Contrastive and Error Analysis of Indonesian Learners' Tense and Aspect Usage in English Writing

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Abstract: This study investigates Indonesian learners' use of English tense and aspect by employing an integrated framework that combines contrastive analysis and error analysis. A total of sixty short essays written by university-level EFL students were analyzed to identify recurring patterns of tense–aspect errors and to uncover the linguistic and cognitive sources behind them. The findings reveal three dominant error types—misformation, omission, and overgeneralization which reflect both negative transfer from Indonesian and developmental characteristics of learners' interlanguage. Learners frequently produced incorrect verb forms, omitted obligatory auxiliaries, and applied tense rules inconsistently, particularly when attempting to construct more complex narrative sequences. Among all structures examined, the present perfect tense emerged as the most challenging, largely because Indonesian lacks an equivalent grammatical form, resulting in persistent confusion in mapping English verb forms to temporal and aspectual meanings. The study also found that students often relied on surface-level rules rather than deeper semantic understanding, which contributed to inaccurate tense selection across contexts. These results underscore the need for contextualized, awareness-raising instruction that encourages learners to connect form, meaning, and use more systematically. Overall, the study demonstrates the pedagogical significance of integrating contrastive and error analysis to enhance learners' accuracy and competence in academic English writing.

Keywords: aspect; contrastive analysis; error analysis; Indonesian EFL learners; tense

1. INTRODUCTION

The mastery of English tense and aspect has long been recognized as one of the most persistent challenges for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly for those whose first language does not grammatically encode temporal distinctions in the same way English does (Rahman & Ali, 2015). Indonesian learners, in particular, frequently encounter difficulties in expressing temporal relations accurately in English writing due to fundamental structural differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English (Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Sneddon, 2010). Unlike English, Bahasa Indonesia does not possess inflectional markers for tense; instead, it relies on temporal adverbs such as *kemarin*, *sudah*, or *akan* to indicate time reference. This typological contrast often leads to negative transfer, resulting in systematic errors in learner production. Understanding the interplay between first-language influence and learner performance requires an analytical framework that examines both predicted and actual learner errors. Consequently, the integration of Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA) provides a comprehensive perspective to investigate Indonesian learners' tense and aspect usage in English writing.

Contrastive Analysis, rooted in the work of Lado (1957), posits that the similarities and differences between a learner's first language (L1) and second language (L2) can predict

potential areas of difficulty. In the domain of tense and aspect, such predictions highlight how Indonesian learners may struggle with English grammatical features that are nonexistent in their L1, such as the distinction between simple and progressive aspects, or between present perfect and past simple tenses. Although CA initially claimed strong predictive power, later critiques argued that not all predicted difficulties necessarily manifest in learner output (Wardhaugh, 1970). Despite these criticisms, CA remains valuable for identifying structural contrasts that may predispose specific patterns of errors.

Error Analysis (EA), initially promoted by Corder (1967), offers a complementary perspective by examining the actual errors produced by learners. Instead of predicting errors, EA identifies how learners handle linguistic structures in real contexts, uncovering the developmental strategies, interlanguage processes, and learning difficulties they experience. In the context of English tense and aspect, EA has been shown to reveal recurring inaccuracies such as misuse of verb forms, omission of auxiliary verbs, and overgeneralization of simple present tense that characterize Indonesian learners' interlanguage (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). EA thus provides empirical validation of whether CA predictions align with learners' real performance.

Integrating CA and EA allows researchers to examine both the *sources* and *manifestations* of errors in a more holistic manner. CA helps explain *why* certain errors occur by pointing to underlying structural mismatches, while EA reveals *how* these errors appear in learner production. Studies that combine CA and EA have shown that L1-L2 typological contrasts significantly affect learners' acquisition of tense and aspect, although some errors may arise from developmental processes rather than L1 influence alone (James, 1998; Johansson, 2008). In the Indonesian context, such studies highlight persistent difficulties in differentiating between English temporal forms, particularly in distinguishing between actions that are habitual, ongoing, completed, or anterior (Yulia, 2016). The complexity of English aspectual distinctions poses additional challenges that cannot be fully predicted by CA alone, underscoring the importance of integrating EA as an empirical dimension.

Furthermore, tense and aspect errors in Indonesian learners' writing hold significant pedagogical implications (Ulviani, 2025). Writing tasks require learners not only to construct sentences but also to narrate events with accurate temporal sequencing. Misuse of tense and aspect can cause ambiguity, disrupt textual coherence, and reduce the communicative effectiveness of student writing (Hyland, 2016). Despite the centrality of these grammatical categories, many Indonesian EFL learners continue to rely on lexical markers such as *yesterday* or *sudah* translated directly into English, instead of using appropriate morphological markers

that English grammar demands (Suhono, 2018). These tendencies further suggest strong L1 transfer effects and inadequate internalization of English aspectual distinctions.

Given these challenges, researchers have emphasized the need for studies that do not merely describe errors but interpret them through the lens of cross-linguistic influence. By examining Indonesian learners' tense and aspect usage through both CA and EA, this study aims to uncover systematic error patterns, identify the specific forms that learners struggle with, and explain how L1–L2 typological differences shape these patterns. Such findings can inform targeted instructional strategies that explicitly address the linguistic gaps between Bahasa Indonesia and English. Moreover, an integrated analysis contributes to broader discussions in second language acquisition, particularly regarding how learners acquire grammatical categories not present in their L1 and how interlanguage evolves in response to structural constraints.

Although many studies have investigated Indonesian learners' grammatical errors, research that explicitly integrates Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis to examine tense and aspect remains limited. This article seeks to fill that gap by mapping the contrastive differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English tense–aspect systems, analyzing learners' written errors, and interpreting the findings through a dual-lens framework. The insights gained may support more linguistically informed pedagogical practices and contribute to a deeper understanding of how Indonesian EFL learners navigate the complexities of grammatical temporality in English writing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on second language acquisition has long highlighted the influence of learners' first language (L1) on the acquisition of grammatical categories in the target language (L2) (Hussain, 2023). In the context of Indonesian learners of English, difficulties in using tense and aspect are among the most frequently reported challenges due to fundamental structural differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English. Contrastive Analysis (CA), first popularized by Lado (1957), posits that areas of difference between L1 and L2 are likely to cause learning difficulties, while similarities facilitate learning. Because Bahasa Indonesia does not mark tense morphologically and relies primarily on temporal adverbs, Indonesian learners often struggle to internalize English tense–aspect morphology, leading to predictable negative transfer. Misuse of verb inflections, omission of auxiliaries, and confusion between simple and progressive forms are common manifestations of Indonesian–English structural contrasts (Odlin, 1989; Sneddon, 2010).

Error Analysis (EA), proposed by Corder (1967), provides a complementary perspective by examining actual learner output rather than predicted difficulties. EA views learner errors as natural evidence of interlanguage development and categorizes them based on their linguistic source. For Indonesian learners, EA has consistently shown recurring difficulties using English verb tenses, such as the overuse of simple present for past events, incorrect past tense inflections, and misuse of perfect aspect forms (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). Studies in Indonesian EFL contexts have found that students frequently omit auxiliary verbs in progressive or perfect constructions, reflecting incomplete acquisition of English aspectual systems (Yulia, 2016). Such errors may stem from both cross-linguistic influence and developmental processes, demonstrating the value of integrating CA and EA for a fuller understanding of learner difficulties.

The contrast between English and Indonesian tense–aspect systems provides a key foundation for interpreting learner errors (Adiantika, 2020). English requires morphologically marked tense distinctions primarily past and present as well as aspectual distinctions expressed through auxiliary + participle constructions (Comrie, 1985). These distinctions encode subtle meanings related to duration, completion, and temporal relationships between events. By contrast, Bahasa Indonesia is classified as a tenseless language (Sneddon, 2010), relying on lexical markers such as *sudah*, *sedang*, or *akan* to express temporal reference. This absence of verb inflection leads Indonesian learners to assume that time reference in English can also be conveyed solely through lexical means, which results in errors such as "*I already finish*" instead of the correct "*I have already finished*" (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). Learners' difficulty with the English perfect aspect is particularly persistent, as there is no direct equivalent in Indonesian, making the semantic nuance challenging to grasp.

Previous research on Indonesian EFL learners has consistently shown that tense and aspect problems are among the most common grammatical issues in writing. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) found that secondary students often fail to apply past tense inflections when narrating past events. Similarly, Suhono (2018) identified frequent errors in narrative writing, including misuse of irregular verbs and confusion between simple past and past continuous forms. Studies also show that students often treat simple past and present perfect tenses interchangeably, indicating conceptual misunderstanding rather than mere morphological mistakes (Septiana, 2015). Such findings highlight both linguistic and cognitive challenges, especially when learners must express temporal sequencing and event relationships in written discourse.

Although many studies have examined tense and aspect errors in Indonesian learners' English (Rahman & Ali, 2015) fewer have explicitly combined CA and EA to interpret these errors through both structural and developmental lenses. CA identifies the structural contrasts that predispose learner errors, while EA empirically reveals the errors learners actually produce. Combining the two allows researchers to distinguish whether errors are caused primarily by L1 transfer, developmental overgeneralization, or incomplete mastery of complex grammatical structures (James, 1998). This integrated approach also aligns with interlanguage theory, which views learner language as a dynamic system influenced by multiple factors (Selinker, 1972).

Overall, the literature indicates that Indonesian learners' difficulties with English tense and aspect arise from a combination of typological differences, cognitive demands, and developmental processes. The integration of CA and EA provides a comprehensive framework to examine these difficulties, offering insights that are crucial for designing pedagogical interventions and improving learners' written accuracy. This study therefore builds on previous findings by analyzing Indonesian learners' written production through a dual-lens approach, aiming to identify systematic tense–aspect errors and explain their underlying causes.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design supported by elements of corpus-based analysis. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to describe and interpret patterns of tense and aspect usage produced by Indonesian learners in authentic writing rather than testing statistical hypotheses. A descriptive framework allows for a detailed examination of language forms, error patterns, and the underlying sources of such errors through both Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA). CA is used to identify structural contrasts between Indonesian and English that potentially lead to learner difficulties, while EA systematically categorizes and interprets actual errors produced in learner texts. Combining these two approaches provides a comprehensive interpretive lens that captures both predicted and emergent difficulties, making the methodology suitable for exploring the relationship between linguistic structures, learner interlanguage, and error production in written discourse.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from written compositions produced by Indonesian EFL learners at the university level. Participants were selected purposively based on their enrollment in an intermediate writing course, ensuring that they had already been introduced

to English tense and aspect forms in their curriculum. A total of 30 students were asked to produce a 250–300-word narrative essay on a predetermined topic to maintain comparability across texts. The writing task was completed during class under supervised conditions to ensure authenticity and to minimize external assistance. All compositions were collected in their original form without correction to preserve the natural occurrence of tense–aspect usage. The data were then digitized and compiled into a small learner corpus to facilitate systematic analysis. Ethical considerations were observed by anonymizing all participant identities and obtaining consent prior to data collection.

Data Analysis

The analysis procedure consisted of two complementary stages: Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis. First, Contrastive Analysis was conducted by examining the structural differences between Indonesian and English tense–aspect systems, focusing on morphological marking, temporal reference, and aspectual distinctions. This contrastive framework was used to generate predictions about potential areas of difficulty. Second, Error Analysis was applied to the learner corpus following Corder's (1974) procedures: (1) identifying errors, (2) describing and classifying them, and (3) explaining their possible sources. Errors related to tense selection, incorrect or missing verb inflections, misuse of auxiliaries, and inappropriate aspectual marking were coded and categorized. Each error instance was also evaluated to determine whether it resulted primarily from L1 transfer, overgeneralization, developmental factors, or incomplete learning. Quantification was included to indicate the frequency of error types, while qualitative interpretation was employed to explain their linguistic causes. The combined analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of learner difficulties and their relation to underlying interlanguage processes

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the collected data focuses on the patterns of tense and aspect usage in the English writing of Indonesian learners at the university level. From the 60 short essay samples examined, it was found that most students demonstrated a basic understanding of tense forms but still struggled to apply them consistently and appropriately within written discourse. The errors identified in their writing fell into three main categories: misformation, omission, and overgeneralization, all of which reflect the structural differences between Indonesian and English grammatical systems.

The first major finding shows that misformation is the most dominant type of error. This occurs when learners produce incorrect tense forms or select verbs that do not match the

intended time reference. Many students wrote sentences such as *"She go to school yesterday"* or *"He was study last night."* These errors indicate that while learners may grasp the general concept of past time, they often fail to link this concept to the required morphological changes in English verbs. In many instances, present verbs were used to describe past events, or past continuous forms were used where simple past was appropriate. This pattern suggests that learners frequently rely on guesswork or intuitive approximations rather than a systematic understanding of tense formation.

The analysis also revealed a substantial number of omission errors, particularly related to auxiliary verbs. Because Indonesian does not employ auxiliaries to mark tense, many students unintentionally omitted these crucial elements in their English sentences. Common examples include *"I working now,"* *"They eating when I arrive,"* or *"He not finish his task."* These omissions make the tense form unclear and lead to ambiguity in meaning. The frequency of such errors highlights the significant influence of first language transfer, as learners naturally fall back on Indonesian structures when constructing English sentences.

A third category of errors is overgeneralization, which occurs when learners apply rules too broadly. These errors were often seen in students' tendency to attach *-ed* to verbs that should not take the ending, such as *"I am agreed"* or *"She eated the cake."* Overgeneralization was also visible in the use of continuous forms for actions that did not require them, for example, *"I am go to campus every day."* These patterns show that learners tend to hold onto one rule they understand and apply it universally, even in contexts where it is grammatically inappropriate.

From a contrastive perspective, many of these errors can be understood as consequences of the fundamental differences between Indonesian and English. Indonesian does not mark tense through verb inflection; instead, it expresses time through adverbs such as *kemarin* (yesterday), *besok* (tomorrow), or markers like *sedang* (in progress) and *sudah* (already), without altering the verb form. English, on the other hand, relies heavily on verb changes, auxiliary verbs, and aspect marking to convey time and duration. This incompatibility makes English tense-aspect grammar appear complex and unintuitive for Indonesian learners.

Another important finding is that the present perfect tense was the most challenging structure for the students. Many wrote sentences such as *"I have finish my work,"* *"She has went to the market,"* or used present perfect for events with explicit time markers, for example, *"I have visited Bali last year."* The difficulty stems from the absence of a direct equivalent of present perfect in Indonesian. Without a conceptual reference in their first language, Indonesian

learners often perceive present perfect as simply another way to express past events, without understanding its aspectual meaning.

The analysis also showed that students performed better with tense accuracy when writing simple, personal, or routine-related sentences. However, when required to produce a longer essay with a more complex sequence of events, inconsistency in tense usage became more evident. It was common to observe students starting a paragraph in the simple past and then unintentionally switching to the present tense, or vice versa. This pattern suggests that learners' control of tense is still partial and unstable, especially in extended discourse.

Overall, the findings indicate that Indonesian learners' difficulties with tense and aspect stem not only from limited knowledge of grammatical rules but also from insufficient temporal and aspectual awareness when constructing narratives. In many cases, learners prioritize conveying ideas over maintaining grammatical accuracy. As a result, tense usage becomes secondary and is often overlooked or inconsistently applied. In addition, instructional practices that emphasize memorizing tense formulas over contextualized usage contribute to the persistence of these errors.

In summary, the results of this study show that the acquisition of English tense and aspect among Indonesian learners is gradual but nonlinear. Students may understand certain rules but fail to apply them flexibly across different contexts. The recurring errors indicate the need for more explicit and contextualized instruction that helps learners develop an awareness of how verb forms interact with meaning, time reference, and narrative structure. These findings lay the foundation for the next section, which discusses the broader implications of the study and examines how contrastive and error analysis can inform more effective pedagogical practices.

Before examining each sub-section, it is important to emphasize that the findings of this study confirm the strong influence of L1–L2 structural differences and developmental patterns on Indonesian learners' mastery of English tense and aspect. Using contrastive analysis, the study identifies how the absence of verbal inflection in Indonesian shapes learners' errors. Meanwhile, error analysis reveals how learners internalize, partially master, and sometimes overgeneralize English tense rules. The following sub-sections discuss each major pattern of error in relation to theoretical perspectives and pedagogical implications.

Misformation and Learners' Partial Understanding of Tense

The dominance of misformation errors suggests that Indonesian learners possess only a surface-level understanding of tense forms without fully grasping how form and meaning interact. The fact that learners often used present verbs for past contexts or misused continuous forms indicates a reliance on intuition rather than stable grammatical knowledge. This aligns

with the idea that learners build interlanguage systems that reflect incomplete rule acquisition. From a contrastive perspective, misformation errors emerge because Indonesian does not require morphological changes to signal time. Learners therefore rely on lexical cues such as adverbs and apply them directly to English structures. When they attempt to use English tense, they often produce analogy-based forms such as *"was study"* or *"go yesterday."* These errors show that learners are still negotiating grammatical categories that do not exist in their L1.

Pedagogically, the prevalence of misformation errors suggests that instruction should emphasize form–meaning mapping more explicitly. Rather than teaching tense solely as formulas, students need guided exposure to narrative contexts where time relations shape verb choice. Instruction should highlight how changing a verb form in English changes the meaning a concept that does not naturally exist in Indonesian grammar. Classroom feedback should also focus on awareness-raising, encouraging learners to notice inconsistencies between the time reference they intend to express and the forms they produce.

Omission and the Influence of L1 Transfer

Omission errors, especially the absence of auxiliary verbs highlight the strong role of L1 transfer in shaping learners' interlanguage. Because Indonesian expresses tense without auxiliaries, learners often perceive elements such as *am*, *is*, *was*, or *have* as optional or unnecessary. This results in constructions like *"I working now"* or *"He not finish."* These patterns indicate that learners may be processing English sentences using Indonesian syntax and only adding English morphology when it feels necessary.

Developmentally, omission errors also reflect the natural stages of second language acquisition, where functional elements (auxiliaries, inflections, copulas) tend to emerge later than content words (nouns and verbs). Indonesian learners appear to prioritize the main verb because meaning can still be conveyed even when the sentence is not grammatically accurate.

The implications for teaching are significant. Learners need sustained exposure to auxiliary verbs in meaningful contexts, not only as grammatical terms to memorize. Drills alone are insufficient; instead, teachers should integrate awareness tasks that highlight the communicative role of auxiliaries. Moreover, writing instruction should provide feedback that draws attention to missing elements and guides learners toward restructuring the sentence. In addition, peer review activities can be used to help students identify omissions in each other's writing, strengthening their metalinguistic awareness.

Overgeneralization and Developmental Patterns in Interlanguage

Overgeneralization errors such as *"eated," "am agreed,"* or the excessive use of continuous forms indicate that learners are actively testing grammatical rules and extending them beyond appropriate contexts. Rather than reflecting a lack of learning, overgeneralization shows that learners are internalizing patterns but have not yet developed the ability to distinguish between regular and irregular forms or between habitual and progressive meanings.

This finding aligns with the concept of developmental sequences in second language grammar acquisition. Learners typically apply a newly learned rule broadly, and only later refine their understanding as they encounter exceptions. For Indonesian learners, this process is further complicated because English irregular verbs have no predictable patterns and must be memorized. The misuse of the continuous form similarly reflects an attempt to rely on one familiar structure, especially when learners are unsure about the correct tense.

Instructionally, these errors point to the need for pedagogical approaches that emphasize pattern recognition rather than mere memorization. Teachers should guide students to compare examples, identify exceptions, and understand why certain constructions cannot be generalized. Activities that contrast habitual, ongoing, and completed actions may also help learners develop deeper aspectual awareness. By encouraging learners to articulate the difference between *"I go," "I am going,"* and *"I went,"* teachers can strengthen their ability to choose the correct form independently.

Challenges with Present Perfect and Aspectual Awareness

The finding that present perfect is the most difficult tense for Indonesian learners reflects deeper conceptual gaps rather than simple grammatical confusion. Because Indonesian does not mark aspect grammatically, learners struggle to grasp the connection between past events and present relevance. They often treat present perfect as interchangeable with the simple past, producing sentences such as *"I have visited Bali last year."*

This difficulty suggests that learners lack aspectual awareness, a concept that is essential for mastering English verb forms. Without an internalized understanding of how duration, completion, or relevance affect verb choice, learners cannot apply the present perfect correctly. Instructors should therefore integrate activities that help students conceptualize time relationships, such as timelines, sequencing tasks, or narrative reconstructions. Rather than teaching present perfect as an abstract rule, teachers should situate it within communicative contexts where its meaning becomes clearer. This approach can support learners in developing the mental framework needed to use aspect appropriately.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the significant challenges Indonesian learners face in mastering English tense and aspect, particularly due to structural differences between the two languages. The analysis shows that misformation, omission, and overgeneralization are the dominant errors, reflecting both L1 transfer and developmental patterns in learners' interlanguage. Learners often rely on Indonesian temporal markers, struggle with auxiliary verbs, and inconsistently apply tense rules in extended writing. The difficulty with the present perfect further demonstrates the lack of aspectual awareness shaped by Indonesian's non-inflectional system. These findings indicate the need for more explicit, contextualized, and meaning-focused instruction that helps learners connect verb forms with temporal and aspectual meanings. Pedagogical approaches should emphasize awareness-raising, guided practice, and contrastive tasks to support learners in refining their understanding of tense usage. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of integrating contrastive and error analysis to inform more effective teaching strategies in EFL classrooms.

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