuous tense	30	1	5	4.00	1.339
5.	Students frequently use the present perfect tense (with past time adverbs) instead of the past indefinite tense.	30	1	5	3.93	1.552
6.	Students often use <i>ing</i> with stative verbs (love, want, know, understand, etc.	30	1	5	4.13	1.408
7.	Students often confuse perfect tenses with perfect progressive ones.	30	1	5	3.70	1.535
	Difficulties	28	1.43	5.00	4.2041	1.15236
	Valid N (listwise)	28				

**Analysis**

The above table shows that the majority of teachers have similar perceptions regarding difficulties teaching their students tenses. The difficulties, according to teachers include, using future indefinite tense instead of simple future tense for scheduled future activities, using present continuous tense instead of the present tense, using future indefinite tense instead of present continuous for planned future activities, using present continuous tense instead of the present perfect tense, using present perfect tense with past time adverbs instead of past tense, using *ing with stative verbs and confusing perfect tenses with perfect progressive tenses.*

**Table 7. Causes of the difficulties in teaching tenses as perceived by teachers (changing the view of the table)**

SNO	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
8.	Our school language (language of instructions) is Urdu.	30	1	5	4.30	1.291
9.	Students first think in Urdu and then speak or write in English.	30	1	5	4.10	1.470
10.	Students do not speak English in the classroom.	30	1	5	4.13	1.408
11.	English language teaching cannot be related to practical life activities.	30	1	5	3.93	1.413
12.	Students are not interested in classroom participation	30	1	5	3.90	1.398
13.	Teachers encourage oral and written exercises for learning some unusual structures of the English language. (Irregular verb forms).	30	1	5	3.70	1.512
14.	Teachers prepare students for examination (instrumentally motivated).	30	2	5	4.40	1.037

15.	Most of the students come from uneducated families.	30	1	5	4.03	1.402
16.	Teachers first teach rules and then give examples.	30	1	5	4.40	1.102
17.	Teachers teach tenses at (isolated) sentence level.	30	2	5	4.23	1.104
18.	Teachers do not undergo any training for English language teaching.	30	1	5	4.20	1.270
	Causes	30	1.18	5.00	4.1212	1.26854
	Valid N (listwise)	30				

#### Analysis

The majority of teacher attributes the difficulties in the applications of tenses as mentioned in Table 6 to school language (Urdu) interference, first thinking in Urdu and then translating it into English, students' reluctance to speaking English inside the classroom, students' lack of interest in classroom participation, teachers hardly make the students practice learning the irregular verbs, teachers focus only on preparing for the examination thereby leading only to instrumental motivation among the students, uneducated family background of the students, deductive method of teaching tenses and lack of training on the part of teachers for teaching tenses.

Thus, the perceptions of both teachers and students regarding difficulties encountered by students to learn the applications of tenses are almost similar. Moreover, the majority of both students and teachers attribute the difficulties to the same causes.

#### Discussion

This study was an attempt to investigate the difficulties faced by high school students in learning the applications of English tenses. Moreover, the study also attempted to explore the causes of any of these difficulties. To this end, a Likert scale questionnaire was designed for both the students and teachers of ten different schools of Takht-e-Bhai Tehsil, District Mardan and Pakistan. The results of the study indicated that the students have difficulties in the applications of tenses. They often time use future indefinite tense instead of present indefinite tense regarding scheduled future activities as supported by a study conducted by (Copley, 2009). Moreover, the majority of the students in this study agreed that they use present continuous tense instead of simple present tense for permanent situations in the present. Additionally, the students were convergent on the point that they use future indefinite tense instead of present continuous tense for planned future activities which is reinforced by a study carried out by (Calver, 1946). Students use future indefinite tense for planned future activities. Students frequently use present continuous tense in place of perfect continuous tense. Most of the students use present perfect tenses (with past time adverbs) instead of past indefinite tense (Klein, 1992). Students often use *ing* with stative verbs (love, understand, want, know, etc.). Students frequently confuse perfect tenses with perfect progressive tenses (Palmer, 2014).

The study further indicates that the focus of the teachers is on teaching rules and translation from the school language into English and vice versa (Ehret, 2014). The rules are taught in bits and pieces mostly through GTM which enables the learners to develop their linguistic skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Besides, frequent translation drills from the target language to the native language and vice versa, the translation skills of the learners are also developed up to a great extent (Durrani, 2016). Nevertheless, communicative competence is always pushed to the background (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). The students have poor communicative skills and can hardly express themselves well in the target language. This study further shows that students are good at translating isolated sentences and know about the rules of the tenses well but do not know about the applications of the tenses. If they are asked to translate a sentence of a particular tense, they do it quite easily but placed in the real situation where the application of a particular tense is required, they quite often commit mistakes. Further, the study also shows that the students concerned are not clear about the applications and uses of tenses. Due to this, they confuse, one tense with another concerning their uses (Decarrio, 1986). The teachers unless teaching the uses of the tenses to their students apart from the rules and then do not give examples from real life, the students will not be able to learn them in the true sense of the term. The GTM used in these schools shall be complemented by other methods and teaching strategies. A better option would be to go for communicative language teaching, though a switch over to GTM, when needed is a good strategy to apply. But sticking completely to GTM will be an injustice to the learners

## Conclusion

This was a quantitative study investigating the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding difficulties faced by high school students in learning the applications of English tenses. Additionally, the study also attempted to explore the perceptions of the students and teachers about the causes of any of these difficulties. To this effect, a Likert scale questionnaire was utilized. Descriptive statistics were used for the analysis of the data which showed that most of the students use future indefinite tense instead of simple present tense regarding its use for scheduled future activities. The majority of students use present continuous tense instead of a simple present for the permanent situation in the present. Besides, students use future indefinite tense for planned future activities. The learners very often use present continuous tense in place of perfect continuous tense. A great number of the students use present perfect tenses (with past time adverbs) instead of past indefinite tense. Moreover, students quite often use *ing* with stative verbs (love, understand, want, know, etc.). Additionally, they frequently confuse perfect tenses with perfect progressive tenses. The difficulties were attributed to the school language (Urdu) interference, uneducated family background of the students, and lack of speaking environment in the classroom, inappropriate teaching methodology, and lack of training for the teachers in teaching tenses.

## Recommendations

The study, in the light of the results, makes the following recommendations:

- Teachers should develop English speaking environment in the classroom.
- Teachers should be properly trained in teaching tenses.
- Teachers should be made aware of the weaknesses and strengths of all teaching methodologies so that they may be able to exploit them to the best possible extent.
- Teachers should not teach tenses in isolation rather they should relate them to real-life situations thereby making it an organic part of the English language.
- English should be taught more as a language than as a mere body of rules.
- Examination in English should include evaluation of all the four skills of language learning that are speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

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