

The Structure of English Verbs

Sisilia S. Halimi

Universitas Indonesia

Abstract

This paper explores the structure of English verbs, with particular attention to tense. Before discussing English tenses, the structure and systems of English verb phrase will be explained. After this exploration, some features of English tenses which are found to be the most difficult for Indonesian learners and the implication for teaching them will be discussed.

Key words:

English verbs, English verb phrase, English tenses, Indonesian learners

1. Introduction

According to Carter (1997, p. 35), “Knowing more about how grammar works is to understand more about how grammar is used and misused.” This shows that there has been a change towards the making of errors in language learning. Research has shown that the making of errors could be an effective means of improving grammatical accuracy (White et al., 1991, Trahey and White, 1993). In this paper, I will discuss some features of English verbal system which are found to be the most difficult for Indonesian learners to acquire; and therefore, often cause errors. This will be very useful for English teachers in Indonesia because they will know which features of English verbal system they need to be paid more attention to in teaching. In addition, I believe in what Palmer (1985) says that learning a language is to a very large degree learning how to operate the verbal forms of that language, so English teachers need to understand the English verbal forms well.

2. English Verbs

According to Huddleston (1984), the great majority of verbs have six forms which can be shown below:

Table 1. English Verbs

Tensed			Non-tensed		
Past	Present		Base Form	-ing Form	-en Form
	3 rd person singular	General			
took	takes	take	take	taking	taken

The tensed forms are those which belong to one of the two terms in the inflectional system of tense. They have one or other of the inflectional properties ‘past tense’ and ‘present tense.’ The non-tensed forms do not enter into inflectional contrast of this kind. The –ing form is derived from the lexical stem (base form) by suffixation of –ing. In regular verbs, the –en form is identical with the past tense forms. The past tense forms are formed in the following ways:

1. If the lexical stem ends in /t/ or /d/, add /ed/ as in *wanted, landed*;
2. If the lexical stem ends in a voiceless consonant, add /t/ as in *pushed*;
3. Otherwise, add /d/ as in *killed, robbed*.

The irregular verbs are divided by Quirk (1985) into the following seven classes:

Table 2. Verbs Forms

Class	Verb Forms
One	V-ed ₁ (Past) is identical with V-ed ₂ (-en form), vowel identity in all the parts, e.g.: <i>learn – learned/learnt – learned/learnt</i>
Two	V-ed ₁ is identical with V-ed ₂ , change of base vowel, suffixation is used, e.g. : <i>mean – meant - meant</i>
Three	All three parts are identical, no change of base vowel, e.g.: <i>cut – cut – cut</i>
Four	V-ed ₁ is identical with V-ed ₂ , no suffixation, change of base vowel, e.g.: <i>meet – met – met</i>
Five	V-ed ₂ has two suffixes, no change of the base vowel for V-ed ₁ , e.g.: <i>mow – mowed – mown/mowed</i>

Six	V-ed ₁ and V-ed ₂ are different, there is a range of base vowel changes, e.g.: <i>break – broke – broken, blow – blew – blown</i>
Seven	V-ed ₁ and V-ed ₂ are different, no suffixation, change of base vowel, e.g.: <i>swim – swam – swum</i>

In the present tense, the verb has to agree with the subject, either 3rd person singular subject of general subject. The general present tense form is identical with the base form. The 3rd person singular present is formed in the following way:

1. If the lexical stem ends in a ‘sibilant’, add /iz/ or /əz/, as in *kisses, watches*
2. If the lexical stem ends in a ‘voiceless consonant’, add /s/, as in *hops, walks*
3. Otherwise, add /z/, as in *lobs, runs*.

Quirk (1985) states that in English clause structure, the function of the verb element is realized by the verb phrase, which consists of one or more verb constituents. According to Halliday (1985), this verb phrase, which he calls ‘verbal group’, is the expansion of a verb. It ranges from short, one-word verbal group to long string of verbs.

3. The Structure of Verb Phrase in English

Huddleston (1984) says the verb phrase consists of a head element, obligatory except in cases of ellipsis, and optionally one or more dependents. These positions of the dependents may be filled by auxiliary verbs or not. If the dependent positions are filled by auxiliaries, the main verb may be preceded by up to four auxiliaries. The four auxiliary positions are as follows:

Table 3. Auxiliary Positions

Auxiliaries				Main Verb
Modal	Perfect	Progressive	Passive	

The relative order of these auxiliaries is rigidly fixed. This means if the modal and perfect auxiliaries combine, the former must precede the latter, and so on.

One very important principle governing the structure of the verb phrase is that each auxiliary determines the inflectional form of the following verb. The rules can be summarized as follows:

Table 4. Verb Phrase Construction in English 1

Auxiliary	Inflectional Form of the Following Verb
Modal	Base form
Perfect	-en form
Progressive	-ing form
Passive	-en form

These rules determine the inflectional form of each verb in the verb phrase other than the first. In verb phrases, the first verb carries one of the tense inflections, that is present or past. If the initial verbs are present tense forms, there are 16 possibilities of verb phrases, ignoring differences in the choice of modal. The possibilities are:

Table 5. Verb Phrase Construction in English 2

No.	Modal Auxiliary	Perfect Auxiliary	Progressive Auxiliary	Passive Auxiliary	Main Verb
i					takes
ii				is	taken
iii			is		taking
iv			is	being	taken
v		has			taken
vi		has		been	taken
vii		has	been		taking
viii		has	been	being	taken
ix	may				take
x	may			be	taken
xi	may		be		taking
xii	may		be	being	taken
xiii	may	have			taken
xiv	may	have		been	taken

xv	may	have		been	taking
xvi	may	have	been	being	taken

If we allow a past tense counterpart for the first eight possibilities above, the number of possibilities becomes 24.

4. The Systems of Verb Phrase in English

Huddleston (1984) uses the tense contrast and the selection of auxiliary verbs as five dimensions of contrast for the verb phrase. Each of these dimensions yields a system. The names of the systems and their terms are as follows:

Table 6. The Systems of Verb Phrase in English

System	Terms	Corresponding structural property of VP
Tense	i. Past	Initial verb carries past tense inflection
	ii. Present	Initial verb carries present tense inflection
Analytic Mood	i. Modal	Contains modal auxiliary; next verb is base form
	ii. Non Modal	[Unmarked; no modal auxiliary]
Perfect Aspect	i. Perfect	Contains auxiliary have; next verb is –en form
	ii. Non Perfect	[Unmarked; no perfect auxiliary]
Progressive Aspect	i. Progressive	Contains auxiliary be; next verb is –ing form
	ii. Non-progressive	[Unmarked; no progressive auxiliary]
Voice	i. Passive	Contains auxiliary be; next verb is –en form
	ii. Active	[Unmarked; no passive auxiliary]

The correlation between the structure and the classification can be illustrated in the following examples:

- *had been eating* is past tense, non-modal, perfect, progressive, active
- *may have been eaten* is present tense, modal, perfect, non progressive, passive

5. English Tenses

The term ‘tense’ and ‘time’ are often used interchangeably. Time is not the same thing as tense. Time is an element of our experience of reality, whereas tense is a purely grammatical idea (Lewis, 1986).

Confusion arises when people think of the present tense as having something to do with present time, or the past tense with past time. Lewis (1986) gives some examples to show that the grammatical tense and the time referred to are not the same:

Table 7. English Tenses

1. I speak quite good French	Present tense, refers to general, not present time
2. We leave at 4 o'clock tomorrow	Present tense, future time
3. Would you mind if I opened the window?	Past tense, present or future time
4. Have you ever been there before?	Past time but without the past tense

Time is divided into three, past, present and future, but English has only two tenses, the present tense and the past tense (Ho, 2005). Although English has no future tense, this does not mean that it is not possible to talk about future time

in English. As the examples show, both the present tense (example 2) and past tense (example 3) can be used to talk about future time.

According to Huddleston (2002), the general term tense applies to a system where the basic or characteristic meaning of the terms is to locate the situation, or part of it, at some point or period of time. Huddleston (1985) talks about tenses under three headings:

1. Location in time

The primary use of the past tense is to indicate that the time or situation is in the past. The past tense inflection indicates that the time of the situation is past relative to some other time – usually the time of uttering the sentence. The past time may be identified specifically by a temporal expressions like yesterday or by the context. Huddleston's opinion about tenses contradicts Lewis' (1986) opinion. I think from the teaching point of view, Huddleston's opinion is easier to understand, especially for students at the elementary level of proficiency. This, however, does not mean that students do not need to learn Lewis' opinion about tenses. At a higher level of proficiency, students should be introduced to Lewis' opinion.

With the present tense, the time of the situation will normally be present or future. Whether the situation is interpreted as present or future may be determined by temporal expression, the content of a superordinate clause, by the nature of the situation, or simply by the context.

2. Factuality

Another use of the past tense is to indicate factual remoteness. Three subcases of the factual remoteness use of the past tense are:

- a. In the unreal conditional construction, with *if*, *unless*, *suppose*, *supposing*, etc.: *If Gerda comes tomorrow, we could play bridge.*
- b. In clauses functioning as complement to the verb *wish* or in construction with *It is time*: *I wish I had the latest edition. It is time you were in bed.*

- c. It occurs with modal auxiliaries: *'You might be right.'* presents the possibility of your being right as somewhat more remote than *'You may be right.'*

3. Backshifting

When a clause is embedded inside a clause whose own verb phrase is in the past tense, the present tense verb is shifted back to the corresponding past tense. This process is commonly known as 'backshifting.' The particular case of backshifting is called 'indirect reported speech.' For example: *Kim said that the match started tomorrow.* The past tense inflection accompanying 'start' does not indicate that the time of the situation is past. The phenomenon of backshifting is also found in: *Kim didn't know that the match started tomorrow.* Because of this, Huddleston prefers to use the term 'backshifting' to refer to the relation between a subordinate clause and its main counterpart, rather than that between indirect reported speech and the actual speech utterance being reported.

These three headings are also used by Palmer (1985) in discussing tense. Tense has three functions. First, to mark purely temporal relations; secondly, to mark sequence of tenses of reported speech; and thirdly, to mark 'unreality' in conditional clauses and wishes.

Another confusion is the distinction between 'tense' and 'aspect.' Lewis (1986) defines aspect as a verb form involving the use of an auxiliary which allows the speaker to interpret the temporal elements of an event. It relates to considerations such as the completion or lack of completion of events or states described by a verb (Biber, et al., 1999).

As shown on p. 5, English has two sets of aspectual contrasts: perfect/non perfect and progressive/non progressive. The progressive presents the situation as being 'in progress' while the non progressive by contrast does not present the situation as 'in progress.' The progressive aspect designates an event or state of affairs which is in progress, or continuing, at some point in time. The perfect aspect designates events or states taking place during a period leading up to the specified time. In general terms, the present perfect is used to refer to a situation

that began sometime in the past and continues up to the present. For example, the sentence *I have been teaching for more than 15 years* describes a past action that creates a situation (result) that extends to the present. Compared with present perfect aspect, past perfect aspect has a straight-forward function – to refer to a time that is earlier than some specified past time: *He died after he had drunk some poison.*

6. Some Problems Faced by Indonesian Learners in Learning English Tenses

Most Indonesians find it difficult to learn English tenses. The most obvious reason for this is Indonesian has no inflectional features at all. This difference is one of the reasons why the use of past tense in speaking is difficult to acquire. Indonesian has no inflections and no past tense. There is only one form of verb for any subject at any time to refer to present, past or future time. Time reference is expressed by adverbial phrases/words:

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| 1. Dia <i>belajar setiap hari.</i> | - | He <i>studies every day.</i> |
| 2. Dia <i>belajar kemarin.</i> | - | He <i>studied yesterday.</i> |

In Indonesian, the verb *belajar* is not inflected and has the same form for all persons. The time reference is expressed by the adverbial phrase/word *setiap hari* and *kemarin*. So Indonesians tend to use present instead of past tense.

They find it even more difficult to use past tense to indicate factual remoteness. English conditional sentences use different constructions in the main and subordinate clauses while Indonesians use the same construction as when expressing affirmative sentences. Indonesians only use adverbial of time to show the differences in meaning. Hypothetical, past hypothetical or future meaning should be expressed with the adverbial word/phrases such as *sekarang* (now), *kemarin/ minggu lalu* (yesterday/last week) and *nanti malam/ nanti sore* (this evening/this afternoon, etc.) to make it clear and easy to understand.

1. I would come to her party if she invited me
Saya akan datang ke pestanya *sekarang* jika dia mengundang saya.

2. I would have come to her party if she had invited me.
Saya akan datang ke pestaanya *kemarin* jika dia mengundang saya.
3. I will come to her party if she invites me.
Saya akan datang ke pestaanya *nanti malam* jika dia mengundang saya.

These conditional constructions in English are really very difficult to acquire because the use of past time in these constructions are very complicated.

Another difficulty which is also caused by the difference in tense system is in choosing the past tense and present perfect. It is difficult for learners to see the difference between them. The perspective aspect is expressed by the word *sudah* or *telah* which refers to the past in Indonesian. So, for learners, both of them are used to refer to past. They cannot understand easily the fact that the present perfect is most importantly a present form.

Based on my experience in high school and my observations recently, the traditional statement of tense in terms of present, past and future are still taught in schools. The result of this is the use of *will/shall* for expressing future time and students are rarely taught to use present tense for expressing future time while the meaning is actually different in using *present tense* and *will/shall*. The majority of Indonesian learners will use *will/shall* for expressing future time for different purposes.

7. Implication for Teaching

The dominant view of English language learning at the moment is not about accumulating grammar rules and through practice becoming more and more proficient at deploying them. Instead, learners are supposed to engage in various communication activities which will trigger natural acquisition processes and for many second/foreign language acquisition specialists (Nunan, 1990, Ellis, 2003) , the most appropriate type of communicative activity is the task.

Even if this is correct, it does not mean that explicit grammar instruction cannot be used to support the process of implicit language development. I still believe that language teacher should invest some classroom time in explicit grammar instruction. Knowing explicit grammar rules may lead to learners being

able to notice the structures that exemplify these rules in the input; and therefore, help learners obtain more comprehensible input. According to VanPatten (2004), this increased comprehensible input will result in increased likelihood of a form being processed in the input. In addition, for many adult learners, being able to understand how a target language works, obviously including the rules underlying their own production, is a vital part of the learning process (Scheffler and Cinciata, p. 14). Therefore, the best way to overcome the problems faced by Indonesian learners in learning English tenses is to provide some classroom time to teach the English tenses that are difficult to learn by teaching them using what is called form-focused instruction (FFI). Simple, explicit metalinguistic descriptions and implicit, incidental references to form can be meaningful to learners. This can be done by the incorporation of forms into communicative tasks. Ellis (1997) calls this grammar consciousness raising (C-R).

8. Conclusion

As learning a language is to a very large degree learning how to operate the verbal form of that language, it is really important for English teachers to understand the English verbal forms well. Since in English clause structure, the function of the verb element is realized by the verb phrase, it is really important for English teachers to comprehend the English verb phrase competently.

The English verb phrase can consist of one or more verb constituents and it varies depending on the six major structural distinctions, that is, tense, analytic mood, perfect and progressive aspects, and voice. For most Indonesians, learning the systems of English verb phrase is not easy because of the differences that exist between Indonesian and English. Indonesian language has no inflectional features at all and no past tense. It also cannot indicate factual remoteness without using adverbial of time to show the differences in meaning. Indonesian learners also find it difficult to choose the past tense or present perfect. Therefore, it is really very important for Indonesian learners to master the English tense system if they want to use English successfully. One way to help them overcome these difficulties is by teaching them using C-R. C-R is believed to be able to help facilitate acquisition, converting the explicit knowledge the learners develop into

implicit knowledge, the knowledge that becomes the ultimate goal in language pedagogy (Sugiharto, 2006).

References

- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E. 1999. Harlow: Longman.
- Carter, R. 1997. The new grammar teaching. In R. Carter, *Investigating English discourse* (pp. 19-35). London: Routledge.
- Ellis, R. 1997. *SLA research and language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. 2003. *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1985. *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Ho, C. M. L. 2005. *Exploring errors in grammar: A guide for English language teachers*. Singapore: Longman.
- Huddleston, R. 1984. *Introduction to the grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huddleston, R & Pullum, G. K. 2002. *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, M. 1986. *The English verb*. London: Language Teaching Publications.
- Nunan, D. 1990. *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Palmer, F. R. 1985. *The English verb*. London: Longman.
- Quirk, R. G. & Leech, G. 1985. *A grammar of contemporary English*. London: Longman.
- Scheffler, P. & Cinciata, M. 2011. Explicit grammar rules and L2 acquisition. *ELT Journal*, 65, 13-23.
- Sugiharto, S. 2008. Grammar consciousness-raising: research, theory, and application. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 2, 140-148.
- Trahey, M & White, L. 1993. Positive evidence and preemption. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 15, 181-204.

- VanPatten, B. 2004. Input processing in second language acquisition. In B. VanPatten (ed.) *Processing instruction: Theory, research and commentary*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- White, L., Spada, N., Lightbown, P. & Ranta, L. 1991. Input enhancement and L2 question formation. *Applied Linguistics*, 12, 416-432.