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Exploring Difficulties in the Selection of Tenses while Speaking in English at the Secondary Level in Pakistan

Nadeem Hussain

Research Scholar at the Department of English, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Sanghar Campus, Pakistan. nh4544153@gmail.com

Syed Husnain Shah

Ph.D. Scholar at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM). shussnain738@gmail.com

Ishfaque Ali Kalhoro

Lecturer in English at the Shaikh Ayaz University, Shikarpur, Pakistan. ishfaquealikalhoro@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the difficulties faced by secondary school students in Pakistan in selecting appropriate tenses while speaking English. Mastery of tense usage is essential for effective communication; however, many students struggle with the correct application of tenses due to a limited understanding of their contextual use. The research adopts a qualitative approach to explore this linguistic challenge in depth. The study was conducted with a purposive sample comprising four English language teachers and eight secondary-level students. Multiple data collection tools were employed, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, written assessments, and audio recordings of students' spoken English. Through descriptive analysis, the findings reveal that students frequently misuse tenses, especially in spoken contexts. Common errors include incorrect use of helping verbs, confusion in verb forms, and lack of awareness about the temporal context of actions. Teachers also highlighted that students often translate directly from their first language, which contributes to incorrect tense usage. The study further identifies gaps in classroom instruction and limited speaking practice as contributing factors. These findings underscore the need for improved pedagogical strategies that emphasize contextual and practical use of tenses in speech. It is recommended that teachers integrate more interactive speaking activities and contextual grammar exercises to help students internalize tense structures more effectively. The study contributes to understanding the nature of tense-related difficulties in spoken English at the secondary level and offers practical implications for curriculum designers, educators, and language trainers aiming to enhance English language proficiency among Pakistani learners.

Keywords: Selection of Tenses, English Speaking Skills, Functional Grammar, Secondary Students

Introduction

The English language is considered a second language in Pakistan, and students face significant difficulties while speaking it. Despite efforts to improve, students often make errors, and some struggle to learn or speak fluently. Secondary level students particularly struggle with selecting tenses and verbs when speaking



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English and leading to mistakes that hinder fluent communication. Rahman and Ab Rashid (2017) noted that secondary school students learn about translation language methods and language forms, which help them understand rules but not necessarily practical language skills. The prevailing method in Pakistani classrooms is the grammar translation method, which enables students to learn rules but not the usage of tenses.

Effective English communication is crucial in today's globalized world. However, nonnative speakers often face challenges, particularly when selecting tenses in spoken communication. Furthermore, the pressure of real-time dialogue can exacerbate these challenges, requiring ESL students to quickly choose the correct tenses without opportunity for reflection or correction (Brown, 2019). Learning English tenses has several importance for several reasons. Firstly, English tenses provide the necessary tools to express action, events, and states in different time frames (Phuwarat, 2020; Stephens & Sanderson, 2022). The second challenge in learning English tenses is understanding their appropriate usage in other contexts (Koh, 2021; Shah, et al., 2022). The study aims to investigate difficulties faced by students selecting tenses while speaking English in Pakistan

Research Question of the Study

1. What are the perceptions of students related to the difficulties faced in the selection of tenses while speaking English at the secondary level?
2. What strategies do secondary-level teachers use the methods to improve the use of tenses while speaking English at the secondary level?

Literature Review

English language learning has become an advertised part of education in Pakistan. Despite this, secondary-level students in Pakistan face significant challenges in selecting the correct tenses while speaking English. This literature review aims to discuss research studies on this topic and identify the most common difficulties faced by secondary-level students while speaking in English and the contributing factors to these difficulties. The selection of tenses is a vital feature of English language learning, enabling effective communication, clarity, and accuracy. However, the English language has a complex tense system with multiple tenses and aspects, making it challenging to master. Khan (2017) explored the difficulties faced by secondary-level students in selecting tenses while speaking English, revealing that students had limited understanding of tense usage and were stressed to apply tenses in complex sentences.

Contextualized teaching introduced by Littlewood (1986) and Abdulbari and Abdulmalik (2017), integrating tenses into meaningful and authentic contexts, has also been shown to enhance learners' comprehension and production of tenses. Rahman (2017) found that limited exposure to English, ineffective practice, and cognitive limitations were significant factors contributing to students' difficulties. The practical application of tenses is essential for remembering and using them correctly. Despite using various methods for effective communication, secondary-level students in Pakistan often struggle to choose the correct tenses. Research suggests that a more practical and contextual approach to teaching and learning English tenses could help alleviate these challenges.



Methodology

This research study employed qualitative research to investigate the perceptions and experiences of teachers and students related to the difficulties of selecting tenses while speaking in the English language. The qualitative method was chosen because it offers a comprehensive understanding of students' perspectives and their practices in daily life activities in the classroom. Usually, participants were unaware of the difficulties associated with selecting tenses; therefore, a brief introductory workshop was conducted to provide an overview of the challenges in selecting tenses while speaking English and its relevance to language speaking. Once they understood the concept, interviews were conducted together with more in-depth information. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to share their thoughts freely while also ensuring that essential research themes were addressed. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling, which included four English language teachers and eight students. It's an emphasis on individuals with experience or exposure to the selection of tenses methodology. Interviews were conducted in both audio recording and written formats, depending on participants' preference and availability. This approach enabled participants to feel comfortable and provide honest responses. After all the responses were transcribed, they were analyzed using thematic analysis, which helped to identify the major themes. These themes were then categorized into two main primary groups: perceptions and experiences. The themes were developed independently for both teachers and students to emphasize their perspectives and provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges associated with selecting tenses. All participants were informed about the purposes of the study, and their informed consent was acquired. They were assured that all information would be utilized exclusively for education reasons, and confidentiality was guaranteed for voluntary participants felt secure and confident in sharing their thoughts and experiences.

Finding

The research shows the importance of the study, which seeks to investigate the perceptions and experiences of students and teachers related to the selection of tenses, particularly in teaching English speaking skills to secondary level students. The participant included four English language teachers and eight secondary level students, and the students participated after attending a brief introductory workshop on the difficulties of selection tenses concepts. The data were described thoroughly. The themes generated were grouped into sub-themes, which were further categorized into two main themes. These have been organized into two primary sections: teachers' perceptions and experiences, and students' perceptions and experiences.

Q1: What are the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the difficulties in the selection of tenses while speaking in English?

Common Difficulties Faced By Students: Teachers' Perceptions

The responses from teachers indicated that the 'S' and 'ES' are common mistakes in the present indefinite tense, and students are used to committing errors in the form of verbs. Teacher one (T2) stated that in the present indefinite tense, students commit errors in positive and negative sentences because of the form of the verb they use the 2nd form in negative and positive sentences. (T3) Answer



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that students used to commit mistakes in helping verbs, and they do not use a singular helping verb with singular subjects and a plural with plural subjects. (T4) highlighted that the present indefinite tense is used for habit and daily routine, but students are unaware of its proper use, while (T1) stated that students use present indefinite tenses for daily exercise, not for both habit and daily routine.

Instructional Strategies Help Master Tense Usage In Speaking: Teachers' Perceptions

The responses of teachers indicated that teachers used different strategies to teach students in the usage of tenses while speaking. (T1) stated that I emphasis to my students to deliberate on the subject of the verb; if the subject is singular, we use "DOES" and if the subject is plural, we use "DO" with plural subjects. (T2) stated that I introduced to my students about the helping verbs of present indefinite tense, and I use different strategies to help my students master their tenses usage in speaking. 1st, I introduce students to singular subjects by giving examples of my family members that we use "DOES" with father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, and "DO" with friends and teachers. (T3) stated that I use filliped class strategies that make sentences in positive, negative, and interrogative sentences about your family's activities. (4) Stated that classroom activities can help students master the selection of tenses, so that I make students ask questions and give answers to one another. (T1) stated that in present perfect tenses, I use functional English strategies to teach my students in the usage of tenses while speaking. (T3) stated that functional strategies help students to clear and master all perfect tenses.

Assessment Of Students To Progress In Using Correct Tenses During Speaking Activities: Teachers' Perceptions

The responses of teachers indicated that assessment is a good method to understand students' level and grip in English language (T1) assess students, Are the making mistakes in speaking and if they make mistakes I try to correct them, if they do not *does* mistake then I come to know they are using tenses and their helping verbs correctly. (T2) stated that I assess my students by using different strategies. 1st, I give them topics for speaking. 2nd, I give them topics for writing. In this way, I assess my students and correct their mistakes. (T3) stated that I consider my students by giving them topics about their daily routine, after writing, I correct their mistakes as well as their helping verbs. (T4) stated that while speaking, I indicate to my students to use the correct tense in the proper place, and I also solve their confusion in all perfect tenses.

Share Successful Activities To Improve Students' Use Of Tenses In Speaking: Teachers' Perception:

(T1) stated that teachers should give chance to every student to teach tense on behalf of the teacher; in this way, students can demonstrate their ability to use correct tenses. (T2) stated that teachers must use the translation method to enhance students' ability to progress their tenses while speaking. (T3) said that to progress students' tenses, we need to give them a task, and after completing the task, teachers should correct students' mistakes.



Challenges Teachers Face In Teaching Tenses Usage And How They Address Them: Teachers' Perceptions

(T1) stated that when I teach future indefinite tense I face lot of the challenges in helping verbs "HAVE" and "HAS" because students use to commit mistake in helping verbs after teaching I address them that if the subject is singular we use "HAS" and if the verb is plural we use the "HAVE" in this way I improve my students mistake. (T2) stated that the present perfect tense is not difficult to teach students, but students instead of the present perfect tense, they use the past perfect tense because they consider both for the same purposes. Then, I address them by giving them a chance on stage for speaking to speak and correct their mistakes. (T3) stated that the future indefinite tense present perfect tense is difficult to teach students because students commit errors in the form of verbs they use 1st form instead of 3rd, and I address them by teaching them about the 3rd form of the verb. (T4) stated that the present perfect tense is easy to teach, but students commit mistakes because students use the present indefinite tense instead of perfect, so I address them through their activities, which they have done right now then they come to know about the present perfect tense.

Challenges Faced By Students Choosing The Correct Tense While Speaking In English: Students' Perceptions

The responses of students indicate that we face a lot of challenges while choosing the correct tense. (S1) stated that I face a lot of challenges in the present indefinite tense and in the form of helping verbs. (S2) stated that I face a lot of difficulties with the helping verb of present indefinite tense "DO" and "DOES". (S3) stated that I commit mistakes in all present tenses because I always confuse helping verbs and their forms. (S4) stated that I commit mistakes in the present perfect continuous tense, and it is too difficult to use 'SINCE' and 'FOR'. (S5) stated that I always commit mistakes in the present perfect tense and its form of the verbs. (S6) stated that I commit mistakes in the past indefinite tense and its form of the verb. (S7) stated that I commit mistakes in all perfect tenses and also in their form of verbs. (S8) stated that I commit mistakes in all perfect continuous tenses and their form of verbs.

Abilities To Use English Tenses Correctly During Conversation: Students' Perceptions

(S1) stated that I always practice in my home, and I feel that I use correct tenses when I speak with a mirror, and I try to correct the helping verb of all tenses. (S2) stated that I used to practice English tenses when I got free from my homework, then I started to practice and I tried to remember verbs to make sentences in different tenses. (S3) stated that English is not a difficult language, and I try to speak slowly to improve my sentence structure and to use correct tenses during conversation. (S4) stated that I always conversation with my sister to use correct tenses, and my sister tries to correct my mistakes whenever I do. (S5) stated that during conversation, I choose the tense after I speak to enhance my ability in the selection of tenses. (S6) stated that during conversation, I try to correct others' mistakes in tenses to develop my ability in the usage of tenses. (S7) stated that during conversation, I try to speak in the past to create my past tenses and models. (S8) stated that English is a language, and I try to speak it, and I build my tenses instead of doing the practice in writing.



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Three Particular Tenses Are More Difficult To Use Than Others: Students' Perception

(S1) stated that the past indefinite tense, all perfect continuous tenses, and the past perfect tense are too difficult, and we face a lot of difficulties while selecting them during conversation. (S2) stated that three tenses are more difficult to use: the present perfect tense, the past perfect tense, and the past indefinite tense. (S3) stated that I found it difficult to present the indefinite past indefinite tense and the future perfect tense whenever I speak. (S4) stated that three tenses confuse me when I talk in English. (S5) stated that I need to practice the past indefinite tense, present perfect tense, and past perfect tense because these three are too difficult to use. (S6) stated that I faced a lot of difficulties when I tried to speak in the past indefinite tense, present indefinite tense, and future indefinite tense. (S7) stated that I commit common errors in three perfect tenses when I speak English. (S8) noted that the present indefinite tense and, past indefinite tense.

Experienced Students Struggled With Tenses Usage While Speaking English: Students' Perceptions

(S1) stated that I used to practice in my home to clear all my tenses, and after clearing my tenses, I used to speak in the English language. (S2) stated that I try to clear all my tenses in my tuition center, and after clearing them, I always use them in sentences to develop my English language. (S3) stated that I do my struggle in my school with my best friend, and he always supports me to clear all my tenses while speaking in English. (S4) stated that I struggled with my sister at home to clear all my tense and usage while speaking with her, and she always corrects my mistakes. (S5) stated that I make common mistakes while speaking in past tenses, and I used to correct them at home. (S6) stated that I practice with my family members, and I clear all my tenses with my homemates. (S7) stated that I struggle with tenses while speaking English in my hometown, and my friends always talk to me in English language and I correct my tenses with them. (S8) stated that I feel some common difficulties while speaking in English in the past indefinite tense, and I try to clear this tense while practicing with a mirror.

Q2. What strategies do secondary-level teachers use the methods to improve the use of tenses while speaking English at the secondary level?

Strategies Used To Improve The Use Of Tense In Spoken English: Students' Perceptions

(S1) stated that I use different strategies to improve my tenses in spoken English. 1. Remember the tense and its helping verb. 2. I remember the verb to use in sentences. After that, I will practice with my friends. (S2) stated that I used to remember all present tenses and their helping verbs. After that, I spoke with my sister to improve my English. (S3) stated that I feel common difficulties, but I use to enhance my usage of tenses by practice with foreigners; in this way, I strengthen my tenses. (S4) stated that my teacher helps me to improve my English language, and I always remember tenses, and after I try to use them in sentences. (S5) stated that I feel difficulties in all past perfect tenses, and I try to clear them as well as their helping verbs to enhance my abilities in spoken English. (S6) stated that I improved my English while practicing with my friends, and they used to correct my mistakes in the tenses. (S7) noted that the English language is easy to speak, and I tried to fix all my mistakes in the usage of tenses



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when I talk with a mirror. (S8) stated that I considered myself weak in the past indefinite tense, but I used to practice at home. I used to write twenty sentences in positive, negative, and interrogative sentences to understand the sense of the past indefinite tense. Also, I cleared my rest of my tenses like this method.

Teachers Support Learning Using English Tenses Correctly During Speaking Activities

(S1) stated that my teacher supports me by making positive, negative, and interrogative sentences of all tenses on the board. In this method, I correct all my mistakes and use correct tenses while speaking in the English language. (S2) stated that my teacher supports me if I make wrong sentences, then my teacher clears my concept and always corrects me while speaking in English. (S3) stated that my teacher creates a functional English speaking environment in school to clear all tenses while speaking in English. (S4) indicated that teachers should use the English environment in schools, colleges, and universities, but my teacher teaches us tenses after learning about tenses, we make sentences in particular tenses. (S5) stated that my teacher supports us when we speak English, and my teacher writes our mistakes on the board after we write, and he explains to us about the errors. (S6) stated that my teacher corrects our helping verbs when speaking in English, and when I commit mistakes, my teacher gives me tasks in which I had committed mistakes. (S7) stated that my teacher supports us by using practical application of the tenses and allows us to speak in English slowly to make proper sentences in tense. (S8) stated that my teacher teaches us tenses by video and audio recording. In this method, I learn a lot about tenses, and I always speak fluently after this method.

Discussion

The result of this research is that the difficulties in selection tenses while speaking in the English language provide not only new learning experiences for students but also offer a new teaching method for teachers. Teachers shifted towards a conversational teaching method and adopted the tenses in the classroom; their focus was revised to promoting students' active participation and engagement. The participant in this research indicated that this approach played a significant role in improving their selection of tenses skills, especially in terms of self-confidence and fluency. It positively affects learners who were practicing the choice of tenses at home, to enhance their abilities to study at their own pace and encourage them to get involved in speaking activities such as debates, role play, and group discussion, further developing their practical speaking skills. This study refers to clear students present indefinite tense, present continuous tense, and future indefinite tense, and students always misuse the tenses. This supported by Ali (2021) shows that students often use tenses that are not appropriate to the context, such as using future indefinite tense for activities scheduled in the future and present continuous tense for current permanent situations. Many studies have difficulty understanding and using various types of tenses in English, such as simple tense, present continuous tense, present perfect, and future indefinite tense.

Conclusion

This study concluded that difficulties in the selection of tenses can be solved by



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the making an English language environment in class room for the secondary level students, it encourages students involvement, self-confidence, and speaking proficiency, while this method also urge teachers to adopt more interactive speaking and teaching methods, at the same time, teachers should use flipped class method to enhance the abilities of students in clearing tenses and teachers should teach students proper use of tenses with their helping verbs and must say them for making sentences in 'positive, 'negative' and interrogative sentences and also relate students about tenses helping verbs and form of the verbs during teaching and in this ways students could follow the instructions during making the sentences in written or spoken form.

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