

Problems in Mastering English Tense and Aspect and the Role of the Practitioners

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Abstract: *Although tense and aspect occupy a major part in the language teaching materials, many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners continue making mistakes in those areas even when they are in advanced level studies. Tense alone cannot distinguish between expressions, especially when the expressions are in the same tense. Therefore, understanding the aspect is essential in order for the language users to use expressions properly. Traditional EFL grammar books have ignored lexical aspect. As a result, many EFL learners face semantic problems as they attempt to produce the target language. This article examines some problems which may encumber learners' attempt to master tense and aspect, and emphasizes that language teachers and teaching materials must also focus on the lexical aspect so that learners can be aware of meaning apart from the form and the function of an expression.*

I. Introduction

Tense and aspect are apparently two major issues in language teaching (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). As a result, they occupy a major part in almost every language teaching syllabus. Yet, in many foreign language teaching contexts, little effort is rendered to the factors that facilitate or hinder the acquisition systems of tense and aspect (ibid.). Therefore, a lot of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners fail to master tense and aspect even though they spend substantial amount of time in order to master them.

This paper aims at examining some difficulties that EFL learners might face in their attempt to master tense and aspect properly. We also examine how the ignorance of lexical aspect may cause problems to learners' attempt to learn as well as use tense and aspect properly. Finally, the study explores the roles English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners can play to help the learners overcome the problems they face in mastering tense and aspect.

II. Tense

Tense is related to time, and time refers to 'when' an action takes place. It '...expresses the time that an action occurs in relation to the moment of speaking' (Cowan, 2008, p. 350). Salaberry & Shirai (2002, p. 2) posit 'tense is a deictic category that places a situation in time with respect to some other time, usually moment of speech'. Tense has three 'dimensions': 'present', 'past', and 'future' (Cowan, 2008, p.350). According to Comrie (1985, p. 13):

[T]ime itself does not provide any landmarks in terms of which one can locate situations. If time had a beginning, we do not know where that beginning was, so we cannot locate anything else relative to that beginning (other than trivially, by saying that situation is posterior to that beginning). If time has an end, again we do not know its location, so again no non-trivial location is possible relative to that end point. Therefore, it is necessary to establish some arbitrary reference point, with which we can then locate situations in time.

Out of the three 'dimensions', however, merely present and past are exposed in English by inflections on verb; 'present time for third person singular, is indicated by adding -s to a regular verb'(Cowan, 2008, p.350). For example,

(1) Aimin loves Mango.

Past time is expressed with the addition of '-ed' with a regular verb (ibid); for example,

(2) Aiman loved Mango.

Sometimes, past time is revealed with the change of an irregular verb in form (ibid.); for example,

(3) Aiman went to the town center.

Celce-Murcia, Larsen Freeman & Williams (1999) claim that although in a lot of languages, future time is expressed with the change of verb form, in English future time is indicated with the use of 'modal auxiliary verb' with the main verb. For example,

(4) I will go back home.

According to Cowan (2008), apart from the verb form, time can be also indicated by the 'time adverb', such as, 'yesterday', 'today', 'at noon', 'three o'clock', 'for three years', etc. (p.351).

III. Aspect

Aspect ‘concerns the different perspectives which a speakers can take and express with regard to the temporal course of some event, action, process, etc.’(Klein, 1994, p.16). In other words, aspect refers to how speakers sees the event. According to Cowan (2008, p. 351):

[A]spect expresses how the speaker views the action of the verb; for example, an action that is seen as bounded and complete is perfect in aspect. If the action is seen as incomplete, it is imperfect in aspect, if seen as repeated, it is iterative, if seen as occurring regularly, it is habitual.

The following examples distinguish between tense and aspects:

	Tense	Aspect
(5) She is reading now.	Present	Progressive
(6) She has eaten the mango.	Present	Perfect

Examples 5 and 6 are in present tense; yet, we understand the difference between them through aspect, not just based on tense as both are in present time. Hence, in order to understand both the form and functions, we must understand the aspects along with tense. Flora & Hasan (2012) claim, ‘... tense without the aspectual distinction fails to convey the difference in meaning between ... two sentences [belonging to same tense], and therefore, aspect is as important as tense in the study of English Grammar’ (p.89). For a detailed and through discussion on aspect see Flora & Hasan (2012) & Liz & Soars (2002).

3.1 Lexical aspect

Even understanding the form and function of verbs is not enough. We also need to examine the functions in terms of what Cowan (2008, p.352) calls: ‘lexical aspect’. As for the categories of the Lexical aspect, Cowan (2008, p.352) remarks:

Verbs can be classified by the type of act they denote. That is, a verb can be classified based on answers to questions such as the following: Does the act have duration? Does it have an end point? Does it involve change? The resulting properties, called semantic features, make up the lexical aspect of verbs. The basic categories of English verbs from this standpoint of lexical aspect are stative and dynamic.

Stative verbs are those that ‘express states or situations rather than action’ (Cowan, 2008, p. 352). Activity, achievement and accomplishment verbs can be categorized as dynamic verbs (Cowan, 2008). To Collins (2007), ‘states’ are not dynamic; they explain the ‘inherent characteristics of situation’. On the other hand, activities, accomplishments, and achievements are all dynamic; that is, ‘they require some effort or input of energy to occur’ (ibid.). For further details see Cowan (2008).

Cowan (2008) claims that traditionally ‘aspect [was] not discussed with much clarity and lexical aspect [was] rarely mentioned at all’ (p.356). Hence, the ignorance of lexical aspect in English language teaching grammar has resulted in the failure of many EFL learners to master English expressions properly (ibid.).

IV. Learners’ Problems In Tense

EFL learners face several difficulties in their attempt to master English tense properly. To Cowan (2008, p. 350) ‘use of verb forms is one of the two or three most difficult areas for English language learners to master’. As a result, EFL learners sometimes make mistakes in the proper use of verb forms as they attempt to express the time of an event in the target language. The following sentences produced by some Bengali learners of English who have completed secondary education. The sentences indicate some potential areas in which they are likely to make errors:

(7) * When I was entered into the exam hall, I was feeling nervous.

(When I entered the exam hall, I was feeling nervous.)

(8) * I was seen and introduced with many unknown students.

(I saw many unknown students, and I was introduced to them.)

(9) * Then I was taken lunch.

(Then I took lunch.)

(10) * Then I was come back home.)

(Then I came back home.)

(11) * I was done the work.

(I did the work.)

The above Bengali learners of English seem to make errors in the formation of past expression; Sentences 7 to 11, for example, indicate that some EFL learners form past tense using an auxiliary and the past participle form of the verbs instead of using the past form of the verbs. Therefore, this is an area in which learners are observed to face problems in using verbs to indicate past time.

EFL learners are sometimes found to form expression in which time itself is confused. In the following example (12), a Grade 8 level student does not use any auxiliary to indicate whether the action time is in the present or the past. This may be due to the L1 interference because in Bengali language, progressive action does not require any extra auxiliary.

- (12) * I going with my father.
(I am/was going with my father.)

In example 13, an EFL learner who is studying for a BA degree in English, uses 'is appeared' to form the following past expression: 'The ghost appeared for some reasons.'

- (13) * The ghost is appeared for some reasons.

EFL learners' native language (L1) influence can be claimed to be one of the reasons behind their failure to acquire the tense of the target language (TL). For example, according to Cowan (2008), in some languages, including Chinese, tense is not expressed through 'overt markers, or inflections on verbs'. The following Chinese sentences, for example, indicate past time with the use of 'jien tien' not by adding an inflection such as the 'English -ed'.

- (14) 'Ta zao tian chu zhigiageo'
(*She yesterday go Chicago.)
(She went to Chicago yesterday)

Moreover, as an influence of the L1, Chinese ESL learners often make errors like using 'bare infinitive forms' instead of 'verbs inflected for the simple present and past'(ibid.). For example,

- (15) *She go (to) Chicago everyday.
(16) *She go (to) Chicago yesterday.

Apart from the Chinese EFL learners, L1 influence is observed among the Dutch learners of English. According to Housen (2000), Dutch EFL learners are required to understand the difference between the simple past and the past progressive in English for this dissimilarity is not marked in their L1. L1 influence may retain to affect even the proficient L2 learners (See also, Housen, 2002).

Unlike English, Bengali speakers do not need to use inflection in the verb for simple present tense.

- (17) Arif vat khai
*Arif eat rice.
(Arif eats rice.)

Sentence 17, for example, shows that the Bengali EFL learner of English did not use inflection in the verb- eat. This is a common mistake that is observed with most EFL learners in Bangladesh, and this seems to happen as Bengali language does not indicate present tense though inflection on verbs.

According to Cowan (2008), unlike English some languages do not include 'back shifting constraints' (p.382). Bengali speakers may use their L1 sequence of tense rule in forming English sentences. For example, in the sentence shown below (21), the verb in that clause is not backshifted to had.

- (18) *He remembered that he has to go back home.
(He remembered that he had to go back home.)

Within Bengali language, speakers do not have to maintain tense sequence by backshifting to previous clause(s). Hence, some learners apply their Bengali tense sequence in order to form English sentences with that complements (See also, Cowan, 2008).

V. Learners' Problems in Aspect

Apart from EFL learners' problems in tense, sometimes they also have problems in understanding how they need to see an event- aspect. In what follow are some example sentences produced by some Bengali learners of English. The examples indicate the nature of the problems these EFL learners have in using aspect properly.

- (19) * I am reading everyday in the evening.
(I read everyday in the evening.)

Although 'everyday' in sentence 19 indicates that the action is habitual, hence simple in aspect, the Grade 8 level Bengali learner of English views it as temporal and therefore progressive in aspect. Here the learner overgeneralizes the fact that as she reads everyday, the action is in progressive aspect. This phenomenon

can be related to the example that is provided by Cowan (2008) that German simple sentence conforms to both English present simple and present progressive; hence, 'they [German speakers of English] have troubles using the two English tenses in the appropriate context. A common error is to overgeneralize the progressive to context in which time expression requires a simple form'. For example,

(20) Do you know Sapsucker Woods?

*Yes, my wife is often going there with the children.

Alternatively, German speakers may make errors using simple present in the place of present progressive (Cowan, 2008). For example,

(21) * I send you the money now.

Therefore, the answer to the sentence 18 and sentence 19 are erroneous in aspect, and the problem in how the German speakers view the action here is caused by their German L1 interference.

The following ill-formed sentence (22) was produced by a Bengali learners of English:

(22) * I am studying English for twelve years.

(I have been studying English for twelve years.)

Bengali EFL learners are often seen to produce sentences like 22. This occurs as within Bengali language temporal progressive aspect (e.g. I am playing football) is not usually distinguished from the progressive activity that started in the past but extends to the present (I have been playing football for seven years).

VI. Role of the Practitioners

As many EFL learners' errors in tense and aspect appear from the influence of their L1, language teachers in EFL contexts need to consider the differences that are apparent between the L1 and the TL (See also, Collins, 2007). This can be done through the contrastive analysis technique.

Within EFL contexts, materials should also focus on the differences between the L1 and the TL. Learners need to be made aware of the areas where they may make errors due to their L1 interference. Grammar books need to focus on lexical aspect rather than sticking merely to the traditional pedagogy of tense through the grammatical rules.

In order to solve the problems of the EFL learners, stemming from L1 influence, language teachers should take an account of 'the role that lexical aspect plays in teaching', so that learners have an opportunity to have 'extensive' examples from all the four types of verbs- *stative*, *activity*, *accomplishment*, and *achievement* and also experience 'how the different types can produce different meanings when they appear in a particular tense...' (Cowan, 2008). Consider the following examples:

(23) * The Jar finished containing any more water.

(24) * All the hope is finished.

(25) * He ended liking me.

(26) * I am hoping that he will come.

(27) * I have finished sitting the exam.

(28) * Then he started catching fish.

Sentences 23-28 are fine in form but they are erroneous in lexical aspect. In examples 23-25, contain, hope and like are stative verbs, which do not have an end point. Therefore, we cannot use finish or end with those verbs. Sentence 26 is also erroneous as stative verbs do not usually occur in progressive aspect. In example 27, sit is an activity verb which is also atelic-no ending point. Hence, we cannot use finish with sit. Finally, in sentence 28, catch is an achievement verb, and thus, it is telic- it has an ending point. Telic verbs normally do not occur with start and stop. Therefore, example 28 is erroneous. The aforesaid examples indicate that even advanced level EFL learners may make errors in the use of tense and aspect even if they know the forms. This problem is due to their lack of awareness of the lexical aspect.

Collins (2007) posits that teachers ought to place 'greater' focus on the 'tenses' in which learners are usually 'confused' for example, 'simple past', 'present perfect' and 'present progressive', etc. Teachers can help the EFL learners to overcome the problems by focusing on the contexts; Collins (2007), for example, argues, 'problems which arise from L1 influence can also be addressed through context-manipulation exercises'. Again, to Collins (2005) as well, 'it may be more productive to expose students to relevant contrasts in context...' (in Cowan, 2008). Also, 'instructional activities that require learners to supply or manipulate context for given forms may help address the difficulty learners have mastering the tense- aspect forms they know with the meanings they would like to express' (Collins, 2007).

VII. Conclusion

The paper has made an attempt to examine some of the problems that EFL learners might face in mastering English tense and aspects properly. The study reveals that most learners face problems in mastering tense and aspect due to their L1 interference. Also, it appears that many EFL learners fail to master tense and aspect properly because ‘ESL/EFL course and materials often ignore lexical aspect and its effects’ (Cowan, 2008, p.354).

Finally, the study recommends that language teachers and language teaching materials need to focus on the areas in which learners are likely to face difficulties in mastering tense and aspect. Modern pedagogic grammar books must also address the lexical aspect in detail with a lot of exercises on the four types of verbs. Teachers can help the EFL learners address their shortcomings ‘with an understanding of how lexical aspect factors in the learning of tense’ (Cowan, 2008, p.354).

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