

ASSESSING EFL LEARNERS' MASTERY OF SIMPLE PRESENT AND PRESENT PROGRESSIVE TENSES

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Abstract

This study explores the mastery of the simple present and present progressive tenses among second-semester Counselling and Guidance students at Universitas Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH, Bengkulu. The purpose of the study is to assess students' ability to use these tenses correctly in both written and spoken forms. A mixed-methods approach was employed, consisting of a grammar test to evaluate students' written proficiency and structured interviews to assess their spoken usage. The results revealed that while students showed relatively high proficiency in using the simple present tense, their performance with the present progressive tense was weaker. Common errors identified included confusion between the two tenses, omission of auxiliary verbs, and incorrect verb forms. These findings suggest that students have a solid grasp of the simple present tense but face difficulties with the present progressive tense, largely due to the absence of similar tense forms in their native language. The study concludes that targeted grammar instruction, particularly focusing on the present progressive tense, is essential. It also recommends incorporating task-based learning and form-focused instruction to enhance grammatical accuracy. The findings offer valuable insights into tense acquisition among Indonesian EFL learners and have implications for improving English grammar teaching practices at the university level.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL); simple present tense, present progressive tense; grammar mastery; tense acquisition

INTRODUCTION

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, understanding and mastering grammar is a crucial part of language proficiency. Among the various grammatical structures, tenses are often identified as one of the most challenging areas for learners, especially for non-native speakers. In particular, the mastery of the simple present tense and present progressive tense plays a pivotal role in the foundation of communicative competence. Although these two

tenses are conceptually simple, learners frequently struggle to apply them accurately in both written and spoken forms (Burhan, 2019). This difficulty may stem from insufficient exposure to natural language use, a lack of explicit instruction, or ineffective learning strategies. Without a strong grasp of these fundamental tenses, students may struggle with more complex grammatical structures later in their language learning journey.

This difficulty arises because each tense serves distinct functions in communication. The simple present tense describes habitual actions, general truths, and states, whereas the present progressive tense indicates actions happening at the moment of speaking or temporary situations (Baker, 2018). However, many EFL learners, particularly in Indonesia, find it challenging to differentiate between these two tenses due to structural differences between English and their native language. As a result, these challenges can hinder their overall language proficiency and communication skills. Addressing these difficulties through targeted grammar instruction and meaningful practice is crucial to helping learners develop greater accuracy and confidence in their English usage.

This study focuses on assessing the mastery of these two tenses among second-semester Counselling Guidance students at Universitas Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH in Bengkulu, Indonesia. This group is particularly interesting as students from the Counselling Guidance program are expected to use English in both academic and professional settings, where grammatical accuracy is vital. Yet, little is known about how these learners perform with respect to these two tenses, making this research both timely and necessary.

Research in EFL pedagogy consistently points to the importance of grammar in language acquisition, particularly tenses. In Indonesia, English language instruction typically begins at an early age, but many students still struggle with certain grammatical areas, especially tenses. Studies indicate that tense errors, such as incorrect usage of the simple present and present progressive tenses, are among the most common issues faced by Indonesian EFL learners (Listia & Febriyanti, 2020). The frequent misuse of these tenses often results in misunderstandings and communication breakdowns.

The Counselling Guidance department students at Universitas Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH Bengkulu are an ideal group to examine for this study due to the importance of precise language



use in the field of counselling. Effective communication is essential for counselling professionals, and grammatical accuracy plays a key role in ensuring the clarity of their messages. This context provides a unique angle to explore how second-semester students, who are still in the early stages of their academic journey, manage these fundamental grammatical structures.

While previous studies have examined the challenges faced by Indonesian EFL learners in mastering various tenses, there is a lack of focused research specifically addressing the mastery of the simple present and present progressive tenses in specialized fields such as Counselling Guidance. Studies by Rizky et al. (2021) have pointed out that Indonesian EFL students often show difficulties in mastering these tenses, yet none have explored how these challenges manifest in specific disciplines like Counselling Guidance, where communication proficiency is crucial.

Additionally, there is limited research that connects grammatical mastery with students' readiness for their professional roles. Most studies focus on general language proficiency, but there is a gap in understanding how grammar, particularly tenses, influences the academic and professional readiness of students in a specialized field. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of how Counselling Guidance students at Universitas Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH perform in mastering these tenses.

Previous studies have underscored the difficulty of mastering tenses among EFL learners. For instance, Baker (2018) found that EFL students, particularly those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, frequently confuse the simple present and present progressive tenses due to differences in their native languages. Similarly, (Mahmudah & Izzah, 2019) conducted a study on Indonesian EFL learners and found that tense-related errors were one of the most frequent sources of mistakes in their writing and speaking tasks.

In a more specific context, a study by Tahang (2020) revealed that Indonesian university students had significant difficulty with the correct usage of tenses, with the present progressive tense being especially problematic. However, Taryanto's research focused on a general student population and did not explore specialized programs like Counselling Guidance. A further study by Shaukat Ali et al. (2021) demonstrated that EFL learners often have difficulties in

recognizing the contextual differences between the simple present and present progressive tenses, which can lead to confusion and miscommunication in academic contexts.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on a specific group of students from a Counselling Guidance program, a field where communication accuracy is paramount. Unlike previous studies that generalized findings across all EFL learners, this research narrows its focus to examine how second-semester students in a particular program at a local university perform in mastering these tenses. The study not only evaluates grammatical proficiency but also explores the practical implications of tense mastery for students' academic and professional success.

Moreover, this study seeks to offer pedagogical recommendations based on the findings, specifically aimed at improving the teaching of tenses in the Counselling Guidance curriculum. By examining how students in this specialized field interact with English grammar, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on how grammar instruction can be tailored to meet the needs of specific disciplines, providing a new perspective in EFL pedagogy.

METHOD

This section outlines the research design, participants, instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques used in this study. The research follows a descriptive quantitative approach, as it aims to assess the level of mastery of the simple present and present progressive tenses among second-semester Counselling Guidance students at Universitas Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH Bengkulu. Descriptive research is appropriate in this case as it allows the researcher to describe the current state of students' grammatical proficiency without manipulating variables.

The research used a descriptive analysis design to examine students' proficiency in using the simple present and present progressive tenses in English. This design was selected because the goal is to assess the current state of learners' grammatical abilities in these specific tenses, providing a snapshot of their strengths and weaknesses. Descriptive analysis allows for a clear understanding of students' mastery levels, which can be useful for pedagogical recommendations. Additionally, the study employs a case study approach, focusing on a



specific group of students from the Counselling Guidance department. This method is suitable as it enables an in-depth examination of a particular group within a specific educational context, allowing for a more detailed exploration of the challenges they face and the instructional strategies that may support their learning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By combining descriptive analysis with a case study approach, this research not only provides a general overview of students' grammatical proficiency but also highlights specific difficulties and learning patterns unique to this group. Such an approach ensures that the findings can be directly applied to improve grammar instruction, making learning more effective and relevant to students' needs.

The participants in this study are second-semester students from the Counselling Guidance department at Universitas Prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH, Bengkulu. These students were selected because they are in the early stages of their academic program and are expected to acquire basic English grammar knowledge that will be critical in their future professional practice. The sample consists of 30 students, both male and female, aged between 19 and 22 years. They are native speakers of Indonesian, and their English proficiency is at an intermediate level, based on their TOEFL scores (averaging around 450-500).

Inclusion criteria for participation required students to be officially enrolled in the second semester of the Counselling Guidance program at the institution. This criterion ensured that participants had a similar academic background and level of exposure to the program's curriculum. Additionally, students were required to have completed at least one English course that specifically focused on grammar and language skills. This prerequisite was set to ensure that all participants had a foundational understanding of English language structures, enabling a more consistent assessment of their linguistic development.

The study utilizes two primary instruments for data collection: a grammar test and a structured interview. Both instruments were designed to assess the participants' mastery of the simple present and present progressive tenses. These instruments were chosen based on their ability to capture both written and spoken production of the target tenses, providing a comprehensive evaluation of grammatical proficiency.

Grammar Test: The grammar test consists of multiple-choice questions and fill-in-the-blank exercises that require students to correctly apply the *simple present* and *present progressive* tenses in context. The test is designed to measure both recognition and production of the tenses in various sentence structures. The total number of questions is 20, with 10 questions for each tense, and the test is administered within a 45-minute time limit.

The multiple-choice section will assess students' ability to select the correct tense given a sentence, while the fill-in-the-blank section evaluates their ability to produce the correct form of the verb in context. Both sections are scored based on accuracy, and the total score will be used to assess the students' overall proficiency in the tenses.

The structured interview is designed to assess the oral proficiency of students in using the simple present and present progressive tenses. The interview consists of 5 questions related to personal daily routines, current activities, and future plans, which require students to use both tenses in their responses. The interviews are conducted one-on-one with the researcher and recorded for later transcription and analysis. The interview questions include prompts such as: "What do you usually do on weekends?" (simple present tense) and "What are you doing right now?" (present progressive tense). This instrument helps gather data on how well students can apply these tenses in spontaneous speech.

The data collection process was carried out over a two-week period. First, students were invited to participate in the grammar test, which was administered in their regular classroom setting. The test was conducted during a designated class time, with no external aids allowed. The researcher explained the test instructions before administration to ensure that students understood the task. After the grammar test, students were scheduled for individual structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately 10-15 minutes per student. Students were encouraged to speak freely and were allowed to ask for clarification if necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The collected data were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the students' grammatical proficiency. In the quantitative analysis, the grammar test results were scored based on the number of correct



answers for each tense. A descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to calculate the average scores for both the simple present and present progressive tenses. Additionally, the standard deviation and range were calculated to understand the variation in students' performance, allowing the researcher to determine the overall proficiency level of the students in using these tenses. Meanwhile, the qualitative analysis focused on structured interview responses, which were transcribed and examined for patterns in students' use of the simple present and present progressive tenses. Errors in tense usage were categorized into different types, such as tense confusion, omission, or substitution, and the frequency of each error type was recorded. A thematic analysis was also conducted to identify common themes in students' oral production, including hesitation or difficulty in producing the correct tense in spontaneous speech. By combining these two approaches, the study provides a well-rounded understanding of students' grammatical abilities and the challenges they face in mastering these tenses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results of the data collection process are presented and discussed in relation to the research questions, previous studies, and the theoretical framework. The analysis focuses on two primary aspects: students' performance on the grammar test and their proficiency in using the simple present and present progressive tenses in structured interviews. The grammar test results indicate that students demonstrated a better grasp of the simple present tense than the present progressive tense. Out of 30 participants, the average score for the simple present tense was 80%, while the average score for the present progressive tense was only 62%, suggesting that students are more familiar with the simple present tense, likely due to its frequent use in daily communication and academic contexts. Common errors in the simple present tense included subject-verb agreement issues, particularly with third-person singular subjects (e.g., "he go" instead of "he goes"), and omissions of auxiliary verbs in negative forms (e.g., "She not like" instead of "She does not like"). Meanwhile, performance on the present



progressive tense was significantly lower, with students frequently struggling to recognize its function for actions occurring at the moment of speaking. The most common mistakes included using the simple present tense instead of the present progressive (e.g., "I eat" instead of "I am eating") and omitting the auxiliary verb to be (e.g., "She playing" instead of "She is playing"). These errors align with findings from previous studies that highlight tense confusion as a common issue among Indonesian EFL learners.

The structured interviews provided further insight into students' spoken language proficiency, reinforcing the patterns observed in the grammar test results. Students demonstrated more confidence in using the simple present tense, particularly when describing daily routines, habits, or general facts. However, when asked to describe ongoing actions or current situations, they often struggled with the present progressive tense. Many students either used the simple present tense incorrectly (e.g., "I read now" instead of "I am reading now") or omitted the auxiliary verb to be (e.g., "She studying" instead of "She is studying"). The most significant challenge appeared to be a lack of understanding of the present progressive tense as an indicator of actions happening at the moment of speaking. These findings corroborate previous research that suggests Indonesian EFL learners often confuse these two tenses due to differences in their native language structure.

The findings of this study reflect the complexity of tense acquisition for Indonesian EFL learners, particularly the contrast between their mastery of the simple present and present progressive tenses. The stronger performance in the simple present tense can be attributed to its frequent exposure in both written and spoken communication, as well as its relatively straightforward grammatical structure (Maya Sartika, 2020). In contrast, difficulties with the present progressive tense can be explained by the absence of equivalent tense forms in the Indonesian language, where context rather than verb conjugation typically determines temporal meaning. Additionally, limited explicit instruction and contextualized practice in using the present progressive tense may contribute to students' struggles. Without sufficient reinforcement, learners may fail to grasp its correct usage, leading to persistent errors.

To address these challenges, the study highlights the importance of incorporating contextualized grammar instruction that emphasizes meaningful communicative tasks. Task-



based learning, such as role-plays and discussions about current events, can help learners apply both tenses in real-life situations, thereby enhancing grammatical accuracy and fluency. Previous research has demonstrated that task-based activities improve learners' understanding of tense distinctions by providing opportunities for active use in authentic contexts. Furthermore, teachers should focus on form-focused instruction, offering clear explanations, targeted exercises, and corrective feedback to help students differentiate between the two tenses more effectively (Setiana, 2023). In addition, drills, games, and interactive exercises can reinforce proper tense usage and increase students' confidence in applying the present progressive tense correctly. By incorporating these strategies, teachers can create a more engaging and supportive learning environment that facilitates mastery of both tenses.

These findings align with previous studies indicating that Indonesian EFL learners struggle with tense acquisition, particularly when dealing with tenses that do not have direct equivalents in their native language. Research has consistently shown that the confusion between the simple present and present progressive tenses is a recurring issue, stemming from differences in linguistic structure and exposure. Similar to findings by Kuswanty et al. (2023), this study confirms that Indonesian learners often default to the simple present tense due to its familiarity, leading to errors in their use of the present progressive tense. Additionally, Nurlaela & Nawir (2020) observed that Indonesian students exhibited stronger confidence in using the simple present tense while struggling with the present progressive in both written and spoken forms. By reinforcing effective teaching strategies and increasing opportunities for students to engage with these tenses in meaningful ways, educators can help bridge this gap and improve overall grammatical proficiency among Indonesian EFL learners.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has provided important insights into the difficulties faced by Indonesian EFL learners in mastering the *simple present tense* and *present progressive tense*. By highlighting the specific challenges encountered by second-semester Counselling Guidance students, the research has contributed to the understanding of tense acquisition in the Indonesian EFL context. The findings emphasize the need for more targeted grammar instruction and increased opportunities for students to practice these tenses in meaningful communicative

contexts. By addressing these challenges, educators can better support students in achieving greater accuracy and fluency in their use of English tenses, ultimately enhancing their overall language proficiency.

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