A Corpus-Based Study on the Use of Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' in Argumentative Essays of Malaysian ESL Learners

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Abstract

This research is a corpus-based study of secondary and college ESL Malaysian learner's written work by identifying and classifying the types of errors in the Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be'. This This research studied the past tense auxiliary 'be', types of past tense auxiliary 'be' errors and frequency of past tense auxiliary 'be' errors found in the Malaysian Corpus of Students' Argumentative Writing (MCSAW) corpus using the WordSmith Tools Version 4.0 and using the Error Analysis (EA) approach. The findings revealed that there are seven types of errors. They are Tense Shift, Agreement, Missing Auxiliary Be, Wrong Verb Form, Addition and Misformation and Misordering. This study can be used as a guide for English Language teachers to identify the most common errors in using the Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' made by the ESL learners and decide what remedial action can be taken to prevent them from making these errors. It can also help teachers improvise and develop materials which are not only more suitable but also cater to the needs of the students. In addition to the materials, teachers can also revise their teaching approaches and strategies to ensure effective teaching and learning of these grammar components.

Keywords: corpus study, past tense auxiliary 'be', secondary school learners, tertiary level learners

1. Introduction

Mastering a second language is often seen as a difficult task, especially for those who communicate with others using their first language. Malaysia is a multiracial country which consists of the three main races; Malay, Chinese and Indian, as well as many other minority ethnic groups which make up the population. Although Malaysians have their own mother tongues such as Bahasa Melayu for the Malays, Mandarin for the Chinese and Tamil for majority of the Indians, they generally use Bahasa Melayu to communicate as it is the National language. However, Malaysians do speak languages of their different ethnic groups within their respective communities. The Malaysian Constitution prescribed English as the second language in Malaysia. It has now become a necessity for Malaysians to be competent in the language as English is essential for employment opportunities and for learners to pursue higher education. However, learners have fewer opportunities to naturally acquire the English language through interaction and conversation as they are more prone to be immersed in the National language or mother tongues, especially in the rural areas of the country. Therefore, in learning and acquiring a second language (English in this case) in these limited opportunities, learners are bound to make errors. Stapa & Izahar (2010) indicate that errors in learning a language have always been the focal point to individuals who are oppressed with English language learning and teaching standards, particularly, the knowledge of grammar. This is supported by Light Bown & Spada (2006) cited in Muftah & Rafic-Galea, (2013) who claim that learners' errors in learning a language and knowledge on grammar reveal the development of second language. Thus, the communicative language teaching approach was widely accepted and used among theorists and educationists in the 1980s (Stapa & Izahar, 2010).

2. Problem Statement

Despite English being taught as a second language in the education system in Malaysia for many years, there is still a need for it to be mastered by a large number of Malaysian learners as numerous mistakes are found in their language production (Stapa & Izahar, 2010). Mastering English is crucial because English is an international language widely spoken in the world. People who are able to speak English have international business

opportunities, chances of getting better jobs in established corporations and chances of meeting many new people globally through social networking sites and knowing English is also important because most of the books, researches and software programs are written and expressed in English (Wijaya, 2012).

According to Corder (1981), ESL learners do not realise the errors they make and are unable to make corrections by themselves. Furthermore, Muftah & Rafic-Galea (2013) claim that grammatical knowledge, tense to be specific, is the most critical and difficult part for ESL learners to master. According to Cao, (2012), Zhuang Xin, (2010) and Moursi, (2012), this is because many L1 languages do not have tenses. Therefore, they believe that mastering the English language begins by mastering the use of the English tenses. Tense is a grammar component that enables learners to locate a situation in time. They are in the form of the present, past and future tense. In the English language, tenses are important because they give information on the time a verb occurs. Lim Ho Peng (1976), Azimah (1998), and James (1988) as cited in Darus & Subramaniam (2009), conducted researches on Malaysian ESL learners' written works and found errors in tenses being used. Thus, this study intends to use a corpus-based method to explore Form 4, Form 5 and college ESL Malaysian learners' written work in terms of identifying and classifying the types of errors in the Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' in order to find answers to the following research questions:

1) What is the frequency of past tense auxiliary 'be' used in the argumentative essays written by Malaysian form 4, form 5 and college students?

2) What types of past tense auxiliary 'be' errors are found in the argumentative essays written by Malaysian form 4, form 5 and college students?

3) What is the frequency of past tense auxiliary 'be' errors found in argumentative essays written by Malaysian form 4, form 5 and college students?

3. Significance of the Study

The contribution of this study to the body of knowledge of ESL teaching and learning of grammar is believed to be valuable. This is because English Language teachers will be able to use the findings as guidance on necessary remedial actions that should be employed to prevent Malaysian ESL learners from making errors in using the Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be'. Among the remedial actions that can be considered are the revision of more appropriate teaching materials and more creative teaching strategies to enhance the mastery of these grammar components.

4. Literature Review

There are different kinds of errors and variations in second language learners' writings. Therefore, it is important to investigate their written production. There has been an increasing interest in the research of tense among second-language learners (L2). Tense is a grammatical component that indicates when the situation takes place and locates a situation in time. It is normally indicated by a verb form, either on the main verb or on an auxiliary verb. An auxiliary verb is a verb used to add functional or grammatical meaning to the clause in which it appears. There are three types of tenses which are the past tense, present tense and the future tense. In this research, the past tense auxiliary 'be' will be investigated. By investigating students' writing, teachers will be able to find the best ways in overcoming the problematic areas in students' writings (Ahour & Mukundan, 2012).

4.1 Studies on Past Tense

According to Saadiyah & Subramaniam (2009), a study was carried out among 72 Form 4 Malay students to examine errors in a corpus of 72 essays written by them. These students barely communicate in English outside the classroom and come from a non-English speaking background. The researchers used the Markin software to analyse the participants' essays which identified and classified errors into a range of categorizations. As a result, verb tense errors were one of the most common errors found. Participants found difficulty in applying the correct tense to the verbs in their sentences because they lacked awareness of the various rules required for the application of tenses.

Wong (2012) investigated English tense and agreement morphology acquisition among Malaysian ESL learners. In order to compare Malay and Chinese languages' roles in English language acquisition, data was gathered from two groups of ESL learners for the study. A grammatically judgment task (GJT) which tested the basic knowledge of English tense and agreement morphology of the learners was designed and used to collect the data that was gathered. The Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (Hawkins and Chan 1997) in English as a second language acquisition was aimed to be tested in this study. Its purpose was to identify the contexts in which L1 Malay and L1 Chinese speakers find English non-past tense and agreement morphology more difficult, and analyse the nature of L1 representations of the non-past tense and agreement morphology in English among these speakers. The findings show that apparent near native-like acquisition of the L2 property might not be the

case when learners seem to have more difficulty with the ungrammatical items than the grammatical items. L1 Malay and L1 Chinese learners of L2 English were predicted to have difficulty in acquiring the tense and agreement morphology in English, in terms of the different ways tense is produced between English, and Chinese or Malay. Previous researches have revealed that L1 Chinese speakers of L2 English find English tense and agreement morphology difficult (Lardiere 1998 a, b).

4.2 English Language Corpus Work in Malaysia

There are only a few corpora on the English language used in Malaysia and they are not easily available to the public (Menon, 2009 cited by Norwati Roslim & Mukundan, 2011). There are only four notable corpora developed by different universities in Malaysia which are the English language of Malaysian School Students (EMAS) which was created by Arshad Abd Samad et al., (2002) from Universiti Putra Malaysia, textbook corpus of the Form One to Form Five Malaysian English language textbooks by Mukundan & Anealka Aziz, (2007) from Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysian Corpus of Learner English (MACLE) was developed by Knowles & Zuraidah, (2004) in Universiti Malaya and Corpus of Malaysian English (COMEL) was also developed by the same university (Norwati Roslim & Mukundan, 2011). For this research, the Malaysian Corpus of Students' Argumentative Writing (MCSAW) corpus was created in 2013. The corpus consists of Form 4, Form 5 and College ESL learners' argumentative essay on the topic Advantages and disadvantages of Facebook.

4.3 Theoretical Framework

The Error Analysis (EA) theoretical approach was used for this study. Assumptions that the learners make a major constituent in the language teaching and learning process feedback system are made in this approach (Corder, 1967). Errors are also a result of the active contribution to second language acquisition by learners (Ellis, 1986). The researchers employed Corder's Error Analysis procedure to analyse the errors made by the subjects, (Corder 1974, as cited by Stapa & Izahar (2010) which comprise the steps below:

a) A corpus of language is selected and the size of the sample, the medium and the homogeneity of the sample is decided with regard to the learners' ages, L1 background, stage of development.

b) The errors are identified and classified with a grammatical description to each error.

c) The errors are explained and evaluated.

The steps above were adhered to in the present study. All errors connected to Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' were identified after the essays were gathered. They were then classified into two categories which were 'was' and 'were' and classified into different types of errors.

5. Method

5.1 Population and Sampling

For the purpose of this study, the population for the English language corpus was students of Form 4, Form 5 and college from Selangor, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan. The corpus used in this study is the Malaysian Corpus of Students' Argumentative Writing (MCSAW) developed by Mukundan & Rezvani Kalajahi (2013). This corpus consisted of 406500 running words.

The analysis of Auxiliary 'Be' Past Tense, comprised one assignment of approximately 250 words, titled Advantages and Disadvantages of Facebook written by Form 4, Form 5 and College students. Using such a corpus as the base to identify and examine the problems of ESL learners provides researchers with genuine data for investigation of learner errors.

5.2 Instrumentation

The WordSmith Tools Version 4.0 was used almost entirely for the purpose of this research, because it has been recognized as a capable and suitable tool to support quantitative and qualitative data analysis by many researchers. (Mukundan & Roslim, 2009)

6. Results and Discussion

In this section, the findings are presented and discussed in detail. The analysis will answer the research questions, which are:

1) What is the frequency of past tense auxiliary 'be' used in the argumentative essays written by Malaysian form 4, form 5 and college students?

2) What types of past tense auxiliary 'be' errors are found in the argumentative essays written by Malaysian form 4, form 5 and college students?

3) What is the frequency of past tense auxiliary 'be' errors found in argumentative essays written by Malaysian form 4, form 5 and college students?

6.1 Frequency of Auxiliary 'Be' Used

The findings for the first research question reveals that Form 4, Form 5 and College Malaysian ESL learners have used the Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' in their argumentative essay entitled Advantages and Disadvantages of Facebook. Table 1 shows the frequency of Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' used in their essays.

Table 1. Frequency of past tense auxiliary be used in advantages and disadvantages of facebook

Past Tense Auxiliary Be Form	Form 4		Form 5		College	
	Error Free	Error Laden	Error Free	Error Laden	Error Free	Error Laden
Was	122	49	68 (74.7%)	23 (25.3%)	98	54
	(71.3%)	(28.7%)			(64.47%)	(35.53%)
Were	29	38	28 (59.6%)	19 (40.4%)	25	28
	(43.3%)	(56.7%)			(47.17%)	(52.83%)
	114.6%	85.4%	134.3%	65.7%	111.64%	88.36%

According to the data shown in Table 1, there were 238 attempts in Form 4 essays, with 151 (63.44%) attempts being correct and 87 (36.55%) attempts being erroneous. Form 5 students used past tense auxiliary 'be' 138 times in their essays, with 81 (58.69%) attempts being correct and 57 (41.30%) attempts being erroneous. There were 205 attempts in college students' essays, 123 (60%) were correct and 82 (40%) were erroneous. Overall, there were 248 (42.68%) incorrect past tense auxiliary 'be' usage in their essays. It shows that these students regardless of education level have not fully mastered how to use the past tense auxiliary 'be' correctly.

6.2 Types and Frequency of Errors

Table 2. The overall errors types and frequency in advantages and disadvantages of facebook

No	Types of Errors	Frequency			Percentages (%)		
		Form 4	Form 5	College	Form 4	Form 5	College
1	Tense Shift	13	24	52	14.94	57.1	63.41
2	Agreement	4	9	13	4.59	21.4	15.85
3	Ommission	6	0	1	6.89	0	1.22
4	Wrong Verb Form	49	5	13	56.32	11.9	15.85
5	Addition	1	2	2	1.14	4.8	2.44
6	Misformation	14	2	0	16.09	4.8	0
7	Misordering	0	0	1	0	0	1.22
	Total Errors	87	42	82	100	100	100

The collected essays were analyzed sentence by sentence in order to detect the types of errors of Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' using Error Analysis (EA). The table above shows the types and frequency of errors found in this study. After analyzing the MSWEC Corpus seven types of Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' errors are found. They are Tense Shift, Agreement, Missing Auxiliary Be, Wrong Verb Form, Addition and Misformation and Misordering. These findings will be accompanied by further discussions.

1. Tense shift

Tense shift is changing from one verb tense to another (usually from past to present, or vice versa) within a sentence or paragraph.

Example:

Form 4

Facebook *was* one of the social network that's famous among school students now.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

Facebook *is* one of the social network that's famous among school students now..

There *were* many case such as wife having relationship with other man or husbands having relationship with other woman.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

There *are* many case[s] such as wife having relationship with other man or husbands having relationship with other woman.

Form 5

It *was* very dangerous so please don't add any people you don't know …

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

It *is* very dangerous so please don't add any people you don't know …

This is because they *were* too busy with their online friends…

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

This is because they *are* too busy with their online friends…

College

Students can also acquire new information through Facebook since it *was* one of the useful social media.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

Students can also acquire new information through Facebook since it *is* one of the useful social media.

Nowadays, a lot of social networks *were* created for the society.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

Nowadays, a lot of social networks *are* created for the society.

The frequency shows that 14.94% of Form 4 students attempt to make this tense shift error followed by 57.1% for Form 5 and 63.41% for college students. This shows that tense shift is committed the most by college students followed by Form 5 students. Tense shift errors occur in sentences because these students may have overlooked the transition in time when writing the essay. (present time and past time)

2. Agreement

Agreement can be defined as the verb agreeing with the singular or plural subject.

Example:

Form 4

If some of our friends *was* in oversea, we can use facebook   …..

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

If some of our friends *were* in oversea, we can use facebook   ….

Form 5

…that is why their names *was* destroyed in facebook.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is

…that is why their names *were* destroyed in facebook.

College

Lastly, her children *was* found killed by unknown people.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is

Lastly, her children *were* found killed by unknown people.

The frequency shows that 4.59% of Form 4 students made this type of error, followed by 21.4 % for Form 5 and

15.85% for college students. This shows that the students' make careless mistakes that they did not notice whether it is the singular or plural subject when using the verb.

3. Omission

This error type happens because the students omit the past tense auxiliary 'be' (was /were) in the sentences.

Example:

Form 4

The website intended to be an online version of the University's printed Facebook

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

The website *was* intended to be an online version of the University's printed Facebook

College

The child cried in hunger while she browsing Facebook.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is

The child cried in hunger while she *was* browsing Facebook.

The frequency of this error is 6.89% for Form 4, and 1.22% for college students'. Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' is used as a helping verb, which shows the progressive actions in the past time. Although the students are making errors in this type, the frequency shows low percentage on this type of error. The form five students tend to understand the progressive actions in the past time. These students did not produce any mistakes compared to the form four students.

4. Wrong verb form

This error type occurs when there is an error on the agreement of the subject with the verb form.

Example:

Form 4

When it was my time to chat, my chat space was stopped functioning

The accurate sentence is:

When it was my time to chat, my chat space had stopped functioning

But now, people *were* trying to create something new which can gain profit towards it.

The accurate sentence is:

But now, people *are trying* to create something new which can gain profit towards it.

Form 5

Since 10 Aug 2009 facebook *was* become a famous social network in the world.

The accurate sentence is:

Since 10 Aug 2009 facebook *has* become a famous social network in the world

…but they *were* lost his phone number,…

The accurate sentence is:

…but they *had* lost his phone number,…

College

They was taken their friends status as their very own one.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

They had taken their friends status as their very own one.

Facebook customers *were* order the product.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

Facebook customers ordered the product.

Wrong verb form has a frequency of 56.32% for Form 4, 11.9% for Form 5 and 15.85% for college students. The frequency shows that using the correct verb form is the most problematic among Form 4 students.   Students

tend to make this mistake unintentionally because students cannot comprehend which and when to use the appropriate be verb.

5. Addition

Addition errors are the opposite of omission. The students sometime add on item which should not appear in a sentence / sentences.

Example:

Form 4

Students *were* tend to copy other users status.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

Students tend to copy other users status.

Form 5

Many of these cases *were* happened through facebook.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

Many of these cases *happened* through facebook.

College

Facebook was founded by Mark Zuckerberg and *was* launched on Feb 2004

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

Facebook was founded by Mark Zuckerberg and *launched* on Feb 2004

Students *were* often use Facebook.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

Students *often* use Facebook.

The frequency shows 1.14% for Form 4, 4.8% for Form 5 and 2.44% for college students. Although errors on addition are committed   among these students, its low frequency means that it should not be a major concern as these learners may have overgeneralised the use of the auxiliary verb 'be'.

6. Misformation

In misformation errors, learners know the rules but produce something incorrect.

Example:

Form 4

It was **say** that they like to copy other peoples status…….

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

It was **said** that they like to copy other peoples status…….

Form 5

…but it *was* expand for the rest of the world.

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

…but it *was expanded* for the rest of the world.

The frequency for this error type is 16.09% for Form 4, and 4.8% for Form 5. The percentage for Form 4 is quite high compared to the Form 5. Students tend to produce a sentence even though there were mistake in it. This could be due to students' lack of understanding in providing the correct verb after the auxiliary verb 'be'. College students did not produce any mistake because they have comprehended the understanding of the correct verb after the auxiliary verb.

7. Misordering

Misordering error is the incorrect placement of the past tense auxiliary 'be' in a sentence / sentences.

Example:

College

Facebook *also was* easy…..

The accurate auxiliary 'be' is:

Facebook *was also* easy…

The frequency shows none of the Form 4 and Form 5 students made this error Therefore, it can be implied that the college students may have committed this error due to being careless.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

The findings of this study reveal that Malaysian ESL learners still face difficulties in Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' during formal schooling up to college level. The findings of the study show that there are some points to be marked from this study. The findings of this study have also identified seven types of errors made by the students in their writing which are Tense Shift, Agreement, Missing Auxiliary Be, Wrong Verb Form, Addition and Misformation and Misordering.

Thus, this study provides some suggestions to curb these problems from occurring too often. First of all, students should learn to make changes in their errors from the feedback given to them by the teacher. It can be useful for them in order to improve their writing in future. . Secondly, the teachers should pay more attention to their students' errors in order to strategize a constructive plan in their classroom teaching. Besides that, the teachers should also decide on the necessary actions that need to be taken to address the challenges faced by these Malaysian ESL learners in the usage of Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be'. In addition, the teachers should focus on teaching grammatical structure to these students as they are often the only source of input in terms of grammar, for their students. Teachers could also suggest online learning strategies such as completing interactive quizzes and exercises on Past Tense Auxiliary 'Be' to further improve their understanding and application of these grammar components.

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