

Grammatical Expressions of Time in English

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Abstract: *Language educators have been sharing their grievances over the poor mastery of English among the L2 learners. Many past studies demonstrated that L2 learners encountered difficulties in understanding and using grammatical features including Tenses. Several other studies pointed out that the difficulties are due to the differences between the learners' first language (L1) and the target language (L2) in terms of the structure, leading them to transfer their knowledge of L1 to L2 and eventually, producing many language errors. Such an occurrence is called 'Negative Language Transfer'. Nevertheless, not always that the transferring of the L1 knowledge to L2 will cause errors. In some studies, it was shown that knowing the differences as well as similarities between L1 and L2 would reversely facilitate the learners to acquire L2 and to be good in both languages. This paper, apart from highlighting problems faced by the L2 learners in using appropriate English Tenses, seeks to review past studies examining the grammatical expressions used to convey time messages in English. It is hoped that with the information presented, language educators would be able to devise teaching techniques that would make the L2 learners notice the differences between English (L2) and their L1s in terms of the grammatical expressions used to convey time messages.*

Keywords: Grammatical Expressions; Time; English

1. Introduction

1.1 Language as a means of communication

Communication is essential in human society. There is always the urge to communicate or share information with others and this can be done by speaking, drawing and even with actions such as raising our eyebrows to express a certain message. According to Edie & Goret (2018), communication is about how information is transmitted from Point A to Point B, or from one source to one destination.

Language has been a tool for us to communicate with one another. We use language to convey information, to make enquiries, to make requests and many more. It must be noted that we communicate not only to convey information but also to achieve certain communicative goals that we have in mind. Therefore, there is a need for us to use language appropriately. Using language appropriately means that we choose and use appropriate language features (both lexical and grammatical features) in the right contexts. When appropriate language features are used, more precise messages will be conveyed. With that, it will increase the chance for the hearer to correctly interpret the message we convey and therefore, we will be able to get the

kind of response that we expect from the hearer. According to Lewis (2002a), a message is successfully conveyed when the hearer can interpret the utterance used in a particular context. It can be said that our communicative goal is achieved once we are able to get the expected response from the one whom we are speaking to.

Failing to choose appropriate language features may lead us to have communication breakdowns. When communication breakdown occurs, there may be a distortion of meaning or the intended message may become imprecise and unclear. In such a case, the speaker may not get the kind of response expected and thus, fails to achieve his/her goal.

1.2 What makes a successful communication?

There are three important elements needed to create a successful communication: language, language users and context. Language, as the main tool of communication, helps language users to convey various messages and exchange information with each other. With language, we can get many tasks done and achieve more communicative goals in our daily life. We are all social beings, and we need to mingle and communicate with other human beings, and this is made possible by using language. Grammar and lexicon are two items needed to construct sentences. Some people may think that to be able to communicate well, we only need to rely on vocabulary or lexicon alone. However, it was reported in a study that the vocabulary may only provide basic information, but it is the grammatical feature that would help language users to be more precise in communicating the intended message (Tobin, 1990).

Language users are also important as without the language users, we cannot have any communication. Communication will not be made possible with the absence of a speaker or a hearer. Both must be present and play an equal role in the communication process. Language users are also known as the Creators of Meaning (Reid, 1991; Tobin, 1990) as every day they are actively involved in the meaning-making processes.

Some people may have the idea that having language alone would be adequate if we want to communicate with others. This is not true as there are cases that require us to utilise context or contextual information to interpret the intended message. Barry (2013) stated that knowing how to use language may not be enough and that one should also be able to explain how language works, as well as how linguistic items can be deployed to convey different contextual messages. Communication breakdowns can occur during the process of exchanging information and studies showed that one of the ways to minimise these communication breakdowns is by utilising contextual information. Through this way, the hearers will be able to understand the message conveyed to them and with that, they will be able to provide the kind of responses expected by the speakers. That is why it was stated that good inferencing abilities are also needed in the communication process (Tobin, 1990). According to him, having good inferencing abilities will help the decoder (hearer) to correctly interpret the message conveyed and the encoder (speaker), at the same time, will get the expected response.

2. Past studies on the challenges faced by the ESL learners

In Malaysia, there has been a growing concern among the language educators on whether the English as a Second Language (henceforth ESL) or L2 learners have a good mastery of the English language. Many studies have been conducted to find out the ESL learners' performance in English and challenges they face in learning the language. Quite a number of past studies reported that Tenses are among the major problems faced by the ESL learners.

Based on a study conducted by Saadiyah and Khor (2009) on Chinese students from vernacular schools, it was discovered that English Tenses are among the grammatical aspects that the students found difficult to understand; many errors in Tenses were found in their writings. The researchers of this study concluded that the lack of exposure to English might have deprived the students from having a good mastery of the language. Su-Hie, Mahanita and Siew Lee (2010) conducted a study to examine the errors made by a group of university students in a series of simulated oral interactions. It was discovered that Tenses also appeared as among the most common errors made by the students. A more recent study conducted in 2023 has also reported that Tenses were the second most frequent errors committed by tertiary students. In this study, a writing task was administered to 49 students pursuing their Diploma studies in one of the local universities in Malaysia. Results showed that there were frequent errors made in Tenses. The example below was provided by the researchers to explain the occurrence of the error made by one of the students. This student wrote the verb ‘decide’ in the present form when s/he wanted to talk about an event that occurred in the past.

I *decide* (decided) to accept the offer. So, here I am as a student of Universiti Malaysia Pahang (p. 8)

Based on the analysis conducted, the researchers are of the view that there are many exceptions in English Tenses and thus, making it more difficult for the ESL learners, including those who are at the advanced level of English, to understand how to use Tenses correctly (Ali, et.al, 2023).

While some researchers pointed out that the difficulties are due to the lack of proficiency in the two languages, others discovered that the low proficiency of English among teachers to be the main reason. In a study conducted by Munir (2009), it was revealed that some English teachers had problems in both accuracy and fluency. This might have an adverse effect on their students making it hard for the students to have a good mastery of English. As reported in MoE (2015), quite a considerable number of English teachers (64.4%) only achieved a CEFR level of B2 when they were requested to sit for the test. This means that they failed to achieve the minimal criterion of CEFR C1.

In short, there have been studies conducted in the past pointing out that students still have poor mastery of English while the English language teachers were found to be not well-equipped with the ability of teaching the language. The lack of proficiency in English may negatively affect the national aspirations negatively. There are still many students and fresh graduates who are not well-equipped with a good mastery of English and failed to communicate effectively. The inability to use the language accurately and fluently may lead to an increase in the unemployment rate. This is because a poor mastery of English may hinder the fresh graduates from performing well during the job interviews and thus, may not be able to secure the jobs they have applied for.

3. Various Ways of Expressing Time Messages

In our daily communication, we have always talked about events that happened in the past, events that are happening at present time as well as events that have not yet taken place. There are many ways as to how time messages can be expressed. We can use temporal adverbs such as ‘yesterday’, ‘today’, ‘tonight’ and ‘tomorrow’ to tell the time an event occurs. Apart from temporal adverbs, grammatical features may be deployed to express an array of time or different time messages. In some languages such as English, grammatical features attached to

verbs such as the inflections *-s* and *-ed*, would enable language users to interpret time messages or to know the time an event occurs. But not all languages rely on grammatical features to indicate time messages. Typological studies reported that there are languages that have tenses and there are also languages without tenses. (Smith, 2008; Nose, 2020)

Many scholars and linguists are of the view that languages differ in the way time messages are conveyed. Linguists such as Binnick (1991) and Comrie (1985) pointed out that it is hard to describe how temporality (time) messages are linguistically expressed because different languages have different ways of expressing temporality/time messages (Romain, Ez-zizi, Milin & Divjak, 2022). It was added that even two closely related languages such as Germanic and Slavic demonstrate striking differences in the way they express time messages.

Comrie (1985) as cited in Romain, Ez-zizi, Milin & Divjak (2022) stated that tense is generally used to locate an event in time, with the time of speaking or utterance taken as the point of reference.

Past Tense is described as a tense used to indicate an event that occurred before the moment of speaking, a Present Tense to indicate an event at the time of speaking and a Future Tense to indicate an event that takes place after the moment of speaking (Langacker, 2001 as cited in Romain, Ez-zizi, Milin & Divjak (2022). However, it was reported that not everyone agrees to the idea that there is a Future Tense in English as unlike the other two tenses which have inflections attached to the verbs, the Future Tense requires an English Modal such as ‘*will*’ to talk about future events.

In the field of linguistics, there is one area called Linguistic Typology. Linguists whose interest is to examine how two or more than two languages are similar or different will be conducting the studies under the area of Linguistic Typology. According to Smith (2008), language can be categorised into two categories: Tense and Tenseless languages, and that languages without tenses tend to sound more direct. It was also reported that for the tenseless languages, language users need to use their inferencing abilities to interpret the intended message conveyed.

It was reported that Chinese-English bilinguals were not able to differentiate between forms that convey past e.g. I ate, and recent past messages e.g. I have eaten. This was due to the absence of Tense, a grammatical property, that conveys time messages (Comrie, 1985 as cited in Li, Casaponsa, Jones & Thierry, 2024).

Due to the absence of grammatical features that convey time messages, language users of Chinese tend to translate English verbs/verb phrases such as (i) He *had retired*, (ii) He *retired*, and (iii) He *had retired*, the same way as in ‘*intoutuixiu-le*’. The results of the study showed that Chinese learners of English with an upper-intermediate level of proficiency and an excellent mastery of English grammar are conceptually tense-blind. It means that they are not able to interpret time messages conveyed by English Tenses. Thus, it has been deduced that learning English Tenses poses a great challenge to Chinese learners.

A contrastive study of tense-rich and tenseless languages was also conducted in the past (Nose, 2020). In this study, the researcher took 4 languages to be examined; two of them are tense-rich languages and another two are tenseless languages. It was reported that Amele, a Trans-New Guinea language, has three kinds of past – today’s past, yesterday’s past and remote past and that the past tense indicators are in the form of verbal morphology. With that, Amele is regarded as a tense-rich language. Nguna and Mandarin Chinese were the two tenseless

languages taken to be examined in this study. The results showed that Nguna does not have past markers and for that reason, messages from sentences constructed may be interpreted as a past or a present message. It was not mentioned if there is any other way that language users of Nguna can use to communicate time messages. Similarly, it was found that there are no past markers in Mandarin Chinese. However, it was reported that its language users use temporal adverbs such as ‘yesterday’ to indicate a past event.

As for the Present Perfect tense, the Nguna has no morphological marker to indicate a present perfect time message, but it was reported that there are certain temporal adverbs used as cues of the past events and that perfective ‘poo’ is used to indicate tense, aspect, and mood marker.

Mandarin Chinese, on the other hand, utilizes temporal adverbs and aspect marker ‘LE’ to express time messages. Both the Nguna and Mandarin Chinese do not rely on inflections to indicate past events; temporal adverbs are used instead to communicate past messages.

In short and as reported by past studies, there are languages that allow the language users to deploy grammatical features to communicate time messages while there are also languages that require the language users to rely on context due to the absence of grammatical features to convey time messages.

4. Tenses and Time Realms in English Language

Some people claim that English has no grammar at all when it is compared to languages like Latin. Often, discussions on how the language deals with time is done as a defence for such a claim. When it comes to time, English does have grammatical features to mark time (Siti Afifah, 2018). However, it must be noted that not all languages mark time and that every language has its own way of expressing time messages. In cases where there are no grammatical features to mark time, other forms such as adverbs or adverbials are deployed to communicate time messages.

Many scholars are of the view that there are only two tenses in English, and they are Past and Non-Past/Present (Jackson & Stockwell, 2011; Lewis, 2002a; Yule, 2000). This means that there are only two main realms - either an event occurred in the past (Past) or it occurs now, at present time (Non-Past/Present). In English, temporality of events can be conveyed using different language expressions and grammatical features. These language features are used to indicate whether an event takes place in a non-past/present context or a past context.

Expressions such as the ‘*approaching week*’ and ‘*the coming year*’ make the readers feel that the events are closer to them or are brought from the future. Some other expressions such as ‘*past week*’ and ‘*yesteryears*’, are used to indicate events that occurred in the past (Yule, 2000). Besides that, grammatical features in the forms of inflections and auxiliaries can be used to convey time messages. For instance, the inflectional morpheme *-ed* attached to a verb is used to indicate a past event/message (Baker, 2011).

Yule (2000) added that language users can use temporal references to indicate the time an event takes place. Temporal references such as ‘now, here, this’ (Proximal Deictic) and ‘then, there, that’ (Distal Deictic) are used to communicate how immediate or how remote an event is from the current moment of speaking. Apart from these deictics, language expressions can also be used to indicate either an event is in the future (e.g., *the coming week*) or moving away from the speaker taking him to the past realm (e.g. *in days gone by, the past week*).

In English, there are grammatical features that can be deployed to communicate time messages. Inflections/inflectional morphemes (e.g. *-ed*, as in *walked*/PAST; *-s*, as in *walks*/PRESENT) and auxiliaries (e.g., *was*, as in *was walking*/PAST) are among the grammatical features that are used to provide time information (Siti Afifah, 2018). As stated in many studies, there are two realms of time; Non-Past and Past, and that there are four main categories in the English Tense system: Present Tense, Present Perfect Tense, Past Tense and Past Perfect Tense.

4.1 Non-Past Realm in English

There are many ways as to how present or non-past messages can be expressed grammatically in English. According to Lock (1996), Present Tense form is usually deployed when describing people, places, and things whereas, Present Continuous Tense is used to show progressive action as well as to make an action become more vivid.

Example 1

Perhaps, she *speaks* French.

Example 2

He *is coming*.

The verb in Example 1, '*speaks*' is in the form of a Simple Present Tense and the verb phrase in Example 2, '*is coming*' takes the form of a Present Continuous Tense. The inflection '*-s*' attached to the verb '*speak*' (V+*s*) in Example 1 and the auxiliary verb '*is*' in Example 2 (*aux + V+ing/Present Participle*) help to indicate that the events discussed take place in the present contexts. Both events are seen as immediate or currently relevant to the current moment of speaking.

Example 3

Last week, *I'm* in the sitting room with the wife, when this chap next door *staggers* past and in a drunken fit *throws* a brick through our window.

Here in Example 3, the use of Present Tense (*I'm/am*, *staggers*, *throws*) are used to make the story more vivid and such usage is frequently found in spoken narratives when the writers intend to highlight more exciting scenes in the narratives (Cao, 2012; Lock, 1996).

Example 4

He *has taken* his car to the car workshop.

In Example 4, the verb phrase '*has taken*' consists of an auxiliary '*has*' and a verb in the form of a Past Participle '*taken*' (V+*en*). In relation to the concept of Time/Tense, it is more commonly known as a Present Perfect Tense. It is seen as an event that falls under the present/non-past realm. However, the nature of the event is slightly different from the ones in Example 1 and Example 2. This is because the event '*has taken*' which once occurred in the past is still seen as relevant to the current moment of speaking and the information is valid or true until the current moment of speaking. According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985) as cited in Okuyama (2020), a Present Perfect Tense is used to indicate a state, an indefinite, a habit or a recurring event leading up to the present moment. Earlier, Lock (1996) has also stated that the Present Perfect Tense is used to talk about events that occurred at a non-specific time in the past but whose results are relevant to the issues/events discussed in the present moment.

Example 5:

Now it *has been discovered* by the world.

The use of the Present Perfect Tense '*has been discovered*' in the example above is meant to show that the world now knows about it.

One should not be confused with the use of the Simple Past Tense and the Present Perfect Tense as there is a difference between these two tenses, particularly in the nature of events described. Biber, Leech and Conrad (2002) pointed out the difference between the use of Past and Present Perfect. It was stated that a Present Perfect Tense is used in a context where there is a need for an event to be portrayed as relevant to the current moment of speaking, and that it continues to exist up to the present time or the current moment of speaking whereas, a Past Tense is used to indicate a completed action in the past.

4.2 Past Realm in English

There are also grammatical markers that can be deployed to communicate past messages in English.

Example 6

So, it *was* a big surprise to complacent American manufacturers when Honda *started* making cars equally efficiently, using American workers on American soil.

In Example 6, the inflection *-ed* attached to the verb, '*started*' and the verb '*was*' (a past form for '*is*') serve as the indicators that the two events occurred in the past.

However, the use of Past Form/Past Tense may not necessarily be meant to indicate a past event. In fact, some grammar books concur with the assumption saying that a past form modal signals a past event (Aitken, 2002; Swan & Walter, 2011). There can be a pragmatic meaning that is intended to be conveyed when a past form is used, particularly in a non-past or a present context. See the example below:

Example 7

I *wondered* if you could help me.

In Example 7, the use of the past form/past tense '*wondered*' is known as a pragmatic softener meant to provide more options to the hearer (Cao, 2012). According to the researcher, the message will be different if a Present Tense is used. When a Present Tense is chosen instead of a Past Tense, it leaves very little room for the hearer to decide. Therefore, in cases that require some level of politeness as in the above example, past form is deemed to be more appropriate to be used. The softening effect from the use of the past tense is meant to make the hearer feel that they are not obliged to fulfil the request and that they are given the option not to do as requested, unless they want to.

Earlier, Lock (1996) pointed out that language users would also choose past continuous form as an option to make a polite request or suggestion.

Example 8

I *was wondering* whether you would be able to help us (Lock, 1996, p.153)

According to Lock (1996), the use of the past continuous form ‘*was wondering*’ portrays a sense of tentativeness making the request sound more polite. It was also reported in Brown and Levinson (1987) that a past form is the preferred option when language users want to show some level of politeness.

A few other studies have reported that past form modals are found to be used in non-past/present contexts and that modal auxiliaries are not indicators of time (Huffman, 1989; Lewis, 2002b; Fathima Rawshan, 2014; Siti Afifah, 2015). Huffman (1989) pointed out that all English Modals are used to express different levels of probability. From Huffman’s (1989) Probability Model, we can see that each of the Modals carries its own level of probability. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Huffman’s (1989) Probability model

Probability (of an event taking place)		past	non-past
High probability	100%	Did	Do / did
	98%	Would	Will
	75%	Must	Would
50%		Should	Must
			Shall
			Should
25%		Might	May
			Might
			Can
Low probability	1%	Could	Could

It was reported that any past form modal that appears in a non-past/present context will have its degree of probability slightly reduced compared to its counterpart. For instance, when the non-past/present form modal ‘*may*’ is used in a non-past context, it means that the degree of likeliness for the event to occur is approximately 50%. However, when ‘*might*’ is used in a non-past context, the degree of probability is slightly reduced. See Example 9a and Example 9b below:

Example 9a

I *may* be able to attend the meeting this afternoon.

Example 9b

I *might* be able to attend the meeting this afternoon.

We can see that a past form modal ‘*might*’ is used in a non-past context in Example 9b. Based on Huffman’s Probability model, the level of probability for this event is slightly reduced. It means that the possibility for the speaker to attend the meeting that afternoon is much lower i.e., 45%, compared to the example in 9a.

Lewis (2002b) has also pointed out a similar view with regards to the use of past form Modals. He stated that one cannot associate past forms with past messages all the time as there are cases in which past forms are used in non-past contexts. Lewis (2002b) provided two examples, as shown below, to explain how that is possible.

Example 10

I *could speak* better French when I was at school.

In the example above, a past form Modal '*could*' is used. Generally, the Modal '*could*' is seen as a past form for the Modal '*can*'. Therefore, it would generally be interpreted as the event, or the action of speaking must have occurred in the past. However, the same past form Modal is also found to be used in non-past contexts. See Examples 11 and 12.

Example 11

I *could come* tomorrow.

Example 12

Could you please *pass* me the salt, please?

According to Lewis (2002b), it is possible to find cases where past forms are used in non-past contexts. In the two examples above, the use of the past form Modal '*could*' does not portray that the events occurred in the past. The Modal '*could*' is used in Example 11 even though there is a word '*tomorrow*' in the sentence, which is clearly not in a past context. Here in this case, the speaker would like to communicate the idea that it is remotely possible for him to come tomorrow. It was added that if the Modal '*can*' is deployed, then the message conveyed will be different as it will show that there is a greater possibility for the speaker to be able to come tomorrow (Lewis, 2002b). Example 12 clearly shows that the past form does not necessarily indicate that the event discussed occurred in the past and thus, Lewis (2002b) concluded that past forms can also be used when we are making requests.

Indeed, quite several linguists believe that language users use past form verbs when there is a need to sound more polite (Lewis, 2002a; Lock, 1996; Palmer, 2007; Siti Afifah, 2023). Palmer (2007) sees the use of the past form Modals as a strategy adopted by language users to sound more polite when asking for permissions.

It was reported by Fathima Rawshan (2014) that the Modal auxiliaries indicate relational values of probability regardless of the contexts they occur. This means that when modal auxiliaries are used, it is an indicator that the speaker intends to express some probability message.

Besides that, it was also reported that when Modal auxiliaries that convey higher levels of probability are used, there will be little flexibility for the hearers to act upon what is requested. On the other hand, when the modal auxiliaries with lower probability level are used, it gives more flexibility and freedom for the hearers. That is why we can see that past form Modals can be found to be used in non-past contexts. When this happens, the hearer seems to be given more freedom to act upon what is requested, having the option to decline the request.

In another study conducted by Siti Afifah & Govindasamy (2015), it was also found that not all past form Modals are used in past contexts. There are many cases where past form modals are found in non-past/present contexts. The researcher then pointed out that the main function of Modals is to convey probability messages. That is why past form Modals can be seen to occur in a non-past as well as in a past context. Therefore, one cannot associate a past form modal with a past message. The use of a past form modal in a non-past context will only reduce the degree of probability message making it sound more polite or less assertive, thus increasing the likeliness for the request to be fulfilled by the hearer.

As for the use of Past Perfect Tense, it was reported that it is not limited to portraying a past event. It is usually used to describe events that occurred before the occurrence of another event in the past with some duration of time involved, just like the Present Perfect Tense. The main difference is that Past Perfect Tense is used in the past realm whereas Present Perfect Tense is used to describe events that are relevant until the present moment and in the present realm.

Example 13

They *had been waiting* for hours before the bus came.

In the example above, we can see that there are two past events involved: the actions of waiting for the bus and the bus coming or arriving at the bus stop. In this case, the action of waiting for the bus took place before the bus came (before the occurrence of another past event). Lock (1996) also pointed out that the Past Perfect is usually used when one intends to introduce background events before a point in the story, taking the form of a flashback before the story proper. This can be illustrated in the example below (Example 14):

Example 14:

A clerk *had noticed* that the passport *had expired* during the final document check, and he had been instructed to step off the boarding line.

It was added that the Past Perfect Tense is used when we intend to show events prior to a point in the main story line and we use the past continuous tense to locate events simultaneous to a point in the story line (Lock, 1996, p.155)

From the examples and the explanation above, we can see how past forms in English are used to indicate past events and various pragmatic reasons as to why language users choose past forms when communicating with others in non-past contexts.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we should now be more aware of the fact that time messages in English can be conveyed using different tenses or grammatical expressions and that every form chosen has its own function. In certain languages, time messages are conveyed through grammatical features such as inflections and auxiliaries whereas, in some other languages such as Mandarin-Chinese, Thai and Japanese, language users will have to rely more on context to communicate these messages.

From the past studies, we came to know that many claimed that the students' difficulties in mastering the English language are very much attributed to the differences that exist between English and their first languages. It is indeed true to say that there can be similarities and differences between English and our first language in the way time messages are conveyed.

Perhaps it is time for the language educators as well as language learners to accept the differences in a more positive way. While accepting the fact that there are differences, they must also acknowledge the fact that there are also similarities at the same time. Such an awareness may also help the ESL or L2 learners to have good mastery of the language learnt. Teachers may want to devise suitable or effective teaching techniques so that their students will be led to notice the similarities and differences between English and their first language. One should not have the impression that the differences that exist between the two languages

would serve as a deterrence to a successful communication. Instead, we should embrace the differences.

There should be more studies conducted to specifically identify the similarities and differences between two or more languages so that people would be able to become aware of that and thus, help them to communicate more effectively in those languages.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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