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A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF SIMPLE PAST TENSE ERRORS IN MALAYSIAN LEARNERS' ENGLISH WRITING

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Abstract:

In mastering the English language, learners need to be able to comply with its grammatical rules. Most previous corpus-based studies about learners' grammar errors have examined the non-Malaysian context. Therefore, the overarching aim of this study is to investigate simple past tense errors in Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) secondary school learners' writing. Employing a corpus-based error analysis approach, it specifically intends to identify the types of simple past tense errors in Malaysian ESL secondary school learners' writing and the frequency of simple past tense errors in Malaysian ESL secondary school learners' writing. To this end, the English of Malaysian School Students (EMAS) corpus, in particular the sub-corpus of Malaysian learners' narrative essays was analysed based on two main frameworks. The Error Analysis Framework was adapted for the error analysis procedure, while the Surface Strategy Taxonomy Framework was used for the classification of types of errors. Online corpus tools such as Part-Of-Speech (POS) the Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-Tagging System (CLAWS) and Antconc version 3.5.8 were employed as the instruments of the study. The findings of the study showed that there are three types of simple past tense errors in the learners' writing, namely Error of Omission, Error of Addition and Error of Misformation. Misformation is the most popular type of simple past tense error committed by the learners. The findings of the study would be useful for the Malaysian context of ESL learners' curriculum design and pedagogy.

Introduction

Given its status as *lingua franca*, the English language is widely used across different nations, regardless of their existing culture and language (Badrasawi et al., 2020). In Malaysia, despite being a multilingual country, the English language holds a significant position in its education system. English is one of the compulsory subjects for students in Malaysia's primary and secondary schools. The language is seen as instrumental for the country to increase its economic growth and achieve its status as a high-income country (Renganathan, 2021).

Although being a crucial subject in Malaysia's curriculum system, the English language proficiency of Malaysians has shown a decline in recent years (Tharmalingam, 2012). The government has also increased efforts to cater to students' low English competency by reforming the English curriculum (Khair & Shah, 2021; Renganathan, 2021). Several studies have also been conducted to investigate Malaysian school students' language competency in writing. For instance, Ang, Tan, and Lye (2020) found that Malaysian secondary school learners committed multiple types of errors related to Subject-Verb agreement (SVA) and Copula in their writing such as overinclusion, blends, omission and misselection. Narinasamy, Mukundan, and Nimehchesalem (2013) asserted that one of the biggest challenges faced by L2 learners is using tenses correctly while producing a written text. This problem is still pronounced among the learners by the time they are leaving secondary school. A study by Chong, Tan, and Mardziah (2011) showed that the difficulties of producing well-organised speech and written texts among Malaysian English learners are on the rise in trend.

Indeed, writing is one of the most prominent aspects in facilitating a language learner to better comprehend the notion of a language (Foo, 2007). This makes writing the most demanding skill to be mastered by a learner among the three other skills of language learning namely speaking, listening and reading (Celce-Muria & Olshtain, 2000). Past studies have shown that Malaysian students face difficulties in writing. For instance, studies such as Affiq et al. (2015) and Fanny et al. (2022) explored the types and frequency of simple past tense errors in narrative writing committed by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in both Malaysian and non-Malaysian contexts. Results of their studies showed that Malaysian and non-Malaysian learners of English engaged in errors such as Omission, Subject-Verb-Agreement, Misformation and Addition. Misformation type of error was among the highest in terms of frequency of the errors. In another study, by Darus and Subramaniam (2009), it was found that Malay learners of English tend to make verb tense, word choice and preposition types of errors in their writing.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in language corpora and pedagogy among researchers and practitioners in Malaysia. This has resulted in the development of Malaysian learner corpora such as Corpus Archive of Learner English in Sabah/Sarawak (CALES), Malaysian Corpus of Learner English (MACLE) and The English of Malaysian School Students corpus (EMAS) (Rahim et al., 2021). Nevertheless, studies on learner corpora, especially those that focus on the English language in Malaysia are still limited. According to Subramaniam and Kaur (2023), Malaysia is not in the top 10 countries publishing studies on learner corpora. The authors asserted that learner corpus is a significant instrument in Data

Driven Learning that can help facilitate students' target language competency. Thus, to bridge these gaps and add to the growing body of knowledge on Malaysian learner corpus, this study intends to identify the types of simple past tense errors in Malaysian ESL secondary school learners' writing and to identify the frequency of simple past tense errors in Malaysian ESL secondary school learners' writing.

Research Questions

This corpus-based study is driven to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the types of simple past tense errors in Malaysian ESL secondary school learners' writing?
2) What is the frequency of simple past tense errors in Malaysian ESL secondary school learners' writing?

Literature Review

Error Analysis

Error Analysis (EA) is a study of errors committed by learners of a target language (TL). Febriyanti and Sundari (2016) claim that errors produced by L2 learners help teachers in designing numerous methods to aid the learners as the errors provide indications towards their innate learning process. Keshavarz (2012) asserts that EA is "a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness" (p. 168). In addition, Crystal (2003) defines EA as a "technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics" (p.165). According to James (2001), EA refers to "the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance." (p.62).

Simple Past Tense

Thomson and Martinet (2012) affirm that simple past tense describes activities or actions that happened in the past. They are not related to the present time at all. The English verbs are important for imprinting simple past tense. Only about 200 irregular verbs and a limitless number of regular verbs can be found (Huddleston & Pullum, 2007). Inflectional morpheme *-ed* or *-d* is being used to form simple past tense for regular verbs, e.g., *walk - walked*. Irregular verbs do not take any kind of morphemes but are mainly changed to a new form to show simple past tense, e.g., *know - knew*. Some of the irregular verbs remain the same as the base even when being used in the simple past tense context, e.g., *cut - cut*.

Errors Made by L2 Learners

Govindarajoo, Chow, and Aziz (2022) assert that Malaysian learners of English usually commit grammar-related errors while learning the language. These errors range from subject-verb agreement (SVA), singular, plural, adjectives, prepositions, articles as well as tenses. A corpus-based study by Manokaran, Ramalingam, and Adriana (2013) in their findings indicates that Malaysian secondary school and college learners of English as L2 consistently have difficulties in using the correct past tense form of auxiliary 'be' in their argumentative writings. Error of Addition, Misformation and Misordering are also among the other types of errors committed by the learners found in their study. Darus and Subramaniam (2009), which examined errors among 72 Malaysian Form 4 students' essays from non-English speaking backgrounds who

shared similar education experiences highlighted that verb tense errors were among the most prominent errors committed by the students. The other types of errors that were discovered were word choice, word order, singular and plural forms, and SVA.

Committing various errors in learning English as L2 by the learners is not exclusively limited to the Malaysian context (Ang, et al., 2020). It has also been proven to take place in a non-Malaysian context. A study by Lionny and Kusumadewi (2022) delved into types and causes of simple past tense errors in learners' recount text writing and found four types of errors, particularly Omission, Addition, Misformation and Misordering. A major factor that contributed to these errors was Interlingual transfer. Chaudhary and Zahrani (2020) examined learners writing in a classroom context of Saudi Arabia found that learners committed multiple error types such as Addition, Misformation, Misordering and Misformation while attempting to produce an English writing. The highest frequency of error was related to tenses used. Khansir and Ilkhani (2016) examined grammatical errors among 100 Iranian undergraduate students' writings and revealed that the learners had difficulties using the accurate form tenses alongside prepositions, passive voice, and active voice. The learners were tested by using the grammatical judgement test.

In conclusion, these previous studies both in Malaysian and non- Malaysian contexts suggested that learners of English typically face difficulties producing error free writing. They struggled to use correct forms of tenses, especially simple past tense alongside with other types of errors. The learners also committed various types of errors such as Addition, Misformation, Misordering and Omission. Below is the summary of the findings of those previous studies.

Table 1: Summary of the Findings of Previous Studies

Year	Authors	Findings	Context
2022	Govindarajoo, Chow and Aziz	Learners committed grammar related errors including tenses while learning English	Malaysia
2022	Lionny and Kusumadewi	Learners committed Omission, Addition, Misordering and Misformation errors in their English writing	Indonesia
2020	Chaudhary and Zahrani	Learners committed Omission, Addition, Misordering and Misformation errors in their English writing. These errors ranged from sentential and word levels especially regarding tenses used	Saudi Arabia
2016	Khansir and Ilkhani	Learners struggled to use accurate form of tenses alongside with a few others in learning English	Iran
2013	Manokaran, Ramalingam and Adriana	Secondary school and college learners of English struggled to use correct form of simple past tense in their writing	Malaysia
2009	Darus and Subramaniam	Verb-tense errors were among the most prominent errors found in secondary school learners' writing	Malaysia

Source: Related Previous Studies

Theoretical Framework

Researchers used the Error Analysis (EA) theoretical approach when conducting the study. Error Analysis procedure by Gass and Selinker (2008) was adapted in the present study to

analyse simple past tense errors committed by the Form 4 students in their narrative picture-based essays. According to Gass and Selinker (2008), there is a six-step procedure for conducting error analysis. Further information on the procedure is as follows:

1. *Collect data*. Although this is typically done with written data, oral data can also serve as a base.
2. *Identify errors*. What is the error (e.g., incorrect sequence of tenses, wrong verb form, singular verb form with plural subject)?
3. *Classify errors*. Is it an error or an agreement? Is it an error in an irregular verbs?
4. *Quantify errors*. How many errors of agreement occur? How many irregular verb form errors occur?
5. *Analyze source*.
6. *Remediate*. Based on the kind and frequency of an error type, pedagogical intervention is carried out.

(Gass and Selinker, 2008, p. 103)

Only four out of six steps were taken and used in this study. The four steps used were to collect data and identify, classify and quantify errors. The remaining two steps: analyze source and remediate, were abandoned as they were irrelevant to be used.
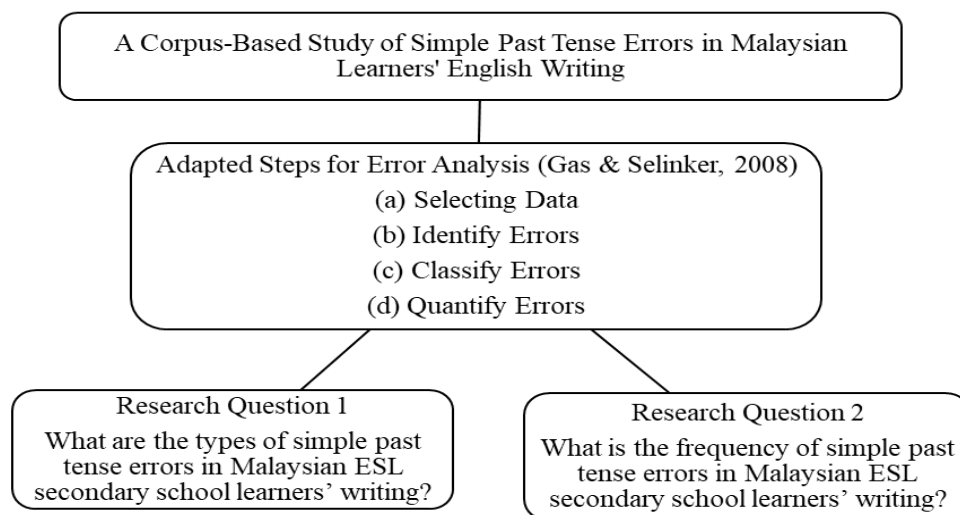

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of the Study

Methodology

Research Design
The present study aims to identify the types of simple past tense errors in Malaysian ESL secondary school learners' writing and the frequency of simple past tense errors in Malaysian ESL secondary school learners' writing. The study adopts a corpus-based quantitative research design in order to achieve its objectives.

Corpus Of the Study
The current study is based on the English of Malaysian Schools Students (EMAS) corpus, a learner corpus in the Malaysian ESL context. Vethamani, Manaf, and Akbari (2008) stated that

the EMAS corpus comprises two parts: written and spoken data from Malaysian English language learners in Forms 1 and 4 of Primary 5. The written data of this learner corpus were collected from primary and secondary schools in Penang, Pahang, and Melaka from Malay learners of the English language. The data were classified into three subsections, namely picture-based essays, Happiest Day in My Life and common school task essays. According to Arshad et al. (2002), the EMAS corpus was assembled in 2002 and has not been altered or tagged since, allowing it to remain in its original format. The current study examined a sub-corpus of Form 4 Malay students' written narrative essays that were picture-based. The sub-learner corpus was chosen based on its capacity to meet the study's two main goals: determining the types of simple past tense errors made by Malaysian ESL secondary school students and the frequency of these errors.

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Size, Labels and Coding of the Sub-corpus Used

This study employed the sub-corpus of Form 4 students' picture-based essays because it was written in a narrative style. The learners typically utilise the simple past tense form when writing narrative essays. There are 264 essays within the sub-corpus, with 4, 518-word types and 85, 992 tokens. With a total of 472, 652 words that comprise both spoken and written data, this represents less than 20% of the overall size of the EMAS corpus. The length of each essay is varied. The shortest essay is about 100 words, while the longest is made up of over 300 words, contributing to the average length of these essays to be about 321 words. Regarding labelling, each file of the picture-based essays was uniquely labelled to avoid confusion. For instance, SMART-P-f4-(03), SAM-P-f4-(17) and SMTA-P-f4-(22). The initial letters, such as SMART, SAM and SMTA, represent the schools where the data were gathered. The letter P in the middle represents a picture-based essay while the digits such as 03, 17 and 22 represent each student that produced the essays.

Instruments and Data Labelling

A few online corpus tools were used to process the data for the study. Firstly, Part-Of-Speech (POS) the Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-Tagging System (CLAWS) was used to automatically tag part of speech of every word of the data. Each word was tagged according to the CLAWS5 Tag set. The researchers could instantly identify lexical and non-lexical verbs used by the learners within the data. Specific code was labelled for each type of verb found in the data. For instance, VVB was labelled for the base form of the lexical verb, VBD was given for the past form of the verb 'be', and VVD was used to mark the past tense form of the lexical verb.

Free online corpus analysis tool software, Antconc version 3.5.8 developed by Anthony in 2019, was used to identify the token, word types and frequency of simple past tense errors committed by the learners in their picture-based essays. Each simple past tense error found was then classified into 4 main types based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (1982) proposed by Burt, Dulay and Krashen. Each type of simple past tense error was specifically coded. Error of Addition was coded as EOA, error of Misformation as EMF, error of Misordering as EMO and error of Omission as EO.

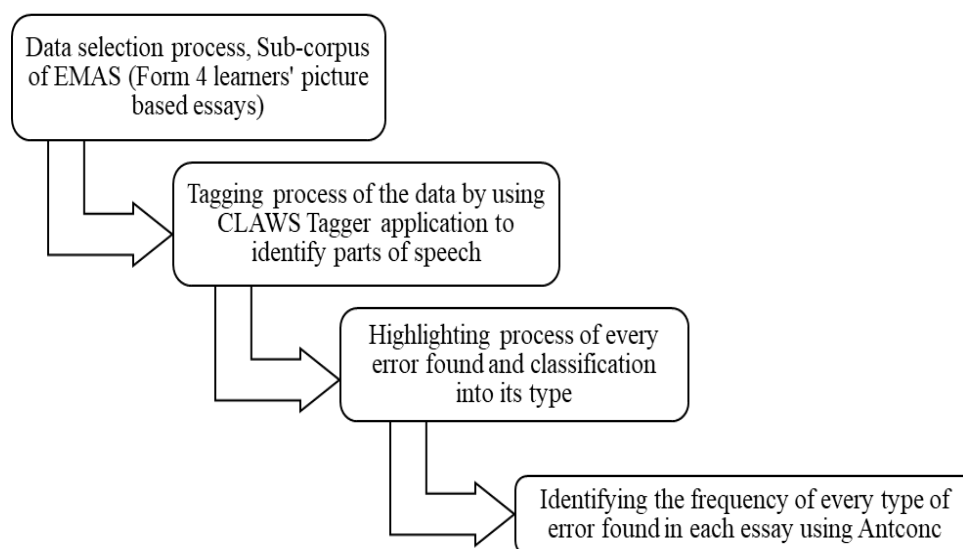*Data Analysis Procedure for the Study*

Figure 2: Flow Chart of the Data Analysis Procedure

The first step taken by the researchers in conducting the data analysis was selecting the most suitable data that could be used. All written data of the EMAS corpus were carefully examined, and only the sub-corpus of Form 4 learners' picture-based narrative essays were selected as they were useful in achieving the aims of the study. Each word of the essay was tagged using the CLAWS Tagger application to identify its part of speech. All the verbs found were individually examined to identify errors regarding simple past tense. Every error found was tagged in red according to its type and highlighted in yellow.

Figure 3: Example of Tagged Data of the Study

The upcoming step in data analysis involved Antconc, an online corpus software application. All 264 essays examined and tagged were transferred into this application. It was used to

identify the frequency of each type of error committed by Form 4 Malaysian ESL learners in their picture-based narrative essays. Code of each type of error was used as the search term using the concordance function to identify its frequency of occurrences. Frequency of each type of error was equivalent to the number of concordance hits.
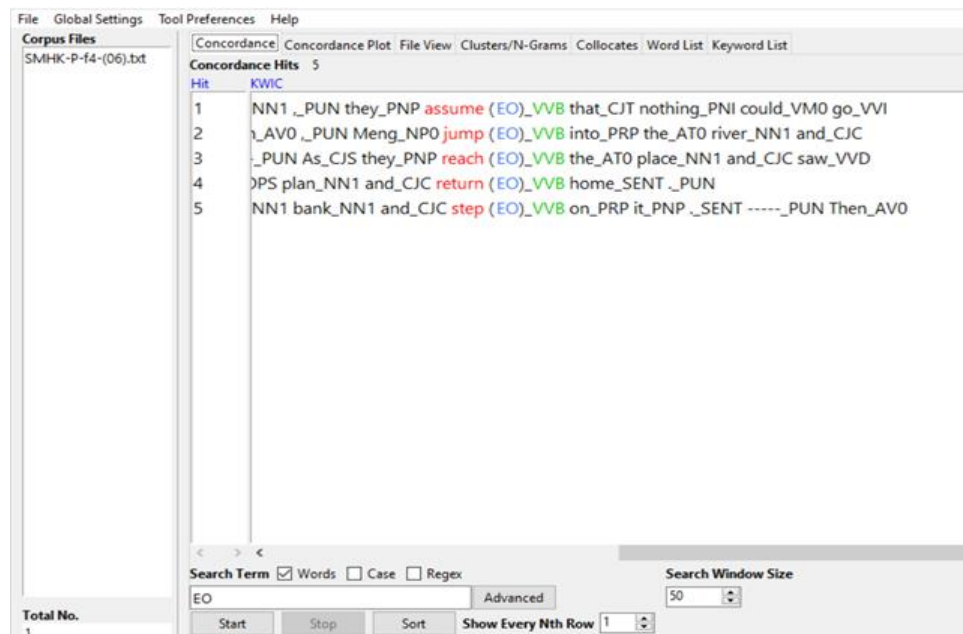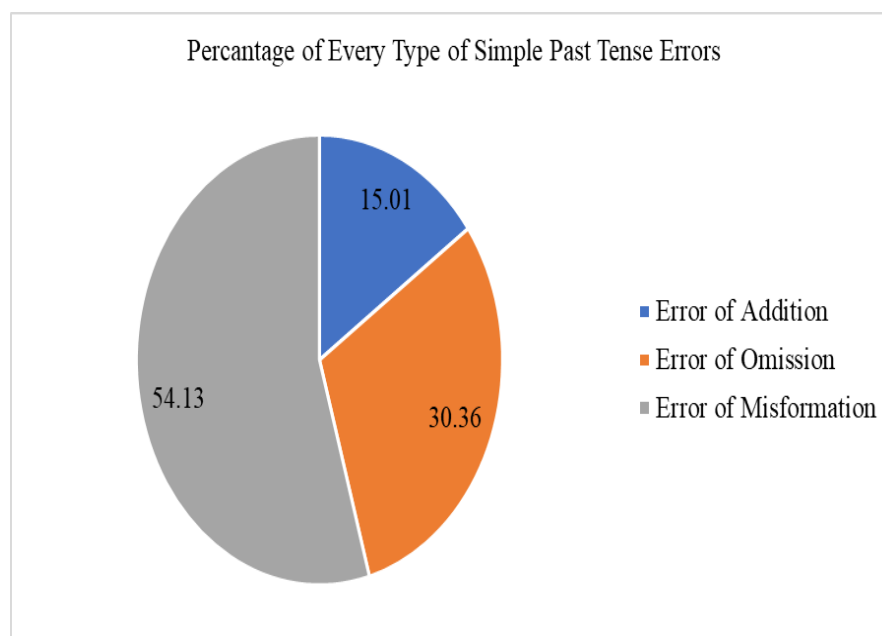

Figure 4: Example of Frequency of Omission Error in One of the Essays

Findings And Discussion

Pie Chart 1: Percentage of Every Type of Simple Past Tense Errors

The findings of the study are presented and discussed in detail in this section, which answers both of the research questions mentioned earlier. Out of 264 picture-based essays analysed, only 36 or 13.64% of them are free from any type of simple past tense errors (frequency of

errors = 0). The remaining 228 or 86.36% of the essays analysed consist of at least a single occurrence of simple past tense errors.

Types Of Simple Past Tense Errors

With regards to types of error, all 264 picture-based essays of Form 4 students were analysed line by line to identify simple past tense errors. All the simple past tense errors found were categorised based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy. They are error of Addition, error of Misformation and error of Omission. Examples of errors along with the correct forms will be presented. Further discussion will be added along with the findings.

Error of Addition

The error of Addition is the opposite of the error of Omission. This error occurs when the learners add an item that should not be presented in a grammatically correct sentence.

Example 1:
After that, the two girls said thank you to us, especially to Husin who *had helped* the girl from the river. [SAM-P-f4-(17)]
The correct form is:
After that, the two girls said thank you to us, especially to Husin who *helped* the girl from the river.

Example 2:
After that, Dina *have thanks* to them and they became good friends. [SAM-P-f4-(150]
The correct form is:
After that, Dina *thanked* them and they became good friends.

Example 3:
And all of sudden, Lela *falls* into the river while choosing the lovely flower. [SMART-P-f4-(14)]
The correct form:
And all of a sudden, Lela *fell* into the river while choosing the lovely flower.

The examples above illustrate the error of Addition in the learners' writing. This Addition type of error takes place due to the addition of the wrong inflectional morpheme to mark the past tense form of a lexical verb and the addition of irrelevant words by the learners. Both examples 1 and 2 imply the addition of irrelevant words to mark simple past tense, while Example 3 shows the addition of the wrong morpheme to mark the past tense form of a verb. These suggest that the learners are still confused regarding the use of past tense *-ed* inflectional morpheme.

Error of Misformation

An error of Misformation occurs when learners of a TL use inaccurate morphemes or structures while they are conscious of the rules that should be followed. A few occurrences of this type of error were detected in the learners' writing.

Example 1:
Siti *felt* to the river. [SAM-P-f4-(08)]
The correct form is:
Siti *fell* into the river.

Example 2:
While we *was* searching for it, I spotted Chee Meng and Augustine with his brother on his way back to our village.
The correct form is:
While we *were* searching for it, I spotted Chee Meng and Augustine with his brother on his way back to our village.

Example 3:
She *were* very surprised. [SMTA-P-f4-(15)]
The correct form is:
She *was* very surprised.

All three examples above exemplify the Misformation type of simple past tense error in the learners' writing for irregular lexical verbs and non-lexical verbs. These suggest that the learners are aware of the rule that the base form of these kinds of verbs should be changed upon usage in past tense form. Despite being aware of the rule, it shows that the learners are still lacking in providing acceptable forms of simple past tense for the verbs.

Error of Omission

The Omission type of error occurs when essential elements that must be included to form a grammatically correct structure are omitted by the learners. The learners might omit inflectional morphemes in their writing.

Example 1:
Michael, who was a good swimmer immediately *jump* into the river to rescue the girl from drowning. [SMHK-P-f4-(09)]
The correct form is:
Michael, who was a good swimmer immediately *jumped* into the river to rescue the girl from drowning.

Example 2:
Sarimah who was unconscious at the time *manage* to wake up. [SMART-P-f4(10)]
The correct form is:
Sarimah who was unconscious at the time *managed* to wake up.

Example 3:
We brought our fishing equipment along and *start* the 30-minute walk to the river. [SMSAB-P-f4-(29)]
The correct form is:
We brought our fishing equipment along and *started* the 30-minute walk to the river.

Each example demonstrates that inflectional morpheme -ed that mark simple past tense of regular verbs have been omitted by the learners in their picture-based essays. This suggests that the learners are not aware of the role of ed- inflectional morphemes in marking simple past tense of regular verbs.

Frequency of Simple Past Tense Errors

Table 2: Types, Frequency and Percentage of Simple Past Tense Errors

Types of Errors	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Error of Addition	289	15.01
Error of Misformation	1042	54.13
Error of Misordering	0	0
Error of Omission	594	30.36
Total	**1925**	**100**

Source: Sub-corpus of Picture-based Essays of the EMAS

Findings illustrated in Table 1 show that there were 1925 simple past tense errors found in the Form 4 students' picture-based essays. Most of the students committed errors of Misformation followed by errors of Omission and errors of Addition. This suggests that on average, each learner committed more than 7 simple past tense errors in the writing. The frequency of each type of error varied from one to another. Error of Misformation had the highest frequency of 1042 or 54.13 %. The error of Omission had a frequency of 594 or 30.36 % and the error of Addition had a frequency of 289, equivalent to 15.01%. The learners did not commit any error of Misordering, as 0 frequency was recorded for this error. These findings connote the learners have yet to be well versed in using the correct form of simple past tense in their narrative essays and the majority of them misformed the simple past tense used.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the frequency and types of simple past tense errors in Malaysian Form 4 narrative learners' writing. The results of this study illustrate three categories of past tense errors—error of Addition, error of Misformation, and error of Omission—that are present in Malaysian Form 4 English learners' narrative picture-based essays, the EMAS sub-corpus. The majority of students made the error of Misformation. Throughout the investigation, not a single student made a Misordering error. According to these results, Malaysian secondary school English language learners still have difficulty using the proper forms of the simple past tense for both lexical (regular and irregular) and non-lexical verbs. When creating appropriate forms of the simple past tense for their narrative writing, they can occasionally be unsure of themselves and negligent in their application of the rules.

Future research may examine students simultaneously at several educational levels, such as primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, to compare the different kinds of errors that occur there and investigate the underlying causes. Teachers are urged to use the study's findings to devise the best plan of action to address this issue and to determine the most effective methods for teaching the simple past tense to secondary ESL students from Malaysia. Comparing language learners' first language system with that of the target language may be the method used in future studies to try and explain the reasons behind errors.

Acknowledgement

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