

## **STUDENTS' CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND CHALLENGES IN LEARNING ENGLISH TENSES AT JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*English tenses play an important role in constructing accurate sentences and expressing clear ideas. Being able to use them accurately will help transfer the information effectively. This study aims to identify students' conceptual understanding of English grammar and the challenges they encounter in learning tenses by interviewing six students and administering grammar tests to 37 students. The results showed that students' understanding of English tenses is limited to mastery of basic patterns and has not developed into contextual application. This finding was supported by the results of grammar tests indicating their understanding of sentence structure but they failed to distinguish verb forms and use them appropriately in sentences. This indicates that their understanding still focuses on memorizing the forms rather than applying them in real communication contexts. The study highlights the necessity of adopting more contextual and communicative approaches, such as practicing tenses in authentic situations like conversations and writing to enhance students' practical application skills.*

**Keywords:** student comprehension, learning challenges, english tenses

### **ABSTRAK**

Tenses dalam bahasa Inggris memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk kalimat yang akurat dan mengekspresikan ide dengan jelas. Kemampuan menggunakan tenses secara akurat akan membantu menyampaikan informasi secara efektif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi pemahaman konseptual siswa tentang tata bahasa Inggris dan tantangan yang mereka hadapi dalam mempelajari tenses melalui wawancara dengan enam siswa dan pemberian tes tata bahasa kepada 37 siswa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemahaman siswa tentang tenses bahasa Inggris terbatas pada penguasaan pola dasar dan belum berkembang menjadi penerapan kontekstual. Temuan ini didukung oleh hasil tes tata bahasa yang menunjukkan pemahaman mereka tentang struktur kalimat, namun mereka gagal membedakan bentuk kata kerja dan menggunakannya secara tepat dalam kalimat. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa pemahaman mereka masih

berfokus pada menghafal bentuk-bentuk tersebut daripada mengaplikasikannya dalam konteks komunikasi nyata. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya mengadopsi pendekatan yang lebih kontekstual dan komunikatif, seperti berlatih tenses dalam situasi autentik seperti percakapan dan menulis, untuk meningkatkan keterampilan aplikasi praktis siswa.

Kata kunci: pemahaman siswa, tantangan belajar, tenses bahasa Inggris

### **A. Introduction**

Mastery of tenses in English is a fundamental aspect of language learning for junior high school students. Tenses not only serve as the basis for constructing grammatically correct sentences, but also play an important role in developing language skills that include speaking, writing, reading and listening effectively. Although students have undergone formal English language learning for several years, the majority of them still have difficulty understanding and applying tenses correctly according to the context of communication they encounter. This illustrates the gap between mastery of grammatical theory and practical proficiency in everyday English usage (Parveen et al., 2017).

In this context, conceptual understanding is crucial in English language learning. Conceptual understanding is an understanding that reflects students' ability to apply

definitions of concepts, relationships and various representations (Alawiya et al., 2022). This ability means that students must understand the meaning, function and relationship between tenses, not just memorize formulas or sentence patterns. A good conceptual understanding allows students to relate grammatical concepts to real communication contexts, so that the use of tenses becomes more meaningful and appropriate. However, many students still struggle to develop this conceptual understanding because learning emphasizes memorizing rules without a deep understanding of their meaning.

One of the main causes of this difficulty is language interference. Indonesian, which is the students' everyday language, does not change verb forms based on tense, whereas English relies heavily on verb form changes to systematically indicate the time of an event (Shi, 2024). This inconsistency in the linguistic system

causes students to tend to make negative transfers in their use of tenses. In addition, teaching methods that still prioritize memorization of rules without linking them to real contexts and communicative situations have proven to be ineffective in helping students understand and apply tenses correctly (Richards & Rodgers, 2010).

In addition to linguistic factors and teaching methods, the availability of interactive and engaging learning media also influences students' motivation and understanding of tense material. Recent studies show that technology based learning media such as language games and educational applications, are very helpful in making it easier for students to understand complex grammatical structures and increase their active participation in the learning process (Tiarina et al., 2019). Equally important, effective teacher support and a conducive classroom environment also determine the success of the learning process, as do internal factors such as student motivation and learning strategies.

The evaluation of learning success in tenses is also an important

issue that needs serious attention. Assessments that only focus on the ability to memorize rules or multiple-choice tests do not reflect students' ability to use tenses communicatively and contextually (Saptadi et al., 2024). Therefore, an evaluation system that integrates language skills holistically is needed, such as task-based assessment of real communication, projects or portfolios that measure understanding and application of tenses in real situations.

The role of teachers as learning facilitators must be strengthened through training and ongoing professional development programs to improve their ability to teach grammar in a communicative and creative manner (Widyaningrum et al., 2019). Teachers who master innovative learning strategies and are able to utilize interactive learning technologies are believed to be able to encourage students to be more active, confident and bold in using tenses in communication. In addition to teachers, curriculum policies also need to be adjusted to learning needs that not only emphasize mastery of grammar theory, but also the ability to communicate authentically. A

curriculum that integrates speaking and contextual writing activities will be more effective in facilitating the development of students' language skills, including mastery of tenses (Alfiani, 2021). A supportive learning environment, such as adequate facilities and infrastructure and a positive learning culture at school, also has a significant influence on students' success in mastering tenses. A conducive environment can increase motivation and provide space for students to practice more freely (Rahayu et al., 2024).

Although there have been many studies discussing the teaching of tenses, studies that specifically examine the conceptual understanding of tenses in general and the challenges faced by junior high school students in Indonesia are still very limited. For example, research by (Fauziah et al. 2024) which focuses on understanding the conceptual tenses of PGSD students, while the research (Hapsari et al. 2025) examining elementary school students' understanding of perfect tense and past perfect continuous tense sentence structures through the application of a contextual learning

approach to improve their understanding. Unlike previous studies, this study focuses on ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Peterongan Jombang, with the aim of exploring how their conceptual understanding of tenses is formed and what challenges they face in the learning process.

Theoretically, the results of this study are expected to broaden our understanding of student's conceptual development in learning English grammar. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a reference for teachers, curriculum developers and education policymakers in designing more effective, engaging and contextual teaching methods, learning media and evaluation systems to improve the quality of tense learning at the junior high school level.

## **B. Research Method**

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach that focuses on understanding the level of concept mastery and challenges faced by students in learning English grammar, especially tenses. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and

observations during the learning process in the classroom. The main instruments used were semi-structured interview guidelines developed based on aspects of concept mastery and student learning experiences, as well as observation notes on teaching and learning activities. The interview guidelines were designed to explore students' understanding of the form, function and use of tenses in the context of communication, as well as the challenges they faced directly while learning. The participants consisted of six ninth-grade students who were purposively selected based on the results of an initial grammar test to obtain various levels of understanding. They were recruited through a selection process based on their ability to understand tense, so that the data obtained would be more in-depth and focused. Data from the interviews were analyzed thematically by looking for patterns, categories and relationships between data regarding students' understanding of tense concepts and the obstacles they encountered. In addition, data from grammar tests were used to support the findings from the interviews, showing the actual level of mastery of

students regarding the form and use of certain tenses.

### **C. Findings and Discussion**

#### **Findings**

Based on the results of concept testing and interviews, it can be concluded that most students still consider tenses to be mere sentence patterns and have difficulty applying them contextually, especially in oral conversation. The following are some of the main points from these findings:

#### **Conceptual Understanding of Tenses**

Based on interviews with six ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Peterongan, the majority of participants demonstrated a structural and formulaic understanding of tense usage in English. They tended to view tense as a specific sentence pattern or form, rather than as a representation of overall meaning in time. Some students revealed that they knew the differences between tenses in theory, but had difficulty applying them in practice, especially in speaking. For example, they relied on notes and were often confused about

determining the correct tense when talking about activities that were happening in the present but were related to the past.

In addition, some participants stated that they understood tenses in terms of patterns, such as Present Tense as S + V1, Past Tense as S + V2, and Continuous as S + to be + V-ing, without really understanding their meaning as expressions of time. They were more oriented towards memorizing patterns than understanding their deeper meaning. Many of them also admitted that they found it easier to understand tense when writing than when speaking, which indicates a gap between theoretical knowledge and productive ability.

The grammar test results support the findings of the interviews. Students tend to be able to remember the basic forms of tenses such as Present, Past, and Present Continuous, but show a low level of understanding and application of contextual meaning of time. The highest level of success was achieved in mastery of the Past Simple form, while mastery of the Present Continuous was very low. This

indicates that students are more accustomed to mechanical patterns than being able to use tenses appropriately in real communication situations.

Overall, the analysis shows that students' understanding of tenses is still limited to form and pattern, rather than as a tool for expressing the overall meaning of time. They are not yet able to integrate the concept of time into the appropriate use of tenses, which is a major obstacle to mastering communicative English language skills. Therefore, the development of learning that is able to connect form and meaning of time is necessary to improve students' contextual and communicative mastery of tenses.

### **Students' Challenges in Learning Tenses**

Based on interviews and grammar test results, it was found that students face a number of major challenges in understanding and applying tenses in English. First, the greatest difficulty is related to recognizing and using the correct verb forms, such as V1, V2, V-ing, and V1+s/es. Although students

understand that each tense has a specific structure, they often experience confusion when determining the appropriate form, especially under exam pressure. The high error rates in the Present Simple and Present Continuous sections, namely 55% and 83%, indicate that they experience both conceptual and procedural difficulties. These difficulties include matching verb forms with subjects, such as distinguishing between "go" and "goes," as well as the use of auxiliary verbs such as "is/are" and the "-ing" form in progressive sentences.

In addition, students experience difficulties in constructing complete and grammatically correct sentences. Although they understand the basic rules, they often struggle to combine words into complete sentences, especially when faced with uncertainty about the correct verb tense. A limited vocabulary is a major factor that hinders the application of tense patterns, because they are unable to apply the rules even though they understand the basic structure. When faced with these obstacles, they tend to fail to construct complete sentences according to the context,

thus limiting their communication skills.

Furthermore, the lack of practice and repetition affects the practical mastery of tenses. Many students report that they lack opportunities to review and reinforce the concepts they have learned, making it easy for them to forget and become confused in distinguishing the use of tense forms, especially in the present continuous tense. In fact, they already understand the concept of time, but its practical application is limited to very explicit situations.

Overall, the data shows that the main challenge faced by students is in practical application, not just theoretical understanding. They understand the basic patterns, but difficulty in distinguishing the context of their use and forming grammatically correct complete sentences is a major obstacle. Therefore, learning strategies should emphasize the integration of practice and real-world application so that conceptual understanding can develop into more effective communication skills.

## **Discussion**

Based on interviews with six ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Peterongan, it was found that most students face various challenges in learning English tenses. In general, students understand that each tense has its own sentence structure, but they still have difficulty distinguishing and applying the correct verb forms such as V1, V2, V-ing and the use of the suffixes -s/-es. One student said that he actually knew the differences between tenses, but still found it difficult to apply them, especially in speaking. This shows that although students have a theoretical understanding of tense patterns, their ability to apply them in real communication contexts is still limited.

The grammar test results support the findings of the interviews. The tests administered showed that students' accuracy rate for the present simple tense was only 45% and for the present continuous tense only 17%, while for the past simple tense it reached 78%. This data shows that students find it easier to understand simple sentence forms than progressive forms, which require an understanding of the use of auxiliary verbs such as is/are or was/were.

Difficulties in identifying verb form changes and the use of auxiliary verbs confirm that the application of tenses remains a major obstacle in the learning process.

In addition to grammatical difficulties, limited vocabulary is also an important factor that affects students' ability to use tenses. Some students explained that even though they understand the rules of grammar, they often do not know the right words to use in constructing sentences. As a result, they often rely on digital translators to help them complete assignments or construct sentences in English. This dependence makes students less trained in using vocabulary independently, limiting their ability to connect grammar rules to the context of a sentence. These results are reinforced by research (Saengboon et al. 2022), which explains that limited vocabulary is one of the main factors that hinders effective English language skills. A similar point was made by (Bilge dan Kalenderoğlu 2022) which states that lexical limitations greatly affect fluency in speaking and writing. Listia dan Febriyanti (2020) also found that EFL learners in Indonesia often experience

difficulties in connecting vocabulary mastery with consistent grammar application, especially in the context of tense usage.

The next challenge for students is the lack of practice and repetition of material in learning. Some students mentioned that tenses are usually only discussed once in a meeting, without reinforcement or further practice in subsequent meetings. The lack of repetition causes students to quickly forget and often mix up different tense forms. Although students conceptually understand the difference between past, present and future tenses, they still rely on the presence of explicit time markers in sentences to determine the correct tense. Grammar test results show similar results, with the most errors occurring in the present continuous tense, which requires a simultaneous understanding of verb forms and temporal context.

This finding is in line with Benzerroug's (2021) view that foreign language learners often rely on rule-based learning, but fail to apply it in real communication. Students can explain sentence patterns such as S+V1, S+V2 or S+to be+V-ing, but

when they have to use them in conversation or writing, they experience confusion. This condition shows that success in learning English does not only depend on understanding grammar rules, but also on the ability to integrate structure, vocabulary and context of use.

Overall, the interview results show that students' challenges in learning English tenses lie more in practical application than theoretical understanding. Students still have difficulty distinguishing verb forms, constructing sentences with the correct structure and face obstacles in the form of limited vocabulary and lack of practice. The grammar test results support these findings by showing low accuracy rates in the Simple Present and Present Continuous tenses, indicating that students are not yet able to consistently identify and apply grammar rules. Therefore, tense learning needs to focus on context based exercises and vocabulary enrichment so that students can develop better communication skills and understand the practical functions of tenses.

#### **D. Conclusion**

Based on interviews with ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Peterongan, it was found that students' understanding of tenses in English is still limited to basic patterns and is often not applied appropriately in the context of communication. Students are able to explain general forms such as S+V1, S+V2 and S+to be+V-ing, but have difficulty distinguishing and using verb forms that correspond to time markers. Difficulties also arise in constructing correct sentences and using auxiliary verbs such as is/are and was/were.

The grammar test results support these findings, showing that students' accuracy levels are higher in the simple past than in the simple present and present continuous. This confirms that students are more familiar with simple sentence forms, while the application of progressive forms remains a challenge. Overall, it can be concluded that students' conceptual understanding of tenses has begun to take shape, but its practical application is still limited due to a lack of contextual practice and learning that tends to focus on memorizing structures.

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